

STORIES OF THE TRANSLATION

Emma Smith

(interviewed by Edmund C. Briggs, 1856)

When my husband was translating the Book of Mormon, I wrote a part of it, as he dictated each sentence, word for word, and when he came to proper names he could not pronounce, or long words, he spelled them out, and while I was writing them, if I made any mistake in spelling, he would stop me and correct my spelling, although it was impossible for him to see how I was writing them down at the time. Even the word *Sarah* [Sariah] he could not pronounce at first, but had to spell it, and I would pronounce it for him.

When he stopped for any purpose at any time he would, when he commenced again, begin where he left off without any hesitation, and one time while he was translating he stopped suddenly, pale as a sheet, and said, “Emma, did Jerusalem have walls around it?” When I answered “Yes,” he replied, “Oh! I was afraid I had been deceived.” He had such a limited knowledge of history at that time that he did not even know that Jerusalem was surrounded by walls.¹

Martin Harris

(interviewed by Edward Stevenson, 1870)

[Martin Harris] also stated that the Prophet translated a portion of the Book of Mormon, with the seer stone in his possession. The stone was placed in a hat that was used for that purpose, and with the aid of this seer stone the Prophet would read sentence by sentence as Martin wrote, and if he made any mistake the sentence would remain before the Prophet until corrected, when another sentence would appear. When they became weary, as it was confining work to translate from the plates of gold, they would go down to the [Susquehanna] river and throw stones into the water for exercise. Martin on one occasion picked up a stone resembling the one with which they were translating, and on resuming their work Martin placed the false stone in the hat. He said that the Prophet looked quietly for a long time, when he raised his head and said: “Martin, what on earth is the matter, all is dark as Egypt.” Martin smiled and the seer discovered that the wrong stone was placed in the hat. When he asked Martin why he had done so he replied, to stop the mouths of fools who had declared that the Prophet knew by heart all that he told him to write, and did not see by the seer stone; when the true stone was placed in the hat, the translation was resumed, as usual.²

¹ Edmund C. Briggs, “A Visit to Nauvoo in 1856,” *Journal of Mormon History* 9 (October 1916): 454.

² Edward Stevenson, “The Three Witnesses to the Book of Mormon,” *Millennial Star* 48 (June 21, 1886): 389–90.

Lucy Mack Smith

(recounting in her memoir the morning that Joseph, after traveling 130 miles from Harmony to Palmyra, learned that Martin had lost about 116 pages of the manuscript)

[About 6:00 AM] we commenced preparing breakfast for the family; and we supposed that Mr. Harris would be there, as soon as it was ready, to eat with us, for he generally came in such haste when he was sent for. At eight o'clock we set the victuals on the table, as we were expecting him every moment. We waited till nine, and he came not—till ten, and he was not there—till eleven, still he did not make his appearance. But at half-past twelve we saw him walking with a slow and measured tread towards the house, his eyes fixed thoughtfully upon the ground. On coming to the gate, he stopped, instead of passing through, and got upon the fence, and sat there some time with his hat drawn over his eyes. At length he entered the house. Soon after which we sat down to the table, Mr. Harris with the rest. He took up his knife and fork as if he were going to use them, but immediately dropped them. Hyrum, observing this, said "Martin, why do you not eat; are you sick?" Upon which, Mr. Harris pressed his hands upon his temples, and cried out, in a tone of deep anguish, "Oh, I have lost my soul! I have lost my soul!"

Joseph, who had not expressed his fears till now, sprang from the table, exclaiming, "Martin, have you lost that manuscript? Have you broken your oath, and brought down condemnation upon my head, as well as your own?"

"Yes, it is gone," replied Martin, "and I know not where."

"Oh, my God!" said Joseph, clinching his hands. "All is lost! All is lost! What shall I do? I have sinned—it is I who tempted the wrath of God. I should have been satisfied with the first answer which I received from the Lord; for He told me that it was not safe to let the writing go out of my possession." He wept and groaned, and walked the floor continually.

At length he told Martin to go back and search again.

"No," said Martin, "it is all in vain; for I have ripped open beds and pillows; and I know it is not there."

"Then must I," said Joseph, "return to my wife with such a tale as this? I dare not do it, lest I should kill her at once. And how shall I appear before the Lord? Of what rebuke am I not worthy from the angel of the Most High?"

I besought him not to mourn so, for perhaps the Lord would forgive him, after a short season of humiliation and repentance. But what could I say to comfort him, when he saw all the family in the same situation of mind as himself; for sobs and groans, and the most bitter lamentations filled the house. However, Joseph was more distressed than the rest, as he better understood the consequences of disobedience. And he continued, pacing back and forth, meantime weeping and grieving, until about sunset, when, by persuasion, he took a little nourishment.

The next morning he set out for home. We parted with heavy hearts, for it now appeared that all which we had so fondly anticipated, and which had been the source of so much secret gratification, had in a moment fled, and fled for ever.³

³ Lucy [Mack] Smith, *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith the Prophet, and His Progenitors for Many Generations* (Liverpool, England: S. W. Richards, 1853), 120–22. Lucy Mack Smith was Joseph Smith's mother.

Oliver Cowdery

(in a letter to W. W. Phelps, 1834)

These were days never to be forgotten—to sit under the sound of a voice dictated by the inspiration of heaven, awakened the utmost gratitude of this bosom! Day after day I continued, uninterrupted, to write from his [Joseph Smith's] mouth, as he translated, with the Urim and Thummim, or, as the Nephites would have said, "Interpreters," the history, or record, called "The Book of Mormon."⁴

David Whitmer

(interviewed by William H. Kelley and George A. Blakeslee, 1882)

One morning when he [Joseph Smith] was getting ready to continue the translation, something went wrong about the house and he was put out about it. Something that Emma, his wife, had done. Oliver and I went up stairs, and Joseph came up soon after to continue the translation, but he could not do anything. He could not translate a single syllable. He went down stairs, out into the orchard and made supplication to the Lord; was gone about an hour—came back to the house, asked Emma's forgiveness and then came up stairs where we were and the translation went on all right. He could do nothing save he was humble and faithful.⁵

Mary Musselman Whitmer

(as recounted by her grandson John C. Whitmer in an interview with Andrew Jenson and Edward Stevenson, 1888)

I [John C. Whitmer] have heard my grandmother (Mary M. Whitmer) say on several occasions that she was shown the plates of the Book of Mormon by an holy angel, whom she always called Brother Nephi. (She undoubtedly refers to Moroni, the angel who had the plates in charge.) It was at the time, she said, when the translation was going on at the house of the elder Peter Whitmer, her husband. Joseph Smith with his wife and Oliver Cowdery, whom David Whitmer a short time previous had brought up from Harmony, Pennsylvania, were all boarding with the Whitmers, and my grandmother in having so many extra persons to care for, besides her own large household was often overloaded with work to such an extent that she felt it to be quite a burden. One evening, when (after having done her usual day's work in the house) she went to the barn to milk the cows, she met a stranger carrying something on his back that looked like a knapsack. At first she was a little afraid of him, but when he spoke to her in a kind, friendly tone and began to explain to her the nature of the work which was going on in her house, she was filled with unexpressible joy and satisfaction. He then untied his knapsack and showed her a bundle of plates, which in size and appearance corresponded with the description subsequently given by the witnesses of the Book of Mormon. This strange person turned the leaves of the book of plates over, leaf after leaf, and also showed her the engravings upon them; after

⁴*Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate* 1, no. 1 (October 1834): 14.

⁵*Saints' Herald* 29, no. 5 (March 1, 1882): 68.

which he told her to be patient and faithful in bearing her burden a little longer, promising that if she would do so, she should be blessed; and her reward would be sure, if she proved faithful to the end. The personage then suddenly vanished with the plates, and where he went, she could not tell. From that moment my grandmother was enabled to perform her household duties with comparative ease, and she felt no more inclination to murmur because her lot was hard. I knew my grandmother to be a good, noble and truthful woman, and I have not the least doubt of her statement in regard to seeing the plates being strictly true. She was a strong believer in the Book of Mormon until the day of her death.⁶

Elizabeth Ann Whitmer Cowdery

(affidavit recorded by William E. McLellin, 1870)

Richmond, Ray Co., Mo. Feb 15th 1870—I cheerfully certify that I was familiar with the manner of Joseph Smith's translating the Book of Mormon. He translated the most of it at my Father's house. And I often sat by and saw and heard them translate and write for hours together. Joseph never had a curtain drawn between him and his scribe while he was translating. He would place the director in his hat, and then place his face in his hat, so as to exclude the light, and then [read the words?] as they appeared before him.⁷

⁶ Andrew Jenson, "The Eight Witnesses," *Historical Record* 7, nos. 8–10 (October 1888): 621, CHL. Mary Whitmer was the mother of David Whitmer, one of the three witnesses, and of four of the eight witnesses.

⁷ William E. McLellin to "My Dear Friends," February 1879, Miscellaneous Letters and Papers, Community of Christ Library-Archives, Independence, MO. Elizabeth was fourteen when the translation was being done at her parents' home; she married Oliver Cowdery in 1832.