

# **“The Most perfect Book,”**

## **How Did Joseph translate the Book of Mormon**

At the time Nephi (she said it was Nephi) showed Mrs. Whitmer the Gold Plates, {1} the angel suggested she hire someone to help her around the house while Joseph and Oliver were staying there working on the translation of the Book of Mormon. She hired her niece, a girl named Sarah Conrad, to live at the house and help with the chores. She did not tell Sarah what Joseph and Oliver were doing, but it did not take long for Sarah to discover something unusual was going on. Sarah noticed that the Prophet and his friend "would go up into the attic, and they would stay all day. When they came down, they looked more like heavenly beings than they did just ordinary men." {2} At first Sarah was curious, but in time their appearance actually frightened her. She went to her aunt and threatened to leave if she was not told what made those men "so exceedingly white." {3}

When Mrs. Whitmer "told her what the men were doing in the room above and that the power of God was so great in the room that they could hardly endure it. At times angels were in the room in their glory which nearly consumed them." {4} The light with which Joseph shown came from his having been with the angels. This explanation was reasonable enough, and satisfied Sarah. She not only stayed with the Whitmers, but also became one of Joseph's good friends, was baptized, and much later, after the Church was driven from Kirtland, Missouri, and Nauvoo, she settled with the Saints in Provo, Utah. {5}

Sarah's is the earliest of a number of accounts which testify that at times, when the Prophet was receiving revelation or was in the presence of heavenly beings, he, like Moses, actually glowed. Wilford Woodruff used the words, "His face was clear as amber," when he tried to describe the Prophet's appearance on one of those occasions. {6} Philo Dibble, who was present when the Prophet received the revelation which is now the 76th section of the Doctrine and Covenants, reported, "Joseph wore black clothes, but at this time seemed to be dressed in an element of glorious white." {7}

Sarah's testimony that the men who were working on the translation of the Book of Mormon "looked so exceedingly white," combined with Mrs. Whitmer's explanation, "angels were in the room in their glory which nearly consumed them," gives us a valuable key to understanding the Book of Mormon, by having a better insight to how it was translated. One may assume that if there were angels in the room they had some purpose for being there other than just to pass the time of day. It is reasonable to believe that their presence in the translating room implies that they were somehow involved in the actual work of translation.

Neither Joseph Smith, Oliver Cowdery, the Whitmers, nor Sarah Conrad left any record identifying who the angels were; but others also knew; and we have some information from them.

Parley P. Pratt, did not identify the angels by name, but he testified that through Joseph

Smith "and the ministration of holy angels to him, that book came forth to the world." {8} His brother, Orson, added that during those years Joseph "was often ministered to by the angels of God, and received instruction" from them. {9}

President John Taylor, who was a dear friend and confidant of the Prophet Joseph mentioned some of the angels by name. He said,

Again, who more likely than Mormon and Nephi, and some of those prophets who had ministered to the people upon this continent, under the influence of the same Gospel, to operate again as its [the gospel's] representatives? Well, now, do I believe that Joseph Smith saw the several angels alleged to have been seen by him as described one after another: Yes, I do. {10}

On another occasion, when President Taylor was discussing the restoration of the Gospel, he said, "I can tell you what he [Joseph] told me about it." Then told this story:

Afterward the Angel Moroni came to him and revealed to him the Book of Mormon, with the history of which you are generally familiar, and also with the statements that I am now making pertaining to these things. And then came Nephi, one of the ancient prophets, that had lived upon this continent, who had an interest in the welfare of the people that he had lived amongst in those days. {11}

On yet another occasion, President Taylor was even more explicit.

And when Joseph Smith was raised up as a Prophet of God, Mormon, Moroni, Nephi and others of the ancient Prophets who formerly lived on this continent, and Peter and John and others who lived on the Asiatic Continent, came to him and communicated to him certain principles pertaining to the Gospel of the Son of God.... He was indebted to God; and we are indebted to God and to him for all the intelligence that we have on these subjects. {12}

Similarly, George Q. Cannon once assured his listeners,

[The Prophet Joseph] had doubtless, also, visits from Nephi and it may be from Alma and others. He was visited constantly by angels;... Moroni, in the beginning as you know, to prepare him for his mission came and ministered and talked to him from time to time, and he had vision after vision in order that his mind might be fully saturated with a knowledge of the things of God. {13}

Joseph said very little about his work with Book of Mormon prophets other than Moroni. However, in the famous letter to John Wentworth, the one in which he also wrote the Articles of Faith, the Prophet explained that the Book of Mormon came forth only "after having received many visits from the angels of God unfolding the majesty and glory of the events that should transpire in the last days." {14} The "many visits" could, of course, have all been from Moroni. But Moroni is only one angel and Joseph wrote that he had received "many visits from the angels." That statement by the Prophet, coupled with those of his friends, leads one to conclude that the prophets who wrote the Book of Mormon either helped Joseph understand what he was

reading, or actually participated in the translation of the Book of Mormon. It seems reasonable to me to suppose that the translation process was something of a joint effort between Moroni, Joseph Smith who used the Urim and Thummim, Nephi (perhaps more than one Nephi), Alma, Mormon "and others" of the book's original authors. Let me explain why I believe that is so.

One cannot read the Book of Mormon without being aware that its original authors were very concerned that their message be accurately conveyed to the people of our day. {15} It would be consistent with the desires they expressed in their own lifetimes, and equally consistent with the covenants the Lord made with them about the preservation and coming forth of the Book of Mormon, {16} that those same prophets who originally wrote the words should be permitted to be present when Joseph Smith was working on the translation of their own writings. But It is my personal opinion that they were more involved than just acting as advisors.

I once heard Nibley say that a translation, no matter how good, is, in fact, only a commentary - because at best, it is only the translator's best guess about what the author intended to say. (The variety and number of translations of the Bible are sufficient evidence of how true that is.) However if the person who wrote the text in the first language, also wrote it in the second language, then the result would not be a "translation" at all. It would be a primary text written by the original author. Similarly, if the original authors translated their own portions of the Book, then when we read the Book, we are reading the actual words as they were written by Nephi, Alma, Mormon and the other great prophets. That would mean that the Book of Mormon in English is not a translation of a primary source, but is itself a "primary source" because it is the actual words of the original authors, and the ideas expressed by them there are as near to what they intended to say as the English language is able to convey. I believe that, and that is the way I read the Book of Mormon.

It is my personal opinion that the original authors did participate in the translation of the Book of Mormon, and that the precision of their language - as they expressed it in English - imposes upon their readers the obligation to study with great care, not just the meaning of the words, but also the structure of the sentences, and the relationship of the ideas, in order to discover the full intent of the writings of those ancient American prophets.

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END NOTES

- {1} Andrew Jensen, *Biographical Encyclopedia*, 1:267.
- {2} Richard L. Anderson, "The House Where the Church Was Organized," *Improvement Era*, April, 1970, p. 21.
- {3} Oliver B. Huntington, "Diary," typescript copy at BYU Library. Vol. 2, p. 415-6. Huntington heard this story from Sarah, herself, when she was 88 years old.
- {4} Huntington, "Diary," 2:415-6.
- {5} Huntington, "Diary," 2:415-16. See also Anderson, "The House...", *Improvement Era*, April, 1970, p. 21. I have also spoken with her descendants who confirmed the story.
- {6} Wilford Woodruff, *Conference Report*, April, 1898, p. 89.
- {7} *Juvenile Instructor*, 27:303-4.
- {8} *Journal of Discourses*, 9:212. (Hereafter, JD)

- {9} JD 15:185. See similar testimonies in JD 13:66 and 14:140.
- {10} JD 21:164. {11} JD 21:161.
- {12} JD 27:374.
- {13} JD 13:47; and JD 23:363.
- {14} *Documentary History of the Church*, 4:537.
- {15} For examples see: II Nephi 33:3-4; III Nephi 5:18; Mormon 8:12, 9:30-31; Enos 1:15-16; Ether 12:25-29. See also, II Nephi 3:19-21, 26:16, chapter 27; Mormon 5:12-13; Mosiah 1:7; Doctrine and Covenants 17:6.
- {16} Doctrine and Covenants 10:46-53.