

How long did it take Joseph Smith to translate the Book of Mormon?

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One of the most amazing facts about the Book of Mormon is that it took Joseph Smith only about sixty-five working days to translate a book that, in the current edition, is 531 pages long. Historical details about the time it took to translate the book are remarkably well preserved, and they are corroborated by the independently consistent statements of numerous witnesses.¹

Almost all of the Book of Mormon as we now have it was translated between 7 April and 30 June 1829. Before that, from 12 April to 14 June 1828, Joseph had translated the 116 pages that Martin Harris lost when he borrowed them to show to members of his family. In addition, during March 1829, Joseph translated "a few" pages—with his wife, Emma, acting as scribe—before he was commanded to "stop for a season." (D&C 5:30.)

Around that same time, about one hundred miles away, Oliver Cowdery was in Palmyra, New York, boarding at the Smith family home, where he "importuned Mr. Smith [Joseph Smith, Sr.] ... a considerable length of time"² for information concerning the plates. In 1832, Joseph Smith stated that the Lord had answered Oliver's prayer, appearing to Oliver and showing "unto him the plates in a vision and also the truth of the work and what the Lord was about to do."³ At the same time, as reported in an 1847 letter by Joseph's mother, Lucy Mack Smith, Joseph was in Harmony, Pennsylvania, praying for assistance. In answer to his prayer, an angel of the Lord assured him that a scribe "should be forthcoming in a few days."⁴

Oliver arrived in Harmony as the sun was going down on Sunday, 5 April 1829. After a day for Oliver to get settled, Joseph began translating on Tuesday, April 7, with Oliver as his scribe. They continued with the work day after day, more or less "uninterrupted."⁵ They probably began translating at the beginning of the book of Mosiah, where Joseph had last left off. Thus, the Prophet Joseph actually began translating at the *middle* of the book; it is probable that he did not work on 1 and 2 Nephi until later—in June.⁶ Yet the Book is not disorganized; nothing is out of place. Indeed, the fact that a passage like Alma 36:22, which quotes Lehi so fluently and precisely, was translated *before* 1 Nephi 1:8 [1 Ne. 1:8] was translated, supports Joseph Smith's testimony that he translated those words from an actual ancient record.

By 15 May 1829, Joseph had translated the books of Mosiah, Alma, Helaman, and 3 Nephi's account of Christ's ministry among the Nephites. It was that account of the Savior's ministry—probably 3 Nephi 11:22-27 [3 Ne. 11:22-27] in particular, that led Joseph and Oliver to inquire of the Lord about the authority to baptize. That, in turn, led to the restoration of the Aaronic Priesthood on that same day, and to that of the Melchizedek Priesthood shortly thereafter.⁷

By the end of May, they had completed the books of 4 Nephi, Mormon, Ether, Moroni, and the title page—which stood as the last plate among the plates of Mormon.⁸ At this time, David Whitmer arrived in Harmony. During the first week in June, David, Oliver, Joseph, and possibly Emma moved one hundred miles, on buckboard, to the Peter Whitmer home in Fayette, New York, about twenty-five miles southeast of Palmyra. On 11 June 1829, the copyright for the Book of Mormon was secured in the Federal District Court for the Western District of New York. The copyright application used the full text of the Book of Mormon's title page as the legal

description of the contents of the book, so it is clear that the title page had already been translated by then.

Once Joseph, Emma, and Oliver were settled in Fayette, the translation resumed. Oliver and John Whitmer acted as scribes, and it was here that they worked on what is the beginning of the Book of Mormon as we know it—1 Nephi and 2 Nephi. By around 20 June, they had reached 2 Nephi 27:12, [2 Ne. 27:12] which provided the basis upon which the Three Witnesses and the Eight Witnesses were shown the plates around that time, in June 1829.⁹ By the end of June, the translation was completed, and inquiries to publishers were being made.

The translation was a staggering achievement. It was completed within eighty-five days, from 7 April to 30 June. Of course, not all of that time was spent working on the translation. The Prophet and his scribes also took time to eat, to sleep, to seek employment (once, for money when supplies ran out), to receive the Aaronic and Melchizedek priesthoods, to make at least one (and possibly two) trips to Colesville, thirty miles away, to convert and baptize Hyrum and Samuel Smith (who came to Harmony at that time); to receive and record thirteen revelations that are now sections of the Doctrine and Covenants; to move from Harmony to Fayette; to acquire the Book of Mormon copyright; to preach a few days and baptize several near Fayette; to experience manifestations with the Three and Eight Witnesses; and to begin making arrangements for the Book of Mormon's publication.

Conservatively estimated, this leaves sixty-five or fewer working days on which the Prophet and his scribes could have translated. That works out to be an average of eight pages per day. At such a pace, only about a week could have been taken to translate all of 1 Nephi; a day and a half for King Benjamin's speech. Considering the complexity, consistency, clarity, artistry, accuracy, density, and profundity of the Book of Mormon, the Prophet Joseph's translation is a phenomenal feat. As Oliver Cowdery a few years afterwards testified, "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 mouth, as he translated ... the Book of Mormon."¹⁰

Gospel topics: Book of Mormon, Church history, Joseph Smith

1. Statements include those of Joseph Smith, Emma Smith, Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer, Lucy Mack Smith, Joseph Knight, John Gilbert, and others. For a thorough documentary treatment of this subject, see John W. Welch and Tim Rathbone, "The Translation of the Book of Mormon: Basic Historical Information," FARMS Preliminary Report W&R-86, P.O. Box 7113, University Station, Provo, Utah 84602. In subsequent notes, this report will be referred to as W&R-86.
2. Lucy Mack Smith, *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith the Prophet and His Progenitors for Many Generations*, 1st ed. (Liverpool: S. W. Richards, 1853), p. 128.
3. Dean C. Jessee, *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1984), p. 8.
4. Lucy Mack Smith, Preliminary MS #1 (1847), p. 101.
5. Oliver Cowdery, *Letter 1, Messenger & Advocate* 1 (Oct. 1834), p. 14, reprinted in the 1981 edition of the Pearl of Great Price. (See JS—H 1:71 n.) In subsequent notes, this letter will be referred to as Cowdery, Letter 1.
6. There are several historical and textual reasons why this is almost certainly the case. Only if Mosiah was translated first would there be a reasonable amount of text to be translated at the Whitmer farm after the translation of the title page, before 11 June. The "Mosiah first" theory has

been viewed favorably by George Reynolds, in "History of the Book of Mormon" (*Contributor*, Jan. 1884, 5:121-25); Stan Larson, in "'A Most Sacred Possession': The Original Manuscript of the Book of Mormon," (*Ensign*, Sept. 1977, pp. 87-91); Max H Parkin, in "A Preliminary Analysis of the Dating of Section 10" (*Sidney B. Sperry Symposium*, Provo: Brigham Young University, 1979, pp. 68-84); and Richard Bushman, in *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Urbana, Ill.: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1984). See also W&R-86, pp. 33-37.

7. See Larry C. Porter, "Dating the Restoration of the Melchizedek Priesthood," in *Ensign*, June 1979, pp. 5-10.

8. See *History of the Church*, 1:71.

9. There has been some confusion whether the verses authorizing the Witnesses to see the plates were found in Ether 5 or in 2 Nephi 27. Ether 5:2-4 says that the plates would be shown to three people; 2 Nephi 27:12-14, [2 Ne. 27:12-14] however, speaks of three witnesses "besides him to whom the book shall be delivered," and also mentions the "few" others who would see the book "according to the will of God, to bear testimony of his word," and who would become the Eight Witnesses. Thus, it is more likely that 2 Nephi 27 was the scripture that the Prophet followed to show the plates to the witnesses. It appears that the reference to Ether 5, which occurs in *History of the Church*, 1:52, should be corrected to refer to 2 Nephi 27. This conclusion is corroborated by the fact that this scriptural reference was left blank in *Times and Seasons*, 3:897, but was first filled in by an 1850s note on a manuscript of the *History of the Church*, referring in this context to 2 Nephi 27.

10. Cowdery, Letter 1. (See JS—H 1:71 n.)

Title Page

Joseph Smith once wrote, "I wish to mention here that the title-page of the Book of Mormon is a literal translation, taken from the very last leaf, on the left hand side of the collection or book of plates, which contained the record which has been translated; ...and that said title-page is not...a modern composition, either of mine or of any other man who has lived or does live in this generation" (HC 1:71.).

The title page is therefore the translation of an ancient document, at least partially written by [Moroni 2](#), son of Mormon, in the fifth century A.D. It describes the volume as an "abridgment of the record of the people of Nephi, and also of the Lamanites" and "an abridgment taken from the Book of Ether also, which is a record of the people of Jared" *Encyclopedia of Mormonism, Vol.1, Book of Mormon*

It is now known that other ancient books placed the title page as the last page.

