

NEW VIEWS ON THE TRANSLATION OF THE BOOK OF MORMON

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When Joseph Smith commenced to translate the Book of Mormon in the spring of 1828, Martin Harris assisted him as his scribe. After the Prophet had translated 116 pages known as the Book of Lehi, Harris was permitted to take the manuscript to his home in Palmyra, New York and it was lost. Later the Prophet was told in a revelation to translate the Small Plates of Nephi, which covered the same period of Nephite history, to take the place of the lost manuscript. The revelation instructing him to do this is now found in Doctrine and Covenants 10.

In treating the episode of the lost manuscript, most historians have assumed two things: (1) that Joseph Smith received the revelation instructing him to translate the Small Plates of Nephi sometime in the summer of 1828, not long after the original manuscript was lost;¹ (2) that when the translation again commenced in April 1829, with Oliver Cowdery acting as scribe, Joseph Smith began translating from the Small Plates of Nephi.

However, these assumptions are not warranted when a more thorough examination is made of the story of the lost manuscript. There is conclusive evidence that the revelation found in Doctrine and Covenants 10 was not given to Joseph Smith in the summer of 1828, but in May 1829.

This fact makes it necessary for us to alter some of the conclusions that have heretofore been drawn relating to the story of the translation of the book of Mormon. The reason it has been assumed that Doctrine and Covenants 10 was given in the summer of 1828 is due to a statement found in Joseph Smith's history. Having recorded Doctrine and Covenants 3, which was given in July 1828 reprimanded him for his part in a loss of the manuscript book of Lehi. Joseph Smith wrote: "After I had obtained the above revelation, both the Plates and Urim and Thummim were taken from me again: but in a few days they were returned to me, and I inquired of the Lord, and the Lord said thus unto me."² Then follows the revelation which is found in doctrine covenants 10.

In editing Joseph Smith's History of the Church, Elder B. H. Roberts added the following footnote to the profits introduction to doctrine covenants 10:

This revelation, which appears as section 10 in the Doctrine and Covenants, was formerly dated 1829. This is clearly an error. The prophets words in the text above can lead to one conclusion, namely, that this was the first revelation he received after the Plates and the Urim and Thummim were finally restored to him and this, he says, was only "a few days" after he had received the previous

revelation, which, indeed, refers to the same subject as this one. The latter was, therefore, in all probability, received in August or September, of 1828.³

On the strength of this argument, the date of the revelation in Doctrine and Covenants 10 was changed from May 1829 to the summer of 1828, but a more thorough study of this issue leads to the conclusion that the original date is correct.

The major argument supporting the original date is found when a textual analysis is done of Doctrine and Covenants 10 in comparison with Doctrine and Covenants 5. The latter revelation was given to the Prophet in March 1829. Wherein the original revelation now contained in Doctrine and Covenants 5 the following promise appears: “If the people of this generation harden not their hearts, I will work a reformation among them, and I will put down all lyings, and deceivings, and priestcrafts, and envyings, and strifes, and idolatries, and sorcerers, and all manner of iniquities, and I will establish my church, like unto the church which was taught by my disciples in to days of old.”⁴

In Doctrine and Covenants 10 the Lord refers back to this promise stating: “And for this cause have I said of this generation hard not their hearts, I will establish my church among them.”⁵ Doctrine and Covenants 10 therefore had to be given after Doctrine and Covenants 5: and is the latter revelation was given in March 1829, it follows that the original date of May 1829 is the correct date for the Doctrine and Covenants 10. There is no other promise of this kind in the earlier revelations to which latter revelation could have referred.

(There are other instances when a statement in the earlier revelation is referred to in a later revelation. On the date of February 9, 1831, the Lord said “and even now, let him that goeth to the east teach them that shall be converted to flee to the west, and this in consequence of that which is coming on the earth, and of secret combinations.”⁶ A month later the Lord referred to the earlier directive and declared: “Wherefore I, the Lord, have said, gather ye out from the eastern lands, assemble yourselves together ye elders of my church: go ye forth unto the western countries.”⁷

In addition to the above argument, there are other evidences that support the position that the original date given to the revelation in Doctrine and Covenants 10 is right:

First, in all editions of the printed revelations published during the lifetime of Joseph Smith, Doctrine and Covenants 10 bears the date of May 1829. This could hardly be an oversight, as the Prophet personally prepared the revelations for publication.

Second, Joseph’s mother twice quotes the Prophet as stating that the Urim and

Thummim were not returned after the loss of the Book of Lehi until September 22, 1828. This being true, Doctrine and Covenants 10 could not have been given in the

summer of 1828, but sometime after September 1828. Mother Smith gives the date of Doctrine and Covenants 10 as “a few months after” September 1828.⁸

Third, the prophet had again commenced to translate from the Plates of Mormon before Doctrine and Covenants 10 was given, for that revelation instructed: “continue on unto the finishing of the remainder of the work of translation as you have begun.”⁹ Again, in directing Joseph Smith to translate the Small Plates of Nephi and insert the material in place of the book of Lehi, the Lord said in Doctrine and Covenants 10: “you shall translate the engravings which are on the Plates of Nephi, down even until you come to the reign of King Benjamin, or until you come to that which you have translated, which you have retained.”¹⁰ Here, too, it is evident that Doctrine and Covenants 10 was not given “a few days after the Plates and the Urim and Thummim were returned to the prophet, for he had again commence to translate when that revelation was given.

Finally, if Joseph Smith continued translating from the Plates of Mormon until he reached the unsealed portion of that record, there was no reason to instruct him to translate the Small Plates of Nephi until the spring of 1829.

The fact that the prophet started on the book of Mosiah I a when he again began to translate, after the loss of the book of Lehi, is a point of major significance in the story of the translation of the Book of Mormon. Evidence supporting this view are as follows:

First, when Joseph Smith was instructed to translate the Small Plates of Nephi to fill a historical gap caused by the loss of the book of Lehi the revelation advised: “continue on into the finishing of the remainder of the work of translation as you have begun.”¹¹ In other words, he was instructed first to finish the unsealed portion of the Plates of Mormon.

Second, Oliver Cowdery stated that by May 15, 1829, the prophet had translated the account of Christ's appearance to the Nephites, and that it was the Savior's instructions to the Nephites that cause Joseph and Oliver to inquire concerning the need of baptism.¹² Had the profit translated the Small Plates of Nephi before beginning again on the Plates of Mormon, he would have translated more than four-fifths of the total volume by 15 May 1829. He and Oliver started to translate on April 7, 1829¹³ and did not complete the Book of Mormon until the latter part of June or the forepart of July. Had to begin with the book of Mosiah (considering that the prophet, with his wife as scribe, had translated some of the cheerio before Oliver arrived), they would have completed a little more than half of the work on the Book of Mormon during the first 5 and on half weeks that ended May 15, 1829. This makes a more equitable distribution of work accomplished before and after that date.

Third, Joseph Smith's reports that Oliver Cowdery and David Whitmer first ascertained from the record that there were to be three special witnesses blade in the work

of the translation; and profit dates their discovery in June, 1829.¹⁴ This fact indicates that the Small Plates of Nephi were not translated first, the promise that there would be three witnesses is also made in second Nephi 27. Had Joseph and Oliver translated the Small Plates of Nephi first, they would have come across the promise that there would be witnesses much earlier in the translation.

Fourth, in The Historical Record, Andrew Jensen quotes Joseph Smith as writing: “in the course of the work of translation, we ascertained that three special witnesses were to be provided by the Lord, to whom he would grant that they should see the Plates from which this work (the Book of Mormon) should be translated, and that these witnesses should bear record of the same, as will be found recorded in the Book of Mormon, Ether 5:2-4.”¹⁵

This is the profits report of this discovery by Oliver and David that there would be three witnesses,¹⁶ for Joseph Smith then writes: “almost immediately after we had made this discovery, it occurred to Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer and the aforementioned Martin Harris, who had come to inquire after our progress in the work, that they would have we inquire of the Lord to know if they might not obtain from him the privilege to be these three special witnesses.”¹⁷ It is apparent from this record that Oliver Cowdery and David Whitmer first learned that there would be witnesses to the Book of Mormon when the Prophet translated ether chapter 5. Again it is evident that Joseph Smith had not yet translated the Small Plates of Nephi.

Finally, though Joseph Smith had only about 40 pages to translate after the promise of three special witnesses was mentioned in the Plates of Mormon, he indicates that he translated for several days before the Book of Mormon was completed.¹⁸ This fact implies, that after finishing the Plates of Mormon he still had the Small Plates of Nephi to translate.

The points of evidence given in this article supports the conclusion that the revelation found in Doctrine and Covenants 10 was given to Joseph Smith in May of 1829, after he and Oliver Cowdery had been translating for about one month; and that when Joseph and Oliver commence to translate in April, 1829, they began on the book of Mosiha, the second unit of Mormon’s abridgment to the place of Mormon.

Endnotes

¹ See the introduction of D&C 10.

² DHC, I, p. 23.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Book of Commandments* 4:5. (Italics by the writer.) As indicated, this statement is not found in the latter versions of the revelation which are found in the Doctrine and Covenants. That it was in the revelation when it was first published in 1833 of the book

of Commandments.

⁵ D&C 10:53. (Italics by the writer.)

⁶ Ibid., 42:64

⁷ Ibid., 45:64. See also ibid., 37:3, in relation to ibid., 38:32, for another example of this sort of thing.

⁸ Lucy Mack Smith, History of Joseph Smith (Salt Lake City, 1954), pp. 133-13

⁹ D&C 10:3. (Italics by the writer.)

¹⁰ Ibid., 10:41. (Italics by the writer.)

¹¹ Ibid., 10:3.

¹² See Messenger and Advocate, I (October, 1834), p.15.

¹³ Ibid., p. 14.

¹⁴ DHC, I, pp. 51-53

¹⁵ Andrew Jensen, The Historical Record, VII (January, 1888), p. 369. (Italics by the writer.)

¹⁶ The reason I omit Martin Harris in this statement is because a revelation direct him to declare in March, 1829 that there would be three special witnesses and that he might be one of them, provided he humbled himself sufficiently before the Lord. See D&C five. Harris later said that Joseph Smith mentioned the matter to him sometime before he saw the record. See an interview with Martin Harris in January, 1859, published under the heading "Mormonism," in Tiffany's monthly, by Joel Tiffany (New York, beginning May, 1859 and continuing thereafter for three additions), p. 165. But evidently the prophet had said nothing about the matter to the other two men until a translated chapter 5 of Ether.

¹⁷ Jensen, op. cit.

¹⁸ See DHC, I, pp. 52-54, 59, 71.