

**Commentary on a Revelation Not Included
in the Printed Book of Commandments
and
The Story of the Book of Mormon Plates**

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There was one revelation given through Joseph Smith in the month of June 1829 that was included in the manuscript for the Book of Commandments but not published in the book. This document is known today as LDS Doctrine and Covenants section 17. This revelation was given for Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer and Martin Harris at Fayette, New York about the time when the Book of Mormon was completed. The revelation for these men was produced previous to viewing the plates of the Book of Mormon, breastplate, sword of Laban, two stones (interpreters) and directors. All of these are known only through the Book of Mormon record.

The Book of Mormon states that the ancient book would be hidden from the eyes of the world and three witnesses who believed in its words would behold the book by the power of God.

Wherefore, at that day when the book shall be delivered unto the man of which I have spoken, the book shall be hid from the eyes of the world, that the eyes of none shall behold it save it be that three witnesses shall behold it, by the power of God, besides him to whom the book shall be delivered; and they shall testify to the truth of the book and the things therein. And there is none other which shall view it, save it be a few according to the will of God, to bear testimony of his word unto the children of men; for the Lord God hath said that the words of the faithful should speak as if it were from the dead. Wherefore, the Lord God will proceed to bring forth the words of the book; and in the mouth of as many witnesses as seemeth him good will he establish his word; and wo be unto him that rejecteth the word of God! ¹

When some of the elders in conference on 1 November 1831 were asked "what testimony they were willing to attach to these commandments which should shortly be sent to the world" (Book of Commandments), a number arose said "they were willing to testify to the world that they knew that they were of the Lord." ² This June 1829 revelation for Oliver Cowdery, David

¹ LDS 2 Nephi 27:12-14, This prediction was transferred to Isaiah chapter 29 in 1833 when Joseph Smith was revising the King James Bible. LDS Ether 5:2-3 mentions that three would be shown the plates "by the power of God."

² Donald Q. Cannon and Lyndon W. Cook, eds., *Far West Record: Minutes of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1830-1844* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book, 1983), 27.

Whitmer and Martin Harris was among the manuscript compilation but not included in the Book of Commandments. The following text is from the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants:

Behold I say unto you, that you must rely upon my word, which if you do, with full purpose of heart, you shall have a view of the plates, and also the breastplate, the sword of Laban, the Urim and Thummim, which were given to the brother of Jared upon the mount, when he talked with the Lord face to face, and the miraculous directors which were given to Lehi while in the wilderness, on the borders of the red sea; and it is by your faith that you shall obtain a view of them, even by that faith which was had by the prophets of old.

And after that you have obtained faith, and have seen them with your eyes, you shall testify of them, by the power of God; and this you shall do that my servant Joseph Smith, jr. may not be destroyed, that I may bring about my righteous purposes unto the children of men, in this work. And ye shall testify that you have seen them, *even as my servant Joseph Smith, jr. has seen them*, for it is by my power that he has seen them, and it is because he had faith: and he has translated the book, even that part which I have commanded him, and as your Lord and your God liveth it is true.

Wherefore you have received the same power, and the same faith, and the same gift like unto him; and if you do these last commandments of mine, which I have given you, the gates of hell shall not prevail against you; for my grace is sufficient for you: and you shall be lifted up at the last day. - And I, Jesus Christ, your Lord and your God, have spoken it unto you, that I might bring about my righteous purposes unto the children of men. Amen. ³

According to the wording of this revelation the witnesses were by faith to see besides "a view of the plates", four other artifacts of antiquity. The testimony of the three witnesses is only written concerning one of the five religious artifacts - the plates of the book which they are making a testimony to. If the text of the June 1829 revelation originally listed all items to be seen why are not all items listed in the statement? In other retellings David Whitmer and Martin Harris (two of the witnesses) mentioned they saw artifacts other than the plates. Because Oliver Cowdery did not live as long as the other two witnesses, we only have his testimony about the plates.

The revelation has the witnesses prepared to spiritually see the artifacts by the eyes of faith or by their spiritual eyes just as Joseph Smith had seen them. The three witnesses were to make their statement so that Joseph Smith would not be destroyed. By the same spiritual power, faith and gift which Smith had the gates of hell would not prevail against the witnesses if they so testified.

³ 1835 Doctrine and Covenants, section 42, page 171, **emphasis added**. There was one known change in wording for the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants. The brother of Jared's two stones or interpreters (spectacles according to Joseph Smith's 1832 account) was considered under the biblical "Urim and Thummim."

The 1830 printed testimony of the three witnesses which when published in the first edition of the Book of Mormon appeared at the end of the book. These three men, Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer and Martin Harris were as stated in the June 1829 revelation under stress with the understanding that the gates of hell would prevail against them unless "you do these last commandments of mine" which was to testify of the things that they were to view. The witnesses were interested parties in relation to the writing and printing of the Book of Mormon. Compared to the 1829 revelation the testimony of the witnesses is not clear in its wording as it was written only about the plates and a reading of it makes it appear as though they saw physical plates. The religious testimony of the three witnesses is as follows:

BE it known unto all nations, kindreds, tongues, and people, unto whom this work shall come, that we, through the grace of God the Father, and our Lord Jesus Christ, have seen the plates which contain this record, which is a record of the people of Nephi, and also of the Lamanites, his brethren, and also of the people of Jared, which came from the tower, of which hath been spoken; and we also know that they have been translated by the gift and power of God, for his voice hath declared it unto us; wherefore we know of a surety, that the work is true. And we also testify that we have seen the engravings which are upon the plates; and they have been shewn unto us by the power of God, and not of man. And we declare with words of soberness, that an Angel of God came down from heaven, and he brought and laid before our eyes, that we beheld and saw the plates, and the engravings thereon; and we know that it is by the grace of God the Father, and our Lord Jesus Christ, that we beheld and bear record that these things are true; and it is marvellous in our eyes: Nevertheless, the voice of the Lord commanded us that we should bear record of it; wherefore, to be obedient unto the commandments of God, we bear testimony of these things. - And we know that if we are faithful in Christ, we shall rid our garments of the blood of all men, and be found spotless before the judgement seat of Christ, and shall dwell with him eternally in the heavens. And honor be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost, which is one God. Amen.

OLIVER COWDERY,
DAVID WHITMER,
MARTIN HARRIS.⁴

The testimony indicates among others things that the three men saw physical plates, they knew they had been translated by the gift and power of God, they saw the engravings thereon, they were shown this by the power of God and not of man and that an angel laid them before their eyes. In order for a testimony of these purported ancient plates to be taken seriously one

⁴ 1830 Book of Mormon. Hubert Howe Bancroft observed, "The objections raised against this testimony are, first, there is no date nor place; second, there are not three separate affidavits, but one testimony signed by three men; third, compare with Smith's revelation *Doctrine and Covenants*, p. 173 [LDS section 17], and it appears that this testimony is drawn up by Smith himself." (Hubert Howe Bancroft, *History of Utah*, 59, footnote 18)

question needs to be asked: Did they make a comparison of the engravings on the plates with the manuscript transcript? If not they in reality did not know that the engravings on the plates contained the record they testified to.⁵ It is probable that Joseph Smith was the one who told them that this record was the same from which his translation came from. The statement that they proclaimed to "all nations, kindreds, tongues, and people" was not brought before any legal official and was not certified in such a manner to the information it contained was correct.

That the revelation of June 1829 existed is evident by the early recollection of Ezra Booth who had joined the Mormon movement and traveled to Missouri with some of the early elders. He wrote in October 1831 of the early version of the commandment to the witnesses:

You have probably read the testimony of the three witnesses appended to the Book of Mormon. These witnesses testify, that an angel appeared to them, and presented them the golden plates, and the voice of God declared it to be a Divine Record. To this they frequently testify, in the presence of large congregations. When in Missouri, I had an opportunity to examine a commandment given to these witnesses, previous to their seeing the plates. They were informed that they should see and hear those things by faith, and then they should testify to the world, as though they had seen and heard, as I see a man, and hear his voice: but after all, it amounts simply to this; that by faith or imagination, they saw the plates and the angel, and by faith or imagination, they heard the voice of the Lord.⁶

Many persons who read the testimony of the three witnesses believe that they saw the physical plates at the time of their experience. But the revelation given to them just prior to their viewing the plates explains that it was a power, faith and gift experience, a spiritual second sight experience. In fact, according to Joseph Smith's history the experience with the three witnesses was a visionary experience with their spiritual eyes.⁷ The June 1829 revelation shows the mindset of the witnesses before viewing the objects mentioned in the revelation. Their testimony does not contain a clear statement of their spiritual eyes viewing old artifacts. Rather their testimony observes a physical nature of one reported relic, the Book of Mormon plates.⁸

⁵ The other eight witnesses state that they were shown the plates by Joseph Smith and claim to have handled the plates. They stated that the plates had the "appearance of gold" and they saw the engravings thereon. Many of the same words of the testimony of the three witnesses are contained in their statement. Since they were viewed the plates as Joseph Smith viewed them, only he could tell them what they looked like. Their statement says, "as many of the leaves as the said Smith has translated, we did handle with our hands."

⁶ Letter of Ezra Booth to Rev. I. Eddy, dated October 24, 1831 and published in the *Ohio Star*, October 27, 1831, 3.

⁷ Joseph Smith's history indicates that the background to the printed testimony were two visions. The first one to Joseph Smith, Oliver Cowdery and David Whitmer and the second vision with Joseph Smith and Martin Harris. See Dean C. Jessee, ed., *The Papers of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989), 1:236-37, 295-97.

⁸ Since Joseph Smith did not use the gold plates to obtain the contexts of his Book of Mormon, the question is often asked why Smith needed additional written testimony from other witnesses

Statements oral or written were made by several persons who said that they saw, lifted and viewed the box that contained the gold plates. Some of these witnesses mentioned that the box and/or plates were at the time covered with a cloth. It is probable that rather than seeing the plates these individuals were permitted to see the outside covering rather than the real object. It appears that this was used by Joseph Smith to produce faith within the individual that Smith indeed had in his possession the plates. This confirms again the importance of the June 1829 revelation to the three witnesses to the Book of Mormon gold plates.

Many who consider their testimony to be correct believe that the three had faith and they would view the plates physically. But if the plates were physical then no one would need faith to view them. The testimony appears to support this idea as it states that they (1) "have seen the plates" and (2) "seen the engravings which are on the plates" and (3) "we beheld and saw the plates and the engravings thereon."

The statement of the three witnesses is not so significant when the persons were to pray with faith to see the plates as the revelation to the witnesses suggests. It was the same when believing and seeing hidden treasures in the earth. The pressure by Joseph Smith to have the witnesses pray for a vision of what was not present helps us understand the mindset of Smith and the witnesses.

If there were no plates then the story of finding them, having custody of them and translating from them would not be factual and accurate. This short study will examine problems relating to real plates not being relied upon to help produce the religious work, the Book of Mormon.

The text of the Book of Mormon relates that its contents were engraved upon plates of gold. These plates were used by Mormon and his son Moroni to write the final version from which Joseph Smith obtained the events recorded for the Book of Mormon.

The claim that these plates were used when Joseph Smith "translated" has major problems. Martin Harris, who had been a scribe from April to June 1828, did not see the plates during this time. When he wanted to be shown them in March 1829, he was promised a view of them.⁹ Joseph Smith wrote that Oliver Cowdery saw them in vision prior to meeting him in April 1829.¹⁰ Emma Smith also a scribe did not see them.¹¹

The problem becomes this - authentic documents could be shown to anyone whether a believer or non-believer. If the plates existed and were exhibited this would not necessarily convert anyone since most individuals would probably want to know if they were translated

who spiritually viewed the plates that contained "a record of the people of Nephi." For additional background on witnesses mentioned in the Book of Mormon, see Brent Lee Metcalfe, ed.; Metcalfe, "The Priority of Mosiah: A Prelude to Book of Mormon Exegesis," *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon: Explorations in Critical Methodology* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1993), 423-25.

⁹ A revelation was given in response to Martin Harris wanting "to know whether Joseph [Smith] had, in his possession, the record of the Nephites" (Book of Commandments 4:1). The text reads in part, "I the Lord am God, and I have given these things unto my servant Joseph" (BC 4:2). See LDS D&C 5:1; RLDS 5:1b, March 1829.

¹⁰ Dean C. Jessee, ed. *The Papers of Joseph Smith: Autobiographical and Historical Writings* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989) 1:10.

¹¹ LDS D&C 25:4; RLDS 24:1, July 1830.

correctly. By viewing the plates no one would have sound reason to doubt their existence and the story of how they were obtained would at least be a good possibility. Not all of Joseph Smith's associates were shown the plates, many later recalled they handled something which was contained in a box or under a cloth or in a pillowcase but they did not see the actual artifact. Why include a testimony in a book which asks you to accept the book by faith?¹²

Do purported ancient documents need to be in actual existence to produce a text? Can a person render the correct meaning from an ancient document without being fluent with language skills? The Book of Mormon is one example where no physical document was needed. Another example during the time period when the Book of Mormon was produced is a parchment written by John the Beloved.¹³ Though it was claimed to have been written anciently it was not present for Joseph Smith to see. In fact if the document was in the Greek language it would not matter since Smith did not have knowledge of the language. Joseph Smith said that he translated the parchment and he also said he translated the gold plates.

The second major project that Joseph Smith worked on was his expansion and revision of the Bible. When he first dictated the text of Genesis it was represented to be what Moses wrote. It became a new translation or revision of the King James Version of the Bible.

When some Egyptian papyri were purchased in 1835, Joseph Smith used some of the writing to produce his "translation." Smith compared the Book of Mormon characters with the Egyptian writing on the papyri.¹⁴ He dictated an Egyptian Alphabet and soon after the text of part of his "Book of Abraham." Later in 1842 Joseph Smith tried to restore sections of three Egyptian drawings. The restorations were published and are in the LDS scripture titled the Pearl of Great Price.¹⁵

The problem in this case is that by examination of the original papyrus of Facsimile No. 1, a sketch of modified Facsimile No. 2, and study of Facsimile No. 3 show that there were alterations in portions of the drawings where some of the Egyptian documents were damaged. The purpose appears to make it look like these documents are complete reproductions. It appears that Smith tried to restore the documents but they are not according to what would have been on them in the first place.

In 1843 Joseph Smith represented a modern forgery to be an ancient work. These were known as the Kinderhook Plates.¹⁶

All of the above examples of trying to reproduce what "ancient" writings meant have serious problems with them. Whether by linguistic learning (where it appears there was none) or

¹² LDS and RLDS Moroni 10:4-5. Prayer is supposed to help determine whether the Book of Mormon is true (correct in what it says). Prayer by faith is how the witnesses were to prepare themselves to view the plates.

¹³ Book of Commandments 6:1; heading of LDS and RLDS D&C 7, April 1829.

¹⁴ Oliver Cowdery to William Frye, December 22, 1835, cited in *Messenger and Advocate* 2 (December 1835):235.

¹⁵ The copies of the Egyptian drawings were called facsimiles but they were not accurate reproductions of how the original document appeared when drawn anciently. They are modified facsimiles.

¹⁶ William Clayton Journal, entry of May 1, 1843, as cited in James B. Allen, *No Toil Nor Labor Fear: The Story of William Clayton* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2002), 393; also broadside titled "Discovery of the Brass Plates," dated June 24, 1843.

by inspired revelation, the English text produced and dictated by Joseph Smith reproduces something other than what the documents would have contained at the time period when they were claimed to have been originally written.

Joseph Smith's story of what he does and how he does it appears to be questionable. It is known for example that the three witnesses to the Book of Mormon were influenced by Joseph Smith prior to their vision of the plates.¹⁷ When in 1835 they were called to choose the first twelve apostles for their church two of the witnesses were pressured to change one of their choices for a brother of Joseph Smith.¹⁸ Prayer can be changed by other pressures at the time. Prayer is not a guide which will never fail. Prayer can be used to make persons ask questions which normally they would not do.

If there was something tangible to feel and handle like the Book of Mormon plates, one would naturally expect them to be used by Joseph Smith when dictating the text. Faith to pray about seeing plates or faith to feel an object in which a person believes in has serious problems. Can a vision produce physical plates? Does handling a box with something in it (but without examining its contents) tell you what that something is? What about an object covered with a cloth?

To pray to see the plates or to pray for inspired guidance on what to do under certain circumstances as has been stated is not an infallible rule. A good example is the revelation which Joseph Smith received to sell a copyright to the Book of Mormon in Canada. Oliver Cowdery and Hiram Page went to Kingston, Canada after being told they would be successful in their endeavor. They made the trip and were treated well but they were not able to accomplish the goal of their mission.¹⁹ They were told on returning "Some revelations are of God: some revelations are of man: and some revelations are of the devil."²⁰

If the plates were not used for the text of the Book of Mormon, then the story told by Joseph Smith that they were revealed to him years earlier would not mean anything since he did not have plates in his possession. Also, if the plates were not physical but spiritual and they were not used for the text of the Book of Mormon then his story should not be believed.

If the plates were visionary then there is no use of the testimony of witnesses. Certainly, the problem is we do not need the testimony of any witness if the plates were not used. The problem is with Joseph Smith's story.

Joseph Smith never used the contents of the plates. By not using the content of the plates then why would witnesses need to say that they saw the plates "which contained this record"? The evidence from all sources points to there being no physical plates in existence contrary to the

¹⁷ LDS D&C 17; RLDS D&C 15.

¹⁸ Letter of Oliver Cowdery to Brigham Young, February 27, 1848 cited in Stanley R. Gunn, *Oliver Cowdery Second Elder and Scribe* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1962), 268. Interview of David Whitmer by Zenas H. Gurley, Jr., January 14, 1885, LDS archives. See Lyndon W. Cook, ed., *David Whitmer Interviews: A Restoration Witness* (Orem, Utah: Grandin Book Co., 1991), 157.

¹⁹ Letter of Hiram Page to William E. McLellin, February 2, 1848, typescript in Community of Christ Archives, Independence, Missouri.

²⁰ David Whitmer, *An Address to All Believers in Christ* (Richmond, MO: author, 1887), 31. See similar wording in Book of Commandments 49:9 (March 1831); LDS Doctrine and Covenants 46:7; RLDS Doctrine and Covenants 46:3.

story told by Joseph Smith. The Book of Mormon text is not based upon any ancient record found by Smith. What Joseph Smith said concerning how he found the physical plates, that he used the plates and showed the same plates to witnesses is not correct. The story can not be depended upon.

The Book of Mormon was not based upon an ancient record recovered by Joseph Smith. The Book of Mormon should not be accepted as a record based upon the non-existent plates. The book came from the mind of Joseph Smith with material from the Bible and religious ideas which he held at the time it was composed. It does not have to be accepted as an authentic artifact of antiquity.

It is improbable that an angel came to Joseph Smith and had the location of the depository where the gold plates revealed to him if the plates were not needed to produce the text.

How can one explain the published testimony of the witnesses to the Book of Mormon that they saw and handled the plates? It can be explained by observing that what was recorded to be physical plates were to the witnesses seen by their spiritual eyes and would be spiritual plates. The mindset of the witnesses would account for them viewing and lifting the plates in separate visions and the spiritual experience was to them as though the plates were in actual physical existence for them to see and handle while in their viewing state.

Many scholars have realized that there are problems regarding the claim that it is a history of peoples of ancient America that would place the Book of Mormon and its people in a Christian setting.

To begin, the Book of Mormon states it is an account of what actually happened to those mentioned in the book otherwise it would be a piece of fiction. This is the issue in regard to the questions which have been raised concerning the book. If this question can be solved only in part it would bring a new look on a book which has been considered as a guide of how ancient people lived and practiced their religion.

The Book of Mormon not only Christianizes the Old Testament portion of the work, but incorporates an interpretation that goes far beyond what the biblical text actually says. Most modern versions of the Bible permit the Old Testament to stand on its own and do not compromise its integrity by transforming it into a Christian product. Gordon Irving has stated it correctly:

... Mormons naturally developed a view of the past which held that the gospel of Christ as presented in the New Testament had been preached to all men since the beginning of the world and that whenever God's church had existed on earth, it had enjoyed the same gifts as the apostolic church. The order set up in Jesus's day was thus projected both backward to Adam and forward in time to the Mormon themselves and on beyond to the Millennium. This much was accepted by all Mormons, although individuals might differ somewhat as to details and implications of the idea.²¹

²¹ Gordon I. Irving, "Mormonism and the Bible, 1832-1838," (Senior Honors Project Summary, University of Utah, August 1972), 4-5; see also *Brigham Young University Studies* 13 (Summer 1973):474.

By dictating the Book of Mormon Joseph Smith Jr. expressed some of his religious beliefs through the text of the book. A few examples are: (1) America is a promised land, a land of liberty, a Zion; (2) the Bible was brought to America; (3) the Bible was brought to the Indians; (4) the ordinance of baptism is to be performed by immersion; (5) infants are not to be baptized; (6) the name of the church is to be the Church of Christ; (7) Hebrew/Israelite origin of American Indians; (8) the book of Isaiah was important to the Indians; (9) visit of Christ to America after his crucifixion; (10) the Sermon on the Mount used to help document this event; (11) there is one God; (12) current Christian churches were corrupt and have false teachers and doctrines; (13) a New Jerusalem is to be built in America with the help of the Indians; (14) Christianity existed in America prior to the birth of Christ; (15) revival experiences; (16) the Bible has been tampered with; (17) Isaiah 29 a prediction of the Book of Mormon; (18) a seer to be raised up by the name of Joseph, after his father's name. These are some of the many ideas embodied in the text of the 1830 Book of Mormon.

After the claim of finding gold plates, the plates were not known to have been used by Smith in the dictation process. None of the scribes or any one of the eleven witnesses of the Book of Mormon saw physical plates in the possession of Joseph Smith Jr. while he was dictating the text of the book.

If the plates were not used in the dictation process, as all careful evidence and research indicates, then there would be no point in having witnesses to what was never used for the text of the Book of Mormon. If the text was to have been revealed by revelation, then no plates were needed.

While some have considered the Book of Mormon to be an ancient record, we today can look at the book in light of modern research. It is because the Book of Mormon's historical, religious, and doctrinal ideas are known to be drawn from a nineteenth century setting rather than an ancient setting that a new position can be made. The teachings of the Book of Mormon, archeology, geography, Hill Cumorah, gold plates, and angel all go together. With the new understanding the Book of Mormon can now be put on a shelf and take its place as an artifact of the Restoration movement.