

“Sight and Power to Translate”

Revelatory Translation, Seership, and Joseph Smith’s Scriptural Productions

Stephen O. Smoot

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The Lord, in his great mercy, has condescended to give miraculous evidence to establish the Divine Authenticity of that great and glorious revelation—the Book of Mormon.¹

In a talk delivered during the April 2020 General Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Elder Ulisses Soares of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles reaffirmed a core principle of Latter-day Saint faith: that the early visionary experiences of Joseph Smith were real and that the translation of the Book of Mormon was a miracle.² Elder Soares stated on that occasion:

This sacred ancient record was not “translated” in the traditional way that scholars would translate ancient texts by learning an ancient language. We ought to look at the process more like a “revelation” with the aid of physical instruments provided by the Lord, as opposed to a “translation” by one with knowledge of languages. Joseph Smith declared that through God’s power he “translated the Book of Mormon from [hieroglyphs], the knowledge of which was lost to the world, in which wonderful event [he] stood alone, an unlearned youth, to combat the

1. Orson Pratt, *Divine Authenticity of the Book of Mormon* (Liverpool, 1850–51), 68.

2. Ulisses Soares, “The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon,” *Ensign*, May 2020, 32–35.

worldly wisdom and multiplied ignorance of eighteen centuries, with a new revelation.” The Lord’s help in the translation of the plates—or revelation, so to speak—is also evident when considering the miraculously short time Joseph Smith took to translate them.³

Nearly six decades earlier, Elder Bruce R. McConkie, then a member of the First Quorum of the Seventy, gave a talk in the April 1964 General Conference in which he made a similar affirmation. Reflecting on the events following the First Vision, Elder McConkie taught: “In due course, amid testings and trials, other revelations came [to Joseph Smith]. The Book of Mormon was revealed, translated, and published as a new witness of Christ and his gospel—an inspired record of God’s dealings with the ancient inhabitants of America. . . . New light and knowledge, new revelation, to meet all the challenges of a modern world, were added to the canon of scripture.”⁴

Elder Soares’s comment on the coming forth of the Book of Mormon—like Elder McConkie’s before him—illustrates a persistent question central to Joseph Smith’s scriptural contributions: Should these texts be understood primarily as revelations or translations? The tension bound up in this question arises mainly from the Prophet’s method of translation that defied conventional standards and methods, and is exemplified in two recent publications: *Producing Ancient Scripture: Joseph Smith’s Translation Projects in the Development of Mormon Christianity* and *Joseph Smith’s Translation: The Words and Worlds of Early Mormonism*. That two separate academic presses have published these books addressing this tension underscores the enduring relevance of this topic.⁵

3. Soares, “Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon,” 33, citing “History, 1838–1856, Volume E-1 [1 July 1843–30 April 1844],” 1775, Joseph Smith Papers, Church Historian’s Press, accessed June 18, 2025, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-e-1-1-july-1843-30-april-1844/147>; and “Letter to James Arlington Bennet, 13 November 1843,” in *Documents, Volume 13: August–December 1843*, ed. Christian K. Heimbürger, Jeffrey D. Mahas, Brent M. Rogers, Mason K. Allred, J. Chase Kirkham, and Matthew S. McBride, Joseph Smith Papers (Church Historian’s Press, 2022), 258–70, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-to-james-arlington-bennet-13-november-1843/1>.

4. Bruce R. McConkie, in *One Hundred Thirty-Fourth Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1964), 26–27.

5. Michael Hubbard MacKay, Mark Ashurst-McGee, Brian M. Hauglid, eds., *Producing Ancient Scripture: Joseph Smith’s Translation Projects in the Development of Mormon Christianity* (University of Utah Press, 2020); Samuel Morris Brown, *Joseph Smith’s Translation: The Words and Worlds of Early Mormonism* (Oxford University Press, 2020).

This paper examines the documentary record surrounding the production of Joseph Smith's scriptural texts to shed light on how he and early Latter-day Saints understood his role as a seer and his divine calling as a translator. It focuses on the translation of the Book of Mormon (1828–1829), including the revelations tied to its production, and the creation of the book of Abraham (1835–1842). I argue that the modern dichotomy of revelation versus translation is largely an external framework imposed on Joseph Smith's conceptualization of these texts and his role in producing them. For Joseph and the early Saints, revelation and translation were nearly synonymous because both categories converged within his role as a seer.

The Translation of the Book of Mormon

By Joseph Smith's own declaration, the Book of Mormon is the keystone of the Latter-day Saint faith.⁶ This makes it striking and perhaps even counterintuitive how reserved Joseph was in describing the process of rendering the text. During an 1831 conference of elders in Ohio, Hyrum Smith solicited "information of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon" from his brother, but the Prophet demurred, stating "that it was not intended to tell the world all the particulars of the coming forth of the book of Mormon."⁷

While Joseph occasionally recounted aspects of the book's origin, his descriptions were characteristically brief. In an 1833 letter to Noah Saxton,⁸ an 1843 letter to James Arlington Bennet,⁹ and in accounts

6. "Remarks, 28 November 1841," 112, Joseph Smith Papers, Church Historian's Press, accessed June 18, 2025, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/remarks-28-november-1841/1>. "Sunday, I spent the day at Brigham Young's in the company of Joseph Smith and the Twelve, conversing on a variety of subjects. It was an interesting day. Elder Joseph Fielding was present, he having been in England for four years. We also met with a number of English brethren. Joseph remarked that the Book of Mormon was the most correct of any book on earth and the keystone of our religion, and that a man would get nearer to God by abiding by its precepts than by any other book." The spelling, punctuation, and grammar of manuscript sources in this paper have been standardized, whereas published historical sources are quoted in their original form.

7. "Minutes, 25–26 October 1831," in *Documents, Volume 2: July 1831–January 1833*, ed. Matthew C. Godfrey, Mark Ashurst-McGee, Grant Underwood, Robert J. Woodford, and William G. Hartley, Joseph Smith Papers (Church Historian's Press, 2013), 84, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/minutes-25-26-october-1831/4>.

8. "Letter to Noah C. Saxton, 4 January 1833," in Godfrey, and others, eds., *Documents, Volume 2*, 354.

9. "Letter to James Arlington Bennet, 13 November 1843," 261.

published in 1838 and 1842,¹⁰ he described the translation as being accomplished through “the gift and power of God” with the aid of divinely prepared stones—a sentiment he also expressed in the preface to the 1830 first edition of the Book of Mormon.¹¹ At the same time, Joseph sometimes spoke of the Book of Mormon as the product of inspiration. In an 1840 discourse, he told a crowd that the book “was communicated to him, *direct from Heaven*.” The auditor of the speech, Matthew L. Davis, recorded that while Joseph claimed to be the “Author” of the book in a technical sense, “the idea that he wished to impress was, that he had penned it as dictated by God.”¹²

By piecing together firsthand statements from the Prophet and accounts from those who assisted in the translation and publication of the text, historians have reconstructed a reasonably reliable account of the miraculous events surrounding the translation.¹³ It is not the purpose of

10. “Elders’ Journal, July 1838,” 42, Joseph Smith Papers, Church Historian’s Press, accessed June 18, 2025, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/elders-journal-july-1838/10>; “‘Church History,’ 1 March 1842,” in *Documents, Volume 9: December 1841–April 1842*, ed. Alex D. Smith, Christian K. Heimburger, and Christopher James Blythe, Joseph Smith Papers (Church Historian’s Press, 2019), 183, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/times-and-seasons-1-march-1842/5#facts>.

11. Joseph Smith Junior, *The Book of Mormon: An Account Written by the Hand of Mormon, upon Plates Taken from the Plates of Nephi* (Palmyra, 1830), iii, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/book-of-mormon-1830/9>.

12. “Discourse, 5 February 1840,” in *Documents, Volume 7: September 1839–January 1841*, ed. Matthew C. Godfrey, Spencer W. McBride, Alex D. Smith, and Christopher James Blythe, Joseph Smith Papers (Church Historian’s Press, 2017), 179, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-5-february-1840/3>, emphasis original. The editors of the Joseph Smith Papers note that the Prophet’s use of the term “author” for the Book of Mormon appears to address claims that he either fabricated the text or borrowed it from another source. Indeed, to meet copyright requirements, the 1830 first edition of the Book of Mormon identified Joseph Smith as its “Author and Proprietor.” See Miriam A. Smith and John W. Welch, “Joseph Smith: ‘Author and Proprietor,’” in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon: A Decade of New Research*, ed. John W. Welch (Deseret Book, 1992), 154–57; Nathaniel Hinckley Wadsworth, “Copyright Laws and the 1830 Book of Mormon,” *BYU Studies* 45, no. 3 (2006): 77–96; and Royal Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon, Part One: 1 Nephi–2 Nephi 10* (Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2014), 35–36. See also “Oliver Cowdery’s Letter to Cornelius C. Blatchly, November 9, 1829,” in *A Documentary History of the Book of Mormon*, ed. Larry E. Morris (Oxford University Press, 2019), 374–75, for Oliver Cowdery’s explanation of why Joseph is identified as the Book of Mormon’s “author” in the first edition.

13. For accessible accounts, see Brant A. Gardner, *The Gift and Power: Translating the Book of Mormon* (Greg Kofford Books, 2007); Michael Hubbard MacKay and Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, *From Darkness unto Light: Joseph Smith’s Translation and Publication of the Book of Mormon* (Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Deseret

this article to revisit those details, which are already well known. Instead, to better understand what Joseph meant when he said he translated the Book of Mormon "by the gift and power of God," I will examine the revelations he received during the translation process. These revelations offer valuable insights into how Joseph and his collaborators understood his role as a translator of new scripture.

Translation as a Provisional Gift (Sections 3, 5, and 10)

As early as July 1828, Joseph Smith's revelations associated with the production of the Book of Mormon repeatedly emphasized that God had granted him both a "gift" and a "power" to translate the record. Following Martin Harris's loss of the 116 pages, the revelation now canonized as section 3 in the Doctrine and Covenants warned that Joseph's "right to Translate" was in jeopardy unless he repented.¹⁴ In the 1835 first edition of the Doctrine and Covenants, edited under Joseph's direction, this language was revised to state that "God had given [him] s[i]ght and power to translate."¹⁵ This change explicitly introduced seeric terminology, linking the concepts of translation and seership in Joseph's thinking (see current D&C 3:12).

Another revelation tied to the loss of the manuscript, now section 10, explained that with the loss of the pages, Joseph also "lost [his] gift." His "mind became darkened," according to this revelation, and the "power given unto [him] to translate, by the means of the Urim and Thummim," was depleted. Only through divine grace and Joseph's renewed

Book, 2015); John W. Welch, "Timing the Translation of the Book of Mormon: 'Days [and Hours] Never to Be Forgotten,'" *BYU Studies Quarterly* 57, no. 4 (2018): 11–50; and Gerrit J. Dirkmaat and Michael Hubbard MacKay, *Let's Talk about the Translation of the Book of Mormon* (Deseret Book, 2023). For a compilation of relevant primary sources related to the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, see Morris, ed., *Documentary History of the Book of Mormon*; John W. Welch, "Documents of the Translation of the Book of Mormon," in *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations, 1820–1844*, ed. John W. Welch, 2nd ed. (Brigham Young University Press; Deseret Book, 2017), 126–227.

14. "Revelation, July 1828 [D&C 3]," in *Documents, Volume 1: July 1828–June 1831*, ed. Michael Hubbard MacKay, Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, Grant Underwood, Robert J. Woodford, and William G. Hartley, *Joseph Smith Papers* (Church Historian's Press, 2013), 8, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/revelation-july-1828-dc-3/2#facts>.

15. Joseph Smith Junior, Oliver Cowdery, Sidney Rigdon, Frederick G. Williams, *Doctrine and Covenants of the Church of the Latter Day Saints: Carefully Selected from the Revelations of God* (Kirtland, Ohio, 1835), 157, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/doctrine-and-covenants-1835/165>, hereafter cited as *Doctrine and Covenants* (1835).

faithfulness was this power “restored unto [him] again,” enabling him to “continue on unto the finishing of the remainder of the work of translation” (see current D&C 10:1–3).¹⁶

The significance of these two revelations is clear: through disobedience, the Prophet’s ability to translate was temporarily withdrawn. This underscores that Joseph’s ability—his “gift”—to translate was not inherent but was bestowed from beyond himself. Only through divine power could Joseph effectively use the Urim and Thummim or the seer stone in translating the plates.¹⁷ Without this heavenly power, the instruments were ineffective. In these revelations, the “gift” of seership and the divine “power” of the stones used in the translation were given by God to Joseph, and were not innate in the young man.

This idea is further supported by David Whitmer’s account of another incident during the translation when Joseph’s ability as a seer was briefly lost and then restored. Whitmer recalled:

[Joseph] was a religious and straightforward man. He had to be; for he was illiterate and he could do nothing of himself. He *had* to trust in God. He could not translate unless he was humble and possessed the right feelings towards every one. To illustrate, so you can see. One morning when he 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

16. *Doctrine and Covenants* (1835), 163.

17. Readers today must recognize that our earliest sources do not always clearly distinguish between the Nephite “interpreters” buried with the plates (Mosiah 8:19; 28:20; Alma 37:24–25)—a pair of transparent stones set in a metal frame resembling spectacles, later called the Urim and Thummim (for example, JS–H 1:35, 42, 52)—and Joseph Smith’s chocolate-colored, oval-shaped seer stone, which he discovered as a young man and also used in translating the record. Some of Joseph’s contemporaries occasionally referred to the brown stone as the Urim and Thummim. For example, Wilford Woodruff, “Journal (January 1, 1841–December 31, 1842),” December 27, 1841, Wilford Woodruff Papers, accessed June 27, 2025, <https://wilfordwoodruffpapers.org/p/LZg>, adding to the ambiguity. Further complicating matters, the Nephite “interpreters” functioned as seer stones, meaning that “both the interpreters and the single stone apparently functioned in the same way and both were used to translate the Book of Mormon.” Michael Hubbard Mackay and Nicholas J. Frederick, *Joseph Smith’s Seer Stones* (Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Deseret Book, 2016), 50. Therefore, we must be cautious in assuming that every use of the term Urim and Thummim by Joseph or his contemporaries necessarily referred to the Nephite interpreters. Careful attention to context and historical details is essential in determining which instrument is being described in each instance.

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.¹⁸

A revelation received in March 1829 declared that Joseph had "A gift to translate the Book,"¹⁹ referring, as clarified in the printed version, to the plates of the Book of Mormon. The Lord described this as "the first gift that I bestowed upon [Joseph]" (see current D&C 5:4).²⁰ The revelation warned that if Joseph stepped beyond what God commanded him during the course of the translation, then the young seer would "have no more gift," and God "will take away the things which" he had entrusted to him (see current v. 31).²¹

Translation as Revelation (Sections 6 and 8)

One month later, a revelation jointly addressed to Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery extended this sacred power to the Prophet's newly called scribe, affirming that he too had been granted "a gift" that was "sacred" and came "from above." By exercising this gift, the revelation promised that the two men would be "enlightened by the Spirit of truth," and uncover divine "mysteries" together (see current D&C 6:10–11, 15).²²

A revelation received in April 1829, now canonized as section 8 of the Doctrine and Covenants, makes this connection plain. The Lord assured Cowdery that he would "receive a knowledge of whatsoever things you shall ask with an honest heart," including "a knowledge concerning the engraveings [*sic*] of old Records which are ancient which contain those parts of my Scriptures of which hath been spoken by the manifestation of my Spirit." Cowdery was told that such knowledge would come "in your mind & in your heart by the Holy Ghost which shall come upon you & . . . dwell in your heart." This "spirit of Revelation," as the text calls it, would, "according to [Oliver's] faith," ultimately empower him

18. "Letter from Elder W. H. Kelley," *Saints' Herald* 29, no. 5 (March 1, 1882): 68, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/303f8d3f-6090-4cdf-862e-eb90dea38f83/0/3>, emphasis original.

19. "Revelation, March 1829 [D&C 5]," in MacKay, and others, eds., *Documents, Volume 1*, 16, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/revelation-march-1829-dc-5/1#facts>.

20. *Doctrine and Covenants* (1835), 158.

21. *Doctrine and Covenants* (1835), 160.

22. *Doctrine and Covenants* (1835), 109. See also current *Doctrine and Covenants* 8:1–3, 11.

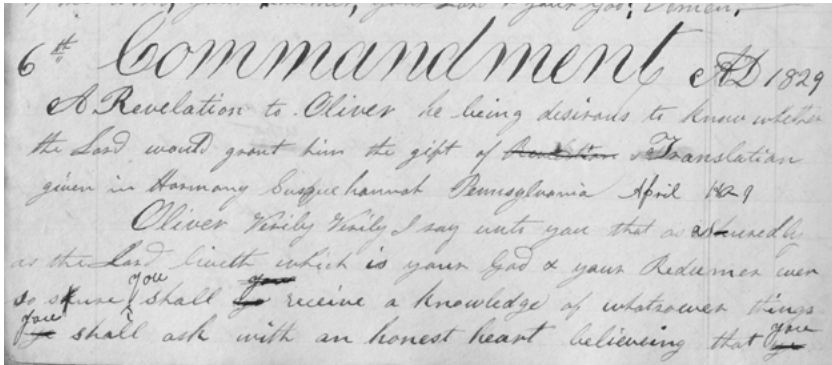


FIGURE 1. “Revelation, April 1829–B [D&C 8],” 45, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/revelation-april-1829-b-dc-8/1>. Handwriting of John Whitmer. Courtesy Church History Library.

to “Translate all those ancient Records which have been hid up which are Sacred.”²³

It is little wonder, then, that John Whitmer, in his manuscript copy of this revelation, hesitated on whether to describe Oliver’s gift as one of “revelation” or “translation.” This ambivalence is captured in a revealing strikethrough (fig. 1): “A Revelation to Oliver [Cowdery] he being desirous to know whether the Lord would grant him the gift of ~~Revelation & th~~ Translation given in Harmony Susquehanna Pennsylvania April 1829.”²⁴

Translation as Power (section 20)

The “Articles and Covenants” of the young Church of Christ, now section 20 of the Doctrine and Covenants, provides one of the earliest accounts of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon and underscores the conceptual equivalence of translation and revelation in early Latter-day Saint thought. The earliest canonical account prepared by Joseph Smith reads:

After it was truly manifested unto this first elder that he had received a remission of his sins he was entangled again in the vanities of the world;

23. “Revelation, April 1829–B [D&C 8],” in MacKay, and others, eds., *Documents*, Volume 1, 46–47, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/revelation-april-1829-b-dc-8/1#facts>.

24. “Revelation, April 1829–B [D&C 8],” 45, spelling original; compare *Doctrine and Covenants* (1835), 161.

but after repenting, and humbling himself, sincerely, through faith God ministered unto him by an holy angel whose countenance was as lightning, and whose garments were pure and white above all other whiteness, and gave unto him commandments [*sic*] which inspired him, and gave him power from on high, by the means which were before prepared, to translate the book of Mormon, which contains a record of a fallen people, and the fulness of the gospel of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles, and to the Jews also, which was given by inspiration, and is confirmed to others by the ministering of angels, and is declared unto the world by them, proving to the world that the holy scriptures are true, and that God does inspire men and call them to his holy work in this age and generation, as well as in generations of old, thereby showing that he is the same God yesterday, to-day, and forever.—Amen.²⁵

This significant passage from the 1835 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants encapsulates the dynamic discussed above. It describes Joseph receiving “power from on high, by the means which were before prepared”—a reference to the translation instruments—to translate the Book of Mormon. The passage further characterizes the “record of a fallen people” as being “given by inspiration.” It speaks of the ministering of angels, including the angel who revealed himself to Joseph Smith and others who confirm and declare the book. According to this text, the revelatory power tied to Joseph’s seer office is bidirectional. It flows inwardly, giving Joseph power to produce the book of scripture, and outwardly, impacting those who read it “by the ministering of angels . . . proving to the world that the holy scriptures are true, and that God does inspire men and call them to his holy work in this age and generation, as well as in generations of old, [and] thereby showing that he is the same God yesterday, today, and forever” (D&C 20:10–12).

Early Public Perceptions of Translation as Revelation

The reaction of Joseph Smith’s contemporaries to his claims reveals that he was not alone in conceptually merging the phenomena of receiving new revelation and translating an ancient book. In an 1830 letter, minister Diedrich Willers, who was familiar with the Whitmer family through their membership in the German Reformed Church, articulated an important early understanding of the bold claims made by the young seer:

25. *Doctrine and Covenants* (1835), 77, emphasis added. See also current *Doctrine and Covenants* 20:5–12.

The Angel indicated that the Lord destined him to translate these things into English from the ancient language, that under these plates were hidden spectacles, without which he could not translate these plates, that by using these spectacles, he (Smith) would be in a position to read these ancient languages, which he had never studied, *and that the Holy Ghost would reveal to him the translation in the English language*. Therefore, he (Smith) proceeded to Manchester township, Ontario County, and found everything as described, the plates buried next to the spectacles in the earth, and soon he completed the translation of this work.²⁶

That same year, the *Observer and Telegraph*, based in Hudson, Ohio, reported the missionary efforts of Oliver Cowdery and other Latter-day Saint missionaries in the area. A correspondent identified as “A. S.” wrote, “They are preaching and teaching a species of Religion we are not all prepared to embrace.”²⁷ The report continued: “These men have brought with them copies of a Book, known in this region by the name of the ‘Golden Bible,’ or, as it is learned on its title-page, ‘The Book of Mormon.’ They solemnly affirm, that its contents were given by Divine inspiration.” According to the report, Cowdery and his companions preached that “in or near the township of Palmyra, Ontario Co. N. Y. . . . an Angel appeared to a certain Joseph Smith residing in that place, who, they say, was a poor, ignorant, illiterate man, and made no pretensions to religion of any kind. . . . They affirm that the said Smith obeyed the heavenly messenger, when lo! a new Revelation—the Golden Bible was discovered!” The writer then summarized Cowdery’s account of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon.

Although a secondhand report that viewed this new “species of Religion” as delusional and blasphemous, requiring swift action to stem its spread, the language in the description (apart from its editorial skepticism) aligns with accounts from Latter-day Saint sources, including those from Joseph Smith himself. This consistency lends reliability to the report as a reflection of how early Latter-day Saints conceptualized and described the Book of Mormon to others.

According to the narrative given by one of these disciples—Oliver Cowdery—at their late exhibition in Kirtland, this pretended Revelation

26. “Diedrich Willers’s Letter to Rev. L. Mayer and D. Young, June 18, 1830, Extract,” in Morris, *Documentary History of the Book of Mormon*, 404–5, emphasis added. See also D. Michael Quinn, trans. and ed., “The First Months of Mormonism: A Contemporary View by Rev. Diedrich Willers,” *New York History* 54, no. 3 (July 1973): 317–33.

27. “*Observer and Telegraph* Articles, November 18, 1830,” in Morris, *Documentary History of the Book of Mormon*, 385.

was written on golden plates, or something resembling golden plates, of the thickness of tin—7 inches in length, 6 inches in breadth, and a pile about 6 inches deep. None among the most learned in the United States could read, and interpret the hand-writing, (save one, and he could decipher but a few lines correctly,) excepting this ignoramus, Joseph Smith, Jr. To him, they say, was given the spirit of interpretation; but he was ignorant of the art of writing, he employed this Oliver Cowdery and others to write, while he read, interpreted, and translated this mighty Revelation.²⁸

Throughout the report, the *Observer and Telegraph's* informant emphasizes how Oliver Cowdery and his fellow missionaries described the Book of Mormon as a "new Revelation," or a "Divine Revelation," given by "Divine inspiration."²⁹ They affirmed that "its contents were . . . written by prophets of the Most High from a period of 600 years before, to that of some hundred years after our blessed Saviour's advent" and had been "deposited by Divine command below the surface of the ground."³⁰ Furthermore, as summarized by the report, "This new Revelation, they say is especially designed for the benefit, or rather for the christianizing of the Aborigines of America; who, as they affirm, are a part of the tribe of Manasseh, and whose ancestors landed on the coast of Chili 600 years before the coming of Christ, and from them descended all the Indians of America."³¹ This account offers a valuable glimpse into how the earliest Latter-day Saint missionaries—including Oliver Cowdery who helped produce the book—presented the Book of Mormon to the public: an ancient record written by divinely inspired prophets, revealed through a modern prophet, and translated by the power of revelation.

The disenchanted Ezra Booth, writing in November 1831, offered another early (albeit openly hostile) depiction of Latter-day Saint beliefs about the Book of Mormon by attributing the following declaration to a stereotypical "Mormonite" missionary: "The Book of Mormon which I hold in my hand, is a Divine Revalation [*sic*], and the very thing we need, to burst the cloud and remove the darkness, which has long surrounded the mysterious and degraded aborigines [of America]."³²

28. "Observer and Telegraph Articles, November 18, 1830," 385.

29. "Observer and Telegraph Articles, November 18, 1830," 386.

30. "Observer and Telegraph Articles, November 18, 1830," 385.

31. "Observer and Telegraph Articles, November 18, 1830," 386.

32. Ezra Booth, "Mormonism No. VIII," *Painesville (Ohio) Telegraph*, December 20, 1831, [image 2], Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/28359d83-66f6-49df-929c-0bf99e8339>

Booth's portrayal of this missionary's declaration aligns with other contemporary accounts, confirming it was not mere caricature.

For example, John Whitmer, one of the Eight Witnesses, testified in 1830 that he had personally handled "as many of the leaves as the said Smith has translated."³³ Six years after this declaration, Whitmer comfortably used "revelation" to describe the book. In an 1836 editorial, he expressed "no hesitancy" in declaring that the Book of Mormon was "a revelation from God" and affirmed that he could "with all confidence . . . [sign his] name to it as such."³⁴

Another early convert, Harrison Burgess, recalled being convinced of the Book of Mormon's divine origin after hearing Simeon Carter preach in July 1832. Yet, the following spring, Burgess experienced a crisis of faith, writing that his "mind became perplexed and darkened" and that he was "so tormented in spirit" that he retreated into the woods to pray. During this anguished moment, Burgess recounted that "a glorious personage clothed in white stood before me and exhibited to my view the plates, from which the Book of Mormon was taken." Reassured of the Book of Mormon's authenticity, Burgess's faith was renewed.³⁵

Joseph's claim to have translated the Book of Mormon through divine revelation led other early readers to use the terms *translation* and *revelation* almost interchangeably when describing the book. Phineas Young's recollection of his first encounter with the Book of Mormon stresses this point. Young recounted:

In April, 1830, having received the Book of Mormon, as I was on my way home from the town of Lima, where I had been to preach, I stopped at the house of a man by the name of Tomlinson, to get some dinner. While engaged in conversation with the family, a young man came in, and walking across the room to where I was sitting, held a book towards me,

63/0/1; E. D. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled* [. . .] (Painesville, Ohio, 1834), 210–11. See also H. Michael Marquardt, "Ezra Booth on Early Mormonism: A Look at His 1831 Letters," *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 28 (2008): 65–87.

33. "Appendix 5: Testimony of Eight Witnesses, Late June 1829," in MacKay, and others, eds., *Documents, Volume 1*, 387, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/appendix-5-testimony-of-eight-witnesses-late-june-1829/1#facts>.

34. John Whitmer, "Address," *Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate*, March 1836, 286, Mormon Publications: 19th and 20th Centuries, Digital Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, accessed October 13, 2025, <https://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/digital/collection/NCMPI820-1846/id/9754/rec/2>.

35. Harrison Burgess, "A Short Sketch of the Life of Harrison Burgess, son of William and Violaty Burgess," 1–2 [images 4–5], Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/dfab06d0-8973-4207-8299-1c7e874feeb9/0/0>.

saying,—“There is a book, sir, I wish you to read.” The thing appeared so novel to me that for a moment I hesitated, saying,—“Pray, sir, what book have you?” “The Book of Mormon, or, as it is called by some, the Golden Bible.” “Ah, sir, then it purports to be a revelation.” “Yes,” said he, “it is a revelation from God.” I took the book, and by his request looked at the testimony of the witnesses. Said he, “If you will read this book with a prayerful heart, and ask God to give you a witness, you will know of the truth of this work.” I told him I would do so, and then asked him his name. He said his name was Samuel H. Smith. “Ah,” said I, “you are one of the witnesses.” “Yes,” said he, “I know the book to be a revelation from God, translated by the gift and power of the Holy Ghost, and that my brother Joseph Smith, jun., is a Prophet, Seer and Revelator.”³⁶

By his own account, Phineas Young, after reading the Book of Mormon and receiving a divine witness of its truth, publicly affirmed to an eager crowd “that [the Book of Mormon] was a revelation from God, translated from the Reformed Egyptian language by Joseph Smith, jun., by the gift and power of God.”³⁷ Young’s testimony demonstrates how closely the concepts of revelation and translation were linked in the early Latter-day Saint religious lexicon.

A final example worth considering here is Orson Pratt, an Apostle and prominent early Latter-day Saint thinker. Pratt produced extensive writings on the Book of Mormon, making him a representative orthodox figure for this discussion. A few examples from his work illustrate his interchangeable use of the terms *translation* and *revelation* in describing the book’s origins. In his 1848 pamphlet *Divine Authority*, Pratt affirmed Joseph Smith’s account of “the finding and translation of the Book of Mormon,” stating that it was accomplished “through the inspiration of the Holy Ghost, by aid of the Urim and Thummim.”³⁸ Citing Isaiah 29:11–12, Pratt avowed how “there is no circumstance mentioned by Isaiah, connected with the revelation and translation of the book he mentions, but what is connected with the Book of Mormon.”³⁹ Elsewhere, Pratt spoke of “the revelation of the record of Joseph,”⁴⁰ of

36. “History of Brigham Young,” *The Latter-day Saints’ Millennial Star* 25, no. 23 (June 6, 1863): 360–61, Digital Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, <https://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/digital/collection/MStar/id/7598>.

37. “History of Brigham Young,” 361.

38. Orson Pratt, *Divine Authority; or the Question, Was Joseph Smith Sent of God?* (Liverpool, 1848), 8.

39. Pratt, *Divine Authority*, 11.

40. Pratt, *Divine Authority*, 7.

Moroni “reveal[ing] a book containing a beautiful and glorious system of salvation,”⁴¹ and the plates’ “translation by the gift of God.”⁴² Throughout *Divine Authority*, Pratt consistently describes Joseph Smith as having translated the record while also referring to the Book of Mormon as a revelation, freely interchanging the two terms.

Pratt reinforced this dual language in his 1850 publication *Divine Authenticity of the Book of Mormon*. It opens: “The Book of Mormon claims to be a divinely inspired record, written by a succession of prophets who inhabited Ancient America. It professes to be revealed to the present generation for the salvation of all who will receive it, and for the overthrow and damnation of all nations who reject it.”⁴³ Throughout the rest of *Divine Authenticity*, Pratt alternates between the terms *revealed*, *revelation*, *translate*, and *translated*, leaving readers with the clear impression that Joseph Smith “translated this record into the English language” and that “the Book of Mormon is a divine revelation, because God has confirmed the same unto them by the miraculous manifestations of his power.”⁴⁴

Pratt maintained this language in *The Seer* (1853), where he asked, “Do you believe the Book of Mormon is a divine revelation?” and answered simply, “We do.”⁴⁵ Whether Pratt meant the content or teachings of the Book of Mormon were revelatory or that the book was received by revelation, that he felt comfortable using this term to describe the text at all is significant. A year later, he again referred to “the revelation and translation of the Book of Mormon” and warned that those who did not “embrace the Book of Mormon as a divine revelation” would stand condemned before God.⁴⁶ His writings thus exemplify how early Latter-day Saints blurred the distinction between *translation* and *revelation*, viewing them as interconnected in Joseph Smith’s process of bringing forth the Book of Mormon.

These examples align well with Joseph Smith’s own 1843 statement to James Arlington Bennet, previously quoted by Elder Soares, where Joseph succinctly encapsulates and illustrates this conceptual overlap. “The fact is,” Joseph wrote, “that by the power of God I translated the

41. Pratt, *Divine Authority*, 4.

42. Pratt, *Divine Authority*, 16.

43. Pratt, *Divine Authenticity of the Book of Mormon*, 1.

44. Pratt, *Divine Authenticity of the Book of Mormon*, 49, 78; see also pp. 50, 55, 57, 63, 68.

45. Orson Pratt, *The Seer* (Eborn Books, 1990), 30.

46. Pratt, *Seer*, 213, 215.

book of Mormon hieroglyphics from hieroglyphics; the knowledge of which was lost to the world. In which wonderful event," he continued, "I stood alone, an unlearned youth, to combat the worldly wisdom and multiplied ignorance of eighteen centuries. [sic] with a new revelation."⁴⁷

The Translation of the Book of Abraham

The book of Abraham is another relevant Joseph Smith translation project, begun in the summer of 1835 and published in the spring of 1842. As with the Book of Mormon, the Prophet unfortunately left fewer details about the precise method of this translation than we might hope. Consequently, "no known first-person account from Joseph Smith exists to explain the translation of the Book of Abraham, and the scribes who worked on the project and others who claimed knowledge of the process provided only vague or general reminiscences."⁴⁸ However, what is clear is that Joseph repeatedly referred to his work with the Egyptian papyri and the resulting text of the book of Abraham as a "translation."⁴⁹ For example, the heading that introduced the first published installment of the text identified it as "A TRANSLATION Of some ancient Records."⁵⁰ Furthermore, an unpublished editorial comment from Joseph, presumably intended to accompany the publication, promised that he would "contin[u]e to translate & publish [the book of Abraham] as fast as possible till the whole is completed."⁵¹

47. "Letter to James Arlington Bennet, 13 November 1843," 261.

48. Robin Scott Jensen and Brian M. Hauglid, ed., *Revelations and Translations, Volume 4: Book of Abraham and Related Manuscripts*, Joseph Smith Papers (Church Historian's Press, 2018), xxiii.

49. See the entries in Joseph Smith's 1835 journal on the following dates: October 7, November 19, 20, 24, and 25. Joseph Smith, "Journal, 1835–1836," in *Journals, Volume 1: 1832–1839*, ed. Dean C. Jessee, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Richard L. Jensen, Joseph Smith Papers (Church Historian's Press, 2008), 71, 107, 109–10, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/journal-1835-1836/8>; see entry for March 8, 1842, in "Journal, December 1841–December 1842," in *Journals, Volume 2: December 1841–April 1843*, ed. Andrew H. Hedges, Alex D. Smith, and Richard Lloyd Anderson, Joseph Smith Papers (Church Historian's Press, 2011), 42, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/journal-december-1841-december-1842/20>.

50. "Times and Seasons, 1 March 1842," 704, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed June 21, 2025, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/times-and-seasons-1-march-1842/2>.

51. "Editorial, circa 1 March 1842, Draft," in Smith, and others, eds., *Documents, Volume 9*, 207, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/editorial-circa-1-march-1842-draft/1>.

Complicating matters somewhat is the fact that shortly after the publication of the book of Abraham, Latter-day Saints and others were referring to it as a revelation rather than a translation. In September 1842, not six months after the publication of the book of Abraham, an editorial published in the *Times and Seasons* under Joseph Smith's editorial supervision freely employed this language. "If we believe in present *revelation*," the editorial read, referring to the book of Abraham, "as published in the *Times and Seasons* last spring, Abraham, the prophet of the Lord, was laid upon the iron bedstead for slaughter."⁵²

Similarly, non-Latter-day Saint readers—whether skeptical or sympathetic—described the book of Abraham using both terms. One month after the *book of Abraham's* publication, the *Telegraph* in Southport, Wisconsin, announced, "Joe Smith, the prophet of Nauvoo has recently translated into the English language a new revelation of the Mormon faith. This new revelation is called the Book of Abraham, which Joe pretends was found among the catacombs of Egypt."⁵³

That same month, James Gordon Bennett republished the opening text of the book of Abraham and Facsimile 1 in the *New York Herald*, observing, "The Prophet of Nauvoo has given the chapter, and it is set down as a revelation among the Mormons."⁵⁴ Joseph Smith was pleased enough with Bennett's description to have it republished in the Church's newspaper the following month.⁵⁵ Finally, in May 1842, the same month that *Times and Seasons* published the final installment of the book of Abraham,⁵⁶ the *Churchman* newspaper out of New York described being shown "a printed order or revelation of the prophet, which was a sort of

52. "Selections from *Times and Seasons*, 1 September 1842," in *Documents, Volume 11: September 1842–February 1843*, ed. Spencer W. McBride, Jeffrey D. Mahas, Brett D. Dowdle, and Tyson Reeder, *Joseph Smith Papers* (Church Historian's Press, 2020), 23, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/times-and-seasons-1-september-1842/8>, emphasis added.

53. "Article clipped from *The Telegraph-Courier*," April 26, 1842, *Newspapers.com*, <https://www.newspapers.com/article/the-telegraph-courier/82494293/>, emphasis original.

54. "The Mormons—a Leaf from Joe Smith," *New York Herald*, April 3, 1842, [2], Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn83030313/1842-04-03/ed-1/?sp=2>; reprinted in *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 13 (May 2, 1842): 767–82, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/times-and-seasons-2-may-1842/7>.

55. "*Times and Seasons*, 2 May 1842," 773–74.

56. "Book of Abraham and Facsimiles, 1 March–16 May 1842," in *Revelations and Translations, Volume 4: Book of Abraham and Related Manuscripts*, ed. Robin Scott Jensen and Brian M. Hauglid, *Joseph Smith Papers* (Church Historian's Press, 2018), 303–27, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/book-of-abraham-and-facsimiles-1-march-16-may-1842/10>.

hieroglyphic, with a brief explanation and application subjoined," referring to the book of Abraham facsimiles.⁵⁷

Where the Prophet left gaps in the documentary record, his clerks and other contemporaries help fill in some details, their statements providing insight into how the book of Abraham was understood and conceptualized. William W. Phelps, who was involved in the production of the book of Abraham and the associated Egyptian language project, shared his perspective in a letter to his wife Sally written shortly after the acquisition of the papyri. Phelps wrote, "As no one could translate these writings, they were presented to President Smith. He soon knew what they were and said that the rolls of papyrus contained a sacred record kept by Joseph in Pharaoh's court in Egypt and the teachings of Father Abraham." To Phelps, Joseph's translation of the Egyptian records was compelling evidence that "there is nothing secret or hidden that shall not be revealed" to the Saints.⁵⁸ John Whitmer, in his history written primarily between 1835 and 1838, similarly recounted the recovery of the papyri and the translation of the book of Abraham. He described how "Joseph the Seer saw these Record[s] and by the revelation of Jesus Christ could translate these records. . . . Which when all translated will be a pleasing history and of great value to the saints."⁵⁹

After his disillusionment with Joseph Smith and the Church, Warren Parrish, a scribe involved in the production of the book of Abraham, wrote a scathing letter to the *Painesville Republican* in 1838. In the course of complaining against his former faith, Parrish recalled that he had "set by [Joseph's] side and penned down the translation of the Egyptian Hieroglyphicks as he claimed to receive it by direct inspiration of Heaven."⁶⁰ Similar language appears in Josiah Quincy's 1883 account of his meeting with Joseph in Nauvoo, where Joseph reportedly assured him that he

57. "The Churchman Newspaper Publishes Secondhand Account of the Greek Psalter Incident [*The Churchman* (New York), May 21, 1842, 42]," B. H. Roberts Foundation, accessed August 22, 2025, https://bhroberts.org/records/0Y5sG9-FMfXRd/the_churchman_newspaper_publishes_secondhand_account_of_the_greek_psalter_incident.

58. Journal History of the Church, July 20, 1835, 1–2, Church History Library, microfilm copy in Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/19f871d7-9f8b-414b-9a93-2fae5e62e8cd/0/518>.

59. "John Whitmer, History, 1831–circa 1847," in *Histories, Volume 2: Assigned Histories, 1831–1847*, ed. Karen Lynn Davidson, Richard L. Jensen, and David J. Whittaker, Joseph Smith Papers (Church Historian's Press, 2012), 86, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/john-whitmer-history-1831-circa-1847/80>.

60. Warren Parrish, letter to the editor, February 5, 1838, "Mormonism," *Painesville (Ohio) Republican*, February 15, 1838, [3].

“was the only mortal who could translate these mysterious writings [on the papyri], and that his power was given by direct inspiration.”⁶¹

The descriptions offered by Parrish and Quincy of Joseph invoking “direct inspiration” in the translation of the book of Abraham intriguingly echo Oliver Cowdery’s 1834 account of the Book of Mormon translation process, suggesting a similar understanding of how the two texts were produced. Cowdery wrote, “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, with the *Urim* and *Thummim*, or, as the Nephites would have said, ‘Interpreters,’ the history or record called ‘The book of Mormon.’”⁶²

Another clerk involved in the publication of the book of Abraham in early 1842, Wilford Woodruff, was even more explicit in his reflections. While assisting with the first installment of book of Abraham text for the *Times and Seasons*, he wrote, “The Lord is Blessing Joseph with power to reveal the mysteries of the kingdom of God.” He continued, marveling that God had given Joseph the ability “to translate through the Urim & Thummim Ancient records and Hieroglyphics as old as Abraham or Adam.” This deeply impressed Woodruff, who, using language familiar to modern Latter-day Saints, observed that reading the book of Abraham “cause[d] our hearts to burn within us while we behold their glorious truths opened unto us.” Referring to Joseph by the title also favored by John Whitmer, Woodruff rejoiced that “Joseph the Seer has presented us some of the Book of Abraham which was written by his own hand but hid from the knowledge of man for the last four thousand years but has now come to light through the mercy of God.” He concluded, “I am convinced for myself. that none of the Prophets Seers or Revelators of the Earth haven ever accomplished a greater work than will be accomplished in the Last days through the mercy of God By JOSEPH THE SEER.”⁶³ After the first two installments of the text were published, Woodruff again

61. Josiah Quincy, *Figures of the Past from the Leaves of Old Journals* (Roberts Brothers, 1883), 387, emphasis original, <https://archive.org/details/figuresofpastfro01quin/page/386/mode/2up>.

62. Oliver Cowdery, *Latter Day Saints’ Messenger and Advocate*, October 1834, 14, emphasis original, <https://archive.org/details/latterdaysaintsm01unse/page/14/mode/2up>.

63. Wilford Woodruff, “Journal (January 1, 1841–December 31, 1842),” February 19, 1842, Wilford Woodruff Papers, accessed June 30, 2025, <https://wilfordwoodruffpapers.org/p/163>.

exulted in his journal, declaring that "the truths of the Book of Abraham are truly edifying great & glorious which are among the rich treasures that are revealed unto us in the last days."⁶⁴

Orson Pratt also described the translation of the book of Abraham using both *revelation* and *translation* as key terms. In an 1859 reminiscence, Pratt recalled witnessing Joseph Smith's "countenance lighted up as the inspiration of the Holy Ghost rested upon him" during his revelatory pronouncements. Specifically, Pratt remembered observing Joseph "translating, by inspiration, the Old and New Testaments, and the inspired book of Abraham from Egyptian papyrus."⁶⁵ In another discourse that same year, addressing the primeval antiquity of the gospel, Pratt again employed this terminology to describe Joseph's translation of the papyrus:

These extracts [from the book of Moses] which I have read concerning Adam, Enoch, and Noah you will find in a little work called "*The Pearl of Great Price*," published by F. D. Richards, in England, a few years ago [1851]. We might go on and read further extracts from the Book of Abraham—a book also revealed by inspiration to the Prophet Joseph Smith, showing that the Gospel was revealed to him, and how he received the promise that all the children of men that would obey that same Gospel preached by him should be justified and become his children—called his seed, and heirs according to the promise. But I have read sufficient for the information of the Latter-day Saints upon this subject.⁶⁶

Twenty years later, after overseeing the preparation of the second edition of the Pearl of Great Price for publication in Utah,⁶⁷ Pratt explicitly compared the translation of the book of Abraham to that of the Book of Mormon. Once again, he invoked the language of inspiration and

64. Woodruff, "Journal (January 1, 1841–December 31, 1842)," *March 19, 1842*.

65. Orson Pratt, in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool, 1855–86), 7:176 (July 10, 1859).

66. Orson Pratt, in *Journal of Discourses*, 7:253 (September 11, 1859). The first edition of the Pearl of Great Price can be found on the Church History Library website. Joseph Smith, *The Pearl of Great price: Being a Choice Selection* [. . .] (Liverpool, 1851), <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/777118c9-9529-4cb1-823d-36833959ec1f/0/26>.

67. *The Pearl of Great Price: Being a Choice Selection from the Revelations, Translations, and Narrations of Joseph Smith, First Prophet, Seer, and Revelator to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints* (Latter-day Saints' Printing and Publishing Establishment, 1878). See Kenneth W. Baldrige, "Pearl of Great Price, Contents and Publication," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow, 4 vols. (Macmillan, 1992), 3:1071–72; Terryl Givens with Brian M. Hauglid, *The Pearl of Greatest Price: Mormonism's Most Controversial Scripture* (Oxford University Press, 2019), 1–3, 20–22.

revelation to describe both processes. Describing Joseph Smith, Pratt wrote:

Notwithstanding his youth and inexperience in regard to the learning and wisdom of the world, he proved himself a great and mighty man of God; he not only was the instrument in the hands of God of bringing to light the Book of Mormon, but also received numerous other revelations which are contained in this book called the Doctrine and Covenants, a book that contains nearly as much reading matter as the Book of Mormon; and besides these you will find that many of the revelations were given by him which are found in what is called the new edition of the Pearl of Great Price, published by the *Deseret News Office*.⁶⁸

With the book of Abraham included in the new edition of the Pearl of Great Price, Pratt recounted its translation for his listeners. After detailing its discovery, Pratt concluded emphatically, “The Prophet translated the part of these writings which, as I have said is contained in the Pearl of Great Price, and known as the Book of Abraham. Thus you see one of the first gifts bestowed by the Lord for the benefit of His people, was that of revelation—the gift to translate, by the aid of the Urim and Thummim, the gift of bringing to light old and ancient records.”⁶⁹ It is little wonder, then, that earlier in an 1853 discussion of the book of Abraham’s theology of the premortal existence, Pratt revered the text as part of “those ancient revelations which have been revealed anew through Joseph the Seer.”⁷⁰

The early Latter-day Saints’ understanding of Joseph Smith’s seeric abilities is further confirmed by sources describing his use of the “Urim and Thummim” (probably one of his personal seer stones) in the translation process.⁷¹ As early as one month after the acquisition and initial translation of the papyri in July 1835, reports began to circulate about Joseph employing these instruments. The *Cleveland Whig* reported in August 1835 that it was “credibly informed” by Frederick G. Williams (or possibly William W. Phelps⁷²) that “the Mormons have purchased of Mr. Chandler, three of the mummies, which he recently exhibited in this

68. Orson Pratt, in *Journal of Discourses*, 20:64 (August 25, 1878).

69. Orson Pratt, in *Journal of Discourses*, 20:65 (August 25, 1878).

70. Orson Pratt, “The Pre-Existence of Man,” *Seer* 1, no. 4 (April 1853): 51.

71. See Stephen O. Smoot, “Did Joseph Smith Use a Seer Stone in the Translation of the Book of Abraham?” *Religious Educator* 23, no. 2 (2022): 64–107.

72. Mackay and Frederick, *Joseph Smith’s Seer Stones*, 127, identify the *Cleveland Whig*’s source as Phelps, even though the paper itself names “Williams” (meaningly most likely Frederick G. Williams, who, like Phelps, also assisted in the translation of the papyri).

village; and that the prophet Joe has ascertained, by examining the papyrus through his spectacles, that they are the bodies of *Joseph* (the son of Abraham,) and King Abimeleck, and his daughter."⁷³ Similarly, in 1842, Apostle Parley P. Pratt wrote to English readers of the *Millennial Star* that "the record is now in course of translation by means of the Urim and Thummim, and proves to be a record written partly by the father of the faithful, Abraham, and finished by Joseph when in Egypt."⁷⁴ Howard Coray, another of Joseph's Nauvoo clerks, later reminisced to his daughter Martha in 1889 about hearing Joseph "prophesy many things that have already come to pass" and also "translate by the Seer's stone,"⁷⁵ most likely referring to the book of Abraham.⁷⁶

Other sources suggest that Joseph used the seer stone to translate the book of Abraham in a manner comparable to how he translated the Book of Mormon. Lucy Mack Smith reportedly told a Quaker visitor to Nauvoo in 1846 that "when Joseph was reading the papyrus, he closed his eyes, and held a hat over his face, and that the revelation came to him; and that where the papyrus was torn, he could read the parts that were destroyed equally as well as those that were there; and that scribes sat by him writing, as he expounded."⁷⁷ Similar accounts appear in earlier and later sources. William West, writing in 1837 after his visit to the Saints in Kirtland, described the process as follows: "These records were torn by being taken from the roll of embalming salve which contained them, and some parts entirely lost; but Smith is to translate the whole by divine inspiration, and that which is lost, like Nebuchadnezzar's dream, can be interpreted as well as that which is preserved."⁷⁸ Likewise, Frederic Mather in 1880 recorded a similar claim that "Joe Smith translated

73. "Another Humbug," *The Cleveland Whig*, August 5, 1835, 1, emphasis in original.

74. Parley P. Pratt, "Editorial Remarks," *Millennial Star* 3, no. 3 (July 1842): 47, Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/6350bd5e-05e9-46a7-8281-86b336ed4558/0/14>.

75. Howard Coray to Martha Jane Lewis, August 2, 1889, image 4, holograph, Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/becd2d14-e7c0-4aa8-b70d-26861581916f/0/3>.

76. See the discussion in Smoot, "Did Joseph Smith Use a Seer Stone?," 86–87.

77. M., "Correspondence of the Friends' Weekly Intelligencer," *Friends' Weekly Intelligencer* (Philadelphia), October 3, 1846, 211, https://archive.org/details/sim_friends-in-intelligencer_1846-10-03_3_27/page/n1/mode/2up.

78. "William West Describes the 'Four Mummies' and 'Quantity of Records' [William West, *A Few Interesting Facts Respecting the Rise Progress and Pretensions of the Mormons* (n.p., 1837), 5]," B. H. Roberts Foundation, accessed October 13, 2025, https://bhroberts.org/records/0ueBOW-9pbnhc/william_west_describes_the_four_mummies_and_quantity_of_records.

the characters on the roll [of papyrus], being favored with a ‘special revelation’ whenever any of the characters were missing by reason of the mutilation of the roll.”⁷⁹

While these testimonies warrant a degree of caution, they align with accounts from those close to Joseph Smith who reported his use of a seer stone in the translation of the book of Abraham. Whatever else, these sources suggest that contemporaries understood revelation and translation as interwoven activities in Joseph’s study of the Egyptian papyri. Just as in his translation of the Nephite gold plates, the Prophet’s translation of the Egyptian papyri thus subsumed both concepts under the broader category of seership—a gift uniquely bestowed upon him by God.

Conclusion

A comprehensive diachronic analysis of the terms *translation*, *inspiration*, and *revelation* as used by Latter-day Saints to describe Joseph Smith’s scriptural texts is beyond the scope of this article. My survey of the historical record has focused primarily on the earliest decades of these texts’ reception. It would not be surprising to find certain phrases prevailing in the Latter-day Saint religious lexicon during specific periods or contexts; nor would it be surprising to find variation among different Latter-day Saint thinkers, writers, and leaders. However, a thorough examination of this would require a book-length study. In the meantime, I have presented strong evidence from Joseph Smith and early readers of his scriptural texts—both believers and skeptics—to substantiate the main argument of this paper and lay the groundwork for further study. A few concluding observations will suffice to bring this discussion to a close.

For early Latter-day Saints, including Joseph Smith, the translation of ancient scripture was understood as a divine gift and power bestowed by God upon those called as seers. This principle is explicitly taught in the Book of Mormon (see Mosiah 8:13–18) and, according to Joseph’s history, was affirmed by the angel during his inaugural visit on the night of September 21, 1823 (JS–H 1:34–35). Joseph’s repeated declaration that he “translated” the Book of Mormon “by the gift and power of God,” (though less descriptive than we might prefer) aligns with and is illuminated by the early revelations surrounding the book’s production. These revelations clarify that Joseph’s gift and the power he received involved

79. Frederic G. Mather, “Early Days of Mormonism,” *Lippincott’s Magazine* 26, no. 152 (August 1880): 211, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/24851/24851-page-images/p211.png>.

the ability to use the Urim and Thummim or the seer stone in a process that combined revelation and translation into a single miraculous outpouring.⁸⁰

From this, we see that nineteenth-century Latter-day Saints, much like those in the twenty-first century, did not impose rigid terminological boundaries on Joseph Smith's scriptural productions. His roles as "a seer, a translator, a prophet, an apostle of Jesus Christ, [and] an elder of the church" (D&C 21:1) were not strictly compartmentalized by his early followers. Orson Pratt, for example, spoke of Joseph Smith's "gift of translation by the inspiration of the Holy Ghost." In his view, this gift enabled Joseph to

translate the Scriptures, and to reveal some of the lost books; such as, the prophecy of Enoch, the Book of Abraham, the Revelation to Moses, not included in the five books called the Pentateuch, and some other revelations not now in the Bible. By this great gift of the Spirit, he translated the Book of Mormon from the original language of the ancient inhabitants of America—a language entirely unknown to human wisdom at the present day. By this gift, he translated the Book of Abraham from Egyptian papyrus, taken out of the catacombs of Egypt. By this gift, he translated from parchment a sacred revelation concerning the Apostle John and his great mission to "prophesy again before many peoples, and nations, and tongues, and kings." (See Revelation x. 11.)⁸¹

All of this follows naturally from Pratt's logic that "the Spirit is perfectly acquainted with every language and tongue upon the earth" and can therefore "speak words and sentences in an unknown tongue" as well as "speak the words of a new revelation."⁸²

This merging of concepts is also evident in the writings of William Appleby, whose reflections further illustrate how closely revelation and translation were intertwined in the early Latter-day Saint worldview. In 1856, Appleby wrote to Apostle John Taylor for publication in

80. See further Christopher James Blythe, "By the Gift and Power of God': Translation Among the Gifts of the Spirit," in *Producing Ancient Scripture: Joseph Smith's Translation Projects in the Development of Mormon Christianity*, ed. Michael Hubbard MacKay, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Brian M. Hauglid (University of Utah Press, 2020), 27–53. He argues that the revelatory translation of scripture in early Latter-day Saint thinking was understood to be a gift of the Spirit.

81. Orson Pratt, *Spiritual Gifts* (n.p.: December 1856), 71, Mormon Publications: 19th and 20th Centuries, accessed October 13, 2025, <https://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/digital/collection/NCMP1820-1846/id/14711>.

82. Pratt, *Spiritual Gifts*, 72.

Taylor's New York-based newspaper, *The Mormon*. In his letter, Appleby expounded extensively on the corruption and restoration of scriptural texts and their significance to the faith of the Latter-day Saints.⁸³ After discussing the history and transmission of the Bible and other ancient records, as well as Joseph Smith's prophetic role in restoring lost truths, Appleby concluded his treatment with the following:

But thanks and praise be given to Him who rules on high and sways the destinies of men; He has spoken from the heavens in these days, raised up a Prophet, Seer and Revelator, who has, by commandment and the aid of the Urim and Thummim, and the power of inspiration, translated and brought back and restored "*the most plain and precious things*" that have been taken away by uninspired men, under the authority of a corrupt and apostate church, so that the Saints of Latter Days know, understand and comprehend truth from error, and the inspiration of the Almighty from the wisdom of men.⁸⁴

The pronouncements of Orson Pratt and William Appleby anticipated Elder Soares's 2020 general conference address by nearly one hundred and fifty years. This reflects an indisputably long and consistent pattern in Latter-day Saint religious discourse of using the terms *revelation* (and related words like *inspiration*) and *translation* practically interchangeably when describing Joseph Smith's scriptural productions—a pattern particularly evident in discussions of both the Book of Mormon and the book of Abraham.⁸⁵

On a final note, lest there be any lingering confusion, it is important to emphasize that this terminological fluidity does *not* suggest a strategic retreat from the authenticity of Joseph Smith's scriptural productions. There is no evidence to indicate that Latter-day Saint leaders—from Orson Pratt and Wilford Woodruff to their modern successors—have

83. William I. Appleby, "Correspondence of Judge Appleby," *The Mormon* (New York), November 8, 1856, 3, Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/08753165-2138-4f99-b16f-a78b3d1efce8/0/2>; compare William I. Appleby, "Translations of the Bible," *Millennial Star* 18, no. 51 (December 20, 1856): 801–4.

84. Appleby, "Correspondence of Judge Appleby," 3, emphasis original.

85. One final example of a Latter-day Saint describing the Book of Mormon as a revelation can be found in an August 1904 article by John Henry Evans in the *Improvement Era*, the Church's official publication from 1897 to 1970. "As to the nature of the first vision and the *revelation* of the Book of Mormon . . ." wrote Evans, "there is nothing in Scripture or reason from which it could plausibly be inferred that such things as revelations and visions are impossible or improbable. On the contrary, there are many things which indicate that these are intended as a special privilege of men." J. H. Evans, "Seeing, They See Not," *Improvement Era* 7, no. 10 (August 1904): 756, emphasis added.

sometimes described Joseph Smith's translations of ancient scripture as revelations out of deference to critics or bashful concession that they lack historicity. On the contrary, the Latter-day Saint apologetic tradition has consistently offered a robust and spirited defense of the historicity and divine inspiration of both the Book of Mormon and the book of Abraham.⁸⁶ In the case of the book of Abraham, it may be observed that Church leaders have recently shown greater openness to questions about the manner of its translation, but this is far from conceding to critics seeking to discredit its ancient authenticity.⁸⁷

The sources reviewed here are unequivocal: While these texts were often described as revelations, such descriptions were never meant to deny their status as ancient records. Recognizing this is essential for accurately understanding Joseph Smith's view of his scriptural texts, how Latter-day Saints have historically conceptualized Restoration scripture, and how that understanding has endured.

Stephen O. Smoot is a doctoral candidate in Semitic and Egyptian languages and literature at the Catholic University of America. He holds a master's degree in Near and Middle Eastern civilizations, with a concentration in Egyptology, from the University of Toronto, and bachelor's degrees in ancient Near Eastern studies (Hebrew Bible emphasis) and German studies from Brigham Young University.

86. See Stephen O. Smoot, "From the Catacombs of Egypt': Latter-day Saint Engagement with Ancient Egypt and the Contest of Religious Identity," *Journal of Mormon History* 46, no. 4 (2020): 1–44; Stephen O. Smoot, "Apologetics and Antiquity: Book of Mormon Reception, 1830–1844," *Journal of Mormon History* 48, no. 4 (2022): 1–31.

87. Smoot, "From the Catacombs of Egypt,'" 41–42.