

Mosiah First Translation – taken from John Welch, *The Miraculous Translation of the Book of Mormon*, as found in *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations 1820-1844*, p. 115-117

Footnote 111. See note 72 above. Two theories exist about the order in which the Book of Mormon was translated in 1829. The book of Lehi was translated and lost in 1828. In March 1829, the translation resumed with both Samuel Smith and Emma acting as scribe for a few pages (document 12). In April 1829, Oliver Cowdery arrived and the pace of the work accelerated. Where in the text did Joseph begin at this time? Did he pick up where the 116 pages had left off (around the time of King Benjamin near Mosiah 1), or did he start at the beginning of the Small Plates (with 1 Nephi 1)? A few considerations make the “Mosiah-first” theory more plausible than the “Nephi-first” theory:

First, which scripture triggered the experience of the Three Witnesses in June 1829, toward the end of the translation? Was it Ether 5:2–4 or 2 Nephi 27:12, 22? If they were translating 2 Nephi in June, this would strongly indicate that they had begun with Mosiah in April and had returned after finishing Moroni in May to translate the Small Plates of Nephi in June. On the other hand, if they were translating the Book of Ether in June, this would support the Nephi-first theory, since in the few days remaining in June after the experience of the Three Witnesses there would have been only enough time left to finish Ether and Moroni.

The *History of the Church* first appeared in print as a serial in the *Times and Seasons* in 1842. “History of Joseph Smith,” *Times and Seasons* 3 (March 15, 1842): beginning on p. 726. A blank was left in the sentence that was to tell which passage in the Book of Mormon inspired the manifestation to the Three Witnesses. “History of Joseph Smith,” *Times and Seasons* 3 (September 1, 1842): 897a. Joseph Smith, “History of the Church,” A-1, MS 23, Joseph Smith Collection, Church Archives, likewise has a blank at this point. Page 25 of one of the manuscripts of the History of the Church, however, contains a note that the relevant scripture was found “in the 1st ed. . . . page 110 [2 Nephi 27].” This information was added to the manuscript sometime after 1852, as is evident since that scribe also refers to a European edition of the Doctrine and Covenants of that date. Smith, “History of the Church,” A-2, 25. Therefore, the earliest recorded understanding saw 2 Nephi 27 as the scripture involved. B. H. Roberts chose to refer principally to Ether 5 in the published edition of *History of the Church*, 1:52, but he also mentioned 2 Nephi 11:3 in this context. Significantly, the scripture in 2 Nephi 27 authorizes more precisely what in fact transpired with the witnesses (as discussed above under the date “Around June 20, 1829”), all making it more likely that 2 Nephi 27 was the relevant scripture authorizing the manifestation to the Witnesses than Ether 5.

Second, the Mosiah-first theory allows five weeks (from April 7 to May 15) for the translation of Mosiah 1 through the account of the ministry of Christ among the Nephites in 3 Nephi. The book was then finished at about the same rate in June. Under the Nephi-first theory, however, all the material from 1 Nephi 1 through the account in 3 Nephi would have to have been translated within that time, requiring a faster rate. Correlatively, the Mosiah-first theory leaves a significant amount of material to be translated after May 15, which accommodates the fact that the translation continued at Harmony for two more weeks and that “many pages” were translated at the Whitmer house in Fayette. One report indicates that John Whitmer acted as scribe for as many as “sixty pages.” Gurley, “Synopsis of a Discourse,” 370b.

Third, the title page of the Book of Mormon was translated before June 11, 1829, the date on which this text appears on the copyright application. Since the title page was written by Moroni and was found at the end of the Plates of Mormon (“I wish to mention here that the title-page of the Book of Mormon is a

literal translation taken from the very last leaf, on the left hand side of the collection or book of plates, which contained the record which has been translated,” *History of the Church*, 1:71), it would appear that books up to and including the title page, namely 4 Nephi, Mormon, Ether, Moroni, and the title page itself, were translated after May 15 but before June 11. This supports the Mosiah-first theory.

Fourth, the handwriting on the original manuscript for 1 Nephi is neither Oliver Cowdery’s nor Emma Smith’s. It may be Reuben Hale’s, which would support the Nephi-first theory, but it is also possible that it is one of the Whitmers’, which would favor the Mosiah-first theory. In light of the foregoing, the Mosiah-first theory seems more likely than the Nephi-first theory. Accepting this view, see George Reynolds, “History of the Book of Mormon,” *Contributor* 5 (November 1883): 41–47; (February 1884): 161–68; (June 1884): 321–27; (July 1884): 361–67; Stanley R. Larson, “A Most Sacred Possession: The Original Manuscript of the Book of Mormon,” *Ensign* 7 (September 1977): 87–88; Parkin, “Dating of Section 10,” 76; Bushman, *Beginnings of Mormonism*, 105; Welch, *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*, 1–8. Royal Skousen, *The Original Manuscript of the Book of Mormon* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2001), 33, notes that “there is some evidence that Joseph Smith translated the small plates of Nephi at the very end of the process,” but defers further discussion for a future publication. Ruminating about the implications and ideologies of some discussions of the Mosiah-first theory, see Alan Goff, “Positivism and the Priority of Ideology in Mosiah-First Theories of Book of Mormon Production,” *FARMS Review* 16, no. 1 (2004): 11–36, arguing that the Mosiah-first theory need not pose any compositional difficulty.

See also: Discussed further in John W. Welch, “How Long Did It Take Joseph Smith to Translate the Book of Mormon?” *Ensign* 18 (January 1988): 46–47; Neal A. Maxwell, “By the Gift and Power of God,” *Ensign* 27 (January 1997): 36–41, reprinted in Donald W. Parry and others, eds., *Echoes and Evidences of the Book of Mormon* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2002), 1–15. It is also significant that the original manuscript of the Book of Mormon “gives no aid or comfort” to those who have sought alternative explanations to account for the existence of the Book of Mormon; the manuscript “shows no evidence” of developmental research, of revision and rethinking, or rewriting or reformulation. John W. Welch, “What the Original Book of Mormon Manuscript Is Not,” in John W. Welch, ed., *Pressing Forward with the Book of Mormon* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1999), 293–95.