

Rough Stone Writing

Emma Smith stated:

“Joseph Smith... could neither write nor dictate a coherent and well-worded letter, let alone dictate a book like the Book of Mormon”

Could Joseph Smith write or dictate a coherent and well-worded letter?

This quote is from the “Last Testimony Of Sister Emma” in The Saints’ Herald, 1879 when Emma Smith was around 75 years old. ¹ The events of the translation of the Book of Mormon would have been roughly 50 years prior to this interview.

Potential problems with the source

I am concerned with using this source as some for claims of truth since Emma Smith was not fully truthful in other parts of this document. For example:

Question. What about the revelation on polygamy? Did Joseph Smith have anything like it? What of spiritual wifery?

... No such thing as polygamy or spiritual wifery was taught, publicly or privately, before my husband’s death, that I have now, or ever had any knowledge of.

Question. Did he not have other wives than yourself? He had no other wife but me; nor did he to my knowledge ever have.

The statements above are in contradiction with both secular and Church sponsored, historically recognized facts.²

It may be important to recognize that some conflicts of interest may have existed between Emma Smith and the Church at the time of this interview. Emma Smith may have lied in the previous statements to protect her late husband, her own reputation, and her son, Joseph Smith III, who was both the interviewer and the President of the reorganized Latter-day Saint Church at the time of this interview.

A coherent, well-worded letter dictated by Joseph Smith

Letter from Joseph Smith to Oliver Cowdery in 1829³ corrected for some spelling and grammar (like the Book of Mormon)

¹Last Testimony Of Sister Emma

²Emma Hale Smith, Church History

³Letter to Oliver Cowdery, 22 October 1829

Respected sir,

I would inform you that I arrived at home on Sunday morning the 4th, after having a prosperous journey, and found all well. The people are all friendly to us except a few who are in opposition to everything unless it is something that is exactly like themselves and two of our most formidable persecutors are now under censure and are cited to a trial in the church for crimes which if true are worse than all the Gold Book business. We do not rejoice in the affliction of our enemies but we shall be glad to have truth prevail. There begins to be a great call for our books in this country. The minds of the people are very much excited when they find that there is a copyright obtained and that there [are] really books about to be printed.

I have bought a horse of Mr. Josiah Stowell and want someone to come after it as soon as convenient. Mr Stowell has a prospect of getting five or six hundred dollars. He does not know [for] certain that he can get it but he is going to try and if he can get the money, he wants to pay it in immediately for books. We want to hear from you and know how you prosper in the good work.

Give our best respects to Father & Mother and all our brothers and sisters. To Mr. Martin Harris and all the company concerned, tell them that our prayers are put up daily for them that they may be prospered in every good word and work and that they may be preserved from sin here and from the consequence of sin here after and now. Dear brother, be faithful in the discharge of every duty looking for the reward of the righteous. And now may God of his infinite mercy keep and preserve us spotless until his coming and receive us all to rest with him in eternal repose through the atonement of Christ, our Lord, Amen.

This letter was dictated by Joseph Smith around the time that the Book of Mormon was being translated. This letter seems to be coherent.

An Exchange of Joseph Smith at seven years old with Lucy Smith.

Joseph Smith was recorded by his mother a little less than three decades after this event occurred.^{4 5} Since this exchange has been published by the Church multiple times.^{6 7 8 9 10}

⁴Biographical sketches of Joseph Smith the prophet and his progenitors for many generations by Smith, Lucy, 1775-1856

⁵Joseph Smith's Leg Surgery, Church History

⁶Chapter 1: Joseph Smith: The First President of the Church, Presidents of the Church Student Manual

⁷Joseph Smith's Leg Surgery, Church History

⁸Joseph Smith's Boyhood Surgery: Mercy During a Desperate Siege, Ensign June 2013

⁹The Prophet Joseph Smith: Teacher by Example, Ensign June 1994, republished in New Era, December 2005

¹⁰A Tribute to Brother Joseph, Liahona December 1997

¹¹ ¹² ¹³ This may indicate that the Church believes in its truth. (Joseph’s words in bold)

The principal surgeon, after a moment’s conversation, ordered cords to be brought to bind Joseph fast to a bedstead; but to this Joseph objected. The doctor, however, insisted that he must be confined, upon which Joseph said very decidedly, **“No, doctor, I will not be bound, for I can bear the operation much better if I have my liberty.”** “Then,” said Dr. Stone, “will you have some brandy?...”

“No,” exclaimed Joseph, **“I will not touch one particle of liquor, neither will I be tied down; but I will tell you what I will do—I will have my father sit on the bed and hold me in his arms, and then I will do whatever is necessary in order to have the bone taken out.”** Looking at me, he said, **“Mother I want you to leave the room, for I know you cannot bear to suffer so; father can stand it, but you have carried me so much, and watched over me so long, you are almost worn out.”** Then looking up into my face, his eyes swimming in tears, he continued, **“Now, mother, promise me that you will not stay, will you? The Lord will help me, and I shall get through with it.”**

This would be considered coherent language for a seven-year old. We can assume that someone who speaks like this at age seven can write, or at least dictate letters coherently.

The “Uneducated Farm boy” in Question

Many positive, orthodox descriptions explaining the translation of the Book of Mormon describe Joseph Smith as a humble farm boy (aged 24) who lacked education.

For example from Apostle Mark Peterson:

“On the 22nd day of September 1823, near Palmyra, New York, an angel of God revealed [the Book of Mormon’s] resting place to a 17-year-old boy named Joseph Smith, at this time as yet an unlearned, uneducated farm laborer, but now called of God to be His modern prophet.”

-Apostle Mark Peterson

¹¹The Church Began with a Prophet, Liahona December 1993

¹²The Life of the Prophet Joseph Smith: His Childhood, UK Church of Jesus Christ

¹³I Was with My Family—Joseph Smith as Husband, Father, Son, and Brother, Liahona December 1992

Formal Education

Analysis of Joseph Smith's life and history shows that Joseph Smith spent the equivalent of approximately seven full school years.¹⁴ in formal education. While Joseph Smith lacked formal schooling in comparison to a contemporary adult, he did not have a low amount of education to adults at his time. In the 19th century, most Americans received little formal education. At the time of the Civil War, the average American had received less than two years of formal education.¹⁵ Other 19th century Americans managed to become successful despite having limited amounts of schooling.

- Abraham Lincoln had only a year of formal education^{16 17}
- Andrew Carnegie had no more than a few years' schooling¹⁸
- Thomas Edison (now slightly controversial) had five sporadic years of education¹⁹
- Benjamin Franklin had two years of formal education²⁰
- Mark Train only obtained a fifth-grade level of education ²¹

Beyond that, according to his own words, Joseph read and pondered scriptures. He had access to books and newspapers. He even held a position as "exhorter" at a local church and participated in the debate group in Palmyra.²² This family concern for education thus created a dynamic where the parents and the older children were actively involved in the entire family's instruction. Lucy would recall how she and her husband acted "together in the education and instruction of our children," and a neighbor to the Smiths in New York, recalled how the Smiths "had school in their house, and studied the Bible." Additionally, homeschooling and independent learning is a valid form of education. Many 19th century innovators and writers were homeschooled.

Below are a list of teachers who formally taught in Joseph Smith's family ^{23 24}

- **Joseph Smith Sr**, Joseph's father, was a school teacher
- **Lydia Mack**, Joseph's maternal grandmother, was a school teacher
- **Hyrum Smith**, Joseph's brother, was a school teacher and school trustee
- **Emma Smith**, Joseph's wife, was a teacher

¹⁴Davis, 2016

¹⁵Encyclopedia Britannica

¹⁶Roberts, 1954

¹⁷Study: Abraham Lincoln's Early Life, Childhood & Education

¹⁸History Channel

¹⁹Encyclopedia Britannica

²⁰Totally History

²¹Mark Twain House

²²Question: Did Joseph Smith join the Methodists as an "exhorter" years after being told not to join another church during the First Vision?

²³Davis, 2016

²⁴Journal of History. (1921)

The Translation Process

A Speedy Translation

From 1823 to 1829, Smith explains how Moroni told Joseph Smith about the Nephite record on gold plates.^{1 2} Throughout this time it is possible that Joseph Smith obtained more knowledge of the contents of the Book of Mormon either through increased revelation (from the faithful stance), or through him slowly authoring it (from a skeptic stance). This is corroborated by descriptions of Joseph Smith during this time. According to Lucy Smith:

During our evening conversations, Joseph would occasionally give us some of the most amusing recitals that could be imagined. He would describe the ancient inhabitants of this continent, their dress, mode of travelings, and the animals upon which they rode; their cities, their buildings, with every particular; their mode of warfare; and also their religious worship. This he would do with as much ease, seemingly, as if he had spent his whole life among them.

-Lucy Smith

The level of detail described is fantastic. If an external source told him this information, it is impressive that he would be able to verbally explain all these details with “much ease”. An additional note regarding Joseph Smith’s works- even before the Book of Mormon, he was already dictating revelation from God.³

No reference notes?

While Smith’s knowledge of the Book of Mormon was great before the translation months, the dictation to paper time for the Book of Mormon was relatively short. Joseph Smith was reluctant to describe the translation process in detail. We do know that there were four scribes: Martin Harris, Oliver Cowdery, John Whitmer, and Emma Smith- though the majority of the Book of Mormon was translated with Oliver Cowdery as a scribe in about 65 working days between April and June 1829.⁴ While David Whitmer and Emma Smith say that there were no reference notes in the 1870’s and 1880’s, the amount of evidence suggesting a “separating

¹BYU Encyclopedia of Mormonism: Moroni, Visitations of

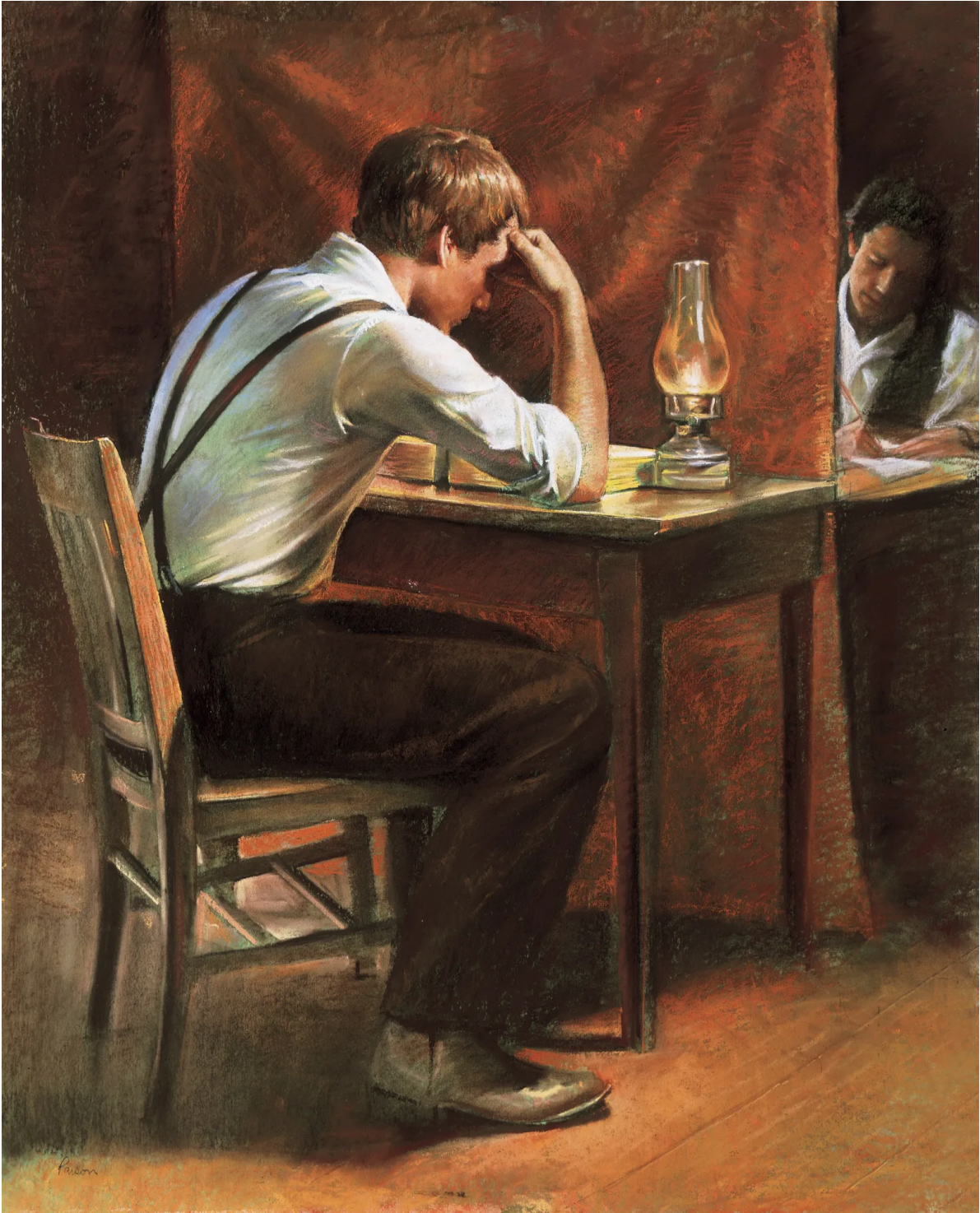
²Angel Moroni

³D&C, Chronological Order of Contents

⁴New Era: The Book of Mormon: From Plates to Press

curtain” is overwhelming- meaning the plausibility of Joseph Smith using reference notes is actually there.

Hypothetical illustrations of Smith being able to “hide” a manuscript



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⁵Joseph Smith Translating (Joseph Smith Translating the Gold Plates) Note, this illustration depicts the plates on the table, but the plates were probably not visible during the translation process.

⁶Still from *Joseph Smith, Volume 1: Plates of Gold*

Eyewitness accounts of the method of translation ⁸

(could Joseph Smith have had anything and concealed it from a transcriber?)

Eyewitness	Method
Martin Harris (1829)	By placing the spectacles in a hat and looking into it, Smith interprets the characters into the English language.
Martin Harris (1830)	by placing the spectacles in a hat and looking into them, Joseph Smith said he could interpret these characters.
Martin Harris (1831)	Harris declares, that when he acted as amanuenses, and wrote the translation, as Smith dictated, such was his fear of the Divine displeasure, that a screen (sheet) was suspended between the prophet and himself
Oliver Cowdery (1831)	Smith found with the plates, from which he translated his book, two transparent stones, resembling glass, set in silver bows. That by looking through these, he was able to read in English, the formed Egyptian characters, which were engraved on the plates.
Joseph Smith (1833) Eber Howe quoting Martin Harris (1834)	translated into our own language by the gift and power of God [Martin Harris] says he wrote a considerable part of the book, as Smith dictated, and at one time the presence of the Lord was so great, that a screen was hung up between him and the Prophet; at x'other times the Prophet would sit in a different room, or up stairs, while the Lord was communicating to him the contents of the plates. He does not pretend that he ever saw the wonderful plates but once, although he and Smith were engaged for months in deciphering their contents
Isaac Hale (1834)	The manner in which he pretended to read and interpret, was the same as when he looked for the money-diggers, with the stone in his hat, and his hat over his face, while the Book of Plates were at the same time hid in the woods!

⁷Joseph Smith Translating the Golden Plates

⁸Statements on the Book of Mormon Translation method: 1829-1835

Eyewitness	Method
Charles Anthon quoting Martin Harris (1834)	Whoever examined the plates through the spectacles, was enabled not only to read them, but fully to understand their meaning...This young man was placed behind a curtain, in the garret of a farm house, and, being thus concealed from view, put on the spectacles occasionally, or rather, looked through one of the glasses, decyphered the characters in the book, and, having committed some of them to paper, handed copies from behind the curtain, to those who stood on the outside. Not a word, however, was said about the plates having been decyphered “by the gift of God.” Every thing, in this way, was effected by the large pair of spectacles.
Oliver Cowdery (1834)	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.”
John Clark quoting Martin Harris (1840)	The way that Smith made his transcripts and translations for Harris was the following; Although as the same room, a thick curtain or blanket was suspended between them, and Smith concealed behind the blanket, pretend to look through his spectacles, or transparent stones, and would then write down or repeat what he saw, which, when repeated aloud, was written down by Harris, who sat on the other side of the suspended blanket. Harris was told, that it would arouse the most terrible divine displeasure, if he should attempt to drawn near the sacred chest or look at Smith while in the work of deciphering the mysterious characters. This was Harris’ own account of the matter to me.
Joseph Smith (1842)	Through the medium of the Urim and Thummim I translated the record by the gift, and power of God.

Eyewitness	Method
Martin Harris (1870)	<p>the Prophet possessed a seer stone, by which he was enabled to translate as well as from the Urim and Thummim, and for convenience he then used the seer stone. Martin explained the translation as follows: By aid of the seer stone, sentences would appear and were read by the Prophet and written by Martin, and when finished he would say, "Written," and if correctly written, that sentence would disappear and another appear in its place, but if not written correctly it remained until corrected, so that the translation was just as it was engraven on the plates, precisely in the language then used.</p>
Emma Smith (1879)	<p>Question. Had he not a book or manuscript from which he read, or dictated to you?</p> <p>Answer. He had neither manuscript nor book to read from.</p> <p>Question. Could he not have had, and you not know it?</p> <p>Answer. If he had had anything of the kind he could not have concealed it from me.</p> <p>Question. Are you sure that he had the plates at the time you were writing for him?</p> <p>Answer. The plates often lay on the table without any attempt at concealment, wrapped in a small linen tablecloth, which I had given him to fold them in. I once felt of the plates, as they thus lay on the table, tracing their outline and shape. They seemed to be pliable like thick paper, and would rustle with a metallic sound when the edges were moved by the thumb, as one does sometimes thumb the edges of a book.</p> <p>Question. Could not father have dictated the Book of Mormon to you, Oliver Cowdery and the others who wrote for him, after having first written it, or having first read it out of some book?</p> <p>Answer. Joseph Smith [and for the first time she used his name direct, having usually used the words, "your father" or "my husband"] could neither write nor dictate a coherent and well-worded letter, let alone dictate a book like the Book of Mormon. And, though I was an active participant in the scenes that transpired, and was present during the translation of the plates, and had cognizance of things as they transpired, it is marvelous to me, "a marvel and a wonder," as much so as to anyone else.</p>
David Whitmer (1881)	<p>My statement was and now is that in translating he put the stone in his hat and putting his face in his hat so as to excluded the light and that then the light and characters appeared in the hat together with the interpretation which he uttered and was written by the scribe and which was tested at the time as stated.</p>

Eyewitness	Method
David Whitmer (1884)	The understanding we have about it was that when the book was discovered an angel was present and pointed the place out. In translating from the plates, Joseph Smith looked through the Urim and Thummim, consisting of two transparent pebbles set in the rim of a bow, fastened to a breastplate. He dictated by looking through them to his scribes
David Whitmer (1885)	Each time before resuming the work all present would kneel in prayer and invoke the Divine blessing on the proceeding. After prayer Smith would sit on one side of a table and the amanuenses, in turn as they became tired, on the other. Those present and not actively engaged in the work seated themselves around the room and then the work began. After affixing the magical spectacles to his eyes, Smith would take the plates and translate the characters one at a time. The graven characters would appear in succession to the seer, and directly under the character, when viewed through the glasses, would be the translation in English.
David Whitmer (1885)	In order to give privacy to the proceeding a blanket, which served as a portiere, was stretched across the family living room to shelter the translators and the plates from the eyes of any who might call at the house while the work was in progress. This, Mr. Whitmer says, was the only use made of the blanket, and it was not for the purpose of concealing the plates or the translator from the eyes of the amanuensis. In fact, Smith was at no time hidden from his collaborators, and the translation was performed in the presence of not only the persons mentioned, but of the entire Whitmer household and several of Smith's relatives besides.

David Whitmer (1887) I will now give you a description of the manner in which the Book of Mormon was translated. Joseph Smith would put the seer stone into a hat, and put his face in the hat, drawing it closely around his face to exclude the light; and in the darkness the spiritual light would shine. A piece of something resembling parchment would appear, and on that appeared the writing. One character at a time would appear, and under it was the interpretation in English. Brother Joseph would read off the English to Oliver Cowdery, who was his principal scribe, and when it was written down and repeated to Brother Joseph to see if it was correct, then it would disappear, and another character with the interpretation would appear. Thus the Book of Mormon was translated by the gift and power of God, and not by any power of man.
