

How the 1908 Book of Mormon Was Produced

By the Editors

The Book of Mormon has come down to us through several editions, but the 1908 Edition is remarkably close to the original.

Joseph Smith, Jr., dictated the text of the book to Oliver Cowdery and other scribes, as he read from the golden plates. This first handwritten manuscript was called the “Original Manuscript.” Oliver Cowdery and others then made a copy of the Original Manuscript to be used by the printer. That copy was called the “Printer’s Manuscript” and was used by the printer, E. B. Grandin, to produce the Palmyra Edition in 1830. Joseph Smith, Jr., gave the Printer’s Manuscript to Oliver Cowdery who, shortly before his death, gave it to his brother-in-law, David Whitmer, who like Oliver, was one of the three witnesses.

David Whitmer later testified:

I was present when Joseph Smith gave this manuscript to Oliver Cowdery it was such a solemn charge. He [Joseph] said, “I feel it in my bones that there will be a division in the church, like was with the Nephites and Lamanites, and if these manuscripts are not preserved, I fear the church may be injured, and when you deliver them up to others, be sure they are left in good hands.” (Pearl Wilcox, *Saints of the Reorganization in Missouri* [Independence, Missouri; 1974], 105)

When the Nauvoo House was being built in 1841, Joseph Smith, Jr., placed the Original Manuscript in the cornerstone. Forty years later when the manuscript was removed, it was found that a major portion of it had been destroyed by moisture—only a few pages, now owned by the Utah Church have survived. God was protecting the Latter Day Work when He prompted Joseph to give the Printer’s Manuscript to Oliver and to place the Original Manuscript in the cornerstone of the Nauvoo House. Joseph’s feelings about a division in the Church were prophetic, for a division did occur when Apostle Brigham Young took the Saints to Utah and took great liberty in rewriting and altering Church history. If Brigham Young had had either of the manuscripts, he could have made changes as he did in Joseph Smith’s history, in order to support polygamy and other false doctrines.

As the Book of Mormon was printed at Palmyra, and reprinted during the Kirtland, Nauvoo, Plano, and Lamoni periods, errors crept into the text. Therefore, the General Conference of 1884 appointed a committee to investigate the possibility of asking David Whitmer, who lived at Richmond, Missouri, if the original Printer’s Manuscript in his possession could be consulted to check the RLDS and other editions to determine their accuracy, and to improve future editions. As a result the committee met at David Whitmer’s home in the summer of that year and made corrections.

The RLDS officials who were members of the committee that went to Whitmer’s in 1884 and helped make the corrections, were President Joseph Smith III and his brother,

Apostle Alexander H. Smith; and Apostles William H. Kelley and Thomas W. Smith. According to Joseph Smith III, the Holy Spirit was present as the men worked together comparing the texts.

Joseph Smith III Reported about the Work at Whitmer’s Home

Joseph III gave the following account of the particulars of the work of correction:

At the conference it was decided that it would be advisable to secure the privilege of examining the manuscript of the Book of Mormon, then in possession of David Whitmer, of Richmond, Ray County, Missouri, for the purpose of comparing it with the editions put out by the church, in order to correct errors of any description which may have crept into them through transcription and publication. A committee consisting of [Apostle] Alexander H. Smith, [Apostle] William H. Kelley, and [Apostle] Thomas W. Smith was appointed to confer with Elder Whitmer and, if possible, arrange for such examination and comparison.

Through correspondence it was learned that Brother Whitmer would consent to the proposition provided I should be present during the time the work was done. He seemed willing to trust me with the temporary custody of the historic sheets, but unwilling that the others would examine them without my presence. Of course I knew there would be perfect safety to the manuscript in the hands of any one of the committee named and that the rights of Elder Whitmer would not be disregarded or invaded in any way, and no wrong advantage would be taken of the permission he had granted. However, I was pleased at the expression of confidence he seemed willing to place in me, and made arrangements to go with the committee to Richmond and remain with them as long as the work might require.

We reached that city on July 8, and secured quarters at Dale’s boarding house, where we stayed and visited during that evening. We found, next day, that Elder Whitmer had arranged for one or two others also to be present during the examination of the manuscript, as he felt himself unable to undertake alone the responsibility of the important supervision. Accordingly, Philander Page, a relative of Elder Whitmer by marriage, and John C. Whitmer were assigned the duty, Mr. Page spending the greater part of the time with us.

After lunch, we began the solemn task. Repairing to the house of Elder Whitmer, in his presence we all knelt down and implored Divine sanction and the aid of the Holy Spirit to direct and confirm us in the duty we were striving to perform.

It was agreed that one of us should hold and read the manuscript, while others, holding respectively copies of the Palmyra edition, the Nauvoo edition, and the edition published by the Reorganization, carefully compared what was read with what they held; also we were to “take turns” in reading aloud,

as might be found desirable.

The committee continued at work daily, from seven in the morning until six at night, with an intermission for lunch. On Friday a recess was called, and during that week-end we visited Independence. We returned on Monday to continue our task which was finally finished on the seventeenth.

We felt that the work was well and faithfully done. Brother T. W. Smith and Alexander kept a daily record, making notes as the work proceeded. The result of the examination was subsequently reported, being printed in the *Herald* in August of that year—1884.

In reflecting upon this work, it must be conceded that it was timely, for a great deal had been said and much speculation indulged in about the differences said to exist between the various editions and its original manuscript. The result of our examination showed plainly that there had been no vital divergences from the text and descriptions, the supposed errors being chiefly in verbiage, by few of which was the sense even slightly altered. The list of differences showed a few variations in spelling, and, except in one instance, the members of the committee were entirely in unity in their understanding of the manuscript as found. In one place in the published book occurs the phrase *arrest the Scripture*, while in other places, under similar construction in the sentence, the word *arrest* is found as *wrest*, meaning twisting or changing out of place. In one place in the manuscript we found the word written in such a way as to warrant the opinion that the word was really *arrest*—at least so thought the majority of the committee. From this conclusion I disagreed, believing it to be the same word with the same meaning as the word *wrest* found in other places.

My remembrance of the time spent in the home of Elder David Whitmer while engaged in this work was one of the pleasantest episodes of that period. It was especially appreciated because it afforded us an intimate association with the aged patriarch, and because we thoroughly enjoyed the friendly and interesting communion together, as we read and discussed the passages of the sacred and historic old document.

At the close of our work, those who had sat with us from time to time—John C. Whitmer and the other relative Philander Page—expressed their satisfaction and approval of the fairness and courtesy with which Father Whitmer was treated by the committee.

Upon a few occasions during the sessions, Elder Whitmer was visited by citizens or strangers, calling upon one business or another. Once Colonel Giles, a resident of Richmond, brought a stranger by the name of Captain Fall, and their interview with Elder Whitmer resulted in their being brought into the room where we were at work, where they were introduced to us and permitted to see the manuscript.

The colonel, in an affable and friendly manner, discussed with Elder Whitmer the evidence the latter had borne as a special witness to the divinity of the Book of Mormon. Rather suggestively he asked if it might not have been possible that he, Mr. Whitmer, had been mistaken and had simply been moved upon by some mental disturbance, or hallucination, which had deceived him into *thinking* he saw the Personage, the Angel, the plates, the Urim and Thummim, and the sword of Laban.

How well and distinctly I remember the manner in which Elder Whitmer arose and drew himself up to his full height—a little over six feet—and said, in solemn and impressive tones:

“No sir! I was not under any ballucination, nor was I deceived! I saw with these eyes and I heard with these ears! I know whereof I speak!”

Everyone present, including the colonel and his friend, stood under the spell of the impressive silence which followed this emphatic declaration. It was as if we were in the presence of the Angel himself!

I went out of the room with the visitors, and the Colonel remarked:

“It is somewhat difficult, Elder Smith, for us everyday men to believe the statement made by Mr. Whitmer, but one thing is certain—no man could hear him make his affirmation, as he has to us in there, and doubt for one moment the honesty and sincerity of the man himself. He fully believes he saw and heard, just as he has stated he did.”

We felt wonderfully blessed at being permitted to hear, for ourselves, this positive and emphatic testimony of Elder Whitmer.

At the close of our task, as he bade us good-bye, he expressed his gratitude to God that the manuscript had been preserved thus far, and for this visit of our committee and the complete and satisfactory examination and comparisons which had taken place; for he believed, as we did, that it would set at rest much controversy—which, indeed, it has done. (Joseph Smith III, *Saints' Herald* [January 28, 1936], 113–114)

After David Whitmer's death in 1888, his grandson [George Schweich] sold the original Printer's Manuscript to the RLDS Church for \$2,450 (*RLDS History of the Church* 6:62). It was used later in preparing the 1908 Authorized Edition.

The Book of Mormon contains the fullness of the Gospel and is a major part of the foundation upon which the great Latter Day Work is built. It is an honor to be a part of the effort to keep the familiar 1908 Edition available to all who want it. The noble Saints who have gone before us did much to preserve and pass on this sacred Scripture, and now our generation is privileged to have its turn (see *Vision* #14 [October 1993], 3–5).

“Behold, verily, I say unto you, I have reserved those things which I have entrusted unto you, my servant Joseph, for a wise purpose in me, and it shall be made known unto future generations; but this generation shall have my word through you; and in addition to your testimony, the testimony of three of my servants, whom I shall call and ordain, unto whom I will show these things; and they shall go forth with my words that are given through you; yea, they shall know of a surety that these things are true; for from heaven will I declare it unto them; I will give them power that they may behold and view these things as they are; and to none else will I grant this power, to receive this same testimony, among this generation, in this, the beginning of the rising up, and the coming forth of my church out of the wilderness; clear as the moon and fair as the sun, and terrible as an army with banners. And the testimony of three witnesses will I send forth of my word; and, behold, whosoever believeth on my words, them will I visit with the manifestation of my Spirit, and they shall be born of me, even of water and of the Spirit” (Doctrine and Covenants 5:3a–e).