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JOSEPH SMITH AND THE GIFT OF TRANSLATION: THE
DEVELOPMENT OF DISCOURSE ABOUT SPIRITUAL GIFTS DURING
THE EARLY BOOK OF MORMON TRANSLATION PROCESS (1828–
1829)¹

Kirk Caudle

The *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* states, ‘The gift of the Holy Ghost is understood to be the key to all of the “spiritual gifts” found in the church, including the gifts of prophecy and revelation, of healing, of speaking in tongues, and of the translation and interpretation of tongues.’² Although Mormons currently understand spiritual gifts to be inseparably connected with the gift of the Holy Ghost that is not how Joseph Smith apparently understood them before his baptism. Smith’s understanding of the function of spiritual gifts and the reasons for which they were obtained shifted conceptually following his and Oliver Cowdery’s baptism on May 15, 1829. The 1833 *Book of Commandments* changed the original focus from “gifts” as relating exclusively to the gift of translation of the *Book of Mormon* to the more expansive spiritual gifts related to the gift of the Holy Ghost and the establishment of the church.

This essay focuses on the earliest ideas or concept of spiritual gifts as contained in the earliest revelations and translations of Joseph Smith from July 1828 through May 1829. In order to give the earliest possible readings of these texts, I have cited the 1833 *Book of Commandments* and the 1830 edition of the *Book of Mormon* in parentheses, while putting the modern editions of *Doctrine and Covenants* and *Book of Mormon* references in brackets.

EARLY MORMONISM AND GIFTS

The practice of charismatic spiritual gifts by mainstream Christian churches, such as Methodists, was waning by the 1820s in New

¹ I gratefully acknowledge Chris Smith and Maxine Hanks for their invaluable input and editing skills as I composed this article.

² Bruce D. Porter, ‘Gift of the Holy Ghost,’ in *The Encyclopedia of Mormonism* (Macmillan Publishing Company: New York, 1992). Available online at http://eom.byu.edu/index.php/Gift_of_the_Holy_Ghost.

England, although they continued among some revivalist movements and folk visionary traditions. From perhaps 1822 to 1828, Joseph Smith semi-regularly attended the services of the Methodists, a sect historically associated with visions and spiritual gifts. By this time, however, Methodists rarely exercised the gifts and downplayed their importance.³ As Richard Bushman observes, the earliest converts to Mormonism were individuals who had “in common a sympathy for visionary religion.” With Methodist charisma waning, the more charismatic Protestants looked to upstart visionaries, seers and prophets like Mother Ann Lee and Joseph Smith.⁴

When Joseph Smith moved his fledgling church into Kirtland, Ohio in early 1831, he found that the churches there were much like they had been in New York. Not even Alexander Campbell, fellow Restorationist and one of Smith’s most hardened opponents, believed that spiritual gifts were needed in the modern church.⁵ Therefore, when Smith arrived in Kirtland many charismatically-inclined people involved in these congregations gravitated towards him. In terms of early converts, Bushman recounts, “The greatest hunger was for spiritual gifts like dreams, visions, tongues, miracles, and spiritual raptures, making the visionaries the natural audience for the Mormon missionaries and the new revelation.”⁶ They craved a visionary leader with a visionary gift.

Solomon Chamberlin, who ended up becoming one of the great missionaries of the early LDS church, was baptized days after the official organization of the church because he believed that Mormons were the true holders of the spiritual gifts. John Taylor records Chamberlin saying:

Somewhere about the time that Joseph Smith found the record of the Book of Mormon, I began to feel as though the time was nearly come, that had been made known to me by the angel. I made some inquires through the country if there

³ Dan Vogel, *Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2004), p. 59.

⁴ Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), p. 113.

⁵ The need for spiritual gifts in the modern church was a major point of contention between Alexander Campbell and Sidney Rigdon before the two men parted ways. Lloyd Knowles, ‘Sidney Rigdon: the Benedict Arnold of the Restoration Movement’, *Stone Campbell Journal*, 6, no. 1 (2003), pp. 3–25. See also, Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, pp. 146–149.

⁶ Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, p. 113.

was any strange work of God, such as had not been on the earth since the days of Christ . . . I soon arrived at the [Smith] house, and found Hyrum walking the floor; as I entered the room, I said peace be to this house; he looked at me and said 'I hope it will be peace.' I then said is there any one here that believes in visions and revelations. He said yes, we are a visionary house.⁷

Even though charismatic spiritual gifts became very important in early Mormonism, Joseph Smith seems to have been unaware of or unfocused on the role they would play ~ until after he and Oliver Cowdery were baptized and began translating the book of Moroni in May 1829. Before these events, Joseph was focused on visionary experiences and revelation; however, the only “gift” per se spoken of by Joseph Smith was his “gift of translation.”

JULY 1828 (THE DISCOVERY OF A GIFT)

From the earliest days of Joseph Smith’s prophetic career he saw himself as a visionary. The young Smith was a seer and believed in a God who could help him discover his potential. The first time Smith used the word gift in a revelation was on July 1828:

Behold thou art Joseph, and thou wast chosen to do the work of the Lord, but because of transgression, if thou art not aware thou wilt fall, but remember God is merciful: Therefore, repent of that which thou hast done, and he will only cause thee to be afflicted for a season, and thou art still chosen, and wilt again be called to the work; and except thou do this, thou shalt be delivered up and become as other men, and have no more gift. (BOC 2:4 [D&C 3:10-11]; italics added)

This referred to Joseph Smith’s gift of translation and put him in the position of a chosen, but fallible prophet. Righteousness was what made Smith’s gift effective and transgression could cause that gift to be taken away.

What is most telling about this passage is that there is no indication that this gift was new. The text leads the reader to believe that Smith already held the gift before the revelation was received. This is evident

⁷ John Taylor, *Journal* (January 1845–September 1845), pp. 50–54, entry of April 1845, in possession of Brent Ashworth, Provo, Utah. Cited in *Early Mormon Documents*, 5 vols, ed. by Dan Vogel (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1998), III, 40–43.

from the revelation's threat to revoke Smith's gift. It could not be revoked if he didn't already hold it. Given his reported visions of god and angels, and his working with seer stones to discover hidden things, it seems that Smith already felt that he had a gift from God for "seeing" and discovering other worldly things and translating or interpreting them—ever since he received his first seer stone via Sally Chase in 1819, which he ended up using in order to locate his own seer stones.⁸ In the intervening years Smith had acquired a minor fame as a seer by looking into his stones to locate lost objects, natural resources, and buried treasure, as well as acquiring infamy as a visionary seer or revealer of divine beings.⁹ Smith's July 1828 revelation about his own gift implies that his secular uses of divination had been misappropriations of an authentic spiritual gift whose divinely-intended use the young scribe hadn't been fully aware of. Henceforward, he was to use his gift solely in the way God intended.¹⁰

This 1828 revelation was given in the context of Joseph Smith and Martin Harris translating the first 116 pages of the *Book of Mormon*, or what became known as "the Book of Lehi." After some substantial deliberation on the matter, Smith allowed Harris permission to take the

⁸ Willam H. Kelly, 'The Hill Cumorah, and the *Book of Mormon*', *Saints' Herald*, 28 (1 June 1881), p. 165, as cited in *Early Mormon Documents*, II, pp. 105–106. See also D. Michael Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1998), p. 43 and Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, p. 48.

⁹ A newspaper report on this subject related that 'For several years preceding the appearance of his book, he [Joseph Smith] was about the country in the character of a glass-looker: pretending, by means of a certain stone, or glass, which he put in a hat, to be able to discover lost goods, hidden treasures, mines of gold and silver, &c. Although he constantly failed in his pretensions, still he had his dupes who put implicit confidence in all his words. In this town, a wealthy farmer, named Josiah Stowell, together with others, spent large sums of money in digging for hidden money, which this Smith pretended he could see, and told them where to dig; but they never found their treasure.' A.W.B., 'Mormonites', *Evangelical Magazine and Gospel Advocate*, 9 April 1831, p. 120.

¹⁰ Richard Bushman believes that 'After 1828, Joseph could no longer see that magic might have prepared him to believe in a revelation of gold plates and translation with a stone. It did not occur to him that without magic his family might have scoffed at his story of Moroni, as did the minister who rejected the First Vision. Magic had played its part and now could be cast aside.' *Rough Stone Rolling*, p. 69.

116-page transcription to New York to show to his wife Lucy, and perhaps others. Harris ended up losing the manuscript, or possibly having it stolen from him. As a consequence of this event, the angel took away the plates and the translating device from Smith, which his mother referred to as “precious gifts,”¹¹ because he had “wearied the Lord in asking for the privilege of letting Martin Harris take the writings which he lost by transgression.”¹² After Smith’s repentance for this transgression, the same angel that had taken the Urim and Thummim reappeared and returned the plates to Smith.¹³ This implied that the Urim and Thummim itself was the gift or medium of the gift of translation.

During this earliest period of Smith’s prophetic career, physical objects are inseparable from his gift of divine translation, while his personal revelations manifest his soul or mind. In fact, Smith understood the objects themselves to be the gift or medium of the gift of translation, which is why the physical objects were taken from Smith in accordance with the *Book of Commandments* prophecy that if he transgressed and failed to repent, he would “have no more gift.”¹⁴ Historian Christopher Smith has recognized that Joseph Smith was already referring to his seer stone, and other physical objects, as “keys” in the mid-1820s. Smith believed that the earth held many of these sorts of keys that allowed one to

¹¹ *Early Mormon Documents*, I, 220.

¹² *The Papers of Joseph Smith*, ed. by Dean C. Jessee, 2 vols (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989–1992), I, 297.

¹³ Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1984), p. 92. Other commentators on this event noted that, ‘When Joseph Delivered the 116 pages of the translation to Martin Harris, his Plates, his Interpreters, and his gift were taken from him for some two months. The Plates and gift of translation were returned to him, but not the Interpreters. He translated the entire *Book of Mormon* by the use of a little stone he had in his possession before he obtained the plates.’ John W. Welch and Tim Rathbone, ‘The Translation of the Book of Mormon: Basic Historical Information’, in *To All the World: The Book of Mormon Articles from the Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. by Daniel H. Ludlow, S. Kent Brown, John W. Welch (Provo: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1986), p. 13.

¹⁴ Brigham Young believed that there was a seer stone for every righteous individual if they would seek it out. There was also the belief in 19th century Mormon history that the gift of seeing through a seer stone was disconnected from the priesthood. Quinn, *Early Mormonism*, p. 202.

see into the past, present, and future.¹⁵ In much the same way, Smith's gift of translation was apparently of no use without the interpreters or Urim and Thummim or seer stones ~ because the objects themselves were the "gift."

MARCH 1829 (NO OTHER GIFTS)

Although one might conclude that Joseph Smith's "gift" was a physical object, it is hard to narrow down exactly all that Smith felt about his gift during this early period. Following the loss of the 116 pages, Smith did not receive additional recorded information concerning his gift until March 1829, a good eight months after his last revelation on the matter.

And now, behold, this shall you say unto him:~I the Lord am God, and I have given these things unto my servant Joseph, and I have commanded him that he should stand as a witness of these things, nevertheless I have caused him that he should enter into a covenant with me, that he should not show them except I command him, and he has no power over them except I grant it unto him; and he has a gift to translate the book, and I have commanded him that he shall pretend to no other gift, for I will grant him no other gift. (BOC 4:2 [D&C 5:2–4]; italics added)

Joseph Smith not only understood god to be telling him that his "gift" was to translate the *Book of Mormon*, but also that this was his only "gift." From this point forward, he believed that he would receive no other gift other than this one. The *Book of Commandments*, quoted above, reads much differently than the modern edited version of the *Doctrine and Covenants*: "and this is the first gift that I bestowed upon you; and I have commanded that you should pretend to no other gift until my purpose is fulfilled in this; for I will grant unto you no other gift until it is finished" (italics added to indicate textual additions, 5:4). One could argue that this change in the 1835 *Doctrine and Covenants* was for clarification purposes. However, even if this is the case, the original *Book of Commandments* transcription is more indicative of what Joseph Smith would have understood about his "gift" at the time he received this revelation. There is no indication at this juncture that Smith expected to possess any other

¹⁵ Christopher Smith, 'Joseph Smith in Hermeneutical Crisis', *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, 43, no. 2 (2010), 92–95.

“gifts,” and his gift is differentiated from his revelations, which come via an inner process

At the reception of this revelation (BOC 4), Smith was probably just finishing translating (interpreting via the “gift”) the book of Mosiah. After the loss of the first 116 pages, Joseph Smith moved ahead with translating Mosiah through Moroni, rather than starting over at the beginning with 1 Nephi, which waited to retranslate after finishing Moroni, then went back and re-translated 1Nephi through Words of Mormon.¹⁶ Emma Smith, working as scribe for a short time, later recalled that she “frequently wrote day after day, often sitting at the table close by him, he sitting with his face buried in his hat with the stone in it and dictating hour after hour, with nothing between us.”¹⁷ Spiritual gifts are mentioned twice in the book of Mosiah and both of these instances are in reference to the gift of translation. After these two instances, the gift of translation is curiously absent from the rest of the *Book of Mormon* other than a passing reference to the idea in Alma. Chapter 5 of Mosiah in the 1830 *Book of Mormon* states:

Now Ammon saith unto him, I can assuredly tell thee, O king, of a man that can translate the records: for he hath wherewith that he can look, and translate all records that are of ancient date; and it is a gift from God. And the things are called interpreters; and no man can look in them, except he be commanded, lest he should look for that he had not ought, and he should perish. And whosoever is commanded to look in them, the same is called seer. And behold, the king of the people which is in the land of Zarahemla, is the man that is commanded to do these things, and which hath this high gift from God. And the king saith, That a seer is greater than a prophet. And Ammon saith, That a seer is a revelator, and a prophet also; and a gift which is greater, can no man have, except he should possess the power of God, which no man can; yet a man may have great power given him from God. [Mosiah 8:13–16]

It is not difficult to read Joseph Smith into this text. This passage loosely describes his own role as a prophet, seer, revelator, and translator at the

¹⁶ References in this paper to the timeline of Book of Mormon translation are based on the unpublished work of Don Bradley, which he graciously shared with me.

¹⁷ *Early Mormon Documents*, I, 541.

exact time that he is writing it down. More importantly, Smith viewed these *Book of Mormon* activities as a model for his own self-understanding as a seer. Also interesting, this passage links translation and interpreters with being a seer and revelator, which is greater than a prophet. While this could erase a distinction between the “gift” of translation and personal revelation, Smith’s translation of the *Book of Mormon* verses his revelations in the *Book of Commandments*, imply two different processes.

Thus, the gift of translation is again expressly linked with a physical object, in this case, the interpreters. This pericope mirrors Smith’s first revelation concerning his gift, which warned him that transgression would equal the loss of the ability to translate ancient records (BOC 2:4 [D&C 3:10-11]).¹⁸ Since not everyone had this gift, the people sought out Ammon on this occasion for clarification as to who actually had this gift to translate. Smith was warned to only translate the *Book of Mormon* and “that he shall pretend to no other gift” (BOC 4:2 [D&C 5:2-4]).

It is not entirely clear what the revelation meant by the phrase “he shall pretend to no other gift,” but my sense is that it was an implicit repudiation of his earlier use of the seer stone for non-religious purposes. The verse implies that Joseph Smith may have “pretended” to have other gifts, or attempted to use his “gift” i.e. the stone in unjustifiable ways. This connects with the other mention of the gift in Mosiah 9 in the 1830 edition of the *Book of Mormon*: “And now Limhi was again filled with joy, on learning from the mouth of Ammon that king Benjamin had a gift from God, whereby he could interpret such engravings; yea, and Ammon also did rejoice” [Mosiah 21:28]. While there is no explicit mention in this verse of a physical object, the gift mentioned here could very well refer to an “interpreter.” Indeed, this reference to King Benjamin’s “gift”

¹⁸ He also receives this warning as he is translating the book of Mosiah. During March 1829 Smith recorded, ‘behold I say unto you, Joseph, when thou hast translated a few more pages, thou shalt stop for a season, even until I command thee again: then thou mayest translate again. And except thou do this, behold thou shalt have no more gift, and I will take away the things which I have intrusted with thee’ (BOC 4:10 [D&C 5:30–31]). If the stone is the gift then it is the instrument of translation. Therefore, the seer stone is directly connected to the one gift that Joseph has, the gift of translation. Joseph Smith could only then use the stone for translating because if he used the stone for any other purpose (such as treasure digging) then he would be pretending to have a gift that he did not have. Therefore, it is the seer stone that is being threatened to be taken away here.

should probably be viewed in light of the earlier reference in Mosiah 8:13, where Benjamin's gift is explicitly described as a physical object.

APRIL 1829 (TRANSLATION TOWARDS SALVATION)

April 1829 marked the first appearance of the word "gift" used in connection with something other than translation. The following revelation was given from Joseph Smith to Oliver Cowdery:

Behold thou hast a gift, and blessed art thou because of thy gift. Remember it is sacred and cometh from above; and if thou wilt inquire, thou shalt know mysteries which are great and marvelous: therefore thou shalt exercise thy gift, that thou mayest find out mysteries, that thou mayest bring many to the knowledge of the truth; yea, convince them of the error of their ways. Make not thy gift known unto any, save it be those which are of thy faith.~ Trifle not with sacred things. If thou wilt do good, yea and hold out faithful to the end, thou shalt be saved in the kingdom of God, which is the greatest of all the gifts of God; for there is no gift greater than the gift of salvation. (BOC 5:5 [D&C 6:10–13]; italics added)

On April 7th, Oliver Cowdery took over scribal duties from Emma Smith, a process that he later described: "Day after day I continued, uninterrupted, to write from his [Smith's] mouth, as he translated with the Urim and Thummim, or, as the Nephites would have said, 'Interpreters.'"¹⁹ In this revelation, Smith told Cowdery two things. First, that Cowdery had a gift. Second, that there is no greater gift than salvation. It was not until the next verse of the *Book of Commandments*, 5:11 that Smith revealed the meaning of this gift to Cowdery: "And now behold, you have received a witness, for if I have told you things which no man knoweth, have you not received a witness? And behold I grant unto you a gift if you desire of me, to translate even as my servant Joseph" [D&C

¹⁹ Joseph Smith–History 1:71. Royal Skousen argues that before Oliver Cowdery there were only two other scribes, Martin Harris and Emma Smith. These two mostly worked on the lost 116-page manuscript and the first part of the book of Mosiah. Royal Skousen, 'Oliver Cowdery as *Book of Mormon Scribe*', in *Days Never to Be Forgotten: Oliver Cowdery*, ed. by Alexander L. Baugh (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2009), para. 4–5. Accessed 22 June 2013 at <https://rsc.byu.edu/archived/days-never-be-forgotten-oliver-cowdery/3-oliver-cowdery-book-mormon-scribe>.

6:22-25]. Suddenly, Oliver Cowdery discovered that he, like Joseph Smith, possessed the gift of translation.

To this point, the gift of translation was the only charismatic gift that had been given to either of the two men. Smith seemed to understand that he only had one gift and that now Cowdery also had that same single gift. They now also understood that the gift of translation ultimately led to the gift of salvation. Cowdery's gift of translation becomes more interesting later in the revelation: "Verily, verily I say unto you, that there are records which contain much of my gospel, which have been kept back because of the wickedness of the people; and now I command you, that if you have good desires, a desire to lay up treasures for yourself in heaven, then shall you assist in bringing to light, with your gift, those parts of my scriptures which have been hidden because of iniquity" (BOC 5:12 [D&C 6:26-27]).

Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery were translating the book of Alma during this time. Therefore, chapter 5 of the *Book of Commandments* [D&C 6] might be read in light of the following passage:

And now my son, these directors were prepared, that the word of God might be fulfilled, which he spake, saying: I will bring forth out of darkness unto light, all their secret works and their abominations; and except they repent, I will destroy them from off the face of the earth; and I will bring to light all their secrets and abominations, unto every nation that shall hereafter possess the land. (Alma 17 [Alma 37:24–25])

As Oliver Cowdery listened to the prophet dictate this *Book of Mormon* passage, he may have inferred that the purpose of his own gift was the same as the purpose of Alma's: not only to translate, but also to bring to light "secret works" and "abominations."²⁰ As the two men now understood it, this was one of the aspects of the gift of translation. Later *Book of Mormon* editors substituted the word "interpreters" for "directors." I believe that Cowdery related better to the word director. Just as Smith

²⁰ This passages talks about hidden 'secret works and abominations' of wicked, Gadianton-like people. Cowdery understands his gift through this lens, he probably wouldn't have understood it as a direct reference to translation, but to revelation more generally. For example, consider that Joseph Smith spoke of using his 'key' (seer stone) to learn when the local money-diggers were going to make attempts to steal the plates. In other words, Smith used his gift to divine secret combinations among his neighbors to get the plates. Cowdery might be thinking along the same lines.

discovered the golden plates, Cowdery now expected to be directed by his own gift to do some discovering of his own, even if that were just uncovering secrets contained on the golden plates. Now that the gift of translation was shared between Smith and Cowdery they could fulfill the prophecy that “in the mouth of two or three witnesses, shall every word be established” (BOC 5:13 [D&C 6:28]).

Keeping in mind that Joseph Smith first translated the books of Mosiah through Moroni, and then worked on the books 1 Nephi through Words of Mormon, the “gift” references in Mosiah and Alma, during March and April of 1829, would have been the first that he encountered in the text. The phrase “Holy Ghost” never appeared in Mosiah, but it quickly appeared in Alma. The first two instances came in chapters 5 [7:10] and 6 [8:30], referring respectively to the birth of Jesus Christ and being filled with the Holy Ghost. Then an interesting usage of the phrase appeared in chapter 7 of the 1830 version:

after having had all things made known unto them, according to their desires, and their faith, and prayers, of that which has been, and which is, and which is to come; having been visited by the spirit of God; having conversed with angels, and having been spoken unto by the voice of the Lord; and having the spirit of prophecy, and the spirit of revelation, and also many gifts: the gift of speaking with tongues, and the gift of preaching, and the gift of the Holy Ghost, and the gift of translation. [Alma 9:21–22]

Although Mosiah described what the gift of translation looked like, this was the only time that the phrase “gift of translation” was used in the entire 1830 version of the *Book of Mormon*. How the gift of the translation and the gift of the Holy Ghost are separated in this passage is important for understanding Joseph Smith. Smith later stated that all spiritual gifts come following the reception of the gift of the Holy Ghost.²¹ However,

²¹ “We believe that the Holy Ghost is imparted by the laying on of hands of those in authority, and that the gift of tongues, and also the gift of prophecy, are gifts of the spirit, and are obtained through that medium; but then to say that men always prophesied and spoke in tongues when they had the imposition of hands, would be to state that which is untrue, contrary to the practice of the apostles, and at variance with holy writ; for Paul says, “to one is given the gift of tongues, to another the gift of prophecy, and to another the gift of healing”- and again, “do all prophecy? do all speak with tongues? do all interpret?” evidently shewing that all did not possess these several gifts; but that one received

at this early stage in the translation project Smith does not appear to have had such a simple or unified theology worked out. In this passage, the gift of the Holy Ghost was grouped along with all of the other spiritual gifts as one of them. The passage gave no indication that the other gifts listed come through the reception of the Holy Ghost. In fact, it appears to me that the gifts listed are totally independent from one another.

This passage is also interesting for two other reasons. First, it distinguished between “the spirit of” prophecy and revelation and the various “gifts.” Implicitly, revelation and prophecy come by some sort of independent spirit rather than through a personal gift.²² In fact, the *Book of Mormon* never mentions revelation as a gift at all in the entire book, while mentioning prophecy as such only once.²³ Second, the gift of the Holy Ghost was not the source of all of the other gifts, but it was a gift in itself. This is significant because it shows why Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery could exercise the gift of translation before receiving the gift of the Holy Ghost in 1829.

Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery apparently saw the gift of the Holy Ghost as distinct from the gift of translation. If they did not see these as two distinct gifts, then they would have either already seen themselves as holding the gift of the Holy Ghost, or they would have seen themselves as not really having the gift of translation until they received the Holy Ghost. Given the circumstances, neither of these two options seems plausible. Additionally, the gift of translation is never mentioned thus not connected with the gift of the Holy Ghost in the Bible. The gift of translation was a uniquely *Book of Mormon* gift and was used by Smith and Cowdery in a uniquely *Book of Mormon* way. The gift is entirely absent from the Biblical text and thus is not listed among the gifts of the Holy Spirit in 1 Corinthians 12.

one gift and another received another gift—all did not prophecy; all did not speak in tongues; all did not work miracles; but all did receive the gift of the Holy Ghost; sometimes they spake in tongues and prophesied in the Apostles' days, and sometimes they did not. The same in [sic] the case with us also in our administration.’ *Times and Seasons*, June 15, 1842, p. 822.

²² Exactly what the spirit of revelation means here is entirely unclear. Perhaps it refers to some kind of benevolent spirit possession? The text seems to indicate that the spirit of prophecy was something one could ‘have’ rather than something by which one was spoken to. I believe that Joseph Smith understood himself to be in some way indwelt by this ‘spirit.’

²³ This exception comes in Moroni 10 where it is listed in a long list of other gifts.

Understanding that revelation is disconnected from the gift of the Holy Ghost at this point in the *Book of Mormon* translation process is important as one moves further through the text. What exactly is and is not considered a spiritual gift in Joseph Smith's early theology is not entirely clear at this point and can be a little confusing. Oliver Cowdery is told, "Now, behold this is the Spirit of revelation:~behold this is the Spirit by which Moses brought the children of Israel through the Red sea on dry ground: therefore, this is thy gift; apply unto it and blessed art thou, for it shall deliver you out of the hands of your enemies, when, if it were not so, they would slay you and bring your soul to destruction" (BOC 7:2 [D&C 8:3–4]; italics added). This passage is curious because all of a sudden the spirit of revelation is given as a gift to Cowdery and that seems to directly contradict the passage that the men just translated in Alma.

To make sense of this contrast, one could interpret the gift of prophecy given in the *Book of Commandments* as synonymous with the Biblical interpretation, which says that the "testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy" (Revelation 19:10). This reading gives Cowdery the faith necessary to know that God will allow his gift of translation to work. However one takes this passage, though, it is still not given through the gift of Holy Ghost.²⁴ The gift, as it is given here, is still a gift that stands on its own, but is still only given for the benefit of translation.²⁵ Cowdery is then told:

O remember, these words and keep my commandments. Remember this is your gift. Now this is not all, for you have another gift, which is the gift of working with the rod: behold it has told you things: behold there is no other power save God, that can cause this rod of nature, to work in your hands, for it is the work of God; and therefore whatsoever you shall ask me to tell you by that means, that will I grant unto you,

²⁴ I do recognize that a case can be made in this chapter for the spirit of revelation being equal to the gift of the Holy Ghost. From my reading of this chapter, the spirit of revelation is only the Holy Ghost working through Oliver Cowdery, but is not the gift itself.

²⁵ It should also be noted that Oliver Cowdery is recorded as receiving an additional spiritual gift before Joseph Smith. It stands to reason that since Smith is already receiving revelations that he must already possess this spirit. However, the text itself never states this as the case, although I believe that that it is strongly inferred.

that you shall know. (BOC 7:3 [D&C 8:5]; italics added)

Just as Joseph Smith's gift of translation came in the form of a physical interpreter, so did Oliver Cowdery's gift of the spirit of revelation. Cowdery had a gift to receive revelation, but the revelation came only through working with the rod. Thus, as with the stones and interpreters, the medium of the gift was a physical object. However, just as in previous passages, the power to exercise the gift ultimately came from God. The power that operates the gift is not the gift itself.

The phrase "working with the rod" originally read "working with the sprout." *The Joseph Smith Papers* relates the following concerning this issue: "the phrase 'the gift of working with the sprout' appears, possibly describing Cowdery's use of a divining rod or similar 'thing of Nature.' The phrase was later revised to read 'the gift of working with the rod' in the 1833 *Book of Commandments* and 'the gift of Aaron' in the 1835 *Doctrine and Covenants*."²⁶

Joseph Smith already viewed himself and Oliver Cowdery as modern-day versions of Moses and Aaron. Thus, providing Cowdery with the gift of the rod further reflected Smith's identification with the Old Testament prophets.²⁷ It was not long before this revelation that Cowdery read in the Book of Mosiah that "Doubtless, a great mystery is contained within these plates; and these interpreters was doubtless prepared for the purpose of unfolding all such mysteries to the children of men" (Mosiah 5 [8:19]). Like its ancient *Book of Mormon* counterparts, Cowdery understood his rod to be his interpreter (or director) for unfolding such mysteries. Joseph Smith probably believed the same, as Brant Gardner points out in his book *The Gift and Power*: he "believed that his stone accessed the divine and that Oliver's rod would do the same. Just as Joseph had transferred his talent with a particular medium—the stone—to the task of translating, both young men understood that Oliver could transfer his talent with the rod to the task of translation."²⁸ Before their baptisms, both men were still equating their gifts with physical objects.

²⁶ Revelation, April 1829–B [D&C 8], *The Joseph Smith Papers*, accessed 9 July 2013 at <http://josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/revelation-april-1829-b-dc-8>.

²⁷ Smith, 'Joseph Smith in Hermeneutical Crisis', p. 94.

²⁸ Brant A. Gardner, *The Gift and Power: Translating the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Kofford Books, 2011), p. 313.

MAY 1829 (THE GIFT OF TRANSLATION AS A PROTECTIVE FORCE)

During this time Joseph Smith became concerned about whether or not it was necessary to retranslate the 116-page manuscript lost by Martin Harris. Chapter 9 of the *Book of Commandments*, [D&C 10] is a response to this conundrum.²⁹ Verse 1 reads:

Now, behold I say unto you, that because you delivered up so many writings, which you had power to translate, into the hands of a wicked man, you have lost them, and you also lost your gift at the same time, nevertheless it has been restored unto you again: therefore, see that you are faithful and go on unto the finishing of the remainder of the work as you have begun. Do not run faster than you have strength and means provided to translate, but be diligent unto the end, that you may come off conqueror; yea, that you may conquer satan, and those that do uphold his work. [D&C 10:1–5; italics added]

Again, the gift spoken of in this verse refers to the physical object taken by the angel.

The lesson learned by Joseph Smith from this revelation is not only that his gift can be taken away, but also that his gift is not for him. He lost his gift only to have it restored for the express purpose of teaching him that the gift of translation (in the form of the interpreters) is given to further the process of translating the Book of Mormon.

This revelation reminded Joseph Smith that he was up against a very real demonic force and presented Satan as something that must be “conquered” as it was actively fighting against his gift. Smith believed himself to be engaged in a very real battle between good and evil, and because of this he feared that once he lost the gift of translation another individual (led by Satan) could pick up and pervert the work of translation (BOC 9:2 [D&C 6–13]).³⁰ From Smith’s perspective, his gift of

²⁹ There is much debate about whether or not this revelation came in 1828 or 1829. I have chosen to follow the dating of the *Joseph Smith Papers* and date this revelation May 1829. Given this, I fully recognize that not all readers will agree with my dating of this revelation.

³⁰ ‘Behold they have sought to destroy you; yea, even the man in whom you have trusted, and for this cause I said, that he is a wicked man, for he has sought to take away the things wherewith you have been intrusted; and he has also

translation was the only thing protecting the plates from being corrupted by demonic forces. To lose the gift of the interpreters meant that the plates lost their protection.

Verily I say unto you, that I will not suffer that satan shall accomplish his evil design in this thing, for behold he has put it into their hearts to tempt the Lord their God; for behold they say in their hearts, We will see if God has given him power to translate, if so, he will also give him power again; and if God giveth him power again, or if he translate again, or in other words, if he bringeth forth the same words, behold we have the same with us, and we have altered them: Therefore, they will not agree, and we will say that he has lied in his words, and that he has no gift, and that he has no power: therefore, we will destroy him, and also the work, and we will do this that we may not be ashamed in the end, and that we may get glory of the world. (*italics added*, BOC 9:3 [D&C 10:14–19])

This revelation offers an indication that the devil himself can give the gift of translation to his followers in order to destroy Joseph Smith's work of translation by denying that his gift exists.³¹ The evil people will say, "We will see if God has given him power to translate, if so, he will also give him power again" or in other words, "where is Joseph Smith's translation item, if he really has an object that lets him translate ancient records,

sought to destroy your gift, and because you have delivered the writings into his hands, behold they have taken them from you: therefore, you have delivered them up; yea, that which was sacred unto wickedness. And behold, satan has put it into their hearts to alter the words which you have caused to be written, or which you have translated, which have gone out of your hands; and behold I say unto you, that because they have altered the words, they read contrary from that which you translated and caused to be written; and on this wise the devil has sought to lay a cunning plan, that he may destroy this work; for he has put it into their hearts to do this, that by lying they may say they have caught you in the words which you have pretended to translate.'

³¹ Smith is already somewhat familiar with demonic forces at this point. He later describes an encounter with an evil force during his 1838 account of the First Vision, 'I was seized upon by some power which entirely overcame me and had such astonishing influence over me as to bind my tongue so that I could not speak. Thick darkness gathered around me and it seemed to me for a time as if I were doomed to sudden destruction' (Joseph Smith—History 1:15). However, it is worth noting that Joseph Smith says nothing about this demonic encounter in his earliest account of the First Vision in 1832.

then God should return it to him so that we can see it and compare it with our own.” Smith recognized this argument as a trap and understood that no matter what he produced the people would still claim to “have the same with us.”

MAY 15, 1829 (THE BAPTISMAL EVENT AND THE IDEA OF A CHURCH)

When Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery reached 3 Nephi during their translation efforts, the idea of baptism started to weigh upon their minds. In one of the earliest accounts of the event, Oliver Cowdery recorded in 1834, “the question [sic] might be asked, have men authority to administer in the name of Christ, who deny revelations? when his testimony is no less than the spirit of prophecy? and his religion based, built, and sustained by immediate revelations in all ages of the world, when he has had a people on earth?”³² Buck’s *Theological Dictionary*, a popular nineteenth-century Evangelical text, describes baptism as “consisting in the application of water to a person, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, by which he is initiated into the visible church . . . Baptism does not constitute a visible subject, but only recognizes one.”³³ According to Buck, baptism does not make one love, but rather shows that one already does love. If this is extended to Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery then we might conclude that they do not need to be baptized in order to receive spiritual gifts, but that their baptisms are a response to their faithfulness to the spiritual gifts that they already received. In other words, spiritual gifts lead to baptism, rather than baptism leading to spiritual gifts. This makes the gift of translation a precursor to the baptismal event. The gift of the translation kept Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery constantly in the text of the *Book of Mormon* searching for answers and direction. Another important theme mentioned in Buck’s description of baptism is that it is the entrance into a visible church from an invisible church.

It is unknown when Joseph Smith conceived of organizing a visible church, whether relatively early on during the *Book of Mormon* translation process or toward the end, since the details pertaining this

³² Oliver Cowdery, *Messenger and Advocate*, October 1834, p. 15.

³³ Charles Buck, *A Theological Dictionary, Containing Definitions of All Religious Terms; a Comprehensive view of every Article in the System of Divinity an Impartial Account of all the Principal Denominations which have Subsisted in the Religious World from the Birth of Christ to the Present Day* (Philadelphia: Crissy & Markley, Goldsmith's Hall Library Street, 1851), p. 40.

matter are very unclear. Dan Vogel believes that one reason Joseph Smith might not have considered the idea of baptism prior to translating 3 Nephi in May 1829 is that he “had not yet conceived of a church.”³⁴ David Whitmer cited August 1829—three months after Joseph and Oliver’s baptism in May, and eight months before the official founding in April 1830—as the date of the actual conception of an institutional church as “fully organized spiritually” and baptizing new members.³⁵

It is interesting also to note when the notion of a church first appears in LDS scripture. Like the gift of translation, the first mention of the word “church” during the translation of the *Book of Mormon* came in Mosiah 9 [18:17] translated in early April 1829. Church quickly became a major theme for the rest of that book. Likewise, the first canonized revelation using the word church came right around the same time in March 1829, two months before Smith and Cowdery’s baptism in May 1829 (BOC 9 [D&C 10]). Prior to the first establishment of an actual church in August 1829, Joseph Smith may have viewed the Book of Mormon as a document that reinforced the Old Testament covenants and the true church of God or existing “invisible” church of all Christian believers:

And now, behold, according to their faith in their prayers, will I bring this part of my gospel to the knowledge of my people. Behold, I do not bring it to destroy that which they have received, but to build it up. And for this cause have I said, if this generation harden not their hearts, I will establish my church among them. Now I do not say this to destroy my church, but I say this to build up my church: therefore, whosoever belongeth to my church need not fear, for such shall inherit the kingdom of heaven. (BOC 9:13-14 [D&C 10:52-55])

This revelation focused on the *Book of Mormon*, while referring to an already existing church. Given textual references in the *Book of Mormon*, Smith understood that an invisible church was already in place, but he

³⁴ Vogel, *The Making of a Prophet*, p. 161.

³⁵ ‘We preached, baptized and confirmed members into the Church of Christ, from August, 1829, until April 6th, 1830, being eight months in which time we had proceeded rightly; the offices in the church being Elders, Priests and Teachers . . . it was all a mistake about the church being organized on April 6, 1830 . . . We were as fully organized – spiritually – before April 6th as were on that that day.’ David Whitmer, *An Address to All Believers in Christ*, August 1, 1887, pp. 32–33.

now understood that a visible church must be established. The revelation had a very ecumenical feel: those who are already part of the invisible church needn't fear the establishment of this visible church; it is as if they are already members.³⁶ The spiritual gift of translation possessed by Smith and Cowdery led to baptism and is what ultimately led to this invisible church becoming visible.

Joseph Smith recorded in this 1838 history that, "No sooner had I baptized Oliver Cowdery, than the Holy Ghost fell upon him, and he stood up and prophesied . . . so soon as I had been baptized by him, I also had the spirit of prophecy . . . I prophesied concerning the rise of this Church, and many other things connected with the Church."³⁷ Although Oliver Cowdery was baptized first and expressed the spirit of prophecy, he had already received this ability less than one month prior (BOC 7:2 [D&C 8:3–4]). This might have been seen as the promised fulfillment of that gift to Cowdery.

Also one month prior to this event, Joseph Smith learned that the gift of translation would ultimately lead to the gift of salvation (BOC 5:5 [D&C 6:10–13]). Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery both held the gift of translation and had access to the spirit of prophecy and thus "rejoiced in the God of our salvation."³⁸ The event of baptism, and the idea of establishing a church, led Joseph Smith to think more deeply about what it meant for one to receive spiritual gifts.

MAY 1829 (HYRUM SMITH AND MORONI 10)

After their momentous baptismal event, Joseph Smith became more concerned than ever with spiritual gifts. For the first time the focus now shifted to gifts outside of the gift of translation. Not long after Smith and Cowdery started translating the book of Moroni in May 1829, Smith received his first recorded revelation following his baptismal event, which revelation is found in *Book of Commandments* chapter 10 [D&C 11]. This is significant because the book of Moroni is full of references to spiritual gifts and it shows that the idea was on the minds of the two men. I believe

³⁶ One could read 'establish' as 'To enact or decree by authority and for permanence; to ordain; to appoint; as, to establish laws, regulations, institutions, rules, ordinances, &c.' 'establish,' 1828 edition of Webster's American Dictionary of the English Language, accessed 22 June 2013 at <http://1828.mshaffer.com/d/search/word,establish>.

³⁷ Joseph Smith–History 1:73.

³⁸ Joseph Smith–History 1:73.

that it is very possible that the events surrounding their baptisms may have influenced Smith's conceptualization or wording while translating Moroni.

Joseph Smith received a revelation about spiritual gifts which was directed to his brother Hyrum Smith, and contained in *Book of Commandments* chapter 10 [D&C 10]. Verse 5 of that chapter states:

Behold thou hast a gift, or thou shalt have a gift, if thou wilt desire of me in faith, with an honest heart, believing in the power of Jesus Christ, or in my power which speaketh unto thee: for behold it is I that speaketh: behold I am the light which shineth in darkness, and by my power I give these words unto thee. (D&C 11:10)

Again, Book of Commandments 10 [D&C 11] is probably given just as Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery are finishing their translation work on the book of Moroni in May. Given the prevalence of the gifts of the spirit in this revelation, combined with the corresponding gifts found in Moroni 10, this suggests a plausible overlap in dating. The gifts of the spirit in this revelation mirror Moroni 10 in many ways. The beginning of Moroni 10 [Moroni 10:5–17] can be read as Joseph Smith talking with Hyrum. This chapter in the *Book of Mormon* gives the most complete list of spiritual gifts to date at this point of the translation process as well as in Joseph's revelations. Some of the gifts mentioned in this chapter include faith, healing, miracles, prophecy, tongues, and the interpretation of tongues [Moroni 10:7–16]. Joseph Smith tells his brother that he has a gift, but at the same time, not yet.

At this early stage of the restoration, Hyrum has not yet gone through the ritual of baptism so he is still a part of the invisible church. Buck's and the *Book of Commandments* both support the notion of Hyrum receiving a gift, but not yet. There is a sense that the invisible church and the spiritual gifts are in one way like the keys described by Joseph Smith in the mid-1820s ~ in that they are already all around us, but always in potentiality as yet to be discovered or used.

Joseph Smith provides his brother with a way of unlocking his gift through faith in Jesus Christ as he goes on to tell Hyrum:

seek not to declare my word, but first seek to obtain my word, and then shall your tongues be loosed; then, if you desire you shall have my Spirit, and my word: Yea, the power of God unto the convincing of men: but now hold your peace; study my word which hath gone forth among the children of men;

and also study my word which shall come forth among the children of men; or that which you are translating. (BOC 10:10 [D&C 11:21])

Although this verse does not specifically use the word “gift,” it nonetheless provide a clue to the identity of Hyrum Smith’s spiritual gift. Hyrum is told that after he obtains God’s “word,” then his tongue shall “be loosed.”³⁹ This might be an early reference to the gift of prophecy and/or revelation, or perhaps teaching or even tongues, although those do not really start happening until the Kirtland period. Just as the spiritual gift of translation led to the baptism of Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery, likewise spiritual gifts seem to have led to ordination. Moroni 3 records, “after this manner did they ordain priests and teachers, according to the gifts and callings of God” [3:4]. The *Book of Mormon* records people being ordained in the church “according to” the gifts that they already possessed. This is the same position that Hyrum is in during this time. The next verse (11), strengthens this reading:

Behold thou art Hyrum, my son; seek the kingdom of God and all things shall be added according to that which is just. Build upon my Rock, which is my gospel; deny not the spirit of revelation, nor the Spirit of prophecy, for wo unto him that denieth these things: therefore, treasure up in your hearts until the time which is in my wisdom, that you shall go forth: Behold I speak unto all who have good desires, and have thrust in their sickles to reap. (D&C 11:23–27)

Here Hyrum is explicitly warned against denying the possibility of receiving revelation or prophecy by the spirit. Again, the wording here is very close to what is found in Moroni 10, “deny not the power of god; for he worketh by power, according to the faith of the children of men, the same today and tomorrow, and forever, and again, I exhort you, my brethren, that ye deny not the gifts of God, for they are many” [Moroni 10:7–8].

MAY 1829 (THE TITLE PAGE OF THE BOOK OF MORMON)

Probably still in May 1829, around the time that he translated the book of Moroni, Joseph Smith translated the Book of Mormon title

³⁹ The 1835 edition of the *Doctrine and Covenants* changes the plural ‘tongues’ to the singular ‘tongue’.

page, which was “taken from the very last leaf, on the left hand side of the collection or book of plates.”⁴⁰ This portion of the record reads:

Written by way of commandment, and also by the spirit of Prophecy and of Revelation . . . to come forth by the gift and power of GOD, unto the interpretation thereof; sealed by the hand of Moroni, and hid up unto the LORD, to come forth in due time by the way of Gentile; the interpretation thereof by the gift of GOD.⁴¹

The only thing that Joseph Smith refers to on the title page as a gift is the translation aspect, everything else is done by the “spirit of Prophecy and of Revelation.” Joseph Smith was very careful translating the word gift here. He might still have had in mind that he and Oliver Cowdery were the only ones who really held this one true gift of translation to bring forth the Book of Mormon. There was still no mention of anything being done by the Holy Ghost or by the gift of the Holy Ghost.

It could be that Smith was still viewing the gift of the Holy Ghost as just another gift that one might receive, but not as the channel by which all gifts are received (Alma 7 [Alma 9:21–22]). For Joseph Smith in 1829, he was still holding only the one gift that had so far been given to him. In the preface of the 1830 edition of the *Book of Mormon*, Joseph Smith again reminded readers that he “would inform you that I translated, by the gift and power of God.”⁴²

CONCLUSION

The first time that Joseph Smith actually laid out a list of spiritual gifts, outside of the *Book of Mormon*, was on March 8, 1831 (BOC 49 [D&C 46]). This revelation mentioned that each member of the church can have at least one, but maybe only one, spiritual gift (BOC 49:12 [D&C 46:12]). This is the first time that the gifts of the spirit were undeniably linked with the gift of the Holy Ghost in a revelation. It was only at that point that Joseph Smith finally sat down and systematized the purpose of gifts and specifically said that spiritual gifts come “by the Holy Ghost” (BOC 49:13–16 [D&C 46:13–16]). Earlier while translating the book of Moroni, Joseph Smith said that spiritual gifts “come by the Spirit of Christ” (Moroni 10 [Moroni 10:17]). It is important to remember here

⁴⁰ *The Papers of Joseph Smith*, I, 300.

⁴¹ Title page of the 1830 edition of the *Book of Mormon*.

⁴² Preface of the 1830 edition of the *Book of Mormon*.

that Joseph Smith translated Moroni in late May, after his baptism earlier that month. With this in mind, *Book of Commandments* 49 [D&C 46] would suggest that he slowly became more aware of spiritual gifts of the Holy Ghost and the importance that they held in establishing the church.

Early in his prophetic career Joseph Smith believed that the gift of translation was connected to a physical object, and would be his one and only gift. Later, Oliver Cowdery also received this same gift. Since these gifts came in the form or through the medium of physical objects, they could be physically taken away or “lost.” During the early translation process of the *Book of Mormon* Joseph Smith only talked about “gifts” in relation to translation of the book. It was not until after his baptism that he conceived of establishing a church, and talked of gifts as associated with or coming through the medium of the Holy Ghost.

Thus, in the formative years of Mormonism during the translation of the *Book of Mormon*, Joseph Smith did not describe or deal with spiritual gifts in the way that most modern Mormons would conceive of them. This did not occur until after May 1829 when he started translating the book of Moroni and was baptized, and then finally much later in an 1831 when he received a specific revelation about spiritual gifts.