

The Lost Manuscript

The following is an account of the lost 116 pages. We studied this along with sections 3 and 10 of the Doctrine and Covenants...

Martin's wife, Lucy, was suspicious of Joseph Smith. She had questioned him about the plates and demanded to see them. He had told her she could not, "for he was not permitted to exhibit them to any one except those whom the Lord should appoint to testify of them."

That same night Lucy had a dream: A personage appeared to her who told her that as she had disputed the servant of the Lord, ... she had done that which was not right in the sight of God. After which he said to her: "Behold, here are the plates, look upon them and believe."

Unfortunately, Lucy's concerns were not resolved by her dream. She was angry that her husband was spending so much time away from her and wondered if the Smiths were trying to defraud him. She insisted on going to Harmony again. This time she announced to Joseph that she was not going to leave until she saw the plates. She ransacked the entire house looking for them, but did not find them. From that day on she claimed that her husband had been "duped" by a "grand imposter." After two weeks, Martin took her home. Despite her attempts to dissuade him, he returned to Harmony. In Martin's absence, Lucy continued her criticism in Palmyra.

In Pennsylvania, Joseph and Martin labored together on the translation until 14 June 1828. By that time the translation filled 116 foolscap pages (roughly legal-size), and Martin asked if he could take this manuscript home to show his wife and friends. He hoped this would convince Lucy that the work was legitimate and stop her opposition. Through the Urim and Thummim, Joseph inquired of the Lord. The answer was no. Martin, not satisfied, persisted until Joseph again asked the Lord; still the answer was no. Martin's pleadings and solicitations continued. Joseph wanted to satisfy his benefactor. He was young and inexperienced, and he relied upon the age and maturity of Martin. Moreover, Martin was the only one Joseph knew who was willing to work as scribe and finance the publication of the book. These considerations moved him to ask again. Finally, the Lord granted a conditional permission. Martin agreed in writing to show the manuscript to only four or five people, including his wife; his brother, Preserved Harris; his father; his mother; and Lucy's sister, Mrs. Polly Cobb. Martin then left for Palmyra with the only copy of the manuscript.

Shortly after Martin's departure, Emma Smith bore a son, Alvin, who died the day he was born. Emma nearly died herself, and for two weeks Joseph was constantly at her bedside. When she improved, his attention returned to the manuscript. By this time Martin had been gone for three weeks, and they had heard nothing from him. Martin had not been totally irresponsible. He had spent time with his wife, taken care of business in Palmyra, and served on a jury.

Emma encouraged Joseph to catch a stage to Palmyra and check on the matter. After traveling from Harmony to the Palmyra area and walking the last twenty miles during the night, Joseph finally arrived at his parents' home in Manchester. He immediately sent for Martin. Martin usually came quickly, so breakfast was prepared for him and the Smiths. Several hours passed before Martin finally plodded up the walk with head hung down. He climbed on the fence and sat there with his hat down over his eyes. Finally he came in and sat down at the breakfast table, but he could not eat. Lucy Mack Smith, the Prophet's mother, recorded: "He took up his knife and fork as if he were going to use them, but immediately dropped them. Hyrum, observing this, said 'Martin, why do you not eat; are you sick?' Upon which Mr. Harris pressed his hands upon his temples, and cried out in a tone of deep anguish, 'Oh, I have lost my soul! I have lost my soul!'"

Joseph who had not expressed his fears till now, sprang from the table, exclaiming, "Martin, have you lost that manuscript? Have you broken your oath, and brought down condemnation upon my head as well as your own?"

"Yes; it is gone," replied Martin, "and I know not where."

Self-condemnation and fear beset the Prophet. He exclaimed, "All is lost! All is lost! What shall I do? I have sinned—it is I who tempted the wrath of God. I should have been satisfied with the first answer which I received from the Lord; for he told me that it was not safe to let the writing go out of my possession." He wept and groaned, and walked the floor continually.

At length he told Martin to go back and search again. "No," said Martin, "it is all in vain; for I have ripped open beds and pillows [looking for the manuscript]; and I know it is not there."

"Then must I," said Joseph, "return with such a tale as this? I dare not do it. And how shall I appear before the Lord? Of what rebuke am I not worthy from the angel of the Most High?" ...

The next morning, he set out for home. They parted with heavy hearts, for it now appeared that all which we had so fondly anticipated, and which had been the source of so much secret gratification, had in a moment fled, and fled forever.

Upon returning to Harmony without the 116 pages of manuscript, Joseph immediately began to pray for the Lord to forgive him for acting contrary to his will. Moroni appeared to Joseph and required him to return the plates and the Urim and Thummim, but promised that he could receive them back if he were humble and penitent. Some time later he received a revelation which chastised him for negligence and for "setting at naught the counsels of God" but also comforted him that he was still chosen to perform the work of translation if he repented (see D&C 3:4–10). Joseph did repent and again received the plates and the Urim and Thummim, along with a promise that the Lord would send a scribe to assist him in the translation. There was a special message: "The angel seemed pleased with me ... and he told me that the Lord loved me, for my faithfulness and humility."

With his divine gift restored, Joseph learned by revelation that wicked men, intending to entrap him, had altered the words of the manuscript. If he translated the same material again and published it, they would say he was unable to do it the same way twice, and therefore the work must not be inspired (see D&C 10). God, however, had prepared for this circumstance. The lost document was the book of Lehi taken from Mormon's abridgment of the large plates of Nephi. But Mormon had been inspired to attach the small plates of Nephi to his record for 'a wise purpose,' which at the time he did not understand (see Words of Mormon 1:3–7). These smaller plates contained an account similar to that in the book of Lehi. Joseph was instructed not to retranslate, but to continue on and at the appropriate time to include the material from the small plates of Nephi. These records were the account of Nephi, which the Lord said was "more particular concerning the things which, in my wisdom, I would bring to the knowledge of the people" (D&C 10:40).