

CHAPTER IX

Some Problems Arising from Martin Harris' Visit to Professor Charles Anthon

Shortly after receiving the plates of the Book of Mormon, the prophet Joseph Smith began to copy the characters thereon. He states that he copied a considerable number of them and by means of the Urim and Thummim translated some of them.¹ After he had done this, it would appear that the Lord commanded him to have someone take the characters that had been translated and show them to some learned men. For in part of the text of Isaiah in the Book of Mormon we find these words:

But behold, it shall come to pass that the Lord God shall say unto him to whom he shall deliver the book [Joseph Smith]: Take these words which are not sealed and deliver them to another [Martin Harris], that he may show them unto the learned [Dr. Anthon, Dr. Mitchell, *et. al.*], saying: Read this, I pray thee. And the learned shall say: Bring hither the book, and I [Dr. Anthon] will read them. (2 Nephi 27:16; cf. Isa. 29:11; the Book of Mormon indicates a corrupt text.)

The prophet must have been commanded to send Martin Harris on the mission to the "learned," for in his history he writes:

Sometime in this month of February [1828], the aforementioned Mr. Harris came to our place, got the characters which I had drawn off the plates, and started with them to the city of New York. For what took place relative to him and the characters, I refer to his own account of the circumstances, as he related them to me after his return, which was as follows: "I went to the city of New York, and presented the characters which had been translated, with the translation there-

of, to Professor Charles Anthon, a gentleman celebrated for his literary attainments. Professor Anthon stated that the translation was correct, more so than any he had before seen translated from the Egyptian. I then showed him those which were not yet translated, and he said that they were Egyptian, Chaldaic, Assyric, and Arabic; and he said they were true characters. He gave me a certificate, certifying to the people of Palmyra that they were true characters, and that the translation of such of them as had been translated was also correct. I took the certificate and put it into my pocket, and was just leaving the house, when Mr. Anthon called me back, and asked me how the young man found out that there were gold plates in the place where he found them. I answered that an angel of God had revealed it unto him.

"He then said to me, 'Let me see that certificate,' I accordingly took it out of my pocket and gave it to him, when he took it and tore it to pieces, saying, that there was no such thing now as ministering of angels, and that if I would bring the plates to him, he would translate them. I informed him that part of the plates were sealed, and that I was forbidden to bring them. He replied, 'I cannot read a sealed book.' I left him and went to Dr. Mitchell, who sanctioned what Professor Anthon had said respecting both the characters and the translation."²

This statement of the prophet concerning Martin Harris' experience with the "learned" in New York City has been the object of considerable criticism, more especially the part purporting to be Professor Anthon's verdict that "the translation was correct, more so than any he had before seen translated from the Egyptian." How could Professor Anthon, say the critics, make such a statement when there was no real scientific knowledge of Egyptian available at the time? We have heard some critics express doubts that Professor Anthon made the statement attributed to him or that Martin Harris ever visited him. Let us dispose of the last point at once. In a footnote in the *Docu-*

mentary History of the Church, President B. H. Roberts, the editor, makes this observation:

In a letter to E. D. Howe, of Painesville, Ohio, who published a book against the Church in 1834, Professor Anthon acknowledged the visit of Martin Harris to him and the presentation of the characters in question. He states, however, that Harris, whom he describes as "a plain, apparently simple-hearted farmer," presented him with a note from Dr. Samuel L. Mitchell, of New York, requesting him (Anthon) to decipher, if possible, a paper which the "farmer" would hand to him. The call on Dr. Mitchell, alluded to in Martin Harris' statement above, must therefore, have referred to a second visit to Dr. Mitchell, after his adventure with Professor Anthon. The latter's communication to Howe bears the date of February 17th, 1834, and is published in *extenso* in Smucker's *History of the Mormons*, pp. 37-39.³

That Martin Harris contacted both Professor Anthon and Dr. Mitchell there can be no question.

Now let us examine other technical matters pertaining to the Prophet Joseph Smith's statement. In the first place, we should observe that the prophet is giving us his own recollection of what Martin Harris reported to him about ten years after the events took place.⁴ "I [Joseph Smith] refer to his own account of the circumstances, *as he related them to me after his return.*" (Italics ours.) It will be seen as we proceed that the prophet's account may be judged substantially correct; some details may not be quite accurate. In relation to the last point, when Professor Anthon is reported to have said that the characters "were Egyptian, Chaldaic, Assyric, and Arabic," we can readily believe that he might have said "Egyptian" and "Arabic," but if he said "Chaldaic" and "Assyric," what did he mean by those terms? Did he mean "Hebrew" and "cuneiform" or "cuneiform" and "Syriac" characters? Or, if he actually said the two words, was he only attempting in a general way to indicate a conglomerate of characters? The answers are not

too important, but they illustrate our point that some minor matters relating to Martin Harris' interview with Professor Anthon might not have been correctly reported. We must also keep in mind that Martin Harris was no linguist, and in his report to the prophet he might have unwittingly misinterpreted some of Professor Anthon's statements concerning translation. But let us never forget that in all probability his report to Joseph Smith was substantially correct. How likely are the chances that a hardheaded businessman or "farmer"—call him what you will—like Martin Harris would dig down in his own pocket and provide three thousand dollars to defray the cost of the Book of Mormon if he hadn't been convinced by Professor Anthon that the characters on the manuscript carried by him were genuine?

Let us look at Professor Anthon's side of the episode for a moment. In his letter to Mr. E. D. Howe, of Painesville, Ohio, (Feb. 17, 1834) he speaks of the "scroll" handed him by Martin Harris and the characters thereon in this way:

This paper in question was, in fact, a singular scroll. It consisted of all kinds of singular characters disposed in columns, and had evidently been prepared by some person who had before him at the time a book containing various alphabets, Greek and Hebrew letters, crosses and flourishes; Roman letters inverted and placed sideways were arranged and placed in perpendicular columns, and the whole ended in a rude delineation of a circle, divided into various compartments, arched with various strange marks, and evidently copied after the Mexican calendar by Humboldt, but copied in such a way as not to betray the source whence it was derived. I am thus particular as to the contents of the paper, inasmuch as I have frequently conversed with friends on the subject since the Mormon excitement began, and well remember that *the paper contained anything else but Egyptian hieroglyphics.*⁵

Notice Professor Anthon's denial that the "scroll" contained any Egyptian hieroglyphics. In view of this fact, let us now quote parts of a letter he wrote to the Rev. Dr. T. W. Coit of New Rochelle, New York, under date of April 3, 1841, and compare them with other parts of his letter to Howe.

To Howe

On hearing this odd story [from Martin Harris], I changed my opinion about the paper, and instead of viewing it any longer as a hoax, I began to regard it as part of a scheme to cheat the farmer of his money, and I communicated my suspicions to him to beware of rogues. *He requested an opinion from me in writing, w h i c h, of course, I declined to give, and he then took his leave, taking his paper with him.*⁶

To Coit

He [Martin Harris] then proceeded to give me the history of the whole affair, which convinced me that he had fallen into the hands of some sharper, while it left me in great astonishment at his simplicity. On my telling the bearer of the paper that an attempt had been made to impose on him and defraud him of his property, *he requested me to give him my opinion in writing about the paper which he had shown to me. I did so without hesitation, partly for the man's sake, and partly to let the individual 'behind the curtain' see that his trick was discovered.*⁷

We shall not call Professor Anthon a prevaricator—let our readers judge him for themselves—rather we shall take the charitable view that the learned gentleman was roundly embarrassed at being connected with the unpopular Mormons and did his best to squirm out of his predicament. President Roberts adds this interesting observation regarding Professor Anthon's letters:

The reader should observe also that in his letter to Rev. Coit, written in 1841, the Professor says that no

one until that time had ever requested from him a statement in writing on the subject of his connection with the Book of Mormon. Yet as a matter of fact, E. D. Howe had addressed him a letter on the subject, asking him for a statement in 1834, to which request the professor responded, telling substantially the same story as in this letter to Rev. Coit excepting as to the written opinion furnished to Harris. The contradictions in Anthon's letters leave him in a most unenviable situation; and doubtless accounts for anti-Mormons publishing extracts only from his letters.⁸

From what has been pointed out thus far, we see that Martin Harris affirms in no uncertain terms that Professor Anthon acknowledged the presence of Egyptian characters on the paper he brought to him, but Anthon denies this, asserting that the "paper contained anything else but Egyptian hieroglyphics." Whom shall we believe? In view of the facts that can be ascertained, our vote is certainly in favor of Martin Harris. He has a straightforward story to tell, and, moreover, his actions following his brush with Professor Anthon all show that he was satisfied with the opinions he received concerning the genuineness of the Book of Mormon characters. He proceeded to help Joseph Smith by acting as a scribe when the latter translated, and then, to cap it all, he provided the money (as we have already pointed out) to print the first edition of the Book of Mormon. Professor Anthon's letters, on the other hand, betray him. He didn't want to be put in the position of helping the cause of an unpopular religion.

Now let us further evaluate Martin Harris' report as given by Joseph Smith, assuming that Professor Anthon did acknowledge the presence of Egyptian characters on the paper shown him. Would it be possible for Anthon in 1828 to identify the characters brought by Martin Harris as "Egyptian" and, further, could he have "translated" them? To answer these questions with any certainty one would need to have access to the original paper taken by

Martin Harris and presented to Professor Anthon for examination. In a letter to Elder John A. Widtsoe of the Quorum of Twelve under date of May 9, 1941, President Frederick M. Smith of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints said, "Without reasonable doubt we have the original paper taken by Martin Harris to Professor Anthon."⁹ Photographs of the "Caractors" on this "Anthon Transcript," so-called, are now readily available.¹⁰ Thanks to the very useful research of Professor Stanley H. B. Kimball of Southern Illinois University, we now know that Professor Anthon's interest in Egypt was of long duration and that he was acquainted with the latest discoveries pertaining to the Egyptian language. Professor Kimball tells us that Champollion's two-volume work, *Precis du Systeme Hieroglyphique (1824)*, was in Anthon's possession and that "at least a full year prior to the visit by Martin Harris, Anthon had studied the work of Champollion."¹¹ Champollion's *Precis* is described as "marvellous" by Dr. Alan H. Gardiner (*Egyptian Grammar*, p. 15, 1927), but it must be kept in mind that it was a pioneer effort in the decipherment of Egyptian, great as it was. Even if Professor Anthon had mastered its contents, able scholar that he was, it is not to be supposed that he could translate even simple Egyptian sentences with any facility. His understanding at best would be limited to the decipherment of numbers of proper names in simple inscriptions and to the identification of numbers of hieroglyphic, hieratic and demotic signs, for all of these are present in Champollion's two volumes. Yes, and even a few cuneiform signs are to be found in the smaller of the two books.¹² Perhaps this is the reason that Martin Harris could report Anthon as saying that part of the signs were "Chaldaic" or Assyric." So we are able to conclude that the Professor was in a position to identify with a considerable degree of Correctness quite a number of hieroglyphic, hieratic and demotic signs from the ancient Egyptian. "Identify" is the Word to emphasize, not "translate," with the possible ex-

ception of a few proper names as indicated above.

The modern student of Egyptian who glances at the "Anthon Transcript" for the first time is quite apt to conclude that the characters resemble hieratic or demotic or variations of the two. In fact, he may tentatively identify a number of the characters as Egyptian. Professor Kimball, in his article, "I Cannot Read a Sealed Book," relates this interesting experience:

Dr. William C. Hayes, Curator of the Egyptian Department of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, in a recent interview with this writer, identified several of the characters (see illustration accompanying this article) as closely resembling hieratic Egyptian characters and indicated their possible meaning.¹³

Dr. Ariel L. Crowley has done a lot of hard work over the years on the Anthon Transcript, and it is now our considered opinion that he has correctly identified numbers of the characters thereon as true Egyptian.¹⁴ It is too much to expect that professional Egyptologists will agree with all of his identifications, but we believe his work is often correct. But though identification of characters has been made, no one, the prophet Joseph Smith excepted, has yet translated the Anthon Transcript. If modern students of Egyptians can't do it—at least they haven't—it is too much to believe that Professor Anthon could. But he could well have recognized in a number of instances that the prophet's translation or identification of the characters was correct. Thus we are finally led to about the same conclusions reached by President B. H. Roberts years ago:

The writer is of the opinion that there is in this statement [of Martin Harris] too wide a scope given to what Professor Anthon said of the translation of the Egyptian-Nephite characters. Of course in the transcripts the professor would doubtless recognize some Egyptian characters of the hieratic Egyptian, and in

the translation would also find a right interpretation of those characters, as it will be seen by his letters, quoted later in the body of the work [Roberts'], he acknowledges that the characters submitted to him were true characters' but beyond this I do not think he could give confirmation as to the correctness of the translation.¹⁵

1. *D.H.C.*, I, 19.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 19-20.

3. *Ibid.*, p.20.

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 18-19.

5. As in B. H. Roberts, *New Witnesses for God*, II, 76; italics ours; 1909. President Roberts points out that the letter appears, as we have already seen, in Smucker's *History of the Mormons*, pp. 37-39. Smucker's name, more often than not, is spelled Schmucker

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 75-76; italics ours.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 78; italics ours. President Roberts should be credited for pointing out the discrepancies in Anthon's letters.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 81.

9. As quoted by Dr. Ariel L. Crowley, *About the Book of Mormon* p. 9. Deseret News Press, 1961. Those interested in the problems of this chapter will find much valuable material in the first five chapters of the Crowley brochure.

10. *Ibid.*, p.6. See also Prof. Stanley H. B. Kimball's valuable article, "I Can Not Read a Sealed Book," *Imp. Era*, Vol. 60, p. 80, 1957.

11. See "Charles Anthon and the Egyptian Language," *Imp. Era*, Vol. 63, p. 710 1960.

12. See, e.g., sign 125, a.

13. *Op. cit.*, p. 106.

14. *Op. cit.*, Ch. II.

15. *Op. cit.*, p. 73, footnote. See also Mormon 9:32-34.