

Michael Hubbard MacKay and Gerrit J. Dirkmaat.
*From Darkness unto Light: Joseph Smith's Translation and
Publication of the Book of Mormon.*

Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2015.

Reviewed by Steven L. Olsen

As Richard L. Bushman points out in the foreword to *From Darkness unto Light*, “This volume is the first of what could be many potential histories coming out of the Joseph Smith Papers Project” (v), which has been a central goal of JSP leadership from the beginning of this vital scholarly initiative. I wish success to the JSP project and the resulting scholarship to help fulfill the inspired directive given through the Prophet on the day the Church was organized: “Behold, there shall be a record kept among you; and in it thou [Joseph Smith] shalt be called a seer, a translator, a prophet, an apostle of Jesus Christ, an elder of the church through the will of God the Father, and the grace of your Lord Jesus Christ, being inspired of the Holy Ghost to lay the foundations thereof, and to build it up unto the most holy faith” (D&C 21:1–2). I cannot imagine a more worthy goal for this scholarly undertaking.

To this end, *From Darkness unto Light* uses both familiar and obscure historical sources to create a more complete and accurate account of Joseph Smith's ministry and the life of the early Latter-day Saint faith. I found the following narratives, along with their new details, particularly informative: retrieving the plates from the Hill Cumorah (5–14), using other scribes beside Martin Harris and Oliver Cowdery (85–89), seeking support for the authenticity of the Book of Mormon from recognized scholars (39–53), using certain translation methods and techniques (123–30), finding a printer for the manuscript (163–75), and paying for the printing (181–93). The title of the book, then, has a double meaning: it clarifies many facets of the book's “coming forth” that were previously unknown, misunderstood, or considered problematic, and it documents events that produced Mormonism's first and most distinctive truth claim (the Book of Mormon). For these reasons alone, this book is an important addition to Mormon historical scholarship and

should be a welcome read for all who are interested in the gospel's restoration in this dispensation.

Jointly published by Deseret Book and BYU's Religious Studies Center, *From Darkness unto Light* is written primarily for a Latter-day Saint audience and will appeal variously to general readers and scholars alike. For example, roughly a third of the book's 200-plus pages is devoted to extensive footnotes. Placed at the end of each chapter, they are removed from readers who want to focus primarily on the narrative but accessible to readers who desire to check sources and dig deeper into the reported events.

For the most part, this account of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon is organized chronologically, beginning with the first visitations from the angel Moroni in September 1823 and ending with the first printing and public sale of the Book of Mormon in March 1830. Many elements of the book reinforce its narrative focus, such as chapter headings that use gerund phrases: "Retrieving the Plates," "Learning to Translate," "Negotiating with Printers," and so on.

While essentially a narrative of the Book of Mormon's coming forth, *From Darkness unto Light* does not give equal weight to all associated events. For example, chapter 1 devotes four times more space to the efforts of Joseph's contemporaries to steal the plates than to the early appearances of the angel Moroni. In more than fourteen pages, chapter 3 provides numerous details associated with Martin Harris's brief 1828 trip to scholars in the eastern United States, but the book hardly mentions Moroni's extensive tutoring of the Prophet from 1823 to 1827. Chapter 4 devotes most of its eleven pages to describing the tools and methods of translation but little space to reflecting on Joseph's own spiritual growth in his accepting the burden of translation. Chapter 11 provides extensive information on the community and religious contexts of the printing but much less on the printing methods and processes, which are well documented but not widely known. These examples seem to indicate that the authors are less interested in creating a full account of the emergence of the Book of Mormon than in filling readers' current knowledge gaps and addressing scholars' current contentious issues. While *From Darkness unto Light* is neither comprehensive nor complete, it makes a solid contribution to the knowledge and existing scholarship about the translation of the Book of Mormon.

However, a few editorial habits of the authors may be disconcerting to some devoted readers of titles from the Religious Studies Center, which has long been a bastion of thoughtful scriptural, doctrinal, and

devotional works. A short overview and comment on these practices may be helpful.

The first concerns historical certainty. Historians like MacKay and Dirkmaat are careful to distinguish facts known for certain from those less well known. Following the scholarly convention, this study uses conditional verb tenses—“may have,” “might have,” and “could have”—and qualifying adverbs and adjectives—“likely,” “probably,” “possibly,” “somewhat,” “presumably,” and “apparently”—to identify less certain facts (see, for example, page 26).

The second editorial approach involves objective distance. Unbiased reporting of facts is a desirable, even if unattainable, objective in historical scholarship. Academic historians often, but not always, express emotional distance from the subject by referring to characters in the story by their last names. While common in historical scholarship, this convention is rather unusual in established LDS discourse, especially with reference to Church leaders without the use of an honorific title: “Elder,” “President,” or even “Brother.” Accordingly, MacKay and Dirkmaat, along with many academic publications (including the Joseph Smith Papers), frequently refer to early Church leaders by their last names: “Smith,” “Cowdery,” and “Harris;” however, they also use the familiar LDS convention: “Joseph,” “Oliver,” and “Martin” (see, for example, page 6). The authors consistently refer to women by first or full names, with preference given to the former usage, except when introducing a character or clarifying the referent, for example, “Lucy Harris” versus “Lucy Smith.” I fail to discern a pattern for these contrasting conventions.

A third convention involves memory versus history. For many academics, “history” is the factual reporting of past events, and “memory” is the retention of past events by historical characters. Thus, many scholars view “history” as objective evidence and “memory” as conditioned by cultural and emotional factors, especially if temporal and spatial distance separates the initial occurrence from its later recording and if the authenticity of the reported event is beyond empirical verification. Applying this convention, the authors mention that “Joseph remembered” the First Vision in a certain way in his 1838 account (2), that “Lucy Mack Smith remembered Lucy Harris having a ‘remarkable dream,’” (28), and that “Lucy Mack Smith and Martin Harris [each] remembered these events,” that is, Joseph’s obtaining the gold plates, much differently after the fact (30).

These conventions have recently become more prominent even in faithful and devotional settings, which raises questions about the ability

of scholarly language to confirm religious conviction. While the authors walk a fine line between academic and devotional discourse, they seem regularly to favor the former in an effort to bring the believer into the world of scholarship more than the scholar into the world of faith.

While some readers may be disappointed by this emphasis, it should not dissuade them from exploring the rich insights and many new facts about the emergence of their own faith that this book provides. It delivers well on its basic promise “to provide the reader with new and significant details about these formative years of Mormonism” (xii). Hopefully, readers who are accustomed to different literary conventions will not be troubled by the authors’ adherence to current standards of historiographical discourse.

My greatest quibble with this book concerns its use of numerous illustrations, including contemporary photographs of stylized objects such as the Urim and Thummim and gold plates, as well as contemporary watercolors of key events and settings such as Joseph using the seer stone. While the authors go to extraordinary lengths to verify the accuracy of historical facts in the narrative, the verification of accuracy in the illustrations is much less rigorous. Furthermore, the appendix written by the watercolorist himself adds little to the narrative and exacerbates the interpretive problem. In my estimation, this study would have been better without the contemporary representations and the artist’s interpretive essay. Otherwise, *From Darkness unto Light* is a work of careful scholarship that I highly recommend.

Steven L. Olsen received his PhD in cultural anthropology from the University of Chicago, and he has served as the senior curator and managing director of the Church History Department in Salt Lake City. He has long associations with the Religious Studies Center, Maxwell Institute, and BYU Studies, as well as serving in leadership positions of such professional organizations as Utah Humanities Council, American Society of Church History, Western Museums Association, Utah State Office of Museum Services, and Charles Redd Center for Western Studies.