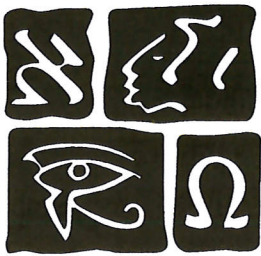




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Robert L. Millet

# Lessons from the Joseph Smith Translation

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## Summary

Robert Millet discusses what, in addition to doctrine, we can learn from Joseph Smith's translation of the Bible. These lessons include the knowledge that the Bible has not come to us in its pristine purity, the greatest commentary on scripture is scripture, revelation comes line upon line to prophets as it does to us, passages may be rendered in several ways, loyalty to a living oracle entails acceptance of what he brings forth, and the JST is part of the canon.

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## Lessons from the Joseph Smith Translation

Robert L. Millet

Joseph Smith was called of God in this final dispensation to be a prophet, seer, revelator, and translator (see D&C 21:1; 107:92; 124:125). Not only was he ordained to make known truths that had never before been given to people on earth (see D&C 121:26; 124:41; 128:18), but he was also empowered to translate ancient records and restore and clarify doctrine and understanding from previous dispensations. To Oliver Cowdery the Lord said, "Assuredly as the Lord liveth, who is your God and your Redeemer, even so surely shall you receive a knowledge of whatsoever things you shall ask in faith, with an honest heart, believing that you shall receive a knowledge concerning the engravings of old records, which are ancient, which contain those parts of my scripture of which has been spoken by the manifestation of my Spirit" (D&C 8:1). Within a short time, the Savior spoke again to Oliver, saying that that when the translation of the golden plates was completed, "other records have I, that I will give unto you power that you may assist to translate" (D&C 9:2). These two revelations refer to the Prophet Joseph Smith's work as translator of the Book of Mormon, the book of Abraham, and the Bible.

### Making the New Translation

Some time prior to June 1830 the Lord commanded Joseph Smith to begin a serious study of the King James Version of the Bible (KJV). On 8 October 1829 Oliver Cowdery purchased a large pulpit-style edition of the Bible from E. B. Grandin in Palmyra, New York. This was the Bible used in what we have come to know as Joseph Smith's Translation of the Bible (JST). The Prophet read from the Bible and, under inspiration, dictated to a scribe, who then wrote what was said on manuscript pages. Though the Prophet was assisted briefly in the translation by Oliver Cowdery, Emma Smith, and John Whitmer, the preeminent scribe was Sidney Rigdon. The work with the Bible was done without the aid of the Urim and Thummim. The first revelation, dated June 1830, was what we call Moses 1, an account of an extrabiblical experience had by the prophet Moses on an unnamed mountain. Following this account, the Prophet and his scribe began to move through Genesis, making alterations in the text as they were inspired to do so. What we now have as the Book of Moses in our Pearl of Great Price is the Joseph Smith Translation of the opening chapters of Genesis. The translators worked with the text of Genesis until 7 March 1831, when a revelation instructed them to begin the translation of the New Testament (see D&C 45:60–62).

Translation activity continued until February 1833, when the New Testament was completed. Then the translators returned to the Old Testament. On 2 July 1833 the Prophet wrote to the leaders of the church in Missouri and indicated that he and his scribe had just

completed their translation of the Bible.<sup>1</sup> In fact, Joseph worked with the text for the next eleven years of his life, editing, correcting, refining that which had come to him by revelation. In total, over 3,410 verses from the KJV were altered—corrections, additions, and occasional deletions. There is no question in my mind that in many cases these changes represent a restoration of ancient texts that were corrupted or lost before the compilation of the Bible. This is certainly the case in regard to insight that came to Joseph Smith pertaining to the creation, fall, and atonement, and the work of Adam and Eve (see Moses 2–6); the life, ministry, and translation of Enoch (see Moses 6–7); the Christian ministry of Noah (see Moses 8); the person and powers of Melchizedek (see JST, Genesis 14); and the prophecies of Joseph of old (see JST, Genesis 50). In the New Testament, significant doctrinal details concerning the ministry and teachings of John the Baptist (see JST, Luke 3), Jesus as the Word, the baptism of Christ (see JST, John 1), the Sermon on the Mount as a kind of missionary training center for the Twelve (see JST, Matthew 5–7), and scores of other changes point toward a divinely directed restoration.

It may be that Joseph the Prophet restored conversation and teachings as well as episodes in the lives of the ancients (in both Old and New Testaments) that actually took place but were never recorded. In addition, we cannot overlook the possibility that in some cases the Prophet's alterations to the KJV represent a type of inspired prophetic commentary on the text—a prophetic prerogative that surely must be received with as much enthusiasm as the restorations. And certainly one reason we must take the entire JST seriously is that the Prophet never delineated which changes were restorations, which were harmonizations, and which were prophetic commentary.

Some of the most important truths of our dispensation came as a direct result of the translation of the Bible. Many of these came from the translation itself, while others came in the form of revelations (now recorded in the Doctrine and Covenants) that arose from questions during the translation. In the former category, consider the following matters, for example, from the Old Testament alone, that came directly from the translation:

- the spirit creation and the spiritual creation (see Moses 2–3)
- the premortal existence of mankind (see Moses 4)
- the revelation of the gospel to Adam by heavenly messengers; the baptism, confirmation, and ordination of Adam (see Moses 6)
- the call and prophetic ministry of Enoch; the establishment of the ancient city of Zion and its translation (see Moses 6–7)
- the gospel teachings of Noah (see Moses 8)

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<sup>1</sup> See Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1980), 1:368.

- the ministry of Melchizedek and the translation of Salem (see JST, Genesis 14)
- the age of accountability of children (see JST, Genesis 17)
- a difference between the two sets of tablets Moses brought down from Sinai (see JST, Exodus 34; JST, Deuteronomy 10)

The following sections of the Doctrine and Covenants also came as a direct result of the translation: section 74 (dealing with 1 Corinthians 7), section 77 (dealing with the Apocalypse), section 91 (dealing with the Old Testament Apocrypha), and section 132 (dealing with eternal and plural marriage). Perhaps the most important was D&C 76, known as the vision of the glories, which was one of the greatest and most sublime revelations ever received. It came to Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon as they pondered over a change they had made in John 5:29.

The JST proved to be a vital dimension of the spiritual education of Joseph Smith himself. As the Prophet studied the text of the KJV, he came to know by revelation what had been taken, altered, or added and what needed to be changed in order to open the scriptures more fully to the Latter-day Saints and the world. The Prophet considered this work to be a branch of his calling.<sup>2</sup> He warned the Saints, "God [has] often sealed up the heavens because of covetousness in the Church. The Lord [will] cut short his work in righteousness and except the Church receive the fulness of the Scriptures that they would yet fail."<sup>3</sup> The Lord himself took this labor very seriously. To Sidney Rigdon, the preeminent scribe of the JST, the Lord said, "And a commandment I give unto thee—that thou shalt write for him [the Prophet]; and *the scriptures shall be given, even as they are in mine own bosom, to the salvation of mine own elect*" (D&C 35:20).

### Other Lessons

In addition to the sublime doctrinal messages that came from or through the JST, there are lessons to be learned from this remarkable labor of Joseph Smith.

#### **The Bible Has Not Come down to Us in Its Pristine Purity**

Nephi learned from an angel that at one time the Bible contained the "fulness of the gospel of the Lord" (1 Nephi 13:24) that went forth "from the Jews in purity unto the Gentiles" (1 Nephi 13:25). He saw, further, "the formation of that great and abominable church, which is most abominable above all other churches; for behold, they have taken away *from the gospel* of the Lamb many parts which are plain and most precious; and also many covenants of the Lord have they taken away" (1 Nephi 13:26). These were not unintentional scribal errors such as the errors of eye or ear that are created and perpetuated through human limitations. The angel explained, "And all this have they done that they might pervert the right ways of the Lord, that

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<sup>2</sup> See *ibid.*, 1:238.

they might blind the eyes and harden the hearts of the children of men" (1 Nephi 13:27). Not only does the mother of abominations tamper with the gospel and its meaning, but also "there are many plain and precious things taken away *from the book*, which is the book of the Lamb of God" (1 Nephi 13:28). And because of these plain and precious truths taken away and kept back by malicious mortals, "an exceedingly great many do stumble, yea, insomuch that Satan hath great power over them" (1 Nephi 13:29; see D&C 6:26).

Most biblical scholars acknowledge that scribal errors inevitably took place in the transmission of the Bible and even that thousands of errors were purposely introduced by scribes adding to or taking from the manuscripts.<sup>4</sup> But because the Bible is all they have, because it is the only sacred scripture in their possession, they feel the need to make statements like the following from J. Harold Greenlee: "We must trust that the same Holy Spirit who inspired the original text was able to protect it through the centuries of handwritten copying."<sup>5</sup> Greenlee acknowledges that while the secular Greek classics, for example, were generally copied by professional scribes "and checked against accepted copies or originals by professional proofreaders," the New Testament texts were probably copied "mostly by ordinary Christians who were not professional scribes but who wanted a copy of a New Testament book of books for themselves or for other Christians." These copyists did not have "the same opportunity as the secular copyists to compare their manuscripts with other manuscripts."<sup>6</sup> Greenlee also observes that as "scribes copied their copies, they continued to make changes through the centuries. Most of these changes were insignificant; those that were of importance—the ones with which we are concerned—were introduced during the first two centuries after the New Testament was written."<sup>7</sup> "The textual variants that concern us, of course, are those that affect the meaning of the New Testament in some way. There are a few thousand of these," he states, then hastens to add, "but we should be clear on the fact that they affect only a small portion of the New Testament text."<sup>8</sup>

Bart D. Ehrman, a New Testament scholar, has recently suggested that the theological debates that took place during the first few centuries of the Christian church impacted the biblical texts in a major way: "The New Testament manuscripts were not produced impersonally by machines capable of flawless reproduction. They were copied by hand, by

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<sup>3</sup> *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 9. (Hereafter cited as TPJS.)

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Bruce M. Metzger, *The New Testament: Its Background, Growth, and Content*, 2nd ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1983), 280–81.

<sup>5</sup> J. Harold Greenlee *Scribes, Scrolls and Scripture*, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1985), 35–6.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

living, breathing human beings who were deeply rooted in the conditions and controversies of their day. Did the scribes' polemical contexts influence the way they transcribed their sacred Scriptures?"<sup>9</sup> He contends that "they did, that theological disputes, specifically disputes over Christology, prompted Christian scribes to alter the words of Scripture in order to make them more serviceable for the polemical task. Scribes modified their manuscripts to make them more patently 'orthodox' and less susceptible to 'abuse' by the opponents of orthodoxy."<sup>10</sup>

Even if biblical scholars never acknowledge that significant doctrinal matters were excised from the Bible, Joseph Smith explained otherwise: "From Sundry revelations which had been received," he said, "it was apparent that many important points touching the salvation of man had been taken from the Bible, or lost before it was compiled."<sup>11</sup> "From what we can draw from the Scriptures relative to the teaching of heaven," he declared some two years later, "we are induced to think that much instruction has been given to man since the beginning which we do not possess now. . . . We have what we have, and the Bible contains what it does contain."<sup>12</sup> In short, "I believe the Bible, as it ought to be, as it came from the pen of the original writers."<sup>13</sup> That the Prophet Joseph Smith was "appointed" by God (D&C 42:56; 76:15) and called to undertake a new translation of the Bible implies that the message of the Bible, though essentially true, needed clarification, correction, and supplementation at the hands of an inspired translator. The early Latter-day Saints thus exulted in the fact that the Bible was "undergoing the purifying touch by a revelation of Jesus Christ."<sup>14</sup>

### **The Greatest Commentary on Scripture Is Scripture**

A careful study of scripture brings forth additional light and truth. One of the fascinating discoveries of a careful study of the new translation—and thus one of the reasons the history of the church cannot be prepared or told without adequate attention to the work with the Bible—is the manner in which matters in the translation, both doctrinal topics and specific phrases, are reflected in the revelations given to the Prophet at about the same time. We have sometimes been too prone to impose artificial distinctions, to study the translations and the revelations as separate endeavors, when in fact they went forward concurrently in the daily activity of the life of Joseph Smith. Generally, the knowledge the Prophet gained through his work with the Bible preceded a revelation addressing the same subject. Shortly we will note exceptions to this

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<sup>9</sup> Bart D. Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 3.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 3–4.

<sup>11</sup> *TPJS*, 9–10.

<sup>12</sup> *TPJS*, 61.

<sup>13</sup> *The Words of Joseph Smith*, ed. Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1980), 256.

<sup>14</sup> Joseph Smith, in *Messenger and Advocate* 2/3 (December 1835): 229.

order—times when the revelations seemed to precede the translations. For now, we will consider some specific illustrations of doctrinal topics first revealed through the JST and later discussed in the Doctrine and Covenants.

### Translation Precedes Revelation

*The premortal existence.* Though it would appear that Joseph Smith encountered the doctrine of the premortal existence of man for the first time in his translation of the Book of Mormon (see Alma 13), it is doubtful whether he or the Saints fully appreciated the implications of the teachings there.<sup>15</sup> It appears that the first discernible discussion of this matter was revealed in the Prophet's translation of the early chapters of Genesis, sometime between June and October 1830. Having recorded the words of God to Moses regarding the creation of the earth, Joseph the Prophet then wrote:

And I, the Lord God, spake unto Moses, saying: That Satan, whom thou hast commanded in the name of mine Only Begotten, is the same which was from the beginning, and he came before me, saying—Behold, here am I, send me, I will be thy son, and I will redeem all mankind, that one soul shall not be lost, and surely I will do it; wherefore give me thine honor. But, behold, my Beloved Son, which was my Beloved and Chosen from the beginning, said unto me—Father, thy will be done, and the glory be thine forever. Wherefore, because that Satan rebelled against me, and sought to destroy the agency of man, which I, the Lord God, had given him, and also, that I should give unto him mine own power; by the power of mine Only Begotten, I caused that he should be cast down; And he became Satan, yea, even the devil, the father of all lies, to deceive and to blind men, and to lead them captive at his will, even as many as would not hearken unto my voice. (Moses 4:1–4; compare JST, Genesis 3:1–5)

In September 1830, a revelation received at Fayette, New York, spoke of the temptation of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden: “And it came to pass that Adam, being tempted of the devil—for, behold, the devil was before Adam, for *he rebelled against me, saying, Give me thine honor, which is my power*; and also a third part of the hosts of heaven turned he away from me because of their agency; and they were thrust down, *and thus became the devil and his angels*” (D&C 29:36–37).

*The creation, fall, and atonement.* The Lord explained to Moses, “I, the Lord, God, created all things, of which I have spoken, spiritually, before they were naturally upon the face of the earth” (Moses 3:5; compare JST, Genesis 2:5). We gain that same understanding through Joseph Smith's translation of Genesis. In Doctrine and Covenants 29:31 the Lord declared that by the power of his Spirit he had created all things, “yea, *all things both spiritual and temporal—first spiritual, secondly temporal*, which is the beginning of my work.” This refers to the physical and spiritual creation of Adam, Eve, and all forms of life in the Garden of Eden, where there existed a condition that was brought to an end and transformed into a temporal existence through our

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<sup>15</sup> See Orson Pratt, in *Journal of Discourses*, 15:249.

first parents' partaking of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. "And again," the word of the Lord continues, "first temporal, and secondly spiritual, which is the last of my work" (D&C 29:32). This seems to describe man's transformation from a mortal to an immortal state after the resurrection.

The inspired translation of the Bible contains a detailed description of the temptation and fall of Adam and Eve and of the consequences, including spiritual death, that followed on the heels of their disobedience (see Moses 4:5–5:4; JST, Genesis, 3:6; 4:4). We note by comparison the briefer but relevant account in the Doctrine and Covenants: "Wherefore, it came to pass that the devil tempted Adam, and he partook of the forbidden fruit and transgressed the commandment, wherein he became subject to the will of the devil, because he yielded unto temptation. Wherefore, I, the Lord God, caused that he should be cast out from the Garden of Eden, from my presence, because of his transgression, wherein he became spiritually dead." (D&C 29:40–41.) Through the new translation of the Bible comes an understanding of how the gospel was first preached to Adam. God gave to Adam and Eve commandments "that they should worship the Lord their God, and should offer firstlings of their flocks, for an offering unto the Lord" (Moses 5:5). An angel of God then appeared to Adam, questioned him on the purpose of his sacrifices, and instructed him in the redeeming reality of the great and last sacrifice: "This thing is a similitude of the sacrifice of the Only Begotten of the Father, which is full of grace and truth. Wherefore, thou shalt do all that thou doest in the name of the Son, and thou shalt repent and call upon God in the name of the Son forevermore" (Moses 5:7–8; compare JST, Genesis 4:5–8). In the Doctrine and Covenants we read the language of the Savior: "I, the Lord God, gave unto Adam and unto his seed, *that they should not die as to the temporal death, until I, the Lord God, should send forth angels to declare unto them repentance and redemption, through faith on the name of mine Only Begotten Son*" (D&C 29:42). Thus it was made known at that pristine day that through Christ the way is opened for mankind to be "raised in immortality unto eternal life, even as many as would believe." (D&C 29:43; compare Moses 1:39.)

*Enoch and the establishment of Zion.* In December 1830 Joseph and Sidney began to record, as a part of their Bible translation, details concerning Enoch and his people. "It may be well to observe here," the Prophet wrote of those times, "that the Lord greatly encouraged and strengthened the faith of his little flock . . . which had embraced the fulness of the everlasting Gospel, as revealed to them in the Book of Mormon, by giving some more extended information upon the Scriptures, a translation of which had already commenced." He stated further, "Much conjecture and conversation frequently occurred among the saints, concerning the books mentioned, and referred to, in various places in the Old and New Testaments, which were now nowhere to be found. The common remark was, 'They are lost books,' but it seems the Apostolic

Church had some of these writings, as Jude mentions or quotes the prophecy of Enoch, the seventh from Adam. To the joy of the little flock . . . did the Lord reveal the following doings of olden times, from the prophecy of Enoch."<sup>16</sup>

Whereas three verses in Genesis 5 describe the ministry of Enoch, the JST of the corresponding parts of Genesis consists of over one hundred verses. Joseph Smith's translation of Enoch's experience proved to be pivotal in the quest for a Zion society—a holy city or New Jerusalem—among the Latter-day Saints. Enoch became the pattern, the scriptural prototype, against which all social or economic or spiritual programs were to be judged. Within a month after the Enoch material had been recorded in the JST, a revelation given through Joseph Smith began:

Thus saith the Lord your God, even Jesus Christ, the Great I AM, Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the same which looked upon the wide expanse of eternity, and all the seraphic hosts of heaven, before the world was made; The same which knoweth all things, for all things are present before mine eyes; I am the same which spake, and the world was made, and all things came by me. *I am the same which have taken the Zion of Enoch into mine own bosom*; and verily, I say, even as many as have believed in my name, for I am Christ, and in mine own name, by the virtue of the blood which I have spilt, have I pleaded before the Father for them. (D&C 38:1–4)

On 9 February 1831, just two months after the JST passages on Enoch had been written, a revelation through the Prophet Joseph Smith contained specific instructions on how to establish equality and oneness among the Saints. In section 42 of the Doctrine and Covenants, the law was given whereby, through the proper implementation of the principles of consecration and stewardship, the people of the Lord in the latter days could establish Zion in a manner like that of Enoch and his former-day Saints. Thus the pattern for the achievement of the eternal ideal—a society where the people are “of one heart and one mind” (Moses 7:18), a holy commonwealth where the municipalities dwell in righteousness and where there are no poor—was unfolded to a modern Enoch, and the blueprint for the Zion of the final dispensation was unrolled.

*Age of accountability.* Sometime between 1 February and 8 March 1831, the translators made changes in the seventeenth chapter of Genesis. The Prophet and Sidney learned that in the days of Abraham a type of infant baptism had been introduced and that some were guilty of doctrinal error in matters of the atonement of Christ and accountability before God. Jehovah said to the father of the faithful, “And I will establish a covenant of circumcision with thee, and it shall be my covenant between me and thee, and thy seed after thee, in their generations; that thou mayest know for ever that children are not accountable before me until they are eight years old” (JST, Genesis 17:11; see 17:3–7). Though the concept of a time of accountability is

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<sup>16</sup> Smith, *History of the Church*, 1:238.

mentioned in D&C 18:42 (received in June 1829), D&C 20:71 (April 1830), and D&C 29:47 (September 1830), it was several months later, in November 1831, that the specific age of accountability, eight years, was given (see D&C 68:25).

### Revelation Precedes Translation

Occasionally, specific doctrinal topics from the revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants preceded a recording of those same topics in the inspired translation of the Bible. Some examples include:

*Christ's eternal gospel.* Perhaps one of the greatest contributions of the restoration set in motion by Joseph Smith is the priceless insight concerning Christ's eternal gospel—the revelation to the church and the world that Christian prophets have taught Christian doctrine and administered Christian ordinances since the days of Adam. Much of what has been delivered through Joseph Smith is indeed a restoration, not only of the first century Christian church, but of those matters that pertain to the ancient of days and have their origin in the earth's primeval period of temporal existence. Adam was told by an angel that he was to do all he did in the name of the Son and that he and his posterity were to repent and call upon God in the name of the Son forevermore (see Moses 5:8; JST, Genesis 4:8). Adam was likewise taught that Jesus Christ is "the only name which shall be given under heaven, whereby salvation shall come unto the children of men" (Moses 6:52; see JST, Genesis 6:53). Enoch, looking down through the stream of time, "saw the day of the coming of the Son of Man, even in the flesh; and his soul rejoiced, saying: The Righteous is lifted up, and the Lamb is slain from the foundation of the world" (Moses 7:47; see JST, Genesis 7:54). Further, Noah's warning voice and testimony were not simply vague challenges to change, but rather an invitation to participate in those Christian principles and ordinances that anchor one to truth (see Moses 8:23–24; JST, Genesis 8:11).

The material above, referring to Adam, Enoch, and Noah, came in 1831. However, it is worth noting that at the time of the organization of the church, in April 1830, a revelation spoke of the Lord Jesus Christ having "ascended into heaven, to sit down on the right hand of the Father, to reign with almighty power according to the will of the Father; That as many as would believe and be baptized in his holy name, and endure in faith to the end, should be saved—Not only those who believed after he came in the meridian of time, in the flesh, but all *those from the beginning, even as many as were before he came*, who believed in the words of the Holy prophets, who spake as they were inspired by the gift of the Holy Ghost, who truly testified of him in all things, should have eternal life, *As well as those who should come after*, who should believe in the gifts and callings of God by the Holy Ghost, which beareth record of the Father and of the Son" (D&C 20:24–27).

*How the gospel is preached.* In light of some of the specific doctrines that we have come to know through the Book of Mormon and the restoration, consider a revelation given in April

1830: "And we know that these things are true and according to the revelations of John, neither adding to, nor diminishing from the prophecy of his book, the holy scriptures, or the revelations of God which shall come hereafter by the gift and power of the Holy Ghost, the voice of God, or the ministering of angels" (D&C 20:35). This latter thought—the ways in which saving truths are dispensed—is reflected in the Joseph Smith Translation of Genesis. After Moses described the origin and growth of secret combinations and how many in the Adamic dispensation refused to hearken to the voice of the Son of God, he wrote, "And thus the Gospel began to be preached, from the beginning, *being declared by holy angels sent forth from the presence of God, and by his own voice, and by the gift of the Holy Ghost*" (Moses 5:58; JST, Genesis 5:44).

*How man becomes an agent.* In a revelation given through Joseph Smith in September 1830, Christ explained that he "gave unto [Adam] that he should be an agent unto himself; and I gave unto him commandment" (D&C 29:35). Further, "it must needs be that the devil should tempt the children of men, or they could not be agents unto themselves; for if they never should have bitter they could not know the sweet" (D&C 29:39). A few weeks later, it was revealed in the inspired translation of Genesis that the gospel was preached to Adam. The Lord declared that the transgression in Eden had been forgiven, that "the Son of God hath atoned for original guilt" (Moses 6:54). Then the Lord continued his lesson to Adam: "Inasmuch as thy children are conceived in sin, even so when they begin to grow up, sin conceiveth in their hearts, and *they taste the bitter, that they may know to prize the good. And it is given unto them to know good from evil; wherefore they are agents unto themselves*" (Moses 6:55–56; see JST, Genesis 6:55–58).

*The signs of the times.* As noted earlier, on 7 March 1831 the Prophet Joseph Smith received a revelation instructing him to begin his translation of the New Testament. This directive came in the middle of a lengthy discussion of the signs of the times. "And now, behold," the Savior said, "I say unto you, it shall not be given unto you to know any further concerning this chapter, until the New Testament be translated, and in it all these things shall be made known; wherefore, I give unto you that ye may now translate it, that ye may be prepared for the things to come. For verily I say unto you, that great things await you" (D&C 45:60–62). The chapter mentioned here appears to be Matthew 24, and the revelation seems to indicate that certain insights into that chapter would be forthcoming after the translation of the New Testament began. In fact, sometime between 7 April and 19 June 1831 the Prophet dictated his revision of Matthew 24, what we know as Joseph Smith—Matthew in the Pearl of Great Price. The inspired version of this chapter is an invaluable scriptural tool that helps us understand what would normally be a difficult and confusing prophecy. As it appears in the JST, Matthew 24 represents a recounting of the Master's words to his disciples in Jerusalem; it clearly and plainly distinguishes between the events to precede the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 and those that would come to pass before his glorious second coming.

*The parable of the wheat and the tares.* A study of the original manuscripts of Matthew 13 suggests that when the Prophet first translated this chapter, sometime between April and June 1831, he did not make significant alterations in the parable of the wheat and the tares. On 6 December 1832, during a time that the Prophet was reviewing and editing the JST manuscripts, section 86 of the Doctrine and Covenants was received. In this revelation, which contains a more detailed recitation and explanation of the parable of the wheat and the tares, the reapers are told to "let the wheat and the tares grow together until the harvest is fully ripe" (D&C 86:7). The order of what is to be gathered is then reversed from that in the KJV: "Then ye shall first gather out the wheat from among the tares, and after the gathering of the wheat, behold and lo, the tares are bound in bundles, and the field remaineth to be burned" (D&C 86:7). The JST manuscript was subsequently altered. The original passage in the manuscript, which reflected the language of the KJV, was crossed out, and a revision, written on a scrap of paper, was pinned over the crossed-out section. This suggests that the order reversal in the revelation may have precipitated a change in the translation.

Perhaps when the full picture of the restoration is unveiled we will come to appreciate an even greater impact of the JST on this final dispensation. In the meantime, we can only surmise about other sections of the Doctrine and Covenants and their possible relation to the translation of the Bible.

#### **Revelation Comes Line upon Line to Prophets, Just As It Does to Us**

There is no question that Joseph Smith knew far more, worlds more, than he ever revealed to the Latter-day Saints. What is also clear, however, is that often the Lord required his choice seer to labor and ponder and reflect and ruminate upon a doctrinal matter before clarity came. It is one thing to receive a revelation, to come to know the mind and will of God; it is another thing to record what one has learned. Certainly most of the revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants were dictated by Joseph Smith as God spoke through him. On other occasions, such as in the case of the JST, Joseph was required to put into words what God had put into his mind. This is reflected in the different manuscripts of the Old and New Testaments, which evidence a process of inspired but laborious refinement of the JST.

Robert J. Matthews wrote, "In the face of the evidence it can hardly be maintained that the exact words were given to the Prophet in the process of a revelatory experience. Exact words may have been given to the Prophet on occasion, but the manuscript evidence suggests that generally he was obliged to formulate the words himself to convey the message he desired. Consequently, he might later have observed that sometimes the words were not entirely satisfactory in the initial writings. They may have conveyed too much or too little. Or they may have been too specific or too vague, or even ambiguous. Or the words may have implied meanings not intended. Thus through (1) an error of recording, (2) and increase of knowledge, or

(3) an inadequate selection of words, any passage of the New Translation might be subject to later revision."<sup>17</sup>

### A Passage May Be Rendered More Ways than One

When Moroni first appeared in September 1823, he quoted numerous passages of scripture to Joseph Smith. Among these passages was Malachi 4:5–6, which Moroni rendered differently (see D&C 2) than it appears in the KJV. Moroni's rendition did not necessarily invalidate the KJV, but it did shed light on a doctrine—the “promises made to the fathers”—that is less clearly set forth in the KJV. Indeed, in this case, both renditions are correct and either could be cited, depending on what point needed to be made at the time. In an epistle he wrote at Nauvoo in 1842, the Prophet quoted the KJV version of Malachi 4:5–6 in referring to work for the dead. “I might have rendered a plainer translation to this,” he then wrote, “but it is sufficiently plain to suit my purpose as it stands” (D&C 128:18).

The extensive changes in the JST deal with such matters as God's repenting, God's hardening people's hearts, predestination, man's capacity to see God, Christian covenants and ordinances in antiquity, and the ministries of otherwise enigmatic characters such as Enoch and Melchizedek. In other places, changes in the JST seem to reflect not a correction so much as a clarification or even a different meaning entirely. For example, when the Prophet translated Hebrews 11 (sometime between February 1832 and February 1833) he altered verse 40 from “God having provided some better thing for us, that they without us should not be made perfect” to “God having provided some better things for them through their sufferings, for without sufferings they could not be made perfect.” Hebrews 11 is the New Testament's “Who's Who in Faith” chapter, the equivalent to Ether 12 in the Book of Mormon. It is a statement of what was required of the ancients to gain faith unto life and salvation, and gaining faith included enduring suffering and trials. The change in the JST fits perfectly the doctrinal context of the chapter. It seems clear to me that at this time the Prophet and the Saints did not yet comprehend the doctrine of work for the dead. It was probably not until the vision of the celestial kingdom (see D&C 137), given in January of 1836, that the doctrinal door opened to the idea that men and women could reap the blessings of the gospel even after they had departed this life. Later in his ministry, operating with added light and knowledge concerning this supernal gem in the plan of salvation, Joseph Smith quoted Hebrews 11:40 as scriptural support for the importance of work for the dead.<sup>18</sup>

Revelation 1:5–6 also supports the importance of work for the dead. The KJV of this passage refers to the work of Christ the Redeemer, who has “made us kings and priests unto

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<sup>17</sup> Robert J. Matthews, “A Plainer Translation”: *Joseph Smith's Translation of the Bible: A History and Commentary* (Provo, Utah: BYU Press, 1975), 86.

God and his Father; to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever" (Revelation 1:6). When the Prophet translated this passage (sometime between February 1832 and February 1833) he rendered it as follows: Christ "hath made us kings and priests unto God, his Father" (JST, Revelation 1:6). The JST of this passage seems to indicate that the Prophet and the Saints may not have at this time understood the doctrine of the plurality of Gods. In a sermon delivered in Nauvoo just eleven days before his martyrdom, the Prophet quoted Revelation 1:5–6 and added, "It is altogether correct in the translation." He then spoke at length of the plurality of Gods: "Where was there ever a son without a father? And where was there ever a father without first being a son? . . . Hence if Jesus had a Father, can we not believe that *He* had a Father also? I despise the idea of being scared to death at such a doctrine, for the Bible is full of it."<sup>19</sup>

### **Loyalty to a Living Oracle Entails an Acceptance of What He Brings Forth**

We cannot afford to pick and choose what we will or will not accept, even if it is not well received by the learned. As far as I can tell, Joseph Smith (or the Lord, for that matter) did not view the Bible translation as being of lesser worth than the Book of Mormon, the revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants, or the Book of Abraham. They are all products of the restoration, fruits of a modern oracle, evidences of his prophetic call. The JST was no sideline, no prophetic parlor game; it was serious business. In the words of Dallin H. Oaks, it is "a member of the royal family of scripture" and should be "noticed and honored on any occasion when it is present."<sup>20</sup> As noted earlier, the Lord explained that through the Bible translation the scriptures would be given "even as they are in mine own bosom, to the salvation of mine own elect" (D&C 35:20). Salvation itself is at stake. The issue is whether or not we will in fact receive and use the JST—with enthusiasm, not just tolerance.

Why have we been somewhat hesitant to use the JST in the past? Simply stated, for many years we were ignorant of both the process and the product. Over the years we have been a bit prejudiced and assumed that the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints made changes in the Prophet's work. Robert Matthews's groundbreaking work with the original manuscripts helped dispel those myths.

Some have suggested that we should not use the JST because the Prophet never finished the work. They use the following scripture to support this theory: "It is expedient that thou shouldst hold thy peace concerning [the translation], and not teach them until ye have received

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<sup>18</sup> See *TPJS*, 193, 356; D&C 128:15.

<sup>19</sup> *TPJS*, 369, 373.

<sup>20</sup> Dallin H. Oaks, "Scripture Reading, Revelation, and Joseph Smith's Translation of the Bible," in *Plain and Precious Truths Restored: The Doctrinal and Historical Significance of the Joseph Smith Translation*, ed. Robert L. Millet and Robert J. Matthews (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1995), 13.

them in full" (D&C 42:57). This simply cannot mean, as some have concluded, that Joseph and the Saints were not to teach from the JST until all the changes that were ever to be made in the Bible were made. Earlier in D&C 42 the Lord directed that the elders, priests, and teachers of the church were to teach the principles of the gospel as found in the Bible and the Book of Mormon (see D&C 42:12). In addition, the Saints were to "observe the covenants and church articles to do them, and these shall be their teachings, as they shall be directed by the Spirit. . . . And all this ye shall observe to do as I have commanded concerning your teaching, *until the fulness of my scriptures is given*" (D&C 42:13–15). "At that time," Elder McConkie noted, "they had only the imperfect King James Version of the Bible and the near-perfect Book of Mormon. These were their only scriptural sources for the principles of the gospel. When the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible—included in this revelation [D&C 42] under the designation 'fulness of my scriptures'—came forth, then teachers were to use it and the various additional direct revelations. This, then, is a command to teach the changes and additions now found in the so-called Inspired Version."<sup>21</sup>

As indicated, Joseph Smith was not permitted to make every possible change. In fact, the Prophet taught from the new translation during his ministry, and many parts of the JST were published during his lifetime—in the *Evening and the Morning Star*, *Lectures on Faith*, and the *Times and Seasons*. He obviously did not perceive the Lord's command to be anything other than a warning against prematurely sharing the mysteries of the kingdom with those unprepared to receive them (the Prophet did ask that William W. Phelps not print the new translation in a serial format in the *Evening and the Morning Star* because he planned to publish it as a unit; see Moses 1:42; 4:32). Elder McConkie expressed his feelings on the matter: "True, the Joseph Smith Translation, though completed to the point that the early Brethren were going to publish it at one time, has not been completed in the full and true sense. But for that matter neither has the Book of Mormon. I am as anxious to read and study what is in the sealed portion of the Book of Mormon as I am to give the same attention to those parts of the Bible yet to be revealed. I am clear in my mind that the sealed portion of the Book of Mormon will not come forth until the Millennium. The same thing is undoubtedly true of the fulness of the Bible, though some additions could well be made before that time. Of what will the Bible consist when it is perfected? Surely it will contain the writings of Adam and Enoch and Noah; of Melchizedek and Isaac and Jacob; and certainly Abraham wrote much more than the Prophet found on the Egyptian papyrus. The Book of Abraham in our Pearl of Great Price is obviously a restored biblical record. Does anyone think we have all of the words of Isaiah or Jeremiah or Malachi?

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<sup>21</sup> Bruce R. McConkie, "The Doctrinal Restoration," in *The Joseph Smith Translation: The Restoration of Plain and Precious Things*, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Robert L. Millet (Provo, Utah: BYU

And are there not prophets and apostles without number, whose names we do not even know, who have recorded their teachings and testimonies?"<sup>22</sup>

### The JST and the Canon of Scripture

Why do some feel comfortable accepting the parts of the JST that are in the scriptural canon (the standard works), such as the book of Moses and Joseph Smith—Matthew, but feel less inclined to accept the other JST alterations? There is no question that we are firmly committed to the canon and that these books of scripture serve as the rule of faith and practice for the Latter-day Saints; they are binding upon us. But if any people in all the wide world have reason to be nervous about sealing the canon, it is the Latter-day Saints. For us nothing is more fixed, set, and established than the eternal fact that the canon of scripture is open, flexible, and expanding. What is scripture one day may become part of the canon the next, as was the case in 1976 with the vision of the celestial kingdom (see D&C 137) and the vision of the redemption of the dead (see D&C 138). These were, according to the definition given in modern revelation (see D&C 68:3–4), scripture from the time they were given; they were equally true both before and after they were canonized in 1976. This is also the case in regard to the entire JST before it was printed by the reorganized church.

In our study and inquiry concerning the mind and will of the Lord, we as a people are not bound by a single collection of sacred books. We are called upon to "live by every word . . . of God" (D&C 84:44), to open ourselves to new truths as they come through proper channels. The addresses delivered by the president of the church at general conference are not in the canon, nor are official doctrinal declarations of the First Presidency such as "The Origin of Man" (1909), "The Father and the Son" (1916), or "The Proclamation on the Family" (1995), but they certainly represent the mind, will, and voice of the Lord to the Saints. The members of the church are expected to "give diligent heed to the words of eternal life" (D&C 84:43) as they come from the lips of the Lord's anointed servants. Does anyone really believe that what Alma, Paul, and John the Beloved say in scripture by is more binding on the Saints in our day than President Ezra Taft Benson's messages on the Book of Mormon or President Howard W. Hunter's pleas for greater Christian charity and more devoted service in the temples?

In writing about the biblical canon, the respected Protestant scholar F. F. Bruce observed, "There is a distinction between the canonicity of a book of the Bible and its authority. Its canonicity is dependent upon its authority. For when we ascribe canonicity to a book we simply mean that it belongs to the canon or list. But why does it so belong? Because it was recognized as possessing special authority. People frequently speak and write as if the authority with

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Religious Studies Center, 1985), 3.

<sup>22</sup> McConkie, "The Doctrinal Restoration," 15.

which the books of the Bible are invested in the minds of Christians is the result of their having been included in the sacred list. But the historical fact is the other way about; they were and are included in the list because they were acknowledged as authoritative." Bruce concludes, "Both logically and historically, authority precedes canonicity."<sup>23</sup>

In our own history there are doctrinal practices that were in effect long before the actual revelation was a part of the canon. For example, the Latter-day Saints were gathering Israel—bringing people into the kingdom through conversion—even before the church was officially organized, but the keys of the gathering of Israel were not actually conferred until Moses appeared at the Kirtland Temple in April 1836. Those keys formalized and empowered a work that was already well under way. As a result of his inspired translation of Genesis, Joseph Smith seems to have learned of eternal and plural marriage as early as 1831, and plural marriage was introduced to some of the Saints in Nauvoo. However, it was not made public knowledge until Elder Orson Pratt delivered the first public discourse on the subject in 1852. Doctrine and Covenants 132, which deals with plural marriage, was first recorded on 12 July 1843 but was not included in the Doctrine and Covenants until 1876. The practice of plural marriage continued until the Manifesto issued by President Wilford Woodruff called for its cessation in 1890.

Elder McConkie noted in 1984 that the JST "contains various additions, deletions, and emendations to the King James Version. But most importantly it contains the book of Moses and the twenty-fourth chapter of Matthew as published in the Pearl of Great Price. These portions have been formally canonized by us, which should establish that any changes made by the Prophet are true and should be used. Does anyone think that the pure revelation found in Genesis 14 about Melchizedek or in Genesis 50 about the Nephites and Joseph Smith and the latter days is any less a revelation than Moses 17? Does anyone think the [JST of the] first chapter of John's Gospel is of any less worth than the twenty-fourth chapter of Matthew's?"<sup>24</sup>

We are neither bound by the written word nor limited by our devotion to texts. It is the spirit of revelation, not specific texts, that leads the church of Jesus Christ. It is the living voice, not the standard works alone, that directs the kingdom of God. "Those who will not rely on revelation," Elder Oaks observed, "and who insist on a manuscript so they can concentrate on the original meaning and intent of the words spoken by the author can be expected to ignore the Joseph Smith Translation. In contrast, those who understand that the importance of the scriptures is what the Lord would have us understand today are anxious for revelatory insight into the current significance of scriptural texts and concepts. They understand that some things

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<sup>23</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Books and the Parchments* (Westwood, N.J.: Revell, 1963), 95–96; see F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1974), 27.

we have already received are hard to understand without the Lord's help (see 1 Nephi 15:1, 3, 8, 11), and that we can never receive enough of the word of God. Persons with this attitude are anxious to have every source of revelation to help us know what the Lord would have us understand from the scriptures today. Such persons will welcome the revelatory insights—even additions—by the prophets of this dispensation."<sup>25</sup>

We love the Bible, we cherish the Bible, and we thank God that so many truths in the Bible have been preserved for us. But were it necessary—and thank God that it is not—we could move forward without the Bible. God has revealed sufficient truth and knowledge through his latter-day prophets for us to be sustained and directed. President Marion G. Romney explained:

In each dispensation . . . the Lord has revealed anew the principles of the gospel. So that while the records of past dispensations, insofar as they are uncorrupted, testify to the truths of the gospel, still each dispensation has had revealed in its day sufficient truth to guide the people of the new dispensation, independent of the records of the past.

I do not wish to discredit in any manner the records we have of the truths revealed by the Lord in past dispensations. What I now desire is to impress upon our minds that the gospel, as revealed to the Prophet Joseph Smith, is complete and is the word direct from heaven to this dispensation. It alone is sufficient to teach us the principles of eternal life. It is the truth revealed, the commandments given in this dispensation through modern prophets by which we are to be governed.<sup>26</sup>

## Conclusion

Joseph Smith was not a linguist, at least not according to worldly standards. But he possessed the mind of God, enjoyed all the gifts of the Spirit, and was in tune with the Infinite. On one occasion he said, "I . . . have witnessed the visions of eternity, and beheld the glorious mansions of bliss, and the regions and the misery of the damned. . . . I . . . have heard the voice of God, and communed with angels, and spake as moved by the Holy Ghost for the renewal of the Everlasting Covenant, and for the gathering of Israel in the last days."<sup>27</sup> In speaking of his affection for an old German translation of the Bible, he stated, "I thank God that I have got this old book; but I thank him more for the gift of the Holy Ghost. I have got the oldest book in the world; but I [also] have the oldest book in my heart, even the gift of the Holy Ghost."<sup>28</sup> Thus the Prophet's schooling was of the Spirit. His instructors were heavenly beings, and the light and intelligence by which he operated were pure and undiluted. In the future we will surely come to understand how the Prophet translated the gold plates, the Egyptian papyri, and the King James Bible. We all will know that he was a man of integrity, that he knew whereof he spoke,

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<sup>24</sup> McConkie, "The Doctrinal Restoration," 15.

<sup>25</sup> Oaks, "Scripture Reading," 13.

<sup>26</sup> Marion G. Romney, "A Glorious Promise, *Ensign* (January 1981): 2.

<sup>27</sup> Smith, *History of the Church*, 6:77–78.

<sup>28</sup> *TPJS*, 349.

and that he accomplished superhuman tasks by means of divine assistance. In the meantime, the knowledge restored through Joseph Smith's work as a translator transcends what is currently known in the world of scholarship and must thus be accepted in faith. Even if we cannot for the present time understand how he translated reformed Egyptian from golden plates, we can still taste the sweetness of the fruit. If we cannot reconcile the text of the Book of Abraham with what scholars translate from the facsimiles of the few papyrus fragments in our possession, we can still recognize the truth of the record. If we find that the Prophet's Bible translation does not match what is found on the oldest extant Hebrew or Greek manuscripts, we can still recognize the spirit and genius of a prophet in this sacred labor and treat the JST with the same respect we would treat doctrinal insights from the Book of Mormon or Doctrine and Covenants.

If we are true and faithful to what we believe and know in our hearts, the Lord will open our minds and bring forth great discoveries in the land. If, on the other hand, we let what we have discovered by study alone drive our faith and commitment, we close ourselves to a vital realm of reality and block the hand of God. Our study must always be tempered by faith if we desire to be loyal to the work of Joseph Smith, because he is a man who walked and talked in the light of divine truth. "His mind was opened by the visions of the Almighty," Elder Wilford Woodruff testified, "and the Lord taught him many things by vision and revelation that were never taught publicly in his day; for the people could not bear the flood of intelligence which God poured into his mind."<sup>29</sup> A major part of that marvelous flood of intelligence came as a result of his inspired translation of the Bible. The Lord and his preeminent prophetic witness in this dispensation referred to this work as "the fulness of the scriptures,"<sup>30</sup> a designation well worth pondering. That we will receive and believe and employ all that has come to us through Joseph Smith, the choice seer, is my sincere prayer.

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<sup>29</sup> Wilford Woodruff, in *Journal of Discourses*, 5:83–84.

<sup>30</sup> *TPJS*, 9; D&C 42:15; 104:58.