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FOUNDATION FOR ANCIENT RESEARCH AND MORMON STUDIES

Robert J. Matthews

The Role of the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible in the Restoration of Doctrine

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Summary:

Robert Matthews presents this survey of biblical textual criticism with the suggestion that omissions to the Bible text of today are more extensive and more intentional than most textual critics have realized. He sums up the history of biblical translations and discusses the church situation in June 1830, when Joseph Smith received the first revelation associated with an inspired translation of the Bible.

Preliminary Paper
Joseph Smith Translation

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This FARMS preliminary paper was presented at the symposium Pioneers of the Restoration on 8 March 1997. It is being further edited for inclusion in a forthcoming collection of papers in honor of Richard Lloyd Anderson. Although it is not ready for final publication, this paper reflects substantial research and is made available to be critiqued and improved and to stimulate further research.

The Role of the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible in the Restoration of Doctrine

Robert J. Matthews

Overview

The Holy Bible originally contained the revealed word of God in plainness, but extensive omissions and changes early in the post-New Testament era significantly depleted the content of all manuscript copies to such an extent that no known Bibles now on earth present the fulness of the gospel in doctrinal clarity. The problem today lies not with inability to translate languages, but in the absence of an adequate manuscript. This heavy loss of gospel truth has been coterminous with worldwide apostasy from the true church, so that for centuries the world saw neither an adequate Bible nor an adequate church. As an early accomplishment of the restoration of the true church to the earth, the Prophet Joseph Smith was commanded to make a revelatory translation of the Bible, the process of which restored lost material to the Bible and contributed to the doctrinal base of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Part 1—Historical Background

The Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible (JST) was produced by the Prophet Joseph Smith and his close associates from the years 1830–1844. The handwritten manuscript consists of 464 pages, 8 1/2" x 14". This is accompanied by an 1828 printing of the King James Version containing various pencil and ink markings, which are actually directions pertaining to the manuscript. The manuscript itself consists of first and second drafts, edited and punctuated with a view toward publication. Every book of the Old and New Testaments received attention, although the written manuscript itself has no mention of Ecclesiastes. Joseph Smith called this work the "New Translation."

Robert J. Matthews is a former dean of Religious Education and a longtime friend, associate, and admirer of Richard Lloyd Anderson, whom this volume honors.

Extracts from the translation (now identified as the book of Moses and Joseph Smith—Matthew in the Pearl of Great Price) were published and circulated in the time of the Prophet Joseph Smith. The presiding brethren of the church had serious plans underway in Nauvoo for a complete publication, but Joseph Smith's martyrdom in 1844 prevented it. The manuscript and the marked Bible eventually came to the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (RLDS) through the Smith family and was published as the Holy Scriptures in 1867. Several editions containing modest variations have since been published by the RLDS.¹

The JST Overlooked by Latter-day Saint Scholarship

It is my observation that the JST has neither received the attention it deserves nor been recognized for what it is and for the extensive influence it has had on Latter-day Saint scripture and doctrine. It has been largely neglected and even ignored by LDS scholars and historians. I suppose this condition exists for the following reasons: (1) Because the JST is a Bible, church historians have not sensed its connection with *latter-day* revelation, scripture, or events in history. (2) On the other hand, because the JST is not a translation of the Bible in the usual sense of ancient manuscripts and languages, traditional, professionally trained textual experts in the church have not regarded it as a translation at all or even as a serious biblical document. As a consequence, the JST has in effect been relegated to the incorrect status of an orphan, a stepchild, or an ugly duckling in the house of Latter-day Saint scholarship.

In 1994 I examined every book listed under the heading of Doctrine and Covenants in the card files of the Harold B. Lee Library and discovered that, even though many publications discuss the origin, history, and content of the book of Doctrine and Covenants, few contain any mention of the JST, and only one author clearly discussed the role of the JST as a contributing factor to the doctrine of the church. This was surprising since the translation of the Bible is referred to several

¹ For more detail and photographs, see my *A Plainer Translation: The Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible, A History and Commentary* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1975, 1985).

times in the text of the Doctrine and Covenants and also in the official seven-volume *History of the Church*.

My Approach to the Subject

This treatise deals somewhat with biblical textual criticism, but because of space it can be only a survey. Those familiar with the technical nature of biblical criticism will recognize that some of the conclusions herein may seem to be oversimplifications. I think, however, that the statements presented in the remaining parts of this treatise are based on reliable evidence. For space consideration, extensive supporting arguments cannot be presented, but citation is made to various published works. However, differing opinions exist even among world-renowned textual specialists, particularly as to which ancient biblical manuscripts present the most accurate text. My goal is to discuss the subject in a reasonable manner in the context of latter-day scripture and also of statements by the Prophet Joseph Smith. I feel that these sources offer a reliable dimension of interpretive control that non-LDS scholars do not enjoy. I do not pretend to be a biblical scholar; I am, however, very interested in textual criticism, have read much of the literature, and enjoy the search. I do not, however, always agree with the way they interpret their discoveries.

Part 2—Unholy Hands on the Bible

In 1842 the Prophet Joseph Smith expressed a basic tenet of the church when he wrote: “We believe the Bible to be the word of God as far as it is translated correctly” (Article of Faith 8). In both earlier and later statements the Prophet clearly demonstrated that he did not mean only the translation of languages, but rather the transmission of the Bible, such as the work of copying, editing, and excising, in addition to translating. This wider view is evident by his following utterances:

From sundry revelations which had been received, it was apparent that many important points touching the salvation of men, had been taken from the Bible, or lost before it was compiled.²

² TPJS, 9–11, 16 February 1832.

And also:

I believe the Bible as it read when it came from the pen of the original writers. Ignorant translators, careless transcribers, or designing and corrupt priests have committed many errors.³

Textual experts have also noted from their examination of existing manuscripts that thousands of variations exist and have been perpetuated in the transmission of the Bible. Several reasons exist for these differences, some accidental and others intentional. Accidental variations occur because of human frailty, the difficulty of copying a large document by hand, and also errors of sight and hearing. The planned, deliberate, intentional changes are far more damaging because they are selective and are usually of doctrinal significance. Planned departures in the text are often accomplished by simply omitting what one feels is objectionable—perhaps consisting of words, sentences, paragraphs, or whole books.

Omissions and other kinds of differences would not be permanently damaging if the original manuscripts were available for comparison. In the absence of the originals, or near facsimiles, it appears that the wounded text produced by the many successive copiers of varying degrees of integrity has become an accepted base of the Old and New Testaments from which all Bibles today have descended. Many detailed and technical books are currently available that describe the known Bible manuscripts and laboriously and meticulously discuss the various readings. Textual criticism is a fascinating and time-consuming study, even though the experts do not agree on all points. The following are several concepts which I consider appropriate to this treatise and which I have observed in the writings of acclaimed biblical scholars. No one writer seems to say it all, but from the aggregate, much useful information is obtained and some interesting observations can be deduced. I know these are selective on my part, but they are actual quotations from experienced, serious men.

Sir Frederick Kenyon (1863–1954) spoke of the New Testament:

³ Ibid., 327, 15 October 1843.

The originals of the several books have long ago disappeared. They must have perished in the very infancy of the Church; for no allusion is ever made to them by any Christian writer.⁴

John W. Burgon (1813–88) wrote:

It must not be imagined that all the causes of the depravation of the text of Holy Scripture were instinctive. Or that mistakes arose solely because scribes were overcome by personal infirmity, or were unconsciously the victims of surrounding circumstances. There was often more design and method in their error. They, or those who directed them, wished sometimes to “correct” and “improve” the copy or copies before them. And indeed occasionally they desired to make the Holy Scriptures witness to their own peculiar belief. Or they had their ideas of taste, and they did not scruple to alter passages to suit what they fancied was their enlightened judgment.⁵

Burgon believed that “the omission of words, clauses and sentences” was the most frequently occurring type of “corrupt variations from the genuine Text” of the Bible.⁶ He also noticed that even where omissions had occurred in the text, the remainder of the passage generally appeared to be complete rather than dangling or awkward, thus making omissions harder to detect. He also declared:

Inadvertency may be made to bear the blame of some omissions, but it cannot bear the blame of shrewd and significant omissions of clauses which invariably leave the sense complete. A systematic and perpetual mutilation of the inspired Text must be the result of design, not of accident.⁷

While it was once believed by students that existing New Testament manuscripts could be traced in genealogical fashion in an unbroken line to the originals, it is now evident that a space of

⁴ Sir Frederic Kenyon, *Our Bible and the Ancient Manuscripts* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 155.

⁵ John W. Burgon, “The Causes of Corruption Chiefly Intentional,” in *The Traditional Text of the New Testament*, republished in *Unholy Hands on the Bible*, vol. 1 (Lafayette, Ind.: Sovereign Grace Trust Fund, 1990), B–44.

⁶ Ibid., B–61.

⁷ Ibid. B–9.

nearly 300 years elapsed between the originals and the earliest New Testament manuscripts available today, except for some small fragments in which the gap is “only” 150 or 200 years. The alarming truth is that none of the surviving manuscripts contains categorical information as to where, when, by whom, or from what precise source they were copied. Such information, if discovered at all, must come from detective-like investigation, which so far has not given significant answers. Some textual scholars realize that the second century A.D. presents an impenetrable barrier to tracing the history and source of New Testament documents. We read the following by Dr. Frederick C. Grant (1891-?):

Instead of tracing back the text to its original in the autographs by a steady process of convergence following back to a common source the divergent lines of descent, we shall have to stop when we get to the second century; and in place of some rule of preference for one type of text over another, or for their common agreements over their divergences, we shall have to trust a great deal more than heretofore to what is called internal criticism. . . . But now, with Kenyon’s conclusions before us, it is more obvious than ever where our chief problems lie. “In the first two centuries this original text disappeared under a mass of variants, created by errors, by conscious alterations, and by attempts to remedy the uncertainties thus created. Then, as further attempts to recover the lost truth were made, the families of text that we now know took shape. They were, however, nuclei rather than completed forms of text, and did not at once absorb all the atoms that the period of disorder had brought into existence.” (*The Text of the Greek Bible*, p. 242)⁸

What Drs. Kenyon and Grant are saying is that a gap of at least two or three centuries between any present text and the originals is present. Surely anyone with a sense of history must be concerned about what changes could have occurred during that time, without apostolic leadership to correct errors, and with no original manuscripts for honest folk to use for comparison.

⁸ *An Introduction to the Revised Standard Version of the New Testament* as cited in J. Reuben Clark Jr., *Why the King James Version* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1956), 364.

Another dimension yet to be considered is the fact that the Bible contains the word of God and is therefore a target of Satan's influence. John W. Burgon, cited earlier, said it this way:

The Scriptures became a mark for the shafts of Satan from the beginning, for the very reason that they were known to be the Word of God. So they were as eagerly solicited by heretical teachers on the one hand, as they were hotly defended by the orthodox on the other. Therefore, from friends and from foes the Scriptures are known to have experienced injury, and that in the earliest age of all. Nothing of the kind can be predicated of any other ancient writings. This consideration alone should suggest a severe exercise of judicial impartiality in the handling of ancient evidence of whatever sort. Observe that I have not said—and I certainly do not mean—that the Scriptures themselves have been permanently corrupted either by friend or foe. Error was fitful and uncertain, and was contradicted by other error. And it eventually sank before a manifold witness to the truth. Nevertheless, certain manuscripts belonging to a few small groups, particular copies of a Version, individual Fathers, these do, to the present hour, bear traces incontestably of ancient mischief.⁹

Elder Bruce R. McConkie, a latter-day scripture advocate, also attributed corruption of the scriptures to the influence of Satan:

As we consider them [the Book of Mormon, the Bible, and the revelations to Joseph Smith] we should be aware of the insidious and devil-directed attack upon them.

Let me speak plainly. Satan hates and spurns the scriptures. The less scripture there is, and the more it is twisted and perverted, the greater is the rejoicing in the courts of hell.

There has never been a book—not even the Book of Mormon—that has been so maligned and cursed and abused as the Bible.¹⁰

⁹ Burgon, "Causes of Corruption," B-4.

¹⁰ 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 Religious Studies Center, 1985), 12.

That the Bible was intentionally altered by designing persons so as to neutralize its witness of Jesus Christ is also declared in the words of the angel to Nephi. After explaining to Nephi that “many plain and precious things” would be taken “out of the book” that contained the words of the Jewish prophets and apostles, the angel also said:

Wherefore, these things go forth from the Jews in purity unto the Gentiles, according to the truth which is in God.

And *after* they go forth by the hand of the twelve apostles of the Lamb, from the Jews unto the Gentiles, thou seest 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.

And *all this have they done that they might pervert the right ways of the Lord*, that they might blind the eyes and harden the hearts of the children of men.

Wherefore, thou seest that after the book hath gone forth through the hands of the great and abominable church, that there are many plain and precious things *taken away from the book*, which is the book of the Lamb of God. (1 Nephi 13:25–28)

I have observed from my own study that most textual scholars emphasize the variants that were caused by the difficulties of writing, whereas the Book of Mormon (1 Nephi 13) and the book of Moses (1:41) place the emphasis on the losses by designing and deceitful persons. The textual critics, of course, are governed in their thinking by their research, and they have no way of measuring the extent of the loss by omission, whereas prophets are more likely to judge the text by the help of the Spirit of God. For example, the Prophet Joseph Smith evaluated the Bible by comparison with the revelations he had received: “There are many things in the Bible which do not, as they now stand, accord with the revelations of the Holy Ghost to me.”¹¹

Based on an extensive comparison of the Bible and latter-day revelation, it is my conviction that omissions to the Bible text are (1) more extensive, (2) earlier, and (3) more intentional than the textual critics have realized.

¹¹ TPJS, 310.

Example from the Book of Mormon

The loss of 116 pages of Book of Mormon manuscript in 1829, within two years of the time Joseph Smith got the plates, alerts every Latter-day Saint to the fact that large sections of material can be lost to the text in a very short time. This particular example also serves to emphasize that in order to be effective, omissions must occur early before multiple copies are extant. This condition requires that the perpetrators be near the top, or at least have access to the originals or near originals. Such a condition suggests that the corruption of the New Testament occurred early, before wide distribution, and must therefore have been an “inside job.” This fact was pointed out by the angel to Nephi, as recorded in 1 Nephi 13:29: “And after these plain and precious things were taken away it [the record of the Jews] goeth forth unto all the nations of the Gentiles.”

The Old Testament appears to have been depleted much earlier, even perhaps as early as 300 B.C., before the Septuagint or the Dead Sea Scrolls appear; thus they suffer from the same major loss as other manuscripts. Jesus expressed to the Jews his displeasure that they had already, before his day, taken away the “fulness of the scriptures” (Luke 11:52 JST). It is true that the Jewish scribes developed intricate rules and safeguards for preserving the accuracy of the Old Testament text; however, these seem to have been put in place too late, after much loss had occurred. Furthermore, rules and safeguards are for honest people — scriptural thieves are not hampered by rabbinic rules.

The Difficulty of Recovering the Original Text

It was noted earlier that today no known original manuscripts of the Bible exist. However, nearly 5,000 New Testament manuscripts in varying degrees of completeness, containing thousands of textual differences, have been preserved. Three of these, known as Vaticanus, Sinaiticus, and Alexandrinus are given the greatest credence by most nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholars. These manuscripts are in good condition, are rather complete, and are eloquently written in Greek; they were probably composed in Egypt in the fourth century A.D. They are thus separated from the originals by more than 250 years. It is not known who produced them or even from what documentary sources they were copied. Because these three were seemingly composed

centuries earlier than most other available New Testament manuscripts, they are highly regarded by modern scholars and have been the basis of most revisions of the Bible in the past one hundred years, for instance, the English Revised Version of 1881, the American Standard Revision of 1901, the Revised Standard Version of 1946–52, and the New English Bible of 1961. Although highly regarded by many scholars, these particular texts, when compared with latter-day revelation, are shown to be doctrinally weaker than the New Testament manuscripts from which the King James Version was obtained.

The difficulty, if not impossibility, of completely determining the original text and meaning of the Bible by the methods of literary criticism alone (without the aid of new revelation) is staggering. The Bible is too extensive, too ancient, and too complex, and the sources are too uneven for that. Perhaps such a task could be illustrated as follows. Suppose one wished to know about a particular ancestor (whom we will call the “archetype”) of 250 years ago—his size, facial features, hair pattern, countenance, intellect, personality, etc.—so well that if seen he would be recognized. To accomplish this the researchers had only a record of some of his descendants for four or five generations, lacking some major links in the genealogical chain. Even though current descendants could be interviewed and examined, and the writings, descriptions, and diaries of intervening ancestors long since dead could be studied, it would be next to impossible to reassemble the archetype. Too many variables complicate the process.

The task is made more difficult if the researchers neither really know what particular features are right if found nor whether some features present in the archetype are not found in any of the known descendants. Because some features present in the missing descendants are not evident in any of the existing descendants, it is not possible to reconstruct the archetype accurately. Perhaps all that can be determined with certainty would be that the ancestor did exist at a given time and place, that he wore clothes, and that he has many descendants with a certain eye and hair color, certain types of physique, and so forth. If, however, an accurate color portrait were discovered (or revealed), accompanied by a detailed physical and personality description, then a possible

determination of the archetype could be made, and perhaps a living descendant could then be recognized as having many of the same likenesses.

The Bible as a Witness for Christ

The scriptures have a basic mission to testify of Christ (John 5:39). This may be the appropriate time to note the words of the angel to Nephi, as recorded in 1 Nephi 13:39–40. After explaining to Nephi that many plain and precious things would be taken “out of the book” containing the record of the Jews and the testimony of the Apostles of the Lamb (surely the Old and New Testaments), the angel speaks of a restoration, through the agency of “other books,” which “shall establish the truth of the first, which are of the twelve apostles of the Lamb, and shall make known the plain and precious things which have been taken away from them” (1 Nephi 13:39–40). Two things are apparent here: (1) Material has been lost from the Bible, and (2) the missing parts shall be made known again through other books. It seems evident that these “other books” would include the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, and the JST.

A similar reference is found in Moses 1:40–41, in which the Lord informs Moses that after he (Moses) has written a book about this earth (surely this is Genesis) that others will “take many things out of the book which” Moses has written. However, the Lord will raise up another “like unto” Moses, and once more the lost material “shall be had among those who believe” and who accept this second Moses. If this later one is Joseph Smith, then, according to prophecy, he would restore certain words once written by Moses that have been taken away. Those who would not “believe” the words of Joseph Smith would not recognize the restoration. A related example of willful extraction of scripture, later restored, is found in Jeremiah 36:20–32, but space limits the discussion of that item in this treatise.

Selective omissions from the Bible have weakened its power as a witness for the Lord Jesus Christ. To be an adequate witness, the Bible would need to have the missing parts returned to its pages.

The Lack of an Adequate Manuscript

It was noted earlier that the problem with recovering the original text and meaning of the Bible is not one of knowing the ancient biblical languages, but rather the absence of an adequate manuscript to be translated. This is the crux of the whole matter. An illustration: A bald man who once had hair waits his turn in a barbershop. As the barber finishes with an earlier patron who has ample, healthy hair, the balding man approaches the chair, and says to the barber: "Make me look like him." This may be good for a laugh, but the truth is that it can't be done because the substance isn't there. The barber would probably say, "It's too late." And indeed it is. A true translation of an inadequate manuscript cannot produce the material that is no longer in the manuscript. Only an outside intervention can restore material that was originally in the manuscript but is not there now. Thus the need for a revelatory translation of the Bible by the Prophet Joseph Smith is evident. We will now discuss some of the significant contributions of the JST to the doctrine of the church. Equally important is the role of the JST in strengthening the Bible as a witness for Christ.

Part 3—The Unfolding of the JST

The Bible, in spite of its deficiencies, is still a marvelous record of God's dealings with mankind and tells of Jesus' ministry among the Jews. However, the Prophet Joseph Smith, even as a boy, discovered that the Bible was sufficiently vague in some very important doctrinal matters, actually creating confusion rather than offering clear answers. His experience was that "the teachers of religion of the different sects understood the same passages of scripture so differently as to destroy all confidence in settling the question by an appeal to the Bible" (Joseph Smith—History 1:12). These circumstances led him to pray for information, which resulted in the first vision, from which he gained information through new revelation. Joseph Smith also noticed that the Angel Moroni quoted various passages "with a little variation" from how they read in the Bible (Joseph Smith—History 1:36–39). Such experiences would give him, even at an early age, an awareness that the nineteenth-century Bible without additional revelation is an insufficient guide.

The Value of Original Sources

In studying the original manuscripts of the JST to check the accuracy of the published editions, a second theme emerged that appears apropos to the subject of Bible manuscript history. Much has been said in this paper about the value that original sources would be in the study of the Holy Bible. Quite unexpectedly to me, I discovered that the same is true with the JST. Without an examination of the original manuscripts prepared by the Prophet Joseph Smith and his scribes, I could not have obtained the perspective that the real purpose of the JST is to be a primary source of doctrine and to strengthen the Bible as a witness for the Lord Jesus Christ.

When reading printed editions of the JST, I had often noticed the similarity of doctrine and even identical phrases found in the Doctrine and Covenants. From the published sources alone, it would generally be impossible to discover which of the two came first. I have often heard it said that Joseph Smith "Mormonized the Bible," that is, that he "corrected" the Bible on the basis of what he already knew about the gospel to make it conform to Latter-day Saint doctrine. One prominent church historian, William E. Berrett, promoted this concept in a textbook that was used in the church school system for many years. In discussing the JST he said that "the work was limited to those parts of the Bible upon which divine revelation had been received."¹² Dr. Berrett was one of the few who mentioned the JST in his writings, but unfortunately he did not have the benefit of the original manuscripts.

When in 1967 the opportunity arose for me to examine the original JST manuscripts in the RLDS archives, it was with the encouragement and support of William E. Berrett that I was able to go to Independence, Missouri, and make the study. At that time the sole purpose in my mind was to compare the published editions of the JST with the original sources to determine if the published editions were accurate. This was a fruitful exercise requiring weeks of diligent, eyestraining effort. And I was happy to report that in the main, the printed JST by the RLDS Church correctly reflects the text of the manuscripts, except for a few adjustments yet to be made. To examine the originals

¹² William E. Berrett, *The Restored Church* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1961), 100.

over many months was inspiring. The task seemed significant since the RLDS had not previously made the manuscripts available for research, and no Latter-day Saint had carefully examined them in over a century.

A Chronological Approach

Having completed the comparison, the story could well have ended at that point, had it not been that the manuscripts contained dates of their composition and showed frequent changes in handwriting, denoting changes of scribes and revealing other bits of information in addition to the text itself. Because of these dates, it became possible to determine when particular portions of the JST were composed in relation to various revelations printed in the Doctrine and Covenants. This could not have been ascertained without the dates on the original manuscripts. I learned that in many instances doctrinal utterances appeared in the JST earlier than in the Doctrine and Covenants. This remarkable fact opened the way for a chronological study of the JST and allowed me to see that the JST was often the source, not simply the beneficiary, of Latter-day Saint doctrine.

Once this perspective is in place, an entirely new vista lies before the willing researcher, as he sees a steady, progressive unfolding of doctrine in the early days of the church. The Book of Mormon brought unparalleled light on many gospel subjects, but revealed limited detail on the premortal existence, degrees of glory, celestial marriage, the law of consecration of property, organization of priesthood quorums, the office of bishop, and such things. Many of these were first made known to the Prophet as he translated the Bible.

That the JST was to be a learning experience for the Prophet Joseph Smith is seen in the Lord's directive that he begin a translation of the New Testament:

And now, behold, 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. (D&C 45:60–61)

We will more plainly see the doctrinal contribution of the JST if we sort it out chronologically. We are not accustomed to doing that because we tend to think in terms of separate

books rather than in terms of history. We read the Book of Mormon one year, the Doctrine and Covenants another year, and the Bible another year. Without an awareness of the context, we tend to forget, or perhaps even fail to learn, that the gospel was revealed to Joseph Smith line upon line, precept upon precept, a little at a time.

The Church in 1830

Consider what the church was like in June 1830. What were the offices, the doctrines, and the practices of the church in that day? It would be easier to identify features the church lacked. In June 1830 the church had no wards, no stakes, no First Presidency, no Council of the Twelve, no patriarchs, no seventies, no bishops, no “word of wisdom,” no revelation on degrees of glory, no tithing, no welfare program, no law of consecration or united order, no priesthood quorums of any kind, no temples, no endowments, no sealings, no marriages for eternity, no real understanding of the New Jerusalem, no baptisms for the dead, no Doctrine and Covenants, no Pearl of Great Price, and no JST. How did each of these features, which today we recognize as vital to our spiritual life and basic to the church, come into being?

The publication of the Book of Mormon was completed during the week of 18–25 March 1830. A few days later, on 6 April, the church was organized. A few weeks later, in June 1830, we have the earliest revelation associated with the JST. We are familiar with it as the “Visions of Moses” in the Pearl of Great Price, Moses 1. We do not know the exact day in June on which the material was written, but it was recorded in Harmony, Pennsylvania. Comparing the chronology of the JST with the Doctrine and Covenants reveals the striking pattern that many of the concepts contained in the Doctrine and Covenants were first presented to the mind of the Prophet during his translation of the Bible and were actually first recorded for that purpose. Many of these subjects were later expanded by subsequent revelation and appear as parts of various sections of the Doctrine and Covenants.

The Prophet's Credentials as a Translator

The greatest credential of the Prophet Joseph Smith to translate the Bible was the command and authorization from the Lord to do so. His situation seems similar to that of Nephi, who was commanded to build a ship. Nephi felt confident that "If God had commanded me to do all things I could do them" (1 Nephi 17:50). By 1830, when the Prophet Joseph began the translation of the Bible, he was already an experienced translator, because of his work on the translation of the Book of Mormon. He said that he and Oliver Cowdery had specific help from the Holy Ghost so that the scriptures were "laid open to our understandings, and the true meaning and intention of their more mysterious passages revealed unto us in a manner which we never could attain to previously, nor ever before had thought of" (Joseph Smith—History 1:74). Such aid would surpass even the help of a biblical language and a lexicon.

Enoch and the Consecration of Property

An extensive revelation about Enoch and his people was received by Joseph Smith in December 1830 while he and Sidney Rigdon were translating from the fifth chapter of the King James Version of Genesis. Chronologically this came after Doctrine and Covenants section 35 and before section 37. This revelation, called in early Latter-day Saint literature the "Prophecy of Enoch," deals with the ministry of Enoch, his faith in Jesus Christ, his preaching of the gospel, his city called Zion, the righteousness of his people, the fact that no poor existed among them, the taking of the people into heaven, and a declaration that they would return to the earth in the last days and be joined with the New Jerusalem, which would be built upon the earth (Moses 6, 7). This information about Enoch contains many items of history and doctrine of particular interest to Latter-day Saints because it deals with the work of the Lord on the earth in our day—the establishment of latter-day Zion.

Consider the situation of the church in December 1830. What did anyone in the church know about Enoch, the New Jerusalem, the city of Zion, or any of these things at that time? We certainly cannot learn much from the King James Version about Enoch, his city of Zion, or the laws that governed the people of Zion. None of the Bibles available today say Enoch had a city, his people

were called “Zion,” or his people were translated. The entire offering in the Bible about Enoch can be read in less than two minutes and consists of only nine verses totaling thirty-eight lines of type, found in Genesis 5:18–24, Hebrews 11:5, and Jude 1:14–15. Together that would amount to about three-fourths of one column of print in a Bible. The Book of Mormon does not help on this subject, for it does not mention or even allude to Enoch.

The church in 1830 was entirely dependent on revelation in order to learn anything substantial about Enoch, his ministry, the people of his city (Zion), or their laws. The introduction began in November and December 1830 while the Prophet was translating from Genesis. In the next few months (after the initial installment about Enoch), the revelations in Doctrine and Covenants 42–43, 45–51, and 57–59 (February–August 1831) were received. What a marvelous prelude the prophecy of Enoch in JST Genesis 7 (Moses 7) was in laying the foundation for these later revelations. In length alone it is impressive. The information about Enoch and Zion, as revealed to Joseph Smith in November and December 1830 while he was translating the Bible, is eighteen times longer than all the Enoch material contained in the King James Version and contains over 5,200 more words of very detailed and informative text about Enoch and the gospel. Thus if we want a correct historical perspective of how the Lord educated the Prophet Joseph about Zion, we must first read the revelations received during the translation of the Bible. This is perfectly proper, because that is the order in which they were received. It is only in publishing them in separate books that we have created an artificial separation between JST Genesis 6–7 and Doctrine and Covenants 42–59. In order to get a proper orientation about the sections in the Doctrine and Covenants dealing with consecration and the establishment of Zion, one would appropriately first study JST Genesis 6–7 (Moses 6–7) about Enoch and his people who were called Zion, their laws, their absence of poverty, their glory, etc., before reading Doctrine and Covenants 38–59. JST Genesis 7 is an overview of the glory and greatness of Enoch’s Zion given to the church as a prelude before the Lord revealed in detail the laws and requirements that would enable the Latter-day Saints to build a similar Zion.

We could gain a clearer, richer, and more comprehensive understanding of the way the doctrine of this dispensation was unfolded by taking the revelations received during the translation of the Bible and placing them in their proper chronological order between the sections of the Doctrine and Covenants. For example, Moses 1 would come just before section 25; JST Genesis 1–5 (Moses 2–5) would be just before section 29; JST Genesis 6 (Moses 6) would be just before section 35; and JST Genesis 7 (Moses 7) would be just before section 37. This procedure occurred to me only after I had access to the original JST manuscripts and discovered the dates on them. Seeing the originals changed my perspective.

The Age of Accountability

In Doctrine and Covenants 68:25–28 the age of accountability is explained as beginning at the age of eight years, at which time baptism should be administered. This doctrine is mentioned only once in the Doctrine and Covenants and is dated November 1831. However, baptism and the eight-year-old age of accountability is recorded in the JST in connection with Genesis 17:1–11. The dates on the JST manuscript show that this Genesis chapter was recorded sometime between February 1831 and April 1831 and was, therefore, from six to nine months earlier than appearance of the doctrine in the Doctrine and Covenants.

A careful reading of Doctrine and Covenants 68:25–28 demonstrates that the declaration of eight-year-old accountability at that instance does not sound like a “first-time” announcement, but more like a reaffirmation or a reminder. And indeed, that was the case for, as we have seen, the concept was already written in the translation of the Bible many months before it was reiterated in the Doctrine and Covenants. Without the dates on the original JST manuscript, we would never have been able to reconstruct this historical connection.

The Vision of the Degrees of Glory

While translating John chapter 5 and pondering over verse 29 concerning the resurrection of the just and of the unjust, Joseph Smith received the vision of the degrees of glory. In the revelation itself we read this explanation:

For while we were doing the work of translation, which the Lord had appointed unto us, we came to the twenty-ninth verse of the fifth chapter of John, which was given unto us as follows—

Speaking of the resurrection of the dead, concerning those who shall hear the voice of the Son of Man:

And shall come forth; they who have done good, in the resurrection of the just; and they who have done evil, in the resurrection of the unjust.

Now this caused us to marvel, for it was given unto us of the Spirit.

And while we meditated upon these things, the Lord touched the eyes of our understandings and they were opened, and the glory of the Lord shone round about. (D&C 76:15–19)

The JST Is a Primary Source

Based on the line of thinking presented above, it is evident that many important doctrines and practices of this church were made known to the Prophet Joseph Smith during the course of his translation of the Bible. The reason the Kirtland era was such a great revelatory period may be that it was the time in which the Prophet was engaged most actively in the translation of the Bible. Time prohibits a discussion of each example, but this concept includes revelations on at least the following subjects: the New Jerusalem, plural marriage, Zion, powers of the priesthood, quorums and councils in the church, quorum organization and duties, the fall of Adam, the atonement of Jesus Christ, the spirit world, resurrection, exaltation, age of accountability, agency, and the nature of the devil, man, and God.

Restoring the Biblical Witness

At least one more vital point should be considered: What do we do with the JST—is it simply Joseph Smith's commentary on the Bible or is it in part a restoration of lost material? In view of the role of the JST as a primary source of doctrine, produced not out of thin air, but by command of the Lord as the Prophet studied the pages of the Bible itself, it seems very reasonable to argue that the JST is at least a restoration of meaning and doctrinal content. Every translation is to some extent a commentary and an interpretation. The JST deserves to be given recognition primarily as a restoration of lost biblical content and meaning.

When Sidney Rigdon was called as the scribe for Joseph Smith in the translation, the Lord told him, “thou shalt write for him; and the scriptures shall be given, even as they are in mine own bosom” (D&C 35:20). The implication is that current Bibles were not in a condition like “the Lord’s own bosom.” Such a promise sounds strongly like a statement of restoration. It is either declaring a restoration or saying that the ancient Bible never had the truth in the first place. This would be contrary, however, to the statement of the angel to Nephi that in the beginning the Bible was plain and precious, easy to understand, and contained the fulness of the gospel of Jesus Christ (1 Nephi 13:24–25). Is it not an insult to say that the ancient apostles and prophets did not know how to write details of the doctrine of the Lord any clearer than they occur in our current Bibles? Since many basic doctrines are not now clearly presented in our Bibles, we are led to conclude that the Bible has been ravaged by unholy hands and does not do justice to the original authors.

Some may think it too bold to say the JST is in part a revealed restoration. However, we note that Doctrine and Covenants 45:15–59 claims to be a restoration of a dialogue that once took place between Jesus and the Twelve on the Mount of Olives. The Latter-day Saint student may need to ask himself this question: If the Lord could and would reveal that Olivet conversation to Joseph Smith, could or would he do so again and again in the translation of the Bible?

The Bible is Judah’s witness for God and for Jesus Christ. I do not think it sufficient for the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price alone to restore the missing doctrinal truth. Justice requires that the Bible itself be restored as an expert witness. Having the truth only in the other books of scripture cannot suffice. The Bible must also be made right. The JST is a start in the restoration of the Bible as a witness for Christ.

Conclusion

What then is the conclusion to the whole matter? I believe that the Prophet’s translation of the Bible is a primary source for much of the doctrinal content of the church. In like manner, I feel that the Judaeo-Christian world has failed to realize the extent to which the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, is weakened in doctrinal perspective and therefore undermined as a witness for Christ.

It will remain so depleted until an original manuscript is found or a revelation is received. If the reader would indulge me, I submit that the JST is closer to the content and doctrine of the original Bible than anything the world has seen in the past 1,900 years. The Prophet Joseph Smith has restored much of the original doctrinal content of the Bible—it is called the Joseph Smith Translation.