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Joseph Smith—Translator

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Robert J. Matthews

I am pleased to be part of this symposium which is designed to honor the name and memory of the Prophet Joseph Smith. It would be impossible to mention all of his contributions and the wonderful things that the Lord brought forth using him as an instrument. In producing scripture he was very prolific. Reading scripture does not make a man a prophet, but a prophet makes scripture almost every day. Joseph Smith was the means, in the hands of the Lord, of translating and publishing the Book of Mormon; receiving and publishing the revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants; receiving, translating, dictating, and publishing the materials in the Pearl of Great Price; dictating what is known as the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible, and also receiving many revelations that have not been published. I suppose the number of pages of scripture produced through Joseph Smith exceeds that of any other prophet. Today my focus will be on those things which Joseph Smith produced as a translator.

Many Translations by Joseph Smith

Much of Joseph Smith's adult life was spent in the difficult work of translation, as the following chronological list of his translations will illustrate:

1. **The Book of Mormon.** Between 1828 and 1829, Joseph Smith used the Urim and Thummim to translate the reformed Egyptian of the gold plates into English.

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2. **Doctrine and Covenants Section 7.** This is a statement originally written on parchment by John the Apostle about the Lord's promise to him that he would tarry on the earth until the Second Coming. The language of the original is not specified, but was probably Aramaic or Greek. Joseph Smith translated it into English in April 1829 by use of the Urim and Thummim. It is not clear from the Prophet's record whether he actually had the document, or saw it in vision, or was given the translation by inspiration without seeing the document.
3. **The Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible (JST).** This is variously known as the Inspired Version or New Translation. The Prophet used a King James Version English text as a manuscript base. The JST contains at least 3,410 verses that are different from and add thousands of words and many concepts to the King James Version. The Song of Solomon is deleted. Joseph began the translation in June 1830 (just a few weeks after publishing the Book of Mormon) and completed it in July 1833. He did not use the Urim and Thummim nor did he have a knowledge of biblical languages at that time. The translation was necessary because the Bible had not been preserved through the centuries in its original purity and completeness, and Joseph Smith restored many missing passages containing concepts that were essential for establishing the gospel in this dispensation.
4. **The Book of Abraham.** Joseph translated it into English from papyri containing Egyptian characters and pictorial illustrations. He worked on the translation at intervals between July 1835 and March 1842. The Prophet may have used the Urim and Thummim or seer stone in at least part of the translation (Smith 3:225–26; *Millennial Star* 47; Woodruff 3:155).

5. **The Papyrus Scroll of Joseph in Egypt.** This was a document in Egyptian writing and illustrations, obtained at the same time as the Abraham papyri. It was reported by both Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery to contain writings by Joseph in Egypt (*History of the Church* 2:236; Cowdery 235–37). How much translation of this document the Prophet accomplished is not clear, as there is no known transcript. However, Oliver Cowdery reported in December 1835, that the work contained an account of the Creation, the Godhead, the Final Judgment, Enoch’s pillar, and other things, which implies that some translation had occurred, even though nothing is known of a written English text (Cowdery 236).

The foregoing translations followed soon one after another: first the Book of Mormon; then at the same period, the record of John; then a short time later, the Bible; and two years after that, the book of Abraham and the record of Joseph. These translations by Joseph Smith have given the Church and the world sacred information that would not otherwise be known. Perhaps we Latter-day Saints have not appreciated how much of what we know and hold sacred came to us through the labor of the Prophet Joseph Smith as he translated the Bible. Indeed, the formal title and description of the prophet and President of the Church is to be “a seer, a revelator, a translator, and a prophet, having all the gifts of God which he bestows upon the head of the Church” (D&C 107:92; compare D&C 21:1).

One of the prerogatives of a seer is to be able to translate languages by means of an instrument such as the Urim and Thummim. We read the following in Mosiah 8:13:

I can assuredly tell thee, O king, of a man that can translate the records; for he has wherewith that he can look, and translate all records that are of ancient date; and it is a gift from God. And the things are called interpreters, and no man can look in them except he be commanded, lest he should look for that he ought not and he should perish. And whosoever is commanded to look in them, the same is called seer.

This power of translation is called a “high gift from God” (v 14) and is therefore one of the greatest of the gifts of God:

[For] a seer can know of things which are past, and also of things which are to come, and by them shall all things be revealed, or, rather, shall secret things be made manifest, and hidden things shall come to light, and things which are not known shall be made known by them, and also things shall be made known by them which otherwise could not be known. Thus God has provided a means that man, through faith, might work mighty miracles; therefore he becometh a great benefit to his fellow beings. (vv 17–18; compare JS-H 1:35)

Meanings of the Word *Translate*

It would be informative to consider various meanings of the word *translate*. *The Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) gives these definitions: “To turn from one language into another retaining the sense”; also, “To express in other words, to paraphrase.” It gives another meaning as, “To interpret, explain, expound the significance of.” Other dictionaries give approximately the same definitions as the OED. Although we generally think of translation as having to do with changing a word text from one language to another, that is not the only usage of the word. Translate equally means to express an idea or statement in other words, even in the same language. If people are unfamiliar with certain terminology in their own tongue, they will need an explanation. The explanation may be longer than the original, yet the original had all the meaning, either stated or implied. In common everyday discourse, when we hear something stated ambiguously or in highly technical terms, we ask the speaker to translate it for us. It is not expected that the response must come in another language, but only that the first statement be made clear. The speaker’s new statement is a form of translation because it follows the basic purpose and intent of the word *translation*, which is to render something in understandable form.

Some have wondered why the JST is called a translation as it began with the English text of the King James Version and

remained an English text. However, since the books of the Bible did not originate in English and since Joseph Smith restored lost material and also the original intent and meaning of existing passages, what he produced through the power of God by the Spirit is tantamount to a translation. The Holy Ghost may have been the translator and Joseph Smith the mortal instrument, but we are the beneficiaries.

The concept of translation can be illustrated by what happens to natural light when it shines through a glass prism. The light appears colorless before it enters the prism; but it emerges in several bands of color. These colors were inherent in the light all along, but were not visible until they were “translated.” The prism is more than a relay station; it is, in a sense, a translator, because it makes things visible in a different frequency and wave length, thus making them visible in a “new light.” In like manner, a translation is able to provide varying shades and depths of meaning.

If done accurately, a translation is marvelously helpful in making great truths known that otherwise would be passed over or even be undiscoverable in the original. In explaining this point, the translators of the King James Version of the Bible wrote this description of what a translation accomplishes:

How shall men meditate in that which they cannot understand? How shall they understand that which is kept close in an unknown tongue? . . . Translation it is that openeth the window, to let in the light; that breaketh the shell, that we may eat the kernel; that putteth aside the curtain, that we may look into the most holy place; that removeth the cover of the well, that we may come by the water . . . [for] without translation into the [common] tongue the unlearned are but like children at Jacob’s well (which was deep) without a bucket or something to draw with. (Clark xxxiv)

As the Prophet Joseph translated, the object, of course, was to convey necessary understanding to the reader. To accomplish this might sometimes require him to go beyond the words of the original document to render a more meaningful translation to his audience. This would be especially true when translating ancient documents. The original writer would be in possession

of certain cultural and factual information as he wrote, not all of which would have been recorded in detail. When a translation is made, it may not be adequate unless it included some of the unwritten background. It appears that this is what occurred in 1823 when the angel Moroni quoted Malachi 4:5–6 to the seventeen-year-old inexperienced Joseph Smith. The text of Malachi as we have it in the King James Version contains the following 51 words:

Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord: And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse.

However, when Moroni quoted it he enlarged upon it as follows, using 69 words:

Behold, I will reveal unto you the Priesthood, by the hand of Elijah the prophet, before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord. And he shall plant in the hearts of the children the promises made to the fathers, and the hearts of the children shall turn to their fathers. If it were not so, the whole earth would be utterly wasted at his coming. (D&C 2:1–3; JS-H 1:38–39)

Malachi, who originally wrote it, would have known the necessity of having the priesthood in Elijah’s ministry and in restoring the keys to Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery. He would have known that turning the heart of the children to the fathers was connected to ancient covenant promises. He would have known what was involved in making all this effective in the lives of the children, but he didn’t elucidate. Yet the priesthood, the promises, and the keys are inherent in sending Elijah on this mission and therefore are contained beneath the visible surface of the biblical text. Moroni translated that passage so Joseph Smith and the rest of us would understand what was involved in Malachi’s statement about Elijah.

Nineteen years later, on 6 September 1842, the Prophet Joseph touched on this principle when discussing the same passage from Malachi, but cited it exactly as it stands in the King James Version. Then he said, “I might have rendered a

plainer translation to this, but it is sufficiently plain to suit my purpose as it stands. It is sufficient . . . in this case . . .” (D&C 128:18). It is quite obvious that the particular rendering of the King James Version was adequate for the Prophet’s purpose at that particular time, but it is just as obvious that were he expounding a different phase of the passage, he might have clarified the translation. In fact this very thing did occur a year later, on 13 August 1843, when the Prophet cited the Malachi passage a little differently:

I will send Elijah the Prophet and he shall reveal the covenants of the Fathers to the children and of the Children to the Fathers that they may enter into Covenant with each other, lest I come & smite the whole Earth with a curse. (*Words of Joseph Smith* 241)

This interesting process of translation might have some bearing and explanation as to why the first publication of the translation of the parchment of John, which we now call Doctrine and Covenants 7, consisted of 142 words, whereas the second publication was enlarged to 282 words (compare Book of Commandments VI, 1833 with D&C XXXIII, 1835). Both printings were made just two years apart and under the direction of the Prophet Joseph Smith.

Spiritual Development of Joseph Smith

We noted earlier that the Prophet Joseph used the Urim and Thummim for translation in some instances and not in others. We wish we knew more about this process. However, two items will help our understanding. The first is a statement from the Prophet himself with reference to receiving the Holy Ghost immediately after he was baptized. Remember, this was after he had already translated much of the Book of Mormon by means of the Urim and Thummim. The statement is as follows:

Immediately on our coming up out of the water . . . we were filled with the Holy Ghost, and rejoiced in the God of our salvation. Our minds being now enlightened, we began to have the scriptures 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.
(JS-H 1:73–74)

It appears that having the Holy Ghost in such abundance after baptism was a greater aid in understanding “the true meaning and intention” of the scriptures than even using the Urim and Thummim had been before baptism.

The second item is a statement attributed to Elder Orson Pratt and is found in the “Minutes of the School of the Prophets in Salt Lake City,” 14 January 1871:

He [Elder Pratt] mentioned that as Joseph used the Urim and Thummim in the translation of the Book of Mormon, he wondered why he did not use it in the translation of the New Testament. Joseph explained to him that the experience he had acquired while translating the Book of Mormon by the use of the Urim and Thummim had rendered him so well acquainted with the Spirit of Revelation and Prophecy, that in the translating of the New Testament he did not need the aid that was necessary in the 1st instance.

This interesting statement by Elder Pratt throws a bit of light upon the whole process of the use of instruments in the translation and revelatory process.

Translation Aided by the Spirit of God

Every translation is an interpretation—a version. The translation of language cannot be a mechanical operation as in the case of a prism. Translation is a cognitive and functional process because there is not one word in every language to match with exact words in every other language. Gender, case, tense, terminology, idiom, word order, obsolete and archaic words, and shades of meaning—all make translation an interpretive process. In the case of scripture, the Holy Spirit is also needed. As stated by Elder James E. Talmage:

There will be, there can be, no absolutely reliable translation of these or other scriptures unless it be effected through the gift of translation, as one of the endowments of the Holy Ghost. The translator must have the spirit of the prophet if he would render in another tongue

the prophet's words; and human wisdom alone leads not to that possession. (237)

It is sometimes a fine line between translation and interpretation. The process I have been describing can only be reliable and safe when it is done by a prophet working under the inspiration of the Lord. Translation of sacred information must be done by the help of God. In Doctrine and Covenants 1:29, the Lord says that the translation of the Book of Mormon was done by the power of God. On page 1 of the JST manuscript of Matthew are the words: "A translation of the New Testament, translated by the power of God." We find a similar thought in D&C 76:15–18, which affirms that the JST text of John 5:29 was given "of the Spirit." When the Lord called Sidney Rigdon to be the scribe of the JST, he promised that the translation of the scriptures "shall be given, even as they are in mine own bosom" (D&C 35:20).

Understanding this particular mode or process of translation may yet unfold to us the manner in which the Prophet Joseph translated the Egyptian papyri from which the book of Abraham came. Even though honest scholars are unable to find the Abrahamic teachings in the fragments of the papyri the Prophet Joseph was working with, he was working on a different level and wave length and was able to bring forth the Abrahamic material that lay beneath the surface of the papyri.

Influence of the JST

The translations of scripture given to the Church and the world through Joseph Smith have had great impact on the doctrine of the Church and in the belief and practice of the Saints. Since we are already familiar with the Book of Mormon and the book of Abraham, I will cite only a few examples from Joseph Smith's translation of the Bible to illustrate some of the doctrinal benefits that have come to the Church because of the JST. It has affected the life of every Latter-day Saint since the time it was given. I wish to emphasize that point: The JST has

influenced every person who has been or is now a member of the Church in one way or another.

In the first place, doing the translation was a learning experience for Joseph Smith, just as reading it is for the rest of us. The Lord told Joseph he would learn by revelation as he pursued the translation of the Bible (see D&C 45:60–62; 76:15–18). The JST, like all true scripture, is a witness for the Lord Jesus Christ. The great revelations in the book of Moses were obtained directly from the translation of the Bible and include an account of the visions of Moses, the ministry of Enoch, and the City of Zion. Most of what we know about the gospel of Jesus Christ being taught to Adam, Enoch, and Noah, we learn from the JST. Likewise, the marvelous statement of the priesthood and the ministry of Melchizedek comes to us from the JST (see JST Genesis 14:25–40). Following the initial revelations about Enoch’s Zion that the Prophet Joseph received as he translated Genesis, he received the many revelations included in the Doctrine and Covenants about consecration of property, the New Jerusalem, and the building of latter-day Zion. Furthermore, because of the JST we have Doctrine and Covenants 76 about the degrees of glory; Section 77 about the book of Revelation; Section 91 about the Apocrypha, and so on. Section 132, dealing with celestial and eternal marriage, also has historical connections to the JST. The age of accountability, set by the Lord as eight years, was first made known early in 1831 through the translation of Genesis 17:11 (see JST). It was stated again several months later in Doctrine and Covenants 68:25. Everyone who believes in any of these doctrines or practices of the Church, who was baptized at the age of eight years, who has read the Doctrine and Covenants or the book of Moses, has been influenced by the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible.

We rejoice that the Lord gave us Joseph Smith, a choice seer, prophet, translator, and benefactor of mankind.

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