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Translation of the Book of Mormon, Answers to Questions Respecting the Theory in the Senior Manual, 1905-6 [Concluded]

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Abstract: Roberts defends his theory about the role that the Urim and Thummim and Joseph Smith played in translating the Book of Mormon. He shows that literal translations are difficult or impossible in similar languages, and points out that it would be even harder from the Egyptian-like language of Mormon's plates.

TRANSLATION OF THE BOOK OF MORMON.

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS RESPECTING THE THEORY IN
THE SENIOR MANUAL, 1905-6.

[CONCLUDED]

BY B. H. ROBERTS.

I find it necessary to refer again to the matter of a "literal translation"—a word-for-word bringing over from one language into another, a thing which is practically impossible, if sense is to be expressed. Reference is again made to this subject because it seems to be the most stubborn obstacle in the way of the acceptance of the "Manual theory."

Since writing the article which appeared in the April number, a so-called "literal translation" of the Greek New Testament has fallen into my hands, extracts from which I think will help to illustrate the point at issue. It should be remembered in what is to follow, that this "literal translation" is only approximately so. The publishers themselves say, "We give the Greek text with an interlinear translation *as literal as may be to be useful.*" To show that the "literal translation" is not and cannot be literal, it is only necessary to call attention to a few facts which the publishers of the Greek text and its translation themselves call attention to; namely, The word "master" is used in the authorized version (our common English version) to translate six different Greek words, all bearing different shades of meaning. The word "judgment" stands for eight different Greek words in the original. Of particles, "be" represents twelve different words; "but," eleven; "for," eighteen; "in," fifteen; "of," thirteen; and "on," nine; and so with many other words. Where these facts obtain, to talk of "literal translation" is to talk of literal nonsense. Still, this so-called "literal translation" will be of assistance to us in this in-

γέλιον πάσῃ τῇ κτίσει. 16 ὁ πιστεύσας καὶ βαπτισθεὶς σωθήσεται· ὁ δὲ ἀπιστήσας κατακριθήσεται. 17 σημεῖα δὲ τοῖς πιστεύουσιν ταῦτα παρακολουθήσει. ἐν τῷ ὀνόματί μου δαιμόνια ἐκβαλοῦσιν· γλώσσαις λαλήσουσιν καινὰς.¹ 18 ὄφεις ἀροῦσιν· κἂν θανάσιμόν τι πίωσιν οὐ μὴ αὐτοῦς βλάψει· ἐπὶ ἀρρώστους χεῖρας ἐπιθήσουσιν, καὶ καλῶς ἔξουσιν.

19 Ὁ μὲν οὖν κύριος μετὰ τὸ λαλῆσαι αὐτοῖς ἀνελήφθη εἰς τὸν οὐρανόν, καὶ ἐκάθισεν ἐκ δεξιῶν τοῦ θεοῦ. 20 ἐκεῖνοι δὲ ἐξελθόντες ἐκήρυξαν πανταχοῦ, τοῦ κυρίου συνεργῶντος, καὶ τὸν λόγον βεβαιούντος διὰ τῶν ἐπακολουθούντων σημείων. Ἄμην.¹

¹Τὸ κατὰ Μάρκον εὐαγγέλιον.
The according to Mark glad tidings.

said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. 16 He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned. 17 And these signs shall follow them that believe; In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues; 18 they shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover.

19 So then after the Lord had spoken unto them, he was received up into heaven, and sat on the right hand of God. 20 And they went forth, and preached every where, the Lord working with them, and confirming the word with signs following. Amen.

ΤΟ ΚΑΤΑ ΛΟΥΚΑΝ ΑΓΙΟΝ ΕΥΑΓΓΕΛΙΟΝ.
THE ACCORDING TO LUKE HOLY GLAD TIDINGS.

Ἐπειδήπερ πολλοὶ ἐπεχείρησαν ἀνατάξασθαι διήγησιν περὶ τῶν πεπληροφορημένων ἐν ἡμῖν πραγμάτων, 2 καθὼς παρέδοσαν ἡμῖν οἱ ἀπ' ἀρχῆς αὐτόπται καὶ ὑπηρέται γενόμενοι τοῦ λόγου, 3 ἔδοξεν ἡμῖν, παρηκολουθηκότι ἀνωθεν πᾶσιν ἀκριβῶς, καθεξῆς σοι γράψαι, κράτιστε Θεόφιλε, 4 ἵνα ἐπιγνῶς περὶ ὧν κατηχήθης λόγων τὴν ἀσφάλειαν. 5 Ἐγένετο ἐν ταῖς ἡμέραις Ἡρώδου βασιλέως τῆς Ἰουδαίας ἱερεὺς τις ὀνόματι Ζαχαρίας, ἐξ ἡμερίας Ἀβιά· καὶ ἡ γυνὴ αὐτοῦ ἐκ τῶν θυγατέρων Ἀαρών, καὶ τὸ

FORASMUCH AS many have taken in hand to set forth in order a declaration of those things which are most surely believed among us, 2 even as they delivered them unto us, which from the beginning were eyewitnesses, and ministers of the word; 3 it seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write unto thee in order, most excellent Theophilus, 4 that thou mightest know the certainty of the things, wherein thou hast been instructed. 5 THERE WAS IN THE days of Herod, the king of Judæa, a certain priest named

¹ παρακολουθήσει ταῦτα L; ἀκολουθήσει ταῦτα Tr. ² — καινὰς Tr. ³ + καὶ ἐν ταῖς χερσὶν and in the hands Tr. ⁴ βλάβη should it injure GLTAW. ⁵ + Ἰησοῦς Jesus LTr. ⁶ ἀνελήμφθη LTrA. ⁷ — Ἄμην EGLTAW. ⁸ — Τὸ κατὰ Μάρκον εὐαγγέλιον EGLTW; Κατὰ Μάρκον Tr; Εὐαγγέλιον κατὰ Μάρκον [A].
⁹ Εὐαγγέλιον ([Evang.] A) κατὰ Λουκᾶν GLTAW; κατὰ Λουκᾶν Tr. ¹⁰ — τοῦ Tr[A].
¹¹ γυνὴ αὐτοῦ LTrA.

vestigation, and I hope also somewhat convincing for the contention made here, and in the Manual, respecting the nature of the translation of the Book of Mormon.

I give on the foregoing page the photograph of an entire page from the Greek New Testament. It will be observed that the Greek is given, and under each Greek word an English equivalent, "as literal as may be to be useful." Remember, not absolutely literal; and in the margin is the translation of our common English version.

Now, for purposes of comparison, I give Paul's account of himself before King Agrippa from the so-called Greek "literal translation," and Nephi's account of himself taken from the Book of Mormon.

PAUL'S ACCOUNT OF HIMSELF.

And Agrippa to Paul said, It is allowed thee for thyself to speak. Then Paul made a defense, stretching out the hand: Concerning all of which I am accused by Jews, King Agrippa, I esteem myself happy being about to make defense before thee today, especially acquainted being thou of all the among Jews customs and also questions; wherefore I beseech thee patiently to hear me. The then manner of life my from youth, which from commencement was among my nation in Jerusalem, know all the Jews, who before knew me from the first, if they would bear witness that according to the strictest sect of our religion I lived a Pharisee. And now for hope of thee to the Father's promise made by God, I stand being judged, to which our twelve tribes intently night and day serving hope to arrive; concerning which hope I am accused, O King Agrippa, by the Jews. Why incredible is it judged by you if God dead raises? I indeed therefore thought in myself to the name of Jesus the Nazarine I ought many things contrary to do.

NEPHI'S ACCOUNT OF HIMSELF.

I, Nephi, having been born of goodly parents, therefore I was taught somewhat in all the learning of my father; and having seen many afflictions in the course of my days—nevertheless, having been highly favored of the Lord in all my days; yea, having had a great knowledge of the goodness and the mysteries of God, therefore I make a record of my proceedings in my day; yea, I make a record in the language of my father, which consists of the learning of the Jews, and the language of the Egyptians. And I know that the record which I make, is true; and I make it with mine own hand; and I make it according to my knowledge. For it came to pass in the commencement of the first year of the reign of Zedekiah, King of Judah, (my father Lehi, having dwelt at Jerusalem in all his days;) and in that same year there came many prophets prophesying unto the people that they must repent, or the great city Jerusalem must be destroyed.

In order that it may be seen that the difference between even an approximately "literal translation," and the translation of the Book of Mormon, holds good in other forms of composition as well as personal narrative, I place the following doctrinal explanations before the reader for purpose of comparison:

THE DOCTRINE OF PREACHING TO THE SPIRITS IN PRISON—PETER.

For better, doing good, if wills the will of God, to suffer, than doing evil; because indeed Christ once for sins suffered, just for unjust, that us he might bring to God; having been put to death in flesh, but made alive by the spirit, in which also to the imprisoned spirits having gone he preached, disobeyed sometimes, when once was waiting the of God long suffering in the days of Noe, being prepared ark, into which few, that is eight souls, were saved through water, which also us figure now saves baptism, not of flesh a putting away of filth, but of a conscience good demand towards God, by resurrection of Jesus Christ who is at right hand of God, gone into heaven, having been subjected to him, angels, authorities and powers.

DOCTRINE OF THE FALL OF ADAM.—LEHI.

And now, behold, if Adam had not transgressed, he would not have fallen; but he would have remained in the garden of Eden. And all things which were created, must have remained in the same state which they were, after they were created; and they must have remained forever and had no end. And they would have had no children; wherefore, they would have remained in a state of innocence, having no joy, for they knew no misery; doing no good, for they knew no sin. But behold, all things have been done in the wisdom of him who knoweth all things. Adam fell that men might be; and men are, that they might have joy. And the Messiah cometh in the fulness of time, that he may redeem the children of men from the fall.

This will doubtless be sufficient to show the difference between a somewhat "literal translation" and one which is evidently not a "literal," or word-for-word bringing over from one language into another. The difference between the two things as indicated here is very great. Still not so great as it would be if we were in possession of a real "literal translation." One other thing also should be remembered; namely, that however sharp the difference is between a somewhat "literal translation" of the Greek and the translation of the Book of Mormon, a "literal translation" from the Nephite reformed Egyptian language would undoubtedly indicate a still sharper difference, for the reason that our English idiom undoubtedly conforms more readily to the Greek than it would to the Nephite language; so that, great as the

differences are in the foregoing illustrations, they would be still more sharply defined if the Book of Mormon were a word-for-word bringing over from the Nephite language into the English—if such a thing were possible. Enough, however, is here apparent to make it plain that the Book of Mormon is not a “literal translation” from the Nephite language, that is, in the sense of being brought over word for word and letter for letter from the Nephite into the English. The translation of the Book of Mormon is English in idiom, and the idiom of the time and locality where it was produced, as all must know who read it, and especially those who have read the first edition of it. It having been determined, then, that the translation of the Book of Mormon is in English idiom, the question remains, Whose is it? The Urim and Thummim’s, the Lord’s, or is it Joseph Smith’s? And who is responsible for its palpable errors? The Lord, or man? With that question in mind, read the following few sample passages from among many that might be quoted of like character from the first edition. Speaking of Urim and Thummim the following occurs:

And the things are called interpreters; and no man can look in them, except he be commanded, lest he should look for that he had not ought, and he should perish; * * * but a seer can know of things which has past, and also of things which is to come * * * and hidden things shall come to light, and things which is not known shall be made known by them. (Page 173.)

Blessed are they who humbleth themselves without being compelled to be humble. (Page 314.)

Little children doth have words given unto them many times which doth confound the wise and the learned. (Page 315.)

But they had fell into great errors, for they would not observe to keep the commandments of God. (Page 310.)

Have mercy on me, who art in the gall of bitterness and art encircled about by the everlasting chains of death. (Page 325.)

I have always retained in remembrance their captivity; yea, and ye also had ought to retain in remembrance, as I have done their captivity; * * * for ye had ought to know as I do know, that inasmuch as ye shall keep the commandments of God ye shall prosper in the land; and ye had ought to know also that inasmuch as ye shall not keep the commandments of God, ye shall be cut off from his presence. (Page 326.)

Behold I say unto you, that it is him that surely shall come to take away the sins of the world. (Page 333.)

My son, do not risk one more offense against your God * * * which

ye hath hitherto risked to commit sin; * * * for that which ye doth send out shall return unto you again. (Page 337.)

And thus ended the record of Alma, which was wrote upon the plates of Nephi. (Page 347.)

And this shall be your language in them days: But behold your days of probation is past.

Are these flagrant errors in grammar chargeable to the Lord? To say so is to invite ridicule. The thoughts, the doctrines, are well enough; but the awkward, ungrammatical expression of the thoughts is, doubtless, the result of the translator's imperfect knowledge of the English language,* for which lack of knowledge he is not one whit blamable, since his lack of education was due entirely to his want of opportunity for acquiring learning. And, moreover, the errors are just such errors as one circumstanced as the translator was, would make. Again, I say for the translation, as Moroni says for the original Nephite record: "If there be errors, they are the errors of man," not God's errors. Let us rid ourselves of the reproach of charging error, even though it be of forms of expression, unto God, in whom and in whose ways there are no errors at all.

One correspondent to the ERA, after making some objections to the "Manual theory" of the translation of the Book of Mormon, closes his communication with the following *post script*:

P.S.—We don't think the writer of the Manual should answer this. Give us better authority.

* Of course, inefficient proof-reading, and the fact that the publishing firm that got out the first edition of the Book of Mormon was unfriendly to it, and, therefore, careless in its work, and, perhaps, even mischievously disposed towards it, may account for some of the verbal and grammatical errors of the first edition. On the probability of this being the case, the writer of the Manual said in that work:

"Of course, the fact that the Book of Mormon was published in a country town, on a hand press, and by persons unfamiliar with book making, and the proofs were read by Oliver Cowdery, who was entirely without experience in such work, will account for many errors verbal and grammatical. The further fact that the employees, at the printing establishment where the book was published, were unfriendly to it, and were more anxious to make it appear ridiculous than to turn out a good job, may account for other errors that crept into the first edition. But after due allowance is made for all these conditions, the errors are so numerous, and of such a constitutional nature, that they cannot be explained away by these unfavorable conditions under which the work was published."—*Manual*, page 494-5.

It would have pleased the writer of the Manual had the editors of the ERA thought proper to have referred these questions concerning the translation of the Book of Mormon to someone else—to better authority—and there are many better authorities; but the editors have seen proper to refer the questions to the Manual writer, and they have received such consideration as he is able to give them, within the compass of these articles. Since the questions were referred to him, however, the *Deseret News* editorially has taken up the subject, and I am very pleased with the opportunity of presenting to this *post script* writer the better authority for which he longs; but he may be disappointed in the fact that the *News* writer sees this matter of translation substantially in the same light in which it was presented by the Manual:

A CURRENT QUESTION.

We have received from one of the wards in Idaho the following question, which we are requested to answer through the columns of the *Deseret News*. As it does not relate to any local matter which would come under the immediate jurisdiction of the ward or stake authorities, and is a subject that is receiving much attention just now, we will respond to the desire of our friend on this matter, as we are able. The question asked is as follows:

Did Joseph Smith the Prophet, in translating the Book of Mormon, use his own language in translating the book into the English language, or did he use what appeared to him in the Urim and Thummim as the interpretation of the Nephite characters, and would it pass away before it was correctly written?

We are of the opinion that the Manual for 1905-1906, prepared as a guide to the Young Men's Mutual Improvement Association in the study of the Book of Mormon, will give a sufficient answer. But there is some conflict of opinion, in consequence of statements purporting to have been made by David Whitmer and Martin Harris, concerning the manner in which the Prophet Joseph obtained the interpretation of the characters inscribed upon the metallic plates, which were in "reformed Egyptian" hieroglyphics. The idea conveyed by those statements was that when the Prophet Joseph looked into the Urim and Thummim he saw the characters that were on the plates, and underneath them their meaning in the English language, and that when reading them to the scribe who wrote for him, the line would not disappear and another take its place unless it was copied correctly.

The history of the Prophet Joseph Smith, prepared from his diary, does not afford that information, nor do we know of anything authentic as coming from him which gives a description or explanation of the manner of translation of the

NepHITE record. One thing, however, is very clear to us, and that is, that whether in prophecy or preaching or translating, the man inspired of God is not simply a talking machine, but one who is divinely impressed and enlightened and whose understanding is quickened and enlarged, but who still possesses all his faculties and the free agency which God has given to all mankind.

If all that was necessary for the Seer was to look into the instrument given to him as an aid in the work of translation, there would have been no real necessity for his possession of the plates, which he had to guard with such care. And if every word in English was supplied to him in the way supposed, it is not likely that any errors either in grammar or composition would be seen. We have not the slightest doubt that with the aid of those stones, and by the gift and power of God, Joseph was able to read the characters on the plates and understand their full signification, and that he expressed that in the ordinary language to which he was accustomed and according to his knowledge in the use of it, just as a person who translates anything from an ancient or modern language, the understanding of which he obtains by the ordinary means, and who would give it in English, according to the usual phraseology to which he was accustomed.

The prophets of old who spoke and wrote "as moved upon by the Holy Ghost," though inspired by the same spirit, expressed that which was given to them in their own way and with those distinctive peculiarities they each possessed. They were not acted upon against their own will, or as automatons. As Paul has it, "The spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets." Any one who has enjoyed the spirit of revelation, either in prophecy, in testimony, in preaching, in interpretation of tongues, or in other spiritual gifts, knows what it is to receive light and truth by the power of God, which he speaks in his own language and in his own manner and style. He who has not been thus inspired, may not be able to understand how the meaning of the characters on the plates was made clear to the translator so that he could express it in his own language.

But the important fact in this important matter is, that Joseph Smith really received these ancient records, containing much of the history of this continent and an account of the dealings of God with the early inhabitants thereof; that he translated them into the English language; and that, according to the testimony of the three witnesses—Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer and Martin Harris—the voice of the Lord declared that they were translated "by the gift and power of God," and therefore they were translated correctly. As to the exact *modus operandi*, there is nothing on record that we know of as coming from the Prophet himself.

The great truth remains, that we have the Book of Mormon, written in simple language, and that such imperfections as may be found in it are, as it declares itself, "the mistakes of men," and that these are simply errors of language, of such small importance that the meaning is not obscured, but whoever reads may also understand. It gives a plain and succinct account of the manner in which this continent was peopled in early times, shows the origin of the present tribes of so-called Indians, unfolds the purposes of the Almighty concerning this hemisphere, expounds the principles of the everlasting Gospel, by obedience to which

mankind may be saved, and testifies that Jesus of Nazareth was in very deed the Son of the Eternal God and the Redeemer of the world. These great truths are invaluable, and the question concerning the exact manner of the translation of the Book is comparatively of little moment.—*Deseret Evening News*, January 31, 1906.

I think it proper at this point, also, to say, by way of personal explanation, and perhaps to some extent by way of defense against unkind criticisms that have been made of the writer of the Manual, because of the theory of translation therein advanced—I think it proper to say, I repeat, that the present writer did not upon his own responsibility, and without consultation with those somewhat the guardians of these matters, set forth the theory of the Manual on the translation of the Book of Mormon. Chapter VII of the Manual, the one setting forth the Manual theory of translation, was submitted to the First Presidency, and several of the Apostles met together to consider the chapter, and to listen to the reasons which, in the writer's opinion, demanded that such an explanation of the translation should be given. After listening to Chapter VII, and hearing the reasons for making such explanations therein contained, it was moved and carried that such chapter be published in the Manual, and it was published accordingly.

This statement is not made with a view of making the First Presidency and the Twelve, who were present and voted upon the subject, responsible for the ideas advanced; the motion then taken carried with it no such consequences. It meant only that the brethren then consulted were willing that the present writer should publish those views in the Young Men's Manual; but primarily he, the writer, stands responsible for the views there expressed—a responsibility, by the way, which he is very willing to carry; but he is anxious to have the Latter-day Saints understand, and especially the young men in Israel, that in setting forth the Manual theory of translating the Book of Mormon, the writer was not seeking to gratify his personal vanity by advancing some novel theory, and pushing it to the front regardless of the opinions of others, or the general interests of the work.

The same correspondent also says:

The theory of the Manual is having a bad effect upon our best Book of Mormon students.

With all due respect to the gentleman's opinion, I desire to say to him that he is entirely mistaken. The "Manual theory" of translation is having no such effect; but, on the contrary, Book of Mormon students everywhere are rejoicing in the fact that the "Manual theory" of translation gives them a rational defense against the criticisms that are urged against the faulty language of the English translation of that book. Many errors, verbal and grammatical, have already been eliminated in the later English editions, and there is no valid reason why everyone of those that remain should not be eliminated, since it is the thought, the facts of the book, that one should be concerned in preserving, not the forms in which they happen to be cast. There is no good reason why we should not have just as good a Book of Mormon in the English language as they now have in the French, the German, the Swedish and the Danish, and (since the recent revision of it) in the Hawaiian; for in these translations, it has not been thought necessary to perpetuate the English errors; nor do I believe it necessary to perpetuate them in our English editions. By making merely verbal changes, and changes in grammatical construction, without changing the shade of a single idea or statement, changes that could be legitimately authorized by the President of the Church—who is the recognized lawgiver in Israel, and guardian of the written word—the Book of Mormon could be made a classic in English, and the present writer hopes that he will live to see those verbal and grammatical changes authorized.*

Salt Lake City, Utah.

* The ERA is promised a paper by Elder Roberts on Manual Lesson V, "Original Doctrines," and relating especially to question 13, on the immortality of the soul as taught in the Book of Mormon. It will be printed in an early number.—EDITORS.