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## Joseph Smith's "Translation" of the Scriptures

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**Abstract:** This article quotes the Eighth Article of Faith declaring that Latter-day Saints believe both the Bible and the Book of Mormon to be the words of God. Nephi taught that the Hebrew scriptures had “plain and precious parts” removed. For this reason Joseph Smith was called on to revise the Bible and produce an “inspired translation.”

## Editors' Table

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A communication has been received from Battleground, Washington, in which the enquirer says:

"I have met at different times elders of your Church that have made denials of matters pertaining to their doctrines which [are] either done through ignorance or deceit. Recently two of them denied before several witnesses, that Joseph Smith, Jr., ever translated the Bible. I charged them with only believing the King James translation in so far as that agreed with that which it is claimed Smith translated, or the Book of Mormon. I then produced the Doctrine and Covenants in which it is stated that he did translate the scriptures, especially mentioning the Apocrypha and other parts and therefore the *Times and Seasons*, of 1844, (I have the bound volume of said paper for that year) Smith in his history of the doctrine plainly states that he was engaged at different times in the translation of the scriptures. These elders after I had produced such evidence they then stated that they had heard that he did translate it, and that it was kept for sale in your city but that they had never seen a copy of it. \* \* \*

"After various experiences of this kind it seems necessary to get some information from one in authority in your organization, for the sake of truth. If you will kindly answer the following, it will greatly oblige me and place some matters beyond controversy:

"1. Did Joseph Smith, Jr., translate the Bible as he claimed that he did, with his own hand signature?

"2. What is the price of said book which these elders said is sold by your Church?

"3. Does this translation that you have differ from the one sold by the Reorganized Church, of which I have a copy?

"4. Was not the *Times and Seasons* the official paper of the Latter-day Saints, in 1844, inasmuch as it has the recorded minutes of the conference of that year?

"5. Are not the letters of Joseph Smith, above his signature, as printed in that volume, authentic, or are they a forgery?"

The writer of this inconsistent communication, if he had been indeed searching "for the sake of truth," would not be under the necessity of writing to the President of the Church for answers to his questions. There are in each of the mission fields many elders who are capable of answering clearly and truthfully these questions, as far as answers are merited, for it is quite obvious that they were not asked "for the sake of truth."

It may be possible that some one or two, perhaps, of the elders have been approached with some catch-questions in regard to particulars relating to the revision of the scriptures by the Prophet Joseph Smith, or other matters, with which they were

not familiar; but they would not try to deceive, or in any way act dishonorably. Of this we are positive. The elders, quite generally, are capable of answering any honest questions asked "for the sake of truth."

We find, however, a class of individuals in the world, who spend much of their time seeking out the young, inexperienced elders as soon as they reach their fields and are not fully accustomed to the work of the ministry, with the object in view of confusing and discouraging them, if possible, in their labors. It is a cunning trick of the adversary who rages because of the progress of the work, which he would destroy if he could. It is the hope of such individuals that the young, inexperienced elders may have their faith impaired or destroyed by the assaults made upon them, before they become firmly entrenched in a knowledge of the gospel and have a clear testimony of the truth. Those who resort to such tactics very studiously avoid elders of experience who could fully answer their sophistical questions. They are not seekers after truth; it is not truth they desire to see established; but, on the contrary, the overthrow of truth.

In answering the questions propounded, it is not necessary to take them up *seriatim*. In fact, some of them are stated so palpably with the intent, and the intent only, to imply that we, the Latter-day Saints, are in opposition to the teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith, that they deserve no answer. The explanation and evidence given here, are not presented so much for the benefit of the questioner, as to correct ideas that may possibly be held by some who have been misinformed regarding the facts connected with the revision of the Bible by Joseph Smith, and otherwise deceived in relation to the accepted teachings of the Latter-day Saints.

We are not out of harmony with the doctrines promulgated by Joseph Smith, neither do we, or have we, denied the teachings that he declared, whether over his signature or otherwise. We have never accused him of being a fallen prophet, as some others have done who apparently profess a belief in his mission, but oppose the Church which was established through his instrumentality by the Lord. To us, he was, and is, a prophet of God, who sealed his testimony with his blood, after faithfully performing the work the Lord required at his hands.

No clear idea is expressed in these questions as to what communications in the *Times and Seasons* are referred to. The *Times and Seasons* was considered an official publication of the Church, and at one time Joseph Smith was the editor. It was while he was editor, in 1842, that he published the Book of Abraham, which he translated by the power and gift of God, from the Egyptian papyrus which came into his hands. Thus, some of the lost scriptures which were not had in the Bible were re-

stored in their plainness and are "had again among the children of men—among as many as believe."

The fact that the *Times and Seasons* was an official publication of the Church, does not mean that every article appearing in it was an official utterance of the Church, or even that these articles were endorsed as authentic by the councils of the Church. It was official in the sense that it was used by the First Presidency as a medium in which official communications to the Saints could be publicly proclaimed. Extracts from minutes were not necessarily passed upon by the editors, or endorsed by the Church authorities as authentic, but were printed as they were prepared by secretaries and clerks for publication. The minutes of some very important meetings appearing in the *Times and Seasons* were abbreviated to fit the limited space that could be allotted to them; and it was fully understood by the authorities of the Church that these printed minutes were but extracts of the official minutes which were kept by the Church historians and recorders, appointed to assist in the keeping of the journal of the Prophet Joseph Smith, which was kept as the history of the Church. The presentation of such documents as the Book of Abraham, we accept not only as authentic, but as the word of the Lord to us.

While we are not informed what letters are meant, it is natural to suppose that any letters appearing in the *Times and Seasons* over the signature of Joseph Smith, or any other man, for that matter, are authentic. We have not heard that any of these things have at any time been questioned and their authorship disputed by Latter-day Saints.

The Articles of Faith, now officially received as standard doctrine of the Church, first appeared in a letter written March 1, 1842, to Mr. John Wentworth, editor and proprietor of the *Chicago Democrat*—nearly eight years after the Prophet prepared his revision of the Scriptures. The eighth article reads as follows:

"We believe the Bible to be the word of God, as far as it is translated correctly; we also believe the Book of Mormon to be the word of God."

It will be generally conceded that the Bible has not been correctly translated in all instances; for we are informed by many of the early writers, that in the various translations, the translators "have taken liberty to add thereunto, to retrench and correct divers things," which in their opinions needed correction, amplification or elimination. We learn from the Book of Mormon that many plain and precious parts have been taken away from the Hebrew Scriptures. Nephi wrote concerning the vision shown him by an angel:

"The book that thou beholdest, is a record of the Jews, which contains the covenants of the Lord which he hath made unto the house of

Israel; and it also containeth many of the prophecies of the holy prophets. \* \* \* 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 foundation of a 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; \* \* \* because of these things which are taken away out of the gospel of the Lamb, an exceeding great many do stumble, yea, inso-much that Satan hath great power over them."

We read in the Pearl of Great Price (Book of Moses ch. 1, v. 23):

"And now of this thing [the vision of Moses] Moses bore record; but because of wickedness it is not had among the children of men."

And in verses 40, 41:

"And now, Moses, my son, I speak unto thee concerning this earth upon which thou standest; and thou shalt write the things which I shall speak. And in a day when the children of men shall esteem my words as naught and take many of them from the book which thou shalt write, behold, I will raise up another like unto thee; and they shall be had again among the children of men—among as many as shall believe."

The fulfilment of this was seen when, in 1850, the Book of Moses and the Book of Abraham were published by the Church in the Pearl of Great Price, and were circulated among those who believed. Because of the eliminations of things which were "plain and most precious," the improper additions and mistranslations in the Bible, and in fulfilment, in part, at least, of the predictions and promises of old, Joseph Smith was directed by the Lord to revise many parts of the Bible. He commenced this work shortly after the organization of the Church, and revised from time to time as opportunity permitted, completing the New Testament, February 2, 1833, and the Old Testament, July 2 of that same year, as far as he was directed and permitted by the Lord at that time, to revise the Scriptures. The Apocrypha he did not revise, the Lord in a revelation given March 9, 1833, instructing him not to do so. (See section 91, Doc. and Cov.)

While this revision is spoken of as a "translation," it was not a translation of the scriptures in the true meaning of that term. The Prophet did not have any of the ancient manuscripts or versions of the scriptures before him, from which we have received the present King James and Douay translations of the Bible. The work Joseph Smith was directed to do was to revise and correct such passages as he was led by the Spirit of the Lord to correct, and to make such additions as he was given through

revelation to make. It was not a change from one language into another, but a correction of the reading of the English text as that text was found in the King James translation.

That Joseph Smith commenced with Genesis and went through the Bible, verse by verse, to the Book of Revelation, is believed by some. This is an error. He corrected various subjects and marked his corrections in the wide margin of a large copy of the Bible. Where additions had to be made, or corrections were too lengthy for the margin, as we find in Genesis and other parts, these were made in manuscript writing which was carefully noted and preserved with this marked copy of the Bible. The New Testament was taken up and finished first, several months before the Old Testament revision was done. These are the facts as asserted by those who were associated with the Prophet while he performed this remarkable labor.

It is not true that he corrected every error in the scriptures. There were many subjects that were never touched by him. Some of these he intended to revise before his death. There are still many "plain and precious things" that are still withheld from the people, because of the hardness of their hearts and unbelief. Evidence of this truth is found, both in the revelations given to Joseph Smith, and in the Book of Mormon. Adam, Enoch, Moses, Abraham, Joseph, and others of the prophets, received wonderful manifestations, which they were commanded to write and seal up, that are not found in any modern scriptures. The same thing is true of the prophets spoken of in the Book of Mormon. Jared, Nephi, Mormon, Moroni, and others of the Jaredite and Nephite prophets, received revelations that have not yet been restored, but are to be revealed in the due time of the Lord. We read in III Nephi 26:

"And now there cannot be written in this book even a hundredth part of the things which Jesus did truly teach unto the people; but behold the plates of Nephi do contain the more part of the things which he taught the people; and these things have I written which are a lesser part of the things which he taught the people; and I have written them to the intent that they may be brought again unto this people, from the Gentiles, according to the words which Jesus hath spoken.

"And when they shall have received this, which is expedient that they should have first, to try their faith, and if it shall so be that they shall believe these things, then shall the greater things be made manifest unto them. And if it so be that they will not believe these things, then shall the greater things be withheld from them, unto their condemnation. Behold I was about to write them all which were engraven upon the plates of Nephi, but the Lord forbid it, saying, I will try the faith of my people." (verses 6-11).

There are a number of inspired books spoken of in these we now have in the Bible, that are not found among mankind today, which contained many "plain and precious things" revealed to the ancient prophets. Neither were these things given to the

world through Joseph Smith, for the time has not come, because of the unbelief of the people. Even in the restoration of the writings of Enoch, it is quite evident that all his prophecies have not yet been restored. Paul, Jude, and other early prophets, wrote epistles which are not to be found today. In the Book of Mormon (I Nephi 9) brief mention is made of remarkable prophecies uttered by three great prophets, Zenos, Neum and Zenock, evidently of the Hebrew race, who wrote some very "plain and precious things" relating to the ministry and mission of the Son of God. Without a doubt the records of these prophets were engraven upon the plates which Lehi and his sons carried with them from Jerusalem to the promised land. But we fail to find their prophecies in any of our modern Bibles. Even the names of these prophets—who were surely remarkable men—are unknown in the Christian world today.

In stating these plain facts, which are beyond successful controversy, we do not discredit in the least the work of restoration by Joseph Smith. He revised, as it is, a great deal more than the world can, or will, receive. In the "translation" of the scriptures, he gave to the world all that the Lord would permit him to give, and as much as many of the members of the Church were able to receive. He therefore finished all that was required at his hands, or, that he was permitted to revise, up to July, 1833, when he discontinued his labors of revision.

It is also evident that he did not "translate" all which was incorrect in the Bible, when he finished his labors in 1833, from his own statement made June 18, 1840, in a communication to the High Council of Nauvoo. In this communication he stated that he felt the time has fully come when he should devote himself exclusively to those things which relate to the spiritualities of the Church, "and commence the work of translating the Egyptian records, the Bible, and wait upon the Lord for such revelations as may be suited to the conditions and circumstances of the Church."

It stands to reason that if the Bible had been completely revised by Joseph Smith, in 1833, there would be no need to continue his work of revision, in 1840. That he did intend to continue his labors in this direction is clearly shown by the foregoing.

On this subject, President George Q. Cannon records (p. 142) , in his *Life of Joseph Smith*:

"We have heard President Brigham Young state that the prophet, before his death, had spoken to him about going through the translation of the scriptures again and perfecting it upon points of doctrine which the Lord had restrained him from giving in plainness and fulness at the time of which we write" (Feb. 2, 1833).

As previously noted, he did translate the Egyptian records, or a goodly part of them, and that translation has been preserved,

as well as the revision of the Holy Scriptures. The Egyptian record—Book of Abraham—was published by Joseph Smith in the *Times and Seasons*, in 1842, but the Reorganized Church rejects these writings because they conflict with their doctrines. Nevertheless, this record also contains many of those things which are mentioned in the Book of Mormon, as being most “plain and precious,” which have now been restored and given to the world.

The Prophet did not “translate” every passage in the King James version of the Bible, which will be shown by a careful reading of the passages that are, according to his own statement, not revised. For example, compare the 4th chapter of Malachi, which is the same in the Prophet’s revision as in the King James version, with the account given by Joseph Smith in the *History of the Church*, as the Angel Moroni quoted that chapter to him. This is the way the angel quoted part of it:

“For behold, the day cometh that shall burn as an oven, and all the proud, yea, and all that do wickedly shall burn as stubble; for they that come shall burn them, saith the Lord of hosts, that it shall leave them neither root nor branch. \* \* \*

“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.”—(See Doc. and Cov. sec. 2.)

Other passages could be mentioned, but this will be sufficient for our purpose.

In regard to the manuscript of the “inspired translation,” or more properly, the revision that was made by Joseph Smith, we have a complete copy of that work done by him, filed in the archives of the Church in this city. This copy was made by Dr. John M. Bernhisel, while he was living at the home of Joseph Smith. It was carefully copied, preserved and brought to the valleys of the mountains by the Latter-day Saints when they were driven from Nauvoo. So far as publishing this revision is concerned, we have not published it in full, but we have it and can do so whenever the Lord indicates that it should be done. We have published many of the most important parts in the Pearl of Great Price, as early as 1850, and they have been published in that book—which is a standard work of the Church—ever since, together with the Egyptian record which was translated by Joseph Smith and published by him in the Church paper, the *Times and Seasons*, in 1842, as an official document and revelation from the Lord.

JOSEPH F. SMITH, JR.