

MOSES

INTRODUCTION

The placement of the book of Moses as part of the Pearl of Great Price obscures the fact that it was actually produced in June 1830 as part of the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible. Below is a brief history of that translation and how excerpts of its first chapters became the book of Moses.

Background

During the translation of the Book of Mormon, Joseph Smith would have encountered passages that spoke of “plain and precious things” that had been removed from the Bible and that made mention of other books coming forth in the last days and making known “the plain and precious things which [had] been taken away” (1 Nephi 13:40). In events that anticipated the involvement of Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery in restoring lost stories and teachings from the Bible, the two men had already produced what can be seen as a new translation of portions of John 21 (now Doctrine and Covenants section 7) in April 1829.

Significantly, there is support for the idea that Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery made specific preparations for the work of Bible translation. For example, in October 1829, they purchased a Bible that was eventually used in the preparation of the Joseph Smith Translation. Though there is currently no independent evidence that they acquired this copy of the Bible with a new translation in mind, the time frame of the purchase is suggestive.

If we assume for a moment that the Bible was purchased in anticipation of a new translation, how can the months between the purchase and the start of translation be explained? Simply put, it was not until June 1830 that Joseph Smith was able to free himself to begin the new work of translation that was

intended to restore “many important points touching the salvation of men, [that] had been taken from the Bible, or lost before it was compiled.”¹

Translation History

Joseph Smith Translation scholar Kent P. Jackson wrote the following in summarizing the translation history:

Not long after the Church was organized in the spring of 1830, Joseph Smith began a careful reading of the Bible to revise and make corrections in accordance with the inspiration he would receive. From that labor came the revelation of much truth and the restoration of many of the “precious things” that Nephi had foretold would be taken from the Bible (1 Nephi 13:23–29). In June 1830, the first revealed addition to the Bible was set to writing. Over the next three years, the Prophet made inspired changes, additions, and corrections while he filled his calling to provide a more correct translation for the Church. Collectively, these are called the “Joseph Smith Translation.”

The first revelation of the Joseph Smith Translation is what we now have as Moses 1 in the Pearl of Great Price—the preface to the book of Genesis. Beginning with Genesis 1:1, the Prophet apparently had the Bible before him and read aloud from it until he felt impressed to dictate a change in the wording. If no change were required, he read the text as it stood. Thus dictating the text to his scribes, he progressed to Genesis 24, at which point he set aside the Old Testament as he was instructed in a revelation on March 7, 1831 (see Doctrine and Covenants 45:60–62). The following day, he began revising the New Testament. When he completed John 5 in February 1832, he ceased dictating the text in full to his scribes and began using an abbreviated notation system. From that time on, it appears that he read the verses from the Bible, marked in it the words or passages that needed to be corrected, and dictated only the changes to his scribes, who recorded them on the manuscript.

Following the completion of the New Testament in February 1833, Joseph Smith returned to his work on the Old Testament. He soon shifted to the abbreviated notation system for that manuscript also. . . . [During this last phase of Old Testament translation,] he dictated only the replacement words, as he had done earlier with the New Testament. At the end of the Old Testament manuscript, after the book of Malachi, the scribe wrote the following words: “Finished on the 2nd day of July 1833.” That same day the Prophet and his counselors—Sidney Rigdon and Frederick G. Williams, both of whom had served as scribes for the new translation—wrote to Church members in Missouri and told them, “We this day finished the translating of the Scriptures, for which we returned gratitude to our Heavenly Father.”²

1. “History, 1838–1856, volume A-1 [23 December 1805–30 August 1834],” p. 183, <https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-a-1-23-december-1805-30-august-1834/189>.

2. Kent P. Jackson, “Joseph Smith’s Cooperstown Bible: The Historical Context of the Bible Used in the Joseph Smith Translation,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 40, no. 1 (2001): 58–60.

Did “Finished” Mean “Final”?

Even though the Joseph Smith Translation manuscript was marked as finished, it would be a mistake to assume that the book of Moses is currently in any sort of final form. As Robert J. Matthews aptly put it, “Any part of the translation might have been further touched upon and improved by additional revelation and emendation by the Prophet.”³

In translating the Bible, Joseph Smith’s criterion for the acceptability of a given reading was typically pragmatic rather than absolute. For example, after quoting a verse from Malachi in a letter to the Saints, the Prophet admitted that he “might have rendered a plainer translation.” However, he said that his wording of the verse was satisfactory in this case because the words were “sufficiently plain to suit [the] purpose as it [stood]” (Doctrine and Covenants 128:18).

There is another reason we should not think of the book of Moses as being in its final form. Careful study of the translations, teachings, and revelations of Joseph Smith suggests that he sometimes knew much more about certain sacred matters than he taught publicly. Even after Joseph Smith was well along in the translation process, he seems to have believed that God did not intend for him to publish the Joseph Smith Translation in his lifetime. For example, writing to W. W. Phelps in 1832, he said: “I would inform you that [the Bible translation] will not go from under my hand during my natural life for correction, revisal, or printing and the will of [the] Lord be done.”⁴

Although in later years Joseph Smith reversed his position and made serious efforts to prepare his translation manuscript for publication, his own statement makes clear that initially he did not feel authorized to share publicly all he had produced and learned during the translation process. George Q. Cannon remembered Joseph Smith saying that he intended to go back and rework some portions of the Bible translation to add in truths he was previously “restrained . . . from giving in plainness and fulness.”⁵ In short, we should not be surprised if some especially sacred scriptural teachings found in Joseph Smith’s later sermons were not included in the Joseph Smith Translation.

3. Robert J. Matthews, *“A Plainer Translation”: Joseph Smith’s Translation of the Bible—A History and Commentary* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1975), 215.

4. “Letter to William W. Phelps, 31 July 1832,” p. 5, <https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-to-william-w-phelps-31-july-1832/5>.

5. George Q. Cannon, *The Life of Joseph Smith, the Prophet*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret News, 1907), 129n1. In a letter to her son Joseph on February 10, 1867, Emma Smith also mentioned the “unfinished condition of the work” (cited in Paul A. Wellington, *Joseph Smith’s “New Translation” of the Bible* [Independence, MO: Herald House, 1970], 11).

Book of Moses Manuscripts and Publication History

The earliest extant dictation manuscript of the first twenty-four chapters of Genesis is called Old Testament 1 (OT1). This material was later copied to a second manuscript, OT2, which also contained a translation of additional Old Testament chapters. OT2 contained many minor revisions in wording over the earlier manuscript of the book of Moses but relatively little in the way of substantive prophetic additions.

From 1832 to 1843, various portions of what later became the book of Moses appeared in Church publications. Drawing from these publications, Elder Franklin D. Richards included portions of the book of Moses in the first edition of the Pearl of Great Price, printed in England in 1851. The abrupt ending of our current book of Moses in the middle of Noah’s story is explained simply by the fact that this is where the *Times and Seasons* periodical happened to have concluded its printing of excerpts from the Joseph Smith Translation, so it was all that was available to Elder Richards at the time.

When Elder Orson Pratt revised the Pearl of Great Price in 1878, he completely replaced the previously used book of Moses text with a version that had been published by the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (RLDS, now known as the Community of Christ). It later came to light that the RLDS publication committee had unintentionally failed to incorporate changes made in the later OT2 manuscript. Fortunately, however, because a fair number of the changes made to OT2 were unlikely, unnecessary, and even unhelpful, OT1 passages adopted in the Latter-day Saint version of the book of Moses sometimes seem to have accidentally preserved superior readings.⁶ As with the dictation manuscript of the Book of Mormon, OT1 (the original dictation manuscript of the book of Moses) includes important phrases and literary features that were omitted or obscured by later OT2 edits.

With painstaking effort over a period of eight years, and with the generous cooperation of the Community of Christ, a facsimile transcription of all the original manuscripts of the Joseph Smith Translation was at last published in 2004.⁷ A detailed study of the text from the portions of the Joseph Smith Translation relating to the book of Moses appeared in 2005.⁸ Taken together, these studies allow us to see the translation with greater clarity than ever before.

6. Jeffrey M. Bradshaw and Ryan Dahle, “Textual Criticism and the Book of Moses: A Response to Colby Townsend’s ‘Returning to the Sources,’” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 40 (2020): 104–122, especially 120–122.

7. Scott H. Faulring, Kent P. Jackson, and Robert J. Matthews, eds., *Joseph Smith’s New Translation of the Bible: Original Manuscripts* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2004).

8. Kent P. Jackson, *The Book of Moses and the Joseph Smith Translation Manuscripts* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2005).

Several minor changes and corrections were made to the published version of book of Moses over the years. In 1979 and 1981, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints first published new editions of the scriptures, which contained, along with various study aids, extracts of many (but not all) revisions from the Joseph Smith Translation. Although it is not the official Bible of the Church, the Joseph Smith Translation is an invaluable scripture study aid and witness for the calling of the Prophet Joseph Smith. The early chapters of the Joseph Smith Translation of Genesis (corresponding to Moses 1–8) and Matthew 24 (corresponding to Joseph Smith—Matthew) hold a place of special importance in the Latter-day Saint scriptural canon since they have been wholly incorporated within the Pearl of Great Price.

Structure and Key Themes

The book of Moses is an amalgam composed of long revealed passages with little or no parallels in the Bible and shorter interpretive clarifications and modernizations. Like nearly all the revelations and translations of Joseph Smith, the book of Moses draws on the vocabulary, phrasing, and imagery of the King James English translation of the Bible (popularly known as the KJV). There is, however, some evidence of Hebraic literary features, especially in the long additions to Genesis.⁹ Significantly, there is a focus on the sorts of priestly concerns that would have been of interest to a Levite such as Moses.¹⁰

The book of Moses opens in chapter 1 with Moses’s doctrinally rich visions that function as a prologue to the stories of the Creation and the Fall in subsequent chapters. Ancient Jewish texts such as the *Book of Jubilees* and the *Apocalypse of Abraham* similarly couch their accounts of the Creation and the Fall as follow-ons to prophetic visions. Remarkably, the narrative structure of *Apocalypse of Abraham* contains significant resemblances to Moses 1 from start to finish in both content and narrative sequence.¹¹

Moses 2–5 generally follows the description of events of the corresponding Genesis account of Creation and the Fall, though with important additions and variations that parallel related Book of Mormon accounts. Importantly, the opening of chapter 4 includes a significant account of Jehovah’s premortal appointment as the Savior of humankind and of Satan’s rebellion as a prelude to the story of his role as a tempter in the Garden of Eden. Chapter 5 contains explicit prophecies to Adam and Eve about the coming “sacrifice of the Only Begotten of the Father” (verse 7) and elaborates the conspiracy of Cain

9. See Mark J. Johnson, “The Lost Prologue: Reading Moses Chapter One as an Ancient Text,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 36 (2020): 145–186; Jonathan Riley, “Hebraisms in the Book of Moses: Laying Groundwork and Finding a Way Forward,” in *Tracing Ancient Threads in the Book of Moses: Inspired Origins, Temple Contexts, and Literary Qualities*, ed. Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, David R. Seely, John W. Welch, and Scott Gordon (Orem, UT: Interpreter Foundation; Springville, UT: Book of Mormon Central; Redding, CA: FAIR; Salt Lake City, UT: Eborn Books, 2021), 703–732.

10. John W. Welch and Jackson Abhau, “The Priestly Interests of Moses the Levite,” in *Tracing Ancient Threads*, 163–256.

11. Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, David J. Larsen, and Stephen T. Whitlock, “Moses 1 and the Apocalypse of Abraham: Twin Sons of Different Mothers?,” in *Tracing Ancient Threads*, 789–922.

with Satan (verses 21–31). The stories of the trials of Adam and Eve and the emphasis on the prophecies of the Atonement of Jesus Christ find significant general echoes in medieval Christian apocrypha.¹²

In Moses 6–7, we encounter the extensive revealed record of the teachings, prophecies, and grand visions of Enoch, a character mentioned in only a handful of biblical verses. Ancient Enoch texts such as the Dead Sea Scrolls *Book of Giants*¹³ are replete with ancient affinities to the Enoch accounts in the book of Moses. These affinities range from details such as analogues to specific names, messianic titles,¹⁴ and rare phraseology to larger themes such as the prophet’s gathering the righteous to cities of refuge. In the Bible, we learn only that “Enoch walked with God: and . . . God took him” (Genesis 5:24). However, in the book of Moses, as the *Book of Giants* also seems to imply, we learn that an entire community of disciples ascended to heaven with Enoch.¹⁵

Moses 8 recounts the opening events of the biblical career of Noah, stopping just short of the Lord’s instructions for building the ark. Its most significant addition to Genesis is the description of the wicked “children of men” who falsely proclaimed themselves to be “the sons of God” (Moses 8:20–21). The nature and identity of these so-called sons of God is a long-standing interpretive puzzle for Bible scholars that is resolved straightforwardly in the book of Moses.

Significance for Latter-day Saints

Readers of the Joseph Smith Translation would be correct if they concluded that the Prophet went all the way through the Bible from Genesis to Revelation. However, without knowing more than this, one might also incorrectly assume that each chapter of the Bible received the same level of attention from the Prophet. In examining the known durations of the time periods when each part of the translation was completed, however, we discover that the first twenty-four chapters of Genesis took up nearly a quarter of the total time Joseph Smith spent on the entire Bible translation.

As a proportion of page count, changes in Genesis occur four times more frequently than changes in the New Testament and twenty-one times more frequently than changes in the rest of the Old Testament. The changes in Genesis are not only more numerous but also more significant in the degree of doctrinal

12. David Calabro, “‘This Thing Is a Similitude’: A Typological Approach to Moses 5:1–15 and Ancient Apocryphal Literature,” in *Tracing Ancient Threads*, 468–504.

13. Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, “Moses 6–7 and the *Book of Giants*: Remarkable Witnesses of Enoch’s Ministry,” in *Tracing Ancient Threads*, 1041–1256.

14. S. Kent Brown, and Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, “Man and Son of Man: Probing Theology and Christology in the Book of Moses and in Jewish and Christian Tradition,” in *Tracing Ancient Threads*, 1257–1332.

15. Bradshaw, “Moses 6–7 and the *Book of Giants*”; Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, *Enoch and the Gathering of Zion: The Witness of Ancient Texts for Modern Scripture* (Orem, UT: Book of Mormon Central; Springville, UT: Interpreter Foundation; Salt Lake City, UT: Eborn Books, 2021).

and historical expansion. Though we cannot know how much of Joseph Smith's daily schedule the translation occupied during each of its phases, it seems evident that Genesis 1–24, the first one percent of the Bible, received a significantly more generous share of the Prophet's time and attention than did the remaining ninety-nine percent.

What important lessons could Joseph Smith have learned from translating Genesis 1–24? To begin with, the story of Enoch and his righteous city would have had pressing relevance to the mission of the Church as Joseph worked to help the Saints understand the law of consecration, which was essential to establishing Zion on a firm footing in Missouri. Thus, it makes sense that Moses 6–7 was the first extract of the Joseph Smith Translation to be published in 1832 and 1833. However, we should not allow the salience of these immediate events to overshadow the importance of the fact that the first twenty-four chapters of the Joseph Smith Translation of Genesis also relate the stories of other prophets and patriarchs, in particular Adam, Noah, Melchizedek, and Abraham.

In consideration of this fact and other evidence from revelations and teachings of this period, the most significant impact of the translation process may have been the early tutoring Joseph Smith received in temple-related doctrines as he revised and expanded Genesis 1–24 and later translated relevant passages in the Old and New Testaments. Taken as a whole, the book of Moses is one of several indicators that the Prophet Joseph Smith's extensive knowledge of temple matters was the result of early revelations, not late inventions.

Elder Bruce C. Hafen commented the following about the significance of the book of Moses to Latter-day Saint temple teachings:

The Book of Moses is an ancient temple text as well as the ideal scriptural context for a modern temple preparation course. In answering the question “why do we care about the Book of Moses,” John W. Welch said, “To me, it's all about the temple,” even though the Lord revealed this temple text to Joseph “well before [Joseph] had any idea about building a temple, let alone what was to be done in the temple.” And yet, “much of the blueprint for the endowment is here and only here.”

I have for years encouraged people preparing to receive their temple endowment to study the Book of Moses. The book gives them unique and rich doctrinal perspective for understanding the endowment—the concept of heavenly ascent, the Creation, Fall, Atonement, the purposes of mortality and its trials, ritual prayer, sacrifice, obedience, consecration, priesthood, revelation, building Zion, and preparing to meet God. And, as Welch points out, the Book of Moses also teaches the difference between secular, self-centered marriage and “God-sanctioned, interdependent, child-rearing marriage.” . . .

In the early temples of this dispensation, as a patron moved from the baptistry to each succeeding ordinance, he or she stepped up, literally, to a higher level. . . . This upward pattern could plausibly derive from the Book of Moses, given to Joseph twelve years before he administered the first endowments in Nauvoo. In a clear prologue to the Adam and Eve story, chapter one begins with Moses in God's presence, learning that he is God's son and that God has a work for him to do. Knowing his identity and purpose, he then falls back to the earth, where he must overcome Satan's power before beginning his upward journey of return, calling on God, hearing His voice, seeing His heavenly vision, and regaining His presence.

The same cosmic pattern repeats in Adam and Eve's story of Creation, Fall, overcoming opposition, redemption, and growing into a return to God. Then Enoch, their descendant, experiences and extends the pattern, moving on to lead his entire city back to God's presence. Thus "the temple themes in the Book of Moses extend beyond the . . . story of Adam and Eve" to their culmination in the story of Enoch.¹⁶

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16. Bruce C. Hafen and Marie K. Hafen, "Adam, Eve, the Book of Moses, and the Temple: The Story of Receiving Christ's Atonement," in *Tracing Ancient Threads*, 6, 8–9.