



Type: Journal Article

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Author(s): Robert J. Matthews

Source: *BYU Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 11, No. 4 (1971)

Published by: BYU Studies

Page(s): 400–422

Abstract: This article discusses Joseph Smith's translation of the Bible.



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The "New Translation" of the Bible, 1830-1833: Doctrinal Development During the Kirtland Era

ROBERT J. MATTHEWS*

Before one can recognize the role of the "new translation"¹ of the Bible in the development of doctrine during the Kirtland era of Church history, it is necessary that he first have a historical perspective of the beliefs and practices of the Church at various times since its organization in 1830. In addition, it is necessary that one know *what* the new translation of the Bible is; *why* the Prophet Joseph Smith made the translation; *when* it was made; and *how* it was made. In pursuit of these items this article will attempt to look at the Church in the early 1830s and, so far as it is possible, will trace the introduction of several important doctrinal concepts into the Church during that time. In this context we will discuss the role of new translation of the Bible in the restoration of the gospel in this dispensation.

When speaking of the "development" of the Church doctrine, we do not mean particularly to dwell on an evolutionary phenomena but rather simply to emphasize that all of the doctrines were not revealed at once and that there has been a

*Dr. Matthews is Director of Academic Research for the Department of Seminaries and Institutes. The author of numerous books and articles, he is a recognized authority on Joseph Smith's inspired revision of the Bible.

¹Although not a translation in the usual sense, the Prophet Joseph Smith consistently referred to his work with the Bible as the new translation or simply as the translation. When later published by the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints it was titled: *Holy Scriptures, Inspired Version*, and it is commonly spoken of today as the "Inspired Revision." Since the focus of this article is on the process and purpose of Joseph Smith's work with the Bible in his own day and time and has no reference to the printed editions, the writer has elected to use the terminology used by the Prophet in the 1830s and 1840s.

developmental increase of doctrine from continuing revelation. Such is the message of the ninth Article of Faith which reads:

We believe all that God has revealed, all that He does now reveal, and we believe that He will yet reveal many great and important things pertaining to the Kingdom of God.

It is in the spirit of this principle that we trace the historical relationship that exists between Joseph Smith's new translation of the Bible and the increase of doctrine during the Kirtland period.

THE GOSPEL WAS REVEALED LINE UPON LINE

What did the faithful convert of the Church in 1830-1831 accept as essential "Mormonism"? Was he instructed concerning marriage for time and eternity? Of the three degrees of glory in the resurrection? Was he taught concerning the temple endowment, of baptism for the dead, of patriarchal blessings, or of the word of wisdom? Was he instructed in detail concerning the various offices and quorums in the priesthood from the deacons up through the teachers, priests, elders, seventies, and high priests? Was he taught concerning the quorums of the Presiding Bishopric, the First Council of Seventy, the Patriarch to the Church, the Council of the Twelve, and the First Presidency? To each of these questions the answer must be "no" for the simple reason that these matters had not yet been revealed in this dispensation and were known, if at all, only by the scant mention of some of them in the Bible and the Book of Mormon.²

Again, what did the faithful Latter-day Saint of the early 1830s hold to as the "standard works" of the new dispensation? He had a Bible and a Book of Mormon, but he did not have a book of Doctrine and Covenants or a Pearl of Great Price simply because the contents of these two standard works had for the most part not yet been revealed.

As additional revelations came to the Prophet Joseph Smith, the doctrinal concepts of the gospel as it was to be taught in this dispensation began to be known, and as these revelations were recorded, they became the documentary materials for new

²There is some information in Doctrine and Covenants 20 (April 6, 1830) about the duties of deacons, teachers, priests, and elders, but this revelation does not contain quorum organization.

volumes of scripture. It is on the background from which many of these revelations came that we can now focus our attention to discover what it was that prompted or called forth revelations from heaven on particular subjects. In other words, what was the Prophet doing when he received this or that revelation, and what was it that prompted him to inquire of the Lord about this or that doctrine?

PURPOSE OF THE NEW TRANSLATION

Obtaining the word of the Lord on a subject appears to be partly a matter of asking, of careful study and self-exertion, as well as listening. The Lord explained that divine communication is not to be had merely for the asking without effort, but that one must "study it out in the mind" and then inquire of the Lord. (D&C 9:7-8.) Consistent with this principle we turn to three passages in the Doctrine and Covenants that have a bearing upon the "translation" of the Bible. First, from a revelation to Joseph Smith, Oliver Cowdery, and John Whitmer, dated July 1830 and now identified as Doctrine and Covenants 26:1:

Behold, I say unto you that you shall let your time be devoted to the studying of the scriptures. . . .

Although this passage does not specifically mention the translation of the Bible, it is noteworthy that the manuscripts of the translation dated at this same time (from June to November 1830) are in the handwriting of John Whitmer and Oliver Cowdery, as dictated by the Prophet Joseph, which shows that these three brethren were simultaneously engaged in a study of the scriptures and in making the translation of the Bible.³

A second passage, from Doctrine and Covenants 42:56, is dated February 9, 1831, and reads:

Thou shalt ask, and my scriptures shall be given as I have appointed, and they shall be preserved in safety. (Italics added.)

That this passage has reference to the translation of the Bible seems obvious, since the Book of Mormon was already trans-

³The original manuscripts of the new translation of the Bible are in the custody of The Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints in Independence, Missouri. By the courtesy of that organization the writer has had the opportunity of studying these manuscripts.

lated and published, and the work with the Bible was already underway at the time. The Lord was simply telling the Prophet that he had to ask to start the process of receiving revelation.

A third, and perhaps the most impressive passage is found in Doctrine and Covenants 45:60-61, under the date of March 7, 1831, just twenty-eight days after the previous reference. Until this time the translation had been focused only on the book of Genesis, but now the Prophet was instructed to turn to 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.

Of particular importance in the above passage is the explanation as to *why* the translation was to be done. It was that the Prophet himself would learn by the process. The implication is that Joseph had been asking questions about the gospel, and the Lord's answer was that he would have to translate the New Testament to "know any further" about those things. The promise was that "in it [i.e. in the translation] all these things shall be made known." In the subsequent translation of the Old and New Testaments many revelations were received which contained much information and gave expanded views on the gospel. Some of these revelations are now published as sections in the Doctrine and Covenants and as portions of the Pearl of Great Price.

There are many examples that corroborate the proposal that through the study and translation of the Bible the Prophet would be prompted to ask questions and in turn receive divine inspiration. It was reading James 1:5-6 in 1820 that first prompted Joseph to inquire of the Lord, which resulted in the First Vision.⁴ Reading the Book of Mormon led to an inquiry concerning baptism, which brought John the Baptist to confer the Aaronic Priesthood.⁵ Thus, searching the scriptures and receiving revelation thereunto was a familiar pattern to the Prophet, and it illustrates the wisdom of the Lord in directing him to make a translation of the Bible so that he would fre-

⁴Joseph Smith 2:11-20, Pearl of Great Price.

⁵Ibid. 2:67-72.

quently ask and be the recipient of many new revelatory experiences concerning the doctrines of the gospel.

A CHRONOLOGICAL HISTORY OF THE TRANSLATION

In order to discuss the very fundamental matter of why and how the translation of the Bible was made, we have jumped ahead of the natural sequence of events and passed over many important dates and circumstances relating to the Prophet's work with the Bible. It will be profitable for us to return to the date of June 1830 and follow the progress chronologically through July 2, 1833, which are the first and last dates recorded upon the manuscripts of the new translation. In so doing we will have the opportunity to observe the introduction of several major doctrinal concepts of the restored gospel and to see many direct and indirect relationships between the new translation of the Bible and the development of doctrine during the Kirtland period.

Perhaps the earliest date we can attach to the new translation is June 1830, at which time the revelation called the "visions of Moses" was received. Concerning this revelation the Prophet Joseph wrote:

I will say . . . that amid all the trials and tribulations we had to wade through, the Lord who well knew our infantile and delicate situation, vouchsafed for us a supply of strength and granted us line upon line of knowledge—here a little and there a little, of which the following was a precious morsel.⁶

He then recorded the "visions of Moses," now published as chapter one of the Book of Moses in the Pearl of Great Price. The Prophet does not say what connection this revelation has with the actual translation of the Bible, or whether or not it was received while he was engaged in the translation. It may have immediately preceded the translation. However, it is included as part of the original manuscripts of the translation which suggests that the Prophet recognized a connection between it and them. The earliest manuscript copy available is in the handwriting of John Whitmer, who, as we have already observed, was studying the scriptures at this time with Joseph and

⁶Joseph Smith, *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B.H. Roberts (2d ed. rev.; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1957), Vol. 1, p. 98 (commonly called *Documentary History of the Church*; hereafter referred to as *DHC*).

Oliver. Of special note in this revelation is the declaration that many things had been taken out of the book which Moses had written, but that the Lord would raise up another like unto Moses, and those things which had been removed would be had again among those who believe. (See Moses 1:40-41.) It may well have been at this time (June 1830) that the Lord instructed the Prophet to begin a translation of the Old Testament.

The next date is July 1830 in which a commandment was given to Joseph Smith, Oliver Cowdery, and John Whitmer to let their time be devoted to the studying of the scriptures. This is Doctrine and Covenants 26:1, as referred to earlier.

The next dates of importance are October 21, 1830, November 30, 1830, and December 1, 1830. These three dates appear on the manuscript for the early parts of Genesis up through about Genesis chapter five.

Also, under the general heading of December 1830 the Prophet recorded in his journal:

It may be well to observe here, that the Lord greatly encouraged and strengthened the faith of His little flock, which had embraced the fulness of the everlasting Gospel, as revealed to them in the Book of Mormon, by giving some more extended information upon the Scriptures, *a translation of which had already commenced.*

. . . To the joy of the little flock . . . did the Lord reveal the following doings of olden times, from the Prophecy of Enoch. (*Italics added.*)⁷

The Prophet then added the prophecy of Enoch which corresponds to the seventh chapter of Moses in the Pearl of Great Price. The exact date is not certain, but the manuscripts of the new translation suggest a date *early* in December for this entry, since material translated just previous to this is dated December 1 as noted above.

In the meantime, Oliver Cowdery, Parley P. Pratt, and others had been called on a mission to the wilderness "among the Lamanites." (D&C 32.) While traveling in Ohio in November on the first segment of the journey, the missionaries converted Sidney Rigdon, a former acquaintance of Brother Pratt. Rigdon thereupon left Ohio and traveled back to Fayette, New York, to see the Prophet, arriving on December 11, 1830. He asked the Prophet to inquire of the Lord as to what he

⁷DHC 1:131-133.

(Sidney Rigdon) should do as a member of the Church. The reply as recorded in Doctrine and Covenants 35 states that the Lord had had his eye on Sidney for some time and that he had been prepared for "great things." Verses 18 and 20 are of particular interest to us.

And I have given unto him [Joseph Smith] the keys of the mystery of those things which have been sealed, even things which are from the foundation of the world, and the things which shall come from this time until the time of my coming. . . .

And a commandment I give unto thee [Sidney]—that thou shalt write for him; and the scriptures shall be given, even as they are in mine own bosom, . . .

The declaration that the Prophet held keys to the knowledge of things from the foundation of the world, and also of things that were yet to come, enhances his position as one who could by revelation understand and translate the Bible. Sidney is specifically told that he is to serve as scribe to write the new scriptures that would be given.

Until Sidney Rigdon was appointed as scribe, John Whitmer, Oliver Cowdery, and Emma Smith had served as scribes to Joseph. But Oliver was now away on a mission, and John Whitmer was about to be called on one. The earlier manuscripts of the translation show the handwriting of Whitmer, Cowdery, and Emma. However, with the appointment of Rigdon to write for the Prophet, the material of the early manuscripts (which extended at least through the first seven chapters of Genesis) were further revised by the Prophet and rewritten in the handwriting of Sidney Rigdon. Thus, the final rendition of these materials of Genesis date from late December 1830.⁸

The next significant date is still later in December 1830 at which time Joseph is instructed to cease his labors of translating and move to Ohio. (D&C 37:1.) The move was not to be made in haste, but Joseph was first to take care of the business of the Church in the Colesville, New York area.

Early in January 1831 John Whitmer was sent on a mission to Ohio, and he took with him a copy of the revelations which Joseph had lately received. That these materials included parts

⁸Since Sidney arrived in Fayette on December 11, 1830, the final revision and rewriting of the early chapters of Genesis would have to be sometime in the month after that date.

from the new translation is seen from the following quotation from the *Painesville Telegraph* of January 18, 1831:

A young gentleman by the name of Whitmer arrived here last week from Manchester, New York, the seat of wonders, with a new batch of revelations from God, as he pretended, which have just been communicated to Joseph Smith. As far as we have been able to learn their contents, they are a more particular description of the creation of the world, and a history of Adam and his family, and other sketches of the antediluvian world, which Moses neglected to record⁹

By February 4, 1831, Joseph had moved to Ohio, and the following instruction was received at Kirtland for the benefit of the Church located there:

And again, it is meet that my servant Joseph Smith, Jun., should have a house built, in which to live and translate. (D&C 41:7.)

Since the Book of Mormon had already been published a year earlier, and the Book of Abraham would not be known for four years, this passage can have reference only to the translation of the Bible. Although the Prophet had been instructed late in December to put aside the work of translating the Bible while he moved to Ohio (D&C 37:1), this revelation dated early in February indicated that the translation was to be taken up again.

Five days later, on February 9, 1831, the following instruction was received as recorded in Doctrine and Covenants 42:56-58:

Thou shalt ask, and my scriptures shall be given as I have appointed, and they shall be preserved in safety. (Italics added.)

More revelation concerning the scriptures was to be received, but the procedure was to *ask*. This key to procedure is no doubt a major reason why the Prophet was required to make the translation of the Bible. In the process of reading the scriptures and inquiring, a favorable mental and spiritual climate would be created, doctrinal and historical questions would arise, the Prophet would ask, and revelation would be received. The labor would produce its own reward. This con-

⁹The excerpt was copied from the original paper by Francis W. Kirkham and published in his *A New Witness for Christ in America* (Salt Lake City: Utah Printing Company, 1960), p. 436.

cept is supported by further instructions about four weeks later when on March 7, 1831, additional instructions were given about the purpose of the translation and the procedure to be followed.

This brings us back again to the important passage of Doctrine and Covenants 45:60-61 which we quoted earlier, but repeat here for emphasis:

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.

Just what "chapter" is referred to is not known, but the Prophet was to proceed with the translation so that many things of great import *could* be made known; first to him, and through him to the Church.

The above communication illustrates an important fact referred to previously; that at least one purpose of the translation was for the education of the Prophet himself. Notwithstanding that he held the keys to the mysteries, that he was tutored by angels, and that he had the guidance of the Holy Ghost, it was necessary for him to make an effort in the work in order to gain the knowledge. By the process of translation many things were to be known to the Prophet. It was apparently through this means that the gifts and keys that he held would operate in bringing him to the greater knowledge. In light of this view of the translation, it is a mistake to assume that he translated the Bible solely by information he had previously obtained.

The original manuscript shows that the brethren began work on the New Testament on March 8, 1831, the very day after receiving the foregoing instruction. The title of that page of the manuscript is indicative of the attitude that Joseph and Sidney had about the work they were doing: "A Translation of the New Testament translated by the power of God."

Although the translation of the New Testament was begun on March 8, 1831, the dating on the original manuscripts suggests that they had also continued to work with the Old Testament until April 5, 1831, at which time the translation of the Old Testament had reached Genesis 24:42. A note placed at

the end of Genesis 24:42 in the manuscript reads: "April 5, 1831—transcribed thus far." Thus it appears that for about three weeks (March 8 until April 5) both Genesis and Matthew were being translated. Since the primary emphasis was on the New Testament during this period of time, it is likely that what the notation really means is that the translation of Genesis was being discontinued at this point in favor of devoting more time to the New Testament.

From the foregoing we may conclude that Genesis 1:1 through 24:42 had been translated and recorded between June 1830 and April 5, 1831. Therefore all of the doctrinal information that is found in those chapters was made known to the Prophet at least by the latter date. It is not possible to include a complete list of the doctrinal concepts and contributions that are found in the translation of these chapters of Genesis in the limits of this short article; but such a survey would include revelations and statements about the creation of the world, about pre-mortal existence, about Adam and the early patriarchs, the revelation of the plan of salvation to Adam, the account of Cain as Master Mahan, the preaching of Enoch, the preaching of Noah, the preaching of Melchizedek, and much information about Abraham, all of which is not found in the King James Version or in any other scripture.

AGE OF ACCOUNTABILITY REVEALED

Of particular importance is a comment in the translation of Genesis 17:11 (printed edition, Inspired Version) in which it is stated that children become accountable to the Lord when they are eight years of age. The age of accountability is a basic principle of the gospel and one of the distinctive features of Mormonism and is about as familiar to members as any principle or practice in the Church. Perhaps no principle or practice is more faithfully observed in the Church than that of parents having their children baptized at the age of eight years, because they believe that is when children begin to be accountable. But we would ask when was it revealed to the Prophet Joseph that little children begin to be accountable at the age of eight? The Book of Mormon emphatically declares that children are innocent and do not need baptism, but it does not tell at what age baptism should be administered. The matter is clearly stated in the Doctrine and Covenants 68:25-27, and it is to this source

that we generally turn for instruction on the matter. However, Section 68 is dated November 1831, while the dates on the manuscript of Genesis show that the Prophet was aware of the doctrine sometime before April 5, 1831, which was more than eight months earlier than Section 68. It appears from these facts that the eight-year-old age of accountability was revealed to the Prophet Joseph while he was translating Genesis 17 sometime between December 1, 1830 (when he was working with chapter 5), and April 5, 1831 (when he had reached Genesis 24). This is important historically, and adds dignity and worth to the role of the translation of the Bible in the restoration of the gospel in this dispensation. It is therefore a major point in the purpose of this article, which is to discuss the place of the translation of the Bible in the development of Church doctrine during the Kirtland era.

OTHER DOCTRINAL REVELATIONS ASSOCIATED WITH THE TRANSLATION

On December 1, 1831, the Prophet recorded the following in his journal:

I resumed the translation of the Scriptures, *and continued to labor in this branch of my calling* with Elder Sidney Rigdon as my scribe. (Italics added.)¹⁰

This important passage reiterates the Prophet's conviction that his work of translating the Bible was not a self-appointed venture, but was part of his divine calling. Soon thereafter Joseph and Sidney were instructed by the Lord to go forth and preach "expounding the mysteries thereof out of the scriptures" for a season until instructed otherwise. (D&C 71:1.) Obedient to this command, they continued to travel and to preach in the area until January 10, 1832, when the following, now designated as Doctrine and Covenants 73:3-4, was received:

Now, verily I say unto you my servants, Joseph Smith, Jun., and Sidney Rigdon, saith the Lord, it is expedient to translate again;

And, inasmuch as it is practicable, to preach in the regions round about until conference; and after that it is expedient to continue the work of translation until it be finished.

¹⁰DHC 1:238-9.

The next entry in the Prophet's journal states:

Upon the reception of the foregoing word of the Lord [on January 10], I recommenced the translation of the Scriptures, and labored diligently until just before the [Amherst, Ohio] conference, which was to convene on the 25th of January.¹¹

The Prophet generally did not indicate the exact passages of the Bible on which he was working, but on this occasion he wrote:

During the period [between January 10-25, 1832], I also received the following, as an explanation of the First Epistle to the Corinthians, 7th chapter, 14th verse:¹²

He then recorded the revelation now identified as Doctrine and Covenants 74, which is the first complete section in the Doctrine and Covenants that was obtained as a result of his work in translating the Bible.

The work of translation was again laid aside in order to hold the conference at Amherst, Ohio, late in January. After the conference, Joseph returned to Hiram, near Kirtland, to the home of John Johnson, where he had been living for some time, and shortly thereafter, made the following entry in his journal:

Upon my return from Amherst conference, I resumed the translation of the Scriptures. From sundry revelations which had been received, it was apparent that many important points touching the salvation of man, had been taken from the Bible, or lost before it was compiled. It appeared self-evident from what truths were left, that if God rewarded every one according to the deeds done in the body the term "Heaven," as intended for the Saints' eternal home must include more kingdoms than one. *Accordingly, on the 16th of February, 1832, while translating St. John's Gospel, myself and Elder Rigdon saw the following vision: (Italics added.)*¹³

The Prophet then recorded the revelation now identified as Doctrine and Covenants 76, which is the second complete section of the Doctrine and Covenants received as a result of translating the Bible. Thus as a result of translating the Bible on the above date, he received not only one of the greatest revelations contained in the Doctrine and Covenants but one of the greatest revelations ever received by mortal man.

¹¹DHC 1:242.

¹²DHC 1:242.

¹³DHC 1:245.

The above journal entry is extremely informative because it is another instance wherein the precise date is known on which the Prophet was laboring on a particular passage, and a particular doctrinal subject is revealed.

The revelation itself contains an informative comment about the work of translation and leaves no doubt as to how the two brethren felt about their calling. In verses 15 to 18, it is affirmed that Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon were appointed by the Lord to make the translation and that the work was done by the Spirit:

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*. (Italics added.)

Two weeks later, the Prophet entered the following note in his journal:

About the first of March [1832], in connection with the translation of the Scriptures, I received the following explanation of the Revelation of Saint John: (D&C 77.)¹⁴

The “explanation” referred to is now published as Doctrine and Covenants Section 77, and is the third complete section of that volume that was given to the Prophet as a direct result of the translation of the Bible. This revelation contains some extremely interesting information about spirits, angels, the earth, and the creation of man.

Later in March 1832, the Prophet wrote:

Besides the work of translating, previous to the 20th of March I received the following four revelations:¹⁵

He then recorded sections 78 through 81 of the Doctrine and Covenants. Whether or not these revelations are associated

¹⁴DHC 1:253.

¹⁵DHC 1:255.

with the translation of the Bible we do not know. Their content is not particularly doctrinal, and there may not be a direct relationship, since they deal more particularly with regulatory affairs of the Church.

On April 1, 1832, the Prophet began a journey from Kirtland, Ohio, to Independence, Missouri, during which time he did not continue with the translation. On May 6, 1832, he left Independence in company with Newel K. Whitney and Sidney Rigdon, intending to return immediately to Kirtland. However, due to an accident in which Brother Whitney sustained a broken leg and foot, the Prophet did not arrive at Kirtland until some time in June.¹⁶ Shortly after his return to Kirtland, he wrote:

As soon as I could arrange my affairs, I recommenced the translation of the Scriptures and thus I spent most of the summer.¹⁷

During the summer and fall of 1832 in Kirtland several revelations on doctrine were received. We do not have categorical evidence that these came as a direct result of the translation of the Bible, but it seems likely that there is some relationship. On the basis of the revelations for which there are direct ties, which are all doctrinal, it follows that other doctrinal revelations might have the same background if received at a time when the translation was in progress. On this basis Section 84 of the Doctrine and Covenants might be related to the translation, since it contains information about the ancient patriarchs, priesthood, baptism and related doctrinal items. This revelation was received on September 22 and 23, 1832.

Following the reception of the revelation now known as Doctrine and Covenants 84, the Prophet's next journal entry states:

I continued the translation of the Bible and ministering to the Church, through the Fall.¹⁸

As the Prophet continued translating into the winter of 1832, he wrote:

On the 6th of December, 1832, I received the following revelation explaining the parable of the wheat and tares:¹⁹

¹⁶*DHC* 1:271-272.

¹⁷*DHC* 1:273.

¹⁸*DHC* 1:295.

¹⁹*DHC* 1:300.

Then follows the revelation now known as Doctrine and Covenants 86. Though there is not a direct statement to the effect, the same reasoning that links Section 84 to the translation of the Bible could be applied to Section 86. We know that the translation was being made at this time, and it is possible that sections 84, 86, and also 88 of the Doctrine and Covenants came as a direct result of the translation, since the time element and the subject matter are harmonious to this conclusion.

The relationship between these sections and the translation of the Bible may be direct or it may be indirect, but there is strong probability that a relationship does exist. Sometime after December 6, 1832, and before February 2, 1833, the Prophet recorded in his journal:

This winter was spent in translating the Scriptures; in the School of the Prophets; and sitting in conferences. I had many glorious seasons of refreshing.²⁰

Then on February 2, 1833, at Kirtland, Ohio, the Prophet wrote the following in his journal:

I completed the translation and review of the New Testament, on the 2nd of February, 1833, and sealed it up, no more to be opened till it arrived in Zion.²¹

Having thus "completed" the New Testament, the Prophet then returned to the translation of the Old Testament, as indicated in the following excerpt from Doctrine and Covenants 90:13, dated March 8, 1833:

And when you have finished the translation of the prophets, you shall thenceforth preside over the affairs of the school.

The language suggests that the work with the books of the Old Testament, called the "prophets" was already in progress, and perhaps nearly finished, for on the next day, March 9, 1833, the Prophet wrote:

Having come to that portion of the ancient writings called the Apocrypha, I received the following.²²

He then recorded Doctrine and Covenants 91 which is the

²⁰DHC 1:322.

²¹DHC 1:324.

²²DHC 1:331.

fourth complete section of the Doctrine and Covenants that is definitely known to have been received in direct consequence of the Prophet's work of translating the Bible.

A few weeks later, on May 6, 1833, the following instruction, now identified as Doctrine and Covenants 93:53 was received:

And verily I say unto you, that it is my will that you should hasten to translate my scriptures.

On the same day the Prophet also received a revelation concerning printing the translation of the Bible. This information is now published as Doctrine and Covenants 94:10. The subject of printing the translation was later mentioned in Doctrine and Covenants 104:58 and also in 124:89-90.

In an "Epistle of the First Presidency to the Saints Scattered Abroad" on or near the date of August 31, 1840, an appeal was made to the membership of the Church to contribute funds to be used in building up the kingdom. Of special interest is the following paragraph near the close of the Epistle:

Connected with the building up of the Kingdom, is the printing and circulation of the Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, hymnbook, *and the new translation of the scriptures*. It is unnecessary to say anything respecting these works; those who have read them, and who have drunk of the stream of knowledge which they convey, know how to appreciate them; and although fools may have them in derision, yet they are calculated to make men wise unto salvation, and sweep away the cobwebs of superstition of ages, throw a light on the proceedings of Jehovah which have already been accomplished, and mark out the future in all its dreadful and glorious realities. Those who have tasted the benefit derived from a study of those works, will undoubtedly vie with each other in their zeal for sending them abroad throughout the world, that every son of Adam may enjoy the same privileges, and rejoice in the same truths. (Italics added.)²³

During the years between 1833 and 1844 several letters of the Prophet and other official Church documents mentioned the need for money to publish the translation of the Bible. Notable among these are a Memorial of Joseph Smith, Jr., to the High Council, on June 18, 1840;²⁴ a notice in the *Times and Seasons*

²³DHC 4:187.

²⁴DHC 4:136-137.

for Wednesday, January 12, 1842;²⁵ and an epistle of the Twelve, March 1, 1843.²⁶

Some portions of what is now the Book of Moses, taken from the early chapters of Genesis, were published in Church periodicals in the lifetime of the Prophet.²⁷ At least two undated printed "broadsides" of Matthew chapter 24 were issued "for the benefit of the saints."²⁸ It is believed that these were printed in Ohio in the middle 1830s.²⁹ Whether or not the broadsides were official Church publications is not known. Neither is it known who authorized their printings.

REVELATION ON MARRIAGE

The revelation on celestial marriage and plurality of wives was recorded on July 12, 1843, and is known today as Doctrine and Covenants Section 132. However, there is a strong probability that this document is related to the translation of the Bible—an assertion supported by historical evidence and also by doctrinal affinity. Although the document is dated July 12, 1843, in Nauvoo, Illinois, it is believed that the information contained therein was made known to the Prophet as early as 1831 and that the 1843 date signifies only the day on which it was committed to writing in its present form. For example, the record begins with the statement:

Verily, thus saith the Lord unto you my servant Joseph, that inasmuch as you have inquired of my hand to know and understand wherein I, the Lord, justified my servants Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob . . . as touching the principle and doctrine of their having many wives and concubines . . .
(D&C 132:1.)

It is likely that the question regarding the plurality of wives of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob could have arisen during the translation of the book of Genesis, which took place in 1830 and

²⁵DHC 4:493.

²⁶DHC 4:293.

²⁷*Evening and Morning Star* 1, No. 3 (August 1832), "Extract from the Prophecy of Enoch"; 1, No. 10 (March 1833), "A Revelation of the Gospel to Adam"; 1, No. 11 (April 1833), "History of Noah," and "Revelation to Moses of the Heaven and the Earth." *Times and Seasons* 4 (January 1844), 71-73, "A Revelation to Joseph Smith, Jr. given June 1830."

²⁸Original copies are located in the Special Collections room of the Clark Library at Brigham Young University.

²⁹See Reed C. Durham, "A History of Joseph Smith's Revision of the Bible" (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, 1965), pp. 83-96, for a discussion of the printing of these broadsides.

1831. The following excerpt from the writings of Brigham H. Roberts supports this view:

There is indisputable evidence that the revelation making known this marriage law was given to the Prophet as early as 1831. In that year, and then intermittently up to 1833, the Prophet was engaged in a revision of the English Bible text under the inspiration of God, Sidney Rigdon in the main acting as his scribe. As he began his revision with the Old Testament, he would be dealing with the age of the Patriarchs in 1831. He was doubtless struck with the favor in which the Lord held the several Bible Patriarchs of that period, notwithstanding they had a plurality of wives. What more natural than that he should inquire of the Lord at that time, when his mind must have been impressed with the fact—Why, O Lord, didst Thou justify Thy servants, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; as also Moses, David, and Solomon, in the matter of their having many wives and concubines (see opening paragraph of the revelation)? In answer to that inquiry came the revelation, though not then committed to writing.³⁰

Direct testimony of the early dating of the revelation on marriage comes from Orson Pratt and Joseph F. Smith. These two brethren attended a meeting of the Reorganized Church in Plano, Illinois, in 1878, while on a visit to the East, and Elder Pratt was invited to speak. An extract from the report of his remarks is as follows:

Elder Pratt . . . explained the circumstances connected with the coming forth of the revelation on plural marriage. Refuted the statement and belief of those present that Brigham Young was the author of the revelation; [and] showed that Joseph Smith the Prophet had not only commenced the practice of that principle himself, and taught it to others, before President Young and The Twelve had returned from their mission in Europe, in 1841, but that Joseph actually received revelations upon that principle as early as 1831. Said "Lyman Johnson, who was very familiar with Joseph at this early date, . . . told me himself that Joseph had made known to him as early as 1831, that plural marriage was a correct principle. Joseph declared to Lyman that God had revealed it to him, but that the time had not come to teach or practice it in the Church, but that the time would come."³¹

If the document on marriage is associated with the translation of the Bible, then it constitutes still another revelation to

³⁰DHC 5: 29-30.

³¹Signed report of Orson Pratt and Joseph F. Smith, *Millennial Star*, 15, No. 50 (Liverpool, England, December 9, 1878), 788.

add to the list of sections in the Doctrine and Covenants that have a common background in the translation of the Bible.

OTHER POSSIBLE RELATIONSHIPS TO THE TRANSLATION

At some time, the exact date or dates being unspecified, the Prophet received intelligence relative to the correct order of organizing and conducting councils in the Church, including the manner in which councils were conducted anciently. In referring to this subject at a conference in Hiram, Ohio, on October 11, 1831, Joseph said:

. . . . the Elders were instructed in the ancient manner of conducting meetings, of which knowledge most of them were ignorant.³²

To a council of high priests and elders in Kirtland on February 12, 1834, the Prophet gave further instructions concerning ancient councils, saying that he had never before set forth "all the order in which it [a council] ought to be conducted." He then proceeded to explain the order of ancient councils, and the manner in which they were conducted.³³

The Prophet does not specify the circumstances or the dates when these things were communicated to him, but it is possible that they came as part of the accumulation of knowledge and spiritual experience that came to him in connection with the work of translating the Bible.

That his work with the Bible sometimes brought the Prophet into visionary experiences is evident from the fact already noted that the vision of the degrees of glory was received in connection with the translation of the fifth chapter of John. Hence, it is possible that other visions were also given to the Prophet while he was engaged in the translation. He reported that he "saw Adam in the valley of Adam-ondi-Ahman," and that Adam called his children together to bless them.³⁴ He likewise spoke of Adam presiding at a council of high priests.³⁵ Whether

³²DHC 1:219.

³³DHC 2:25-26.

³⁴DHC 3:388.

³⁵D&C 107:53-57. This same information is contained in a blessing given by the Prophet to his father on December 18, 1833, more than a year before it appears in Section 107, thereby showing that the Prophet had the information earlier than the date of writing Section 107, which was February 1835. See Joseph Fielding Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1938), pp. 38-39.

the Prophet first learned of these things in connection with the translation of the Bible is not known, but it seems possible.

It is well to note again that the purpose of the translation of the Bible was the spiritual education of the Prophet himself, and that in the process many things were revealed to him which before were not known.

Although a categorical statement by the Prophet connecting the revelation about ancient councils to the translation of the Bible is not available, the possibility of such a relationship is strengthened by virtue of the fact that many doctrines and principles were received in that connection, and it is reasonable to expect that this should be the case with this subject also. Such an assumption, if correct, further suggests a relationship between the translation of the Bible and the revelation on priesthood known as Doctrine and Covenants Section 107. The subject matter of Section 107, concerning Adam, the ancient patriarchs, a council at Adam-ondi-Ahman, latter-day councils, and priesthood quorums seems entirely consistent with the above hypothesis. That the pattern of councils and Church organizations was shown to the Prophet by vision is claimed in Doctrine and Covenants 107:93, wherein it is said that the order of the Seventy (and presumably the other quorums also) was "according to the vision." Likewise Parley P. Pratt quoted the Prophet as saying to the Twelve:

. . . I have now finished the work which was laid upon me, by committing to you all things for the building up of the kingdom *according to the heavenly vision*, and the pattern shown me from heaven. (Italics added.)³⁶

Although Section 107 was not recorded until March 28, 1835, it is certain from the translation of the early chapters of Genesis in 1830 and also from the Prophet's instructions to the elders in 1831 about ancient councils that he knew much about these things as early as 1831. It is probable that much of the information about priesthood had been revealed to the Prophet earlier than the formal writing of Section 107 in 1835, and if so, the logical connection would be with the translation of the Bible. The same relationship respecting councils might also pertain to the organization of the "high council" described in Doctrine and Covenants 102.

³⁶Statement by Parley P. Pratt in New York, January 1, 1845, and printed in the *Millennial Star*, 5, No. 10 (March, 1845), 151.

Thus the knowledge of the gospel possessed by the Prophet and extended to the Saints in 1833 was considerably increased over that which they had in 1830. Line upon line, here and there a little, and particularly as a result of the Prophet's labors in "translating" the Bible, the doctrines of the gospel were steadily revealed. The real *purpose* of the Bible translation was not so much to have a new corrected edition of the Bible, but rather, to bring the Prophet to a greater understanding of the gospel. Consequently, the real *product* is not so much a new Bible itself, but the doctrines that were revealed in the process. Consequently, the Prophet's work with the Bible is an indispensable element in the unfolding of the gospel and the building of the dispensation of the fulness of times—much of which occurred while the Prophet lived in the vicinity of Kirtland, Ohio.

The Prophet worked on the Bible translation primarily between June 1830 and July 1833. This is also the same period of time during which most of the doctrinal revelations now published in the Doctrine and Covenants were received. This is not *coincidence*, but rather it is *consequence*. This was a time of learning and of revelation in which the fundamental doctrines of the restored gospel were being revealed to the Prophet, and the translation of the Bible was the principle vehicle, the mode, the method, etc., by which the gospel was restored during these years.

There had been a previous period of great doctrinal revelation when the Prophet had translated the Book of Mormon, and subsequently there would be another period of great doctrinal advancement when he later would work with the Book of Abraham. The Book of Mormon was in the New York period, the translation of the Bible in the early Kirtland period, and the Book of Abraham came in the later Kirtland and early Nauvoo periods. In each case there was a major surge of doctrinal revelation associated with the translation of tangible documents.

SUMMARY

In summary of the principal items discussed in this article we recall the following:

1. The Prophet attached great importance to his divine commission to make a translation of the Bible.

Among other things, he stated that the work of Bible translation "was a branch of his calling" and that he and Sidney "were doing the work of translation, which the Lord had appointed" unto them. Frequently the Lord instructed the Prophet to set the work aside temporarily because of the press of other business, and later to take it up again. Each directive to the Prophet to resume the work was in effect a renewal of the divine commission.

2. The Prophet's background was rich in spiritual experiences preparatory to the work of the translation of the Bible.
3. A major purpose of the translation was the spiritual education of the Prophet, and through him, the education of the Church.
4. There is a close historical relationship between the translation of the Bible and much of the material contained in the Doctrine and Covenants, and it is obvious that the history of the Doctrine and Covenants and the history of the translation of the Bible are closely intertwined. In the revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants frequent mention is made of the translation of the Bible, and several entire sections of the Doctrine and Covenants were received as a direct consequence of the translation.

Individual passages in the Doctrine and Covenants that have reference to the translation of the Bible must include at least the following:

35:18-20	90:13
37:1	93:53
41:7	94:10
42:56-61	104:58
45:60-61	124:89
73:3-4	

Entire sections in the Doctrine and Covenants for which there is direct relationship to the translation of the Bible are as follows:

74	77
76	91

In addition, the following sections of the Doctrine and

Covenants are probably directly related to the Bible translation:

84	102
86	107
88	113
93	132

5. The translation of the Bible contributed the Book of Moses and the 24th chapter of Matthew to the Pearl of Great Price.
6. The translation of the Bible had a significant role in the history of the Church.

The fact that the Prophet made a translation of the Bible is a matter of record. That it was a substantial work is certified to by its sizable contributions to the Doctrine and Covenants and the Pearl of Great Price, two of the standard works of the Church. It is also a topic of frequent mention in the Prophet's journal and in the official *History of the Church*. It occupied much of the Prophet's time for a period of three years (1830-1833) and was included in the subjects of several epistles of the leading councils of the Church.

7. The translation of the Bible contributed to the doctrine of the Church developed during the Kirtland era.

As previously noted, the translation of the Bible contributed much to the content of the Doctrine and Covenants and to the Pearl of Great Price, two of the standard works giving the doctrine, faith, and practice of the Church. Much concerning pre-earth life, the degrees of glory in the resurrection, much information concerning Adam, Enoch, and the ancient patriarchs, of Cain, of the work of Satan, views of the Church respecting the Apocrypha, an explanation of the Revelation of John, the age of accountability, and probably also the doctrine of the eternal marriage covenant are associated directly with the translation of the Bible.

The major part of the translation was done intermittently during a period of approximately three years from June 1830 to July 2, 1833, during which time most of the major doctrinal revelations now published in the Doctrine and Covenants were received as a consequence.