



Type: Magazine Article

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

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Source: *Improvement Era*, Vol. 9, No. 6 (April 1906)

Published by: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints P

age(s): 425-436

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

IMPROVEMENT ERA.

VOL. IX.

APRIL, 1906.

No. 6.

TRANSLATION OF THE BOOK OF MORMON.

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

BY B. H. ROBERTS.

I.

A number of questions, from their correspondents, have been submitted to the writer, by the editors of the ERA, respecting the Senior Manual for 1905-6.

One of the correspondents calls attention to the fact that on page 464 of the Manual, Solomon Spaulding is said to be a man of—to quote the words of the correspondent—“considerable learning and experience; he was even a graduate of Dartmouth College, and had the honor of carrying with him the degree, A. B.” While on page 476, of the Manual, his *Manuscript Found* is described as full of errors of grammar, orthography, etc.

The correspondent should read the Manual more carefully. He would then see that the author himself does not say that Spaulding was a graduate of Dartmouth, but merely remarks that

it was reported that Spaulding was a graduate from that institution. The author of the Manual does not believe that Spaulding was a graduate of Dartmouth, or any other college, the best evidence being furnished by *Manuscript Found* that he was not an educated man; but it was claimed by his surviving relatives and friends, when connecting him with the origin of the Book of Mormon, that he was a graduate of Dartmouth, and their reputation of him is merely recorded.

The other questions relate to the manner of translating the Nephite record. In one communication, a president of an association, an aid in a M. I. A. Stake Board, and a bishop's counselor, join in saying:

We are not able to harmonize the theory of translation presented in our Manual with the testimony of the Three Witnesses, especially Harris and Whitmer. We are not able either to harmonize the theory of the Manual with the following passages of scripture regarding the interpreters: Ether 3: 22-25; Mosiah 8: 13-18; Mosiah 28: 11-15; Doctrine and Covenants, Section 130: 8-10.

To answer the matter set forth in the above quotation, it is necessary to ask: What is the Manual theory of translating the Nephite record? It is a theory based upon the only statement made by the Prophet Joseph Smith on the subject; *viz.*, "Through the medium of Urim and Thummim I translated the record by the gift and power of God;"* and the Lord's own description of the manner of translating in general by means of Urim and Thummim, contained in his revelation to Oliver Cowdery in the Doctrine and Covenants, sections viii and ix.

That is the only theory the Manual has upon the subject. The foregoing quotation from the prophet is all he has said with reference to the manner of the translation, and we could wish that all other persons, necessarily less informed upon the subject than the prophet himself, had been content to leave the matter where he left it. In this, however, they did not follow his wise example; but must needs undertake to describe the manner of the translation; and from such description has arisen the idea that the Urim and Thummim did all, in the work of the translation, the prophet,

* Wentworth's letter, *Millennial Star*, vol. 9, page 118.

nothing; except to read to his amanuensis what he saw reflected in the seer-stone or Urim and Thummim, which the instruments, and not the prophet, had translated. The men responsible for those statements, on which said theory rests, are David Whitmer and Martin Harris. The former says:

A piece of something resembling parchment did appear, (*i. e.*, in Urim and Thummim), and on that appeared the writing, one character at a time would appear, and under it was the translation in English. Brother Joseph would read off the English to Brother Oliver Cowdery, who was his principal scribe, and then it was written down and repeated to Brother Joseph to see if it was correct; then it would disappear and another character with the translation would appear. Thus the Book of Mormon was translated by the gift and power of God, and not by any power of man.*

We have no statement at first hand from Martin Harris at all, only the statement of another, Edward Stevenson, as to what he heard Martin Harris say was the manner of translation. This was as follows:

By aid of the seer stone, sentences would appear, and were read by the prophet, and written by Martin, and when finished he would say "written," and if correctly written that sentence would disappear, and another appear in its place; but if not written correctly, it remained until corrected so that the translation was just as it was engraven on the plates precisely in the language then used.†

These statements have led to the assumption of the theory, I repeat, that the Urim and Thummim did the translating, not Joseph the Seer. Accordingly, it is held that the translation was a mechanical, arbitrary, transliteration; a word for word bringing over from the Nephite language into the English language, a literal interpretation of the record. The prophet, therefore, it is urged, was in no way responsible for the language of the translation, it was not his, but the divine instrument's, and if there are errors of grammar, or faults of diction, (modern words for which in the nature of things there could be no exact equivalents in an ancient language) New England localisms, modern phrases from the English translation of Hebrew scripture, and other sources—all these must have been in the original Nephite record, say the advocates

* *Address to all Believers in Christ*, by David Whitmer, page 12.

† *Millennial Star*, vol. 24, page 86-87.

of this theory, and are arbitrarily brought over into the English language.

This theory of translation led opponents of the Book of Mormon—and some who were not opponents of it, but sincere investigators of its claims—to suggest certain difficulties involved in such a theory of translation.

First. The impossibility of such a thing as a word-for-word bringing over from one language into another. Such a procedure could only result in producing an unintelligible jargon—a fact well known by those who are at all acquainted with translation.

Second. The fact that the language of the English translation of the Nephite record is in the English idiom, and diction of the period and locality when and where the translation took place, and is evidently but little influenced by any attempt to follow the idiom of an ancient language.

Third. The fact that such errors in grammar and diction as occur in the translation are just such errors as might reasonably be looked for in the work of one unlearned in the English language.

From this data the following argument proceeds: It is impossible that the alleged translation, whether by divine or human media, could be a word-for-word bringing over from the Nephite language into the English; and if the translation is not such a word-for-word bringing over affair, then it cannot be claimed that the Nephite original is responsible for verbal inaccuracies and grammatical errors. If the Book of Mormon is a real translation instead of a word-for-word bringing over from one language into another, and it is insisted that the divine instrument, Urim and Thummim, did all, and the prophet nothing—at least nothing more than to read off the translation made by Urim and Thummim—then the divine instrument is responsible for such errors in grammar and diction as occur. But this is to assign responsibility for errors in language to a divine instrumentality, which amounts to assigning such errors to God. But that is unthinkable, not to say blasphemous. Also, if it be contended that the language of the Book of Mormon, word for word, and letter for letter, was given to the prophet by direct inspiration of God, acting upon his mind,

then again God is made responsible for the language errors in the Book of Mormon—a thing unthinkable.

Rather than ascribe these errors to Deity, either through direct or indirect means, men will reject the claims of the Book of Mormon; and, since the verbal errors in the Book of Mormon are such as one ignorant of the English language would make, the temptation is strong, in the minds of those not yet converted to its truth, to assign to the Book of Mormon an altogether human origin.

In the presence of these considerations, it is but natural to ask, "Is there no way by which such a conclusion may be avoided?" Most assuredly. Set aside the theory based upon the statements made by David Whitmer and Martin Harris, (mark you, *I say the theory* based on these statements, not necessarily the statements themselves) and accept the more reasonable theory based upon what the Lord has said upon the subject, in sections viii and ix of the Doctrine and Covenants, where, in describing how Oliver Cowdery might translate by means of Urim and Thummim, the Lord said:

I will tell you in your mind and in your heart, by the Holy Ghost which shall come upon you, and it shall dwell in your heart.

Then, Oliver only having partially succeeded, and that to a very limited extent, in his effort to translate, the Lord, in explaining his failure, said,

Behold, you have not understood; you have supposed that I would give it [*i. e.*, the power to translate] unto you, when you took no thought, save it was to ask me; but, behold, I say unto you, that you must study it out in your mind; then you must ask me if it be right, and if it is right I will cause that your bosom shall burn within you; therefore, you shall feel that it is right; but if it be not right, you shall have no such feelings, but you shall have a stupor of thought, that shall cause you to forget the thing which is wrong.

This is the Lord's description of how Oliver Cowdery *could* have translated with the aid of Urim and Thummim (see context of the revelations quoted), and it is undoubtedly the manner in which Joseph Smith *did* translate the Book of Mormon through the medium of Urim and Thummim. This description of the translation destroys the theory that Urim and Thummim did everything, and the seer nothing; that the work of translating was merely a

mechanical process of looking at a supplied interpretation, in English, and reading it off to an amanuensis. This description in the Doctrine and Covenants implies great mental effort; of working out the translation in the mind, and securing the witness of the Spirit that the translation is correct. In all this, Urim and Thummim are helpful. They are an aid doubtless to concentration of mind. They may have held at the time just the characters to be translated at the moment, and excluded all others; the translation thought out in the seer's mind may also have been reflected in the interpreters and held there until recorded by the amanuensis, all of which would be incalculably helpful. But since the translation is thought out in the mind of the seer, it must be thought out in such thought-signs as are at his command, expressed in such speech-forms as he is master of; for man thinks, and can only think coherently, in language; and, necessarily, in such language as he knows. If his knowledge of the language in which he thinks and speaks is imperfect, his diction and grammar will be defective. That errors of grammar and faults in diction do exist in the Book of Mormon (and more especially and abundantly in the first edition) must be conceded; and what is more, while some of the errors may be referred to inefficient proof-reading, such as is to be expected in a country printing establishment, yet such is the nature of the errors in question, and so interwoven are they throughout the diction of the book, that they may not be disposed of by saying they result from inefficient proof-reading, or referring them to the mischievous disposition of the "typos," or the unfriendliness of the publishing house.

In the presence of these facts, only one solution to the difficulties presents itself, and that is the solution suggested in the Manual; *viz.*, that the translator is responsible for the verbal and grammatical errors, in the translation; as it is said of the original Nephite record, so let us say of the translation of that record, "If there be faults, they are the faults of man;" not of God, either mediately or immediately. Nor does this solution of the difficulties presented cast any reflections upon Joseph the Seer. It was no fault of his that his knowledge in the English language was so imperfect. His imperfect knowledge was due entirely to

his limited opportunity to acquire such knowledge; to environment, not at all to neglect of opportunities or to mental laziness.

But it is objected that this theory unsettles former conceptions of the part taken by Urim and Thummim, in the work of translation. It upsets somewhat the marvelous that has been associated with the translation of the Nephite record. "Shall we understand," writes with some feeling one objector, "that Urim and Thummim are not what they hitherto purported to be?" and cites somewhat indefinitely the testimony of the Three Witnesses; refers, but not definitely, to the *History of the Church*, and to a sermon by Brigham Young; also to the following passages in the Book of Mormon and Doctrine and Covenants: Mosiah 28: 11-15; Ether 3: 22-25; Mosiah 8: 13-19; Doctrine and Covenants, section 130. We assure this writer and other correspondents of the ERA that there is no conflict between the Manual theory of translation and these passages of scripture. The strongest passage cited as suggesting a conflict is Mosiah, 28: 13-16, as follows:

And now he translated them (*i. e.*, the Jaredite records) by the means of those two stones which were fastened into the two rims of a bow.

Now these things were prepared from the beginning, and were handed down from generation to generation, for the purpose of interpreting languages; * * *
* And whosoever has these things, is called seer, after the manner of old times.

Emphasizing and insisting upon a rigid construction of the words, "Now these things were handed down * * * for the purpose of interpreting languages," may seem to fix the power of interpretation in the divine instruments, not in the seer; but when these words are considered in connection with all that one may learn upon the subject, we know better than to insist upon a severely rigid construction. It should be observed in the opening sentence of the very passage quoted that these words occur:

And now he (Mosiah) translated them (the Jaredite records) by means of those two stones, which were fastened to two rims of a bow.

In other words, Mosiah, the seer, did the translating, aided by Urim and Thummim; it was not the Urim and Thummim that did it, aided by Mosiah.

Moreover, the theory that the interpreters did the translating,

not the seer aided by them, is in conflict with the Lord's description of translation by means of Urim and Thummim; and if old conceptions respecting the part performed by Urim and Thummim are in conflict with God's description of translation, then the sooner we are rid of such conceptions the better.

"We are not able," say some of these objectors, "to harmonize the theory of translation, presented in our Manual, with the testimony of the Three Witnesses." The testimony of the Three Witnesses respecting the translation of the record, mentioned in the foregoing, is simply this:

We also know that they have been translated by the gift and power of God, for His voice hath declared it unto us.

This goes no further than the Prophet's description, already quoted. The only thing Oliver Cowdery ever said, outside of the official testimony of the Three Witnesses, was:

I wrote with my own pen the entire Book of Mormon (save a few pages) as it fell from the lips of the Prophet Joseph Smith, as he translated by the gift and power of God, by the means of Urim and Thummim.

This is all that he has said on the subject, and that is in harmony, it will be observed, with what the Prophet Joseph Smith said, and at no point contradicts the view of translation set forth in the Manual.

There remains, however, the statement of Whitmer and Harris, and it is claimed that the Manual theory of translation cannot be harmonized with what they have said. If that were true, and the Manual theory is more in harmony with what God has said upon the subject than what they have said, then all the worse for their theory—"yea, let God be true but every man a liar!" And, by the way, in passing, I want to ask those who stand up so stoutly for the vindication of what Messrs. Whitmer and Harris have chanced to say on the subject of translation—What about the Lord's description of the same thing in the Doctrine and Covenants? Are they not interested in vindicating that description? I care very little, comparatively, for what Messrs. Whitmer and Harris have said about the subject. I care everything for what the Lord has said about it. Whence did the two

witnesses in question obtain such knowledge as they had about the manner of translation? Undoubtedly, from the Prophet Joseph; for they claim no revelation from the Lord upon the subject. And this knowledge they did not announce until in the later years of their lives; nothing was said about it, by them, until long after the death of the Prophet. They doubtless have given their recollection of what the Prophet had told them about the manner of translating; but experience and observation both teach us that there may be a wide difference between what is really said to men, and their recollection of it—their impressions about it; especially when that recollection or impression is not formulated into written statement until long years afterwards.

At the same time, it is proper to say, as the Manual suggests, that there is no necessary conflict between the statements of these two Witnesses and the Manual theory of translation. They say the Nephite characters, to be translated, appeared in Urim and Thummim. We say that may be true, or the Prophet may have looked through the interpreters—since they were transparent stones—and thus have seen the characters. They say the interpretation appeared in English, under the Nephite characters in Urim and Thummim: we say, if so, then that interpretation, after being wrought out in the Prophet's mind, was reflected into Urim and Thummim and held visible there until written. The English interpretation was a reflex from the Prophet's mind. All this is possible, and is not in conflict with what either the Prophet or Oliver Cowdery said upon the subject; nor in conflict with the Lord's description of translation. But to insist that the translation of the Book of Mormon was an arbitrary piece of mechanical work, wrought out by transparent stones rather than in the inspired mind of the Prophet, is in conflict with the Lord's description of translation, and all the reasonable conclusions that may be drawn from the known facts in the case. This theory—the Manual theory—accepted, accounting for errors in grammar and faulty diction, as pointed out in chapter vii, Part I of Manual, and in chapter xlvii, of the Manual, Part III, is easy.

It is asked, however, "Shall we understand that Urim and Thummim are not what they have hitherto purported to be?" By no means; if by "purported to be," is meant what the seers,

Mosiah of the Book of Mormon, and Joseph Smith, said of them. The former said of them that "he translated by means of them"—*i. e.*, they were an aid to him in translating. Joseph the seer said that "through the medium" of Urim and Thummim, he translated the Nephite record—*i. e.*, they were an aid to him in the work of translation. But if by "purported to be" is meant that the Urim and Thummim did the mental work of translating—that the instrument did everything, and the Prophet nothing, except to read off what the instrument interpreted—then the sooner that theory is abandoned the better; there is nothing in the word of God, or right reason, to warrant it; it is utterly untenable, and affords no rational explanation of the difficulties arising from the existence of verbal and grammatical errors in the translation of the Nephite record.

But the question is asked, "Why bring these matters up at all?" "I seriously question the expediency of any theory, beyond the facts that are definitely known and attested, to explain the details of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon," says one ERA correspondent. So say we all. I wish Messrs. Whitmer and Harris, and those who have worked out theories based upon their statements, had left the whole matter where the Prophet Joseph left it; but this they failed to do. Then opponents took up the question, and insisted that the theory of translation, hitherto commonly accepted, requires us to charge all the faults in diction and errors in grammar, to the Lord; and also urge that we have no right, under this theory of translation, to change a single word of the translation, and some Latter-day Saints take the same view.

The correspondent last quoted also says: "It is enough for me to know that the Book of Mormon was translated by the Prophet Joseph Smith, by the gift and power of God, through the means of the Urim and Thummim." The present writer might join in that simple, bigoted refrain, and say—"for me, too." But what of those for whom it is not enough? What of the many young men in the Church who hear the objections urged by the opponents of the Book of Mormon, based upon the hitherto popular conception of the manner in which the translation was done—what of them? What of the earnest inquirers, in the world, whose knowledge of languages, and of translation, teaches them that the

hitherto popular conception of the translation of the Book of Mormon is an absurdity, not to say an impossibility—what of them? What of the elders in the mission field who are constantly coming in contact with these questions involved in the manner of translating the Book of Mormon, and are asking—as they have been asking for years—for some rational explanation of these matters—what of them? It is not enough, in the presence of the controversies that have arisen out of Messrs. Whitmer and Harris's unfortunate partial explanations, to say that the Book of Mormon was translated by the gift and power of God, and that is enough for one to know.

It is not a question involving merely the wisdom or unwisdom of setting up a "theory" of the manner in which the translation of the Book of Mormon was accomplished. A "theory" already existed, based upon the statements of Messrs. Whitmer and Harris, which, as generally understood, was untenable. This had to be corrected; and the truth, so far as possible, ascertained and expounded. It was not the desire to create a new theory respecting the translation of the Book of Mormon that prompted the writer of the Manual to advance such explanations as are there made. Indeed, the theory set forth in the Manual did not originate with him. The difficulties involved in the hitherto commonly accepted theory of translation have long been recognized by Book of Mormon students; and often have been the subject of conversation between this writer and Elder George Reynolds, President Anthon H. Lund, members of the Manual committee, and others; and this writer by no means regards himself as the originator of what is sometimes called the new theory of the Book of Mormon translation.

Meantime, the fact should be recognized by the Latter-day Saints that the Book of Mormon of necessity must submit to every test, to literary criticism, as well as to every other class of criticism; for our age is above all things critical, and especially critical of sacred literature, and we may not hope that the Book of Mormon will escape closest scrutiny; neither, indeed, is it desirable that it should escape. It is given to the world as a revelation from God. It is a volume of American scripture. Men have a right to test it by the keenest criticism, and to pass severest judgment upon

it, and we who accept it as a revelation from God have every reason to believe that it will endure every test; and the more thoroughly it is investigated, the greater shall be its ultimate triumph. Here it is in the world; let the world make the most of it, or the least of it. It is and will remain true. But it will not do for those who believe it to suppose that they can dismiss objections to this American volume of scripture by the assumption of a lofty air of superiority, and a declaration as to what is enough for us or anybody else to know. The Book of Mormon is presented to the world for its acceptance; and the Latter-day Saints are anxious that their fellow men should believe it. If objections are made to it, to the manner of its translation, with the rest, these objections should be patiently investigated, and the most reasonable explanations possible, given. This is what, in an unpretentious way, is attempted in the Manual. The position there taken is intended to be not destructive, but constructive; not iconoclastic, but conservative; not negative, but positive; and the writer is of opinion that time will vindicate the correctness of the views therein set forth.

(TO BE CONCLUDED IN MAY NUMBER.)

Salt Lake City, Utah.

FAITH AND WORKS.

Once when Cromwell's troops were about to cross a river to attack the enemy, that great leader concluded an address to them with these words: "Put your trust in God; but mind to keep your powder dry." Colonel W. Blacker, in *Oliver's Advice*, writes:

The Power that led his chosen, by pillared cloud and flame,
Through parted sea, and desert waste, that Power is still the same;
He fails not—He—the loyal hearts that firm on him rely;
So put your trust in God, my boys, and keep your powder dry.