



Type: Magazine Article

Book of Mormon Translation: Interesting Correspondence on the Subject of the Manual Theory

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

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

Page(s): 706–713

Abstract: This article is a response to an inquiry made concerning the theory of translation of the Book of Mormon as presented in the Senior Manual of 1905-1906.

BOOK OF MORMON TRANSLATION.

INTERESTING CORRESPONDENCE ON THE SUBJECT OF THE MANUAL THEORY.

[Interest in the manner of the translation of the Book of Mormon is still alive among many thoughtful students. The following letters on the subject are, therefore, both timely and engaging—EDITORS].

April 28, 1906.

President B. H. Roberts, Salt Lake City:

DEAR BROTHER:—As a subscriber to the ERA I have also received the *Manual* from year to year, and I have perused them with much interest. I have carefully studied the lessons or chapters pertaining to the translation of the Book of Mormon, and have read your articles, published in the recent numbers of the ERA, written as a defense of your theory of translation as set forth in the *Manual*.

It is not my intention to enter into any controversy with you in relation to this theory, this would be presumptuous on my part. Neither do I want to criticize, but inasmuch as we have no *sure* authority, no word left us from the Prophet, neither anything revealed putting this matter beyond a doubt, the field is open for theorizing. I would readily accept your theory with just one amendment, and to propose that amendment I write you these lines. While reading one of your articles, a thought was suggested to me like this: May it not have been that the Prophet *did see*, as related, through the Urim and Thummim the translation of each sentence from the plates into the English language, but in a so-called word for word or literal translation; and from this odd rendering, it became his task to put the sentence into readable English? Taking this view of it, we can account for how the language of the Book of Mormon is in part *modern* and in part decidedly ancient. The Prophet having used partly the words as they appeared, and, in order to put it into proper form, used or supplied words of his own. This will account for all errors, and place the responsibility for them where it *must* belong,

with man and not with God. It would give due importance and credit to the sacred instruments, and would leave ample scope for the Prophet to exercise his own mental powers. It would make the statements of Martin Harris and David Whitmer in relation to the translation substantially correct, and it would also be in perfect harmony with what the Lord made known to Oliver Cowdery in relation to the mode of translation.

I don't know, of course, what objections you may see to this idea, but shall be pleased, if you are not too busy to do so, if you will write me a line in relation to it.

With kind regards, your brother,

ELDER ROBERTS' REPLY.

SALT LAKE CITY, UTAH, June 1, 1906.

DEAR BROTHER:—Your esteemed favor of April 28th duly to hand, and contents read with pleasure; but have not found opportunity to write you on the subject of your letter until now. The solution you suggest as to difficulties involved in the alleged manner of translating the Book of Mormon have been urged upon my attention by others, but, unfortunately, not always in the clear and temperate spirit of your communication. I have several letters before me now asking if the supposition you suggest is not tenable, and would it not relieve us of whatever remains of difficulties, after accepting the chief ideas advanced in the *Manual* theory of translation. I have had a number of conversations with others on the same subject, and it may interest you to know that one of the prominent professors in one of our principal Church institutions of learning very earnestly entertains the same theory.

Your theory is so clearly and completely stated in your letter that it need not be restated by me. All you ask is my opinion of it.

Frankly, then, in the first place, I cannot see that it helps us out of our difficulties at all. In the second place, it still involves us in the absurdity of supposing some kind of intellectual or mental force in the transparent stones of the Urim and Thummim. And in the third place, all the supposed harmonizing effect of your suggestion is already found in the *Manual* theory of translation.

Of course, however, the whole point at issue in my consideration of your suggestion, is the probability of its being true; for if we can but get at the truth of the matter for once, all other considerations, in time will take care of themselves,—the difficulties in which it would seemingly involve us, the harmonizing of all seeming inconsistencies, all seeming conflict of testimonies of the uncritical persons who were honored of God in bringing forth the work, etc. So now, as to the probability of the truth of your suggestion.

First, I must demur somewhat to your remark that we have nothing “revealed putting this matter beyond a doubt;” I am rather inclined to think we have. The more I think of the Lord’s revelation to Oliver Cowdery describing the manner in which he might have exercised the gift of translation by means of Urim and Thummim, had his faith not failed him (Doc. and Cov., secs. viii, ix), the more I am convinced that we have the Lord’s description of the manner in which translation by means of Urim and Thummim is accomplished. That is the word of the Lord, to which all theories must conform, whatever becomes of merely human testimonies. Now with this as the premise, I hold that it is clear that the power which stands between the Nephite characters seen through Urim and Thummim, and the English translation of these, is the inspired mind of the Prophet Joseph Smith; and not any intellectual or mental power in the transparent stones of the divine instrument. To suppose that Urim and Thummim, by some means, and necessarily it must have been intellectual means, some mental process, made a transliteration from the Nephite characters in exact though awkward and often meaningless English equivalents, which Joseph Smith constructs into his unlearned yet plainly understood English, (your theory) is to transcend all human experience and knowledge which God has revealed, and lands us back into the midst of all the difficulties from which we are trying to escape. To explain: It nowhere appears from anything which man has discovered, or that God has revealed, that there is any substance, from street mud to radium, from a mountain to an atom, or an electron, aside from *mind*, that possesses intellectual or mental force, the only force conceivable as translating the thought crystalized in the symbols of one language, into

thought crystalized into the symbols of another language—intellectual or mental force alone, I say, must be supposed to be capable of doing such work as that. If the Urim and Thummim possessed that intellectual power it must have been conferred upon it of God, and under that supposition, we are brought face to face again with all our old difficulties, chief of which is the question: If God created such an instrument, and conferred upon it the power to give a transliteration of the Nephite characters, how is it that he did not give it the power to translate the meaning into reasonable and readable, not to say perfect English, at first hand, and relieve us from the awkward supposition that the instrument possessed the mental power to make the literal translation from the Nephite language—which Joseph Smith was left to construct into bad English? What would be gained by the adoption of this cumbersome and, pardon me, untenable theory? And again, what occasion for it, when we have the more simple and reasonable theory of the *Manual* which is in accord with what God has revealed upon the subject, and not necessarily contradictory of what Messrs. Whitmer and Harris have said upon the subject? In order that this may appear, I restate the *Manual* theory: The Prophet saw the Nephite characters in the Urim and Thummim; through strenuous mental effort, the exercise of faith and the operation of the inspiration of God upon his mind, he obtained the thought represented by the Nephite characters, understood them in the Nephite language, and then expressed that understanding, the thought, in such language as he was master of; which language, as his mind by mental processes arranged it, was caught and held to his vision in Urim and Thummim until written by his amanuensis. That leaves all the factors involved in the work of translation in their true relation: The Urim and Thummim an *aid* to the Prophet in the work, yet not necessarily, and contrary to human experience and knowledge revealed of God, endowed with intellectual power; the mind of the Prophet, touched through his faith by the inspiration of God, the chief factor; the testimony of Messrs. Harris and Whitmer that both Nephite characters and the English translation appeared in the Urim and Thummim, undisturbed and unimpaired.

That I believe to be the truth of the matter, so far as it may

be ascertained, and the certainty of it grows apace. The compromise suggestions you make I do not think can stand, but they indicate an advancement from the old untenable theory. That theory cannot be successfully maintained; that is, the Urim and Thummim did the translating, the Prophet, nothing beyond repeating what he saw reflected in that instrument; that God directly or indirectly is responsible for the verbal and grammatical errors of translation. To advance such a theory before intelligent and educated people is to unnecessarily invite ridicule, and make of those who advocate it candidates for contempt.

Since receiving your letter I have received a communication from Ann Arbor, Michigan, written by Brother Francis W. Kirkham, of Provo, the body of which is as follows:

“A paper on ‘Mormonism’ was recently read before the seminary class in American History at this university. The writer was very fair, and I believe tried to be impartial. In the paper the manner of the interpretation of the Book of Mormon as described by Martin Harris was brought to its only logical conclusion. Our professor stopped the reader and asked if ‘Joseph Smith had made the statement which seemed so incredulous.’

“‘I am not sure,’ was the reply, ‘yet this appears to be the ‘Mormon’ explanation of the manner of interpretation.’

“‘Later I gave copies of the last *Manual* to both our professor and my fellow classmate. Both myself and another ‘Mormon’ boy who listened to the paper, heartily wished that the correspondents you found it necessary to answer in the last two numbers of the ERA had been seated in the room. We believe a cure would have been the result.’

Desiring something more in detail on this circumstance, Edward H. Anderson, assistant editor of the ERA, wrote to Elder Kirkham for further particulars. Following is the body of the letter received in reply to this request:

The paper was on “Mormonism.” In discussing the Book of Mormon, the reader followed largely the argument of Mr. Frank Pierce in a number of the *American Archæologist*. [I can get the exact reference when I return to Ann Arbor.] I did not read the article in full, but it quoted from the writings of Martin Harris, and others. Mr. Pierce claimed he gave the “Mormon” account of the interpretation of the golden plates, which is, he said, that Joseph Smith, Jr., saw the

exact words he was to write in the transparent stone spectacles and that the words would not disappear until the scribe had written them exactly as the Lord had given them. Mr. Pierce also gave the testimony of the printer of the original edition of the Book of Mormon in which he testified that the "Smiths" would not allow him to change the manuscript in the least although he was aware of its crudeness.

When the reader of the paper had made the above assertions concerning the interpretation of the Book of Mormon, our professor spoke up and said: "Are you sure Joseph Smith said this was the manner of the interpretation?" "No," was the reply, "I am not sure." "Well," continued our professor, "It is very important that we know, for, if Joseph Smith did make the assertions you speak of, there seems to me but one logical conclusion, either the Lord intentionally made all the mistakes of the first edition and colored the writings with the provincialisms of New York state, or, that the Lord was unable to speak correctly or use other than the phrases and mannerisms of the locality in which Joseph Smith lived."

I wrote to Elder B. H. Roberts the letter because we regretted the necessity of his two articles in the ERA which he was obliged to write in defense of the position which he took in the last Manual. We regret it, because we realize that the Martin Harris theory of the interpretation is contrary to common sense and reason.

It is no use resisting the matter, the old theory must be abandoned. It could only come into existence and remain so long and now be clung to by some so tenaciously because our fathers and our people in the past and now were and are uncritical. They have been and are now—and to their honor be it said—more concerned with the fact of the divine origin of the Book of Mormon and the great work it introduced than to the *modus operandi* of its translation. Overwhelmed by a divine testimony of its truth they have paid little attention to the precise manner by which it was brought forth. It is doubtful if the Prophet Joseph himself was conscious of the mental and spiritual processes of translation. It was not his part in the great work to distinguish all the *minutiae* of the process by which the word of God came to him. It was his higher and nobler part to feel and know the word of God in his own soul; to receive that word through the aids and means provided of God, and to proclaim that word of God to the world, leaving to others the less important task of expounding it, unifying its parts, harmonizing it with previous revelations, proving it true, analyzing it, defending it when assailed. And in the process of attending to the part of the work of God the Prophet left

to us, we meet with the necessity of explaining the manner of translating the Book of Mormon, so far as it can be ascertained, in order to defend the book from assaults made upon it by mocking unbelievers. One could wish that our own people would approach the consideration of the matter with less feeling and more reason than they do; for the whole effort on the part of those who put forth the *Manual* theory of translation is merely to ascertain the truth respecting the matter, and with the view of finding a basis from which the work may be successfully defended and advocated.

These latter reflections bring to mind some observations I remember to have read some time ago in the philosophical works of John Fiske respecting two classes of disciples or partisans in the world of religious and philosophical opinion, which I think with profit may be reproduced here. By the way, I see the passage occurs in the introduction to *Fiske's Work*, written by Josiah Boyce, and is as follows:

Disciples and partisans, in the world of religious and of philosophical opinion, are of two sorts. There are, first, the disciples pure and simple,—people who fall under the spell of a person or of a doctrine, and whose whole intellectual life thenceforth consists in their partisanship. They expound, and defend, and ward off foes, and live and die faithful to the one formula. Such disciples may be indispensable at first in helping a new teaching to get a popular hearing, but in the long run they rather hinder than help the wholesome growth of the very ideas that they defend: for great ideas live by growing, and a doctrine that has merely to be preached, over and over, in the same terms, cannot possibly be the whole truth. No man ought to be merely a faithful disciple of any other man. Yes, no man ought to be a mere disciple even of himself. We live spiritually by outliving our formulas, and by thus enriching our sense of their deeper meaning. Now the disciples of the first sort do not live in this larger and more spiritual sense. They repeat. And true life is never mere repetition.

On the other hand, there are disciples of a second sort. They are men who have been attracted to a new doctrine by the fact that it gave expression, in a novel way, to some large and deep interest which had already grown up in themselves, and which had already come, more or less independently, to their own consciousness. They thus bring to the new teaching, from the first, their own personal contribution. The truth that they gain is changed as it enters their souls. The seed that the sower strews upon their fields springs up in their soil, and bears fruit,—thirty, sixty, an hundred fold. They return to their master his own with usury. Such men are the disciples that it is worth while for a master to have. Disciples of the first sort often become, as Schopenhauer said, mere magnifying

mirrors wherein one sees enlarged, all the defects of a doctrine. Disciples of the second sort co-operate in the works of the Spirit; and even if they always remain rather disciples than originators, they help to lead the thought that they accept to a truer expression. They force it beyond its earlier and cruder stages of development.

I believe "Mormonism" affords opportunity for disciples of the second sort; nay, that its crying need is for such disciples. It calls for thoughtful disciples who will not be content with merely repeating some of its truths, but will develop its truths; and enlarge it by that development. Not half—not one-hundredth part—not a thousandth part of that which Joseph Smith revealed to the Church has yet been unfolded, either to the Church or to the world. The work of the expounder has scarcely begun. The Prophet planted by teaching the germ-truths of the great dispensation of the fulness of times. The watering and the weeding is going on, and God is giving the increase, and will give it more abundantly in the future as more intelligent discipleship shall obtain. The disciples of "Mormonism," growing discontented with the necessarily primitive methods which have hitherto prevailed in sustaining the doctrine, will yet take profounder and broader views of the great doctrines committed to the Church; and, departing from mere repetition, will cast them in new formulas; co-operating in the works of the Spirit, until they help to give to the truths received a more forceful expression, and carry it beyond the earlier and cruder stages of its development.

You see once having got started, I have gone beyond the inquiries of your letter, though I hope not unprofitably so. And, by the way, since there are a number who are inclined to the view of the manner of translation suggested by you, is there any objection in your mind, to publishing this correspondence as a part of the very interesting consideration now being given to the subject of which it treats?

Very truly yours,

B. H. ROBERTS.