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Is the Bible Translated Correctly?

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Abstract: This article considers the accuracy and completeness of Bible translations.

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THE eighth Article of Faith declares that "We believe the Bible to be the word of God as far as it is translated correctly." This implies that there are mistranslations in the Bible. Moreover, the Prophet Joseph Smith, from the beginning of his ministry, gave some time to revising passages in the Bible which had been translated incorrectly or so rendered as to make the meaning obscure. (See *Documentary History of the Church*, notably Volume 1.)

Errors in the translation of the Bible are due primarily to the fact that the original documents are lost. The manuscripts from which our Bible translations have been made are copies, perhaps copies of copies, of the originals. Even in our day, with our many modern helps, it is practically impossible to secure a letter-perfect copy of a book, if done by hand. It is not a matter of dishonesty, but of human limitations. The wrong word may be written, or a word so written as to convey a false meaning; for example, the accidental absence of a dot converts the Aramaic sign for *rope* into *camel*. Therefore we have long wrestled with the meaning of the Biblical statement, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle," which really should read, "It is easier for a rope to go through the eye of a needle." Likewise, the statement, "Let the dead bury the dead" has been perplexing. The Aramaic word for dead is *metta* and for town, *matta*. It becomes likely, therefore, that the true saying was "Let the town bury the dead," a very common practice in the days of Christ. (See Lamsa, *Gospel Light*.)

More serious are the evident attempts by ancient copyists to clarify or correct the text of the manuscripts by inserting personal comments, which in course of time, have become parts of the sacred record. As an illustration, I John 5:7, 8 reads, "For there are three that bear record in Heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost, and these three are one. . . ." It is said that two hundred and fifty Greek manuscripts exist, containing this section of John's epistle, but do not contain the words in verses 7 and 8. Only four known manuscripts contain them, and they were made after 1400 A. D., and they are not found in any known manuscript before the seventh century after Christ. These words evidently added by a scribe have given rise to much religious misunderstanding. (See Sims, *The Bible from the Beginning*; McGavin, *An Apology for the Book of Mormon*.)

Earnest efforts employing every available device have been made by lovers of the Bible to discover such errors, and thus to purify the text of the Bible. The various existing manuscripts have been com-

pared with minute care to detect differences. Quotations from the Bible by ancient writers, when perhaps earlier copies were extant, have been assembled and compared. The human toil given to such labor, is a noble example of the esteem in which the sacred scriptures are held. It is another evidence of his greatness that Joseph Smith was one of the early workers in the so-called textual criticism of the Bible.

Another group of workers has undertaken to discover the origin, authorship, and history of the many parts of the Bible. Their avowed objective is not to discredit the Bible, but to discover truth. To accomplish their purpose, methods of literary and historical criticism have been employed. From dissimilarities in style and contemporary historical sources, and by other means it has been inferred, for example, that certain books of the Bible are composites of several original manuscripts, or have been written by several authors. This is the so-called Higher Criticism. However honest and God-fearing these workers may be, many of their conclusions and explanations remain in the field of inference, not of fact. Whether the Pentateuch and Joshua are made up from four original documents, or that the Gospel of John and the Book of Revelation were written by two different writers, or that Paul did not write the Epistle to the Hebrews, may ever remain in the region of hypothesis. The purpose of Higher Criticism may be acceptable; but its limitations must ever be kept in mind. Theories have the same value in Biblical study as in chemistry, but no more; and theories are forever changing. This is well brought out in the "modern trend" in Biblical criticism. (See Willett, *The Bible Through the Centuries*; White, *The Conflict of Science with Theology*; *Journal of Bible and Religion*, Vol. 6, part 2.)

How the sacred scriptures were translated from ancient tongues into English and made available to the common man is a most thrilling chapter in human history. Love of God and man was the driving impulse of the translators; disgrace and death were their frequent reward. The names of Wycliffe, Tyndale, Coverdale, and many others, including the makers of the so-called authorized or King James' translation, should be held in reverence by all English-speaking people. Like honor should be shown those who made the Bible available in other tongues, German, French, Scandinavian, etc. The Bible has rendered manifold services to every nation which it has entered. As it formed and fixed the English language, and unified the German tongue from Luther's version, so it has influenced deeply all peoples who have received it. (See J. Patterson Smythe, *How We Got Our Bible*; Goodspeed, *The Making of the English New Testament*; Calwell, *The Study of the Bible*.)

It should be remarked that the translation of the Bible into several modern languages has helped us to understand the meaning of many passages otherwise obscure. To convert the ideas recorded in Hebrew or Greek into another language is not an easy task. The translator at the best is only an interpreter of the text. It is well therefore to compare, say a standard trans- (Concluded on page 191)

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lation in German or French with one in English. The peculiar genius of one language often permits a clearer expression of the original meaning.

In recent years many new translations of the Bible into English have been made, chiefly to render the text in modern, colloquial language, though others have sought, primarily, to make the rendering correspond more exactly with the text. These modern translators have had at their command for comparison many more manuscripts than were possessed by the translators in 1611. Each such translation has contributed something towards our fuller understanding of the Bible; for example, King James' version says, "Else what shall they do which are baptized for the dead if the dead rise not at all? Why are they then baptized for the dead?" The Smith and Goodspeed translation makes the thought clearer, "Otherwise what do people mean by having themselves baptized on behalf of the dead? If the dead do not rise at all, why do they have themselves baptized on their behalf?"

However, none of these translations surpass the King James' version of the English Bible in beauty of language and spiritual connotation, and probably in faithful adherence to the text available to them. It is this version which is used by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in all of its official work both at home and abroad. The literature of the Church refers invariably to the King James' translation. Other translations are used by the Church only to help explain obscure passages in the authorized version. This translation is recommended to obtain an acquaintanceship with the Hebrew scriptures.

The hundreds of revisions made by the Prophet Joseph Smith, some of them extensive and exhaustive, are very enlightening. Note the following as lesser examples: Genesis 3:8, King James' version, says, "They heard the voice of the Lord God walking in the Garden"; the inspired version reads, "They heard the voice of the Lord God, as they were walking in the Garden"; 2 Samuel 24:16, King James' version, says, "The Lord repented him of the evil, and said to the angel that destroyed the people, It is enough, stay now thy hand"; the inspired version reads, "For the people repented, and the Lord stayed the hand of the angel"; Exodus 10:27, King James' version, says, "But the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart"; the inspired version reads, "But Pharaoh hardened his heart"; Luke 9:24, King James' version says, "For whosoever will save his life shall lose it; but whosoever will lose his life for my sake, the same shall save it"; the inspired version reads, "For whosoever will save his life, must be willing to lose it for my sake; and whosoever will be willing to lose his life for my sake, the same shall save it."

Latter-day Saints believe that the protecting hand of the Lord has been over the Bible, whether in the ancient original manuscript or in copies of the earliest documents. Modern scholarship and modern revelation have clarified erroneous and difficult passages. How the Bible came to be is unimportant compared with what it says. The real message of the Bible has been preserved, unimpaired, and is confirmed by every new translation. That message continues to be the greatest ever given to man.

—J. A. W.

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