

Chapter 12

Translation and Transculturation in the Pacific

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Book of Mormon prophets are regarded as heroes among Latter-day Saint Pacific Islanders. One such prophet, Alma the Younger, declared: “For behold, the Lord doth grant unto all nations, of their own nation and tongue, to teach his word, yea in wisdom, all that he seeth fit that they should have” (Alma 29:8). We are of the opinion that this means that each Pacific Islander, whether he or she be Tongan, Samoan, Solomon islander, Maori, a Hindi-speaker in Fiji, or any other nationality, deserves to hear the saving principles of the restored gospel and partake of the ordinances in his or her own language. Alma seemed to be saying that these principles and ordinances will be delivered to them, not only by Americans who have learned the new languages and cultures, but eventually by authorized indigenous people who speak one of these languages as a mother tongue and who are part of the native culture.

This concept is strengthened by a prophecy in the Doctrine and Covenants: “For it shall come to pass in that day, that every man shall hear the

fulness of the gospel in his own tongue, and in his own language, through those who are ordained unto this power” (D&C 90:11). We interpret “fulness of the gospel” to mean all the basic principles and ordinances of the gospel, the doctrines of the gospel as found in the Church’s four standard works, or holy scriptures, and the ordinances of the holy temple. Thus, we begin our chapter on the premise that all people deserve eventually to have a translated package of materials containing the “fulness of the gospel” printed in the language they regularly speak in the home, in the extended family, and in the regular community. This package would include:

1. *Gospel Fundamentals* (formerly called *Gospel Principles*)
2. Several hymns of Zion, including sacred music of the native culture
3. The Holy Bible
4. The Book of Mormon
5. The Doctrine and Covenants
6. The Pearl of Great Price

7. Basic curriculum manuals
8. The temple ceremony (for use only in the temple)

The Church does not translate the Holy Bible into other languages. Whether there be one or many translations in a given language to choose from, the most doctrinally accurate translation is eventually submitted to the Priesthood Executive Council to approve or conditionally approve for the Saints to read and study in their own language. A 1992 *Church News* article on translating Latter-day Saint scriptures includes the following statement: “Church leaders have expressed a debt of gratitude and love to members of Bible societies who have literally dedicated their lives to the translation of the Bible into new languages.”¹ One of the earliest translators of the Bible into the English language was William Tyndale (1492–1536). We are moved by his statement: “Without the Bible it is impossible to establish the people in truth. . . . Christians must read the New Testament [for themselves] in their own tongue.”²

We recognize that such massive translation projects mentioned above require time, resources, expert translators, and money. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has many other costly projects in order to fulfill its three-fold mission of proclaiming the gospel, perfecting the Saints, and redeeming the dead. Almost all worthwhile projects require time, experimentation, and the Lord’s help to bring them to fruition. We are of the opinion that more of the children of men will come to Christ as the Church puts forth the necessary efforts to provide these materials in the mother tongue of those persons it seeks to attract. Furthermore, we feel that “every kindred, tongue, and people” will progress more toward becoming a unified Zion people when we realize that in the sight of God every temporal language has equal validity with the Church’s host language, English.

Likewise, recognizing cultural differences and appreciating cultural diversity as a means of enriching the whole fabric of the restored gospel

has great worth. Elder Christoffel Golden Jr., one-time president of the Pretoria South Africa Stake and now a member of the First Quorum of the Seventy, observed in an interview printed in the *Ensign*: “The gospel brings a spirit into people’s lives which heals and also covers many of the so-called differences we have. I’ve also learned that before the Lord, all people are equal, yet all people are diverse.” Elder Golden added, “And I don’t think there’s a weakness in diversity. I think there’s a strength. As the Church continues to grow, members worldwide will learn what we have learned here in South Africa—that the inclusion of more and more cultures will dramatically enrich the Church and give it greater strength than it has ever had before.”³

In this chapter we wish to deal with the history of translation and transculturation in the Pacific Islands. We will examine the challenges of translating the basic “fulness of the gospel” package into each language and culture, and we will consider a specific case study of the nation of Fiji.

History of Translation and Transculturation in the Pacific Islands

The Latter-day Saints’ first missionary foray into the Pacific was in 1844 when Addison Pratt, Noah Rogers, and Benjamin Grouard preached in the Society Islands, later known as French Polynesia. This was the first non-English-language proselytizing in Latter-day Saint history. Addison Pratt (see figure 1 in chapter 3) remains one of the great missionary heroes of the nineteenth century. His devotion to the people he taught and nurtured is truly exemplary. Addison learned the cultural ways of the people of the small island of Tubuai. He quickly mastered their language, Tahitian. He lived in the same kind of dwellings they did. He slept the same way they did. He ate the same way they did. He became united with them in nearly every way. The Polynesian Saints certainly accepted him as one of their own.

Addison was not able to translate any Latter-day Saint scriptures or teaching materials into

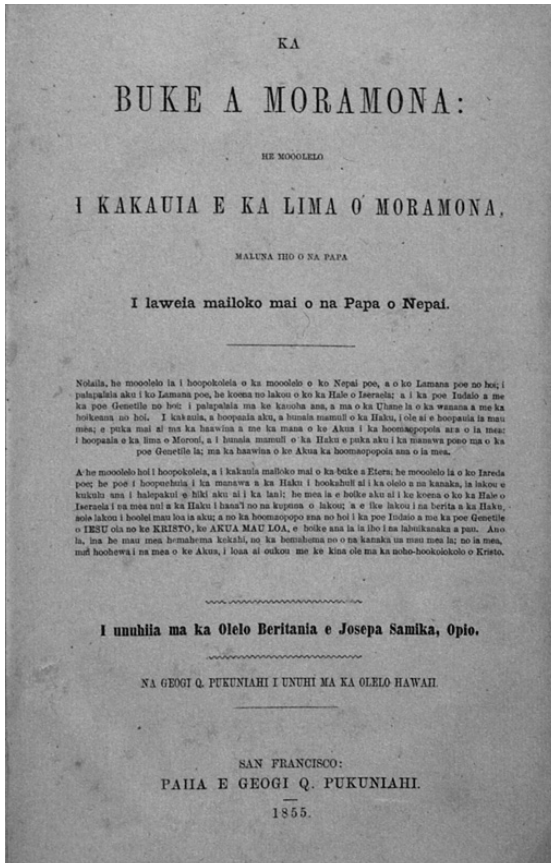


Fig. 1. Book of Mormon translation in Hawaiian
 Courtesy of Church Archives

Tahitian because there were no printing facilities on Tubuai. Yet significantly, he had a Tahitian Bible available to him that the London Missionary Society (LMS) had completed just a few years before his arrival. The London Missionary Society had been in the Society Islands since 1797 and had succeeded in bringing Christianity and some Western civilization influences to most islanders as well as in diminishing internecine warfare and cannibalism among them. Addison Pratt and his companions used the LMS Bible effectively. Missionaries of that era typically taught from the Bible more than from the Book of Mormon.⁴

An early translator of a Polynesian language was the inveterate George Q. Cannon, who, at twenty-five, began translating the Book of Mormon into Hawaiian (see chapter 15). Elder Can-

non, like Addison Pratt, became convinced early in his mission to the Sandwich Islands that he would need to learn the language and ways of the native Hawaiians in order to make his missionary labor a success. His senior elders had figured they would only deal with the *haoles*, or European and American sailors. Cannon realized native islanders deserved the gospel as well. In his reminiscences he declared, “For my part I felt it to be my duty to warn all men, white and red. . . . I felt resolved to stay there, master the language and warn the people of those islands, if I had to do it alone; for I felt that I could not do otherwise and be free from condemnation; the spirit of it was upon me.”⁵ Elder Cannon’s labor and example led to Hawai’i becoming one of the Church’s strongest missions in the nineteenth century. Elder Cannon completed the translation

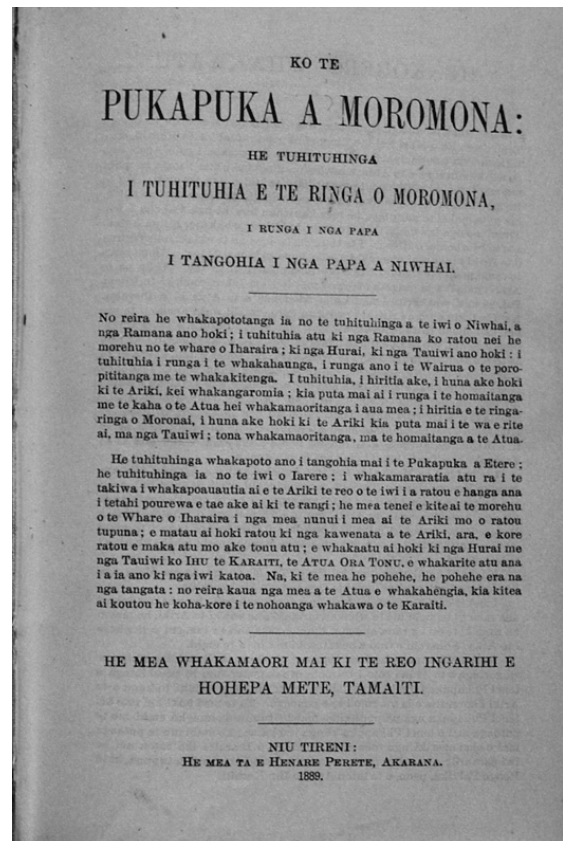


Fig. 2. Book of Mormon translation in Maori
 Courtesy of Church Archives

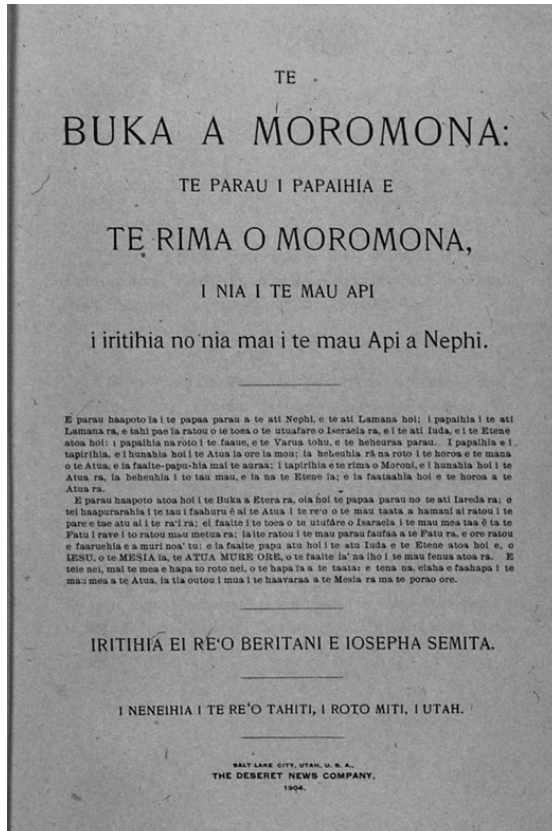


Fig. 3. Book of Mormon translation in Samoan
 Courtesy of Church Archives

of the Book of Mormon in 1854. This was the fifth non-English translation, preceded by Danish, French, German, and Italian.⁶

The next serious Polynesian translation project was an early attempt to translate the Book of Mormon into Maori in the late 1880s. The idiomatic expressions in the Book of Mormon posed a major problem for the elders assigned to the project. It was not until 1918 when the gifted young Matthew Cowley set his hand to revision, that the New Zealand Mission published a respectable Maori translation of the Book of Mormon. Elder Cowley also translated the Doctrine and Covenants and the Pearl of Great Price into Maori.

Translation of the Book of Mormon into Samoan was completed in 1903, into Tahitian in 1904, and into Tongan in 1946. Successful

missionary work had been conducted in Sāmoa, French Polynesia, and Tonga prior to those specific years, thus it is obvious that the Book of Mormon was not essential for proselytizing. Yet it can be demonstrated that missionary work went forward at a greater pace in Polynesia once grammar books, Latter-day Saint scriptures, and tracts in the native languages were available. So, too, the understanding and maturity of the native members improved once they had portions of the “fulness of the gospel” in their own tongue.

The Pacific Islands missions limped along with translations of the scriptures and little more until 1967, when translation offices were established in Sāmoa, Tonga, and French Polynesia. More recently, a translation office has been established in Suva, Fiji. We will explore the unique

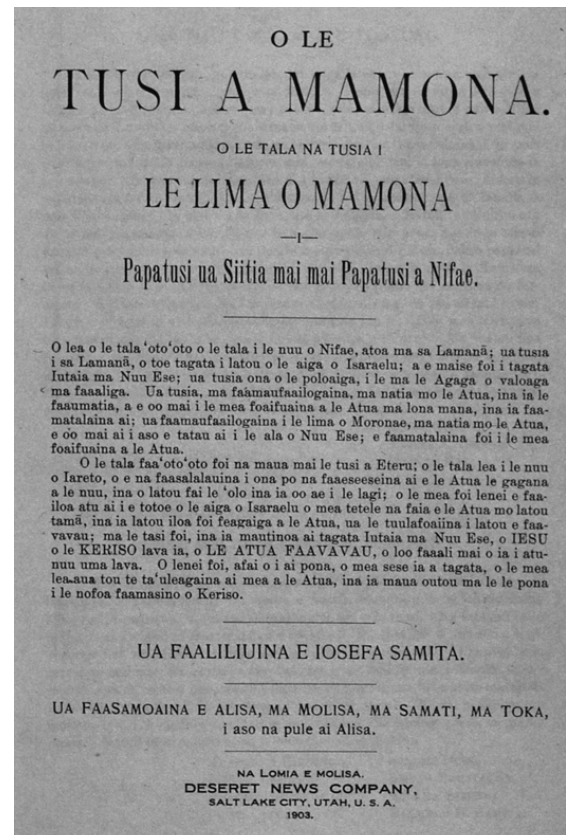


Fig. 4. Book of Mormon translation in Tahitian
 Courtesy of Church Archives

circumstances in Fiji later in the chapter. Personnel in these offices worked on translation of the same curriculum materials that had been approved for Latter-day Saint use and had been previously translated into nearly twenty languages. Thus all Latter-day Saint curriculum that had been officially translated into German, French, Spanish, and Portuguese, for example, was translated into Samoan, Tongan, and Tahitian. The Pacific translation offices were not able to keep up with production schedules and were transferred in 1982 from Sāmoa, Tonga, and Tahiti to the Church Administration Building in Salt Lake City.

In 1992, two years after the translation division became a separate department at Church headquarters, the Presiding Bishopric announced that translation of curriculum materials was to be decentralized worldwide under the Area Presidencies. In 1993, Lowell Bishop of the translation department was sent to Sydney, Australia, to become the Pacific Area translation manager. At the same time, another coworker, Remi Mataoa, was sent to Manila to become the Philippines/Micronesia Area translation manager. In the Pacific Area, Brother Bishop resumed the work of the full-time translation offices in Tonga, Tahiti, and Sāmoa.

Challenges in Translation and Transculturation in the Pacific

It has never been easy for Church missionaries and leaders to make appropriate adjustments to new languages and cultures. This is as true in the Pacific Islands as it is anywhere else in the world. For example, a number of the Pacific Islands languages do not have a word that distinguishes between hill and mountain due to the lack of such terrain on their islands. Numerous Pacific Island languages have no word for snow. Obviously, an allusion in a magazine article or a Primary lesson to a snowstorm would be difficult for both translators and readers in the islands. Also difficult is the fact that most languages do

not have specific terms equivalent to our numerous priesthood offices, so transliterations are generally used.

Translators themselves face enormous challenges in the Pacific. European-language translators input their work directly into modern computers that facilitate sending out copies of their work quickly to reviewers. Pacific Islander translators, on the other hand, who typically lack the necessary degree of computer literacy, rarely use computers. Much of the translation work is produced by hand. It must then be inputted on computer by full-time staff. The Pacific Area also has long distances between destinations, with many islands having air flights (and mail delivery) in and out just once or twice weekly. All these situations create time delays.

Perhaps the biggest challenge is the common misperception that most Pacific Islanders *can* get by with English language materials (except those in Tonga, Sāmoa, and French Polynesia, where their own languages have been traditionally used). The Church Educational System, for example, began sending out their materials in the 1970s—all in English. This was definitely a case of putting the cart before the horse, but the precedent was set. Members in countless Pacific Island settings receive material in English that could be put to little or no use, especially when attempting to teach the gospel in the home. When Church leaders try to motivate rapid growth in a given island nation, they usually find members lacking in their understanding of procedures and doctrines. The maturity level of the general membership will continue to languish as long as instruction and gospel study continue to be in English rather than in the mother tongue of those members receiving it.

Papua New Guinea, a fertile field for the Church, has over one hundred regularly spoken languages. Leadership development in that country is severely hindered by a lack of translated materials and illiteracy. Even in Australia and New Zealand, many leaders operate under

the misperception that everybody speaks and understands English. This retards the growth that otherwise could occur in these two countries. When this issue of accepting all commonly used languages is finally resolved, much will need to be done to catch up.

For over thirty years, there was a misconception that Church members in the Philippines were getting by in English. Not until 1990 and 1993 were Tagalog and Cebuano taught at the Mission Training Center. Most missionaries called to the Philippines previously thought that they were being sent to an English-speaking mission. The Filipino Saints themselves kept the misconception alive since many believed that for them to serve in the Church they must be able to speak and read in English. This concept began to change in 1981 when plans for the Manila Philippines Temple were announced. Realizing they would be expected to enter into sacred, binding covenants in a language they did not fully understand, the people began pleading for translation into at least three of the fourteen major languages spoken in their country. Some Church materials have been translated into eight of those fourteen languages now, and in 2004 there were almost as many copies (56,775) of the Tagalog Book of Mormon distributed as there were copies of the French Book of Mormon distributed throughout the world.

Literacy is also a major concern in many Pacific Islands settings. The Relief Society's literacy program is often misused. Through this program many people are taught to read English rather than to become literate in the language they speak at home. In many cases, the only accomplishment is in getting people to mimic the English pronunciation without having a real understanding of what they are reading. All of this validates the misperception that these people *can* get by in English, which thereby avoids the effort of translating texts into a language that they already speak and that they could be taught to read.

Overall Church Translation Policies and Their Application in the Pacific Islands

The First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve approved a policy of providing a very literal translation of the scriptures, not in the sense of "word-for-word" but in maintaining all the idiosyncrasies of the original text.⁷ This policy does not make exceptions for redundancies, difficult sentence structure, or watering down of the doctrines. The policy presents some difficulties for many Pacific Islander languages but generally nothing that would not be experienced in almost any language. The resulting translations are about as difficult for the islanders to read as the Book of Mormon is for English readers who are not used to King James-style English.

Translators have a little more leeway with items that simply do not make sense culturally. They can contact Church authorities either to clarify the intent and meaning or to obtain permission to use other examples that might be more culturally understandable. Only after the Council of the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve have granted approval can translation into any given language begin. Recommendations for such translations are made by the various Area Presidencies scattered throughout the world. Requests for translation of specific materials are based on the organization and projected growth of the Church in the language area.

Case Study in Fiji

Since proselytizing began in Fiji in 1954, the Church has progressed from a mere handful of members to four organized stakes. There was a vigorous translation effort supervised locally by Maryann Wright in the late seventies and early eighties, both in Fijian and Hindi. With the approval for translation of the Book of Mormon into Hindi, targeted at India, the translation effort in Fiji began to decline. The translation office in Fiji was essentially closed down about the same time

the other Polynesian languages were moved to Salt Lake City for supervision. The standard works had already been published in Fijian by that time, however.

In 1969 a Church school was held in the only meetinghouse in the Fiji Islands. By 1973 one hundred students were enrolled. The Fiji LDS Technical College opened in 1975 and currently 370 students are enrolled. As is the practice in many of the Pacific Islands, classes are taught in English. Even today, however, there is a relatively low percentage of students who graduate with sufficient understanding of English to be able to pass college entrance exams.

In 1983 the first stake was created in Suva, Fiji, and was presided over initially by Inosi Naga. The stake struggled along for twelve years without a division. Most nations where there is regular proselytizing experience multiple stake divisions within such a time frame. This has certainly been true in the Pacific Area countries of Australia, New Zealand, Western Sāmoa, American Sāmoa, and Tonga. But such was not the case in Fiji.

Elder Rulon G. Craven, president of the Pacific Area in 1991, diligently sought to discover the answer to this problem. Through frequent visits and much listening with an open mind, Elder Craven concluded that greater Church activity would likely be increased by allowing for more gospel instruction in the Fijian language and for more translated materials. Furthermore, he figured, more Church units were needed in rural areas rather than focusing only on urban-based wards and branches. When Elder Craven was released, one of his counselors who became the president, Elder Lowell D. Wood, continued to support these ideas. Creation of Fijian-speaking units within the districts brought a resurgence of commitment and attendance.

In the late 1980s, some political unrest and racial tensions between the majority Indian population and the indigenous Fijians—who have rights to 83 percent of the land in the villages—resulted in some Indian Church members be-

coming less active. The Church, however, has for the most part remedied this situation by ensuring that both Indians and local Fijians are involved in Church leadership positions. A new national constitution approved in 1990 favored the indigenous Fijians. Thus, there still exists some political tension between Fijians and those who have Indian ancestry. This is true even in the Church. For example, some members are uneasy about having Fijian-speaking units because it leaves the Indian Saints in English-speaking units.

In 1993, when Lowell Bishop became Pacific Area translation manager, there was only one outstanding item still approved for translation into Fijian—the hymnbook. Translation of many of the basic curriculum items had been overlooked. It was determined that moving the work forward required taking one step backward. Though Fijian was then among the established languages in the Church—on par with Tongan, Samoan, German, and French—the Area Presidency requested that the Fijian language revert to the status of a developing-area language, thus forcing translation of the more basic materials first. Under Brother Bishop's supervision, Savenaca Damuni became the pioneer contract translator to complete this effort. With the assistance of his reviewers, only two years were needed for Savenaca Damuni to help move Fijian back to its former established language status. The Fijian-speaking units today now have access to a majority of the basic manuals in Fijian for their priesthood, Relief Society, Sunday School, and Primary classes. A Fijian *Liahona* magazine began quarterly publication in 1998 and is now produced every other month.

There are an increasing number of Fijian-speaking units among the English-speaking stakes and districts in Fiji. Member commitment in each unit is demonstrated by a high rate of activity. It is likely that a similar increase in activity will be manifest among Indians and Rotumans living in Fiji as a similar first-language emphasis becomes possible. Participation at the Suva Fiji Temple may tend to exemplify this situation because Fijian

and Hindi are accommodated there, but Rotumans must listen to English.

Conclusion

We are confident that the work of the Lord will continue to move forward in all parts of the Pacific Islands. The 1990s demonstrated the benefit of following the enlightened direction from Elders Craven and Wood. Impressive growth in terms of member activity and the creation of new stakes will likely continue. Yet as a Church we have to tackle some hard questions. Are we willing to pledge the resources to provide translated materials into Hindi, Rotuman, and other languages in Fiji; into Ilokano and scores of other languages in the Philippines; into the over one hundred regularly used languages in Papua New Guinea; and into languages used in Vanuatu, Tuvalu, the Solomon Islands, and the hundreds of small islands of Micronesia? Just how important is this sacred work of translation?

The group of translators who gave us the King James translation in English asked,

How shall men meditate in that which they cannot understand? How shall they understand that which is kept closed in an unknown tongue? . . . Translation it is that openeth the window, to let in the light; that breaketh the shell, that we may eat the kernel; that putteth aside the curtain, that we may look into the most holy place; that removeth the cover of the well, that we may come by the water. . . . Indeed without translation into the [common] tongue, the unlearned are but like children at Jacob's well (which was deep) without a bucket or something to draw with.⁸

If this sentiment applies to God's children who speak English, and we believe it does, then the same sentiment applies to all of God's children in the Pacific Islands and to people everywhere.

It has been observed that when the Church pledges more resources to education, it is not long before all that money returns as increased tithes and offerings from devoted Saints. The vast expense of building temples and family history centers has also proven to be worth the

money. We suggest that the same providential results would occur with an enhanced translation service for all the regularly used languages in the world. Whenever people dedicate themselves to language learning, they nearly always become more culturally aware and sensitive. Some cultural faux pas of the past can be overcome through language enhancement and learning, literacy in one's own tongue, and translation of vital Church literature.

Two final statements adeptly summarize the importance of the translation work in the Pacific Islands. We first concur with Elder John H. Groberg who said, "Our prime role . . . is not to teach people English or how to become American. Gospel standards and the message of the Atonement and the Restoration don't vary from language to language."⁹ And we conclude with the wise words of Elder Dean L. Larsen:

The segmenting biases that worked such a destructive influence in the church of Paul's day cannot be allowed to take root in this dispensation. . . . Latter-day Saints [must] rise above interests of nationality, culture, tradition, and politics to a higher view of their joint membership in God's eternal kingdom. This will be an ever-present challenge in a worldwide Church. To be 'fellowcitizens with the saints, and of the household of God' (Ephesians 2:19) should be regarded as a privilege and blessing that supercedes all others.¹⁰

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Notes

1. "'All People' to Receive LDS Scriptures," *Church News*, February 8, 1992, 3.

2. As cited in Robert J. Matthews, "A Bible! A Bible!" *Ensign*, January 1987, 25.

3. As cited in R. Val Johnson, "South Africa: Land of Good Hope," *Ensign*, February 1993, 34–35, 37–38.

4. See S. George Ellsworth, ed., *The Journals of Addison Pratt* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1990).

5. George Q. Cannon, *My First Mission* (Salt Lake City: Juvenile Instructor Office, 1882), 22.

6. We are indebted to the research and writing of R. Lanier Britsch for his historical background. See his

Unto the Islands of the Sea (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1986).

7. Instruction to the Translation Department of the Church, 1990.

8. "The Translators to the Reader," in J. Reuben Clark Jr., *Why the King James Version* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1956), 34.

9. As cited in Giles H. Florence Jr., "City of Angels," *Ensign*, September 1992, 36.

10. Dean L. Larsen, "The Challenges of Administering a Worldwide Church," *Ensign*, July 1974, 22.

