

# “Give Me Right Word, O Lord”: The JST Changes in the Psalms

*David A. LeFevre*

Joseph Smith’s translation of the Bible (referred to in the Church today as the Joseph Smith Translation and abbreviated as JST) was a revelatory and educational experience that played an important role in tutoring, preparing, and training the young prophet for his mission.<sup>1</sup> This paper takes the position that Joseph Smith’s translation of the Psalmist’s words through the inspiration of the Holy Ghost was the most personal part of the entire effort, reflecting his own experiences, situation, and feelings. It is easy to hear the pleas and prayers of a man learning the truths of God through revelation in these inspired revisions.

The biblical psalms are individual and communal expressions of faith, pleading, worship, or praise. Many of the JST changes to the Psalms turned those sacred writings into autobiographical expressions of the Prophet’s own feelings and reflect his own circumstances, including the First Vision, instruction for the temple, the establishment of Zion, and the persecutions he had already experienced in his ministry. The changes also hinted at the future challenges for the Saints. In these changes, we are given an intimate

---

*David A. LeFevre is a BYU Adult Religion teacher in Redmond, Washington.*

window into the deep passion that drove Joseph Smith's understanding of his own sense of destiny and his profound commitment to his calling.

A careful exegesis of the changes, correlated against the events of Church history and Joseph's life during and after the translation period, show that as the Psalms were translated by the Prophet, they

- ✦ became more eschatological—focused on the last days, the Second Coming, and the final triumph of the Lord, as well as the role of the temple in preparing Saints for those events;
- ✦ offered encouragement to Joseph Smith against enemies and criticism;
- ✦ gave hope that the Lord would contend against the forces of darkness in his behalf;
- ✦ were reflective of his own revelations and visions;
- ✦ echoed the young prophet's commitment to both hear and speak the word of the Lord; and
- ✦ expressed Joseph Smith's great but still developing desire for the success of *Zion*.

### The Date of the Translation Work on the Psalms

Because the JST manuscripts of Psalms are undated and no other records mention translating them, the translation work on Psalms cannot be dated precisely. However, several related sources can narrow the timeframe. The translation of the New Testament was completed in July 1832, and the Prophet then returned to the Old Testament, picking up in Genesis 24 where he had left off in April 1831.<sup>2</sup> He continued to work on the Old Testament (and review the New Testament translation, which was completed on February 2, 1833)<sup>3</sup> through the fall and winter of 1832–33, though no work was done on the translation from October 5, 1832, to November 6, 1832, while the Prophet traveled to Boston and Albany.<sup>4</sup> It appears that he had progressed to at least Isaiah by March 8, 1833, for the Lord made reference to his current focus in section 90 of the Doctrine and Covenants: "And when you have finished the

translation of the prophets” (v. 13). Thus it is likely that he finished working on Psalms just prior to the reception of section 90.

All of these considerations combine to give us an approximate date for the translation of Psalms of January and February 1833. Understanding the timing of this work helps position these inspired changes in the context of Joseph Smith’s life and tie them to events in Church history, and this context helps us understand the meaning of the changes to Joseph Smith, the young Church, and us today.

### Increased Eschatology

The translation of the Bible provided substantial insights to Joseph Smith about the last days, the Second Coming, and the ultimate triumph of the Lord. The most striking example of this is Joseph Smith—Matthew and Doctrine and Covenants section 45, which preceded this translation of Matthew 24 and prepared the Prophet for it.<sup>5</sup> But a number of changes in the psalms also shifted some of their messages from a present-tense, Old Testament focus to one looking forward to the Second Coming and the events preceding it.

One pervasive trend in the JST psalms is that verses were shifted to future tense,<sup>6</sup> bringing their message forward to the last days and the Lord’s Coming—topics Joseph and many of the early Saints were anxious about. R. Scott Burton states, “While reading the JST, . . . one gets the feeling that it is a prophetic insight on the part of the Psalmist concerning some far-distant occurrence. . . . What this means is that the Prophet read some psalms as prophetic oracles concerning the latter days which the KJV read as historical occurrences within ancient Israel.”<sup>7</sup> For example, Psalm 10:16 reads: “**And the Lord is shall be King for ever and ever over his people: for the heathen wicked are perished shall perish out of his land.**”<sup>8</sup> The original verse declared that the Lord was King and caused the heathen to be removed from the land of Israel. The JST puts the Psalmist’s plea in an eschatological perspective, focused on the future coming of the Lord and how the Lord will judge the wicked and care for his own people. Instead of a plea for help, this translated psalm is a prophetic statement of faith in the future grace and power of the Lord.

Another example of a change to future tense is found in Psalm 46: “The heathen raged **shall be enraged**, the **and their** kingdoms were **shall be** moved: he uttered **and the Lord shall utter** his voice, **and** the earth **shall be** melted.

The Lord of hosts, *is who shall be* with us; the God of Jacob *is* our refuge. Selah. Come, behold the works of the Lord, what desolations he hath made **shall make** in the earth **in the latter days**" (vv. 6–8).

This entire psalm is therefore put into a future context, a dramatic shift from the past tense of the original. The events become prophetic, set not in the Psalmist's lifetime but "in the latter days" (v. 8). The psalm concludes, "**And saith unto the nations**, Be still, and know that I *am* God: I will be exalted among the heathen, I will be exalted in the earth. The Lord of hosts *is shall be* with us; the God of Jacob *is* our refuge. Selah" (vv. 10–11).

The prophecy here is that in the last days, God will speak these words to the nations (the Gentiles). That, in effect, was fulfilled in December 1833, shortly after the work on the JST was completed, through D&C 101:16. Like this psalm, section 101 has Zion as its subject: "Therefore, let your hearts be comforted concerning Zion; for all flesh is in mine hands; be still and know that I am God."

In the JST, both Psalms 11:1 and 12:1 start with the phrase "In that day," a clear reference to the future day of God's judgment, retribution, and triumph.<sup>9</sup> "In that day" the Lord "shalt come" to his temple (Psalm 11:1) or "shalt help" the poor and the meek (Psalm 12:1). In 11:1, the Lord's people will also hear his voice calling to them: "**Thou shalt say unto thy people, for my ear hath heard thy voice: How thou shalt say ye to my unto every soul, Flee as a bird to your unto my mountain, and the righteous shall flee like a bird that is let go from the snare of the fowler**" (Psalm 11:1). The phrase "my mountain" in this verse parallels "his holy temple" (Psalm 11:4), as the image of a mountain does in other Old Testament scriptures, such as Isaiah 2:2–3. God's people are commanded to flee from the wickedness of the world to his mountain/temple, even as a bird miraculously freed from its snare. Variations on the phrase "snare of the fowler" are repeated in other psalms (91:3 and 124:7) and in Hosea 9:8, so this JST change adds a fourth occurrence of the image. "Fowler" can be seen as a metaphor for the devil and his evil powers and influences. (Compare 1 Timothy 3:7; 6:9; and 2 Timothy 2:26, all of which associate a snare, or bird's trap, with the devil.) The uniqueness of this verse is that the righteous are called to flee the satanic snare with great haste in order to get to the safety of God's holy mountain.

Prior to translating the psalms, Joseph Smith received section 88 of the Doctrine and Covenants (dated December 27, 1832), which includes “a commandment that you assemble yourselves together, and organize yourselves, and prepare yourselves, and sanctify yourselves; yea, purify your hearts, and cleanse your hands and your feet before me, that I may make you clean” (D&C 88:74). After recounting great events of the last days leading up to the Second Coming, the revelation continues: “Therefore, verily I say unto you, my friends, call your solemn assembly, as I have commanded you. . . . Organize yourselves; prepare every needful thing; and establish a house, even a house of prayer, a house of fasting, a house of faith, a house of learning, a house of glory, a house of order, a house of God” (D&C 88:117, 119). This is the first revelation in the Doctrine and Covenants that directed the Saints to build a temple in this dispensation. The translation of Psalm 11 came chronologically just after section 88, so the psalm’s “mountain” and “holy temple” can be interpreted through that revelation. These phrases then refer not only to a place to worship but to a sanctuary from Satan’s power, an additional and powerful motivation to construct the house of God called for in section 88.

Protecting the righteous by the Lord’s power is an important theme of the last days. Psalm 24 in the JST reflects this emphasis:

**Who is this King of glory? And the Lord strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle, who is the king of glory, shall establish you forever. And he will roll away the heavens, and will come down to redeem his people; to make you an everlasting name; to establish you upon his everlasting rock. Lift up your heads, O ye gates generations of Jacob; even lift *them* up your heads, ye everlasting doors generations; and the Lord of hosts, the King of Kings; even the King of glory shall come in unto you; and shall redeem his people, and shall establish them in righteousness.** (Psalm 24:8–9)

Thus the heavens are rolled away so that the Lord in his power is revealed. Isaiah used similar language when he said, “The heavens shall be rolled together as a scroll” (Isaiah 34:4). This image is also used in Revelation 6:14 and in Doctrine and Covenants 88:95, which was revealed to Joseph Smith in late December 1832 and early January 1833, just prior to his work on this psalm.

Another eschatological sense of these psalms is one of judgment, captured in many verses but illustrated particularly in one verse: “**Therefore, thus saith**

**the Lord, I will arise in that day, I will stand upon the earth, and I will judge the earth** for the oppression of the poor, for the sighing of the needy; ~~now will I arise, saith~~ **and their cry hath entered into mine ear, therefore the Lord; shall sit in judgment, upon all those who say in their hearts, We all sit** I will set *him* in safety ~~from him that~~ **and** puffeth at him” (Psalm 12:5).

The expression added by the Prophet at the beginning of Psalm 12:5, “Thus saith the Lord,” is common in scripture—used over five hundred times—when a prophet is declaring the words of God, but it is never employed in Psalms in the KJV. In the Doctrine and Covenants, the phrase appears sixty-two times, many of those prior to the time the Prophet labored on the psalms. Joseph Smith understood well what it meant to say “thus saith the Lord.” This phrase’s addition to Psalm 12 in the JST makes this psalm prophetic, highlighting the direct revelation to the Psalmist. This thought continues in the next verse where it is confirmed that “**these are the words of the Lord, are yea pure words**” (Psalm 12:6).

The inserted phrase toward the end of JST Psalm 12:5, “the Lord shall sit in judgment,” applies to those who oppress the poor and ignore their sighing. Other scriptures speak of the Lord judging the poor (see Psalm 72:2, 4; Isaiah 11:4; Jeremiah 22:16; 2 Nephi 30:9), but not to their condemnation. Rather, in Psalms, judgment “refers to the activity of a third party who sits over two parties at odds with one another. This third party hears their cases against one another and decides where right is and what do to about it.”<sup>10</sup> This image of judgment fits perfectly with the JST changes to the Lord judging between the poor and their oppressors and coming down on the side of his covenant people: “Thou shalt keep them **save thy people**, O Lord, **thou shalt keep them**; thou shalt preserve them from **the wickedness of this generation these generations** for ever” (Psalm 12:7). The Lord provides his people with a temporal and spiritual preservation because they made and kept covenants. It is through covenants that God will preserve his people from the wickedness of the world around them in the latter days. The JST addition of “save” in this verse brings into focus the ultimate goal of that preservation—to bring the people to the salvation of God, for which they worship the Lord Jehovah.

### Encouragement against Enemies

By early 1833, Joseph Smith had already experienced much persecution, starting with his early accounts of the First Vision being rejected by a local

minister (Joseph Smith—History 1:21). Some enemies came from outside the Church—in June 1830, while the Prophet was preparing to baptize some people in Colesville, New York, a mob spurred on by a local minister attempted to prevent the activity.<sup>11</sup> Other enemies were actually Church members who turned against the Prophet, such as Ezra Booth, who decided that Joseph Smith was “Mormonism’s signal weakness,”<sup>12</sup> or Symonds Ryder, who left the Church in anger when his name was misspelled.<sup>13</sup> In early 1832, the Prophet was tarred and feathered by an angry group of which Ryder was a member and which was stirred on by Booth’s hatred. Additionally, in the summer of that year, Joseph labored to establish credibility with some Missouri Saints who were anxious to point out flaws they perceived in Joseph’s behavior.<sup>14</sup> All of this opposition left the Prophet sensitive to the words and efforts of those he perceived to be his enemies, whether in or out of the Church. Revelation about how the Lord views the enemies of his people and kingdom would have been highly comforting, such as that included in Psalm 10:

Wherefore doth The wicked contemn God, **wherefore** he hath said **doth say** in his heart, Thou wilt not require *it* **iniquity at my hand**. **Oh Lord**, thou hast seen it **all this**; for thou beholdest mischief and spite, to requite *it* with thy hand: the poor committeth himself unto thee; thou art the helper of the fatherless. **Oh Lord, thou wilt break thou** the arm of the wicked and **of** the evil *man*: **and** seek out his wickedness *till* **until** thou find none **that remain**. **And** the Lord *is* **shall be** King for ever and ever **over his people**: **for** the heathen **wicked** are perished **shall perish** out of his land. (Psalm 10:13–16)

The opening question in verse 13 is changed to a statement, declaring that the wicked not only condemn God but deny that God will judge them for their iniquities. In verses 14 and 15, the Psalmist pleads with the Lord that this will not be the case, with the JST addition of “Oh Lord” at the beginning of both verses to confirm to whom the prayerful words are addressed or to add emphasis and pathos to the pleading to the Lord. The entire section is changed to future tense to anticipate God’s judgment on the wicked, and it seems to foresee more potential persecutions.

Verse 16 presents the first psalm change that anticipates teachings about Zion, which become more clear and direct in subsequent changes (see “The Desire for Zion” below).<sup>15</sup>

Another passage promises that enemies will be held accountable for their crimes: “The wicked walk on every side, when **and** the vilest men are exalted; **but in the day of their pride thou shalt visit them**” (Psalm 12:8). “Visit” in the Old Testament is typically translated from *pāqad* (in the Qal form), meaning to “exercise oversight over a subordinate, either in the form of inspecting or of taking action to cause a considerable change.”<sup>16</sup> The change can either be a promised reward (as in Genesis 50:24, where Joseph promised his family the Lord would take them back to the land of Abraham) or a punishment (as in Exodus 32:34, where the Lord punished the people for making the golden calf). In the JST of Psalm 12:8, the sense is clearly one of punishment of the wicked and is in stark contrast to the promised preservation and salvation of the righteous in the preceding verse. This change completes the eschatological reversal of the JST changes elsewhere in this psalm—in the JST, the wicked will be punished; in the KJV, the wicked are left in their positions of power and authority.

While many of these changes emphasize the judgment that will come upon the wicked, some also provide comfort to those suffering under their hands: “I had fainted; Unless I had believed to see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living, **thou wouldest deliver my soul into hell. Thou didst say unto me, Wait on the Lord: be of good courage, and he shall strengthen thine thy heart: wait, I say, on the Lord**” (Psalm 27:13–14).

The Psalmist elsewhere shows gratitude to God for delivering his soul from the lowest hell (Psalm 86:13; see also Proverbs 23:14). Alma also exhorts members of the Church to remember how the Lord delivered the souls of their fathers from hell (Alma 5:6). This addition to Psalm 27:13 presents that concept from another perspective—without belief in the Lord, he *would be* delivered into hell—at the same time poetically paralleling verse 12, where the Psalmist asks to be delivered from the will of his enemies.

In a remarkable turn in verse 14, the Psalmist’s words become the Lord’s direction, emphasizing the revelatory nature of the counsel and giving courage and strength to Joseph and the fledgling Church against their enemies.

Another change confirming the Lord’s support is found in Psalm 138: “The Lord will perfect *that which* concerneth me **in knowledge, concerning his kingdom.:** thy mercy I will praise thee, O Lord, *endureth* for ever: **for thou art merciful, and wilt not forsake not the works of thine own hands**” (Psalm 138:8).



Many psalms are doxologies, meaning they are focused on praise. The Prophet changed Psalm 138 from a plea for God to remember his children to a doxology—a bold and positive declaration that the merciful Lord will not forsake them, giving greater reason to praise and worship the Lord.

### Reflective of Revelations and Visions

Joseph Smith received many revelations, visitations, and visions prior to 1833. The most significant had to be the First Vision. In the summer of 1832, Joseph Smith was working on the first recorded history we have from him. In that history, he paraphrased Psalm 14:1 as a concept that struck him before the vision: “My heart exclaimed well hath the wise man said the <it is a> fool <that> saith in his heart there is my God.”<sup>17</sup> During the account of the vision itself, he quoted Psalm 14:3 as part of what the Lord said to him: “None doeth good no not one.”<sup>18</sup> Both of these uses of Psalm 14 are nearly identical to how they appear in the KJV, so it would seem reasonable not to expect any later JST changes. But during the translation work, the Prophet dramatically transformed the first four verses of Psalm 14 to become almost “another account of the First Vision”:<sup>19</sup>

The fool hath said in his heart, **There is no man that hath seen God, because he sheweth himself not unto us, therefore, there is no God. Behold,** they are corrupt, they have done abominable works, *there is* and none that of them doeth good. For the Lord looked look down from heaven upon the children of men, and by his voice said unto his servant, seek ye among the children of men, to see if there were are any that did do understand, *and* seek God. And he opened his mouth unto the Lord, and said, behold, all these who say they are thine. The Lord answered and said, They are all gone aside, they are all together become filthy: *there is* thou canst behold none of these that doeth are doing good, no, not one. All they have for their teachers all the are workers of iniquity and there is no knowledge in them?. They are they who eat up my people; as they eat bread, and call not upon the Lord. (Psalm 14:1–4)

There is a subtle and appropriate shift in theology in these verses. In the KJV, the Lord is the one looking down and seeking to know the current state

of things, while in the Prophet's revised psalm, the Lord is instructing his servant about what is happening.<sup>20</sup>

The Prophet made other inspired changes in the Bible to teach that man does indeed see God under certain conditions,<sup>21</sup> and the Prophet referred to this revealed truth in the psalm's message: not only does the fool say there is no God, but his reason for saying this is that he believes no one can see God. Of course, Joseph saw God and was persecuted by such "fools" for saying so (Joseph Smith—History 1:21–22).

Even with Joseph's multiple accounts of the First Vision, we do not have all the details of his conversation with the Lord.<sup>22</sup> In verses 2–4 of JST Psalm 14, we perhaps get a sense of that extended conversation. First, the Lord asks his servant to consider if anyone around him understands God. The servant's reply is that they all claim to speak for God, but it is a response of confusion and uncertainty, just as Joseph felt prior to his vision. Then the Lord states his position on these people: as Joseph can readily see ("thou canst behold"), they live in apostasy, work iniquity, and lack the knowledge of the truth. After the First Vision, Joseph Smith noted in his history that his "soul was filled with love and for many days I could rejoice with great Joy and the Lord was with me."<sup>23</sup> The translation of Psalm 14 could well have renewed such feelings of joy for the young Prophet.

### Hear and Speak the Word of the Lord

Other psalms appear to address the struggle Joseph Smith expressed in his histories to be forgiven of sins and thus be ready to receive the word of the Lord. In some of his early letters, written just prior to or during the translation of Psalms, Joseph Smith wrote about "an awful struggle with satan"<sup>24</sup> and how he was "left to morn w <and> Shed tears of sorrow for my folly in Sufering the adversary of my Soul to have so much power over me."<sup>25</sup> He lamented, "I often times wandered alone in the lonely places seeking consolation of him who is <alone> able to console me."<sup>26</sup> In all of this, he sought to hear and speak the word of the Lord that he might better fulfill his calling. He longed to "stand together and gase upon Eternal wisdom engraven upon the hevens," praying that God would "deliver us in thy due time from the little narrow prison almost as it were totel darkness of paper pen and ink and a crooked broken scattered and imperfect language."<sup>27</sup> Inspired changes in the psalms reflect these same desires and concerns.

Joseph Smith’s translation of Psalm 13 starts, “*How long wilt thou forget me, O Lord, wilt thou withdraw thyself from me? for ever? how long wilt thou hide thy face from me that I may not see thee? wilt thou forget me, and cast me off from thy presence forever?*” (Psalm 13:1). The JST expansion of verse 1 greatly deepens the feeling of despondency in this psalm, which already expresses a “deep sense of abandonment.”<sup>28</sup> The author feels distanced from God, for the Lord has withdrawn himself and hidden his face from him. The author no longer experiences divine visitations, and he wonders how long (a phrase repeated four times in the first two verses) until he will see the Lord again. Most importantly, he fears God will forget him (*shākah*, which has the sense of intentional neglect or ceasing to care),<sup>29</sup> causing him to be driven out of the Lord’s presence forever.

His concern for this outcome is because of his sins: “Consider **me, O Lord**, and hear me **my cry**, O Lord my God: **and** lighten mine eyes, lest I sleep the *steep of death of the ungodly*” (Psalm 13:3). He fears his sins might bring him “the death of the ungodly.” But he is sorrowing and praying for forgiveness (“Consider me, O Lord, and hear my cry”), similar to the plea in Nephi’s psalm (2 Nephi 4:16–35), in which the Nephite prophet sought to be delivered out of the hands of his enemies but also recognized that sin was “the enemy of my soul” (2 Nephi 4:28).

Changes to Psalm 17 extend the developing plea in the KJV to a worshipful commitment to act when the author’s prayer is answered: “Hear the **Give me right word**, O Lord, **speak and thy servant shall hear thee**; attend unto my cry, **and** give ear unto my prayer, *that goeth I come not unto thee* out of feigned lips” (v. 1). The phrase “right word” (from the Hebrew word *yōšer*) is used elsewhere only in Job 6:25, where the term refers to words of “uprightness” (in the ASV and JPS translations of the Bible) or “honesty” (NASB and NIV). The most important addition is the commitment to hear the Lord’s teachings, implying both hearing the words and obeying them. To show his readiness to do this, the writer declared that God had “proved mine **my heart**” (Psalm 17:3), meaning the writer had passed the Lord’s test and enjoyed visits from him in the past. Continuing to expound his qualifications, the author told God that “**thou shalt find nothing evil in me**”<sup>30</sup> and that his own “mouth shall not transgress” (v. 3). So Joseph Smith, after the First Vision, felt concerned about his own sins, but he also clarified that he was not “guilty of any great or malignant

sins” and had “full confidence in obtaining a divine manifestation” (Joseph Smith—History 1:28–29).

In Psalm 22, it is easy to hear the concern of the young Prophet as he struggles to be directed by the Lord in establishing Zion in Missouri and building a temple in Kirtland but feels alone in these great responsibilities: “My God, my God; why hast thou forsaken me? **My God, hear the words of my roaring.** *why art Thou so art* far from helping me, and from the words of my roaring?. O my God, I cry in the daytime, but thou hearest **answerest** not; and in the night season, and am not silent” (Psalm 22:1–2). Such words are also reminiscent of a later prayer from the depths of Liberty Jail (D&C 121:1–6).

Joseph Smith’s burden of declaring God’s word to so many people comes through in one psalm: “When I kept silence, **my spirit failed within me.** **When I opened my mouth,** my bones waxed old through my roaring **speaking** all the day long. For day and night thy hand **spirit** was heavy upon me: my moisture is turned into the drought of summer. Selah” (Psalm 32:3–4). These verses naturally draw the reader to Jeremiah 20:8–9, where that prophet, though tired of speaking the Lord’s message, felt God’s word like a burning fire in his bones and could not keep from speaking it to the people even though it brought him great persecution. Joseph Smith expressed a similar sentiment in one of his letters: “my bowels is filled with compassion towards them and I am determined to lift up my voice . . . [though] I prefer reading and praying and holding comunion with the holy spirit and writing to <you> then walking the streets.”<sup>31</sup>

Joseph Smith greatly desired to commune with the Lord. In fact, one of the main goals of the School of the Prophets, organized in January 1833—the same time as the translation of Psalms was beginning—was to allow all its members to see the Lord: “The Lord helping us we will obey, as on conditions of our obedience, he has promised <us> great things, yea <even> a visit from the heavens to honor us with his own presence.” But the Prophet also feared that they “should fail of this great honor which our master proposes to confer on us.”<sup>32</sup> This desire is captured beautifully in Psalm 42, along with a sense of the writer’s vulnerability to the criticism of his enemies: “My soul thirsteth for **to see** God, for **to see** the living God: when shall I come and appear before **thee, O God?** My tears have been my meat **poured out unto thee** day and night, while they **mine enemies** continually say unto me, Where is thy God?” (Psalm 42:2–3).

The Prophet’s rendering of the KJV expression—“My tears have been my meat **poured out unto thee** day and night”—is marvelously literal, interpreting the symbolic meaning that tears have been the Psalmist’s only food (KJV “meat”) to reflect his constant prayers for the desired blessings. Finally, it is not clear in the KJV what the antecedent for “they” is in the last part of verse 3. The inspired change to “mine enemies” has support from modern translations, one of which (NLT) indeed uses the word “enemies” in verse 3.

### The Desire for Zion

The concept of Zion was prominent in the minds of Church members in early 1833. Through the translation of Genesis, Joseph Smith had learned of Enoch’s Zion, where the people “were of one heart and one mind, and dwelt in righteousness; and there was no poor among them” (Moses 7:18). Additional revelations followed in 1831 that mentioned Enoch and Zion and commanded the Saints to “be one” and care for the poor (D&C 38:4, 25, 27, 35); promised that with faith they would receive God’s law (D&C 41:3); revealed the law of consecration (D&C 42); and established Independence as the center of Zion (D&C 57:1–3). In 1831, Saints had started moving to Missouri to build up Zion there, and Joseph Smith traveled to Missouri in the summer of 1831 and spring of 1832 to dedicate a temple location, hold conferences, and keep the work moving forward.

Thus it is not surprising that the JST changes four of the psalms to focus them on the establishment of Zion, a word already appearing thirty-seven times in the KJV psalms. On the surface, the addition of four more references to Zion in the JST (Psalms 14:7; 15:1; 46:5; 53:6) might seem a small change, but each addition adds a significant dimension to the biblical picture of Zion.

In the JST, Psalm 15:1 reads, “Lord, who shall abide in thy tabernacle? who shall dwell in thy holy hill **of Zion?**” The phrase “holy hill of Zion” is found uniquely in Psalm 2:6 in the KJV, though the place called Zion (often a mount or hill) is mentioned in other scriptures, such as Psalms 48:2, 11; 74:2; 125:1; Isaiah 4:5; 8:18; 10:32; 18:7; 24:23; and 31:4. The poetic parallelism between the two phrases ending with “tabernacle” and “holy hill” is enhanced by the JST addition “of Zion,” since *Zion* also refers to the temple or the dwelling place of God (Psalms 9:11; 76:2; Joel 3:17).

The JST of Psalm 46:5 reads, “**For Zion shall come, and God is shall be** in the midst of her; she shall not be moved: God shall help her; *and that* right

early.” While other psalms plead for Zion to come down, this translation is a prophetically sure statement—Zion *will* come and God *shall* be in her midst (compare Moses 7:64).

The next addition of *Zion* in the JST appears in Psalm 53:6: “Oh that **Zion were come**, the salvation of Israel, **were come for** out of Zion **shall they be judged**,<sup>†</sup> when God bringeth back the captivity of his people, **and** Jacob shall rejoice, and Israel shall be glad.” The Lord judging the people is a common theme in Psalms (e.g., 96:13) and other scriptures (e.g., Jeremiah 11:20), but this is the only reference in all scripture to judgment issuing from Zion.<sup>33</sup>

The most significant JST changes relating to Zion are found in the last three verses of Psalm 14, the same psalm that starts as an account of the First Vision, linking the beginning of and the major reason for the Restoration. In 1833, achieving Zion was “the most important subject which then engrossed the attention of the saints”<sup>34</sup> and “one of the main objects of Joseph Smith’s ministry.”<sup>35</sup> These last three verses read, “~~There were~~ **They are** in great fear: for God **is dwells** in the generation of the righteous. **He is the counsel of the poor, because they are ashamed of the wicked, and flee unto the Lord for their refuge.** ~~Ye have shamed~~ **They are ashamed** of the counsel of the poor, because the Lord *is* his refuge. Oh that **Zion were established out of heaven**, the salvation of Israel, ~~were come~~ out of **O Lord, when wilt thou establish Zion!?** When the Lord bringeth back the captivity of his people, Jacob shall rejoice, and Israel shall be glad” (Psalm 14:5–7).

As in the Book of Moses, Zion in Psalm 14 is where “God dwells”; his presence brings fear to the city’s enemies. Zion is where the poor “flee unto the Lord for their refuge.” A refuge is “a shelter where vulnerable animals or vulnerable human beings hide from attack or storm or sun. . . . It thus comes to be a figure for Yhwh’s [Jehovah’s] relationship with vulnerable people.”<sup>36</sup> Because the Church needed that refuge in 1833, the Prophet’s inspired prayer that “Zion were established out of heaven” was an impassioned call for Enoch’s city to return and join the fledgling New Jerusalem in Jackson County (Moses 7:62–63). The plea immediately following, “O Lord, when wilt thou establish Zion?” implies, like Doctrine and Covenants 58:3–4, that it may not be soon. In January 1833—the likely time he was translating the psalms—Joseph Smith wrote with prophetic optimism to N. C. Saxton, the editor of the *American Revivalist, and Rochester Observer*, “The City, of Zion, spoke of by David in the 102 Psalm will be built upon the Land of America and the ransomed of the Lord shall return and come

to it with songs and everlasting joy upon their heads, and then they will be delivered from the overflowing scourge that shall pass through the Land.”<sup>37</sup> But four years later, after the Saints were persecuted in Missouri and had their homes and lands seized, Joseph wrote another letter with a different tone, referring to language in Psalm 137:1–4:

When the children of Zion are stranger[s] in a strange land their harps must be hung upon the willows: and they cannot sing the songs of Zion: but should mourn and not dance. Therefore brethren, it remains for all such to be exercised with prayer, and continual supplication, until Zion is redeemed. We realize the situation that all the brethren and sisters must be in, being deprived of their spiritual privileges, which are enjoyed by those who set in heavenly places in Christ Jesus; where there are no mobs to rise up and bind their consciences. Nevertheless, it is wisdom that the church should make but little or no stir in that region, and cause as little excitement as possible and endure their afflictions patiently until the time appointed.<sup>38</sup>

The tension between seeking to establish Zion and patiently waiting for the Lord to fully reveal his hand was the story of the Church for many years to come.

## Conclusion

The songs of prayer, lament, praise, and worship that are the psalms have played an important role in Jewish synagogues and Christian churches for more than two thousand years, teaching millions about God and how to communicate with him at the deepest, most personal level. Joseph Smith was clearly a student of the Psalter before he began his translation, for he saw in them his own struggle prior to the First Vision.<sup>39</sup> Even before he completed the translation of the psalms in early 1833, the Prophet’s personal feelings were often expressed in psalm-like language, and this kind of language only increased after the translation.<sup>40</sup> This work also pushed Joseph Smith to a new understanding of many psalms. Like Nephi with Isaiah (2 Nephi 11:2–8), the Prophet directly applied the words of the psalms to himself and the young Church, and he delighted in what he discovered. The result was an intensely personal and prophetic experience that reflected Joseph Smith’s focus on the last days, Zion, and the struggles of the Church, and that provided echoes and insights into his own

visions, revelations, and individual experiences with the Almighty. With the authors of the psalms, he sought to worship God and understand, teach, and live his commandments: “Give me right word, O Lord; speak and thy servant shall hear” (JST, Psalm 17:1).

---

## Notes

1. See Robert J. Matthews, “A Plainer Translation”: *Joseph Smith’s Translation of the Bible, a History and Commentary* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1975), 264–65; Robert J. Matthews, moderator, “The JST: Retrospect and Prospect—A Panel,” in *The Joseph Smith Translation: The Restoration of Plain and Precious Things*, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Robert L. Miller, Religious Studies Monograph Series 12 (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1985), 292.

2. Joseph Smith to William W. Phelps, in *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, comp. and ed. Dean C. Jessee, rev. ed. (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2002), 274.

3. *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2nd ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1980), 1:324.

4. *History of the Church*, 1:295, 322.

5. Matthew 24 was probably translated in late May or early June 1831, but no later than June 19, 1831, the day Joseph Smith and his scribe, Sidney Rigdon, left for Missouri. This departure concluded the work on the New Testament at Matthew 26:71 until they returned in October and resumed translating; see *History of the Church*, 1:188; and Scott H. Faulring, Kent P. Jackson, and Robert J. Matthews, eds., *Joseph Smith’s New Translation of the Bible: Original Manuscripts* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2004), 58.

6. Although some contest that the English language does not really have a future tense, these examples and others throughout the paper inarguably indicate futurity and will be referred to as future tense for the sake of simplicity.

7. R. Scott Burton, “The Hymnal of Ancient Israel,” in *Studies in Scripture*, vol. 4, 1 *Kings to Malachi*, ed. Kent P. Jackson (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1993), 409.

8. Unless otherwise specified, passages from the Bible are presented with the King James Version as the base text and with JST deletions indicated by ~~strikeout~~ and additions by **bold**, following the text as presented in *The Complete Joseph Smith Translation of the Old Testament*, ed. Thomas A. Wayment (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2009). Italicized words, which frequently attracted the Prophet’s attention because they represent words not in the original languages, are presented as they appear in the KJV.

9. For example, see Isaiah 2:11; 4:2; 7:18, 23; 11:11; 22:12; 24:21; 26:1; Jeremiah 3:16; 30:8; Ezekiel 24:26–27; Hosea 2:18; Joel 3:18; Zechariah 14:4–21.

10. W. E. Vine, Merrill F. Unger, and William White Jr., *Vine’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1996), 125.



11. Karen Lynn Davidson, David J. Whittaker, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Richard L. Jensen, eds., *Histories, Volume 1: Joseph Smith Histories, 1832–1844*, vol. 1 of the Histories series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, ed. Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2012), 390–97; hereafter *H1*.

12. Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 169.

13. See Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 170.

14. See Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 186–87.

15. It is significant with these verses that though the Hebrew is consistently translated in the present tense in all translations, including the KJV, the change to the future tense in the JST is matched in the Greek Septuagint (LXX) version, providing a supportive text.

16. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, and Bruce K. Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1980), 731.

17. *H1*, 12.

18. *H1*, 13.

19. Joseph F. McConkie, “Joseph Smith and the Poetic Writings,” in *The Joseph Smith Translation*, 111.

20. Burton, “Hymnal of Ancient Israel,” in *1 Kings to Malachi*, 410.

21. See the JST versions of Exodus 33:20, 23; John 1:18; 1 Timothy 6:15–16; 1 John 4:12.

22. As illustrated by this comment: “He again forbade me to join with any of them; and many other things did he say unto me, which I cannot write at this time” (Joseph Smith—History 1:20).

23. *H1*, 13.

24. *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, 257.

25. *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, 264.

26. *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, 272.

27. *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, 287.

28. John Goldingay, *Psalms*, vol. 1, *Psalms 1–41* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 204.

29. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2001), 1013; *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 922.

30. While “evil in me” is not in the KJV, the JST addition agrees with the LXX version of this verse, which reads, “Thou hast tried me as with fire, and unrighteousness (*adikia*) has not been found in me.” *Adikia* is also used in New Testament scriptures, including John 7:18 (“unrighteousness”) and 1 Corinthians 13:6 (“iniquity”).

31. *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, 279.

32. *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, 293.

33. Other scriptures do relate that in the millennial day “out of Zion shall go forth the law” (Isaiah 2:3; see also Micah 4:2), perhaps implying judgment by the standard of that law.

34. Quoted in Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 161.

35. Burton, "Hymnal of Ancient Israel," in Jackson, *Studies in Scriptures* 4, 409.
36. Goldingay, *Psalms 1–41*, 216.
37. *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, 297.
38. *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, 365–66.
39. See *H1*, 12.

40. Joseph Smith's journal entries are often laced with short prayers that have the ring of the psalms, such as "oh may God grant that I may be directed in all my thoughts Oh bless thy Servant" and "Oh how marvellous are thy works Oh Lord and I thank thee for thy me[r]cy unto me thy servent Oh Lord save me in thy kingdom for Christ sake Amen" (18). Dean C. Jessee, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Richard L. Jensen, eds., *Journals, Volume 1: 1832–1839*, vol. 1 of the Journals series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, ed. Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2008), 9, 18. Scores of similar pleas are found in the 1832–34 journal in the same volume.