New Discoveries in the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible

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In November 2004, the Religious Studies Center at Brigham Young University published a facsimile transcription of all the original manuscripts of the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible.¹ I was privileged to be one of the editors of the project and worked with those manuscripts in preparing the publication. A facsimile transcription seeks to reproduce in print—as much as is humanly and typographically possible—the writing found on a handwritten document. Thus the transcription includes the writers’ original spelling, grammar, punctuation, line endings, omissions, errors, insertions, and deletions. The purpose of the publication is to provide scholars and lay readers with an accurate reproduction of the text as found on Joseph Smith’s original manuscripts. Its importance is in the fact that those documents had never been made public before but were only available for study by a limited number of researchers.

The last Latter-day Saint leader with any hands-on involvement in the JST was Joseph Smith himself. After his death, the manuscripts were in the possession of his family and then the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (RLDS, now Community of Christ). Today they are carefully preserved in the Library-Archives of the Community of Christ in Independence, Missouri. None of those who assisted the Prophet as scribes came west with the Saints, and so from the time of his death, contact between the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and the Bible translation was for the most part severed. It was not until the 1960s that the contact was reestablished,
when Brigham Young University professor Robert J. Matthews undertook the first serious and systematic study of the original manuscripts. More recent efforts by others, including recent scholarly publications on the JST, build on the foundation established by Professor Matthews. Now, thanks to the cooperation of the Community of Christ in making possible the publication of the manuscripts, the texts are available for continued research and exploration.

During the course of our work with the New Translation (the term used by Joseph Smith and his contemporaries), we learned many things. Some confirmed what was already known, but there were also some surprises. This article will touch briefly on a few of the things we discovered.

How the Translation Was Done

Although the Prophet left no written account of the process by which the translation was accomplished, there are important clues in the manuscripts, and thus we understand the work better now than ever before.

Like many other important people of his generation, Joseph Smith did almost all of his writing with the help of scribes. In the 446 pages of the New Translation manuscripts, his handwriting is found on only four pages where he served as his own scribe and on seven other pages where he wrote small, isolated corrections. Otherwise, he dictated the text, and his scribes wrote down what they heard from him.

The translation was done sequentially—not by topic, as some have supposed. And it was done from one end of the Bible to the other, but not exactly in that order. Joseph Smith translated Genesis 1–24 between June 1830 and March 1831. Then he was instructed in a revelation to leave the Old Testament and translate the New Testament (see D&C 45:60–61), which he did from March 1831 to July 1832. He then returned to Genesis 24, and he translated from there to the end of the Old Testament, finishing in July 1833. But the translation was not complete with the original dictation. There is much evidence on the manuscripts that Joseph Smith went over sections already translated and made additional refinements and corrections—until he felt that the translation was as the Lord wanted it to be.

Before the translation began, Oliver Cowdery had purchased a Bible for Joseph Smith and himself. The Prophet used that Bible for the New Translation, apparently from the very beginning. Much of the work was done with Joseph Smith dictating the text in full. The evidence tells us that he had the Bible in front of him, likely in his lap
or on a table, and that he read from it while his scribes wrote. When he
came to a passage needing revision, he would dictate words not found
in the King James text until he came back to that text and continued
with it. The writing on the manuscripts shows no indication of when
the text was coming out of the printed Bible and when it was coming
through revelation. The scribes may not have known when he was sim-
ply reading and when he was uttering words not found on the printed
page. The translations of Genesis 1–24 and Matthew 1–John 5 were
recorded that way.

But many Bible chapters required no changes at all, and thus mid-
way through the translation, Joseph Smith (perhaps with some pleading
by his scribe) developed a system in which only the corrections and
additions would be recorded, rather than the entire text including pas-
sages with no changes. On the pages where the short-notation system
was used, we see the following system at work: Joseph Smith dictated
to his scribes the chapter and verse references and then only the new
words or sentences. In his Bible, he marked the words to be replaced
and the locations for insertions and changes. Thus the Prophet’s Bible
contains the deletion and insertion points, and the manuscripts contain
only the new words to be inserted. So in order to understand fully what
Joseph Smith had in mind with the changes in Genesis 24–Malachi
and John 6–Revelation, readers and researchers need to study both the
marked Bible and the original manuscripts. In our publication of the
documents, we made that possible by printing photographs of almost
fourteen hundred marked verses from Joseph Smith’s Bible on pages
directly facing the corresponding manuscript transcriptions.

Scribes and Dates

Modern technology has allowed us to confirm and clarify some
important points regarding the scribes and the dates they worked.
In the 1970s Robert Matthews developed the general chronological
outline of the translation, based on evidence on the manuscripts. Our
work in recent years made use of high-definition scanned images that
allowed magnification and computer enhancement. As a result, we
were able to see things in the electronic images that are not visible on
the original manuscripts, even with a magnifying glass. But much of
our progress in recent years was the result not of high technology but
of good detective work. In the summer of 1995, my coeditors, Robert
Matthews and Scott Faulring, were examining the pages of the first
Old Testament manuscript at the RLDS archives in Independence,
Missouri. Faulring was then a research historian with the Joseph Field-
ing Smith Institute for Latter-day Saint History. Professor Matthews had a hunch years ago that Emma Smith may have served as one of the Prophet’s scribes. When looking at some handwriting attributed to John Whitmer that did not look quite as expected, they decided to act on his hunch and check the writing against some Emma Smith letters in the archives. A positive match was established that was later confirmed when Faulring did an extensive examination with other examples.

Thanks to the handwriting expertise of Faulring and my student assistant Brenda Johnson, we now are quite certain of the exact locations where one scribal hand ends and another begins, and we have been able to correlate some of that information with known events and dates in Church history. Oliver Cowdery, John Whitmer, Emma Smith, Sidney Rigdon, and Frederick G. Williams are the known scribes, but one other scribe remains unidentified. We called him or her “Scribe X” while we worked on the manuscripts, but we gave in to the more dignified title “Scribe A” for the publication. There is also one other unidentified hand that transcribed just a few lines from one manuscript to another. Some other people, probably office workers employed by Joseph Smith, added verse breaks and corrections to the spelling, capitalization, and punctuation. RLDS archivists added a few small notations for organizational purposes, like occasional line numbers and page numbers. A few small corrections, written in pencil, appear to be in the handwriting of Joseph Smith III, the Prophet’s son and president of the RLDS Church (1860–1914). Most of them correct copying errors made by scribes. One small insertion he made to an awkward but correct King James phrase (perhaps thinking it was an error by a scribe) was mistakenly made into a footnote in the LDS edition of the Bible: “... and worthy of death” at Matthew 26:66.

Scott Faulring found some important historical sources that allowed us to make significant improvements in the internal dating. Two documents relating to the scribal work of Frederick G. Williams now let us know when the New Testament translation was finished (July 1832) and help us understand the timing of the corrections the Prophet made after the initial dictation. This revised dating is significant because it helps us correlate revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants with the progress of the JST, and it helps us deal with the question, “When was the JST finished?”

**Types of Changes in the JST**

I believe that parts of the Joseph Smith Translation restore original biblical text that had become lost since the time of the Bible’s authors.
There are some things in the translation that, in my opinion, cannot be explained in any other way. For example, I have found wording on the first Old Testament manuscript that I believe can only be explained as a very literal translation from a Hebrew original. The wording is so odd in English that editors after Joseph Smith’s time took it out, so it is not in the Book of Moses today. Even though I believe that the JST restores original text, it is likely that most changes have other explanations. Joseph Smith taught that some truths pertaining to our salvation were lost even before the Bible was compiled, and thus some JST corrections may reveal teachings or events that never were recorded in the Bible in the first place. Some JST changes probably edit the text to bring it into harmony with truth found in other revelations or elsewhere in the Bible. The Prophet taught: “[There are] many things in the Bible which do not, as they now stand, accord with the revelation of the Holy Ghost to me,” necessitating latter-day correction.

Many changes edit the wording of the Bible to make it more clear and understandable for modern readers. As I examined the changes the Prophet made, I was surprised to see that more individual corrections appear to fall into this last category than into any other. Few are aware of that (nor was I), because the JST footnotes in our LDS Bible rightly focus on the more important matters of doctrine and history. There are many instances in which the Prophet rearranged word order or added words to make the text easier to read or modernized the language to replace archaic King James features with current grammar and vocabulary. There are numerous changes from *saith* to *said*, from *that* and *which* to *who*, and from *thee* and *ye* to *you*. He even modernized the language of his original dictations in some instances. When refining one passage, he changed “this earth upon which thou standest, and thou shalt write” to “this earth upon which you stand, and you shall write.” But by no means were the modernizations done consistently through the manuscripts, and alternative forms like “*mine* hands” and “*my* hands” and *hath* and *has* are very frequent.

**Translation and Revelation**

From observing the writing on the manuscripts, it seems to me that Joseph Smith’s process for translating the Bible was different from that used for the Book of Mormon. On the original Book of Mormon manuscript, there is very little evidence that he struggled with wording, changed his mind, or made later revisions to his translation. His calling was to render the text of the gold plates into the English language, and it appears that he was to do so without modifying, enlarging, or embel-
lishing what Mormon and the other authors had written. When he prepared the second printing of the Book of Mormon, he made spelling and grammatical revisions. He also made some word changes for clarification, but considering the size of the book, those were relatively few.

On the JST manuscripts, we frequently see remarkable writing that suggests that the words flowed spontaneously from the Prophet’s lips without the slightest contemplation, hesitation, or uncertainty. The first page of the translation, which begins Moses 1, gives that impression. But that does not seem to be how all the New Translation came. Other passages show evidence of exertion as the Prophet sought to obtain the right words to convey the intended meanings. There are many instances in which he changed his mind, tried different words until he felt he had them right, or dictated words with which he later was dissatisfied. And even on pages in which the text seemed to flow easily, the Prophet sometimes returned later to make additional corrections and refinements. All of that evidence shows that Joseph Smith was very concerned to have the translation be consistent with the Lord’s will and never content until it was. It seems that in the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible, more so than in the Book of Mormon, the Lord’s instructions for translators were applicable: “You must study it out in your mind; then you must ask me if it be right, and if it is right I will cause that your bosom shall burn within you; therefore, you shall feel that it is right” (D&C 9:8; see also D&C 1:24).

As we researched the JST manuscripts, my student assistant Peter Jasinski discovered that Joseph Smith translated Matthew 26 twice, each with the help of a different scribe. The translations were done several months apart, and it appears that the Prophet simply forgot that he had translated the chapter already. We studied the duplicate translations carefully, believing that they would help us understand the nature of the JST better. The two new translations are not identical; in fact, there are considerable differences. The rewordings for clarity and modernizations of archaic language were done without great consistency, with both of the translations contributing in unique ways. For example, in one of the translations, Joseph Smith modernized most of the King James pronouns, but he changed few in the other.

The most important changes were those that introduced new content or changed a verse’s meaning. What we found when we examined those changes amazed us and added to our appreciation of Joseph Smith and his inspired work. Although some content changes were unique to one new translation or the other, the majority were found in both. Yet the new thoughts the Prophet added to the two translations
were rarely expressed in the same words, and often they were not even inserted at the same locations in the text. In other words, he made the same corrections but not necessarily in the same words or the same places.

Why were the two inspired translations of the same chapter not identical? Joseph Smith taught that when the Holy Ghost gives us “pure intelligence,” it serves in “expanding the mind [and] enlightening the understanding” with “sudden strokes of ideas.”

Our conclusion was as follows: “Perhaps it would be reasonable to propose that as Joseph Smith worked his way through Matthew 26, dictating the text to his scribe Sidney Rigdon in spring 1831 and again to his scribe John Whitmer the next fall, impressions came to his mind in the form of pure intelligence, enlightened understanding, and sudden strokes of ideas—but not necessarily in exact words. Responding to those impressions, the Prophet himself supplied the words that corrected the problem or emphasized the point or otherwise caused the verse to express the ideas that the Lord wanted it to communicate.”

This may explain why the duplicate translations are verbally different.

**The Text of the Book of Moses**

In an earlier article, I gave a general review of how the JST and the Book of Moses came to be. Many Latter-day Saints still do not know that the Book of Moses in the Pearl of Great Price is an excerpt from the JST. It includes the vision Moses had before God revealed to him the Creation account (now Moses 1), and it includes the JST of Genesis 1:1–6:13 (now Moses 2–8). Our Book of Moses text did not come from Joseph Smith’s original manuscripts, however, because those were not available to Latter-day Saints when the Pearl of Great Price was created and when subsequent editions were prepared.

Joseph Smith made his initial translation of the early Genesis chapters between June 1830 and February 1831. Sometime during the next two years, he made additional corrections and refinements to the translation. Years later, Joseph Smith III headed a committee to prepare the publication of the *Inspired Version*, which is a printed version of the Joseph Smith Translation, edited, prepared in Bible format, and published by the RLDS Church beginning in 1867. Unfortunately, the committee did not understand fully the intent of the original manuscripts, and as a result, many of the Prophet’s corrections were not included in the *Inspired Version* text. Because Latter-day Saints in Utah had no access to the original manuscripts, the *Inspired Version* was the best text available to them, and thus in the 1878 Latter-day
Saint Pearl of Great Price, the RLDS *Inspired Version* text through Genesis 6:13 was copied and included verbatim, creating what we now call the Book of Moses. With modifications in editions of 1902, 1921, and 1981, it has remained our text ever since. The 1902 edition made many changes in the text of the Book of Moses, but changes in the later editions were minor.

**When Was the JST Finished?**

It is often heard in the Church that Joseph Smith’s Bible translation was never finished, an assumption that stems from the nineteenth century when we had no access to the manuscripts and virtually no institutional memory about the translation. But careful study of the manuscripts and early historical sources teaches us otherwise. Although in one sense the JST was not finished, in the most important ways it was. It was not finished in the sense that things still needed to be done to get it ready for printing. The spelling on the manuscripts reflects the idiosyncrasies of the individual scribes, the grammar sometimes reflects the frontier English of Joseph Smith, the punctuation is inconsistent, and not all of the text was divided systematically into chapters and verses. The Prophet had assigned assistants to take care of most of those needs, but by the time of his death there was yet much technical work to be done. The Joseph Smith Translation was still in need of editors.

But the translation itself was finished as far as was intended. We know that because the Prophet said so on more than one occasion. At the conclusion of the Old Testament, where the translation ends, the following words are written: “Finished on the 2d day of July 1833.” That same day, the Prophet and his counselors, JST scribes Sidney Rigdon and Frederick G. Williams, wrote to Church members in Missouri and told them, “We this day finished the translating of the Scriptures for which we returned gratitude to our heavenly father.” Could more have been done with the translation? Yes, but it was not designed to be. The Lord could have revealed other things in the JST, but He did not. Instead, beginning in July 1833, Joseph Smith no longer spoke of translating the Bible but of publishing it, which he wanted and intended to do “as soon as possible.” As Robert Matthews pointed out years ago, the Prophet’s own words show that from then on, his efforts were to have it printed as a book, and he repeatedly encouraged Church members to donate money for its publication. But other priorities and a lack of funds caused that it was not printed in his lifetime.

The Bible Dictionary in the English LDS Bible states that Joseph Smith “continued to make modifications [in the translation] until his
death in 1844.”26 Based on information available in the past, that was a reasonable assumption, and I taught it for many years. But we now know that it is not accurate. The best evidence points to the conclusion that when the Prophet called the translation “finished,” he really meant it, and no changes were made in it after the summer (or possibly the fall) of 1833.

The primary evidence is in the handwriting on the manuscripts. In the process of translating the Bible, Joseph Smith made an initial dictation of the text and then later went back over parts of it to make further refinements and corrections. He called that second stage of the process the “reviewing.” The historical sources tell us that the review of previously translated material was going on while the initial translation of other parts of the Bible was still under way. In July 1832 Joseph Smith announced the completion of the New Testament translation and the shift back to the Old Testament, which had been set aside some time earlier.27 Then in February 1833, during the time he was engaged in the Old Testament translation with Frederick G. Williams as scribe, he announced that the “reviewing” of the New Testament had just been completed, for which Sidney Rigdon was the primary scribe.28 The manuscripts show a frequent pattern of translating with one scribe and making additional corrections with another.

What does the handwriting tell us about when the final corrections were completed? Richard P. Howard, an RLDS historian who did early research on the JST manuscripts, wrote that the later corrections were “most likely in the handwriting of Joseph Smith, Jr.”29 Based on that assessment, he and others concluded that the Prophet continued to refine the translation, even until his death in 1844. But, in fact, extremely few of the later corrections are in Joseph Smith’s handwriting. Of the hundreds of corrections made after the original dictation, only fifteen small revisions are in Joseph Smith’s hand. Of the rest, roughly 10 percent are in the hand of Frederick G. Williams, and most of those are in the New Testament and thus were made by February 1833. The remaining 90 percent are in the hand of Sidney Rigdon, and the vast majority of those are early in the New Testament (made by February 1833) and in Old Testament sections that had been translated in 1830 and early 1831. As far as we know from early documents, Elder Rigdon served as the Prophet’s scribe only until the fall of 1833, which is therefore probably the last possible date for any translation changes. Both men were out of Joseph Smith’s favor by 1839. What later writing there is on the manuscripts appears to be the work of the Prophet’s clerks to prepare for the printing—the insertion of punctuation, capitalization, and verse numbers.
The Miracle of the New Translation

The Joseph Smith Translation is a miracle—a divine act of God. Its origin is expressed on the manuscripts in words like these: “A Revelation given to Joseph the Revelator,”30 “A Revelation given to the Elders of the Church of Christ,”31 and “A Translation of the New Testament translated by the power of God.”32 To these can be added the Lord’s words about it in the Doctrine and Covenants: “And the scriptures shall be given, even as they are in mine own bosom, to the salvation of mine own elect” (D&C 35:20). Given these statements, it is hard to imagine that any Latter-day Saint would not take the JST seriously and earnestly seek to learn from it.

My work with the manuscripts increased my appreciation for what this collection of revelation adds to our religion. Consider the following list of doctrines for which the JST makes unique contributions or is our only or best source:33 the nature of God, the scope of the Father’s work, the mission of Jesus Christ, the plan of salvation, the character and motives of Satan, the Fall of Adam, the antiquity of the gospel, Enoch and the establishment of Zion, the doctrine of translation, Melchizedek and his priesthood, the destiny of the house of Israel, the purpose of animal sacrifice, the age of accountability, the origin of the law of Moses, the Second Coming of Jesus Christ, and the degrees of glory.

As one of the editors of the Joseph Smith Translation texts, I labored over the Prophet’s manuscripts most working days and many Saturdays for over six years, a privilege that I will always consider to be among the high points of my life. On numerous occasions I felt to say, as Oliver Cowdery did regarding his service as scribe for the Book of Mormon: “These were days never to be forgotten.”34 On the wall of the office where we worked, my student assistants placed pictures of each of Joseph Smith’s scribes for his Bible revision. We felt honored to be in their company as we worked to make more fully available to the Latter-day Saints this great work of revelation—the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible. 

Notes


3. For example, see Doctrine and Covenants 124:89.
4. Old Testament Manuscript 2, pages 81, 82, 83, and 86.
9. The JST footnotes came from the printed RLDS Inspired Version (1944 edition), not from the manuscripts. See New Testament Manuscript 2, folio 2, page 4, line 9; and RLDS Committee Manuscript, Matthew, page 73, line 6, Library-Archives, Community of Christ, Independence, Missouri. The words “and worthy” are inserted on both manuscripts in Joseph Smith III’s handwriting.
10. Frederick G. Williams, undated statement concerning his employment as scribe, Frederick G. Williams Papers, Church Archives, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah (hereafter, Church Archives); and Joseph Smith to W. W. Phelps, July 31, 1832, Joseph Smith Collection, Church Archives, published in Dean C. Jessee, ed., The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith, rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2002), 274.
11. For an extended discussion of the possible types of changes in the JST, see Faulring, Jackson, and Matthews, Joseph Smith’s New Translation of the Bible, 8–11.
17. Ehat and Cook, Words of Joseph Smith, 4–5; spelling standardized. I thank my friend Richard D. Draper for bringing this quotation to my attention in this context.
20. The Book of Moses material in the 1851 Liverpool Pearl of Great Price was fragmentary, out of order, and came from preliminary manuscripts. The 1878 edition contained a much more accurate and complete text.
21. For a detailed history of the Book of Moses text, see Kent P. Jackson, The
Book of Moses and the Joseph Smith Translation Manuscripts (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2005).


23. Joseph Smith, Sidney Rigdon, and Frederick G. Williams to the Brethren in Zion, July 2, 1833, Joseph Smith Collection, Church Archives, published in Joseph Smith, History of the Church, 1:368.

24. “You will see by these revelations that we have to print the new translation here at Kirtland for which we will prepare as soon as possible.” Joseph Smith, Sidney Rigdon, and Frederick G. Williams to Edward Partridge, August 6, 1833, Joseph Smith Collection, Church Archives.


27. “We have finished the translation of the New Testament . . . , we are making rapid strides in the old book [Old Testament] and in the strength of God we can do all things according to his will” (Joseph Smith to W. W. Phelps, July 31, 1832, Joseph Smith Collection, Church Archives, published in Jessee, Personal Writings of Joseph Smith, 274).


30. Old Testament Manuscript 1, page 1, line 1.


33. The following list summarizes Faulring, Jackson, and Matthews, Joseph Smith’s New Translation of the Bible, 20–25. References can be found there.

34. Latter Day Saints’ Messenger and Advocate 1, no. 1 (October 1834): 14.