



Translators frequently consult the Dead Sea Scroll texts, particularly in problematic passages.

# Why Bible Translations Differ: A Guide for the Perplexed

BEN SPACKMAN

Ben Spackman (benspackman@gmail.com) received an MA in Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations from the University of Chicago, where he pursued further graduate work. Currently a premedical student at City College of New York, he will apply to medical schools in 2014.

---

Brigham Young once said that “if [the Bible] be translated incorrectly, and there is a scholar on the earth who professes to be a Christian, and he can translate it any better than King James’s translators did it, he is under obligation to do so.”<sup>1</sup> Many translations have appeared since 1611, and modern Apostles have profitably consulted these other Bible translations, sometimes citing them in general conference or the *Ensign*.<sup>2</sup> Latter-day Saints who likewise wish to engage in personal study from other Bible translations will quickly notice differences of various kinds, not only in style but also in substance. Some differences between translations are subtle, others glaringly obvious, such as the first translation of Psalm 23 into Tlingit: “The Lord is my Goatherder, I don’t want him; he hauls me up the mountain; he drags me down to the beach.”<sup>3</sup>

While the typical Latter-day Saint reads the Bible fairly often,<sup>4</sup> many are unfamiliar with “where the [biblical] texts originated, how they were transmitted, what sorts of issues translators struggled with, or even how different types of translations work, or even where to start finding answers.”<sup>5</sup> Generally speaking, differences arise from four aspects of the translation process, three

of which are rooted in the original languages. An introduction to these four categories as well as a bit of background on biblical languages can go far in helping readers understand and evaluate different translations. Various Bible versions will be cited by common abbreviation, explained either at the first reference (e.g., KJV), or by an endnote. Due to my own academic training, the following discussion focuses mainly on the Old Testament, but similar issues are involved in translating the New Testament.

### **Category 1: What Are the Textual Sources of the Translation?**

Translators must choose a base text from which to translate. Until the 1947 discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls (often abbreviated as DSS), the oldest and best Hebrew manuscripts of the Old Testament were dated back to the ninth century AD, far closer in date to modern translators than to the Hebrew authors and editors. This traditional Hebrew text, called the Masoretic Text (or MT), serves as the source of most Bible translations of the Old Testament, including the KJV.<sup>6</sup> Scribes copied biblical texts by hand for generations. Consequently, changes to the text crept in by nature of imperfect copying<sup>7</sup> as well as by intention.<sup>8</sup> On occasion scribes would “correct” a text to the way they thought it should read.<sup>9</sup> If one read a story in which a dog chases a man, the dog catches him, *the man* bites *the dog*, but then the man goes to the hospital, you would reasonably assume that it was the dog that bit the man, not the other way around and correct the corrupted text. Scribes also sometimes made changes in pronunciation (e.g., to make sure *Yahweh* was pronounced as *Adonai*), made theological changes,<sup>10</sup> or bowdlerized the text.<sup>11</sup> (This term comes from a Dr. Thomas Bowdler, who produced an edition of Shakespeare in 1807 with offensive or inappropriate passages for women and children removed. Ophelia’s suicide, for example, became merely an unfortunate drowning.) Minor textual errors in the Hebrew text are relatively common, obvious corrections or major theological changes much less so. Translators frequently consult the Dead Sea Scroll texts, particularly in problematic passages.<sup>12</sup> The books of Samuel are held to be two of the more textually corrupt books, with many difficult decisions to be made about which text should be used in which passage.<sup>13</sup> Whether translators decide to use the MT, DSS, or both as the basis of the translation is a philosophical decision based upon theological commitments and scholarly presuppositions. Using a different base text will result in differences in the translation.

The base text is often supplemented by reference to ancient translations of the Hebrew scriptures, known as “versions.”<sup>14</sup> These include the Greek translations known as the *Septuagint*, or LXX;<sup>15</sup> Aramaic translations known as targums or *targumim*; the Samaritan Pentateuch; and more in Latin, Syriac, and other languages. Prior to the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, some of the existing copies of these versions predated our oldest copies of the Masoretic Hebrew text, resulting in the odd situation of translations that were older than the “original” text. Translators often consult the versions at difficult or ambiguous passages because they show how ancient translators understood the text, and sometimes attest to a textual tradition different than that handed down in the MT. One example is Deuteronomy 32:8–9, in which the MT was apparently “corrected” in a monotheistic direction, while the Septuagint preserved a very different text that was then largely confirmed by the Dead Sea Scrolls Hebrew text of Deuteronomy.<sup>16</sup>

The standard editions of the original language texts<sup>17</sup> provide the most relevant variations between manuscripts and the versions in what is called the *textual apparatus*, a densely abbreviated technical tool.<sup>18</sup> Good modern Bibles often include footnotes that say something like “other manuscripts read X” or “Hebrew uncertain.” The NET Bible often explains its translation in terms of the base text and includes text-critical notes labeled TC.<sup>19</sup> (“Text criticism” is the study of textual variants.) English translations of the versions are available, such as the recent and free New English Translation of the Septuagint (NETS)<sup>20</sup> or The Dead Sea Scrolls Bible, which includes the biblical texts of the DSS with some textual commentary.<sup>21</sup> How much weight should be given to the versions, and under what circumstances are questions of translation philosophy that directly affect the translation. Most Bibles thus include a preface explaining the general choice of texts and other decisions.<sup>22</sup>

## **Category 2: How Does the Translator Understand the Grammar and Syntax?**

While the details are complex, a simple overview of a few of the significant ways Biblical Hebrew differs from English will help the reader gain appreciation for the difficulties of translation. Those unfamiliar with these Hebrew difficulties may wonder how anyone can firmly derive meaning from the text under such circumstances, but the Hebrew is rarely as ambiguous as this section makes it appear.

Like many other ancient languages, Biblical Hebrew had no formal punctuation, no capitals, and variable word order.<sup>23</sup> Consequently, a Hebrew translator cannot always easily determine if a word is a proper name<sup>24</sup> or if it belongs to the ending of one phrase or the beginning of the next. Deciding where one sentence ends and another begins can be difficult, particularly since Hebrew uses “and” much more frequently and differently than English.<sup>25</sup> Translators have to decide where the breaks are in the text, and then how to represent that in the target language.<sup>26</sup> James Kugel provides one example from Genesis 22:8: “Since biblical Hebrew was originally written without punctuation marks or even capital letters marking the beginnings of sentences, Abraham’s answer to Isaac could actually be read as two sentences: ‘God Himself will provide. The lamb for the burnt offering [is] my son.’ (Note that Hebrew does not use “to be” in the present tense; thus, this last sentence would be the same whether or not the word ‘is’ is supplied in translation.)”<sup>27</sup>

Another significant way Hebrew differs from English is that it has only two verb “conjugations,” one that adds suffixes and one that adds prefixes. Whereas English makes liberal use of words to indicate tense and mood, Hebrew does not grammatically indicate tenses such as future, past, or present, let alone those nightmarish tenses like future perfect progressive (“you will have been doing X”).<sup>28</sup> This is not to say Israelites weren’t concerned with time; what English indicates explicitly either within the verb itself (e.g., “eat” versus “ate,” “run” versus “ran”) or by ancillary words (“he *will* work” versus “he *did* work”), Hebrew indicates less explicitly via syntax or word order.<sup>29</sup> This again means translators must both decide what the Hebrew means and then how to represent that in English. The lack of explicit grammatical tense and scholarly consensus over the verbal system explains why one translation may interpret a verse in the past tense, another in the future, and another in the present.<sup>30</sup> While perhaps an extreme example, compare the variety of tenses in Isaiah 9:6 in table 1 (emphasis added).

Another issue with Hebrew is that, like Spanish, it does not require pronouns with verbs; one can simply say “ate” instead of “he ate.” Thus, lacking an explicit subject, translators must decide if the subject is new and assumed (he? it? God?) or carried over from something in the previous phrase. Ambiguities of this nature combined with lexical difficulties described in the next section occur significantly more often in poetry. Indeed, the ambiguities of Hebrew lend themselves frustratingly well to poetry. It poses particular difficulties, as it is often less concrete and more elliptical than prose. Because poetry in

KJV	NRSV	NJPS	NASB
For unto us a child <i>is born</i> , unto us a son <i>is given</i> : and the government <i>shall be</i> upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace.	For a child <i>has been born</i> for us, a son <i>given</i> to us; authority <i>rests</i> upon his shoulders; and he <i>is named</i> Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.	For a child <i>has been born</i> to us, A son <i>has been given</i> us. And authority <i>has settled</i> on his shoulders. He <i>has been named</i> “The Mighty God is planning grace; The Eternal Father, a peaceable ruler.”	For a child <i>will be</i> born to us, a son <i>will be</i> given to us; And the government <i>will rest</i> on His shoulders; And His name <i>will be called</i> Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace.
Present perfect, present perfect, future, future.	Past, past, present, present.	Past, past, past, past.	Future, future, future, future.

Table 1. Comparison of Tenses in Isaiah 9:6

English-speaking cultures tends to be used for aesthetic reasons instead of as a practical or common mode of communication, these difficulties may seem irrelevant. However, poetry is the primary form of prophetic texts such as Isaiah and Jeremiah, as well as Psalms, the Old Testament book most quoted in the New Testament. Learning how to understand poetic structures and parse out its ambiguities thus takes on much more importance.<sup>31</sup>

### Category 3: How Does the Translator Resolve Ambiguities on the Word Level?

Due to the evolution of the Hebrew writing system, the relatively small number of Hebrew texts, and the nature of Semitic languages, a translator may be very uncertain of the meaning(s) of a word. Ambiguity over one word here or there may seem inconsequential, but the amount of variance possible and the import of one lone word can change a passage significantly. To choose one theological example, considerable ink has been spilled over the translation of *‘almah* in Isaiah 7:14. “Behold, [the] *‘almah* shall conceive and bear a son, and call his name Immanuel.”<sup>32</sup> Should *‘almah* be “virgin” (the traditional translation conservative evangelicals still argue for) or “young woman” (the translation heavily supported by usage and lexical research)?<sup>33</sup> How is such word-level ambiguity possible?

The first cause of ambiguity is the nature of the writing system.<sup>34</sup> The Hebrew alphabet was originally an *abjad*, a writing system that represented only consonants, likely based on a rebus principle. This means that each Hebrew letter is also the name of an object. To write the word 'ab ("father"), for example, one would draw an 'aleph (the word for ox) and a bet (or house).<sup>35</sup> All Hebrew words begin with consonants. (Those words English speakers would consider to begin with a vowel begin with something like a glottal stop, in which airflow is cut off in the throat, as between the two syllables of *uh-ob*.)

A later stage of Hebrew began to indicate long vowels at the end of words, using *y*, *w*, and perhaps *h*. Later still, *y* and *w* became inconsistently used indicators of long vowels *inside* a word as well as at the end. For example, David is written DWD (*w* as a consonant) before the Babylonian exile, but consistently in texts afterward as DWYD, with *y* indicating the long *i*-vowel (the name is pronounced *dah-VEED* in Hebrew today). The Dead Sea Scrolls expand on this trend of using a few consonants to represent certain vowels.<sup>36</sup>

Roughly one thousand years after the close of the Hebrew Bible, Jews who had memorized the traditional text improvised a system of indicating the pronunciation with marks above, below, and inside the consonants, called "vowel pointing" or just "pointing." Until that time, Hebrew did not indicate doubled consonants, which can change the meaning of a word, nor the full range of vowels.<sup>37</sup> Scholars vary in how much weight should be assigned to the traditional pointing, but at times greater sense can be made of a text by replacing the vowels ("repointing") or redividing a key word or phrase.<sup>38</sup>

For example, if a text had the consonants GDSNWHR in God's appearance to Moses, and the tradition pointed and divided as "GoD iS NoWHeRe," it might be thought a bit odd for an Israelite to say. A scholar might repoint and redivide as "GoD iS NoW HeRe" since it better fits the context of a divine presence. Just as BT in English could give us BuTT, BiT, BaT, ByTe, BuT, aBet, or BeT, many Hebrew words vary only in their pointing. In Amos 6:12, the NRSV prefers to repoint the masculine plural marker of "oxen," *-iyim*, as a separate word *yam*, or "sea." Contrast the KJV "Shall horses run upon the rock? will one plow there with oxen?" with the NRSV "Do horses run on rocks? Does one plow the sea with oxen?"<sup>39</sup>

One of the more common and complex examples involves whether *lō* "to him" or *lō* "not" is the correct reading. This entirely changes the meaning of Job 13:15, an old scripture mastery passage; compare the KJV "Though he

slay me, yet I will trust *in him* (*lō*)” with the NJPS, “He may well slay me; I have *no* (*lō*) hope” (emphasis added).

Here is the Hebrew text of Isaiah 9:5 (English numbering) without pointing.

כי כל-סאון סאן ברעש ושמלה  
מגוללה בדמים והיתה לשרפה  
מאכלת אש:

Here is the same text with pointing added.

כִּי כָל-סֵאוֹן סֵאֵן בְּרַעַשׁ וְשִׁמְלָה  
מִגּוֹלָלָה בְּדָמִים וְהִיְתָה לְשִׂרְפָה  
מֵאֲכַלֶּת אֵשׁ

Finally, here is the same text with the pointing and marks indicating accents and how to “sing” or chant the text, the role of the cantor in a modern synagogue.

כִּי כָל-סֵאוֹן סֵאֵן בְּרַעַשׁ וְשִׁמְלָה  
מִגּוֹלָלָה בְּדָמִים וְהִיְתָה לְשִׂרְפָה  
מֵאֲכַלֶּת אֵשׁ:



Second, assuming the traditional pointing is largely accurate, as it probably is in most cases, another issue deserves consideration: It is usage that determines a word's meaning. (This, combined with tradition, is the issue with "virgin"/"young woman" in Isaiah 7:14.) The more often a word occurs, the more examples and contexts we have to establish its meaning. However, the Old Testament does not have many words—less than 7,000, many of them related to each other—and words often have multiple meanings.<sup>40</sup> Add to the small sample size the fact that usage, and therefore meaning, shifts over time, and it can become quite difficult to know just what a word means in a given passage. We can't haphazardly assume a word with legal or technical meaning will bear the exact same meaning when used in a different genre at a different time. Indeed, conclusions and word studies of this kind require extreme caution.<sup>41</sup>

Particularly when a word is rare, scholars cautiously turn to the versions as well as comparative Semitics. Do Aramaic, Ugaritic, Arabic, or Assyrian/Babylonian use a related word in a similar context? Do the usages there shed any light on its usage in the Old Testament?<sup>42</sup> The combined corpus of these languages dwarfs that of Biblical Hebrew, and is often useful.

Here again the genre of poetry magnifies the difficulties, since poetic texts tend to use more obscure vocabulary and use it in less concrete ways. If the words of Isaiah are great, they are equally rare and semantically difficult. Job is arguably the most difficult text in the Hebrew Bible, with a high concentration of words that occur only once and nowhere else (called *hapax legomena*) and many other rare words.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, in Job 24:18, the NJPS translation notes that "From here to the end of the chapter [verse 25] the translation is largely conjectural."<sup>44</sup>

The bottom line is that even with centuries of tradition and scholarship, ancient translations, and modern lexicons, sometimes meaning cannot be established with any degree of certainty. For some passages, that has serious implications. When reading through the list of non-kosher animals in Leviticus 11, the Jewish Study Bible notes a high degree of uncertainty as to what particular birds are intended. Jews have a practical need to know which birds are kosher and which are not.<sup>45</sup> But again, translations must say *something*, and good scholarship recognizes its own limitations. One scholar has suggested that gaining interpretive humility is one of the advantages of learning biblical languages. "Seeing the messiness of the text—the text-critical problems, the ambiguities, the instances (particularly if reading

in Job or Proverbs) in which you stare at a line but you have no idea what it means and neither does anyone else but the translations have to say something so they grab a phrase out of thin air—causes you to be more humble in your interpretive approach. You come to realize that you are not the master of the text.”<sup>46</sup>

At both the word level and higher, the structure of Hebrew lends itself to ambiguity, multiple meanings, puns, and subtle allusions. While lending itself easily to poetry, this tendency also makes it infuriatingly difficult at times to understand and to translate. One of my graduate professors joked that every Semitic word has at least four meanings: the primary meaning, its opposite, something to do with sex, and something to do with camels! He was exaggerating, but not by much.

#### **Category 4: What Conscious Choices are Being Made about Translation Philosophy, Style, and Register?**

Translation is a tricky process, but particularly so when involving religious sensitivities. After resolving textual issues (category 1), working through the grammar and syntax (category 2), and weighing lexical ambiguities (category 3), a translator might have a good idea what a passage means *in Hebrew*, but must still work out *what it should convey in the target language* and *how it should convey it*. This means that even if two Bible translations used the same underlying text (e.g., MT versus DSS), and the translators understood that text the same way, and agreed on the meanings of every word, the English from each translator could still vary greatly. One could simply charge “translator bias,” but this is not often the case, and examples of flagrant bias tend to be publicized and debated.<sup>47</sup> To English-only readers, all these decisions and issues remain below the surface. An illuminating example of the difficulty Bible translators have in weighing these issues is available on YouTube.<sup>48</sup> Translations can rarely indicate the debates, the deliberate or unconscious choices made by the translator(s), or that the Hebrew text in question may be terribly difficult to understand or fraught with textual issues; regardless of the difficulties involved, at the end of the day a translator must provide a translation.<sup>49</sup>

Translating involves an original language and a target language. No language exists in isolation; each is embedded in and reflects its cultural matrix. The more “distance” there is between the original and the target languages in terms of linguistic similarity,<sup>50</sup> time, and culture, the more difficult

translational decisions become. This also means that evaluation of a translation's accuracy and utility can change; an excellent translation for 1611 may become a terrible translation by 2013 because the target language and culture have shifted.<sup>51</sup>

### *Formal or Dynamic Translation*

Translation is not a science, but has begun to be studied like one. Those introduced to foreign language for the first time often fall into thinking that it's simply a matter of substituting the equivalent words. An elder in my district in the Missionary Training Center once exclaimed, "Il est à propos le temps!" Intending to convey a frustrated "It's about time!" he had simply looked up each English word in his dictionary, substituted the French word he found there, and strung them together. His final phrase was good French ("It concerns the time!"), but did not mean what he intended. (*A propos* has since made its way into English, meaning "relevant to the matter at hand.") All translation, particularly Bible translation, is much more complex than the word-for-word substitution he performed, particularly where idioms and cultural references are concerned.

Beginning in the mid-twentieth century with Eugene Nida, a linguist and Greek scholar, Bible translators today talk about two endpoints on the spectrum of translation theory. On one end is "word-for-word," "formal equivalence," or "text-oriented" translation, which is more literal but less understandable. The translator chooses to preserve more of the original language at the cost of being less accessible to the target language and culture. On the other end is "thought-for-thought," "dynamic/functional equivalence," or "reader-oriented" translation, which is more understandable but potentially less reliable.<sup>52</sup> The translator does more interpreting in order to smooth and adapt to target language and culture, intending to create the same understanding and response among the new audience as among the original.

If a translator has misunderstood the meaning embedded in the cultural/language matrix of either the original or target language, then the meaning will be deformed.<sup>53</sup> For example, Isaiah 1:18 reads, "Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be white as snow." How should one translate "snow" for a tropical culture that has no concept of winter? "White as wool"? Since the text says "white as snow," could one translate "white as wool" and footnote (if a translation allows) saying "white symbolized purity for the Israelites"? What if in the target culture, the color white represents death instead of

purity or sinlessness? If blue were the paradigmatic color of purity, would “blue as the sky” be acceptable? And so on. Essentially, is it the words that matter or the concepts? How much can, must, or should one deform *the text* to be true to and accurately convey *the message* of the text? Sometimes one must translate what the text means instead of what it says.<sup>54</sup> Every translation is a traitor, goes the saying, and this difficulty was recognized long ago by the rabbis. “One who translates literally (according to its form) is a liar, while one who adds [to it] is a blasphemer.”<sup>55</sup>

Continuing this example, let us assume a thought-for-thought translation philosophy; most translations understand “white” in Isaiah 1:18 to represent purity, sinlessness, or forgiveness. What if this equation is mistaken? One scholar concluded that “the formula to be made white as snow is not a blessing in the Hebrew Bible. Rather it is a curse. Thus, also in Isaiah 1:18 we have a judgment speech or *rib* [pronounced *reeve*], which calls the people to judgment. The signs of the judgment are red, as the sign of guilt, and white, the sign of punishment. Come to judgment, if your sins are as bad as scarlet, they shall be made white as snow, a sign of curse and disease.”<sup>56</sup> If this is true, the thought-for-thought translation has seriously mistranslated as “purity” where it should indicate “judgment.” (It may also provide new perspective on Miriam being turned white in Numbers 12:10–12 after speaking against Moses.) A word-for-word translation that simply read “white as snow” would not convey either concept, but allow all interpretation to the reader. In other words, a word-for-word translation puts the onus on the reader to construct a meaning for the passage, whether through tradition, research and study, or problematic “face value”<sup>57</sup> readings. The responsibility for any misunderstanding also falls upon the reader. A thought-for-thought translation offloads much of the responsibility in understanding original contextual meaning onto the translator.

To the left, right, and in between the two points of word-for-word/formal and thought-for-thought/dynamic translation, three more positions can be identified. More literal than formal equivalence is “literal,” between formal and dynamic is “mixed,” and even more interpretive and loose are “paraphrases.” Though every translation is somewhat eclectic depending on the passage, each one generally falls into a particular category, and online guides show generally where a translation falls along this spectrum of translation philosophy.<sup>58</sup>

On one side of the spectrum, there is the literal extreme; Everett Fox's commendable *The Five Books of Moses* attempts to capture more of the flavor and rhythm of Hebrew, with the result that the English is sometimes odd. A familiar passage reads, "At the beginning of God's creating of the heavens and the earth, when the earth was wild and waste, darkness over the face of Ocean, rushing-spirit of God hovering over the face of the waters—God said: Let there be light! And there was light."<sup>59</sup>

At the other extreme, paraphrases like *The Message* risk sounding too loose and disconnected from their original context, too casual, perhaps even non-scriptural<sup>60</sup>: "Our Father in heaven, Reveal who you are. Set the world right; Do what's best—as above, so below. Keep us alive with three square meals. Keep us forgiven with you and forgiving others. Keep us safe from ourselves and the Devil. You're in charge! You can do anything you want! You're ablaze in beauty! Yes. Yes. Yes."<sup>61</sup> Thus reads the Lord's Prayer.

The KJV is far towards the word-for-word/formal end of the spectrum; however, its target language was English of the 1500s. The instructions to the KJV translators to revise Tyndale's version (1526) and the Bishop's Bible (1568) and leave their text unchanged unless necessary resulted in the KJV already sounding archaic when published in 1611.<sup>62</sup> For example, by the end of the sixteenth century, *-eth* endings on verbs were still written but had dropped out of speech and were pronounced as *-s* as standard practice.<sup>63</sup> Four hundred additional years of linguistic shift has not made the KJV more accessible, and this has definite effects on such fundamental LDS matters as missionary work.<sup>64</sup>

### *Choice of Register*

Register is a broad sociolinguistic term that refers to different kinds of language appropriate for a given audience and context. For example, I would speak to a close group of friends at a casual gathering differently than I would to the President of the United States in a formal presentation. I would explain a concept differently to a Primary class, than to my Institute class, than to a missionary contact. The choice of "register" also affects translation. Translators must know their purpose in translation and their audience, and then further decide what kind of language is contextually appropriate for that combination.<sup>65</sup>

One example of this is the reading level chosen for a translation. The NIV has been translated at an eighth-grade reading level, whereas *The Message*

(quoted above with the Lord's Prayer) is around a fourth-grade reading level. A different kind of example concerning register and genre comes from a critique of a recent anthology of ancient Near Eastern texts:

The [Ugaritic] Baal Cycle is a larger than life tale and its ancient readers likely read it as such. When translators render epics like this in immediately accessible, common vernaculars they inescapably fail to translate aspects of how these stories were received and preserved. These were and are grand, expressive stories; encountering the Baal cycle should feel different from reading legal texts or proverbs.<sup>66</sup>

Should a Bible translation be formal or informal? Archaic or modern? Should it reflect differences in style, tone, genre, and dialect that exist in the original? For modern readers of the KJV, both the nature of the translation and non-fluency in its archaic language contribute to a very flat reading;<sup>67</sup> that is, imagine a movie in which every character spoke in the same voice, energy, emotion, and tone, never raising the pitch or lowering the volume regardless of the setting.

The original language texts are not so flat, but vary in many ways. The Gospel of Mark, for example, is low, common "street" Greek with grammatical infelicities, in contrast to the educated and refined Greek of Luke. Esau's grunt for grub, "Let me gulp down some of this red red stuff" starkly contrasts Jacob's careful and lawyerly response.<sup>68</sup> Hebrew had different geographic accents and/or dialects, both a Northern Hebrew and a Southern Hebrew (perhaps like Texan, Brooklynite, or Midwestern English).<sup>69</sup> Both Jacob's servant and then Jacob himself travel north into Aramaic territory to meet Laban, and their own language changes to match Laban's Aramaic "accent."<sup>70</sup> I have an American friend with an Indian mother and grandparents; in conversation with them, her English takes on a different accent, vocabulary, and cadence. Changing registers is something speakers often do unconsciously based on audience and context, and the original texts reflect such changes. Reading the original languages or modern translations which try to capture some of the text's original "flavor" can thus provide a very different experience than the lordly but flat monotone of the KJV. Perhaps this is what led Joseph Smith to exclaim, "My soul delights in reading the word of the Lord in the original, and I am determined to pursue the study of the languages, until I shall become master of them, if I am permitted to live long enough."<sup>71</sup> Should a translation attempt to capture the flavors of the underlying text?

### *Appropriate Language*

Another issue of register concerns differing cultural expectations in terms of sacred writing and language. That which is taboo, shocking, or offensive in one culture may not be in another. While a few originally inoffensive passages became so by translation into a different time or culture, sometimes the prophets intended to shock and offend. One scholar even advises, “If you do not wish to be shocked and disgusted, then stay away from reading the prophetic texts.”<sup>72</sup> Some of these difficult passages have been bowdlerized in the past, some overlooked due to archaic language, and some just never noticed due to their relative obscurity.<sup>73</sup> For example, “The Hebrew Bible regularly uses the root *ŠKB* . . . ‘lie (with)’ as a euphemism for sexual intercourse. But on four occasions the more direct verb *ŠGL* . . . occurs. Scholars agree that *ŠGL* was a word for sexual intercourse, but it may or may not have been vulgar (therefore, we cannot supply an exact English translation). In each of the four instances, *ŠGL* appears as part of a threat or condemnation, and always with the clear intention of shocking the audience . . . Obviously, the authors of these lines [in Deuteronomy 28:30, Isaiah 13:16, Jeremiah 3:1–2 and Zechariah 14:2] deliberately chose strong language—if not actual vulgarity—in order to horrify, upset and rattle their audience.”<sup>74</sup>

The English in 1 Samuel 25, involving David, Nabal (“Fool”), and “every one that pisseth against the wall,” was not offensive when first published,<sup>75</sup> but has now become so as American English has shifted. Translating in such a way as to avoid offending readers, as most modern translations do, turns out to obscure important connections within the story.<sup>76</sup> Even if justifiable “to provoke revulsion and disgust” and contextualized within its own time and culture, the graphic sexual, violent, or scatological imagery used by several prophets, particularly Ezekiel, challenges scholars and those who hold the Bible in high esteem.<sup>77</sup>

How should translators deal with these passages, far more numerous and problematic than most readers realize? They are not limited to the Old Testament. For example, Paul’s use of “you foolish Galatians” may be deliberate use of an ethnic slur to forcefully grab the attention of his audience, equivalent to “you stupid rednecks!”<sup>78</sup> In Philippians 3:8, he disdainfully describes as “dung” (KJV) all he gave up to gain Christ (potentially a considerable amount)<sup>79</sup> but some scholars bluntly suggest a different four-letter word is a more accurate translation. The NET Bible notes that *skubalon* “was often used in Greek as a vulgar term for fecal matter. As such it would most

likely have had a certain shock value for the readers.”<sup>80</sup> Complicating matters, the same *skubalon* letter contains “the admonition of Paul” to seek out whatever is pure and commendable, among other adjectives (Philippians 4:8). How does Paul reconcile his use of language with this admonition?

Why are these passages so troublesome? Setting aside those examples in which prophets *intended* offense, other reasons exist. Modern readers have come to apply certain assumptions and expectations to the idea of “Holy Scripture” which were foreign to its authors. John J. Collins remarks, “When [certain Old Testament] stories are read as Scripture, they become more problematic, because of a common but ill-founded assumption that all Scripture should be edifying,” i.e., positive and uplifting.<sup>81</sup> Ancient prophets did not labor under many of the assumptions we attach to scripture today, because they are largely modern assumptions. The contents of our “Holy Scriptures” did not become such until long after they were written or preached. “Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Isaiah *et al.* had no sense of the white-covered, gold-cross embossed Bibles in which their prose was to be packaged, nor had they been briefed on the standards of Western literary decorum against which they would inevitably offend.”<sup>82</sup> Even our basic concept of “scripture” today would be somewhat foreign to them.<sup>83</sup> Certainly they would have thought they were operating under the Spirit of the Lord, but they were rarely conscious of authoring something that would become canon or “Holy Scripture,” because it did not exist as such. Few prophets have ever written with the idea of “I am adding to the canon,” because there was neither a formally established canon nor a concept of canon (generally in the Old Testament period), or because the canon was something *other* and past; in the New Testament period, “scripture” referred broadly to the writings of Old Testament prophets (as in 2 Timothy 3:15), not things such as Paul’s letters or the Gospels which were being written at the time. Indeed, Peter and Paul (and sometimes Joseph Smith in the Doctrine and Covenants) were simply writing letters to congregations, not attempting to produce canonized and inspired writing fit for all Christians in all times.

The writings eventually canonized as the Bible accurately reflected life in its variety, with language humorous and serious, sacred and profane. But once combined with other books (Greek *ta biblia*, source of the term “Bible,” means “the books,” not The Book) and canonized as “Holy Scripture,” certain expectations and assumptions came to be applied to each book and passage as though these criteria existed at the time, and prophets had written with them



Prayers against Psalms. the wicked.

5 The proud have hid a snare for me and cords: they have spread a net by the wayes side: they have set grins for me. Selah.

6 I said unto the LORD, Thou art my God: hear the voice of my supplications, O LORD.

7 GOD the LORD, the strength of my salvation, thou hast covered my head in the day of battell.

8 Grant not, O LORD, the desires of the wicked: further not his wicked device, lest they exalt themselves. Selah.

9 As for the head of those that compass me about: let the mischief of their own lips cover them.

10 Let burning coals fall upon them, let them be cast into the fire: into deep pits, that they rise not up again.

11 Let not an evil speaker be established in the earth: evil shall hunt the violent man to overthrow him.

12 I know that the LORD will maintain the cause of the afflicted: and the right of the poor.

13 Surely the righteous shall give thanks unto thy name: the upright shall dwell in thy presence.

PSAL. CXXI.

1 David prayeth that his suit may be acceptable, 3 his conscience sincere, 7 and his life safe from sinners.

A psalm of David.

LORD, I cry unto thee, make haste unto me: give ear unto my voice, when I cry unto thee.

2 Let my prayer be set forth before thee as incense: and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice.

3 Set a watch, O LORD, before my mouth: keep the doore of my lips.

4 Incline not my heart to any evil thing, to practise wicked works with men that work iniquitie: and let me not eat of their dainties.

5 Let the righteous smite me, it shall be a kindness: and let him reprove me, it shall be an excellent oil, which shall not break my head: for yet my prayer also shall be in their calamities.

6 When their judges are overthrowen in stony places, they shall hear my words, for they are sweet.

7 Our bones are scattered at the

graves mouth: as when one cutteth and cleaveth wood upon the earth.

8 But mine eyes are unto thee, O GOD the LORD: in thee is my trust, leave not my soul desolate.

9 Keep me from the snare which they have laid for me, and the grins of the workers of iniquity.

10 Let the wicked fall into their own nets: whilst that I withall escape.

PSAL. CXLII.

David sheweth that in his trouble, all his comfort was in prayer unto God.

Catch of David: A prayer when he was in the cave.

LORD, I cried unto thee, with my voice, with my voice unto the LORD did I make my supplication.

2 I poured out my complaint before him: my trouble.

3 When my spirit was overhelmed within me, then thou knewest my path: in the way wherein I walked, have they pitifully laid a snare for me.

4 I looked on my right hand, and beheld, but there was no man that would know me, refuge failed me: no man cared for my soul.

5 I cried unto thee, O LORD, I said, Thou art my refuge, and my portion in the land of the living.

6 Attend unto my cry, for I am brought very lowe, deliver me from my persecutors: for they are stronger then I.

7 Ring my soul out of prison, that I may praise thy name: the righteous shall compass me about: for thou shalt deal bountifully with me.

PSAL. CXLIII.

1 David prayeth for favour in judgement, 3 He complaineth of his griefs, 5 He strengtheneth his faith by meditation and prayer, 7 He prayeth for grace, 9 for deliverance, 10 for sanctification, 12 for destruction of his enemies.

A psalm of David.

LORD, give ear to my supplications: in thy faithfulness answer me, and in thy righteousness.

2 And enter not into judgement with

||Or, let them not be excited.

†Hob. aman of tongue: or an evil speaker, a wicked man of violence be established in the earth: let him be hunted to his overthrow.

†Hob. directed.

||Or, let the righteous smite me kindly, & reprove me: let not their precious oil break my head.

†Hob. make not my soul bare.

†Hob. passe over.

||Or, A psalm of David giving instruction.

||Or, look on the right hand, and see.

†Hob. perished from me.

†Hob. no man fought after my soul.

†Hob. -

†Hob. -

†Hob. -

†Hob. -

Leaf from a 1611 King James Bible showing Psalms 130-33, chapter headings, illuminated letters, and marginal notes.

in mind. Consequently, the kind of language expected by the target community does not always match the kind of language used by the prophets. Should the translator privilege sensitivities of the target community, who may expect “Holy Scripture” to use elevated, archaic, antiseptic language, or should they provide culturally accurate translations of the text, which would create the same kind of reaction among its readers as among its native audience?

### **Suggestions for Personal Study**

The typical Bible reader who is aware of differences between versions cannot directly investigate the reason for those differences in the original languages. However, a multitude of useful tools are available to attack this problem from a different direction.

#### *Multiple Translations*

The easiest and first step is to become familiar with several translations, noting what each appears to say and areas of agreement or disagreement. Most modern Bible translations have been produced by committees of translators, and represent some degree of scholarly evaluation of textual variants and other relevant issues. Where multiple modern translations agree with each other but differ significantly from the KJV (textual scholars would say “agree against” the KJV), as a general rule I would favor the rendering of the modern versions. My personal recommendations would be the NRSV (scholarly/ecumenical), NJPS (Jewish), NIV (evangelical, various editions), NAB or New American Bible, Revised Edition (Catholic), and the NET Bible (discussed below).<sup>84</sup> For those that include them, check each translation’s footnotes of for useful indicators such as “Hebrew uncertain” or “other versions read X.”

#### *Single-Volume Resources*

Besides the various translations of the Bible, there is also a range of accessible resources that can explain to some degree what is taking place under the surface of the English text. While certainly not necessary to consult with any frequency, simple awareness that these resources exist means the interested student knows where and how to search for answers when the need arises.

- The most accessible of these is the NET Bible with its myriad footnotes at [www.netbible.org](http://www.netbible.org). Study Bibles based on reputable translations will provide more footnotes of this kind than simple translations. For example, the Jewish Study Bible comprises the NJPS translation with

notes, maps, introductions, and more from a Jewish perspective. Other good recommendations include the NIV Study Bible (evangelical), the New Oxford Annotated Bible (NRSV, scholarly/ecumenical), and the Jewish Annotated New Testament (NRSV, commentary from a Jewish perspective).

- Robert Alter, a Jewish professor of Literature and Hebrew at UC–Berkeley, often explains his translational decisions in difficult areas by referencing other versions and the original languages.<sup>85</sup> Moreover, his translations are enlightening and enjoyable to read, often capturing literary nuances lacking in others.<sup>86</sup>
- Another potentially useful volume is *The Dead Sea Scrolls Bible*.<sup>87</sup> Authored by several prominent scroll scholars, the text contains a heavily annotated translation of the biblical scrolls with commentary focused on textual differences between the traditional Hebrew text, DSS, and other ancient versions. Differences between the Hebrew manuscripts and scrolls are printed in italics. The authors also provide a helpful introduction to the primary ancient translations.
- Bruce Metzger, a notable scholar of the Greek New Testament, published a one-volume layman’s guide to textual variants of the New Testament.<sup>88</sup> Arranged by chapter and verse, this should be a go-to resource for New Testament questions.

### *Multivolume Resources*

Multivolume works that are often available in public and college libraries can also address these issues in great depth. The *UBS Handbook Series* by the United Bible Societies (UBS) is one such work. These books were written primarily “to assist Bible translators but are also helpful for others who wish to study, reflect on and communicate the Scriptures. Although the commentaries are based on the original biblical languages, it is not necessary to know these languages to benefit from the commentaries.”<sup>89</sup> These go verse-by-verse, avoid technical language, compare multiple translations, and discuss major textual differences. Like other UBS publications, they are relatively expensive.

Also in this category are the most powerful and most difficult references, namely, commentaries, which vary greatly in length, focus, intended audience, and perspective. One-volume commentaries will rarely prove useful since they lack the space necessary to comment verse-by-verse. The greater depth of multivolume commentaries brings issues of greater expense, bulk (unless

purchased electronically), and unevenness, as each volume is usually written by a different author. The most suitable commentary will offer a translation as well as discussion of and justification for it. The strength here is also the weakness: depth enough to explain these issues often means technicality, which is likely to lose or confuse readers without technical training.

As space prevents making specific recommendations for each book of the Bible, a few general suggestions and brief notes on series must suffice.<sup>90</sup> Many of these are available at local public and university libraries.

- *Anchor Bible Commentary*—Now published by Yale University (and renamed accordingly as the *Anchor Yale Bible Commentary*), no denominational orientation, academic. Older volumes are being updated, so more than one volume may exist for a given book.
- *JPS Torah Commentary*—Jewish Publication Society, scholarly Jewish perspective, covers Genesis through Deuteronomy under this title. A selection of other Old Testament books and passages such as Ruth and Jonah are covered under the series title *JPS Bible Commentary*.
- *New International Commentary*—Eerdmans, Protestant perspective, semi-technical, conservative.
- *New Interpreters Bible*—Abingdon Press, variety of perspectives. (I find the commentary on Romans by N. T. Wright to be particularly illuminating.)
- *NIV Application Commentary*—Zondervan, conservative evangelical perspective, less technical, and more useful “modern application” suggestions as Latter-day Saints tend to expect. The authors provide a bridge between ancient and modern perspectives.
- *Word Biblical Commentary*—Thomas Nelson, Protestant perspective, semi-technical.

Samples of these commentaries are often available on Amazon.com, the website of the publisher, or Google Books.

### *Original Language Resources*

The last category involves those resources dealing with words in the original source language. It is possible to research the underlying Greek and Hebrew without any formal training; however, the risk of misunderstanding and misusing this information cannot be overemphasized! Even students with a year or two of formal training tend to fall into common errors. The serious Bible

reader who delves into these should begin by reading John Walton's essay on word studies and D. A. Carson's *Exegetical Fallacies*.<sup>91</sup>

The following process allows the non-specialist to make use of some accessible lexicons. As BYU philosophy professor James E. Faulconer devotes a chapter to this process in his excellent short volume *Scripture Study: Tools and Suggestions* (now available online), what follows is a brief summary.<sup>92</sup> Essentially, one looks up the English word, then chapter/verse reference in *Strong's Lexicon*, which assigns a unique number to every Greek and Hebrew word. This indicates what original language word is behind the English in any given passage. Several recent Hebrew lexicons are keyed to Strong's numbers, making them accessible to the nonspecialist; in other words, Strong's can provide a bridge from the English word to the proper Hebrew entry in one of these other lexicons. Free tools allowing *Strong's Lexicon* lookup are available online, such as at [www.blueletterbible.org](http://www.blueletterbible.org).

There is a caveat to this approach—I cannot recommend relying upon *Strong's* for any but the most general interpretive guidance. Besides being outdated, *Strong's* provides only brief translational equivalents which can mislead, since the translation of a word is not always its meaning. That is, a simple translational equivalent cannot always adequately convey a native understanding of a word, particularly when it bears technical or cultural meaning. For example, the root *PQD* occurs some three hundred times in the Old Testament, with a bewildering variety of translational equivalents, including “to visit” (Genesis 21:1), “to appoint” (Genesis 41:34), “to muster troops,” (Numbers 1:3), “to be numbered” (Exodus 30:13), and “to punish” (Isaiah 10:12). The meaning of *PQD* that contextually demands such different translational equivalents in *English* is “to assign a person or thing to what the subject believes is its proper or appropriate status or position in an organizational order.”<sup>93</sup> Israelites had no need to say that. They just said “paqad.” Since *Strong's* does no more than list the confusing array of seemingly-unrelated English translational equivalents, it should be used only as a stepping stone to more complete tools.

Of all the volumes keyed to *Strong's* numbers, I recommend these: the *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (or TWOT, 3 volumes, evangelical), *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament* (or TLOT, 3 volumes, translated from German scholarship), and the *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* (or NIDOTTE, 6 volumes, evangelical). The last is the most extensive, containing essays on each word as well as

some more general background essays. All three are available for electronic purchase from Logos, Accordance, or Bibleworks.<sup>94</sup> Electronic editions greatly facilitate the process, since one can go directly to the desired Hebrew lexicon from English words.<sup>95</sup> None of these lexicons includes every Hebrew word; *hapax legomena* would not generally be included.<sup>96</sup> The standard academic lexicons<sup>97</sup> do contain those references, but are probably inaccessible to nonspecialists because of their highly technical and abbreviated nature. They are also not keyed to *Strong's*, making it very difficult to look up a Hebrew word without knowing the language. In spite of not treating every word, TWOT, TLOT, and NIDOTTE remain excellent tools accessible to the non-specialist.

### **How Relevant are the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith Translation in Evaluating Translation Differences?**

In many and perhaps most cases where modern translations vary significantly from the KJV, I would follow modern translations on the basis of the information above. However, modern revelation complicates this issue. In some passages, the Book of Mormon and KJV agree against modern translations. In others, the Book of Mormon and KJV agree against the JST.

#### *The Book of Mormon*

While this is a complex issue largely outside the scope of this paper, two general points can be made. First, as a result of his text-critical work, Royal Skousen has determined that many of the Isaiah variants between the 1981 Book of Mormon and the KJV result from copying or scribal errors in the Book of Mormon publication history, instead of a different underlying Hebrew text.<sup>98</sup> This suggests that the brass plates version of Isaiah was closer to the traditional Hebrew text than LDS have often assumed. Second, our text explicitly represents a Nephite *interpretation and recontextualization* of Isaiah. Although Nephi explains this clearly in 1 Nephi 19:23, its significance is often overlooked. Elder McConkie understood Isaiah in the Book of Mormon to be an expansive translation. “Nephi gave, not a literal, but an inspired and interpreting translation.”<sup>99</sup> Thus, some textual differences could be attributed to Nephi interpreting instead of differences in the Hebrew text. Lastly, one’s view of the relationship between the KJV and the Book of Mormon will vary greatly based on how one understands the nature of the Book of Mormon translation and process. Several reputable LDS scholars

come to differing conclusions, and the wise student will be aware of the range of opinions.<sup>100</sup>

In my view, the Book of Mormon is a *sufficient* translation, not a *perfect* one (if indeed, the idea of a perfect translation has any meaning); that is, regardless of how it was translated, the end product was sufficient for God's purposes, despite grammatical infelicities,<sup>101</sup> archaic language, or other less-than-perfect aspects. The "most correct book" statement by Joseph Smith does not apply to its textual characteristics (such as spelling or verb-subject agreement), does not preclude scribal errors,<sup>102</sup> cannot rule out historical errors, cannot guarantee doctrinal correctness,<sup>103</sup> nor, most relevantly, can it affirm some kind of ultimate accuracy of the translation in the Isaiah passages or elsewhere. Rather it is "most correct," as Joseph went on to say, in its capability to bring us closer to God through living by its precepts.<sup>104</sup> Thus, I believe a translation of Isaiah that is better or more accurate than Nephi's Isaiah is theoretically possible.<sup>105</sup>

### *The Joseph Smith Translation*

Many Latter-day Saints seem to approach the Joseph Smith Translation (or JST) as pure restoration of original text, replacing text that was "incorrectly translated," a concept which serves on the popular level as an escape from any text which causes discomfort or doesn't seem to represent current doctrinal understandings. In my view, God's commandment to Joseph Smith to retranslate the Bible had little to do with returning the Bible to an uncorrupted state; rather, God intended Joseph's intensive study to serve as a catalyst for revelation as he came across puzzling passages, pondering and inquiring about them. Many distinctive and divisive LDS doctrines come from just such a process. Joseph's study of the patriarchs led to the revelation of D&C 132 and plural marriage. Study of John 5:29 in February 1832 resulted in D&C 76, revealing three divisions in the heavens. Study of 1 Corinthians led to baptism for the dead. If this is correct, the purpose of the JST translation process was to engender thought, understanding, and revelation, not original text. It "was not a simple, mechanical recording of divine dictum, but rather a study-and-thought process accompanied and prompted by revelation from the Lord."<sup>106</sup> This theory also has the advantage of accounting for Joseph Smith translating the same passages differently on different occasions.<sup>107</sup>

The conclusions and cautions of much recent LDS scholarship exploring the nature of the JST have not yet reached popular consciousness in the Church. Robert J. Matthews was the first LDS scholar to receive permission to study the JST manuscripts, which belonged to the RLDS Church (now Community of Christ). His work in the 1950s served to validate the reliability of the text, overturning suspicions that the RLDS had tampered with them.<sup>108</sup> At that time, Matthews concluded that the JST represented a variety of things. In 2004, Kent P. Jackson, Scott Faulring, and Matthews reiterated his conclusions, categorizing the JST changes within these categories:<sup>109</sup>

1. *Editing to make the Bible more understandable for modern readers.* “Many of the individual JST changes fall into this category . . . An example might include 1 Thessalonians 5:26, in which ‘Greet all the brethren with a holy *kiss*’ is changed to ‘Greet all the brethren with a holy *salutation*’ . . . It is likely that the King James text here accurately represents Paul’s original word and intent. Yet to modern Western readers, unaccustomed to Mediterranean displays of friendship and brotherhood, Paul’s word might miscommunicate and misdirect, and thus the Prophet made a change.” Note that in this category, the JST’s solving of a difficulty (not textual, but cultural) is *not* a restoration of original text or cultural setting. The JST solves a problem that arises because the passage is now being read in a new context; the original context had no such issue.
2. *Restoration of original text.* “Joseph Smith did not restore the very words of lost texts, because they were in Hebrew or Greek (or other ancient languages), and the new Translation was to be in English. Thus his translation, in the English idiom of his own day, would restore the meaning and the message of original passages but not necessarily the literary trappings that accompanied them when they were first put to writing.” Regarding this category, the authors bluntly state that the assumption “that all JST changes are intended to restore original text [is] a claim made neither by the JST itself nor by the Prophet Joseph Smith.”<sup>110</sup>
3. *Restoration of what was once said or done but which was never in the Bible.* This would extend to include “material of which the biblical writers were unaware or which they chose not to include or neglected to record (cf. 3 Ne. 23:6–13).”



4. *Editing to bring biblical wording into harmony with truth found in other revelations or elsewhere in the Bible.* “Where modern revelation had given a clearer view of a doctrine preserved less adequately in the Bible, it was appropriate for Joseph Smith to add a correction—whether or not that correction reflects what was on the ancient original manuscript.”<sup>111</sup>
5. *Changes to provide modern readers teachings that were not written by original authors.* For example, “there is an important JST change at Romans 13 in which Paul’s teaching regarding the Saints’ submission to secular political power is changed to submission to the authorities of the Church. Perhaps both versions are correct. If the Bible preserves accurately Paul’s original thoughts and intent, then the JST revision would be viewed as a latter-day revelation intended to instruct us on a topic not anticipated by Paul.”

The conclusions by those who have studied the JST most extensively run counter to the assumption that the JST is monolithic textual restoration. As Kevin Barney demonstrated in a preliminary paper, few of these changes of the JST are based in the original texts.<sup>112</sup> This is not to discount the JST, but to recognize that its contribution is primarily *doctrinal*, not *textual* or *historical*; it does not address the problems that give rise to differences between the KJV and non-KJV translations. In other words, while the JST and other Bibles vary from the KJV, they do so for very different reasons. Other translations are working from the original languages, with all the problems entailed by categories 1–3 above. The JST was working from the English and Joseph Smith’s prophetic understanding, rarely taking account of any of those difficulties.

If neither the Book of Mormon nor the JST represent some kind of Platonic ideal of purely original and perfectly translated text, but a sufficient, prophetic, line-upon-line text, then we should not expect the JST, Book of Mormon, and KJV to match up. Furthermore, if God so directed, another prophet could provide a new and different retranslation in accordance with new revelation. As Brigham Young expressed, “Should the Lord Almighty send an angel to re-write the Bible, it would in many places be very different from what it now is. And I will even venture to say that if the Book of Mormon were now to be re-written, in many instances it would materially differ from the present translation.”<sup>113</sup> The ambiguity and discontinuity inherent in some of these ideas tend to discomfit many Latter-day Saints, but such is the unavoidable nature of these texts and processes.<sup>114</sup>

## Conclusion

Translations vary for multiple reasons: different underlying texts and influence of the versions, different understandings of the text on the grammatical and syntactic level, as well as on the semantic or word level, and differing philosophies of how to best to express one's understanding of these differences in the target language, taking the intended audience and context into account.

Before actually getting on to providing a translation, translators must examine, weigh, and make difficult decisions on each of these issues, often multiple times in one verse. Once translators understand a passage or at least know that they cannot solve its issues, they must determine how best to express that understanding in the target language and appropriate register for its audience, itself a difficult question. Every translation is an interpretation. The differences between translations can confuse readers, but armed with the understanding of why differences arise and the tools described in this paper, readers can learn to parse those differences profitably. **RE**

---

## Notes

Prompted by a frustrated friend's question about comparing Bible translations, I began this article as a series of informal blog posts at *timesandseasons.org*, and I am grateful for the feedback offered there and on various drafts of the paper. Due to the nature of my training, the original question's Old Testament examples, and the course of study for 2014, the principles laid out are specific to the Old Testament, though similar issues apply to the New Testament.

1. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses* (London: Latter-day Saints' Book Depot, 1882), 14:226–27.

2. For a few examples, see Neal A. Maxwell, "Lest Ye Be Wearied and Faint in Your Minds," *Ensign*, May 1991, 90; "The New Testament—Matchless Portrait of the Savior," *Ensign*, December 1986, 23; Jeffrey R. Holland, "Miracles of the Restoration," *Ensign*, November 1994, 34; and Robert D. Hales, "In Memory of Jesus," *Ensign*, November 1997, 26.

3. As cited in Joe Stringham, "The Bible—Only 4,263 Languages to Go," *Ensign*, January 1990, 20.

4. A 2001 study by the Barna Group found that "Mormons are more likely to read the Bible during a week than Protestants." See "Protestants, Catholics and Mormons Reflect Diverse Levels of Religious Activity," *Barna Group*; <https://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/5-barna-update/54-protestants-catholics-and-mormons-reflect-diverse-levels-of-religious-activity> (accessed July 5, 2013).

5. Grant Hardy, "The King James Bible and the Future of Missionary Work," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 45, no. 2 (Spring 2012): 5. A different version was posted earlier at <http://bycommonconsent.com>, <http://bycommonconsent.files.wordpress.com/2011/02/king-james-bible-and-missionary-work.pdf> (accessed August 1, 2013).

6. One notable exception was the Catholic Douay-Rheims version (completed by 1610), which took as its base the Latin Vulgate, itself a translation of the Hebrew. See Bruce

Metzger, *The Bible in Translation—Ancient and English Versions* (Baker Academic, 2001), 67–69. Modern Catholic translations are now based on the Greek and Hebrew texts. On the Masoretic Text, see E. J. Revell, “Masoretic Text,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 4:597–600; “Masoretic,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 4:593–94; hereafter abbreviated as ABD.

7. The common kinds of errors inherent in hand copying have been well studied, and occur in Latter-day Saint texts as well. See Paul D. Wegner, *A Student’s Guide to Textual Criticism of the Bible* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2006), 44–50; P. Kyle McCarter, *Textual Criticism: Recovering the Text of the Hebrew Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986).

8. I include in these examples both changes made in the text itself as well as in the authoritative tradition of scribal notations and comments known as Masorah, including *kethib/qere*, which instructed the reader to make a verbal substitution (*qere*, “read!”) for what was written (*kethib*, “it is written”). See ABD, “Masorah,” “Kethib and Qere.” See also Page Kelley, Daniel Stephen Mynatt, and Timothy G. Crawford, *The Masorah of Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia: An Introduction and Annotated Glossary* (Eedrmans, 1998).

9. One scribe wrote angrily in a marginal note at Hebrews 1:3 of codex Vaticanus, criticizing a previous scribe for making a change: “Fool and knave, can’t you leave the old reading alone and not alter it!” Wegner, *Student’s Guide*, 54.

10. See note 16 below.

11. See note 76 below and the other references in that section.

12. The Dead Sea Scroll community often had more than one copy of a book.

13. S. R. Driver, *Notes on the Hebrew Text and Topography of the Book of Samuel, with an Introduction to Hebrew Paleography and the Ancient Versions*, 2nd, revised and enlarged ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1913).

14. As the LDS Bible Dictionary was a revision of the *Cambridge Bible Dictionary*, it includes brief sections on “Septuagint” and “Vulgate.” See also Wegner, *Student’s Guide*, 88–103; Metzger, *Bible in Translation*.

15. Multiple translations were made into Greek. “The term *Septuagint*, which has been used in a confusing variety of ways, gives the inaccurate impression that this document is a homogenous unit . . . Strictly speaking, there is really no such thing as *the* Septuagint.” Karen H. Jobes and Moises Silva, *Invitation to the Septuagint* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2000), 29–30; emphasis in the original.

16. The LXX reads “according to the number of the angels,” against the MT’s “according to the number of the sons of Israel.” The DSS confirmed the Hebrew origin of the LXX, reading “sons of God” (≈angels). See notes at Deuteronomy 32:8 and Excursus 31 “Text and Theology in Deu 32:8 and 43,” in Jeffery H. Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, The JPS Torah Commentary (The Jewish Publication Society, 1996).

17. These are published by the United Bible Society, and known as *Nestle-Aland* or NA for the Greek and *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* or BHS for the Hebrew. A new edition of the MT with a different apparatus, known as *Biblia Hebraica Quinta* or BHQ, is being published in sections.

18. These are usually presented in the original language, with abbreviated Latin commentary.

19. The NET Bible is the *New English Translation*, freely available online at [www.bible.org](http://www.bible.org), and in study Bible form at [NETBible.org](http://NETBible.org). Produced by a committee of scholars, the great advantages of the NET are its free availability and over 60,000 translator notes, which “show

major interpretive options and/or textual options for difficult or disputed passages . . . [and] allow a running commentary on the translators' decisions to a degree never seen." See list of translators and discussion of translation philosophy at <http://bible.org/article/preface-net-bible-first-edition> (accessed November 5, 2012).

20. See "New English Translation of the Septuagint"; <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/nets/edition/> (accessed November 5, 2012).

21. Martin Jr. Abegg, Peter Flint, and Eugene Ulrich, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Bible: The Oldest Known Bible Translated for the First Time into English* (HarperCollins, 1999).

22. The KJV itself originally contained a lengthy preface addressed to King James and then the reader, which is not included with the LDS edition, but reprinted online at various sites. The NRSV preface includes this translational maxim and explanation among other statements: "'As literal as possible, as free as necessary.' As a consequence, the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) remains essentially a literal translation. Periphrastic renderings have been adopted only sparingly, and then chiefly to compensate for a deficiency in the English language—the lack of a common gender third-person singular pronoun."

23. Masoretic tradition does punctuate, but as with the vowels, this tradition long post-dates the consonantal text. Differences in punctuation can change meaning. See Grant Hardy, "Of Punctuation and Parentage," *Insights* 24, no. 2 (2004). For more info on textual divisions, see Kent P. Jackson, Frank F. Judd Jr., and David R. Seely, "Chapters, Verses, Punctuation, Spelling, and Italics in the King James Version," *Religious Educator* 7, no. 2 (2006).

24. For example, KJV Jeremiah 38:6 refers to Malchiah the son of Hammelech, but now most translate *hammelech* instead of treating it as a proper name, i.e., Malchiah son of *the king* (*hammelech*). All Hebrew names have meanings, though we may not always be able to recover them. For a quick list, see Jay A. Parry and Donald W. Parry, "Israelite Names—Witnesses of Deity," *Ensign*, December 1990, 52–54.

25. If translated as a word, Hebrew *v* may be many things, including "and," "but," "while," "then," or "now." However, a given translation may not even represent it by a word, since *v* may also signal a change in tense (the so-called *waw conversive*), a circumstantial clause, or a variety of other things. For a discussion of how this may affect English translations and potentially the awkward syntax of the Book of Mormon, see Brian Stubbs, "A Lengthier Treatment of Length," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 5, no. 2 (1996): 82–97; and Brian Stubbs, "A Short Addition to Length: Some Relative Frequencies of Circumstantial Structures," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 6, no. 1 (1997): 39–46. The translation of *v* does matter, even to topics as apparently unrelated as attitudes towards skin color. Should Song of Songs 1:5 be translated as "I am black *but* beautiful" suggesting beauty in spite of blackness or "I am black *and* beautiful"? See David M. Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Princeton University Press, 2003), 79–90.

26. For example, Ephesians 1:3–14 constitutes one long complex sentence in Greek.

27. James L. Kugel, "Early Jewish Biblical Interpretation," in *The Eerdmans Dictionary of Early Judaism*, ed. John J. Collins and Daniel C. Harlow (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 136; brackets in original.

28. This is the majority position. A small minority argues that Hebrew does represent tenses.

29. Scholars argue over whether the verbal system preserved in written Hebrew reflected spoken Hebrew or whether it was a specialized "literary" form. If so, it would be analogous, for example, to the French *passé simple*, a preterit tense rarely used in speech, but present in books and magazines.

30. For LDS writings, see “I Have a Question,” *Ensign*, August 1988, 27–28, answered by Stephen D. Ricks. Some Hebrew scholars argue that this view seriously mischaracterizes the nature of verbal tense/aspect, since it presupposes that the form represents a “perfect” or past tense and that it is deliberate rhetorical or prophetic usage. For a historical overview of these issues, see Bruce K. Waltke and Michael Patrick O’Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), §29.

31. See Kevin Barney, “Understanding Old Testament Poetry,” *Ensign*, June 1990, 51–54. John Gammie looks at three recent books on biblical poetry in “Alter vs. Kugel—Taking the Heat in Struggle over Biblical Poetry,” *Bible Review* 5, no. 1 (February 1989): 26–33.

32. Note that the KJV represents this as an indefinite noun, “a virgin” whereas the Hebrew is clearly definite, suggesting a particular *‘almah* who was present. This explains why the NET Bible translates this as “this young woman.”

33. Contrast the conservative and apologetic treatment in Walter C. Kaiser Jr. and others, eds., *Hard Sayings of the Bible* (Downer’s Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1996), 300–302; with the Hebrew lexical data in Charles D. Isbell, “Does the Gospel of Matthew Proclaim Mary’s Virginity?,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 3, no. 2 (June 1997).

34. In general for this section, see E. Y. Kutscher, *A History of the Hebrew Language* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1982). Waltke and O’Connor, *Syntax*, §§1.5–1.6.

35. This is partially speculative, but long-held. See Herbert G. May, “Moses and the Sinai Inscriptions,” *Biblical Archaeologist* 8, no. 4 (1945). A recent discussion is available online; see Orly Goldwasser, “How the Alphabet Was Born from Hieroglyphs,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 36, no. 2 (March/April 2010). The article, Anson Rainey’s critiques, and replies by Goldwasser are available at <http://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/scholars-study/who-really-invented-the-alphabet—illiterate-miners-or-educated-sophisticates> (accessed August 6, 2013).

36. Francis I. Anderson and Dean A. Forbes, *Spelling in the Hebrew Bible*, *Biblica et Orientalia* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1985).

37. In reality, three systems emerged. Tiberian became the dominant tradition, with Palestinian and Babylonian the other two. Some Emmanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*, 3rd rev. expanded ed. (Fortress Press, 2011), 43–49; Shlomo Morag, *The Vocalization Systems of Arabic, Hebrew and Aramaic*. Targumim are traditionally vocalized using the Babylonian system. Joshua Blau, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1976), §3.1ff.

38. Pointing plays a role in some LDS historical discussion, such as Joseph Smith’s comments on Genesis 1:1. See Kevin Barney, “Joseph Smith’s Emendation of Hebrew Genesis 1:1,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 30, no. 4 (Winter 1997): 109–10; “Examining Six Key Concepts in Joseph Smith’s Understanding of Genesis 1:1,” *BYU Studies* 39, no. 3 (2000): 107–23.

39. Heb. *bāqār* “cattle” is a collective noun and does not require the plural ending. Other than Amos 6:12, *bāqār* appears with the plural marker only in 2 Chronicles 4:3.

40. This is not the total word count, but the total number of distinct words, as calculated with BibleWorks 9.

41. The most common problem with word studies is proof-texting. As eloquently put by B. H. Roberts, proof-texting is “a selection of separate and disconnected texts marshalled together [often by the presence of the same word] in support of a given subject without sufficient care being taken to know the context and historical association of the scriptural

utterances, often attended with great danger of forming misconceptions of such texts, resulting in wrong deductions and conclusions.” *Seventy’s Course in Theology* 5 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1907–1912), 1:i. For a brief overview of other problems with word studies, see D.A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1996), 27–64; James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Languages* (London: SCM Press, 1961); and John H. Walton, “Principles of Productive Word Study,” in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, ed. William A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997), 1:161–71.

42. John Lundquist provides some accessible examples in “The Value of New Textual Sources to the King James Bible,” *Ensign*, August 1983, 42–47.

43. On translation and *hapax legomena*, see Frederick E. Greenspahn, “Words That Occur in the Bible Only Once—How Hard Are They to Translate?,” *Bible Review* 1, no. 1 (1985). See also his entry in ABD under “Hapax Legomena” and his published dissertation, *Hapax Legomena in Biblical Hebrew*, Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series (Chico, CA: Scholar’s Press, 1984).

44. As quoted in Metzger, *The Bible in Translation*, 144.

45. As with Catholicism and the LDS Church, Judaism is not directly dependent upon its texts but has an intermediary of authoritative interpretation, i.e., rabbinic tradition, the LDS prophets and Apostles, and the Magisterium. In this case, the question of which birds are kosher is settled by rabbinic tradition, instead of better lexical understanding.

46. Charles Halton, “What Hebrew Professors Don’t Tell You”; <http://awilum.com/?p=1407> (accessed November 5, 2012).

47. *All* translators are biased. The question is, how much does that bias affect the translation? Does the translation run *against* the bias or in favor? N. T. Wright offered this critique of the NIV, after discovering “that the translators had had another principle, considerably higher than the stated one: to make sure that Paul should say what the broadly Protestant and evangelical tradition said he said. I do not know what version of Scripture they use at Dr. Piper’s church. But I do know that if a church only, or mainly, relies on the NIV it will, quite simply, never understand what Paul was talking about.” Such is the danger of using only one translation. *Justification: God’s Plan and Paul’s Vision* (London: SPCK, 2009), 35–36.

48. “ESV Bible Translators Debate the Word *Slave* at Tyndale House, Cambridge,” YouTube video, posted by “DavidIBHardwick,” September 20, 2011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mx06mtApu8k> (accessed August 15, 2013).

49. Many translations now offer footnotes saying things like “Hebrew uncertain” or “other translations read X.” The LDS KJV tends to offer Greek/Hebrew footnotes where the English is too archaic, but not where the original language is unclear.

50. By similarity, I mean relatedness. It’s relatively easy to learn related languages such as Spanish and Portuguese and translate between them. As languages diverge, they share fewer and fewer features in terms of grammar, syntax, vocabulary, etc. English is a mix of Latin (through the French of the Normans) and Germanic (Anglo-Saxon), both belonging to the large Indo-European family of languages. Hebrew belongs to the completely different Hamito-Semitic family, including Aramaic and Arabic, as well as (more distantly) Egyptian, Berber, and Somali. See Robert Hetzron, *The Semitic Languages, Routledge Language Family Descriptions* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

51. McGrath writes, “The King James Bible may indeed be esteemed as an excellent translation of the word of God by the standards of 1611 and beyond. Yet translations eventually require revision, not necessarily because they are defective, but because the language

into which they are translated itself changes over time. Translation involves aiming at a moving target, which has accelerated over the centuries . . . When a translation itself requires translation, it has ceased to serve its original purpose.” Alister McGrath, *In the Beginning: The Story of the King James Bible and How It Changed a Nation, a Language, and a Culture* (Anchor, 2002), 308–9. Joel Hoffman identifies three problems with the KJV as a translation: (1) English has changed in 400 years. (2) The KJV translators didn’t always understand the Hebrew. (3) Due to their concept of translation, their English didn’t always convey the correct understanding of the Hebrew. *And God Said: How Translations Conceal the Bible’s Original Meaning* (Thomas Dunne Books, 2010), 5–10. In the case of the KJV New Testament, the Greek manuscripts used were quite late and deficient.

52. See, for example, Y. C. Whang, “To Whom Is a Translator Responsible—Reader or Author?” in *Translating the Bible*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and Richard S. Hess (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 46–62. Other essays in the volume take opposing positions on Nida’s theories of translation.

53. For other examples, see Harvey Minkoff, “Problems of Translations: Concern for the Text Versus Concern for the Reader,” *Bible Review* 4, no. 4 (August 1988).

54. See chapter 3, “Just Words? Language,” in E. Randolph Richards and Brandon J. O’Brien, *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes: Removing Cultural Blinders to Better Understand the Bible* (IVP Books, 2012).

55. As translated in Steven D. Fraade, “Targum, Targumim,” ed. John J. Collins and Daniel C. Harlow, *The Eerdmans Dictionary of Early Judaism* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2010), 1279.

56. Randall C. Bailey, “‘They Shall Become White as Snow’: When Bad Is Turned Into Good,” in *Semeia 76: Race, Class, and the Politics of Bible Translation*, ed. Tina Pippin and Randall C. Bailey (Society of Biblical Literature, 1998), 99–114.

57. The problem with reading something at “face value” is that such meaning is not universal, but culturally dependant. The “face-value” meaning of a given datum is only obvious because we fit it into a preexisting cultural matrix. Face-value meaning will only be the same if the two cultural matrices around that datum are identical. For example, our Nazi-influenced “face-value” understanding of the swastika is very different from the pre-Nazi “face-value” meaning in the west, where it was used as one hockey team’s good luck emblem (the Windsor Swastikas), to say nothing of its past or current meaning in Hinduism, Jainism, or Buddhism.

58. See, for example, “Bible Version Chart,” AllBibles.com; <http://www.allbibles.com/bibleversions.asp> (accessed August 6, 2013), or “Bible Translation Chart,” Zondervan; [http://zondervan.com/sites/default/files/m/bibles/translation\\_chart\\_poster.pdf](http://zondervan.com/sites/default/files/m/bibles/translation_chart_poster.pdf) (accessed August 6, 2013).

59. Everett Fox, *The Five Books of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy; a New Translation with Introductions, Commentary, and Notes*, The Schocken Bible (New York: Schocken Books, 1995).

60. Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message: The New Testament in Contemporary Language* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2003). Bruce Metzger opines that Peterson “goes beyond the acceptable bounds of dynamic equivalence in that he will often divest passages from their first-century Jewish context, so that Jesus, for example, sounds like a twentieth-century American.” Metzger, *Bible in Translation*, 182–83.

61. As quoted in Metzger, *Bible in Translation*, 184.

62. McGrath, *In The Beginning*, 173–75. “The King’s translators were thus forbidden to depart to any significant extent from the text of the Bishop’s Bible of 1568. Yet what were

the instructions given to those who prepared the Bishops' Bible? To use the Great Bible of 1539 except where it did not accurately represent the original texts. The directions given to the translators over the years 1539–1604 were thus virtually guaranteed to ensure continuity of language over a period in which the English language itself underwent considerable change and development. The inbuilt conservatism of the translation process . . . thus led directly—yet unintentionally—to the retention of older English ways of speaking in religious contexts, creating the impression that religious language was somehow *necessarily* archaic. But the Great Bible of 1539 is in reality little more than Miles Coverdale's revision of Matthew's Bible, which [in] turn was a revision of Tyndale's translation—at least, those parts of the Bible that Tyndale managed to translate" (p. 269). "In other words, this was to be a deeply [linguistically] conservative text." Stephen Prickett, "Language within Language: The King James Steamroller," in *The King James Bible after Four Hundred Years: Literary, Linguistic, and Cultural Influences*, ed. Hannibal Hamlin and Norman W. Jones (Cambridge, 2010), 30.

63. McGrath, *In The Beginning*, 270–76; Charles Barber, Joan C. Beal, and Philip A. Shaw, *The English Language: A Historical Introduction*, 2nd ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 195.

64. On the KJV, see Royal Skousen, "Through a Glass Darkly: Trying to Understand the Scriptures," *BYU Studies* 26, no. 4 (1986). On its effects on missionary work, see Hardy, "The King James Bible and the Future of Missionary Work" (see note 5 above).

65. For example, some denominations prefer a particular Bible translation for public reading and liturgy, often more formal, archaic, and traditional, but then encourage different translation(s) for personal study.

66. Halton, Charles. "Has Michael Coogan Seized His Opportunity?" *Review of A Reader of Ancient Near Eastern Texts* by Michael Coogan; <http://themarginaliareview.com/archives/202> (accessed January 30, 2013), in *Marginalia: A Review of Books in History, Theology & Religion*.

67. LDS scholar Phillip Barlow, author of *Mormons and the Bible* (Oxford Press), wrote that "the elegance of the [KJV] warps for the modern ear the tone of the original texts, thus distorting our perception of the very nature of biblical scripture, which our additional scriptures then echo. One can hear no King James-like cathedral bells ringing in the background when one reads the Gospel of Mark in *koine* Greek. Mark's writing is raw, fresh, breathless, and primitive. The lordly prose of the KJV, as it is heard by twenty-first-century ears, is for many texts an external imposition, shifting the locus of authority away from the power of the story itself and toward an authority spawned by the partially artificial literary holiness suffusing our culturally created notion of scripture. This exterior authority in one respect gilds the lily of the original message, then construes respect for the gild rather than the lily as a mark of orthodoxy." See Melissa Proctor, "12 Answers from Phillip Barlow, part 1," *Times and Seasons*; <http://timesandseasons.org/index.php/2005/03/12-answers-from-philip-barlow-part-1> (accessed February 6, 2013). Some Latter-day Saints who encounter modern Bible translations reject them for not sounding scriptural, which apparently means "not like the KJV."

68. Translation of Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary* (W. W. Norton, 2004). The verb translated as "gulf down" is a Biblical hapax legomenon, but "[i]n rabbinic Hebrew [this verb] is employed for the feeding of animals. Its use here, unique in the Bible, is suggestive of Esau's boorish manners." Nahum Sarna, *Genesis, JPS Torah Commentary* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989).

69. Besides the infamous *shibboleth/sibboleth* incident in Judges 12:6, see Gary A. Rendsburg, "Morphological Evidence for Regional Dialects in Ancient Hebrew," in



*Linguistics and Biblical Hebrew*, ed. Walter R. Bodine (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1992), 65–88.

70. Gary Rendsburg has explored this theme repeatedly. See “Some False Leads in the Identification of Late Biblical Hebrew Texts: the Cases of Genesis 24 and 1 Samuel 2:27–36,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 121 (2002): 23–46; “Aramaic-like Features in the Pentateuch,” *Hebrew Studies* 47 (2006): 163–76; “Linguistic Variation and the ‘Foreign’ Factor in the Hebrew Bible,” in *Israel Oriental Studies XV: Language and Culture in the Near East*, ed. Shlomo Izre’el and Rina Drory (Brill, 1995), 177–90.

71. Joseph Smith, *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, ed. Dean C. Jessee (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1984), 161.

72. Robert P. Carroll, “YHWH’s Sour Grapes: Images of Food and Drink in the Prophetic Discourses of the Hebrew Bible,” in *Semeia 86: Food and Drink in the Biblical World*, ed. Athalya Brenner and Jan Willem van Henten (Society of Biblical Literature, 1999), 122n10.

73. McGrath, in *The Beginning*, 305–8; Marvin H. Pope, “Bible, Euphemism and Dysphemism,” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (Doubleday, 1992), 1:720–25.

74. Harvey Minkoff, “Coarse Language in The Bible? It’s Culture Shocking!” *Bible Review* 5, no. 2 (1989): 26.

75. The KJV apparently followed earlier translations, which also include “piss” in various passages. See “Piss” in Geoffrey Hughes, *An Encyclopedia of Swearing—The Social History of Oaths, Profanity, Foul Language, and Ethnic Slurs in the English-speaking World* (M.E. Sharpe, 2006). The *Oxford English Dictionary* lists examples in medical books from the 14th and 15th centuries.

76. See Peter J. Leithart, “David’s Threat to Nabal—How a Little Vulgarity Got the Point Across,” *Bible Review* 18, no. 05 (2002). “Nabal and His Wine,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 120, no. 3 (2001).

77. Daniel Bodi, “Ezekiel,” in *Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel, The Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 65.

78. See Richards and O’Brien, *Misreading Scripture*, 57–58. Regarding “Galatians” as a derogatory term, Paul nowhere else uses it, and the title of the epistle “To the Galatians” was not original, but added later.

79. John Welch, “How Rich Was Paul? . . . And Why It Matters,” in *Bountiful Harvest: Essays in Honor of S. Kent Brown*, ed. Andrew D. Skinner, Morgan D. Davis, and Carl Griffin (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2011), 425–53.

80. In “Reader’s Reply,” *Bible Review* 19, no. 1, Peter Leithart responds to a reader’s question about his article in note 76 by saying “the only English word that captures the vulgarity of the Greek [*skubalon*] is ‘shit.’”

81. John J. Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible: An Inductive Reading of the Old Testament* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2004), 90.

82. Yvonne Sherwood, “Prophetic Scatology: Prophecy and the Art of Sensation,” in *Semeia 82—In Search of the Present: The Bible Through Cultural Studies*, ed. Stephen D. Moore (Society of Biblical Literature, 1998), 192.

83. That is, the written word was subservient to the oral word. “Scripture” meant “writing” and only secondarily takes on elevated and religious meaning.

84. See also Leonard J. Greenspoon, “The Holy Bible: A Buyers Guide,” in *Bible Review* 21, no. 4 (Fall 2005): 37–44.

85. Alter has worked his way through the Bible piece-meal, resulting in overlapping publications. One can purchase *Genesis: A Translation and Commentary* (published in 1997), which was then included in *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation and Commentary* seven years later. Alter's works now cover the Pentateuch, Joshua–Kings, Job, Psalms, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes.

86. Roger G. Baker, "Review of Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary*," *BYU Studies* 49, no. 1 (2010): 180–83.

87. See note 21.

88. Bruce Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2nd rev. ed. (Hendrickson, 2006).

89. Quotation from [http://www.ubs-translations.org/publications/ubs\\_handbook\\_series](http://www.ubs-translations.org/publications/ubs_handbook_series) (accessed January 29, 2013). Both the Old Testament and New Testament series are available electronically for purchase, as individual volumes, sets, or included in various packages from <http://www.logos.com>. Logos is available both on Apple and PC devices.

90. For an overview of the many different commentaries and series out there, see <http://bestcommentaries.com/>, which provides a ranked-by-vote list of "best" commentaries as well as categorical divisions by kind (technical, pastoral, devotional) and other useful introductory material. Most reviewers seem to come from a Protestant perspective. John Welch provides useful advice. "Toward Becoming a Gospel Scholar," *This People*, Summer 1998, 42–56. Printed by permission at <http://www.patheos.com/Resources/Additional-Resources/Toward-Becoming-a-Gospel-Scholar.html> (accessed March 21, 2013).

91. See references in note 41.

92. <http://maxwellinstitute.byu.edu/publications/books/?bookid=125>, accessed March 20, 2013.

93. See Stuart Creason, "PQD Revisited," in *Studies in Semitic and Afroasiatic Linguistics Presented to Gene B. Gragg*, ed. Cynthia L. Miller, *Studies in Ancient Oriental Civilization* (2007), 27–42. Available from <https://oi.uchicago.edu/pdf/saoc60.pdf> (accessed March 20, 2013).

94. [www.logos.com](http://www.logos.com), [www.accordancebible.com](http://www.accordancebible.com), and [www.bibleworks.com](http://www.bibleworks.com). Bibleworks includes the TWOT for free, but the other two are not available.

95. The process and ease depends on the program and which text(s) one is using.

96. See note 43 on *hapax legomena*.

97. Brown, Francis, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, eds., *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1906), known as BDB. Koehler, Ludwig, Walter Baumgartner, and M. E. J. Richardson, eds., *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), known as HALOT.

98. Royal Skousen, "Textual Variants in the Isaiah Quotations," in *Isaiah in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Donald W. Parry and John W. Welch (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1998), 379ff.

99. See "Keys to Understanding the Bible" in *Sermons and Writings of Bruce R. McConkie*, ed. Mark L. McConkie (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989), 290–91.

100. See the many essays by Royal Skousen, as well as Brant Gardner, *The Gift and Power: Translating the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2011); Kevin Barney, "A More Responsible Critique," *The FARMS Review* 15, no. 1 (2003); "Isaiah Interwoven," *FARMS Review* 15, no. 1 (2003); Stephen D. Ricks, "Translation of the Book of Mormon: Interpreting the Evidence," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2, no. 2 (1993); "The Translation and Publication of the Book of Mormon" (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1994).

101. For example, B. H. Roberts falls into the translational camp which holds that “Joseph Smith imparted certain characteristics to his translation of the Nephite record, notwithstanding the use of Urim and Thummim and the inspiration of the Lord that rested upon him.” *New Witnesses for God*, 3 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1909), 3:423. Consequently, he offered this thought. “I suppose if the Lord had revealed the existence of the Book of Mormon to a man who had a perfect knowledge of the English language, a grammarian, and perfect in literary attainments, then no doubt we would have had a translation of the Book of Mormon without fault or blemish so far as the grammar is concerned; but it pleased God in his wisdom to appoint that mission to one who was not learned in the English language, whose use of the English language was ungrammatical, through failing of opportunity to obtain the necessary instruction in his youthful days, and consequently we find errors in grammar in the translation of the Book of Mormon, such as this: ‘Whoredoms is an abomination to the Lord.’ Marvelous, is it not?” *Defense of the Faith and the Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1907): 519.

102. Transmission errors are likely among both the ancient and modern people involved with the text of the Book of Mormon, given the process of dictation, hand-copying the Original and Printer’s Manuscripts, and the issues in printing at the time. On the latter, see M. Gerald Bradford and Alison V. P. Coumts, eds., *Uncovering the Original Text of the Book of Mormon: History and Findings of the Critical Text Project* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2002). Available at <http://maxwellinstitute.byu.edu/publications/jbms/?vol=11&num=2> (accessed July 5, 2013).

103. Given the core LDS principles of continuing revelation, line upon line, and that God shall “yet reveal many great and important things pertaining to the Kingdom of God,” doctrinal accuracy is a bit of a moving target. The question of doctrinal accuracy is similar to that of the quality of a translation; both are measured against a non-static standard. A good translation at one time may, because of language changed over time, be found less so. A doctrinally accurate statement at one time may, because of further revelation, no longer be as accurate. LDS should therefore not treat the Book of Mormon as some Protestants approach the Bible, as a static and *de facto* infallible doctrinal handbook that matches in every way what has been revealed today. Such a degree of doctrinal harmonization does violence to the text and context, as well as LDS doctrinal principles.

104. For background on Joseph’s statement, see Scott C. Esplin, “Getting ‘Nearer to God’: A History of Joseph Smith’s Statement,” in *Living the Book of Mormon: Abiding by Its Precepts*, ed. Gaye Strathearn and Charles Swift (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2007), 41–54.

105. This applies as well to the Sermon at the Temple, Jesus’ repetition of the Sermon on the Mount in the Book of Mormon. See John W. Welch, *Illuminating the Sermon at the Temple & Sermon on the Mount* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1999). Available online at <http://maxwellinstitute.byu.edu/publications/books/?bookid=113&chapid=> (accessed July 5, 2013).

106. Robert J. Matthews, *“A Plainer Translation” Joseph Smith’s Translation of the Bible: A History and Commentary* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University, 1985), 39.

107. Kent P. Jackson and Peter M. Jasinski, “The Process of Inspired Translation: Two Passages Translated Twice in the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible,” *BYU Studies* 42, no. 2 (2003).

108. See Matthews, *Plainer Translation*; Robert L. Millet, “Joseph Smith’s Translation of the Bible: A Historical Overview,” in *The Joseph Smith Translation: The Restoration of Plain and Precious Truths*, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Robert L. Millet (Provo, UT: Religious

Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1985), 38–41; Thomas E. Sherry, “Robert J. Matthews and the RLDS Church’s Inspired Version of the Bible,” *BYU Studies* 49, no. 2 (2010): 93–119.

109. I have reordered these categories from the three authors’ arrangement found in *Joseph Smith’s New Translation of the Bible: Original Manuscripts* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2004), 3–13.

110. Kent Jackson reiterates elsewhere, “Even though I believe that the JST restores original text, it is likely that most changes have other explanations.” In “New Discoveries in the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible,” in *By Study and by Faith: Selections from the “Religious Educator,”* ed. Richard Neitzel Holzapfel and Kent P. Jackson (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2009), 169–81.

111. The assumption in the phrase “preserved less adequately” appears to be that any lack of doctrinal harmony between the Bible and modern revelation is explained by asserting the original presence of that doctrine and its subsequent loss. This is not a necessary assumption, as Latter-day Saints also have the idea of line-upon-line and continuing revelation. See comment in note 103.

112. “The Joseph Smith Translation and Ancient Texts of the Bible,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 19, no. 3 (1986): 85–102.

113. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 9:311.

114. On Latter-day Saint discomfort with ambiguity, see Bruce C. Hafen, “On Dealing with Uncertainty,” *Ensign*, August 1979, 63–67. Peter Enns addresses a similar issue about assumptions and textual/theological diversity in the Old Testament, *Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 65–112.