

The King James Bible and the Future of Missionary Work

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[I am a professor of history and religious studies at the University of North Carolina at Asheville. I have a B.A. in Ancient Greek from BYU and a Ph.D. in Chinese from Yale. I am currently serving as the first counselor in the stake presidency of the Asheville North Carolina Stake. In addition to publishing several articles with FARMS, I have also been an associate editor of the *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Restoration Scripture*. My introduction to the Book of Mormon has recently come out from Oxford University Press. For this particular paper, it is also significant that I live in the South, surrounded by very conservative Baptists, Methodists, and other evangelical Christians.]

The Problem

Not long ago I went out with the full-time elders and we taught a young mother who was quite interested in our message. In fact, she had been meeting with the missionaries for several weeks. When they referred to a biblical scripture and invited her to read along, she did so and then responded, “That’s not what it says in my Bible.” Even though she is a conservative Christian, from a Pentecostal background, she was using the New International Version. And it’s not just that the words were different—most Christians are familiar with multiple versions of the Bible these days—the meanings did not match up. The elders were flustered, having no idea how to handle the situation, and they tried to move on to the next point as quickly as possible.

In this case, our exclusive reliance on the King James Version (which is official policy, according to the *Church Handbook of Instructions*, p. 174), became a barrier to sharing the message of the Gospel.¹ This problem will only increase in the future because things have changed dramatically since 1956, when J. Reuben Clark wrote *Why the King James Version*, and even since 1979, when our LDS edition of the Bible was first published. The KJV is no longer the dominant Bible of the English-speaking world, and the only denominations that still hold exclusively to that four-hundred-year-old translation are Latter-day Saints and a few marginal fringe groups (if you think “snake-handlers,” you wouldn’t be far off). The Gideons, famous for providing free bibles to hotel rooms, recognize that King James English no longer speaks to Americans and have consequently started distributing modern language translations. Even proudly fundamentalist Bob Jones University (about an hour from Asheville) has a disclaimer on its website clearly stating that it does not agree with the King James Only position.² The obstacles to effective communication will be compounded as we become a more international church. When American Latter-day Saints employ arguments that depend on peculiar readings of the KJV, these will not make sense when translated for Mormons who read the Bible in their native languages.

For example, one of the most frequently cited scriptures in *Preach My Gospel* is John 7:17 – “If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine,” which we use to encourage both investigators and missionaries to gain a testimony of particular doctrines by putting them into practice. Modern English speakers read the first *will* as a future tense marker of *do*, but it is actually an independent verb which translates the Greek word *thelō*, “to wish or desire.” Modern

¹ [Ed. note – this policy has been reaffirmed, in somewhat stronger language, in the most recent edition of the Church Handbook, vol. 2, section 21.1.7.]

² <http://www.bju.edu/welcome/who-we-are/translation-position.php>

translations all render the verse more accurately with something like, “Anyone who resolves to do the will of God will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own.” The idea of gaining a testimony by putting doctrines into practice is a true principle, but this particular verse is about God responding to our righteous desires rather than to our actions, and every time it is cited in a church manual or a conference talk, translators will have to scramble to cover the discrepancy. There are several more examples like this in *Preach My Gospel* (see the appendix to this paper).

A generation ago, when the KJV was the most widely accepted and trusted translation, it was an advantage for Latter-day Saints to also use that version because it allowed us to present the restored gospel in terms that were familiar to most people. This is no longer the case. There are several major translations today that are more reliable than the KJV in terms of accuracy, clarity, readability, and closeness to the biblical texts as they were originally written. And everyone knows this except for us. In particular, the NIV—an interdenominational translation by believing scholars which was specifically put forward as a conservative alternative to the Revised Standard Version (for many of the concerns that J. Reuben Clark shared)—has swept the field with over 300 million copies distributed since its publication in 1978.³ In fact, it has been outselling the KJV since the 1980s.⁴ As late as 1979, when Deseret Book reissued *Why the King James Version*, the “Publisher’s Preface” could claim that the “use and acceptance of the King James Version is further enhanced by the fact that it still remains the largest-selling version in the world today.”⁵ That is no longer true, and indeed has not been true for more than two decades. The NIV is now *the* standard bible for conservative American Christians, including my most religious students here in North Carolina.

The Solution

This does not mean that Latter-day Saints should follow suit and simply adopt the NIV (or the NRSV, which would be a better choice in many ways). As President Clark noted, and the First Presidency reiterated in their letter of May 22, 1992, modern-day revelations work hand-in-hand with the KJV. As a result, it is essential for young Latter-day Saints to become familiar with the archaic diction and grammar of the King James Bible, since for them, this is the language of scripture and of prayer. Yet while we do not want to cut ourselves off from the insights and revelations that came to Joseph Smith, we should also be concerned about cutting ourselves off from mainstream Christianity and the increased access to the writings of ancient apostles and prophets that comes through more accurate, modern translations. The solution is to retain the KJV as our official Bible, but at the same time strongly encourage the supplementary study of other translations. In doing so, we would be holding true to our own tradition of scripture study.

³ “Publisher Puts ‘NIV’ Bible in Americans’ Handwriting,” *USA Today*, Sept. 30, 2008.

⁴ Gordon D. Fee and Mark L. Strauss, *How to Chose a Translation For All Its Worth: A Guide to Understanding and Using Bible Versions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 149. A news release last year reported that two-thirds of participating leaders named the NIV as their preferred Bible in a survey conducted by the National Association of Evangelicals, an organization that claims to represent 40 million evangelical Christians.
<http://www.nae.net/index.cfm?FUSEACTION=editor.page&pageID=514&IDcategory=1>

⁵ J. Reuben Clark, Jr., *Why the King James Version* (Salt Lake city: Deseret Book, 1979; orig. 1956), iv.

Joseph Smith, who used the King James Bible and knew it well, was not satisfied with it. He studied Hebrew in an attempt to understand the original text better; he read other translations (including Martin Luther's, which he felt was superior to the KJV; see HC 6:307, 364); and he undertook his own inspired translation. It is remarkable that even with direct access to revelation from God, Joseph still felt the need for the laborious study of biblical languages. In 1836, when the bulk of the JST had already been completed, he confided in his diary, "May the Lord help us to obtain this language [Hebrew] that we may read the scriptures in the language in which they were given" and "My soul delights in reading the word of the Lord in the original and I am determined to pursue the study of languages until I shall become master of them, if I am permitted to live long enough."⁶ Indeed, Joseph later stated, "I believe the Bible as it read when it came from the pen of the original writers. Ignorant translators, careless transcribers, or designing and corrupt priests have committed many errors" (HC 6:57). It is now possible to get much closer to those original writers than ever before, thanks to the discovery of thousands of manuscripts (including the Dead Sea Scrolls), as well as significant advances in biblical linguistics, philology, and archaeology. Why would a people who love both the scriptures and our first prophet not want to follow his example?⁷ Or as Brigham Young put it, "If it 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, or the curse be upon him."⁸

There will also be new opportunities as we open ourselves to modern translations, because some of them teach the principles of the restored gospel with more clarity than the KJV. For example, 1 Cor. 1:18 reads in the KJV as: "For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God." Newer versions translate *sōzomenois* more correctly as a dative plural present passive participle: ". . . but *to us who are being saved* it is the power of God," thus indicating that Paul thought of being saved not as a one-time event, but rather as an ongoing process. Similarly, where the KJV translates Gal. 1:15 with "But when it pleased God, *who separated me from my mother's womb*, and called me by his grace," the New Revised Standard Version has "But when God, *who had set me apart before I was born* and called me through his grace"—a reading much more resonant with LDS doctrine.

⁶ Dean D. Jessee, ed., *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1984), 156, 161 (spelling modernized).

⁷ Latter-day Saints have not always been as exclusively devoted to the KJV as they are today. For instance, Elder John A. Widstoe observed:

It should be remarked that the translation of the Bible into several modern languages has helped us to understand the meaning of many passages otherwise obscure. To convert the ideas recorded in Hebrew or Greek into another language is not an easy task. The translator at best is only an interpreter of the text. It is well therefore to compare, say a standard translation in German or French with one in English. The peculiar genius of one language often permits a clearer expression of the original meaning.

In recent years many new translations of the Bible into English have been made, chiefly to render the text in modern, colloquial language, though others have sought primarily to make the rendering correspond more exactly with the text. These modern translators have had at their command for comparison many more manuscripts than were possessed by the translators in 1611. Each such translation has contributed something towards our fuller understanding of the Bible.

John A. Widstoe, *Evidences and Reconciliations*, arranged by G. Homer Durham (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1960), 119. For an authoritative overview of Latter-day Saint attitudes toward the King James Bible, see Philip L. Barlow, "Why the King James Version?: From the Common to the Official Bible of Mormonism," *Dialogue* 22 (Summer 1989): 19-43, which later became ch. 5 of his *Mormons and the Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

⁸ *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool: F. D. Richards and others, 1855-86), 14:226-227.

In addition, Latter-day Saints will come to understand the KJV better as they compare its renderings with other translations. In an age when young people are reading less and less (let alone seventeenth-century classics like Shakespeare and Milton), the highly literary language of the 1611 KJV is quite difficult. We do well enough with the stories and the scripture mastery verses, but the writings of the Old Testament prophets and the letters of Paul are nearly impenetrable. (I say this as someone who taught early-morning seminary for three years.) I myself have a background in Ancient Greek and a doctorate degree, yet I often have to go to modern translations in order to understand what the KJV is saying. To take a recent example, the YM/YW theme for 2009 was 1 Tim. 4:12 – “Be thou an example of the believers, in word, in conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity.” The “of,” however, is ambiguous, and it sounds like our youth are being told to stand up as examples of what believers should be. Actually, the Greek is an objective genitive: “set an example *for* the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity” (NIV). This is slightly different, but equally important, advice.⁹

With regard to the Bible, many Latter-day Saints—like the missionaries I went out with—are functionally illiterate. They don’t know where the texts originated, how they were transmitted, what sorts of issues translators struggled with, or even how different types of translations work. As a result, we read the Bible with blinders, not realizing which of our appeals to scripture are persuasive, and which are based on uncertain readings (though the latter instances can be important because the teachings of modern revelation often restore doctrines that have been lost or obscured in the Bible). In an ideal world, we would follow Joseph Smith’s example and develop a strong tradition of studying the bible in its original languages, but the next best method for getting closer to the original texts is to compare several translations, along with the additional witness of modern scriptures. As it says in 2 Cor. 13:1 (and this time the KJV is clear enough), “in the mouth of two or three witnesses shall every word be established.”

As Translated Correctly

The first rumblings of dissatisfaction with the KJV came with a realization that the translation was based on a relatively poor text, one that had frequently been marred by the “careless transcribers” and “corrupt priests” that Joseph Smith warned about. This was particularly true of the New Testament. The King James translators used a Greek text that had been published by Erasmus in 1516, and this was based on only half a dozen relatively late copies. In the 1800s, new manuscripts were discovered, including the Codex Sinaiticus and the Codex Vaticanus, both dating back to around AD 350. Scholars put together a new, more accurate Greek text based on these much older manuscripts, which became the basis for the 1885 Revised Version (that is, it was a revision of the KJV). Understandably, there was considerable concern at the time over the accuracy of this new Greek text, but subsequent discoveries, especially of very early versions written on papyrus, have generally validated the judgment of the nineteenth-century textual critics. Today the 4th edition of the Greek New Testament published by the United Bible Societies (1993; with a text identical to that of the 27th edition of the Nestle-Aland NT) is the

⁹ When one looks at the Greek manuscripts, the KJV phrase “in spirit” is so obviously a late addition of the Middle Ages that it does not even warrant a comment in the universally-accepted United Bible Societies’ edition of the Greek New Testament.

standard Greek New Testament, accepted by virtually all Christians of every denomination, from Catholic to Protestant to Orthodox, and from liberal to conservative. This text comes about as close as is humanly possible to “the Bible as is read when it came from the pen of the original writers,” and it is the basis for all modern translations.

In 1952, a new edition of the Revised Version was published (called the Revised Standard Version, or RSV). Again, there were concerns about the accuracy and the faithfulness of the underlying text, particularly because some familiar verses were relegated to the margins since they did not appear in the oldest, most reliable manuscripts. These included Acts 8:37 (“And Philip said, if thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest. And he answered and said, I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God”) and the phrase “through his blood” at Col. 1:14. The new version also indicated, quite correctly, that the traditional long ending of Mark was not found in the oldest manuscripts. In addition, some critics strenuously objected to the substitution of the phrase *young woman* for *virgin* in Isaiah 7:14, attributing this change to the supposed faithlessness of the translators (though there are good linguistic reasons for this rendering and, in any case, the virgin birth was still clearly attested to at Matt 1:18 and Luke 1:34).¹⁰ The debate was not one of the finest moments in the history of American religion, with rational scholarly arguments being upstaged by Cold War suspicions of Communist influence as well as blatant anti-Catholicism, anti-Semitism, and book burnings.¹¹ This was the immediate cultural context for J. Reuben Clark’s *Why the King James Version*. President Clark was one of the more moderate voices in the debate, but he admitted that, knowing no Greek, he had no direct knowledge of the issues involved and so had to depend entirely on other experts. Unfortunately, most of the authorities he quoted at length were wrong. Indeed, by 1956 there were *no* major scholars, regardless of denominational affiliation or personal faith, who still defended the Greek text behind the KJV, so Clark had to rely primarily on Frederick Scrivener and John Burgon—two scholars who had been writing in the 1880s. The arguments and charges against the RSV that Clark echoed in *Why the King James Version* were outdated at the time, and now, more than fifty years later, they seem even more unfair and inaccurate. The rest of the English-speaking Christian world has moved beyond the biblical controversies of the 1950s; only Latter-day Saints are still living with the results of those misunderstandings.

The nearly universal perspective today has been summarized by a conservative evangelical scholar as follows:

The King James Version became the most popular English translation in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It acquired the stature of becoming the standard English Bible. But the King James Version had deficiencies that did not go unnoticed by certain

¹⁰ F. F. Bruce, *History of the Bible in English*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 186-203. For a systematic rebuttal of the arguments made by the authorities upon whom Clark relied, see D. A. Carson, *The King James Version Debate: A Plea for Realism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979). Both Bruce and Carson were very conservative, well-respected evangelical scholars. Standard surveys of textual scholarship include Kurt and Barbara Aland, *The Text of the New Testament: An Introduction to the Critical Editions and to the Theory and Practice of Modern Textual Criticism*, trans. Erroll F. Rhodes, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1989), and Bruce M. Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

¹¹ Peter J. Thuesen, *In Discordance with the Scriptures: American Protestant Battles over Translating the Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 94-119.

scholars. First, knowledge of Hebrew was inadequate in the early seventeenth century. The Hebrew text they used (i.e., the Masoretic Text) was adequate, but their understanding of the Hebrew vocabulary was insufficient. It would take many more years of linguistic studies to enrich and sharpen understanding of the Hebrew vocabulary. Second, the Greek text underlying the New Testament of the King James Version was an inferior text. . . . The King James translators had done well with the resources that were available to them, but those resources were insufficient, especially with respect to the New Testament text.¹²

As for the Old Testament, the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in the 1940s revolutionized scholarship of the Hebrew Bible since those newly recovered documents predated all other known copies by about a thousand years. For the most part, they demonstrated the care with which the traditional text had been passed on, but Dead Sea Scrolls occasionally have superior readings which, along with other improvements from the Septuagint and other ancient versions, have been incorporated into the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (1977), the standard Hebrew text of the Old Testament for Jews and Christians alike. Scholars at BYU have been prominently involved in the analysis of the Dead Sea Scrolls. It is a shame that the results of that research are inaccessible to Mormons who use only the LDS version of the scriptures

Linguists make a distinction between translations that lean toward formal equivalence (“form-driven”) and those that feature functional equivalence (“meaning-driven”). The first tries to preserve the word order, ambiguities, and repeated terms of the original language, while the second attempts to recreate the original meaning in phrases that sound natural in the target language. It is not that one approach is good and the other bad, since all translations have to find some balance between the two. There is no such thing as a “literal translation.” What matters most is whether a translation accurately communicates the thoughts of the original author to an audience in a new language.¹³ The KJV can be difficult to read not only because of its archaic English, but also because it favors formal equivalence with convoluted sentences and ambiguous grammatical constructions that are more natural to ancient Greek. Since readers have to struggle to understand it, the KJV is no longer an adequate translation, at least not on its own. In addition, the lofty style for which it is so admired does not accurately reflect the original language of the New Testament, which was written in a rather ordinary form of Greek called *koine*. Common, everyday English captures the flavor of the Greek more precisely.

There are many modern translations, but four are particularly significant. They have all been very successful in balancing respect for the original text with clarity in expressing the meaning. The Revised Standard Version, like the KJV, offers a more form-driven approach, while the New English Bible leans more toward the natural English of a meaning-driven translation.

¹² Philip W. Comfort, “History of the English Bible,” in *The Origin of the Bible*, ed. Philip Wesley Comfort (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House, 1992).

¹³ Basic introductions to the specialized concerns of biblical translation can be found in Fee and Strauss, as well as in David Dewey, *A User’s Guide to Bible Translations: Making the Most of Different Versions* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2004). For an excellent article focusing on these matters from a Latter-day Saint perspective, see Joseph G. Stringham, “The Church and Translation,” *BYU Studies* 21, no. 1 (1981): 69-90.

The Revised Standard Version (1952; currently available as the New Revised Standard Version, or NRSV [1989]). This translation stands in the grand tradition of the King James Bible and it generally follows familiar seventeenth-century wording (itself often borrowed from Tyndale), except for changes needed to reflect better Greek and Hebrew manuscripts, or better understandings of the vocabulary and grammar. This is the most ecumenical Bible today, fully accepted by both Catholics and mainline Protestants, with participation on the translation committee by representatives from Eastern Orthodoxy and Judaism.

The New English Bible (1970; now the Revised English Bible, or REB [1989]). This was an entirely new translation from the original sources that deliberately sought to express the truths of the Bible in fresh words and phrases. It is innovative but quite accurate. As the product of British Christians, it has the support of the Church of England as well as most other major Christian denominations and the Roman Catholic Church.

The New International Version (1978; there is a fairly recent revision, Today's New International Version [2005], but the original NIV is still in print). This is the preferred translation of American evangelicals. It is linguistically accurate and textually reliable, but also rather conservative, so that it still sounds something like the KJV. Produced by over one hundred scholars, all of whom "were united in their commitment to the authority and infallibility of the Bible as God's Word in written form" (NIV Preface), this is the Bible that has overthrown the KJV in the hearts and minds of conservative Christians.

The Jewish Publication Society Translation (1917; revised in 1985 and referred to as the NJPS). This only includes the Old Testament, of course, and is based on the traditional Masoretic Text with additional readings from the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Septuagint, and other ancient versions. Its loveliness and accuracy are striking, bringing to mind Nephi's observation that "I know that the Jews do understand the things of the prophets, and there is none other people that understand the things which were spoken unto the Jews like unto them, save it be that they are taught after the manner of the things of the Jews" (2 Ne. 25:5).

There may be other factors to consider, but if our sole criteria were believing the Bible "to be the word of God as far as it is translated correctly," all of the above translations have more of a claim to being the word of God than the King James Version. They are simply more accurate translations of texts that are closer to what was written by the original authors.

Restored Truths and Additional Insights

So what can new translations add to our understanding of God's word? Here are a dozen or so quick, but representative examples.

1. 2 Samuel 13:21-22. The story of Absalom killing his brother Amnon for raping his sister Tamar is grim in any version, but the KJV simply has, "when king David heard of all these

things, he was very wroth. And Absalom spake unto his brother Amnon neither good nor bad; for Absalom hated Amnon, because he had forced his sister Tamar.” But notice the key narrative element added by the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Septuagint, and various manuscripts: “When King David heard of all these things, he became very angry, *but he would not punish his son Amnon, because he loved him, for he was his firstborn.* But Absalom spoke to Amnon neither good nor bad; for Absalom hated Amnon . . .” (NRSV). In our stake, we have had disciplinary councils that were the direct result of earlier priesthood leaders not taking stern enough action with regard to previous offenses. Sometimes, as David tragically learned, looking upon sin with leniency only leads to further, more serious problems.

2. Psalms 145:13. The KJV, following the Masoretic Text, reads “Thy kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and thy dominion endureth throughout all generations.” The Dead Sea Scrolls has the same reading, but it adds another sentence, so that the complete verse is: “Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and your dominion endures through all generations. The Lord is faithful to all his promises and loving toward all he has made” (NIV). There are no new doctrines taught in this recently recovered sentence, but to those who love the word of God, every line of scripture is precious. (Similarly, the NSRV includes at the end of 1 Sam. 10 an entire paragraph from the Dead Sea Scrolls that was lost from the Masoretic Text.)

3. Isaiah 53:11. The KJV has “He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied . . .” The Dead Sea Scrolls revealed that a word was missing: “after his suffering he will see *light* and be satisfied” (REB). We might wonder if, when Abinadi comments on Isaiah 53 by observing that Christ “is the light and the life of the word; yea, a light that is endless,” he wasn’t responding to the reference to “light” in the original text of Isa. 53:11.

4. Matthew 5:22. Modern translations delete the phrase “without a cause” from this verse (KJV: “I say unto you, that whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment”), because it does not occur in the oldest and most reliable manuscripts. It is similarly absent in the Book of Mormon version of the Sermon on the Mount (3 Ne. 12:22), thus providing a remarkable witness of the authenticity of that text.¹⁴ [A footnote in the LDS edition points to the difference with the Book of Mormon verse, but it does not say anything about the evidence of Greek manuscripts.]

5. Matthew 6:24. “No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.” (NIV). There is no footnote in the LDS edition explaining the meaning of the Aramaic word *mammon*, which was retained by the King James translators. The meaning can be found in the Bible Dictionary, but having to look it up is a poor substitute for the direct impact of Jesus’ words in the NIV.

6. 1 Corinthians 7:1. This change reflects a different interpretation of the Greek rather than different underlying texts. The KJV reads, “Now concerning the things whereof ye wrote unto me: It is good for a man not to touch a woman,” which makes it sound as if Paul is urging the Corinthian saints to adopt celibacy. Many modern translations take the second part of that verse

¹⁴ See John W. Welch, *Illuminating the Sermon at the Temple and the Sermon on the Mount* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1999), 200-201.

to be, not Paul's words, but rather a quotation from an incoming letter: "Now for the matters you wrote about. You say, 'It is a good thing for a man not to have intercourse with a woman'" (REB). [This interpretation of the Greek text matches that of the JST.]

7. 1 Corinthians 15:29. Some Christians quibble about the exact meaning of this verse, but the REB makes a strong witness even clearer by translating, "If the dead are not raised to life at all, what do they mean by being baptized on their behalf?"

8. 2 Corinthians 7:10. The general meaning of this verse is clear enough in the KJV: "For godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of: but the sorrow of the world worketh death," but we might wonder what exactly Paul meant by "salvation not to be repented of." If we turn to the NIV, we read: "Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret . . ." When we turn back to the KJV, we can better grasp how the various parts of the sentence fit together, and we are further enlightened by the doctrine that true repentance allows a person to move forward spiritually and not dwell on past wrongs.

9. 1 Thessalonians 4:4. Here the Greek expression itself is ambiguous. It may mean "every one of you should know how to possess his vessel in sanctification and honour" (KJV), which is reflected in the NIV: "each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable," but the NIV also provides alternate readings of "Or *learn to live with his own wife*; or *learn to acquire a wife*," which opens up other, perhaps equally important, possibilities.

10. 1 Timothy 5:22. At first, the KJV sounds as if it might be speaking of physical assault: "Lay hand suddenly on no man, neither be a partaker of other men's sins: keep thyself pure." An LDS footnote referring to the topical guide subject "Setting Apart" guides readers toward a more accurate understanding, which is reflected in modern translations like the NRSV: "Do not ordain anyone hastily . . ." This may be good counsel, even though we regularly urge bishops to confer the priesthood as soon as possible on recent male converts. However, the REB has an alternative reading of the Greek that is, perhaps, even more interesting: "Do not be over-hasty in restoring an offender by the laying on of hands, or you may find yourself responsible for other people's misdeeds; keep your own hands clean." If Paul was indeed speaking of restoring blessings as the culmination of the repentance process, his urge for caution and proper timing makes perfect sense.

11. Hebrews 11:1. The overly-literal rendering of the KJV makes it hard for English speakers to understand this famous definition of faith. The NIV aims at a more meaning-driven equivalent with the translation "Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see," while the NSRV has "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." The latter translation accords with the JST. The Joseph Smith Translation usually reflects fresh revelation rather than more accurate biblical texts or grammatical constructions, but there are a few places where modern translations clear up problems that were also addressed in the JST. For instance, Joseph was bothered by the implication he saw in the KJV of Heb. 6:1: "Therefore leaving the principles of the doctrine of Christ, let us go on unto perfection," even though, as noted in the LDS footnote, the KJV is an awkward translation. More typical of recent versions is the reading of the REB: "Let us then stop discussing the rudiments

of Christianity. We ought not to be laying over again the foundations of faith in God and of repentance from the deadness of our former ways . . .”

12. 1 Peter 2:2. The KJV, relying on an inadequate sixteenth-century Greek text, translated this verse “As newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby.” But manuscripts much closer to the original include the phrase *eis sōtērian* at the end of the verse (this textual discovery is so uncontroversial that it does not even merit a footnote in the United Bible Societies’ Greek NT). The NRSV accordingly includes this lost phrase when it reads “Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow *into salvation*.” Latter-day Saints, of course, will recognize the restored truth that salvation is a gradual process rather than an instantaneous transformation.

13. 1 John 4:19. In the KJV, John teaches that because Christ, in suffering the atonement, took the first step toward reconciliation, we can respond to his freely offered love and love him in return: “We love him, because he first loved us.” The modern translations all follow better Greek manuscripts which universalize the first phrase: “We love, because he first loved us.” In other words, the power of the atonement allows us to love not just God, but everyone else too.

Latter-day Saints using the LDS edition of the Bible have access to very few of these biblical teachings (I have noted the all the exceptions).

Intelligibility

It might be tempting to assume that, aside from the relatively minor issues covered in the above examples, the KJV teaches the gospel clearly enough. But that is nearly the opposite of the truth. The King James Version is no longer a good translation, which is why almost no one uses it anymore. It is inaccurate to the extent that it relies on late, corrupted Greek manuscripts, and it is inadequate in that it does not communicate the authors’ meaning in an intelligible way. Latter-day Saints understand the familiar stories of Genesis and the Gospels fairly well, but they are confounded by just about everything else. For instance, I was the substitute teacher in Institute a while ago, and when we tried to match up the stories of Paul’s first and second missionary journeys with the maps at the back of the Bible, the students were lost. They had a difficult time even finding where tales about Cyprus, Pisidian Antioch, and Iconium began and ended. These are bright enough students, many of whom graduated from seminary, but without paragraphs, quotation marks, and subheadings, it is hard to distinguish what happened in Philippi from events in Thessalonica, Berea, or Athens. (The chapter headings in the LDS edition very rarely mention locations.) And this is straight narrative rather than doctrinal discourses. The situation is even worse when we come to more complex writings of the Hebrew prophets or Paul.

The footnotes in the LDS edition regarding Hebrew and Greek are acknowledgments of how far distant the KJV is from a clear and intelligible translation, but they are only a halfway measure. They address vocabulary but not syntax, they occur only sporadically, and they encourage verse-by-verse reading, which often results in taking things out of context. Perhaps the strongest reason to encourage the use of modern translations is that they would give English-speaking Latter-day Saints the ability to understand the word of God in their own language. Quite often, expressions

from the KJV that are puzzling or ambiguous can be understood after one sees how other translators have rendered the same Greek phrases. For instance, compare the following phrases from First Thessalonians:

1:8 – “for they themselves show of us what manner of entering in we had unto you” (KJV)

“for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us” (NIV)

2:2 – “we were bold in our God to speak unto you the gospel of God with much contention”
(KJV)

“with the help of our God we dared to tell you his gospel in spite of strong opposition”
(NIV)

2:16 – “to fill up their sins alway” (KJV)

“In this way they always heap up their sins to the limit” (NIV)

4:12 – “that ye may walk honestly toward them that are without, and that ye may have lack of nothing (KJV)

“so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody” (NIV)

The notes in the LDS edition of the KJV do not help make sense of any of these verses. And trying to understand longer passages is even more difficult than interpreting individual phrases. Here are a few passages for comparison, but examples could be multiplied for page after page.

Hosea 11:1-4

KJV: When Israel was a child, then I loved him, and called my son out of Egypt. As they called them, so they went from them: they sacrificed unto Baalim, and burned incense to graven images. I taught Ephraim also to go, taking them by their arms; but they knew not that I healed them. I drew them with cords of a man, with bands of love: and I was to them as they that take off the yoke on their jaws, and I laid meat unto them.

NRSV: When Israel was a child, I loved him,
 and out of Egypt I called my son.
The more I called them,
 the more they went from me;
they kept sacrificing to the Baals,
 and offering incense to idols.

Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk,
I took them up in my arms;
but they did not know that I healed them.
I led them with cords of human kindness,

with bands of love,
I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks,
I bent down to them and fed them.

The NRSV, in a poetic format appropriate to Hebrew poetry, is much clearer. It is easier to see how the clauses fit together, the imagery is translated more precisely, and the entire passage takes on a striking poignancy as God compares his love for Israel to the tender care of a father for a toddler.

Isaiah 10:12-19

This same sort of verse-by-verse comparison could be done for nearly all of Isaiah. That prophet will always be a challenge, but by presenting his prophecies to our members only in King James English, we make it at least twice as hard to read as in a modern translation. In other words, we miss half of what we would otherwise understand. Yet once we see what Isaiah is saying, we can then turn back to the King James Bible (and the Book of Mormon) and comprehend that translation more fully. For instance, Nephi thought that Isaiah 10 was so important for his latter-day readers that he laboriously inscribed it into metal plates, yet our English translation of the Book of Mormon is almost identical to the King James Version, so it does not add much in the way of interpretive help.

KJV: 12 Wherefore it shall come to pass, that when the Lord hath performed his whole work upon mount Zion and on Jerusalem, I will punish the fruit of the stout heart of the king of Assyria, and the glory of his high looks.
13 For he saith, By the strength of my hand I have done it, and by my wisdom; for I am prudent: and I have removed the bounds of the people, and have robbed their treasures, and I have put down the inhabitants like a valiant man:
14 And my hand hath found as a nest the riches of the people: and as one gathereth eggs that are left, have I gathered all the earth; and there was none that moved the wing, or opened the mouth, or peeped.
15 Shall the axe boast itself against him that heweth therewith? or shall the saw magnify itself against him that shaketh it? as if the rod should shake itself against them that lift it up, or as if the staff should lift up itself, as if it were no wood.
16 Therefore shall the Lord, the Lord of hosts, send among his fat ones leanness; and under his glory he shall kindle a burning like the burning of a fire.
17 And the light of Israel shall be for a fire, and his Holy One for a flame: and it shall burn and devour his thorns and his briers in one day;
18 And shall consume the glory of his forest, and of his fruitful field, both soul and body: and they shall be as when a standard-bearer fainteth.
19 And the rest of the trees of his forest shall be few, that a child shall read them.

In order to understand what Nephi intended us to see, we first have to understand what the passage means, and there are puzzling, opaque expressions in nearly every verse. What is “the fruit of the stout heart”? Is being “prudent” a bad thing? What does it mean to “put down the

inhabitants like a valiant man”? Or “as if it were no wood”? Or “send among his fat ones leanness”? Who is the “standard-bearer [who] fainteth”? Who is speaking? What is going on?

Here are the same verses from the NJPS, with quotation marks, paragraphs, and poetic lines. There is still a lot to figure out, but at least we are starting with the modern English equivalent of the Hebrew rather than with quaint expressions of Shakespeare’s age.

But when my Lord has carried out all his purpose on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem, He will punish the majestic pride and overbearing arrogance of the king of Assyria. For he thought,

“By the might of my hand have I wrought it,
By my skill, for I am clever:
I have erased the borders of people;
I have plundered their treasures,
And exiled their vast populations.
I was able to seize, like a nest,
the wealth of peoples;
As one gather abandoned eggs,
So *I* gathered all the earth:
nothing so much as flapped a wing
Or opened a mouth to peep.”

Does an ax boast over him who hews with it,
Or a saw magnify itself above him who wields it?
As though the rod raised him who lifts it,
As though the staff lifted the man!

Assuredly,
The Sovereign Lord of Hosts will send
A wasting away in its fatness;
And under its body shall burn
A burning like that of fire,
Destroying frame and flesh.
It shall be like a sick man who pines away.
The Lord of Israel will be fire
And its Holy One flame.
It will burn and consume its thorns
And its thistles in a single day,
And the mass of its scrub and its farm land.
What trees remain of its scrub
Shall be so few that a boy may record them.

Isaiah 14:29-32

Here is a side-by-side comparison of another familiar passage, also quoted by Nephi:

29 Rejoice not thou, whole Palestina,
because the rod of him that smote thee
is broken: for out of the serpent's root
shall come forth a cockatrice, and his
fruit shall be a fiery flying serpent.

30 And the firstborn of the poor shall
feed, and the needy shall lie down in
safety: and I will kill thy root with
famine, and he shall slay thy remnant.

31 Howl, O gate; cry, O city; thou, whole
Palestina, art dissolved: for there shall
come from the north a smoke, and none
shall be alone in his appointed times.

32 What shall one then answer the
messengers of the nation? That the Lord
hath founded Zion, and the poor of his
people shall trust in it.

(KJV)

Do not rejoice, all you Philistines,
that the rod that struck you is broken;
from the root of that snake will spring up a viper,
its fruit will be a darting, venomous serpent.

The poorest of the poor will find pasture,
and the needy will lie down in safety.

But your root I will destroy by famine;
it will slay your survivors.

Wail, O gate! Howl, O city!

Melt away, all you Philistines!

A cloud of smoke comes from the north,
and there is not a straggler in its ranks.

What answer shall be given
to the envoys of that nation?

“The Lord has established Zion,
and in her his afflicted people will find refuge.”

(NIV)

Without the aid of elaborate commentaries, but by simply comparing the NIV, it is easy to determine the meaning of obscure King James expressions like “Palestina,” “cockatrice,” “fiery flying serpent,” “firstborn of the poor,” and “none shall be alone in his appointed times.” Furthermore, the addition of quotation marks in the last verse makes it clear how the final sentence connects with its immediate predecessor.

Ephesians 2:11-13

11 Wherefore remember, that ye being in
time past Gentiles in the flesh, who are called
Uncircumcision by that which is called the
Circumcision in the flesh made by hands;

12 That at that time ye were without Christ,
being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel,
and strangers from the covenants of promise,
having no hope, and without God in the world:

13 But now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes
were far off are made nigh by the blood of
Christ.

(KJV)

Therefore, remember that formerly you who
are Gentiles by birth and called “uncircumcised”
by those who call themselves “the circumcision”
(that done in the body by the hands of men)—

remember that at that time you were separate
from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel
and foreigners to the covenants of the promise,

without God in the world. But now in Christ
Jesus you who once were far away have been
brought near through the blood of Christ.

(NIV)

If we start with the KJV on the left, it is nearly impossible to make out Paul's argument, though it concerns one of the central ideas of his preaching: how the Gentiles can be brought into the House of Israel through Christ's atonement. Once we read the NIV, however, we can return to

the King James and understand what it is saying. For instance, we can see that the word *sometimes* in v. 13 is not used with its ordinary modern definition; rather, in this passage it means “at one time” or “once.”

Colossians 3:5

When teaching youth the principles of the gospel, it is important to be as clear as possible. And here the KJV is nearly useless. Contrast these two translations:

KJV: “Mortify therefore your members which are upon the earth; fornication, uncleanness, inordinate affection, evil concupiscence, and covetousness, which is idolatry” [with no explanatory footnotes in the LDS edition]

NIV: “Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry”

It seems to me that one of these would make for a much more effective bishop’s youth discussion than the other.

Ephesians 5:3-4

Or imagine how teenagers in seminary would benefit from carefully comparing these two translations, word by word, and then pondering what the scripture might mean in a world of cell phones, email, and text-messaging:

KJV: “But fornication, and all uncleanness, or covetousness, let it not be once named among you, as becometh saints; neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor jesting, which are not convenient: but rather giving of thanks” [again with no explanatory footnotes]

NIV: “But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God’s holy people. Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving.”

As it says in 1 Cor. 14:8 (and here again the KJV is clear enough), “For if the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle?”

Potential Difficulties

Using modern translations as supplements to, rather than replacements for, the King James Bible would allow Latter-day Saints to enjoy the advantages of both; we would reap the benefits of today’s best conservative biblical scholarship, while at the same time keeping our strong connection to fruits of modern-day revelation. We would also increase our ability to converse

with and persuade other Christians. Nevertheless, there may be a few drawbacks, at least temporarily.

Sometimes favorite verses turn out not to teach doctrines as clearly as we had assumed. For instance, Job 19:25-26 is on the seminary scripture mastery list as evidence for Old Testament belief in the savior and the resurrection: “For I know that my redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth; and though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God” (KJV; also very familiar from Handel’s *Messiah*). Yet the underlying Hebrew is quite difficult, and the King James translators had to do a lot of guesswork (as can be seen by the key words they had to add: *day, though, worms, body*). More likely translations, based on several centuries of advances in Hebrew linguistics, often read like the REB: “But in my heart I know that my vindicator lives and that he will rise last to speak in court; and I shall discern my witness standing at my side and see my defending counsel, even God himself, whom I shall see with my own eyes, I myself and no other.” Missionaries looking for Old Testament teachings of a bodily resurrection would do better with other scriptures such as Ezek. 37:1-14.

In other cases, we will discover that a few familiar verses are not in the earliest and most reliable manuscripts of the New Testament. This is true of the ending of the gospel of Mark (16:9-20), and also Luke 23:43-44: “And there appeared an angel unto him from heaven, strengthening him. And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly: and his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground” (KJV). Modern translations include these verses, but add footnotes indicating that the textual evidence is questionable. This is not a matter of scholars disliking the doctrines in these passages; they are simply reporting objective facts about the transmission of manuscripts. Conservative scholars argue that even if these verses were added somewhat later, after the manuscripts began to circulate, they nevertheless reflect authentic traditions and were undoubtedly inspired.¹⁵ Latter-day Saints, however, have an advantage in these two instances because the content of both passages is reaffirmed in latter-day scriptures. The essential teachings of the last chapter in Mark are reiterated at Morm. 9:22-24 (cf. D&C 84:64-74), and Mosiah 3:7 goes even farther than Luke 23; it was not just that Jesus’ sweat, as he suffered for our sins, was *like* drops of blood, but “blood cometh from every pore.”

Comparisons with versions based on older and more reliable manuscripts will show that the Book of Mormon occasionally follows poor readings from the King James Bible. For instance, 1 Ne. 21:24 quotes Isa. 49:24 as virtually identical to the KJV: “For shall the prey be taken from the mighty, or the lawful captives delivered?” The word *lawful* was the 1611 translators’ attempt to paper over an obviously corrupt reading; the Masoretic Text refers improbably to delivering “the captives of the righteous.” Thanks to the Dead Sea Scrolls, it is now clear that the original Hebrew text read more like, “Can his prey be taken from the strong man, or the captive be rescued from the ruthless?” (REB). This makes much more sense, but why, some might ask, would the Book of Mormon contain a mistake that came into the text long after 600 BC? The answer is that given in D&C 1:24: “these commandments are of me, and were given unto my

¹⁵ See, for example, David Dewey on another such passage, the woman caught in adultery at John 7:53-8:11, which did not start appearing in manuscripts until the sixth century: “However, there is no reason to doubt the historical nature of the story; it is too scandalous to have been made up. Neither is there any reason to reject it from the canon of Scripture. It has a ring of truth. While it is not written by John, we need not doubt it is based on fact and inspired by the Holy Spirit.” Dewey, 214-215.

servants in their weakness, after the manner of their language, that they might come to understanding.” Regardless of how the Urim and Thummim may have worked, the end result was an English translation of the Book of Mormon that drew heavily upon the King James Bible. As Hugh Nibley pointed out long ago, the Lord reveals truths in language understandable to people at the time, and the KJV was *the* Bible for Americans in the nineteenth century. The situation is similar to the way New Testament authors, writing for a Greek audience, often quoted the Old Testament in its Greek Septuagint form, even when that version translated the Hebrew awkwardly or imprecisely.¹⁶

Another difficulty, also related to new truths being revealed in familiar language, is that modern-day scriptures occasionally make their points with phrases borrowed from the KJV, but taken out of context. Consequently, the Latter-day meanings cannot be read back into other versions of the Bible. This point is important enough to warrant three examples.

A. Three times in the Doctrine and Covenants, the Lord commands his disciples to “stand in holy places” when the calamities of the last days come (D&C 45:32, 87:8, 101:22; cf. JS-Matt. 1:12). The phrase itself is derived from Matt. 24:15, where the KJV is somewhat ambiguous about who is doing the standing: “When ye therefore shall see the abomination of desolation, spoken of by Daniel the prophet, stand in the holy place . . .” In the original Greek, however, it is quite clear from the grammar that this was *not* a commandment to the faithful, as can be seen in the NRSV: “So when you see the desolating sacrilege standing in the holy place, as was spoken of by the prophet Daniel . . .”

B. We sometimes speak of the “first estate” as being the preexistence. This is the way that Abr. 3:26-28 uses the phrase, and it seems to have been borrowed from Jude 1:6: “The angels which kept not their first estate, but left their own habitation, he hath reserved in everlasting chains under darkness unto the judgment of the great day.” Taken by itself, this sounds like it might refer to Satan and his followers in the preexistence, especially because in the KJV it is ambiguous as to how this verse relates to the rest of the passage. But in Greek the grammar of the next verse makes the meaning perfectly clear: “Remember Sodom and Gomorrah and the neighbouring towns; like the angels, they committed fornication and followed unnatural lusts . . .” (REB). So the fallen angels of v. 6 are *not* the spirits who followed Satan before the creation of the world, but rather angels (or “sons of God”) who apparently had illicit relations with women. That is to say, this is a reference to the somewhat mysterious events of Gen. 6:1-4.¹⁷

C. One of the most beloved principles of the Restoration is that of continuing revelation, “line upon line, precept upon precept” (2 Ne. 28:30; D&C 98:12, 128:21). Though the doctrine is timeless, the words used to describe that principle were borrowed from Isa. 28:10, but only in the KJV. Anyone comparing other translations will encounter a number of puzzling expressions, including: “It is all harsh cries and raucous shouts, ‘A little more here, a little there!’” (REB);

¹⁶ Hugh Nibley, *Since Cumorah*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 111-112; and *The Prophetic Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1989), 215.

¹⁷ For more on this topic, see Hugh Nibley, *Enoch the Prophet*, edited by Stephen D. Ricks (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1986), 178-180. Nibley observes that “while the sons of God have been identified with both angels and the Watchers, the Greek Enoch [which is very closely related to the book of Jude] does not identify the Watchers with Satan’s hosts who fell from heaven from the beginning—they are another crowd.”

“For it is: Do and do, do and do, rule on rule, rule on rule; a little here, a little there” (NIV); and “That same mutter upon mutter, murmur upon murmur, now here, now there!” (NJPS). The problem is that the original Hebrew of this verse is quite uncertain. As a footnote in the NIV helpfully explains, “Hebrew / *sav lasav sav lasav / kav lakav kav lakav* (possibly meaningless sounds; perhaps a mimicking of the prophet’s words).”

What then are we to make of these perhaps potentially troubling facts? Robert J. Matthews, speaking of similar issues, gave an insightful explanation:

The whole question of “correctness” must be viewed in light of the fact that the Bible was not the source of the doctrines the Prophet Joseph Smith taught. Rather, the Bible, so far as it is translated correctly, is tangible evidence that the doctrines he received by revelation were the same as those the ancient prophets obtained by revelation.

Too often we make the faulty assumption that the established scriptures are the ultimate source of doctrine, rather than revelation. This was the basic argument Jesus had with the Jews in John 5:39, wherein Jesus told the Jewish rulers that they had placed their confidence in the written scriptures instead of listening to him. For both Jesus and Joseph Smith, the Bible was a teaching tool rather than the basic source of their information.

Let us examine Hebrews 11:40 first. In the King James Version it reads: “God having provided some better thing for us, that they [referring to the dead who had had faith in the Savior] without us should not be made perfect.” Members of the Church frequently cite this verse in connection with salvation for the dead. However, the Joseph Smith Translation says: “God having provided some better things for *them through their sufferings, for without sufferings* they could not be made perfect.” This rendition is in harmony with the overall message of the chapter, which is not talking about those who died without the gospel, but rather about those who were valiant in the gospel, even suffering and dying in defense of it. The JST rendition of verse 40 is thus consistent with the context of the chapter; the KJV rendition is not. (See TPJS, pp. 170–71.)

However, even though the Prophet Joseph Smith knew that Hebrews 11:40 had reference to earthly suffering, he still occasionally used the KJV passage for teaching about salvation for the dead. I can only give my opinion on why he did so, but one reason may be that in either case the doctrine is true. Since the world and the Church had access to the King James Version, it may be that Joseph Smith used that familiar rendition to undergird the doctrine of salvation for the dead. Because he had obtained the doctrine of salvation for the dead by revelation and not from the printed page of the Bible, he therefore had a certain independence from the Bible and seems to have felt free to use it when it would corroborate true doctrines, even if a particular passage might have been worded differently in its original text.

* * * * *

It isn’t a matter of “correct” or “incorrect” as much as it is a matter of purpose. The nature of human language is such that there can be no “literal” translation of any extensive or intricate document. Every translation is, in effect, an interpretation. The language is not the revelation; it is the awkward vehicle by which a revelation or a

concept is expressed. Thus, texts might often be enlarged or paraphrased by a prophet in order to give a certain emphasis or perspective beneficial to his hearers.¹⁸

The truths of the restored gospel came through revelation. Later, Church leaders and missionaries searched the scriptures to find evidence for those truths, but the biblical evidence they identified is of secondary importance (since the Bible was not the source of the doctrines) and therefore can be revised, updated, and enlarged upon. The basic set of biblical verses that we still use to support the doctrines of the gospel was developed in the 1940s by LeGrand Richards in his *Marvelous Work and a Wonder* (first published in 1950). Many of these will work in any translation of the Bible, but some are too closely keyed to the KJV and will result in confusion and frustration if we hold to them in an age when most people have moved on to modern or foreign language versions. The challenge (and opportunity) of the next generation is to find new biblical references that will explain the principles of the gospel in ways that biblically-literate Christians can understand and accept, without special pleading to seventeenth-century verbal formulations or translation errors. Because we can be confident that our Latter-day Saint doctrines are consonant with the Bible in its clearest, most accurate form, we have no reason to fear modern translations.

Conclusion

It has been thirty years since the current LDS edition of the Bible was first published. At the time, it was a landmark in gospel scholarship and it has helped Latter-day Saints read the scriptures—ancient and modern—in a correlated, integrated manner. That publication has made the four standard works the foundation of teaching in Sunday school, Seminary, and Institute, with an emphasis on gospel principles and our distinctive LDS heritage (including the JST). After a generation, however, it is time to take another look at where we are in our study and knowledge of the scriptures, particularly in relation to other Christians—those who will be most receptive to our missionary efforts.

While there is much in biblical scholarship that is still debatable, the basic issues of texts and translations are settled and universally acknowledged. Using the KJV is no longer as advantageous as it once was, and relying upon that translation exclusively is not like being opposed to increasing worldliness or encroaching secularism. It is more like Christian Scientists rejecting modern medicine. Or perhaps a better analogy is that it makes us seem like Jehovah's Witnesses, who come to your door wanting to prove their beliefs by referencing a version of the Bible that, for historical and theological reasons, only they themselves use (that is, the New World Translation). When Latter-day Saint missionaries open up their King James Bibles, they too are appealing to a translation that, increasingly, Americans do not own, use, or understand. It will seem like we are afraid, or unable, to match up our teachings with the Word of God (which, in the case of the Bible, is actually the original Hebrew and Greek manuscripts). Our ignorance of the basic issues of biblical texts, transmission, and translation will make it much harder to convert, or even communicate with Bible-reading Christians, and it will be an obstacle to new members who want to continue using their old Bibles. Furthermore, an exclusive reliance on the King James Version will inhibit our ability to reach out to members of the Church abroad, as

¹⁸ Robert J. Matthews, "I Have a Question," *Ensign*, Sept. 1981, 16–17.

well as to the next generation of Latter-day Saint youth. We do our English-speaking members a great disservice when we insist that they only use a Bible translation that they cannot reasonably comprehend.

Some of the steps that could be taken include:

- Explicitly encouraging Latter-day Saints to read modern translations as supplements to their study of the LDS edition of the scriptures
- Printing articles in Church magazines on modern translations
- Updating the First Presidency letter of May 22, 1992 to allow for more flexibility in the use of alternate English translations while reaffirming the official status of the King James Version
- Including basic information on translation issues and specific translations in the Sunday school and CES manuals
- Allowing BYU religion classes to use newer versions of the Bible as supplements
- Commissioning articles for the *Religious Educator* on how to appropriately integrate multiple translations of the Bible into gospel teaching
- Selling modern translations of the Bible at Deseret Bookstores
- Inviting BYU professors to write a detailed commentary on the NIV or NRSV for LDS readers

As with faith and works, there must be a balance between revelation and scholarship. Only those charged with the proper stewardship can determine the particular combination appropriate for the Church as a whole, but both are surely necessary. Joseph Smith, who had remarkable access to revelation, was nevertheless thrilled to get closer to the original meaning of the Bible through language study as well as reading translations other than the King James Version. And he considered this type of scholarship so important for the spreading of the Gospel that he made it part of the curriculum for the Kirtland School of the Elders. As he wrote in January of 1836, “This day we commenced reading in our Hebrew Bibles with much success. It seems as if the Lord opens our minds in a marvelous manner to understand his word in the original language, and my prayer is that God will speedily endow us with a knowledge of all languages and tongues, that his servants may go forth for the last time to bind up the law and seal up the testimony.”¹⁹

¹⁹ Jesse, 143 (spelling and punctuation modernized).

Appendix: Problematic Biblical References in *Preach My Gospel*

Some of these references are based on peculiar KJV readings and hence will be problematic in any other translation; other citations will be more confusing in some versions than in others. Yet all of the examples below are potentially troublesome and will likely prove so when they are cited by missionaries working with the variety of non-English Bibles used by Latter-day Saints around the world. These foreign translations tend to be more meaning-driven than form-driven (and consequently more like the REB). You might imagine, for instance, how a Japanese Latter-day Saint would feel when he or she looks up a verse recommended by a manual, a conference talk, or the full-time elders, and discovers that it means something quite different from what the speaker intended.

John 7:17 (pp. 19, 62, 93, 122, 196)

“Whoever has the will to do the will of God shall know whether my teaching comes from him or is merely my own.” (REB)

This translation nicely picks up the pun in the original Greek with the repetition of *will*, but it still clearly promises blessings for a change in attitude, or in faith, rather than for the actions which one assumes will follow. The actual meaning is therefore basically the opposite of how it is used in *Preach My Gospel*.

2 Thessalonians 2:1-12 (p. 35)

We often read this passage as a prophecy of a general apostasy, perhaps because of the phrase “falling away” in verse 3. But in more comprehensible modern translations, it is clear that Paul is here speaking of quite particular events—a “rebellion” led by a “man of lawlessness” who will “set himself up in God’s temple, proclaiming himself to be God” (NIV). I do not know who Paul had in mind, but he may have been describing something in current politics, in which case it does not really demonstrate a world-wide apostasy. If, on the other hand, Paul was prophesying of things to come in the last days, things which have not yet come to pass, it does not make sense to use this scripture as an indication of the pre-Restoration apostasy.

Ephesians 1:10 (p. 38)

“to be put into effect when the time was ripe: namely, that the universe, all in heaven and on earth, might be brought into a unity in Christ.” (REB)

We tend to think of the phrase “the dispensation of the fulness of times” as a technical term with a specific, unique meaning (as on p. 44). This is not how it is used in Greek.

1 Corinthians 15:40-42 (pp. 52, 54, 58)

“There are also heavenly bodies and there are earthly bodies; but the splendor of the heavenly bodies is one kind, and the splendor of the earthly bodies is another. The sun has one kind of splendor, the moon another, and the stars another; and star differs from star in splendor. So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable.” (NIV)

These verses will be problematic in any translation, and remember, because this is the reading of the NIV, this is how *most* American Christians will first encounter the scripture. In explaining the plan of salvation, D&C 76 borrowed the terms *celestial* and *terrestrial* from this passage in the KJV, and then added the word *telestial* (the JST brings this word into 1 Cor. 15 as well). There is no question about the truth of our doctrine of three degrees of glory, which comes from modern revelation, but in 1 Cor. 15:40 Paul is contrasting our future resurrection bodies with our present mortal bodies (even in standard English, *terrestrial* means “earthly”); he is not talking about differences between various kingdoms of glory. In the next verse, with his astronomical analogy, Paul *may* be referring to distinctions between different types of resurrection bodies, but his meaning is not crystal clear here.

1 Peter 4:6 (p. 53)

“For this is the reason the gospel was preached even to those who are now dead, so that they might be judged according to men in regard to the body, but live according to God in regard to the spirit.” (NIV)

One common (and linguistically valid) interpretation of this verse is that it refers to Christians who heard the gospel while they were still alive, but have since died. The NIV contributes to this impression by adding the word *now*, which is not in the Greek. We read this verse as a reference to missionary work in the spirit world (as in D&C 138:10), which is also a defensible interpretation, but it not as unambiguous as 1 Pet. 3:18-20.

Acts 3:21 (p. 70)

“He [Christ] must remain in heaven until the times comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets.” (NIV)

On a happier note, *Preach My Gospel* explains that the word *restitution* means “the return of something that has been taken away or lost. For example, the Restoration of the gospel is called a restitution (see Acts 3:19-21).” The Greek word *apokatastasis*, which was translated in 1611 as “restitution” clearly means restoration, and in this case all the major modern translations will teach the doctrine of Acts 3:21 more clearly than the King James Version.

1 Kings 19:12 (pp. 73, 96)

“and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence.” (NRSV)

“Still small voice” is an idiomatic rendering of the Hebrew, which is also translated as “a soft murmuring sound” (NJPS) or “a gentle whisper” (NIV). It might be confusing, particularly for a non-English speaker who turns to a translation in his own language more along the lines of the NRSV, to be told to listen to “the sound of sheer silence.” We frequently speak of the “still small voice” and assume that everyone understands what we mean, but comparing different translations of 1 Kings 19 might remind us that we are dealing with a metaphor that poetically represents the actual experience of perceiving the promptings of the Spirit. As usual, the doctrine itself is more important than any particular verbal formulation of it.

John 5:39 (p. 74)

“You study the scriptures diligently, supposing that in having them you have eternal life; yet, although their testimony points to me, you refuse to come to me for that life.” (REB)

We usually interpret this verse as Jesus urging his listeners to study the scriptures. In fact, the meaning is nearly the opposite; Jesus is warning scripture-loving Jews that their diligent study is taking them away from what matters most. They think that eternal life is in the scriptures, but they are wrong—eternal life comes only through Jesus Christ, of whom the scriptures testify. The REB captures the actual meaning of the conversation more clearly than the KJV. (It is possible to read the first sentence in Greek as an imperative, “Search the scriptures . . .”, but with this reading Jesus would be speaking ironically, saying something like [in a very loose paraphrase] *Go ahead and search the scriptures if you think you will find eternal life in them, but you are missing the main point . . .*) The standard works include several admonitions to study the scriptures wholeheartedly, but this is *not* one of them.

Philippians 2:12 (p. 88)

“. . . continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.” (NIV, vv. 12-13)

Any modern translation will reflect the fact that Phil. 2:12 is only half a sentence, and readers will naturally continue to the next clause. The phrase “work out your salvation with fear and trembling” is indeed an injunction to individual effort and enduring to the end, as Latter-day Saints commonly use it, but the sentence as a whole makes the more subtle point that any success we may achieve is the result of God working through us.

Ephesians 1:13-14 (p. 91)

“And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession—to the praise of his glory.” (NIV)

Latter-day Saints often treat “the Holy Spirit of Promise” as a technical term, for this is how it is used in the Doctrine and Covenants. As it states in the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, “The Holy Spirit of Promise is the power by which ordinances and other righteous acts performed on this earth, such as baptism and eternal marriage, are ratified, validated, and sealed in heaven as well as on earth.” Yet this usage is, at least partially, the result of an ambiguous genitive in the KJV. In Ephesians, the “holy spirit of promise” is not a power, and it is not even a “descriptive name-title of the Holy Ghost [which] refers to a specific function” (again from the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*). We know from modern revelation that the sealing power is real and significant, but in this particular New Testament verse, Paul is not making a distinction between “the holy spirit of promise” and “the holy spirit”; they are one and the same. This is why all the major translations speak of the “promised holy spirit.”

2 Timothy 3:16 (p. 182)

“All Scripture is God-breathed, and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” (NIV)

The NIV, somewhat uncharacteristically, invents a new expression here. The Greek word *theopneustos* literally does mean “God-breathed,” as does the traditional rendering “inspired of God” (with the word *inspiration* being related to *respiration*), but this translation may come as a surprise to missionaries who first encounter it in their investigator’s Bibles. By the way, the REB offers a perfectly legitimate alternative reading—“All inspired scripture has its use for teaching the truth and refuting error . . .”—which opens up the possibility of uninspired scripture. The JST does exactly the same thing with this verse.