Translation and the World Order

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Translation as a Gift

Joseph Smith published three books he called translations: his masterwork, the Book of Mormon, translated from gold plates when he was twenty-four and published in March 1830; the eight chapters of the book of Moses based on Genesis in the Bible, begun in June 1830 and completed by February of the following year; and the book of Abraham, translated from scrolls that the Church purchased from Michael Chandler in 1835 and published in 1842.[1] It is hard to think of any prophetic figure in religious history who relied as extensively on translations to spread his message as did Joseph Smith.

In other traditions, translation has been the work of scholars in the aftermath of the founding when records of the earlier times were being compiled and disseminated. Translation of the Book of Mormon was the work of the Prophet himself. He began his mission with the translation of an ancient record, published even before the Church was organized. Of all the prophetic figures of his time—Nat Turner, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Ellen White, and Sojourner Truth among many—only Smith presented his message as a translation. He even took on "translator" as an official title (D&C 21:1). His gift fascinated his followers, who eagerly provided him with time and a place to translate, hoping for more inspired words from ancient people.[2]

1. Smith also called his revisions of the Bible a translation, but he only altered intermittent passages here and there in the book.

2. Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith's Gold Plates: A Cultural History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023), 70.

In some respects, Latter-day Saints are translation conservatives, like Muslims who minimize translation in the belief that Mohammad's message can only be truly conveyed in the original Arabic. Other Christians and Jews are forever retranslating their holy books in hope of gaining a clearer understanding of the original texts. Latter-day Saints do not produce modern translations. At most they correct the diction or introduce small discoveries from the original texts in their scriptures. They even cling to the King James Version as their official English Bible rather than experiment with new translations.[3]

What makes translation radical in the Latter-day Saint tradition is the nature of Joseph Smith's work. His translations were an entirely different genre from the translations of the other Abrahamic religions. He produced English texts from writings in another language, but otherwise the word "translation" as commonly defined scarcely applies. Smith did not know the languages he was translating; he did not see characters in the original and then search his mind for an equivalent English word. He made stabs at practicing conventional translation by writing down characters and searching for English equivalents, but he made little headway with these experiments, and they never entered into his extensive translations. He translated not as a scholar but as a prophet, "by the gift and power of God," as he said in the 1830 preface to the Book of Mormon, using a divinely empowered instrument provided for the purpose.[4] The word "translation" may actually obscure what Smith was doing by diverting attention to the purely utilitarian function of making a text in one language accessible in another. His translations came to him as revelation.

A singular passage in the Book of Mormon highlights how prophetic translation in Smith's world differed from conventional translation. When asked for help in translating records found by soldiers of King Limhi, Ammon, a Nephite missionary, told Limhi: "I can assuredly tell thee, O king, of a man that can translate the records; for he has wherewith that he can look, and translate all records that are of ancient date; and it is a gift from God." Translation was a gift, not a skill, one linked to peculiar instruments "called interpreters" into which the translator looked. It was a forbidding gift. "No man can look in them [the interpreters]," Ammon said, "except he be commanded, lest he should look

3. Grant Hardy, "The King James Bible and the Future of Missionary Work," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 45, no. 2 (Summer 2012): 1–3, 26–29.

4. Joseph Smith Jr., *The Book of Mormon* (Palmyra, N.Y.: E. B. Grandin, 1830), 3.

for that he ought not and he should perish." With this life-threatening power came a title: "And whosoever is commanded to look in them, the same is called seer." Translation here rose above mere functional utility to a divine calling. "A seer is greater than a prophet," Limhi said. Ammon added that "a gift which is greater can no man have." The only higher gift is "the power of God" (Mosiah 8:13, 15–16).

Ammon's words call for a perspective on translation that goes beyond conventional definitions. We cannot limit ourselves to the mechanics of translation—how it worked, how it was learned, the sources of its diction—when in the world envisioned by the Book of Mormon, the gift of translation is second only to God's power. What was the purpose of translation? What made it godly? Ammon's pronouncements invite us to look for translation's role in the divine plan for the earth and even to contemplate a theology of translation.

Friedrich Schleiermacher

In the history of translation theory, no speculation has had more influence than Friedrich Schleiermacher's "On the Different Methods of Translating" ("Über die verschiedenen Methoden des Übersetzens") presented in 1813 as a series of lectures at the Prussian Academy of Sciences and published in 1815. Schleiermacher, an influential philosopher and theologian, looked beyond the utilitarian function of making a text in one language accessible in another to view the translator as a pivotal cultural arbiter whose task was to introduce one culture to another. As one commentator puts it, Schleiermacher saw the translator "not merely as a conduit for works of foreign literature but as a sort of cultural ambassador who will help educate his readership in not only the customs of those who live in a particular foreign country but also their particular way of expressing themselves, their sensibility, even their humanity."[5] Translation opened a door into the hearts and minds of a people through their literature as deep conversation might bring two individuals together.

Schleiermacher argued that the translator has two possible approaches. Summing up Schleiermacher, literary scholar Susan Bernofsky writes, "Either the translator leaves the writer alone as much as possible and moves the reader toward the writer, or he leaves the reader alone as much as possible and moves the writer toward the reader." In the first case, the

5. Susan Bernofsky, "Friedrich Schleiermacher," *Translationista: Dispatches from the World of Literary Translation* (blog), February 4, 2011, https://translationista.com/2011/02/friedrich-schleiermacher.html.

translation makes no pretense to being an original text: the translator allows certain marks of foreignness to remain, both in his language use (word choice and syntax) and in details that might strike target-language readers as unfamiliar. In the second, the translator aspires to show us the work "as it would have been if the author himself had written it originally in the reader's language," erasing oddities and making the language as familiar as possible.[6]

Schleiermacher opts for the first, foreignization, leaving the text much as it was in the original rather than catering to readers by moving the original text toward them. The reason for his choice was cultural. Exposure to the actual thoughts and feelings of a writer led toward a deeper form of cultural understanding. Bernofsky goes on to say of Schleiermacher that "translation means giving a sense not only of the texture of that language but of what it would mean to have grown up speaking it. To accustom the reader to foreign texts is thus to engage him in a communal process of becoming more open to other cultures." Schleiermacher hoped to foster "the development of a national mindset, an internationally-oriented cultural literacy."[7] Translation was a form of cultural diplomacy and mediation.

Mormon apologists in the twentieth century treated Joseph Smith's translations as falling into Schleiermacher's category one—foreignization. They claimed there was little evidence of nineteenth-century culture in the Book of Mormon, seeing it as foreign and ancient, not familiar and modern. They emphasized the signs of sixth-century BCE culture in 1 Nephi, moving the reader in the direction of the ancient text, not the ancient text toward the modern reader. These early commentators, however, followed Schleiermacher not to claim that Smith sought to enhance cultural literacy but to defend the claims of the Book of Mormon to be of ancient origins. They were combatting the critics beginning with Alexander Campbell in 1832 and followed by I. Woodbridge Riley in 1902 who argued that the Book of Mormon was a reflection of the culture of the pretended translator, Joseph Smith. He was the author, and the book reflected his culture. The defenders of Smith's claims underscored the differences from the nineteenth century, not to bring readers closer to an ancient culture, but to assert the historicity of the book.

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6. Susan Bernofsky, "Schleiermacher's Translation Theory and Varieties of Foreignization: August Wilhelm Schelegel vs. Johann Heinrich Voss," *Translator* 3, no. 2 (1997): 176.

7. Bernofsky, "Schleiermacher's Translation Theory," 177.

Critics such as Fawn Brodie, Dan Vogel, and Thomas F. O'Dea, Riley's successors, were the ones who put the Book of Mormon into Schleiermacher's second category, familiarization, but again oblivious to Schleiermacher's analysis. They wanted to show that Joseph Smith made up the book, leaving signs of his world on every page.[8] Riley and his successors' explanation of the Book of Mormon was summed up in the term *environmentalist*: Smith composed the Book of Mormon from elements he came across in his environment.

In recent years, this dichotomy has broken down. Latter-day Saint apologists have been going back toward familiarization rather than foreignization as a translation philosophy. Rather than denying nineteenth-century parallels, Latter-day Saint scholarship is returning to the observation made by B. H. Roberts at the beginning of the twentieth century. After commenting on the technology of translation, Roberts suggested that "there can be no doubt, either, that the interpretation thus obtained was expressed in such language as the Prophet could command, in such phraseology as he was master of and common to the time and locality where he lived." Smith read the words in the stones, but the language necessarily came from his own provincial culture to enable his nineteenth-century readers to understand it.[9] In the matter of diction, Roberts was an environmentalist and, in Schleiermacher's terms, saw the Book of Mormon translation as moving the text toward the reader rather than preserving foreign terms.

Recently, Latter-day Saint scholars have increasingly followed Roberts's line of reasoning. Instead of emphasizing the absence of nineteenth-century language as previous apologists did, they have picked up on Roberts's language "common to the time and locality" and joined the critics in identifying elements of Joseph Smith's cultural environment in the Book of Mormon. Instead of trying to refute environmentalism,

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8. See Fawn McKay Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1945), 34–66; Dan Vogel, *Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2004), 109–486; and Thomas F. O'Dea, *The Mormons: Contemporary Perspectives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 22–40.

9. B. H. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints: Century I,* 6 vols. (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1930), 1:133; see 1:127–33. Roberts's explanation was picked up almost immediately by J. E. Homans, author of an apologetic work published under the pseudonym Robert C. Webb. See Robert C. Webb [James E. Homans], *The Real Mormonism: A Candid Analysis of an Interesting but Much Misunderstood Subject in History Life and Thought* (New York: Sturgis and Walton, 1916), 30–31.

they recognize substantial evidence of Joseph Smith's world in the text. In a recent work on translation, Jonathan Neville finds language from the influential Puritan theologian Jonathan Edwards in the Book of Mormon, hypothesizing a young Joseph Smith stocking his mind with Edwardian diction heard from local pulpits and perhaps written works.[10] Brant Gardner points to phrases like "song of redeeming love" (Alma 5:26) that would be alien to Nephi's culture but commonplace in nineteenth-century America's evangelical culture.[11] Then there are the tens of thousands of two- to four-word phrases from the King James Bible, not likely to be found in Mormon's language or Nephi's.[12] In their interpretations of Book of Mormon translation, these scholars are abandoning Schleiermacher's first translation alternative of moving the reader toward the writer and adopting his second method, moving the original author toward his modern readers.[13]

This shift implicitly signals a change in orientation. Instead of proving or disproving the historical authenticity of the Book of Mormon, the recent research addresses its mission. What did it take to inspire belief and acceptance? In the spirit of Schleiermacher, the query is a matter of cultural diplomacy. When cultures encounter each other through a text, how does one understand the other? In the case of the Book of Mormon, the issue is not only a deeper grasp of another culture, but something more far-reaching: acceptance of the ancient text as scripture. The Book of Mormon presented itself as a book to be believed. Beyond seeking to represent an ancient people to modern readers, the book asked those readers to adopt it as their own—to believe it to be scripture. What manner of translation was required to accomplish that remarkable feat? Its acceptance as scripture called for a radical view of prophetic translation,

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10. Neville has found almost four hundred nonbiblical phrases of three words or more common to Edwards's writings and the Book of Mormon. See Jonathan Edward Neville, *Infinite Goodness: Joseph Smith, Jonathan Edwards, and the Book of Mormon* (n.p.: Museum of the Book of Mormon, 2021), xiii–xiv, 3–8, 185–86, 239–81.

11. Brant A. Gardner, *The Gift and Power: Translating the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2011), 256; see also 187–95. For a summary of other Latter-day Saint views on modern language in the Book of Mormon, see Gardner, *Gift and Power,* 148–56.

12. See Bushman, *Joseph Smith's Gold Plates,* 179.

13. All of these scholars honor Joseph Smith's inspiration but look for ways to account for the many traces of nineteenth-century culture in the book. As Grant Hardy puts it, "The English Book of Mormon may be a rather free translation that was nevertheless revealed word for word." Grant Hardy, "The Book of Mormon Translation Process," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 60, no. 3 (2021): 205.

one that made the ancient text as comprehensible and appealing as possible. In Schleiermacher's terms, familiarization was a necessity if translator prophets were to achieve this goal.

Thought Worlds

A 1987 article by Blake Ostler proposed a form of translation that sheds light on how an ancient text might become scripture for a modern people.[14] Ostler, a Latter-day Saint attorney and scholar, examined the Book of Mormon through various lenses used by biblical scholars—source, motif, and form-critical analysis—in search of parallels either to ancient Israel or nineteenth-century America. He argued that some of the Christian doctrines found in the Book of Mormon had no parallels in ancient Israel but did have obvious nineteenth-century connections, implying they were expansions introduced in the translation. Baptism was one such misfit. "Though there may have been ritual washings performed in the tabernacle and temple," Ostler pointed out, "there are no pre-exilic references to baptism."[15] Similarly, "developed ideas of free will enabled by the atonement are not found in Israelite thought but are presented in 2 Nephi 2:8–9, 26–29 and 10:24."[16] The same is true for the Fall. "There simply is no pre-exilic interpretation of the fall of Adam. Indeed, the fall of Adam is not mentioned in the Old Testament after Genesis 2:4–3:23, although the myth of the fall was probably available in sixth-century Israel in some form."[17] Even Book of Mormon concepts of the Messiah went beyond Nephi's preexilic world. "The idea of a Messiah who dies for the sins of others, then rises from the dead, was unknown in ancient Israel."[18] In Ostler's reading, the Messiah of the Book of Mormon cannot be found in the Old Testament world where Lehi originated. The Christian elements must have been enlarged in the process of translation.

Ostler went too far in noting so many anachronistic Christian doctrines in the Book of Mormon. Scholarship by Margaret Barker, published after Ostler's challenging essay, points to strong Messianic currents in the religion of ancient Israel. There may have been

14. Blake T. Ostler, "The Book of Mormon as a Modern Expansion of an Ancient Source," *Dialogue* 20, no. 1 (Spring 1987): 66–123.

15. Ostler, "Book of Mormon as a Modern Expansion," 80.

16. Ostler, "Book of Mormon as a Modern Expansion," 81.

17. Ostler, "Book of Mormon as a Modern Expansion," 82.

18. Ostler, "Book of Mormon as a Modern Expansion," 83.

more Christian doctrine circulating than was once thought, even pre-Christian forms of baptism.[19] Moreover, the Book of Mormon suggests that Book of Mormon prophets received a pre-Christian revelation of Christ which introduced baptism, the Atonement, and other Christian doctrines. Nephi says his father foresaw a prophet being raised up, "even a Messiah, . . . a Savior of the world," and speaks rather gingerly of "this Messiah, of whom he had spoken, or this Redeemer of the world," as if this were news in his own day (1 Ne. 10:4–5). The Christian revelation may have had limited circulation at first, but it was known to the prophets. Three centuries after the first Nephi, Abinadi confronted the priests of Noah who seemed to know only the law of Moses (Mosiah 12:25–32). Abinadi informs the priests of Noah, as if for the first time, that "salvation doth not come by the law alone" and that there must be an atonement (Mosiah 13:27–28). The incident suggests that at this stage, the law of Moses may have dominated great swaths of the Nephite population with only pockets of Christianity informed by the prophets. Abinadi introduces the Christian revelation inherited from the first Nephi and Jacob, but the bulk of society, represented by the priests of Noah, may have practiced only the law of Moses. One of these priests, Alma, learns of Christ from Abinadi and then spreads the word to other Nephites, for the first time organizing a church.

No matter how much of Book of Mormon Christianity was found in the original text and how much was expanded in the translation, Ostler offers a suggestive notion of prophetic translation. Its aim was to create a book of scripture nineteenth-century readers could not only understand but believe. "Joseph Smith gave us not merely the words of the Book of Mormon prophets, but also the true meaning of the text within a nineteenth-century thought-world. The translation was not merely from one language into another but was also a transformation from one thought-world to another that expands and explains the meaning of the original text in terms that Joseph Smith and his contemporaries would understand. Translation 'by the gift and power of God' thus entails much more than merely rendering from one language to another." From Ostler's perspective, "the Book of Mormon is the revelation of an ancient text interpreted within a nineteenth-century framework of thought."[20]

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19. Margaret Barker, *The Great Angel: A Study of Israel's Second God* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992).

20. Ostler, "The Book of Mormon as a Modern Expansion," 107, 111.

The result is a book that resembles the Bible but is far easier for modern people to understand. It is a book made for modern readers. If the original Nephite text had been given a literal rather than a prophetic translation, would it have sounded like one of the Old Testament history books—Deuteronomy, or Kings perhaps—rather than the Christian treatise it actually is? Don Bradley has undertaken to reconstruct the contents of the lost 116 pages from the remaining clues and concludes that the lost pages probably had a much more Hebraic cast than 1 Nephi, more about tribes, sacrifice, and temple.[21] His investigations lead to the question, Why is Nephi's history not more Hebraic? Lehi's family came out of sixth-century Jerusalem, carrying much of the Hebrew Bible on the brass plates; the Book of Mormon is obviously modeled on the Bible. Yet Nephi's account departs from the Old Testament: virtually no ritual law, reliance entirely on history as a framework rather than including distinct prophetic books, and, of course, an extensive Christian presence. The Book of Mormon reads more like the book of Acts than Deuteronomy.

Ostler may go too far in arguing that many of the book's Christian teachings seeped into the text as Joseph Smith translated, but if overdone, his reading opens up a meaning for translation that goes beyond Schleiermacher's two-part analysis. Joseph Smith's translation invited modern readers to accept Nephite writings as scripture. Ostler suggests that the prophetic translator's project is to make the writings of one people God's truth for another. Beyond empathy and comprehension, the target culture adopts the first culture's holy words as the word of God, requiring more drastic treatment of the text than Schleiermacher envisioned.

The remodeling of an ancient text into scripture for a later age was not unique to Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon. In a more modest form, New Testament authors pursued the same goal in their interpretations of the Hebrew Bible, turning obscure phrases from the prophets into prophecies of Christ. The famous passage from Isaiah 7:14 that a "virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel," for example, in Isaiah's day pointed to the godless king Ahaz, not to a future Messiah. It is only conjecture that Isaiah also meant Jesus. Matthew makes about twenty specific references to Old Testament prophecies that he applies to Jesus as Messiah, although there was no common

21. Don Bradley, *The Lost 116 Pages: Reconstructing the Book of Mormon's Missing Stories* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2019), 285–90.

agreement among Jewish scholars of the day about their relevance.[22] Prophetic translation in the New Testament turned the Hebrew past into a rich field of Messianic prophecy—transforming the Hebrew Bible into a testament of Christ.[23]

Recognition of how prophet-translators expand texts has become almost commonplace among students of scriptural transmission. Ostler cites Hugh Nibley to support this larger conception of translation. "We have come across a great tradition of prophetic unity," Nibley once wrote, "that made it possible for inspired men in every age to translate, abridge, expand, explain, and update the writing of their predecessors."[24] Transforming old scripture to sustain new revelation, offensive though it is to modern sensibilities, seems to have been a prerogative of prophets who link the present to the past to strengthen and confirm new teachings.

According to Grant Hardy, Moroni exercised the prerogatives of prophetic translation in his treatment of the Jaredite records: "A close reading of Ether suggests that Jaredite culture was almost entirely non-Christian," Hardy says. "If one were to go through the book of Ether with a red pencil and differentiate Moroni's direct narrator's comments from his paraphrase of the twenty-four plates, it would soon become obvious that, with a single exception, specific references to Jesus Christ appear only in Moroni's editorial remarks." The one exception, Hardy points out, is the brother of Jared's personal encounter with Christ, but he is instructed to seal up his account and never speak of it again, and nothing more is heard of Christ through the remainder of the book until at the end as Moroni injects editorial comments. Consequently, "it is not surprising that Mormon was at a loss as to how to integrate their story into his own account, which was obviously designed to testify of Jesus and his promises. And here Moroni comes to the rescue. With fewer historiographical qualms than his father, Moroni does something that

22. Ed Jarret, "Jesus' Fulfillment of Prophecy in Matthew," A Clay Jar, November 17, 2023, https://aclayjar.net/2020/06/fulfillment-of-prophecy/.

23. The Christianization of scripture motivated Jonathan Edwards's *A History of the Work of Redemption* (1774), which found evidences of Christ's work on nearly every page of the Old Testament. William J. Scheik, "The Grand Design: Jonathan Edwards' History of the Work of Redemption," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 8, no. 3 (Spring 1975): 300–314. For Jewish and Christian readings of the Hebrew Bible, see Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler, *The Bible with and without Jesus: How Jews and Christians Read the Same Stories Differently* (New York: HarperOne, 2020).

24. Hugh Nibley, *Since Cumorah,* The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley 7, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1988), 134.

Mormon either could not or would not do. In a startling act of literary appropriation, he Christianizes the Jaredite record."[25] Carried along by his prophetic calling, Moroni, in Hardy's reading, made the Jaredite faith Christian when the original writers did not even know the term. This bold step was a key development, Kristian Heal and Zach Stevenson have argued, in elevating the Jaredite record. The plates of Ether as Limhi's explorers found them were a mere curiosity that they stumbled across by accident. When translated by Mosiah, the plates became an enthralling history. Not until Moroni's prophetic translation made Ether's record "a text with spiritual relevance" was it treated as holy writing. "The Book of Mormon traces the process whereby an ancient record becomes scripture," with prophetic translation at its heart.[26]

The willingness to manipulate ancient texts in order to advance doctrinal innovation was a commonplace of the ancient world. An impeccable rendering of a text—a requirement for modern translators—was not the point. The authors of the Dead Sea Scrolls, according to the leading authority on pseudepigrapha, James H. Charlesworth, were free with their treatment of revered holy texts. The authors "tend to treat the Tanach in ways that are shockingly cavalier to modern biblical critics. It seems obvious that the text was considered divine, but the spirit for interpretation allowed the Jewish exegete to alter, ignore, expand, and even rewrite the sacred Scripture."[27] Heal and Stevenson argue "a violent handling of texts [is] inherent in making and remaking scripture. Violence, that is, from a modern academic perspective." For a prophet acting with authority from heaven and intent on offering divine guidance to a people, the transmutation of texts was proper and beneficial. Prophets' work, Heal and Stevenson conclude, "is the violence of creation and

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25. Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader's Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 235.

26. Kristian S. Heal and Zach Stevenson, "How the Book of Mormon Reads Ancient Religious Texts," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 61, no. 3 (2022): 111. For more on Moroni's treatment of Ether, see John W. Welch, "Preliminary Comments on the Sources behind the Book of Ether" (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1986), https://archive.bookofmormoncentral.org/content/preliminary-comments-sources-behind-book-ether-0; and Rosalynde Frandsen Welch, *Ether: A Brief Theological Introduction* (Provo, Utah: Neal A. Maxwell Institute, 2020), chaps. 1, 4.

27. Quoted in Nicholas J. Frederick, "Translation, Revelation, and the Hermeneutics of Theological Innovation, Joseph Smith and the Record of John," in *Producing Ancient Scripture: Joseph Smith's Translation Projects in the Development of Mormon Christianity,* ed. Michael Hubbard MacKay and others (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2020), 310.

recreation, birth and rebirth, the process whereby a record becomes scripture by passing through the stage of the historical record."[28]

World Order

The strong treatment of texts suggests that prophetic translation may be in the service of a higher purpose than anything imagined by conventional translation, pointing toward a possible meaning for Ammon's assertion that a translation was a gift without peer. Nephi's discourse on historical records in 2 Nephi 29 gives us a startling glimpse of what the divine gift of translation might mean on a global scale. Nephi discourses at length on the parochialism that has accompanied belief in the Bible, asking on behalf of the Lord, "Know ye not that there are more nations than one? Know ye not that I, the Lord your God, have created all men . . . and that I rule in the heavens above and in the earth beneath; and I bring forth my word unto the children of men, yea, even upon all the nations of the earth?" (2 Ne. 29:7). Nephi's God is universal, not parochial, concerned for all the people he has created, and imparting his word to all. Instead of insisting on the priority of one book, people should realize there may be other books telling of God and "that the testimony of two nations is a witness unto you that I am God, that I remember one nation like unto another" (2 Ne. 29:8).

Nephi requires that we think globally, not locally. He saw the world much as we do today, as a patchwork of cultures, each with its own values, histories, and sacred books. "I shall also speak unto all nations of the earth and they shall write it" (2 Ne. 29:12). All these varying holy books come from God; Nephi has God saying, "I speak the same words unto one nation like unto another." Then he says, in a puzzling passage, "When the two nations shall run together the testimony of the two nations shall run together" (2 Ne. 29:8). The model is the Old Testament and the Book of Mormon and beyond them the writings of all the tribes. "And it shall come to pass that the Jews shall have the words of

28. Heal and Stevenson, "How the Book of Mormon Reads," 114. In an email dated July 18, 2023, Heal wrote: "I'm personally convinced that scripture both is and demands to be constantly remade. The Old Testament remakes ancient Near Eastern 'scripture,' second temple literature remakes the Old Testament, the New Testament remakes both the Old Testament and second temple literature, and the Jewish and Christian traditions constantly retold and remade the scriptural text in both literature and art. At each stage there is a fusion between the scriptural world (a mythic/historical world) and the contemporary world. I see the Book of Mormon in these terms."

the Nephites and the Nephites shall have the words of the Jews, and the Nephites and the Jews shall have the words of the lost tribes of Israel; and the lost tribes of Israel shall have the words of the Nephites and the Jews" (2 Ne. 29:13). Records are being kept everywhere, and in time, this vast scattering of records will flow together, and their makers will read each other's accounts in a vast celebration of unity in diversity.

Can that be? The implication that the words in the two records are the same does not comport with our experience. Even two texts as closely related as the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament clash in many places. Based on our experience with texts, for two of them to "run together" would require a deeper understanding of the underlying harmonies. Texts would have to be transformed, somehow blended, which is to say "translated" in the deep way that prophets practice, the way Joseph Smith translated the work of Nephi, Mormon, and Moroni, joining the ancient and the modern thought-worlds. The unspoken assumption is that translation will help people understand one another like the gift of tongues on the day of Pentecost helped the "Cretes and Arabians" to understand "the wonderful works of God" done by Christ (Acts 2:11).

The difficulty of melding records may be alleviated by Nephi's insistence that mutual care accompany the translation of records. Nephi begins his discourse on other Bibles with a reminder that Bibles come from people. Readers forget that "the Jews, mine [God's] ancient covenant people" wrote the Bible, overlooking all the suffering they went through: "the travails, and the labors, and the pains of the Jews, and their diligence unto me, in bringing forth salvation unto the Gentiles" (2 Ne. 29:4). Nephi seems as concerned about the people as about the contents of their records. "Ye have cursed them, and have hated them, and have not sought to recover them," speaking of readers' treatment of the Jews (2 Ne. 29:5). He implicitly admonishes readers, who benefit from the Jews' writings, to repair this relationship, "to recover them," as he puts it. Translation of records, Nephi seems to be saying, is more than an intellectual exchange. A concern for the people who kept the records must accompany acceptance of the text. Embracing the writings while cursing the writers is reprehensible. Translation of the Jews' writings should lead to a commitment to their well-being, to the establishment of justice, amicability, and peace. Prophetic translation has a social and political dimension. In the Jewish case, Nephi seems to be saying, wrongs would have to be righted and people recovered. Besides understanding each other intellectually, nations would take an interest in each other's well-being. This covenant of mutual care, as Nephi envisions it, would grow

out of translation. Through mutual understanding and shared values, a network of empathetic alliances among cultures and societies would begin to form.

Prophetic translations of historical records offer a vision of how a compatible world order might emerge from the many cultures that populate the earth. At its base, this order would consist of many distinct societies, each with its own records, its own traditions, its own values and theologies. Prophetic translation does not foresee a single religion dominating the world. Nephi's vision of multiple records implies multiple cultures. David Holland points out that Joseph Smith understood "that the grandeur of God's earthly drama would only fully be conveyed through the chorus of many historical voices, not its distillation into one."[29] Diversity is a constant in the world God created. From earliest times, people broke into nations. The divergence of languages, explained biblically by the confusion of tongues at the Tower of Babel, was a punishment, but it drew attention to the fact that differences exist. Deliberations on God's purposes must begin with the reality of innumerable, variant ways of life and religious beliefs among his billions of children. When asked what he saw in his vision of the world, Nephi answered: "I beheld many nations and kingdoms" (1 Ne. 13:2). The problem of bringing peace on earth and establishing goodwill among men and women begins with the cultural complexity of the world God has created.

How do these cultures encounter one another without competitive violence tearing them apart? If God is indeed leading us toward a peaceful world, that is a theological question. Today we hope for an amicable world order to develop out of commercial ties and a shared sense of human rights, but the practice of prophetic translation suggests that discovering and developing commonalities in religious values and beliefs may be even more fundamental. Cultures should encounter one another at the level of theologies and sacred stories as written in their holy books. Translation of such records would involve not only the accurate renditions of the originals, but assimilation of the visions and values of other traditions into the translator's own culture.

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29. David F. Holland, "American Visionaries and Their Approaches to the Past," in *Approaching Antiquity: Joseph Smith and the Ancient World,* ed. Lincoln H. Blumell, Matthew J. Grey, and Andrew H. Hedges (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2015), 50.

Seeds

We may have to await the coming of new seers for the prophetic gift of translation as Joseph Smith practiced it to be exercised again, but the *spirit* of translation can be exercised far more widely. Prophetic translation is an attitude as well as a gift. Searching out commonalities and interpreting doctrine to facilitate blending is possible for anyone who sees the world as Nephi did. If we listen carefully, any of us may hear resonances and harmonies among world religions encouraging us to join and blend rather than compete and conquer. The Book of Mormon suggests that intercultural exchanges based on empathy and receptivity may be one way God will bring in his kingdom.

Recently, examples of empathetic encounters with other religions have proliferated in Latter-day Saint culture—among a people not noted previously for ecumenism. Claims to be the one true church and our reliance on widespread apostasy to frame the Restoration bred a kind of exclusivism that was not conducive to interfaith outreach. But now broad shifts in world culture have made alliances among believers more attractive than before. Where once denominational competition—Pentecostals versus Jehovah's Witnesses, Catholics versus Protestants, Latter-day Saints versus Baptists—characterized the American religious scene, now resistance to the inroads of secularism is the overriding issue. We see that other Christians are not our competitors; disbelief and religious indifference are. Believing Catholics and Baptists are our natural allies in resisting the skepticism and materialism that grew out of the Enlightenment. We link arms not only in philanthropic projects but in respect for each other's common faith in religious principles.

Terryl Givens has long argued that the Restoration consists not only of the revelation of lost truth to the Latter-day Saints, but the gathering of truth from theologies and practices already extant in the world. References in the early revelations to a church already in existence before the Church of Christ was organized in 1830 seem to recognize the validity of Christian lives outside of Smith's Restoration. Today Givens sees in the Church "an institutional shift toward greater appreciation for the contributions of non–Latter-day Saint peoples to Zion." We are moving "in the direction of interfaith, multicultural, and global conceptions of a cooperative project that is a very differently conceived Zion than the one that emphasized isolation, consolidation, and exceptionalism."[30]

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30. Terryl Givens, "The Book of Mormon, Zion, and the Invisible Church," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 23 (2023): 28–29; see also Terryl Givens, *Wrestling the Angel: The*

Is that happening right now? An editorial on the back page of the May 2023 issue of the *Church News* written by the editor, Sarah Jane Weaver, described her relationship with her Catholic father-in-law. She once asked him if he lamented the fact that with his son's conversion to the Church, his grandchildren were not being raised Catholic. He replied that he was not disappointed. "He said religion—our faith and his—strengthens society; it makes better men and women and strengthens families. He was proud of who his son had become."[31] When she wrote the editorial, Weaver had just returned from a symposium on religion and the media, held at the Vatican and sponsored by the Pontifical Academy of Sciences and the Social Sciences in partnership with other organizations, including Deseret Management Corporation. Keith B. McMullin, CEO of Deseret Management, spoke at the symposium on how "faith in God, and faith in one's beginnings and faith in one's purpose in life" can be better discussed in the public media.[32] Think of the *Church News* editor in attendance at a Vatican symposium, Weaver lauding a Catholic's acceptance of Latter-day Saint religious values while remaining Catholic—the sense of a common cause! None of these things would have occurred fifty years ago.

Another story on the Church's KSL website reported a recent celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of Congregation Kol Ami, a Jewish reformed and conservative congregation in Salt Lake City. Rabbi Joseph Spector gave his view of why the congregation had flourished in a predominantly Latter-day Saint culture: "When we first came out here, we saw Latter-day Saints as our brothers and sisters, people who we shared a common narrative with."[33] The moral of the story was that overlapping religious histories led to friendship and peace.

Such anecdotes raise hopes, but the reality is not always so promising. The sharing of common values has not prevented enmity among nations and churches. Catholics and Protestants, Americans and British, Sunni

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Foundations of Mormon Thought: Cosmos, God, Humanity (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 24–40.

31. Sarah Jane Weaver, "Sarah Jane Weaver: What a Vatican Symposium Taught Me about How Media, Art, Business—and Conversations—Promote Faith," *Church News,* May 27, 2023, https://www.thechurchnews.com/living-faith/2023/5/27/23733731/sarah-jane-weaver-vatican-symposium-taught-about-how-media-art-business-conversations-promote-faith.

32. Keith B. McMullin, quoted by Sarah Jane Weaver, "Vatican Symposium."

33. Joseph Spector, quoted by Emily Ashcraft, "Congregation Kol Ami Celebrates 50 Years, and Ongoing Relationship with Latter-day Saints," KSL.com, May 7, 2023, https://www.ksl.com/article/50639378/congregation-kol-ami-celebrates-50-years-and-ongoing-relationship-with-latter-day-saints.

and Shia—kindred though their basic values are—have warred viciously at times. Absorption of one religion into another can be offensive. On the dedication of a Latter-day Saint temple in Sweden, the Lutheran theologian and ecclesiastical leader Krister Stendahl said he felt a "holy envy" for what the temple represented.[34] Latter-day Saints welcomed this generous comment as a stroke of ecumenical friendship; others found the phrase useful but fraught. Maeera Shreiber, chair of the Jewish Studies Initiative in the Religious Studies Program at the University of Utah, adopted Stendahl's phrase for her investigation of Jewish-Christian relations, *Holy Envy: Writing in the Jewish Christian Borderzone*. Shreiber's aim was not to promote a happy blend of religious feelings. She wanted to keep in mind the "turbulent story of intense interaction" rooted in "two thousand years of lethal misunderstandings."[35]

Shreiber took notes on her feelings while attending a Passover seder sponsored by Religious Education at Brigham Young University. The goodwill gesture, she quickly realized, could be categorized as a form of cultural appropriation, defined as "an act entailing the 'inappropriate or unacknowledged adoption of the customs, practices, ideas of one people or society by members of another and typically more dominant people or society.'" Almost immediately after being seated, Shreiber began to feel uncomfortable with "the idea of the seder as a museum exhibit." The leader offered a prayer, "including the sacred name *Adonai Eloheinu*: a non-Jew prays to the Jewish God as part of a performance." She scrawled in her notes: "This isn't yours, it's mine." If Shreiber seems a little stiff, imagine how Latter-day Saints would react if some future body of Christians rewrote the Book of Mormon to make it more relevant, or worse still, adapted the temple ceremonies for their own purposes? Shreiber heard her neighbor at the table musing, "It is funny that the Jews don't understand that Passover is really all about Jesus." With the seder itself over, the leader moved to an image of Jesus at a table with the Apostles, offering them bread and wine. "Seders, like this, help us to build a bridge to our Jewish friends," the leader told the group.[36]

At the end, the group stood as a door was opened for Elijah to enter. The BYU students were all thinking of Kirtland, Ohio, in 1836, and when Shreiber asked one of them what he felt during the moment of silence, he said, "Holiness." Shreiber thought of her childhood seders and the

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34. Daniel C. Peterson, "Prominent Lutheran Leader Has 'Holy Envy' for Baptisms for the Dead," *Meridian Magazine,* June 1, 2023, https://latterdaysaintmag.com/prominent-lutheran-leader-has-holy-envy-for-baptisms-for-the-dead/.

35. Maeera Y. Shreiber, *Holy Envy: Writing in the Jewish Christian Borderzone* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2022), xi.

36. Shreiber, *Holy Envy,* 140–42.

giggles the kids stifled as the door opened for Elijah. She admits that she felt "a pang of 'holy envy,' acknowledging how [her] own lively, sometimes raucous, *sedarim* rarely allowed space for such quiet, explicitly faith-affirming moments." Shreiber wonders if she had been "so intent on safeguarding [her] own religious boundaries" that she "had missed an opportunity to peer over the edge into an 'abyss' and to venture into a place of 'holy insecurity'" where faiths collide.[37] The book "suggests how literature can excavate an alternative interreligious space, at once risky and generative." What she hopes for is "deeper and more honest exchanges—about religious similarities, differences, and longings—welcome departures from the usual niceties."[38]

Barbara Brown Taylor also took up Stendahl's phrase for the title of her investigation of other traditions, *Holy Envy: Finding God in the Faith of Others.* After leaving the Episcopal clergy, she looked closely at "the myriad ways other people and traditions encounter the transcendent." Eventually she returned to her own tradition and was troubled to find teachings "that have too often been used to exclude religious strangers instead of embracing the divine challenges they present."[39] Despite the obstacles, Taylor looks for ways to inspire more open encounters and appreciation.

Latter-day Saints may not be ready for the hard work of religious encounters at the level Taylor and Shreiber are reaching for, where resentments rise to the surface and are dealt with. We like stories such as "A Shaman at BYU," printed in the Spring 2023 issue of *Y Magazine* about an anthropology graduate student, Yang T. Vang, a Hmong displaced from Laos, who is creating a documentary for his master's thesis on Hmong culture and transcribing his knowledge of ceremonial instructions. At BYU, he teaches undergraduate courses in Hmong language and culture. One of Vang's students, Sierra J. Harrison, met his parents during a study abroad in Thailand. "Harrison's host family welcomed her with a 'soul-calling' ceremony, giving her a Hmong name and claiming her as an honorary daughter." Vang and his wife, Pa Yong Lo, are not Latter-day Saints, but their children were baptized into the Church, and the parents often attend Church meetings. Recently before a difficult operation, Vang "asked for a priesthood blessing from his

37. Shreiber, *Holy Envy,* 142.

38. Shreiber, *Holy Envy,* dust jacket.

39. Barbara Brown Taylor, *Holy Envy: Finding God in the Faith of Others,* read by Hillary Huber, HarperAudio, 2019, Audible audio, 7 hr., 26 min., https://www.audible.com/pd/Holy-Envy-Audiobook/0062801368.

war brothers," with the author of the *Y Magazine* article explaining that "Hmong people embrace truth everywhere while holding to tradition."[40]

That's a happy story for Latter-day Saint readers, with none of the resentment Shreiber felt at BYU. But what if, along with the baptism of Vang's children, Sierra Harrison, while visiting Laos, adopted Hmong religion? Would the story have been written up in *Y Magazine*? For now, tokens of mutual understanding and appreciation are enough. We enjoy small encounters like Vang's and happily place them on a spectrum anchored at the far end by prophetic translation. Is this what Nephi hoped for when he spoke of records running together?[41]

It may be somewhat disappointing after an extended analysis of translation to arrive at a simple, familiar sentiment: to establish a godly world order, learn to appreciate other religions. That it is familiar, however, is no drawback. The satisfaction that often comes with interfaith conversations confirms our sense of their value. We know something good is happening when we reach this level of interchange. It can be even more rewarding if we pause at the sticking points where deep differences come to light or where we find other beliefs reprehensible. Interreligious conversation entails risk, as Shreiber says, but recognition of where we part along with where we join leads to even stronger bonds. The critical point is that religious convictions, our deepest commitments, are the level where vital negotiations between individuals and cultures are conducted. To absorb another thought world into our own as scripture is the ultimate blend of cultures, but short of prophetic translation, can we not hope that holy envy, openness to other religions, paves the way to a peaceful—and godly—world order?

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40. Coleman S. Numbers, "A Shaman at BYU," *Y Magazine* (Spring 2023): 14.

41. The scholarly labor of comparison and integration is underway in the work of Benjamin I. Huff on Confucius and D. Morgan Davis on Islam.