

# *Understanding Joseph Smith's Translation of the Bible*

By Kent P. Jackson

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*Reviewed by Kerry Muhlestein*

Kent Jackson has spent about three decades studying Joseph Smith's translation of the Bible and has put all that research together in a masterful volume that is informative yet not overwhelming for the non-academic. While there are a few minor things that could have been done differently, this book, combined with Jackson's recent *Joseph Smith's Translation of the Bible: The Joseph Smith Translation and the King James Translation in Parallel Columns* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2021), have made it possible for us to better use and understand Joseph Smith's translation than ever before.

Jackson begins by describing the evidence available for learning about Joseph Smith's translation of the Bible and what that evidence does and does not allow us to do. He makes it clear that there are no accounts from the Prophet or his contemporaries about the translation process, and that as a result we are left to draw conclusions from surviving manuscripts of the translation about what that process may have been like. He describes in detail the manuscripts, the scribes who created those manuscripts, and a timeline for the translation, which spanned from June 1830 through July 1833 (1–12). Some of his descriptions of scribal works include information that was hitherto unknown and thus is first made public in this volume (22).

Jackson then delves into the translation process itself, stating clearly that while he does not pretend to "enter into the mind of God and the mind of his Prophet," there is a great deal we can learn from the manuscripts (14). From June 1830 through February 1832, Joseph Smith dictated his translation in full, including every word from the Bible that he did not change. After that point, he made notations in his Bible only where there were changes, and his scribes wrote down what those changes were, rather than writing every biblical word.

Jackson argues that the Urim and Thummim were not used in this process. He also argues that Joseph Smith kept a very tight control on the process of editing and revising his translation (19). He demonstrates that the Prophet put a great deal of effort into editing and revising his new translation and that, historically, there has been a misunderstanding as to which manuscripts represented the final revisions. This confusion has resulted in the publication of versions of the translation that do not reflect the Prophet's intended final version of the text. Jackson's parallel column publication of the translation, noted above, represents the only full publication of the text the way it seems Joseph Smith intended for it to be published, according to the evidence Jackson so ably lays out. Jackson uses modernized and standardized punctuation and editorial procedures in that volume.

Jackson next discusses the kinds of changes and additions we find in Joseph Smith's translation of the Bible. In order to do so, he outlines several different types of revisions and provides examples. Jackson avers that the changes and additions consist of

1. Restoration of original text in the Bible
2. Restoration of original text that was in sources other than the Bible
3. Restoration of things said or done that were never written anywhere
4. Modernization of the text
5. Clarification of the text
6. Harmonization with similar passages elsewhere in the Bible
7. Commonsense revisions to correct apparent misunderstandings

As a result, Jackson writes, we find three kinds of texts in Joseph Smith's additions and corrections: (1) new text without a biblical counterpart, (2) revisions that change the wording of existing text but not the meaning, and (3) revisions of existing text that change its function and meaning.

The book then turns its attention to going through the various phases of the translation. Jackson outlines the revelations that came to Joseph Smith that stem from his work with the early part of Genesis, which constitute the most significant additions resulting from his translation work. These revelations are now found in the book of Moses, which can sometimes veil the fact that they are Joseph Smith's New Translation of the first part of the Bible. Jackson provides not only a summary of content but also of important doctrinal contributions of these additions.

He shows us how original the material that is now in Moses 1 is and how the accounts of the Creation and Fall are smaller, though significant, revisions of the material in Genesis. He then informs us that “the Prophet added over six hundred words of new text between the end of Genesis 3 and the beginning of Genesis 4, words that give Latter-day Saints a unique understanding of the experiences of Adam and Eve following their expulsion from Eden” (51). A brief explanation of that material is followed by Jackson’s informing us that “the largest addition of new text came at Genesis 5:22, where over the course of several days, on eight densely written manuscript pages, and using the services of three different scribes, Joseph Smith added about forty-five hundred words of new text regarding the ministry and teachings of the biblical patriarch Enoch” (52). Jackson points out that it is in this material that we encounter history’s first recorded reference to the name *Jesus Christ*, though he was referred to by other terms in the first verses of the New Translation (53).

Jackson spends some time helping us see how clear the teachings about Christ are in this record, as opposed to the Genesis account. He points out that the notion of an Only Begotten Son, the idea of our being children of God the Father, and the roles of the Holy Ghost and Satan are not found in Genesis but become key foundations of LDS theology in the New Translation of Genesis. Jackson explains that these very Christ-centered teachings were not only new, but that they refuted many popular doctrines in Joseph Smith’s day. He then avers that the manuscript evidence demonstrates that this new Christian view of Genesis came “spontaneously and without premeditation,” with no evidence of a careful reworking of old ideas, but rather of a rapid reception of new ideas (58–59). Jackson explains how the manuscripts show us evidence of a seer at work as he receives revelation.

As Jackson continues to summarize the new information gained from the New Translation of Genesis, he demonstrates how thoroughly Christian prophets like Melchizedek and Abraham were and how teachings about the priesthood were restored, as well as prophecies about the last days. He also demonstrates that our understanding of the loss of the Melchizedek priesthood and the installation of a lower priesthood and law are based upon Joseph Smith’s translation work.

Jackson follows the timeline of the work on the translation by shifting to the New Testament after going through Genesis, just as Joseph Smith did when he worked on his New Translation. Jackson provides

examples of several types of changes made in Joseph Smith's prophetic revision of the New Testament. These consist of

1. Enhancing the narratives of the Gospels
2. Expanding the words of disciples and opponents
3. Adding to Jesus's teachings by
  - a. Restoring the context of those teachings
  - b. Explaining metaphors used by the Savior
  - c. Expanding the message

The next section of the book outlines what, after years of studying Joseph Smith's biblical revisions, Jackson felt were the "guiding instincts" behind much of what the Prophet did. This is not in regard to revelations of large passages, but rather in terms of small alterations repeatedly made. Jackson notes several kinds of frequent changes, such as revising words that are italicized in the King James Version, resolving ambiguity, and updating the language to match idioms of his day. Jackson also discusses how Joseph Smith improved narrative flow. This begs the unexplored question as to how these changes to the narrative do or do not mirror the way the narrative flows in the Book of Mormon. Since the New Translation project began almost immediately after the Book of Mormon was printed, one wonders if the earlier project affected the later one and if any of Joseph's revising practices were in common between the two projects. This is a topic that is worth further research.

Some of Jackson's explanations are subjective, which is unavoidable given that he is looking at circumstantial evidence as he tries to deduce Joseph Smith's instincts, and he explicitly says he cannot deduce intent. For example, Jackson speaks of the Prophet having an instinct to explain metaphors and lists several examples. One of these comes from Exodus 7:1, where the KJV says that God will make Moses a "god to Pharaoh: and Aaron thy brother shall be thy prophet." Joseph Smith changes this to say that God "will make [Moses] a prophet to Pharaoh, and Aaron thy brother shall be thy spokesman." While I agree with Jackson's unstated assessment that the text was not being corrected, but rather explained in a way that did not confuse modern readers, it is possible that this was a correction. In other words, Jackson unavoidably makes subjective valuations of the kinds of changes Joseph Smith made. While I agree with most of his assessments, we must ever keep at the forefront of our minds that we are not sure about the intent behind almost all these

changes. I suppose the book would have been too long if Jackson had gone into the different possibilities of every type of change, but this is fertile ground for further research.

Jackson suggests that another of the Prophet's instincts was to remove sexually suggestive language. I think he is correct that Joseph Smith tends to edit sexual language, but in Jackson's examples, sexual language does not seem to be removed or softened. On the contrary, it seems to me that Joseph Smith was making it clear, using acceptable language for his day, that sexual activity was intended. In Jackson's three Old Testament examples (122), the phrases "go in unto her," "went in also unto Rachel," and "come in unto me," were replaced with "go and take her," "slept with Rachel," and "come in and lie with me," respectively. The Prophet's revisions seem to me to be less ambiguous about the sexual behavior being alluded to. The New Testament example Jackson provides, having to do with Mary's question about how she could be pregnant, does indeed seem to remove the sexually charged language.

Jackson also addresses what he sees as an instinct to correct errors. While I would largely agree with him, this is difficult to fully assess because labeling something an error is highly subjective. For example, Jackson discusses the proclivity of the authors of 1 and 2 Kings to hold David up as an example to which his descendant kings are compared and should aspire. Joseph Smith often "corrects" these comparisons, changing the text to portray David as a bad example. Jackson is probably right that Joseph Smith viewed holding David up as an example as an error, as do many of my own students. However, I do not agree. I believe the biblical text is fairly consistent in holding David up as an example of a king who did not pursue idolatry and that this is the criterion that is constantly being addressed when David is used as a good example. As far as the record portrays David, he was an excellent example of eschewing idolatry, and thus this would not be an error in the biblical text but rather an error in how the biblical text was perceived in Joseph Smith's day. I would agree that Joseph Smith often corrected perceived errors in the text, but that those perceptions were not always true errors. Still, since most people perceive(d) as the Prophet did, such corrections can be helpful. It is not altogether clear whether or not Joseph Smith also perceived these things as errors, or whether he recognized that they were not but was willing to correct them to help his contemporaries avoid confusion.

Jackson himself identifies such an instinct as he speaks of the Prophet's tendency to correct things that had come to be understood in such a way

that they portrayed the character of God incorrectly. For example, the Bible often speaks of God as “repenting.” Jackson explains the translation choice by the King James translators that led to the text depicting God as repenting and demonstrates that Joseph Smith often “corrected” what was really a misunderstanding (128–30).

The next section of the book is a discussion of the New Translation of Matthew 24, demonstrating its thematic and historical tie to Doctrine and Covenants 45. Jackson also demonstrates that at times the New Translation relied on similar passages in the Book of Mormon, but at other times it differed from Book of Mormon passages in meaningful ways.

One of the most significant portions of this volume is when Jackson explores the relationship between the New Translation and the revelations that would eventually be put in the Doctrine and Covenants. In 2008, I researched this topic myself, focusing on the material of the New Translation that is published in the book of Moses. Kent Jackson’s work up to that point was helpful in my research, and he offered suggestions to me that improved my assessments. At that time, I called for further research to be done on the relationship between the revelations and Joseph Smith’s Bible translation project.<sup>1</sup> I revised my research and renewed that call in 2021.<sup>2</sup> The eighteenth chapter in Jackson’s book furthers that research in a way I have been looking forward to for years. Jackson highlights a number of interactions between Joseph Smith’s translation work and other revelations. Among some of the more significant connections are those between the translation of John 5 and the reception of the revelation that would become Doctrine and Covenants 76, and between Exodus 34 and what would later be labeled as Doctrine and Covenants 84.

A particularly fascinating section of Jackson’s work is the comparison of passages that seem to have been accidentally translated twice. This provides Jackson, and us, with a unique insight into the Prophet’s translation process. Because the multiple translations of the same passage are

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1. Kerry Muhlestein, “One Continuous Flow: Revelations Surrounding the ‘New Translation,’” in *The Doctrine and Covenants: Revelations in Context*, ed. Andrew Hedges, J. Spencer Fluhman, and Alonzo L. Gaskill (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2008), 40–65.

2. Kerry Muhlestein, “The Doctrine and Covenants and the Book of Moses: An Outpouring of Revelations and the Beginning of Joseph Smith’s ‘New Translation’ of the Bible,” in *Tracing the Ancient Threads in the Book of Moses, Volume I*, ed. Jeffrey M. Bradshaw and others (Salt Lake City: Eborn Books, 2021), 97–136. I made this call at the conference held online in 2020, but the publication came out in 2021.

not identical, we can conclude that the Prophet was not receiving these translations word for word. Yet Jackson opines that “the most remarkable thing about the two translations is the similarity between them. . . . In the majority of cases in which he added substantive content to the text, he added it in *both* of the new translations” (176, emphasis in original). This seems to demonstrate that Joseph Smith had the important concepts of the translation revealed to him but not always the precise wording. This was already suggested by the fact that he kept making revisions after the translation, but the conclusion is greatly strengthened by observing the similarities and coinciding differences between multiple translations of the same passages. As Jackson notes, “Perhaps it would be reasonable to propose that as Joseph Smith was working his way through Matthew 26, dictating the text to Sidney Rigdon in the spring of 1831 and again to John Whitmer the next fall, impressions came to his mind in the form of pure intelligence, enlightened understanding, and sudden strokes of ideas—but not necessarily in English words” (179–80).

I believe it would be worth exploring whether there is enough evidence or not to determine if the process of receiving large new revelations, such as the stories about Enoch, may have had more precise words being revealed to the Prophet than did the process of translating passages with fewer changes. Jackson himself notes that the visions of Moses and other material from early in Genesis create more of an impression of being revealed in “verbal completeness” than the smaller revisions elsewhere in the Bible (183). One can only hope that, as scholars with a variety of backgrounds and linguistic and textual skill sets turn their attention to this topic, they may conduct further research on this question.

Jackson next walks us through the timing of various publications of the New Translation, from portions of it appearing in *The Evening and Morning Star* to the canonization of the Pearl of Great Price and the inclusion of portions of the translation in the Church’s standard works. One of his more interesting conclusions is that Joseph Smith had learned a lesson from the loss of the first 116 pages of the Book of Mormon translation: he would not let “the final New Translation manuscripts out of his hands” (189). We can also see evidence of this tendency in the creation of the printer’s manuscript of the Book of Mormon. This has interesting implications for book of Abraham manuscripts, since none of the copies we currently possess seem to be the copy that Joseph Smith personally kept. If he continued his practice of personally keeping the most correct copy of his translations, then we do not currently have that copy. This should help inform book of Abraham research.

As Jackson traces the history of New Translation manuscripts and publications, he demonstrates that the publications we have used up to this point were publications of inferior or unfinished versions of the translation. This heightens the importance of Jackson's new publication mentioned previously, which employs the most correct version of the New Translation. What a gift!

The penultimate section of the book is the summation of what Jackson has come to see as the most consistent and profound truth gained from Joseph Smith's New Translation of the Bible. Jackson writes, "From its beginning, indeed from its very first page, the Joseph Smith Translation is a witness of Jesus Christ" (229). Jackson explores how the New Translation highlights—in a way that is not presented in any other religious text—that the gospel of Jesus Christ was had from the beginning of time and was handed down through the generations. He demonstrates that the New Translation contains a great number of prophecies about Christ from the earliest generations. He shows us how the changes made to the New Testament help us better understand who Christ is. He explores how the New Translation shows us that Jehovah is the Messiah. He explains how it teaches about Christ being the sinless Son of God. The information that Jackson accumulates and presents creates a new appreciation for the profundity of the New Translation. It helps us see how it fundamentally affects not just our understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ, but also of how God has transmitted that gospel throughout time, which helps us to understand God himself. After reading this section of the book, I do not think I can overstate how important the New Translation is to shaping the way members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints view God, Christ, and the gospel. That translation has created a lens through which we more correctly view the most important concepts of our faith.

Jackson wraps up his volume by exploring Joseph Smith's calling to bring about this translation. He compares Joseph Smith to other scriptural authors and helps us see the authority by which Joseph Smith engaged in this fundamental project. He makes it clear that this was part of Joseph Smith's mission and that God worked with the Prophet in a variety of ways to bring about this important restoration of truth. Jackson aptly ends the book by stating that "the untold number of hours of difficult labor that the Prophet invested in the New Translation was one of the important contributions of his prophetic ministry, and we are the beneficiaries" (253).

While in many ways this new book of Jackson's represents a reworking of some of his other publications, it is an immensely valuable

contribution. New information is presented, some of which was only discovered because Jackson was working on this volume. Other information is synthesized with this entire work in a new way rather than presented in isolation. That seems to have forced Jackson to grapple with ideas in new ways and come to new understandings. Creating this volume also seems to have helped this eminent scholar of the Joseph Smith translation to carefully consider what the most important implications of the New Translation are. As a result, we now have the most complete description of the New Translation we have ever had. Fertile ground for new research emerges along with a profound summary of the work that has already been done.

I will admit there are a few small things I would have done differently had I been writing this volume, and there are a few things I would have concluded differently. Those are small and insignificant. At the same time, as a career-long scholar of the New Translation, I expected to find in this volume a competent and comprehensive summary of this important topic. While I did indeed find just that, I also discovered that I learned a great deal and came to a more profound understanding of and appreciation for the fundamental way the New Translation affects our understanding of the gospel and how God works with us. I suspect that Jackson himself underwent a similar learning process as he wrote this book and that all who read it seriously will have a similar experience.

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