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The Manner of Translating the Book of Mormon

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CHAPTER VII.

THE MANNER OF TRANSLATING THE BOOK OF MORMON.

Relative to the manner of translating the Book of Mormon the Prophet himself has said but little. "Through the medium of the Urim and Thummim I translated the record by the gift and power of God,"^a is the most extended published statement made by him upon the subject. Of the Urim and Thummim he says: "With the record was found a curious instrument which the ancients called a Urim and Thummim,' which consisted of two transparent stones set in a rim of a bow fastened to a breastplate."^b

Oliver Cowdery, one of the Three Witnesses of the Book of Mormon, and the Prophet's chief amanuensis, says of the work of translation in which he assisted: "I wrote with my own pen the entire Book of Mormon (save a few pages), as it fell from the lips of the Prophet Joseph Smith, as he translated by the gift and power of God, by the means of the Urim and Thummim, or, as it is called by that book, 'Holy Interpreters.'"^c This is all he has left on record on the manner of translating the book.^d

David Whitmer, another of the Three Witnesses, is more specific on this subject. After describing the means the Prophet employed to exclude the light from the "Seer

^aWentworth letter, Mill. Star, Vol. XIX., p. 118.

^bWentworth letter, History of the Church Vol. IV, Ch. xxxi.

^cBook of Mosiah, viii: 13.

^dThe above statement was made by Oliver Cowdery at a special conference held at Kaneshville, Iowa, Oct. 21, 1848. It was first published in the Deseret News of April 13, 1859: Bishop Reuben Miller, who was present at the meeting, reported Cowdery's remarks.

Stone," he says: "In the darkness the spiritual light would shine. A piece of something resembling parchment would appear, and under it was the interpretation in English. Brother Joseph would read off the English to Oliver Cowdery, who was his principal scribe, and when it was written down and repeated to Brother Joseph to see if it was correct, then it would disappear, and another character with the interpretation would appear. Thus the Book of Mormon was translated by the gift and power of God and not by any power of man."^e

There will appear between this statement of David Whitmer's and what is said both by Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery a seeming contradiction. Joseph and Oliver both say the translation was done by means of the Urim and Thummim, which is described by Joseph as being "two transparent stones set in a rim of a bow fastened to a breast-plate;" while David Whitmer says that the translation was made by means of a "Seer Stone." The apparent contradiction is cleared up, however, by a statement made by Martin Harris, another of the Three Witnesses. He said that the Prophet possessed a "Seer Stone," by which he was enabled to translate as well as from the Urim and Thummim, and for convenience he then (i. e., at the time Harris was acting as his scribe) used the Seer Stone. * * * Martin said further that the Seer Stone differed in appearance entirely from the Urim and Thummim that was obtained with the plates, which were two clear stones set in two rims, very much resembling spectacles, only they were larger.^f

^eFrom "An Address to all Believers in Christ," by David Whitmer, "A Witness to the Divine Authenticity of the Book of Mormon," published at Richmond, Missouri, 1887, p. 12.

^fHarris's Statement to Edward Stevenson, Mill. Star, Vol. XLIV., p. 87.

The "Seer Stone" referred to here was a chocolate-colored, somewhat egg-shaped stone which the Prophet found while digging a well in company with his brother Hyrum.^g It possessed the qualities of Urim and Thummim, since by means of it—as described above—as well as by means of the "Interpreters" found with the Nephite record, Joseph was able to translate the characters engraven on the plates.^h

Another account of the manner of translating the record, purporting to have been given by David Whitmer, and published in the Kansas City Journal of June 5, 1881, says:

He [meaning Joseph Smith] had two small stones of a chocolate color, nearly egg-shape, and perfectly smooth, but not transparent, called interpreters, which were given him with the plates. He did not see the plates in translation, but would hold the interpreters to his eyes and cover his face with a hat, excluding all light, and before his eyes would appear what seemed to be parchment on which would appear the characters of the plates in a line at the top, and immediately below would appear the translation in English, which Smith would read to his scribe, who wrote it down exactly as it fell from his lips. The scribe would then read the sentence written, and if any mistakes had been made, the characters would remain visible to Smith until corrected, when they would fade from sight to be replaced by another line.

It is evident that there are inaccuracies in the above statement, due, doubtless, to the carelessness of the reporter of the Journal, who has confused what Mr. Whitmer said of

^gCannon's Life of Joseph Smith, p. 56.

^hNearly all the Anti-Mormon works dealing with the coming forth of the Book of Mormon speak of the "Seer Stone" and reiterate the falsehood that the Prophet stole it from the children of Willard Chase, for whom Joseph and Hyrum were digging a well.

the Seer Stone and Urim and Thummim. If he meant to describe the Urim and Thummim or "Interpreters" given to Joseph Smith with the plates—as seems to be the case—then the reporter is wrong in saying that they were chocolate color and not transparent; for the "Interpreters" given to the Prophet with the plates, as we have seen by his own description, were "two transparent stones." If the reporter meant to describe the "Seer Stone"—which is not likely—he would be right in saying it was of a chocolate color, and egg-shaped, but wrong in saying there were two of them.

Martin Harris's description of the manner of translating while he was the amanuensis of the Prophet is as follows:

By aid of the Seer Stone, sentences would appear and were read by the Prophet and written by Martin, and when finished he would say "written," and if correctly written, that sentence would disappear and another appear in its place, but if not written correctly it remained until corrected, so that the translation was just as it was engraven on the plates, precisely in the language then used.[‡]

On one occasion Harris sought to test the genuineness of the Prophet's procedure in the matter of translation, as follows:

Martin said that after continued translation they would become weary and would go down to the river and exercise in throwing stone out on the river, etc. While so doing on one occasion, Martin found a stone very much resembling the one used for translating, and on resuming their labors of translation Martin put in place [of the Seer Stone] the stone that he had found. He said that the Prophet remained silent unusually and intently gazing in darkness, no trace of the usual sentence

[‡]Statement of Martin Harris, to Edward Stevenson, Mill. Star, Vol. XXIV., pp. 86, 87.

appearing. Much surprised Joseph exclaimed: "Martin! what is the matter? all is as dark as Egypt." Martin's countenance betrayed him, and the Prophet asked Martin why he had done so. Martin said, to stop the mouths of fools, who had told him that the Prophet had learned those sentences and was merely repeating them.^j

The sum of the whole matter, then, concerning the manner of translating the sacred record of the Nephites, according to the testimony of the only witnesses competent to testify in the matter is: With the Nephite record was deposited a curious instrument, consisting of two transparent stones, set in the rim of a bow, somewhat resembling spectacles, but larger, called by the ancient Hebrews "Urim and Thummim," but by the Nephites "Interpreters." In addition to these "Interpreters" the Prophet Joseph had a "Seer Stone," which to him was a Urim and Thummim; that the Prophet sometimes used one and sometimes the other of these sacred instruments in the work of translation; that whether the "Interpreters" or the "Seer Stone" was used the Nephite characters with the English interpretation appeared in the sacred instrument; that the Prophet would pronounce the English translation to his scribe, which, when correctly written, would disappear and the other characters with their interpretation take their place, and so on until the work was completed.

It should not be supposed, however, that this translation, though accomplished by means of the "Interpreters" and "Seer Stone," as stated above, was merely a mechanical procedure; that no faith, or mental or spiritual effort was required on the Prophet's part; that the instruments did all, while he who used them did nothing but look and repeat me-

^jHarris's Statement to Edward Stevenson, Mill. Star, Vol. XLIV., pp. 78, 79; 86, 87.

chanically what he saw there reflected. Much has been written upon this manner of translating the Nephite record, by those who have opposed the Book of Mormon, and chiefly in a sneering way. On the manner of translation they have bottomed much of—not their argument but their ridicule—against the record; and as in another part of this volume I am to meet what they consider their argument, and what I know to be their ridicule, I consider here a few other facts connected with the manner of translating the Book of Mormon, which are extremely important, as they furnish a basis upon which can be successfully answered all the objections that are urged, based on the manner in which the translation was accomplished, and also as to errors in grammar, the use of modern words, western New York phrases, and other defects of language which it is admitted are to be found in the Book of Mormon, especially in the first edition.

I repeat, then, that the translation of the Book of Mormon by means of the “Interpreters” and “Seer Stone,” was not merely a mechanical process, but required the utmost concentration of mental and spiritual force possessed by the Prophet, in order to exercise the gift of translation through the means of the sacred instruments provided for that work. Fortunately we have the most perfect evidence of the fact, though it could be inferred from the general truth that God sets no premium upon mental or spiritual laziness; for whatever means God may have provided to assist man to arrive at the truth, He has always made it necessary for man to couple with those means his utmost endeavor of mind and heart. So much in the way of reflection; now as to the facts referred to.

In his “Address to All Believers in Christ,” David Whitmer says:

At times when Brother Joseph would attempt to translate he would look into the hat in which the stone was placed, he found he was spiritually blind and could not translate. He told us that his mind dwelt too much on earthly things, and various causes would make him incapable of proceeding with the translation. When in this condition he would go out and pray, and when he became sufficiently humble before God, he could then proceed with the translation. Now we see how very strict the Lord is, and how he requires the heart of man to be just right in his sight before he can receive revelation from him.^k

In a statement to Wm. H. Kelley, G. A. Blakeslee, of Gallen, Michigan, under date of September 15th, 1882, David Whitmer said of Joseph Smith and the necessity of his humility and faithfulness while translating the Book of Mormon:

He was a religious and straight-forward man. He had to be; for he was illiterate and he could do nothing himself. He had to trust in God. He could not translate unless he was humble and possessed the right feelings towards everyone. To illustrate so you can see: One morning when he was getting ready to continue the translation, something went wrong about the house and he was put out about it. Something that Emma, his wife, had done. Oliver and I went up stairs and Joseph came up soon after to continue the translation, but he could not do anything. He could not translate a single syllable. He went down stairs, out into the orchard, and made supplication to the Lord; was gone about an hour—came back to the house, and asked Emma's forgiveness and then came up stairs where we were and then the translation went on all right. He could do nothing save he was humble and faithful.^l

The manner of translation is so far described by David Whitmer and Martin Harris, who received their informa-

^kAddress to All Believers in Christ, p. 30.

^lBraden and Kelley Debate on Divine Origin of Book of Mormon, p. 186. The above debate took place in 1884, several years before the death of David Whitmer, and the statement from which the above is taken was quoted in full.

tion necessarily from Joseph Smith and doubtless it is substantially correct, except in so far as their statements may have created the impression that the translation was a mere mechanical process; and this is certainly corrected in part at least by what David Whitmer has said relative to the frame of mind Joseph must be in before he could translate. But we have more important evidence to consider on this subject of translation than these statements of David Whitmer. In the course of the work of translation Oliver Cowdery desired the gift of translation to be conferred upon him, and God promised to grant it to him in the following terms:

Oliver Cowdery, verily, verily, I say unto you, that assuredly as the Lord liveth, who is your God and your Redeemer, even so surely shall you receive a knowledge of whatsoever things you shall ask with an honest heart believing that you shall receive a knowledge concerning the engravings of old records, which contain those parts of my scripture of which have been spoken by the manifestation of my Spirit. Yea, behold, I will tell you in your mind and in your heart, by the Holy Ghost, which shall come upon you and which shall dwell in your heart. Now, behold, this is the Spirit of revelation; behold this is the Spirit by which Moses brought the children of Israel through the Red Sea on dry ground. * * * Ask that you may know the mysteries of God, and that you may translate and receive knowledge from all those ancient records which have been hid up, that are sacred, and according to your faith shall it be unto you.^m

In attempting to exercise this gift of translation, however, Oliver Cowdery failed; and in a revelation upon the subject the Lord explained the cause of his failure to translate:

Behold, you have not understood; you have supposed that I would give it [i. e. the gift of translation] unto you, when you

^mDoc. & Cov., Sec. viii.

took no thought save it was to ask me; but, behold I say unto you, that you must study it out in your mind, then you must ask me if it be right, and if it is right I will cause that your bosom shall burn within you; therefore you shall feel that it is right; but if it be not right, you shall have no such feelings, but you shall have a stupor of thought, that shall cause you to forget the thing which is wrong; therefore you cannot write that which is sacred save it be given you from me."

While this is not a description of the manner in which Joseph Smith translated the Book of Mormon, it is, nevertheless, the Lord's description of how another man was to exercise the gift of translation; and doubtless it is substantially the manner in which Joseph Smith did exercise it, and the manner in which he translated the Book of Mormon. That is, the Prophet Joseph Smith looked into the "Interpreters" or "Seer Stone," saw there by the power of God and the gift of God to him the ancient Nephite characters, and by bending every power of his mind to know the meaning thereof, the interpretation wrought out in his mind by this effort—by studying it out in his mind, to use the Lord's phrase—was reflected in the sacred instrument, there to remain until correctly written by the scribe.

We see something akin to this also in the manner in which the Nephites used Liahona, their Urim and Thummim—the instrument through means of which they were directed of the Lord upon their journey to the promised land of America—it worked "according to the faith and diligence and heed" they gave unto it. (I. Nephi xvi: 28.)

In further proof that translation was not a merely mechanical process with the Prophet Joseph, I call attention to the evident thought and study he bestowed upon the work

"Doc. & Cov., Sec. ix.

of translating the rolls of papyrus found with the Egyptian mummies, purchased by the Saints in Kirtland, of Michael H. Chandler, about the 6th of July, 1835. "Soon after this," says the Prophet, "with W. W. Phelps and Oliver Cowdery as scribes, I commenced the translation of some of the characters or hieroglyphics, and much to our joy found that one of the rolls contained the writings of Abraham, another the writings of Joseph of Egypt," etc. Speaking in his history of the latter part of July, he says: "The remainder of this month I was continually engaged in translating an alphabet to the Book of Abraham and arranging a grammar of the Egyptian language." In his journal entry for November 26, 1835, is the following: "Spent the day in translating the Egyptian characters from the papyrus, though suffering with a severe cold." Under date of December 15th, this: "I exhibited and explained the Egyptian characters to them (Elders M'Lellin and Young), and explained many things concerning the dealings of God with the ancients, and the formation of the planetary system." Thus he continued from time to time to work upon this translation, which was not published until 1842, in the *Times and Seasons*, beginning in number nine of volume three. It should be remembered in connection with this "preparing an alphabet" and "arranging a grammar of the Egyptian language" that the Prophet still had in his possession the "Seer Stone" (or at least Oliver Cowdery had it, for on completing the translation of the Book of Mormon the Prophet gave the Seer Stone into Oliver Cowdery's keeping. David Whitmer's "Address to All Believers," p. 32), which he had used sometimes in the translation of the Book of Mormon, yet it seems from the circumstances named that he had to bend all the energies of his intellectual powers to obtain a translation of the Egyptian characters.

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; modified, of course, by the application of that phraseology to facts and ideas new to him in many respects, and above the ordinary level of the Prophet's thoughts and language, because of the inspiration of God that was upon him. This view of the translation of the Nephite record accounts for the fact that the Book of Mormon, though a translation of an ancient record, is, nevertheless, given in English idiom of the period and locality in which the Prophet lived, and in the faulty English, moreover, both as to composition, phraseology, and grammar, of a person of Joseph Smith's limited education; and also accounts for the sameness of phraseology and literary style which runs through the whole volume.

Nor are we without authority of high value in these views for the verbal style of inspired writers. In "The Annotated Bible," published by the "Religious Tract Society," London, 1859, the following occurs in relation to the explanation of the words "prophet" and "prophecy:"

That the prophets were more than foretellers of things future is apparent from their history as well as from their writings. It must also be remembered that, although prophecy contains many very circumstantial allusions to particular facts and individuals, yet these are referred to chiefly on account of their revelation of those great, general principles with which it has to do. Prophecy is God's voice, speaking to us respecting that great struggle which has been and is going on in this world between good and evil.

The divine communications were made to the prophets in divers manners; God seems sometimes to have spoken to them in audible voice; occasionally appearing in human form. At other times he employed the ministry of angels, or made known

his purposes by dreams. But he most frequently revealed his truth to the prophets by producing that supernatural state of the sentiment, intellectual, and moral faculties which the Scriptures call "vision." Hence prophetic announcements are often called "visions," i. e. things seen; and the prophets themselves are called "seers."

Although the visions which the prophet beheld and the predictions of the future which he announced were wholly announced by the divine Spirit, yet the form of the communication, the imagery in which it is clothed, the illustration by which it is cleared up and impressed, the symbols employed to bring it more graphically before the mind—in short, all that may be considered as its garb and dress, depends upon the education, habits, association, feelings and the whole mental, intellectual and spritual character of the prophet. Hence the style of some is purer, more sententious, more ornate, or more sublime than others.

The author of "Moral and Metaphysical Philosophy," Frederick Denison Maurice, sometime Professor of Casuistry and Modern Philosophy in the University of Cambridge, in discussing the philosophers of the last half of the seventeenth century, has an excellent passage on the views of Spinoza respecting the Hebrew prophets, and in what manner they and their work are to be regarded. The passage is so apropos the matter here discussed that I quote the essential parts of it:

"What do the sacred books impart when they affirm the Spirit of God to have been infused into the prophets—that the prophets spoke by the Spirit of God?" (Spinoza).

The result at which our author arrives upon a long examination into the different uses of the word "Spirit" is, that these expressions respecting the infusion of the Spirit "signify nothing more than that the prophets had a singular and extraordinary virtue and cultivated piety, with very great constancy of mind, and thereby they had a perception of the mind or judgment of

God; for we shall find that the Spirit of God denotes in Hebrew as well the mind as the judgment or sentence of God, and therefore that the law of God, because it unfolded the mind of God, is called the mind or Spirit of God; therefore the imagination of the prophets might, with equal justice, be said to be the mind of God, and the prophets be said to have had the mind of God, inasmuch as through their imagination the decrees of God were revealed. * * * The question how the prophets acquired a sense of certainty respecting their revelations gives rise to a long discussion. Their imagination being the main instrument of their discoveries, they cannot have the same security as we have for those truths which are discovered by scientific insight or "natural light." "It is," says Spinoza, very characteristically, "a moral, not a mathematical security. It is derived (1) from the great strength of their phantasy, which brings objects before them as clearly as we see them when we are awake (2) From some divine sign. (3) From their minds being disposed to the right and just," Spinoza affirms the last to be the principal secret of their certainty. * * * Nevertheless, he affirms that the revelations to the prophet depended upon his temperament and upon his own opinions. These he brought with him—these varied not only his style of writing, but his understanding of any communication that was made to him. His joy, his sorrow, all the different moods of his mind and body, were continually affecting his judgments and his teachings. * * * Every thoughtful reader will perceive that in these statements Spinoza has an evident advantage over those who treat the personal feelings, experiences, struggles of the prophets, as if they were nothing—who forget that they were human beings—who look upon them merely as utterers of certain divine dogmas, or as foretelling certain future events. He has a right to say that such persons overlook the letter of the books, while they profess to honor the letter; that they change their substance, while they think that they are taking them just as they are. But no real devout reader of the prophets ever forgets that they are men. Their human feelings, sufferings, rejoicings, are parts to him of the divine revelation. The struggles of the prophet with his own evil—the consciousness and confession that the vile is mixed with the precious—help more than all formal teaching to show him and us how the higher mind is distinct from the lower, as well as how

the one is related to the other. We see how the prophet arrived at a certainty about the divine will and purpose through the very doubts and contradictions in himself.^o

Also the Reverend Joseph Armitage Robinson, D. D., dean of Westminster and chaplain of King Edward VII of England, respecting the manner in which the message of the Old Testament was received and communicated to man, as late as 1905, said:

The message of the Old Testament was not written by the divine hand, nor dictated by an outward compulsion; it was planted in the hearts of men, and made to grow in a fruitful soil. And then they were required to express it in their own language, after their natural methods, and in accordance with the stage of knowledge which their time had reached. Their human faculties were purified and quickened by the divine Spirit; but they spoke to their time in the language of their time, they spoke a spiritual message, accommodated to the experience of their age, a message of faith in God, and of righteousness as demanded by a righteous God.^p

I take occasion at this point to observe that because a writer or speaker claims to be under the inspiration of God it does not follow that in giving expression to what the Lord puts into his heart he will always do so in grammatical terms, any more than the orthography of an inspired writer will always be accurate. We have many illustrations of this fact among the inspired men that we have known in the Church of Jesus Christ in these last days. Those of us who have listened to the utterances of Prophets and Apostles cannot doubt of their inspiration, and at the same time some of those who have been most inspired have been inaccurate in

^oMoral and Metaphysical Philosophy Vol. II., pp. 397-399.

^pSt. Louis Globe-Democrat, Sunday, March 19, 1905—The discourse is published at length.

the use of our English language. The same seems true of the ancient Apostles, also. The writer of the Acts, at the conclusion of a synopsis of a discourse which he ascribes to Peter, says, "Now, when they [the Jews] saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were unlearned and ignorant men,^q they marvelled." The commentators upon this passage say that the listening Jews perceived that Peter and John were uninstructed in the learning of the Jewish schools, and were of the common sort of men, untrained in teaching.^r And again, "Their language and arguments prove that they were untaught in the Rabbinical learning of the Jewish schools."^s But in what way could the Jews have discerned the ignorance and absence of learning in Peter and John except through the imperfections of their language? And yet those imperfections in language may not be urged in evidence of the absence of inspiration in the two apostles. Surely with God it must be that the matter is of more consequence than the form in which it is expressed; the thought of more moment than the word; it is the Spirit that giveth life, not the letter. "He that hath my word, let him speak my word faithfully. What is the chaff to the wheat? saith the Lord."^t

The view of the manner of translating the Book of Mormon here set forth furnishes the basis of justification for those verbal changes and grammatical corrections which have been made since the first edition issued from the press; and would furnish justification for making many more verbal and grammatical corrections in the book; for, if, as here set forth, the meaning of the Nephite characters was given to Joseph Smith in such faulty English as he, an uneducated

^qActs iv: 13.

^rJamieson, Fausset and Brown, Commentary, Acts iv: 13.

^sInternational Commentary of the New Testament, Acts iv.

^tJeremiah xxiii: 28.

man, could command, while every detail and shade of thought should be strictly preserved, there can be no reasonable ground for objection to the correction of mere verbal errors and grammatical construction. There can be no reasonable doubt that had Joseph Smith been a finished English scholar and the facts and ideas represented by the Nephite characters upon the plates had been given him by the inspiration of God through the Urim and Thummim, those ideas would have been expressed in correct English; but as he was not a finished English scholar, he had to give expression to those facts and ideas in such language as he could command, and that was faulty English, which the Prophet himself and those who have succeeded him as custodians of the word of God have had and now have a perfect right to correct."

"The manner of translating the Book of Mormon above set forth, gave rise to considerable discussion within the Church, and led to the publication of a number of papers in the Improvement Era, a monthly magazine published in Utah, in defense of the views here advocated. These papers were finally collected and published in the Author's "Defense of the Faith and the Saints," Vol. I., pp. 255-311, to which the reader is referred for a more exhaustive consideration of the question above discussed.