

Hard Questions in Church History

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Joseph Smith Translation (JST or New Translation of the Bible)

When?—What?—How?—Why?—Where?

Timeline 1823-1981

1823	
Sept 21-22	Angel Moroni quotes Malachi differently than Malachi in the King James Version of the Bible
1829	
April-June	Joseph Smith sees that biblical texts do not always appear exactly the same in the Book of Mormon
June	Joseph Smith learns that changes were made to the biblical record (1 Ne 13:24, 28-29, 39; 14:23)
1830	
June-October	God directs Joseph to begin a new translation of the Bible with Oliver as scribe (until Oliver leaves on his mission to “the Lamanites”) Genesis 1:1 to 4:18 became Moses 1:1-5:43 (~time as D&C 24-32)
Oct 21-Nov 30	John Whitmer scribes from Genesis 4:18 to 5:11 became Moses 5:43-6:18 (~time as D&C 33-34)
Dec 1	Emma acts as Joseph’s scribe for Genesis 5:12-21 became Moses 6:19-52
Dec 2-6	John Whitmer returns as scribe for Moses 6:52-7:1
Dec 7	Sidney Rigdon called as scribe (D&C 35:20) and begins with Genesis 5:22-32 (Moses 7:2-8:30)
Dec 30	Joseph receives D&C 37:1: “It is not expedient in me that ye should translate any more until ye shall go to the Ohio”
1831	
January 18	Painesville Telegraph reports that John Whitmer arrived in Ohio with a draft of changes to the Genesis account of the Creation.
Feb-Mar 7	Joseph works on his new rendition of JST from Genesis 6-24:41, with Sidney Rigdon as scribe.
March 7, 18	D&C 45:60 instructs Joseph to stop translating the Old Testament and to begin translating the New Testament—with Sidney continuing as scribe for most of the NT (Matt 1 to John 5:29 in 11 months).
1832	
Feb 16	Joseph Smith translates through John 5:29, and receives D&C 76 with his scribe Sidney Rigdon
July	New system adopted by Joseph and scribes, no longer record full Bible text, only Joseph’s changes.
July 20	Fredrick G. Williams begins as scribe for the inspired version of the Bible (JST) for part of NT (Sidney Rigdon acts as scribe for most of New Testament).
August	Publishes excerpts about Enoch in the Ohio church newspaper, Evening and the Morning Star
1833	
Feb 2	Joseph completes working successively? through the entire New Testament
Mar 9	D&C 91 is revealed, saying that translating the Old Testament Apocrypha was not needed.
April	Ohio church newspaper, Evening and the Morning Star Publishes more excerpts from Enoch (Moses)

July 2	Joseph completes Bible translation through Malachi; Fredrick G. Williams acts as scribe for most of the Old Testament (JosephSmithPapers.org). Joseph writes to the saints in Missouri, “We this day finished the translating of the Scriptures for which we returned gratitude to our heavenly father.” (JosephSmithPapers.org). Sidney Rigdon proofreads Bible translation for publication.
1835	Joseph directs publication of portions of Joseph Smith Translation in the second Lectures on Faith.
1851	Elder Franklin D. Richards, while on his mission, publishes Genesis/Moses excerpts from the Millennial Star as a booklet which he called The Pearl of Great Price.
1867	Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints publishes the Inspired Version (OT-2)
1878	Pearl of Great Price uses copy from the Inspired Version for the Book of Moses
1880	Canonized Pearl of Great Price includes the Book of Moses (JST Genesis 1-4)
1981	JST biblical footnotes and appendix added to the LDS KJV publication of the Bible

What is the Joseph Smith Translation (JST) of the Bible?

The Joseph Smith Translation (JST) of the Bible did not start with its original languages of Hebrew (Old Testament) and Greek (New Testament) as technical translations do. In this way, the JST is more of a revision of certain passages. Many passages Joseph was inspired to add or change; for others he modernized the grammar or clarified the text. Some changes came from revelation after asking questions, and other ideas came from his study of various books. By studying the changed passages, we observe three trends:

1. The Prophet Joseph dictated words that came to him (D&C 76; Moses 1, 6, 7, 8; etc.).
2. The Prophet Joseph received insight when he had questions (see D&C 77, Matthew 24, etc.).
3. The Prophet Joseph added a first name to a pronoun or modernized the English (i.e., changing “what” to “who,” or changing “greet each other with a holy kiss” to “a holy salutation.” The changes are in found in footnotes or the JST appendix in our King James Version of the Bible if the change resulted in a substantial addition; otherwise they are left out.

The Joseph Smith Translation could be viewed as an expansion of the Eighth Article of Faith—“We believe the Bible to be the word of God as far as it is translated correctly.” Robert J. Matthews, in the Encyclopedia of Mormonism, explains: “The Prophet Joseph Smith claimed a divine appointment to make an inspired rendition or, as he termed it, a ‘new translation’ of the Bible” (“Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible[JST],” 2:764).

The Joseph Smith Translation became a means for the Lord to restore many truths. The process of carefully studying the Bible motivated Joseph to ask more questions, which then led to further revelations. While translating the Bible Joseph learned many principles and doctrines of the Restoration. Over half of the canonized revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants were received during the three years that Joseph actively worked on the first draft of the JST (55% if including portions of D&C 132, and 54.9% without it). For example, from February to December 1832, while Joseph was translating the New Testament, he received 12 revelations filled with major doctrinal

import that directly related to the scriptures in which he was immersed (D&C 76 to 88). The doctrines introduced or clarified in those sections arose out of (or were concurrent with) the JST translation process.

What did Joseph Smith change in the Bible?

There were over 3,000 verses changed by the Prophet Joseph. Fifty-four of the sixty-six books in the Bible were changed. Joseph left twelve books unchanged (i.e. Ruth, Ecclesiastes, etc.), and he bypassed The Song of Solomon as he felt it was “not inspired writing.”

Currently, there are 600 footnotes in our King James Version of the Bible from the JST, representing about one-third of Joseph’s translation. Much of his translation is printed in the Pearl of Great Price, including the Book of Moses and JST of Matthew. The grammatical changes were typically not included. The footnotes focus on changes that affect doctrine. For a full account of the JST, see the Inspired Version or an extensive analysis in Scott H. Faulring and Kent P. Jackson, eds., *Joseph Smith’s Translation of the Bible: Electronic Library* (Provo, UT: BYU, 2011).

Genesis: In the changes made to the first few chapters of Genesis 1-14 (which we refer to as Moses 1-8), Joseph Smith added major doctrinal content:

- God’s purpose in creating humanity and human relationship and responsibility to God (Moses 1)
- Origin and objectives of Satan (Moses 1:12-24)
- Adam knew of the gospel, focused on Christ as our Creator and Redeemer, and preached the same message along with the priesthood, ordinances, covenants, and calling to his posterity through prophets in each dispensation.
- Creation text in first person with multiple changes from Genesis (Moses 2-3)
- Adam and Eve’s revised experience in the Garden of Eden (Moses 4)
- Enoch’s life and teachings expanded from 119 biblical words to 4,726 in JST Genesis (Moses 6:26-8:2, 19).
- Expands nature of the “covenant and the purpose and destiny of the house of Israel” (Gen. 9, 48, 50)
- Tells of Melchizedek’s role as the Great High Priest following Enoch (Gen. 14)

The Prophet Joseph referred to the extra visions of Moses as a “precious morsel” which God revealed to those? “who well knew our infantile and delicate situation” (“History of Joseph Smith,” *Times and Seasons* 4. 5 [January 16, 1843], 71).

The Lord directed the translation of Genesis in two different sections (D&C 45:60). Joseph translated Gen 1 to 24:40 between June 1830 and March 1830, and then from Gen 24:41 to 50:26 between July to August 1832. The Lord inspired far fewer changes in the second half than He did in the first half. Several of the later chapters had no changes at all: chapters 27, 31, 33-36, 40-43, and 45-47. In Genesis 48 Joseph added to the blessing given by Father Jacob to Manasseh and Ephraim. Similarly, in Genesis 50 Joseph added that Joseph of Egypt mourned over his father’s death, returned to Palestine to bury him, reassured his brothers of his loyalty, and asked them to return his bones to lie with his father.

Scholar Kent Jackson summarizes the legacy of the Prophet Joseph Smith’s additions to Genesis:

I believe that it can be stated safely that Joseph Smith's Genesis text is the most important part of his New Translation of the Bible. Indeed, it is one of the great treasures of Mormonism, containing material that makes the beliefs of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints unique among Christians. . . . Perhaps the most singular contribution to Latter-day Saint theology is the remarkable assertion in Joseph Smith's Genesis that the Christian gospel was known and believed from the beginning of human history. This is shown in the explicit depictions of Adam and Eve as Christians, as well as of Enoch, Noah, Melchizedek, Abraham, and Moses. Joseph Smith's dramatic reinterpretation of Genesis thus makes it a thoroughly Christian book—another testament of Jesus Christ (Kent Jackson, "Joseph Smith Translating Genesis," *BYU Studies* 56.4 [2017], 7-28).

New Testament additions: On Dec. 30, 1830, while the Prophet Joseph was translating Genesis, he received a revelation to stop translating for a season (D&C 37:1). Within days he and his family moved to Ohio. Following Joseph's arrival in Ohio, he returned to translating the Book of Genesis through chapter 24.

On March 7, 1831, Joseph received the revelation known as D&C 45:60, instructing him to begin translating the New Testament. Once that was finished, Joseph returned to the Old Testament.

In many places, as Robert Matthews explains, "The New Testament JST portrays a slightly stronger image of Jesus than does the KJV," along with insights regarding God's dealings with mankind, the innocence of children, and problematic statements in the epistles of Paul (*Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 768-69).

Death of Jesus: The above chart helpfully tabulates eleven unique pieces of information contributed by the JST to the accounts of the arrest, trial, and death of Jesus as reported in the four New Testament gospels (Welch and Hall, *Charting the New Testament*, chart 10-2; for other examples regarding the baptism of Jesus and also the Beatitudes, see charts 8-10, and 9-2).

How Did Joseph Translate the Bible?

The *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* describes Joseph Smith's translation process as "a revelatory experience using only an English text . . . [in which it] appears that he would read from the [King James Version] and dictate revisions to a scribe" (Robert J. Matthews, "Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible [JST]," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 2:765). This explanation is a summary of firsthand references from Joseph Smith, his scribes, and the two original translation manuscripts. Thomas Wayment also adds that some of Joseph's textual changes came from inspiration while studying out of the best books available at the time. That is especially clear in the New Testament Matthew, where a nineteenth century commentary by Adam Clarke stimulated Joseph's changes. The Lord taught Joseph the need to study even while translating the Book of Mormon and the Book of Abraham (D&C 9:7), and during the translation of the New Testament Joseph was told, "seek ye out of the best books words of wisdom; seek learning, even by study and also by faith" (D&C 88:118).

We have different reports of Joseph's use of the interpreters in the process. Years later, Orson Pratt remembered that the Prophet Joseph did not use the Urim and Thummim in the translation process as he had with the Book of Mormon. When Orson asked why,

Joseph explained to him that the experience he had acquired while translating the Book of Mormon by the use of the Urim and Thummim had rendered him so well acquainted with the Spirit of Revelation and Prophecy, that in the translating of the New Testament he did not need the aid that was necessary in the 1st instance” (“Minutes of the School of the Prophets in Salt Lake City,” 14 January 1871; cited by Robert J. Matthews “Joseph Smith—Translator,” in *Joseph Smith: The Prophet the Man*, ed. Susan Black and Charles Tate Jr. [Provo, UT: BYU RSC, 1993], 77-87).

Orson’s observation helps to explain why Joseph initially used the golden plates while translating the Book of Mormon but later did not. It also correlates with Joseph Smith’s statement after receiving the Aaronic Priesthood from John the Baptist followed by his baptism on May 15, 1829: “Our minds being now enlightened we began to have the Scriptures laid open to our understandings, and the true meaning and intention of their more mysterious passages revealed unto us, in a manner which we never could attain to previously” (“Times and Seasons, 1 August 1842,” p. 866, www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/times-and-seasons-1-august-1842/4).

How Was It Recorded?

Initially, as the Prophet Joseph read the Bible and felt inspired to add or take away words, his scribe wrote every word. From Genesis 1 to 24, and from Matthew through John 6, the entire biblical text was written in full by scribes, even when some chapters had no changes. In July 1832, about the time Fredrick G. Williams became Joseph’s scribe. Starting in John 6, only the changes made to the KJV were written in full, note the rest of the biblical text. A close study of the Bible they used shows markings on the page by the scribe that changes had been made. This quicker system was not completed until the scribe later wrote the text for publication.

Why Did Joseph Translate the Bible?

Joseph Smith’s alterations to the Bible were not motivated by nineteenth-century Americans. Most Americans believed the Bible was infallible and valued the biblical text as their source of authority, the Spirit, and knowledge. From 1777 to 1833 there were more than 500 separate editions of the Bible published in America, but none added to or took away from the sacred text (Monte S. Nyman and Robert L. Millet, *The Joseph Smith Translation: The Restoration of Plain and Precious Things* [Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1994], 25). Joseph Smith’s claim that there were errors in the Bible that needed to be changed was highly offensive to the nineteenth-century Christians, let alone the fact that he altered more than 3,000 verses.

The Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible presents yet another issue in which Joseph did not fit with society at large. It would be several decades before textual scholarship in Germany pointed out discrepancies between biblical authors. Even translations into modern languages did not add phrases, chapters, or attempt to cut out words.

Even before June 1830, when the Lord called Joseph Smith to translate or offer a new rendition of the Bible, He had already explained why it was needed. Joseph learned while translating 1 Nephi 13:24, 28-29, 39; 14:23 that the Bible needed repairing. Not only had there been a loss of priesthood, ordinances, and doctrines, but essential teachings about the Godhead, the Fall, the atonement, repentance, and the Spirit were missing, suggesting that much vital information needed to be restored.

In the History of the Church, Joseph said he felt it was “a branch of my calling” to translate the Bible (Smith, History of the Church, 1:238). It was not until six months later, in December 1830, that the Lord said, “The scriptures shall be given, even as they are in mine own bosom, to the salvation of mine own elect” (D&C 35:20). The bottom line is that we needed clarifying scripture for our salvation.

In early 1832 Joseph explained, “From sundry revelations which have been received, it was apparent that many important points, touching the Salvation of man, had been taken from the Bible, or lost before it was compiled.” In a sermon in Nauvoo given on October 15, 1843, Joseph further explained, “I believe the bible, as it ought to be, as it came from the pen of the original writers” (Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph* [Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1980], 256).

Why don't we use the JST exclusively? What is the value of the JST?

The importance of the JST is seen, in part, by noting the great care the Prophet Joseph and his wife Emma gave to the manuscripts. When the Saints were driven from Missouri, Emma sewed pockets in her petticoats and placed the manuscripts in the pockets as she carried her babies across the Mississippi River to Quincy, Illinois. During the September 1846 Battle of Nauvoo, when the Mansion House caught on fire, Emma concluded the house was not burned to the ground because the JST manuscripts were inside. Emma gave the JST manuscripts to her son Joseph Smith III who gave oversight to their publication as the Inspired Version by the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints in 1867.

We do not use the Joseph Smith Translation as our Bible because ownership of the JST manuscripts is retained by the Community of Christ (formerly the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints). We did not have access to the manuscripts for over a hundred years, from 1844 until the 1960s. Then a new historian of the RLDS church allowed access in what year? to a member of our faith: BYU faculty member, Robert Matthews, worked very patiently and received permission to study them for decades and became the first member of our faith to see and carefully the manuscripts. His work is stellar and represents over fifty years of scholarship. This paved the way, under the guidance of Elder Bruce R. McConkie, for the 1981 LDS edition of the Bible to include portions of the JST. The appendix and footnotes include the most important changes, but half of Joseph's changes are not included there. This was in part for space reasons (i.e., the Pearl of Great Price includes the Book of Moses and Matthew 24, so there was no need to reproduce them). Many of the changes were only modernizations of the grammar without changing the meaning, so those were also left out.

Why are there different names given to the Joseph Smith Translation?

The Doctrine and Covenants refers to the Prophet Joseph's rewritten portions of the Phinney Edition of the King James Version of the Bible as a “New Translation” (D&C 124:89). When it was first published by the RLDS church in 1867, the JST was called “Inspired Version.” When the RLDS church gave permission to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to publish the text in our scripture edition in 1981, Church historians wanted to use Joseph's title “NT” for Joseph's title, “New Translation.” However, the abbreviation “NT” was not clear as a biblical footnote, because NT is a universal abbreviation for the New Testament. The abbreviation JST was chosen—Joseph Smith Translation.

Why did the Prophet Joseph continue revising the Bible translation?

The Prophet worked on his “New Translation” from 1830 to 1844. Evidences of his fine-tuning are seen in the original manuscripts. For a decade following its completion, he added verses, made spelling changes, and gave clarifications. In August 1833 Joseph wrote to the Missouri Saints, “You will see by these revelations that we have to print the new translation here at Kirtland for which we will prepare as soon as possible.” He hoped to have the translation published multiple times between 1833 and 1844, but a lack of funding and other priorities delayed the work.

Even though the Prophet Joseph felt the manuscript was ready for publication, that does not mean he did not add more biblical commentary. Similarly, although he published the Doctrine and Covenants, he expected more revelation to follow with further editions of the Doctrine and Covenants. Portions of the Joseph Smith Translation were published in local newspapers. For example, excerpts from Genesis appeared in the Evening and the Morning Star and Times and Seasons.

Why so many additions to Enoch?

In the Bible we have very little about Enoch—only 119 words. (There is another person named Enoch in Genesis 4:17, but he is Cain’s son, several centuries earlier, not the prophet Enoch.) This means the Bible is missing centuries of Enoch’s preaching, economic lifestyle, the translation of his righteous city, etc. The Lord inspired the Prophet Joseph to add approximately 4,726 words about Enoch and his people. Why? It was very important that Joseph learn the Lord’s way for establishing a city of righteousness. Unlike the world’s experimentation with communal options or the Kirtland “Family” which some converts had previously lived, the Lord’s economic system as given to Enoch was restored to Joseph Smith in D&C 42 and subsequent revelations that followed.

The Lord’s timing of the revelation was part of this miracle. The Lord commanded Joseph to start with Genesis from which Joseph received all the information on Enoch and his city of Zion. Shortly thereafter, Joseph received the revelation known as the Law of Consecration (D&C 42). The timing of the translation corresponded perfectly. The miracle is in the timing!

Sources

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