

The King James Bible and the Book of Mormon

It's obvious even to the casual reader that the Book of Mormon, in its original 1830 translation, is written in the language of the King James Version Bible (hereafter KJV). The critics have been quick to condemn the Book of Mormon because of this fact. It is interesting to note, however, that in some cases the Book of Mormon departs from the KJV rendering in precisely the same places where other ancient manuscripts depart from the KJV.¹

Nevertheless, all serious students of the Book of Mormon recognize that there is a definite relationship between the KJV and the original Book of Mormon translation. The claim that Joseph plagiarized the Bible is explored elsewhere.² In this article I attempt to examine four scenarios in which Joseph Smith—acting as a prophet—could have used the KJV in his translation of the Book of Mormon.

1) Joseph Smith received the Book of Mormon from God according to his own understanding of biblical language (KJV), and turned to the Bible as an aid in translating. When the Bible appeared to harmonize with the impressions he understood the Book of Mormon conveyed, he opted for quoting the KJV.

Although this is a possibility, and some LDS writers have suggested this,³ I believe that the evidence makes this possibility tenuous. A number of witnesses to the translating process, for example, all claimed that Joseph did not have any manuscripts handy while translating.⁴

2) When Joseph Smith encountered passages that were similar in idea to those already expressed in the KJV, he included these passages, drawing upon an extraordinary memory.

I find this possibility flawed. As far as I can tell, there is no evidence to support the belief that Joseph Smith had an uncanny or photographic memory. From a critic's perspective such a proposition runs counter to other anti-Mormon claims. For example the critics have also claimed that when Joseph Smith lost the first 116 pages of the Book of Mormon translation (through the neglect of Martin Harris), he had forgotten what he had written so he started anew. They also claim that some of Joseph's Old Testament information—such as sacrifices in the Book of Mormon—was inaccurate because he had no “real understanding of Old Testament sacrifices and other Jewish customs.”⁵ For believers in Joseph Smith's prophetic abilities, the proposition that Joseph drew upon a superior natural memory is a possibility, but I suggest there are better scenarios that explain the KJV passages in the Book of Mormon.

3) Joseph Smith received the Book of Mormon from God—word for word—and the KJV passages in the Book of Mormon reflect Joseph Smith's revelation in the vernacular and idioms that God elected to reveal to Joseph Smith.

The phrase “word for word” does not adequately convey the intent of this position, because there is a range of views as to how “tight” or closely Book of Mormon phrases approximate the ancient Nephite script. More than one LDS scholar has noted that a “one-for-one” word translation from the Book of Mormon would likely result “in a syntactic and semantic puree”⁶—or in other words, a nearly unintelligible translation.

Most LDS scholars, who opt for a “tight” translation, suggest that there is a close relationship between the original ancient script and those in the 1830 translation. This possibility has strong support from some studies but is not without its problems.

Royal Skousen, who has done some exciting work on what survived of the original Book of Mormon manuscript, supports a “tight” translation. One reason Skousen believes that Joseph Smith read English words from the seerstone is the evidence that Joseph spelled out Book of Mormon names after pronouncing them phonetically.⁷ Other evidence for a “tight” translation would include Hebraisms, Hebrew poetry structure, chiasmus, and more, precise internal quotations (such as Alma 36:22 quoting verbatim 1 Nephi 1:8 and Helaman 14:12 quoting exactly Mosiah 3:8), consistent use of technical legal terminology, and more.⁸ Dr. John Welch believes that while Joseph's translation was more than a “mechanical literal rendition,” it nevertheless “corresponded in some way, point-by-point, with the ancient writing that was being translated.”⁹

4) Variation of #2. God empowered Joseph Smith with an extraordinary memory of Biblical passages while translating, thereby suggesting that God approved of the included biblical passages as accurately expressing the ideas contained in the Book of Mormon (this does not suggest that these passages need be entirely accurate, but rather that the point of such verses were accurately portrayed).

This proposal, I believe, is a distinct possibility. Some studies, however, suggest that Joseph Smith was not intimately acquainted with the Bible. David Whitmer, for instance, testified that Smith was so unfamiliar with the Bible that he stopped translating from the plates when he read that Jerusalem was a “Walled City.” He asked for a Bible to verify this fact before continuing to translate.¹⁰

Nevertheless, Joseph may have read enough of the Bible in previous years that by the power of God he could recall pertinent passages when the need arose. Those passages might have been brought to memory when they reflected the intent of the Book of Mormon text.

There are a number of scriptures suggesting that the memories of the righteous are enhanced when dealing with spiritual things. “But the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your

remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you” (John 14:26). There also appears to be a possible connection with memory and forgetfulness with righteousness and wickedness. In the scriptures we frequently read how the wicked are slow to remember the Lord (Mosiah 1:17; 2:40; Alma 4:3), or how they have forgotten their covenants or the blessings of their fathers (Judges 8:34). The covenant people are constantly told to remember the Lord, remember our covenants, or to remember the blessings that the Lord has given us (Deut. 9:7; 24:9.)

When the wicked become converted their memories are sharpened. They remember their sins (Alma 5:18), are harrowed up in the memory of their sins, and remember their god. In Helaman we read that when “the people saw that they were about to perish by famine, and they began to remember the Lord their God; and they began to remember the words of Nephi.” (Helaman 11:7).

Remembrance is key to all covenants. The sacrament, for example, is done in *remembrance* of the Savior and his atoning sacrifice. Other covenants as well (both current and in the days of Moses) were enacted to bring the works of God into remembrance of the covenant people.

In D&C 9:9 the Lord told Oliver Cowdery that in his attempt to translate if the translation was not correct he would “have a stupor of thought” and would “forget the thing which is wrong.”

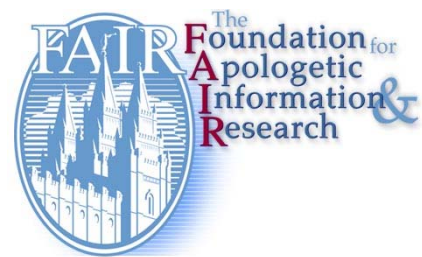
Even the Lord promises to remember only the goodness of the truly repentant. Forsaken sins will be remembered no more (Jer. 31:34; Heb. 10:17; D&C 58:42). Even the truly repentant would forget their sins (Alma 36:19). The scriptures tell us that God remembers all his children (2 Ne. 29:8) and that He even covenanted with Abraham that he would remember his seed forever (2 Ne. 29:14). When Joseph F. Smith meditated on the atonement of Christ, his mind “reverted to the writings of the apostle Peter” after which he received the revelation recorded in D&C 138.

We also have the example of the revelation on plural marriage. Because Joseph had not yet committed the revelation to writing, Hyrum asked that Joseph write the revelation by means of the Urim and Thummim. There was no need to consult the Urim and Thummim, Joseph replied, for he knew the revelation perfectly from beginning to end.¹¹ The revelation, which Joseph dictated to his scribe William Clayton, eventually became D&C 132 (which is sixty-six verses long!). It seems reasonable to believe, that the Lord magnified Joseph’s memory when it came to spiritual things.

Why would God render the Book of Mormon translation into KJV English?

As more than one LDS scholar has pointed out, the KJV English was the accepted scriptural language of Joseph Smith’s day. When Jesus, the Apostles, or even the angel Gabriel quote scriptures in the New Testament they do not quote from some ancient and perhaps original source. Instead they quote from the Septuagint—the Greek version of the Old Testament, which was the accepted Bible of New

Testament readers. “When ‘holy men of God’ quote the scriptures,” notes Nibley, “it is always in the received standard version of the people they are addressing...”¹² Likewise, the scriptural language of Joseph Smith’s day was King James English. Quite often when other ancient texts—such as the Dead Sea Scrolls—are translated into English, they—like the Book of Mormon—are rendered into King James English.¹³ One can hardly chide Joseph for doing the very same thing that modern scholars often do when translating ancient religious texts.



For more details on this topic see
<http://www.mormonfortress.com/firstvis.html>

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¹ See John Welch, *The Sermon at the Temple and The Sermon on the Mount* (SLC: Deseret Book, 1990).

² See Michael R. Ash, “Book of Mormon Plagiarism,” <http://www.mormonfortress.com/bible2.html>

³ B. H. Roberts, *Defense of the Faith and the Saints*, 2 vols. (SLC: Deseret News, 1907), 272.

⁴ See Ash.

⁵ Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *Covering Up the Black Hole in the Book of Mormon* (SLC: Lighthouse Ministry, 1990), 99-100; see also John A. Tvedtnes, *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon v6:2* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1994), 208-9.

⁶ Stephen D. Ricks, “Translation of the Book of Mormon: Interpreting the Evidence,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2:2 (Provo: FARMS, 1993), 203.

⁷ Royal Skousen, “Translating the Book of Mormon: Evidence from the Original Manuscript” (Lecture given on June 7, 1997 at FARMS symposium, “Ancient Scriptures and the Restoration.” Printed version forthcoming from FARMS.)

⁸ John Welch, *The Sermon at the Temple and The Sermon on the Mount* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1990), 140.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Lyndon W. Cook ed., *David Whitmer Interviews: A Restoration Witness* (Grandin Book Co., 1993), 211.

¹¹ *History of the Church*, 5:xxxii.

¹² Hugh Nibley, *The Prophetic Book of Mormon* (SLC: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1989), 215.

¹³ Ibid.