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“A Miracle from Day One”: Publication of the Joseph Smith Translation Manuscripts

Rebecca L. McConkie

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Later this year, the Religious Studies Center will publish a volume called Joseph Smith’s New Translation of the Bible: Original Manuscripts, edited by Scott H. Faulring, Kent P. Jackson, and Robert J. Matthews. To help readers understand the scope and purpose of this project, the Religious Educator held the following interview with two of the editors.

Religious Educator: *What is the purpose of the project, and who is your intended audience?*

Faulring: The purpose of this project is to bring, for the first time ever, a typescript and photographs of the original manuscripts of the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible to the members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and the Community of Christ.¹

Jackson: The intended audience is first, I think, people with academic interests because it is going to be an unedited transcription of the original documents. The second audience is nonacademics in the Church who have an interest in seeing a revealed text in its original form—a revealed text that has not been edited, polished, or corrected for consistency.

RE: *How will religious educators be able to use this material?*

Jackson: This material will give religious educators access to the original documents that they have never had before. For example, in the footnotes and appendix of the 1979 English Latter-day Saint edition of the King James Bible, we have more than six hundred verses

that we have changes for, and all of those changes will be accessible to readers in their original form.

Faulring: Readers will be able to see those changes in context and see how they were done. For example, they will be able to see whether a change was written out in full or in the shortened notation system, in which the Prophet marked the location of a change in his Bible and then dictated to his scribes only the revised words.

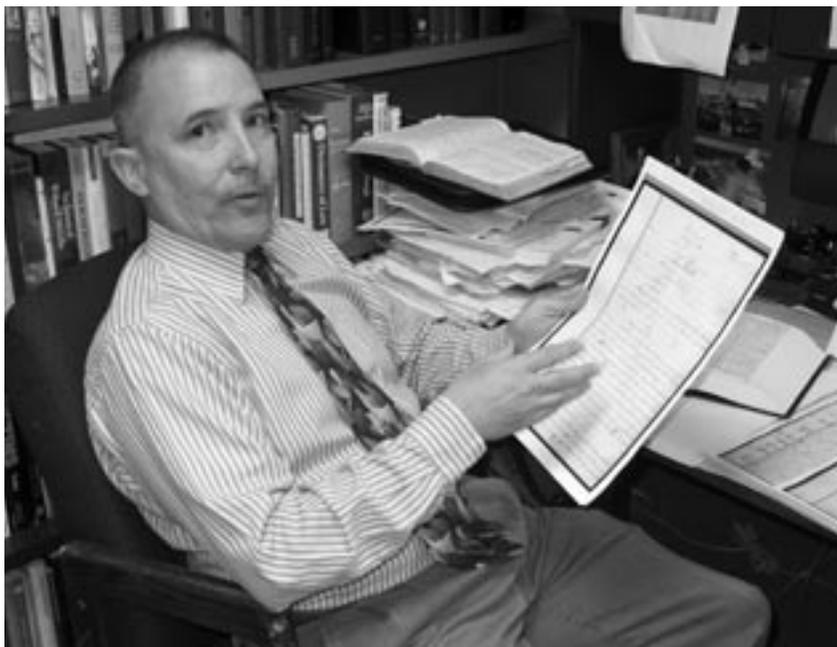
Jackson: We do not have all of Joseph Smith's changes in the footnotes of the current edition of the Latter-day Saint Bible. I think the selections made for the JST footnotes are excellent. The Scriptures Publication Committee went after the changes that have doctrinal and historical significance, but there is a lot of other rich information that is not contained in the footnotes. For example, the Prophet frequently modernized King James Version language and reworded many sentences to make the Bible read more easily. Most Church members are not aware of that because the footnotes contain only things that are of a doctrinal or historical significance.

RE: What have you learned from this project, and how does this knowledge add to our study of the Bible?

Faulring: As a historian, I have learned that Joseph Smith, off and on in a three-year period, devoted as much time as he could to studying the Bible and making changes in it. The Prophet was learning as he was going through this process. As he said, it was a branch of his calling. It was part of his development as a prophet, and it happened early on in the Church, from 1830 to 1833. If you look in the Doctrine and Covenants, most of the revelations were received during that time. And revelation often came when Joseph Smith had a question, prayed, asked for an answer, and received it. Brother Robert J. Matthews has shown that there is an interrelationship between the revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants and the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible, both historical and doctrinal.

Jackson: We have a better grasp on that interrelationship now than we did before because we have been able, mostly through Scott's work, to establish better dating than we ever had before. In this book, we have additional historical sources that have never been published in this context that give us an indication of how the translation was progressing. This gives us a better ability to correlate the revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants with the material in the JST. So historically it does a lot.

Personally, my appreciation for the JST has grown enormously since working with this project. I marvel at the great inspiration of the Prophet Joseph Smith in being able to dictate something as flawless as Moses chapter 1, requiring virtually no editorial revising of any kind after it was first dictated, and to be so full of new doctrinal content and doctrinal revelation that it made a vital contribution to the Restoration. My own appreciation of this has grown very much, and I think other people, as they have access to the original sources, are going to have the same experience.



Scott H. Faulring, research historian at the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Latter-day Saint History, with a photograph of the Joseph Smith Translation manuscripts

RE: What prompted the project, and how long has it been under way?

Faulring: From my perspective, it was the condition of the manuscripts. The manuscripts had been stored in a bank safe in Kansas City for many years. When the new Community of Christ temple was built in Independence, they attached the Temple School, which houses a library-archive, and the manuscripts were kept there in a vault in a temperature-controlled archive. But the manuscripts themselves had already suffered some deterioration.

My research on Oliver Cowdery led me to the manuscripts initially. The first nine pages, and five lines on the tenth page, are in Oliver's

handwriting. I worked with Ronald Romig, the RLDS Church archivist, who let me work with the originals. Knowing my previous use of the microfilm and a printout of the microfilm, he felt that it was justified to let me work with the original. As I worked with the original, little shards of paper along the edge would flake off. Of course, I was handling these with the utmost care, but the manuscripts were dry and brittle. They were not totally falling apart, but, for example, on page one of the first Old Testament manuscript, there were six pieces of yellowed tape that had been put on years ago holding pieces of the page together. Out of a natural concern on my part, I said to Mr. Romig, "Something really needs to be done with these manuscripts." He confided in me that the RLDS archives had a staff of only two people—him and an assistant archivist. He was being very honest and said, "We don't have the time, the talent, the money, to do what would be required to really preserve these manuscripts." Just three months prior to having this discussion with Mr. Romig, I had a discussion with Richard E. Turley Jr., head of the LDS Church Historical Department. I asked Brother Turley if our archives would be willing to help the RLDS conserve their manuscripts, and almost without hesitation Brother Turley said, "Yes, we'd cooperate with them."

The conversation I had with Brother Turley was in October. The following January, I had the above conversation with Ron Romig. It probably lasted no more than fifteen minutes, and Mr. Romig asked me to make a research proposal that included doing conservation work, digitally imaging the manuscripts, and photographing them both before and after the conservation work. It was important that we photographed them before, because when the LDS Church Archives conservation lab soaked the manuscripts to loosen up the tape (luckily, the tape was put on in an age when it was an organic-based adhesive), we did lose a little bit of text. So we scanned them, photographed them, and after the manuscripts got to Salt Lake, they were micro-filmed again. Perhaps most significantly, the RLDS Church gave us the right to publish the manuscripts for the first time.

In January 1995, I wrote the proposal, and within two or three weeks of returning from the RLDS archives, I received a letter granting me permission to proceed. I knew I could not do it alone; I needed help in terms of people, equipment, and money. I approached Religious Education at Brigham Young University, and I was directed to Kent Jackson, who was director of publications at the Religious Studies Center (RSC). I also involved the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS) and the LDS archives. I thought it

would take many months to get all the parties to agree on a project concept. But in an amazing three months, we were able to get the LDS archives to speak with their General Authority advisers.

The RSC and FARMS provided funding for me and Steve Booras of FARMS to travel to Independence. Steve had just returned from Jerusalem, where he was working with the Dead Sea Scrolls. His work on the Dead Sea Scrolls is what gave me the idea of digitally imaging the documents. During the two-week period that Steve and I were in Independence, Steve did the photography on the manuscripts, and I did the scanning. On average, the scanning took about six minutes per page. Now take that six minutes and multiply it by 464 pages. Add



Kent P. Jackson (left, professor of ancient scripture) and Robert J. Matthews (emeritus professor of ancient scripture), two editors of the upcoming book on the Joseph Smith Translation original manuscripts

time getting started in the morning, time for lunch, time for packing things up at the end of the day; that is a full two-week effort in itself. In addition to allowing us to scan the Joseph Smith Translation manuscripts, they allowed us to scan their five-hundred-page committee manuscript, which the RLDS Church had created in 1866–67 for the printing of the 1867 Holy Scriptures (Inspired Version). It was a historian-archivist's dream. We had all these materials at our fingertips,

with high-resolution imaging.

It was then proposed that we create a new transcription. Robert Matthews had painstakingly created a transcription back in the late 1960s and early 1970s, but we created a new electronic transcription. We had access to his, but we didn't reproduce his; we started fresh. It took my wife, Barbara, and me about a year and a half, reading the image off one computer screen with the typescript in the other. It was a very painstaking, laborious process. In historical and documentary editing, the rule of thumb is that a manuscript should be read three times. Don't just transcribe it, look at it once, and publish it. You go through it three times. My wife and I did the initial rough transcription, and then Brother Jackson and his student editors in the RSC worked through it thoroughly and repeatedly—I think letter by letter on a computer monitor.

It was a very humbling experience to work even just with the scanned images. It is also very humbling to be able to touch the original manuscripts and work with the actual text, the actual handwriting, and to see the different scribes, whether it was Oliver Cowdery or John Whitmer or Emma Smith. One particularly memorable experience took place in July of 1995. Brother Matthews and I went back and did a physical description, side by side, measuring and examining each page. There are two lines at the bottom of page 11 of the first Old Testament manuscript that slant upward. We thought that the handwriting changed. Brother Matthews said, "You know, this could be Emma." It was just thrown out as a suggestion. Rather than stop right there in the RLDS archives, where they had many samples of Emma Smith's handwriting, we just kept going. We had too much work to do in that one-week period.

A couple of months after I got back, I selected multiple samples of Emma's handwriting and took the material home with me and sat at my kitchen table. Within about an hour and half, I think I had seventy-eight identical matches of Emma's handwriting. Her capital *E*'s for *Enoch* looked the same as when she signed her name *Emma*. The way she wrote the word *to*, she would flip the cross over on the *t*; it was just a very unique style. Her capital *P*'s—I could go on and give you all these different styles, but when I made that identification, I was so thrilled, for here we have two full pages, plus a little bit more, of the only example I know of female handwriting in the Latter-day Saint scriptures. It fulfilled that promise given to Emma in the Doctrine and Covenants that she would assist her husband as a scribe (D&C 25:6).

This project has taken ten years, but that is because we are working

with scripture. You don’t hurry along something this important.

Jackson: We always felt that this was a special project. The advantage that we had at the RSC was that I was able to hire as many people as we needed to help in the work. At one point, we had seven student editors working on the project in various ways, some working on the transcription but others working on related research projects. The technology allowed us to look at the individual words and the individual letters, and the scanned images allowed us to see the differences in ink and the erasures that are underneath the current words. We did that for many, many months over the course of a few years. On the wall in our office, we had pictures of each one of Joseph Smith’s scribes because we felt a kinship with them in assisting with the effort to bring forth the Joseph Smith Translation.

Our final pass through the entire manuscript was in three-person committees. We knew that we had to make final decisions and there would be differences of opinion, so we had an odd number. Our three-person committees had to vote—sometimes it was two for the letter *a* and one for the letter *o*. I also made a few trips back to Independence to look at the original manuscripts—Scott did as well. I found it to be the case that we could see the material much better on the scanned images than we could on the actual manuscripts with the natural eye, even with a magnifying glass. That took a lot of time, and the process of getting the book finally ready for publication has taken a great deal of time as well. Our objective with the transcription was to make it as clean as possible. The manuscript pages are, in some cases, highly edited by multiple hands, and our objective was to develop a system that makes them as simple as possible to read and understand. We wanted to present the inspired text with as much dignity and reverence as we possibly could. We believe we have succeeded.

The book is absolutely unique. It contains several introductory essays that highlight our recent research into the JST. In the course of our research, we learned many new things that will be published in the book for the first time. We discovered that some of our earlier assumptions and interpretations were wrong, and we discovered that we still have much to learn. The book has about a thousand photographs in it, little verses out of Joseph Smith’s Bible. In part of the translation, the Prophet marked the insertion points in his Bible and then dictated only the changed words to his scribes, who would note them on the manuscript. In those instances, we have actual photographs in the book of each of the verses that the Prophet made corrections to. We photographed about a thousand of them right out of his Bible. The book is

over eight hundred fifty pages long. It is a big book in a large format.

Faulring: It is a typescript facsimile. It is going to be line by line, page by page. Next year we will produce a compact disc, and through any browser you will be able to look at images of the actual manuscripts. So as you are looking at the book, you can call up the typescript in one frame, the manuscript in others. You can even enlarge just the manuscript, so you will have the best of both worlds.

RE: Is there anyone else who contributed time or money to the project?

Faulring: Brother Matthews has contributed his lifetime to the study of the Joseph Smith Translation. When Ron Romig first asked that I propose to do this project, the first thing I did when I got back to BYU was to let Brother Matthews know what the RLDS Church would allow us to do. I won't say he was dumbfounded—he's not the dumbfounded type—but I think he was highly surprised, almost skeptical to a point. In his years, I believe he said it took him fourteen years of trying to actually get access to a copy of the JST manuscripts. He got to see a copy in 1967; then in 1968 they let him work with the original manuscripts. So when I think of who has put the most into it, Brother Matthews has given a lifetime almost.

Jackson: It took him months to really believe that this project was going to happen. This was the answer to forty years of prayers on his part.

Faulring: And his patient diplomacy.

Jackson: Everything that is in this book is built on research that he started back in the 1960s, so he is the major contributor. There are others who have contributed a lot—the Church Historical Department, with the enormous expense of the preservation of the manuscripts. We have been blessed much by the generosity of the Community of Christ. Ron Romig, the archivist, has been very helpful. We need to pay tribute to the very skilled typesetting work of Tonya Facemyer of Deseret Book. She did a marvelous job of laying out the complete book from start to finish. We are also grateful to many student assistants, to Trent Davies, the designer of the compact disc, and to Religious Education and FARMS for putting up the money. This has not been an inexpensive project. A large portion of my salary over the past several years has gone into the production of this book. We are really confident it is going to be a blessing to the Church.

Faulring: Dale Heaps was the senior conservator at the LDS Church archives. To do conservation work is as much art as it is science.

Jackson: It was a world-class conservation job.

Faulring: Yes, he did such a marvelous job. Not only did he do the deacidification of the manuscripts but he also pieced them back together. We have photographs of the manuscripts when they were still together in gatherings, or folios, and the pages were still connected. At some point in the 1950s or 1960s—and we suppose it was probably because of microfilming—they cut the manuscripts. In some cases, the manuscripts were cut unevenly, and we have loose pages. Well, Brother Heaps was able to put the puzzle back together, and when he did that, rather than put the pages back into folios, he laid the sheets flat. Brother Heaps's department had a machine that allowed them to encapsulate the manuscripts. I don't know exactly how it works, but it runs over the top and the bottom of the pages very gently and places them between what Dale described as a microseal—a very fine seal with holes every few inches so the manuscript can breathe. The manuscript is not sealed in there; it is just protected. The manuscripts now lay flat, and they have been rejoined. Dale made special archival acid-free boxes to hold them. And he put them into slip cases that are just beautiful.

I am sure the project would not have happened without the support of Brother Turley and Steve Sorensen of the LDS Church Archives. I really have a testimony that my somewhat naïve, almost dumb, observation to Mr. Romig that the manuscripts were falling apart set off a whole chain of events that led to the conclusion here. It has been a miracle from day one.

I want to express my appreciation to Brother Jackson. I'm a historian, not a theologian, and Brother Jackson has been able to see things in the manuscripts that made sense to him. So it has been a good collaboration. And Brother Matthews—again, he is listed as the third editor, and I think when he gets his copy he is just going to hold it and say, "This is a miracle." He appreciates and understands the importance of the Joseph Smith Translation. He never thought this could ever happen. **RE**

Note

The Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints changed its name to Community of Christ in 2001.