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Traduit de L'Anglais: The First French Book of Mormon

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When the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was first organized in the year 1830, the Book of Mormon had been published in only one language: English. But the church was growing quickly and spreading to other parts of the world. One of the first publications of the Book of Mormon in another language was in French. This article gives an account of the French translation from 1850 to 1852, when Elder John Taylor, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, presided over a newly opened mission in France. Elder Taylor oversaw the translation process, which was done primarily by recent French converts Mr. Wilhelm and Louis Bertrand and one of Elder Taylor’s counselors, Elder Curtis E. Bolton. While these men were translating, Paris was in the midst of political unrest and was wary of unfamiliar social, political, and religious organizations. In fact, both Elder Taylor and Brother Bertrand had to hide from government officials. Despite all the complications that came about during this process, the work was ultimately a success.
Ideally, a team of well-educated, fluently bilingual, fully converted, and time-tested members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints would collaborate on an effort as important as translating the Book of Mormon. Absent this luxury in producing the first French edition of that book, the church did the best it could. Between June 1850 and January 1852, an unlikely mix of five men put their efforts into translating the Book of Mormon into the French language. Theirs proved to be a monumental translation, persisting as the foundation for every subsequent French edition of the Book of Mormon. This story would be incomplete unless set against the backdrop of the considerable distractions that threatened to undermine the work. That fuller picture shows that it is perhaps a miracle that such an enduring translation could be finished so quickly.

In December 1847 the British Mission presidency issued a plea for volunteer missionaries to France, and by August 1849 Elder William Howell was working there. Two months later, in the October general conference in Salt Lake City, three men were called to serve missions in France: Elder John Taylor of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles; Curtis E. Bolton, the son of a wealthy ship owner in New York; and John Pack. By the time these missionaries arrived, Howell had already established a small branch in Boulogne-sur-Mer. The French Mission officially opened on 18 June 1850 with the arrival of the new mission presidency—Elder Taylor as president and Elders Bolton and Pack as counselors.

Of these early missionaries, Bolton deserves special attention because of his instrumental role in translating the Book of Mormon. He was also an interesting character. It appears that he seldom allowed diplomacy and self-restraint to soften the harshness of his honest feelings. In his diary he comes across as melodramatic and paranoid yet extraordinarily sincere, regularly citing the efforts of many people (both below and above him in authority) to undermine his work and destroy his character and authority. For such perceived affronts, he viciously berated both John Taylor and Louis Bertrand, one of the earliest converts in France. Despite this severity, because Bolton was the only one of those first missionaries who spoke French, Elder Taylor immediately appointed him to translate the Book of Mormon. Bolton worked on the translation sporadically until
October 1850, when he laid it aside to translate other tracts under Taylor’s instruction. During their first few months in France, Bolton and Taylor encountered Louis A. Bertrand, who would later play a significant role in the translation. Bertrand wrote of his introduction to the church:

I was editing the political section of Le Populaire at the time the first Mormon missionaries came to Paris. . . . From my first meeting with them I was struck by the far reaching importance of the work they were commissioned to introduce in France. My knowledge of English permitted me to initiate myself into the doctrines of the new Church, and I found in their writings and especially in a work entitled Divine Authenticity of the Book of Mormon, by Orson Pratt, the complete demonstrations of the divinity of that work. The two apostles who landed on French soil were Messrs John Taylor and Curtis E. Bolton. All the questions, all the objections which I raised were answered or explained to my entire satisfaction.7

In 1850 Le Populaire was the largest Communist paper in France. The French socialist Étienne Cabet, who founded the utopian experiment known as the Icarian movement, owned the paper. Also at this time, a few hundred Icarians were settling into the Mormons’ abandoned houses in Nauvoo,7 possibly providing a reason for Taylor’s visit to the paper’s office in France, where he met Bertrand.

Bertrand had traveled a lot in his younger years, returning to France in time to be caught up amid significant political unrest. It was likely sometime between 1846 and 1848 that the man originally named John Francis Elias Flandin adopted the pseudonym Louis Alphonse Bertrand, possibly to protect his wife and two children from negative fallout due to his political activities.7 Three points suffice to describe Bertrand’s involvement in the French Revolution of 1848: he held some form of public influence, having been elected to the Revolutionary Committee; he was a socialist under Cabet’s tutelage (for this he spent a few months in prison despite his support of the revolution); and he was working as Le Populaire’s political editor when he was contacted by Taylor and Bolton in 1850. “I was then a mad Politician, the cashier & editor of the Journal Le Populaire, a demagogick paper of the first water. I did spend about 10 years of my life in Paris, and I am extensively known in that city and by the French Government.”8 Bertrand wrote the following of his conversion:

I was born and reared up in the bosom of Catholicism, but had thrown off the yoke of priestcraft and the false traditions of my fathers for many years; yet I was distressed with doubt and uncertainty, and was assailed by scepticism in every form. I had lived till then absolutely indifferent to any matters of religion.—My conversion was sudden, indeed it might be considered instantaneous. By my obedience to the gospel and by prayer I experienced a complete transformation, so that my eyes once blind were opened, and I can truly say that old things passed away and all things became new.9

Within five months of landing in France, Taylor and Bolton prepared two future translators—Bertrand and a Mr. Wilhelm—for membership in the church, while the final team member would not be a Latter-day Saint. Bolton wrote, “I had three persons ready for baptism, one Editor of a Communist Newspaper, named Bertrand and Wilhelm and his wife.”10 Wilhelm was first and Bertrand was second of five individuals baptized (in order of age) by John
Taylor on the island of Saint-Ouen on 1 December 1850. While Wilhelm was joined by his wife in the new faith, “much to [Bertrand’s] disappointment, his wife did not share his enthusiasm for the new religion nor would she consent to their sons’ being baptized.” A week later, Bertrand and Wilhelm were two of eight members present at the creation of the Paris branch.

The fledgling branch put Mr. Wilhelm to work immediately with an assignment to help translate the Book of Mormon, probably at the same time Bolton resumed the work himself. At this time the translation probably began in earnest. Unfortunately, after only a couple months’ efforts, Wilhelm quit work in late February when John Taylor refused to publish a tract he had written on the church. After bickering with Bolton over pay for another few months and finally being more than sufficiently reimbursed by Taylor, Wilhelm left the church altogether. He was stripped of his priesthood at a council held on 1 May 1851 and excommunicated soon thereafter. On 22 March 1851, Bertrand sent Lazare Auge, a nonmember friend seeking employment, to replace Wilhelm in the translation. The help rendered by Wilhelm and Auge from December 1850 until November 1851 was important largely because they were native French speakers, though Wilhelm’s sincerity may come into question because he left the church so soon and Auge, a nonmember who spoke no English, did not profess to believe in the texts he was translating.

Though Bertrand performed little work on the Book of Mormon during his first nine months as a member, his editorial skills were tapped as he became actively engaged in the church’s other publication efforts. Bolton reported to Taylor in March 1851 that “Brother Bertrand is very busy writing his pamphlet; it is addressed to the working classes of France, so he says. And that if it meet your approbation he will write another for the higher class, more deep and logical.” On 29 May the first issue of Étoile du Désert, edited by John Taylor, came off the press, constituting the “first Mormon periodical on continental Europe.” Articles authored by Taylor, Bolton, and Alphonse Dupont regularly appeared in Étoile. Bertrand published three poems or hymns in the paper (October and November 1851 and February 1852), as well as a substantial article on the church’s beliefs (April 1852). He also independently published a similar article of 32 pages sometime during 1852 titled “Autorité Divine.” Bertrand also put together a collection of hymns in French, including several of his own. Bolton records singing “the songs of Zion composed by our dear Brother Bertrand.”

Perhaps feeling he was not doing enough, Bertrand, on 7 July 1851, “offered to come every evening and revise for the press, Mr. Auge’s work, of which he is eminently capable.” Bolton, whose diary recorded this, had faith in Bertrand’s abilities as the final reviewer of the text. Further, he was pleased that Bertrand was not only an experienced writer in French and English, but also one who (unlike Wilhelm and Auge) firmly believed in the veracity of the book and so would render it more effectively.

The frustrations of the project were creating tension between Bolton and Taylor. On 20 July 1851, Bolton, who only a few months before had prayed that “the Lord preserve and bless [Taylor] most abundantly,” let loose a tirade against him in his diary, complaining that Taylor intended to have his name put as sole translator:

I received a letter from Elder Taylor, very uncourteous, very unjust, very ungentlemanly, untrue and very undeserved on my part and for which he will be sorry some day or other. God knows . . . that the translation of the Book of Mormon into French is literally, emphatically, truly, and essentially my own work. 95 out of 100 of the words are my own, yes, I may say 99. . . . He wants his name to be put as translator of the Book of Mormon into French, tho he has never had anything to do with it at all, except to raise part of the money for its publication, and left me to get the rest which I have done (850 francs). I write this, being determined that these facts shall be on my journal for the benefit of my posterity.

This entry sheds interesting light on the frustrations of working with less than optimal resources and capabilities. It seemed clear to Taylor that, because he had been placed in charge of the translation and had gathered funding for it, his name would appear on the title page. It was not uncommon at the time for leaders to assume credit for work they had delegated to others. Bolton, who spent his days struggling through the grammar word by word, thought it preposterous that someone who did not speak French should be credited with the translation. Taylor’s
frequent absence from France likely complicated the situation. Notably, Bolton’s claim that 99 percent of the words were his own was made before Bertrand began assisting.

Although Bertrand had volunteered to help out in early July, it was another two months before he actually began revising the translation. For the following two and a half months he spent his evenings editing the work generated by Bolton, Wilhelm, and Auge. On 18 November 1851 Bertrand suddenly was able to dedicate more time to the project when Cabet returned to Paris and fired him. This dismissal accomplished several things: it helped extricate Bertrand from his political involvement, which may have saved his life; it proved a major boon to the progress of the Book of Mormon translation; and it elated Curtis Bolton, who desperately wanted help from somebody who knew what he was doing.

Mr. Auge came at 10, Bro Bertrand came in a few minutes after and said with tears in his eyes that Cabet had turned him out of his office and that he was without resources. My joy was extreme, for I knew that as long as he remained in that Newspaper Office (Communist) [the] government would be enimical [inimical] to us. But he looked only on the dark side of the picture and saw nothing but starvation staring him in the face. I then went to Mr. Auge and told him the circumstances, & that it would be my wish to let Elder Bertrand finish the Book of Mormon. He instantly saw the propriety of it, and bid me adieu for a while with strong expressions of lasting esteme [sic] and friendship. This affair is glorious for the Church as it removes Bro Bertrand from his present political associations and from politics of which he is full full. And now as he will devote his whole time to the church his mind will naturally [be] drawn towards the things of God.

Bertrand began helping Bolton full-time on the translation the next morning, and after the day’s work an impressed Bolton recorded: “I hope his ardor will continue. He is an elegant writer.”

Great political unrest still prevailed in Paris. With the advent of a second Napoleon to the throne, political leaders of opposing parties—even those who had supported the revolution—were hunted, imprisoned, and exiled. Church members worked under constant scrutiny from the French government, which suspected virtually any kind of independently organized social, political, or religious movement or activity as potentially treasonous. As Napoleon’s term neared its end, his hunger for power increased, and when “the Assembly declined to consider an extension of his term beyond the four years for which he had been elected, he prepared a military coup d’état. The date chosen was December 2, 1851, anniversary of the great Napoleon’s coronation and of his victory at Austerlitz.” For Louis Bertrand, who had become persona non grata in Paris, the possibilities were terrifying. On the Tuesday of the coup d’état—one year and one day after Bertrand’s baptism—there were riots in the streets, and news reached Bolton that many of Bertrand’s friends had been captured, thrown into prison, and even executed. “There was danger for Bro Bertrand. . . . On account of his safety we concluded to leave Paris for a day or two, which we did at 4 Oclock. Fighting had commenced in Paris. The streets are full of dismal looking faces.” They returned two days later and, despite continued fighting in the street, translated for the entire day.

The unrest also led to immediate changes in the leadership of the mission. Among the ideas published by John Taylor in France was the notion that the kingdom of God, as established by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, would subdue all other political entities, a doctrine not received well by the transitioning government. When Taylor was ordered to leave the country, he simply changed his address, but the ruse was soon discovered. He was in hiding by the time he reorganized the mission presidency on 20 December 1851, with Bolton as president and Bertrand, now a high priest, as counselor and president of the Paris conference. A few days later, Taylor sought refuge from the police at a new convert’s house in the middle of the night. The member found passage for him early the next morning, then stalled government officials until Taylor’s ship was safely out of port.

The translation was nearing completion at the time of Taylor’s departure and the mission’s reorganization. Printer Marc Ducloux began setting type for the Book of Mormon on 13 January 1852, and 1,000 copies of the book were finished by the 22nd, with Paris still in a tumult. Two weeks after the book went to press, Bolton recorded:
A Commissary of the police called today accompanied by two agents of police to inquire about what Elder Bertrand was doing—Elder B was terribly frightened. This very morning I had coax ed and councilled[sic] Elder B to write to this very same Commissary to say that he was no longer a political but a religious man. He acted accordingly, but the commissary had not yet received the letter. I spoke boldly and fearlessly to the commissary so much so that he was astonished, not being accustomed to it. I told him Cabet had turned Elder B away because he was opposed to him in politics. At one time the man confounded asked me if I was at home. I told him yes all the time. 31

By the month of March, Paris, Le Havre, and one-third of France had been put under martial law, effecting a season of constant fear for Bertrand. 32 Fortunately, church leaders replaced Bolton as mission president and reassigned Bertrand to the refugee island of Jersey, where he taught the gospel to a former compatriot from the 1848 revolution, the author Victor Hugo. There Bertrand continued work on church literature, including a complete translation of the Doctrine and Covenants, which was sent to the Liverpool office and never seen again. 33 After living in Brigham Young’s home in Utah for a few years, Bertrand returned to France as president of the mission until it was closed in 1864.

Properly crediting the 1852 French translation of the Book of Mormon remains a problem. Bolton’s journal tirade suggests that Taylor intended to have his name listed alone, despite the fact that he “knew practically no French and actually performed no translation on the book.” 34 Taylor’s biography, on the other hand, admits that he was “greatly assisted by the patient labors of Elder Curtis E. Bolton, Brother Louis Bertrand and several highly educated gentlemen whom he baptized in Paris, but whose names unfortunately cannot be obtained.” 35 The Encyclopedia of Mormonism cleanly asserts that John Taylor “supervised” translation by Bolton. 36 None of the sources contemporary to the translation claim that Taylor ever translated, suggesting rather that he spent his time in administrative functions, traveling back and forth to England, and raising money for the publication. Essentially, he viewed Bolton and the three native French speakers as “ghost-translators” and himself as the producer or sponsor. The title page of the 1852 Book of Mormon (and subsequent editions) is thus something of a compromise:

TRADUIT DE L’ANGLAIS PAR JOHN TAYLOR ET CURTIS E. BOLTON 37

Bolton’s name may have been added after Taylor fled France and Bolton took over leadership of the mission. Given Bolton’s strong feelings on the subject, it comes as a surprise that Taylor’s name remained in the credit line. The book went to press a month after Taylor was forced to leave the country.

Curtis Bolton doubtless contributed the most time to the effort. He maintained that the brunt of the work was his own, but this assertion was made before Bertrand became involved in the project. Before that time, the only other men to perform translation work appear to have been Wilhelm and Auge. Wilhelm worked for three months before being excommunicated, and Auge spoke no English—according to Bolton, he was there merely to argue the French. Louis Bertrand, a seasoned editor, was the only person on the project who was fluent in English and French. He likely accomplished more during his two and a half months of part-time revis ing and three months of full-time translating than...
Bolton had been able to do while working sporadically on the project since June 1850. However, given the time Bolton had already put into the translation before Bertrand started, much of Bertrand’s work was likely reworking what was already a substantial document. Bertrand simply wrote, “I contributed considerably.” One scholar says the following of Bertrand’s involvement:

Bertrand proved to be an invaluable aid with the Book of Mormon, and continued his help until it was finished. Indeed, in later years he related that it was he who had translated almost all of the Book of Mormon into French. He felt that those who were not Mormons who had worked on it had not put its true spirit into the translation, and Curtis Bolton’s knowledge of the French language was not perfect enough to give a meaningful translation. He, therefore, felt that he had been obliged to redo the portion that had been translated as well as the remainder, and thus, in effect, he had done almost all of it.4

In sum, as mission president for all but the last month before the book was published, John Taylor had charge over the project, collecting funds for it while delegating the translation to those who spoke French. Bolton spent the most time on the translation and oversaw the tedious work of hammering through the book word by word. He was assisted by Wilhelm, Auge, and Bertrand—the first left the church mid-project, the second was a nonmember who spoke no English, and the third was precisely whom Bolton had wanted (and needed) all along.

Significantly, all subsequent editions of the French Book of Mormon have been based on this original work despite the fact that those involved had no precedents or models to follow. “The stereotype plates of the Book of Mormon in French were sent immediately after the [first] printing was accomplished, Feb. 2, 1852 by Ducloux from Paris to Liverpool, England, where they remained until the second printing . . . took place.” Sometime after Bolton left France in 1852, the book was published a second time, without changes. In 1907, 10,000 copies of the second edition were printed, with “extensive revisions, chapter divisions, new versing, and footnotes having been added by James Barker and Joseph Evans.” By 1952 the book had been completely revised by Roger Dock, but the title page still credited Taylor and Bolton with the translation. Dock updated the book again in 1962. It appears that by the time of the 1989 printing the church had ceased the practice of crediting translations.4

When Bolton began translating in June 1850, the Book of Mormon had never been published in a language other than English. In light of the political, cultural, and even social impediments in France at the time, it is no small wonder that this team of five men, each with different ideals and interests, was able to produce a translation that has endured for so many years. This they did while devoting time and energy to such things as opening a mission, learning French, joining the church, securing food and lodging, and avoiding government persecution. Sometimes God uses small and simple things to further his work; this time everything was small but not very simple.
1. Because spreading the message of the restored gospel in France required French scriptures, and because the translation process required believers who were fluent in French and English, the opening of missionary work in France and the translation of the Book of Mormon into French were codependent. This explains why the project of translating the Book of Mormon was so daunting—without French members, church leaders couldn’t translate; without a French Book of Mormon, they couldn’t convert. Curtis Bolton was assigned to translate because of his experience with the language, which actually amounted to his having “lived in France for a short time” (Gary Ray Chard, “A History of the French Mission of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints: 1850–1960” [master’s thesis, Utah State University, 1965], 6).

2. Although the Danish translation of the Book of Mormon, published in 1851, has also persisted, the French translation is the only one of the four foreign-language editions published in 1852 that is still used. The German translation was retranslated in 1980, the Italian translation was retranslated in 1964, and the Welsh translation is out of print.

3. See the Latter-day Saints’ Millennial Star, 1 December 1847, 359–360 (hereafter Millennial Star).


5. Louis A. Bertrand, Mémoires d’un Mormon, trans. Gaston Chappuis, Family and Church History Department Archives, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (hereafter LDS Church Archives), 2.

6. The Icarians were French immigrants who tried to establish a communal society in Texas in 1847 and 1848. The experiment failed, resulting in Cabet’s emergency trip to New Orleans in 1849, when he authorized an advance party to arrange for a temporary move to Nauvoo. The party purchased Temple Square in Nauvoo, along with several nearby homes.

7. The church’s International Genealogical Index shows an unidentified event relating to one Louis Alphonse Bertrand at Saint Helier, Jersey, Channel Islands, dated 3 July 1848—possibly the birth of a son or even Bertrand’s marriage. Because ordinances were performed in behalf of...
Bertrand's wife under the name Mrs. J. E. Flandin, not Mrs. L. A. Bertrand, he may have altered his name after he was married or, if not, used his real name for his wedding.

8. Letter to Brigham Young, 23 August 1859, LDS Church Archives.


10. Diary of Curtis E. Bolton, 14 November 1855, LDS Church Archives (hereafter "Bolton diary").


12. See Bolton diary, 27 February 1851.

13. See ibid., 22 March 1851.

14. Bertrand's memoirs record that he began translating the Book of Mormon the day after his baptism; however, his statement is not consistent with information in Bolton's diary, which was kept daily. It appears that Bolton required full-time assistance on the translation, which Bertrand was unable to provide until he lost his job at the newspaper. In the meantime, he worked on various tracts casually while Wilhelm and Auge assisted Bolton.

15. Millennial Star, 1 April 1851.

16. Supervisor might be a better term for Taylor's position than editor. Some sources say that Bertrand "established" this paper, though there is scant evidence for it. The first 10 issues were published in Paris and the last two in Liverpool (see Encyclopedia of Latter-day Saint History, ed. Arnold K. Gurt et al. [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2006], s.v. "L.Étoile," 657).

17. A first poem appeared under the name "A. Bertrand" and the second under "L. Bertrand," while "L. A. Bertrand" authored a third poem and the article. This may be evidence that he had not yet completely settled into his new name.


19. Aside from the three poems published in Étoile, Bertrand had at least one more, "Les Prairies," published on the island of Jersey. A copy and translation are in the collection of Thomas L. Kane (whom Bertrand later befriended) in BYU Special Collections.

20. Bolton diary, 1 November 1851. Within the collection of Charles Savage's papers, owned by Scott Christensen, is a hymn of French hymns, which may have been the hymnal translated by Bertrand.

21. Ibid., 7 July 1851.

22. Millennial Star, 1 April 1851.


24. Two reasons suggest themselves for Caber's behavior. He may have found that the flavor of his periodical had become unpalatable during his absence, given Bertrand's political attitude changes (Bolon later suggested this to the police when they come looking for Bertrand). Alternatively, Bertrand's association with the Mormon Church may have upset Caber, considering his own troubles in Nauvoo (where the church was headquartered a few years earlier).

25. Bolton diary, 18 November 1851.

26. Ibid., 19 November 1851.

27. This scrutiny was not altogether unwarranted in light of sermons John Taylor preached regarding the imminent political dominance of the kingdom of God.


29. Bolton diary, 2 December 1851.

30. "Despite resistance and bloodshed in Paris and some of the larger towns, the French nation ratified the president's stroke by an overwhelming plebiscite. In 1852 the Second Republic gave place to the Second Empire" (Ferguson and Bruun, Survey of European Civilization Survey, 715). It was under a government headed by this self-aggrandizing nephew of the first Napoleon that all of Bertrand's subsequent missionary activities took place, including a monumental petition to preach the gospel publicly, which Napoleon reportedly tore to pieces, laughing.


34. Ibid., 136.

35. B. H. Roberts, The Life of John Taylor, Third President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1963), 228. The other "gentlemen" referred to were Wilhelm and Auge.


37. "Translated from English by John Taylor and Curtis E. Bolton."

38. Letter to Erastus Snow, 17 June 1855, LDS Church Archives.

39. Chard, "History of the French Mission," 15–16. This source cites a letter to George A. Smith dated 16 March 1865. There is no evidence that Bertrand and Bolton ever quibbled over who deserved the credit, as with Taylor and Bolton.

40. Jacobs, Mormon Non-English Scriptures, 136.B.

41. Ibid., 137.B. Some have speculated that this printing came as late as 1861–62, which would have occurred under Bertrand's leadership.

42. Ibid., 138.B.

43. See ibid., 138.B–149.B.