1-1-2014

The Book of Mormon Translation Puzzle

Roger Terry

The Book of Mormon Translation Puzzle

Roger Terry

Review of Brant A. Gardner. *The Gift and Power: Translating the Book of Mormon.* Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2011.

Emerging approaches to academic study of the Book of Mormon, especially in the context of the secular discipline of Mormon studies, pay less and less attention to the actual process by which the book was produced. Such scholars worry that these kinds of questions leave academic study behind to trespass on the territory of faith, and they rightly recognize that much remains to be learned about what the Book of Mormon says and how it has been and might yet be received, regardless of questions concerning its authenticity. In the meantime, however, the academically inclined among believing Latter-day Saints must continue to wrestle with the process by which the English text of the Book of Mormon was produced. Any in-depth study of the book is bound to unearth questions that demand some sort of reasonable explanation for someone who confesses the book's historicity. Many such questions inevitably lead to inquiries about the process of translation. Indeed, it is almost impossible for believers to separate the content of this book from the process by which it was produced because belief in the content is dependent on the validity of its origins.

Brant Gardner has taken these questions seriously and has written an impressive volume that attempts to account for much of the seemingly contradictory evidence swirling around this cornerstone of the Latter-day Saint faith. First and foremost, let me say that I can

wholeheartedly recommend this book to anyone interested in thinking carefully, from the perspective of a believer, about how the Book of Mormon found its way into English. The book (and my review of it) will most naturally appeal to believing Latter-day Saints troubled by apparent nineteenth-century features of the Book of Mormon. Gardner writes as a believer in the book's divine origin. His study may also be of interest to nonbelievers, however, since it concedes that anachronisms populate the Book of Mormon even as it defends the ancient historicity of the book. The breadth of Gardner's research is remarkable, and he even handedly deals with most of the troubling incongruities both within and surrounding the book. *The Gift and Power* is a thorough introduction to the Book of Mormon translation conundrum. Along with such praise, however, let me confess that I disagree with Gardner's ultimate conclusions regarding the translation process. Of course, that does not negate the value of what he has attempted.

The more I study the Book of Mormon, the more I come to view it as a million-piece jigsaw puzzle. Many people are working on this puzzle, and some have assembled small corners of it that suggest the contours of the larger picture; however, so far nobody has put the whole thing together, and some of the pieces have obviously been placed in the wrong position. Some of the pieces haven't even been looked at yet. But anyone who wants to work on the translation puzzle ought to at least be aware of and account for the following:

- the presence of grammatical errors in the translated text
- second- and thirdhand accounts of the translation from scribes and observers who report that Joseph Smith used a seer stone to read text with his face buried in a hat
- Joseph correcting the scribe's spelling while looking in the hat
- historical anachronisms in the text
- whole chapters of text repeated almost verbatim from the King James Version of the Bible (KJV), despite the fact that witnesses, including Emma, insisted that Joseph never referred to outside sources

- specific terms and quotations from Protestant clergy and publications
- Royal Skousen's numerous discoveries from a quarter century of studying the original and printer's manuscripts, as well as various printed editions
- claims regarding the presence of Hebraisms in the English translation
- intertextual quotations
- modern vocabulary and idioms
- inconsistent usage of second-person pronouns and third-person verb conjugations
- a vocabulary apparently far beyond Joseph's at that point in his life (an unlettered young man who, according to his wife, could not even pronounce names such as Sarah)
- complex sentence and textual structures in a dictated document
- New Testament–influenced text

Accounting for *all* these items and more has eluded every translation theorist to some degree. Some of these puzzle pieces do not seem to fit together. But the more we learn, the more accurate the connections, and sooner or later we may get enough of the pieces in place to have a clearer view of this magnificent and perplexing book and its translation process. So I welcome Gardner's efforts. Even where I disagree with his conclusions, his analysis helps illuminate important points and raises new questions.

Surprisingly, Gardner spends the first twelve chapters—132 pages—of his book examining Joseph Smith's experience with folk magic and establishing how a village seer was transformed into a prophetic seer. Joseph's use of seer stones is of course relevant to the translation process, but this portion of the book seemed excessive. Others have addressed Joseph's involvement in folk magic, and much of what Gardner discusses could have been significantly shortened.

In part 2 of the book, "What Kind of Translation Is the Book of Mormon?," Gardner hits his stride. After a helpful chapter on what it means to translate, he reviews theories of Book of Mormon translation, including early inerrant theories and B. H. Roberts's less-than-inerrant scheme. He then briefly introduces Royal Skousen's impressive work. Skousen proposes three possibilities for how the Book of Mormon may have been translated: loose control (in which ideas were revealed to Joseph Smith, who then had to put them into his own language), tight control (in which Joseph saw specific words in English and read them to a scribe), and ironclad control (in which the interpreters—later called the Urim and Thummim—would not allow any error, even in spelling common words). Skousen's textual analysis easily dispatches the third possibility since spelling errors and inconsistencies abound in the hand-written manuscripts. But he also refutes the loose-control theory, leaving him with no other alternative than tight control.

While Gardner agrees with Skousen on tight control over the spelling of names and accounting for the presence of apparent Hebraisms in the English text, he does not find Skousen's framework useful in evaluating the translation itself. Skousen's idea of tight control "refers to the transmission of the text from Joseph to Oliver, not from the plate text to English" (p. 155). Gardner suggests a different three-option framework for analyzing the translation: literalist equivalence, functional equivalence, and conceptual equivalence. A literal equivalence would be a word-for-word translation, a practical impossibility given the vagaries of language, so Gardner uses the term *literalist,* meaning a rendering of the text in the target language that "closely adheres to the vocabulary and structure of the source language" (p. 156). Skousen's tight control is roughly synonymous with Gardner's literalist equivalence. Conceptual equivalence falls on the other end of the translation continuum. It preserves meaning without regard to specific grammatical structures or vocabulary. Functional equivalence falls between the extremes; it adheres "to the organization and structures of the original but is more flexible in the vocabulary" and allows "the target language to use words

that are not direct equivalents of the source words, but which attempt to preserve the intent of the source text" (p. 156).

Gardner first presents evidence supporting a literalist equivalence, much of it from Skousen's work, and he agrees that the evidence does support a literalist equivalence in some regards. But he argues that a functional equivalence better explains the larger part of the translation. Significantly, though, Gardner bases a fair portion of his evidence for functional equivalence (roughly a third of this chapter) on an assumption that is far from settled—namely, a Mesoamerican setting for the book. He asserts that Book of Mormon references to asses, lions, goats, sheep, harrowing, chaff, vessels with sails, land ownership, a monetized economy, debts, and swords had to originate in Joseph Smith's time and culture because they did not exist in Mesoamerica. However, the Mesoamerican geographical model is far from proven and does not always harmonize with the Book of Mormon text.[1] So it should be acknowledged that although there may be no archaeological evidence for lions or goats in ancient Mesoamerica, there is no evidence for Nephites or Lamanites either.

Gardner provides another support for functional or conceptual equivalence—the obvious influence of the King James Version on the text. Words such as *jot* and *tittle* (3 Nephi 1:25) come directly from the KJV, not from the Nephite language. A *tittle*, for instance, "is a visual coding for vowels [in Hebrew], a system developed after Lehi and his family left Jerusalem" (p. 193). These terms and others cannot be accounted for by a literalist equivalence. They must, therefore, represent expressions from Joseph's cultural environment that replace whatever

---

1. Several Book of Mormon geography models have been proposed: Mesoamerica (with a handful of possible locations), Yucatan, the "Heartland" theory, Baja California, South America, a two-continent model including all of North and South America, the Great Lakes region, and even the Malay Peninsula. Each of these models has obvious weaknesses when viewed in concert with what the Book of Mormon text actually describes. Proponents of the various models have adequately highlighted the drawbacks of competing theories. Obviously, if the Mesoamerican model (in any of its specific locations) or one of the other models answered all the questions presented by the scriptural text, there would be consensus on where the Book of Mormon history actually occurred.

Nephite idioms Mormon actually used. I will suggest another explanation later in this essay, but let me first use the presence of KJV language in the Book of Mormon as a jumping-off point for discussing Gardner's rather complex theory on how the Book of Mormon was translated.

The presence of long chapters in the Book of Mormon that contain King James language with a few notable and fascinating deviations poses a serious obstacle for anyone trying to reconcile this evidence with the testimony of Emma Smith and others that Joseph did not consult any other book or manuscript (including the Bible) while translating. Since it is obvious that whoever was translating the text had direct access to a printed King James Bible, this obstacle leaves only two possible explanations: either Joseph was receiving the translation word for word, as Skousen has concluded, or he was somehow able to reproduce from memory or from his subconscious mind a very close replica of certain KJV chapters. In his attempt to deal with this obstacle and many other pieces of the translation puzzle, Gardner devises a rather complicated and, ultimately, unsatisfying explanation based on biology, psychology, and revelation.

In a nutshell, Gardner's theory involves accepting the accounts that indicate Joseph was reading English text through the seer stone buried in the crown of his hat. But most of that English text did not come from an outside source. It came from Joseph's own brain. "Vision," Gardner explains, "happens in the brain. Additionally, the brain does not passively see; it creates vision" (p. 265). So, although the ideas behind the text originated from a divine source, the English text itself did not. Gardner borrows the term *mentalese* from Steven Pinker to describe "the language of thought . . . , or the prelanguage of the brain" (p. 274). So Joseph received through revelation the content of the Book of Mormon in this form of prelanguage thought. It was then converted in Joseph's brain into an approximation of King James English, the religious idiom of his day. And Joseph's brain produced what he then "saw" with his eyes. In this way, Joseph was not a passive reader but an active participant in the translation process. Much like an ordinary translator who understands the source language and culture and must render a close approximation of a particular text in the target language, Joseph

understood at a subconscious level the Nephite language and culture (through revelation) and then had to find English words to express those prelanguage ideas.

Gardner does, however, add two caveats to this theory. The Book of Mormon translation, he claims, was not entirely a product of functional equivalence. Certain pieces of the translation—names in particular—represented literalist equivalence, and at least two elements of the translation denoted conceptual equivalence. These were the connecting text in Words of Mormon 1:9–18 and Martin Harris's visit to Charles Anthon as reflected in 2 Nephi 27:15–20. Gardner considers these and perhaps other sections of text "prophetic expansion" of the plate text.

As indicated earlier, I find several problems with this elaborate theory. Let me briefly discuss four.

First, Joseph's ability to craft (or dictate) an extensive and intricate English document was rather limited. According to Gardner's theory, Joseph was receiving ideas that he had to formulate in coherent English sentences. But Joseph's formal language abilities at this point in his life were limited. According to his wife, Emma, he could not even pronounce names like Sarah and had to spell them out.[2] According to Gardner's theory, "As the generation of language moved from Joseph's subconscious to his conscious awareness, it accessed Joseph's available vocabulary and grammar" (p. 308). I would argue, however, that the vocabulary of the Book of Mormon was far beyond Joseph's "available vocabulary" in 1829. Consider the following list of words that appear in the Book of Mormon, most of which do not appear in the Bible: *abhorrence, abridgment, affrighted, anxiety, arraigned, breastwork, cimeters, commencement, condescension, consignation, delightsome, depravity, derangement, discernible, disposition, distinguished, embassy, encompassed, enumerated, frenzied, hinderment, ignominious, impenetrable, iniquitous, insensibility, interposition, loftiness, management, nothingness, overbearance, petition, priestcraft, probationary, proclamation, provocation, regulation, relinquished,*

---

2. "Emma Smith Bidamon, as interviewed by Edmund C. Briggs (1856)," in *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations, 1820–1844,* ed. John W. Welch and Erick B. Carlson (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005), 129.

repugnant, scantiness, serviceable, stratagem, typifying, unquenchable, and *unwearyingness.* I find it unlikely that Joseph would be able to conjure up this level of vocabulary and use these words correctly in context as he dictated the Book of Mormon.

Second, the Book of Mormon's sentence structure is quite complex, with long, convoluted sentences that sometimes employ multiple layers of parenthetical statements and relative clauses (see, for instance, 3 Nephi 5:14). Putting mentalese into concrete language at this level of complexity would have exceeded the capabilities of a young man whose wife claimed he "could neither write nor dictate a coherent and well-worded letter; let alone dictating a book like the Book of Mormon."[3] Consider the fact that Joseph dictated an *unpunctuated* text, and this task stretches far beyond his ability to convert prelanguage concepts into the lengthy and layered sentence structure of the Book of Mormon. Without the guidance of punctuation to separate embedded clauses, this feat would have been mind-boggling. The Book of Mormon translation was not an on-the-fly translation. In many ways it exhibits the hallmarks of a text someone labored over with abundant support texts at hand (such as a dictionary, thesaurus, the King James Bible, and perhaps some Protestant writings).

Third, according to Emma, "When my husband was translating the Book of Mormon, I wrote a part of it, as he dictated each sentence, word for word, and when he came to proper names he could not pronounce, or long words, he spelled them out."[4] Other witnesses, including Oliver Cowdery, indicated that if the scribe misspelled a word, Joseph would correct it.[5] Gardner agrees that the translation was a literalist equivalence in the case of proper names and perhaps long words that Joseph was unacquainted with but insists that the bulk of the translation represented functional equivalence. But this makes the process rather

---

3. "Emma Smith Bidamon, as interviewed by Joseph Smith III (1879)," in *Opening the Heavens,* 131.

4. "Emma Smith Bidamon, as interviewed by Edmund C. Briggs (1856)," in *Opening the Heavens,* 129.

5. See, for instance, "Oliver Cowdery, as Interviewed by Samuel Whitney Richards (1907)," in *Opening the Heavens,* 144.

chaotic. If Joseph was receiving exact spelling for proper names and some longer words but not for the rest of the text, that means he was receiving exact revelation for parts of sentences but having to come up with text to express revealed ideas for the remainder of those sentences.

The spelling itself is also problematic. Anyone who has read documents handwritten by Joseph knows he struggled with spelling throughout his life. If his brain was responsible for the English text he was reading to his scribes, the very idea of Joseph correcting anyone's spelling based on words his mind was producing is implausible.

Fourth, Joseph would have been incapable of reconstructing whole chapters of the KJV from memory, even if assisted by some form of revealed mentalese. Joseph was so famously unacquainted with the Bible that he was unaware Jerusalem had walls;[6] it is therefore untenable that he could have reproduced many difficult chapters of Isaiah from memory and with significant alteration, often involving words that were italicized in the KJV. Gardner admits this is a problem for his theory: "Although the alterations associated with italicized words suggest that Joseph was working with a visual text, the chapter breaks [which were different in the Book of Mormon than in the KJV] tell us that he was not seeing the KJV with its current chapter divisions. Therefore what Joseph saw may have reproduced the page with the italics, but did not reproduce the chapter divisions. It is at this point that we invoke the divine" (p. 306). In other words, at times the "divine" revealed the basic idea of the text in mentalese; at other times, exact wording was revealed. This explanation is far from satisfactory.

When examined carefully, Gardner's proposed translation methodology does not hold up well. It becomes far too complex an operation, with too many pieces of the puzzle seemingly out of place. There may be simpler explanations.

So how was the Book of Mormon translated? Royal Skousen looks at this question through the lens of control—loose, tight, or ironclad.

---

6. "Emma Smith Bidamon, as interviewed by Edmund C. Briggs (1856)," and "Emma Smith Bidamon, as interviewed by Nels Madsen and Parley P. Pratt Jr. (1877)," in *Opening the Heavens,* 129–30.

Gardner chooses a different lens, equivalence, which yields three differ-ent possibilities: literalist, functional, and conceptual. Elsewhere, I have proposed a different lens that may shed some light on this question.[7] I see three different types of possible translation for the Book of Mormon. It was either a human translation, a divine translation, or a machine trans-lation. By machine translation, I mean that the "interpreters" [Urim and Thummim or seer stone] were some sort of heavenly translation device that automatically converted text from the source language to the target language, similar to our computer translation programs but obviously more advanced. When we view the Book of Mormon through this lens, it becomes obvious that the translation is not a machine translation. Even our crude computer translation programs would never make the sort of random errors in second-person pronoun and third-person verb conjugation usage that we find in the Book of Mormon. Nor is it a divine translation. I agree with B. H. Roberts that "to assign responsibility for errors in language to a divine instrumentality, which amounts to assign-ing such error to God . . . is unthinkable, not to say blasphemous."[8] That means the Book of Mormon must be a human translation, albeit one aided by divine inspiration. But who, then, was the translator? The bulk of the evidence, in my view, does not point to Joseph Smith. He was the human conduit through which the translation was delivered, but the translation doesn't appear to be his. Gardner quotes Skousen on this point: "These new findings argue that Joseph Smith was not the author of the English-language translation of the Book of Mormon. Not only was the text revealed to him word for word, but the words themselves sometimes had meanings that he and his scribes would not have known, which occasionally led to a misinterpretation. The Book of Mormon is not a 19th-century text, nor is it Joseph Smith's. The English-language

---

7. Roger Terry, "Archaic Pronouns and Verbs in the Book of Mormon: What In-consistent Usage Tells Us about Translation Theories," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 47/3 (2014): 59–63.

8. B. H. Roberts, "Book of Mormon Translation: Interesting Correspondence on the Subject of the Manual Theory," *Improvement Era*, July 1906, 706–13.

text was revealed through him, but it was not precisely in his language or ours" (p. 164).[9]

So, in whose language was it written? I want to conclude with a speculative suggestion about an answer that, while it could never satisfy nonbelievers, might satisfy believing readers attempting to complete the translation puzzle. Interestingly, Gardner briefly mentions the same speculative suggestion, which I find more convincing than his own theory. He cites a paper written by LDS member Carl T. Cox, who proposes Moroni as being responsible for the English-language translation.[10] (Gardner quickly dismisses this possibility and moves on to other topics.) After conducting an editorial examination of the Book of Mormon and looking at a good deal of other evidence, I independently came to a conclusion similar to Cox's. I find that the Moroni-as-translator theory explains many of the difficult problems regarding the translation of the Book of Mormon that other theories struggle with, and there may be something quintessentially Mormon about imagining an angel wrestling with the concrete situation of learning a foreign language and struggling to express ideas in that language.[11] Of course, this model may also fall short, but it may also fit together a few more pieces of the puzzle, as Gardner's theory has done.

Roger Terry is the editorial director at BYU Studies, where he has worked since 2006. Before that, he was a senior editor for the *Ensign* and the *Liahona.* He is the author of a variety of fiction and nonfiction publications—books, short stories, essays, scholarly articles, editorials, and book reviews.

---

9. Royal Skousen, "The Archaic Vocabulary of the Book of Mormon," *Insights* 25/5 (2005): 2.

10. Carl T. Cox, "The Mission of Moroni," in three parts on Cox's website. The relevant text is primarily in part 3, found at http://www.oscox.org/stuff/bom3.html.

11. For a more extensive discussion of this theory, see Terry, "Archaic Pronouns and Verbs," 53–80.