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# Through a Glass Darkly: Trying to Understand the Scriptures

Royal Skousen

## INTRODUCTION

In 1965, while on my mission in Finland, I came across a most interesting book in the personal library of one of the missionaries. I was very impressed by the scholarly approach that this book took in discussing the early history of the Christian church. I borrowed that book and spent many enjoyable hours reading it. Later, after my mission, I tried to get a copy of the book for my own library, but discovered that by that time this book was unfortunately out of print. A few years later, when I was teaching at the University of Texas, I decided to use this book for an institute class on the history of the primitive church, but the book was still out of print. I phoned Sam Weller's in Salt Lake City and was able to get an early version of this book: from 1952 through 1954 this book had served as the Melchizedek Priesthood manual for the Church. So I now had a bound copy of the three original priesthood manuals, but I still did not have the version I really wanted. Finally, in 1984, this book was reprinted—so now I am the proud owner of a book that has played an important part in my gospel education. The book, of course, is James L. Barker's *Apostasy from the Divine Church*.<sup>1</sup>

It is for me, then, a great honor to be named the James L. Barker Lecturer in Language and Linguistics for 1985–86. This evening I would like to honor James L. Barker for his valuable contribution to gospel scholarship. Rather than talking about probabilistic and stochastic linguistics—a subject of great interest to you all—I have instead decided to give a talk on a gospel subject, but from a linguistic point of view. In other words, I hope to give a talk that would represent the spirit of James L. Barker's gospel writing—namely, scholarship in defense of the kingdom.

I have decided to speak tonight about a number of passages from the scriptures that have caused misunderstanding and confusion.

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In each of these passages the source of the difficulty has been the language of the passage itself. Sometimes archaic words or changes in word meaning cause misunderstanding. Other times incorrect translations and even misprints can cause problems. Much of our confusion over these passages can be resolved when we seek to determine what the words in the scriptures originally meant. By dealing with such semantic difficulties, we will find that our understanding of the scriptures will be greatly enhanced.<sup>2</sup>

#### OBSOLETE WORDS

In this first section of my paper I would like to deal with the problem of obsolete words in the scriptures. The King James Version of the Bible dates from 1611 and many of the words used in that version are now archaic and basically indecipherable to the ordinary reader.

Consider, as a first example, the word *mete*: “and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again” (Matt. 7:2, King James Version [hereafter cited as KJV]). The Greek word here is *metreite*, meaning simply ‘you measure’. In other words, “with what measure you measure, it will be measured to you.” The word *mete* has essentially dropped out of the English language, although there is occasionally a literary use of it, as in the phrase “to mete out punishment.”<sup>3</sup>

Another example is the word *privily*: “Then Herod, when he had privily called the wise men, enquired of them diligently what time the star appeared” (Matt. 2:7, KJV). The Greek word in this case is *lathrai*, which means ‘secretly’. We still have a few relics of the word *privy* in English: the euphemistic *privy* for an outhouse (also a euphemism); the Privy Council in England; and the idea of “being privy to some information.” But the adverbial form *privily* is completely gone, and an ordinary reader might therefore miss the sneakiness of Herod’s methods.

As a final example of this type in the New Testament, consider the word *manger*: “And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn” (Luke 2:7, KJV). There really is no common modern use of the word *manger* except in the nativity scene. The English word *manger* was borrowed from French and is related to the French verb *manger*, meaning ‘to eat’. Essentially, a manger is a feeding trough for animals.

It should be noted, however, that there are other, more general meanings that may be given to *phatnē*, the original Greek word that underlies *manger*. Like *manger*, *phatnē* is based on a verb meaning

‘to eat’ (namely, *pateomai*<sup>4</sup>). But in addition to the meaning ‘manger’ for *phatnē*, there are two other possibilities: ‘stall’ and ‘stable’. Consider, for instance, the use of *phatnē* in Luke 13:15, where any of the three meanings could be possible: “Doth not each one of you on the sabbath loose his ox or his ass from the stall [*apo tēs phatnēs*], and lead him away to watering?” (KJV). It is not difficult to see that the word for the feeding trough itself could be generalized to refer to the place where the animal would feed from the trough. In fact, given the context of Luke 2:7, especially the last phrase in the verse, it probably makes better sense to translate the verse so that she “laid him in a stable because there was no place for them in the inn.” The intended contrast in this verse seems to be between a place for keeping animals—a stable—and a place for humans to spend the night—an inn.<sup>5</sup> This is further supported by the context of verse 12, in which the angel would most reasonably tell the shepherds to look for the baby in a stable. Thus I would translate the angel’s message as: “You will find the baby wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a stable.”

Finally, let us turn to an example from the Doctrine and Covenants: “reproving betimes with sharpness, when moved upon by the Holy Ghost; and then showing forth afterwards an increase of love” (D&C 121:43). The ordinary reader probably interprets *betimes* to mean ‘at times’ (that is, ‘occasionally’ or ‘sometimes’), but originally *betimes* meant ‘early’, ‘immediately’, or ‘in good time’.<sup>6</sup> For instance, in Genesis 26:31 we have the meaning ‘early’: “And they rose up betimes in the morning” (KJV). In the following line from Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice* we have the meaning ‘immediately’ or ‘speedily’: “Let me say ‘Amen’ betimes, lest the Devil cross my prayer.”<sup>7</sup> Finally, in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *Marble Faun* (published in 1860), we have the meaning ‘in good time’ or ‘before it is too late’: “It is wise, therefore, to come back betimes, or never.”<sup>8</sup> But today hardly anyone knows the word *betimes*, thus readers readily misread D&C 121:43. Given the context of this verse, it seems best to interpret *betimes* as meaning ‘promptly’.

#### CHANGES IN MEANING

I would now like to consider some passages in which the confusion may be more serious. Very often a word will change in meaning, with the result that the ordinary reader, unless warned, will almost always interpret the word according to its current meaning and thus make serious errors in interpretation.

Consider, for instance, the word *virtue* in Mark 5:30 (or Luke 8:46): “And Jesus, immediately knowing in himself that virtue had gone

out of him, turned him about in the press, and said, Who touched my clothes?" (KJV). The modern reader tends to be quite confused by this passage—did Jesus lose some of his moral goodness when the woman touched his clothes in order to be healed? In Greek the word corresponding to *virtue* is *dynamis*, which means 'power' or 'strength'—in fact, the same word serves as the basis for the technical terms *dynamo* and *dynamite*. In the early 1600s, when the King James Version of the Bible was published, *virtue* also had this meaning. Originally, the word came from the Latin *virtus*, meaning 'manliness' or 'valor', and was based on the Latin root *vir* 'man'. Over time the meaning of *virtue* has greatly varied, changing from 'manliness' to 'warlike power', to 'strength', to 'any noble quality', and finally to 'any moral quality', in particular, 'chastity'.<sup>9</sup> Thus today we can speak of a woman's virtue, an etymological impossibility.

Fortunately for Latter-day Saint readers, there is a footnote in the recent LDS publication of the King James Version that explains the meaning of *virtue* in this verse. In addition, I would like to draw your attention to an interesting comment Joseph Smith made in 1843 on the meaning of this word:

Elder Jedediah M. Grant enquired of me the cause of my turning pale and losing strength last night while blessing children. I told him that I saw that Lucifer would exert his influence to destroy the children that I was blessing, and I strove with all the faith and spirit that I had to seal upon them a blessing that would secure their lives upon the earth; and so much virtue went out of me into the children, that I became weak, from which I have not yet recovered; and I referred to the case of the woman touching the hem of the garment of Jesus. The virtue here referred to is the spirit of life; and a man who exercises great faith in administering to the sick, blessing little children, or confirming, is liable to become weakened.<sup>10</sup>

Another example involving semantic change is the word *closet*: "But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret" (Matt. 6:6, KJV). The modern reader readily interprets *closet* as meaning a walk-in enclosure for storing clothes and unsightly items, yet no one seriously thinks (I hope) that prayers must be offered in the closet and with the door shut. The Greek word here for *closet* is *tameion* and refers to an inner or private room in a house. In fact, this was the normal meaning of *closet* during the early 1600s as well,<sup>11</sup> but today the meaning of the word has been greatly restricted. The intended emphasis in this passage is on private prayer, in contrast to the public prayers of others (compare the preceding verse, Matt. 6:5).

In John 14:2 we find the well-known statement, "In my Father's house are many mansions" (KJV). To the modern reader it is somewhat

strange for a house to contain even one mansion. Moreover, the word *mansion* implies a large imposing residence, an obvious reward for righteous living. Yet in the original Greek there is no sense of magnificence; the Greek word *monē* simply means ‘a place to reside or stay’, without the implication of extravagance. In fact, at the time the King James Version was translated, the common meaning of *mansion* was simply a dwelling place. In particular, *mansion* was used to refer to separate apartments or lodgings in a large house.<sup>12</sup> Thus many have translated this passage as: “In my Father’s house are many rooms.”

One final example of misleading words in the King James Version is the word *meat*, as in Paul’s first letter to Timothy (4:1–3): “In the latter times some shall depart from the faith, . . . forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from meats” (KJV). Now this is not a reference to meat (that is, the flesh of animals), but instead is a more general reference to different kinds of food. (The original Greek here is a plural form of *brōma*, which means ‘food’.) To readers of the seventeenth century, *meat* of course meant ‘food’ and *flesh* was used to refer to beef, pork, and sometimes poultry (but not fish).<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Paul’s use of this word *brōma* in 1 Corinthians 3:2 can also mislead the modern reader: “I have fed you with milk, and not with meat” (KJV). Here Paul is comparing the new members of the Church with their limited gospel understanding to infants who have not yet matured enough to eat solid food and can therefore only be fed milk.

Now let us turn to a couple of examples from the Doctrine and Covenants. First, consider the use of the word *only* in that part of the Word of Wisdom that deals with eating meat: “Yea, flesh also of beasts and of the fowls of the air, I, the Lord, have ordained for the use of man with thanksgiving; nevertheless they are to be used sparingly; and it is pleasing unto me that they should not be used, only in times of winter, or of cold, or famine” (D&C 89:12–13, 1921 and 1981 editions). In editions prior to 1921, the comma before *only* was missing: “And it is pleasing unto me that they should not be used only in times of winter, or of cold, or famine” (1879 edition). A reader might interpret this as meaning that meat could be used at any time, not only in times of winter, cold, or famine.

Of course, the real problem here is in the meaning of *only*. In the last century the word *only* very often had the meaning ‘except’. For example, the Oxford English Dictionary quotes a use of *only* that undoubtedly means ‘except’: “For many years the following notice was painted up at Bolton railway station: ‘Do not cross the line only by the bridge.’ ”<sup>14</sup> Clearly, this is the appropriate sense of *only* in this verse from section 89. James E. Talmage put the comma in the 1921

edition, but not in order to change the meaning of *only*. Instead, the meaning of *only* had changed and the comma was put in so that the modern reader could read the verse and still get out its original meaning. A similar difficulty with *only* occurs in my patriarchal blessing, given by William R. Sloan in 1957: “Counsel with your dear parents, and they shall never direct you only in paths of righteousness and truth” —and without a comma! As a youth I thought the word *never* was a mistake, and I was tempted to cross it out. But I was wrong. Now when I read my blessing, I mentally replace *only* with *except*.

Another example that leads to a misunderstanding in our scriptures is the word *translate*, as in the eighth Article of Faith: “We believe the Bible to be the word of God as far as it is translated correctly.” The ordinary reader tends to interpret this as meaning that the only errors in the text of the Bible are the result of trying to translate the original languages into another language. Of course, there are many other errors besides translation errors in the biblical text. We can, however, make better sense of the word *translate* in this Article of Faith when we consider Joseph Smith’s use of this word. We should first note that the word *translate* is ultimately derived from the Latin *transfere* and literally means ‘to carry across’.<sup>15</sup> Language translation was originally viewed as a “carrying across” since in older manuscript practice the original language was often put in one column and the translation was put beside it in a parallel column.<sup>16</sup> In addition, there are other meanings of the word *translate* that show its older meaning of ‘to carry across’; for instance, we talk about the city of Enoch or various prophets being translated.

In fact, Joseph Smith’s use of the word *translate* seems to agree with the original, more general meaning of this word. In referring to the translation of a text, Joseph Smith very often seemed to be referring to how it had been carried down through time. For instance, the Joseph Smith Translation (more commonly known as the Inspired Version) was not really a translation in our present-day sense of the word, but instead was an attempt to restore through inspiration the original meaning of the biblical text. In fact, Robert J. Matthews has argued that “by using the word *translated* [Joseph Smith] apparently meant to convey the meaning that is generally assigned to the term *transmitted*, for, as the Prophet’s own statements on the matter show, there was more involved in the history of the Bible than mere *translation* of languages.”<sup>17</sup> So the intended sense of the eighth Article of Faith, given Joseph Smith’s usage, is probably, “We believe the Bible to be the word of God as far as it has come down to us correctly.”

## A MISPRINT

We now turn to a different sort of error. In the King James Version we read: “Ye blind guides, which strain at a gnat, and swallow a camel” (Matt. 23:24). The ordinary reader must undoubtedly struggle trying to figure out what it means to “strain at a gnat.” One might even guess that it means to strain one’s eyes while looking at a gnat. The problem here, though, is not the word *strain*, but the little word *at*. This is a printing error that has persisted since the original 1611 publication of the King James Version. The translators intended this passage to read as follows: “Ye blind guides, which strain out a gnat, and swallow a camel.”<sup>18</sup> The Greek word here is *diylizō*, which means ‘to filter out’. Figuratively speaking, the scribes and Pharisees could never tolerate a little gnat in their (or anybody else’s) drink, but a camel could be swallowed whole. Jesus, of course, is referring to the strictness with which these legalistic Jews had interpreted the law, yet their concern for detail did not prevent them from violating the most important commandments in the law.

## TRADITIONAL MISINTERPRETATIONS

Now let us consider a couple of passages that readers have traditionally misinterpreted. The first one comes from Cain’s answer to the Lord’s question of where his brother Abel was: “I know not: Am I my brother’s keeper?” (Gen. 4:9, KJV). It is easy to assume that Cain should have been his brother’s keeper instead of murdering him. But this interpretation misses the snottiness in Cain’s reply: Couldn’t Abel take care of himself? Did he have to have someone look after him? The Hebrew word for *keeper*, *shomer*, refers to a watchman, a guard, or anyone who has charge, care, or oversight of something. Typically, we have keepers of sheep, baggage, wardrobes, altars, doors, houses, gates, city walls; forests, fields, and the king’s women.<sup>19</sup> Although *shomer* does not apply to children,<sup>20</sup> the modern reader might get a better feel for Cain’s answer if we paraphrased it as: “How should I know? Am I my brother’s baby-sitter?”

Another problem verse is in the Sermon on the Mount; the first beatitude reads: “Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5:3, KJV). The phrase “the poor in spirit” is a very literal translation of the Greek *hoi ptōkhoi tōi pneumati*. The English reader tends to interpret “poor in spirit” in terms of the phrase “in poor spirits” —in other words, “blessed are the depressed.” Yet if depression were enough to make the kingdom



of heaven, we would have all probably qualified at some time or other. Originally the word *ptōkhos* 'poor' came from the Greek verb *ptōssō*, which means 'to crouch or cringe'. Since this is a characteristic pose of beggars, the noun form *ptōkhos* means 'beggar'<sup>21</sup> and the corresponding adjective has the meaning 'reduced to beggary' and by extension 'extremely poor or destitute'. Normally beggars beg for physical necessities, so the phrase *tōi pneumati* 'in spirit' is added to distinguish these spiritual beggars from normal ones. Thus those who beg for spiritual necessities will be rewarded with the kingdom of heaven, a spiritual reward.

#### ALTERNATIVE TRANSLATIONS

I would next like to consider an example where an alternative translation is possible. In Revelation, chapters 1 through 3, the Lord tells John to write various messages to the "angels" of seven churches in Asia Minor. For example, at the beginning of chapter 2, the Lord tells John to write to "the angel of the church of Ephesus" (v. 1, KJV). In Greek the word *angelos* means 'a messenger' and is used in several different ways in the New Testament. It can refer to a human messenger, sent by God or man; a supernatural messenger from God; a guardian angel; or an evil spirit (that is, one of Satan's angels):

Behold, I send *my messenger* [*ton angelon mou*] before thy face.  
(Mark 1:2, KJV)

And when *the messengers* [*tōn angelōn*] of John were departed . . .  
(Luke 7:24, KJV)

And the angel answering said unto [Zacharias], I am Gabriel, that stand in the presence of God. (Luke 1:19, KJV)

Then said they, It is [Peter's] angel. (Acts 12:15, KJV)

Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels. (Matt. 25:41, KJV)

Now in the first three chapters of Revelation, two possibilities exist. Either the seven angels are envoys from the seven churches or they are angels of God. There has been a lot of discussion on this subject,<sup>22</sup> and most translate *angelos* in these chapters as "angel." Nonetheless, it seems very reasonable that the seven angels could be human messengers representing the seven churches, sent to bring back a message from the last surviving Apostle. In fact, it is worth noting that in these passages Joseph Smith (in the Inspired Version) changed "angel" to "servant," indicating his belief that the "angels" were actually Church members.

## MISTRANSLATIONS

In the final section of this paper, let us consider examples where the King James Version gives an incorrect translation. Consider, first, the decision of the King James translators to use “sit (at meat)” in those places where the Greek verb means “recline (at meal).” For example, in John 13:12 we have: “So after he had washed their feet, and had taken his garments, and was set down again, he said unto them . . . ” (KJV). This passage gives the reader the impression that at the Last Supper Jesus and his Apostles were sitting, but the custom at the time of the Savior was to recline while eating. For instance, Gardner and Jevons describe the Greek dinner party from classical times as follows:

As soon as [the guests] arrived the attendants removed their shoes and washed their feet, and they took their places on the couches in accordance with the directions of their host. In historic times the position at meals was a reclining one, though sitting had been usual in the heroic ages. It was customary to lie on the left side, and to support the left elbow with a cushion: thus the right hand remained free to deal with the food.<sup>23</sup>

Gardner and Jevons also add that “two persons on each couch seems to have been the usual number.”<sup>24</sup>

There is a theory of translation that insists that not only words, but also cultural practices should be translated for the reader. Since we no longer recline while eating, this approach requires us to translate “recline” as “sitting down to eat.” But such a translation can lead to ridiculous consequences. Consider, for example, what happens later on in chapter 13 of John: “Now there was leaning *on Jesus’ bosom* [*en tōi kolpōi tou Iēsou*] one of his disciples, whom Jesus loved” (v. 23, KJV, italics added), and, “He then lying *on Jesus’ breast* [*epi to stēthos tou Iēsou*] saith unto him, Lord, who is it?” (v. 25, KJV, italics added). Now if Jesus is sitting, it will be quite difficult and extremely awkward for John the Beloved to lay his head on Jesus’ chest. So if the translator insists on translating “recline” as “sit,” then the translator should probably have John lay his head on Jesus’ shoulder (even though John uses *kolpos* ‘bosom, breast, or chest’ and *stēthos* ‘chest or breast’ to describe where he laid his head, but never *ōmos* ‘shoulder’).

An even more difficult situation occurs in Luke chapter 7 when Jesus’ feet were anointed: “And, behold, a woman in the city, which was a sinner, when she knew that Jesus sat at meat in the Pharisee’s house, brought an alabaster box of ointment, and stood at his feet behind him weeping, and began to wash his feet with tears, and did wipe them with the hairs of her head, and kissed his feet, and anointed them with the ointment” (vv. 37–38, KJV). This would be

especially ridiculous if Jesus is sitting in a chair and the woman is standing behind him—she'd have to bend down and crawl under the chair to anoint his feet. We could have him sitting in a kneeling position so that she might stand behind him and anoint the soles of his feet. But all this is unnecessary. If Jesus is lying on his side, according to the custom of his time, then she can readily approach him from behind and anoint his feet.

The next example of a mistranslation occurs in Matthew's account of the Resurrection: "In the end of the sabbath, as it began to dawn toward the first day of the week, came Mary Magdalene and the other Mary to see the sepulchre" (Matt. 28:1, KJV). The problem with this verse is the translation of the initial phrase *opse de sabbatōn*. Originally, the Greek word *opse* meant 'late'. This led the King James translators to translate this phrase as "in the end of the sabbath." The problem with this translation is that for the Jews the new day began at sunset, not at dawn. (This is implied, for example, in John 19:31, 42.) We now know from later Greek manuscripts that *opse*, by extension, came to also mean 'after'.<sup>25</sup> In other words, Matthew is simply stating that the women came early in the morning, on the day after the Sabbath. It is of some help that the new LDS printing of the King James Bible has a footnote explaining that the Greek here means "after the Sabbath."

This passage has, however, led to another sort of confusion. In the Greek text of this verse there are actually two occurrences of the word *sabbaton*. The first occurrence is translated as 'sabbath', but the second is translated as 'week':

<i>opse de</i>	<i>sabbatōn</i>	<i>tēi epiphōskousēi</i>	<i>eis</i>
but after	the sabbath	as it was dawning	toward
<i>mian</i>	<i>sabbatōn</i>		
the first (day)	of the week		

Some have objected that the second use of *sabbaton* is incorrectly translated—that *sabbaton* means 'the Sabbath' and should always be translated as such. For instance, in *A Marvelous Work and a Wonder*, LeGrand Richards writes:

This conclusion [that the Christian sabbath was on Sunday] is further sustained by the fact that the first day of the week (Sunday) is called a sabbath eight times in the original Greek Bible. Had the Bible, therefore, been correctly translated, much of the present confusion in this matter would have been eliminated. Why would the first day of the week (Sunday) be called a sabbath in the Bible if it were not a sabbath?<sup>26</sup>

First of all, it should be noted that this explanation incorrectly assumes that the second use of *sabbaton* corresponds to "the first day

of the week.” Actually, there is a separate word in the Greek text for “the first,” namely *mian*. And the word *day* is inferred from the context.

But there is a more serious objection to this argument over the meaning of *sabbaton*: namely, the incorrect assumption that every use of a word must have the same meaning. There is plenty of evidence that the Greek *sabbaton* was used to refer to a period of seven days as well as the Jewish day of rest. One very clear example of the meaning ‘week’ for *sabbaton* is in Luke 18:12: *nēsteuo dis tou sabbatou* “I fast twice in the week” (KJV). It doesn’t sound like much of a fast if we translate this as “I fast two times on the Sabbath.”<sup>27</sup>

Moreover, there is a very good reason for why the Greeks would borrow not only the word *sabbaton* from the Hebrew word *shabbat*, but also the idea of a seven-day period of time: namely, “weeks are not part of the Graeco–Roman calendaric tradition. They are not attested until quite late in Greek or Latin sources.”<sup>28</sup> Nor should it seem strange that *sabbaton* could be extended to refer to a period of seven days. We ourselves use the word *Sunday* to refer to a week, as in the phrase “three Sundays ago.” Moreover, there is some evidence (if the traditional text is correct) that the Hebrews themselves used the Hebrew word *shabbat* in this same extended way.<sup>29</sup>

We should also note that the early Christians clearly distinguished between the Jewish sabbath and the first day of the week. The early Christians referred to Sunday as the Lord’s day (*kyriakē hēmera*, as in Rev. 1:10) since this was the day the Savior was resurrected. “For the earliest Christians [the Lord’s day] was not a substitute for the Sabbath nor a day of rest nor related in any way to the fourth commandment.”<sup>30</sup> In fact, only after several centuries did the Christians begin to consider Sunday as a Christian sabbath.<sup>31</sup>

So in this instance the King James Version correctly translates the phrase *mian sabbatōn* as “the first day of the week.” As far as I know, every other translation of the New Testament translates this phrase in the same way or as simply “Sunday.”

Now we turn to a mistranslation that has caused a good deal of confusion. According to the Gospel of John, the first person to see the resurrected Savior was Mary Magdalene. When she finally recognizes him, Jesus says to her, according to the the King James Version: “Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father” (John 20:17). Now the problem here is twofold: (1) why didn’t Jesus want Mary Magdalene to touch him? and (2) why does Matthew’s account of the Resurrection say Mary Magdalene and the other Mary “came and held him by the feet, and worshipped him” (Matt. 28:9, KJV)?

In *Jesus the Christ* James E. Talmage attempts to deal with these potential contradictions by assuming (without any independent

evidence) that Jesus had to first present himself to his father before any mortal could touch him:

One may wonder why Jesus had forbidden Mary Magdalene to touch Him, and then, so soon after, had permitted other women [?] to hold Him by the feet as they bowed in reverence. . . . To Mary Magdalene Christ had said: "Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father." If the second clause was spoken in explanation of the first, we have to infer that no human hand was to be permitted to touch the Lord's resurrected and immortalized body until after He had presented Himself to the Father. It appears reasonable and probable that between Mary's impulsive attempt to touch the Lord, and the action of the other women [?] who held Him by the feet as they bowed in worshipful reverence, Christ did ascend to the Father, and that later He returned to earth to continue His ministry in the resurrected state.<sup>32</sup>

But all of this attempt to reconcile two differing accounts of the Resurrection is unnecessary. The problem here is the phrase "touch me not." The Greek form of this command is *mē mou haptou*, and the correct translation should be "do not keep on holding me"<sup>33</sup> or "stop touching me"<sup>34</sup> or even "stop clinging to me."<sup>35</sup> In the Greek verbal system there is a distinction between single or instantaneous actions and repetitive or continual actions. In this case the prohibition of the abrupt action is represented by the aorist subjunctive (*mē mou hapsēi* 'don't touch me'), the prohibition of the continual action by the present imperative (*mē mou haptou*). Since the Greek here uses the present tense form, Jesus was telling Mary Magdalene to let go of him. In fact, we might be able to detect a bit of humor in Jesus' response to Mary's embrace—she can't keep holding on to him; he must go see his father.

Interestingly, in the Inspired Version Joseph Smith changed "touch me not" to read "hold me not," thus improving the agreement between John's and Matthew's accounts of the Resurrection.<sup>36</sup>

The next example of a mistranslation comes from Matthew 18:21–22: "Then came Peter to him, and said, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times? Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven" (KJV). We should first note that Jesus' answer essentially means that there is no limit to the number of times we should forgive. But given that, we may ask: What number did Jesus actually say? The phrase "seventy times seven" seems to imply 490 (that is, seventy multiplied by seven). The other possibility is that the number is seventy-seven times and that the King James translators put the *times* in the wrong place.

In order to answer this question, let us first consider how Greek mathematicians expressed multiplication. Normally, multiplication is represented by using the verb *pollaplasiazō* 'to multiply'.<sup>37</sup> It often

appears with the preposition *epi* ‘by’, as in *pollaplasiasōmen epi ta* [y] ‘we multiply by y.’<sup>38</sup> Sometimes the common verb *poieō* ‘to do or make’ is used with *epi*: *poiēson ta* [x] *epi ta* [y] ‘multiply x by y.’<sup>39</sup> And occasionally this is simplified to [x] *epi* [y] ‘x by y.’<sup>40</sup> If we want to say that some object is x times bigger than another object, then we add the adjectival suffix *-plasios* ‘-fold’ to the number x; for example, *tetraplasios tou megistou kyklou* ‘four times the greatest circle’.<sup>41</sup>

On the other hand, the adverbial suffix *-kis* (or *-ki*) is used whenever some action is to be performed a certain number of times. For instance, consider the following mathematical statement from Theon of Alexandria (flourished A.D. 379–95):

<i>epeita</i> then	<i>palin</i> again	<i>apheilomen</i> we subtract	<i>ta</i>	[12] twelve
<i>prōta heksēkosta</i> minutes (literally, ‘first sixtieths’)		<i>triakontaki</i> thirty times	<i>kai</i> and	<i>tris</i> three

In other words, “next we subtract twelve minutes thirty-three times.”<sup>42</sup>

Note first of all how “thirty-three times” is represented: the adverbial suffix *-ki*, meaning ‘times’, is added after the first number (thirty), then after the intervening “and” the second number (three) follows, but without the suffix *-ki*. Also note that the adverbial phrase comes at the end of the clause. It tells us how many times to subtract twelve minutes. In fact, this kind of adverbial use of *times* is the origin of the *times* phrase in English as well as in Greek. From a historical point of view, when we say “subtract three times five,” we really mean “subtract five three times.” In English, as in Greek, the adverbial *times* phrase can also stand right after the verb. In such a case, the expression “subtract three times five” is readily interpreted as the verb “subtract” followed by the direct object “three times five.” From this stage it is easy to use the noun phrase “three times five” in subject position, as in the expression “three times five equals fifteen.”<sup>43</sup>

Now let us look at the Greek text underlying Matthew 18:22:

<i>ou</i> not	<i>legō</i> I say	<i>soi</i> to you	<i>heōs</i> until	<i>heptakis</i> seven times	<i>alla</i> but
<i>heōs</i> until	<i>hebdomēkontakis</i> seventy times	<i>hepta</i> seven			

The form *hebdomēkontakis hepta* is precisely how to represent seventy-seven times in Greek. It is true that the Greek mathematicians would have normally inserted the conjunction *kai* ‘and’ between the

two numbers (*hebdomēkontakis kai hepta*), but this would not be necessary. Nor is such variation surprising: in English, for example, we can say “one hundred thirty” or “one hundred and thirty.” Most of the time New Testament writers do not insert *kai* between compound numbers.<sup>44</sup> So it is not surprising that Matthew has *hebdomēkontakis hepta* without *kai*.

Moreover, if Jesus had actually meant to say 490 times, then the Greek would have to be changed to read “seventy times seven times” (that is, *hebdomēkontakis heptakis*). This would mean something like “seventy is the number of times you should forgive your brother seven times,” a very strange expression. There is one—but only one—Greek manuscript that actually has this construction; namely, Theodore Beza’s Codex D—and only the original hand.<sup>45</sup> This manuscript is notorious for its idiosyncratic and extensive alteration of the gospel text,<sup>46</sup> and when its reading stands alone, as here, this manuscript is nearly always unreliable. It appears that this manuscript represents an attempt to force the reading 490 times and thus the second *-kis* was added. In any event, the rest of the Greek manuscript evidence uniformly supports the reading “seventy-seven times.”

In addition to the linguistic evidence, there is also a clear biblical allusion that favors the reading “seventy-seven times.” In Genesis 4:15 the Lord says: “Whosoever slayeth Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold” (KJV). Later on in the chapter, when Lamech kills Irad for having revealed their secret combination (see Moses 5:49–50), Lamech says: “If Cain shall be avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy and sevenfold” (Gen. 4:24, KJV). Now the story of Cain and Lamech is one of revenge—if Cain’s vengeance was only seven times, then Lamech’s will be that much worse, seventy-seven times. Jesus thus draws upon this comparison from the Old Testament, but applies it to forgiveness, the opposite of revenge.<sup>47</sup>

Moreover, the Hebrew text of Genesis 4:24 must be translated as seventy-seven times. In the Hebrew phrase *shiv'im wəshiv'a* ‘seventy-seven’ (literally, “seventy and seven”), there is no corresponding word for *times* (or *-fold*) that could be used to get out 490. And in the Septuagint this phrase is translated as *hebdomēkontakis hepta*, the exact same way as it is in Matthew 18:22.

When multiplication is used in the Hebrew Old Testament, it is expressed adverbially by using the Hebrew word *pə'amim* ‘times’.<sup>48</sup> In Leviticus 25:8 we have a definite case of multiplication: “And thou shalt number seven sabbaths of years unto thee, *seven times seven years*; and the space of the seven sabbaths of years shall be unto thee forty and nine years” (KJV). But the word

order for the phrase “seven times seven years” is different in the Hebrew text:

<i>sheva'</i>	<i>shanim</i>	<i>sheva'</i>	<i>pə'amim</i>
seven	years	seven	times

The Hebrew word order clearly shows the adverbial use of “seven times.” Moreover, the Septuagint has the exact same word order for this phrase:

<i>hepta</i>	<i>etē</i>	<i>heptakis</i>
seven	years	seven times

Finally, if one must translate *hebdomēkontakis hepta* as 490, then why not translate 2 Corinthians 11:24 in the same way: “Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one” (KJV). In the Greek the word order for the numerical expression in this verse is precisely the same as in Matthew 18:22:

<i>hypo</i>	<i>Ioudaiōn</i>	<i>pentakis</i>	<i>tesserakonta</i>
from	the Jews	five times	forty (stripes)
<i>para</i>	<i>mian</i>	<i>elabon</i>	
less	one	I received	

Did Paul receive thirty-nine stripes on five different occasions or did he get 199 lashes all at once? On independent grounds, we know that the Jews were forbidden to give more than forty lashes (Deut. 25:1–3). Moreover, the custom was to give thirty-nine lashes to avoid exceeding the limit.<sup>49</sup>

The evidence then is overwhelmingly in favor of translating Jesus’ answer as “seventy-seven times.” What is surprising is how most recent translators continue to translate this phrase as “seventy times seven” when it doesn’t even deserve a marginal reading. It seems as if most translators keep looking over each other’s shoulders.

My last example comes from John 5:39–40: “Search the scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of me. And ye will not come to me, that ye might have life” (KJV). In the Greek text the word corresponding to “search” is *eraunate*. Taken by itself this form can be either the present imperative (“search!”) or the present indicative (“you search”). Older translations characteristically chose the imperative sense for this form, probably because the imperative makes such a handy admonition for scripture reading. Yet the imperative causes problems. First of all, it makes the reader think that the following clause explains why we should read the scriptures—namely, in the scriptures there is eternal life. But if this is right, then why did Jesus add the phrase “ye think” if he only meant to say, “Search the scriptures, for



in them ye have eternal life.’’ In fact, the Greek word for ‘‘ye think,’’ *dokeite*, implies that their belief may be wrong. Very often the verb *dokeō* is used in the sense of ‘to suppose incorrectly’, as in Luke 24:36–37: ‘‘And as they thus spake, Jesus himself stood in the midst of them, and saith unto them, Peace be unto you. But they were terrified and affrighted, and *supposed* [*edokoun*] that they had seen a spirit’’ (KJV, italics added). Another problem with the imperative choice is that it would have made no sense to tell the learned Jews to read the scriptures; they read them night and day.

But if we choose the present indicative for *eraunate*, everything makes sense. Essentially, Jesus told them: ‘‘You read the scriptures (continually), for you suppose that in them you have eternal life, yet the scriptures testify concerning me, but you do not want to come to me to have life.’’ In other words, eternal life is in Jesus Christ and nowhere else. If these Jews would read the scriptures with an open heart, they would be led to Christ. They read the scriptures, yet they were blind. Consider Jesus’ final words to them at the end of the same chapter: ‘‘Do not think that I will accuse you to the Father: there is one that accuseth you, even Moses, in whom ye trust. For had ye believed Moses, ye would have believed me: for he wrote of me. But if ye believe not his writings, how shall ye believe my words?’’ (John 5:45–47, KJV). The scriptures should bring us to Christ, not keep us away. But the scriptures themselves do not guarantee salvation—only when we read them in the right spirit will they lead us to Christ.

#### CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper has been to show the advantages of a linguistic study of the scriptures. In reading the scriptures we seek to understand the text in its original setting. We attempt to interpret the words according to the meanings they had when the scriptures were originally written or translated. Of course, such an approach is not a panacea—some scriptures will never be understood through human effort alone. An inspired reading always helps. Nevertheless, a linguistic approach can often help us understand difficult passages. Most importantly, it may make us more cautious about our initial interpretations of scripture. Ultimately, an approach based on inspiration and knowledge will increase our love of the scriptures, for they will make better sense.

Yet we will never obtain a perfect knowledge of the scriptures in this life. But we do have Paul’s promise that someday we will understand all:

For we know in part  
 and we prophesy in part,  
 but when perfection comes,  
 then imperfection will cease.  
 For now we see but a dim reflection,  
 but then we shall see him face to face.  
 Now I know in part,  
 but then I shall know in full,  
 even as I now am known by him.  
 (1 Cor. 13:9–10, 12, author's translation)

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### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>James L. Barker, *Apostasy from the Divine Church* (1960; reprint, Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1984).

<sup>2</sup>I wish to thank Thomas MacKay and Stephen Ricks for earlier readings of this paper and, in particular, for their comments on the Greek and Hebrew examples.

<sup>3</sup>*Oxford English Dictionary*, compact ed. (hereafter cited as *OED*), s.v. “mete.”

<sup>4</sup>Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Lexicon Abridged from Liddell and Scott's Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1871), 536, 752.

<sup>5</sup>Walter Bauer et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 854.

<sup>6</sup>*OED*, s.v. “betimes.”

<sup>7</sup>William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, act 3, sc. 1, line 22.

<sup>8</sup>Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Marble Faun or the Romance of Monte Beni*, pt. 2, chap. 25, in *Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne*, 10 vols. (New York: Bigelow, Brown, and Co., 1923), 9:456.

<sup>9</sup>*OED*, s.v. “virtue.”

<sup>10</sup>Joseph Smith, Jr., *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2d ed. rev., 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1946–50), 5:303.

<sup>11</sup>*OED*, s.v. “closet.”

<sup>12</sup>*OED*, s.v. “mansion.”

<sup>13</sup>*OED*, s.v. “flesh” and “meat.”

<sup>14</sup>*OED*, s.v. “only.”

<sup>15</sup>*OED*, s.v. “translate.”

<sup>16</sup>For an example, see Bruce M. Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*, 2d ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 49 and plate 5.

<sup>17</sup>Robert J. Matthews, *Joseph Smith's Translation of the Bible: A History and Commentary* (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1975), 7; also see 233–37.

- <sup>18</sup>Edgar J. Goodspeed, *Problems of New Testament Translation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1945), 38–39.
- <sup>19</sup>See *shamar* in George Wigram, *The Englishman's Hebrew and Chaldee Concordance of the Old Testament*, 5th ed., 2 vols. (London: Samuel Bagster and Sons, 1890), 1300–1302.
- <sup>20</sup>Keepers of children are “nurses”: either the root *y-n-q* ‘to suck’ or the root ‘-*m-n* ‘to bring up or nurture’ is used—see 2 Kgs. 11:2 and 2 Sam. 4:4.
- <sup>21</sup>Liddell and Scott, *A Lexicon*, 616.
- <sup>22</sup>Homer Hailey, *Revelation: An Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1979), 115–16.
- <sup>23</sup>Percy Gardner and Frank Byron Jevons, *A Manual of Greek Antiquities*, 2d ed. (London: Charles Griffin, 1898), 329–30.
- <sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, 330.
- <sup>25</sup>Goodspeed, *Problems*, 43–45; Bauer et al., *Greek-English Lexicon*, 601.
- <sup>26</sup>LeGrand Richards, *A Marvelous Work and a Wonder*, rev. and enl. ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1976), 336.
- <sup>27</sup>For additional discussion concerning this verse, see Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to S. Luke* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1896), 417–18.
- <sup>28</sup>Alan E. Samuel, *Greek and Roman Chronology: Calendars and Years in Classical Antiquity* (Munich: C. H. Beck'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1972), 18.
- <sup>29</sup>See Lev. 23:15; Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), 992.
- <sup>30</sup>Richard J. Bauckham, “The Lord's Day,” in *From Sabbath to Lord's Day: A Biblical, Historical, and Theological Investigation*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1982), 240.
- <sup>31</sup>Richard J. Bauckham, “Sabbath and Sunday in the Post-Apostolic Church,” in *From Sabbath to Lord's Day: A Biblical, Historical, and Theological Investigation*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1982), 284–85.
- <sup>32</sup>James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1962), 682.
- <sup>33</sup>Jack P. Lewis, *The English Bible from KJV to NIV: A History and Evaluation* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1982), 46.
- <sup>34</sup>Nigel Turner, *Syntax*, vol. 3 of *A Grammar of New Testament Greek* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1963), 76.
- <sup>35</sup>Bauer et al., *Greek-English Lexicon*, 102.
- <sup>36</sup>Robert J. Matthews, on the other hand, suggests other reasons for why Joseph Smith changed this phrase to “hold me not”: “[There is] a question as to what is actually meant by the passage—whether it is saying, ‘Do not embrace me,’ or ‘Do not detain me.’ The context suggests the former, for Mary was overjoyed to see her dead Master raised to life again and was apparently about to throw her arms around him. Therefore the words *Hold me not* are preferable, because *touch* would not be expressive enough for the intensity of the occasion” (Matthews, *Joseph Smith's Translation*, 186–87).
- <sup>37</sup>Ivor Thomas, *Selections Illustrating the History of Greek Mathematics*, 2 vols. (London: William Heinemann, 1951), 1:70–71.
- <sup>38</sup>*Ibid.* 1:52–53.
- <sup>39</sup>*Ibid.* 1:62–63.
- <sup>40</sup>*Ibid.* 1:47–48.
- <sup>41</sup>*Ibid.* 2:112–13.
- <sup>42</sup>*Ibid.* 1:49, 52–53.
- <sup>43</sup>For Greek examples of this last usage, see *ibid.* 1:115–19.
- <sup>44</sup>James Hope Moulton and Wilbert Francis Howard, *Accidence and Word-Formation*, vol. 2 of *A Grammar of New Testament Greek* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1956), 172.
- <sup>45</sup>Turner, *Syntax*, 187–88.
- <sup>46</sup>Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament*, 49–51.
- <sup>47</sup>James Hope Moulton, *Prolegomena*, vol. 1 of *A Grammar of New Testament Greek*, 3d ed. (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1908), 98.
- <sup>48</sup>The literal meaning of *pə'amin* is ‘strokes’ or ‘beats’.
- <sup>49</sup>Flavius Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, trans. H. St. J. Thackeray, 4 bks. (London: William Heinemann, 1930), bk. 4, vv. 238, 248; Makkoth 3:10, in vol. 4 of *Mishnayoth*, ed. Philip Blackman, 7 vols. (London: Mishna Press, 1951–56).