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# Five Impulses of the Joseph Smith Translation of Mark and Their Implications for LDS Hermeneutics

*Julie M. Smith*

WHEN JOSEPH SMITH PRODUCED a new translation of the Bible, he did not work from ancient texts but rather claimed inspiration as his source. The result of his efforts is now known as the Joseph Smith Translation (JST).<sup>1</sup> Only about one-third of the verses that the JST changed are included in the LDS edition of the King James Version (KJV);<sup>2</sup> Robert J. Matthews describes the criteria used to determine what was included: “It was anything that was doctrinal, anything that was necessary in the Old Testament to help us understand the New Testament, anything that bore witness of Christ, anything that bore witness of the Restoration. . . .

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1. Joseph Smith and his contemporaries normally referred to this project as the New Translation. When excerpts of it were added to the LDS edition of the Bible in the late twentieth century, it required a new moniker (since “NT” was already in use as the abbreviation for the New Testament), so it became known as the Joseph Smith Translation. Because this term is now in wide use, it is used in this paper despite the anachronism. Note that this paper always uses the KJV versification—not the JST versification, which sometimes differs. (The JST did change verse numbers, but that system is no longer in use. Where the JST versification differs from the KJV, it reflects a system adopted by the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints [now known as the Community of Christ]. Since it is not original to the text and since it can create confusion, I have not used it here despite the fact that it is used in the LDS Bible.)

2. See Thomas E. Sherry and W. Jeffrey Marsh, “Precious Truths Restored: Joseph Smith Translation Changes Not Included in Our Bible,” *Religious Educator* 5/2 (2004): 61.

Also anything that clarified the role of the tribe of Joseph . . . paramount to the work of the Lord in the last days; . . . there was one other item, and that is anything that was clarified in the JST which no other scripture would clarify.”<sup>3</sup> Thus the JST verses that appear in the LDS edition of the KJV are not a representative sample of the JST. This paper examines five underappreciated aspects of the JST of the Gospel of Mark and considers them as potential trajectories for LDS biblical interpretation. Currently, there is great debate but no consensus regarding LDS hermeneutics. I suggest that these impulses of the JST could be treated as an interpretive framework that would be useful for LDS New Testament scholars. I’ll also briefly explore how I am attempting to engage these impulses in my own approach to the Gospel of Mark for the BYU New Testament Commentary (hereafter BYUNTC).<sup>4</sup>

## 1. The impulse to amplify Mark’s unique tendencies

Scholars have identified a harmonizing impulse to the JST;<sup>5</sup> while this tendency does exist in JST Mark,<sup>6</sup> there is simultaneously a deharmonizing

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3. Quoted in Fred E. Woods, “The Latter-day Saint Edition of the King James Bible,” in *The King James Bible and the Restoration*, ed. Kent P. Jackson (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, in cooperation with Deseret Book, 2011).

4. The hermeneutical approach of the BYUNTC received extensive discussion in the 2014 volume of *Studies in the Bible and Antiquity*. This article is, in part, a response to that roundtable, particularly its criticisms of the approach of the BYUNTC.

5. While it is beyond the scope of this paper, the harmonizing impulse deserves more nuanced consideration. Most interpreters of the Bible—at least until very recently—have read Mark through the perspectives of Matthew and Luke, but sometimes the JST reads Matthew or Luke through the lens of Mark. (For example, JST Matthew 9:18 changes “dead” to “dying” and thus conforms Matthew’s account to Mark’s.) Analyzing the JST’s harmonizing tendency in terms of which gospel is prioritized requires more examination; it may even have interesting implications for the synoptic problem.

6. This harmonizing impulse is evident in both style and content. For example, JST Mark harmonizes Mark’s style by changing the historical present tense to the past tense in over two dozen instances, a tendency also found in Matthew and, particularly, in Luke. One instance where the content is harmonized is the shift in JST Mark from a “young man” at the tomb to “angels” (see Mark 16:5–6).

impulse<sup>7</sup> since the JST extends some of Mark's unique tendencies. One of the most distinguishing features of Mark is the portrayal of the disciples: they frequently make mistakes, experience inappropriate emotions, say foolish things, and thus merit rebuke from Jesus.<sup>8</sup> The JST amplifies this portrait of the disciples in over a dozen instances:

1. In the report of the disciples' ministry, the JST changes "healed them" to "they were healed"<sup>9</sup> (see Mark 6:13). This shifts the credit for the healing away from the disciples and to, presumably, God (via the use of the divine passive).
2. By changing "and" to "as if he" in Mark 6:48, the JST intimates that Jesus was not intending to pass by the disciples as he walked on the water, but rather that the disciples misunderstood Jesus's intentions.
3. To the comment that Peter, James, and John accompanied Jesus up the Mount of Transfiguration, the JST adds that they "asked him many questions concerning his saying" (see Mark 9:2), which implies their lack of understanding.
4. The JST adds "with great astonishment" to the disciples' response to the transfiguration (see Mark 9:8), adding emotion and likely heightening the impression of the disciples' lack of understanding.
5. The JST adds "being afraid" to explain the disciples' silence when Jesus asks what they were disputing about (see Mark

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7. The JST's preservation of each gospel writer's voice has been discussed by Robert Millet and Robert J. Matthews. See Robert L. Millet, "The JST and the Synoptic Gospels: Literary Style," in *The Joseph Smith Translation: The Restoration of Plain and Precious Things*, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Robert L. Millet (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1985), 147–62. See also Robert J. Matthews, "A Plain Translation": *Joseph Smith's Translation of the Bible, a History and Commentary* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1975), 239.

8. See, for example, Mark 4:10–13; 6:52; and 8:14–18, 32–33.

9. All JST citations in this article are from Thomas A. Wayment, *The Complete Joseph Smith Translation of the New Testament: A Side-by-Side Comparison with the King James Version* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2012).

- 9:34). This makes the disciples look even more timid than in Mark's text.
6. After Jesus says in Mark, "But many that are first shall be last; and the last first," the JST adds "this [Jesus] said, rebuking Peter" (see Mark 10:31–32). Now that Jesus's statement is labeled a rebuke of Peter, the fact that the JST also changed "many that are first" to "many *who make themselves* first" (emphasis added) becomes more evidence of the disciples' flaws since it implies that Peter had made himself first—not that he was made first by Jesus.
  7. Mark 11:13 describes Jesus looking for figs; the JST adds "and as [the disciples] supposed" to suggest that the disciples thought Jesus was looking for figs when Jesus was doing something else. Once again, they do not understand Jesus.
  8. In JST Mark 14:29, Peter's denial is changed from "yet will not I" to "yet I will never be offended." This heightening of the language means that Peter's boast is all the more misguided.
  9. To the scene in Gethsemane the JST adds that the disciples "complain[ed] in their hearts, wondering if this be the Messiah" (see Mark 14:32). By registering a complaint with doubt about Jesus's identity, this addition is a very strong example of showing the weakness and lack of understanding of the disciples.
  10. Also to the Gethsemane scene, the JST adds a rebuke of Peter, James, and John.
  11. The JST changes the scene in Gethsemane so that the disciples—not Jesus—are sore amazed and very heavy (see Mark 14:33), emphasizing their outsized emotions.
  12. The JST adds "and they said unto him" to Mark 14:38, which means that not Jesus but the disciples say "the spirit truly is ready but the flesh is weak." This makes it sound not as if Jesus understands their weakness but rather that the disciples are rationalizing it.

13. To the depiction of Peter's denial of Jesus, the JST changes "thought thereon [and] he wept" to "went out, and fell upon his face, and wept bitterly" (see Mark 14:72), expanding on the picture of Peter's emotionality.

Thus, Mark's portrait of the disciples is maintained and amplified. In all of these instances, the portrayal of the disciples in JST Mark is decidedly less positive than it is in Mark. Significantly, the JST did not make changes to the parallel stories in the other gospel accounts to match any of these instances where the disciples are presented as more flawed in Mark.

In addition to the portrayal of the disciples, there are other ways in which the JST extends Mark's distinct material:

1. Use of irony. The JST for Mark 7:9 adds "by the prophets whom ye have rejected" to Jesus's response and thus increases the irony of Jesus's statement.
2. Symbolic use of narrative space. Many scholars believe that Mark gives narrative space symbolic significance;<sup>10</sup> the JST adds "turned away from him" to Mark 14:28 and "went out" to Mark 14:72.
3. Varying responses to Jesus. Mark shows that the common people supported Jesus and it was the religious leadership who were opposed to him; this is made clearer in JST Mark 12:37 (which adds "but the high priest and the elders were offended at him") than it is in Mark.
4. Use of the word "immediately." The word "immediately" (Greek *euthys*) is characteristic of Mark; the JST adds it to 5:17 and 9:8 but not to the synoptic parallels (although it is added elsewhere to Matthew, so the evidence here is somewhat mixed).

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10. See, for example, Elizabeth S. Malbon, *Narrative Space and Mythic Meaning in Mark* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1991).

5. Use of repetition. The addition of “saying” to Mark 9:12 creates a third verb referring to the action of speaking; this kind of duplication is very Markan.
6. Use of provocative questions. The addition of “who art thou?” in JST Mark 12:34 is similar to Mark 3:4; 4:41; and 8:21, 29 and is thus in line with Mark’s penchant for allowing important questions to dangle in the minds of the audience.

The JST preserves or extends each evangelist’s distinct concerns in other instances. For example, the JST adds details about Jesus’s childhood to Matthew (see Matthew 2:22–3:1), despite the fact that Mark’s text might be considered a more likely candidate for additional material on that topic since it has no discussion of Jesus’s childhood. Similarly, the JST adds nine quotations from the Old Testament to Matthew but only one to Mark, which amplifies Matthew’s tendency to include references to the fulfillment of prophecies.<sup>11</sup>

Not only is each of these changes important in its own right, but together they suggest that preserving and enhancing the unique voice of the writers was an important impulse of the JST. It was theoretically possible that Joseph Smith could have followed the harmonizing impulse of much of Christian history and produced just one gospel,<sup>12</sup> yet he not only preserved all four but also enhanced some of the distinct aspects of each writer. This suggests that canonized diversity and multivocality are important. LDS interpreters can follow this impulse by paying careful attention to the narrative boundaries between the four gospel accounts and treating each one as a unique portrait of Jesus. The BYUNTC Mark honors this deharmonizing impulse by taking care to avoid reading the other gospels into Mark, which was written first

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11. The JST also adds five Old Testament allusions to Luke and three to John. See Matthews, *Plainer Translation*, 239–40.

12. The closest the JST comes to collapsing the narratives is with the “little apocalypse” in Matthew 24/Mark 13, which are extremely similar, but even in that case—and despite the incorrect notation in the current LDS scriptures—the text of JST Mark 13 is not identical to JST Matthew 24.

and should therefore be interpreted on its own terms. For example, in John's Gospel, Jesus's temple action is presented as a criticism of those selling merchandise (see John 2:13–17), but it is debatable whether the same is true of Mark's iteration of the story. Similarly, in Mark, it is not clear whether only the twelve accompany Jesus up the mountain before their call or if there is a larger group present; interestingly, Matthew and Luke resolve this ambiguity in different directions.<sup>13</sup> Interpreting Mark requires maintaining the ambiguity. In these and other instances, the BYUNTC attempts to read Mark on its own terms and thus to maintain, as the JST does, the distinct voices of each evangelist.

## 2. The impulse to foreground women

On ten occasions, the JST of Mark either highlights the role of women or makes a passage gender neutral:

1. To the story of the healing of Simon's mother-in-law (see Mark 1:30–31), the JST adds the words "came and" before "ministered unto them." This change initially doesn't seem to add much to the text, but it creates a parallel to Jesus's earlier action, when he "came and took her by the hand." The JST makes a similar change in Mark 14:3–9, which parallels the actions of a woman with Jesus's actions (see number 8 below). Thus the JST emphasizes the woman's ministering role by paralleling it with Jesus's role, a move made in Mark's Gospel but enhanced by the JST. (Note that the JST does not add other instances of ministering, which is therefore still only done by women, angels, and Jesus—never other males—in the JST.)
2. In Mark 8:4, the JST changes the word "men" to "so great a multitude." This makes the passage gender neutral and fits

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13. Compare Mark 3:13–14 with Matthew 10:1–2 and Luke 6:12–13.



with the analysis of the passage, which suggests that, unlike the first feeding miracle, women are present.

3. The word “him” becomes “the child” in JST Mark 9:36, making it possible that the child is female, which makes sense in context since Jesus is emphasizing the low social status of the child. Because the JST also changes “whosoever shall receive one of such children in my name” in verse 37 to “whosoever shall humble himself like one of these children and receiveth me, ye shall receive in my name,” if the child is imagined as female, it is significant that Jesus is inviting the audience to model the child.
4. In Mark 11:32, the JST changes the word “men” to “people,” which implies that there were women who believed that John the Baptist was a prophet and that the religious authorities feared these women.
5. In Mark 13:3, the JST changes the reference to Peter, James, John, and Andrew to “the disciples,” which, in the Markan context, includes women (compare Mark 3:31–35 and Mark 15:41). This change is significant because it means that women are included in the audience for the remainder of Mark 13;<sup>14</sup> these important prophecies were not restricted to a male-only audience and Jesus envisioned women occupying important roles in the early Christian church. The JST reading also makes better sense of Mark 13:17 than imagining an audience of four male disciples; see also number 7 below.
6. In Mark 13:32, the JST changes “no man” to “no one,” implying that women may well be included among the angels of God.
7. In Mark 13:37, the JST adds “two shall be grinding at the mill; the one taken, and the other left.” Because grinding was

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14. Note that neither here nor elsewhere is it my contention that Joseph Smith deliberately made a change for the purpose of foregrounding women; rather I am arguing that that is the effect it has on the text, irrespective of his intentions.

generally women's work, this adds a reference to women to the Markan text.

8. The JST adds material to Mark 14:6–9 so that Jesus's words create a chiasmus.<sup>15</sup> The effect of this structure is to emphasize the centrality of the anointing woman's words and thus emphasize her role and prominence. Further, the JST changes "spoken of for a memorial" to "spoken of *also* for a memorial" (emphasis added) to Mark 14:9, which means that her story is told for reasons other than just simply to memorialize her. This further emphasizes the woman's importance.
9. The JST changes the description of the Simon who carried Jesus's cross (see Mark 15:21) so that his child is named "Alexandria" instead of "Alexander" and thus is a daughter and not a son. It is possible that this situation parallels that of Junia (see Romans 16:7), where discomfort regarding the important role given to a woman resulted in later scribes performing a grammatical sex change on her.<sup>16</sup> It is possible that something similar happened in this situation; of course, in the context of Mark's text and the JST, this is very speculative, since no role other than daughter is occupied by Alexandria. However, given that most scholars think that the reason Simon's children were mentioned at all is because they were personally known to Mark's earliest audiences, it is nonetheless possible and perhaps the most likely explanation for this enigmatic change.
10. The JST changes "he" and "young man" to "angels" in Mark 16:5 and 6, which makes the messengers at the tomb gender neutral and, when read alongside JST Mark 13:32, opens the possibility that the angels were female.

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15. See Julie M. Smith, "She Hath Wrought a Good Work': The Anointing of Jesus in Mark's Gospel," *Studies in the Bible and Antiquity* 5 (2013): 31–46.

16. See John Thorley, "Junia, a Woman Apostle," *Novum Testamentum* 38/1 (1996): 18–29.

Unlike the dual harmonizing and deharmonizing tendencies, there is no tendency to limit women and their roles in JST Mark.<sup>17</sup> The impulse to expand the roles of women is found not only in the JST but in other aspects of Joseph Smith's work as well. For example, when he addressed a group of women in 1842, he told them that he would make of them "a kingdom of priests as in Enoch's day—[and] as in Paul[']s day."<sup>18</sup> There is no indication in the Bible that women were priests in the time of Enoch and only the faintest hint that they might have occupied such roles during Paul's time, and yet Joseph Smith taught that they had in fact occupied broader roles than the extant records reflect.

LDS readers of the Bible can honor this impulse to foreground women and their stories by ensuring that, when women are mentioned in the canon, close attention is paid to the text. Due to the traditional neglect of women's voices, this will often require analysis that builds from the ground up after clearing away centuries of myopic interpretation. For example, I note in the BYUNTC that sewing was, in the biblical world, women's work, and so when Jesus employs a parable about sewing old patches on to new garments (see Mark 2:21), his rhetoric is a natural fit in the world of women—and thus recognizes and honors their labors—while simultaneously requiring male audience members to see through women's eyes. Similarly, when Jesus requires a woman with extended menstrual bleeding—a woman who very covertly sought healing and was content to melt back into the crowd—to take center stage and talk about her medical condition in front of a large crowd, the topic is not one which, to put it mildly, would have been expected or at all comfortable for a male audience (see Mark 5:33). Mark nonetheless codes this woman's bodily experiences as a proxy of Jesus's own suffering.<sup>19</sup> These are but a few of the many, many ways in which Mark's

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17. The only JST variant that comes close to limiting or erasing women occurs when "her branch" (referring to the fig tree of the parable) is changed to "his branches" (see Mark 13:28), but this is probably not significant.

18. See the Nauvoo Relief Society Minute Book, March 31, 1842, available at [josephsmithpapers.org](http://josephsmithpapers.org).

19. See Julie M. Smith, "A Redemptive Reading of Mark 5:25–34," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 14 (2015): 95–105.

text foregrounds women, an impulse heightened by the JST and which should therefore be of interest to all LDS interpreters.

### 3. The impulse to read closely and critically

The changes in JST Mark suggest that the text should be read closely and with a critical eye—and was read by Joseph Smith the same way. For example, Mark 4:10 relates that Jesus was “alone” when those with him asked about his parable. But he obviously wasn’t alone if there were disciples around to ask him questions! The JST changes “alone” to “alone with the twelve and they that believed in him.” Similarly, on several occasions, the JST eliminates or changes the word “answered” when the statement following is not a reply to a question;<sup>20</sup> the JST also eliminates hyperbole (see JST Mark 1:5; 2:12; 5:20; and 9:23). These changes indicate that neither Joseph Smith nor the JST’s reader should read passively and acquiescently; rather, the text should be approached with a critical eye. This tendency is also evident in the sections of the Doctrine and Covenants that resulted from the questions raised by work on the JST (see, for example, D&C 77).

LDS scholars should, similarly, approach texts with a hermeneutics of suspicion, at least some of the time, since reading against the grain can yield new insights. Sometimes tough questions are rewarded with profound answers. I’ve attempted to bring a deliberate and somewhat critical eye to the BYUNTC. For example, a careful study of the exorcism of the man possessed by the legion of demons shows that Mark alters the chronological sequence of events in order to obscure the fact that Jesus’s first attempt at exorcism was not successful. Chronologically, Mark 5:8 comes before Mark 5:7 (hence the “for” at the beginning of Mark 5:8), but the placement downplays the fact that Jesus’s command to come out of the man was not immediately followed, perhaps because Jesus was not aware that there was more than one demon. Once Jesus is aware of the dimensions of the problem, the exorcism is successful. This

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20. See JST Mark 9:19; 10:24, 51; 11:14, 22; 12:35; and 15:12.

kind of observation becomes an important element in understanding Mark's story of Jesus.

#### 4. The impulse to modernize

Quantifying the JST is more art than science, but by my rough estimate<sup>21</sup> about seventy-five percent of JST Mark does not change the theological meaning of the text but rather makes it easier to read by modernizing, clarifying, or simplifying the language. Examples of this tendency include changing "river of Jordan" to "river Jordan" (see Mark 1:5), "of the age of twelve years" to "twelve years old" (see Mark 5:42), and "so shall it not be" to "shall not be so" (see Mark 10:43). The word "saith" is replaced by the word "said" in three dozen instances,<sup>22</sup> while other modernizations include swapping "hath" for "has" (see Mark 10:52 and 14:8), "wist" for "knew" (see Mark 9:6 and 14:40), and "twain" for "two" (see Mark 10:8, twice in this verse). While this trend has been commented on previously, it has not received the attention that it deserves, given that this impulse constitutes about three-quarters of the work of the JST. (Note that it is not unique to JST Mark.)

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21. This figure is the result of my own tally and should be considered an approximation only. To arrive at this percentage, I counted not the number of verses changed by the JST but rather the number of changes; sometimes there are several changes in one verse. (For example, Mark 10:24 is counted as having three changes: "that" becomes "who," "saith" becomes "said," and "answereth" becomes "spake." These are counted as three separate changes because they reflect three different tendencies in the JST: changing the relative pronoun to comport with modern usage, modernizing archaic endings, and eliminating illogical phrasing.) I then divided these changes into three categories: (1) those that did not change the meaning of the text, (2) those that may or may not change the meaning (depending on how they are interpreted), and (3) those that clearly change the meaning of the text. The process of both counting and categorizing is somewhat subjective; other readers would surely arrive at a different number than I did. The purpose of my rough estimate is solely to give a sense of the proportion of changes that do not involve doctrinal shifts.

22. See Mark 1:44; 2:10; 3:3, 4, 5; 4:35; 5:19, 36, 39; 6:38, 50; 7:18, 34; 8:1, 12, 17, 29; 9:19, 35; 10:11, 23, 24, 27, 42; 11:2, 21, 33; 12:16, 43; 14:27, 30, 32, 45, 63; 15:28; and 16:6.

LDS scholarship should take this modernizing and clarifying impulse seriously, especially since this tendency also reflects the Book of Mormon's celebration of the virtue of "plainness" in scripture (see 2 Nephi 25:4, 7 and 31:2–3). Indeed, the LDS Church itself has adopted this impulse to an extent in the changes recently made to its English Bible.<sup>23</sup>

The BYUNTC contains what is called "The Rendition," which renders the Greek text into modern English. With the Mark volume, I've attempted to honor the modernizing impulse of the JST by translating Mark into unadorned, common English and letting this new rendition reflect Mark's awkward—and sometimes even ungrammatical—Greek, which, of course, is also a way of preserving Mark's unique voice in the canon.

## 5. The impulse to revise

The idea that the JST displays an impulse to revise is so self-evident that it may not seem to deserve consideration, but this impulse merits examination both for its details and its implications.

First, some of the details of the production of the JST are suggestive. Joseph Smith began his work on the Old Testament until he felt called to work on the New Testament (see D&C 45:60–62), which he then translated before returning to the Old Testament. His new translation had included new chapter headings, but only for a while.<sup>24</sup> He and his contemporaries apparently labored under an unwarranted suspicion of italicized words. He initially had his scribes copy the entire new translation—including passages that were not changed from their KJV iteration—but then adopted a different system that involved making notations in the Bible with only the changes copied out by hand. This

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23. In the 2013 update to the English scriptures, the church modernized the spelling of about two dozen words in the KJV. See "Summary of Approved Adjustments for the 2013 Edition of the Scriptures," accessed March 24, 2015, [www.lds.org/bc/content/shared/content/english/pdf/scriptures/approved-adjustments\\_eng.pdf](http://www.lds.org/bc/content/shared/content/english/pdf/scriptures/approved-adjustments_eng.pdf).

24. See Matthews, *Plainer Translation*, 146.

system itself underwent evolution. The scribes switched from ink to pencil because the ink bled through the pages of the Bible.<sup>25</sup> And in two instances, Joseph Smith accidentally translated the same passage twice, apparently not realizing that he had already translated it. A comparison of the two translations shows that his changes are similar but not identical.<sup>26</sup> Combined, these details of the translation process support the conclusion of Robert J. Matthews, who explains, “The translation was not a simple, mechanical recording of divine dictum, but rather a study-and-thought process accompanied and prompted by revelation.”<sup>27</sup> Apparently Joseph Smith was given general impressions that he needed to turn into words and general guidelines that he needed to execute. Joseph Smith also revised the JST during his lifetime.

These details of the translation process suggest to most historians and interpreters that the JST is less analogous to stone tablets carved by the finger of God and handed down from on high and more akin to the idea of learning “line upon line, precept upon precept” (D&C 98:12).

Further, it is instructive to see how Joseph Smith used the JST in his own ministry: in many instances, he would refer to the KJV, not his new translation. For example, JST Job 1:6 and 2:1 change “sons” of God to “children of God,” but Joseph Smith, on at least two occasions, referred to Job’s account and mentioned the “sons of God.”<sup>28</sup> Sometimes he would offer alterations to the KJV that were *not* included in the JST; Thomas E. Sherry and W. Jeffrey Marsh find that Joseph Smith’s “sermons from 1833 to 1844 are filled with numerous interpretations about

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25. See Paul W. Lambert and Thomas A. Wayment, “The Nature of the Pen and Pencil Markings in the New Testament of Joseph Smith’s New Translation of the Bible,” *BYU Studies* 47/2 (2008): 87–106.

26. See Kent P. Jackson and Peter M. Jasinski, “The Process of Inspired Translation: Two Passages Translated Twice in the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible,” *BYU Studies* 42/2 (2003): 35–64.

27. Matthews, *Plainer Translation*, 39.

28. See “Try the Spirits,” *Times and Seasons* (April 1, 1842): 745, and “Sons of God,” *Times and Seasons* (January 16, 1843): 75. Credit for this observation belongs to Rico Martinez.

Bible verses not found in the JST.”<sup>29</sup> Later teachings of Joseph Smith that were not part of the JST include:

1. Priesthood keys were given to Peter, James, and John on the Mount of Transfiguration.
2. Robert L. Millet explains:

The second verse of the King James Bible describes the state of things in the morning of the creation: “And the earth was without form, and void” (Genesis 1:2). The JST of this verse is exactly the same as the KJV. In a sermon delivered on January 5, 1841, in Nauvoo, however, Joseph Smith taught that the words “without form and void” should be translated “empty and desolate.”<sup>30</sup>

3. Grant Underwood describes the change made regarding the idea of the Holy Ghost as a dove:

The correction came as part of Joseph’s later public teachings rather than in the JST or other Restoration scriptures. Twice in the Book of Mormon, Nephi says the Holy Ghost descended upon Christ “in the *form* of a dove” (1 Nephi 11:27; 2 Nephi 31:8, emphasis added), and D&C 93:15 reports that “the Holy Ghost descended upon him in the *form* of a dove, *and sat upon him*” (emphasis added). Subsequently, Joseph elaborated, “The dove which sat upon Christ’s shoulder was a sure testimony that he was of God. . . . Any spirit or body that is attended by a dove you may know to be a pure spirit.” This insight was given more detailed formulation two years later. “The Holy Ghost cannot be transformed into a Dove,” Joseph reportedly explained, “but the sign of a Dove was given to John to signify the Truth of the Deed as the Dove was an emblem or Token of Truth.”<sup>31</sup>

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29. See Sherry and Marsh, “Precious Truths Restored,” 57–74.

30. See Robert L. Millet, “Joseph Smith’s Translation of the Bible: A Historical Overview,” in *Restoration of Plain and Precious Things*, 23–47.

31. See Grant Underwood, “Joseph Smith and the King James Bible,” in *The King James Bible and the Restoration*, ed. Kent P. Jackson (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2011), 215–33.



4. Robert L. Millet describes a change concerning the language about there being “many mansions”:

Just five months before his death the Prophet clarifies another biblical passage which had received no alteration on the JST. “The question is frequently asked, ‘Can we not be saved without going through with all those ordinances?’ I would answer, No, not the fulness of salvation. Jesus said, There are many mansions in my Father’s house, and I will go and prepare a place for you. House here named should have been translated kingdom; and any person who is exalted to the highest mansion has to abide a celestial law, and the whole law too.”<sup>32</sup>

This record of doctrinal development independent of the JST, combined with the fact that Joseph Smith later studied Hebrew and Greek, implies that he never regarded the JST as a perfected text and still found an important role for the original languages of the Bible, the KJV, and continuing revelation.

So in both process and product, Joseph Smith regarded the JST as subject to revision, and re-revision. The implications of this are very significant for LDS interpreters—not only in their approach to the JST but to all scripture. There are four important implications of the impulse to revise.

First, in contrast to the impulse of popular Mormonism, the JST must not be regarded as a perfect text by LDS scholars. Sometimes the language of D&C 35:20 (“the scriptures shall be given, even as they are in mine own bosom, to the salvation of mine own elect”) is used to elevate the status of the JST. As this paper proposes, an approach suggesting that the JST nears a state of perfection is not sustainable. And a closer analysis of D&C 35:20 suggests the same. To begin with, the only biblical use of the phrase “own bosom” is Psalm 35:13, where the context is that the unanswered prayer of the psalmist has returned to his “own bosom.” When read in this light, the language of D&C 35:20 might very well imply that the perfected iteration of scripture that resides in the

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32. See Millet, “Joseph Smith’s Translation of the Bible,” 23–47.

heavens cannot be perfectly conveyed to earth. Additionally, the verses leading to D&C 35:20 present Joseph Smith as a very human messenger: verse 17 speaks of his weakness, verse 18 warns him that his calling is subject to his obedience, and verse 19 contains a command to “watch over him that his faith fail not.” Combined, these three statements contextualize Joseph Smith’s abilities as limited and contingent. Nonetheless, the passage assures that his work will be adequate, if not inerrant. So treating the JST as an indisputable solution to a problem in the text is not hermeneutically legitimate when it is recognized that Joseph Smith himself did not deploy the new translation in an absolutist way. This is why, in the Mark BYUNTC, the JST is treated in an appendix and not in the exegetical notes.

Second, if an inspired translation by the lead prophet of the Restoration is not to be treated as inerrant, then how much more must LDS scholars approach other canonical texts—and uncanonized interpretations of texts, even those offered by church authorities—with an eye to their limitations, lacunas, and lapses. Joseph Smith prayed to be released from “the little narrow prison almost as it were total darkness of paper pen and ink and a crooked broken scattered and imperfect language.”<sup>33</sup> LDS interpreters recognize the limitations of communication and of texts by avoiding the tendency to want to harmonize all revelation, under the recognition that different texts will reflect different levels of knowledge and thus might not be reconcilable. This also implies a duty to avoid reading certain beliefs or doctrines into a text in which they might not have been initially present. It also requires avoiding the tendency to treat statements by modern church leaders as if they can definitively and absolutely solve or explain issues within any ancient text. In the BYUNTC, I’ve tried to follow this principle by focusing the commentary on the question of what a particular passage meant in its original context, which normally mandates that implications and applications voiced by later interpreters are not germane.

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33. Joseph Smith, Kirtland, OH, to William W. Phelps, [Independence, MO], November 27, 1832, in JS Letterbook 1, p. 4. Accessed via [josephsmithpapers.org](http://josephsmithpapers.org).

Third, one of the premises of modern textual criticism is that earlier iterations of a text are preferable. But in LDS hermeneutics, this point merits reexamination if the interpreter grants any level of inspiration to the work of the JST. The incident in the Book of Mormon where Jesus asks that the Nephites' record be revised in order to include the account of Samuel the Lamanite's prophecies provides another case where the newer iteration of a text should be preferred to the more archaic version (see 3 Nephi 23:9–13). The story of the woman taken in adultery (see John 8:1–11) may be another instance in which later additions to a text should be favored. At the same time, it is not the case that LDS interpreters should always prefer the newer version since we know that novelty can introduce error. So there is a tension in the Restoration tradition: LDS interpreters must not automatically assume superiority for the older or the newer text but rather have to engage each iteration on its own merits. As historian David Holland notes, "The Book of Mormon itself reinforces the message that when heavenly light mixes with human messengers, God's treasure is to be found in earthly vessels. It repeatedly warns its readers not to discard the things of God because of the flaws of men. . . . The notion that later generations may improve upon the scriptural text—even be 'wiser' than its inspired authors—brings the Book of Mormon closer to the most radical elements of America's emerging culture of biblical criticism than to its long tradition of biblical conservatism."<sup>34</sup>

Fourth, this requirement to engage the iterations without assuming that older is better implies that LDS scholars cannot assume that a text can be perfect, stable, or unchanging. This dovetails nicely with the newest trend in the interpretation of Mark, performance criticism, which sees the Gospel as primarily an oral recitation that would have changed over time.<sup>35</sup> The existence of multiple canonized accounts of

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34. David F. Holland, *Sacred Borders: Continuing Revelation and Canonical Restraint in Early America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 155–56.

35. See, for example, Whitney Shiner, *Proclaiming the Gospel: First-Century Performance of Mark* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003).

the creation<sup>36</sup> and of Malachi 4:5–6<sup>37</sup>—not to mention of Jesus’s mortal ministry—should encourage LDS interpreters in this belief. The restoration is ongoing, an idea that the presence of a perfected text would deny. The JST illustrates that inerrancy is not a reasonable expectation from scripture. Brigham Young shared this view: “Revelations, when they have passed from God to man, and from man into his written and printed language, cannot be said to be entirely perfect. . . . Should the Lord Almighty send an angel to re-write the Bible, it would in many places be very different from what it now is. And I will even venture to say that if the Book of Mormon were now to be re-written, in many instances it would materially differ from the present translation.”<sup>38</sup> At the same time, it is regarded as inspired, so in LDS readings, we need to accept the idea that inspiration and imperfection are equally yoked.<sup>39</sup> This paradoxical concept is also found in the Book of Mormon, a text that makes two claims: first, that it is an inspired and true text,<sup>40</sup> and, second, that it is a flawed text.<sup>41</sup> So the reader who accesses the Book of Mormon on its own terms must read it as inspired and erroneous, sacred and imperfect. Since the text is neither exact nor expendable, the

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36. Latter-day Saints recognize three canonized accounts of the creation (Genesis 1–2; Moses 2–3; and Abraham 4–5) as well as granting quasi-canonical status to the oral retelling of the creation in the temple ceremony.

37. See D&C 2:1–3; 27:9; 110:13–15; 128:17–18 (note especially the language “I might have rendered a plainer translation to this, but it is sufficiently plain to suit my purpose as it stands”); and JS—H 1:36–39.

38. *Journal of Discourses*, 9:310–11.

39. As David Bokovoy notes, “Joseph Smith himself models this approach when on the one hand, he identifies the Bible as the ‘word of God,’ yet on the other, he states that the Song of Solomon is ‘not inspired.’” See “The Divine Word Made Flesh: A Fundamental Mormon Paradox,” accessed March 24, 2015, [www.patheos.com/blogs/davidbokovoy/2015/01/the-divine-word-made-flesh-a-fundamental-mormon-paradox/](http://www.patheos.com/blogs/davidbokovoy/2015/01/the-divine-word-made-flesh-a-fundamental-mormon-paradox/).

40. See 1 Nephi 1:3; 14:30; Mosiah 1:6; Alma 3:12; 3 Nephi 5:9; 18:37; and Moroni 10:29.

41. See the title page (“if there are faults they are the mistakes of men”), 1 Nephi 19:6; Jacob 7:26; Alma 10:5; 3 Nephi 8:2; Ether 5:1; 12:23–40; Mormon 9:31–33; and Moroni 1:4. One could also argue that passages such as Helaman 7:7 reflect clearly erroneous notions, but lack awareness of the error.

reader must approach it from a perch of anxious engagement, continually contemplating and weighing the text.

Taken together, the implications of this unending impulse to revise—which is also a natural consequence of a belief in continuing revelation—lead to the conclusion that a text can be both inspired and improvable. Texts are fluid; there is no perfect recension. The JST shows that a text cannot be considered perfect because it must always interact with an audience, and what an audience brings to the text changes over time. For example, there is a JST reading for Mark 2:14 that explains what it means that Levi was at the “receipt of custom,” a clarification that is likely helpful for modern readers of the KJV but would have been necessary neither for Mark’s earliest audiences nor for readers of modern English translations. So the ability of the text to communicate its intent is not strictly a product of a hypothetical state of perfection resident in the text itself but also of the audience’s level of knowledge. In other words, a verse that might have been perfectly functional, if not inerrant, when written is rendered in need of revision by the passage of time, which causes a lack of awareness of the practice mentioned in the text. Further, there is wide recognition that the JST contains a variety of material—restoration, commentary, harmonization, modernization, doctrinal correction—but the JST reader has no obvious way to distinguish between the types. This has an important effect on the audience—who must accept their inability to determine which type is which. This reader experience is itself an important weight against the swerve toward belief in inerrancy that a conservative religious tradition might be tempted to take.

The burdens that an inspired and imperfect scripture place on the interpreter are numerous and complex. The LDS exegete’s best defense is humility, care, and the avoidance of dogmatism. I’ve tried to honor this impulse in the BYUNTC by avoiding idiosyncratic interpretations and presenting a full spectrum of interpretive options to the reader. One unusual feature of BYUNTC Mark is the extensive use it makes of lists of interpretive options, as opposed to simply presenting the preferred hypothesis of the author.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, these five impulses found in the JST of Mark—to amplify Mark's unique tendencies, to foreground women, to read critically, to modernize, and to revise—are significant not only in themselves but also because of the guidance they might provide to LDS hermeneutics. There is currently a divide in the LDS interpretive community between what might be called traditionalists and progressives. My hope is that this chasm could be bridged by a recognition that these reading impulses can be rooted not only in the modern reading practices of the secular academy but also in the founding prophet of the Restoration. The idea of using the work of Joseph Smith to bridge the divide between more traditional and more progressive LDS exegetes will, I hope, appeal to both groups.

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