



Joseph Smith's Bible Revision: Sources, Claims, and Present Role, 1830–2009

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Introduction

THIS PAPER IS AN ATTEMPT to interpret the Joseph Smith Bible Revision (JSBR), how it came to be, claims made for it, and how the RLDS Church's understanding of the JSBR has begun to change during the past half century. It is not for me to suggest a single course of action in response to that shift of perception. That is a task for leaders who bear responsibility for clarifying the mission, identity, and message of the Community of Christ in today's world. My hope here is to provide a bit of grist for the mill.

Notes from My Story

MY FIRST AWARENESS of the JSBR dawned at age fourteen, during a Seventy John Sheehy sermon at Stone Church in Independence, Missouri. He used Deuteronomy 14:21 to prove the superior inspiration of Joseph Smith's Bible Revision over the King James Version (KJV). He first placed a large russet potato on the corner of the pulpit, and then preached his sermon with neither a glance at nor reference to the potato! I listened to every word, expecting him to use the potato as an object lesson. He finished his sermon, returned the potato to his pocket, and sat down. I had listened to him so intently that I can still see that potato. I can still hear his spirited defense of the JSBR text of Deuteronomy 14:21. The KJV reads, "Ye shall not eat *of* any thing that

dieth of itself: thou shalt give it unto the stranger that *is* in thy gates, that he may eat it; or thou mayest sell it unto an alien: for thou *art* an holy people unto the Lord thy God.” Joseph Smith, sensing this text to lack Christian compassion, added the word “not” two times to Deuteronomy 14:21, making it read, “thou shalt *not* give it unto the stranger that is in thy gates, that he may eat it; or thou mayest *not* sell it unto an alien; for thou art a holy people unto the Lord thy God” (author’s emphasis).

Sheehy saw this change as proof that the JSBR’s inspiration far exceeded that of the KJV, providing us today with superior ethical guidance on how to be more truly Christian. For Sheehy, Smith had restored the KJV text to its original message and meaning, both anciently and for all times and places. For me, however, at that young age, I didn’t know what to make of such an unusual sermon on such an obscure Bible text, potato and all.

To revisit my teenage exposure to John Sheehy’s praise of the JSBR is to appreciate the RLDS subculture of the 1930s and 1940s. RLDS missionaries and leaders, including general officers, in 1936 considered defending the superiority of the JSBR important enough to add the words “Inspired Version” to the title page and spine of their church’s unique Bible. They and their fathers and grandfathers had been jousting with LDS Mormon missionaries and local leaders, most of who had never heard of either the RLDS Church or the “Inspired Version” of the Bible. An intensely combative climate gave RLDS missionaries ample reason to declare the merits of the “Inspired Version” over the KJV. Veteran missionary J. W. A. Bailey’s *Saints’ Herald* article in 1937 held that the RLDS Church’s very possession of the “Inspired Version” vindicated the RLDS claim to be the only true church in proper succession to the original Restoration Movement.¹

As a Graceland College student in Roy Cheville’s Bible class in 1951, I began to wonder about the merits of our church’s decision to label Joseph Smith’s Bible Revision—the JSBR—as the “Inspired Version.” Most every student in Dr. Cheville’s Bible class used the KJV, as instructed by our professor. He rarely referred to the JSBR. In response to a question from the class, Dr. Cheville expressed the hope that the church one day would use the JSBR in line with its actual essence and meaning. So Dr. Cheville taught us from the KJV and the American Standard Bible. He also welcomed the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, just then coming into rather wide usage. So to me it seemed strange that the RLDS Church was claiming to publish the only inspired Bible, when scores of scholars were providing new versions based on much earlier sources

¹J. W. A. Bailey, “The Inspired Version of the Holy Scriptures Identifies the ‘Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints’ as Being the True Church in Succession,” *Saints’ Herald* 84, no. 6 (February 6, 1937): 171–74, 191.

than had been available to the scholars who produced the KJV. The RLDS Church's use of the term "Inspired Version" even back in 1951–52 looked to me like hubris, implying as it did that other Bible versions were uninspired, or at best seriously lacked inspiration.

My analytical interest in the JSBR grew with my early contacts with the original manuscripts in the RLDS Archives during the summers of 1961 and 1962, when I worked there with then church historian Charles A. Davies. He was in about the middle of his six-year tenure as church historian. Davies was developing a keen interest in the original JSBR manuscripts and asked me to produce a calendar of the manuscript pages, i.e., to identify the exact scriptural content on each page of the whole body of handwritten materials. This task, begun during those two summers, was pursued during my first two years of work as Davies' assistant, under full-time church appointment beginning in October 1962.

As work progressed on my calendaring of the manuscripts, I concluded that there were two *fragment* manuscripts for portions of Genesis (Robert J. Matthews of Brigham Young University later convinced me that there was only one²), and one larger manuscript covering, quite unevenly, Genesis to Malachi. I found that the text was written in full for only the first twenty-four chapters of Genesis. After that, only brief notations were made for the remainder of the Old Testament.

As for the New Testament, there was one fragment manuscript, written word-for-word, revising the first twenty-six chapters of Matthew. A second manuscript refined the first at many points and treated, sporadically, the remainder of the New Testament. This was written out in full through the sixth chapter of John's gospel, with only brief notations from that point forward.

Related to the manuscripts was the 1828 H. & E. Phinney edition of the KJV, bought by Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery, jointly, in 1829. I call this Bible the Smith-Cowdery Bible, or, the SCB. The SCB had been the source text for Joseph's copying and adapting several chapters of Isaiah, Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, and selected passages from St. Paul's writings into the nearly finished Book of Mormon text. A sometimes unclear system of ink and pencil markings in the SCB would shed important twentieth-century light on Smith's intent for many of his textual revisions. The 1866 RLDS publication committee, working in Plano, Illinois, apparently did not consult this vital source of information, the SCB, which at the time was in possession of Alexander H. Smith's family in Nauvoo. The 1944 JSBR revision committee used the SCB, purchased by the

² See Robert J. Matthews, "*A Plainer Translation*": *Joseph Smith's Translation of the Bible, A History and Commentary* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1975).

church from Israel A. Smith, to clarify some 352 verses the committee decided had been wrongly interpreted by the 1866 publication committee.

The final republication manuscripts of 1866 were copied from Joseph Smith Jr.'s original papers by Marietta Faulconer and Mark H. Forscutt. These were essential to publication because the unfinished, original manuscripts required much editing and refinement, versification, and chapter headings. Joseph Smith III knew of the unfinished condition of the manuscripts, but chose to rush publication forward anyhow. He and his committee, and indeed most RLDS leaders, felt driven to prove to LDS Mormons that the RLDS Church was the *bona fide* successor to original Mormonism. The JSBR, it was thought, would be a major resource in the RLDS quest for legitimacy. Leaders and members of the RLDS Church's tiny, struggling mission in Salt Lake City, Utah, were desperate for the help that they hoped the JSBR might bring to their missionary work among Utah Mormons. I empathized with the publication committee over these issues, realizing that inter-church rivalry had been a major factor in the decision to publish the JSBR at that time, especially in view of its unfinished state.

In 1964 a committee of the RLDS Council of Twelve Apostles proposed to the First Presidency a centennial celebration in 1967 honoring the publication of the first edition of the JSBR. President F. Henry Edwards asked historian Charles Davies to inform him of the condition and character of the manuscripts. Edwards wanted to make an informed decision on whether the First Presidency should sponsor the centennial celebration proposed by the Council of Twelve committee. Davies' report to the First Presidency, finished early in 1965, was entitled, "Problems with the Inspired Version." Davies' study, which I helped with by doing manuscript research, was never published. I suspect that Davies' findings and conclusions influenced the First Presidency's decision not to launch a centennial celebration of the JSBR.

In retrospect, Sheehy's 1943 sermon had planted a tiny seed in my mind, which eventually became enduring curiosity. Sixty-six years later—today, that is—I am still trying to understand how and why Joseph Smith saw himself as one called to correct the KJV. Joseph's time and place in history began in the Protestant, anti-Roman Catholic subculture of New England and New York, where the KJV reigned as the ultimate authority regarding knowledge of God and the gospel of Jesus Christ. Why did Joseph Smith, in his late twenties, and with no formal theological training, decide to correct the KJV? A brief look at four documentary sources of the JSBR may offer, at most, a partial answer to that question.

Sources

THESE FOUR PRIMARY SOURCES for Joseph Smith Jr.'s mission to revise the KJV emerged between 1829 and 1833. The first appeared in 1829 when Joseph was finalizing the Book of Mormon text. Smith recorded material in I Nephi 3:167–86 (LDS I Nephi 13:26–36) that gave him, in the eyes of his small group of followers, a divine mandate, not only for having produced the Book of Mormon, but also for launching what he would later call “The New Translation” of the Bible. Smith’s sense of calling was, in his own mind, to restore to the Bible the many missing parts central to the gospel. I Nephi 3 (LDS I Nephi 13) states that these parts were missing due to carelessness in transmission, and worse, deliberate distortions of truth and doctrine made by that “great and abominable church.” From those twenty verses, here are several excerpts that convey not only authority for the Book of Mormon record itself, but also an imperative from heaven to correct the KJV.

And after they [pure gospel truths] go forth by the hand of the twelve apostles of the Lamb, from the Jews unto the Gentiles, thou seest the foundation of a great and abominable church, which is most abominable above all other churches; For behold, they have taken away from the gospel of the Lamb many parts which are plain and most precious; And also many covenants of the Lord have they taken away.—I Nephi 3:167–69 (LDS I Nephi 13:26)

And after the Gentiles do stumble exceedingly because of the most plain and precious parts of the gospel of the Lamb which has been kept back, by that abominable church, which is the mother of harlots, saith the Lamb, I will be merciful unto the Gentiles in that day, insomuch that I will bring forth unto them in mine own power, much of my gospel, which shall be plain and precious, saith the Lamb ... And after thy seed shall be destroyed and dwindle in unbelief, and also the seed of thy brethren; behold, these things shall be hid up, to come forth unto the Gentiles by the gift and power of the Lamb; And in them shall be written my gospel, saith the Lamb, and my rock and my salvation.—I Nephi 3:183, 185–86 (LDS I Nephi 13:34–36)

These verses, it seems to me, reflect a vein of early nineteenth-century American, Protestant, cultural antipathy toward the Roman Catholic Church. The latter-day prophet had now arrived to supplant the authority of the pope, whose institutional Orders had decimated the pure gospel of the Lamb as found in pages of ancient scriptural manuscripts—so believed Joseph Smith and his followers.

A second source of Smith’s sense of divine calling to revise the Bible is embedded in Lehi’s blessing of his youngest son, Joseph, recorded in II Nephi 2 (LDS II Nephi 3) of the Book of Mormon. In that blessing Lehi links himself and his son through all their progenitors back to the biblical patriarch Joseph,

whose story is told in Genesis chapters 37–50 KJV. This blessing also projected their lineal descendants forward to the latter days, to include a specific allusion to the “choice seer” and his prophetic work—Joseph Smith Jr. Here is a brief excerpt from this blessing:

Yea, Joseph truly said, Thus saith the Lord unto me: A choice seer will I raise up out of the fruit of thy loins; and he shall be esteemed highly among the fruit of thy loins. And unto him will I give commandment, that he shall do a work for the fruit of thy loins, his brethren, which shall be of great worth unto them, even to the bringing of them to the knowledge of the covenants which I have made with thy fathers.... And I will make him great in mine eyes: for he shall do my work. And he shall be great like unto Moses, whom I have said I would raise up unto you, to deliver my people, O house of Israel.... Behold, that seer will the Lord bless; And they that seek to destroy him, shall be confounded ... Behold, I am sure of the fulfilling of this promise. And his name shall be called after me; and it shall be after the name of his father. And he shall be like unto me; for the thing which the Lord shall bring forth by his hand, by the power of the Lord shall bring my people unto salvation.—II Nephi 2:11–12, 14–15, 25–26, 28–30 (LDS II Nephi 3:7–9, 14–15)

Broadly interpreted, these lines refer not only to the restorative scriptural work to be done by Joseph Smith, the choice seer, but to a restoration of pure religion among the far-distant descendants of Joseph of Egypt and Lehi and his young son Joseph. The promise is affirmed with boundless certainty and includes the promise of redemption and salvation to a broken and scattered people. That latter-day prophet would rank with Moses in the efficacy of his work.

The third source endorsing Joseph Smith’s authority to revise the KJV is found in a revelatory document introducing the JSBR Old Testament papers. For more than a century (1867–1990) this writing appeared as a sort of preface to the JSBR, under the title, “A Revelation, Given to Joseph the Seer, June, A.D. 1830.” This fascinating document details conversations between God and Moses, and Moses and Satan, with added personal reflections of Moses. This revelatory record first appeared in RLDS scriptural literature as section 22 of the first RLDS edition of the Doctrine and Covenants in 1864. Paragraphs 24–25 were often cited by RLDS missionaries and writers as positive proof of God’s commandment to Joseph Smith to restore the lost biblical texts:

And now, Moses, my son, I [God] will speak unto you concerning this earth upon which you stand; and you shall write the things which I shall speak. And in a day when the children of men shall esteem my words as naught, and take many of them from the book which you shall write [the Pentateuch], behold I will raise up another like unto you [Joseph Smith Jr.], and they shall be had again among the children of men, among even as many as shall believe. These words were spoken unto Moses in the mount, the name of which shall

not be known among the children of men. And now they are spoken unto you [i.e., a group of elders of the newly formed Church of Christ, meeting in western New York, June 1830]. Amen.—Doctrine and Covenants 22:24–25 (LDS Moses 1:40–42)

One can infer from these words the context of a small band of elders leading a fledgling church under intensely felt persecution in western New York. They looked toward one whom they had recently accepted as prophet, seer, translator, and apostle of Jesus Christ (Doctrine and Covenants 19:1a [LDS 21:1]). Their faith in Joseph as inspired translator and revealer of ancient sacred history (Book of Mormon) was expanding into faith in his equally effective vocation as restorer of lost biblical passages. In that moment of revelatory pronouncement, the young prophet Joseph Smith stood at the brink of delivering on God's promises mentioned earlier in the first and second books of Nephi. These closing lines of section 22 project an image of Joseph Smith as one accustomed to reading, interpreting, and writing scripture literally, and as embracing a commonly held view among American religionists of that day—that Moses had in fact written the first five books of the Hebrew Bible.

Beyond these deeply held positions of Joseph Smith and the church elders over whom he presided was a corollary of deep vitality to Joseph and his followers. This was that the young church could anticipate Joseph using his gifts and authority once more as translator. He would resurrect ancient sacred history that tied them back in time to the dawn of creation and forward in mission and hope to the culmination of human history—the present-day fruition of the kingdom of God. Section 22, then, is a major marker in Restoration scriptural history, for it signaled to early Mormon disciples that special knowledge of things ancient—so vital to their salvation—was to be readily available to them directly from God via translation, i.e., revelation, through their prophet, Joseph Smith.

The fourth documentary source of Joseph's impetus to do a Bible revision appears in the JSBR itself. During his work on the closing chapter of Genesis, Joseph Smith adjusted the language and context of Lehi's blessing of his son Joseph in II Nephi 2 (LDS II Nephi 3), to fit its new setting: Genesis 50:26–35 of the JSBR. Lehi's blessing of his son Joseph—quoting the ancient biblical patriarch Joseph—now becomes the actual, direct, prophetic words of Joseph of Egypt, in his ancient, patriarchal biblical setting. Joseph Smith Jr.'s prophetic role in the 1830s as restorer of lost biblical treasures was now to be understood as having been prophesied in the Genesis narrative itself! He was to be the latter day prophet—the “choice seer”—doing a work equal in importance to that of Moses. Genesis chapter 50 of the JSBR clearly affirms that all three

Josephs (the biblical patriarch, Joseph Smith Sr., and finally, Joseph Smith Jr.) were genetically linked in a seamless strand of sacred history, recorded by divine revelation through Joseph Smith Jr. This fourth source, then, of Joseph's sense of divine calling became part of the JSBR text, as if to buttress the three previously recorded sources of his commission.

The primary inference that I draw from these four revelatory sources combined is that of self-fulfilling prophecy: Joseph Smith Jr. in the latter days of human history (nineteenth century) would respond to the divine call to restore the many plain and precious parts of the gospel of the Lamb to the biblical record.

These four sources, which begin and end in the mind and imagination of Joseph Smith Jr., were for him sufficient authority, between 1829 and 1833, to restore to the KJV important, missing elements. If, in Smith's mind, the work of Moses for his people had been salvific for them, then his own prophetic work in nineteenth-century America would be and become equally portentous.

I need to add one more source, transcending the other four combined in its portent for so many present moments opening toward the rest of Joseph Smith's life and beyond. This fifth source was Joseph's phenomenal charisma. Harold Bloom, in his *The American Religion*, wrote briefly of this: "To ponder Smith's imagination, we need to begin by considering the charismatic element in his personality, the singular aura that attended him ... the element in which the marvelously gifted Joseph Smith lived and moved and had his being."³ It is common knowledge that Joseph never fully recovered from his traumatic boyhood surgery with no anesthesia, and walked ever after with a limp. But his stride was magnetism. Bluster and unbridled energy marked his bearing among his followers. Several of them wrote in their journals of how, under the impress of the *spirit of revelation*, Joseph's visage became overwhelmingly luminous. It will therefore not surprise us today to note that shortly after learning that Joseph was engaged in biblical *translation*, W. W. Phelps printed most of what ultimately became Genesis chapter 7 in his Missouri paper, *The Evening and the Morning Star*, from a copy of several of the JSBR manuscript pages. These were brought to him from Ohio by church agents. Phelps entitled this "Extract from the Prophecy of Enoch."⁴ The passages on Zion and the New Jerusalem fit the church's Independence, Missouri, mission so well that Phelps felt compelled to print the material. This he did despite Smith's instruction to his followers not

³ Harold Bloom, *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 97.

⁴ "Extract from the Prophecy of Enoch," *The Evening and the Morning Star* 1, no. 3 (August 1832): 2-3.

to spread the news of his biblical work until the entire project could be finished and published to the world.

One by-product of Smith's overpowering charisma was Joseph's and his followers' assumption that came to have enormous consequences for generations to come: Joseph Smith— seer/prophet/revelator/translator—had the power and authority to discern and proclaim ancient history to his people and to the world, directly from God via revelation. Such miraculously derived historiography, when communicated, took instant root in the hearts, minds, and hopes of his followers. For them, and for millions of Smith's disciples even today, the founder of Mormonism was nothing less than prophet, seer, revelator, translator, and, by mystic means, chronicler of literal, sacred history—unavailable to anybody else by any other process.

Claims

EXPLORING THE CLAIMS made for the JSBR is a journey demanding curiosity, a skeptical but open turn of mind, patience, tenacity, and empathy. The 1866 RLDS Church publication committee's statements in the preface to the first edition of 1867 suggest as clear a task as the RLDS leaders could have hoped for. The manuscripts came into their hands from Joseph Smith's widow, Emma Smith Bidamon. Having worked through the manuscript pages to create a usable printer's manuscript, they recorded five major claims about the JSBR in their preface. I list their claims, with my commentary, as follows:

1. The JSBR *was begun by direct commandment of God in June 1830*. It is closer to the truth to say that the five sources alluded to above combined to form the rationale for Smith's biblical revision. The only documented *commandment* to proceed with such a project came in section 45:11b (LDS 45:61) of the Doctrine and Covenants in March 1831 and applied to the New Testament.

2. The JSBR *was finished on July 2, 1833*. More to the point, several excerpts from the JSBR manuscripts were published in the *Times and Seasons* in 1842–43. The published text did not accord with later, final corrections inserted into the manuscripts. Joseph apparently was working on the JSBR well into the 1840s.

3. The manuscripts *were published just as they had come into the hands of the committee*. This claim is belied by the very fact of a printer's manuscript—a massively edited, refined, and clarified text, produced by the committee working in 1866 and 1867, to enable publication of Joseph Smith's unfinished manuscript.

4. The manuscripts, *together with testimonies of those conversant with them, verify that Joseph Smith produced the JSBR text by "the direct revelation of God."* It is a major corrective, however, to consider these facts: only about 5 percent of the

KJV text was changed; fully 90 percent of the revisions made in that 5 percent were stylistic and grammatical, not requiring any *revelatory* process. This fact narrows the search for text derived from *direct revelation* to the remaining 10 percent of revisions. “Direct revelation” presumably would have been involved to produce content with important theological or doctrinal shifts in meaning. Most of that 10 percent occurs where Joseph dictated the whole text for the scribe to record: Genesis 1–24, and in the New Testament, the synoptic gospels and the first six chapters of John. From Genesis 25 through the rest of the Old Testament and from John 7 through Revelation 22, brief notations were made, showing sporadic revising activity—most of it stylistic, and the rest having some theological or doctrinal implications.

There is a high degree of correlation between substantive revisions (i.e., either by interpolations, or by changing words or phrases) on the one hand, and what could be considered anachronisms. This means that Joseph’s revising activity focused occasionally on creating new, substantive content—not to be found in the KJV. For example, consider Smith’s revisions to the second creation story in Genesis 2. The inner workings of Joseph Smith’s cosmology and charisma exist quite apart from the ancient religious and cultural realities embedded in this creation story as preserved in the KJV. Joseph injects into the KJV narrative the concept of pre-existence by affirming that all aspects of the physical creation had been created spiritually in another, perhaps celestial, realm. The poet Wordsworth had put it succinctly a generation earlier: “we came, trailing clouds of glory.” In the same creation story Joseph affirmed that all living beings—not humans alone—*were* (not *have*) souls. This concept blurred the boundaries between sacred and secular, a meaning not implied in the KJV story. Later in that same story, however, Eve is formed from Adam’s rib while he sleeps. If that is to be read literally, as Joseph Smith read it, then who or what was Eve in the previous realm of her *spiritual* creation—a *spiritual* rib?

5. The RLDS publication committee claimed that *Joseph’s purpose in doing this work was to restore biblical texts lost through ancient miscopying or deliberate, evil design*. It is in this arena where Joseph’s enormous charisma, mesmerizing his followers and nurturing their sense of deep involvement in the establishment of the imminent kingdom of God, comes sharply into focus. My previous reference to the publication of Genesis 7 from the JSBR manuscripts in W. W. Phelps’s paper in Missouri in 1832 claims more attention. Joseph expands the KJV’s cryptic references to Enoch and his city. By revelation, however, Joseph closes the cosmic chasm between Enoch’s visions and his city and its glory, and Joseph’s own work—to build up the kingdom of God, the New Jerusalem, in Missouri, in the last days of human history. The dream would become flesh-and-blood achievement, culminating in the Second Coming of Christ. Fruition of

this mission is Joseph's obsession and dream, and by extension, his community's passion and reason for being. They hoped one day to embrace Enoch and his people in a grand celebration of the invincible love and power and justice of community. In a sense, Joseph's narrative in Genesis 7 infused his own dream into the life of an angel ruling an ancient city. In the same instant Joseph collapsed Enoch's embellished glory into early Mormonism's quest for Zion.

Therefore, historians might call the ancient Enoch/modern Zion coalescence an anachronism. As correct as this assessment might possibly be on the basis of logical analysis of the ancient literature, culture, and symbols, it might not be the final word. My question: is there a living, dynamic river of an emerging mythology—not only for Mormonism in the 1830s but also continuing unbroken into the opening years of our twenty-first century? If so, might this mythos possibly appear in other places—not alone in the JSBR, but in other bold and imaginative writings of the founding prophet?

There were literally dozens of *Saints' Herald* articles promoting and defending the JSBR from 1867 through the next ninety-four years. The final article from the RLDS Church press promoting exclusive use of the JSBR among RLDS members came from the pen of a missionary seventy under church appointment, Aleah G. Koury, in a *Herald* article printed in October 1961. Koury urged exclusive use of the "Inspired Version" because Joseph Smith had restored many plain and precious parts of the gospel, lost from the ancient manuscripts through error or design.⁵

From Original Claims to Moderation

IN LIEU OF THE HOPED-FOR, church-wide centennial celebration of the JSBR, F. Henry Edwards, released from twenty years' service in the First Presidency in 1966, was asked to write an article about the JSBR for the *Herald*. It appeared in three consecutive issues, and three years later became the introduction to Paul A. Wellington's *Joseph Smith's "New Translation" of the Bible*, a parallel column comparison of the KJV and the JSBR. Edwards's article marked a softening of the more traditional approach of defending the JSBR. He did not urge church members to use the JSBR in preference to other translations or editions. Aside from quoting section 22:24 of the Doctrine and Covenants, Edwards did not present the JSBR as a restoration of ancient lost parts of the gospel. This introduction was later (1990) reprinted in pamphlet form under the title *What Is the Inspired Version? An Introduction to Joseph Smith's*

⁵ Aleah G. Koury, "The Inspired Version," *Saints' Herald* 108, no. 43 (October 23, 1961): 1016–17.

New Translation of the Bible. Edwards made the following observation about the use of the “Inspired Version”:

When we sit down with any or all of [the other Bible translations] and with the Inspired Version, we come close to having Joseph Smith at our elbow to explain the points of difference which we find there. When this happens, we find ourselves sharing the same spirit of the early Restoration with its deep concern over the ministry of the leaders of earlier dispensations to the people of later times and places.⁶

Just what the first sentence here means or implies is unclear, but its tenor seems to remind the reader of the connection between Joseph Smith and the JSBR. It seems also to imply the intrinsic value of Smith’s Bible revision. This statement, along with others made in his closing observations, marks a real softening in the RLDS Church’s attitude toward other Bible versions, and an openness to encourage church members to use many other versions of the Bible.

In 1991 the RLDS Church First Presidency issued a new edition of the JSBR. In its foreword the Presidency concludes with a pastoral statement encouraging members and other readers to use other versions, as they will find benefit from a prayerful approach, seeking wisdom and support from others in their Bible study. All previous prefaces were removed from this edition, as well as the historic introduction (Doctrine and Covenants section 22). This foreword does not represent the JSBR as a restoration of ancient, lost portions of the gospel:

In the final analysis the Bible’s authority (in any version) depends on its demonstrated values. The Inspired Version, like all other versions, has the greatest value for those who study it intelligently, in the spirit of prayer, and in consultation with others who approach it in similar fashion. Ultimately, the version we use is not as important as our openness to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Our religious movement was founded on that principle. Therefore, we are pleased to offer this new edition of the Inspired Version of the Holy Scriptures to the church and to the world.

Present Role

THE PAST FORTY-PLUS YEARS of my life I have traveled rather widely in the church, conducting classes and institutes on church history and on the indigenous scriptures of the Community of Christ. I have neither performed nor pursued statistically measurable studies to determine the extent

⁶F. Henry Edwards, *What Is the Inspired Version? An Introduction to Joseph Smith’s New Translation of the Bible* (Independence, MO: Herald Publishing House, 1990), 38.

or depth of attachment of Community of Christ members and leaders to the JSBR. Publishing interests of the schismatic independent Restoration branches have issued a replica edition of the first (1867) edition of the JSBR. Officially the JSBR has the status of scripture to the Community of Christ, on the basis of legislation adopted by general conferences during the late nineteenth century. Those resolutions have not been rescinded, nor do I suspect that they will be in the foreseeable future. Herald House continues to advertise and sell the JSBR, mostly as part of its longstanding three-in-one format of scriptural resources. So far as I have been able to discern, there seems to be no interest on the part of church leaders in removing the polemic phrase “Inspired Version” from the title page of the JSBR as currently published. This subtitle has been in use for seventy-three years, so for the church publishing arm to remove it would raise questions if not objections from the more traditionally focused population of the church. With all the other pressing issues that could divide the Community of Christ membership, changing “Inspired Version” to JSBR or some other alternative title anytime soon would probably evoke negative reactions from some people.

LDS Mormon scholarship during the past forty years has had an easier context in which to deal with problem areas of the JSBR. They have done extensive research resulting in commendable manuscript analyses. When approaching the JSBR's claims to biblical textual restoration, however, they have often deemphasized cultural and historical contextual factors, usually invoking a line of reasoning such as “Joseph being a prophet, he would have had revelatory access to information unavailable to scholarship generally.” Notable exceptions to this approach are Melodie Moench Charles, H. Michael Marquardt, and George D. Smith.⁷

C. Robert Mesle and William D. Russell, as well as others of the scholarly community, have described the primary role (i.e., usefulness) of the JSBR as a sort of lens or window through which to view aspects of Joseph Smith's theological and doctrinal perceptions.⁸ Others, including myself, have offered the view that the JSBR might be considered primarily as Joseph Smith's theological commentary on the KJV, a position somewhat similar to Mesle's and Russell's view. This view falls short of the mark, however, in that it implies an intention to

⁷ See Melodie Moench Charles, “The Mormon Christianizing of the Old Testament” in *The Word of God; Essays on Mormon Scripture*, ed. Dan Vogel (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1994), 131–42; H. Michael Marquardt, *The Four Gospels According to Joseph Smith* (Longwood, FL: Xulon Press, 2007); George D. Smith, “Isaiah Updated,” in Vogel, *Word of God*, 113–30.

⁸ See C. Robert Mesle, “Joseph's ‘New Translation,’” in *The Bible As Story and Struggle* (Independence, MO: Herald Publishing House, 1989), 41–50; William D. Russell, “Beyond Literalism,” in Vogel, *Word of God*, 43–54.

Joseph Smith quite out of harmony with his self-conscious rationale and *modus operandi*.

The JSBR, because of its eclectic character in terms of the various ahistorical and sometimes conflicting revisions of the KJV text, seems to me to defy any neat categorization as theological commentary or as a lens through which to view Smith's theology or doctrinal understandings. I earlier observed that 95 percent of the KJV remained untouched by Joseph Smith in his revising activity. In the 5 percent subjected to revision, 90 percent of the revisions were purely stylistic, having no bearing on theological or doctrinal concepts or principles. The remaining 10 percent of the revisions were partly interpolations of new and significantly lengthy material, e.g., Genesis 1–7 and 50:26–35. Some of the remainder represented insertions of words and phrases having significant doctrinal or theological impact, some of them supplanting existing text and others adding words or phrases intended to illumine the KJV text or to clarify its meanings.

Accepting the JSBR at specific points as a restoration of lost ancient texts is in the final analysis a faith affirmation or stance, not a conclusion stemming from historical research or theological reflection. The tools of history, cultural studies, anthropology, theology, and sociology will probably not settle this question generally, and hold out only a modicum of promise when dealing with specific passages. I am holding out, however, for an approach to this unique Bible revision that opens pathways to mythological interpretations of specific texts. The illustration used earlier in this paper of Genesis 7 is quite to the point. I tend to read most scriptures metaphorically with an eye to mythological possibilities. In my view, the JSBR may offer several rich mythological treasures opening fruitful lines of inquiry into, for example, the relationship between Joseph's charismatic, intuitive imagination and the mystical Jewish Kabbalah. How exciting it might be to discover ever deeper insights into the sources of Joseph Smith's doctrines of humanity (e.g., Adam) and God, whereby the gap between them should begin to fall away to new understandings. While we may never substantiate the old claim to a restoration of lost parts of the gospel, we may possibly find ourselves understanding the gospel metaphorically in fresh and redemptive ways.

Careful studies into Joseph Smith's cosmological orientation and perceptions may yield fruitful understandings into the character of his biblical work. Comparative studies have already shown significant congruence between his work on the Bible and his other prophetic and revelatory utterances and documents. For example, an alignment of two texts: Genesis 17:11 (JSBR) and Doctrine and Covenants 68:4 (LDS 68:27), both written toward the end of 1831, posit the age of a child's accountability at eight years. Also, the

relationship of John 5:29–30 JSBR (5:29 KJV) to section 76 of the Doctrine and Covenants is both poignant and instructive into the complex tie between justice and eschatological issues Smith and Rigdon were facing while working on the JSBR.

Epilogue

IN 1967, WHILE I WAS GIVING a slide lecture on the JSBR in a local congregation in Independence, Missouri, an angry high priest jumped to his feet and proclaimed, “You’re saying that Joseph Smith was not a prophet!” I replied, “No, what I am doing here is explaining what the original manuscripts tell us about how we got the ‘Inspired Version,’” how it came into being.” The man rejoined, “Oh no! You’re saying that Joseph Smith was not a prophet! Come on, Maggie, let’s get out of here now!” At which point Maggie rose and left with her husband. The sharp interchange left a lasting impression on my eight-year-old daughter, who was operating the slide projector.

The next week I was in the Stone Church congregation giving essentially the same lecture. Incidentally, my daughter was not operating the projector. There were no interruptions, no outbursts. When it was over, a longtime acquaintance and friend, whom I’d not seen for several years, said to me, “Dick, you can’t know how relieved I am not to have to defend the ‘Inspired Version’ anymore. Thanks so much!”

I still hold these two memories in tension with one another. I am glad beyond words for both of them. I would not wish to hurt anyone when dealing with this topic, and I trust that whatever your response, you will feel entirely free to raise questions now or later, to challenge anything I’ve said, so that we can have open and honest conversations on this or any other aspect of our sacred story.

For Further Reading

Kevin L Barney, “The Joseph Smith Translation and Ancient Texts of the Bible,” in *The Word of God; Essays on Mormon Scripture*, ed. Dan Vogel (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1994), 143–60.

Douglas J. Davies, “Visions, Revelation, and Courage in Joseph Smith,” in *Joseph Smith, Jr.: Reappraisals after Two Centuries*, ed. Reid L. Neilson and Terryl L. Givens (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 119–42.

Terryl L. Givens, "Joseph Smith: Prophecy, Process, and Plenitude," in *Joseph Smith, Jr.: Reappraisals after Two Centuries*, ed. Reid L. Neilson and Terryl L. Givens (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 107–17.

Monte S. Nyman and Robert L. Millet, eds., *The Joseph Smith Translation: The Restoration of Plain and Precious Things* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1985).

Geoffrey F. Spencer, ed., *Restoration Scriptures Part One: The Inspired Version*, Temple School SS200A, Student Resource Book, Advanced Leadership Curriculum, Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, 1984.