

Review of “*A Plainer  
Translation*” Joseph  
*Smith’s Translation of the  
Bible; A History and  
Commentary.*



MATTHEWS, ROBERT J. *"A Plainer Translation" Joseph Smith's Translation of the Bible; A History and Commentary*. Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1975. 468 pp. \$12.95.

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The scholarly community bears a sizable debt to Robert Matthews for his monumental work on the "New Translation" of the Bible commenced by Joseph Smith in 1830 and published by the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints in 1867. The term "monumental" is used in the sense that Matthews has consulted every possible source in his effort to set forth the chronology of events surrounding Smith's work on his "New Translation." With meticulous care Matthews has compiled, as no one before him, the myriad references from primary and secondary sources bearing directly and indirectly on the work of the "New Translation." His book traces not only the intricate and sometimes sketchy course of Smith's MS work, 1830–1844, but also the history of the text as published and edited by the Reorganized Church since 1867.

Matthews' interest in this subject dates back to the early 1940s when his first articles appeared in the Improvement Era. Since then he has labored tirelessly to help the membership of his church appreciate Smith's biblical "translation" more fully, and to understand the basis on which it was produced. An aid to this effort, beginning in 1969, was the availability of the original MSS, held in the Reorganized Church Archives in Independence, Missouri. These had been inaccessible prior to that time awaiting satisfactory photoduplication. Matthews' research in the original MSS has unearthed a number of heretofore unnoted facets of the relationship between those MSS and the work as published (1867) and revised (1944) by the Reorganized Church.

*A Plainer Translation* has three parts: (1) the story of how the "New Translation" came into being, its publication and revision, its relationship to other documents and publications, its place in doctrinal developments, and its position as a restoration of lost original texts; (2) the doctrinal contributions of the "New Translation"; and (3) appendices.

Part I begins with introductory material showing the rationale behind Smith's decision to produce a biblical revision. In this Matthews relies heavily on certain Book of Mormon passages which in his judgment represented for Smith a mandate to revise the Bible in terms of restoring lost texts. Then follows a collection of statement by Joseph Smith and others on various topics related to the preparation of the MSS and the efforts to publish it. Matthews affirms, on the basis of Section 45 of the Doctrine and

Covenants, that a major purpose of the “New Translation” was the education of Joseph Smith himself, i.e., in the process of “translation” Smith was to gain a “spiritual education” (p. 53).

One of the most lucid and helpful chapters is the third, in which Matthews describes the sources for the “New Translation” and explains the intricate relationships between the MSS and the marked Bible with which Smith worked. In addition he gives several examples of how Smith worked and reworked specific passages after either a first revision or an initial indication that no revision was necessary. A close reading of this chapter alone would enable one to conceptualize the *modus operandi* of Smith and his scribes.

One issue placed clearly in focus is the difficulty of establishing the sequence of two of the Old Testament MSS. In my book (*Restoration Scriptures*, 1969) OT MS #1 was the label given to a 16p. fragment in John Whitmer’s hand and extending to Genesis 7:85 of the published text. OT MS #2 described a longer, and what appeared to be a more refined writing of OT #1, extending the text forward to Genesis 24:42a. Matthews (pp. 67–72) presents strong arguments for reversing these designations, and although I am nearly persuaded to his conclusions in this regard, what is needed is a thorough collation of the two MSS and a more definitive examination of all internal and external evidences before a final conclusion can be drawn.

Chapter 4 sets forth the history of the original MSS and the marked Bible and traces the circuitous route by which they came into possession of the Reorganized Church from various members of the Smith family during the period 1866–1942. This is followed by a very brief chapter introducing the uninitiated to the concept of textual criticism.

Chapters 6–9 form a unit in which Matthews discusses the value and meaning of the John Bernhisel copy of the original MSS, the printer’s MS produced by the Reorganized Church in 1866–67, and the various RLDS publications of the text since 1867, and analyzes textual variants between the MSS and the RLDS editions. Matthews correctly judges the 1944 “New Corrected Edition” to be superior to the 1867 edition, noting that the latter is for the most part more faithful to the intent of the combination of the marked Bible and the original MSS.

Chapter 10–13 survey evidences bearing on whether the “New Translation” was finished sufficiently to enable publication; the relation between the Pearl of Great Price and the “New Translation”; whether the latter could be called a “restoration of original biblical texts” lost through mis-translation; and the contributions of the “New Translation” to LDS scripture and doctrine. On the issue of whether the “New Translation” is a restoration at all points of original biblical texts, Matthews attempts to show that the claim of Joseph Smith to divine inspiration, if accepted, leads

one more nearly in the direction of assuming the work to have been a restoration rather than a theological commentary. This of course confronts one with the problem of twelve Old Testament books, for example, that remained completely untouched by Smith's "translation" activity. Some of these books, as modern exegetical studies have shown, come to us in the KJV in a very corrupt form, much in need of revision in light of later manuscript discoveries. Clearly the issue here is the nature of divine revelation and inspiration, and the role played by the human instrument in recording interpretations of metaphysical experiences. It is at this point that LDS scholarship needs a more adequate and comprehensive development and exposition. Matthews' book is illustrative of that need.

Part II of the book is perhaps the most controversial, in that it proceeds to examine the doctrinal contributions of the "New Translation." The controversial nature of this section (chapters 14–19) derives largely from the faith assumptions of the author. He brings to his task a basic framework that tends to minimize the value of what might otherwise have been a truly enlightening learning experience for the reader. The overriding presupposition of this part of the book is, in one form or another, "The Prophet, being a seer and revelator, would be given by the Lord certain information. . . ." Starting as he does from that premise, Matthews was relieved of the obligation to examine and appreciate the insights afforded within the vast stores of biblical scholarship that have accrued since the days of Joseph Smith. Such activity has blessed Christendom with a clarity of exegesis that simply must be in view when examining the significance of Joseph Smith's modifications of the King James text: we can truly understand the implications of Joseph Smith's changes only if we understand what the KJV really says.

Examples of the difficulties Matthews gets into in trying to defend, rather than trying to analyze and interpret, could be multiplied at great length. Romans Chapter 7 is an apt illustration. The composite effect of many historical, theological, and exegetical studies on this profoundly intricate subject of the relationship between sin and the Law is to show that the Christian struggles throughout his whole life to perceive and appropriate into his being and relationships the meaning of the forgiving grace of God. This is sharply contrasted to, for example, Romans 7:14–17 in which Smith emphasizes the importance of good works in winning the favor of God and avoiding God's condemnation. At this point, it appears to me, Smith is accommodating Paul's radical gospel of grace to a works-righteousness gospel more nearly akin to the Old Testament and the Book of Mormon. In this sense, then, Smith needs not to be defended (and, thereby Paul misunderstood), but to be understood as offering his people an alternative theological interpretation given under the inspiration of God, not in an absolute sense, but, as he, Joseph Smith, understood and interpreted that

inspiration. In short, LDS scholarship in areas of biblical exegesis and interpretation, needs to do its homework, taking more seriously the fruit of centuries of Christian scholarship and reflection.

Part III of *A Plainer Translation* offers appendices that are extremely useful to the student who wants to deal with textual variants among various MSS sources and published editions. Used with chapters 6–9 a whole new array of textual studies could come forth, further clarifying the basic nature and purpose of Joseph Smith’s “New Translation” of the Bible and its enduring values for our time.