

**A Study of the Text of Joseph
Smith's Inspired Version of the
Bible**

A Study of the Text of Joseph Smith's Inspired Version of the Bible

R. J. Matthews

This is the first of two discussions that report the results of a critical study of the text of what is popularly known as Joseph Smith's Inspired Version of the Bible.¹ An examination of this subject is invited by the Eighth Article of Faith of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints which declares officially that the Church accepts the Bible (any Bible) "to be the word of God as far as it is translated correctly." In this first discussion attention is given particularly to such matters as the historical importance of Joseph Smith's work with the Bible in relation to his larger mission as the first prophet of this dispensation, the extent of the textual changes effected by the Prophet, his procedure, the time involved, the question of completeness, and especially to the reliability of the printed editions published by the Reorganized Church.²

Joseph Smith's work with the Bible is closely associated with the other standard works of the Church and also with many of the doctrines held by it, and is thus inseparably connected with the history of the Church. For example, the Doctrine and Covenants has frequent reference to the Prophet's work with the Bible. In D&C 45:60–61, dated March 7, 1831, Joseph was instructed to begin working with the New Testament; in D&C 76:15, dated February 16, 1832, Joseph and in D&C 90:13, dated March 8, 1833, instruction was given Sidney Rigdon were working with the fifth chapter of John; concerning the books of the prophets of the Old Testament; in D&C 93:53, dated May 6, 1833, Joseph was told to hasten the work; and in D&C 124:89, dated January 19, 1841, mention is made of printing the work. In addition, there are several entire sections of the Doctrine and Covenants that were received directly as a result of the Prophet's work in revising the Bible. This is true of at least Section 74 concerning some of the writings of Paul, Section 76 about the degrees of glory, Section 77 explaining portions of the Book of Revelation, and Section 91 concerning the Apocrypha. Other sections that are related to the work of the Bible revision might also include 86, 113, and 132.

The Pearl of Great Price is another of the standard works of the Church that owes much to the Prophet's revision of the Bible. Both the Book of Moses and the twenty-fourth chapter of Matthew are extracted from the manuscripts of the Bible revision.

Although the Book of Mormon probably has little, if any, direct relationship to the revision of the Bible, the imperfect condition of our present Bibles is discussed therein. 1 Nephi 13 and 14 state that the Bible (or record of the Jews and of the twelve apostles, although originally correct and in a form that contained the plainness of the gospel of the Lamb) would become corrupted and thereafter be handed down through the generations in an imperfect condition with many “plain and precious things” removed from it. It is further stated that these plain and precious things would be available again through other records incident to the restoration of the gospel. (1 Nephi 13:39–40.) The “other records” referred to probably mean the standard works of the Church, and as shown above, these are closely associated with the Inspired Version of the Bible.

The Prophet Joseph makes frequent mention in his journal (now popularly called the *Documentary History of the Church*) of his special work with the Bible, and he particularly names it “a branch of his calling.”³ It is impossible to separate Joseph Smith’s work of revising the Bible from the other aspects of his mission in the dispensation of the fulness of times.

Records and reports left us by Joseph Smith and by others associated with him indicate that he was prepared by spiritual experience and by divine appointment to do the revision work with the Bible. They also suggest that the work constituted a learning experience for him. By this experience and process many new things were to be made known to him, and this it seems was a basic purpose of the work. At least this is evident from a statement in D&C 45:60–61 which gives the reasons for the Prophet’s work with the New Testament:

And now, behold, I say unto you, it shall not be given unto you to know any further concerning this chapter, until the New Testament be translated, and in it all these things shall be made known;

Wherefore I give unto you that ye may now translate it, that ye may be prepared for the things to come. (Italics mine.)

The Prophet also speaks of his divine appointment to “translate” the Bible in D&C 76:15:

For while we were doing the work of translation, *which the Lord had appointed unto us*, we came to the twenty-ninth verse of the fifth chapter of John. . . . (Italics mine.)

The Prophet likewise had great knowledge of the scriptures from the revelations of the Holy Ghost. In writing about the effects of his baptism and the reception of the Holy Spirit, he said:

Our minds being now enlightened, we began to have the scriptures laid open to our understandings, and the true meaning and intention of their more mysterious passages revealed unto us in a manner which we never could attain to previously, nor ever before had thought of. (Joseph Smith 1:74.)

Additional background development is explained in a series of articles written by Oliver Cowdery, published in the *Messenger and Advocate*, February through July, 1835, in which he tells of the instruction and explanations of the biblical prophecies that the Angel Moroni gave to Joseph Smith. These things are alluded to in the Prophet's own account, but the fuller exposition is given by Oliver, who states that the angel quoted and explained many passages from Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Psalms, in addition to Malachi, Acts and Joel.

According to the Prophet's journal and the dates written on the manuscripts of the Bible revision, the major portion of the work was done between June 1830 and July 2, 1833. Joseph was assisted in the earlier stages by John Whitmer, Oliver Cowdery, and Emma Smith; but after December 1830, the bulk of the writing was done by Sidney Rigdon. A large family-style edition of the King James version printed in Cooperstown, New York, in 1828 was used. The Prophet and Oliver purchased this Bible on October 8, 1829, from E. B. Grandin, at Palmyra, for \$3.75.⁴

In the margins of the Bible they placed check marks, crosses, and dots indicating the passages needing correction. They then wrote the actual corrections on separate sheets of paper. These sheets of paper, used in connection with the marked Bible, constitute the manuscript notes of Joseph Smith's revision of the Bible.⁵

Contrary to what may be popularly believed, the Prophet did not make one entire manuscript of the Bible. There are three separate manuscripts for the Old Testament and two for the New Testament. The first Old Testament manuscript consists of the revelation to Moses (Chapter one of Moses in the Pearl of Great Price) and the first seven chapters of Genesis written in full. The second manuscript consists of a revision of the first manuscript and is completely written out to Genesis 24:42. The third manuscript consists of a revision of Manuscript No. 2 completely written out through Genesis 24 and a set of notes continuing through Malachi.

We should call special attention here to the fact that the entire text was written in full only through Genesis 24; for the remainder of the Old Testament a shorter method consisting primarily of reference citations and brief notes showing only the points of revision was used. The accompanying photocopy of a page from the Bernhisel Manuscript (an incomplete handwritten copy made in Nauvoo in 1845 and now in the Church Historian's Office in Salt Lake City) illustrates this shorter method. (See p. 8.)

Of the two New Testament manuscripts, the first is of Matthew 1:1 to 26:71, written out completely. The second consists of a revision of the first manuscript and is completely written out through John 5. It continues with notes through the Revelation of John.

This knowledge of the nature of the manuscripts is indispensable for an understanding of the Prophet's procedure in making the revision as well

as of some of the problems associated with the publication of the printed editions of the Inspired Version. It is significant to note that where there are multiple manuscripts of the same chapters, the later manuscript is more extensive and contains additional revisions over the earlier.

The Prophet revised many passages by writing in the margins on the manuscript sheets and also by writing on additional scraps of paper and pinning them to the sheets. This is a strong indication that the work of revision was an on-going process that was never quite completed, and that, had the Prophet lived longer, he might have revised many more passages. It is likely that he worked on this task in Nauvoo, since it was left short of completion when he died. A January 12, 1843, notice in the *Times and Seasons* says that work was then being done “to arrange the Book of Mormon, translation of the Bible, Hymn Book, and Doctrine and Covenants for the press.” (DHC 4:493. Italics mine.) Furthermore, Dr. John M. Bernhisel stated that after the Prophet’s death Emma told him that the manuscript “was not prepared for the press, as Joseph had designed to go through it again.”⁶ The minutes of a meeting of the School of the Prophets in Salt Lake City, on June 20, 1868, record Dr. Bernhisel’s report that “the Prophet told him he wished to revise it.”⁷ The unfinished condition of the manuscript became a matter of considerable importance with regard to publishing the Inspired Version, and will be dealt with in greater detail later.

Emma Smith eventually gave the Prophet’s manuscript notes and the marked Bible to the RLDS Church, and they have them to the present day. In 1867 they published an edition of the Bible incorporating the Prophet’s revisions,⁸ having at least 3,400 verses in which the text differs from the King James version. Between 1867 and 1936 at least twenty-three subsequent printings of this edition were made from the same stereotype plates. In 1944 the RLDS published a “New Corrected Edition” which contains a number of variant readings from the 1867 first edition, and there have been eleven subsequent printings of this edition with some slight variation.

A major objective of the study mentioned at the beginning of this article was to discover the exact points of difference between the 1867 edition and the New Corrected Edition of 1944, and to determine, if possible, why there are differences, and also which of the variant readings most nearly represents the original notes of the Prophet. Since the Prophet’s manuscript and the marked Bible were not available for use in this project, the writer used the Bernhisel Manuscript to make the comparisons. The Bernhisel Manuscript is a first-generation copy of the original and has never been published or made available to the RLDS; therefore, it is an independent witness for the text of the Prophet’s original notes.

A word-for-word comparison of the two printed editions of the Inspired Version shows that there are variant readings in at least 352 verses, which is about ten percent of the total number of verses in which the

printed Inspired Version differs from the King James Version. Most of these consist of matters of detail, however, and should not be misinterpreted to mean a ten percent change in the text.

A comparison of the Bernhisel Manuscript with the two printed editions of the Inspired Version revealed some variant readings also; but again, most of the variants consisted of matters of detail that appear to be normal scribal mistakes and printer's errors. There are, however, several instances involving decisions by the RLDS publication committees for passages where the Prophet's notes are inadequate or vague. It is these items that have special interest and importance.

An analysis of the data obtained by the comparison demonstrated several things. First, insofar as the Bernhisel Manuscript has corresponding material, it generally supports the printed editions of the Inspired Version. Second, it shows that the Bernhisel Manuscript supports the 1944 New Corrected Edition in preference to the 1867 first edition of the Inspired Version. This was found to be the case in 49 verses, while only eight were found to the contrary. Following are two examples showing the Bernhisel Manuscript in support of the New Corrected Edition in preference to the 1867 edition. The corresponding passage from the King James Version is given for comparison. The reference is Psalms 19:13:

King James Version	Inspired Version (1867)
Keep back thy servant also from presumptuous sins;	Keep back thy servant also from presumptuous sins;
	Inspired Version (1944)
	Keep back thy servant also from presumptuous <i>acts</i> ;
	Bernhisel Manuscript
	- - acts - -

The 1867 edition simply follows the King James Version and fails to record the change specified in the Bernhisel copy of the manuscript. This change is included in the 1944 edition of the Inspired Version. An additional example is found in Isaiah 14:16:

King James Version	Inspired Version (1867)
They that see thee shall narrowly look upon thee, and consider thee, saying,	They that see thee shall narrowly look upon thee, and consider thee, <i>and shall say</i>
	Inspired Version (1944)
	They that see thee shall narrowly look upon thee, and <i>shall</i> consider thee, <i>and shall say</i>

Bernhisel Manuscript

-- shall -- and shall say --

It is quickly seen in this example that the 1944 edition follows the manuscript more closely than does the 1867 edition.

Following are two of the eight passages in which the Bernhisel Manuscript supports the 1867 edition in preference to the New Corrected Edition. The first is found in Isaiah 2:9:

King James Version

And the mean man boweth down, and the great man humbleth himself: therefore forgive them not.

Inspired Version (1867)

And the mean man boweth *not* down, and the great man humbleth himself *not*; therefore forgive *him* not.

Inspired Version (1944)

And the mean man boweth *not* down, and the great man humbleth himself *not*; therefore forgive *them* not.

Bernhisel Manuscript

-- not -- him --

The actual point of emphasis in this comparison is with the word “him” near the end of the verse. It is noted that the 1867 edition of the Inspired Version follows literally the notation on the Bernhisel Manuscript (and therefore probably also the original notes), although to preserve the plural sense of the passage “them” is preferable. In the 1944 edition the passage reverts to the reading of the King James Version and ignores the use of “him.” In this case the 1944 New Corrected Edition has the more grammatical reading even though it is at the expense of the Prophet’s.

Another example is found in Isaiah 33:18:

King James Version

... where is he that counted the towers?

Inspired Version (1867)

... where is he that counted *in* the towers?

Inspired Version (1944)

... where is he that counted the towers?

Bernhisel Manuscript

-- in --

The 1944 edition simply follows the King James Version, whereas the 1867 edition contains the word “in” as specified in the manuscript.

Since the Bernhisel Manuscript is an independent witness for the Prophet's original notes, and in view of the forty-nine instances in which it supports the New Corrected Edition to the eight in which it was opposed, one must conclude that the New Corrected Edition of the Inspired Version more accurately represents the Prophet's notes than does the 1867 edition. Discovery of this item alone made the study worth the effort. There were, however, other significant findings.

Not only does the study indicate the improved accuracy of the New Corrected Edition, but it also illustrates the unfinished nature of the original manuscript notes. In many instances the notes do not contain an entire passage, but only the scriptural citation with a word or two indicating the point of revision. In most cases this technique is adequate and there is no question about where to place the words, but in other cases it is not clear just where the words of the revision should be placed in the verse. At these points the RLDS publication committees were obliged to make some decisions of their own as to whether the words of the revision were simply to be added to the existing text or whether they were to replace some of the words of the existing text. Where the words are placed in the verse generally varies the meaning, and a number of the variant readings between the New Corrected Edition and the 1867 edition show that the thinking of the later committee sometimes differed from that of the earlier committee. Two citations illustrate this. The first is from John 20:17:

King James version	Inspired Version (1867)
Jesus saith unto her, Touch me not;	Jesus saith unto her, <i>Hold</i> ; touch me not;
	Inspired Version (1944)
	Jesus saith unto her, <i>Hold</i> me not;
	Bernhisel Manuscript
	- - hold - -

In the 1867 edition of the Inspired Version the word "hold" is added to the text in a manner to convey the meaning of "stop," whereas in the New Corrected Edition of 1944 "hold" is inserted in place of the word "touch," and has the connotation of "embrace" or possibly "detain." The Bernhisel Manuscript cannot assist in placing the word, but it does certify that "hold" should be placed somewhere. This example illustrates one type of decision that had to be made by the publication committees in preparing a manuscript for the printer, and attests to the unfinished condition of the Prophet's original notes. There could be no question that the Prophet knew exactly what he meant, but we cannot tell from the manuscript alone what that is.

A second example illustrating this problem is found in Romans 3:24 and could be important as a matter of doctrine:

King James Version

Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus:

Inspired Version (1867)

Therefore being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is *only* in Christ Jesus;

Inspired Version (1944)

Therefore being justified *only* by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus;

Bernhisel Manuscript

Therefore - - only - -

The point of the matter in this example rests on the placement of the word “only,” whether it is to replace the word “freely” or whether it is simply to be added to the words already extant. There is no question that “therefore” and “only” are the words of the revision; it is the placement of those words that constitutes the problem. It is evident that the later RLDS committee saw a different meaning in the passage than did the earlier committee.

In problems of this category there is no evidence that the publication committees had any intent to deceive or that they willfully altered the words of the Prophet, but only that they endeavored to present the actual sense of the revision as intended by the Prophet, whatever that was. Such judgments were necessary if there was to be a publication. The decisions of the committees may be correct or incorrect, but in any event they represent conclusions beyond that which can be substantiated by the Prophet’s actual notes.

In addition to the problem of the indefiniteness of some of the original notes of the revision, there is the perpetual problem of human weakness and fallibility. There were opportunities for human error in every stage of the printing process from the time the Prophet dictated the points of revision to his scribe until they appeared on the printed page.

When the RLDS decided to publish the Inspired Version, they considered it inappropriate to place the original notes in the hands of the printer, and therefore the committee commissioned the preparation of a special working manuscript from the original. After carefully checking the accuracy of this working manuscript, they delivered it to the printer. This was the only feasible way to do the work, but it also increased the possibility for human error. Anyone who has had experience in copying manuscript by hand, in setting type, and in proofreading galleys will appreciate the multiple chances for error that were inherent in the long journey from the

Prophet to the published page. No matter how careful and honest the copyist, the typesetter, and the proofreader, there may be a mistake of the hand or the eye, or a slip of the pen that will permit errors to enter the copy causing it to vary from the original. With a work as complicated, complex, and extensive as the Bible, it is next to impossible to expect a printed edition, especially a first edition, to be without some kind of error.

As one might expect, the 1867 first edition of the Inspired Version and the subsequent reprints from the same plates had a number of unintentional variants from the original notes. Some of these are as follows:

Genesis 11:5: Behold, *the* people are the same.

Genesis 14:17: And *Mechisedek*, king of Salem.

2nd Kings 1:10: If I be man of God.

(Should read: If I be *a* man of God.)

Psalms 109:3: . . . they spoke against me also with works of hatred.

(Should read: . . . with *words* of hatred.)

Isaiah 10:2: And they shall look unto *thee* earth.

(Should read: And they shall look unto *the* earth.)

Matthew 5:38: . . . neither by heaven, for it is God's *home*.

(Should read: . . . for it is God's *throne*.)

Matthew 13:19: . . . And endureth but for a *a* while.

In addition to the normal typographical and scribal errors in the 1867 edition, there was apparently a feeling in time that the publication committee had erred in its judgment in some of the indefinite passages of the original notes. Since there was also a desire for larger and more readable print, it was concluded that a second edition of the Inspired Version would at once be both more accurate and serviceable. Accordingly, a publication committee was appointed and a "New Corrected Edition" came from the press in 1944. This new edition corrected the typographical and scribal mistakes found in the 1867 edition, and also changed some of the passages that were ambiguous in the original notes. These were primarily matters of detail, often nondoctrinal, but in a technical sense they represent variant readings in the text of the printed editions of the Inspired Version.

Although the New Corrected Edition of 1944 contained none of the typographical errors found in the 1867 edition, human weakness and fallibility again manifested themselves in the form of several new typographical errors. This writer has identified twenty-six such instances which appear to be typographical and scribal mistakes which the proofreaders failed to catch.

When a second printing of the New Corrected Edition was issued in 1947 many of the typographical errors were corrected. In subsequent printings the number of typographical errors have become fewer. The latest printing, 1966, has the fewest number yet.

As a result of the study described in this report, it is concluded that the work of the Prophet Joseph Smith in making a revision of the Bible was of major significance in the establishment of the Church in this dispensation. The Prophet was prepared by spiritual experience and was given a divine appointment to do the work. The process was a learning experience for him, and much of the content of the Doctrine and Covenants and of the Pearl of Great Price came as a result of this work, making these standard works inseparably associated with the revision of the Bible. The work was substantial, the printed editions containing 3,400 verses that differ from the King James version. Most of the work seems to have been done in the early 1830's, but it is evident that the Prophet was doing some work with the manuscript as late as the early 1840's.

The Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints holds the Prophet's Bible and notes, and from these they published an edition of the Bible in 1867 and a New Corrected Edition in 1944. The two editions differ in 352 verses. Of these, the New Corrected Edition appears to be the more accurate representation of the Prophet's work and to contain fewer typographical errors. This conclusion is based on a comparison with the Bernhisel Manuscript which is a handwritten copy of much of the original and is held by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Salt Lake City. It is also significant to note that the Bernhisel Manuscript generally supports the text of the printed Inspired Version.

Because of the unfinished nature of the Prophet's manuscript notes which left some passages vague and ambiguous, judgments and adjustments had to be made by the publication committees, and since the final sense of these passages cannot be verified by the manuscript they are open to discussion as to the exact meaning.

Dr. Matthews is Director of Academic Research, Department of Seminaries and Institutes. He is the author of *A Look at the Inspired Translation* (1963), *An Appreciation of Isaiah* (1965), and *Miracles of Jesus* (1968), as well as the compiler of *Index and Concordance to the Teaching of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (1966), and *Who's Who in the Book of Mormon* (1966).

1. Joseph Smith's work with the Bible has been variously known as the "Inspired Version," "Inspired Revision," "Inspired Translation," and the "New Translation." Every reference to it in the Doctrine & Covenants and the *History of the Church* calls it a translation. This was also the name by which it was known in the early years of the Church. Since it was based upon the King James Version and effected no change of language, it has become customary in recent years to refer to it as a "revision" rather than a "translation."

2. The Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints is hereinafter designated by the abbreviation RLDS.

3. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts (2nd ed. rev.; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1957), Vol. 1, pp. 238–239 [hereafter referred to as DHC.]

4. This information is recorded on the flyleaf of the Prophet's Bible, and appears to be in the handwriting of Joseph Smith.

5. The writer is indebted to Mr. Richard P. Howard, Historian of the RLDS for the technical information about the original manuscript notes of the revision. Much of the information can be found in "Question Time," *The Saints' Herald*, May 1, 1966, p. 27. The writer has also had much personal correspondence with Mr. Howard on the subject.

6. L. John Nuttall, "Diary," Vol. I (typescript at Brigham Young University Library, Provo, Utah), p. 335, entry for September 10, 1879.

7. "Journal History of the Church," April–June, 1868, Church Historian's Library, Salt Lake City, entry for June 20, 1868, p. 1.

8. For a detailed history of the publication of the 1867 edition of the Inspired Version, see Reed C. Durham, "A History of Joseph Smith's Revision of the Bible," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, 1965. Durham's study delineates in considerable detail the financial problems involved in bringing the first edition to the press, and also the proposed attempt to publish a "teacher's edition."