

# SCRIPTURE TRANSLATION:

# INTO THE **Language** OF OUR **Heart**

**T**his experience is familiar to those who have been involved in translating the scriptures from English into other languages. It happens over and over:

A young Armenian holding a copy of the Book of Mormon only recently translated into his language approaches a member of the team who assisted with the translating: “Thank you,” he says. “I have read the Book of Mormon in English. I have read the Book of Mormon in Russian. I have read it in Ukrainian. But until I was able to read it in Armenian, I did not truly understand it. When I read it in Armenian, it finally made sense. It was like coming home.”

## **Coming Home**

If the gospel of Jesus Christ is our spiritual home, then it is only right that it feel comfortable and familiar. At home we rest. We nourish ourselves. We talk with those we love in the language taught us at our mother’s knee. This is the language of our heart, and since the heart is what the gospel must reach, reading the scriptures in the language of our heart is vital.

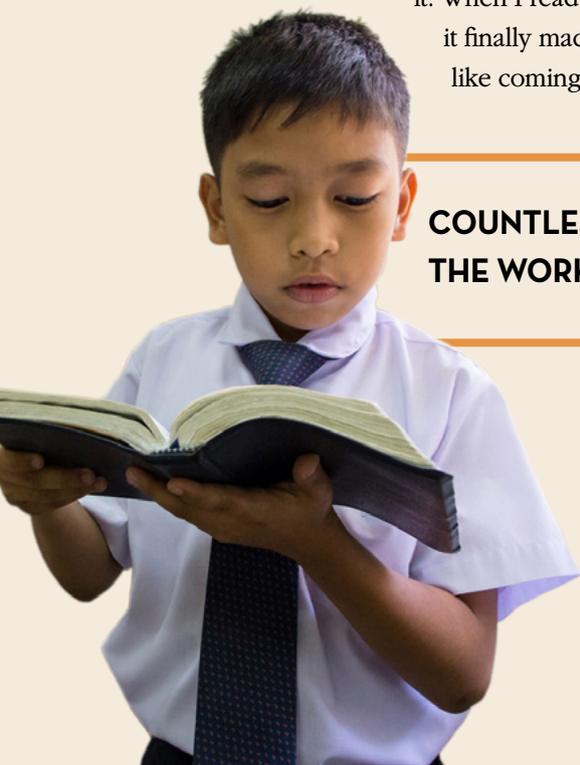
The Doctrine and Covenants suggests as much. There the Lord reveals that through the priesthood keys held by the First Presidency, “the arm of the Lord shall be revealed in power in convincing the nations . . . of the gospel of their salvation.

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**COUNTLESS EXPERIENCES SHOW THE LORD’S HAND IN THE WORK OF TRANSLATING HIS SCRIPTURES.**

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**By R. Val Johnson**  
Church Magazines





*The scriptures  
touch the heart  
more powerfully  
when read in our  
native language—  
the language of  
our heart.*



*The complete Book of Mormon has been published in 89 languages, and selections have been translated in another 21 languages.*

“For it shall come to pass in that day, that every man shall hear the fulness of the gospel in his own tongue, and in his own language, through those who are ordained unto this power, by the administration of the Comforter, shed forth upon them for the revelation of Jesus Christ” (D&C 90:10–11).

Jim Jewell, who worked on the scriptures translation team at Church headquarters, tells a story of how close to home the scriptures can come when translated into the language of the heart:

“In translating the Book of Mormon into Sesotho, the language spoken in the African nation of Lesotho, we needed to find someone to help us evaluate the work of the translation team. The project supervisor, Larry Foley, identified a member of the Church from Lesotho who was a graduate student at Utah State University. In Lesotho, education is conducted in English, so this lady and her children had studied in English from the first grade on, but they still conversed at home in Sesotho.

“She agreed to work on the translation. Her evaluation of the chapters we sent to her was indeed helpful. We routinely submitted specific questions regarding vocabulary and language structure to which she provided helpful commentary. However, we noted that she had highlighted in yellow many verses unrelated to our

questions. When we asked her about the highlighted verses, she said: ‘Oh, those are verses that touched my heart deeply which I had never fully understood in English. I highlighted them so that I could share them with my children.’”

### **A Model for Scripture Translation**

Translation of the Bible has a long and fascinating history, beginning

with the translation of parts of the Old Testament from Hebrew into Greek. Later, the Bible was translated from Greek into Latin and from Latin, Hebrew, and Greek into a myriad of other languages.<sup>1</sup> As a result, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints does not translate the Bible into different languages but adopts versions already accepted as authoritative by Christians speaking those languages.<sup>2</sup>

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**“FOR IT SHALL COME TO PASS . . . THAT EVERY MAN SHALL HEAR THE FULNESS OF THE GOSPEL IN HIS OWN TONGUE, AND IN HIS OWN LANGUAGE, THROUGH THOSE WHO ARE ORDAINED UNTO THIS POWER” (D&C 90:11).**

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# THE SCRIPTURE TRANSLATION PROCESS

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## Approval to Translate

- Scripture translation is requested by the Area Presidency when the number of Church members who speak the language is growing and when basic Church materials have been translated in the language.
- The request is reviewed by several Church headquarters committees, including members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles and the First Presidency.

## Translation Phases

### Introductory phase:

- An existing Bible translation is selected for Church use.
- Basic materials are translated first: *Gospel Fundamentals* (includes basic doctrines as well as the name of the Church, the sacrament prayers, the baptism prayer, and the Articles of Faith), *The Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith* pamphlet, and a web page on LDS.org.
- General conference talks may also be interpreted in the language.

### Phase 1:

- Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, Pearl of Great Price (about 10 years of work).
- Foundational texts such as “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” “The Living Christ: The Testimony of the Apostles,” selected hymns, and *Preach My Gospel*.



Most of the scriptural translation work the Church does, therefore, is of the Book of Mormon (the first to be translated), the Doctrine and Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price. The language from which these books are translated is English, the language the Prophet Joseph Smith revealed them in, the language of his heart. The process used to translate the scriptures into non-English languages should be familiar to students of Church history. It is much the same process the Prophet used to translate the Book of Mormon into English.

Joseph Smith was a humble, largely uneducated farm boy. But he had the qualities and potential the Lord needed for the work that needed to be done. Indeed, Joseph and his family were prepared and set in place to do this very work.<sup>3</sup>

Joseph was also given help—both divine and mortal—in translating the Nephite records. The angel Moroni visited Joseph yearly for four years before allowing him to retrieve the record. We don’t know all that Moroni taught the Prophet, but his visits apparently prepared him spiritually and mentally for the task ahead.<sup>4</sup>

The Lord also prepared “interpreters” ahead of time as a means to translate a lost language. Described as two clear stones bound in metal rims, these and a similar instrument called a seer stone helped the Prophet translate the Nephite record into English.

The Prophet didn’t detail the process; he simply testified that he translated the Book of Mormon by “the gift and power of God.”<sup>5</sup>

In addition to the divine assistance he was given, Joseph had mortal help in the form of scribes who produced the written copy that others ultimately typeset, printed, paid for, and distributed to the world.

Not unlike the preparation and help Joseph received in his translation work, those delegated with the task of translating the scriptures today are prepared by the Lord and given help in their work—both divine and mortal.

## A Revelatory Work

Infusing the rigorous translation process is a spiritual energy perhaps best described as “revelation by council.” The two or three people who are selected as translators team up with others in doing the work. They have Church headquarters supervisors, local reviewers, a lexicon for reference,<sup>6</sup> translation guides, computer programs, and ecclesiastical support that extends all the way to the First Presidency. (See the accompanying chart.) When the First Presidency gives final approval of a translation, the work is then typeset, printed, and distributed. Having been prepared in a digital format, it is also posted on LDS.org and in the Gospel Library app.

This collaborative effort is both intense and inspired. It involves



dedicated attention to the quality of the content and the quality of the physical format it is delivered in. Translations are reviewed at many levels, particularly at an ecclesiastical level that seeks the Lord's approval. Only when that approval is given does a translation move forward. While not precisely revelatory in the way the Prophet Joseph Smith translated the Book of Mormon, the process is clearly guided by the Lord—by His gifts and by His power.

This doesn't mean that a translation is perfect when first completed. Often, time and further reviews by those studying the scriptures suggest improvements in grammar and vocabulary or find typesetting or spelling mistakes. Rarely, changes are made in the explication of doctrine. When these are made, they are made under the guidance of the First Presidency.

### **The Lord Provides**

The Lord sustains this translation work in other ways as well. It is commonly reported by the translation team at Church headquarters that when a need arises, the Lord provides.

As one of many examples, a translator was needed for the translation and recording of Church materials in Mam (pronounced "mum," a descendant of the Mayan language, spoken in Guatemala). Among the first missionaries called to Guatemala was an elder whose grandfather

had spoken Mam. The missionary had been raised in a city and spoke only Spanish. But every night his grandfather would come to him in dreams and teach him the Mam language. This young elder became the primary translator of Mam in the Church.

Often, the work of translation is done at great personal sacrifice. Depending on financial situations, some translators donate their service and others are paid so they can have time to devote to translation.

The man who became one of the Urdu translators was converted to the Church in Pakistan while working as a teacher. As a result of his conversion, he lost his job; he lost his house, which was provided by the school where he taught; and he lost the schooling for his children. A Church translation supervisor approached him about serving as a translator and offered him a modest recompense. After working as a translator for a few months, the man visited with the supervisor and timidly asked if the supervisor would buy him a new ballpoint pen. The one he had been using had run out of ink. Only then did the supervisor discover and fix a clerical error that had resulted in the translator receiving much less than what he should have been paid.

But just as the Lord blessed Joseph Smith in ways that enabled him to complete his work, the Lord blesses

### **Phase 2:**

- Numerous other materials can be requested, such as the *Liahona* magazine, seminary and institute manuals, manuals for Sunday instruction, hymns and children's songs, temple and family history materials, and interpretation for stake and regional broadcasts.

### **Key Workgroups**

#### **Translation team:**

- Two or three temple-worthy Church members with adequate maturity in the gospel.
- Aided by a verse-by-verse translation guide, a lexicon, and a Church headquarters translation supervisor.

#### **Ecclesiastical review committee:**

- Three to five men and women who are Church leaders in the area.
- Called and set apart to help review the translation for readability and doctrinal accuracy.
- Wording changes are not made until the committee unanimously agrees and the changes are in harmony with the translation guide.

#### **Member reviewers:**

- Local Church members also review the translation.
- They give feedback on the clarity and appropriateness of the wording.
- Clarity of translation ensures that the Holy Ghost can bear witness of the truth of the teachings.

***The scripture translation process involves both the head and the heart, both mental skill and spiritual insight.***

His translators. For instance, the translator of the Latvian scriptures was a lawyer who had studied law in Russia, where he had been converted to the restored gospel. Back in Latvia, he was setting up his business. He was also serving as a branch president. He couldn't have been busier, but the Church needed him and his facility with English.

He asked for time to pray about the request because accepting it would, as he told the Church representative, "take food out of the mouth of my children." After praying, he decided to accept but asked the Lord to bless him with the means to do what is a difficult, spiritually demanding, time-consuming work.

He began going to his law office one hour earlier every day and using that hour to translate the Book of Mormon. He finished well under the five years the process usually takes. In fact, this was one of the fastest translations since Joseph translated the Book of Mormon in roughly 60 days.

Many more experiences could be related that illustrate the Lord's hand in the work of translating His scriptures. They all declare clearly that this is His work and that He cares deeply about it. He prepares people to do His work. He prepares the tools they need to hasten the work. And He inspires and blesses them along the way.

The result is a world enriched by the word of God, given to His children in the language of their hearts. ■

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**IN THE WORK OF TRANSLATING THE LORD'S SCRIPTURES, IT IS CLEAR THAT THIS IS HIS WORK. HE PREPARES PEOPLE WITH THE TOOLS THEY NEED TO HASTEN THE WORK, AND HE INSPIRES AND BLESSES THEM ALONG THE WAY.**

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#### NOTES

1. See the eight-part series, "How the Bible Came to Be," by Lenet H. Read printed in the *Ensign* between January and September 1982.
2. See, for example, "Church Edition of Spanish Bible Now Published," [mormonnewsroom.org](http://mormonnewsroom.org).
3. See Matthew S. Holland, "The Path to Palmyra," *Ensign*, June 2015, 24–29; *Liahona*, June 2015, 14–19.
4. See Kent P. Jackson, "Moroni's Message to Joseph Smith," *Ensign*, Aug. 1990, 12–16.
5. Joseph Smith, in introduction to the Book of Mormon. For an expanded description of Joseph Smith's translation of the Book of Mormon, see Gospel Topics, "Book of Mormon Translation," [topics.lds.org](http://topics.lds.org).
6. The lexicon defines every word in the English scriptures so translators can better understand the meaning of the words. Often, words have more than one meaning, so translators must depend on context, inspiration, and teamwork to identify the right solution. Occasionally, questions about meaning are resolved only by the First Presidency.

