

# The Book of Hebrews and the Joseph Smith Translation

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In this paper, I will review the most significant changes to the book of Hebrews made in the Joseph Smith Translation (JST). I will use the King James Version (KJV) as the basis for this comparison, referring to the original language Greek text only as necessary. My argument here is simple: a comparison of the JST to the KJV shows that the JST is neither a *restoration* of the original wording of the text nor a *clarification* of the text's actual meaning, but instead reflects *misunderstanding* of the text on the part of Joseph Smith. Thus, regardless of what theory of "translation" the LDS use to explain the JST, it does not hold up as an inspired work.

In what follows, for sake of clarity I will use the following typographical conventions. Old Testament quotations in the KJV of Hebrews are shown in boldface type. Text that has been moved in the JST from its place in the KJV is underlined. Text of significance that has been added in the JST is italicized. Note that in some cases the JST rewrites the KJV using some of its wording, so that the distinction between words added and words rearranged is blurred. Where possible I have arranged the text in lines for ease of parallel comparison.

| Hebrews 1:6-7 KJV   | Hebrews 1:6-7 JST  |
|---|--|
| <p>And again, when he bringeth in the firstbegotten into the world, he saith,<br/><b>And let all the angels of God worship him.</b></p> <p>And of the angels he saith,<br/><b>Who maketh his angels spirits,<br/>and his ministers a flame of fire.</b></p> | <p>And again, when he bringeth in the firstbegotten into the world, he saith,<br/>And let all the angels of God worship him,<br/><u>who maketh his ministers as a flame of fire.</u></p> <p>And of the angels he saith,<br/><u>Angels are ministering spirits.</u></p> |

In Hebrews 1:6-7, the author quotes two separate passages from the Old Testament (OT). There is actually some discussion about the precise source of the first quote, which is verbally similar to both Deuteronomy 32:43 and to Psalm 97:7 (96:7 LXX) in the Septuagint. Either of these verses might be the source of Hebrews 1:6. In neither verse, though, does anything like the last line of the JST of Hebrews 1:6, "who maketh his ministers as a flame of fire," appear. Smith has moved this line from verse 7 to verse 6.

There is no question about the source of the second quote, found in Hebrews 1:7: "Who makes his angels spirits and his ministers a flaming fire" (Ps. 104:4 [103:4 LXX]). The writer of Hebrews quotes the LXX here exactly except for the last two words, where he uses different grammatical forms of the same words:

ὁ ποιῶν τοὺς ἀγγέλους αὐτοῦ πνεύματα καὶ τοὺς λειτουργοὺς αὐτοῦ πῦρ φλέγον (Ps. 104:4)  
"Who makes his angels spirits and his servants a flaming fire"

ὁ ποιῶν τοὺς ἀγγέλους αὐτοῦ πνεύματα καὶ τοὺς λειτουργοὺς αὐτοῦ πυρὸς φλόγα (Heb. 1:7)  
 “Who makes his angels spirits and his servants a flame of fire”

The Psalm has the accusative form of the noun, *pur* (πῦρ, “fire”), modified by the participle *phlegon* (φλέγον, “flaming”). Hebrews has the genitive form of the noun, *puros* (πυρὸς, “of fire”), modifying the accusative form of the noun, *phloga* (φλόγα, “flame”). The difference is insignificant, and it is obvious that Hebrews is indeed quoting Psalm 104:4, as all commentators and other scholars agree. Even LDS apostle and theologian Bruce McConkie, in his commentary on the New Testament,<sup>1</sup> agrees that Hebrews 1:7 is a quotation from Psalm 104:4.

Joseph Smith, though, for some reason has broken up the quote from Psalm 104:4 and made the first part of it a second line of the quotation in Hebrews 1:6. He may have had some reason for making this change, but it clearly cannot have been to restore the text to its original wording or meaning. It seems that Smith may not even have been aware of the fact that Hebrews was quoting OT passages (we don’t see any changes to Psalm 104:4 or any other OT text that would be consistent with his change to Hebrews 1:6-7). Smith then produces his own version of the statement in verse 7, “Angels are ministering servants,” a conflation of the two lines of the original quotation, so that what appears in the JST is in fact not a quotation from the OT at all.

| <b>Hebrews 4:3, 5 KJV</b>   | <b>Hebrews 4:3, 5 JST</b>  |
|---|--|
| <p>For we which have believed do enter into rest, as he said, <b>As I have sworn in my wrath, if they shall enter into my rest:</b> although the works were finished from the foundation of the world.... And in this place again, <b>If they shall enter into my rest.</b></p> | <p>For we who have believed do enter into rest, as he said, As I have sworn in my wrath, <i>If they harden their hearts they shall not enter into my rest; also, I have sworn, If they will not harden their hearts,</i> they shall enter into my rest; although the works <i>of God</i> were <i>prepared, (or finished,)</i> from the foundation of the world.... And in this place again, <i>If they harden not their hearts,</i> they shall enter into my rest.</p> |

Here again, the book of Hebrews quotes from the OT to support its argument, and once again, Joseph Smith’s translation rewrites the quotation—without bothering to rewrite the OT passage quoted. Hebrews 4:3, 5 quotes twice from Psalm 95:11 (94:11 LXX). In this case, the quotation is verbally identical to the Septuagint rendering: “As I swore in my wrath, if they shall enter into my rest” (as the KJV literally translates). It would appear that Joseph Smith did not understand why the KJV read this way (“if they shall enter”—well, did they or didn’t they?) and so sought to clarify the text by adding quite a bit of material. Unfortunately, his efforts simply revealed his own lack of understanding of what is going on here.

<sup>1</sup>Bruce R. McConkie, *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary, Volume III: Colossians—Revelation* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1973), 141.

The KJV has translated the Greek very literally in these two verses, but in English the result is admittedly confusing. The reason for this is that the book of Hebrews is quoting the Septuagint, which itself translates the Hebrew text of Psalm 95:11 very literally. Evidently the Septuagint translators thought their readers would understand the literal rendering, but this doesn't mean the same would be true of English readers of the KJV almost two millennia later. F. F. Bruce explains in his commentary that the Hebrew idiom is “rightly translated, ‘They shall not enter.’” He further comments that the KJV was following the Geneva and Bishops’ Bible rendering of the verse, even though “Tyndale and Coverdale had already given the true idiomatic sense.”<sup>2</sup> In other words, the more idiomatic translation was already available in Joseph Smith’s day in other English translations. Yet Smith himself did not translate the text correctly; instead, he added words to the text that were not originally there. We know that they were not there because the writer was quoting Psalm 95:11, and the words are not there, either—not even in the JST. Oddly, Smith added 22 words into the middle of the quotation in verse 3, but only 5 words in the same place in the quotation in verse 5—making it abundantly clear that he was not restoring the original wording of the quotation.

| <b>PSALM 95:11 IN THE JST OF HEBREWS</b> |             |            |            |
|--|-------------|------------|------------|
| Verse in Hebrews                         | <b>3:11</b> | <b>4:3</b> | <b>4:5</b> |
| Words added to quotation                 | 0           | 22         | 5          |

Ironically, the same OT verse is quoted earlier in Hebrews, where the KJV used the more idiomatic translation: “So I swear in my wrath, They shall not enter into my rest” (Heb. 3:11). The Greek is exactly the same here as in Hebrews 4:3, 5, but the KJV translators, for whatever reason, gave a more literal, less idiomatic translation there than in 3:11. If Smith had simply been aware of the fact that Hebrews 3:11 had the same quotation as in 4:3 and 4:5, he might have realized that there was no need to add 22 words into the middle of the quotation in 4:3 or 4:5. Smith’s lack of consistency in “translating” this same quotation from Psalm 95:11 proves that he was not really translating the text at all—not even by divine revelation.

| <b>Hebrews 4:8 KJV</b>  | <b>Hebrews 4:8 JST</b>  |
|---|---|
| For if Jesus had given them rest, then would he not afterward have spoken of another day. | For if Jesus had given them rest, then would he not afterward have spoken of another day. |

Hebrews 4:8 poses a different sort of problem for the JST. In this instance, the JST reads exactly the same as the KJV. Yet just about everyone agrees that “Jesus” here is the Old Testament figure Joshua (the Greek name is the same for both persons). McConkie, in his commentary on the passage, agrees.<sup>3</sup> Here is a place where Joseph Smith, if his intent had been to clarify the KJV text, missed an easy and golden opportunity.

<sup>2</sup>F. F. Bruce, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 95 n. 29.

<sup>3</sup>McConkie, *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary*, 153.

| <b>Hebrews 6:1a KJV</b>  | <b>Hebrews 6:1 JST</b>  |
|--|---|
| Therefore leaving the principles of the doctrine of Christ,<br>let us go on unto perfection... | Therefore <i>not</i> leaving the principles of the doctrine of Christ,<br>let us go on unto perfection... |

The problem here is that Smith did not understand the early 17th-century English of the KJV rendering of Hebrews 6:1. He thought “leaving” meant abandoning, whereas in this context it meant going beyond, not staying at the elementary level. Thus, Smith commented on his change as follows:

I believe the Bible as it read when it came from the pen of the original writers. Ignorant translators, careless transcribers, or designing and corrupt priests have committed many errors.... Look at Heb. vi.1 for contradictions—“Therefore leaving the principles of the doctrine of Christ, let us go on to perfection.” If a man leaves the principles of the doctrine of Christ, how can he be saved in the principles? This is a contradiction. I don’t believe it. I will render it as it should be—“Therefore *not* leaving the principles of the doctrine of Christ, let us go on to perfection; not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works....”<sup>4</sup>

Notice that Smith cites Hebrews 6:1 as an example of translators, transcribers, or priests introducing errors into the text of the Bible. This means that Smith’s change to Hebrews 6:1 cannot be explained away as merely updating the language of the KJV. Smith explicitly tells us that Hebrews 6:1 as it read in his day was in error and that he was correcting it.

The Greek word *aphiemi* (ἀφίημι) translated “leaving” can mean to abandon in some contexts, but in other contexts it can mean to “leave behind” in the same sense as in English, that of moving beyond something basic or elementary. (Thus, a teacher might tell her class, “Today we’re going to leave addition and move on to subtraction.”) This clearly is the meaning in context (as the relation between “leaving” and “let us go on” makes clear). Thus, the NET Bible translates, “we must progress beyond the elementary instructions about Christ and move on to maturity,” and a footnote comments, “*Grk* ‘Therefore leaving behind.’ The implication is not of abandoning this elementary information, but of building on it.”<sup>5</sup>

This understanding of the text was current in Smith’s day, so he could have known this just by studying available commentaries—or even by hearing a moderately well-informed sermon on the passage. For example, Matthew Henry (who wrote in the early 1700s, more than a century before Smith) had the following comment on the passage:

In order to their growth, Christians must leave the principles of the doctrine of Christ. How must they leave them? They must not lose them, they must not despise them, they must not forget them. They must lay them up in their hearts, and lay them as the

<sup>4</sup>Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, introduction and notes by B. H. Roberts, 2d ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1950), 6:57, 58.

<sup>5</sup><http://www.bible.org/netbible/index.htm>.

foundation of all their profession and expectation; but they must not rest and stay in them, they must not be always laying the foundation, they must go on, and build upon it.<sup>6</sup>

More than a century before Henry, Calvin made the same point:

Now, he bids them to leave these rudiments, not that the faithful are ever to forget them, but that they are not to remain in them; and this idea appears more clear from what follows, the comparison of a foundation; for in building a house we must never leave the foundation; and yet to be always engaged in laying it, would be ridiculous.<sup>7</sup>

Smith’s failure to understand this point is clear proof that he was not inspired in his “translation.” By adding the word “not,” he not only failed to clarify the text’s real meaning, he actually showed that he did not understand what he was revising. This is about as clear an example of an uninspired rewrite as one could imagine.

| Hebrews 7:3 KJV   | Hebrews 7:3 JST  |
|---|--|
| Without father, without mother, without descent, having neither beginning of days, nor end of life;<br><br>but made like unto the Son of God; abideth a priest continually. | <i>For this Melchisedec was ordained a priest after the order of the Son of God, which order was without father, without mother, without descent, having neither beginning of days, nor end of life; And all of those who are ordained unto this priesthood are made like unto the Son of God, abiding a priest continually.</i> |

In context, Hebrews 7:3 is a continuation of a description of the way in which Melchizedek, a somewhat mysterious figure whom Abraham met in Genesis 14, was a type of Christ. This comparison of Jesus to Melchizedek actually begins in the last verse of chapter 6:

Whither the forerunner is for us entered, *even* Jesus, made an high priest for ever after the order of Melchisedec. For this Melchisedec, king of Salem, priest of the most high God, who met Abraham returning from the slaughter of the kings, and blessed him; To whom also Abraham gave a tenth part of all; first being by interpretation King of righteousness, and after that also King of Salem, which is, King of peace; (Heb. 6:20-7:2)

The basis for this comparison is Psalm 110:4, which plays a prominent role in the argument of Hebrews 5-7:

The LORD hath sworn, and will not repent,  
 Thou art a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek. (Ps. 110:4 KJV)

<sup>6</sup>Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, at Heb. 6:1.

<sup>7</sup>John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, at Heb. 6:1.

The book of Hebrews quotes or alludes to this verse seven times in chapters 5-7 (all quotes from the KJV):

As he saith also in another place, **Thou art a priest for ever after the order of Melchisedec.** (5:6)

Called of God **an high priest after the order of Melchisedec.** (5:10)

Whither the forerunner is for us entered, *even* Jesus, made **an high priest for ever after the order of Melchisedec.** (6:20)

If therefore perfection were by the Levitical priesthood, (for under it the people received the law,) what further need was there that another **priest** should rise **after the order of Melchisedec**, and not be called after the order of Aaron? (7:11)

And it is yet far more evident: for that **after the similitude of Melchisedec** there ariseth another **priest**, Who is made, not after the law of a carnal commandment, but after the power of an endless life. For he testifieth, **Thou art a priest for ever after the order of Melchisedec.** (7:15-17)

For those priests were made without an oath; but this with an oath by him that said unto him, **The Lord sware and will not repent, Thou art a priest for ever after the order of Melchisedec.** (7:21)

The writer of Hebrews did not choose Psalm 110:4 at random. He has already based much of his argument for the supremacy of Jesus over everything in Judaism on Psalm 110:1:

The LORD said unto my Lord,  
Sit thou at my right hand,  
until I make thine enemies thy footstool. (Ps. 110:1 KJV)

Hebrews alludes to this passage in its opening statement, asserting that the Son has sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high (1:3), and quotes it explicitly in its opening battery of Old Testament proof texts (1:13) specifically in support of that assertion. The writer returns to this theme of Christ seated at the right hand of the Majesty immediately after expounding on his comparison of Jesus to Melchizedek (8:1; again, 10:12-13; 12:2). It would therefore not be too strong of a statement to say that the entire book of Hebrews is based on Psalm 110.

Now, why is this important? The reason is that Hebrews 7:3 is part of this extended treatment of Psalm 110 and its significance for understanding the superiority of Jesus, the Son of God, to anything in Judaism and the old covenant. Thus, Joseph Smith's rewriting of Hebrews 7:3 to say that Melchizedek "was ordained a priest after the order of the Son of God" has things stated exactly backwards. Seven times in Hebrews 5-7 the writer states that Jesus is a priest after the order of Melchizedek. He says this three times before Hebrews 7:3 and four times after it. His point is that Jesus' priesthood is typified by that of Melchizedek. Hebrews 7:15 is explicit on this point: Jesus is a priest who arises "after the similitude of Melchisedec," that is, with some

similarities to Melchizedek that make him a suitable type of Christ. By saying that Melchizedek “was ordained a priest after the order of the Son of God,” Joseph Smith reverses the statement found repeatedly in the context and totally misses the point.

Why did Joseph Smith make this change? Apparently he thought the wording of the KJV in Hebrews 7:3 meant that Melchizedek literally had no parents, birth, or death. Joseph therefore changed the text so that it was the priesthood order, not Melchizedek, that was eternal. The fact is that this is not what the text originally said or meant. Nor did it mean that Melchizedek literally was eternal.

Hebrews 7 uses a form of Jewish interpretation to interpret what Genesis says and doesn’t say as foreshadowing the coming of the Messiah. In other words, Melchizedek was a type of Christ (as 7:15 clearly indicates). The mysterious appearance of Melchizedek in the narrative of Genesis is the basis for this typological interpretation in Hebrews 7. All of the major human figures in Genesis are tied into some genealogical record; indeed, genealogies are a prominent part of the book (see Gen. 4-5; 10; 11:10-30; 25:1-4, 12-29; 35:21-26; 36; 46:8-27). In this context, the lack of any reference to Melchizedek’s parentage or lineage, his birth or his death, has typological significance: this mystery man of no recorded origin foreshadows the coming of the Messiah, who is literally eternal.

Joseph Smith didn’t understand any of this. He therefore altered the text to say something he thought made theological sense. In doing so, he showed once again that he did not have an inspired, supernatural understanding of the text of Scripture.

| <b>Hebrews 9:26 KJV</b>  | <b>Hebrews 9:26 JST</b>   |
|--|---|
| For then must he often have suffered since the foundation of the world: but now once in the end of the world hath he appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself. | For then must he often have suffered since the foundation of the world: but now once in the <i>meridian of time</i> hath he appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself. |

One LDS scholar cites this change as an example of a helpful “clarification” of the Bible in the JST: “Christ did not appear in the ‘end of the world’ to suffer for sins (Hebrews 9:26) but in the ‘meridian of time’ (JST Hebrews 9:26).”<sup>8</sup> LDS authorities and scholars alike explain the expression “meridian of time” to refer to a midpoint of history. The *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* says:

The meridian of time has been defined by one LDS apostle as ‘the middle or high point of that portion of eternity which is considered to be mortal time’ (*MD*, 1966, p. 486). It is the DISPENSATION in which Jesus Christ lived in mortality.... The word ‘meridian’

<sup>8</sup>Clyde J. Williams, “The JST and the New Testament Epistles,” in *The Joseph Smith Translation: The Restoration of Plain and Precious Things*, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Robert L. Millet, Religious Studies Monograph Series 12 (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1985), 226.

suggests the middle.... In the context of these events, the Lord’s mortal ministry took place near the meridian, or middle, of mortal time (*DS* 1:81).<sup>9</sup>

As the article explains, the notion that Christ lived at or near the midpoint of mortal history presupposes the belief that human history will eventually cover a period of about eight thousand years, from about 4000 BC (when Adam was traditionally thought to have been created) to about AD 4000—allowing between now and that endpoint for a literal Millennium and a period of unspecified length following it.

There are several problems with this revision of Hebrews 9:26, but the most basic problem is that it reflects a misunderstanding of the expression “end of the world.” The term “world” here translates the plural form of the Greek word *aiōn* (αἰών), “ages,” and the word “end” translates the Greek word *sunteleia* (συντέλεια), which means “end” as in “consummation” or “completion.” Hence, modern English translations render this expression “end of the age” (NRSV) or “end of the ages” (NIV) or “consummation of the ages” (NASB). The idea here is that the death of Jesus Christ heralded the end of this present age of darkness, sin, and death. Christ, Paul says, came to die for our sins so that “he might deliver us from this present evil world” (Gal. 1:4), that is, from this present evil age. The book of Hebrews opens by referring to the coming of God’s Son “in these last days” (Heb. 1:2). This age continues to exist, but the age to come has already broken into our world in advance, as it were, by the coming of Christ, so that this age is in its “last days” (however long they may continue).

I am sure that Smith thought he was removing a theological difficulty from the Bible by changing it so that it did not imply that the New Testament authors believed they were living literally at the time of “the end of the world.” Smith made similar changes elsewhere in the New Testament (e.g., 1 Cor. 10:11). But instead of rewording the text to express in better idiomatic English the meaning of the original text, as modern translations do, Smith altered the text by inserting a concept that is actually not found anywhere in the Bible.

| <b>Hebrews 13:5 KJV</b>   | <b>Hebrews 13:5 JST</b>   |
|---|---|
| Let your conversation be without covetousness; and be content with such things as ye have: for he hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee. | Let your <i>consecrations</i> be without covetousness; and be content with <i>giving</i> such things as ye have: for he hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee. |

There are two interesting, and mistaken, alterations to the text of Hebrews here. The first and most obvious is the replacement of “conversation” with “consecrations.” The KJV used the word “conversation” in a sense now antiquated, to refer to one’s lifestyle or conduct or behavior. Smith apparently understood this at some point, because he changed “conversation” to “conduct” in several occurrences in the epistles of Peter (1 Peter 2:12; 3:1, 2, 16; 3:11), though he missed a few (1 Pet. 1:15, 18; 2 Pet. 2:7). But he apparently did not understand this until he got to the

<sup>9</sup>Marshall T. Burton, “Meridian of Time,” *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 2:891-92, citing McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, and Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*.

Petrine epistles, and so this change appears nowhere before that point in the canon (2 Cor. 1:12; Gal. 1:13; Eph. 2:3; 4:22; Phil. 1:27; 3:20; 1 Tim. 4:12; Heb. 13:5, 7). The only occurrence out of these nine that Smith changed was Hebrews 13:5—not even 13:7, just two verses later. In Hebrews 13:5, Smith appears to have substituted the word “consecrations” because it sounded very similar to “conversation.” The word “consecrations” does not mean the same thing as “conduct,” and its use here is foreign to the context. The writer is telling his readers not to be covetous but to be satisfied with what they have, two opposite attitudes that he clearly contrasts here. Smith alters the verse into an exhortation not to be stingy in making financial contributions to the church—and this leads to the second alteration. Whereas what Hebrews 13:5 actually says is “be content with such things as ye have,” Smith changed it to read “be content with *giving* such things as ye have.” There is no justification for this alteration, and the one legitimate clarification that Smith might have made (changing *conversation* to *conduct*) he failed to do here.

These are just some of the more easily demonstrated errors in the JST. Again, it really does not matter, in these cases, whether LDS apologists take the view that the JST was a restoration of the original wording of the NT text or the view that the JST is an inspired commentary or expansion on the original text. Neither claim holds up in light of the fact that the changes examined here represent demonstrable misunderstandings of the text that do not fit the meaning of the text in context. Such errors, then, pose serious problems for the belief that Joseph Smith was inspired to produce his “translation” of the Bible.