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The Gift and Power: Translating the Book of Mormon

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The Gift and Power: Translating the Book of Mormon



Brant Gardner

I confess that I have been more afraid of doing this than I have any other presentation I have done and that's because we're talking about topics where you tend not to talk about we get someone embarrassed about the church we can talk about seer stones today. We don't like to talk about seer stones. We like to talk about the Urim and Thummim and there is a good reason of why we talk about the Urim and Thummim but we try not to call the Urim and Thummim a seer stone it can sound so much more elegant if we call it the Urim and Thummim. So that's kind of the problem and the basis that we are looking at.

What I want to talk about is the process of translating the Book of Mormon. Brother Brown started that process for us this morning and I was kind of encouraged by some of the questions because some of the questions that were asked of him are some of the ones that I really like to try and answer and that of course makes me nervous because what we really want to see if we can do is talk about how seer stones work and how you would translate with one and believe it or not we're going to come up with the theory of how that's going to work.

First what I am not talking about. Kind of have to be with that because as Scott had mentioned we had for a little while a book for sale out there and it's becoming again at some point in time so this is a topic that I have written book about and there is no way that in this amount of time we're going to be able to talk about everything that we try to cover in the book, so there are certain things that you can't cover, one of the things that I didn't put on the slide that is however very important. One of the

things that I couldn't cover the book and I am not going to cover now is a very important preliminary question to this entire issue of how was the Book of Mormon translated and that is that the question of how the Book of Mormon was translated is completely moot unless it was translated.

So the very first issue that we really ought to know about is can we say that the Book of Mormon was translated and neither here nor there in the book, well I actually address that. I start off in the book and I said no we're just going to take that as given, so you have to take that as given right now. Now I will also tell you that it's a given based on information that I have already researched and I have my reasons for having the security of knowing that the Book of Mormon is a translated ancient document. So I have seen the evidence it just not what we are going to talk about now. Now that we have a book that's a translation what do we do with it? Well the kinds of things we are not going to do with it is I am not going to talk about the stories of translation. There is a lot of interesting things there, how is it that the seer stones became a Urim and Thummim, those are things that I am looking at in the book but again we are in a short period of time, we got to get to the fun stuff.

The next one I don't want to spend too much time on but I do have to mention a little bit is what kind of translation was it. So we have the question of is it a translation that we are going to table for the moment but then the question becomes what kind of translation. For those of you read anything that people have talked about the nature of the translation of the Book of Mormon, there is all kinds of theories of what the relationship of our English text might have been to the text on the gold plates. One of the concepts is that it's a literal word for word, very, very close translation.

For those of you familiar with work the Royal Skousen's done, this is probably closest to what he would call an ironclad type, well actually it's kind of back from that. He has this concept of an "ironclad translation" this is just absolutely dictated and absolutely controlled and he said that the evidence shows that's not there. I would call that an inerrant translation and totally agree with him that the evidence is that we don't have an inerrant, perfect, God-breathed translation, something else happened. What I found is as I was looking through the definitions of what kind of translation it might be I found that the scheme of that Skousen that come up with wasn't particularly useful because what he defined as a "tight translation" that I would probably say is literal. His actual definition talked about the dictation not the translation and we really want to get to the translation. I want to talk about the relationship between the text in English to the text on the plates, not the text that Joseph spoke.

So what I am looking at is three different ways of translating that are all legitimately used modes of translation, each of which moves slightly farther away from its sourced text. So the literal one is the one that comes the closest to the source text. The functional translation is one that says I am following

the text but the vocabulary will be slightly different and modify, the syntax might be modified so that somebody else would understand it. But in general that's going to follow very closely without being a word for word literal translation.

And the last one a conceptual translation is one where you say, for instance, an idiom. I have to translate this idiom. What does it mean to be in hot water? If I translate that literally I am going to get it wrong. So I have to translate it in some way that conveys the information even though I am getting farther away from the words. And in some areas of a conceptual translation that might even drift a little bit farther away.

When I first started looking at the evidence to try and tell me what kind of translation we had in the Book of Mormon. My operating assumption based on everything that I had seen before was that I was pretty convinced from what I had seen that it was a functional translation. I started looking back through the data again and I started finding some things that told me it just wasn't that simple. And you've heard brother Ricks talk about the names and the fact the names are authentic ancient names. You know I have to agree with him. He is right. Not because I did the research, they did it and they showed it to me and I said "you guys are right", those are authentic ancient names. That is not a functional translation. That one is pretty literal. And it's literal and the connections are such that it's nonrandom so it's not one where I could say you know it just so happened you came up with a word that was similar.

Linguists will tell you that there are about a 5% similarity between any two languages that are totally unrelated, where you could find a word in one language and a word in another language that really look the same and might even have the same meaning and the languages aren't related at all. It just pure happen stance. There is only so many syllables we can pronounce and every once in a while somebody is going to put them together if you get enough languages together.

So one of the options might have been to say that some of these names were pure happenstance there is too many of them, the correlations are too tight. So for names there really is evidence, there is a literal translation. However, it's still the majority of the translation that the evidence that I have seen tells me that it's more functional rather than literal. What that means is it's going to follow the plate text but the vocabulary will be different. And one of the things we have to do as we start looking at how the book was translated is to come up with some sort of a theory that will say here is how was translated and here is why names are translated literally. Other things are functional and I've got at least two incidences where I think there is some conceptual translation of the Book of Mormon and I think we can talk about what triggered those and how those occurred as well.

All right. Let's go into the more interesting stuff. What we really do want to talk about are those two questions. How do seer stones work and how do you translate with one? I have been in several conversations with people and I am sure you've asked yourself the same kind of thing. Do seer stones work? Really hard question to answer because unfortunately it's the wrong question. Okay. Do seer stones work? If I really have to answer that question I have to say no, seer stones don't work.

A seer stone is a rock. We have seer stones. The church still has them, I've seen them. At one point in time I remember going on the temple square and going through the museum there and I saw one and I looked at it and I saw a rock. I didn't see the translation; I didn't see anything else I saw a rock. I can pretty much guarantee you that the vast majority of us as we would look at that rock would see, a rock. That does not mean that something isn't working because they were looking at the rock and that's what we have to look at. What we will be looking at is the idea that this whole concept of the seer stone working "It's the seer that's working," and it's stone that becomes the trigger that allows the seer to do what the seer does. So that's kind of step one and we will talk about how that happens.

Step two is once you know how a seer stone works, that isn't necessarily telling us how you translate with one and so that's the next question is how do you translate with the seer stone. All right. How do you see in a stone? I won't read this one, you can read it. This is from a modern seer, a modern scryer. This is from a guy who actually wrote a book on how to see, how to scrye. That's the word the people use for people who look in crystal balls or seer stones or any number of things. And as you can see there is a number of places where this particular quotation corresponds a lot to what we get for the descriptions of how Joseph Smith used the seer stone. He put them at the crown of his hat and stuck his head down in there.

Now for those people who think that he might have been reading something like a manuscript that he was hiding in the crown of his hat, how much light did he need? If you are putting your head down in the hat the purpose of that is to cut out light. I am going to have a real hard time seeing anything and the older I get the harder it's getting for me to see if there isn't enough light. So I am not getting light into my eyes, I am not seeing something and here is the secret of seer stones. Seer stones are used in ways that make it so you should not be able to see a thing. They create a contradiction in that the person explains what they are seeing at a time when they should not be able to see. And that happens with all of the instruments that they use for Scrying. So what you do with the seer stone? You stick in the hat. That wasn't only way Joseph used it.

Another way that Joseph used it that we have a record he held it up to a candle. Think about what happens when you hold a seer stone up to a candle. You have this black dot in the middle and the

corona of the light on the outside and you're disrupting your vision. The Romans used to have a sword and they take the sword, the polished blade of the sword and they glint the sun of it and stare at the glint of the sun. Okay that blinds you. So you are not going to see correctly.

The ancient Americans used polished obsidian. They would have concave mirrors and would use polished obsidian. First of all you would see something in it but if it's concave again something is disrupted there and so all though they were used as mirrors there is something else going on with the reflection that they are seeing. In the Salem witch trial they all began because there were girls who were trying to find out who they were going to marry and one of the ways is to do that was to see them by dropping an egg white into a glass of water. You stare through it and now that's going to mess up your vision, so everything about seer stones says you are messing up your vision. Okay. Everything about seer stones also tells you that the seer saw. So now we've got a problem how do you see when you can't see.

If we're going to understand how seer stones work we have to understand a little bit about how the brain operates because these things are happening in a very human brain. Every prophet that I am aware of has been human no matter how divinely touched, no matter how extra and extraordinarily human they might have been. They had a brain and that brain functions in certain ways and in certain cases probably in ways that are slightly different but very similar to our own. One of the important things about vision is that we have to understand that vision does not occur in the eyes, vision occurs in the brain. Although light comes into the eyes we only see what is transmitted to the brain, and is only a very small part of the data that actually comes in through the eyes. Not only that but the brain is creating vision.

For those of you who know something about the optic nerve, at the very back of the eye you have an optic nerve and that optic bundle comes in and attaches to the back of the retina and it creates a blind spot where we cannot see anything. How many of you know exactly where your blind spot is and see it all the time? Nobody. That's because the brain fills it in, the brain knows how to generate vision so that we see in a place in the brain where technically we can't see. So the brain is capable of generating the image. We do not see because light takes a picture and somebody inside our brain looks at the picture. The brain creates the vision, sometimes we see less than what's there.

There is a wonderful story about a group of psychologists that got together and they went in and took this test and they are all competing with each other to see who is going to do the best and simple one. They said what we want you to do is I want this group of people to account these three players

in black as they pass the basketball around and I want you guys to watch the guys in white as they pass this basketball around and I want you to count how many times they pass the basketball.

So they go through this whole process and they finish it up and everybody is comparing and somebody is one off and they said at the end of this okay now “how many of you saw the gorilla?” And they said “what you mean.” Nobody saw a gorilla. So they played back the tape and in the middle of it the guy walks out in the gorilla suit stands there for one second, beats on his chest and walks off and nobody saw him. Because our brain interprets the information coming in and it saw that irrelevance that “you don’t need that I won’t show it to you.” How does that happen when you are seeing in the brain?

There are certain people that have a brain structure that sees a little bit differently than many of us do. They can see in pictures; I am not one of them. They have what they call an eidetic memory, some people have called a photographic memory and that’s not correct, that’s not what it means. But it does mean that people are able to have and hold in their mind a very detailed picture of something so that when they recall it they can bring up the picture and describe it. And they talk about these people saying when they describe this mental picture that they are seeing that their eyes will move like they are scanning the picture but it’s not there. One of the descriptions of one the man who had this capability, who had this fantastic memory and I am not suggesting the memory part but I am talking about the visual part.

Years ago he was able to tell people, out of this grid of numbers, he could give the list down, across, diagonally. Somebody had written it down and tested them a couple of years later. Except for a number or two that were poorly written he got them all right and they said well how did you do that and he said simple I just call up the blackboard, I can see it and I read it off. Now most of us can’t do that, but there are some people whose visual memory is sufficient that they can see a picture and they can read it. What I am suggesting is that when Joseph Smith uses a seer stone his vision is occluded but he sees in his brain a picture that allows him to describe it in detail that is much more vivid than the rest of us could. Anytime in the pre scientific world when they don’t know how he does this would say that the seer stones made it happen.

Close your eyes and I think you’ve had a pet cat or a pet dog, take a look at the back of your eyeballs and kind of figure out where the spots are, what kind of shape the ears were. Can you do that? The answer is, sure we all can. We can call up an image that we can look at and it’s not particularly vivid in many cases but if somebody says “what shape are beagles’ ears?” You call up the picture of a beagle and start looking at it and then describe it. Okay. So we take this memory of things

that we have seen and we store it and we can reverse the process and create a picture when there is nothing coming into our eyes, so the brain can generate an image.

How many of you dreamed last night? Yeah we all do but remembered it or not, right. In your dreams how many of you actually saw action happening. Now some people are good they can dream in color. I have no idea whether I dream in color or not because I am partially color blind, I don't even see in color but what happens is you see things happening, I see stories occurring. My eyes are pretty closed about that time but I am seeing something because vision occurs in the brain. So once we know that you can reverse that process and instead of light coming into the eyes to generate vision we can have something in the brain that will generate vision that we can see when we cannot see, that's how seer stones work. They all work on the principle that everybody knows who sees that process that you can't see through your eyes. So what you are describing and seeing has to come through some other means and depending on what culture you are in and when you are there they'll have different explanation for how that happens. It was the gods, the spirits, it's something extra and that mechanism is what starts the process for understanding how Joseph is going to use the seer stone.

Now we have had people who have been scrying and using these methods for thousands of years in every culture around the world. This idea that you would see in a stone or see in a blade or see in a blot of ink or a polished thumbnail, all of those things are recorded and they happen in multiple cultures and people know they see these things. It's not going to be that widespread if it doesn't happen. This is human nature we're talking about.

Now we can also know that it's not normal because people see these and they know that they can't do it but somebody else does. So that process is there. Regardless of that, none of them have translated the Book of Mormon, just one. If you take away Mosiah translating the plates we have only Joseph Smith whoever translated with that method. Go to Mosiah we got two. So if nobody else has translated how do you translate?

Now we have to talk about language. Where does language come from? One of the questions that was asked earlier of Brother Brown is can you think without language? Amazingly we have a hard time understanding that we can think without language. The problem is we all do, we all think prior to language. One of the things that Steven Pinker that I am quoting up here mention he said "everyone of us have had the experience of saying oh that wasn't what I meant to say, we've said something but whatever came out of mouth wasn't what we intended." Which means that there has to be a meant to say before it meant and it just come out of our mouth and I would suggest that in many cases there is meaning that occurs prior to the time that we can express it.

Think of the number of times that people have had spiritual experiences and they know they've had them and the burning has been there and it's been filling their soul and they try to explain it and words fail. That doesn't mean they didn't experience it, that doesn't mean it wasn't real. It means that there is comprehension and understanding that surpasses language and they haven't been able to translate it. So we have something that occurs before language is generated and in his terms Pinker calls it "mentalese" say this is how we think, we think in this pre language subset.

Now one of the other things that's fascinating is that as you see how the brain works that a lot of what we think occurs below the level of consciousness. So that what will happen is somebody will say, "what was the word for that?" And you go "if you hadn't asked, I would have known. I know the answer to that, come back at about an hour or two and it will come." And then what happens as you forget about it and a hour or two later all of a sudden you remember. Everybody has done this. That's because the brain keeps working on this thing in the background and doesn't tell us about it. It just keeps going, figures it out, puts everything together and goes up to the top and it says Eureka I've got it! Because there are all kinds of things that occur prior to the level that we are conscious of them and one of things he is talking about here is this idea of priming and they found out that there are people that will actually recognize sentences that they have not read because they contain words or concepts that they have read.

So we have a brain that is designed to interact with language and produces language but language is not its native storage mechanism, it generates language. Put those things together, how is Joseph Smith ever going to translate? How many of you have been reasonably fluent in more than one language? We should get a whole bunch of foreign missionaries here and a whole bunch of other people that have done it. Now how many of you who are not reasonably fluent with another language have struggled with the dictionary to translate. Okay. For those of you who are reasonably fluent and have trouble struggle with the dictionary you know the difference between those two.

If I am struggling with the dictionary I really don't know that language and I am dealing with it on a word by word basis, if I know the language I am not even thinking about. I remember one time when I was on a mission they asked me to translate for this one sister we had she was French and our zone conference were in English. And so I was supposed to translate the English into Spanish so that she could hear it in Spanish so that if she needed it she might translate in French which she knew Spanish well enough so she didn't have to go through that process. But you know when you are translating something live you don't have a time to think and so that word is this word and I should do it this way and you are concentrating on getting the information across. That's called translation, but it isn't translation where you say this word is that word.

Something occurs in your brain that is located in the concept of meaning and you take that meaning and express it in language. How did Joseph Smith translate? First of all did he translate? That's the question I say we had to pause it because there is no way to demonstrate that other than to take The Book of Mormon and go through it and say is that an authentic ancient record? The answer, I believe, is yes. So therefore he translated. How did he do it? Where do all this information come from.

The only explanation I can give you is the God gave it to him in pure understanding, and that pure understanding goes into his brain in the way that we store pure understanding. It goes into the brain in "mentalese." How is it then expressed in language? It is expressed in language in the same way that we express "mentalese" is. Into our language through the vocabulary, the sentence structures, the idioms to which we have access, based on our education. So how is it that the Book of Mormon contains revival language? It's part and parcel of Joseph's brain, part of his language. As soon as that's the meaning he is looking for those words come out.

How many of you have ever used a cliché? How many of know that you shouldn't and do it anyway? Because I come out of your mouth whether you care about it or not? Even if you don't want to use them they pop out because we have these phrases burned in our brain. They are part of our language and we hit the meaning and we pop them out we don't even know what the heck we said. Because that language, that meaning triggers that string and we are going to pop out that whole strings. So how does Joseph get that language? It is part and parcel of his brain. Of course he is going to do it that way. But the understanding comes from that which God gave him.

We need to start pulling whole bunch of things together here. Andrew Lang was kind of an interesting anthropologist at the end of the 1800, 1900s. He got interested in this whole idea of scrying and people seeing and stones and crystal balls and all of that. So he bought a crystal ball and in a very unscientific experiment he took his crystal ball and he handed a bunch of his friends and asked them what they saw. A whole bunch of them looked at the crystal ball and didn't see a darn thing. One of the things he said is you know if you look into a crystal ball he said if you try three or four times and you never see pictures you never going to sorry it just isn't going to work for you.

He said however several of his friends without any prompting, without being told what was supposed to happen would look into this thing and they would see pictures, so it was working. The one that was really fascinating was the young girl. He gave it to this young girl, the young girl looked at it and what she saw was a paper with writing on it that was so real to her that she turned the ball over to see the paper on the other side. Okay. Now how did she see the paper? Brain created it. What

is that have to do with Joseph Smith? Well in the discussion that Brother Brown was doing this morning we were talking about Joseph's translation the papyrus of John. Several of the descriptions that we have of how Joseph translated talk about him seeing words on Parchment. Where did they come from? Same places the girl saw the paper. How does he see something on paper? The brain generates it. Where do the words come from? Well the "mentalese" translates them, he gets language, the language is translated into something that he reads and he sees the words that he dictates to the scribe.

So people say well did Joseph Smith read the translation? All the evidence says yes. Absolutely he saw it. The question then is if he saw it did he translate? Absolutely the same way I translate from two different languages if I know them well, I understand it and I say it. He understood it and he gave it to us and we have it in his language therefore in his translation. So yes he saw a translation, yes he translated.

Here is the last thing that I was trying to do. What we've just been talking about and how does the seer stone work and how do you translate with seer stone. I actually toyed with the idea of reading two chapters and I figured that will put you all to asleep after dinner. So we didn't do that, but that's the information and there is a final chapter that says now that we have a theory for how Joseph Smith translated is that a productive theory? Can we use that theory to begin to explain the facets of the Book of Mormon that we see? Can we answer questions and let me do two of them for you?

Let's start with the hypothesis that the majority of the translation is a functional translation. One that, although it is an authentic translation of an ancient document may not have the precise words that were on the document. I am guessing that there is a very large majority of people here who have not read Allen Christenson translation to the *Popol Vuh*. I don't know why you haven't. The *Popol Vuh* for those who might not know is a Quiché document. Quiché is sufficiently different language that they use language in ways that don't translate very neatly into English and so what Allen Christenson did was something absolutely wonderful for people like me that really want to get into this he gave us two translations. He gave us a functional translation, he gave us a literal translation. You read the literal translation you go what and then you read his other translation in nice smooth English and if you go between the two you can tell that he is telling the same story and getting the same information but the sentences are dramatically different.

The Quiché sentences are much smaller, tighter and demonstrate a completely different understanding of literature and how would you turn a phrase, what the meaning might be and they are both translations. The majority of the Book of Mormon reads like a functional translation. It's nice

and it's smooth. Let's say that it was some language like Quiché, doesn't read like that at all, it reads like English. It reads like the King James Bible. Why does it read like King James Bible? The native language to Joseph of course that's what he is going to produce, it was scripture. Any time he produced scripture and it sounded like King James Bible because that's a scripture was supposed to sound like.

Again information comes into the brain, comes out. Why functional? Because the "mentalese" that we use to store information is designed to handle the gist and not the words. It comes into a brain that is created in such a way that what we understand is meaning, not specific vocabulary. So of course he's got meaning and of course in the translation of that meaning it's going to come out and whatever words Joseph Smith has to be able to communicate that meaning. I suspect that a scholar of a different language might translate it different way. Brigham Young said that if someone other than Joseph were to translate the Book of Mormon he has no doubt that it would be materially different than the translations we have. Of course it was in Joseph's words, it was what he knew.

Now that tells us why the majority of it was that way and I will confess that when I first started working on the project I was pretty convinced that Joseph only translated one way and I had to come up with an answer to how he translated. Then I started looking at the data and the data proved me wrong, data are funny things like that. And we have the names well if everything is functional how do you get a name? A name is a very different kind of animal and is stored in different structures in the brain. Names are not nouns, they are proper nouns and we remember them that way. In fact they are just finding out that there is now a cluster of things that all fire together and if we think of a particular person we think of this whole set of things. But still the name is a specific thing so when that fires it is qualitatively different in the brain storage mechanism than these meanings because it is a name not a description. And so why is it that we get this literal translation of names that we can go from that name back to the subject? It's the way names are stored. It's not surprising at all that's how we're going to get that information.

So far I have been able to go through questions about the translation and apply that theory in concept in ways that begin to answer facets of the text. That doesn't say that it's proof. When we were talking about someone in the message boards one of the brilliant anti Mormons said "you mean you've got these great theories that you can't prove." Yeah, you just can't prove historical theory, it just doesn't work. You can find out if it's productive and if it does something, if it answers the questions, but there is no way to prove this. The only person who really could have told us how he did it was Joseph Smith and I suspect that he did not understand fully how he did it either. But he did know one very, very important thing. He knew that he did not do it alone. So that when he was asked how he

did it, the only competent answer he could give was that it was through the gift and power of God and that is what we really need to know. Thank you.