

Joseph Smith's Emendation of Hebrew Genesis 1:1

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IN THE FALL OF 1980 I WAS A STUDENT in a biblical Hebrew course taught by Professor Keith Meservy at Brigham Young University. One day Professor Meservy shared with the class a letter that had been referred to him for a response. The letter described how a pair of sister missionaries had met a gentleman who taught Hebrew for a living, and how they had decided to impress him by sharing with him Joseph Smith's treatment of Hebrew Genesis 1:1 in the King Follett Discourse. The class collectively cringed, as we could guess what was coming. As we had anticipated, the Hebrew teacher was not favorably impressed by the prophet's performance, and the missionaries were stunned to learn of difficulties in Joseph's treatment of that text. Professor Meservy's response was to point out that Joseph was not translating the text as it stood, but was conjecturally emending it. This was a helpful response and probably the most that could have been said at the time, but, of course, it was also necessarily an incomplete response since the prophet's conjectural emendation of the text (as commonly understood) did not work in Hebrew either.

From time to time I have pondered how Joseph could have mangled the Hebrew so badly. For a long time I simply accepted the explanation given by Louis Zucker in his classic essay on Joseph's use of Hebrew:

It has not been my intention to imply that Joseph Smith's freehandling of Hebrew grammar and the language of the Hebrew Bible shows ineptitude. Professor Seixas was undoubtedly pleased with him as a Hebrew student. I simply do not think he cared to appear before the world as a meticulous Hebraist. He used the Hebrew as he chose, as an artist, inside his frame of reference, in accordance with his taste, according to the effect he wanted to produce, as a foundation for theological innovations.¹

1. Louis Zucker, "Joseph Smith as a Student of Hebrew," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 3 (Summer 1968): 53.

TABLE 1

Thomas Bullock
Report

I sup I am not alld. to go into investign. but what is contd. in the Bible & I think is so many wise men who wod. put me to death for treason I shall turn commentator today. I shall go to the first Hebrew word in the Bible the 1st sen: In the begining — Berosheat — In by thro. & every thing else. Roshed the head when the Inspd. man wrote it he did not put the 1st pt. to it. a man a Jew wltht. any authy. thot. it too bad to begin to talk about the head of any man. "The Head one of the Gods brought forth the Gods" is the true meang. of the word — if you do not believe it you do not believe the learned man of God — no man can tell you more than I do thus the H God brot. forth the Gods in the Head council — I want to bring it to English. Oh ye lawyers ye doctors I want to let you know that the H G. knows something as well as you do — the Head God called togr. the Gods & set in Grand Council &c

William Clayton
Report

I suppose that I am not allowed to go into an investigation of anything that is not in the Bible — you would cry treason. So many learned and wise men here — will go the the old Bible the very Berosheit. make a comment on the first sentence of the history of creation. Berosheit want to annalize the word — Be — in by through & everything else — rosh [Indecipherable] — the head. sheit — where do it come from — when they inspired man wrote he did not put the Be there — But a jew put it there. It read in the first — the head one of the Gods brought forth the Gods — is the true meaning — rosheet signifies to bring forth the Eloheim. Learned men cannt learn any more than what I have told you hence the head God brought forth the head God in the grand council. Will simplify it in the English language. The learned Doctors who have persecuted me I want to let you know that the H.G. —

The grand councilers set in yonder heavens and contemplated the creation of the worlds that was created at that time.

Joseph Smith Diary,
by Willard Richards

— the head, or the head one — The head one of the Gods, brought forth the Gods. — Dr & Lawyers that have persecuted. — The head one called the Gods together in grand council — to bring forth the world.

Wiford Woodruff
Journal

If I should say anything but what was in the bible the cry of treason would be herd I will then go the Bible, Barasheet in the beginning. Analyze the word in and through the head, an old Jew added the word Bath, it red the head one of the Gods, broat forth the Gods, I will transpose it in the english language. I want you to know & learn that the Holy Ghost knows something. The grand Council set at the head and contemplated the creation of the world,

I shod. not have brot. up this word ~~was~~ only to shew that I am right

Should not have introduced this testimony were it not to back up the word rosh — the head father of the Gods.

— In the beginning the head of the gods called a council of the Gods — and concocted a scheme to create the world.

The Gods came together & concocted the plan of making the world & the inhabitants,

now I ask all the learned men who hear me wher. the learned men who are preachg. Saln. say that God created the Heavens & the Earth out of nothing & the reason is that they are unlearned & I know more than all the world put togr. & If the H.G. In me com: more than all the world I will associate with it — What does Boro mean it means to organize same as you wod. organize a Ship. — God himself had materials to org. the world out of chaos which is Element & in which dwells all the glory — that nothing can destroy they never can have an ending they coexist eternally

Learned Doctors tell us God created the heavens & earth out of nothing. They account it blasphemy to contradict the idea — They will call you a fool — You ask them why they say don't the Bible say he created the world & they infer that it must be out of nothing. The word create came from the word Barau — don't mean so — It means to organize — same as man would use to build a ship — hence we infer that God had materials to organize from — chaos — chaotic matter. — element had an existence from the time he had. The pure pure principles of element are principles that never can be destroyed — they may be organized and re organized—but not destroyed.

Doctors say, — created the earth out of nothing. Borau. — creates. — it means to organized. — God had materials to organise the world. Elements — nothing can destroy, no beginning no end. —

An other thing the learned Dr says the Lord made the world out of nothing, you tell them that God made the world out of something, & they think you are a fool. But I am learned & know more than the whole world, the Holy Ghost does any how, & I will associate myself with it. Beaureau, to organize the world out of chaotic matter, element they are principles that cannot be dissolved they may be reorganized.

I suppose I am not allowed to go into an investigation of any thing that is not contained in the Bible, and I think there are so many wise men here, who would put me to death for treason; so I shall turn commentator to-day; I shall comment on the very first Hebrew word in the Bible; I will make a comment on the very first sentence of the history of creation in the Bible, Berosheit. I want to analyze the word; baith, in, by, through, in, and every thing else. Rosh, the head. Sheit, grammatical termination. When the inspired man wrote it, he did not put the baith there. A man, a Jew without any authority, thought it too bad to begin to talk about the head. It read first, "The head one of the Gods brought forth the Gods," that is the true meaning of the words. Baurau, signifies to bring forth. If you do not believe it, you do not believe the learned man of God. No man can learn you more than what I have told you. Thus the head God brought forth the Gods in the grand council. I will simplify it in the English language. Oh ye lawyers! ye doctors! who have persecuted me; I want to let you know that the Holy Ghost knows something as well as you do. The head God called together the Gods, and set in grand council. The grand counsellors sat in yonder heavens, and contemplated the creation of the worlds that were created at that time.

I should have not introduced this testimony were it not to back up the word Rosh, the head, Father of the Gods. I should not have brought it up only to show that I am right.

Now I ask all the learned men who hear me, why the learned men who are preaching salvation say, that God created the heavens and the earth out of nothing, and the reason is they are unlearned; they account it blasphemy to contradict the idea, they will call you a fool. — I know more than all the world put together and the Holy Ghost within me comprehends more than all the world, and I will associate with it. The word create came from the word baurau; it does not mean so; it means to organize; the same as a man would organize a ship. Hence we infer that God had materials to organize the world out of chaos; chaotic matter, which is element, and in which dwells all the glory. Element had an existence from the time he had. The pure principles of element, are principles that can never be destroyed. They may be organized and re-organized; but not destroyed.

I suppose I am not allowed to go into an investigation of anything that is not contained in the Bible. If I do, I think there are so many over-wise men here, that they would cry "treason" and put me to death. So I will go to the old Bible and turn commentator today.

I shall comment on the very first Hebrew word in the Bible; I will make a comment on the very first sentence of the history of the creation in the Bible — *Berosheit*. I want to analyze the word. *Baith* — in, by, through, and everything else. *Rosh* — the head. *Sheit* — grammatical termination. When the inspired man wrote it, he did not put the *baith* there. An old Jew without any authority added the word; he thought it too bad to begin to talk about the head! It read first, "The head one of the Gods brought forth the Gods." That is the true meaning of the words. *Baurau* signifies to bring forth. If you do not believe it, you do not believe the learned man of God. Learned men can teach you no more than what I have told you. Thus the head God brought forth the Gods in the grand council.

I should not have brought it up, only to show that I am right.

In the beginning, the head of the Gods called a council of the Gods; and they came together and concocted [prepared] a plan to create the world and people it.

Now, I ask all who hear me, why the learned men who are preaching salvation, say that God created the heavens and the earth out of nothing? The reason is, that they are unlearned in the things of God, and have not the gift of the Holy Ghost; they account it blasphemy in any one to contradict their idea. If you tell them that God made the world out of something, they will call you a fool. But I am learned, and know more than all the world put together. The Holy Ghost does, anyhow, and he is within me, and comprehends more than all the world; and I will associate myself with him.

You ask the learned doctors why they say the world was made out of nothing, and they will answer, "Doesn't the Bible say He *created* the world?" And they infer, from the word create, that it must have been made out of nothing. Now, the word create came from the word *baurau*, which does not mean to create out of nothing; it means to organize; the same as a man would organize materials and build a ship. Hence we infer that God had materials to organize the world out of chaos — chaotic matter, which is element, and in which dwells all the glory. Element had an existence from the time He had. The pure principles of element are principles which can never be destroyed; they may be organized and reorganized, but not destroyed. They had no beginning and can have no end.

I suppose I am not allowed to go into an investigation of anything that is not contained in the Bible. If I should, you would cry treason, and I think there are so many learned and wise men here who would put me to death for treason. I will, then, go to the old Bible and turn commentator today. I will go to the very first Hebrew word — *BERESHITH* — in the Bible and make a comment on the first sentence of the history of creation: "In the beginning. . . ." I want to analyze the word *BERESHITH*. *BE* — in, by, through, and everything else; next, *ROSH* — the head, *ITH*. Where did it come from? When the inspired man wrote it, he did not put the first part — the *BE* — there; but a man — an old Jew without any authority — put it there. He thought it too bad to begin to talk about the head of any man. It read in the first: "The Head One of the Gods brought forth the Gods." This is the true meaning of the words. *ROSHITH* [*BARA ELOHIM*] signifies [the Head] to bring forth the Elohim. If you do not believe it, you do not believe the learned man of God. No learned man can tell you any more than what I have told you. Thus, the Head God brought forth the Head Gods in the grand, head council. I want to simplify it in the English language.

O, ye lawyers, ye learned doctors, who have persecuted me, I want to let you know and learn that the Holy Ghost knows something as well as you do. The Head One of the Gods called together the Gods and the grand counsellors sat in grand council *at the head* in yonder heavens to bring forth the world and contemplated the creation of the worlds that were created at that time.

I should not have introduced this testimony, only to show that I am right and to back up the word *ROSH* — the Head Father of the Gods. In the beginning the Head of the Gods called a council of the Gods. *The Gods came together* and concocted a scheme to create this world and the inhabitants.

Now, I ask all the learned men who hear me, why the learned doctors who are preaching salvation say that God created the heavens and the earth out of nothing. They account it blasphemy to contradict the idea. If you tell them that God made the world out of something, they will call you a fool. The reason is that they are unlearned but I am learned and know more than all the world put together — the Holy Ghost does, anyhow. If the Holy Ghost in me comprehends more than all the world, I will associate myself with it.

You ask them why, and they say, "Doesn't the Bible say He created the world?" And they infer that it must be out of nothing. The word create came from the word *BARA*, but it doesn't mean so. What does *BARA* mean? It means to organize; the same as a man would organize and use things to build a ship. Hence, we infer that God Himself had materials to organize the world out of chaos — chaotic matter — which is element and in which dwells all the glory. Element had an existence from the time He had. The pure principles of element are principles that never can be destroyed. Nothing can be destroyed. They never can have a beginning or an ending; they exist eternally.

There is certainly an element of truth to this explanation in any event. I continued, however, to have the nagging feeling that this explanation was inadequate, that there was another rationale for Joseph's apparent garbling of the Hebrew.

I began to rethink this issue in connection with my experience in teaching an introductory stake institute course on biblical Hebrew from the fall of 1994 to the spring of 1996. The participants were not college students, but busy, working adults. We met once a week for an hour without significant outside homework, so progress was slow. Some of my students had expressed an interest in Joseph's commentary on Hebrew Genesis 1:1, so I undertook a review of what had been written on the subject. In that connection I also reviewed Joseph's experience in learning Hebrew in Kirtland, Ohio, from 20 November 1835 to the end of March 1836 as recounted in his journal.² I was particularly struck by the entry for 7 March 1836, which indicated that Joseph's class had translated Genesis 17 one day and most of Genesis 22 the next, after which Joseph privately read the first ten verses of Exodus 3 in preparation for the next lesson. As a fledgling Hebrew teacher struggling to help my class read even a single verse coherently, I now had a good idea of what it meant for a student to be able to translate whole chapters at a time, and thus of how far Joseph had presumably come in his Hebrew studies. He was obviously more advanced than my students, yet I was confident that, beginners though they were, my students would not have mangled the Hebrew as Joseph appeared to have done. This subjective observation led me to review all of the original manuscript evidence together in one sitting, and from that review I felt that I was able to see at least the outlines of what Joseph's original conjecture may have been, and how that conjecture had been badly misrepresented in the printed sources. Two later treatments made important advances in our understanding but are, I believe, both flawed. In this essay I review the three existing approaches to understanding Joseph's Hebrew conjecture, which I have labeled the "traditional interpretation," the "Ehat and Cook conjecture," and the "Kabbalistic interpretation." I then propose a new conjecture, which I believe better accounts for all of the available evidence.

Our first task is to recreate as accurately as possible what Joseph said on the subject. Table 1 sets forth the text of the three most relevant extracts from the King Follett Discourse, given 7 April 1844. The first four columns in the table represent the four manuscript reports of the sermon recorded by Thomas Bullock, William Clayton, Willard Richards, and

2. Dean C. Jessee, ed., *The Papers of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992), 2:87-203.

Wilford Woodruff as published by Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook on pages 340-62 in *The Words of Joseph Smith* (hereafter *WJS*).³ Bullock and Clayton had been assigned as clerks for the conference at which the discourse was given, Richards kept the prophet's diary, and Woodruff later entered his version of the sermon in his journal from notes he made at the time. From 23 to 28 April 1844 Bullock prepared the minutes of the conference based on a comparison of his own account with that of Clayton; these minutes were published in the *Times and Seasons*, 15 August 1844, which is the source for the fifth column.⁴ The sixth column derives from the *History of the Church*,⁵ and represents the "amalgamation" of the *Times and Seasons* minutes and the Richards/Woodruff accounts prepared in 1855 by Jonathan Grimshaw, a clerk in the LDS Church Historian's Office. This is the traditional text that has been followed in most printed versions of the discourse since Grimshaw's amalgamation was first published in the *Deseret News*, 8 July 1857.⁶ The last column is the more recent amalgamated text of the discourse prepared by Stan Larson in 1978.⁷ Table 2 sets forth the text of a parallel discussion in the prophet's 16 June 1844 discourse. The first column of that table represents Bullock's manuscript report,⁸ and the second column is the edited version in the *History of the Church*.⁹

To understand Joseph's treatment of the text, it is necessary to have a basic comprehension of the traditional translation of Hebrew Genesis 1:1. The Hebrew text may be transliterated as:

bēre'sīt bārā' 'ēlohīm 'et haššamayim w'et hā'arets

3. Ehat and Cook's work was published in 1980 in Salt Lake City by the Brigham Young University Religious Studies Center and Bookcraft.

4. See Van Hale, "The King Follett Discourse: Textual History and Criticism," *Sunstone* 8 (Sept. 1983): 6.

5. Joseph Smith, Jr., *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1978), 6:307-308 (hereafter *HC*).

6. For the publication history of the discourse, see Donald Q. Cannon, "The King Follett Discourse: Joseph Smith's Greatest Sermon in Historical Perspective," *Brigham Young University Studies* 18 (Winter 1978): 190-92. The most widely accessible printed source for the discourse today is probably Joseph Fielding Smith, comp., *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 342-62.

7. Stan Larson, "The King Follett Discourse: A Newly Amalgamated Text," *Brigham Young University Studies* 18 (Winter 1978): 193-208. Larson used the Bullock account as the base text, superimposing the Clayton version, comparing the Richards account, and finally considering the Woodruff account (which was somewhat less contemporary to the discourse than the other three accounts). Material added from the Woodruff account appears in Larson's text in italics.

8. As published in *WJS*, 379.

9. See *HC*, 6:475-76.

TABLE 2 (16 June 1844 Discourse)

*Thomas Bullock
Report*

HC, 6:475-76

Twice I will shew from the Heb. Bible & the 1st. word shews a plurality of Gods — & I want the apostate & learned men to come here — & prove to the contrary an unlearned boy must give you a little Hebrew — Beroshet &c In the begin. rosheit — the head — it shod. read the heads of — to organize the Gods — Eloheam Elohi. God In sing. heam, reanders Gods I want a little learning as well as other fools

Popes quot: Drink deep

all the confusion is for want of drinking and draught the head God — organized the heavens & the Earth — I defy all the learning in the world to refute me —

In the begin the heads of the Gods organized the heaven & the Earth — now the learned Priest — the people rage — & the heathen Imagine a vain thing — if we pursue the Heb further — it reads

The Head one of the Gods said let us make man in our image I once asked a learned Jew once — if the Heb. language compels us to render all words ending in heam in the plural — why not render the first plural — he replied it would ruin the Bible — he acknowledged I was right. I came here to investigate these things precisely as I believe it — hear & judge for yourself — & if you go away satisfied — well & good — in the very beginning there is a plurality of Gods — beyond the power of refutation — it is a great subject I am dwelling on — the word Eloheam ought to be in the plural all the way thro — Gods — the heads of the Gods appointed one God for us

I will show from the Hebrew Bible that I am correct, and the first word shows a plurality of Gods; and I want the apostates and learned men to come here and prove to the contrary, if they can. An unlearned boy must give you a little Hebrew. *Berosheit baurau Eloheim ait aushamayeen vehau auraitis*, rendered by King James' translators, "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth." I want to analyze the word *Berosheit*. *Rosh*, the head; *Sheit*, a grammatical termination, The *Baith* was not originally put there when the inspired man wrote it, but it has been since added by an old Jew. *Baurau* signifies to bring forth; *Eloheim* is from the word *Eloi*, God, in the singular number; and by adding the word *heim*, it renders it Gods. It read first, "In the beginning the head of the Gods brought forth the Gods," or, as others have translated it, "The head of the Gods called the Gods together." I want to show a little learning as well as other fools —

A little learning is a dangerous thing.
Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian spring.
There shallow draughts intoxicate the brain,
And drinking largely sobers us up again.

All this confusion among professed translators is for want of drinking another draught.

The head God organized the heavens and the earth. I defy all the world to refute me. In the beginning the heads of the Gods organized the heavens and the earth. Now the learned priests and the people rage, and the heathen imagine a vain thing. If we pursue the Hebrew text further, it reads, "*Berosheit baurau Eloheim ait aushamayeen vehau auraitis*" — "The head one of the Gods said, Let us make a man in our own image." I once asked a learned Jew, "If the Hebrew language compels us to render all words ending in *heim* in the plural, why not render the first *Eloheim* plural?" He replied, "That is the rule with few exceptions; but in this case it would ruin the Bible." He acknowledged I was right. I came here to investigate these things precisely as I believe them. Hear and judge for yourselves; and if you go away satisfied well and good.

In the very beginning the Bible shows there is a plurality of Gods beyond the power of refutation. It is a great subject I am dwelling on. The word *Eloheim* ought to be in the plural all the way through — Gods. The heads of the Gods appointed one God for us;

This verse is rendered in the King James Version (KJV) as "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth." The sentence begins with a prepositional phrase, *b^ere'sit* ("in (the) beginning"), which is formed by the prefixed preposition *b^e* ("in") and the noun *re'sit* ("beginning").¹⁰ The subject of the sentence, *'elohim* ("God"), is preceded in the word order by the verb *bara'* ("created"). There are two objects of the verb, each preceded by the (untranslatable) particle *et*, which marks the direct object, and joined by the conjunction *w^e* ("and"): the first is "the heaven" (*šamayim*, preceded by the definite article *ha*), and the second is "the earth" (*hā'ārets*, also with the definite article).

PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS

Joseph begins his analysis by breaking down *b^ere'sit* into three parts, as described in the Clayton report: "Be—in by through and everything else—rosh [indecipherable]—the head. sheit."¹¹ This tripartite division of the word seems to have been suggested by the explanation of *b^ere'sit* given by Joshua Seixas, instructor at the Kirtland Hebrew school, as described in his grammar.¹²

Having broken down *b^ere'sit*, the first change suggested by Joseph is the deletion of the preposition *b^e*. As recorded in the Bullock report: "when the Inspd. man wrote it he did not put the 1st pt. to it. a man a Jew with. any authy. thot. it too bad to begin to talk about the head of any man." Ehat and Cook, the editors of *WJS*, seem to have understood the abbreviation "pt." to mean "point." In *WJS*, p. 397n70, they state: "While in fact, the Dagesh' [or point] in the bosom of the letter Beyth [b] that begins Genesis 1:1 removes the aspiration of the first vowel,¹³ the Prophet says the B (meaning "in, by, through and everything else") should also be dropped." The suggestion seems to be that Joseph's argument was as follows: (a) the *dagesh* in the initial letter did not belong there and (b), in fact, the entire initial letter also did not belong and should be deleted. That Joseph was aware of the technical term "point" is evidenced by his descrip-

10. As we will see, the KJV probably mistranslates this verse, but for our purposes it is only necessary to understand the KJV treatment.

11. Note that Larson normalizes the last element of the word from "sheit" to "ITH," as the "sh" at the beginning of that element belongs at the end of the word "ROSH."

12. J. Seixas, *A Manual Hebrew Grammar for the Use of Beginners*, 2d ed. (Andover: Gould and Newman, 1834), 85 (hereafter *Hebrew Grammar*), where Seixas separates the *b^e* as a "prefix" and the *it* as a "termination."

13. I assume that they meant to say (somewhat awkwardly) that the *dagesh* removes the aspiration "of the first consonant," not "of the first vowel." The presence of *dagesh lene* renders the letter *bêt* a stop (pronounced with a hard b as in "boy"); its absence transforms that letter into its spirantized counterpart (pronounced with a b sound followed by the aspirate /h/, usually represented in English by the letter v).

tion of the characters on the Egyptian antiquities he possessed as being "like the present (though probably not quite so square) form of Hebrew without points."¹⁴ Nevertheless, it seems apparent to me that the abbreviation "pt." here does not stand for "point" but for "part," and the reference is to the entire preposition *bē* (the antecedent to "it" being the full word *bē-rē-šīt*). Larson correctly renders the abbreviation as "part," and both the conference minutes and Grimshaw, following the Clayton report and the Woodruff journal, correctly interpret the reference as being to the letter *bêt* (which is the name of the letter transliterated as *b*). The reference to the "first part" of the word is easily intelligible, as the preposition *bē* is an inseparable preposition that is joined directly to the noun it governs (in this case, *rē-šīt*). Joseph never said anything about the *dagesh* or point in the letter *bêt*; his argument was simply that the letter *bêt*, and thus the word *bē* (which was the "first part" of *bē-rē-šīt*), did not belong and should be deleted.

There are a couple of unusual textual circumstances here that conceivably may have influenced Joseph's deletion of the preposition. Although I am aware of no hard evidence that Joseph was influenced by either of these textual circumstances, I remember noticing them myself when I was a beginning Hebrew student, so I mention them simply as possibilities for further research. If we transliterate the first two words of Genesis 1:1 without vowels (which is the way those words would have been written originally), we get *br'šyt br'*; note that the first three letters of the first word are repeated, in sequence, by the three letters of the second word. It is possible that something about this repeating letter sequence suggested to Joseph's mind the potential for scribal manipulation. For instance, if the first word were simply *r'šyt* or, as Joseph claimed, *r'š*, then the first two letters of that word would have been identical to the last two letters of the next word. A scribe's eye could have picked up the *bêt* from the beginning of the second word and accidentally added it to the beginning of the first word. On this theory, the *bêt* preceding *rē-šīt* would have resulted from an accidental doubling of the *bêt* at the beginning of *bārā'*.¹⁵ Of course, such an error would have been highly unlikely at the beginning of a text, and the rest of the syntax in the sentence as it stands now would not have worked. If, however, as Joseph suggests, this

14. HC, 2:348. Seixas also refers to the *dagesh* as a "point"; see Seixas, *Hebrew Grammar*, 7.

15. In scholarly terms this could be described as dittography (or letter doubling) resulting from the combination of homoeoarchon ("like beginning") and homoeoteleuton ("like ending") in the juxtaposition of the words *r'š br'*, where the beginning of the first word is identical to the ending of the next word. In articulating this possibility, I do not mean to suggest that Joseph had necessarily thought through the scribal mechanics that could have led to the letter *bêt* being added to the word *rē-šīt*. If this repetition of letters influenced him at all, it may have simply looked suspiciously artificial to Joseph, who needed little pretext to exercise prophetic license in modifying the text.

text originally read differently than it does now, and if it were originally present in another source and, after the manipulation had occurred, incorporated into the beginning of this text (which would be consistent with the significant editorial processes assumed by the documentary hypothesis¹⁶ of the textual origins of the creation account in Genesis), then this suggestion is at least a possibility worth considering.¹⁷ Although it may be unlikely that the text was actually manipulated in this fashion by ancient scribes, what is significant for our purposes is the possibility that Joseph may have been influenced in his conjecture in some way by this repeating letter sequence.

One also cannot help but wonder whether Joseph might have been influenced to consider deleting the preposition by the absence of the article in the Masoretic Text. Presumably Joseph would have expected the word *b^erē'šīt* to correspond to the three English words "in the beginning," but in fact the word "the" is not there. The raised ^e in the transliteration is the half-vowel *š^ewa'* and indicates that the article was not explicitly present in the prepositional phrase; if the article had been present, the vowel in that position would have been *qāmet*s and the word would be transliterated *bārē'šīt*. That the Masoretic vocalization preserves an ancient tradition is shown by the Septuagint, which translates Genesis 1:1 into Greek without the article (*en archē*, as opposed to *en hē archē*; compare John 1:1, which follows LXX Genesis 1:1 in reading *en archē*). There was a tendency in antiquity to supply the missing article. Origen in his transliterations into Greek uses *bresith* (suggesting the absence of the article as in

16. The documentary hypothesis posits that the Pentateuch was developed from multiple documentary sources, classically referred to as J (the Yahwist document), E (the Elohist document), D (the Deuteronomistic source), and P (the Priestly source). For an extensive description of the documentary hypothesis and its development, see Roland Kenneth Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1969), 3-82.

17. For a known case of scribal addition of the preposition *b^e* to the noun *rē'šīt*, see Proverbs 8:22, which begins *YHWH qānānī rē'šīt darkō* (New English Bible: "The LORD created me the beginning of his works"). A manuscript tradition developed (reflected in the Syriac and some Targum and Vulgate manuscripts) that read *b^erē'šīt* for *rē'šīt* here (which is followed in the KJV: "The LORD possessed me in the beginning of his way"). See *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1990), 1285 at apparatus note 22a; Gary Anderson, "The Interpretation of Genesis 1:1 in the Targums," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 52 (1990): 24; C. F. Burney, "Christ as the APXH of Creation," *Journal of Theological Studies* 27 (1926): 167. In this case the addition of *b^e* reflects scribal assimilation to the wording of Genesis 1:1. In Proverbs 8:22 and the following verses, the argument is made that the Lord acquired Wisdom at the outset of the creation. Accordingly, these verses make profound use of the vocabulary of Genesis 1 (such as "earth," "heavens" and "waters"), including such specific allusions as *'al-p^enē t^ehōm* "upon the face of the depth" (Proverbs 8:27 = Genesis 1:2). It is interesting in this connection that these verses not only use the word *rē'šīt* without the preposition *b^e*, they also use the word *rō'š* twice, in Proverbs 8:23 (KJV: "beginning") and 8:26 (KJV: "highest part"). One wonders whether the word *rō'š* might have been a part of the vocabulary of the creation account as it was known by this author.

the Masoretic Text), but the form *bareseth* (suggesting the presence of the article) is attested in marginalia to Origen, and the Samaritan Pentateuch reads *bārāšit*, also suggesting the presence of the article.¹⁸ Perhaps Joseph viewed the absence of the article as evidence that the preposition had been improperly added to the noun.¹⁹ In reality the article is not present because *b^erē'šit* is not an absolute prepositional phrase, as the KJV renders it, but rather introduces a temporal clause: "When God set about to create heaven and earth ..." ²⁰

The second change suggested by Joseph is the extraction of the word *rō'š* (head) from *rē'šit*. This word is then made the subject of the sentence. The two words are in fact related, *rē'šit* being derived from the word *rō'š* with the added ending *it*.²¹ The word *rō'š*, though literally meaning "head," more figuratively may refer to one who is the first in authority or the chief person in a group, as in the expression *kōhēn harō'š* "chief priest." Therefore Joseph's use of the term to refer to a head or chief God among many Gods is a correct application of the word. In fact, the word in at least one instance has been applied to God; in 2 Chronicles 13:12, which in the KJV reads: "And, behold, God himself is with us for our captain" (*w^ehinnēh 'immanū bārō'š hā'ēlōhīm*), the word rendered "captain" is *rō'š*.²² In this passage God is the leader of a group including humans; Joseph uses the word to refer to God as the leader of a group including other gods.

These two changes (the deletion of *b^e* and the extraction of *rō'š* from *rē'šit*) are fairly clear. It is also fairly clear that the revised sentence in English is to begin "the Head one of the Gods brought forth the Gods," wording that is preserved in all four manuscript sources of the King Follett Discourse. Unfortunately, as we have suggested, the remainder of the

18. *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, 1 at apparatus note 1:1a; Fridericus Field, *Origenis Hexaplorum quae supersunt* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1875), 1:7.

19. Seixas, *Hebrew Grammar*, 54, explains how when prefixes such as *b^e* "expel the article [*h*] ... they take its pointing." Here the pointing for the article is not present.

20. E.A. Speiser, *Genesis, The Anchor Bible*, vol. 1 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964), 3.

21. The great semitist Wilhelm Gesenius, in his *Hebraische Grammatik* (originally Halle, 1813; translated in numerous editions, including *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar* [Oxford: University Press, 1966]), Sec. 76, no. 5, explained that "abstract" nouns may be formed from "concretes" by the addition of *it* (as in the case of the English terminations -dom, -hood and -ness), citing as an illustration *rē'šit* (*principium*) being derived from *rē'š* [= *rō'š*] (*princeps*). Moses Stuart, in his *A Grammar of the Hebrew Language*, 4th ed. (Andover: Flagg & Gould, 1831), 124, which was one of the grammars used by students at the Kirtland Hebrew school, makes the same point using the same example with nearly identical wording to Gesenius' (including describing the feminine ending *it* as a "termination").

22. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1906; rpt. ed. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1979), 911. The New International Version for this passage reads "God is with us; he is our leader," where "leader" translates *rō'š*.

argument is more obscure.

THE TRADITIONAL INTERPRETATION

The traditional understanding of the remainder of Joseph's argument is based on the Grimshaw amalgamation, which at this point follows Bullock's conference minutes in the *Times and Seasons*. There are essentially three aspects to the traditional understanding. First, the ending of *b^erē'sīt*, "sheit," is said to be a "grammatical termination." Although it is not obvious on its face what is meant by the expression "grammatical termination," the Seixas grammar uses the word "termination" to refer to the feminine singular ending *it*, both generally and specifically with respect to this word.²³ The implied argument is that this part of the word should be deleted. Second, the verb "brought forth" is understood to be a translation of *bārā'*. Third, *'ēlōhīm* is transformed from the *subject* of the sentence to its *object*, understood as a literal plural. Therefore, according to the traditional understanding, the text originally read *rō's bārā' 'ēlōhīm*, which is supposed to mean something like "the Head one of the Gods brought forth the Gods."

Louis Zucker states that "the syntax he imposes on his artificial three-word statement is impossible."²⁴ Although a syntactically possible (though nonsensical)²⁵ arrangement of words, Zucker's point is that, having cannibalized *bārā'* and *'ēlōhīm* from the remainder of the sentence, there is now no way to connect the first part of the sentence (about bringing forth the Gods) with the second part of the sentence (about creating heaven and earth). Perhaps even more significantly, the use of *bārā'* for "bring forth" (in the sense of a call to assembly) is also lexically unprecedented.

Zucker assumed that the traditional understanding of this text is an accurate reflection of Joseph's meaning. This is a natural assumption given the wording of the modern published versions, and one that has been widely held throughout the history of the church (and remains the most common understanding today). There are, however, important reasons why the traditional interpretation should not uncritically be taken as correct, and in fact may be erroneous. The aspect of the traditional interpretation that is most problematic is its treatment of the verb *bārā'*, both

23. Seixas, *Hebrew Grammar*, 21 and 85. As we have seen, the Gesenius and Stuart grammars also refer to this word ending as a "termination."

24. "Student of Hebrew," 52-53.

25. This three-word construction would be translated something like "a head created gods," which is a meaningless jumble of words. The most glaring internal problem in this construction is the lexical one of understanding *bārā'* to mean "brought forth." The real syntactic problem is in joining this three-word construction to the rest of the sentence.

by cannibalizing it from its correct position later in the sentence and by translating it to mean "brought forth" (in the sense of a call to assembly). This treatment, however, is not attested in the original manuscript evidence. If Joseph said "*baurau* signifies to bring forth," none of the manuscript sources picked it up; yet all four manuscripts, even the cursory Willard Richards report, dutifully report Joseph's mention of the verb *bārā'* later in the sermon (used in its correct context).

The traditional interpretation can be traced to one source: Bullock's conference minutes in the *Times and Seasons* (as opposed to Bullock's or any other manuscript report). Bullock, however, could not have made it up; it had to come from someone who knew some Hebrew and, specifically, from someone who had (1) learned from Seixas, (2) learned from a Seixas-trained student, or (3) taught himself from the Seixas grammar. We deduce this from three characteristics of the conference minutes that are not reflected in the manuscript evidence. First, the expression "grammatical termination" is partially attested in the Seixas grammar. As we have seen, other grammars of the day also used the expression "termination" to refer to the feminine singular ending *it*, so this in itself does not necessarily point to Seixas. Second, Bullock in his manuscript report spelled the word *bārā'* as "Boro," based on what he heard Joseph say, but in his conference minutes he spelled that word as "*baurau*." This is precisely the Seixas manner of transliterating the word, using "au" to represent the vowel *qāmets*.²⁶ Third, Bullock in his conference minutes spells the name of the second letter of the Hebrew alphabet "*baith*," which, once again, reflects the Seixas manner of transliteration.²⁷

It is unlikely that Bullock himself was the source for this additional information. He could not have attended the Kirtland Hebrew school, having emigrated from England to Nauvoo in 1843. His professional training was as a law clerk, and we have no indication that he had an independent knowledge of Hebrew.²⁸ Since the Seixas spellings would not

26. Seixas, *Hebrew Grammar*, 6. For additional examples of the influence of the Seixas transliteration method, consider the following: (1) Nauvoo (*nā'wū*, *pilel* of *nā'āh*, "be comely," as in Isaiah 52:7 and Song of Solomon 1:10), where the vowel *qamets* is represented by "au" and the vowel *šūreq* is represented by "oo" (this rare verb form is listed in Seixas, *Hebrew Grammar*, 111); (2) *gnolaum* (*'ōlām*, "eternity"; see Abr. 3:18), where the guttural letter *'ayin* at the beginning of a word is represented by "gn" (see Seixas, *Hebrew Grammar*, 5); and (3) *rau-keeyang* (*rāqī'a*, "firmament" or "(solid) expanse"; see Abr., Fac. 1, Fig. 12, and Fac. 2, Figure 4), where the letter *'ayin* at the end of a word is represented by "ng" (Seixas, *Hebrew Grammar*, 5).

27. Seixas, *Hebrew Grammar*, 6. The only manuscript report to record this word is the Woodruff account, which spells the word "bath."

28. For general background on Bullock, see Jerald F. Simon, "Thomas Bullock as an Early Mormon Historian," *Brigham Young University Studies* 30 (Winter 1990): 71-88, and the introductory essay in Greg R. Knight, ed., *Thomas Bullock Nauvoo Journal* (Orem, UT: Grandin, 1994).

have been available from Bullock's memory of the discourse, Bullock must have derived the information from some other source. If that other source were Joseph himself (who, of course, learned his Hebrew from Seixas at the Kirtland Hebrew school), and if Bullock correctly understood Joseph's explanation,²⁹ then the traditional interpretation reflected in the conference minutes would correctly reflect Joseph's understanding. In contrast, if someone else were Bullock's source, while that in itself would not prove the traditional interpretation to be erroneous, it would certainly open the door to the possibility that Bullock's source had misunderstood the prophet's Hebrew arguments.

In order to assess the likelihood that Bullock's source was Joseph or someone else, I present below a synopsis of relevant entries from Bullock's journal³⁰ for the period surrounding the conference and Bullock's preparation of the minutes:

[April 1844]

- 6 attended Conference as a Reporter - after rain down to Phelps - with El Taylor writing in German & Hebrew [Bullock then describes the rainstorm]
- 7 [Bullock continues to attend the conference as a reporter]
- 10 in morning met with the twelve to arrange the minutes ... [Bullock spends the period from the 10th until the 23rd planting his garden]
- 23 went to the mill - meeting - Joseph and others speaking then went with Elder Taylor to his house, home at 2, began writing out the minutes ...
- 24 ... afternoon at home writing out conference minutes ...
- 25 ... then to Elder Taylor with 30 pages of writing - staid till 3 o'clock [Bullock then returns home and continues writing out the conference minutes]
- 26 [Bullock spends most of the day at home writing out the conference minutes]
- 27 [Bullock spends the entire day hiking from 20 to 25 miles in search of his cow and enjoying nature; he does not appear to have worked on the minutes this day]
- 28 [Bullock and his wife attend a meeting at which Hyrum Smith

29. We cannot assume that Joseph's historical clerks correctly understood his Hebrew arguments. This point may be illustrated by the edited version of Joseph's 16 June 1844 discourse, reproduced in Table 2. When Joseph turns his argument from Genesis 1:1 to Genesis 1:26, instead of transliterating Genesis 1:26 a clerk has simply repeated the Hebrew transliteration of Genesis 1:1. This error still appears in the *History of the Church*.

30. Known for this period as the Journal of the Church Historian's Office, available at the LDS archives, Historical Department, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.

presides and Brigham Young speaks] ... in afternoon at home writing conference minutes. ...

In Bullock's account of his activities during this time period, several things stand out. First, following the conference, Bullock only mentions seeing Joseph once, at a public speech he gave on 23 April 1844.³¹ There appears to have been little opportunity for Bullock to have received a clarification of the prophet's Hebrew arguments directly from Joseph.

Our second observation relates to the possibility that Joseph had explained his conjecture to Bullock *prior* to delivering the King Follett Discourse on 7 April 1844. Van Hale suggests in passing that Bullock and Willard Richards may have prepared the Hebrew and German quotations for Joseph, based on the 6 April entry in Bullock's journal.³² This is a puzzling assertion, since, like Bullock, Richards did not attend the Kirtland Hebrew school, and it is therefore unclear how either man could have prepared the Hebrew quotations for the prophet. Hale's suggestion appears to be mistaken, as neither Joseph nor Richards was mentioned as being present. Although it is possible that W. W. Phelps, John Taylor, and Bullock³³ were engaged in preparing German and Hebrew quotations for the prophet's use the next day, this seems unlikely without the presence of the prophet (who presumably would have been mentioned by Bullock had he been there). Joseph only quoted a few words of Hebrew and less German, all of which he knew by heart; there would have been no need to have scribes writing out German and Hebrew texts for him. Furthermore, it must be remembered that Bullock spelled the verb *bārā'* phonetically in his conference report (Boro), and only spelled it with the correct Seixas spelling (*baurau*) later in his conference minutes. This suggests that Bullock received the added details reflected in his conference minutes (but not in his conference report) *after* the conference itself, not *before*. My impression is that the evening at Phelps's house was more a pleasant social event. The interest of Phelps and Taylor in studying German and He-

31. See WJS, 365 and 401. Ehat and Cook mention an address by Joseph on this date based on this entry from Bullock's journal, which they quote. No report of the content of this address has been preserved.

32. Van Hale, "The Doctrinal Impact of the King Follett Discourse," *Brigham Young University Studies* 18 (Winter 1978): 210n11.

33. The syntax of Bullock's 6 April entry is ambiguous; the word "writing" could refer to Taylor, Phelps, Bullock, or any combination of the three. As "writing" immediately follows "El Taylor," Taylor is probably included in the reference. Since we know that Phelps knew Hebrew and that Taylor knew German, this may be a situation where Taylor was teaching Phelps German and Phelps was teaching Taylor Hebrew. Although it is possible that Bullock was also involved in learning Hebrew from Phelps, my impression is that Bullock was a guest at this study session. I am not aware of any other indication that Bullock had studied any Hebrew.

brew had no doubt been sparked by Joseph's own enthusiasm for those languages. Thus it does not appear likely that Joseph personally explained his conjecture to Bullock on the evening of 6 April, although I know of no way to dismiss that possibility completely.

The third item of interest from these journal entries is that, while Joseph does not emerge as a likely source for Bullock's more detailed Hebrew information, John Taylor does. Elder Taylor did not attend the Kirtland Hebrew school himself, as it was not until 9 May 1836 that he was baptized in Canada by Parley P. Pratt. Bullock's 6 April entry suggests, however, that Taylor had been studying Hebrew with W. W. Phelps, one of the better students at the Kirtland Hebrew school.³⁴ There are several additional indications that Taylor had studied some Hebrew.³⁵ Bullock met with Taylor twice during the course of his preparation of the conference minutes; first, at the outset of the project on 23 April, and again on 25 April, when he had completed thirty pages of writing. There are at least three reasons why Bullock may have met with Taylor. First, as indicated by Bullock's 10 April entry, preparation of the conference minutes was under apostolic supervision, and Taylor may have been Bullock's contact with the Quorum of the Twelve. Second, Taylor edited the *Times and Seasons*, where the conference minutes would eventually be published in mid-August.³⁶ Third, Bullock had recently spent an evening with Taylor in which Phelps and Taylor were studying Hebrew. It is easy to imagine Bullock coming to the Hebrew portion of the sermon, realizing that the Clayton account was scarcely more illuminating than his own, and going to Taylor (who he knew was acquainted

34. On 19 February 1836 Seixas selected ten students for advanced instruction: Joseph Smith, Sidney Rigdon, Oliver Cowdery, W. W. Phelps, Edwin Partridge, William E. McLellin, Orson Hyde, Orson Pratt, Sylvester Smith, and Warren Parrish. See Jessee, *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 2:177. Zucker mistakenly refers to this group as the "first class"; what the prophet's Ohio journal indicated was that these ten were selected *from* the first class (meaning the *original* class as opposed to additional classes formed to meet student demand). The mistake is a minor one, however, as these ten students were clearly considered by Seixas as superior in ability to the others, and the "first class" is therefore an apt description.

35. Consider, for instance, the following three circumstances: (1) the copy of the Moses Stuart grammar on microfilm at the library of the LDS church historical department has John Taylor's signature on the flyleaf; (2) in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool, Eng.: Latter-day Saints' Bookseller's Depot, 1854-86) (hereafter *JD*), 1:25, Taylor describes in generic terms how useless it would be to have a knowledge of French, German, and Hebrew without also having common sense (Taylor knew French and German, so this quote may imply that he also had been exposed to Hebrew); and (3) in *JD* 25:213-14, Taylor describes how he heard Joseph speak to the effect that the suffix "mem" makes the word "Eloheim" a plural ("mem" being the name of the last letter of "Eloheim" and, once again, representing a Hebrew detail that is nowhere reflected in either the conference reports or the conference minutes, suggesting that Taylor had independent knowledge of such matters).

36. As the minutes were not published until more than a month and a half after Joseph's death, it is unlikely that Joseph reviewed them prior to publication.

with Hebrew) for editorial guidance.

For these reasons, I believe that the source for the glosses in the conference minutes that are not attested in the manuscript evidence was most likely John Taylor. Now, as I have indicated, it is possible that Taylor was acquainted with Joseph's Hebrew conjectures and understood them, but the probability that Taylor's understanding of Hebrew was superficial at best suggests that he may have misunderstood Joseph's argument.³⁷

An additional reason for rejecting the traditional interpretation is provided by Joseph's own specific, detailed, explicit discussion of the verb *bārā'* in the second part of his argument. Zucker complains that Joseph understands the verb *bārā'* narrowly—too narrowly in Zucker's view—and Zucker is right, Joseph does understand the verb *bārā'* in a narrow sense. The Hebrew verb *bārā'* cannot mean "to bring forth" in the sense of a call to assembly, and Joseph understood that perfectly well. It is doubtful, given his understanding of *bārā'* to mean "to organize" as in organizing raw materials into a ship, and given the weight he placed on that understanding in denying the dogma of *creatio ex nihilo*, that Joseph would have understood that word in the incredibly loose sense to mean a call to assembly. Such a double usage of the verb *bārā'* would have eviscerated the second part of his argument.

Although for the most part the original manuscript evidence does not support the traditional interpretation, there are two passages in the original manuscript reports that do seem to support that interpretation, at least indirectly. In his 16 June discourse, Joseph is reported as using the verb "organize," which was his favored translation of *bārā'*, with "the Gods" as object. This may suggest that Joseph did indeed conceive of the verb "brought forth" (which is also used with "the Gods" as object) in the first part of his argument as a translation of *bārā'*. A possible supporting passage is in the Richards account of the King Follett Discourse, where Richards represents Joseph as using the verb "to bring forth" with "the world" as object. That is, perhaps Joseph saw the verb *bārā'* as capable of being translated either as "organized" or as "brought forth." Although we normally think of the first part of the argument as "brought forth the Gods" and the second as "organized the heavens and the earth," if the verb is identical in both parts of the argument, we should not be surprised to find the English translations reversed, as in "to organize the Gods" or "to bring forth the world."

Thus we are faced with a situation where the available evidence seems to be contradictory. Portions of the original manuscript evidence

37. For a discussion of the factors contributing to this possible misunderstanding, see "A New Conjecture" below.

suggest that *bārā'* was not the verb rendered "brought forth" in the first part of Joseph's argument, while other portions suggest that it may have been. This sort of problem explains why different explanations of Joseph's Hebrew conjecture have arisen. It is difficult to know to what extent such contradictions may result from ignorance or ineptness on the part of the prophet or a lack of understanding and incomplete reporting on the part of his clerks. Perhaps at times Joseph played with the Hebrew and moved from one explanation to another.

On balance, however, I believe that Joseph did not understand the verb "brought forth" to be a translation of *bārā'*, and that the two passages which suggest that are scribal mistakes. Richards had correctly used "brought forth" at the beginning of his cursory report, and only a few lines later writes "to bring forth the world," so he may have been assimilating the second use of "bring forth" to the first. This is suggested by the more detailed Clayton and Woodruff accounts, which report that Joseph did not repeat the verb "bring forth," but said that the Gods in the grand council "contemplated the creation of" the world. Also we must remember that the scribe for the 16 June discourse was Bullock himself, and 16 June is *after* Bullock had completed his conference minutes and thought that he understood Joseph's argument. Therefore, Bullock's first use of "to organize" may have been a scribal anticipation (based on Bullock's own understanding) of the actual use of the verb "organize," which in fact appears a couple of lines later. That Bullock may have realized this to be an error is suggested by the fact that the *History of the Church* version, which Bullock himself would have either drafted or reviewed, corrects the verb from "to organize" back to "brought forth."

The very aspects of the traditional interpretation that are problematic are those that are not reflected in the original manuscript evidence and seem to be based on editorial glosses suggested by John Taylor, who had an exposure to Hebrew but did not have the strong beginner's knowledge that Joseph and the other leading students of Seixas had. In view of the apparent carelessness with which Joseph presented his argument, which was then filtered through someone with a superficial exposure to Hebrew, the potential for misunderstanding was great. Accordingly, I believe that the traditional interpretation is an error that originally made its way into the conference minutes and has been the source of much confusion ever since.

THE EHAT/COOK CONJECTURE

Ehat and Cook have gone a long way toward correcting this error by publishing the four manuscript sources and making them available for study. Based on the manuscript evidence, they clearly reject the tradi-

tional notion that *bārā'* was the verb rendered "brought forth." But if the verb was not *bārā'*, what was it? They suggest their own conjecture on this point at *WJS*, 399n107:

If we are following the Prophet's reasoning correctly, he believed that the word *re'shiyth* should have been the two words *re'sh* and *shiyth*; that the two words were originally there, and the letter [š], which is both the last letter of the first word and the first letter of the second word, was somehow dropped from one of the words thus fusing the two words into one. As Joseph Smith indicates, one meaning of the word *shiyth* is "to bring," and the word *re'sh* means "head."

The idea is that the text originally read *rō'š šīt*, and that the two words were combined by haplography of the letter *šin* (transliterated *š*) into *rē'šīt*. This is a clever conjecture, and I believe that Ehat and Cook are on the right track in rejecting the traditional interpretation, relying closely on the manuscript evidence and giving careful consideration to Joseph's perceptions of possible letter manipulation.

The rationale for the Ehat and Cook conjecture is twofold. First, the Clayton account preserves the words "rosheet signifies to bring forth the Eloheim." Larson editorially expands that sentence in a manner so as to be consistent with the traditional interpretation; Ehat and Cook have attempted to understand the sentence as it stands in the Clayton account, as if Joseph had said "rosh sheet signifies to bring forth the Eloheim." Second, in apparent confirmation of this approach, when Clayton records the tripartite analysis of "Berosheit," he writes the last element not as "eit," as we might expect and as Larson understood it, but as "sheit," keeping the "sh" at the beginning of that element, notwithstanding the "sh" at the end of "rosh," the middle element.

Although this is a step in the right direction, ultimately I believe that their conjecture is wrong. We cannot press the significance of retaining the "sh" at the beginning of "sheit," as Joseph appears to have had an idiosyncratic habit of pronouncing suffixes as whole syllables. Although the suffix itself of *b^erē'šīt* is *īt*, the final syllable is *šīt*, because a Hebrew syllable always begins with a consonant. Joseph does the same thing with a different word in his 16 June discourse, where he says "Eloiheam Eloi. God in sing. heam, reanders Gods." Ehat and Cook have a footnote following "heam," which begins "The transliteration should be 'elôhîym (pronounced el-o-heem')." The singular for god is simply 'êl (pronounced ale)." The first sentence of this footnote is incorrect, the second is misleading; Ehat and Cook misunderstand Joseph's argument here, which is adequately captured by Bullock's report. If I may paraphrase the argument by expanding it with bracketed material: "Eloiheam [is a literal plural meaning 'Gods.'] Eloi [Eloah] [is the word for] God in [the] sing[ular];

adding the suffix] heam reanders [the singular Eloah into the plural Elohim; that is,] Gods." The word "heam" should not be transliterated "elo-him," but rather is simply a reference to the male plural suffix *im*. Again Joseph idiosyncratically gives *him*, the final syllable of *ʾēlohîm*, for the suffix *im*.³⁸ Although it is true that *ʾēl* is a singular term for God (and is probably related in some fashion to *ʾēlohîm*), the singular of *ʾēlohîm* is not *ʾēl* but *ʾēloah*,³⁹ a synonym of *ʾēl*, as correctly explained by Joseph.

Another difficulty with the Ehat and Cook conjecture is that *šît* does not lexically fit the necessary meaning "to bring," meaning rather "to put" or "to place." This verb appears in the Seixas grammar,⁴⁰ but the meaning suggested by Seixas for the *qal* perfect form of the verb is "he placed, appointed"; to derive "he brought forth" from that verb is a stretch. Furthermore, the *qal* perfect form of this verb, which is the form given in the Seixas grammar, is *šāt* (without the middle letter *yôd*, represented by the diacritic mark over the letter *i* in *šît*); the form *šît*, which would be the form required for the Ehat and Cook conjecture, is an infinitive form, not the necessary perfect form.⁴¹

There is another important reason why the Ehat and Cook conjecture is wrong: Joseph himself tells us his understanding of the derivation of the letter *yôd* in *bʿrēʾšît*, and it has nothing to do with a verb. In his 16 June discourse he says "rosheit—the head—it shod. read the heads of" and then later says "the heads of the Gods appointed one God for us." The *History of the Church* account preserves the later plural but completely misses the former explanatory aside. Those six words—"it shod. read the heads of"—are significant. Joseph's English rendering of his conjecture in

38. Later in his 16 June discourse, Joseph repeats this usage: "if the Heb. language compels us to render all words ending in heam in the plural—why not render the first plural[?]" Although the spelling "heam" is Bullock's, Joseph must have pronounced the suffix with an initial "h" sound to result in that spelling. My conclusion regarding Joseph's pronunciation of suffixes as whole syllables is also supported by Stuart, *Grammar of the Hebrew Language*, 41, which, as an illustration of syllabification, provides the following analysis of Genesis 1:1: "[*rē*] *rē*, with a quiescent long vowel ... [*šît*] *shlth*, with the like vowel followed by quiescent Yodh ... [*šîf*] is a mixed syllable ... [*ʾēlohîm*] *ʾēlohîm*; [*ʿē*] with composite Sheva ... [*lô*] *lô*, simple syllable ... [*hîm*] *hîm*, with Yodh quiescent ... and Hhireq protracted ..., and in a mixed syllable."

39. Note that the singular form is given in the Seixas grammar on p. 85. *Eloi* is simply Bullock's phonetic spelling.

40. Seixas, *Hebrew Grammar*, 36.

41. "Hollow" verbs (verbs that have a *waw* or *yôd* used as a vowel for a middle letter) such as this use the infinitive construct as their lexical form (i.e., the form you would look up in a lexicon), whereas other verbs use the *qal* perfect third person masculine singular as their lexical form. Ehat and Cook apparently assumed that the lexical form *šît* was a *qal* perfect third person masculine singular; since the form required by the Ehat and Cook conjecture would be the perfect and not the infinitive, the middle *yôd* would not be present, and the notion that the *yôd* in the word *bʿrēʾšît* would have derived from the *yôd* in the verb would be impossible.

the King Follett Discourse suggested that he perceived the word $\bar{r}\bar{o}'\bar{s}$ to be in the construct state,⁴² but with only that account it would be difficult to decide conclusively whether he perceived $\bar{r}\bar{o}'\bar{s}$ to be (1) in construct with "of the Gods" or (2) an absolute noun (with "of the Gods" not explicitly present in the text but implied), because in the singular there is no difference between the construct and absolute forms of the word $\bar{r}\bar{o}'\bar{s}$ (the vowel *chôlem* being unchangeably long). In his 16 June discourse, Joseph begins the same way he did in the King Follett Discourse, with the singular "head," but then either reveals a little more fully the nature of his conjecture or suggests an alternative,⁴³ telling us that it should read "the heads of." This means that (1) Joseph conceived of this word as being a construct form,⁴⁴ and (2) the perceived source for the letter $\bar{y}\bar{o}\bar{d}$ in $\bar{b}^e\bar{r}\bar{e}'\bar{s}\bar{i}\bar{t}$ was not a verb but was the end of the male plural construct $\bar{r}\bar{a}'\bar{s}\bar{ê}$, which means "heads of." That this was Joseph's conjecture should be obvious to a Hebraist, but if further confirmation is necessary we find it in the Seixas grammar. Page 85 of the grammar contains Seixas' word-for-word explanation of Genesis 1:1. The facing page summarizes various forms explained elsewhere in the grammar. Roughly 10 percent of the examples on that page (eight out of 76 Hebrew words) involve some form of the word $\bar{r}\bar{o}'\bar{s}$. Near the bottom of the page is a section that illustrates the "terminations" of various words; in that paragraph we find this sequence: " $\bar{r}\bar{e}'\bar{s}\bar{i}\bar{t}$ beginning, [$\bar{s}\bar{i}\bar{p}\bar{r}\bar{ê}$] books of, [$\bar{r}\bar{a}'\bar{s}\bar{ê}$] heads of." This added insight seems to reject the Ehat and Cook argument from haplography.

Joseph did not understand the verb "brought forth" to be $\bar{b}\bar{a}\bar{r}\bar{a}'$, and he did not understand that verb to be $\bar{s}\bar{i}\bar{t}$. He gave the verb as "brought forth" in English, but he never did give the verb in Hebrew. His public explication of Hebrew Genesis 1:1 was simply incomplete. At this point Joseph was only commenting on the first word ($\bar{b}^e\bar{r}\bar{e}'\bar{s}\bar{i}\bar{t}$) for the rhetorical

42. Genitival relationships between nouns in Hebrew are expressed by juxtaposing the nouns in what is commonly referred to as a construct relationship. In any expression "x of y," the first noun x is said to be in the construct state (generally, a shortened form of the noun to the extent such shortening is possible), and the second noun y is said to be in the absolute state (the normal or lexical form of the noun). For instance, in the place name $\bar{b}\bar{ê}\bar{t}$ $\bar{l}\bar{e}\bar{c}\bar{h}\bar{e}\bar{m}$ (house of bread), the word $\bar{b}\bar{ê}\bar{t}$ is a construct form meaning "house of" (shortened from the lexical form $\bar{b}\bar{a}\bar{y}\bar{i}\bar{t}$, "house"), and the word $\bar{l}\bar{e}\bar{c}\bar{h}\bar{e}\bar{m}$ is the absolute form of the word meaning "bread."

43. I know of no way to discern for certain whether this is just a more detailed accounting of the conjecture that he had previously given in the King Follett Discourse or an alternative to that conjecture. That Joseph begins with the singular but then stops and offers the plural ("the head—it shod. read the heads of") suggests that he may have had "the heads of" in mind all along but only offered the simpler version on 7 April. It is possible, however, that Joseph modified his conjecture from a singular to a plural during the 70-day interval between the two discourses.

44. There would not appear to be an absolute noun for $\bar{r}\bar{a}'\bar{s}\bar{ê}$ to be in construct with; I argue below, in "A New Conjecture," that part of Joseph's conjecture involved supplying an absolute noun ("the Gods") at this position in the text.

purposes of (1) demonstrating his learning and (2) supporting his doctrine of a plurality of Gods. He does not give us the Hebrew verb of his conjectured introductory clause because the Hebrew verb is not to be found in the extant word *bē'rē'sīt*, and because most of his audience did not know Hebrew, and to go into more detail than he did would not have served his rhetorical purpose.

THE KABBALISTIC INTERPRETATION

The fundamental errors inherent in the traditional interpretation seem inconsistent with Joseph's apparent success as a student of Hebrew. It is difficult to fathom how Joseph could have made such errors. I have suggested that he did not make the errors attributed to him, but that they were an editorial mistake. A different approach was recently suggested by Lance Owens.⁴⁵ Owens quotes the relevant section of the King Follett Discourse, then states (correctly) that "by any literate interpretation of Hebrew, [the traditional interpretation] is an impossible reading."⁴⁶ Joseph could not have intended such an interpretation. As an alternative, Owens suggests that Joseph's interpretation was Kabbalistic; that, although it is nonsensical by normative Hebrew standards, it is consistent with an interpretation of Genesis 1:1 found in the Zohar, the foundation text of Jewish Kabbalah. Joseph may have been introduced to Kabbalistic concepts by virtue of his relationship with Alexander Neibaur, a Jewish convert to Mormonism who arrived in Nauvoo in April 1841.⁴⁷ Owens deduces on the basis of a piece written by Neibaur⁴⁸ that he may have had (or had access to) a library of Kabbalistic works. Various entries in Neibaur's and Joseph's journals show that they studied German and Hebrew together in 1844.⁴⁹

There are essentially three elements to Owens's Kabbalistic interpretation. First, and most important, "Bereshith bara Elohim" was interpreted by certain Kabbalists to mean something like "through the medium of the beginning, the Hidden Nothing emanated the Elohim."⁵⁰

45. Lance S. Owens, "Joseph Smith and Kabbalah: The Occult Connection," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 27 (Fall 1994): 117-94 (particularly 173-84).

46. *Ibid.*, 179.

47. Owens details Neibaur's background and relationship to Joseph in *ibid.*, 173-78.

48. "The Jews," *Times and Seasons* 4 (1 June 1843): 220-22, and 4 (15 June 1843): 233-34.

49. Owens, "Joseph Smith and Kabbalah," 177n128. The only such entry preceding the King Follett Discourse is that for 18 March 1844, which only mentions German; nevertheless, it seems reasonable to suppose that Joseph and Neibaur had already begun studying some Hebrew together by the time of the discourse.

50. Where "beginning" refers to Hokhmah or "Wisdom," the primordial image of the Father God in the Kabbalistic Sefirot; "Hidden Nothing" (that is, the unstated subject of the verb) refers to the vast unorganized mystery preceding creation; and "emanated" refers to creation in the sense of unfolding. See *ibid.*, 180-81.

This interpretation matches the traditional understanding of the King Follett Discourse by transforming Elohim from the subject to the object of the verb. Second, by virtue of a complex Kabbalistic anagram, Rosh is derived from Reshith.⁵¹ Third, Genesis 1:26, which Joseph cited in his 16 June 1844 discourse, is used in the Zohar as the basis for a discussion on the plurality of gods.⁵²

Owens's interpretation is intriguing. It seems to me that the strength of his argument is his recognition that Joseph's understanding was simply too great to have intended the traditional interpretation. This is a helpful contribution to resolving the problem. Ultimately, however, the Kabbalistic interpretation is beset with too many difficulties to be credible.

First, Owens's argument depends on the traditional wording. As I have shown, however, the traditional wording is likely an editorial gloss not intended by the prophet. If true, then Owens's strongest evidence becomes a coincidental oddity. A further problem is that Joseph's approach seems to be normative and rational rather than esoteric and mystical. Taking Owens's three elements in reverse order, we know that Joseph's introduction of the idea of a plurality of Gods predated Neibaur's arrival in Nauvoo, so Neibaur could not have been the source for that idea.⁵³ Although it is interesting that a Kabbalistic reading of Genesis 1:26 suggests a plurality of Gods, a rational reading of that verse could yield that idea just as easily. In his 16 June discourse, Joseph himself points to his learning that *'ēlōhīm* is plural in form as critical to the development of the idea, the groundwork for which had already been laid by Joseph's encounter with biblical references (both real and apparent) to a plurality of Gods while preparing his "new translation" of the Bible.⁵⁴ Neibaur may have seen the Zohar as supportive and confirming of Joseph's view, but Joseph arrived at that view independent of the Kabbalah.

It is unnecessary to posit an elaborate anagram to derive *rō's* from *rē'sīt*, since, as we have seen, the two words are in fact related. That Joseph analyzes *b^erē'sīt* in precisely the same tripartite manner as Seixas strongly suggests that Joseph's source for this point was the Seixas gram-

51. Ibid., 182. The full text of the relevant passage from the Zohar is quoted by Owens at 182n142 as follows: "A further esoteric interpretation of the word bereshith is as follows. The name of the starting point of all is Ehyeh (I shall be). The holy name when inscribed at its side is Elohim, but when inscribed by circumscription is Asher, the hidden and recondite temple, the source of that which is mystically called Reshith. The word Asher (i.e., the letters Aleph, Shin, Resh from the word bereshith) is anagrammatically Rosh (head), the beginning which issues from Reshith" (*Zohar* 1:15a).

52. Ibid., 182-83.

53. See Hale, "Doctrinal Impact," 224-25.

54. Compare, for example, the following KJV passages with their counterparts in the Joseph Smith Translation: Gen. 11:7, Ex. 7:1 and 22:28, 1 Sam. 28:13, and Rev. 1:6.

mar, not Kabbalistic speculation.

Joseph's English vocabulary for his suggested interpretation of Genesis 1:1a is much more straightforward than the mystical Zohar version. Owens argues that this is in essence a translation of the esoteric concepts of the Zohar into Joseph's simple frontier language, but this seems unlikely. Joseph's expanded conjecture in his 16 June discourse concerning the male plural construct *ra'sē* gives us an important window to his reasoning and suggests that Joseph's approach was normative and rational (subject, of course, to inspiration), based on his perceptions of possible letter manipulation and thoroughly grounded in the Seixas grammar.⁵⁵

In summary, there have been three principal interpretations of Joseph's Hebrew commentary. The traditional interpretation is nonsensical; people have either been unaware that it is nonsense in Hebrew, or have assumed that Joseph was mistaken in his Hebrew reconstruction. Ehat and Cook, based on the original manuscript evidence, reject the traditional wording, but offer in its place a conjecture that is unlikely. Owens follows the traditional wording, but suggests that that which is a mistake in normative Hebrew actually reflects a Kabbalistic interpretation based on the Zohar. I agree with Ehat's and Cook's historical judgment in rejecting the traditional wording, and have buttressed that view with evidence from Bullock's journal. I believe that Joseph's argument was based on normative Hebrew (as opposed to mystical Kabbalistic concepts) and can be partially recovered based on a careful review of the Seixas grammar (drawing on Abraham 4 for support).

A NEW CONJECTURE

The traditional interpretation has been so influential for so long that it is difficult to reassess the textual evidence from a fresh perspective. Nevertheless, if we ignore the printed sources and focus on the original manuscript evidence, the structure of the prophet's argument becomes clear. The first part of Joseph's argument, about the head one of the Gods bringing forth the Gods, is based entirely on his analysis of *b^erē'sīt*, the first Hebrew word. So in the Bullock account, Joseph says, "I shall go to the first Hebrew word in the Bible." After analyzing the word, he says, "'The Head one of the Gods brought forth the Gods' is the true meaning of the word," where "the word" refers back to *b^erē'sīt*.⁵⁶ He later says, "I

55. For a more extensive critique of Owens's argument, see William J. Hamblin, "'Everything is Everything': Was Joseph Smith Influenced by Kabbalah?" *FARMS Review of Books* 8/2 (1996): 251-325.

56. Bullock, in his conference minutes, edited the singular "word" to a plural "words" so as to conform to the traditional interpretation; this plural has been followed in all subsequent printed sources.

shod. not have brot. up this word ~~unt~~ only to shew that I am right," which supports the earlier statement to the effect that Joseph's entire initial conjecture was based on the single word *b^erē'sīt*. Similarly, in Bullock's account of the 16 June discourse, Joseph says that "the 1st. word shews a plurality of Gods."⁵⁷

In the Clayton account, immediately after the analysis of *b^erē'sīt* Clayton records Joseph as saying, "It read in the first—the head one of the Gods brought forth the Gods—is the true meaning—rosheet signifies to bring forth the Eloheim," where the antecedent to "it" is *b^erē'sīt*.⁵⁸ Elucidating the argument using bracketed material, the sense of this passage is as follows: "It[, meaning the first Hebrew word, *b^erē'sīt*,] read in the first[, that is, originally, prior to scribal corruption] — the head one of the Gods brought forth the Gods[, or, to be more precise, a Hebrew phrase that, rendered into English, would read "the head one of the Gods brought forth the Gods"] — is the true meaning — rosheet[, that is, the first Hebrew word after the deletion of the preposition but without deleting the termination,] signifies to bring forth the Eloheim." The word "rosheet" was the foundation of Joseph's entire initial conjecture. Contrary to the assumption of the traditional interpretation, Joseph did not argue that the "termination" of "rosheet" should be deleted; rather, he used those letters as part of the basis for a conjectured expansion of the word "rosheet" into a Hebrew clause that could be rendered "the head one of the Gods brought forth the Gods."

When Joseph comes to the second part of his argument (about the Gods organizing the heavens and the earth), he moves from the first to the second word, *bārā'*, which he understands to mean "to organize." This is consistent with the idea that Joseph's initial conjecture was based entirely on his analysis of the first word of Hebrew Genesis 1:1. Joseph was not cannibalizing *bārā' 'ēlōhīm* and using those words twice, in both the first and second parts of his argument. Rather, the first part of his argument was based entirely on his analysis of the first word; the second, third, and following words all belong to the second part of his argument.

Joseph was careless and incomplete in the way he described his arguments, so it should not be surprising that John Taylor misunderstood them when editing Bullock's conference minutes (if that is in fact what

57. Bullock's manuscript report of the 16 June discourse begins "twice I will show from the Heb. Bible." An advocate of the traditional interpretation could read "twice" as referring to two words of Hebrew Genesis 1:1; however, it seems clear to me that "twice" refers to the two prooftexts cited by Joseph in that discourse, Genesis 1:1 and Genesis 1:26.

58. The traditional interpretation reads the word "it" as referring loosely to the whole passage, but, particularly in light of the evidence described above from Bullock's conference report, this loose understanding does not seem to be supported by a plain reading of the Clayton account.

happened). Two factors would have contributed to this misunderstanding. First, Taylor probably assumed that there was something like a word-for-word correspondence between the extant Hebrew and Joseph's English conjecture; after all, how could Joseph have derived ten English words from but one Hebrew word? In fact, I had noticed that Joseph's initial conjecture seemed to have derived entirely from the first word alone on a couple of occasions in the past, but each time I dismissed the idea based on this same objection. I might never have gotten beyond this apparent difficulty were it not for the experience I mentioned at the outset of this essay. When I recently reviewed all of the manuscript evidence, something clicked in my mind, and finally I was able to see that Joseph was conjecturally emending the Hebrew prior to translating it. That is, Joseph was not translating the single word *b^erē'šīt* directly into "the head one of the Gods brought forth the Gods"; rather Joseph was modifying and expanding *b^erē'šīt* into a Hebrew phrase that could be rendered "the head one of the Gods brought forth the Gods." The idea was that his conjectured Hebrew phrase had been original, but was altered by scribes until all that remained was the extant word *b^erē'šīt*. We can see the beginnings of Joseph's reasoning in emending the text, but his public explanation was incomplete and did not give a full accounting of that expansion.

A second factor leading to the traditional interpretation is that Joseph's conjectured initial clause used the word *'ēlōhīm* twice. This word had obviously been suggested to Joseph by *'ēlōhīm* the third word of Hebrew Genesis 1:1. By assuming a word-for-word correspondence between the extant Hebrew and the English conjecture, Taylor apparently assumed that the object in the English phrase "the head one of the Gods brought forth the Gods" had to be *'ēlōhīm* the third word of Genesis 1:1. If the subject ("head") were derived from the first word and the object ("Gods") were the third word, then the verb ("brought forth") must be the second word, *bārā'* (following normal English word order, subject + verb + object). As we have seen, however, based on the original manuscript evidence, the structure of the argument, and Joseph's lexical understanding of the word, it seems unlikely that Joseph was cannibalizing the word *bārā'* into the first part of his argument. If the verb rendered "brought forth" was not *bārā'*, then it is also unlikely that either use of *'ēlōhīm* in the first part of the argument is to be equated with *'ēlōhīm* the third word of Genesis 1:1. The word *bārā'* forms a barrier that effectively prevents the word *'ēlōhīm* following it from being a candidate for either of the two uses of *'ēlōhīm* in the first part of the argument. Joseph did not cannibalize the word *'ēlōhīm*, but doubled (or, rather, tripled) it. Thus the whole notion of cannibalization is a red herring. Taylor could probably appreciate that his interpretation did not work well at all, but since he

never contemplated a textual expansion it was the only way he could approximate enough Hebrew words to result in the translation "the head one of the Gods brought forth the Gods."

Although I believe it is clear, strange as it may seem to us, that Joseph somehow derived the ten English words "the head one of the Gods brought forth the Gods" from the single Hebrew word *rē'sīt*, we simply do not have enough textual evidence to document fully how he accomplished this or what his thought processes were along the way. In the absence of such evidence, at this point I undertake a speculative reconstruction of what the details of his conjecture may have been. My aim is simply to demonstrate that, given the available evidence (the original manuscript reports, the Seixas grammar, and Abraham 4), a plausible textual expansion of *rē'sīt* into a Hebrew clause that could be rendered "the head one of the Gods brought forth the Gods" can be constructed. However, given the omissions and contradictions in the manuscript reports, *any* attempt to understand fully Joseph's treatment of the Hebrew of Genesis 1:1 is necessarily speculative.

To gain insight into what Joseph's conjectured expansion might have been, I have translated the English phrase "the head one of the Gods brought forth the Gods" backward into Hebrew. There are two possibilities, depending on whether Joseph understood the subject to be singular or plural:

1. [singular verb] *rō's hā'ēlōhīm 'et hā'ēlōhīm*
2. [plural verb] *rā'sē hā'ēlōhīm 'et hā'ēlōhīm*

There is at least circumstantial evidence, mostly from the Seixas grammar, suggesting that Joseph may indeed have had such a phrase in mind.

Note that normal Hebrew word order would place the verb *before* the subject, not after (as in English). As it so happens, Seixas explains this pattern on page 85 of his grammar, in the middle of his discussion of Genesis 1:1, by a footnote following the word *ēlōhīm*, which reads (emphasis in original): "Nominatives generally *follow* their Verbs, and adjectives their substantives." Because of the fortuitous placement of this explanation, I believe Joseph may have known of this rule and conceived of the verb as being *before* the subject, not after, as others have assumed. He had read enough Hebrew (including Genesis 1:1 itself) to be familiar and comfortable with this word order.⁵⁹

What did Joseph perceive to be the verb? My working hypothesis

59. When Joseph refers to the "first" word of the Bible, I read him to mean the first word as we have it today, not the first word of his conjecture. Although positing normal word order makes this reconstruction easier, it is not critical; it remains possible that Joseph perceived the subject as coming first.

(based on the English target "brought forth") was that the verb was something like *ʿasap* or *qābats*, but in reviewing the Seixas grammar I found two strong candidates for the verb. The first is the *hiphil* of the verb *bōʿ*. My reasoning for this is: first, this verb would lexically fit Joseph's meaning. In the *qal* or simple active stem that verb means "to come," but in the *hiphil* stem, which has a causative force, that verb means "to cause to come" or "to bring." Second, Seixas, on page 37, gives an example of a verb that loses one of its letters in conjugating: "[wayyābē] and he brought, from [bōʿ]." This is a third person, masculine, imperfect *hiphil* form with *waw*-consecutive. Seixas gives the English translation as "brought," which, but for the compound "forth," matches Joseph's English rendering. Third is the circumstance that, in the form quoted by Seixas, the verbal root consists of the letters *bēt* and *ʿālep*, and these are two of the letters in the duplicated sequence of letters *bēt rēš ʿālep* (*brʿ*) in the first two words of Genesis 1:1 that may have influenced Joseph's deletion of the letter *bēt* from *bʿrēʾšīt*. Fourth is the fact that this is a *hiphil* form. As Michael T. Walton has demonstrated,⁶⁰ Joseph shows a special awareness of *hiphil* verb forms in his translation of Abraham 4. For instance, KJV Genesis 1:4 reads, in part, "and God divided the light from the darkness." The verb translated "divided" is the *hiphil* form *wayyabdel*, the causative force of which is emphasized in Abraham 4:4: "and they divided the light, or caused it to be divided, from the darkness" (emphasis added). A similar emphasis of the *hiphil* of this verb occurs in Abraham 4:17: "and to cause to divide the light from the darkness" (emphasis added). Fifth is the fact that Joseph was almost certainly exposed to this verb in its *hiphil* form in his studies of the early chapters of Genesis. Consider the following texts:

And out of the ground the LORD God *formed* [wayyitser] every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air; and *brought* [wayyābē] them to Adam to see what he would call them (Gen. 2:19).

And the rib, which the LORD God had taken from man, he made a woman, and *brought* her [wayʿbiʿeha] to the man (Gen. 2:22).

And in process of time it came to pass, that Cain *brought* [wayyābē] of the fruit of the ground an offering to the LORD. And Abel, he also *brought* [hēbī] of the fruit of the ground an offering to the Lord (Gen. 4:3-4).

The *hiphil* of *bōʿ* is repeated four times in the first four chapters of Genesis

60. "Professor Seixas, the Hebrew Bible, and the Book of Abraham," *Sunstone* 6 (Mar. 1981): 41-43.

(each time with the translation “brought”), so Joseph was certainly exposed to it. In fact, two of these occurrences are precisely the same form quoted by Seixas in his grammar. Sixth, and most important, Seixas, immediately following his use of the *hiphil* of *bô’*, goes on to give another example: “[wayyitser] and he formed, from [yātsar].” This is the *qal* imperfect of the verb *yātsar*, which is also attested several times in the early chapters of Genesis, as Genesis 2:19 above shows.⁶¹ This is significant because Abraham 4:1 reads, in part, “and they, that is the Gods, organized and formed the heavens and the earth” (emphasis added). I had always assumed that Joseph used the two English verbs “organized and formed” to translate the single Hebrew verb *bārā’* by merismus; whether that is the case, or whether Joseph specifically understood *yātsar* to be present in the text, it is clear that the English rendering “and formed” was influenced by this Hebrew verb.⁶² Thus there is every indication that Joseph had focused specific attention on this very line of the Seixas grammar in connection with a text that parallels Genesis 1:1.

Another strong possibility for the verb is the *hiphil* of the verb *yātsa’*. The *hiphil* form is cited in Seixas’ grammar on page 39, immediately following the *hiphil* form of the verb meaning “to divide,” which was emphasized in Abraham 4: “[*habdîl*] to cause to divide, from [*bādal*]; [*hawtsē*] ... cause to come, bring out, from [*yātsa*].” Note that this verb would be lexically consistent with Joseph’s intended meaning. Joseph also would have been exposed to this verb in the early chapters of Genesis, as in Genesis 1:12: “And the earth brought forth [*wattôtse’*] grass,” and 1:24: “And God said, Let the earth bring forth [*tôtse’*] the living creature.”⁶³ The KJV not only translates this verb with the word “brought,” but with the compound “brought forth,” which is precisely the English translation Joseph has in mind. I have summarized the evidence supporting these two words as the verb in Table 3.

Thus the first word of Joseph’s conjecture may have been the verb, which may have been the *hiphil* of either *bô’* or *yātsa’*. On the analogy of *bārā*, the form would have been third person, masculine, and perfect. Whether the verb would have been singular or plural depends on whether Joseph understood the subject, “head,” as singular or plural. This suggests the following four possibilities:

61. See also, in particular, Genesis 2:7: “And the LORD God formed [*wayyitser*] man of the dust of the ground.”

62. Note that in poetic texts *yātsar* is often paired as a synonym to *bārā’*. For citations, see Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), 2:246.

63. The last verse that Joseph privately read in Hebrew on 7 March 1836, Exodus 3:10, also uses this word in its *hiphil* form: “Come now therefore, and I will send thee unto Pharaoh, that thou mayest bring forth [*w^hhôtse’*] my people the children of Israel out of Egypt.”

1. *hēbî'* [singular of *bô'*]
2. *hēbî'û* [plural of *bô'*]
3. *hôtîš'* [singular of *yātsa'*]
4. *hôtîš'û* [plural of *yātsa'*]

One of these words could have been the verb rendered "brought forth."⁶⁴

TABLE 3
Summary of Evidence for the Verb

<i>Evidence</i>	<i>bô'</i>	<i>yātsa'</i>
Attestation in Seixas grammar	p. 37	p. 39
Seixas rendering	and he brought	cause to come, bring out
Possible perception of letter manipulation?	yes	no
<i>Hiphil</i> form?	yes	yes
Attestation in early Genesis	Genesis 2:19, 2:22, 4:3-4	Genesis 1:12 and 1:24
KJV rendering	brought	brought forth (bring forth)
Adjacent verb in Seixas grammar	[wayyitser] and he formed	[habdîl] to cause to divide
Abraham 4 attestation of adjacent verb	Abraham 4:1	Abraham 4:4 and 4:17

The next word would be the subject, either *rô'sš* (head of) or *ra'sšē* (heads of). Because the subject is in the construct state, it is not necessary to prefix the definite article; a noun in the construct state always derives its definiteness or lack thereof from the noun in the absolute state which it governs. As generally nothing is allowed to separate a noun in the construct state from the noun in the absolute state which it governs, the next word must be the noun in the absolute state (what Seixas on page 32 refers to as the "Genitive Case") that is governed by the noun in the construct state, and it must be a definite noun: *hā'ēlōhîm* (the Gods).⁶⁵

We know from the English target and from the statement "rosheet signifies to bring forth the Eloheim" that the object of the verb would also be "the Gods" or "the Eloheim" (Hebrew *hā'ēlōhîm*), and a definite object is usually preceded in the word order by *et*, the sign of the direct object. I

64. In spelling these words out, I do not mean to suggest that Joseph had necessarily committed his conjecture to writing or that he had gone so far as to determine the appropriate form for the verb to take in this setting. To that extent, this presentation may be more detailed than Joseph's actual conjecture.

65. For the sake of clarity I have appended the definite article, but it may be that Joseph did not explicitly supply the article here. Such usage would nevertheless be acceptable, as the noun *ēlōhîm* could be taken as implicitly definite. As noted in Ludwig Köhler, *Old Testament Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1957), 241n30: "The use or omission of the article [with *ēlōhîm*] in ancient times is entirely arbitrary. Indeed even later there was no complete agreement about it."

believe that Joseph may have understood the final *taw* at the end of *rē'sīt* (which, if it is not to be deleted, remains to be accounted for) as the remnant of the accusative particle *et*, which marks the direct object of a verb, for three reasons. First, this possibility is suggested by page 85 of the Seixas grammar, which identifies the "termination" of *b^erē'sīt* separately as *it* (which is close in appearance to *et*), and then lists the particle *et* twice in the third and fifth lines below *it* (as the particle appears twice in Genesis 1:1). This is particularly important, because it may have been the appearance of the word *rē'sīt* (by itself and without the preposition) on the bottom of the facing page in sequence with the male plural construct *rā'sē* that first moved Joseph to conjecturally emend the first Hebrew word of Genesis 1:1. Second, a footnote on page 60 of the Seixas grammar, the page that explains the accusative particle, contains a fairly close parallel to Joseph's "rosheet signifies to bring forth the Eloheim," referring to a pronominal suffix used as an object of a verb: "[*nī*] at the end of verbs signifies *me*; as [*p^eqādanī*] *he visited me*, etc." This usage is similar to my understanding of Joseph's "rosheet signifies to bring forth the Eloheim" because (1) both use the English verb "signifies" (which is particularly appropriate for a grammatical structure that marks the direct object of a verb) and (2) both refer to lettering at the end of a word as indicating an object of a verb. Finally, an understanding of this *taw* as the remnant of an originally present accusative particle fits Joseph's conjecture, as the Hebrew equivalent of "the head one of the Gods brought forth the Gods" would in fact require the presence of the accusative particle. Admittedly, this evidence for the use of *taw* (the last letter of *rē'sīt*) is not as strong as the evidence for the use of *yôd* (the next to the last letter of *rē'sīt*) as part of the male plural construct *rā'sē*. Joseph's conjecture concerning the male plural construct demonstrates, however, that he did not intend simply to delete the termination *it*. If my conjecture is mistaken, and if we continue to reject the Ehat and Cook conjecture, then the *taw* should probably be deleted, because it is difficult to see what other possible use Joseph could have made of it.

Thus I believe that Joseph's conjecture for his expanded initial clause would be something like one of the following four possibilities (I have placed the conjectured expansions of *rē'sīt* in brackets):

1. [*hēbī'*] *rō's* [*hā'ēlōhīm et*] [*hā'ēlōhīm*]
2. [*hēbī'ū*] *ra'sē* [*hā'ēlōhīm et*] [*hā'ēlōhīm*]
3. [*hōtsī'*] *rō's* [*hā'ēlōhīm et*] [*hā'ēlōhīm*]
4. [*hōtsī'ū*] *rā'sē* [*hā'ēlōhīm et*] [*hā'ēlōhīm*]

These possibilities could be translated as follows:

1. The head one of the Gods brought [forth] the Gods
2. The heads of the Gods brought [forth] the Gods
3. The head one of the Gods brought forth the Gods
4. The heads of the Gods brought forth the Gods

In these reconstructions, the subject and the object are both expressly identified in Hebrew by Joseph in the original manuscript reports, and the verb and the accusative particle are supported by evidence from the Seixas grammar (and, in the case of the verb, Abraham 4). Although the presence of the first *hā'ēlōhîm* is not supported by such evidence, it may nevertheless be inferred, both from the English target and from the fact that the subject was definitely perceived by Joseph as a construct form, thus requiring that an absolute noun follow it.

I see Joseph's conjecture as transforming Genesis 1:1 into two independent clauses, something like the following (brackets indicate variations in the sources): "The [head one][heads] of the Gods brought forth the Gods, and the [Gods][head God][heads of the Gods] organized [and formed] the heavens and the earth." The first clause is derived entirely from *rē'sīt*, the first Hebrew word, and the second clause is derived from the remainder of Genesis 1:1. Joseph may have perceived the transition from the first to the second clause as being formed by a simple *waw*-conjunction, which seems to be suggested by Abraham 4:1, where "at the beginning" (=the first Hebrew word) is joined to the remainder of the sentence by the English word "and" (which is not present at this position in KJV Genesis 1:1).

Some of this can be seen in the Bullock account of the 16 June discourse. Joseph begins with "Berosheit &c In the begin.," which sets out the extant text. The next word in the report is "rosheit," which is significant because, like the Clayton report of the King Follett Discourse, it deletes the preposition but does not delete the termination. This may suggest, as I have argued, that Joseph intended to use the termination as part of his conjecture. He then gives his conjectured expansion of *rosheit*, but he gives it this time both with a plural construct subject and with the English verb "to organize" rather than "brought forth" (I have argued that this last change is a mistake and that the edit here is actually correct, but this point remains uncertain). A little later he gives his second conjectured clause: "the head God—organized the heavens & the Earth." He then says, "In the begin the heads of the Gods organized the heaven & the Earth." I have always found this statement frustrating, because under any theory he has already conjecturally emended *b^erē'sīt* into something else, so it is no longer available to be rendered "in the beginning." It occurs to me, however, that here he is focusing on the *second* clause, and so he may be converting his initial conjecture back into the extant first word

b^ere'sit ("in the beginning") for the sake of simplicity and to retain his focus on the second clause with his audience. If this suggestion is correct, then "In the begin the heads of the Gods organized the heaven & the Earth" would be the fullest statement available to us from the original manuscript evidence of how Joseph understood Hebrew Genesis 1:1, because it combines the two clauses (although the first clause has been converted back into extant Hebrew form). To make this statement truly complete, however, we would need to replace "In the begin" with the conjecture he had earlier derived from *b^ere'sit*, "the [head one][heads] of the Gods brought forth the Gods."

CONCLUSIONS

As we have seen, the available evidence is sparse, difficult to work with, and at times contradictory. It is therefore not surprising that different interpretations of that evidence have arisen. My argument to some extent relies on speculative reconstruction and, absent more definitive evidence, is tentative. With that caveat, a summary of my conclusions follows:

1. Although there is a textual argument to be made for it, on balance I believe it is more likely that the traditional interpretation does not correctly reflect Joseph's argument. This is suggested by the original manuscript evidence, the structure of the argument, and Joseph's lexical understanding of the word *bārā'*. This interpretation may have originated from John Taylor's editing of Thomas Bullock's conference minutes. (If there is something to the traditional interpretation, it would appear to be more complicated than the simplistic three-word construction commonly assumed.)

2. Ehat and Cook correctly concluded that the traditional interpretation is erroneous. Their alternative conjecture, however, to the effect that Joseph understood the verb to be *šit*, is wrong.

3. The Kabbalistic interpretation is premised on the traditional wording; if, as suggested in conclusion number 1, that wording derives not from Joseph but from an editorial gloss, then the Kabbalistic interpretation is also wrong. If the traditional wording is correct, then the Kabbalistic interpretation is possible, but it has other problems, and on the whole I do not believe that it is correct.

4. Structurally, Joseph's initial argument is based entirely on his analysis of the first Hebrew word, which he conjecturally emended and expanded into a Hebrew phrase that could be translated "the head one of the Gods brought forth the Gods," and which he understood as an independent clause from the remainder of Genesis 1:1.

5. Joseph analyzed the first Hebrew word, *b^ere'sit*, by breaking it into

three parts, as suggested by the Seixas grammar.

6. Joseph then deleted the preposition, for reasons that are not entirely clear (three possibilities being [1] the repeating letter sequence in the first two words of Hebrew Genesis 1:1, [2] the absence of the definite article in the first word of Hebrew Genesis 1:1, and [3] the appearance of *rē'šit* without the preposition on the facing page to Seixas' explanation of Hebrew Genesis 1:1).

7. The Seixas grammar (and not Kabbalistic speculation) was the source for Joseph's extraction of *rō's* (or *rā'shê*) from *rē'šit*.

8. Rather than delete the "termination" of *rosheet*, as assumed by the traditional interpretation, Joseph used those letters as part of his textual expansion. (Ehat and Cook saw this but misunderstood Joseph's use of those letters.) Joseph understood the *yôd* as the end of the male plural construct meaning "heads of," and he may have understood the *taw* as the remnant of the accusative particle.

9. The Seixas grammar and Abraham 4 suggest that Joseph may have perceived the verb "brought forth" to be the *hiphil* of either *bô'* or *yātsa'*.

10. In general, Joseph may have known what he was doing and, although he freely experimented with the Hebrew, he did not completely butcher it, as has long been assumed. It should scarcely surprise us that Joseph Smith, who produced such extensive and creative biblical expansions in the English of the Joseph Smith Translation, had the capacity to construct a comparatively modest textual expansion in the Hebrew of Genesis 1:1.⁶⁶

66. I have focused on attempting to understand Joseph's argument as it relates to the Hebrew of Genesis 1:1. Whether Joseph's conjecture ever actually existed in an ancient Hebrew text and whether the ideas reflected in his conjecture are worthy of religious consideration are beyond the scope of this essay.