

## LETTERS

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### *Reading Scripture*

I was pleased to read the articles on the King James Bible by Grant Hardy and Ronan James Head in the Summer 2012 issue of *Dialogue*. This is a subject that has long interested me as a missionary, as textual scholar, as someone engaged in interfaith work, and as a teacher (of gospel doctrine, Institute and Seminary classes, and currently of courses at Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley). I especially appreciate Grant Hardy's balanced approach and the broad and deep scholarship that informs his discussion. I have praised elsewhere his brilliant scholarship on the Book of Mormon,<sup>1</sup> and was pleased to see it on display here as well.

If the first object of studying the scriptures is to understand what they say, then access to understanding has to take priority over other considerations. That is, revelation comes to our hearts *and* our minds and when we do not know what a scripture means or even if we have only a vague comprehension of its meaning, its full cognitive, emotional and spiritual import are not accessible to us. We might feel good about reading or speaking the words, but without knowing their meaning, without specific connotative and denotative connection to the intent of the writers of scripture, we might as well be babbling—which, I'm afraid, is what sometimes happens in our classes and pulpit presentations.

As someone who has taught Shakespeare, Milton and Chaucer, I am keenly aware of how much distance there is between Middle, Elizabethan

and Jacobean English and the English we speak today. Since the English used by King James's translators was archaic even at the time they produced their Bible and since, as Hardy points out, their syntax was much more complicated than ours, the KJV is often impenetrable to modern readers. As a teacher of literature, I love the rhetorical beauty and rhythmic majesty of the King James Bible and am delighted when I find it echoed in other documents down the ages (as for example in Lincoln's memorable words about the Mississippi, "the Father of Waters again goes unvexed to the sea"), but even with three degrees in English, I often find myself unable to grasp the import of what is being said, unable to untangle the full meaning of particular scriptures.

I appreciate Hardy's suggestion that we read more modern translations along with the KJV, although I suspect that most Mormon readers will find that one step too complicated (or assumed forbidden!). My late wife and I often read the scriptures with one of us using the KJV and the other using the NIV or the NEB (Hardy's REB) and commenting on the difference. We also found the NIV Study Bible helpful as we did the extensive notes and verse-by-verse explanations and explications in the Zondervan *NIV Commentary*.

The extent to which Latter-day Saints sometimes slavishly cling to the KJV was dramatically illustrated to me several years ago when I was teaching gospel doctrine class in the San Lorenzo Valley Ward (Santa Cruz

Stake). On one Sunday, in order to help the class understand a particularly dense passage from one of Paul's letters, I had three members of the class read the passage, respectively, from the KJV, the NIV, and the NEB. Afterward, a member of the bishopric informed me that I was forbidden from ever using any translation but the KJV. To emphasize the seriousness of his instruction, he said, "And Brother Rees, if you ever use another translation, consider yourself released on the spot."

Having taught gospel doctrine class for over thirty-five of my, by then, sixty years in the Church (as well as Institute, Seminary and priesthood classes), I was flabbergasted by his comments. I tried to explain that I always used the KJV but found it helpful at times to use other translations as supplementary sources, but he was adamant and intractable, even after I wrote him a long letter full of examples showing general authorities (both in general conference and in the Ensign), Mormon scholars, Mormon journals, and prominent LDS websites using the NIV.

Ultimately, this brother was not persuaded and still forbade me from using any translation but the KJV. Therefore, I appealed to the bishop. I told him that if he insisted on my doing so, I could conform to his counselor's dictate (which is what it was), but that I considered it a stupid ("given to unintelligent decisions or acts") request because it ran counter to the very idea of what Sunday school was for. He agreed with me and I continued teaching as before.

While I find some of Ronan Head's arguments in favor of keeping the KJV persuasive, ultimately (and I hope sooner rather than later), I believe the Church will have to change its position, if for no other reasons than those Hardy states—the edification of members, the success of missionary work, and unity with other believers. My guess is that a study of members' Bible study would reveal both a reduction in actual reading time and a diminishment in understanding what is read. If one of the objects of our scripture study is to find the "precious" truths contained therein, we must remember that "plainness" (or understanding) is a necessary prelude. If, as Hardy states, "Decade by decade, the language of the 1611 KJV is becoming more foreign, artificial, and opaque to young people [and, I would add, *older people!*] and potential converts," then the Church is facing a choice of some significance—moving toward a text that people can understand and therefore will be more inclined to read, or sticking with a text that they might read but will not understand.

I endorse Hardy's recommendation that the Church adopt a modern translation, preferably the NRSV, for the reasons he articulates. When I baptized my bright, beautiful granddaughter two weeks ago, I gave her the LDS standard works with her name embossed on the covers. She is a very sophisticated reader at her tender age, but I couldn't help wishing as I handed the scriptures to her, that I was giving her a more readable, un-

derstandable text, one that would be more accessible to her heart and mind.

Hugh Nibley translated the Greek logos in John 1:1 to read, "In the beginning was the dialogue, and the dialogue was with God, and the dialogue was God," suggesting that logos (normally understood as Christ) is ultimately associated with a dialogue with God. That dialogue cannot take place without our understanding the Word of God itself. The writers of Jewish Midrash saw God himself as wrestling with scripture: "The Talmud says that God himself studies the Bible every day. It says God is sitting in the *bet midrash*, the study house, wearing a round black cap and holding an open Bible, arguing and wrestling his own text

right along with learned rabbis throughout the ages."<sup>2</sup> Our dialogue with God and with one another can only happen if we too read from an open bible.

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### Notes

1. See my review-essay, "The Figure in the Carpet: Grant Hardy's Reading of the Book of Mormon," *The John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 31:2 (Fall-Winter 2011), 132–143.

2. Judith M. Kunst, *The Burning Word: A Christian Encounter with Jewish Midrash* (Brewster, Mass.: Paraclete Press, 2006), 4.