BIBLE TRANSLATION; IT'S NOT ABOUT HATS AND STONES

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Why do Bible translators have to do all of this tedious training, linguistic analysis, study, testing, revising, exegetical checking and what have you? Why doesn't God just do something magic?

Category: Methodology

Last week, the Mormon Church released photographsÂ of a small, brown, egg-shaped stone. In and of itself, pictures of stones are not that exciting, but this was the stone that Joseph Smith, the founder of the Mormon faith used to translate what was to become The BookÂ of Mormon.



At this point, my ears pricked up. Over the years, I've done a fair bit of translation. I've used dictionaries, thesauruses, commentaries, computers and all sorts of other stuff, but I've never never used a small, brown, egg-shaped stone. Nor do I know anyone else who has. To be honest, I'm not even sure how you would set about using a stone in translation, so I decided to do a bit of digging.

This is from an early Mormon history (details here):

> *â€œI will now give you a description of the manner in which the Book of Mormon was translated. Joseph Smith would put the seer stone into a hat, and put his face in the hat, drawing it closely around his face to exclude the light; and in the darkness the spiritual light would shine. A piece of something resembling parchment would appear, and under it was the interpretation in English. Brother Joseph would read off the English to Oliver Cowdery, who was his principal scribe, and when it was written down and repeated to brother Joseph to see if it was correct, then it would disappear, and another character with the interpretation would appear. Thus the Book of Mormon was translated by the gift and power of God, and not by any power of man.â€*

So apparently, you don't just need a stone, you also need a hat!

Of course, this raises the obvious question of why God doesn't just provide hats and stones to Bible translators. Why do we have to do all of this tedious training, linguistic analysis, study, testing, revising, exegetical checking and what have you?

Though this might sound a silly question, the answer is rather profound and it is all to do with how the God of the Bible relates to human beings. Right back at creation, we are told that God made human beings in his image and he gave us the responsibility to care for his world. God tied his own glory up with our lives and gave us a huge amount of responsibility. It all went wrong, he knew it would, but he did it anyway.

In the New Testament, we see God taking on human form, he became a man. I don't know how this works, but it is remarkable. In an even more profound form than at creation, God allowed his own life

and reputation to be entwined with that of humanity. And so it goes on, at Pentecost, God the Spirit came and lives in the Church; God with us in all of our successes, but also in our failures. God doesn't look down at humanity from some fluffy cloud on high, heÂ has always been involved in our lives and he givesÂ us the responsibility to be his representatives on the planet.

The same comes to Scripture. God didn't just dictate the words of the Bible. He worked through the life, experience and personalities of the different writers to produce a work which is divine, but also intensely human. David's writings do not sound like Solomon's and no one would mistake Luke's Gospel for John's. It is worth revisiting the introduction to Luke, to get an idea of this picture:

> *Many people have set out to write accounts about the events that have been fulfilled among us. Â They used the eyewitness reports circulating among us from the early disciples.Â Having carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I also have decided to write a careful account for you, most honorable Theophilus, so you can be certain of the truth of everything you were taught. (Luke 1:1-4)*

Luke worked hard, he interviewed people, he read the eyewitness accounts, he weighed the different versions of things and he finally wrote his life of Jesus. This combination of Luke's scholarship and divine inspiration (which Luke doesn't even mention) produced a very special sort of document.

And this is why Bible translators have to go to all of the hard work of exegesis, drafting, checking, redrafting, rechecking etc. Because God has placed sacred things and his own reputation in humanÂ hands.Â It is a remarkable privilege and shows just how much God loves and cares for us.

Next time you feel drawn to argue about the merits of one translation over another, why not take time out to reflect how amazing it is that God reveals himself through human translations of his Word. He could have used a stone and a hat, but he loves us far more than that.