

## The Language Problem in Revelation

By Evan A. Fry

In our previous lecture we discussed "The Prophet and His Language," pointing out the difference between pervasive and plenary revelation, and stressing that one of our church distinctives is the *implementation* of revelation through the prophet, seer, and revelator, and other official prophetic channels.

Regardless of how revelation comes, or through what person it comes, there is always a language problem. Language does not mean the same to all men nor at all times; each man is conditioned in his use and understanding of language by all his background of experience and education. And as we pointed out in the previous lecture, there is always the problem of inadequate vocabulary to convey full meaning, and inadequate capacity for comprehension in those who hear or read revelation.

But even if a prophet could couch revelation in language which conveyed a perfectly accurate knowledge to every one of his listeners or readers *today*, there would be a language problem in that revelation a hundred or two hundred years from now. One hundred years can work vast changes in a living language that is being used day by day by multitudes of people. Joseph Smith never heard of a blimp, or a bolshevik, or a Hun,

or a tank, or a blitz—to name only a few of the terms that have entered our language during the past two world wars.

If you were to try to read today the English of Chaucer, who lived from A.D. 1340 to 1400, you would find many words unintelligible, countless spellings obsolete and puzzling, and many grammatical constructions peculiar to your modern eyes. If you attempted to go back to the Anglo-Saxon period of "Old English," approximately A.D. 900-1100, you would find the language absolutely unintelligible. I am not a linguist, but I have studied some Spanish and a smattering of French, as well as "Old English," and I can state unequivocally that it was much easier to learn a completely different language such as Spanish or French than to learn "Old English" which is the ancestor of the English which we speak today.

Here is an interesting example of the obsolescence of language. A sixteenth century Bible rendered Psalm 91: 5 thus: "So that thou shalt not nede to be afraid for any *bugges* by nighte, nor for the arrow that flyeth by day." Now, that word "bugges" had nothing whatsoever to do with the sanitary condition of your bed, or with any entomological specimens that might be found therein. In the sixteenth century, "bugge" meant "ghost," or "hobgoblin" or any imaginary object of fear. Remnants of this kind of "bugge" are to be found in such words as "bugbear," "bugaboo," and "bogy," "bugger," "booger," or "boogie man." Yet in the next

century, less than one hundred years later (1611 to be exact) the Authorized or King James translation dropped the "bugges" and translated, "Thou shalt not be afraid for the *terror* by night."

There are many similar examples of obsolescent language, even in the Authorized or King James Version. In 1611, "let" meant "prevent"; "earnest" was a token payment in promise of a larger sum; the "Comforter" was one who came "cum" (with) "fortis" (strength), not one to assuage grief; "prevent" as used in I Thessalonians 4: 15 meant to "precede." When Paul said (I Cor. 10: 24), "Let no man seek his own, but every man another's wealth," he did not mean that we should be seeking the other fellow's money, but concerned for his wealth, or his well-being. Incidentally, our Inspired Version uses "good" instead of wealth. "Careful," in many places, does not mean "cautious," but "full of care." "Emulation," in Galatians 5: 20, does not mean striving to equal or excel, as the word is used today, but "jealousy." The word "allow" in 1611 meant to approve; the word "communicate" meant to share; "conversation" meant conduct. The Greek word for "immediately" is variously translated in the Authorized Version as "straightway," "immediatly," "presently," "anon," and "by and by." Our Doctrine and Covenants is not old enough to have language problems quite so numerous or quite so acute as these examples from the King James Bible, but the older it gets, the greater will be the problem. One example that has caused endless argument is the peculiar use of the word "only" to mean

"except," in Doctrine and Covenants 86: 2, regarding the use of meat "only" in times of winter, or of cold, or famine.

With Joseph Smith, this language problem was particularly noticeable. He had little formal education. He did not write in a polished, cultured, or erudite manner. Some of his followers found fault with his revelations; they did not like the phraseology, the vocabulary, the construction. Section 67 was given to answer the doubts of those who thought it would be quite easy to do as well or better themselves. "His language you have known; and his imperfections you have known; and you have sought in your hearts knowledge, that you might express beyond his language; this ye also know." They were counseled to seek out the least of the commandments or revelations, and then "appoint him that is most wise among you," to see whether he could make one like it in language and content. William E. McLellan tried to imitate the language of previous revelations, and failed.

One of the practical tests of revelation is suggested in paragraph two of Section 67: "there is no unrighteousness in them; and that which is righteous cometh down from above, from the Father of lights." An evil, scheming, designing man could not have written such documents. Undoubtedly there were defects of grammar, of vocabulary, of construction, of phraseology, but even those who were more skilled in language could not produce a document with the dignity, the sublimity, the

solemnity, the depth, the breadth, the sincerity, the directness, the forthrightness, the scriptural quality, the inherent righteousness of these revelations. The true test of any revelation is not the polished language in which it is couched, but the quality of its revelation. If "there is no unrighteousness in them," if the revelation partakes of the nature of God, it is worthy of notice and study and obedience, though it may be "given unto my servants in their weakness, after the manner of their language" (Doctrine and Covenants 1: 5).

When I was doing graduate work in the University of Kansas, I took a course in literary criticism, in which among other things I studied the techniques of how to identify and evaluate the writings of various authors. By a painstaking and time-consuming analysis of some forty factors which enter into the written language, the class developed an almost uncanny accuracy in identifying the works of those authors which had been selected for study. By this process, if one has access to known portions of an author's work for purposes of analysis, he can take a piece of doubtful writing, analyze it, and with almost 100 per cent surety determine whether it is the work of the same author. Certain telltale idiosyncrasies will inevitably creep in. Idiomatic expressions peculiar to that author will occur again and again. The length of the sentence, the form of the sentence, the sound of the sentence, the author's use of similes, metaphors, rhythm, metonymy, and antithesis; the author's peculiarities of vocabulary, his

idiomatic use of the various parts of speech, particularly prepositions—these and many other factors make it relatively easy to determine whether or not a certain piece of writing was done by the same author who wrote another piece of whose origin you are sure.

For many years I have cherished an ambition to make such a study of our Doctrine and Covenants, with the particular purpose of trying to see what such a study would show about the authorship of Section 132 in the Utah book, the "revelation" on polygamy. In the very limited time available I have tried to begin such an analysis to bring before this institute. Because of the extremely detailed nature of such an analysis, I feel that I have only scratched the surface; but I have turned up some things which are very interesting to me, and which I hope may be interesting to you. Incidentally, I may say that although the Doctrine and Covenants Concordance is of inestimable value for almost every other kind of study, it is almost useless in this kind of analysis, for much of the idiomatic usage, and consequently most of the literary clues, are contained in such otherwise insignificant words as prepositions, pronouns, auxiliary verbs such as have, shall and will, should and would, and conjunctives; and in the interests of space conservation, none of these types of words are included in our concordance. That means that in the type of analysis of which I am speaking, it is necessary to go through the book from beginning to end, classifying, indexing, and analyzing practically every word and its relationship to all the other words in the sentence. Ob-

viously this is not a task to be completed in one quiet evening. But here are a few of the interesting things I have observed.

Joseph Smith is fairly fond of the adjective "meet," meaning fit, or suitable. The phrase "it is not meet," occurs six times in the Doctrine and Covenants.

There are frequently abrupt changes in the subject or person addressed, not always with a clear indication of the change. For example, see Section 19, which begins, "Behold, there shall be a record kept among you," evidently addressed to the church; followed immediately by "in it thou [Joseph Smith] shalt be called a seer," etc. Then paragraph two is addressed again to the church, but not until an introductory "wherefore" which could point either to Joseph or to the church, making necessary the explanatory phrase, "meaning the church."

Another peculiarity of Joseph Smith's style is his frequent habit of breaking off the sentence continuity to talk about a completely different subject before he finally comes back to complete the original thought. Two good examples of this are found in 28: 10, and 83: 2. In the first occurs the phrase, "And it came to pass that Adam, being tempted of the Devil," followed by an account of the fall of Lucifer, with no further mention of Adam until the beginning of paragraph 11. In the second, there is a break from the discussion of temple building to an explanation of priesthood, which con-

tinues through paragraphs 2, 3, 4, and 5 before the original subject is again picked up in paragraph 6.

A peculiarity which may have stemmed out of Joseph Smith's experience in translating the Book of Mormon is the Hebrew custom of "stringing out" numerals and names (i.e., "fifty *and* five years," or "one hundred *and* fifty *and* five") which is very pronounced in the Book of Mormon. For an example of this in the Doctrine and Covenants, see 26: 3; "Peter, and James, and John."

Though it occurs only three times in the Doctrine and Covenants (5: 3c; 5: 5c; and 10: 8b) such a phrase as "I know of a surety" is highly significant and distinctive. It would be interesting to see whether this phrase could not be traced through other writings of Joseph Smith. Another interesting phrase which occurs only twice (12: 5 and 15: 1) is "which if you do," or "which thing if thou doest."

Time and time again Joseph Smith seems to have felt keenly the language problem and the difficulty of expressing in words that others could understand the truth he perceived so clearly in his own mind. He would do the best he could, and then decide that perhaps by phrasing it another way he could make his meaning clearer. Therefore, the phrase "in other words" occurs twenty-four times in the Doctrine and Covenants. And in addition, there are many parallel constructions, where an idea is repeated in different language. For example, such passages as this in 10: 5,

"thou hast a gift, or thou shalt have a gift;" also "believing in the power of Jesus Christ, or in my power which speaketh unto thee." Section 26: 2 mentions Elias, "to whom I have committed the keys of bringing to pass the restoration of all things, or the restorer of all things," etc.

A strange thing is that Joseph Smith, who was so sadly lacking in some aspects of grammatical knowledge, has a pretty good score on his use of "shall" and "will" in the Doctrine and Covenants, words that often trip up much better educated people today. Since these are auxiliary verbs, they are not listed in the concordance, and must be dug out one at a time. Some good examples are to be found in Sections 32 and 33—"I will gather . . . as many as will believe," "Open your mouths and they shall be filled and you shall become as Nephi," "you shall be laden with sheaves," "they shall have faith in me," "I will build my church," "gates of hell shall not prevail against you," "ye shall remember the church articles," "you shall confirm," "I will bestow the Holy Ghost," "I shall come," "it shall be a great day," "all nations shall tremble," etc.

Another thing that trips up many a modern grammarian is nearly always done correctly in the language of the Doctrine and Covenants. That is the use of the subjunctive mood, to express condition contrary to fact. Note "if it be so," in 16: 3 and 26: 1; and "were it possible" in 36: 6d, as good examples.

Still another thing that Joseph usually got right, but which even well-educated people frequently miss, is the use of the nominative case for the predicate pronoun. See 16: 5e: "You are they" (not them), 18: 1, "I am he" (not him). In other and simpler cases, he was not always so expert or so fortunate in his choice of the cases for his pronouns. Section 59: 1 contained this blunder (originally): "*them* that live shall inherit the earth, and *them* that die shall rest from their labors."

Here are some other phrases containing grammatical blunders of more or less seriousness—selected at random. Some have been corrected in the new edition.

- 1: 6, "I, the Lord, . . . willeth."
- 3: 8, 9, 10, "engraven" for "engraved" (This occurs thirty-one times in the Book of Mormon.)
- 3: 10, "They have only got a part," should be, "They have got only a part."
- 5: 3, "Whosoever [singular] . . . them [plural] will I visit, and they . . ."
- 32: 3, "Whoso [singular] . . . I will bestow the gift of the Holy Ghost upon them" (plural).
- 35: 3, "Every man *which* [who] will embrace it."
- 36: 1, "Enoch *begun* [began] to prophesy."
- 38: 7, "Whomsoever I will, shall go forth," should be "whosoever." Whoso, whosoever, and whomsoever seem to have puzzled Joseph Smith, yet incidentally, whoever wrote Doctrine and Covenants 132 in the Utah edition used them correctly in paragraphs 46 and 47.

42: 9, "Inasmuch as is sufficient for himself and family." "Inasmuch as" means "seeing that," or "since," and is therefore incorrectly used here.

One of the outstanding characteristics of Joseph Smith's language in the revelations is his habit of stringing together dependent clauses almost interminably, and in such fashion that it is impossible for even the trained grammarian to analyze or diagram the relationship. (Incidentally, much of this has been edited out of the Utah edition, by breaking up the revelations into shorter paragraphs and supplying additional punctuation.) In our book it is not at all unusual to have lengthy paragraphs without a single period between beginning and end; nor is it unusual for such paragraphs to contain thirty, thirty-five, or forty clauses—a clause for purposes of this survey being very loosely defined as any group of words containing a verb form and a subject. Even in the shorter sentences, it is not unusual to have from five to fifteen or twenty clauses. One of the most lengthy and grammatically unwieldy passages in the book is paragraph 5 of Section 76—a paragraph which covers a solid page of the printed book, all in one sentence without a period from beginning to end, and with a total of over seventy-five clauses! Joseph Smith seemingly wrote habitually in this somewhat dangling style, simply adding ideas as the ideas came to him, without bothering to put down a period, end the sentence, and start a new one. Neither did Joseph Smith ever bother to use a multiple compound subject with a single verb;

his style was to write a new clause, and either use a new verb or repeat the old one for each subject.

As I have said previously, I make no pretense of having done a thorough enough study to determine beyond the shadow of a doubt the authorship of Section 132 in the Utah Doctrine and Covenants—the "revelation" on polygamy, or celestial marriage. But some significant facts are revealed in even a superficial examination such as I have made in limited time. In paragraph 7 of that document there is a compound subject with *ten* nouns, namely, "covenants, contracts, bonds, obligations, oaths, vows, performances, connections, associations, or expectations," followed by one easily analyzed dependent clause, six phrases, one more clause, one parenthesis, and *then* the main verb—"ARE of no efficacy." I do not think it possible that Joseph Smith could have written that sentence. I have not as yet been able to find a single example of such a compound subject in his other writings; he would have multiplied clauses, not nouns. Then, if he had by chance used such a subject, the chances are that he would have entirely lost the connection long before he got down to the main verb, or would have completely forgotten to supply it. In paragraph 19 of the same document, the author again shows his proclivity for compound subjects by using a string of seven nouns; and in paragraph 13, a string of six.

In paragraphs 22 and 24 of this document occurs the phrase, "eternal lives" (plural). At no place in our Doctrine and Covenants does it ever occur in the plural;



it is always "eternal life." Note also that paragraph 25 speaks of "the way that leadeth to the deaths" (plural), another form that is not found in our Doctrine and Covenants.

The use of the word "exaltation" in this document on polygamy is significant. "Exaltation" appears only once in our Doctrine and Covenants, in 107: 2, which speaks of the exaltation or lifting up of Zion. "Exalted" appears eight times, each time with condemnation for the man who exalts himself, and commendation for the man who abases himself, for he shall be exalted. The Utah document uses "exaltation" eleven times, in paragraphs 17, 19, 22, 23, 26, 29, 37, 39, 49, 57, and 63, each time in the sense of a man exalting himself through the "new and everlasting covenant." Incidentally, the "new and everlasting covenant" is mentioned in this one document seven times, in paragraphs 4, 6, 19, 26, 27, 41, and 42; but that term does not appear in our book except in 20: 1a, which speaks not of *the* new and everlasting covenant (note the significance of the definite article here) but of "*a* new and everlasting covenant," in connection with the necessity for rebaptism.

Joseph Smith speaks once in our Doctrine and Covenants of the "cause which ye have *espoused*" (77: 1d), but never is the word used in the sense of marrying a wife. Utah 132: 61 uses "espouse" three times in the sense of marrying plural wives; and the word is once repeated in a similar sense in paragraph 63.

Here is a little peculiarity of speech which could be tremendously important, if enough research could be done to prove the point; for it is phrases like this which tend to crop up again and again to label the writings of men as unfailingly as if they had signed their names to them. Utah 132: 60 says, "Let no one therefore *set on* my servant Joseph, for I will justify him." "Set on" as used here means to criticize, to attack. Joseph Smith in our Doctrine and Covenants has shown that he knew the word "set." Eleven times occurs the phrase "set in order," and seven times the phrase "set apart." But nowhere in our book do we find him using this peculiar and distinctive colloquialism "set on." If that phrase could be found in the writings of some other person who might have had ulterior motives in writing the "revelation" on polygamy, it would be conclusive proof to me, at least, of its authorship.

In the Reorganized Church's Doctrine and Covenants the phrase "as touching" occurs four times (6: 15; 26: 3; 42: 1; and 50: 1). In each case it is used in connection with "agreed," and is therefore a biblical phrase which Joseph borrowed. But Section 132 of the Utah edition has used "as touching" four times in quite a different way, making it a colloquialism or provincialism that would quickly identify the author if it could be found elsewhere. Paragraph 1, "as touching the principle . . . of many wives"; paragraph 2, "I will answer thee as touching this matter"; paragraph 30, "as touching Abraham and his seed"; paragraph 58, "as touching the law of the priesthood."

No doubt many more plain clues and evidences of the authorship of the "revelation" on polygamy await the careful student who has time, training, and inclination to look for them.

There is a language problem in revelation. No revelation is grammatically perfect. The Authorized or King James Bible is couched in stately and beautiful language, not because the original authors wrote that way but because the best scholars and writers of King James's day translated the original Hebrew and Greek into the best of scholarly English. The Doctrine and Covenants examples of modern revelation—particularly those revelations given through Joseph Smith, Jr.—lack much in grammatical correctness, in sentence structure, in vocabulary, in punctuation, in scholarly polish. Joseph Smith never claimed that the language of the revelations was perfect, but Section 1: 5 says (and we should never lose sight of this), "These commandments are of me, and were given unto my servants in their weakness, after the manner of *their* language, that they might come to understanding." It may sound silly to say so, but sometimes we have to ignore the mechanics of language in order to find true meaning. In spite of language problems, which may grow more and more acute as language grows and changes through the centuries, there are inspiration, wisdom, beauty, dignity, and lofty idealism in the revelations of the Doctrine and Covenants. There is science, one hundred years ahead of its time. "There is no unrighteousness in them, and that which is righteous cometh down from above, from the Father of lights."

## The Function of a Prophet

By Arthur A. Oakman

In order to discuss intelligently the subject assigned it will be necessary to distinguish between prophets. There are prophets who may ably and accurately forecast the future. Norman Angell wrote a book called *The Great Illusion* in 1910 in which he accurately predicted the economic situation which actually followed the first great war of 1914-18. He was a prophet in economics and international trade. H. G. Wells more recently has given us the feeling of dramatic destiny in his repeated emphasis that mankind must adapt to ways of brotherhood or perish—perish as other species have perished when they grew too big and cumbersome, or overran their food supply. Wells saved history by wedding it to biology. He was a prophet who is still quoted and I dare say will be quoted for many years to come. And now Arnold Toynbee has given to the world in his *Study of History* a profound Christian interpretation of the rise and fall of civilizations, and based thereon are far-reaching implications of what may await us in the not too distant future. Well's prophetic genius led him into despair. Toynbee still has hope.

All these are prophets—prophets in terms of ability to predict the future. And why not? The Spirit "lighteth every man that cometh into the world," and always for