

The Translator's Dilemma

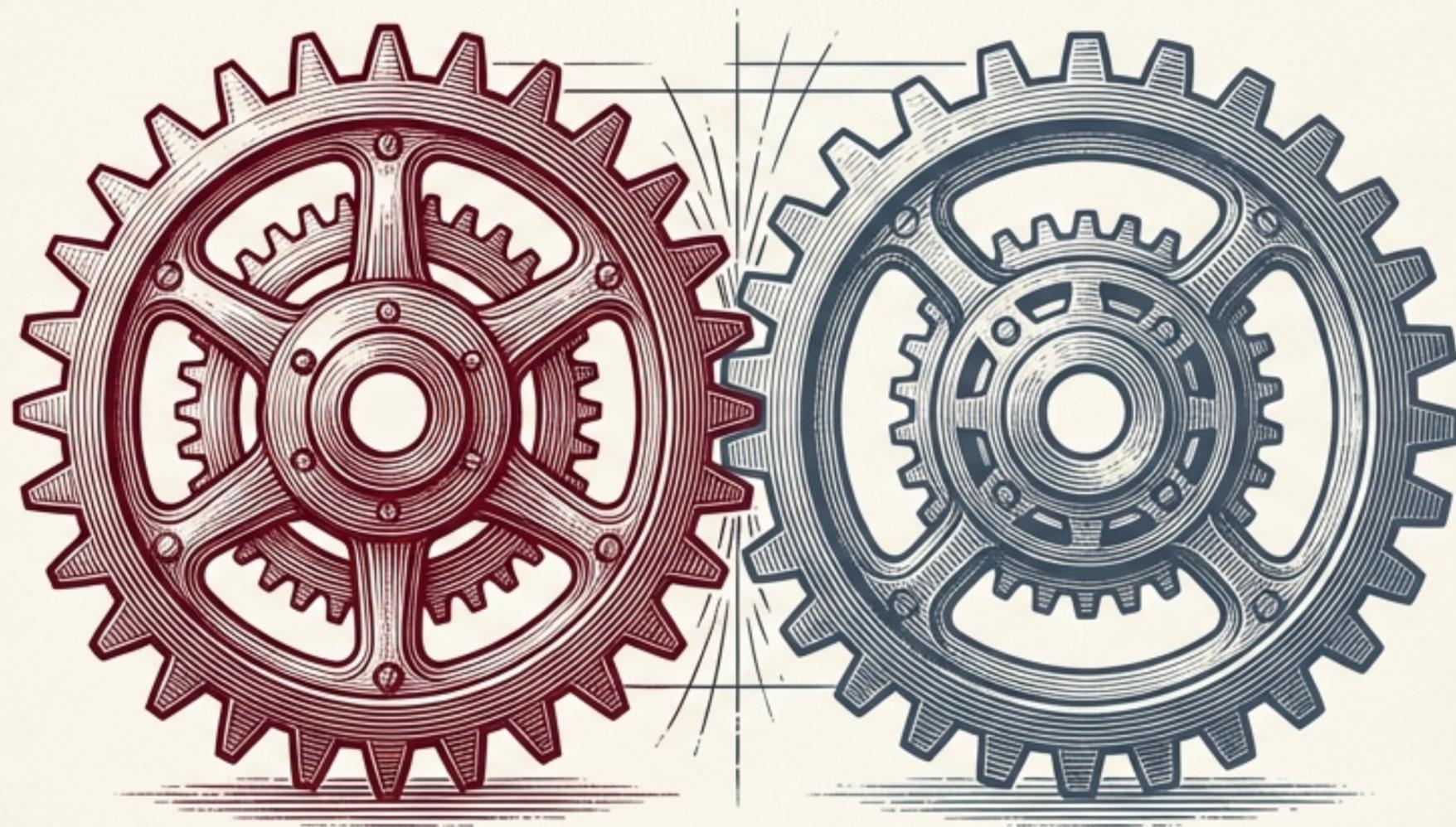
Why Both 'Tight' and 'Loose' Translation Models for the Book of Mormon Logically Fail

'Tight' Translation Model: Literal & Direct.

Presumes divine dictation of exact words.

PROBLEM: Fails to account for linguistic anachronisms, grammatical inconsistencies, and the translator's own cultural influence.

"Every word was given by the power of God."
- Early View



'Loose' Translation Model: Conceptual & Dynamic.

Views the translation as an inspired interpretation of ideas.

PROBLEM: Dilutes the claim of divine authorship and reduces the text to a product of the translator's mind, not a direct revelation.

"The prophet was given the ideas, but expressed them in his own language."
- Modern View

Conclusion: The incompatibility of the 'Tight' and 'Loose' models creates an inescapable logical dilemma, challenging the claimed divine origin of the translation.

The Foundational Claim and the Central Question

The Book of Mormon's origin story rests on a single claim: that Joseph Smith translated an ancient record by the "gift and power of God." But *how* did this translation supposedly happen?

The answer to this question is critical, and has created two mutually exclusive apologetic models.

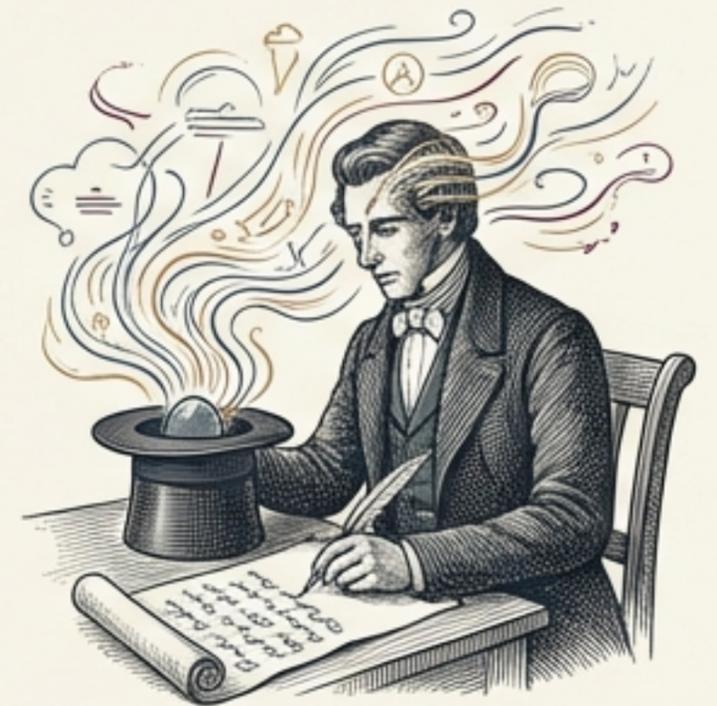
Path A: Tight Translation

A word-for-word, divine dictation. God provided the exact English words, and Joseph Smith simply read them aloud.



Path B: Loose Translation

A conceptual, revelatory process. God provided ideas, and Joseph Smith put them into his own words and 19th-century worldview.



"Scholars have examined and debated the issue of a tight versus loose translation method for many years." - [FairMormon](#)

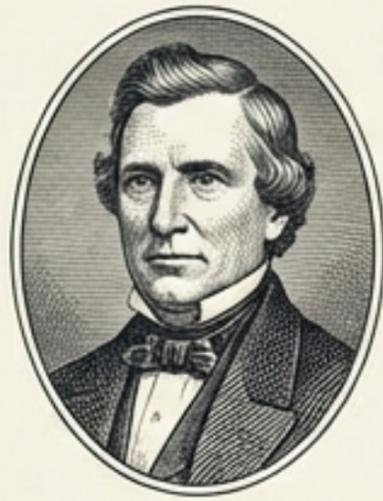
The Witnesses Describe an Unmistakably Tight Translation

Every primary, contemporaneous account describes a process where Joseph Smith had no intellectual input. The words appeared on the stone and would not change until they were written down perfectly.



Emma Smith

“...he dictated each sentence word for word... if I made a mistake stop me and correct my spelling, although it was impossible for him to see how I was writing...”



David Whitmer

“...one character at a time would appear, and under it it was the interpretation in English... when it was written down and repeated to brother Joseph to see if it was correct, then it would disappear...”



Martin Harris

“...sentences would appear and were read by the prophet and written by Martin, and finished he would say ‘written’ and if correctly written that sentence would disappear... but if not written correctly it remained until corrected... the translation was just as it was engraven on the plates, precisely.”

Problem #1: The King James Bible Errors

If the Book of Mormon is a divine, word-for-word translation of ancient plates, why does it contain entire chapters copied from the 17th-century King James Bible—including translation errors and italicized words added by KJV translators centuries later?

Book of Mormon

3 Nephi 14:6

Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn again and rend you.

King James Bible

Matthew 7:6

Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn again and rend you.

Why would a perfect translation from God contain 17th-century translation choices made by men?
This problem requires a *loose* translation, where Joseph Smith is borrowing familiar language.

Problem #2: The 100,000+ Textual Changes

According to the witnesses, the stone would not proceed until every word was transcribed “precisely.” This makes the thousands of subsequent changes to the Book of Mormon text impossible to explain under a tight model. Many changes were not simple grammar fixes, but reflected Joseph Smith’s evolving theology.

1830 Edition – 1 Nephi 11:18

...behold the virgin which thou seest is the mother of God, after the manner of the flesh.

(Reflecting a Trinitarian view)

1837 Edition – 1 Nephi 11:18

...behold the virgin whom thou seest is the mother of the Son of God, after the manner of the flesh.

(Reflecting Joseph’s later view of a separate Godhead)

If God dictated the text perfectly the first time, why did it need to be “corrected” later to align with Joseph’s new doctrines? This requires a *loose* translation.

Problem #3: 19th-Century Anachronisms

The Book of Mormon is filled with animals, technologies, and concepts that did not exist in the ancient Americas. This includes:



Horses & Chariots



Cattle, Sheep, Goats, Swine



Steel & Metalworking



Wheat & Honeybees



New Testament concepts and christology



19th-century treasure-digging language (“slippery treasure”)

The apologetic response, known as “loan shifting,” argues that Joseph substituted familiar 19th-century terms for things he didn’t recognize (e.g., “horse” for “tapir”).

Apologist Brant Gardner: “the underlying text would have been jaguar, but the translation would be lion.” ”

This explanation is, by definition, a loose translation model.

The Tight Translation Model is Untenable

- The textual evidence makes a tight, word-for-word translation impossible.
- The **King James Bible errors** show a 17th-century influence.
- The **theological changes** show a 19th-century author.
- The **anachronisms** show a 19th-century worldview.

To reconcile these facts, apologists proposed a new model out of necessity: a “Loose Translation.”

In this model, Joseph Smith was not a mere reader, but a co-author, receiving concepts and clothing them in his own language.

Let's examine if this new model solves the problems.

The Loose Model's First Casualty: The Witnesses

A loose translation model immediately invalidates the sworn testimony of every key witness to the process.

The Theory

Loose Translation: Joseph Smith received impressions and put them into his own words, acting as a co-author.



The Evidence

'IT made from witness quotes

“word for word”

- Emma Smith

“I conno scend.”

- Martin Harris

“remained until corrected”

- Martin Harris

The witness quotes

“precisely”

- Martin Harris

“if I made a mistake in spelling, he would stop me”

- Emma Smith

“it would disappear, and another character with the interpretation would appear”

- David Whitmer

To accept a loose translation, you must conclude that Emma, David, and Martin were either all mistaken in the same way, or Joseph Smith systematically misrepresented the process to them.

The Authenticity Paradox: Hebraisms & Chiasmus

Apologists often point to complex literary structures like Chiasmus (a form of inverted parallelism found in ancient Hebrew texts) as proof of the Book of Mormon's ancient, Semitic origins.

Apologetic Claim

The presence of authentic, complex Hebraisms is proof of an ancient text.

This Logically Requires...

Required Model

A **TIGHT**, literal translation to preserve the ancient structures.



Loose Translation Model

Joseph Smith is a co-author, inserting KJV language and 19th-century ideas.

This Also Means...

Logical Consequence

He is also capable of **MIMICKING** Hebraic writing styles found in the Bible.

You cannot have it both ways. Are Hebraisms proof of an ancient text (requiring a tight translation), or are they artifacts of a 19th-century author (consistent with a loose translation)?

The Co-Author Problem & The Lost 116 Pages

If the translation was loose, then Joseph Smith was a co-author, not merely a translator. This creates two new problems.

1. Diminished Authority

The book is no longer a direct transmission from God, but a story filtered through Joseph's mind and vocabulary, diminishing its claim as pure scripture.

2. The 116 Pages Test

In 1828, Martin Harris lost the first 116 pages of the manuscript. Joseph claimed he could not re-translate them because his enemies would alter the original manuscript to produce a contradictory version.



If the translation was **loose**, re-creating a conceptually similar but not identical text would have been simple. His inability to do so reveals his fear that he could not perfectly replicate a **tight** translation he had produced once before.

The Impossible Verse: Ether 9:19

A single verse in the Book of Ether demonstrates the absurdity of trying to apply both models.

“...they also had horses and asses, and there were elephants and **cureloms** and **cumoms**...” - Ether 9:19

To explain ‘horses,’ ‘asses,’ and ‘elephants’ (known 19th-century animals anachronistic to the Americas), you **MUST** use a **LOOSE** translation (loan shifting).

To explain ‘**cureloms**’ and ‘**cumoms**’ (unique, made-up words with no known meaning), you **MUST** use a **TIGHT** translation where God provides a specific, unknown term.

This verse requires Joseph Smith to switch translation methods mid-sentence. It is the dilemma in microcosm.

The Apologetic Response Relies on Misdirection

The FairMormon response attempts to create space for a loose translation by quoting from the Doctrine & Covenants:

...joseph's model of revelation is one in which god could use things such as the king james language... we read in D&C 1:24 "behold, i am god and have spoken it; 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."

The Deconstruction

This is a classic case of quoting out of context. D&C 1:24 is not about the Book of Mormon translation. It is God explaining why He is giving the commandments in the D&C to Joseph Smith in plain English so Joseph can understand them.

Using this verse to justify KJV errors in the Book of Mormon is a deliberate misuse of scripture to create a false impression of nuance.

An Unsolvable Dilemma

Neither model is consistent with the total body of evidence. Each requires ignoring a fundamental and contradictory set of facts.

To Accept a TIGHT Translation, You Must Ignore:

- 100,000+ textual changes.
- Widespread KJV errors and italics.
- Dozens of anachronisms (steel, horses, wheat).
- Evidence of Joseph's evolving theology in the text.



To Accept a LOOSE Translation, You Must Ignore:

- The sworn testimony of ALL primary witnesses.
- The entire premise of the lost 116 pages incident.
- Apologetic claims for authenticity (Hebraisms, Chiasmus).
- Unique, non-19th century words like "curelom" and "Liahona."

The Third Option: A 19th-Century Composition

The dilemma only exists if one assumes the Book of Mormon *is* a translation of an ancient record. If we remove that premise, the contradictions resolve. The evidence is **not** contradictory; it is cumulative.

A 19th-century text authored by Joseph Smith perfectly explains:

- ✓ **Why the witnesses described a tight translation:** It was part of the narrative of miraculous production.
- ✓ **Why it contains KJV language and errors:** It was Joseph's primary religious text.
- ✓ **Why the theology changes:** Joseph's own beliefs evolved during its creation and after.
- ✓ **Why it contains anachronisms AND unique words:** He drew from his environment ('horses') and his imagination ('cureloms').
- ✓ **Why he couldn't reproduce the 116 pages:** He couldn't perfectly replicate a complex, lengthy work of improvised fiction.

The simplest explanation that fits all the evidence is that the Book of Mormon is a product of its time and its author, not a translation from antiquity.