

Deseret Morning News (Salt Lake City)

September 1, 2009 Tuesday

Mathews key to LDS edition of Bible

BYLINE: Michael De Groot Deseret News

LENGTH: 990 words

Robert J. Matthews was a teenager during World War II when he first heard that LDS Church founder Joseph Smith had made what he said were inspired changes to the Bible. The 17-year-old was listening July 9, 1944, when Elder Joseph Fielding Smith of the Quorum of the Twelve said during a KSL Radio broadcast that Joseph Smith had corrected a verse in the Bible by revelation. Matthews had a spiritual experience. "The word revelation meant something," Matthews said in an interview in the Journal of Book of Mormon Studies.

"I hadn't known that Joseph Smith had made some corrections in the Bible. Joseph Fielding Smith's statement penetrated me." That day in 1944 began Matthew's quest to learn about what is called the Joseph Smith Translation. Before he died Sunday, Aug. 30, 2009, at age 82 of complications following open-heart surgery Matthews became known as the world's expert on the translation. Matthews probably would have preferred that people forget his role in bringing the Joseph Smith Translation into popular acceptance among members of the LDS Church. However, his work on the JST was his most lauded achievement by those who spoke with the Deseret News on Monday. Oscar W. McConkie, author and chairman of the law firm Kirton & McConkie, was a regional representative for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormon) when he called Matthews to be a stake president. "In my judgment, Robert J. Matthews is one of the great men of this dispensation. He did yeoman work on the Joseph Smith Translation," McConkie said. "My brother, (the late Elder Bruce R. McConkie of the Quorum of the Twelve), was insisting that we get the Joseph Smith Translation in our scriptures, but he couldn't have done it without the scholarship backing him up of Robert J. Matthews." That scholarship had as much to do with Matthews' personality and tenacity as it did with his academic work. When he first became interested in Joseph Smith's work on the Bible, the LDS Church did not trust the printed copies of the JST that had been printed by the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, now called the Community of Christ. According to an essay by BYU professor Robert L. Millet in the book "The Joseph Smith Translation: The Restoration of Plain and Precious Things," Matthews was sometimes chided by fellow Mormons for even quoting the JST. "I lived in that time period," said Monte Nyman, a retired professor of ancient scriptures from BYU and a friend of Matthews. "Nobody knew anything about the Joseph Smith Translation ? I mean they had a little knowledge ? but today we have it footnoted in the LDS Bible and openly talked about ... Bob just made a great contribution to the church's understanding of it." The distrust arose because the RLDS Church had not allowed any member of the LDS Church to inspect the original documents of the Joseph Smith Translation. Matthews began requesting permission to see the source materials. It took him fifteen years before he was finally allowed to see them in 1968. "He was the first Latter-day Saint since 1845 to have access to the original manuscript," said Kent P. Jackson, BYU professor of ancient scripture. "His research caused a serious change of thinking on the part of church members and church leaders." In short, the version published by the RLDS Church was very accurate. Philip Barlow, Arrington Chairman of Mormon History and Culture at Utah State University, said Matthews' made three major contributions concerning the JST. First, no scholar working on the JST can ignore Matthews' work. Second, without Matthew's work, it would be hard to see how the JST could have been included in the LDS edition of the Bible. Third, Matthews' efforts played a role, along with the work of other scholars, in the warming of relations between the LDS Church and the RLDS Church. In 1979, the LDS Church published a new LDS edition of the King James Version of the Bible. Matthews worked with the Scriptures Publication Committee, led by Elder Thomas S. Monson, Elder Boyd K. Packer and Elder Bruce R. McConkie of the Quorum of the Twelve. The new Bible included, for the first time, footnotes that contained excerpts from the JST. Matthews also contributed his expertise to the volume's Bible dictionary. Matthews work wasn't limited to the JST. He was one of four senior editors of the "Encyclopedia of Mormonism," reporting to editor Daniel Ludlow. He taught religion at BYU until he retired in 1992. "I used to sit in on his classes when I was at BYU," Charles D. Tate, a retired English and religion teacher at BYU and former editor of BYU Studies, said. "His insights were amazing and his research was thorough." Jackson said his impact also included involvement as a curriculum writer for the church's seminaries and institutes before joining the BYU faculty, scores of lectures at BYU's Education Week, Know Your Religion classes, firesides and special summertime classes for instructors in the Church Education System. "He never ever wanted anything in his life to be about him," Matthew's son, Robert D. Matthews said. "Most of the things that he has done in his life I have learned about from other people." After his father died on Sunday, Robert D. Matthews said hundreds of people have shared their experiences with him. "I have a

good friend of mine who said, 'I took a class from your dad when I was in college.' One semester (my friend) got mono and missed a bunch of time. And he said, 'Your dad was the only teacher that called me on the phone and asked how I was doing and who brought me my coursework.'" Funeral services will be held at 11 a.m. Thursday at the Lindon 6th Ward Chapel, 56 E. 600 North in Lindon. A viewing will be held from 6-8 p.m. Wednesday at Olpin Mortuary, 494 S. 300 East in Pleasant Grove. Internment will be at the Lindon City Cemetery, 550 N. 200 East in Lindon following the service. e-mail: mdegroote@desnews.com

LOAD-DATE: September 1, 2009

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

PUBLICATION-TYPE: Newspaper

Copyright 2009 The Deseret News Publishing Co.