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## The Expanse of Joseph Smith's Translation Vision

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# THE EXPANSE OF JOSEPH SMITH'S TRANSLATION VISION

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**Brant A. Gardner**

Review of Samuel Morris Brown, *Joseph Smith's Translation: The Words and Worlds of Early Mormonism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020). 314 pages. \$34.95 (hardback).

**Abstract:** *Samuel M. Brown opens up a new and expansive view of Joseph Smith as a religious thinker. Written for an academic audience, Brown is intentionally dealing with what can be seen and understood about Joseph Smith's various translations, a term that Brown uses not only for texts, but for concepts of bringing the world of the divine into contact with the human domain. This is a history of the interaction of a person and the world of his thought, from the first text (the Book of Mormon) to the last, which Brown considers to be the temple rites.*

Some will read the main title of Samuel Brown's book without continuing to the subtitle. That will lead to an unfortunate misunderstanding of Brown's sympathetic investigation into early Latter-day Saint thought. This book never intends to venture into the questions of how or whether Joseph Smith translated a text from one human language to another. His use of the word *translation* is a more expansive concept; thus, the subtitle: *The Words and Worlds of Early Mormonism*.

Easily overlooked also would be the last two words: *early Mormonism*. Those are essential because an important distinction in Brown's work transcends the common notion that *early Mormonism* simply means its historical beginnings. In Brown's description of the *Words and Worlds of Early Mormonism*, it is a qualitative rather than a temporal difference.

In 1994, Armand L. Mauss published *The Angel and the Beehive: The Mormon Struggle with Assimilation*. Mauss selected two symbols

to represent the tensions he felt the young Church developed. For the maturing Latter-day Saint church, the beehive symbolized “all aspects of Mormon involvement with the world, cultural as well as economic.”<sup>1</sup> The angel (specifically the angel Moroni on the temple) signified “the charismatic element in Mormonism.”<sup>2</sup> That tension between early charisma and later assimilation is part of the developmental process that moves an early sect into a recognized church.<sup>3</sup>

That division between charismatic beginnings and eventual assimilation is important when approaching Brown’s book because it was written in the assimilation phase, and it will be read either by an audience that has no Latter-day Saint history or by those whose Church history consists of perceptions developed as part of the assimilation phase. Samuel Brown is pushing his description into the past and discussing the early charisma with reverence, understanding, and a view to present the impact of that charisma to an audience increasingly distant from the intellectual world in which the early Latter-day Saint converts lived. Brown is as close to an insider’s view as we can get while still presenting the overarching perspective of a longer history that allows a vision of how the puzzle pieces finally fit together.

Brown is painting a picture of the development of ideas and therefore begins not with a typical history of Latter-day Saint origins but with one of swirling concepts that will eventually coalesce into an impression of Joseph’s mental world that so enthralled his early converts. It is a verbal painting more akin to Van Gogh’s *Starry Night* than to the more photorealistic paintings of, say, Norman Rockwell. That is not to say it is inaccurate or only impressionistic. It is always difficult to capture the metaphysical in the mundane.

The first chapter deals with “The Quest for Pure Language.” Brown places the Church experience inside the general mood of the times. It wasn’t a unique Latter-day Saint task, but it would be developed in uniquely Latter-day Saint ways.

The second chapter deals with “The Nature of Time,” an examination of the relationship of humanity within divine time.

The third chapter is “Human and Divine Selves,” which looks at the human relationship to divinity.

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1. Armand L. Mauss, *The Angel and the Beehive: The Mormon Struggle with Assimilation* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 3.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid., 6.

Only after this three-chapter introduction to Joseph's thought-world does Brown finally begin to discuss Joseph's translated texts. Brown deals with the Book of Mormon as a new Bible, the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible as a continuation of the revisioning of the Bible, and the book of Abraham as "The Egyptian Bible and the Cosmic Order." Perhaps in these chapters some believing Latter-day Saints may wish for an indication that something like the modern concept of translation was taking place. Brown does not provide that; it isn't the question he is answering.

This is a book written for an academic audience, and Brown's examinations of those texts deal with Joseph's involvement with them as well as his developing understanding as each was produced. One aspect of his discussion that will have some relevance to the other discussions of translation method is that he does speak of how Joseph understood and interacted with those texts. For those who do believe they were divinely transmitted, Brown's discussion points to the active participation of Joseph Smith's mind during that mysterious process.

Highlighting Brown's expansive take on the texts of the early Church is his final chapter on the temple rites. These are not typically seen as translations; however, they fit into the reconceptualization of translation that informs Brown's examination of the words and worlds of the early Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Through most of his text, Brown allows the concept of translation to hover with implied meaning over the specifics he discusses. He does, however, eventually solidify his meaning. The first sentence of his conclusion finally links all the pieces together: "In the temple liturgy he completed in Nauvoo, Smith brought to an idiosyncratic fruition his twin projects of metaphysical translation: the transformation of texts and humans" (269).

This, then, is Brown's vision of translation. There is nothing of the mundane presentation of words from one language to another. It is a transformation of a divine understanding to create an available tapestry of understanding of one's place in the divine. It is the full charismatic and metaphysical vision that excited the early converts, long before the process of becoming a church that was assimilated into (and mostly accepted by) the larger society, had begun. It is a picture of the excitement of an unassimilated, dramatically dissimilated early Mormonism.

**Brant A. Gardner** (MA, State University of New York Albany) is the author of *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on*

the Book of Mormon *and* The Gift and Power: Translating the Book of Mormon, *both published through Greg Kofford Books. He has contributed articles to Estudios de Cultura Nahuatl and Symbol and Meaning Beyond the Closed Community. He has presented papers at the FairMormon conference as well as at Sunstone.*