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# JOSEPH SMITH'S TRANSLATION PROJECTS UNDER A MICROSCOPE

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**Brant A. Gardner**

Review of *Producing Ancient Scripture: Joseph Smith's Translation Projects in the Development of Mormon Christianity*, edited by Michael Hubbard MacKay, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Brian M. Hauglid (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2020). 544 pages with index. Hardback, \$70. Paperback \$45, eBook \$40.

**Abstract:** *Producing Ancient Scripture is a collection of sixteen detailed essays with an introduction by the editors. This is the first such collection that examines the greater range of Joseph Smith's translation projects. As such, it is uniquely positioned to begin more sophisticated answers about the relationship between Joseph Smith and both the concept of translation and the specific translation works he produced.*

I find this a particularly difficult book to review. It is a large work, and even the separate articles are large in content and complex in understanding. A review that simply describes the contents of the book does not really do it justice. An in-depth interaction with each article could easily be nearly half as large as the text itself.

The next problem is that this review is being written for the *Interpreter* journal, which is subtitled "A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship." Publishing in this venue creates an expectation that I will review this book from the perspective of a believing Latter-day Saint, which I am doing. However, that also creates a superficial conflict with the nature of the articles in the book I'm reviewing. *Producing Ancient Scripture* is not devotional in nature; it is not necessarily faith-affirming. It is a work of scholarship, written by scholars for scholars, and made available for the rest of us to consult. By editorial choice, the articles do not examine the question of whether or not there was divine participation

in Joseph's translations. Therefore, even though I review the book as a believer, I do not review it on the basis of its relationship to faith.

In *Producing Ancient Scripture*, the authors carve out the middle ground where the issue isn't belief but rather understanding. Terence J. Keegan discussed a similar issue with critical biblical scholarship. He notes that the "resulting tendency among recent scholars has been to emphasize the human activity involved in the production of Scripture while politely ignoring the question of precisely how they are of divine origin."<sup>1</sup> That wise scholarly approach informs this volume.

Joseph Smith's translation projects occurred within a known timeframe and have the benefit of multiple recoverable accounts that clarify (and infelicitously muddy, at times) the human side of the production of what members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints consider sacred scripture.

I will try to cover the essential introduction to the articles in this volume, and then provide some insights I have gained from the articles.

### Overview of the Contents

Introductions to collected articles necessarily provide a brief indication of what those articles will be and something of the perceived importance. This introduction does that, but it also attempts to set the stage for the vision of the book as a whole. Readers really should resist the temptation to jump into a particular article and instead begin with the introduction. It demonstrates the validity of a work where the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.

In general, the book is organized into chronological sections that move through aspects of the various translation projects.

### Part I: Context and Commencement

*"By the Gift and Power of God": Translation among the Gifts of the Spirit* (Christopher James Blythe). This article places the early Mormon understanding of translation into the same sphere as other gifts of the spirit.

*"Bringing Forth" the Book of Mormon: Translation as the Reconfiguration of Bodies in Space-Time* (Jared Hickman). Where the previous article placed the concept of translation into the realm of gifts of the spirit, this article suggests that Joseph's use of the concept of translation was much more expansive. Readers intrigued by this article

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1. Terence J. Keegan, *Interpreting the Bible: A Popular Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), 12.

should also read Samuel Morris Brown's *Joseph Smith's Translation: The Words and Worlds of Early Mormonism*.<sup>2</sup> Hickman notes that some of the ideas in his article came from discussions with Brown, and Brown's book expands greatly upon them.

*Performing the Translation: Character Transcripts and Joseph Smith's Earliest Translating Practices* (Michael Hubbard MacKay). A perhaps forgotten or at least easily forgotten translation project was Joseph's interaction with the characters copied from the plates. This is an episode preliminary to the translation of the Book of Mormon and is given its due in this article.

*Reconfiguring the Archive: Women and the Social Production of the Book of Mormon* (Amy Easton-Flake and Rachel Cope). Aside from later deep-dives into translation issues (a personal interest of mine), this is my favorite article in the book. Easton-Flake and Cope rightfully emphasize the important role played by four women in the coming forth of the Book of Mormon: Lucy Mack Smith, Lucy Harris, Mary Musselman Whitmer, and Emma Hale Smith. This article should be read by all Latter-day Saints, even if they have no interest in the rest of the articles in the book.

## Part II: Translating the Book of Mormon

*Seeing the Voice of God: The Book of Mormon on Its Own Translation* (Samuel Morris Brown). Brown's article interacts with concepts from both Blythe's and Hickman's articles. This is a look at the conceptual result of the translation rather than a method of production. Brown describes his approach as "metaphysics of translation" (138).

*Joseph Smith, Helen Schucman, and the Experience of Producing a Spiritual Text: Comparing the Translating of the Book of Mormon and the Scribing of A Course in Miracles* (Ann Taves). The idea of comparing Helen Schucman and Joseph Smith is obvious. Both produced long and complicated dictated texts without obvious recourse to outside prompts. It is an important and instructive comparison.

*Nephi's Project: The Gold Plates as Book History* (Richard Lyman Bushman). Bushman steps into the text to examine the Book of Mormon story as a record of the creation of a book. He looks at the implications of how the text says it was created. This is more a question of the text before translation for believers, but an artifact of translation in academic discussion.

*Ancient History and Modern Commandments: The Book of Mormon in Comparison with Joseph Smith's Other Revelations* (Grant Hardy).

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2. Samuel Morris Brown, *Joseph Smith's Translation: The Words and Worlds of Early Mormonism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

Hardy examines the important question of how the nature of the Book of Mormon as a translated text compares to the dictated revelations, most of which were not considered to be translations, at least in the same sense as the Book of Mormon.

### **Part III: Translating the King James Bible**

*The Tarrying of the Beloved Disciple: The Textual Formation of the Account of John* (David W. Grua and William V. Smith). This article moves to questions of biblical translation but deals with a text not typically examined as part of Joseph's translation projects — a letter from John as recorded in Doctrine and Covenants 7.

*A Recovered Resource: The Use of Adam Clarke's Bible Commentary* (Thomas A. Wayment and Haley Wilson-Lemmon). Wayment and Wilson-Lemmon examine evidence that, in some sections of the translation of the Bible, Joseph consulted Adam Clarke's Commentary and that Clarke's commentary influenced the way in which certain translations were written.

*Lost Scripture and "the Interpolations of Men": Joseph Smith's Revelation on the Apocrypha* (Gerrit Dirkmaat). The inclusiveness of this volume on Joseph's translating process is underscored by the inclusion of this interesting examination of a translation that wasn't done and the story behind it.

*Translation, Revelation, and the Hermeneutics of Theological Innovation: Joseph Smith and the Record of John* (Nicholas J. Frederick). Frederick examines the interrelationship between the received Gospel of John and development of Joseph's theological thought.

### **Part IV: Pure Language, the Book of Abraham, and the Kinderhook Plates**

*"Eternal Wisdom Engraven upon the Heavens": Joseph Smith's Pure Language Project* (David Golding). Of all of Joseph's projects, the one that has received the least attention has been his pure language project. Nevertheless, it is an important foundation to much of his translating work.

*"Translating an Alphabet to the Book of Abraham": Joseph Smith's Study of the Egyptian Language and His Translation of the Book of Abraham* (Brian M. Hauglid). Joseph had translated the Book of Mormon from characters described as reformed Egyptian. In an era that was fascinated with and promoted multiple amateur ideas about language (and Egyptian in particular), the chance to study papyri with actual Egyptian characters led to another project not well-known to lay Mormons. Hauglid examines both the history and nature of the studies

of Egyptian and how those studies interacted with the development of the book of Abraham.

*Approaching Egyptian Papyri through Biblical Language: Joseph Smith's Use of Hebrew in His Translation of the Book of Abraham* (Matthew J. Grey). Grey notes that in popular thought, Hebrew was considered an original language and therefore must have been related to Egyptian. Joseph's opportunity to interact with the Egyptian papyri appears to have initiated his desire to learn Hebrew, which was taught through classes in Kirtland. Grey examines the ways in which Joseph's growing understanding of Hebrew language and culture influenced aspects of the book of Abraham.

*"President Joseph Has Translated a Portion": Joseph Smith and the Mistranslation of the Kinderhook Plates* (Don Bradley and Mark Ashurst-McGee). The history of Joseph's interaction with the Kinderhook plates is fascinating. For decades, faithful Saints believed that Joseph had translated them. Then, they were discovered to be forgeries, and the assumption had to be revisited. Bradley and Ashurst-McGee carefully lay out the history and then the evidence for the nature of the purported translation. They find that Joseph did provide a "translation" but one based on a secular style of translation rather than revelation.

### **Impressions of the Importance of the Book**

Collections of papers inevitably produce uneven results, with some papers being stronger than others. That perspective could be applied to this collection as well but with the caveat that all papers cover their topics remarkably well, and the relative strength may ultimately rest in the personal interests of the reader. I can say without hesitation that many of the papers have so well defined their topic that they are now the standard references for that topic. For some topic areas, there may be little left to be said.

Since I have declared that I cannot do justice to the papers individually, I will give my impressions of where these papers steer future research. I will begin with Ann Taves's paper comparing Joseph Smith and Helen Schucman. First, it must be clarified that this paper aptly fits the parameters of the quotation from Terence Keegan that I cited early in this review. This is a paper making a comparison, not a judgment; there is no intent to suggest that one person is right and the other wrong. This is a paper making the comparison between two methods that similarly produced a text through the process of a smooth dictation.

The value of this comparison for the future of Joseph Smith translation studies is that Helen Schucman is more recent and modern, and interviews could ask questions we only wish we could ask Joseph. For me, the comparison lays the foundation for an important insight into Joseph as a translator. Schucman, while learned and articulate, could offer no explanation for how she scribed her book. Joseph is known to have been obscure in his descriptions, relying on the phrase “the gift and power of God,” without any attempt to help modern scholars understand that definition. I find the important takeaway from the comparison to be that it is quite plausible that Joseph could not describe how he translated any more than Schucman could. For scholars of Joseph’s translations, it means we really do have to resort to other avenues of investigation. It also strongly suggests that, comparable to Schucman, there is no apparent intent at subterfuge or dishonesty. Both Joseph and Schucman produced a text by means they considered beyond normal.

Beginning with that understanding, the rest of the evidence presented clearly examines Joseph Smith as an integral part of the translation process. As Keegan has noted, they are an examination of the humanity in the development of scripture.

Whatever explanations we finally accept for those translations, the articles in this book demonstrate that we cannot remove Joseph Smith the person from his resulting translations. Many articles provide clear evidence of proposed ways in which Joseph’s mind participated in the translation process. Among those most important to the thesis would be the papers by MacKay, Hardy, Grua and Smith, Wayment, and Wilson-Lemmon, Frederick, Golding, Hauglid, and Grey. Even for believers, the evidence is strong that however we see the Divine’s participation in the translation process, we must also understand the very human Joseph as an important participant in the process.

The comprehensiveness of the treatment of Joseph Smith’s translation projects, the quality and depth of the specific papers, and the way in which many papers confirm or interact with the others in the book support the assertion that this is currently the most important single work examining the whole of Joseph Smith’s translation projects. For many years to come, anyone attempting to discuss any of Joseph Smith’s translation projects must refer to *Producing Ancient Scripture*.

**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.*

