Joseph Smith's Translation: The Words and Worlds of Early Mormonism
By Samuel Morris Brown
New York: Oxford University Press, 2020

Reviewed by Kent P. Jackson

Samuel Morris Brown's *Joseph Smith's Translation: The Words and Worlds of Early Mormonism* announces a sweeping objective: to place all of Joseph Smith's prophetic projects under a single heading: *translation*. The thesis of the book is that "translation as a source of scriptural texts" is mirrored in "translation as a process by which humans became assimilable to the divine presence" (ix). "Translation was about more than words and sentences. Translation was also concerned with the transformation of human beings and the worlds they were capable of inhabiting. These twin senses of translation run together in early Latter-day Saint thought" (4).

This book is a collection of essays, some of which revisit previously published material (ix). Refreshingly, Brown notes changes in his previous thinking, a welcome acknowledgment in an exploratory work of this kind (for example, 34–35). The chapters cover Joseph Smith's new scriptural texts, such as the Book of Mormon and the book of Abraham, as well as more esoteric topics such as the quest for "Pure Language" and the "Nature of Time." My general feeling of the book is that it often concludes more than the evidence allows, and it is more a book of philosophical musings than a book of history. The translation thesis is intriguing, however, and the parallels between "translation" and "translation" are thought-provoking. After the book's introduction, the thesis is rarely mentioned again until the final chapter, where it makes perfect sense woven nicely into the discussion of the temple.

Brown writes of the Prophet's "goals and aspirations" in his revelatory projects, and he uses words like "he [Joseph Smith] feared," "he worried that," he "was haunted by," and he "sought to make sense of," all without citing sources (7). These phrases suggest conscious objectives on the Prophet's part, yet the evidence seems to show his surprise at the

revelations when he received them. It may well be that after the fact we can see a grand design, but I'm not convinced that Joseph Smith was aware of it until late in his career.

In the chapter "The Quest for Pure Language," Brown cites some contemporary non–Latter-day Saint statements about a desire for the language of Eden to enable communication on a more heavenly level. He then suggests that statements like those reflect the ideas of Joseph Smith, but this kind of environmental reasoning doesn't always work. He quotes the Prophet wishing he could communicate in better ways, but the Prophet's words seem only to reflect the frustration he felt when he was not able to express himself adequately. Brown adds a mystical element to all this that does not seem warranted by the evidence, suggesting that the ability to communicate in Edenic words somehow equates with transcendent power. He invokes the document "A Sample of Pure Language" from March 1832 as evidence of a desire to know something about divine language, and that is certainly what it appears to be. But the document itself is enigmatic, and half of the "pure language" in it is English ("Son," "sons," "angels").[1] The major contributions of the "Sample of Pure Language" seem to be that it tells us that God's name is Awmen (later rendered "Ahman"; see D&C 90:17), and it implies that God, Jesus, humans, and angels are of the same category of beings. Beyond that, it is hard to tell what the document suggests. Brown believes that Joseph Smith was on a lifelong quest to find pure language and sees events surrounding the coming forth of the book of Abraham to be part of that process. I find more compelling the idea that what the Prophet was seeking was not mystical power through language but simply truth—new information through new revelation.

The chapter "The Nature of Time" suggests that Joseph Smith's revelations cross time boundaries. I suspect that they do that but only in the most down-to-earth way: they provide information about the past. I did not find Brown's idea compelling that the revelations flatten time, collapse time, or fuse time periods together. Instead, they make simple and concrete historical statements: Adam, Eve, Abraham, and Moses all had the same gospel of Jesus Christ that we have today. Joseph Smith learned these things when new texts were revealed to him, starting with the Book of Mormon, which is the first Latter-day Saint text that presents Christianity before Christ. New texts revealed new historical realities.

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1. "Sample of Pure Language, between circa 4 and circa 20 March 1832," 144, Joseph Smith Papers, https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/sample-of-pure-language-between-circa-4-and-circa-20-march-1832/1.

Brown emphasizes that all Joseph Smith's translations—the Book of Mormon, the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible, and the book of Abraham—"are biblical in nature." This is certainly true, but I think the author overreaches when he states that all of them were "concerned with recovering the primordial Bible" (123). It would be more accurate to say that they restored "primordial truth," but "primordial Bible" suggests original text, and that is not what the evidence suggests. The Book of Mormon sees itself as a book that simultaneously confirms the Bible and teaches in plainness truths that the Bible lacks. One of the first claims of the Restoration is that it proves that the Bible is "true" (D&C 20:11). As Brown points out, the Book of Mormon "wasn't intended to be an independent scripture, but instead to be integrated warp and woof with the Bible" (124). Indeed, the Book of Mormon takes for granted a Christian readership and can't be understood fully independently of the Bible, but I think that Brown overdoes it when he says that the book's intent is to dismantle the Bible (161) or kill it in order to save it (127, 142). His discussion of how the Book of Mormon "transforms" the Bible is more on target, in which he argues that the transformation is in the minds of readers who see from the Book of Mormon how revelation works and how scripture is to be understood (148–49).

In the chapter on the New Translation of the Bible, Brown too eagerly credits Sidney Rigdon with influencing Joseph Smith's Bible revision, calling it "Smith's and Rigdon's project" and "the Smith-Rigdon project" (171, 173). The majority of the New Translation's most unique content (now in the book of Moses) came before Rigdon became the Prophet's scribe, and after the Prophet removed Rigdon from his scribal duties in the summer of 1832, the translation work continued for another year with a different scribe. Brown's idea that the JST was "self-consciously a direct competitor" to Alexander Campbell's New Testament translation (171) is puzzling, because very few people saw the JST in Joseph Smith's lifetime, and Campbell's translation remained primarily, though not exclusively, a denominational publication. Brown shows how both translations were revisions of existing texts—the KJV in Joseph Smith's case and a handful of different translations, including the Greek text itself, in Campbell's case. Yet the two translations differ profoundly in that Campbell sought to find the best English words to express the meaning of the existing New Testament text, while Joseph Smith's revisions often change existing meanings beyond recognition. Campbell was a careful and conscientious translator, while Joseph Smith considered the existing text to be an invitation to revelation and believed himself authorized to revise

both the Bible's wordings and its meanings. Brown describes this as "moving past the English text" (173), but it was actually much more than that because the New Translation was moving past even the Hebrew and Greek texts as well. As for what the Prophet was doing in the New Translation, Brown correctly asserts that he was "ranging all over the map" to produce his revised text (185).

The author demonstrates well how Joseph Smith's translations, revelations, and sermons reflect repeatedly on the Bible, and his description of how the Prophet's revelations and sermons are interlaced with scriptural texts is one of the highlights of the book (183–91).

The survey of the documents associated with the book of Abraham focuses more on their content than on the continuing debates about their origin. Brown's discussion shows a great deal of research and thought in his effort to integrate all the documents together and understand them. Collectively he calls them "the Egyptian Bible" (for example, 227). Some readers may be concerned that his explorations seem to place the associated Egyptian papers on an equal footing with the canonized text, but this kind of integration is one of the characteristics of Brown's book. I don't find his conclusions convincing, but they are a legitimate attempt and are likely as good as the conclusions drawn by others. For most readers, including myself, the Egyptian documents remain a mystery.

The chapter on the temple may be the best in the book, and it is there that the "translation" thesis comes together nicely. "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." The revised Genesis and the book of Abraham provided the narrative that "deposited them directly into the scriptural scenes," in which they "became direct participants in cosmic history, welding their own links to their ancestors the same way scripture did." Through this process, "they were themselves transformed" (269).

This book is not for everyone. It is not an easy read, and it is more a work of ponderings than a source of information. Brown's language is dense, and his choice of terminology is sometimes hard to explain. His application of the title "New Translation" to include Joseph Smith's Bible-oriented revelations and sermons is not helpful, because the Prophet and his contemporaries used the title only with respect to the written Bible revision on a specific set of manuscripts. Brown seems to use the title "Visions of Moses" for the whole of what we now call the book of Moses (33, 179), even though the text connects nothing after chapter 4 with Moses, and "Visions of Moses" is a long-standing traditional title

for Moses 1 and not for anything else. Sometimes errors distract from his arguments. The Bethesda Pool is not "near the Sea of Galilee" (43). The Prophet and Rigdon did not change "'Gospel' to 'Testimony' in the titles for the Gospels, presumably in deference to Campbell" (174–75). Only the apostolic Gospels—Matthew and John—are called testimonies in the JST, and the first use of the word *testimony* for a Gospel is in the hand of John Whitmer, not in Rigdon's.[2] Much of the material was far too theoretical for my tastes.[3] These matters may seem trivial, but they and others like them show an occasional lack of care for precision in the author's pursuit of the big picture.[4]

But small details are not what this book is about. It is about thinking very big about Joseph Smith and his translations. In doing so, it seems sometimes to be a quest for exotic explanations, and thus because my own instinct is to prefer the simplest explanations possible, much of the book didn't resonate with me. But its approach is thought-provoking and creative, and parts of it can break new ground in understanding the work of Joseph Smith.

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2. Scribe Sidney Rigdon did not write a title for Matthew (New Testament Manuscript 1, p. 1). Scribe John Whitmer wrote "The testimony of St Mathew" (New Testament Manuscript 2, folio 1, p. 1). At the beginning of Mark, Whitmer wrote "The Gospel ~~of~~ <according to> St Mark" (New Testament Manuscript 2, folio 2, p. 8). Rigdon labeled Luke as "Luke" (New Testament Manuscript 2, folio 2, p. 45), but he labeled John "The testimoney of John" (New Testament Manuscript 2, folio 4, p. 105).

3. I found the chapters on language, time, and "selves" to be particularly speculative.

4. Brown uses the term "Old Testament Judaism" (62), but Judaism is a post–Old Testament phenomenon. He also follows antiquated nineteenth-century usage in calling ancient Israelites "Hebrews" (74), and he calls the Lehites "ancient American Jews" (63), which, even though it mirrors the translation of Nephi's words, miscommunicates. The Book of Mormon was a duodecimo, not an octavo, and once its pages were opened, it actually didn't look like other Bibles of the time (132–33).