

ways Mormons are subjected to systematic structural exclusion due to gender and sexual difference and equip readers to advance religiously grounded imperatives that all are equal before God.

ALISON HALFORD {ad4480@coventry.ac.uk} is a research fellow at Coventry University, UK. Her PhD research looked at how British Mormon women negotiate gender, and she has also researched Mormon women in Sweden and Greece. She is currently working on the relationship between religion, ethnicity, and gender with minority student engagement in India.



The Words and Worlds of Smith and Brown

Samuel Morris Brown. *Joseph Smith's Translation: The Words and Worlds of Early Mormonism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020. 320 pp. Hardcover: \$34.95. ISBN: 9780190054236.

Reviewed by Jonathan A. Stapley

In 1887 Albert Michelson and Edward Morley performed what was intended to be the crowning accomplishment of physics—an experiment to determine how movement through the luminiferous ether changed the speed of light. What they found instead was the first strong evidence that there was no ether and that the speed of light was constant regardless of motion. Such an idea seemed absurd. It still does. Many physicists and engineers were content to ignore the data—skyscrapers and bridges were predictably constructed without incorporating what seemed like an outlying anomaly. Of course, it was precisely this weird bit of data that led Einstein to a radical reconceptualization of space, matter, and time itself.

The historical record is not reproducible in the way that physical experiments are. Yet Joseph Smith's Restoration left scattered anomalies in the archives for believers and scholars to use for their various purposes, or to ignore. The proverbial shelves are littered with the bits and pieces left over from their various constructions. Not everything is useful, even for historians and theologians, and bridges really do just fine with classical physics. But like the Michelson–Morley experiment performed in Cleveland, Ohio, these strange records create an opening for more. It is in this space that Samuel Brown's *Joseph Smith's Translation* (hereafter referred to as *JST*) enters. Whether or not it revolutionizes the fields that approach the Mormon past will take time to determine, but Brown's *JST* is certainly a fresh and important reconsideration of Smith and his cosmology.

JST is a volume in two parts. The first section deals with the aspects of the Restoration that Brown has been working with for over a decade: pure language, religious time, and the nature of being. These are the critical contexts that allow Brown to then turn his attention to Smith's various translations. Brown takes from the shelves words of Edenic language, animal sacrifice, teleportation, seer stones, and interpretations of hieratic characters, integrating them into a narrative that casts Smith as doing work incongruous to that demanded by a Protestant epistemic tradition bent on stripping the divine presence not only from the altars but also from the age. Here Brown engages and relies on the magisterial work of Charles Taylor and to a lesser extent Robert Orsi to good effect. His linguistics training also bubbles through. Brown details a rich and vivid world with Smith "manipulating complex conceptual structures" while aware of the danger when scholars impose their views on the past (12–13). The positivistically inclined and heirs to the Protestant secularism that Brown militates against will disagree that Brown successfully avoids the trap. Brown is clearly happy with that.

With *JST*, Brown presents a cosmos in which Smith and other early Saints wielded religious fire. This cosmos is compelling, but also sometimes disorienting. And like the wormhole that Brown describes as being Smith's scripture and ultimately translation itself, Brown also wields evidence from scattered times and places. He collapses them in ways that are effective, but that also on occasion seem forced. For example, Brown's analysis of the tension between Lockean impulses of Church members and Zion is masterful. His proposed etymology of Ahman is plausible, but only merely so.

The second section of *JST* focuses on the "texts" of Smith's translations. Here Brown convincingly argues that Joseph Smith's religious career was an extended rereading of the Bible. One key framework that Brown uses throughout this section is the idea that these rereadings are targums—a class of ancient Hebrew translations that expanded the narratives for a vernacular audience. Despite a short introduction to the concept of targums, and repeated use of the category as being descriptive of Smith's work, I was never convinced that Smith conformed to the ancient antecedent or that Brown presented a complete repurposing for the term. Still, whether or not you agree that the Book of Abraham is a targum, the work that Smith is doing is clearly and usefully described in *JST*.

Many ideas from *JST* struck me as important contributions. One such argument of *JST* is that the Book of Mormon (and subsequent translational projects) constructively "broke" the Bible. It amplified stress and exposed fault lines that Atlantic Christians had papered over for generations. The Saints and their scripture then exploited the topology in very non-Protestant fashion. The Saints' religious fire destroyed and it constructed. The idea that Smith's early Bible revision project is best understood as comprising many of his canonized revelations is significant. And Brown's use of the Egyptian grammar documents to demonstrate how elements of the cosmological/genealogical/temple

priesthood and its gendered valances are rooted in Kirtland is provocative in the best ways. Brown approaches the Nauvoo temple liturgy's intersection with Masonry and revelation in an innovative manner that opens new avenues for future work.

Brown's *JST* is also timely as popular interest in the Book of Abraham seems to be growing. Book of Abraham studies have been a quagmire for decades, with personalities and devotions twisting even the most patient attempts at dialogue into what can charitably be described as a mess. Brown productively skirts above most of this with his expansive proposed translation framework. For Brown, the act of translation throughout Smith's religious corpus, and his "Egyptian Bible" in particular, was never a robotic lexical exercise.

Just as scholars took the data produced in nineteenth-century Ohio to find a new space and a new time, Brown took data that most scholars ignore and that has often been grist for the antagonistically inclined. He outlays cohesive worlds populated by gods, queens, and priests. He finds a space and time outside of the secular age. *Joseph Smith's Translation* is creative, smart, and expansive. Read it.

JONATHAN A. STAPLEY {j.stapley@outlook.com} is a scientist and historian. Oxford University Press published his *Power of Godliness: Mormon Liturgy and Cosmology* in 2018.

