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Mormonism through the Lens of Translation Studies

El mormonismo desde la óptica de los Estudios de la Traducción

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Abstract: Most religious movements often have an invisible relationship to translation. This is the case for major religious traditions, such as Christianity. Among the Christian denominations, Mormonism is perhaps particular due to a quite visible relationship with translation. As a religious tradition that is very much rooted in and experienced through translation, it has caught the eye of translation scholars who have studied it to theorize on the nature of translation. However, much of this scholarship seems somewhat uninformed as to what scholars in the field of Mormon Studies have also been exploring regarding translation. And the opposite seems to also be true. Thus, in what could be an obvious space for interdisciplinary exploration, these two disciplines, for the most part, do not engage each other. This paper will explore that common space, the intersection of translation and Mormonism, in an attempt to highlight possible areas for better collaboration.

Keywords: Book of Mormon, Book of Abraham, Bible, Mormonism, Translation

Resumen: La mayoría de los movimientos religiosos tienen alguna relación, por lo general invisible, con la traducción. Esto se aplica a las principales tradiciones religiosas, como el cristianismo. Entre las confesiones cristianas, el mormonismo destaca en este sentido por tener una relación muy evidente con la traducción. Al considerarse como una tradición religiosa arraigada y transmitida por medio de la traducción. Esto ha despertado el interés de estudiosos en la materia que han centrado sus investigaciones en el análisis de las traducciones que se han llevado a cabo con el fin de elaborar nuevas teorías que logren explicar su naturaleza. No obstante, muchas de estas investigaciones parecen carecer de una sólida fundamentación, especialmente en lo que respecta a los avances realizados por los académicos especializados en el campo conocido como Estudios Mormones. En consecuencia, se trata de un ámbito idóneo para llevar a cabo una

exploración interdisciplinaria por sus convergencias, ya que no es frecuente que estas disciplinas entablen un diálogo. Por ende, el presente trabajo procura explorar ese espacio común –la intersección entre la traducción y el mormonismo– con el fin de resaltar los aspectos en los que podrían colaborar de una forma más clara.

Palabras clave: Libro de Mormón, Libro de Abraham, Biblia, Mormonismo, Traducción

INTRODUCTION

Religion, especially in the case of major religious traditions such as Christianity, has some kind of (often) invisible relationship to translation, including interpreting. Among the Christian traditions, Mormonism[1] is perhaps particular in that it has a very visible relationship to translation, from the live interpreting of regular international broadcasts to the origin of the religious movement itself. Indeed, this is rooted in founder Joseph Smith's unusual translation projects, including that of the Book of Mormon. It comes as no surprise, then, that some scholars would become interested in different translational aspects of Mormonism. In fact, the volume of articles about, for example, the translation of the Book of Mormon is considerable. It is however surprising that most of these articles are not produced by translation scholars.

Even so, Mormonism, as a religious tradition that is very much rooted in and experienced through translation, has caught the eye of a few translation scholars. As a rule, these scholars have explored the nature of translation by considering the implications of Smith's translation of the Book of Mormon. In this sense, Translation Studies has something to offer in terms of the nature of translation generally and the translation of the Book of Mormon specifically. However, much of that scholarship seems slightly uninformed in terms of what scholars in the field of Mormon Studies have been exploring. Therefore, in what could be an obvious space for interdisciplinary exploration, these two disciplines for the most part do not engage each other.

This paper will explore that common space between translation and Mormonism, in an attempt to highlight possible areas for better collaboration. To achieve this goal, it will review how Translation Studies has approached translation in Mormonism, critically pointing out some places where the scholarship may be lacking. It will then review the extent to which Mormon Studies has engaged with the scholarship produced in Translation Studies, if at all. Finally, the combination of these two reviews will lead to some

[1] In this paper, the term *Mormonism* will be mostly understood as pertaining to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, but it should be noted that it can be applied to the broader Latter-day Saint restorationist movement.

conclusions about Mormonism as a fruitful object of study for Translation Studies.

1. What Translation Studies Has to Say about Mormonism

Early theorists of translation were themselves translators, and at times they engaged in the translation of sacred texts. Thus, it was not unusual for early reflection on translation to focus on the experience and concerns of translating texts such as the Bible. While this tendency weakened over time, even as late as the 1960s, Bible translation continued to play an important role in the conceptual and methodological development of Translation Studies. However, as the field grew more extensive and more academic, concerns revolving around the translation of sacred texts became less central, to the point one might currently consider them peripheral, even if still present (*cf*. Israel, 2023).

Despite the decidedly secular concerns of current Translation Studies, some of its scholars have taken note of Mormonism. This should come as no surprise given that the Mormon tradition originates in a series of religious projects that were presented to the world as having important, even defining, translational activities at their core. Thus, a small number of translation scholars, including some that were very influential in the field, have studied translation through the prism of the Mormon experience. It should be noted at the outset that these scholars were not so much interested on the question of what translation can teach about Mormonism but rather on what the Mormon experience can teach about translation. Thus, concerns about *truth*, doctrine, or practice that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints or other groups in the broader Latter-day Saint movement might have from a religious standpoint become more or less immaterial to translation scholars. To these scholars what matters is not religion but rather translation. Thus, Mormonism is only interesting because it can be used to say things about translation.

For the most part, when translation scholars have looked at Mormonism, they have been interested in the Book of Mormon, particularly in founder Smith's claims about translation in relation to the production of that book in English. Very few scholars have considered the translation of the Book of Mormon into other languages. This is why, even though Spanish is the second most spoken language in the Church, there are only a handful of studies concerned with the book's translation into Spanish. Zarandona (2011) compares five different translations of the Book of Mormon into Spanish to draw some conclusions about the level of control the sponsoring institution (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints) held over the translation

process. In turn, López Alcalá[2] (2014) writes about the first translations of the Book of Mormon into Spanish, which were carried out by a former military officer from Spain named Melitón González Trejo. López Alcalá (2017) has also explored the habitus–or set of dispositions, tendencies, and inclinations–of LDS (Latter-day Saints) translators who translate Mormon sacred texts from English into the world's many languages. Even so, the production of translations in languages other than Spanish has failed to draw the attention of translation scholars.[3] What these isolated studies indicate is that there is no scholarship within Translation Studies concerned with ongoing efforts to translate the Book of Mormon or other LDS scripture. One might surmise that these are perhaps deemed similar enough to the efforts of Bible translators, and thus they have not proven sufficiently interesting.

What is particularly interesting, however, is the account of Smith and his production of the Book of Mormon in English. What makes it remarkable in Translation Studies is not that it involves angelic visitations, buried ancient gold, or even the birth of a religion, but rather that it provides a case study for the depth of the concept of *translation*. The implications of Smith claiming that the book was a translated text (as opposed to an inspired text or even a fantastical text) provide translation scholars with the opportunity to explore the role of translation in society. Again, the story is interesting because it can show something about translation. In essence, the account of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon is seen as valuable in developing translation theory.

In so doing, translation scholars tend to reject the supernatural elements of Smith's story and focus on the Book of Mormon as a product of the culture in which it emerged. In other words, translation scholars are not interested in trying to find evidence for or against the Book of Mormon as an ancient text but rather treat it as an early 19th-century, American text that was presented as a translation. Toury (2005, pp. 11-14) argues that the presentation of the Book of Mormon as a translation was an act of deliberate cultural planning intended to strengthen the position of the book. His interest

[2] Samuel López Alcalá is a translation scholar at Brigham Young University whose academic training is in Translation and whose publications are in the field of Translation Studies. His research interests are found in translation history and translation theory, lenses through which at times he explores Mormon issues. This is evident in his bemoaning the lack of attention paid to translation "in the historiography of Mexican Mormonism" (López Alcalá, 2020, p. 56) and his subsequent exploration of the role that translation played in early LDS proselytizing in Mexico (López Alcalá, 2020, pp. 58-63).

[3] The translation of the Book of Mormon into languages other than Spanish has garnered the attention of scholars in Mormon Studies. For example, the *Journal of* Book of Mormon *Studies* published a series of articles that describe the book's translation into French (McClellan, 2002), German (Scharffs, 2002), Italian (Homer, 2002), and Welsh (Dennis, 2002). The same journal later published two articles regarding translation into Japanese (Gessel, 2005; Takagi, 2009). None of these articles are situated in the field of Translation Studies.

in the book comes from the idea that scholars can learn about translation by studying not only translations themselves but any original texts that were passed off as translations within a culture, what he refers to as *pseudotranslations* (p. 48). This author considers pseudotranslations as a way for an author to introduce changes to a culture with the relative safety of claiming that one is merely the messenger. In this view, claiming that the Book of Mormon is a translation allowed Smith to introduce "novelties" into "the American (Christian) culture of the first third of the 19th century" which could not have been introduced through an original work of fiction (Toury, 2012, p. 49).

While the claim is intriguing, a critical reading of Toury (2012) might ask the question of why Smith could not have, to the same effect, presented the Book of Mormon as direct revelation from God, sans a source text. That is the strategy, for example, adopted by Muhammad when introducing his proposed cultural changes–that he received the Quran as revelation from the archangel Gabriel. In fact, Smith produced several texts which he pronounced as revelation, and these were later published in two volumes accepted as sacred scripture by the faithful: *Doctrine and Covenants* and the *Pearl of Great Price*. Thus, it is not clear what the advantage was to Smith in presenting the Book of Mormon as a translation *per se* and not some other type of divinely originated knowledge, as he did with other texts. Toury's use of the Book of Mormon in this way may reflect a lacuna in the understanding of the role the book played in Smith's theological project. Or, at the very least, it fails to address the key question of what the advantage was of the book being a translation. The book was clearly meant to introduce theological innovations, in this Toury is correct. Even so it is unclear that presenting the book as a translation was more advantageous to that end than presenting it as some other type of text. After all, what made the book powerful, to believers at least, was the claim that it came about through divine intervention, *i.e.*, that it was God who was speaking through Smith. In a way, that is the understanding that was and continues to be key for Latter-day Saints who give credence to Smith's claims–not that he could translate but that he spoke for God.

Even so, Toury (2012) finds the Book of Mormon to be a good example toward the point he is making, namely, that pseudotranslations hold a cultural position that is similar to that of "genuine translations" (p.52). He believes this idea might be useful to Mormon scholars, as indicated in this footnote:

> It is interesting to note that a few years ago, Mormon scholars, mostly believers interested in theological issues, started turning to the notion of 'pseudotranslation' in an attempt to appease the many tensions between their strong wish to stick to their belief and various phenomena of a historical, linguistic and textual nature which have

> long been presented as stumbling blocks. (See especially Shepherd 2002; Tvedtnes and Roper 2003.) (Toury, 2012, p. 49)

However, it is unclear that the idea of pseudotranslation is useful to that particular group of Mormon scholars. Specifically, the Shepherd (2002) article that Toury (2012) cites was produced by an Evangelical (not Mormon) scholar in a collected work whose aim is to rebut or discredit the claims of Mormonism (Beckwith *et al.*, 2002). In turn, the Tvedtnes and Roper (2003) article cited is a review by Mormon scholars of the Shepherd (2002) article. The review praises Shepherd for his scholarly approach but disagrees with Shepherd's conclusion that the Book of Mormon is a pseudotranslation (Tvedtnes & Roper, 2003).

Nonetheless, the idea that the Book of Mormon does not need to be an actual translation for it to offer some perspective that can be used for theoretical postulation has been fruitful. Hermans (2007) takes this approach in his book *The Conference of the Tongues*. In this work, Hermans develops a theory of authentication, namely, that a translation can gain the same status as the original text through the intervention of some authority. To develop this idea, he retells the account of how the Book of Mormon came to be: an angel called Moroni visited Smith; following angelic direction, Smith recovered a set of plates; Smith translated these using Urim and Thummim spectacles while dictating to several scribes (Emma Smith, Martin Harris, and Oliver Cowdery) from behind a screen;[4] several witnesses bore testimony of seeing the plates; and the Book of Mormon was finally published in English (Hermans, 2007, pp.1-2). Importantly, once the translation was finished, the angel took the plates away, and no one has seen them since; nonetheless, the translation is as good as the original because the voice of God himself indicated that the translation was good (Hermans, 2007, p. 3). A translation thus authenticated by God for all intents and purposes replaces the original in every sense (Hermans, 2007, p. 3). The translation is fully equivalent to the original (Hermans, 2007, p. 4). This becomes possible through authoritative verbal statements that make the original plates redundant (Hermans, 2007, p. 4). In other words, it does not matter what Smith did when translating the text, because a higher authority has turned the translation into an original anyway (Hermans, 2007, p. 4).

In terms of Hermans' analysis of the Book of Mormon as a translation, what matters is that an authentication procedure took place which made the

[4] Delabastita and Grutman (2021), based on Hermans (2007) description of the process, argue that the "the magic disks" (i.e., the Urim and Thummim) used by Smith to translate where like the Babelfish technology used for instant translation in the novel *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (pp. 20-21).

translation fully equivalent to the original.[5] This particular example of the Book of Mormon as an authenticated translation that replaces the original has been criticized by Chesterman (2010), who protests that "at no point in this story does Hermans refer to the fact (for non-Mormons) that we must surely be dealing with a pseudotranslation here" (p. 356). Thus, Chesterman finds the example unsatisfying because, unless one is a Latter-day Saint, there was never an original to be replaced, and thus the entire authentication analysis fails. One might argue, of course, that Hermans did not need to address the issue because for at least one group of people (believing Latter-day Saints) there is an original. All that Hermans (2007) is doing here is explaining how authentication works.[6] The point is that the pronouncement of some person or institution in authority can make a translation's original text irrelevant and unnecessary. In this case, for example, what makes the English version of the Book of Mormon a reliable source text from which to translate into other languages is that it was authenticated. The translation's validity is, therefore, a result of its authentication.

Another scholar who finds the account of the Book of Mormon's translation fruitful for theorizing about translation is Douglas Robinson in *Who Translates? Translator Subjectivities Beyond Reason* (2001). The main thesis developed here by Robinson (2001) is that human translation is often seen as a process where a translator channels "the voices and writings and ideas and knowhow and plans and desires of other people […] from various sources, through their own bodies" (p. 187). He finds that this process "strikingly resembles spirit-channeling, and indeed some of the most famous translations in Western history were once believed to have been channeled, or 'divinely inspired'" (p. 193). He calls this belief the Spirit-channelling Model of translation, which he develops in part by relating the account of how the Book of Mormon was translated into English (pp. 54-65). After describing the translation process, Robinson (2001) asks:

> was Smith translating? […] He had no ancient Egyptian; how could he be translating? The divine instrumentalities, a.k.a. the 'seer stone,' a.k.a. the Urim and Thummim, served as a spiritualistic MT

[5] Some translation scholars have found Hermans insightful on this matter. He has been echoed, for example, by Vidal Claramonte (2010, pp. 15-19), who summarizes him in her development of the idea that equivalence is an illusion that cannot be ever truly realized because translators actively shape the text they are translating.

[6] In addition, Hermans (2007) provides other examples of authentication. One is the Septuagint, or the ancient translation of the Hebrew Old Testament into Greek, where 72 translators translated the text in 72 days, each one sitting independently in his cell (pp. 3-4). When they compared versions, they were all exactly the same, word for word, which provides evidence that the Spirit guided the translation, thus authenticating it (pp. 3-4). Another more secular example is provided: in the Vienna treaties, the contracting parties declared certain language versions to be authentic and thus eliminated the "original" in favour of equal versions (pp. 7-11).

> [Machine Translation] program, doing the translation for him. He was only the human channel of an essentially divine act of translation. Who translates? God does, or the Angels Mormon and Moroni (the mediate source authors) do, using the instrumentalities of both the Urim and Thummim and Joseph Smith. This is classic spirit-channeled translation. (p. 58)

It should be noted that Robison (2001) is not claiming that the Book of Mormon has a divine origin. He communicates at different points that he does not believe this story and that to believe it "strains rationalist credibility to the breaking point" (p. 55). Even so, he relies on the account of how the Book of Mormon was translated into English to make the point that one way in which translation has been historically understood is as a process of spiritually channelling the voices of others.[7] Once that point is made, Robinson sets the Book of Mormon aside and moves on to develop his model by exploring how translation has historically also been understood as the channelling of ideological forces (pp. 67-138).

Ultimately, Robinson (2001) finds that these models are lacking. He argues that cognitive science helps us understand that the translator's inner self is "scattered, fragmentary, 'pandemoniac'" (pp. 143-144) and that, additionally, the translator is subjected to outside influences from a number of agents, including "the translation market, clients, agencies, initiators, freelancers, helpers, editors, end-users" (p. 187). Robinson's basic argument, therefore, is that in translating, the translator sifts through all of these inner "demons" and outer "invisible hands" to arrive at the target text. He finds this model to be a more accurate description of translation than one where people channel spirits (including authors) or ideologies.

The way the account of the Book of Mormon's translation into English is used to develop the model has been the object of an interesting critique by Hague[8] (2009). He does not argue against Robinson's model but rather explains that it could be expanded by a more nuanced consideration of the actual translation process followed by Smith. In order to develop his critique, Hague explains that it is immaterial whether Smith actually was the conduit of

[7] Even though the Book of Mormon is presented as key evidence for his argument, Robinson (2001) builds said argument relying on other examples as well. He describes the translation of the Septuagint as an example of the translator-as-spirit-channeler view, even though he is careful to signal that the story of 72 translators who were inspired by the Spirit to write exactly the same text independently of each other counters the actual historical description of the translation process (pp. 49-54). He also points to Paul's writings on glossolalia, where the apostle calls for speaking in tongues to be interpreted by an interpreter who presumably is not a learned professional but someone who channels the same spirit as the speaker of tongues (p. 64).

[8] Daryl Hague is a translation scholar at Brigham Young University whose academic training is in Law and in Translation, and his publications are in the field of Translation Studies.

divine revelation, but it needs to be assumed that “Smith sincerely believed he was transforming an ancient text into an English text” (p. 23). With this assumption in place, Hague (2009) argues that the Book of Mormon is a problematic example for translation-as-spirit-channelling because Smith needed to “study things out” in his mind, which implies some level of subjectivity, and because the copious editorial changes he made to the text in 1837 and 1840 suggest that he considered several possible renderings for different instances (pp. 23-24).

Ultimately, this author argues that a closer look at Smith’s account reveals the presence not only of spirit channelling but also of Smith’s own, complex inner self. In essence: “Smith may be a channeler, but he is a channeler whose subjectivity remains intact and makes a significant contribution to text creation” (Hague, 2009, pp. 24). He provides further examples of Smith applying his own subjectivity to these channelling experiences. Hague explains that Smith made changes when editing the *Book of Commandments*, a collection of revelations he received, and rendered Matthew 26:26 in two different ways when producing his own revision of the Bible (pp. 24-25). One might argue that Robinson (2001) is not completely against the idea that Smith also had some say in the form of the translation. The model, where the translation is handed by some divine being or spirit to the translator, does not completely eschew the possibility of the translator exercising some level of individual agency or subjectivity. Robinson (2001) argues that Smith had to have been more than a passive instrument, otherwise God or some angel could just have issued the translation, or some other individual could have been assigned the task, but the fact that Smith himself was chosen to do this implies he had something himself to contribute (pp. 60-61). Even so, Robinson never explores what it is that Smith was, in fact, contributing and places the whole process under the spirit channelling banner. Hague’s contribution arrives from looking more closely at what Smith actually did during the translation process, which leads him to place Smith as both a spirit channeller and an active subject who contributed in complex ways to the text’s creation.

Hague’s contribution is interesting, in part, because it considers elements from Smith’s translation projects beyond the Book of Mormon. Another author who does this is Valdeón (2014). Instead of exploring the role of Smith as a translator, Valdeón picks up where Toury (2012) left off, that is, with the observation that the Book of Mormon being presented as a translation offered certain advantages to Smith’s project. This is the starting point from which Valdeón sets out to explore the use of the concept of translation, but he does not limit his analysis to the Book of Mormon. He considers two additional

projects: what is now dubbed the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible[9] and the Book of Abraham, now published as part of the *Pearl of Great Price*. He nuances his approach to these three texts by pointing out that they are different as regards the type of translation that they represent. Specifically, Valdeón relies for his exploration on Jakobson's (1959/2012, p. 127) classification of translations as interlingual translation (*i.e.*, "translation proper", or translation between languages), intralingual translation (*i.e.*, "rewording", or translation within a language), and intersemiotic translation (*i.e.*, "transmutation", or translation between non-verbal sings and a verbal language):

> In fact, when we write about the use of translation in the creation of a Mormon canon, we can speak of, at least, three distinct types of transformations. First, the golden plates claim to record the origins of the Nephites (one of the Middle Eastern groups believed to have emigrated to the Americas), who were seeking the Promised Land. Smith allegedly translated these plates into English. After the completion of *The Book of Mormon*, Smith undertook the retranslation of the Bible following another revelation that compelled him to do so. This could be regarded as a case of intralingual translation as Smith was not familiar with Hebrew or Greek. Finally, Smith performed the intersemiotic translation of some Egyptian papyri that the new Church had purchased in Ohio. This gave way to the *Book of Abraham*. (Valdeón, 2014, p. 224)

As regards the Book of Mormon, Valdeón (2014) points out that its being presented as a translation created both problems and advantages. On the one hand, its nature as a supernatural translation made obtaining funding for publication difficult (p. 226). On the other hand, its nature as a supernatural translation made it similar to the foundational text of Christianity, namely, the Bible (p. 226). This would be an immediate advantage to the Book of Mormon being more than a revealed text. Inasmuch as it was a translation, it was similar in nature to the Bible, which was generally held in high regard and authoritative by 19th century Americans. Valdeón (2014) also considers what the Book of Mormon's status as a translation offered generations of Latter-day Saints after Smith's lifetime, namely, that the text itself was found to have "foreignizing elements" that were seen as textual evidence of its nature as a translation, which makes the book a sort of self-authenticating text (pp. 226-227).

[9] During Smith's lifetime, the project was known as the New Translation (Jackson, 2010, p. 56). It later became known as the Inspired Version because it was published under that name starting in 1867 by the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, now Community of Christ (Jackson 2010, p. 56). The title Joseph Smith Translation was created by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the 1970s (Jackson, 2010, pp. 56, 72).

A further advantage is that the lack of a source text, *i.e.,* of the plates, places the text above the scrutiny of those who might wish to address the problems of equivalence that are present in every translated text of any import (Valdeón, 2014, pp. 226–227). Valdeón also infers that this inaccessibility to any source text is what raised the Book of Mormon to its status as "the canonical text of the new Church, the one by which all standards were to be measured" (p. 227). That last inference should probably be qualified. There is evidence to suggest that the Book of Mormon was not always the text "by which all standards were to be measured" (p. 227). Research indicates that it was not until the 20th century that the Book of Mormon became the centrepiece of the Latter-day Saint scriptural cannon (Reynolds, 1999, pp. 7-30). Reasons that have been identified for its raise to prominence include calls from Church leaders to give the book more prominence, the introduction of a Church-wide and correlated curriculum that gave the book a more central role, the publication of new editions of LDS scriptures, and increased scholarly and apologetic publications about the book (Reynolds, 1999, pp. 30-37). The fact that it was presented as a translation has not been identified by scholars as a reason, let alone the single reason, why the Book of Mormon rose to a central position in the LDS scriptural cannon.

Valdeón (2014, pp. 229-231) moves on to discuss the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible, which he presents as an example of an intralingual translation. He argues that this revision of the Bible was called *translation* by Smith because "as with the transcription of the golden plates first and the interpretation of the Egyptian papyri later, the concept of translation provided his work with the element of veracity and respectability he desired for his divine mission" (p. 229). He acknowledges that referring to this text as a *translation*, *intralingual* or otherwise, is problematic because of some large additions to the Book of Genesis which are now published as the Book of Moses (p. 230). In fact, the types of changes that Smith made to the Bible includes not only these lengthy additions but also fixing perceived errors, commenting on the meaning of certain passages, harmonizing contradictory passages, making specific changes to meaning, and updating or clarifying word choice and grammatical structures (Barlow, 1991, pp. 51-53). The most common type of change in the Joseph Smith Translation is the latter, which means that the argument could be made that this is mostly an intralingual translation (as Valdeón seems to be doing), but the commentary, harmonization, changes in meaning, and lengthy additions present a challenge to the idea of the project being a translation at all. In that light, it makes more sense to refer to it as a version of the Bible built in part, and only in part, through intralingual translation. Of course, the reason a translation scholar would focus on this text at all is that Smith himself referred to it as a

translation. The project nonetheless presents some basic challenges in understanding how exactly it fits the definition of translation.

Valdeón (2014, pp. 232-233) then moves on to the Book of Abraham, which he presents as an example of intersemiotic translation. This categorization, however, can be challenged. According to Jakobson (1959/2012), who created the categories in question, *intersemiotic translation* is specifically the "interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems" (p. 114). While he does not elaborate on the definition too much, he offers as an example the transposition "from verbal art into music, dance, cinema, or painting" (p. 118). This is not what is taking place with the Book of Abraham. What has been published as the Book of Abraham was presented by Smith as the translation of some fragments of ancient Egyptian papyri that he purchased in 1835. The project was never concluded, but the portions that were published include both text and images. The text is presented as

> A TRANSLATION / Of some ancient Records that have fallen into our hands, from the Catecombs of Egypt, purporting to be the writings of Abraham, while he was in Egypt, called the BOOK OF ABRAHAM, written by his own hand, upon papyrus. ("A Translation", p. 704.)

These papyri were written in Egyptian hieroglyphs, which is an established, albeit defunct, writing system. Thus, inasmuch as Smith presented the Book of Abraham as containing material translated from one writing system into another, the project would be more correctly branded as interlingual, and not intersemiotic, translation.

Even so, there may be a sense in which a part of the Book of Abraham could be considered to a certain extent an example of intersemiotic translation. Alongside the text, the Book of Abraham contains three facsimiles of partially reconstructed illustrations from the papyri. These facsimiles include a set of explanations that are printed under the illustrations. Such explanations, since they are verbal expressions of non-verbal symbols, could be considered intersemiotic translation. Thereby, it could be said that the Book of Abraham includes some intersemiotic translation but claiming the whole of it is an intersemiotic translation is somewhat of a stretch.

Such a categorization assumes that Smith in fact interlingually translated the Egyptian language into English and also intersemiotically translated the symbols into written English. If one assumes that such is not the case, that Smith simply created the text in his mind and then dictated it, this would be better categorized as a case of pseudotranslation. Valdeón (2014, p. 232) argues, however, that the Book of Abraham cannot be a

pseudotranslation because the original papyri, or part of them at least,[10] are extant. Thus, insofar the papyri represent Egyptian funerary texts (Ritner, 2011), the Book of Abraham is not a "fictitious translation" but rather an "erroneous translation" (Valdeón, 2014, p. 232). This is a euphemistic way of saying that Smith made the Book of Abraham up but claimed it was a translation of an existing text, in which case it would still not be an intersemiotic translation.

Classifications aside, Valdeón (2014) makes an important contribution in that he addresses the issue as to why Smith would engage in a series of translation projects in the process of establishing a new religion. Specifically, "by resorting to the concept of translation he was lending authority to the new Christian faith he was creating" (p. 234). This makes sense intuitively because the Christian faith holds the Bible, a translated text, as its most authoritative text, so by claiming to be called of God to produce translated scripture, Smith was engaging in a type of religious activity that Christians had long respected. Valdeón (2014, pp. 234-235) further argues that such "resorting to the concept of translation" helped the new faith become accepted by mainstream American society. This latter assertion, however, is rather questionable. One of the arguments often made to discredit Mormonism is, precisely, its acceptance of non-biblical scripture–translated or otherwise. Further, the gradual acceptance of Mormonism as part of mainstream American society seems to have taken place mostly because the religion embraced conservative American values and "seemingly effaced all traces of otherness" (Givens, 2012). In short, the fact that Latter-day Saints believe that their scriptural cannon was produced to a large extent by translation does not seem to be the reason Mormonism became tolerated in mainstream American culture. Therefore, what continues unanswered is this question: what was the exact advantage for Smith in employing the concept of *translation*? That this was advantageous is assumed by most translation scholars who consider the Book of Mormon, but why that would be an advantage over other options Smith remains an open question.

Further, Valdeón's attempts at finding a traditional categorization for the Joseph Smith Translation and the Book of Abraham, as well as Chesterman's protest against Hermans' considering the Book of Mormon a translation at all, illustrate that translation scholars struggle with the very nature of Smith's translation projects. While they have found his projects helpful for theorizing, trying to understand them within a Translation Studies framework has proven a challenging task. This seems to be the case because Smith's translation

[10] A total of 12 fragments from the original papyri have been recovered and are in possession of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Todd, 1968, p. 12).

projects push the concept of translation to the limit, and thus, traditional understandings of translation seem to be unable to account for the complexity of Smith's project of scriptural production. This does not imply that translation scholars have not provided worthwhile insights, as the paragraphs above should illustrate.

2. How Mormon Studies has Engaged with Translation Studies

2.1. On the Nature of Mormon Studies

One might wonder to what extent the previous insights have reached beyond the field of Translation Studies. In essence, do they inform scholarship and understanding in other fields? A logical place to begin exploring that question is by considering the impact of Translation Studies scholarship on another field that might be interested in Mormonism and translation, namely, *Mormon Studies*. This is a field, the contours of which are difficult to define, ranging from apologetic studies that seek to provide evidence in favour of the claims made by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (*e.g.*, Parry *et al.*, 2002) to scholarly explorations of the Latter-day Saint movement as a religious, social, cultural, and historical phenomenon (*e.g.*, Bushman, 2005). Wherever one might draw the field's boundaries, scholarly study of Mormonism began taking place in the 20th century, with the publication of works about Mormon history and culture (*e.g.*, Neff, 1918). [11] In turn, scholarly studies specifically about the Book of Mormon began appearing in the mid-20th century (Becerra *et al.*, 2022, pp. 15-17). Much like Translation Studies, the field of Mormon Studies arises from interest in a specific object, in this case Mormonism, and is largely interdisciplinary in nature.

2.2 Translation Studies in Mormon Studies

One would therefore expect that the scholarship provided by translation scholars into translation within Mormonism would to some extent be reflected in Mormon Studies. As to this, the starting observation would be that the amount of scholarship that has been produced around the Book of Mormon, the Book of Abraham, and to a lesser extent the Joseph Smith Translation is staggering (*e.g.*, Becerra *et al.*, 2022, pp. 131-163), yet very little of it considers work done within Translation Studies. This is true even of works that directly address translation. For example, a book titled *Producing Ancient Scripture: Joseph Smith's Translation Projects in the Development of Mormon Christianity* (MacKay *et al.*, 2020) makes no mention of any of the insights provided by translation scholars.

[11] While Neff's (1918) scholarship is now outdated, it represents a major, early scholarly endeavour to consider Mormonism beyond its theological claims.

There are some exceptions to this general layout. For example, the book *Envisioning Scripture: Joseph Smith's Revelations in Their Early American Contexts* (Townsend, 2022) is a collected volume of articles that explore different aspects of Smith's scriptural production. It contains an updated version of Valdeón's (2014) article on Smith's three major translation projects. This reproduction is interesting in that an entire Translation Studies article is recontextualized for a Mormon Studies audience, which could potentially result in fruitful cross-pollination.

The more usual pattern, however, is that the few authors who do engage with Translation Studies scholarship do so rather briefly. Consider *The Gift and Power: Translating the Book of Mormon* (Gardner, 2011). This book-length treatment of the history, process, and nature of the Book of Mormon's translation into English only cites one translation scholar, *i.e.*, Robinson (2001). Gardner (2011, p. x) first mentions Robinson as an example of how dismissive scholars tend to be of the supernatural origins of the Book of Mormon. Robinson is referenced a second time to support the idea that Smith "must have contributed something" to the translation process (Gardner, 2011, p. 255). Of course, as stated above, Robinson's main thrust is quite the opposite: while Smith surely contributed something, he was in essence a spirit-channeller. Gardner was apparently unaware of Hague's (2009) critique of Robinson, which would have proved to be more on point for the argument Gardner was developing–that Smith was not simply parroting words but that he was an active participant in a translating process.

Another author who engages Robinson is Brown (2012). He finds that the way Robinson uses Smith as an example of purported spirit channelling is "accidentally useful" (p. 54). It is unclear what Brown means by that, except perhaps that Robinson serves to exemplify the way many individuals and scholars interpret Smith's translation process to be "xenoglossic", *i.e.*, "the supernatural ability to speak a known human language" (pp. 62-63). In 2012, Brown explains that Hague's critique of Robinson is an example of Smith's translation process as "glossolalic" (p. 69), *i.e.*, "an ecstatic experience whereby a worshiper is caused to speak (or sing) syllables that belong to no known human language" and "another believer is often called upon to 'interpret' the glossolalia into familiar human language" (p. 63). Brown (2012) finds Hague's approach to theorizing Smith's translation projects helpful in that it "correctly draws attention to the multivalence of human experience and translation" (p. 70). Clearly, Brown finds contemporary translation theories to be of value in developing an understanding of what Smith was doing when translating. He calls for exploration of such theories, arguing that "[t]here are important insights to be gained from these schools of thought that will need to inform a credible account of Smithian translation" (Brown, 2012, p. 70).

Unfortunately, he does not follow up on this invitation, and his book length treatise on Smith's scriptural production, titled *Joseph Smith's Translation* (Brown, 2020), draws on a wide range of scholarship but not on Translation Studies.

CONCLUSIONS

If we consider how scholars in Mormon Studies have approached translation, two observations become evident. The first is that a vast amount of writing has been published. The second is that it generally ignores the contributions found in Translation Studies. This might be evidence, at some point, of the effects of compartmentalized academia. Nonetheless, hastily giving a pass due to territoriality will not do. Given that Mormon Studies is interdisciplinary in nature, one would expect perhaps more exploration of the ideas found within Translation Studies. As stated above, Brown (2012) has called on scholars in Mormon Studies to more fully engage with current translation theories.[12] This would no doubt enrich the work of scholars in the field by providing additional models to understand their object of study.

Something similar seems to happen at the other end. Some translation scholars have engaged Mormonism. They seem to be fascinated by the story of the translation of the Book of Mormon. They have explored this particular aspect of Mormonism as a way to theorize about translation. In this sense, there has been serious engagement with the story. And yet, the story proves problematic. Its validity as a way to substantiate certain claims about translation comes into question, and how to even understand its very nature is a source of difficulty.

Part of the problem is once again the compartmentalization of the Academy. Even so, translation scholars who are willing and able to delve into the labyrinthine amount of scholarship produced around Smith's translations in the field of Mormon Studies might there find models and insights that can be enriching to understanding translation. This was made evident above in how Hague (2009) benefitted from his familiarity with Mormon Studies by drawing on a fuller understanding of Smith's other translation projects. To further illustrate this point, this essay will close by considering some insights

[12] Some works in Mormon Studies have begun to do this. Terryl Givens with Brian Hauglid relied partially on Schleiermacher (1813/2012) to develop their claim that the Egyptian papyri held by Smith acted as a catalyst for the creation of a new, inspired text (Givens & Hauglid, 2012, pp. 195-196). In turn, Vogel (2021) relies in part on Venuti (1995/2018) to claim that the Book of Abraham as translated from the papyri was a "conventional and straightforward" translation (pp. 204-13). Because neither Schleiermacher nor Venuti were actually discussing Smith's translations, this section will not explore their theories further.

gleaned from Mormon Studies that can enrich translation scholars' consideration of Smith's translation projects.

One way in which Mormon Studies can enrich Translation Studies has to do with the question of what really was the advantage of presenting the Book of Mormon as a translation. As explained above, in Translation Studies it has been assumed that Smith presented the book as a translation because this was helpful in some way, but the question remains unanswered as to why exactly it might have been helpful. Insights gleaned from Mormon Studies can help fill in that gap. Bushman (2004) addresses exactly the issue of why Smith would present "a volume of translated reformed Egyptian as his initial claim on the public's attention" (p. 233). This question needs to be addressed, particularly because of how unusual it is. After all, "religious young men of that time" who felt called by God, or claimed to be so called, saw their path forward as preachers (p. 234). This was a time and a place where only "the most learned" among the "college-educated class would undertake a translation of scripture" (p. 237). In short: "In conventional Protestant Christianity, learned men translated the Bible, and pious young people became preachers like Finney or Lorenzo Dow, not translators" (p. 242). Bushman argues that Smith's unusual role as a translator is in a way the product of his being caught between two world views. He was raised in a culture where many people believed in magic, including the "practice of divining with a stone" (pp. 241–242). At yet, his was also a time when "Christian apologists vented their anger on the remnants of magic carried down from an earlier time when magic and religion mingled" (p. 242). Thus, Smith's bringing forth of the Book of Mormon as a translation is evidence that he still believed in "the magic culture of his early life" and yet did not want to become "a target for attacks that would cripple the work" he had engaged in (Bushman, 2004, p. 242). Thus, what was helpful about presenting the Book of Mormon as a translation was that it allowed Smith to position himself in a space between world views. Its nature as a translation provided the religious project with a measure of secular erudition, while the process of inspired divination rooted the project in long-held religious tradition.

Of course, these insights highlight just how unusual Smith's activity was. He continued working on translation projects throughout his life, and in many ways bound his prophetic call to his translation activity (see Brown, 2022). Every translation project that Smith engaged in was designed to further his role as God's mouthpiece to the word. This makes Smith an outlier as a translator, at least until evidence can be found that translators commonly see themselves as the oracles of God. It also makes his translation projects highly unusual in the world of translation. This begs the question as to whether his work can be categorized as that of translation at all. As stated above, the

difficulties in trying to understand Smith's translation output are made clear when seeing how Valdeón struggles to pack the Book of Mormon, the Bible, the Book of Abraham into preexisting translation categories.

Here too, insights from Mormon Studies can help. Scholars in that field have increasingly come to qualify the term *translation* when describing what Smith was doing. For example, Flake (2007) argues that the verb *translate* means something quite unique in the context of Smith's ministry. She points out that "[e]ach of Smith's works is an elaboration on climactic moments in the Bible story" (pp. 508-509). When he translated, he was in practice reading the biblical text and reacting to it; thus, his translating was "his experience of creative agency before a text and, simultaneously, his sense of being bound by the text as an account of events or as history" (pp. 507-508). In this sense, Smith can be understood to translate only in a metaphorical sense: his activity is similar to translation in that it requires the study of a source text and a reaction to it, but it is dissimilar to translation in that it is an expansion of the source text (Flake, 2007, p. 508).

In other words, what Smith was doing is not what translation scholars would really consider translation, whether that be intralinguistic, interlinguistic, or intersemiotic. Increasingly, scholars who work for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints point this out too. For example, in the presentation to the Revelations and Translations series of The Joseph Smith Papers, a clarification is made about how to understand the word *translation* in the context of Smith's output:

> Translation refers to works such as the Book of Mormon that Joseph Smith said were based on sacred, ancient texts and translated "by the gift and power of God," that is, by a revelatory or inspired process and not by natural means. As used in this series, translation does not refer to conventional translations. (Jensen *et al*., 2011, p. xix)

Thus, translation in the case of Smith refers to a process where a text of some sort–metallic plates, a printed Bible, Egyptian papyri–served as the catalyst for the inspired or revealed dictation of a text. This process has been compared, in Mormon Studies, to other religious experiences. In particular, McAlister (2022) argues that the way Smith produced his translations is similar to how gter ma Tibetan scripture is produced, namely, in that

> both are said to have been authored by ancient religious figures, buried with the anticipation of future discovery, discovered by visionaries with the help of supernatural beings, and 'translated' from an obscure language into the discoverers' native tongue by supernatural, revelatory means". (pp. 41-43)

Taking a less scholarly and more devotional approach, Richard Turley and William Slaughter, who work for the LDS Church History Department, put forward that "the translation came by revelation. Joseph could not read the language on the plates by himself. He needed God's help. With that help, he could translate, even if he wasn't looking directly at the record [source text]" (Turley & Slaughter, 2011, p. 14). Perhaps, then, Latter-day Saints would be better served by adopting a qualified term such as *revealed translation* to describe Smith's translation projects. This need for a different term may apply to scholars as well. Terms such as *metaphysical translation* have been put forth to move away from an understanding of Smith as a linguistic translator (see Hickman, 2020).

Translation scholars too may benefit from understanding the non-linguistic and expansive or even transgressive usage of *translation* by Smith. The benefits may be in the expansion of a theoretical understanding of the limits of the concept of translation. Another, more practical benefit, may be the inclination to move beyond Smith when studying translation within Mormonism. Scholars like López Alcalá have begun doing this by considering other translation projects that involve other translators during other stages of Mormon history. Translation, including interpreting, seems to be a constant presence in the Mormon experience, not just because of Smith but because its largest denomination, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, is experienced by most of its adherents through translation: its scriptures, its magazines, its current teachings, its church-wide broadcasts, all emanate mostly out of English into the languages of the world. Surely, many interesting things can be learned about translation by looking beyond Joseph Smith. That may no doubt be a fruitful way forward.

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