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## Seerhood, Pure Language, and Sacred Translation

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# Seerhood, Pure Language, and Sacred Translation



**Samuel Brown**

I am grateful for the invitation to speak with you and spend some time today. Talking about issues that crowd my mind as a believing Latter-Day Saint and as a scholar of our cultural history and as a physician who treats people who are quite sick in facing episodes of spiritual and moral crisis. I will say that my knowledge of fear comes through my friendship with Kevin Barney who is a great star of our church. So we're very grateful to have Kevin as a scholar, you should get to know him if you do not.

I want to talk to you today about Seerhood, Pure Language, and Sacred Translation. The main arguments that I want to make today are that early Latter-day Saint Seerhood represented a prophetic encounter with the dead in a very sacred and vital way. In some respects I hope that my comments will be framed by the tender feelings that we feel for the Parker family.

As we ponder what it means for someone to have moved on and what it means to be Latter-day Saints in a context where others have moved on and we have an opportunity of sacred encounter with them. I think it's worth returning to foundational concepts like Seerhood to begin to understand the feelings and opportunities we have in that regard. I also would like to suggest that the related quest for pure language sometimes called Adamic represented an attempt to imagine and create an environment in which modern and ancient humans could be directly connected and then I wanted to discuss sacred translation which is an area that I think comes up frequently in the "bread and butter" work of the FAIR organization and that's thinking through what it might mean to make a particular claim about what translation means.

In the interest of understanding that little bit better I would like to use the images of what it called glossolalia and xenoglossia. I'll explain those in more detail as we get there as an attempt to understand what translation might have represented. I am a medical researcher and we would like to roadmaps in our talks. This is the roadmap. We'll talk about Seerhood and voices from the dust, then we'll talk about pure language and then we will move to discussion of what I call *Smithian translation* or translation as undertaken by Joseph Smith Jr.

Let's start by talking through Seerhood and Voices from the Dust. I would like to reflect now for a moment on the silence that we often invoke by way of memory of those who have passed in the silence that manifestly marks those who have passed. In human culture and particularly acutely in early national America, loss of speech was seen as a marker of death. There is beautiful language all through early America and many other cultures including ancient biblical cultures that note that when we die what happens is we lose our capacity to speak. It is the silence of the tune in the lost tongue.

There is also the image in the first vision of silence as death. This is an extract from now out of copyright edition of the Joseph Smith history and I want to draw our attention to a well-known event "The First Vision" and think for a moment about some of the language that Joseph Smith uses to describe what happened when Satan tried to prevent The First Vision from occurring. He says that Satanic force had such an "astonishing influence over me as to bind my tongue so that I could not speak. Thick darkness gathered around me and it seemed to me for a time as if I were doomed to sudden destruction." There is in this image the identity of a loss of voice and the loss of life.

For those of you that are very interested in scholarly history, I want to draw your attention to the fact the American enlightenment is rolling out in this period the late 18th century and to the middle of the 19th century and as a part of the American enlightenment that Dawkins of that era new atheism is anything but new. We're focusing primarily not on their selfish genes but supernatural voices. There is a magisterial account of this transition it's written by one of the preeminent religious historians in America named now Washington University and I hardly recommend reading this. So be aware that there is a very personal valence, there is a very religious valence and there is a very intellectual or social, cultural valence to the questions of silence at the time of the restoration.

Well given that we have talked about the silence of death what about ways that the dead might persist. Now we as believing Latter-day Saints share with many other religious believers that notion of physical and immortality and I include that that's an important way that the death persist. But the devil is in the details and the fact of our ultimate physical resurrection and immortality does not necessarily, immediately speak to all of the ways that the death can persist for us. There is biological

immortality and that's immortality through your progeny, your grandchildren and your great grandchildren. They are social immortality, which is you being remembered. So many of us yearn to be remembered after we passed by those that we loved in life and their descendants and those are biological and social immortality.

The dead can also persist through our tradition, in our culture. My wife and I were we moved to Utah five or six years ago and began gardening which we have loved and I reflected as I got to know soil and the cycles of soil that in many respects tradition and culture the dead have left for us are the soil in which the seeds of our lives are sown and in which they grow. Importantly also, death can persist through the written word. That's what we as historians and as believers embrace quite readily. Books within 50 to a 100 years will be legacies of the dead rather than conversations with the living.

Who could allow the dead to speak? This is related to the last slide and I won't stay here long of course God and angels can allow the dead to speak. We have many examples in scripture and history of God or angels speaking to us from beyond the pale of mortality. Seers, and this is something that I think is beautifully evoked in the early restoration. Then there are books and scriptures and oral traditions that are ways that those who have passed can begin to communicate to those who continue to live.

Now I want to think about some scriptural examples and this is one of the most striking things to me about the Book of Mormon. When Mosiah comes to stand down and needs to transfer royal power in his community none of the heirs are interested, they are all off on missions. How often does it happen that we would rather do good than be powerful? So he goes to the son of the high priest to try to transfer power, secular power. Then what happens is he brings the records of a people and then he interprets the lost legacy of the Jaredites.

Now the interpreter stones are also a part of this really important transaction. I talk about this more in my book and won't belabor the point here, but go back to Mosiah 28 and think about what's going on here. This is an inauguration and instead of merely placing a hand on the Bible and "I swear that I will do all the right things and not have the things I am not supposed to have" that we see now, they actually bring out the documents and they interpret or translate these documents of another civilization. Think about that image next time you go back to the Book of Mormon. So this is Mosiah the Seer this is an extract from 1830 Book of Mormon of Mosiah 28.

There is another image in restoration scripture Latter-day Saints scripture that brings this to bear quite forcefully. That's in Moses chapter six specifically the Book of Remembrance, the Adamic the

book of remembrance and that is an archetype that speaks to the essential nature of something of scripture. Go back again the Moses six as well and think about what's actually being said. Scripture is a way that Adam preserves his language for those who come after and Enoch needs that Book of remembrance to maintain his connection to Adam, his linguistic connection to Adam, his religious connection to Adam in his personal connection to Adam.

Go back through a lot of our scripture in the early writing of the restoration and look at book of remembrance and you'll see this beautiful image of scripture as a way to seal your generations together. Now the most important I think exegesis of the first decade or two of the restoration was the exegesis of Isaiah 29. It's very familiar to us as modern Latter-day Saints and it's the sealed book that the scholar is unable to interpret. This is from Joseph Smith's Bible I made some photocopies from there.

In Isaiah there is a somewhat uncertain interpretation of a passage that has caused exegetes in many traditions to wonder just exactly what Isaiah had in mind. There are voices that will speak out of the dust like a familiar spirit out of the ground. Now this imagery is expanded dramatically in the Book of Mormon witness. Now just a few verses in Isaiah become pages in the 1830 Book of Mormon that spend a great deal of time trying to understand what Isaiah 29 might have indicated. And second Nephi 27 is one part of this extended meditation by the ancient American prophets on the meaning of Isaiah 29. I want to draw your attention to the ways that Nephi and the American prophets clarify what Isaiah had in mind specifically. The Book of Mormon says "they are the words of them which have slumbered" very self-conscious and I think very explicit identity of scripture and the voices of them that slumbered.

This is not this like necromantic familiar spirit or I am going to call up my little spirit with the three horns and divided tail. The familiar spirit is that the spirits of the people that are gone, the spirits of the people whose stories are told in scripture and I think the Book of Mormon illuminates a way to understand Isaiah 29 that is both beautiful and true. Then when you go into the first two decades of restoration the early Latter-day Saints were obsessed with this. They kept talking about it, Parley P. Pratt famous hymn talked about the Book of Mormon as sleeping for ages, the book itself sleeping in a tomb on the Hill Cumorah waiting the Lords command to speak from the dust.

Parley Pratt, God bless him, sent a letter to the Queen Victoria and in that letter to Queen Victoria he says that the Book of Mormon represents the nation whose bones are dried and they have spoken from the dust and revealed to the world their history. So the Book of Mormon and many early Latter-

day Saints, including prophet, understood scripture particularly the Book of Mormon as a communication of those who are gone.

The text of the Book of Mormon when Williams Phelps wrote a letter to William Smith shortly after the prophet died trying to explain what he understood of the legacy of the prophet Joseph. He talked about the ways that the book “speaks from the dead.” He is talking about the Book of Mormon here “whereby the living can hear from their friends who have fought the good fight of faith and passed from life onto death and from death onto life.”

With that as context I want to talk a little bit about pure language and then turn to translation. A moment on the language of Eden it was the language before traditional human languages and it’s the language that was used by God and angels. There is wonderful writing in the Christian and Jewish traditions about what that might have meant. We don’t have time to discuss it today but Augustine and Thomas Aquinas are important, very important in the Christian tradition in this regard.

We as Latter-day Saints usually call it Adamic. By that we mean the language that Jehovah spoke with Adam in the garden and the early Latter-day Saints and many, many others in the Jewish and Christian traditions understood this language of Eden to be complexly related to Egyptian and Hebrew. But there was a problem and that was a tower on the plane of Shinar, I’ll let one of you Semitic scholars correct my pronunciation later.

It’s a somewhat difficult text to understand when you come to just the Hebrew of the text. What exactly was the problem with the very tall building? Was it just a Donald Trump or the lack of taste kind of moment or was there a secret attempt to make the human builders the equivalent of the guards? Regardless of how we approach the Hebrew text itself it cast a long shadow in the Jewish traditions and specifically it was seen as a curse with very rare exceptions. Randall Paul told me there are some Islamic traditions that suggest that maybe Babel was not a curse. But in the Jewish and Christian traditions it was almost uniformly seen as a curse and specifically it was a curse that caused language to fall.

This is a selection from a letter that Joseph Smith wrote to William Phelps in 1832 and he prayed “Oh Lord God deliver us in thy due time from this little narrow prison almost as it were total darkness of paper, pen and ink.” An image of languages failing us is so powerfully personal and also deeply religious think about the times that language is unable to communicate what means most to us. Think about how often we struggle to say just the right thing; think how often we are offended by language

used even when it wasn't intentional. These are the kinds of personal issues that the prophet and others brought to their encounter with the curse of Babel.

Now there are parallels of human language in addition to our inability to communicate and one is isolation from ancestors. Every high-schooler in late 20th and early 21st century America knows that when they are forced to go read Shakespeare in the unabridged original, worse yet try to get through Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, that their English ancestors make no sense at all to them and that's the simple version. Think about what happens when we try to return to the Hebrew Bible. We are not Hebrew anymore and even the very best scholars have some difficulty in trying to understand what it was like to be someone in the court of David. We spend lifetimes trying to get at that it's not immediately available to many of us.

So there is a sense in which human language in its evolution and change overtime separates us from our ancestors. It also isolates us from each other for the early restoration it was a notorious source of bad theology. You think we get strident now, go read some of these accounts of Campbellites versus Calvinists and Latter-day Saints versus Presbyterians and you will see incredibly powerful and angry language brought to bear on minor interpretative differences over individual words or sentences in the Bible. The prophet Joseph also talked about ways that language could lead to the corruption of scriptural texts and in some regards a new translation of the Bible was meant to respond to that.

So some of the solutions to the fall of language are these complexly interrelated concepts of Seerhood, revelation, scripture and translation. I recommend that you spend some time with the scriptures of the restoration pondering what it might mean for Joseph Smith to have revealed a solution to the curse of fallen language associated with Babel. So I want to have those two images. How do our loved ones and our ancestors persist and how does scripture play into that? What's the significance of a language freed from the limitations of human language? Within that context, come to the question of Joseph Smith's translations.

I want to talk about some possible models for its translations but remind you briefly and join the power of modern technology to evoke what is now gone, mention that Joseph Smith translated the Book of Mormon in 1829 published in 1830. He translated John's Lost Parchment in 1829 that many feel was the first inkling of the New Translation of the Bible. He translated the Bible and what was called by the early Latter-day Saints the New Translation and in scholarly writing I am personally recommending that we use their terminology. We as Latter-day Saints know it is the JST or the Joseph Smith Translation. When you abbreviated as NT it's confusing because the New Testament is NT.

So JST is okay for our convenience but I think in scholarship now that Scott Faulring and others have brought forth a really useful primary document of the New Translation and have it now in a DVD that you can get for 20 bucks instead of the 100 bucks for the big book that I unfortunately bought before I knew they were bring on a DVD. I think we'll see it called the New Translation. So if we hear the new translation with the capital N and capital T that's what we've known as the JST early Latter-day Saints just call that the New Translation of the Bible.

We also know quite a bit about the Book of Abraham. It's been a topic of much discussion. Here I display one of the original publications of the facsimile with interpretation. So when I am talking about Smithian translation I mean primarily these three or four texts depending on whether you include D&C 7 in the new translation. So those are the translations that I want to try to give it at least a partial account of today.

Now let's talk about the models and think for a moment about the gift of tongues. It's something that we hear a lot about with Palin Campaign for World Domination. It was brought again to our mind that there are currently denominations within Protestant Christianity primarily, that practice the gift of tongues and often it has that strange association with the 20th century Western Pentecostalism. But the Gift of Tongues are something that are very important to Bible Christians and they were important probably for the first 10 to 20 years in the restoration and some of the most gifted practitioners of tongues were active until the end of the 19th century.

The Gift of Tongues primarily was hymn singing for the early Latter-day Saints and was really, really quite beautiful. So in a religious meeting one of the early Latter-day Saints would stand and sing in a language, I'll talk a little bit more about what they might have understood that language to be a beautiful hymn. They were very good singers and then at the conclusion of that somebody would interpret what had been sung. That's primarily how it operated for the early Latter-day Saints.

I tell you that just because there is so much confusion sometimes particularly with the press coverage of Palin's membership and Assemblies of God that's notorious for being a Western Pentecostalism practitioner. I want to try to separate some of that controversy from what was really beautiful thing that some early Latter-day Saints did as they were trying to understand the restoration. So that's what gift of tongues has meant in religious history in America.

But there are two ways to understand the Gift of Tongues. One is what's called xenoglossia and other is glossolalia. I would propose today tentatively that xenoglossia and glossolalia specifically the differences between the two maybe very instructive as we try to understand Smithian translation.



Xenoglossia comes from the Greek term “foreign tongue” or “strange tongue.” It is generally understood as the supernatural or miraculous ability to speak a language that the speaker does not understand. In Kirtland in the early 1830’s these were generally Native American tribal languages.

When Latter-day Saints said “oh, we’ve received the gift of xenoglossia” they generally tended to mean that they were able to communicate with native groups that were around Zion. Now xenoglossia is often advanced as an external evidence or miraculous support of other truth claims. So the way this logic works and the way that it was used if you look at the X2 for the early Christians there is no way this could have happened if God were not with these people. So the fact that they were able to speak Galician when they gathered at the Temple of Jerusalem meant that God was with that movement. So that’s how xenoglossia tends to operate. It’s a brief sacred encounter and then primarily is used either to effect evangelism to allow you to preach the gospel to someone else and that’s how it’s understood and Acts 2 as well. Or it’s understood as an external evidence that forces the attention of observers to the possibility that God is with the group.

I would submit the xenoglossia only trivially acknowledges the limits of human language. It’s in some respects like having a supernatural Babel fish. Anybody remember Douglas Adams’ “Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy?” So the Babel fish is this little tiny fish that was found, you put in your ear and it instantly and perfectly translates every human language. Douglas Adams is a cute thing where there is a talk between a pompous theologian and God and the pompous theologian says “this Babel fish is so improbable that it could only have been created by God but there can be no infallible proof of God’s existence so that would deny faith therefore you do not exist.”

So it’s a funny little interchange but in some respects xenoglossia is just like that Babel fish and it says oh we can trivially fix that no problem, but doesn’t appreciate that there are limitations to language itself. There are things that must exist beyond any human language. And I need to just have a moment to pause to introduce a concept that I think is relevant as we work through xenoglossia versus glossolalia and that’s what called Scottish common sense philosophy in theology. This is a very important part of the American enlightenment and it’s a part of the American enlightenment. Because it was so theological it was easily incorporated into the religious beliefs of early American Protestants.

It was a response to the fancy pants Calvinist theology and metaphysics. It was a response to scholasticism and it basically says that any non mentally ill human when confronted with the facts will use the natural sense that God gives him or her of logic to come to the same conclusion. It also said there was a spiritual sense that we could rely on in the same way that there are other senses could be

relied on. But the primary way that it was employed was the coaptation by Protestants to allow them to continue to feel that science was always on their side and was crucial to what's called evidential Christianity. So when you read the Christian discourse of the early American Protestants they say Christianity is true because I have 35 irrefutable truths from science and maybe the theology works out.

It was a sense in which God can be perfectly tied up in a scientific framework that made them absolutely free of any risk of creditability. You see the early Latter-day Saints trying to come to terms of this cultural legacy while also trying to move beyond it. So you can imagine that a Scottish commonsense philosopher theologian would see the gift of tongues in exclusively xenoglossic terms. It something that simple, it provides an evidence just like the people counting birds and plants in the Orient of tropics as they would have said or being rigorous and methodical. So would be anyone who used the gift of tongues to prove that biblical Christianity was true.

It was this attempt to get God in the problems of language and the problems of existence into a tidy little package. The reason I give you that background is that there is another understanding of the gift of tongues and that's glossolalia and in Greek the term just means "tongue speaking." Glossolalia itself is a supernatural or miraculous ability to speak or sing syllables that are not an identifiable foreign language. It's often a primarily ecstatic experience, the time that someone is removed from the normal types of interactions that we have and it's generally coupled to a revelation or final translation through the gift of interpretation of tongues.

I propose today that glossolalia itself fundamentally and centrally acknowledges the limitations of language. It's a time that God draws us or draws the believer into a communion with God that is above and beyond language. I am not personally advocating that we begin this practice, though I have respect for it. What I am suggesting is that it may provide some useful insight into ways we could approach questions of translation. So now let's ponder what the implications might be for us as Latter-day Saints attempting to give an account of our faith.

Xenoglossic model would be precisely the model that we see in some devotional art with Joseph Smith. You noticed in this picture he's got his hand up against his forehead as if drawing attention to the intellectual energy, the scholarly energy that's been poured into his encounter with the plates. In a similar vein one possible explanation for the Book of Abraham there is translated from the papyrus now lost would also be a part of the xenoglossic translation model. It's difficult to account for the New Translation on xenoglossia.

Now I want to be clear when I describe xenoglossic and glossolalic like I am not doing it to say that the xenoglossic model is not accurate or couldn't be accurate. I am trying to make space for other possible models to coexist with it. It may be that there are times when God uses something like an xenoglossic model and times when uses something like a glossolalic model. I want to be clear what I intend by those models and these I think are the best descriptions of those models. One of the problems of the xenoglossic translation model that I think we need to work better at is working through these Kirtland Egyptian papers that I won't talk too much about here except to say that the alphabet and grammar of the Egyptian language. When you apply the Scottish commonsense philosophy model xenoglossic model you end up with little informative notes.

I like Michael Marquardt quite a bit, but I think this was not his finest moment. This snide little comment that these documents, they are not Egyptian. I would propose though that on a glossolalic model the one that recognizes that language may be less and more than we expected to be that we could understand something like the Kirtland Egyptian papers not as a grammar of hieroglyphics again on the xenoglossic model but being themselves hieroglyphic grammar more on a glossolalic model. That it is possible for God to reveal a vast and eternal truths to us as we puzzle through the meanings of language and the limitations of language that we may be confronted with when we encountered something like a collection of funerary papyri.

So glossolalic translation model would be one that would be quite comfortable with what we know about a lot of the Book of Mormon translation which was the Joseph Smith was using interpreter seer stones using them in a more seeric model and was not necessarily running his fingers over the text of the Book of Mormon. On a glossolalic translation model we wouldn't need to search for a missing papyrus. I think an advantage of glossolalic translation is that it may give account for the New Translation that would integrate it very closely into other translation efforts by Joseph Smith. I think it also allows us to begin to think through the great vision of 1832 as itself being a part of that. You'll remember that Sidney Rigdon and Joseph Smith were praying over the claim that there are many mansions in God's kingdom and this beautiful revelation it's now our D&C 76 but the early Latter-day Saints called that "Capital Vision." It may be that itself represent some insight into our understanding of Joseph Smith's translation.

I am primarily again a medical research and I think in terms of hypothesis as I develop this account of xenoglossic versus glossolalic translation it occurred to me to wonder whether there are other data distinct from those I used to generate the account, that might be explained by the account itself. I think that this actually does speak to the question of whether the translations would be revised at any point. In xenoglossic translation the English text itself is the miracle.

In glossolalic translation the miracle is the encounter between the prophet or the believer and God and any attempt to give an account to it will necessarily be tentative and subject to revision. It strikes me that the fact that Joseph Smith did feel very comfortable revising translations after they had been completed reflected his open understanding that human language itself was broken and that we were groping to a God and language rather than this notion that the xenoglossic translation was itself a perfect miracle that could not be denied or indeed revised or edited.

By way of wrap up I want to give you what I think of the take home messages of this talk. Specifically that Seerhood represented recovery of the voices of those who have gone in a very sacred and powerful way. Pure language is both primordial primitivist calling us back to the Garden of Eden and relational is about the relationships that are created through it. Translation can be conceptually rich and very useful to us as Latter-day Saints believers and scholars.

By way of supplementary reading, again I love Schmidt's "Hearing Things" (Howard 2002). John Durham Peters, who is a Latter-day Saint and one of the preeminent communication scholars in Iowa, wrote a book called "Speaking into the Air" (Chicago 1999); I think it's wonderful. I wrote my interpretation the Kirtland Egyptian papers and a paper in church history back in 2009 and an LDS English professor at Hopkins and I have started in the last six months putting together a book that we hope will explore many of these concepts in a largely scholarly way but we're hoping to have some devotional nuggets for our co-believers. I feel like a young parent and I am sort of pathetic and I confess it but my first book is finally coming out. It's been years and years. It's coming out this January and "In Heaven as it is on Earth" is my attempt to understand how Joseph Smith in the early Latter-day Saints came to terms with this question of death and the dead and our connections to them.

Thank you.