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## **The Spectacles, the Stone, the Hat, and the Book: A Twenty-first Century Believer's View of the Book of Mormon Translation**

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# THE SPECTACLES, THE STONE, THE HAT, AND THE BOOK: A TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY BELIEVER'S VIEW OF THE BOOK OF MORMON TRANSLATION

*Roger Nicholson*

*Abstract: This essay seeks to examine the Book of Mormon translation method from the perspective of a regular, nonscholarly, believing member in the twenty-first century, by taking into account both what is learned in Church and what can be learned from historical records that are now easily available. What do we know? What should we know? How can a believing Latter-day Saint reconcile apparently conflicting accounts of the translation process? An examination of the historical sources is used to provide us with a fuller and more complete understanding of the complexity that exists in the early events of the Restoration. These accounts come from both believing and non-believing sources, and some skepticism ought to be employed in choosing to accept some of the interpretations offered by some of these sources as fact. However, an examination of these sources provides a larger picture, and the answers to these questions provide an enlightening look into Church history and the evolution of the translation story. This essay focuses primarily on the methods and instruments used in the translation process and how a faithful Latter-day Saint might view these as further evidence of truthfulness of the restored Gospel.*

**I**n his 1916 book, *The Birth of Mormonism*, John Quincy Adams provided this rather colorful description of the Book of Mormon translation method.

The process of translating the “reformed Egyptian” plates was simple though peculiar. It was all done with

the Urim and Thummim spectacles, but it was instant death for any one but Joe to use them. Even when he put them on, the light became so dazzling that he was obliged to look through his hat. Moreover, when so engaged, no profane eyes were allowed to see him or the hat. Alone, behind a blanket stretched across the room, Joe looked into his hat and read the mystic words.<sup>1</sup>

Any Latter-day Saint will immediately be able to sort the familiar from the unfamiliar elements of this story. We see the Urim and Thummim and the blanket shielding the translator from others in the room, but what is all of this talk about a hat?

As an active Latter-day Saint, I cannot remember a time when I was not familiar with the story of the translation of the Book of Mormon. The story with which we are quite familiar from Sunday School and Seminary describes Joseph using the Urim and Thummim (the Nephite interpreters) to look at the gold plates while screened from his scribe by a curtain. Joseph dictated the entire text of the Book of Mormon to his scribe, picking up the next day right where he had left off the day before, and the text was written without any punctuation. Joseph never required that any of the previous text be re-read when the translation started again the next day. The bulk of the translation was accomplished within a roughly three-month period, and the resulting text is remarkably consistent not only with itself, but with the Bible. The circumstances surrounding the translation and production of the Book of Mormon can only be considered miraculous when considered by a believing member of the Church.

There is, however, another story with which many have become familiar in recent years. Modern portrayals of the translation process such as that shown in the popular animated tele-

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1. John Quincy Adams, *The Birth of Mormonism* (Boston: Gorham Press, 1916), 36.

vision show *South Park*<sup>2</sup> depict Joseph looking at a stone in the bottom of his hat and dictating to his scribe, without the use of a curtain. The popular online encyclopedia Wikipedia displays a “twenty-first century artistic representation of Joseph Smith translating the golden plates by examining a seer stone in his hat.”<sup>3</sup> A Google search of “Book of Mormon translation” or “seer stone Joseph Smith” produces a large number of such images, many of them hosted by websites that are critical of the Church’s truth claims. This is a method which I did not learn about in Seminary, and there are anecdotal stories of Latter-day Saints who, upon being presented with this portrayal, simply deny that this method may have ever been employed, attributing such depictions to “anti-Mormon” sources.

Depictions of the translation process by artists have also contributed to the confusion. Latter-day Saints are quite familiar with a variety of artistic portrayals of Joseph and Oliver as they participated in the translation process. Some depict Joseph and his scribe sitting at a table with a curtain across the middle. Others show Joseph and Oliver sitting together at a table, with no curtain in view and the plates clearly visible, yet we know that Oliver was not allowed to view the plates prior to acting as one of the Three Witnesses. One thing that these scenes have in common is that they do not depict the Urim and Thummim, despite the fact that we know that a translation instrument was used during the process. We see no crystal stones mounted in a set of “spectacles,” nor do we see the breastplate.<sup>4</sup>

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2. *South Park* Season 7, Episode 12, “All About Mormons” originally broadcast on 19 November 2003. <http://www.southparkstudios.com/full-episodes/s07e12-all-about-mormons>.

3. Wikipedia article “Seer Stone (Latter Day Saints). [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seer\\_stone\\_\(Latter\\_Day\\_Saints\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seer_stone_(Latter_Day_Saints)).”

4. For example, the illustrated *Book of Mormon Stories* (1978) shows Joseph and a scribe separated by a curtain. Joseph is looking directly at the plates without using a translating instrument. The *Book of Mormon Reader* (1985) and *Book of Mormon Stories* (1997) both replace this scene with one of Joseph and his scribe sitting at a table in the open, with the plates clearly in view. No attempt

We certainly never see Joseph gazing into the bottom of his hat while dictating.

The twenty-first century has given us access to a wealth of historical sources that were simply unavailable to the average Latter-day Saint in previous decades. Now one must ask the question: Which of these portrayals is correct? In searching for an answer, we start with a modern Church manual in order to provide us with our first clue. The following description of the translation process appears in the 2003 *Church History In The Fulness Of Times Student Manual* (hereafter referred to as the *Student Manual*).

Little is known about the actual process of translating the record, primarily because those who knew the most about the translation, Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery, said the least about it. Moreover, Martin Harris, David Whitmer, and Emma Smith, who assisted Joseph, left no contemporary descriptions. The sketchy accounts they recorded much later in life were often contradictory.<sup>5</sup>

It makes perfect sense that those who were directly involved in or observed the translation would have the most accurate information. What, then, did these witnesses say that appears to have been contradictory? Were there other witnesses that can shed light on these events? What did outside sources have to say about the translation process? As Latter-day Saint

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by the artist is made to depict the Urim and Thummim. There exists one image that may be found on the Internet which depicts Joseph Smith using the breastplate and spectacles, which is claimed to be from a “1970s” edition of the *Book of Mormon Reader*. A collection of images representative of the various ways the translation process has been depicted may be viewed on Blair Hodges’ *Life on Gold Plates* blog, “The ‘Stone-In-Hat’ Translation Method in Art,” posted on October 27, 2009. <http://www.lifeongoldplates.com/2009/10/stone-in-hat-translation-method-in-art.html>.

5. *Church History in the Fulness of Times Student Manual* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2003), 58.

researcher Brant Gardner summarizes it, “What stories shall we believe? What stories of the translation could we or should we tell? Which stories are true? For this last question, I would suggest that they are *all* true. That is, they are true for the people who are telling them.”<sup>6</sup>

### What did Joseph and Oliver say?

The logical place to begin is with the translator himself. What did Joseph Smith say about the Book of Mormon translation process? As it turns out, he said very little about the actual translation method used to produce the Book of Mormon, except to note that it was performed “by the gift and power of God.” The *Student Manual* notes that Joseph deliberately did not give many details of the process.

The Prophet was reluctant to give the details about the translation. In a Church conference held 25–26 October 1831 in Orange, Ohio, Hyrum requested that a firsthand account of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon be given. But the Prophet said, “It was not intended to tell the world all the particulars of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon.” Joseph explained in an open letter to a newspaper editor in 1833 the heart of the matter, but he gave few particulars, stating that the Book of Mormon was “found through the ministration of an holy angel, and translated into our own language by the gift and power of God.” His explanation is consistent with the Doctrine and Covenants, which says that he was granted “power to translate through the mercy of God, by the power of God, the Book of Mormon” (D&C 1:29) and that the Lord “gave him power from on high, by the means

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6. Brant A. Gardner, *The Gift and the Power: Translating the Book of Mormon* (Draper, UT: Greg Kofford Books, 2011), 8.

which were before prepared, to translate the Book of Mormon” (D&C 20:8).<sup>7</sup>

Joseph very consistently told people who asked that he had translated by the gift and power of God. He did not wish to focus on the method, but rather the result. Since Joseph chose not to provide details, we must examine what the other witnesses to the translation said in order to get a more accurate picture of the methods employed.

Oliver Cowdery was the next witness closest to the translation, since he acted as scribe for the majority of it. Some of Oliver’s descriptions of the translation are very much consistent with the story that we are already familiar with. However, Oliver’s comments deserve a more detailed review. We will revisit Oliver’s comments in more detail later.

### **What did Martin Harris, David Whitmer, and Emma Smith say?**

The *Student Manual* refers to “sketchy accounts” given “much later in life” by Martin Harris, David Whitmer, and Emma Smith. What is contained in these late accounts? How do they contradict what we know about the translation process?

There are two things that these three descriptions have in common: (1) they were all given near the end of the person’s life, and (2) they all describe the use of a translation instrument placed in a hat. These stories may initially appear to be inconsistent with the story that we are familiar with today, but there is a good reason for this.

Near the end of her life in 1879, some 49 years after the publication of the Book of Mormon, Emma Smith Bidamon was interviewed by her son Joseph Smith III. Emma described her memories of the translation process. “In writing for your father I frequently wrote day after day, often sitting at the table

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7. *Church History in the Fulness of Times*, 58.

close by him, he sitting with his face buried in his hat, with the stone in it, and dictating hour after hour with nothing between us.”<sup>8</sup>

This description raises some immediate questions. Where is the Urim and Thummim? Where is the curtain? Why is Joseph using a hat? Where are the plates? It is very easy to see that Emma’s description appears to contradict the account that we learn of in Sunday School.

David Whitmer’s descriptions of the translation process also were given near the end of his life, with two notable descriptions given in 1885 and 1887, over 55 years after the publication of the Book of Mormon. Whitmer claimed that Joseph described the method to him, and he provides some detail that Emma did not.

[H]e used a stone called a “Seers stone,” the “Interpreters” having been taken away from him because of transgression. The “Interpreters” were taken from Joseph after he allowed Martin Harris to carry away the 116 pages of Ms [manuscript] of the Book of Mormon as a punishment, but he was allowed to go on and translate by use of a “Seers stone” which he had, and which he placed in a hat into which he buried his face, stating to me and others that the original character appeared upon parchment and under it the translation in English.<sup>9</sup>

Note that Whitmer mentions the *Interpreters*—which we know as the Urim and Thummim—as being distinct from the “seers stone.” Whitmer is indicating that the interpreters were

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8. “Emma Smith Bidamon Interview with Joseph Smith III, February 1879,” in *Early Mormon Documents*, ed. Dan Vogel (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996), 1:541.

9. David Whitmer, quoted by Zenas H. Gurley, cited in Richard van Wagoner and Steven Walker, “Joseph Smith: ‘The Gift of Seeing,’” *Dialogue* 15/2 (Summer 1982), 54.

taken from Joseph after the loss of the 116 pages and not given back to him. He mentions the use of a stone and a hat, just as Emma did. Again, there is no curtain mentioned.

One might wonder at this point if this account is inconsistent with what the Church has taught. However, Elder Russell M. Nelson quoted David Whitmer's 1887 account to a group of new mission presidents in 1992. This description is found in the July 1993 *Ensign* and is on the Church's official website, lds.org. Elder Nelson states,

The details of this miraculous method of translation are still not fully known. Yet we do have a few precious insights. David Whitmer wrote:

“Joseph Smith would put the seer stone into a hat, and put his face in the hat, drawing it closely around his face to exclude the light; and in the darkness the spiritual light would shine. A piece of something resembling parchment would appear, and on that appeared the writing. One character at a time would appear, and under it was the interpretation in English. Brother Joseph would read off the English to Oliver Cowdery, who was his principal scribe, and when it was written down and repeated to Brother Joseph to see if it was correct, then it would disappear, and another character with the interpretation would appear. Thus the Book of Mormon was translated by the gift and power of God, and not by any power of man.” (David Whitmer, *An Address to All Believers in Christ*, Richmond, Mo.: n.p., 1887, p. 12.)<sup>10</sup>

It is clear that Elder Nelson is quite aware of the stone and the hat. As it turns out, this is not a unique mention of these items within Church publications. A search on lds.org for the

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10. Russell M. Nelson, “A Treasured Testament,” *Ensign*, July 1993. <http://www.lds.org/ensign/1993/07/a-treasured-testament>.

term “seer stone translation” produces the following description from the September 1974 issue of the Church’s official children’s magazine, the *Friend*: “To help him with the translation, Joseph found with the gold plates ‘a curious instrument which the ancients called Urim and Thummim, which consisted of two transparent stones set in a rim of a bow fastened to a breastplate.’ Joseph also used an egg-shaped, brown rock for translating called a seer stone.”<sup>11</sup>

It is apparent that not only are the descriptions of Emma Smith and David Whitmer different than the process that we are familiar with, but that the Church has periodically made mention of some of this information.

Next, we examine what Martin Harris had to say. Martin was quite closely involved with the early translation process, since he acted as Joseph’s scribe for the first 116 pages of manuscript. As indicated by the *Student Manual*, near the end of his life, Martin Harris also provided a description of the translation process. Martin granted an interview to Joel Tiffany in 1859, in which he described the translation instrument that we commonly know as the Urim and Thummim.

The two stones set in a bow of silver were about two inches in diameter, perfectly round, and about five-eighths of an inch thick at the centre; but not so thick at the edges where they came into the bow. They were joined by a round bar of silver, about three-eighths of an inch in diameter, and about four inches long, which, with the two stones, would make eight inches. The stones were white, like polished marble, with a few gray streaks. I never dared to look into them by placing them in the hat, because Moses said that “no man could see God and live,” and we could see anything we

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11. “A Peaceful Heart,” *Friend*, September 1974, 7. <http://www.lds.org/friend/1974/09/a-peaceful-heart>.

wished by looking into them; and I could not keep the desire to see God out of my mind. And beside, we had a command to let no man look into them, except by the command of God, lest he should “look aught and perish.”<sup>12</sup>

This description is quite interesting, because Harris describes placing the *Nephite interpreters* in the hat, rather than a stone. Indeed, Martin’s account of placing the Nephite interpreters in the hat even appears to contradict David’s and Emma’s account of Joseph using his own seer stone. Furthermore, all three accounts do not appear to be consistent with the story that we are familiar with of Joseph using the Urim and Thummim, sitting behind a curtain and looking at the plates while dictating to Oliver Cowdery.

### The Spectacles and the Hat

To gain a better understanding of how the translation process was viewed at the time that it occurred, we can examine how contemporary newspapers described it. In 1829, the New York newspaper *Rochester Advertiser and Daily Telegraph* reported on the translation of the Book of Mormon. The report, understandably, takes a skeptical tone.

[A]nd after penetrating “mother earth” a short distance, the [Golden] Bible was found, together with a huge pair of spectacles! He had been directed, however, not to let any mortal being examine them, “under no less penalty” than instant death! They were therefore nicely wrapped up and excluded from the “vulgar gaze of poor wicked mortals!” It was said that the leaves of the bible were plates of gold, about 8 inches long, 6 wide, and one eighth of an inch thick, on which were

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12. “Martin Harris Interview with Joel Tiffany, 1859,” in *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:305.

engraved characters or hieroglyphics. By placing the spectacles in a hat, and looking into it, Smith could (he said so, at least,) interpret these characters.<sup>13</sup>

This account seems consistent with Martin Harris's story that the Nephite interpreters were placed in a hat. Note, also, that the *spectacles* are *not* referred to as the Urim and Thummim. Did Joseph actually use a hat with the Nephite interpreters? We also see Martin's 1859 recollection that he "never dared to look into them" because "no man could see God and live," being amplified by the 1829 news account into a "penalty" of "instant death." This account, or one like it, is likely the genesis of the story related by John Quincy Adams in 1916 of the threat of "instant death" waiting to befall anyone but Joseph if they attempted to use the interpreters.

This newspaper description wasn't an aberration. The same description was repeated almost one month later in a New York publication called *The Gem: A Semi-Monthly Literary and Miscellaneous Journal*, "By placing the spectacles in a hat and looking into it, Smith interprets the characters into the English language."<sup>14</sup>

Four months later, in February 1830, Martin Harris is quoted in the *New York Telescope*,

[H]e proceeded to the spot, and found the bible, with a huge pair of spectacles. . . . He is said to have shown some of these characters to Professor Samuel L. Mitchell, of this city, who could not translate them. Martin Harris returned, and set Joseph Smith to the business of translating them: who, "by placing the

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13. "Golden Bible," *Rochester Advertiser and Daily Telegraph* (New York, 31 August 1829). Reprinted from *Palmyra Freeman*, 11 August 1829. <http://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/BOMP/id/176>.

14. "Golden Bible," *The Gem: A Semi-Monthly Literary and Miscellaneous Journal* (Rochester, New York: 5 September 1829), 70. <http://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/BOMP/id/161>.

spectacles in a hat and looking into them, Joseph Smith said he could interpret these characters.”<sup>15</sup>

In June 1830, *The Cincinnati Advertiser* mentioned a “white stone” and the hat.

A fellow by the name of Joseph Smith, who resides in the upper part of Susquehanna county, has been, for the last two years we are told, employed in dedicating as he says, by inspiration, a new bible. He pretended that he had been entrusted by God with a golden bible which had been always hidden from the world. Smith would put his face into a hat in which he had a white stone, and pretend to read from it, while his coadjutor transcribed.<sup>16</sup>

The reference to a “white stone” is consistent with Harris’s description of the Nephite interpreters. All of these newspaper accounts are entirely consistent with Martin Harris’s 1859 description, given 30 years later. Therefore, it appears that Martin Harris told a consistent story.

We have evidence that Martin Harris, both at the time that the translation occurred, and at the end of his life, perceived that Joseph used the Nephite interpreters, or “spectacles,” together with a hat in order to interpret the characters on the gold plates. The use of the hat as part of the translation process was clearly noted. Martin’s description would coincide with the period of time that he acted as scribe, which corresponded with the translation of the 116 lost pages of manuscript. The idea that the Urim and Thummim was placed in a hat sounds quite

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15. C. C. Blatchley, “Caution Against the Golden Bible,” *New-York Telescope* 6/38 (20 February 1830), 150. <http://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/BOMP/id/4211>,

16. *Cincinnati Advertiser and Ohio Phoenix*, June 2, 1830. Reprinted from *Wayne County Inquirer*, Pennsylvania, ca. May 1830. <http://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/BOMP/id/201>.

different from the mental picture that we might have of Joseph using the *spectacles* like a pair of glasses to view the plates. However, recall that Martin described the stones in the interpreters as “white, like polished marble, with a few gray streaks.” This does not necessarily imply that they were transparent.

The references in newspapers to placing the spectacles in a hat continued for several years after the publication of the Book of Mormon. The October 15, 1831, *Daily Albany Argus* mentions the need to shield the interpreters from ambient light. “The preacher said he found in the same place two stones, with which he was enabled, by placing them over his eyes and putting his head in a dark corner, to decypher the hieroglyphics on the plates!”<sup>17</sup> The *Morning Star*, Limerick, Maine (March 7, 1833) states that “an angel gave him a pair of spectacles which he put in a hat and thus read and translated, while one of the witnesses wrote it down from his mouth.”<sup>18</sup> Note that these newspaper accounts as late as 1833 still make *no* reference to the term “Urim and Thummim,” instead referring to the Nephite translators as “stones” or “spectacles.”

The *Protestant Sentinel* in 1834 was either unaware of, or unwilling to use, the term *Urim and Thummim* to refer to the spectacles. They were, however, quite aware of the placement of the spectacles in the hat. The story has evolved somewhat to the point that the *plates* are in the hat as well.

In the year 1828, one Joseph Smith, an illiterate young man, unable to read his own name, of Palmyra, Wayne County, New York, was reported to have found several golden plates, together with a pair of spectacles, relics of high antiquity. The spectacles were designed to aid mental vision, under rather peculiar circumstances.

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17. *Daily Albany Argus* VI/1866, Oct. 15, 1831. <http://www.sidneyrigdon.com/dbroadhu/NY/miscNYSe.htm#040931>.

18. *Morning Star* VII/45, March 7, 1833. <http://www.sidneyrigdon.com/dbroadhu/NE/miscMe01.htm#030733>.

They were to be adjusted, and the visage thrust into a close hat. This done Smith could interpret the sacred mysteries of the plates, in which lay, by the hypothesis, in the top of the hat!<sup>19</sup>

The phrase “aid mental vision” is worthy of note. Although we do not know where the writer got this idea, the statement implies that the spectacles did not necessarily function like a pair of glasses, but more like a seer stone.

The *New York Weekly Messenger* in 1835, five years after the Book of Mormon was published, claimed that both the “plate” and the “two smooth flat stones” were placed in a hat.

Smith pretended that he had found some golden or brass plates, like the leaves of a book, hid in a box in the earth, to which he was directed by an Angel, in 1827,—that the writing on them was in the “Reformed Egyptian language,”—that he was inspired to interpret the writing, or engraving, by putting a plate in his hat, putting two smooth flat stones, which he found in the box, in the hat, and putting his face therein—that he could not write, but as he translated, one Oliver Cowdery wrote it down.<sup>20</sup>

Although there are some amusing variations being introduced to the story relative to what we currently know, one thing that is consistent with all of the newspaper accounts mentioned so far is that they all mention the use of the *Nephite interpreters* (the spectacles) and the *hat*.

Even the Prophet’s brother William, 53 years after the publication of the Book of Mormon, talked of Joseph placing the Urim and Thummim in a hat.

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19. “Mormonism,” *Protestant Sentinel* (Schenectady, New York) n.s. 5/1 (4 June 1834): 4–5. Reprinted from *New England Review*, ca. May 1834.

20. “Mormonism,” *New York Weekly Messenger and Young Men’s Advocate* (29 April 1835). Reprinted from *The Pioneer* (Rock Springs, IL), March 1835.

He translated them by means of the Urim and Thummim, (which he obtained with the plates), and the power of God. The manner in which this was done was by looking into the Urim and Thummim, which was placed in a hat to exclude the light, (the plates lying near by covered up), and reading off the translation, which appeared in the stone by the power of God.<sup>21</sup>

Joseph Knight was a good friend of the Prophet Joseph. His account identifies the Urim and Thummim as the *glasses*. Significantly, Knight also mentions the hat.

Now the way he translated was he put the Urim and Thummim into his hat and darkened his eyes, then he would take a sentence and it would appear in bright Roman letters, then he would tell the writer and he would write it. Then that would go away, the next sentence would come, and so on. But if it was not spelled right it would not go away till it was right, so we see it was marvelous. Thus was the whole translated.<sup>22</sup>

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21. "William Smith, *On Mormonism*, 1883," in *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:497.

22. "Joseph Knight Sr., Reminiscence, Circa 1835–1847," in *Early Mormon Documents*, 4, 17–18. Spelling and punctuation have been modernized for readability. Original spelling is as follows: "Now the way he translated was he put the urim and thummim into his hat and Darkned his Eyes than he would take a sentance and it would apper in Brite Roman Letters then he would tell the writer and he would write it[.] Then <that would go away> the next sentence would Come and so on But if it was not Spelt rite it would not go away till it was rite[.] so we see it was marvelous[.] thus was the hol [whole] translated. " One item of interest here is Joseph Knight's use of the term *Urim and Thummim* to describe the "glasses." The question is whether Knight's account was recorded in 1827, or whether it was recorded after 1833, when the term *Urim and Thummim* was in common usage. According to Dean Jessee, Knight's account is "undated and unsigned," with the words "22 Sept. 1827" being "inserted by Thomas Bullock, a church clerk from 1843 to 1847." Knight's account, therefore, cannot be used to establish with any certainty that the term *Urim and Thummim* was applied to

These accounts present a case for considering the idea that Joseph placed the *spectacles*, which we know as the Urim and Thummim, into a hat during the translation process. We usually assume that Joseph had the plates on the table and looked at them *through* the spectacles.

### The Spectacles as Urim and Thummim

As previously noted, none of the contemporary newspaper accounts printed in the 1830 to 1833 timeframe mentions the Urim and Thummim. Instead, they mention *spectacles* or a *white stone*. How, then, did the spectacles found by Joseph Smith come to be known as the Urim and Thummim? One of the earliest known references to the spectacles as the Urim and Thummim appeared in the Latter-day Saint newspaper *The Evening and Morning Star* in January 1833, three years after the Book of Mormon was published. The wording is interesting, as it appears to be one of the earliest times that the term *Urim and Thummim* is applied to the instruments of translation.

The book of Mormon, as a revelation from God, possesses some advantage over the old scripture: it has not been tinctured by the wisdom of man, with here and there an Italic word to supply deficiencies.—It was translated by the gift and power of God, by an unlearned man, through the aid of a pair of Interpreters, or spectacles—(known, perhaps, in ancient days as Teraphim, or Urim and Thummim).<sup>23</sup>

Note the use of the word “perhaps.” It does not appear that the term *Urim and Thummim* was generally associated with the interpreters at this point in time.

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the Nephite interpreters (the *glasses*) in 1827. See Dean Jessee, “Joseph Knight’s Recollection of Early Mormon History,” *BYU Studies* 17/1 (1976), 2.

23. W. W. Phelps, *The Evening and The Morning Star*, 1/8 (January 1833), 57.

The Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints even made a point of noting that the term *Urim and Thummim* only came into use after 1833.

The proofs are clear and positive that the story of the Urim and Thummim Translation does not date back, for its origin further than 1833, or between that date and 1835; for it is not found in any printed document of the Church of Christ up to the latter part of the year 1833, or the year 1834. The “Book of Commandments” to the Church of Christ, published in Independence, Mo., in 1833, does not contain any allusion to Urim and Thummim; though the term was inserted in some of the revelations in their reprint in the “Book of Doctrine and Covenants” in 1835.<sup>24</sup>

The association of the term *Urim and Thummim* with the spectacles thus appears to have come into use several years after the publication of the Book of Mormon. The term may not have actually been used during the period of translation itself. Historian D. Michael Quinn, however, feels that the term may have been applied as early as 1828. “This was the term in the ‘Manuscript History of the Church’ for the object through which early revelations were received to 1830, and this statement about the Urim and Thummim has appeared in the headings to these early revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants from 1921 to the present.”<sup>25</sup>

However, Quinn also notes that “there was no reference to the Urim and Thummim in the headings of the Book of Commandments (1833) or in the headings of the only editions

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24. *The True Latter Day Saints' Herald*, 26/22 (15 November 1879).

25. D. Michael Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View, Revised and Enlarged* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1998), 174–75.

of the *Doctrine and Covenants* prepared during Smith's life (in 1835 and 1844).<sup>26</sup>

In 1836, we finally find a reference to the Urim and Thummim in a non-LDS publication. The story was printed in the *Ohio Observer*. Truman Coe resided in Kirtland, Ohio, but was not a member of the Church. He appears to be repeating what either Joseph Smith, or other Church members in Kirtland, told him, and therefore employs the term *Urim and Thummim* to refer to the interpreters. Significantly, Coe does *not* mention the use of a hat. "The manner of translation was as wonderful as the discovery. By putting his finger on one of the characters and imploring divine aid, then looking through the Urim and Thummim, he would see the import written in plain English on a screen placed before him."<sup>27</sup>

Brant Gardner observes that Coe "certainly did not accept the story at face value," but that he "seems to have reported it without sarcasm or distortion." Gardner also notes that Coe's story "provides a picture of the translation that has endured from at least 1836 to modern times."<sup>28</sup> Indeed, Coe's account appears to be very close to the story that we use in the Church today, even correlating with certain modern artwork showing Joseph sitting at a table with his finger on the plates.

In 1840, we find a hostile account that actually employs the term *Urim and Thummim* to refer to the interpreters. In this account, the spectacles are placed on the eyes and there is no mention of the use of a hat.

He declared that an angel was sent from God to make known to him the place in which the book was concealed,—that he searched and found the same,—that the words were engraved on plates of gold in a language

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26. Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, 175.

27. "Truman Coe Account, 1836," in *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:47. Originally printed in *Ohio Observer* (Hudson, Ohio), 11 August 1836.

28. Gardner, *The Gift and the Power*, 7.

which no man understood,—and that two large jewels resembling diamonds were given to him, which, being applied to the eyes, like spectacles, enabled him to get at the meaning and translate the Book of Mormon into English. These jewels were, he said, the Urim and Thummim of the Old Testament.<sup>29</sup>

An 1891 interview with the prophet's brother William Smith provides a description of the Urim and Thummim and its relationship to the breastplate. At the time that William gave his description, the term *Urim and Thummim* had been used for many years to describe the Nephite interpreters. William said that “a silver bow ran over one stone, under the other around over that one and under the first in the shape of a horizontal figure 8 much like a pair of spectacles.” William also said that the spectacles were “much too large for Joseph,” and that Joseph “could only see through one at a time using sometimes one and sometimes the other. By putting his head in a hat or some dark object it was not necessary to close one eye while looking through the stone with the other. In that way sometimes when his eyes grew [tired] he [relieved] them of the strain.”<sup>30</sup>

William said that Joseph “looked through” the stones “one at a time,” which naturally implies that he was looking *through them at the plates*, yet the placement of his “head in a hat or some dark object” seems to negate the idea that the plates were located on the other side of the stone. Because the Nephite interpreters took the form of “spectacles,” we naturally assume that Joseph was required to look *through* the interpreters directly at the characters on the plates.

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29. *A Letter to Those Who Have Attended Mormonite Preaching* (London: J. B. Bateman, 1840), 1–4.

30. “William Smith interview by J. W. Peterson and W. S. Pender, 1890,” in *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:508.

## The Spectacles and the Stone

Having seen contemporary newspaper accounts that are entirely consistent with Martin Harris's late life description that the spectacles were used with a hat early in the translation process, what are we to make of the descriptions of Emma Smith and David Whitmer? They describe the use of a "seer stone" and a hat. The stone is mentioned infrequently in Church publications, but there are several notable instances. As previously noted, *The Friend* mentions two translation instruments, stating that "Joseph found with the gold plates" a "Urim and Thummim, which consisted of two transparent stones set in a rim of a bow fastened to a breastplate," and that "Joseph also used an egg-shaped, brown rock for translating called a seer stone."<sup>31</sup>

Here we have evidence that Joseph employed more than one instrument during the translation process. Further confirmation can be found in an account by Edward Stevenson printed in the *Deseret News* in 1881, in which he quoted Martin Harris as saying "that the Prophet possessed a seer stone, by which he was enabled to translate as well as from the Urim and Thummim, and for convenience he then used the seer stone."<sup>32</sup>

We now see that Martin was aware of the existence of and distinction between two different translation instruments. In fact, we learn from the January 1988 *Ensign* that Martin not only knew that Joseph used both the Nephite interpreters and a seer stone, but that Martin once actually *swapped* Joseph's stone with a different one in order to test Joseph's ability to translate.

From April 12 to June 14, Joseph translated while  
Martin wrote, with only a curtain between them.

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31. "A Peaceful Heart," *Friend*, September 1974, 7. <http://www.lds.org/friend/1974/09/a-peaceful-heart>.

32. *Deseret News*, 28 December 1881.

On occasion they took breaks from the arduous task, sometimes going to the river and throwing stones. Once Martin found a rock closely resembling the seer-stone Joseph sometimes used in place of the interpreters and substituted it without the Prophet's knowledge. When the translation resumed, Joseph paused for a long time and then exclaimed, "Martin, what is the matter, all is as dark as Egypt." Martin then confessed that he wished to "stop the mouths of fools" who told him that the Prophet memorized sentences and merely repeated them.<sup>33</sup>

Martin wanted proof that Joseph was actually capable of using the stone to translate. Since he dared not look at the spectacles in accordance with the Lord's commandment, he would only have ventured to switch Joseph's own seer stone. Emma Smith also confirms that Joseph switched between the Urim and Thummim and seer stone. Emma stated, "Now the first that my husband translated, was translated by use of the Urim, and Thummim, and that was the part that Martin Harris lost, after that he used a small stone, not exactly, black, but was rather a dark color."<sup>34</sup>

With this statement, Emma establishes a timeframe for the transition from the Nephite interpreters to the seer stone. She states that it occurred after the loss of the 116 pages and upon the resumption of translation.

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33. Kenneth W. Godfrey, "A New Prophet and a New Scripture: The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon," *Ensign*, January 1988. <http://www.lds.org/ensign/1988/01/a-new-prophet-and-a-new-scripture-the-coming-forth-of-the-book-of-mormon>.

34. "Emma Smith Bidamon to Emma Pilgrim, 27 March 1870," in *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:532. Text has been formatted for readability. Original text is as follows: "Now the first that my <husband> translated, [the book] was translated by use of the Urim, and Thummim, and that was the part that Martin Harris lost, after that he used a small stone, not exactly, black, but was rather a dark color."

David Whitmer, who only observed the translation after the loss of the 116 pages, also distinguished the Urim and Thummim (the spectacles) from the seer stone.

With the sanction of David Whitmer, and by his authority, I now state that he does not say that Joseph Smith ever translated in his presence by aid of Urim and Thummim; but by means of one dark colored, opaque stone, called a “Seer Stone,” which was placed in the crown of a hat, into which Joseph put his face, so as to exclude the external light. Then, a spiritual light would shine forth, and parchment would appear before Joseph, upon which was a line of characters from the plates, and under it, the translation in English; at least, so Joseph said.<sup>35</sup>

Another Whitmer interview notes that while Joseph was not allowed by the Lord to display the Urim and Thummim, he was able to show others his seer stone.

That Joseph had another stone called seers’ stone, and “peep stone,” is quite certain. This stone was frequently exhibited to different ones and helped to assuage their awful curiosity; but the Urim and Thummim never, unless possibly to Oliver Cowdery. . . . Elder David Whitmer’s idea was that the translation was made by the seers’ stone, as he calls it, not the Interpreters, and Emma Smith’s (Bidamon) statement accords with Whitmer as published in Herald some years since. The only discrepancy between the statements of the witnesses is that relating to the detail of the translation; and, as shown above, David and Emma, in the nature of things, did not know just how the Urim and Thummim

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35. *The True Latter Day Saints’ Herald* 26/22 (15 November 1879). <http://www.sidneyrigdon.com/dbroadhu/IL/sain1872.htm#111579>.

were used, as they had never seen them. The reader will please bear in mind that no one was allowed to see either the plates or the Urim and Thummim, except as God commanded. The Eight Witnesses were allowed to see the plates and handle them as shown above; none else.<sup>36</sup>

In 1886, David Whitmer indicates that Joseph used his own seer stone to translate all of our current Book of Mormon text. In this interview, Whitmer states that the spectacles were never returned after the loss of the 116 pages and that a seer stone was *presented* to Joseph Smith for the purpose of continuing the translation.

By fervent prayer and by otherwise humbling himself, the prophet, however, again found favor, and was presented with a strange oval-shaped, chocolate-colored stone, about the size of an egg, only more flat, which, it was promised, should serve the same purpose as the missing urim and thummim (the latter was a pair of transparent stones set in a bow-shaped frame and very much resembled a pair of spectacles). With this stone all of the present Book of Mormon was translated.<sup>37</sup>

However, Whitmer's assertion that Joseph was *presented* with a stone is most likely not correct, since Joseph already possessed at least one seer stone prior to receiving the Nephite interpreters. One could speculate that the angel took Joseph's stone away at the same time that he took the plates and the Nephite interpreters, and then returned it to him after consecrating it

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36. Zenas H. Gurley, quoting "Dr. Robinson," Source: Zenas H. Gurley, "The Book of Mormon," *Autumn Leaves* 5 (1892): 451-54, located on the Book of Abraham Project. <http://www.boap.org/LDS/Early-Saints/BOM-Witn.html>.

37. "Mormon Relics," *The Sunday Inter-Ocean*, Vol. 15, No. 207 (Chicago, Illinois, 17 Oct. 1886). Also *Saints' Herald* 33 (13 November 1886): 706, cited in Van Wagoner and Walker, "The Gift of Seeing," 53-54.

for the purpose of translation. There is, however, no evidence to confirm that this is the case other than the fact that Joseph was *allowed* to use the stone for this purpose.

Not only did Joseph possess a seer stone prior to receiving the Nephite interpreters: He was already quite familiar with the manner of its use. Matthew B. Brown notes that, “Joseph Smith reportedly said in 1826, while under examination in a court of law, that when he first obtained his personal seerstone he placed it in his hat, and discovered that time, place, and distance were annihilated; that all intervening obstacles were removed, and that he possessed one of the attributes of Deity, an All-Seeing Eye.”<sup>38</sup>

Brown goes on to note that Brigham Young confirmed this view, “When Joseph had a revelation he had, as it were, the eyes of the Lord. He saw as the Lord sees.”<sup>39</sup>

In fact, upon receiving the Nephite interpreters, Joseph viewed them as a more powerful version of the stone that he already possessed. Joseph Knight recalled that Joseph appeared to be more excited about receiving the *glasses* than the gold plates themselves. After Joseph returned from retrieving the plates, Joseph Knight recalled,

After breakfast Joseph called me in to the other room and he set his foot on the bed and leaned his head on his hand and says, “Well, I am disappointed.” “Well,” say I, “I am sorry.” “Well,” says he, “I am greatly disappointed. It is ten times better than I expected.” Then he went on to tell the length and width and thickness of the plates, and, said he, they appear to be gold. But he seemed to think more of the glasses or the Urim and Thummim than he did of the plates for, says he, “I can

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38. Matthew B. Brown, *Plates of Gold* (American Fork, Utah: Covenant Communications, 2003), 167.

39. Brown, *Plates of Gold*, 167.

see anything. They are marvelous. Now they are written in characters and I want them translated.”<sup>40</sup>

The idea that the Nephite interpreters were a more powerful version of Joseph’s seer stone is interesting, since it implies that there was something special about the stones themselves. It is more likely, however, that it was Joseph’s own perception that the stones were superior because these stones had been consecrated by God for the purpose of seeing things.

However, the idea that the Nephite interpreters were superior to a common “seer stone” was accepted by twentieth-century apostle and Church historian Joseph Fielding Smith. In response to accounts that indicated that Joseph may have used his own seer stone during the translation of the Book of Mormon, Elder Smith flatly stated that he did not believe this to be true, since the stone was inferior to the Nephite interpreters. In *Doctrines of Salvation*, published in 1956, Smith states that he considers such accounts “hearsay.”

While the statement has been made by some writers that the Prophet Joseph Smith used a seer stone part of the time in his translating of the record, and information points to the fact that he did have in his possession such a stone, yet there is no authentic statement in the history of the Church which states that the use of such a stone was made in that translation. The information

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40. “Joseph Knight Sr., Reminiscence, Circa 1835-1847,” in *Early Mormon Documents*, 4:15. Spelling has been modernized and formatted for readability. Original spelling and formatting is as follows: “After Brackfist Joseph Cald me in to the other Room and he set his foot on the Bed and leaned his head on his hand and says well I am Dissop[o]inted. well, say I[,] I am sorrey[.] Well, says he[,] I am grateley Dissop[o]inted, it is ten times Better then I expected. Then he went on to tell the length and width and thickness of the plates[,] and[,] said he[,] they appear to be Gold But he seamed to think more of the glasses or the urim and thummem then [than] he Did of the Plates for[,] says he[,] I can see any thing[.] They are Marvelus[.] Now they are written in Characters and I want them translated[.]”

is all hearsay, and personally, I do not believe that this stone was used for this purpose. The reason I give for this conclusion is found in the statement of the Lord to the Brother of Jared as recorded in Ether 3:22–24. These stones, the Urim and Thummim which were given to the Brother of Jared, were preserved for this *very purpose of translating the record*, both of the Jaredites and the Nephites. Then again the Prophet was impressed by Moroni with the fact that these stones were given for that very purpose. It hardly seems reasonable to suppose that the Prophet would substitute something evidently *inferior* under these circumstances. It may have been so, but it is so easy for a story of this kind to be circulated due to the fact that the Prophet did possess a *seer stone*, which he may have used for some other purposes.<sup>41</sup>

We have now established that there are multiple accounts from witnesses and Church sources confirming that Joseph switched from the spectacles or Nephite interpreters to a seer stone during the Book of Mormon translation process. The next question is: Why did Joseph switch between translating instruments? Was it simply for “convenience,” as Martin Harris indicated?

One possible explanation is that the size of the interpreters may have been a hindrance to their use. William Smith described the Nephite interpreters as “much too large for Joseph and he could only see through one at a time using sometimes one and sometimes the other.”<sup>42</sup> Charles Anthon, who had to have obtained his information from Martin Harris, provided additional detail when he wrote that “these spectacles were so

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41. Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, 3:225–26.

42. “William Smith interview by J. W. Peterson and W. S. Pender, 1890,” in *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:508.

large that if a person attempted to look through them, his two eyes would have to be turned towards one of the glasses merely, the spectacles in question being altogether too large for the breadth of the human face.”<sup>43</sup>

John Corrill, in 1839, confirmed that Joseph had returned the Urim and Thummim to the angel before the Book of Mormon was published, noting that “After finishing the translation, the plates and stones of Urim and Thummim were again taken and concealed by the angel for a wise purpose, and the translation published to the world in the winter of A. D. 1829 and '30.”<sup>44</sup>

Another possible explanation is that the Nephite interpreters were never returned to Joseph, and that he was expected to continue the translation using his own seer stone. David Whitmer seems to indicate this as a possibility when he claims that the Urim and Thummim were taken from Joseph and that he was “presented” with a seer stone.

Based upon these accounts, it appears that Joseph began the translation process using the Nephite interpreters, and that at some point he may have used them with a hat. After the loss of the 116 pages, he may have either switched to his own seer stone or continued to use the Nephite “spectacles,” again with the hat. In fact, given the consistent reports of the use of the hat during translation, it is not possible to know with certainty whether Joseph was using the Nephite interpreters or the seer stone in the hat during this period of time. One thing seems certain based upon witness accounts—during the period of the translation process after the loss of the 116 pages, Joseph sat in

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43. “Charles Anthon to E. D. Howe, 17 February 1834,” in *Early Mormon Documents*, 4:378.

44. John Corrill, *A Brief History of the Church of Christ of Latter Day Saints* (1839), 12. <http://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/cdm/fullbrowser/collection/BOMP/id/4577/rv/compoundobject/cpd/4592>.

the open, without a curtain, dictating to his scribe while looking into his hat.

### The Spectacles and the Stone as Urim and Thummim

At some point several years after the publication of the Book of Mormon, both the Nephite interpreters (the spectacles) and the seer stone became referred to as the *Urim and Thummim*. When the term *Urim and Thummim* was introduced in 1833, it did not refer uniquely to the instrument that Joseph recovered with the plates, but also referred to Joseph's own seer stone, which he possessed prior to the translation of the Book of Mormon. In 1907, Elder B.H. Roberts clearly associates the term with both the stone and the Nephite interpreters.

The seer stone referred to here was a chocolate-colored, somewhat egg-shaped stone which the Prophet found while digging a well in company with his brother Hyrum. It possessed the qualities of Urim and Thummim, since by means of it—as described above—as well as by means of the “Interpreters” found with the Nephite record, Joseph was able to translate the characters engraven on the plates.<sup>45</sup>

In common Church conversation, the designation *Urim and Thummim* is always assumed to be referring to the Nephite interpreters that Joseph recovered with the plates. Only those familiar with the sources will realize that there was more than one translation instrument. The term *Urim and Thummim* referred to any instrument used for the purpose of translation or the receipt of revelation.

The January 2013 *Ensign* clarifies that Joseph used multiple revelatory instruments, and that they all were classified under the name *Urim and Thummim*.

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45. B. H. Roberts, *Defense of the Faith and the Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1907), 1:257.

Those who believed that Joseph Smith's revelations contained the voice of the Lord speaking to them also accepted the miraculous ways in which the revelations were received. Some of the Prophet Joseph's earliest revelations came through the same means by which he translated the Book of Mormon from the gold plates. In the stone box containing the gold plates, Joseph found what Book of Mormon prophets referred to as "interpreters," or a "stone, which shall shine forth in darkness unto light" (Alma 37:23–24). He described the instrument as "spectacles" and referred to it using an Old Testament term, Urim and Thummim (see Exodus 28:30).

He also sometimes applied the term to other stones he possessed, called "seer stones" because they aided him in receiving revelations as a seer. The Prophet received some early revelations through the use of these seer stones.<sup>46</sup>

The idea that there could be more than one Urim and Thummim is not unusual, and we only need to look to the Bible. The Urim and Thummim referred to in the Bible is not the same instrument used by the Nephites or by Joseph Smith. However, the Biblical references to the Urim and Thummim *do* associate the instrument with a breastplate. Exodus 28:30 states, "And thou shalt put in the breastplate of judgment the Urim and the Thummim; and they shall be upon Aaron's heart, when he goeth in before the Lord. Leviticus 8:8, states, "And he put the breastplate upon him: also he put in the breastplate the Urim and the Thummim." From the Church's official website, lds.org, we learn that the Urim and Thummim was "an ancient

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46. Gerrit Dirkmaat, "Great and Marvelous Are the Revelations of God," *Ensign*, January 2013, 45–46. <http://www.lds.org/ensign/2013/01/great-and-marvelous-are-the-revelations-of-god>.

instrument or tool prepared by God and used by Joseph Smith to aid in the translation of the Book of Mormon. God provided a Urim and Thummim to His prophets in ancient times (see Exodus 28:30; 1 Samuel 28:6; Ezra 2:63).

The Urim and Thummim is not a unique instrument: God did not provide *the* Urim and Thummim, but instead provided *a* Urim and Thummim. There can be more than one instrument called “Urim and Thummim.”

The Biblical Urim and Thummim was also used to receive revelation, and indicated in 1 Samuel 28:6, “And when Saul enquired of the Lord, the Lord answered him not, neither by dreams, nor by Urim, nor by prophets.”

### Didn't Joseph Smith Talk of the Urim and Thummim?

During the latter part of his life, Joseph Smith clearly referred to the instruments used for translation as the Urim and Thummim. Joseph Smith said in the *Elders Journal* in 1838, “I obtained them and the Urim and Thummim with them, by the means of which I translated the plates, and thus came the Book of Mormon.”<sup>47</sup>

A more well known example is the Wentworth Letter, printed in the 1 March 1842, edition of the *Times and Seasons*. Joseph writes, “With the records was found a curious instrument, which the ancients called ‘Urim and Thummim,’ which consisted of two transparent stones set in the rims of a bow fastened to a breastplate. Through the medium of the Urim and Thummim I translated the record by the gift and power of God.”<sup>48</sup>

However, did Joseph use the term *Urim and Thummim* to refer to the translation instruments during the period that

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47. *Elder's Journal*, July 1838, 1:43.

48. “Church History,” *Times and Seasons*, 1 March 1842. Also found in “The Wentworth Letter,” By Joseph Smith Jr. (1805–44), *Ensign*, July 2002. <https://www.lds.org/ensign/2002/07/the-wentworth-letter>.

he was translating the Book of Mormon? *Teachings of the Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* credits Joseph Smith as saying, “The angel was rejoiced when he gave me back the Urim and Thummim.”<sup>49</sup> It initially appears from this statement that Joseph used the term *Urim and Thummim* to refer to the Nephite spectacles at the time he was translating. However, an examination of the endnote for this entry reveals that this text is from Lucy Mack Smith’s 1845 manuscript history of the Prophet’s life, which was written well after the term *Urim and Thummim* came into general use. Furthermore, upon examining the original text of Lucy’s 1845 manuscript, we note some interesting alterations. The text was originally written by Lucy partially in the third person.

I then continued, Joseph, “my supplications to God without cessation that his mercy might again be exercised towards me and on the 22 of September I had the joy and satisfaction of again receiving the record into my possession and I have commenced translating and Emma writes for me now but the angel said that if I get the plates again that the Lord would send someone to write for me and I trust that it will be so”—he also said that the angel seemed rejoiced when he gave him back the plates and said that he was pleased with his faithfulness and humility also that the Lord was pleased with him and loved him for his penitence and diligence in prayer in the which he had performed his duty so well as to receive the record and he [was] able to enter upon the work of translation again.<sup>50</sup>

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49. *Teachings of the Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith*, (2007), 71. Quoted by Lucy Mack Smith, “The History of Lucy Smith, Mother of the Prophet,” 1844–1845 manuscript, book 7, p. 11, Church Archives.

50. “Lucy Smith History, 1845,” in *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:370–71. Spelling and punctuation have been modernized for readability. Original spelling, strikeouts and additions noted by editor Vogel are as follows: I then con-

After strikeouts and word replacements, the complete text reads as if it were written by Joseph himself, with all references to “the plates” and “the record” now replaced with “the Urim and Thummim.”

“I continued,” said Joseph, “my supplications to God without cessation that his mercy might again be exercised towards me and on the 22 of September I had the joy and satisfaction of again receiving the Urim and Thummim into my possession and I have commenced translating and Emma writes for me now but the angel said that the Lord would send someone to write for me and I trust that it will be so - he also said that he was rejoiced when he gave me back the Urim and Thummim and that God was pleased with my faithfulness and humility and loved me for my penitence and diligence in prayer in the which I had performed his duty so well as to receive the Urim and Thummim and was able to enter upon the work of translation again.”<sup>51</sup>

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tinued[,] <said> Joseph[,] my supplications to God without cessation that his mercy might again be exercised towards me and on the 22 of September I had the joy and satisfaction of again receiving the record <urim and Thummin> into my possession and I have commenced translating and Emma writes for me now but the angel said that if I get the plates again that the Lord woul[d] send some one to write for me and I trust that it will be so-he also said that the ange<l> <he> seemed <was> rejoiced when he gave him <me> back the plates <urim and Thummin> and said that he <God> was pleased with his <my > faithfulness and humility also that the Lord was pleased with him and loved him <me> for his <my> penitence and diligence in prayer in the which he <I> had performed his duty so well as to receive the record <urim and Thummin> and he <was> able to enter upon the work of translation again.

51. “Lucy Smith History, 1845.” Original spelling, strikeouts and additions noted by editor Vogel are as follows: I then continued[,] <said> Joseph[,] my supplications to God without cessation that his mercy might again be exercised towards me and on the 22 of September I had the joy and satisfaction of again receiving the record <urim and Thummin> into my possession and I have commenced translating and Emma writes for me now but the angel said that if I get the plates again that the Lord woul[d] send some one to write for me and I trust that it will be so-he also said that the ange<l> <he> seemed <was> rejoiced

Since Lucy is the one who originally wrote the text of Joseph's statement, we have established this reference to the Urim and Thummim as a late second-hand statement. The use of the term to refer to the translation instruments is unsurprising, but its use as a replacement for references to the plates is unusual. By the time Lucy's history was published in 1853, there was no indication that these "Urim and Thummim" references originally referred to the plates, and it now appeared that Joseph Smith himself had spoken these words.

"After the angel left me," said he, "I continued my supplications to God, without cessation, and on the twenty-second of September, I had the joy and satisfaction of again receiving the Urim and Thummim, with which I have again commenced translating, and Emma writes for me, but the angel said that the Lord would send me a scribe, and I trust his promise will be verified. The angel seemed pleased with me when he gave me back the Urim and Thummim, and he told me that the Lord loved me, for my faithfulness and humility."<sup>52</sup>

It was common practice in the nineteenth century to rewrite historical third-person accounts as first-person accounts. Such was also the case with *History of the Church*.

### Oliver Cowdery and the Urim and Thummim

Oliver Cowdery, as Joseph's scribe during the period of translation that produced the text of the Book of Mormon that we have today, is arguably the best witness of the method used.

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when he gave him <me> back the plates <urim and Thummin> and said that he <God> was pleased with his <my > faithfulness and humility also that the Lord was pleased with him and loved him <me> for his <my> penitence and diligence in prayer in the which he <I> had performed his duty so well as to receive the record <urim and Thummin> and he <was> able to enter upon the work of translation again.

52. "Lucy Smith History, 1845," 370–71.

Some of Oliver's accounts of the translation process refer to the Urim and Thummim and the Nephite interpreters. For example, in 1834, W.W. Phelps wrote a letter to Oliver Cowdery noting that the translation occurred "through the aid of the 'Urim and Thummim,' 'Nephite Interpreters,' or Divine Spectacles."<sup>53</sup> Oliver wrote an article in the *Latter Day Saint's Messenger and Advocate* in which he described the translation process:

These were days never to be forgotten—to sit under the sound of a voice dictated by the *inspiration* of heaven, awakened the utmost gratitude of this bosom! Day after day I continued, uninterrupted, to write from his mouth, as he translated, with the *Urim and Thummim*, or, as the Nephites would have said, "Interpreters," the history, or record, called "The book of Mormon."<sup>54</sup>

The *Messenger and Advocate* was a Church newspaper, and its audience was primarily members of the Church. It is clear that by 1834, Urim and Thummim was the accepted name within the Church for the instruments used during the translation. There is no distinction being made between Nephite interpreters and seer stone.

After Oliver left the Church, he continued to hold to his testimony of the Book of Mormon, although he no longer believed that Joseph Smith was inspired to lead the Church. There is a well-known quote attributed to Oliver Cowdery circulating on the Internet that is used as evidence that Oliver became skeptical of his role in the translation of the Book of Mormon, and that he specifically mentioned the use of the seer stone as the Urim and Thummim. Oliver is purported to have said the following in 1839:

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53. W. W. Phelps, "Letter No. 4," *Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate* 1/5 (Feb. 1835), 65. [http://en.fairmormon.org/Messenger\\_and\\_Advocate/1/5](http://en.fairmormon.org/Messenger_and_Advocate/1/5).

54. Oliver Cowdery, *Latter Day Saint's Messenger and Advocate* 1/14. Emphasis in original. [http://en.fairmormon.org/Messenger\\_and\\_Advocate/1/1](http://en.fairmormon.org/Messenger_and_Advocate/1/1).

I have sometimes had seasons of skepticism, in which I did seriously wonder whether the Prophet and I were men in our sober senses, when he would be translating from plates, through “the Urim and Thummim” and the plates not be in sight at all.

But I believed in both the Seer and the “Seer stone,” and what the First Elder announced as revelation from God, I accepted as such, and committed to paper with a glad mind and happy heart and swift pen; for I believed him to be the soul of honor and truth, a young man who would die before he would lie.<sup>55</sup>

The document containing these statements is known to be a historical forgery, although it was accepted as genuine for many years after it came to light in 1906. The document consists primarily of phrases authored by Oliver Cowdery, which were extracted from several 1834 and 1835 issues of the *Latter Day Saints’ Messenger and Advocate* and then placed into a different context. The document also utilizes a rephrasing of concepts discussed in David Whitmer’s 1887 *An Address to All Believers in Christ*.<sup>56</sup> Richard Lloyd Anderson explains the origin of this forgery in the April 1987 *Ensign*.

In 1906 the “mountain evangelist” R. B. Neal, a leader in the American Anti-Mormon Association, published a document with much fanfare but without evidence of the document’s authenticity. Reverend Neal claimed that the publication was a reprint of an 1839 document

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55. Oliver Cowdery, *Defence in a rehearsal of my grounds for separating myself from the Latter Day Saints*, (1839), 5. This document is a historical forgery. [http://books.google.com/books?id=imVVAAAAAYAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs\\_ge\\_summary\\_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false](http://books.google.com/books?id=imVVAAAAAYAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false).

56. The Cowdery phrases were extracted from the *Messenger and Advocate* 1/1; 2/1; 1/ 5; 1/7 and 1/10 . Whitmer material was taken from *An Address to All Believers in Christ*, 27, 31, 35, 42, 45, 61, 62, and 95.

explaining Oliver Cowdery's apostasy: *Defence in a Rehearsal of My Grounds for Separating Myself from the Latter Day Saints*. "No more important document has been unearthed since I have been engaged in this warfare," R. B. Neal asserted. With such convictions, one can be sure that Reverend Neal would have produced evidence to prove that the original actually existed. But all we have is his 1906 first printing, which is silent about why no one had ever heard of the document until a half century after Oliver Cowdery's death.<sup>57</sup>

There is another matter involving Oliver Cowdery that we must take into account. We know that at some point during the translation process that Oliver Cowdery desired to translate. His attempt, and subsequent failure to do so, has provided one of the Church's most well known object lessons. Most members of the Church are likely familiar with the lesson offered in Doctrine and Covenants 9:7-9:

Behold, you have not understood; you have supposed that I would give it unto you, when you took no thought save it was to ask me. But, behold, I say unto you, that you must study it out in your mind; then you must ask me if it be right, and if it is right I will cause that your bosom shall burn within you; therefore, you shall feel that it is right. But if it be not right you shall have no such feelings, but you shall have a stupor of thought that shall cause you to forget the thing which is wrong; therefore, you cannot write that which is sacred save it be given you from me.

The lesson taught is a very powerful one, and defines for Latter-day Saints the manner in which we can receive personal

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57. Richard Lloyd Anderson, "I Have a Question," *Ensign*, April 1987. <https://www.lds.org/ensign/1987/04/i-have-a-question>.

revelation. Elder Richard G. Scott discussed this in the April 2007 General Conference.

Some misunderstandings about prayer can be clarified by realizing that the scriptures define principles for effective prayer, but they do not assure *when* a response will be given. Actually, He will reply in one of *three* ways. First, you can feel the peace, comfort, and assurance that confirm that your decision is right. Or second, you can sense that unsettled feeling, the stupor of thought, indicating that your choice is wrong. Or third—and this is the difficult one—you can feel no response.<sup>58</sup>

Oliver's failed attempt to translate provided this valuable lesson to generations to come. However, when we consider the translation process itself, do we ever wonder what *method* Oliver would have employed in his attempt to translate? We know that Oliver was *not allowed* to view the plates or the Nephite interpreters until he became one of the Three Witnesses. Yet, we typically assume that the process of translation required the use of the Nephite interpreters and a view of the plates. There is a contradiction here: The story of Oliver's attempt at translation does *not* fit with the common image of Joseph and Oliver sitting at a table separated by a curtain.

How, then, did Oliver attempt to translate the plates during the period of time prior to being a witness? What translation instrument did Oliver use? Although Oliver's translation attempt does not fit the scenario in which the Nephite interpreters are employed, it does fit perfectly well with the use of the stone and the hat, with Oliver and Joseph sitting in plain view of one another and the plates covered.

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58. Richard G. Scott, "Using the Supernal Gift of Prayer," *Ensign*, May 2007. <http://www.lds.org/ensign/2007/05/using-the-supernal-gift-of-prayer>.

Richard Lloyd Anderson, in an article in the September 1977 *Ensign*, noted this inconsistency regarding Oliver and the plates.

Oliver Cowdery says, “I . . . handled with my hands the gold plates.” Yet another Witness, David Whitmer, insisted that he had never handled the plates; he only watched as the angel in the vision displayed the plates and other sacred objects. Since Whitmer and Cowdery were together at this impressive vision, one must infer that Cowdery did not handle the plates at that time. Thus a distinction emerges between the key secretary and his witness brother-in-law: at some time during the translation process Oliver Cowdery evidently handled the plates.<sup>59</sup>

Anderson’s conclusion is that “Oliver Cowdery might well have handled the plates during his translation attempt.”<sup>60</sup> This is based upon the common assumption that the use of the Nephite interpreters, as *spectacles*, required the translator to view the plates directly through them. Anderson assumes that the process involved “the physical art of placing the translating instruments directly over the plates.” Anderson also quotes a second-hand account that he states “explicitly says that the translator placed the Urim and Thummim over the characters on the plates, though it must be judged with great caution.” The account is given by Church member Samuel W. Richards. Richards visited Oliver Cowdery, and described the visit as follows:

“He [Oliver Cowdery] represented Joseph as sitting at a table with the plates before him, translating them by means of the Urim and Thummim, while he sat beside

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59. Richard Lloyd Anderson, “By the Gift and Power of God,” *Ensign*, September 1977, 79. <http://www.lds.org/ensign/1977/09/by-the-gift-and-power-of-god>.

60. Anderson, “By the Gift and Power,” 79.

him writing every word as Joseph spoke them to him. This was done by holding the ‘translators’ over the hieroglyphics, the translation appearing distinctly on the instrument, which had been touched by the finger of God and dedicated and consecrated for the express purpose of translating languages.”<sup>61</sup>

Anderson qualifies the account by noting that “it is doubtful whether Samuel Richards could quote Oliver accurately in 1907, fifty-nine years after their intimate visit. In fact, he continued the above statement by picturing Oliver Cowdery as successfully translating himself, thus learning how Joseph Smith performed that work. But the contemporary revelation to Oliver Cowdery says the opposite (D&C 9), which means that no one besides Joseph Smith knew personally the exact means of translation.”<sup>62</sup>

This account would also imply that Oliver actually viewed the Nephite translation instrument and the plates prior to acting as one of the Three Witnesses. It seems more reasonable, however, that Oliver may have attempted to translate without having to view the plates, though he could have “handled” the plates while covered.

Did Oliver attempt to translate using Joseph’s seer stone? This is one possibility. Another possibility is that Oliver possessed his own revelatory instrument and attempted to use it to translate. There is such an inference in the original text to Doctrine and Covenants Section 8, which discusses Oliver’s “gift.”<sup>63</sup> This is clarified on the Church’s official Church History

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61. Personal Statement of S. W. Richards, 25 May 1907, at Harold B. Lee Library, BYU, Special Collections, quoted in Anderson, “By the Gift and Power,” 79.

62. Anderson, “By the Gift and Power,” 79.

63. It was a common practice for Joseph to edit and supervise others in editing the wording of revelations. The Church has recently published the original text of the revelation comprising D&C Section 8, in which the Lord tells Oliver, “[R]emember this is thy gift now this is not all for thou hast another gift which

website, [history.lds.org](http://history.lds.org). In the article “Oliver Cowdery’s Gift,” by Jeffrey G. Cannon, we learn that Oliver possessed a divining rod, which he used to receive revelation.

Oliver Cowdery lived in a culture steeped in biblical ideas, language and practices. The revelation’s reference to Moses likely resonated with him. The Old Testament account of Moses and his brother Aaron recounted several instances of using rods to manifest God’s will (see Ex. 7:9–12; Num. 17:8). Many Christians in Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery’s day similarly believed in divining rods as instruments for revelation. Cowdery was among those who believed in and used a divining rod.<sup>64</sup>

Since Oliver had used his divining rod to receive revelation in the past, it is not unreasonable to assume that Oliver may have attempted to use his own revelatory instrument during his attempt to translate. This would satisfy the requirement that he not view the plates or the Nephite interpreters prior to becoming one of the Three Witnesses.

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is the gift of working with the sprout Behold it hath told you things Behold there is no other power save God that can cause this thing of Nature to work in your hands.” Revelation, April 1829–B [D&C 8], in Robin Scott Jensen, Robert J. Woodford, and Stephen C. Harper, eds., *Manuscript Revelation Books*, vol. 1 of the Revelations and Translations series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, ed. Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2009), 17. The phrases found in the Revelation book “working with the sprout” and “thing of Nature to work in your hands” were first edited by Sidney Rigdon, and subsequently by Joseph Smith, Oliver Cowdery, and Frederick G. Williams for inclusion in the Book of Commandments to read “working with the rod” and “rod of nature, to work in your hands.” This wording has led some to speculate that Oliver possessed his own revelatory instrument and that he used it during his attempt to translate. In preparation for the publication of this revelation as part of the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants, these phrases were ultimately edited to read “gift of Aaron” and “gift of Aaron to be with you.”

64. Jeffery G. Cannon, “Oliver Cowdery’s Gift,” *Revelations in Context* (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 15 December 2012). <https://history.lds.org/article/doctrine-and-covenants-oliver-cowdery>.

## References to the Urim and Thummim in the Doctrine and Covenants

There are a number of references to the Urim and Thummim in the Doctrine and Covenants. Could any of these be used to determine when the term came into use? The Doctrine and Covenants mentions a number of revelations that were received by Joseph Smith through the Urim and Thummim. D&C 130, which has numerous references, was received in 1843, well after the term was commonly used. Of greater interest are D&C Sections 10 and 17, which were received during the time that translation was in progress.

Doctrine and Covenants 10 was received in the summer of 1828. Upon reading verse 1, it initially appears that the term *Urim and Thummim* was used at the time that the revelation was received.

Now, behold, I say unto you, that because you delivered up those writings which you had power given unto you to translate by the means of the Urim and Thummim, into the hands of a wicked man, you have lost them.

However, the term *Urim and Thummim* was added in 1835 when the revelation was included in the first edition of the Doctrine and Covenants. The same revelation in the 1833 Book of Commandments does not refer to the instrument used for translation. "Now, behold I say unto you, that because you have delivered up so many writings, which you had power to translate, into the hands of a wicked man, you have lost them."

More intriguing is D&C 17, which was received in June 1829 "through the Urim and Thummim." Verse 1 informs the Three Witnesses that "you shall have a view of the plates, and also of the breastplate, the sword of Laban, the Urim and Thummim, which were given to the brother of Jared upon the mount, when he talked with the Lord face to face, and the

miraculous directors which were given to Lehi while in the wilderness, on the borders of the red sea.”

Not only are the translation instruments a key subject of the revelation, but the term *Urim and Thummim* is directly associated with the Nephite interpreters, “which were given to the brother of Jared.” The original text of Section 17 was not part of the Book of Commandments, and was initially printed as Section 42 in the 1835 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants.<sup>65</sup> The original text of this revelation can be found in “Revelation, June 1829–E [D&C 17],” *Joseph Smith Papers*.

Behold I say unto you that you must rely upon my word which if you do with full purpose of heart you shall have a view of the plate and also the breastplate, the sword of Laban, the Urim and Thumim which was given to the brother of Jared upon the mount when he talked with the Lord face to face and the marvelous directors which was given to Lehi while in the wilderness on the borders of the red sea.<sup>66</sup>

The Historical Introduction to this section in JSP states that “Revelation Book 2 contains the earliest extant copy of this revelation. Undated, it apparently was copied sometime after 25 November 1834 by scribe Frederick G. Williams. No ear-

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65. Doctrine and Covenants, 1835. P. 171. *Joseph Smith Papers*, Church Historians Press. <http://josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/doctrine-and-covenants-1835#179>.

66. Revelation, June 1829-E [D&C 17], located on the Joseph Smith Papers website. Spelling and punctuation have been modernized and strikeouts and insertion marks have been removed for readability. The original text reads as follows: “Behold I say unto you that you must rely upon my word which if you do with full purpose of heart you shall have a view of the plate and also the breastplate the sword <of Laban the> Urim, and Thumim of Laban the Urim and Thumim <which was> given to the brother of Jared upon the mount when he talked with the Lord face to face and the marvelous directors which was given to Lehi while in the wilderness on the borders of the red sea . . .” <http://josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/revelation-june-1829%e2%80%93e-dc-17>.

lier copy is extant. The 1835 Doctrine and Covenants and later accounts give the date as June 1829.” If the actual date upon which this revelation was committed to paper was in 1829, this would establish that the term *Urim and Thummim* was associated with the Nephite interpreters during the period that translation was in progress. Unfortunately, the written version of this revelation cannot be dated earlier than 1834.

### The Stone and the Hat

Prior to the appearance of the angel Moroni, Joseph possessed several stones that he used for the purpose of locating things, the most well known use being the location of lost objects or buried treasure. This was not as unusual of an activity at that time as it would appear to be from our modern perspective. In 1825 the *Wayne Sentinel* in Palmyra reported that buried treasure had been found “by the help of a mineral stone, (which becomes transparent when placed in a hat and the light excluded by the face of him who looks into it).”<sup>67</sup> Regarding the Smith family and treasure seeking, Latter-day Saint scholar Richard Bushman notes,

So that once you spread out this process so that Joseph Smith is not a peculiarly weird version of treasure seeking but that it was widely practiced suddenly it was no longer a blot on his character or his family’s character. It was no more scandalous than say gambling—playing poker today. A little bit discredited and slightly morally disreputable but not really evil; and when it was found that all sorts of treasure seekers were also serious Christians, why not the Smith’s too? So instead of being a puzzle or a contradiction it was just one aspect

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67. “Wonderful Discovery,” *Wayne Sentinel*, Palmyra, New York (27 December 1825).

of the Smith family culture and not really anything to be worried about.<sup>68</sup>

It makes logical sense that the Lord would choose to approach someone who would readily accept the idea that one could “see” using a stone. Joseph already believed that the stone could be used to “see” things, and the transition from using the stone to receive information to a means of receiving revelation from God would have been straightforward. Recall that to Joseph, the spectacles that he received from Moroni were simply a more powerful version of the stone that he already possessed.

Elder Dallin H. Oaks discussed the treasure-seeking culture of that time, noting that “it was indulged in by upright and religious men such as Josiah Stowel[[]],” who employed Joseph Smith “at fourteen dollars a month, in part because of the crushing poverty of the Smith family.”<sup>69</sup>

The Church’s *Student Manual* tells us that “Joseph and his brothers hired out by the day at whatever work was available. Treasure hunting, or ‘money digging,’ as it was then called, was popular in the United States at this time. In October 1825, Josiah Stowell, from South Bainbridge, New York, a farmer, lumber mill owner, and deacon in the Presbyterian church, came to ask Joseph to help him in such a venture.”<sup>70</sup> The Prophet’s mother, Lucy Mack Smith, noted that “after laboring for the old gentleman about a month, without success, Joseph

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68. Richard L. Bushman, “Joseph Smith Miscellany” (Mesa, Arizona: FAIR, 2005 FAIR Conference). <http://www.fairlds.org/fair-conferences/2005-fair-conference/2005-a-joseph-smith-miscellany>.

69. Dallin H. Oaks, “Recent Events Involving Church History and Forged Documents,” *Ensign*, October 1987, 63. The name “Stowel” is sometimes spelled as “Stowell” or “Stoal.” <http://www.lds.org/ensign/1987/10/recent-events-involving-church-history-and-forged-documents>.

70. *Church History in the Fulness of Times Student Manual*, 42.

prevailed upon him to cease his operations.”<sup>71</sup> In March of the next year, several of Stowell’s relatives felt that Joseph had been defrauding Stowell, and brought charges against him. Joseph was taken before a judge and charged with “glasslooking.” In fact, the June 1994 *Ensign* noted Joseph’s trial and acquittal for “glasslooking” as one of the “highlights in the Prophet’s life.”

Highlights in the Prophet’s Life 20 Mar. 1826: Tried and acquitted on fanciful charge of being a “disorderly person,” South Bainbridge, Chenango County, New York. New York law defined a disorderly person as, among other things, a vagrant or a seeker of “lost goods.” The Prophet had been accused of both: the first charge was false and was made simply to cause trouble; Joseph’s use of a seer stone to see things that others could not see with the naked eye brought the second charge. Those who brought the charges were apparently concerned that Joseph might bilk his employer, Josiah Stowell, out of some money. Mr. Stowell’s testimony clearly said this was not so and that he trusted Joseph Smith.<sup>72</sup>

Brant Gardner clarifies the role that Joseph and his stone played within the community of Palmyra:

Young Joseph Smith was a member of a specialized sub-community with ties to these very old and very respected practices, though by the early 1800s they were respected only by a marginalized segment of society.

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71. Lucy Mack Smith, in Scott Facer Proctor and Maurine Jensen Proctor, *The Revised and Enhanced History of Joseph Smith by His Mother*, (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft), 124. Also cited in “Lucy Smith History, 1845,” in *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:310. Lucy’s statement regarding Joseph’s work for Stowell (spelled “Stoal” in her manuscript) only appears in the 1853 version and does not appear in the original 1845 manuscript.

72. “Highlights in the Prophet’s Life,” *Ensign*, June 1994, 24.

He exhibited a talent parallel to others in similar communities. Even in Palmyra he was not unique. In D. Michael Quinn's words: "Until the Book of Mormon thrust young Smith into prominence, Palmyra's most notable seer was Sally Chase, who used a greenish-colored stone. William Stafford also had a seer stone, and Joshua Stafford had a 'peepstone' which looked like white marble and had a hole through the center." Richard Bushman adds Chauncy Hart, and an unnamed man in Susquehanna County, both of whom had stones with which they found lost objects.<sup>73</sup>

The August 1987 *Ensign* relates how Brigham Young talked of Joseph obtaining his first seer stone "by digging '15 feet underground' after seeing it first in another seer stone."<sup>74</sup> This occurred while Joseph was digging a well in the company of Willard Chase, who was himself a treasure seeker. Chase's own account of the event noted that "after digging about twenty feet below the surface of the earth, we discovered a singularly appearing stone, which excited my curiosity. I brought it to the top of the well, and as we were examining it, Joseph put it into his hat, and then his face into the top of his hat."<sup>75</sup> Joseph ul-

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73. Brant A. Gardner, "Joseph the Seer—or Why Did He Translate With a Rock in His Hat?" 2009 FAIR Conference presentation. Gardner references [9] D. Michael Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1987), 38. and [10] Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 70. <http://www.fairlds.org/fair-conferences/2009-fair-conference/2009-joseph-the-seer-or-why-did-he-translate-with-a-rock-in-his-hat>.

74. Wilford Woodruff journal, 11 September 1859, cited in Richard Lloyd Anderson, "The Alvin Smith Story: Fact and Fiction," *Ensign*, August 1987. <http://www.lds.org/ensign/1987/08/the-alvin-smith-story-fact-and-fiction>.

75. "Willard Chase Statement, Circa 11 December 1833," in *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:65–66. Published in Eber Dudley Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled* (Painesville, OH: Telegraph Press, 1834), 240–8. Chase claimed, "It has been said by Smith, that *he* brought the stone from the well; but this is false. There was no one in the well but myself. The next morning he came to me, and wished to

timately ended up keeping the stone, and it is this stone that he may have used during translation. Chase's statement, made several years after the publication of the Book of Mormon, asserted that he was the rightful owner of the stone, claiming to have only lent it to Joseph.

Prior to receiving the plates, Joseph used the stone to "see" things as a seer. In 1835, Oliver Cowdery described how the angel Moroni revealed the location of the golden plates to Joseph Smith, stating that "the vision of his mind being opened at the same time, he was permitted to view it critically; and previously being acquainted with the place, he was able to follow the direction of the vision, afterward, according to the voice of the angel, and obtain the book."<sup>76</sup> At the time of Moroni's visit, Joseph was well acquainted with the use of the seer stone to "see" things. It is not unreasonable to suppose that Joseph looked into his stone in order to see the vision of the hill in which the plates were hidden after receiving Moroni's instructions regarding their location. One such account supporting this idea was given by Henry Harris in 1833, in which he stated, "I had a conversation with [Joseph], and asked him where he found them [the plates] and how he come to know where they were. He said he had a revelation from God that told him they were hid in a certain hill and he looked in his stone and saw them in the place of deposit."<sup>77</sup>

Joseph Knight also recounts that Joseph used the stone to identify his future wife Emma as being the person who should accompany him to retrieve the plates, noting that Joseph

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obtain the stone, alleging that he could see in it; but I told him I did not wish to part with it on account of its being a curiosity, but I would lend it."

76. Oliver Cowdery, *Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate* 1/5 (February 1835), 80.

77. Henry Harris, statement in Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled*, 252.

“looked in his glass and found it was Emma Hale, Daughter of old Mr. Hale of Pennsylvania, a girl that he had seen before.”<sup>78</sup>

### The Spectacles, the Stone and the Curtain

The image of Joseph translating using the stone and the hat does not match the picture that we typically have in our mind of Joseph looking at the plates through a pair of “spectacles,” while sitting behind a curtain. However, the use of the stone and the hat provides a distinct advantage in bolstering the claim that Joseph received the Book of Mormon text through revelation. The absence of a curtain during the latter part of the translation, during which the entire text of the Book of Mormon that we now have was produced, substantially weakens the critical argument that Joseph dictated the Book of Mormon by plagiarizing a number of other works. Instead of having Joseph obscured by a curtain or blanket, which could have hidden any number of reference materials, Joseph sat in the open, dictating the text of the Book of Mormon to Oliver while looking at the interpreter placed in his hat. Now, instead of “Joseph the plagiarist,” those wishing to provide an alternate explanation of the translation must assert “Joseph the plagiarist who has a photographic memory.” This is of particular value with respect the biblical passages contained within the Book of Mormon, which duplicate the textual structure of the King James Version. Joseph was never seen consulting a Bible as he dictated the text of the Book of Mormon. One must either assume that he consulted a Bible out of view of others and memorized the text, or accept the claim that the text was revealed to him as he dictated it.

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78. Dean Jessee, “Joseph Knight’s Recollection of Early Mormon History,” *BYU Studies* 17/1 (1976), 2. Original spelling: “looked in his glass and found it was Emma Hale, Daughter of old Mr. Hail of Pensylvany, a girl that he had seen Before.”

That having been said, there is ample evidence that a curtain or sheet of some kind was used during the early period of translation. Martin Harris is quoted as saying as much in an 1831 issue of the *Palmyra Reflector*. According to the *Reflector*, “Harris declares, that when he acted as amanuenses, and wrote the translation, as Smith dictated, such was his fear of the Divine displeasure, that a screen (sheet) was suspended between the prophet and himself.”<sup>79</sup> This would correspond to the early period of the translation during which Harris acted as scribe, prior to the loss of the 116 pages of manuscript.

The use of the curtain to screen the translator from the scribe certainly makes sense if the translation instruments being employed are the Nephite interpreters. Critic Eber D. Howe in his 1834 book *Mormonism Unveiled* notes that Harris mentions the use of a “screen.”

[Martin Harris] says he wrote a considerable part of the book, as Smith dictated, and at one time the presence of the Lord was so great, that a screen was hung up between him and the Prophet; at other times the Prophet would sit in a different room, or up stairs, while the Lord was communicating to him the contents of the plates. He does not pretend that he ever saw the wonderful plates but once, although he and Smith were engaged for months in deciphering their contents.<sup>80</sup>

The claim that Harris said that he saw the plates “but once” is quite consistent with the stage of the translation process during which a curtain was employed. Harris only saw them once when he acted as one of the Three Witnesses. It is apparent that during the initial stage of the translation process the sacred objects were required to be hidden from view of others. Charles

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79. *Palmyra Reflector*, 1829–1831, “Gold Bible, No. 6,” (19 March 1831) in *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:248.

80. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled*, 14.

Anthon, whose only knowledge of the process was relayed to him during a visit by Martin Harris, states,

This young man was placed behind a curtain, in the garret of a farm house, and, being thus concealed from view, put on the spectacles occasionally, or rather, looked through one of the glasses, decyphered the characters in the book, and, having committed some of them to paper, handed copies from behind the curtain, to those who stood on the outside. Not a word, however, was said about the plates having been decyphered “by the gift of God.” Every thing, in this way, was effected by the large pair of spectacles.<sup>81</sup>

John A. Clark, in a 1834 book chapter criticizing Mormonism, also associates the use of the curtain with the period during which Harris acted as scribe.

The way that Smith made his transcripts and translations for Harris was the following; Although in the same room, a thick curtain or blanket was suspended between them, and Smith concealed behind the blanket, pretend to look through his spectacles, or transparent stones, and would then write down or repeat what he saw, which, when repeated aloud, was written down by Harris, who sat on the other side of the suspended blanket.<sup>82</sup>

Clark’s mention of “transcripts” would make sense with the use of a curtain, since it is known that Joseph copied char-

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81. “Charles Anthon to E. D. Howe, 17 February 1834,” in *Early Mormon Documents*, 4:379.

82. John A. Clark, “Gleanings by the Way” (Philadelphia, 1842), 230. Available in Google Books: [http://books.google.com/books/about/Gleanings\\_by\\_the\\_way.html?id=Q-sQAAAAIAAJ](http://books.google.com/books/about/Gleanings_by_the_way.html?id=Q-sQAAAAIAAJ).

acters off the plates, and would have needed to shield them from view at that time.

Another hostile account published ten years later in 1844 notes that “The ‘prophet,’ as he is now called, took care, of course, that neither of them, nor any one else, should see the plates, the part of the room he occupied having been partitioned off from where they sat by a blanket.”<sup>83</sup>

Pomeroy Tucker, a friend of Martin Harris who later became skeptical of Harris’s involvement with Mormonism, claims that Joseph dictated “from behind a blanket-screen drawn across a dark corner of a room at his residence—for at this time the original revelation, limiting to the prophet the right of seeing the sacred plates, had not yet been changed, and the view with the instrument used was even too brilliant for his own spiritualized eyes in the light!”<sup>84</sup> Since Tucker never observed the process of translation, it is likely that he heard this story from Martin Harris himself.

So far, all of the accounts describing the use of a curtain appear to have originated with Martin Harris. However, during an interview for the *Chicago Tribune* in 1885, Book of Mormon witness David Whitmer also mentioned the use of a curtain, although this particular account contains some obvious inaccuracies.

[Joseph] Smith [Jr.], also said that he had been commanded to at once begin the translation of the work in the presence of three witnesses. In accordance with this command, Smith, Cowdery, and Whitmer proceeded to the latter’s home, accompanied by Smith’s

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83. Robert Baird, *Religion in the United States of America* (Glasgow: Blackie and Son, 1844), 647–49.

84. Pomeroy Tucker, *Origin, Rise, and Progress of Mormonism* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1867), 36. Available in Google Books: [http://books.google.com/books/about/Origin\\_rise\\_and\\_progress\\_of\\_Mormonism.html?id=1SPym5-HSN4C](http://books.google.com/books/about/Origin_rise_and_progress_of_Mormonism.html?id=1SPym5-HSN4C).

wife, and bearing with them the precious plates and spectacles. The house of senior Whitmer was a primitive and poorly designed structure, but it was deemed the most secure for the carrying out the sacred trust on account of the threats that had been made against Smith by his mercenary neighbors. In order to give privacy to the proceeding a blanket, which served as a portiere was stretched across the family living room to shelter the translators and the plates from the eye of any who might call at the house while the work was in progress. This, Mr. Whitmer says, was the only use made of the blanket, and it was not for the purpose of concealing the plates or the translator from the eyes of the amanuensis. In fact, Smith was at no time concealed from his collaborators, and the translation was performed in the presence of not only the persons mentioned, but of the entire Whitmer household and several of Smith's relatives besides.<sup>85</sup>

There are elements of this account that make it appear that the interviewer has mixed various aspects of the translation process. For example, it was not required that Joseph perform the translation in the presence of three witnesses—this is obviously a reference to the Three Witnesses. However, it is interesting to note that the interviewer states that Whitmer actually made an effort to specify that a blanket was used only to shield the translation process from others who might stop by. This may indicate that a curtain was used in a different manner in the Whitmer home than it was during Martin Harris's tenure as scribe. Whitmer is then said to describe the actual translation process.

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85. "David Whitmer Interview with *Chicago Tribune*, 15 December 1885," in *Early Mormon Documents*, 5:153. Also reprinted in the *Deseret News*, 6 January 1886.

Each time before resuming the work all present would kneel in prayer and invoke the Divine blessing on the proceeding. After the prayer Smith would sit on one side of the table and the amanuenses, in turn as they became tired, on the other. Those present and not actively engaged in the work seated themselves around the room and then the work began. After affixing the magical spectacles to his eyes, Smith would take the plates and translate the characters one at a time.<sup>86</sup>

In this instance, Whitmer seems to indicate the use of the Nephite interpreters in full view of others. Since Whitmer would not have been allowed to view the spectacles or the plates prior to being one of the Three Witnesses, this account does not correlate with other accounts, even those other accounts coming from Whitmer himself. It is possible that Whitmer described both aspects of the early translation using the spectacles and blanket as well as the later situation in which Joseph placed the translation instrument into his hat and dictated in full view of others. The interviewer may not have distinguished the various elements present during different periods of translation, and may have simply conflated these different elements into the single story that was produced.

By the time that the translation resumed after the loss of the 116 pages, the translation method appears to have changed substantially. Even if a blanket or curtain was used in the Whitmer home for any period of time, it appears to have quickly disappeared. The translation of the entire text of the Book of Mormon that we now have took place primarily at David Whitmer's home. Not only is the use of a curtain not apparent, but there is an actual denial that it was used in the process. David Whitmer's daughter Elizabeth Ann Whitmer Cowdery stated,

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86. "David Whitmer Interview with *Chicago Tribune*," in *Early Mormon Documents*, 5:153–54.

I cheerfully certify that I was familiar with the manner of Joseph Smith's translating the book of Mormon. He translated the most of it at my Father's house. And I often sat by and saw and heard them translate and write for hours together. Joseph never had a curtain drawn between him and his scribe while he was translating. He would place the director in his hat, and then place his [face in his] hat, so as to exclude the light, and then [read] to his scribe the words as they appeared before him.<sup>87</sup>

Elizabeth asserts that the translation at the Whitmer home was performed using the translation instrument in the hat, thus eliminating any need for a curtain to shield the Nephite interpreters and the plates from view. Even the anomalous account reported to have come from David Whitmer regarding the use of a curtain at his home includes the claim that the translation occurred in the open, where anyone could observe it. The fact that Elizabeth felt the need to make such a statement at all strongly implies that there was still a story in circulation among the Latter-day Saints that a curtain was used in the translation process. In 1887, David Whitmer, who two years earlier in the 1885 *Chicago Tribune* interview asserted the use of the Nephite interpreters and curtain, now also described the translation method using the stone and the hat.

I will now give you a description of the manner in which the Book of Mormon was translated. Joseph Smith would put the seer stone into a hat, and put his face in the hat, drawing it closely around his face to exclude the light; and in the darkness the spiritual light would shine. A piece of something resembling parchment would appear, and on that appeared the writing.

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87. Elizabeth Ann Whitmer Cowdery, "Elizabeth Ann Whitmer Cowdery Affidavit, 15 February 1870," in *Early Mormon Documents*, 5:260.

One character at a time would appear, and under it was the interpretation in English. Brother Joseph would read off the English to Oliver Cowdery, who was his principal scribe, and when it was written down and repeated to Brother Joseph to see if it was correct, then it would disappear, and another character with the interpretation would appear. Thus the Book of Mormon was translated by the gift and power of God, and not by any power of man.<sup>88</sup>

### What Instrument Did Joseph Use to Translate the Book of Mormon?

In 1886, David Whitmer indicates that Joseph used his own seer stone to translate all of our current Book of Mormon text. In this interview, Whitmer indicates that the spectacles were never returned after the loss of the 116 pages and that a seer stone was made available to Joseph Smith for the purpose of continuing the translation; however, there is no way to confirm that this was actually the case.

What eventually happened to Joseph's seer stone? According to David Whitmer, "After the translation of the Book of Mormon was finished early in the spring of 1830 before April 6th, Joseph gave the Stone to Oliver Cowdery and told me as well as the rest that he was through with it, and he did not use the stone anymore."<sup>89</sup> The stone ultimately made its way to Utah. At one point, the stone was present at the Manti Temple dedication. Wilford Woodruff wrote about this event in his journal: "Before leaving I Consecrated upon the Altar the seers Stone that Joseph Smith found by Revelation some 30

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88. David Whitmer, *An Address to All Believers in Christ* (1887), 12.

89. Whitmer, *An Address*, 32. Joseph Smith's claim that he no longer needed the seer stone in order to receive revelation was one factor in Whitmer's eventual disillusionment with him.

feet under the Earth Carried By him through life.”<sup>90</sup> In 1956, Elder Joseph Fielding Smith commented that “the statement has been made that the Urim and Thummim was on the altar in the Manti Temple when that building was dedicated. The Urim and Thummim so spoken of, however, was the seer stone which was in the possession of the Prophet Joseph Smith in early days. This seer stone is currently in the possession of the Church.”<sup>91</sup> This means that the instrument by means of which the Book of Mormon *may* have been all or partially translated is currently still in the possession of the Church, as opposed to the “original” Urim and Thummim (the Nephite interpreters), which were returned to the angel Moroni at some point during or after the translation.

References to the stone being used during the Book of Mormon translation are not confined to the nineteenth century. We have already seen a reference to the stone in the September 1974 *Friend* and Elder Russell M. Nelson’s quote of David Whitmer’s description of the stone and the hat in the July 1993 *Ensign*. These are not the only instances. Elder Neal A. Maxwell quoted Martin Harris in the January 1997 *Ensign*, noting that “Martin Harris related of the seer stone: ‘Sentences would appear and were read by the Prophet and written by Martin.’”<sup>92</sup> In 1988, Elder Maxwell also referred to “the light-shielding hat reportedly used by Joseph Smith during some of the translating of the Book of Mormon.”<sup>93</sup> In the January 1988 *Ensign*, Church Educational System area director Kenneth Godfrey mentioned that “translation involved sight, power,

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90. Wilford Woodruff’s journal, 18 May 1888, quoted in Richard O. Cowan, *Temples to Dot the Earth* (Springville, UT: Cedar Fort, 1997).

91. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1956), 3:225.

92. Neal A. Maxwell, “By the Gift and Power of God,” *Ensign*, January 1997, 36. <http://www.lds.org/ensign/1997/01/by-the-gift-and-power-of-god>.

93. Neal A. Maxwell, *Not My Will, But Thine* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1988), 26.

transcription of the characters, the Urim and Thummim or a seerstone, study, and prayer.”<sup>94</sup> Brigham Young University professor Richard Lloyd Anderson, in the September 1977 *Ensign*, quotes David Whitmer’s statement that “Joseph Smith would put the seer stone into a hat and put his face in the hat, drawing it closely around his face to exclude the light.”<sup>95</sup>

Elder Dallin H. Oaks clarified that “it should be recognized that such tools as the Urim and Thummim, the Liahona, seerstones, and other articles have been used appropriately in biblical, Book of Mormon, and modern times by those who have the gift and authority to obtain revelation from God in connection with their use.”<sup>96</sup>

Early Church members knew that Joseph received revelation through the Urim and Thummim, which could have been either the Nephite interpreters or the seer stone. Doctrine and Covenants 28 states that “Hiram Page, a member of the Church, had a certain stone and professed to be receiving revelations by its aid concerning the upbuilding of Zion and the order of the Church. Several members had been deceived by these claims, and even Oliver Cowdery was wrongly influenced thereby.”<sup>97</sup> The fact that Oliver “was wrongly influenced thereby” clearly indicates that Oliver was quite aware that the Urim and Thummim was not limited to a single instrument. The resolution of this situation involved the Lord clarifying that, “no one shall be appointed to receive commandments and revelations in this church excepting my servant Joseph Smith, Jun., for he

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94. Kenneth W. Godfrey, “A New Prophet and a New Scripture: The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon,” *Ensign*, January 1988. <http://www.lds.org/ensign/1988/01/a-new-prophet-and-a-new-scripture-the-coming-forth-of-the-book-of-mormon>.

95. Anderson, “By the Gift and Power,” 79.

96. Dallin H. Oaks, “Recent Events Involving Church History and Forged Documents,” *Ensign*, October 1987, 63. <http://www.lds.org/ensign/1987/10/recent-events-involving-church-history-and-forged-documents>.

97. Heading to Doctrine and Covenants 28.

receiveth them even as Moses” (D&C 28:2). Page’s stone was destroyed and any revelations that he received through it were disavowed. The problem was not the fact that Hiram Page was using a stone other than Joseph’s Urim and Thummim to receive revelation, but rather the fact that he was not authorized to receive revelation on behalf of the Church.

### The Stone and the Hat Become Buried in History

We already know that Joseph Smith was reluctant to describe the translation process in detail. Brigham Young University professor Stephen Ricks feels that Joseph’s “reticence was probably well justified and may have been due to the inordinate interest which some of the early Saints had shown in the seer stone or to the negative and sometimes bitter reactions he encountered when he had reported some of his sacred experiences to others.”<sup>98</sup> Thus, Joseph never discussed the details regarding which translation instrument he used to both translate the Book of Mormon and to receive revelation. Joseph simply told people that he received his early revelations through the “Urim and Thummim.”

During the 1930s, Dr. Francis Kirkham endeavored to “gather and evaluate all the newspaper articles he could locate about the Book of Mormon.”<sup>99</sup> Many of these articles were obtained from newspaper collections located in the New York area and have recently been made available in an online database hosted by the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship.<sup>100</sup>

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98. Stephen D. Ricks, *Joseph Smith’s Translation of the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: Maxwell Institute, n.d.), <http://maxwellinstitute.byu.edu/publications/transcripts/?id=10>

99. Keith W. Perkins, “Francis W. Kirkham: A ‘New Witness’ for the Book of Mormon,” *Ensign*, July 1984. <https://www.lds.org/ensign/1984/07/francis-w-kirkham-a-new-witness-for-the-book-of-mormon>.

100. This effort on the part of the Maxwell Institute was referred to as the “Kirkham Project.” See “Early Book of Mormon Writings Now Online,” *Insights*

As we have seen, many of these news accounts refer to the use of the spectacles or stone together with a hat, consistent with the late statements of Martin Harris and David Whitmer. Kirkham, in the October 1939 *Improvement Era*, quoted the accounts of the stone and the hat given by Martin Harris and David Whitmer. Kirkham, however, did *not* accept the eyewitness accounts that Joseph actually used a seer stone in the translation of the Book of Mormon, concluding that “the statements of both of these men are to be explained by the eagerness of old age to call upon a fading and uncertain memory for the details of events which still remained real and objective to them.”<sup>101</sup> In his 1951 book *A New Witness For Christ in America*, Kirkham believed that “it may not have been expedient for the Prophet to try and explain the method of translation for the reason his hearers would lack the capacity to understand. It seemed sufficient to them at that time to know that the translation had been made by the gift and power of God.”<sup>102</sup> Kirkham goes on to say that, “After a lapse of forty years of time, both David Whitmer and Martin Harris attempted to give the method of the translation. Evidently the Prophet did not tell them the method.”<sup>103</sup> Despite the fact that elements of Harris’s and Whitmer’s story were consistent with each other, Kirkham simply refused to accept the idea that the accounts might have basis in the truth.

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30:2 (Provo, UT: Maxwell Institute), which notes that “for more than 10 years Matthew Roper, research scholar at the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship and head of the project, has been collecting this literature. The collection builds upon the early efforts of Francis W. Kirkham, an educator for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. According to Roper, during the 1930s Kirkham began collecting rare newspapers relating to early Latter-day Saint history. Subsequent researchers and historians have discovered many additional items, all of which are included in this new collection.”

101. Francis W. Kirkham, “The Manner of Translating the Book of Mormon,” *Improvement Era*, October 1939, 632.

102. Francis W. Kirkham, *A New Witness for Christ in America* (Independence, MO: Press of Zion’s Printing and Publishing Co., 1951), 194.

103. Kirkham, *A New Witness*, 196.

In 1956, Elder Joseph Fielding Smith knew of the seer stone, but did not believe that Joseph actually used it during the translation of the Book of Mormon.

SEER STONE NOT USED IN BOOK OF MORMON TRANSLATION. We have been taught since the days of the Prophet that *the Urim and Thummim were returned with the plates to the angel*. We have no record of the Prophet having the Urim and Thummim after the organization of the Church. Statements of translations by the Urim and Thummim after that date are evidently *errors*.<sup>104</sup>

Like Kirkham, Joseph Fielding Smith simply refused to accept accounts of Joseph having utilized his seer stone for the purpose of translation as having any validity. In his opinion, such accounts were simply erroneous.

During the twentieth century, the story of Joseph translating behind a curtain while employing the Nephite interpreters as the Urim and Thummim remained firmly established and generally uncontested among the general Church membership. Latter-day Saint scholars, however, continued to research the stories of Joseph's use of the seer stone. Such references never made it into the general Church curriculum or the awareness of the general Church membership. If you were a scholar, then you knew that Joseph used a seer stone. If you were a regular Church member, then you knew that Joseph used the Nephite interpreters. Discussions of Joseph's use of "seer stones" or the practice of "treasure seeking" remained primarily in the realm of LDS scholars. During the tenure of Church Historian Leonard J. Arrington, from 1972 and 1982, some attempts were made to make certain elements of Latter-day Saint history more accessible to the average member. One 1976 book

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104. Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, 3:225. Emphasis in original.

produced during this period, *The Story of the Latter-day Saints*, by James B. Allen and Glen M. Leonard, noted in a straightforward manner Joseph's acquisition of his seer stone and its use in the translation of the Book of Mormon.

Sometime around 1822, before his first visit from the angel Moroni, Joseph was digging a well with Willard Chase, not far from the Smith home, and he discovered a smooth, dark-colored stone, about the size of an egg, that he called a seerstone. He later used it to help in the translation of the Book of Mormon and also in receiving certain revelations.<sup>105</sup>

The visibility of these issues among the general Church membership began to change significantly in the early 1980s as the result of a very unusual and tragic event: the exposure of the Mark Hofmann forgeries. Suddenly, newspapers were talking about salamanders and treasure guardians in association with some of the Church's founding events.

Mark Hofmann was a member of the Church who became involved with the acquisition and sale of historic documents during the early 1980s. He seemed to have a knack for acquiring missing documents that were alluded to by other documents related to Church history. For example, Hofmann claimed to have located a blessing in which Joseph Smith III was allegedly promised that he would be the next prophet of the Church. Hofmann also produced what he claimed was the Anthon transcript, which matched a description of the document provided by Charles Anthon himself. The most famous document in the collection of Hofmann forgeries was the Salamander Letter, which was purportedly written by Martin Harris. Hofmann's documents were so well crafted that they fooled a number of experts in the field, and they were all considered genuine for

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105. James B. Allen and Glen M. Leonard, *The Story of the Latter-day Saints*, 2nd ed., rev. and enl. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992), 40–41.

a period of time. During that period of time, a new wave of Latter-day Saint historical works were produced, taking into account the “magical” aspects emphasized in the Salamander Letter. There was also an effort to reconcile and integrate the new information with existing accounts.<sup>106</sup>

Some of Hofmann’s documents were created based upon existing eyewitness accounts regarding treasure seeking, and to some extent simply amplified concepts that were already known to historians. Once the forgeries were exposed, it became necessary to re-examine what had been written to support the now discredited documents.<sup>107</sup> Although the Hofmann forgeries were discounted, the underlying legitimate historical accounts that fueled their creation began to become more well known among the general Church membership. Joseph’s early involvement with treasure seeking, beyond what had long been documented in Church publications regarding his efforts with Josiah Stowell, became more well known. Elder Dallin Oaks emphasized that this in no way diminished Joseph’s standing as the Prophet of the Restoration.

Some sources close to Joseph Smith claim that in his youth, during his spiritual immaturity prior to his being entrusted with the Book of Mormon plates, he sometimes used a stone in seeking for treasure. Whether this is so or not, we need to remember that no prophet is free from human frailties, especially before he is called to devote his life to the Lord’s work.

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106. A list of known Hofmann forgeries related to Church history appeared in “Fraudulent Documents from Forger Mark Hofmann Noted,” *Ensign*, October 1987.

107. Richard Lloyd Anderson, “The Alvin Smith Story: Fact and Fiction,” *Ensign*, August 1987. Anderson states, that “attempts to reposition the foundations of the Church on the basis of documents tied to Mark Hofmann are now outdated, because he has pleaded guilty in open court to selling false documents. Thus, revised histories based on these documents must now be revised themselves.”

Line upon line, young Joseph Smith expanded his faith and understanding and his spiritual gifts matured until he stood with power and stature as the Prophet of the Restoration.<sup>108</sup>

### **The Translation Process Was Spiritual, Not Mechanical**

The translation of the Book of Mormon was a spiritual process, not a mechanical one. The interaction of seer with seer stone is fascinating from a historical perspective, but it is not the most important aspect of the process. It should be kept in mind that Joseph chose to emphasize that the most important aspect of the translation was that it was accomplished by the gift and power of God. The precise means by which God accomplished that purpose are primarily of historical interest, and are not required to build faith. Joseph initially received revelation through the Urim and Thummim (either the spectacles or the stone), but eventually learned that he did not need a physical aid in order to act in the capacity of prophet and seer. One of the important lessons taught to Joseph during this process is that the use of these instruments required faith and humility, in order for Joseph to know the Lord's will. David Whitmer describes this.

At times when Brother Joseph would attempt to translate, he would look into the hat in which the stone was placed, he found he was spiritually blind and could not translate. He told us that his mind dwelt too much on the earthly things, and various causes would make him incapable of proceeding with the translation. When in this condition he would go out and pray, and when he became sufficiently humble before God, he could then proceed with the translation. Now we see how very

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108. Oaks, "Recent Events."

strict the Lord is, and how He requires the heart of man to be just right in His sight, before he can receive revelation from Him.<sup>109</sup>

Joseph eventually realized that his ability to communicate with the Lord was not dependent upon a sacred object, but was instead a function of his faith and humility. He spiritually outgrew the need to use the Nephite interpreters or the seer stone, thereby setting the pattern by which every person has the promise of receiving personal revelation. The objects used to guide him to this realization eventually became unimportant in light of the greater lesson learned.

### Viewing the Translation Process from a Twenty-First Century Perspective

It is still desirable to reconcile the various accounts of the translation in order to understand how some have viewed various aspects of the process as contradictory. From this believer's perspective, the story of the translation of the Book of Mormon and the subsequent emphasis and de-emphasis of its various elements appears to have taken the following course:

- Joseph Smith received the plates and the Nephite interpreters from the Angel Moroni.
- Joseph began the process of translation using the Nephite interpreters, with Martin Harris as scribe. A curtain separated the translator from the scribe, thus shielding the plates and the Nephite interpreters from view.
- Joseph may have placed the Nephite interpreters in a hat in order to shield them from the light, in accordance with the method that he used when utilizing his own seer stone.

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109. Whitmer, *An Address to All Believers*, 30.

- At times, Joseph may have switched to using his own seer stone, placing it in the hat. On one such occasion, Martin swapped the stones, which he would never have dared to do had Joseph been using the Nephite instrument.
- Upon completion of and subsequent loss of the 116 pages of manuscript, the Angel Moroni took back the plates and the Nephite interpreters.
- After a sufficient time of repentance, the plates were returned to Joseph, along with the Nephite interpreters.
- Joseph began translating using either the Nephite interpreters or his seer stone, either of which may have been placed in the hat. The witnesses would not necessarily have been able to determine which instrument he was using, although Martin Harris's swapping of the stone to test Joseph indicates that the stone was used at some point. This translation process occurred in plain view of those around Joseph, including his scribe Oliver Cowdery. There was no curtain present during this period of the translation process.
- The translation process using the stone and the hat was observed directly by David Whitmer, Martin Harris, Oliver Cowdery and Emma Smith, who shared their observations with interviewers many years later near the end of their lives.
- As early as three years after the publication of the Book of Mormon, the term *Urim and Thummim* became applied to both the Nephite interpreters and the seer stone. In the minds of the early Saints, they were essentially the same instrument used for the same purpose.
- The term *Urim and Thummim* subsequently became understood as representing the Nephite interpreters exclusively, and the use of the seer stone and the hat became pushed back in history. The lack of a need to use a

curtain to shield the translator from the scribe likewise became buried in history. The translation process became represented within Church literature and artwork by its earliest iteration: Nephite interpreters and plates shielded from the scribe by a curtain.

- During much of the twentieth century, reports that the stone and the hat had been employed during the translation were dismissed with skepticism.
- Partially as a result of the Mark Hofmann forgeries, new publications brought documents related to the use of the stone and the hat back into the public eye.
- With the advent of the Internet, numerous documents related to the translation process became easily accessible to the general Church membership, once again highlighting the use of the stone and the hat. References to these items entered the popular media. The presence of this information made it appear that the story that we are familiar with in Church is contradicted by that provided by witnesses such as Martin Harris, David Whitmer, and Emma Smith.
- The Church initiated efforts to make early documents such as the Joseph Smith Papers easily accessible, further supporting these early accounts.

The apparent contradictions between accounts of the translation are not actually contradictions at all, and are primarily the result of certain elements of the translation process being de-emphasized, or even denied at various points during the last century and a half. The use of the Nephite interpreters as Urim and Thummin, the use of the seer stone as Urim and Thummim, and the use of the hat with both instruments, as well as the appearance and disappearance of the curtain, all fit into the translation scenario at various stages of the process.

## Conclusion

The average member now has access to an abundance of information regarding the Book of Mormon translation process. The Internet has allowed hundreds of documents to be made available to anyone interested in viewing them, rather than restricting them to just scholars who take the time to access the archives. The *Joseph Smith Papers* project is a significant boon to historians and researchers who wish to view and examine the original documents associated with the restoration. One significant new product of this effort is the Church History website [history.lds.org](http://history.lds.org), which hosts *Revelations in Context*.<sup>110</sup> On this site, the Church provides unprecedented detail regarding the production and evolution of the revelations received by the Prophet Joseph Smith.

With regard to the specific procedures involved in the translation, Brant A. Gardner's 2011 book *The Gift and the Power: Translating the Book of Mormon* provides a detailed analysis of the process.

The use of the seer stone should be of no particular surprise or concern to any Latter-day Saint who accepts that Joseph received a set of sacred stones that were consecrated for the purpose of receiving revelation and translation. After all, what precisely is the difference between using one seer stone versus another? One can assume that Joseph continued to use the Nephite interpreters, since they were the instrument that was consecrated specifically for the purpose of translation. However, it is entirely reasonable to assume that God could consecrate any other instrument that He wished to serve that purpose as well.

It is clear from the contemporary accounts that the object placed within the hat could either be the spectacles or the seer

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110. *Revelations in Context*. <https://history.lds.org/series/doctrine-and-covenants-revelations-in-context?lang=eng#/date/10/1>.

stone. Both were classified by the early Latter-day Saints as “Urim and Thummim.” It is therefore safe to say that, regardless of which actual instrument Joseph was using at any particular point in time, he did indeed translate the entire Book of Mormon using the Urim and Thummim.

The primary issue that seems to concern some is the idea that Joseph translated in the open, in full view of others, by placing the instrument of translation in a hat and dictating text without looking directly at the plates. Why would the Lord allow Joseph to alter the method used to translate? The 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon contains over 580 pages, which were dictated without repetition at a rate of seven to eleven-and-a-half pages per day.<sup>111</sup> This is a significant accomplishment, regardless of the precise method used during the translation. A reasonable conclusion is that by allowing Joseph to dictate the entire Book of Mormon text in full view of witnesses without the process being obscured in any way, it significantly strengthens the position that Joseph was indeed receiving revelation rather than consulting other materials.

Finally, what of the plates themselves? If Joseph was not actually required to look at them directly during translation, then what *was* their purpose? Recall that the Urim and Thummim was a revelatory instrument. This means that rather than “translating” the plates in the traditional sense, Joseph received revelation that inspired him with an understanding of what was written there. He then expressed these concepts during dictation using his own language.<sup>112</sup> The Book of Mormon, therefore, constitutes Joseph’s greatest and longest revelation.

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111. John W. Welch and Tim Rathbone, “How Long Did It Take to Translate the Book of Mormon?” (Provo, UT: Maxwell Institute). <http://maxwellinstitute.byu.edu/publications/books/?bookid=71&chapid=767>.

112. There are various schools of thought among Book of Mormon scholars regarding whether the text of the Book of Mormon represents a “loose translation” as opposed to a “tight translation” of the meaning of the characters on the plates. Given that I am not a scholar, it is not my intention to draw any conclu-

The plates did serve an important purpose, however. The Three Witnesses and the Eight Witnesses confirmed that the Nephite record actually existed and testified of this to the world, even after some of them left the Church. The witnesses' testimony has endured against all attempts to discredit them. The fact that the plates actually existed, and that Joseph had to exert great effort to recover and protect them, helped shape the Prophet's character during these crucial early years. And, the existence of a set of literal plates made it crystal clear that Joseph's account was a real history: a genuine ancient people had learned of Christ, and had actually seen the Risen Lord. Joseph's revelation was no romantic novel, nor was it pious make-believe.

An examination of the translation method in light of the information now available should not be used as a foundation for faith, nor should it contribute to the destruction of one's faith. It is simply history, and as such provides a richer and more in-depth understanding of what actually happened, as well as filling in some of the gaps that are apparent in the story that we know. Elder Neal A. Maxwell offers some wise advice against becoming too focused on the mechanics of, rather than the results of, the translation.

We are looking beyond the mark today, for example, if we are more interested in the physical dimensions of the cross than in what Jesus achieved thereon; or when we neglect Alma's words on faith because we are too fascinated by the light-shielding hat reportedly used by Joseph Smith during some of the translating of the Book of Mormon. To neglect substance while focusing on process is another form of unsubmitively looking beyond the mark.<sup>113</sup>

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sions regarding this aspect of the translation. I simply assert that some form of revelation occurred.

113. Maxwell, *Not My Will*, 26.

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