

## Joseph Smith: “The Gift of Seeing”

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Analysis of eyewitness accounts of the Book of Mormon translation is long overdue. Studies of the statements of early witnesses<sup>1</sup> have not attempted to clarify the method of translation, even though testimony is occasionally contradictory, often tainted with bias, always sketchy. We retrace history's footsteps to the scene of the translation in pursuit of better understanding of how the Book of Mormon was translated.

The primary witness to the translation of the Book of Mormon record is the translator himself. But Joseph Smith's procedural descriptions are too brief and general to be of much help. In an 1831 Church conference in Orange, Ohio, Joseph's older brother Hyrum requested a firsthand account of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon. The Prophet vetoed the idea: "It was not intended to tell the world all the particulars of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon; it was not expedient for him to relate these things."<sup>2</sup> Joseph maintained this closemouthed attitude on the subject of the translation throughout his lifetime. His first recorded account of the process, in an 1833 letter to N. E. Seaton, is typically terse: "The Book of Mormon is a record of the forefathers of our western tribes of Indians, having been found through the ministrations of an holy angel, and translated into our own language by the gift and power of God."<sup>3</sup>

In 1835 he gave an even more abbreviated version to "Joshua the Jewish Minister": "I obtained them [the plates] and translated them into the English language by the gift and power of God and have been preaching it ever since."<sup>4</sup> Joseph's 1838 account in the Elder's Journal adds the additional detail of Urim and Thummim assistance: "Moroni, the person who deposited the plates ... told me where they were; and gave me directions how to obtain them. I obtained them, and the Urim and Thummim with them, by the

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1 Two excellent discussions of primary sources are James E. Lancaster, "By the Gift and Power of God—The Method of Translation of the Book of Mormon," *Saints' Herald* 109 (15 Nov. 1962):798-817, and Robert F. Smith, "Translation of Languages," a 1980 unpublished account of primary sources respecting the Book of Mormon translation, privately circulated by the author.

2 Minutes of general conference, 25 Oct. 1831, cited in *Far West Record*, p. 13, Historical Department Archives of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, UT; hereafter cited as LDS Church Archives.

3 Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, B. H. Roberts, ed., 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1974), 1:315. Hereafter referred to as *History of the Church*.

4 Warren Cowdery, *Manuscript History of the Church*, Book A-1, pp. 121-2, LDS Church Archives.

means of which I translated the plates and thus came the Book of Mormon.”<sup>5</sup>

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The Prophet’s 1842 description of the translating procedure, in the Wentworth Letter, is no more specific: “Through the medium of the Urim and Thummim I translated the record, by the gift and power of God.”<sup>6</sup> Public interest in Church history, stirred by this letter, impelled the *Times and Seasons* to initiate an 1842 serial publication of the Prophet’s history of the Church, which provides an amplified statement on Book of Mormon translation: “Immediately after my arrival there [Harmony, Pennsylvania] I commenced copying the characters off the plates. I copied a considerable number of them, and by means of the Urim and Thummim I translated some of them, which I did between the time I arrived at the house of my wife’s father in the month of December [1827], and the February following.”<sup>7</sup>

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The Prophet’s final statement about translation procedure, in a 13 November 1843 letter to James Arlington Bennett, adds little more to our understanding of the process: “By the power of God I translated the Book of Mormon from hieroglyphics; the knowledge of which was lost to the world: in which wonderful event I stood alone, an unlearned youth, to combat the worldly wisdom, and multiplied ignorance of eighteen centuries.”<sup>8</sup>

To find exactly what the Prophet meant in his repeated insistences that the plates were translated through the medium of Urim and Thummim by the gift and power of God, we must turn to other eyewitness accounts. Martin Harris<sup>9</sup> served Joseph as the first of several scribes in the work of translation.<sup>10</sup> His description of the method of translation is specific, though we have it only at second hand. Edward Stevenson, later of the First Council of Seventy, recorded the testimony of his friend Harris:

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5 Elder’s Journal 1 (July 1838): 43.

6 Joseph Smith, “Church History,” *Times and Seasons* 3 (March 1842): 707.

7 Joseph Smith, “History of Joseph Smith,” *Times and Seasons* 3 (May 1842): 772.

8 *Times and Seasons* 4 (Nov. 1843): 373.

9 Harris, a family friend of the Smiths, was one of the few persons outside the family to know of the “plates of gold” prior to their retrieval from the Hill Cumorah in 1827.

Joseph Knight, Sr., close friend and neighbor of the Smiths, also knew of the plates: “I went to Rochester on business and resumed by Palmyra to be there about the 22<sup>nd</sup> of September I was there several days I will say there was a man near By By the name of Samuel Lawrence he was a Sear and he had Bin to the hill and knew about the things in the hill and he was trying to obtain them he had talked with me and told me the Conversation he had with the personage which told him if he would Do right according to the will of god he mite obtain the 27<sup>nt</sup> Day of September next and if not he never would have them. Now Joseph was some affraid of him that he mite be a trouble to him he therefore sint his father up to Sams as he called him near night to see if there was any signs of his going away that night he told his father to stay till near Dark and if he saw any signs of his gang you till him if I find him there I will thrash the stumps with him” Joseph Knight, Sr., untitled and undated manuscript in LDS Church Archives written between the last date of entry mentioned in the manuscript, 1833, and Knight’s death in 1847).

Brigham Young in 1855 mentioned an additional person, “a fortune-teller... who knew where those plates were hid. He went three times in one summer to get them ... the same summer in which Joseph did get them.

... He had not returned to his home from the last trip he made for them more than a week or ten days before Joseph got them. “ (The Journal of Discourses. Report of Addresses by Brigham Young and others, 26 vols. (Liverpool and London: F. O. and S. W. Richards, 1853-86), 19 July 1857, 5:55. Hereafter cited as Journal of Discourses.

10 Dean C. Jessee, “The Original Book of Mormon Manuscript,” *BYU Studies* (Spring 1970): 259-78, lists the scribes as Martin Harris, Emma Smith, Oliver Cowdery, Reuben Hale, John Whitmer, and David Whitmer. The Prophet’s brother, Samuel H. Smith, is also mentioned as a scribe in the Kirtland Letterbook, 1829-35, pp. 1-6, LDS Church Archives.

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 used the seer stone. . . . By aid of the seer stone, sentences would appear and were read by the Prophet and written by Martin, and when finished he would say, “written,” and if correctly written that sentence would disappear and another appear in its place, but if not written correctly it remained until corrected, so that the translation was just as it was engraver on the plates, precisely in the language then used.<sup>11</sup>

Martin served as scribe only between 12 April 1828 and 14 June 1828, when his part in the loss of the first 116 pages of completed manuscript cost him the privilege of further transcription.

The second scribe to serve Joseph was his wife, Emma. In 1879 Emma, interviewed by her son Joseph Smith III concerning important events in early Church history, explained, “In writing for your father I frequently wrote day after day, often sitting at the table 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.... The plates often lay on the table without any attempt at concealment, wrapped in a small linen table-cloth, which I had given him to fold them in.”<sup>12</sup> Emma’s service as scribe, interrupted as it must have been by the necessity of household chores, was at best brief. Her handwriting is not found on any original manuscript material now available.<sup>13</sup>

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Full-time transcription did not become possible again until a young schoolteacher, Oliver Cowdery, arrived 5 April 1829. Cowdery wrote in 1834: “These were days never to be forgotten—to sit under the sound of a voice dictated by the inspiration of heaven.... 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>14</sup> Shortly after leaving the Church in 1838, Oliver expanded his description of the translation process: “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.”<sup>15</sup> When Cowdery returned to the Church in 1848, Reuben Miller recorded in his diary that Oliver confirmed his testimony to the Council Bluffs, Iowa, Saints: “I wrote with my own pen, the entire Book of Mormon [save a few pages], as it fell from the lips of the Prophet Joseph Smith, as he translated it by the gift and power of God, by means of the Urim and Thummim, or as it is called by that book, ‘holy interpreters’”<sup>16</sup> (The bracketed material is Cowdery’s).

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After approximately two months of translating at the Isaac Hale home in Harmony, Pennsylvania, Joseph was invited by a friend of Cowdery, David Whitmer, to continue the translation work at his father’s farm on the north end of Seneca Lake near Fayette, New York. Thus the Whitmer family witnessed the Book of Mormon translation process as the manuscript grew day by day throughout June 1829. Elizabeth

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11 Edward Stevenson, “One of the Three Witnesses,” *Deseret News*, 30 Nov. 1881. Reprinted in *Millennial Star* 44 (6 Feb. 1882): 86-87.

12 *Saints’ Herald* 26 (1 Oct. 1879): 289-90.

13 Jesse, “Original Manuscript,” pp. 276-77.

14 *Messenger and Advocate* 1 (Oct. 1834):14.

15 Oliver Cowdery, *Defense in a Rehearsal of My Grounds for Separating Myself from the Latter Day Saints* (Norton, OH, 1839); also *Saints’ Herald*, 54 (20 May 1907): 229-230.

16 Reuben Miller Diary, 21 Oct. 1848, LDS Church Archives. Also *Deseret News*, 13 April 1859.

Ann Whitmer, who married Oliver Cowdery in 1832, recorded in 1870, when she was fifty-five: “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<sup>17</sup> in his hat, and then place his face in his hat, so as to exclude the light.”<sup>18</sup>

David Whitmer, one of the Three Witnesses to the Book of Mormon, served as scribe during this brief period. He provides us with more specific information about the translation procedure than any other person. In 1887 he published a booklet in Richmond, Missouri, entitled *An Address to All Believers in Christ* which includes this detailed description:

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. 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 by 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>19</sup>

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Whitmer reiterated that account on many occasions, explaining the translation process in a consistent fashion: “Joseph did not see the plates in translation, but would hold the interpreters to his eyes and cover his face with a hat, excluding all light, and before him would appear what seemed to be parchment on which would appear the characters of the plates on a line at the top, and immediately below would appear the translation in English.”<sup>20</sup> In an 1881 interview with the *Kansas City Journal*, David Whitmer even details characteristics of the seer stone (multiplied by an enthusiastic reporter into two stones):

I, as well as all of my father’s family, Smith’s wife, Oliver Cowdery, and Martin Harris were present during the translation. The translation was by Smith, and the manner as follows: He had two small stones of a chocolate color, nearly egg shaped and perfectly smooth, but not transparent, called interpreters, which were given him with the plates. He did not use the plates in the translation, but would hold the interpreters to his eyes and cover his face with a hat, excluding all light.<sup>21</sup>

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Whitmer explicitly confronted the general confusion between the seer stone and the Nephite “interpreters,” or Urim and Thummim, when he tried to set the record

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17 In Book of Mormon editions from 1830-1920, Alma 37:24 read “directors” in stead of the present “interpreters.” RLDS Book of Mormon editions have retained the original and printer’s copies reading of “directors.”

18 Original not available; cited in William McLellan letter to “My Dear Friends,” from Independence, Missouri, February 1870, of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, Independence, MO; hereafter cited as RLDS Church Archives. Reference courtesy Robert F. Smith.

19 David Whitmer, *An Address to All Believers in Christ* (Richmond, MO: n.p., 1887), p. 13.

20 *Kansas City Journal*, 5 June 1881.

21 Ibid.

straight through a friend, Edward Traugher:

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>22</sup>

Other early witnesses tend to corroborate Whitmer's account. Joseph Knight, Sr., a close friend of Joseph Smith, recorded an account of the translation process, possibly as early as 1833: "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 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."<sup>23</sup>

Emma Smith's father, Isaac Hale, provides a valuably frank perspective of the translation process because of the hostility he came to harbor toward son-in-law Joseph Smith during the few months the translation proceeded in the Hale home: "The manner in which he [Joseph Smith] pretended to read and interpret, was the same as when he looked for money-diggers, with a stone in his hat, and his hat over his face, while the Book of Plates were at the same time hid in the woods."<sup>24</sup>

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Michael Morse, husband of Emma Smith's sister, Triana Hale, described the procedure as he witnessed it, a description remarkably consistent with previous accounts. He is quoted in 1879 by W. W. Blair, of the RLDS First Presidency:

When Joseph was translating the Book of Mormon, [Morse] had occasion more than once to go into his immediate presence, and saw him engaged at his work of translation.

The mode of procedure consisted in Joseph's placing the Seer Stone in the crown of a hat, then putting his face into the hat, so as to entirely cover his face, resting his elbows upon his knees, and then dictating word after word, while the scribes—Emma, John Whitmer, O. Cowdery, or some other wrote it down.<sup>25</sup>

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These eyewitness accounts to the translation process must be viewed in proper perspective. Most were given in retrospect and may be clouded by the haze of intervening years. Many were reported second hand, subject to skewing by nonwitnesses. Yet there are persistent parallels among these scattered testimonies. Consensus holds that the "translation" process was accomplished through a single seer stone from the time of the loss of the 116 pages until the completion of the book. Martin Harris's description of interchangeable use of a seer stone with the interpreters, or Urim and Thummim, refers only to the portion of translation he was witness to—the initial 116 pages. The second point of agreement is even more consistent: The plates could not have been used directly in the translation process. The Prophet, his face in a hat to exclude exterior light, would have been unable to view the plates directly even

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22 Saints' Herald 26 (15 Nov. 1879): 341.

23 Joseph Knight, Sr., account, LDS Church Archives.

24 The Susquehanna Register, 1 May 1834. Cited in Eber D. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled* (Painville, OH: Eber D. Howe, 1834), p. 77.

25 Saints' Herald 26 (15 June 1879):190-91.

if they had been present during transcription.

A mental picture of the young Joseph, face buried in a hat, gazing into a seer stone, plates out of sight, has not been a generally held view since the early days of the Church. The view raises some difficult questions. Why, for example, was such great care taken to preserve the plates for thousands of years if they were not to be used directly in the translation process? Is it possible that they were to serve primarily as evidence to the eleven witnesses of the Book of Mormon that the record did in fact exist?

The concept of a single seer stone is another problem area, for we have been taught since the Prophet's day that the Urim and Thummim were used. The term itself is problematic. The Book of Mormon does not contain the words "Urim and Thummim." Ammon describes the instrument as "the things ... called interpreters"—"two stones which were fastened into the two rims of a bow" which were "prepared from the beginning" and "handed down from generation to generation, for the purpose of interpreting languages" (Mosiah 8:13, 28:13-14). Joseph Smith adds in the Pearl of Great Price that "God had prepared them for the purpose of translating the book" (Joseph Smith—History 1:35). Furthermore, the Nephite interpreters were not referred to as Urim and Thummim until 1833, when W. W. Phelps first equated the two in the first edition of the Evening and Morning Star: "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>26</sup> p.53 - p.54

That the Prophet should have used a seer stone rather than the Nephite interpreters is puzzling in itself. Martin Harris's 1875 mention of convenience in using a seer stone may refer to the fact that by all accounts the Nephite interpreters were large.<sup>27</sup> An additional reason for using the seer stone Harris conveniently omits, since it directly involved him. David Whitmer explains that after Martin Harris lost the first 116 pages of Book of Mormon manuscript,

... the Lord ... took from the prophet the Urim and Thummim and other wise expressed his condemnation. By fervent prayer and by other wise 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.... With this stone all of the present Book of Mormon was translated.<sup>28</sup>

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26 Phelps was Church printer in Independence, Missouri, and editor of the Evening and Morning Star. He was also publisher of the Book of Commandments and while living in Joseph Smith's Kirtland home, assisted the 1835 First Presidency in compiling the first edition of the Doctrine and Covenants.

27 William Smith, the Prophet's brother, described the interpreters as "too large for Joseph's eyes; they must have been used by larger men (William Smith interview by J. W. Peterson and W. S. Pender, 4 July 1891, reported in *The Rod of Iron* 3 (Feb. 1924): 6-7; *Saints' Herald* 79 (9 March 1932): 238. Professor Charles Anthon, retrospectively recalling Martin Harris's description, agreed: "These spectacles were so 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 (Charles Anthon letter to E. D. Howe, 17 Feb. 1834, in *Mormonism Unveiled*, p. 17). Though Anthon's account seems exaggerated, Martin Harris refutes that the lenses were "about two inches in diameter, perfectly round, and about five-eighths of an inch thick at the centre.... 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" Harris read proofs of this article before publication and verified the accuracy of the reporting. (Joel Tiffany, *Tiffany's Monthly*, June 1859, pp. 165-66.)

28 *Chicago Inter-Ocean*, 17 Oct. 1886. Also *Saints' Herald* 33 (13 Nov. 1886): 706.

When Zenas H. Gurley, editor of the RLDS Saints' Herald, interviewed Whitmer in 1855 and specifically asked if Joseph used his "Peep stone" to finish up the translation," David replied that

he 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 of the Book of Mormon as a punishment, but he was allowed to go on and translate by the 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>29</sup>

Whitmer's accounts also find support in the Historical Record of the Church: "As a chastisement for this carelessness, the Urim and Thummim was taken from Smith. But by humbling himself, he again found favor with the Lord and was presented a strange oval-shaped, chocolate colored stone, about the size of an egg but more flat which it was promised should answer the same purpose. With this stone all the present book was translated."<sup>30</sup>

Joseph had apparently possessed this seer stone for several years before using it in the translation process, despite the accounts of a divine "presentation." Willard Chase, a neighbor of the Smiths in Palmyra, New York, relates how the stone was discovered on his property.

In the year 1822, I was engaged in digging a well. I employed Alvin and Joseph Smith to assist me.... 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.... The next morning he came to me, and wished to 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.<sup>31</sup>

Confirmation of Chase's account is made by Martin Harris in 1859: "Joseph had a stone which was dug from the well of Mason Chase twenty-four feet from the surface. In this stone he could see many things to my certain knowledge."<sup>32</sup> Wilford Woodruff, writing in 1888, recalled that Joseph Smith found the "seers stone ... by revelation some

29 "Questions asked of David Whitmer at his home in Richmond Ray County Mo. Jan. 14 1885 relating to book of Mormon, and the history of the Church of Jesus Christ of LDS by Elder Z. H. Gurley," holograph in LDS Church Archives. Another supportive account is a Whitmer interview recorded in the Chicago Tribune, 17 Dec. 1885: "The plates were never restored to Joseph--nor the spectacles, but a different Urim & Thummim--one oval or kidney-shaped--a seer's stone, which he pieced in his hat, and, face in hat, he would see character and translation on the stone."

Whitmer's account is also corroborated by William E. McLellin, an early member of the Quorum of the Twelve: "After the 116 pages were lost Joseph translated the rest of the Book of Mormon with a stone," Saints' Herald 19 (1 Aug. 1872): 473.

30 The Historical Record. Devoted Exclusively to Historical, Biographical, Chronological and Statistical Matters. p.632, LDS Church Archives.

31 Howe, "Mormonism," pp. 241-42. The use of seer stones in upstate New York was not unusual. The Wayne Sentinel, 27 Dec. 1825, refutes: "A few days since was discovered in this town, by the help of a mineral stone (which becomes transparent when pieced in a hat and the light excluded by the face of him who looks into it provided he is fortune's favorite) a monstrous potash kettle in the bowels of old Mother Earth, filled with purest bullion."

32 Tiffany's Monthly, June 1859, p. 163.

30 feet under the earth.”<sup>33</sup>

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Several accounts document that Joseph often carried the Chase seer stone on his person between 1822 and 1830. In an 1826 trial, “on the request of the court he exhibited the stone. It was about the size of a small hen’s egg, in the shape of a high-instepped shoe. It was composed of layers of different colors passing diagonally through it. It was very hard and smooth, perhaps by being carried in the pocket.”<sup>34</sup> Martin Harris in 1859 recalled an incident that occurred in the early 1820s:

I was at the house of his father in Manchester, two miles south of Palmyra village, and was picking my teeth with a pin while sitting on the bars. The pin caught in my teeth and dropped from my fingers into shavings and straw. I jumped from the bars and looked for it. Joseph and Northrop Sweet also did the same. We could not find it. I then took Joseph on surprise, and said to him--I said, “Take your stone.” I had never seen it, and did not know that he had it with him. He had it in his pocket. He took it and placed it in his hat--the old white hat--and placed his face in his hat. I watched him closely to see that he did not look to one side; he reached out his hand beyond me on the right, and moved a little stick and there I saw the pin, which he picked up and gave to me. I know he did not look out of the hat until after he had picked up the pin.<sup>35</sup>

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A third attestation of the Prophet’s possession of a seer stone is the difficulty between Joseph and the family of his 1825 employer, Josiah Stool, a difficulty which apparently arose from Joseph’s reputation with such a stone. According to the Prophet’s mother, Stool “came for Joseph on account of having heard that he possessed certain keys by which he could discern things invisible to the natural eye,”<sup>36</sup> and engaged him to seek Spanish treasure near the Susquehanna River. Stool, who later became a member of the Church, related that the young Joseph, who was in his employ for some five months, “pretended to have skill of telling where hidden treasures in the earth were by means of looking through a certain stone.”<sup>37</sup> Joseph explains the incident in some detail in the Pearl of Great Price:

In the month of October, 1825, I hired with an old gentleman by the name of Josiah Stool, who lived in Chenango county, State of New York. He had heard something of a silver mine having been opened by the Spaniards in Harmony, Susquehanna county, State of Pennsylvania; and had, previous to my hiring to him, been digging, in order, if possible, to discover the mine. After I went to live with him, he took me, with the rest of his hands,<sup>38</sup> to dig for the silver mine at which I continued to work for nearly a month, without success in our undertaking, and finally I prevailed with the old gentleman to cease digging after it. (Joseph Smith--History 1:56)

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33 Wilford Woodruff Journal, 18 May 1888, holograph in LDS Church Archives.

34 W. D. Purple’s account in *The Chenango Union*, 3 May 1877, cited in Francis W. Kirkham, *A New Witness For Christ in America*, 2 vols. (Independence, MO: Zion’s Printing and Publishing Company, 1951), 2:365.

35 Tiffany’s Monthly, June 1859, p. 164.

36 Lucy Mack Smith, *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith The Prophet, And His Progenitors for Many Generations* (Liverpool: Published for Orson Pratt by S. W. Richards, 1853), pp. 91-92.

37 Fraser’s Magazine, February 1873, pp. 229-30.

38 Martin Harris adds that Stool’s “hands” included “Mr. Bem an (Alva), also Samuel Lawrence, George Proper, Joseph Smith, jr., and his father, and his brother Hiram Smith,” Tiffany’s Monthly (June 1859), p. 164.



Though Stool professed “implicit faith” in Joseph’s psychic abilities, the Stool family remained unconvinced. In 1826, Peter Bridgeman, a nephew of Stool’s wife, preferred charges against Joseph Smith as a “disorderly person and an imposter”—charges evidently referring to Joseph’s “glass looking” psychic abilities. Though the full court record has not yet been discovered and recorded accounts of the trial fail to agree on all points, there is consensus that the Stool family became convinced that Josiah Stool was squandering his resources and urged him to stop.<sup>39</sup>

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Another account corroborating Joseph’s habit of carrying a stone on his person comes from Lucy Smith, the Prophet’s mother: “That of which I spoke, which Joseph termed a key, was indeed, nothing more nor less than the Urim and Thummim, and it was by this that the angel showed him many things which he saw in vision; by which also he could ascertain, at any time, the approach of danger, either to himself or the Record, and on account of which he always kept the Urim and Thummim about his person.”<sup>40</sup> Since the Urim and Thummim was too large, by all accounts, to be concealed on Joseph’s person, Mother Smith must have been referring here not to the Nephite interpreters but to the Chase seer stone.

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That a seer stone was divinely prepared for Joseph’s use is suggested in the Book of Mormon. Alma 37:23 reads: “I will prepare unto my servant Gazelem, a stone, which shall shine forth in darkness unto light, that I may discover unto my people who serve me, that I may discover unto them the works of their brethren, yea, their secret works, their works of darkness, and their wickedness and abominations.” “Gazelam,” with a slight difference in spelling, is identified, in three sections of the Doctrine and Covenants (78:9, 82:11, 104:26, 43), as Joseph Smith. W. W. Phelps, scribe and personal friend to the Prophet, declared in Joseph Smith’s funeral sermon that the Prophet was “Gazelam” in the spirit world.<sup>41</sup>

The Prophet related in his Pearl of Great Price account that during Moroni’s first conversation with him 23 September 1823, “the vision was opened to my mind that I could see the place where the plates were deposited, and that so clearly and distinctly that I knew the place again when I visited it” (Joseph Smith—History 1:42). Joseph does not relate how the vision was opened to his mind, but parallel accounts indicate that it may have been through the Chase seer stone.<sup>42</sup> Martin Harris recalled in 1859: “Joseph

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39 The trial, reported in *Fraser’s Magazine*, February 1873, and *Chenango Union*, 3 May 1877, has long been disputed: But in 1971 Judge Neely’s bill of costs for the trial (\$2.68) was discovered. This document designates Joseph Smith as “the glass-looker” and charges him with a “misdemeanor” (Marvin S. Hill, “Joseph Smith and the 1826 Trial: New Evidence and New Difficulties,” *BYU Studies* (Winter 1972): 222-33).

Joseph Smith’s cousin, Church Historian George A. Smith, was apparently referring to this case when he related in 1855 that Joseph Smith “was never found guilty but once ... the magistrate, after hearing the witnesses, decided that he was guilty, but as the statutes of New York did not provide a punishment for casting out devils, he was acquitted” (*Journal of Discourses*, 2:213).

40 Lucy Mack Smith, *Sketches*, p. 106.

41 Joseph Smith Funeral Sermon in W. W. Phelps Papers, LDS Church Archives. In a 10 April 1854 letter to Brigham Young, Phelps, who served as Joseph Smith’s scribe in Kirtland, Ohio, states that Gazelam refers to “The Light of the Lord,” Brigham Young Letter Collection, LDS Church Archives.

42 An interesting account related by Joseph Knight, Sr., suggests that Emma Smith’s involvement in the recovery of the plates on 22 September 1827 was shown in vision through the Chase Seer Stone: “Joseph says when can I have it [the Nephite Record] the answer was the 22nd Day of September next ffyou bring the right person with you Joseph says who is the right person the answer is your oldest Brother But before September Came his oldest Brother Died [Alvin died 19 November 1823] then he was disappointed and did not [k]now what to do but when the 22nd day of September came he went to the place and the personage appeared and told him he could not have it now But the 22nd

had before this described the manner of his finding the plates. He found them by looking in the stone found in the well of Mason Chase. The family had likewise told me the same thing.”<sup>43</sup>

Willard Chase, on whose property the stone was discovered, points out that in 1827 Joseph Smith, Sr., explained to him “that some years ago, a spirit had appeared to Joseph his son, in a vision, and informed him that in a certain place there was a record on plates of gold; and that he was the person that must obtain them. He [Joseph Smith] then observed that if it had not been for that stone, he would not have obtained the book.”<sup>44</sup>

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Henry Harris, an acquaintance of the Smith family, confirms these accounts: “He [Joseph Smith] 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 piace of deposit.”<sup>45</sup> Further corroboration is provided by W. D. Purple, who had taken notes for Judge Albert Neely during Joseph Smith’s 1826 trial: “Smith, by the aid of his luminous stone, found the Golden Bible, or the book of Mormon.”<sup>46</sup> And in 1856, after attending a meeting of the Board of Regents of the University of Deseret, Judge Hosea Stout recorded in his journal that “President Young exhibited the ‘seer’s stone’ with which the Prophet Joseph discovered the plates of the Book of Mormon.”<sup>47</sup>

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The Prophet’s 1838 account of the manner in which he discovered the plates, though it makes no mention of the Chase seer stone, does not preclude its use: “Moroni, the person who deposited the plates, from whence the Book of Mormon was translated, in a hill in Manchester, Ontario County, New York, being dead, and raised again therefrom, appeared unto me, and told me where they were; and gave me directions how to obtain them.”<sup>48</sup> The seer stone could have been the medium through which Moroni’s instructions were given. The fact that the Smith brothers who shared Joseph’s bedroom were not disturbed by Moroni’s visitation adds support to the possibility of a seer stone vision.

Lest the Prophet’s omission of mention of such matters be taken as proof they did not occur, it should be noted that his hesitation to divulge details of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon might be expected in light of the vitriolic public reception of his accounts of sacred matters. If the early response of a nonbelieving Methodist minister as recorded in the Pearl of Great Price is typical, it is obvious why Joseph would hesitate to provide detailed disclosure: “I took occasion to give him an account of the vision which I had had. I was greatly surprised at his behavior; he treated my communication not only lightly, but with great contempt, saying it was all of the devil, that there were no such things as visions or revelations in these days; that all such things had ceased with the apostles, and that there would never be any more of them” (Joseph Smith–History 1:21). Given that sort of reaction, it is not surprising that Joseph seldom discussed the Chase seer stone, and showed it only to trusted associates.

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day of September next he might have the Book if he brot with him the right person Joseph says who is the right person the answer was you will know then he lo ok ed in his glass and fo un d it w as Emm a Hale daughter of old Mr. Hale of Pen nsy lv any ,” Knight m anu script, LDS C hurch A rchives.

43 Tiffany’s Monthly, June 1859, p. 169.

44 Cited in Howe, Mormonism Unveiled, pp. 246-47.

45 Henry Harris Affidavit cited in Kirkham, New Witness, 1:133.

46 Chenango Union, 3 May 1877.

47 Juanita Brooks, ea., On The Mormon Frontier, The Diary of Hosea Stout, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press/Utah Historical Society, 1964), 2:593.

48 Elder’s Journal, (1 July 1838): 43.

Historical evidence indicates that he retained possession of this stone for a brief period after the completion of the Book of Mormon translation. In early 1830, Martin Harris, who had consented to finance publication of the book, was unable to come up with the necessary funds quickly. Hyrum Smith and others became impatient and suggested that Joseph send some of the brethren to Toronto, Ontario, to attempt to sell the copyright. David Whitmer records the Prophet's use of the seer stone in seeking inspiration on the matter:

Joseph looked into the hat in which he placed the stone, and received a revelation that some of the brethren should go to Toronto, Canada, and that they would sell the copy-right of the Book of Mormon. Hiram Page and Oliver Cowdery went to Toronto on this mission, but they failed entirely to sell the copy-right, returning without any money. Joseph was at my father's house when they returned. I was there also, and am an eye witness to these facts. Jacob Whitmer and John Whitmer were also present when Hiram Page and Oliver Cowdery returned from Canada. Well, we were all in great trouble; and we asked Joseph how it was that he had received a revelation from the Lord and the brethren had utterly failed in their undertaking. Joseph did not know how it was, so he enquired of the Lord about it, and behold the following revelation came through the stone: "*Some revelations are of God: some revelations are of man; and some revelations are of the devil.*"<sup>49</sup>

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Oliver Cowdery, after he had been excommunicated from the Church, related his own account of the 1830 revelation

that some among you will remember which sent Bro. Page and me, so unwisely, to Toronto, with a prediction from the Lord by "Urim and Thummim," that we would there find a man anxious to buy the "First Elder's copyright." I well remember we did not find him, and had to return surprised and disappointed. But so great was my faith, that in going to Toronto, nothing but calmness pervaded my soul, every doubt was banished, and I as much expected that Bro. Page and I would fulfill the revelation as that we should live. And you may believe, without asking me to relate the particulars that it would be no easy task to describe our desolation and grief. Bro. Page and I did not think that god would have deceived us through "Urim and Thummin [sic]," exactly as came the Book of Mormon.<sup>50</sup>

David Whitmer indicated that the seer stone was later given to Oliver Cowdery: "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>51</sup> Whitmer, who was Cowdery's brother-in-law, stated that on Oliver's death in 1848, another brother-in-law, "Phineas Young, a brother of Brigham Young, and an old-time and once intimate friend of the Cowdery family came out from Salt Lake City, and during his visit he contrived to get the stone from its hiding place, through a little deceptive sophistry, extended upon the grief-stricken widow. When he returned to Utah he carried it in triumph to the apostles of Brigham Young's 'lion house.'"<sup>52</sup>

Whatever the exact circumstances of its acquisition, the Chase seer stone remained

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49 Whitmer, *Believers in Christ*, pp. 31-32.

50 Cowdery, *Defense*, p. 229. An important distinction here is that though Cowdery writes, "through 'Urim and Thummin,' exactly as came the Book of Mormon," David Whitmer's description of the same medium refers to the seer stone. Eyewitness accounts corroborate Whitmer's account.

51 Whitmer, *Believers in Christ*, p. 32.

52 David Whitmer interview in *Des Moines Daily News*, 16 Oct. 1886.

in Brigham Young's possession until his death in 1877.<sup>53</sup> Hosea Stout described in detail the stone President Young displayed to the University of Deseret Board of Regents on 25 February 1856, "a silicious granite dark color almost black with light colored stripes some what resembling petrified poplar or cotton wood bark. It was about the size but not the shape of a hen's egg."<sup>54</sup>

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This same seer stone was carried by President Wilford Woodruff to the dedication of the Manti Temple in 1888: "Before leaving I consecrated upon the Altar the seers stone that Joseph Smith found by Revelation some 30 feet under the earth carried by him through life."<sup>55</sup> Another description of the stone was given by Richard M. Robinson when he returned from a Southern States mission in 1899 and presented a strange coin he felt might be of Nephite origin to President Lorenzo Snow. Robinson relates that President Snow

went and got the money purse or leather bag that President Young had brought to the Rocky Mountains with him, also the Seer Stone and said, "This is the Seer Stone that the Prophet Joseph used. There are very few worthy to view this, but you are." He handed the Seer Stone to me and I couldn't express the joy that came to me and took that stone in my hands. Words are not equal to the task of expressing such a sublime joy! He then told me to hand the Seer Stone to my wife and I handed it to her. He then blessed us with the greatest blessing I have ever heard fall from the mouth of man!

The Seer Stone was the shape of an egg though not quite so large, of a gray cast something like granite but with white stripes running around it. It was transparent but had no holes, neither in the end or in the sides. I looked into the stone, but could see nothing, as I had not the gift and power of God that must accompany such a manifestation.<sup>56</sup>

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Though we seldom hear the Chase seer stone mentioned in the Church today, it remains in the possession of the First Presidency. Joseph Fielding Smith, as an apostle, made clear that "the Seer Stone which was in the possession of the Prophet Joseph

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53 President Brigham Young's estate included two seer stones. His daughter, Zina Young Card, in a letter to her cousin, Apostle F. D. Richards, related: "There is a matter that I wish to lay before you, that weighs upon my mind, and seems very important to me. I refer to some very sacred articles I bought at the sale of my father's personal effects, -articles that never should have been given up to the idle gaze; but being brought out, my mother and myself felt it a wish of our hearts to get them, that their sacredness might not be sullied.

"They are: two sear-stones and an arrow point. They are in the possession of President Woodruff now, and very properly too, but I feel dear cousin, that they should ever be the property of the President of the Church, and not of individuals; that at his demise, they are not retained as they were before among 'personal effects,' but considered ever the legitimate property of God's mouth-piece," Zina Young Card to F. D. Richards, 31 July 1896, F. D. Richards Letter Collection, LDS Church Archives.

In addition to the seer stones, President Young also possessed a "bloodstone" which he wore about his neck on a chain "when going into unknown or dangerous pieces" (See display #1076, Brigham Young Collection, Daughters of Utah Pioneers Museum, Salt Lake City, Utah).

54 Brooks, Hosea Stout, 2:593.

55 Wilford Woodruff Journal, 18 May 1888, LDS Church Archives. Though the reason for the consecration is not given, Orson Pratt refuted in 1873 that through the medium of Urim and Thummim, "which the Lord God has ordained to be used in the midst of his holy house, in his Temple ... books of genealogy, tracing individuals and nations among all people back to ancient times will be revealed," Journal of Discourses, 16:260.

56 "The History of A Nephite Coin," a personal experience of Elder Richard M. Robinson of Grantsville, Utah, recorded 30 Dec. 1934, LDS Church Archives.

Smith in early days ... is now in the possession of the Church.”<sup>57</sup> Elder Joseph Anderson, Assistant to the Council of the Twelve and long-time secretary to the First Presidency, clarified in 1971 that the “Seer Stone that Joseph Smith used in the early days of the Church is in possession of the Church and is kept in a safe in Joseph Fielding Smith’s office.... [The stone is] slightly smaller than a chicken egg, oval, chocolate in color.”<sup>58</sup>

The final word as to what happened to the Nephite interpreters or Urim and Thummim is usually thought to be the Pearl of Great Price account in Joseph Smith--History 1:59-60:

At length the time arrived for obtaining the plates, the Urim and Thummim, and the breastplate.... By the wisdom of God, they remained safe in my hands, until I had accomplished by them what was required at my hand. When, according to arrangements, the messenger called for them I delivered them up to him: and *he has them in his charge unto this day, being the second day of May, one thousand eight hundred and thirty-eight* [italics added].

Though “them” in this account could refer solely to the plates, Patriarch Zebedee Coltrin, an early acquaintance of Joseph Smith, related in an 1880 high priests’ meeting in Spanish Fork, Utah, that he had once asked Joseph what he had done with the Urim and Thummim and that “Joseph said he had no further need of it and he had given it to the angel Moroni. He had the Melchizedek Priesthood, and with that Priesthood he had the key to all knowledge and intelligence.”<sup>59</sup> Joseph Smith apparently did not have the Nephite interpreters after the completion of the Book of Mormon translation; Moroni had them in his possession when they were shown to the Three Witnesses in June 1830. David Whitmer explained to Orson Pratt and Joseph F. Smith in 1878 that he, Martin Harris, and Oliver Cowdery, in fulfillment of a promise made in Doctrine and Covenants 17:1, were shown “a table with many records or plates upon it, besides the plates of the Book of Mormon, also the Sword of Laban, the Directors--i.e., the ball which Lehi had--and the Interpreters.”<sup>60</sup>

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If the Nephite interpreters were in fact returned to Moroni before June 1830, as the evidence strongly suggests, then why are so many references made to “Urim and Thummim” in Church history after this date? Wilford Woodruff’s journal entry describing a Quorum of the Twelve meeting held 27 December 1841 in Nauvoo shows the problem: “The Twelve, or part of them, spent the day with Joseph the Seer, and he confided unto them many glorious things of the Kingdom of God. The privileges and blessings of the priesthood, etc. I had the privilege of seeing for the first time in my day, the *Urim and Thummim* [italics added].”<sup>61</sup>

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Yet Brigham Young, attending the same meeting, recorded:

I met with the Twelve at brother Joseph’s. He conversed with us in a familiar manner on a variety of subjects, and explained to us the Urim and Thummim which he found with the plates, called in the Book of Mormon the Interpreters. He

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57 Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, 3 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1956), 2:225.

58 David C. Martin, *Restoration Reporter*, 1 (June 1971):8.

59 High Priests Record, Spanish Fork, Utah, September 1880, p. 128, LDS Church Archives.

60 Orson Pratt and Joseph F. Smith to President John Taylor and Council of the Twelve, 17 Sept. 1878, cited in *Millennial Star* 40 (9 Dec. 1879): 772.

61 Wilford Woodruff Journal, 27 Dec. 1841, LDS Church Archives.

said that every man who lived on the earth was entitled to a seer stone, and should have one, but they are kept from them in consequence of their wickedness, and most of those who do find one make an evil use of it; he showed us his seer stone.<sup>62</sup>

Which apostle was mistaken? Was there actual confusion of objects or simply confusion of terminology? We suggest that the discrepancy results from the popularity of Urim and Thummim terminology. Jane Manning James, a black convert living in Joseph's Nauvoo home, uses the "Urim and Thummim" terminology in her autobiographical reminiscence:

One morning I met Brother Joseph coming out of his mothers room he said good morning and shook hands with me. I went in to his mothers room she said good morning bring me that bundle from my bureau and sit down here. I did as she told me, she placed the bundle in my hands and said, handle this and after I had done it she said sit down. Do you remember that I told you about the Urim and Thummim when I told you about the book of Mormon, I answered yes mam. She then told me I had just handled it, you are not permitted to see it, but you have been permitted to handle it. You will live long after I am dead and gone and you can tell the Latter-day Saints, that you was permitted to handle the Urim and Thummim.<sup>63</sup>

Lucy Clayton Bullock, wife to Brigham Young's clerk, Thomas Bullock, also tells of "seeing the urim and thummim" during the Nauvoo period.<sup>64</sup>

The brother apostles Orson and Parley P. Pratt relate separate accounts of the Urim and Thummim being used to "translate" the book of Abraham from the Egyptian papyri. Parley was quoted in 1842 as having said: "The Pearl of Great Price is now in course of translation by means of the Urim and Thummim and proves to be a record written partly by the father of the faithful, Abraham, and finished by Joseph when in Egypt."<sup>65</sup> Orson added in 1878: "The Prophet translated the part of these writings which, as I have said, is contained in the Pearl of Great Price, and known as the Book of Abraham. Thus you see one of the first gifts bestowed by the Lord for the benefit of His people, was that of revelation, the gift to translate by the aid of the Urim and Thummim."<sup>66</sup> Wilford Woodruff similarly associates the Urim and Thummim with the translation of the Egyptian papyri: "The Lord is blessing with power to reveal the mysteries of the kingdom of God; to translate by the Urim and Thummim ancient records and hieroglyphics old as Abraham or Adam."<sup>67</sup>

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In short, the term "Urim and Thummim" appears repeatedly. Joseph Smith's personal secretary, William Clayton, records that in 1843 Hyrum Smith "requested Joseph to write the revelation [on celestial marriage] by means of the Urim and Thummim [*italics added*], but Joseph in reply said he did not need to, for he knew the revelation perfectly from beginning to end."<sup>68</sup> President Heber C. Kimball testified in

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62 Widen J. Watson, ea., *Manuscript History of Brigham Young* 27 Dec. 1841. Also in "History of Brigham Young," *Millennial Star*, 26 (20 Feb. 1864):118.

63 Jane Manning James *Autobiography*, p. 19, holograph in LDS Church Archives. Reference courtesy of Linda King Newell.

64 Lucy Clayton Bullock, *Biographical sketch*, LDS Church Archives.

65 *Millennial Star*, 3 (July 1842): 47.

66 *Journal of Discourses*, 25 Aug. 1878, 20:65.

67 *Wilford Woodruff Journal*, 19 Feb. 1842.

68 Statement of 16 Feb. 1874, cited in B. H. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of The Church of*

1853, after the Chase seer stone had been brought to Salt Lake City by Phineas Young: “Has Brother Brigham got the Urim and Thummim? Yes, he has everything that is necessary for him to receive the will and mind of God to this people.”<sup>69</sup>

p.61

In addition to Joseph’s use of a seer stone in “translation” work with the Book of Mormon and the book of Abraham, evidence suggests that several of the early revelations recorded in the Doctrine and Covenants may have come through this medium. Orson Pratt, who lived for a time in the Prophet’s home, related in 1878 “the circumstances under which revelations were received by Joseph . . . he [Elder Pratt] being present on several occasions of the kind. . . . At such times Joseph used the ‘seer stone’ when inquiring of the Lord, and receiving revelations, but that he was so thoroughly endowed with the inspiration of the Almighty and the spirit of revelation that he often received them without any instrument or other means than the operation of the spirit upon his mind.”<sup>70</sup> Headings to eight sections in the present LDS Doctrine and Covenants—3, 6, 7, 11, 14-17—describe revelations received from July 1828 through June 1829 by “Urim and Thummim.” David Whitmer, who stated he was “present when Brother Joseph gave nearly every revelation that is in the Book of Commandments,”<sup>71</sup> records “Brother Joseph giving the revelations of 1829 through the same stone through which the Book was translated. . . . He then gave up the stone forever.”<sup>72</sup>

Revelations given through the seer stone at the Whitmer home in Fayette, New York, during 1829 include not only sections 14 through 17, but also section 18. Headnote references, which were not added until the 1921 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants, list sections 14-17 as having been given through “Urim and Thummim,” but David Whitmer also mentions the 18th section (which directs him and Oliver to select the first Quorum of the Twelve) as having come through the Chase seer stone.

Section 10:1 describes the “power given unto you to translate by the means of the Urim and Thummim.” But the reference to Urim and Thummim is a retrospective addition which does not appear in the original revelation in the Book of Commandments (Chapter IX).<sup>73</sup> This change first appeared in the 1835 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants (section 36:1). The Prophet’s handwritten 1832 account of his early history says “the Lord had prepared spectacles for to read the Book,”<sup>74</sup> and he did not begin to use the phrase “Urim and Thummim” to describe his translation vehicle until after W. W. Phelps equated the interpreters with the “Urim and Thummim” in an 1833 Evening and Morning Star article.

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President Joseph Fielding Smith thought all “statements of translations by the Urim and Thummim” after 1830 “evidently errors.”<sup>75</sup> If by “Urim and Thummim” we mean exclusively the Nephite interpreters, President Smith is correct. A more feasible

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Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Century 1, 6 vols. (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1965), 2:106.

69 Journal of Discourses, 13 Aug. 1853, 2:111.

70 “Report of Elders Orson Pratt and Joseph F. Smith,” Millennial Star 40 (16 Dec. 1878): 787.

71 David Whitmer, An Address to All Believers in the Book of Mormon (Richmond, MO: n.p., 1887), p. 3. Also All Believers in Christ, p. 30.

72 Whitmer, Believers in the Book of Mormon, p. 3.

73 Robert Woodford, “Historical Development of the Doctrine and Covenants” (Ph.D. dissertation, Brigham Young University, 1974), presents strong evidence that section 10 was given in May 1829 as originally recorded in the Book of Commandments and not in the summer of 1828 as stated in the heading of current editions of the Doctrine and Covenants.

74 Kirtland Letterbook, 1829-35, pp. 106.

75 Smith, Doctrines of Salvation, 2:225.

explanation, however, is advanced by Apostle Orson Pratt: “The Urim and Thummim is a stone or other substance sanctified and illuminated by the Spirit of the living God, and presented to those who are blessed with the gift of seeing.”<sup>76</sup> Evidence suggests that the Prophet Joseph Smith used the term “Urim and Thummim” in a much broader fashion than we have become used to. After Martin Harris had lost the 116 pages of completed Book of Mormon manuscript, Lucy Smith said that Moroni appeared to Joseph and demanded the return of the Nephite interpreters. The Prophet responded:

I did as I was directed, and as I handed them to him, he remarked, “If you are very humble and penitent, it may be you will receive them again; if so it will be on the twenty-second of next September [1828].” After the angel left me 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.<sup>77</sup>

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Though Joseph’s account appears at first glance to refer to the return of the Nephite interpreters, an 1870 statement by Emma Smith indicates that Joseph in all likelihood meant the Chase seer stone: “Now the first that my husband translated was translated by the 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>78</sup>

Another Joseph Smith application of the term “Urim and Thummim” to mean “seer stone” is recorded in the journal of Wandle Mace, a Nauvoo acquaintance of the Prophet. Mace explains that a group of Church members in England had been using two seer stones in exploring “magic or astrology.” These two stones, often referred to as the “Sameazer Stones,” were given to Joseph Smith’s cousin, George A. Smith, who brought them to the Prophet in Nauvoo. Mace records that “Apostle Smith gave them to Joseph the prophet who pronounced them to be a Urim and Thummim—as good as ever was upon the earth—but he said, ‘They have been consecrated to devils.’”<sup>79</sup>

These stones could not have been the Nephite interpreters, yet Joseph specifically calls them “Urim and Thummim.” The most obvious explanation for such wording is

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76 N. B. Lundwall, *Masterful Discourses of Orson Pratt* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1962), p. 452.

77 Lucy Mack Smith, *Sketches*, p. 126.

78 Emma Smith Bidamon to Emma Pilgrim, 27 March 1870, RLDS Church Archives. Joseph described the interpreters in his 1842 Wentworth Letter as “two transparent stones set in the rim of a bow.” But Martin Harris described them in an 1859 Tiffany’s Monthly interview as “white, like polished marble, with a few grey streaks.”

An interview with David Whitmer (“The Golden Fables,” *The Chicago Times*, 7 Aug. 1875) clarifies this confusion by explaining the interpreters as “shaped like a pair of ordinary spectacles, though much larger, and at least half an inch in thickness, and perfectly opaque save to the prophetic vision of Joseph Smith.”

79 Wandle Mace Journal, p. 66, microfilm in LDS Church Archives. Priddy Meeks, a Nauvoo acquaintance of Joseph Smith, recorded in his journal, *Utah Historical Quarterly*, 10 (Oct. 1842): 80: “It is not safe to depend on peepstones in any case where evil spirits have the power to put false appearance before them while looking in a peepstone.... That is my experience in the matter; also the Patriarch Hyrum Smith ... stated that our faith was not strong enough to overcome the evil influences.”

Imitative use of a seer stone in the early days of the Church was demonstrated by Book of Mormon witness Hiram Page who, in September 1830, “had in his possession a certain stone, by which he had obtained certain ‘revelations’ concerning the upbuilding of Zion, the order of the Church, etc., ... many-- especially the Whitmer family and Oliver Cowdery--were believing much in the things set forth by this stone.” (*History of the Church*, 1:110). Doctrine and Covenants 28:11 responded for Oliver Cowdery: “Thou shalt take thy brother, Hiram Page between him and thee alone, and tell him--that those things which he hath written from that stone are not of me, and that Satan deceiveth him.”



that he used the term generically to include any device with the potential for “communicating light perfectly, and intelligence perfectly, through a principle that God has ordained for that purpose,” as John Taylor would later put it.<sup>80</sup>

Though a seer stone is referred to many times in the early days of the Church as “Urim and Thummim,” the reference is not always to the Chase seer stone. The Prophet used several seer stones during his lifetime. One of the accounts of his 1826 trial in New York records testimony that “Prisoner [Joseph Smith] laid a book up on a white cloth, and looking through another stone which was white and transparent. . . . Prisoner pretended to him that he could discover objects at a distance by holding this white stone to the sun or candle; that prisoner rather declined looking into a hat at his dark colored stone, as he said that it hurt his eyes.”<sup>81</sup>

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Philo Dibble, a friend of Joseph Smith who made early replicas of the Smith brothers’ death masks, preserved a third stone used by the Prophet in Nauvoo: “At the time of the martyrdom, [Dibble] rescued a small seer stone, at the Nauvoo Mansion House, from falling into the hands of the apostates. He brought this seer stone across the plains. Later, as curator of church history, he showed the death masks, the seer stone, and other items of historical value on his lecture tours throughout the territory of Utah.”<sup>82</sup> Though a description of this stone is not given, it is definitely not the Chase seer stone, which was still in the possession of Oliver Cowdery. It may well be the same stone that the Prophet showed to the Quorum of Twelve in 1841, which Wilford Woodruff referred to as the “Urim and Thummim” and which Brigham Young called a seer stone. Brigham Young documents that Joseph had more than one seer stone: “I met with President W. Richards and the Twelve on the 6th. We spent the time in interesting conversation upon old times, Joseph, the plates, Mount Cumorah, treasures and records known to be hid in the earth, the gift of seeing, and how Joseph obtained his *first* seer stone [italics added].”<sup>83</sup>

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Joseph Smith further expanded the meaning of “Urim and Thummim” on April 2, 1843, in response to a William Clayton question:

God and the planet where he dwells is like crystal, and like a sea of glass before the throne. This is the great Urim & Thummim whereon all things are manifest both things past, present & future and are continually before the Lord. The Urim & Thummim is a small representation of this globe. The earth when it is purified will be made like unto crystal and will be a Urim & Thummim whereby all things pertaining to an inferior kingdom or all kingdoms of a lower order will be manifest to those who dwell on it. and this earth will be with Christ Then the white stone mentioned in Rev. c2 v17 is the Urim & Thummim whereby all things pertaining to an higher order of kingdoms even all kingdoms will be made known and a white stone is given to each of those who come into this celestial kingdom, whereon is a new name written which no man knoweth save he that receiveth it. The new name is the key word.<sup>84</sup>

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80 Journal of Discourses, 24 June 1833, 24:262-63.

81 Frazier’s Magazine, Feb. 1873, pp. 229-230.

82 Millennial Star 11 (Jan. 1849):11-12.

83 Manuscript History of the Church, 6 May 1849, Church Archives. The Quorum of the Twelve Minutes of this date record that the Brethren spent the “evening in conversation upon many little incidents connected with finding the Plates, preserving them from the hand of the wicked, & returning them again to Cumorah, who did it &c, also about the gift of seeing & how Joseph obtained his first seer stone. Treasures known to exist in the earth of money & records.”

84 William Clayton Diary, 2 Apr. 1843. Cited in Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, The Words

Though all events surrounding the coming forth of the Book of Mormon are not yet fully known, some things seem clear: Joseph Smith discovered a “singular-looking seer stone” in 1822 which not only served as a medium through which, according to numerous descriptions, all of the present Book of Mormon was translated but which also played a vital role in the discovery of the Nephite record. “Urim and Thummim,” the traditional nomenclature for the Nephite interpreters which were used as the medium for translating the 116 Book of Mormon manuscript pages Martin Harris lost, has a broader meaning; any mechanism capable of eliciting the mind and will of God can correctly be referred to as “Urim and Thummim.” Apparent historical discrepancies between references to the Nephite interpreters and the prophet Joseph Smith’s seer stones evaporate once this generic use of “Urim and Thummim” is understood. Whatever the actual device used, the Prophet in 1842 provided the most important insight about his Book of Mormon translation: “Through the medium of the Urim and Thummim I translated the record by the gift and power of God.”<sup>85</sup>

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of Joseph Smith (Provo, Utah: BYU Press, 1980), p. 169.

85 Joseph Smith, “History of the Church,” *Times and Seasons* 3 (March 1842):707.