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an Unreliable Methodology:
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Underscores the Problems**

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Honorable Intentions with an Unreliable Methodology: Lucas's Response Underscores the Problems

Jeff Lindsay

Abstract: *James Lucas has made a passionate response to the negative review I offered for his and Jonathan Neville's book By Means of Urim & Thummim. Though we agree on many important issues, there are some troubling gaps that readers of their book need to understand. Some of these issues may be illustrated in the methodology of Lucas's response. In general, the unreliable methodology and its often extreme, unnuanced approach to dealing with complex, unclear issues must be challenged, as painful as that has been. The complaints in my review remain intact if not further underscored by Lucas's response. The basic concern remains that the approach taken in the book not only represents inadequate scholarship, but may improperly stir disrespect for the modern Church and its leaders.*

I thank James Lucas for sharing his response¹ to my review of his book.² I appreciate his efforts to clarify his views and share his reactions to my review. I felt more empathy for his work after reading his

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1. James W. Lucas, "Joseph and Oliver Told the Truth about the Translation: A Response to Brant Gardner's and Jeff Lindsay's Reviews," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 64 (2025): 81–98, journal.interpreterfoundation.org/joseph-and-oliver-told-the-truth-about-the-translation-a-response-to-brant-gardners-and-jeff-lindsays-reviews/.
 2. The book is James W. Lucas and Jonathan E. Neville, *By Means of the Urim & Thummim: Restoring Translation to the Restoration* (Cottonwood Heights, UT: Digital Legend Press & Publishing, 2023). My review is Jeff Lindsay, "Through a Glass Darkly: Restoring Translation to the Restoration?," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 63 (2025):

response, better recognizing how easy it is even for people agreeing on many issues to talk past each other. I also know the frustration of having a negative reaction to a work that took a great deal of time to prepare. And I know the pain of having a reader seem to completely miss the point of something I've written, almost as if they hadn't read it or didn't try to understand it. We are apparently both experiencing this pain right now.

Before addressing Lucas's response, I first wish to acknowledge key issues that I believe we both agree on, though Lucas may feel I don't share some of these views:

- There is no question that the Nephite interpreters — a pair of stones set in a frame — were received by Joseph with the gold plates.
- There is no doubt that these interpreters, years later called the Urim and Thummim, were used in at least the initial translation of the gold plates.
- There is also no question that Joseph had at least one seer stone.
- There is no controversy that Joseph had been widely mocked and even faced legal trouble over his alleged use of a seer stone before translating the Book of Mormon.³
- There are multiple witnesses who reported seeing Joseph using a seer stone for translation. Lucas and Neville obviously recognize this because such reports were the motivation for developing their "Demonstration Hypothesis" in which Joseph pretended to translate in the sight of others using a stone in a hat.
- There is also no question that many accounts provided by Joseph, Oliver, and other figures in the Church referred to the use of the Urim and Thummim to translate without mentioning seer stones.
- But we also have clear evidence — even canonized evidence in Doctrine and Covenants 130:8–11 — that a single stone rather than the two stones of the Nephite interpreters could be called a Urim and Thummim.

169–202, journal.interpreterfoundation.org/through-a-glass-darkly-restoring-translation-to-the-restoration/.

3. Russell Anderson, "The 1826 Trial of Joseph Smith" (presentation, 2002 FAIR Conference, Utah Valley State College, Orem, UT), fairlatterdaysaints.org/conference/august-2002/the-1826-trial-of-joseph-smith.

- However the Book of Mormon was translated, the translation was done by a seer, Joseph Smith, through the power of God.
- The Book of Mormon was the divine translation of an ancient record written on gold plates in a script that had long since been lost. The plates were real, as testified by many witnesses under various circumstances, including the powerfully miraculous and the fully mundane. Those many witnesses never denied their testimony of the reality of the gold plates.
- The Book of Mormon is a powerful witness for Jesus Christ, a source of divine truths about His role and His Gospel, and evidence for the Restoration of the Church of Jesus Christ. It is a marvelous work and a wonder, and we should respect the seer and prophet, Joseph Smith, for his sacrifice and faithful work in bringing this sacred scripture to the world.

With all the things that unite us, it is painful to write a negative review of a book written by brothers in the gospel, but in my view, there are things that must be said. This is due in part to the need for peer review of works seeking to provide scholarship on important matters, but also because some of the erroneous claims made may be harmful to some, in my opinion. More specifically, *By Means of Urim & Thummim* takes such a harsh black-and-white view of complex events with nuanced factors behind them, as to bring condemnation upon the Church and its current prophet while seeking to defend a prior prophet.

I am grateful for Lucas's thoughtful response, though the problems I detailed in my review have not been resolved. Indeed, my concerns over their methodology have only been fortified, for several issues in the response seem to demonstrate in a nutshell my broader concerns about the book. Please note that I am not saying that the thesis of the book is absolutely wrong. It is possible that only the Nephite interpreters were used to translate and that all those who witnessed the use of a non-Nephite seer stone were wrong or deliberately deceived. However, I find that argument very unlikely and certainly not demonstrated as plausible by the authors. My primary concern is not with their thesis, but with the poor methodology that makes the book and its conclusions unreliable, with potentially harmful consequences.

Turning now to the details of Lucas's response, I'll first point out some of what it fails to consider.

Neglecting Lessons from B. H. Roberts's Efforts to Overthrow the Traditional Model of Translation

Lucas complains that one-third of my review dealt with B. H. Roberts (more accurately, with B. H. Roberts and a common misunderstanding of Doctrine and Covenants 9). His response was to simply say that it was all irrelevant. He then moves on, abandoning any further engagement:

Lindsay devotes a third of his review (pages 175–86, 11 of 32 pages) not to our book, but rather to attacking B. H. Roberts. And this even though our translation theory is quite different from Roberts's and that we do not cite him as authority for our views. (He is only referenced in footnotes for thoroughness as Roberts was a prominent LDS thinker who did write about the translation.)⁴

Lucas and Neville reject the translation model of Joseph seeing a translated text that he could simply dictate to his scribes without having to perform significant mental work to develop the finished words he would dictate. They also reject the idea that part of the translation was done with a seer stone. In making these rejections, they feel that they are restoring the proper original model of translation. They oppose what they see as a perversion by modern academics who recently developed questionable theories in which Joseph saw and dictated the completed translation, and in which some of the translation included use of a seer stone.

Surely it is relevant to recognize that the model opposed by Lucas and Neville is actually the model opposed by B. H. Roberts over a century ago. He felt the then-common understanding was embarrassing (how could so much “bad grammar” have been given by God?) and that it did not give sufficient honor to Joseph Smith for the hard work of “studying out” the translation in his mind, per Doctrine and Covenants 9:7–9. The reigning model that so concerned Roberts in 1905 included Joseph seeing the finished text and using both the Nephite Urim and Thummim and a seer stone over the course of the translation. Ironically, the translation model now opposed by Lucas and Neville is essentially the traditional model Roberts opposed, not a new-fangled perversion by modern academics. Both Roberts and our two authors misapply Doctrine and Covenants 9:7–9 as a foundation

4. Lucas, “Joseph and Oliver Told the Truth about the Translation,” 90.

for their translation theories. In effect, our authors seek to restore Roberts's translation model.

This context is vital for understanding the project of Lucas and Neville and how it fits into Book of Mormon studies. Good scholarship must not ignore related work, especially related work that entirely reshaped popular understanding of Book of Mormon translation in the Church. The unwillingness to even engage with the issue reflects a basic weakness in the methodology of the authors, though not as severe as some of the other flaws.

An important part of my section on B. H. Roberts that also went completely unanswered in Lucas's response is the argument that Roberts as well as Lucas and Neville have misapplied Doctrine and Covenants 9:7–9, as if the "burning in the bosom" statement on the need to "study *it* out" and ask "if *it* be right" was referring to *how* the translation was done. This confusion regarding "it" in that passage is a common one, but in this case the error undermines a key motivation for Lucas's and Neville's theories of translation, as it did for Roberts. Thanks to careful scholarship exploring that passage, today we can make much better sense of the meaning. As Stan Spencer concludes, "the Lord was not telling Oliver Cowdery how to translate but rather how to know whether it was right for him to translate and how to obtain the faith necessary to do so."⁵

A variation of Spencer's approach, shared with me by Kendra Lindsay, my wife, is that ultimately Oliver's need was to have the faith and power to translate, which required more than looking into a stone or stones. It required prayerful preparation that he might be able to receive the revelation needed for the translation. Being attuned with God may have been the key to the translation, and only then would he be able to look into a Urim and Thummim to see the written translation. If so, what he should have studied out in his mind was how to act as a seer, or rather, to verify that he had the faith and closeness to God required to perform as a seer. Based on Spencer's approach, we might summarize the "it" of Doctrine and Covenants 9:8 as, "Is it right for me to translate now?," while my wife's approach might frame the

5. Stan Spencer, "The Faith to See: Burning in the Bosom and Translating the Book of Mormon in Doctrine and Covenants 9," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 18 (2016): 219, journal.interpreterfoundation.org/the-faith-to-see-burning-in-the-bosom-and-translating-the-book-of-mormon-in-doctrine-and-covenants-9/.

question as, “Am I right before God and ready to translate?”⁶ Perhaps the two can be united with the question, “Is the time right and the translator ready?”

Viewing the question that faced Oliver in this way makes more sense in understanding the miraculous translation of the Book of Mormon. For example, there seems to be a lack of evidence for use of the impractical “study it out” method when Joseph was confronted with an unknown script in translating the Book of Mormon, the Book of Abraham (see the overlooked evidence cited in my review), and whatever may have been on the parchment behind Doctrine and Covenants 7 or behind the translation of the Book of Moses, etc.

Further, the remarkable speed of translation seems more practical with a “Joseph read the text” model rather than the much slower process of studying out a foreign script and coming up with a proposed meaning to verify in prayer. With about 269,000 words in the dictated text for the published Book of Mormon⁷ and with “not many more than the equivalent of about 60 actual working days [that] would have been available in April, May, and June 1829” for translation, as John Welch has determined,⁸ we can estimate that about 4,500 words on average per day of translation were dictated, a pace well above that of many professional writers.⁹ In fact, that pace is also above typical professional translation rates, which are often said to be around 2,500 words per day.¹⁰ But this can vary, as clearly noted by one translation firm:

6. Kendra Lindsay, personal communication, 17 January 2025.

7. “Word Count,” *Scripture Central*, Evidence 254, 13 October 2021, scripturecentral.org/evidence/word-count.

8. John W. Welch, “Timing the Translation of the Book of Mormon: ‘Days [and Hours] Never to Be Forgotten,’” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 57, no. 4 (2018): 16–30, byustudies.byu.edu/article/timing-the-translation-of-the-book-of-mormon-days-and-hours-never-to-be-forgotten.

9. “Average Daily Word Count for Writers,” *The Novelry*, 14 August 2017, thenovelry.com/blog/word-counts.

10. For example: “the average professional translator can translate somewhere between 1,500 to 2,500 words per day,” per Flor Dimassi, “How Long Does It Take To Deliver A Professional And Quality Translation?,” LinkedIn.com, 17 August 2021, [linkedin.com/pulse/how-long-does-it-take-deliver-professional-quality-flor-dimassi/](https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/how-long-does-it-take-deliver-professional-quality-flor-dimassi/). Also see the discussion at “How many words per day can you translate on a day-to-day basis?,” Proz.com, 2–3 April 2008, [proz.com/forum/getting_established/101263-how_many_words_per_day_can_you_translate_on_a_day_to_day_basis.html](https://www.proz.com/forum/getting_established/101263-how_many_words_per_day_can_you_translate_on_a_day_to_day_basis.html); and “How many words does a professional translator translate per day?,” Pangeanic.com, 10 May 2015, [blog.pangeanic.com/how-many-words-does-a-professional-translator-translate-per-day](https://www.pangeanic.com/how-many-words-does-a-professional-translator-translate-per-day).

The number of words a translator can produce per day can vary significantly depending on various factors such as the translator's experience, language pair, subject matter, complexity of the text, and the translator's working speed and efficiency. The use of Computer Aided Translation (CAT) tools can also increase a translator's productivity, especially if there are large numbers of repeated or fuzzy matches compared to completely new translations.

It is difficult to provide an exact figure, as translation productivity can vary greatly from person to person. On average, a professional translator can typically translate around 2,000 to 3,000 words per day for general content. However, this number can be higher or lower depending on the factors mentioned above. Some experienced and efficient translators may be able to handle larger volumes, translating 4,000 to 5,000 words or even more per day. On the other hand, when dealing with highly technical or specialized content, the translation speed might be slower, and the translator may produce fewer words per day.¹¹

One thing that could certainly cause a drop in professional translation rates would be the challenge of facing an unknown language in an unknown script. Even if they had a Urim and Thummim that worked according to the model proposed by Lucas and Neville, I don't think Joseph could possibly maintain the normal professional rate if he needed intense mental effort to study out each word or phrase, seek spiritual impressions, propose a translation based on those impressions, and then seek confirmation in prayer before dictating a few words. It's hard to see any way to reconcile the model proposed by Lucas and Neville with the prodigious rate of not just translation but translation plus dictation and longhand writing with quill and ink. The speed of Book of Mormon translation is a marvelous work in its own right.

Assuming extremely rapid translation provided by revelation, in which the time-consuming work was reading the dictation and then writing it down, John Welch conducted trials with other people to see if a practical pace of speaking and writing could fit the data. He

11. "How many words can a translator produce per day?," AZWorld, 12 October 2023, a-zworld.ca/translation-services-canada-blog/how-many-words-can-a-translator-produce-per-day/.

determined that rates between 10 to 20 words per minute were practical and would require from about 4 to 8 hours per day.¹² The pace that Welch considered did not include estimates of time for studying out characters in Joseph's mind, changing the translated words and their order to get a better translation, and then getting confirmation in prayer before dictating the final, confirmed text. Such steps would considerably slow down the translation process. With fast work, fast revelation, and great endurance, the Lucas and Neville model might theoretically be possible, but still seems unrealistic. Just speaking and writing displayed text is challenge enough for a sixty-day project.

The mechanics that we can infer from the flow of text in the Original Manuscript of the Book of Mormon suggests that Joseph saw the text in discrete chunks of around twenty words at a time, not a couple of carefully pondered and prayed-about characters.¹³ To quote the title of a compelling paper by Stanford Carmack, "Joseph Smith Read the Words."¹⁴ That's not an ironclad conclusion, but it is a reasonable one. This is consistent with the Lord's statement, enshrined in scripture, that says three times that Joseph will "read the words" that would be given him (see 2 Nephi 27:20, 22, 24). The authors have not overcome the multiple problems with their theory, which means I am most comfortable with the model of Joseph, as seer, simply reading revealed words — with or without some mental tweaking at times, a possibility I do not rule out since Joseph obviously was comfortable with making what seemed like necessary adjustments for clarity or grammatical purposes after the dictation.

B. H. Roberts, and now Lucas and Neville, have pursued a similar trajectory. The latter authors are ironically seeking to cast out what they view as a new-fangled model from apostates that was actually the traditional model in Roberts's day that he wished to revise. Roberts, Lucas, and Neville are motivated by a noble desire to save

12. Welch, "Timing the Translation of the Book of Mormon," 37–39.

13. Royal Skousen, "The Witnesses of the Book of Mormon," in *The History of the Text of the Book of Mormon*, vol. 3, part 7 (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2024), 68–69. A pre-print of this article has been available for over three years at "Update of the Pre-Print of a Discussion of the Book of Mormon Witnesses," *Interpreter Foundation Blog*, 25 August 2021, pp. 28–29, interpreterfoundation.org/blog-update-of-the-pre-print-of-a-discussion-of-the-book-of-mormon-witnesses-by-royal-skousen/.

14. Stanford Carmack, "Joseph Smith Read the Words," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 18 (2016): 41–64, journal.interpreterfoundation.org/joseph-smith-read-the-words/.

the reputation of Joseph and defend the Book of Mormon, but all of them are wrong in an insistence that it was not enough for the seer to see the text, but that he needed to do slow, heavy lifting in his own mind to meet the improperly applied constraints thought to be in Doctrine and Covenants 9. Evaluating Roberts's story in the light of Lucas's and Neville's current work adds important historical context. I am surprised that three short sentences of dismissal was all the evaluation received by Lucas. My evaluation still applies.

Roberts's objection was the "bad grammar" and poor wording in the dictated text, which he felt would shame the Church if such imperfection came from the divine revelatory tools. At that time, we did not have the data showing that these irritants (to Roberts) were likely not from Joseph's bad grammar, but from a strong vein of acceptable grammar from the Early Modern English (EModE) era, as the extensive work of Stanford Carmack and Royal Skousen demonstrates. We don't really yet know why EModE structures exist in the Book of Mormon, though they provide benefits of clarity and ease of translation to other languages. We also cannot answer Lucas's objection as to who prepared such a translation apart from the fact that the translation is of divine origin, regardless of who may have been tasked with preparing whatever was actually shown to Joseph.

Another relevant but ignored aspect of the B. H. Roberts section was that a reader in 1906 responded to Roberts's new theory by proposing that the apparent flaws in the translated text could be accounted for if the Urim and Thummim only provided an incomplete literal translation that required Joseph to study it out in his mind and rework the text to make it acceptable. Roberts strongly objected to the notion that a divine instrument could give imperfect results if it were displaying text to read. He found this illogical and offensive. That proposal is certainly similar to the translation model of Lucas and Neville. The objections Roberts raised may still be appropriate today. I was hoping (apparently in vain) for a response to this as well.

About that Overlooked Gospel Topics Essay

I was further disappointed to see no discussion of my comments regarding the Church's Gospel Topics Essay, "Book of Mormon Translation," a publication with scholarly input and approved by the Church.¹⁵ It's not scripture, but it's a meaningful discussion of the

15. "Book of Mormon Translation," *Gospel Topics Essays*, churchofjesuschrist

issues. It proposes that a seer stone was sometimes used, directly clashing with the position held by Lucas and Neville. More recently, Church-provided content for the 2025 *Come, Follow Me* program addresses Book of Mormon translation by stating:

We don't know many details about the miraculous translation process, but we do know that Joseph Smith was a seer, aided by instruments that God had prepared: two transparent stones called the Urim and Thummim and another stone called a seer stone.¹⁶

It is puzzling that in urging Latter-day Saints to understand Joseph's statements their way—an understanding that rules out the possibility of a seer stone being used, let alone the seer stone being an instrument “that God had prepared”—they are directly clashing with Church publications and another prophet's remarks. I was hoping to understand how the authors resolve that tension.

The Gospel Topics Essay also quotes Wilford Woodruff in what should be considered meaningful evidence that a seer stone can be called a Urim and Thummim, for when Joseph showed his seer stone in 1841, Elder Woodruff (at the time) replied, “I had the privilege of seeing for the first time in my day the URIM & THUMMIM.”¹⁷

Defense of the Demonstration Hypothesis?

To me one of the key weaknesses and ironies of *By Means of Urim & Thummim* is explaining the seer stone as the result of deliberate deception by Joseph. Since Lucas and Neville take the extreme position of claiming that those who think a seer stone was used in the translation are saying that Joseph Smith was a liar, I would expect them to give a thorough defense when those troubled by their Demonstration Hypothesis fret over how that unnecessary speculation would make a deliberate deceiver out of Joseph. Lucas dismisses my response

.org/study/manual/gospel-topics-essays/book-of-mormon-translation.

16. “Voices of the Restoration: Translation of the Book of Mormon,” in *Doctrine and Covenants 2025, Come, Follow Me—For Home and Church: Living, Learning, and Teaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2024), churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/come-follow-me-for-home-and-church-doctrine-and-covenants-2025/06a-voices-of-the-restoration-translation. The “Voices of the Restoration” vignettes are available in the online version of *Come, Follow Me*, not in the printed versions of the manual.

17. “Book of Mormon Translation,” *Gospel Topics Essays*, n21.

by saying that David Whitmer, the man they attack as incredible and unfaithful, was the source of their idea. I don't see how that responds to the concerns I raised.

Responding to the Body of the Response

We now turn to some of the details of Lucas's response, where I feel some serious errors were made, leaving more gaps in the methodology and thesis of *By Urim and Thummim*.

The strange case of the “Last Testimony of Sister Emma”

Despite some gaps in missing major aspects of my review, Lucas was thorough in other areas, even so thorough as to criticize a part of my paper that I thought wasn't there.

While it's possible that many parts of the authors' thesis are correct, the methodology of *By Means of Urim and Thummim* remains on shaky ground as evidence is force-fit into favored theories or extracted from sources that sometimes don't really agree with the authors' claims. We get a vivid example of such methodology problems in Lucas's comments on an issue he feels is critical—the purported unreliability of Emma's “Last Testimony” given in 1879 in an interview with her son, Joseph Smith III:

For example, both reviews refer to the “Last Testimony of Sister Emma” as an authoritative source for their arguments. The “Last Testimony” is an account published on 1 October 1879 by Joseph Smith III of an interview of his mother, Emma Smith, that he conducted in February 1879, not long before her death on April 30. The “Last Testimony” includes a claim ascribed to Emma that Joseph Jr. used a seer stone in a hat when Emma was scribing for the Book of Mormon. However, we discovered that only seven years later, in 1886, after performing his own extensive research, Joseph III repudiated the stone-in-the-hat narrative. This undermines the credibility of the “Last Testimony,” whether or not Emma actually stated what Joseph III reported. This 1886 document from Joseph III was not hidden; it did not come out of an attic. It was sitting in *The Saints' Herald* for 137 years, but neither Gardner nor Lindsay inform their readers about this

key previously unrecognized source. To the contrary, they promote Emma's "Last Testimony" as fully credible.¹⁸

Let's enumerate the key points here:

1. I relied on what Emma said in 1879 as if Emma's "Last Testimony" were an authoritative source favoring the use of a seer stone in a hat used by Joseph in translation.
2. Seven years later, the interviewer, Joseph Smith III, conducted "his own extensive research" and "repudiated" the seer stone and hat narrative as published in a prominent "key source."
3. This undermines his mother's statement.
4. I was irresponsible if not deceptive in refusing to let readers know about the repudiation.
5. Instead, I promoted a questionable source as fully credible.

This really sounds bad.

For a moment, I seriously wondered how I could have been so careless as to cite, rely on, and promote Emma's "Last Testimony"¹⁹ when in fact, I believed that I had deliberately avoiding discussing that source. Why avoid it? Because after reading Lucas's and Neville's extensive attacks on her 1879 statement in their book, I *chose not to rely on and promote that source* since it appeared to be so problematic. In fact, I didn't even read it in preparing my review. Puzzled, I went back and searched my essay to see how I might have carelessly let it slip in.

Readers of my essay may be equally puzzled at Lucas's charge, for there is no mention of Emma's "Last Testimony" in my paper nor any citation of that work. How, then, had I fallen for its deceptive lure? Ah, there it is: a mention of Emma on p. 173 of my review, where I parenthetically note that "other scribes such as Emma also made statements supporting Joseph's use of a seer stone." Emma is also mentioned twice in a quote from Royal Skousen, but I only mentioned her in passing once.

Still, if Emma's only mention of a seer stone were in the 1879 interview, then Lucas might be correct to believe that my paper and the Skousen quote implicitly drew upon Emma's 1879 statement.

18. Lucas, "Joseph and Oliver Told the Truth about the Translation," 84.

19. Interview of Emma Smith by Joseph Smith III, "Last Testimony of Sister Emma," *Saint's Herald* 26, no. 19. p. 289 (1 October 1879): 289, archive.org/details/TheSaintsHerald_Volume_26_1879/page/n287/mode/2up.

Fortunately, there is no basis to see my mention of Emma’s viewpoint as some kind of ethical breach, for in an earlier letter to Emma Pilgrim, Emma Smith affirmed that Joseph used a seer stone after initially using the Urim and Thummim itself. Her 1870 letter supports the Church’s modern position that Joseph transitioned from the Nephite interpreters to the seer stone in the translation work:

Now the first that my <husband> translated, [the book] 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 rather a dark color.²⁰

Brant Gardner was also condemned for promoting the 1879 “Last Testimony,” yet I also fail to see it mentioned or relied upon in his review.²¹ I believe the accusation of deceiving readers on this point was improper. This is an unfortunate misreading of our reviews, but our reviews are not the only sources that were misread.

A repudiation? Misreading Joseph Smith III

Given how my article was misread regarding my alleged promotion of Emma’s “Last Testimony” as authoritative, I was reminded of the related mishandling of sources that so irritated me while reading *By Means of Urim & Thummim*. As a result, I felt a need to check what Joseph Smith III actually said that so “repudiated” the use of a seer stone and, by association, Emma’s “Last Testimony.” Did his repudiation really undermine his mother’s comments?

The astute reader might be wondering, “When a mother shares her personal beliefs and observations to her son in a published interview, what difference does it make if that son later expresses disagreement?” Seven years after he published his interview, if Joseph Smith III decided that he disagreed with his mother on how the Book of Mormon was translated, does that erase her testimony? This would

20. Emma Smith Bidamon, letter to Emma Pilgrim, 27 March 1870, in the Emma Smith Papers, Library-Archives, Community of Christ, Independence, MO, bhroberts.org/records/OiSghu-CyqXGc/emma_smith_reports_that_joseph_used_the_urim_and_thummim_before_the_lost_pages_and_a_dark_seer_stone_afterwards.

21. Brant A. Gardner, “Trust Us, We’re Lawyers: Lucas and Neville on the Translation of the Book of Mormon,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 63 (2025): 135–68, journal.interpreterfoundation.org/trust-us-were-lawyers-lucas-and-neville-on-the-translation-of-the-book-of-mormon/.

not be the first time that a child differed with a parent (and not the first time that a child's difference of opinion had no bearing on the veracity of a parent's testimony).

Here the context and agenda for the later 1886 statement referenced by Lucas needs to be considered. At this time, David Whitmer had become a threat to Joseph Smith III by claiming that his father was a fallen prophet. In the 1886 article, Joseph III strongly criticizes Whitmer and many of his claims. It is natural that under the circumstances and with the need to attack Whitmer's credibility that the seer-stone theory, so frequently espoused by Whitmer, would also come under attack. But does Joseph III's critique constitute a repudiation that undermines Emma's "Last Testimony?" Let's look at what Joseph III actually wrote and see how well it fits Lucas's characterization:

It must be allowed that these men [Joseph and Oliver] best knew by what means the Book of Mormon was translated. **If the stone of which Mr. Whitmer speaks was used in translating, it was in effect a Urim and Thummim**, yet it was evidently not the chief instrument, **nor did its use detract from the Seeric powers of Joseph Smith. It rather confirms and exalts them, showing that the gift of translation and revelation was bestowed of God upon the Seer in person**, and was of first importance and virtue.²²

There seems to be a major discrepancy here. Joseph Smith III may prefer emphasizing the Nephite interpreters and may not be completely convinced that a seer stone was used, but this is far from a repudiation of what Emma said in his 1879 interview. In fact, he makes no mention of her "Last Testimony" in his 1886 critique of Whitmer. If a seer stone was used by the seer instead of the dual-seer-stone Nephite interpreters, Joseph III did not seem to have a fundamental problem with that. Rather, he recognized that such a stone would, in effect, be a Urim and Thummim. Joseph's purported use of a seer stone would not detract from his role as seer, but would "confirm and exalt" his seeric powers.

In my view, Lucas's statement in his response, similar to related statements in *By Means of Urim & Thummim* regarding Joseph Smith III, lacks the needed nuance for a scholarly work and strikes me as

22. Joseph Smith III, "David Whitmer Reviewed," *Saints Herald* 33, no. 45 (13 November 1886): 707, latterdaytruth.org/pdf/100821.pdf, emphasis added.

abusing a cited source. This is a critical flaw in the book's methodology. Lucas sees an article where the author, while suspicious of Whitmer's claims, still leaves the door open for the possibility that a seer stone could have been used by the Seer. That constitutes a repudiation of the seer-stone theory? One that demolished Joseph III's earlier report of Emma's testimony? To me, this is an example of Lucas and Neville occasionally making overreaching claims that are not adequately supported by the documents cited. I remain concerned about their overly aggressive methodology and questionable claims.

To be fair to the authors, though, I think I can explain what may have led Lucas and Neville to feel justified in what I see as a mistaken reading of Joseph III's statement such that Emma's "Last Testimony" appeared to be "repudiated." In their book, they are troubled by that testimony to the degree that they pursue many paths to undermine it. Most interesting is the "new perspective" they propose that suggests that Emma's "Last Testimony" may have been a "summary, interpretation, or characterization" of Emma's "answers" by Joseph III.²³ In other words, the "Last Testimony" was not authored by Emma, but was composed by or largely "ghostwritten" by Joseph III to serve his agenda at the time of distancing his father from polygamy. In this speculative theory, he might have been largely sharing his views and possibly a few of his mother, they argue²⁴ — all this despite the article's mention of a third party, Emma's second husband, who was there as witness:

It was decided to present to her a few prominent questions, which were penned and agreed upon, the answers to which might, so far as she was concerned, settle these differences of opinion. In accordance with this understanding the Senior Editor of the Herald visited Nauvoo, in February last, arriving on the 4th and remaining until the 10th. Sister Emma answered the questions freely and in the presence of her husband, Major Lewis C. Bidamon, who was generally present in their sitting-room where the conversation took place. We were more particular in this, because it had been frequently stated to us: "Ask your mother, she knows."²⁵

To me it's inconceivable that this interview might not have happened or that the answers provided were falsified given that they appeared in

23. Lucas and Neville, *By Means of the Urim & Thummim*, 51.

24. Lucas and Neville, *By Means of the Urim & Thummim*, 51–52.

25. Smith III, "Last Testimony of Sister Emma," 19.

a public record likely to be seen by Emma's family and peers, and published in the same year while Lewis Bidamon was still alive (he passed away years later in 1891²⁶). This makes no sense to me. Solving the problems of the unwanted testimony by making Joseph III a deceiver without evidence in order to defend preconceived notions is much like the "Demonstration Hypothesis" that makes a deceiver of Joseph Smith in the name of honoring him. I enjoy irony, but this is untenable.

In what I would call "The Strange Case of the 'Last Testimony of Sister Emma,'" we find an accusation of promoting a questionable source when the source was not cited, discussed, or relied upon. We are told that the interviewer who published Emma's "Last Testimony" repudiated the stone-in-the-hat theory that Emma mentioned, when the 1886 source does not really support that claim. Strong and sometimes very harsh claims are improperly made while evidence is mangled to comply with pet theories, even if it means unjustly painting others as deceivers. This is not the approach of reliable scholarship.

Did I ignore Eugene Nida's work? Yes! Here's why

Lucas, with reasonable cause, is frustrated that I disregarded their treatment of Eugene A. Nida's work on the nature of translation, particularly Bible translation. Here I must admit to being guilty. Why would I neglect that part of the book? Because I considered it an irrelevant distraction already made moot by other gaps in their approach. It was one of several dozen minor issues (in my opinion) that would be best to ignore for a review that was already growing too long.

While Nida's work has been of profound importance for translators of the Bible and has helped them better recognize the decisions they need to make to better select and achieve the goals of their translation work, what Joseph did is a world apart from the work of modern Bible translators. Modern translators begin with a profound knowledge of the ancient language, an awareness of how words are used throughout the text and how those words are used in documents outside the Bible, and knowledge of how other translations have rendered those words and phrases. They are also aware of ancient cultural issues that help clarify the meaning of many passages and may even know related words in other languages that may have influenced a Greek or Hebrew passage.

26. Gracia Jones, "In Memory of Major Lewis Crum Bidamon—1806–1891," The Joseph Smith Jr and Emma Hale Smith Historical Society, 16 August 2020, josephsmithjr.org/in-memory-of-major-lewis-crum-bidamon-1806-1891/.

Joseph, on the other hand, was faced not just with an unknown language and culture, but with an *undeciphered script*. Nida's principles might be relevant once a script is fully deciphered and an initial translation has been completed that could reveal apparent meaning and intent. Then that preliminary work could be revised iteratively in the context of the whole text and other relevant texts by determining what parts of the translation-in-development might now best employ formal translation or more functional translation. But the idea of Joseph receiving a few words of a nearly literal translation and deciding whether it needed to be kept nearly literal for formal translation purposes or more functional makes no sense. How can Joseph make that decision in his own mind if he does not yet know where the section being translated is going? Is this the beginning of a chiasmus or part of a word play or meaningful Hebraism where specific words need to be strictly employed for a highly formal translation? Is it an allusion to a biblical passage (or "impossibly," a yet-to-be-translated text like the Book of Moses) that had best closely follow other translated language? Or does it cover minor details or historical information without significant rhetorical features that are best given a loose functional translation? One needs to understand the context and agenda of the passage and how it fits in with surrounding or even distant text or other sources before such decisions can be properly contemplated.

Based on how Joseph actually did the translation without rewrites or major revisions, but with a continuous flow of dictated text, the intricate intertextuality and consistency of the result only makes sense if Joseph were being provided the finished text or something very close to it in most cases, not a literal translation that needed to be reworked every time in his own words without any of the knowledge and context that Nida presumes.

Nida, as important as his work may be, is simply irrelevant to the impossible task of decipherment and translation that Joseph faced, and of no value in explaining the miraculous output from that project. The result of Joseph's revelatory process was miraculously dictating an ancient text from an unknown script and unknown language in a continuous manner at high speed, without notes, without massive rewrites, and without first learning the language and coming to terms with internal word usage, tone, and authorial agenda. This miracle cannot be the fruit of a human composing a translation on the fly.

I came to the section on Nida right after making the surprising realization that Lucas and Neville were not willing to seriously consider

the implications of the evidence-based proposals of Carmack and Skousen on the abundant non-biblical Early Modern English influences in the Book of Mormon. They dismissed it as an apologetic attempt “to deflect evidence of Joseph Smith’s active involvement in the creation of the Book of Mormon,”²⁷ which does not fit the history of Carmack and Skousen’s work at all. Without providing any evidence, Lucas and Neville assume that the archaic pre-KJV features in the dictated Book of Mormon text were part of Joseph’s dialect or something he could have picked up from his environment. The most glaring problem with such an assumption is that documents that Joseph either wrote himself or dictated to others do not show that unusual syntax—it is only in the Book of Mormon.

Lucas and Neville assert that Joseph dictated the Book of Mormon in his own dialect, perhaps influenced by old books he had read as well, so that could explain the Early Modern English features, and they assume that his written documents don’t reflect his speech because “speaking and writing are two different skills; people do not write the way they talk.”²⁸ When people write a formal document, they first conceive of a statement and then express it in formal language, which often differs from casual speech in part because more time is spent on coming up with the words to use. But how is this different than the mental processes used when dictating a formal text to a scribe? The text is literally “spoken,” yes, but it differs from casual speech in essentially the same way that writing by hand differs. In fact, even more time may be spent in mentally forming the dictated text because of hearing the text spoken aloud and then pausing for the next phrase to be written before moving forward, giving both time and audio feedback to assist in formulating the words.

The dictated translation of the Book of Mormon has a syntax far different from Joseph’s dictated or handwritten letters or from what we know of Yankee dialect. The literary fingerprint of the dictated Book of Mormon text cannot fairly be ascribed to his efforts to imitate KJV style or to a few remnants of archaic features in Yankee dialect. The serious scholarship of Skousen and Carmack cannot be dismissed with such casual ad hoc arguments. Mountains of evidence weigh against Joseph serving as the primary composer, though he did feel free to revise some portions later (sometimes adjusting awkward grammar, even when doing so might obscure what would later be recognized as

27. Lucas and Neville, *By Means of the Urim & Thummim*, 89.

28. Lucas and Neville, *By Means of the Urim & Thummim*, 90.

evidence of antiquity). I am also open to the possibility of some functional revision on the fly if he felt it necessary. It's not for us to impose rules on what he could or could not do, but we are free to seek to understand what happened.

But if Joseph read the text in finished or nearly finished form, the kind of choices Nida refers to had already been made by someone else before being displayed to Joseph — whether it was God himself or divine agents whom he may have asked to prepare an English translation. Nida's discussion of translation strategies, then, doesn't apply to Joseph and the issue of what tools he used. But even if Joseph were doing the heavy lifting, Nida still doesn't seem to apply in any useful way except as a pedantic tool to characterize the output if we think we know what input was being processed, which we don't. The whole discussion of Nida seems irrelevant without providing real support for Lucas's and Neville's thesis, but perhaps I should have taken the time to point out my objections more clearly.

The mistake of using "literal" to describe Lucas's and Neville's translation theory

Lucas complains that both Gardner and I make a critical mistake in sometimes using "literal" or related terms to characterize the kind of translation that Lucas and Neville propose Joseph received from the Urim and Thummim. (I also referred to it as a "fractional" or "crude" translation.) We are said to be guilty of another ethical breach:

Similarly, neither reviewer uses the term "formal equivalence" in the correct sense, even though it is carefully defined and regularly used in the book. The reviewers' refusal to do so appears to be **deliberate misrepresentation** intended to bias readers against the book's translation explanation.²⁹

Had we paid more attention to their discussion of Nida's work, Lucas seems to feel that we would not have made such a fundamental mistake. That may be true, but in defense, I can say we are not alone.

As a newcomer to the terminology in Lucas's and Neville's work, I hope that I and other readers like Gardner might be forgiven for confusion regarding their terminology. This confusion begins with the very first words in the book related to their thesis on the copyright page as it describes the image on the cover:

29. Lucas, "Joseph and Oliver Told the Truth about the Translation," 94, emphasis added.

As Joseph turns the leaf of the plates, he is studying out in his mind the best way to express in English the meaning of **the literal translation** of the characters provided by the Urim and Thummim, which he will then dictate to Oliver Cowdery to write down.³⁰

That discussion of the “literal translation” from the Urim and Thummim is provided by Lucas and Neville, who now accuse us of “deliberate misrepresentation” for similar terminology. Please note that the text being studied in the image on the book’s cover is in the middle of the gold plates. It is not the last plate with the title page, for which Joseph once spoke of a having provided a “literal translation” — a term to which I think Lucas and Neville give unjustified emphasis. Joseph had not yet studied foreign language and may not have realized how often a strictly literal translation of individual words may be a terrible and quite unusable translation of the actual meaning, an important point to keep in mind with respect to the translation theory of the authors. I think Joseph used “literal” to mean a “real and precise” translation of the very words on that last plate, just as today we might say, “I literally translated it from the last page” without saying how the translation was done or how strictly it follows the meaning of the original words or their word order. Likewise, if asked, Joseph may have said that the first page of the lost 116 pages was a “literal” translation of the first plate in the book of Lehi, etc.

The copyright page is not the only place that might have misled me into using the word “literal.” The authors also variously speak of the hypothesized translation system being “literalistic,”³¹ “close-to-Nephite literal English,”³² “close to literal,”³³ and “a more literal English.”³⁴ I sense that the authors may misunderstand how great the gap is between anything close to a literal translation and an intelligible, finished English translation — especially in translating from languages in distant language families. Such linguistic remoteness makes it unlikely that a literal or close-to-literal translation could be a suitable basis for Joseph to then render it into a finished translation, whether it was a mostly formal or functional translation. Such a displayed incomplete translation

30. Lucas and Neville, *By Means of the Urim & Thummim*, copyright page, emphasis added.

31. Lucas and Neville, *By Means of the Urim & Thummim*, 186, 190, 196.

32. Lucas and Neville, *By Means of the Urim & Thummim*, 186.

33. Lucas and Neville, *By Means of the Urim & Thummim*, 189, 190.

34. Lucas and Neville, *By Means of the Urim & Thummim*, 196.

could not reasonably sustain the fluent intertextuality and textual consistency of the Book of Mormon if significant work remained to be done to make sense of what was revealed. Converting a literal or close to literal translation to meaningful English scripture requires skills similar to those of modern Bible translators — skills that Joseph lacked.

Reading Lucas’s response, it seems that he is distancing his model from anything associated with the word “literal” to a much more usable formal translation that a genuine bible scholar might render for a biblical text. But that is not what I found in his and Neville’s book when their translation theory was finally proposed:

We propose a translation model which we believe resolves these apparently conflicting lines of evidence. We suggest that the interpreters did display English, as all the witnesses said, but that the text displayed on the two “stone” screens was not a complete, final interpretation of the engravings. Instead, the interpreters provided a **literalistic** English rendition of the Nephite characters. In some cases, it may have been transliterated phonetic spellings of proper names and foreign words untranslated in the Nephite text such as *cureloms*.

The isolated meanings for each character given by the interpreters would rarely transfer directly word-for-word into contemporary English. [This sure sounds like a literal translation.] Even the Title Page, which Joseph said was a literal translation, includes English pronouns and conjunctions to make the text flow coherently.

Carrying on the analogy to modern technology from Chapter 5(C), software on our smartphones can already “look” at foreign language characters and instantly display them in English. In that sense, the software literally “translates” the characters, but does not interpret the meaning in a fully useful way. . . .

The important comparison is that the English read-out displayed on the interpreters’ double screens was not a final translation. It was left to Joseph to render the **close-to-Nephite literal English presentation** displayed on the interpreters into English which would be meaningful to modern readers, a deliberative process that involved myriad word and grammar choices he had to study out in his mind using his own learning and linguistic resources. Further,

as with any literary work, the translator continued to refine his work as his spiritual understanding and language skills grew.³⁵

The incomplete translation that supposedly required intense mental work and sorting through a myriad of complex possibilities to get an English translation really doesn't seem to fit the concept of intelligible formal equivalence. If a true "formal equivalence" was provided, it would be an intelligible result and an essentially finished product when formal equivalence made sense. The authors seem to insist on something far less finished, and so I can see why they so frequently used forms of "literal" in describing the translation. I hope the authors will have some sympathy for my error.

I can accept that the *finished* text of the Book of Mormon may have a spectrum of translation approaches ranging from formal to functional equivalence, in ways that could be consistent to some degree with functional examples proposed in Gardner's works.

The question to me is who generated the more functional translations? At least some of them could have been already provided in the text displayed to Joseph Smith. The existence of apparently relatively functional phrasing in some places does not require Joseph Smith to have composed that text nor to have been sorting through a myriad of word, grammar, and style choices each time he confronted a short new chunk of nearly literal text, unaware of what followed, unaware of what rhetorical or literary tools it was employing, and unaware of what allusions to other scripture it might be making. Had he been sorting through all the possibilities in his own mind, we might not have much more than a fraction of 1 Nephi after sixty days of translation and would likely have a text rife with rewrites to account for what he learned later.

Making the plates of no value?

Lucas quotes Richard Bushman to challenge the idea of seeing a translation in a seer stone, as if this would devalue the golden plates and the history of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon. Here there may be a subtle problem in a quotation:

Yet modern advocates of the stone-in-the-hat narrative have made the entire divine saga of the coming forth of the

35. Lucas and Neville, *By Means of the Urim & Thummim*, 186–87, emphasis (bold) added; italic in original.

Book of Mormon largely irrelevant. At the end of his book on the plates, Bushman asks,

Why the plates at all? So long as it was believed Joseph read from the plates through the Urim and Thummim, their purpose was clear. But if he read the text from a seer stone while the plates lay covered on the table, as many now believe, . . . why the effort to preserve them through the centuries, why the trouble to recover and protect them, why their presence?³⁶

Upon checking this source, a minor gripe is that Bushman does not present this as *his* question, but as his characterization of how lay Latter-day Saints may react to the debates on the translation. He is expressing how the details of translation remain unsolved and puzzling, not necessarily railing against a theory he rejects. Here is the context:

The puzzle of translation has not been solved. How the words came to flow from Joseph Smith's mouth into the ears of the scribes and then on to paper remains unresolved. We have plenty of hypotheses and no agreement. **Among lay Latter-day Saints, the question is, Why the plates at all?** So long as it was believed Joseph read from the plates through the Urim and Thummim, their purpose was clear. But if he read the text from a seer stone while the plates lay covered on the table, as many now believe, what part did they play? Why the effort to preserve them through the centuries, why the trouble to recover and protect them, why their presence? Sometimes it looks as if the plates were both essential to translation and useless. And so their story begins and ends in a puzzle.³⁷

The question about the value of the plates that might occur to some members of the Church is a fair question to raise, but it has long been answered. The plates contain tangible, remarkable evidence for the existence of an ancient sacred record, showing that Mormon, Moroni, Nephi, and the ancient Nephites were a real people with a sacred record. The Testimony of Three Witnesses and The Testimony

36. Lucas, "Joseph and Oliver Told the Truth about the Translation," 94. Lucas is quoting Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith's Gold Plates: A Cultural History* (New York: Oxford University, 2023), 181.

37. Bushman, *Joseph Smith's Gold Plates*, 181, emphasis added.

of Eight Witnesses are precious documents providing powerful evidence of the ancient and divine origins of the record. They not only bear witness of the role of Joseph Smith as a prophet and seer and of the reality of the Book of Mormon, but they even provide tangible evidence of the reality of the Messiah, Jesus Christ, as Elder Mark E. Petersen has noted.³⁸

The power of the plates as a witness of Christ and the Restoration is not diminished by the details of any translation process. Today ancient documents are often translated by first scanning them and then having scholars examine digitized images. This does not diminish the physical reality of the manuscript from which the images came or from which computer-aided enhancements of text and even translation of text came. The important thing is that the translation was created from an authentic, tangible manuscript. How a translation process worked is irrelevant when it is divine — unless one creates an excessively narrow definition of the flexible word *translation*.

Mistranslating “translate”

Like B. H. Roberts rejecting the traditional model of translation where Joseph saw the text in both the Nephite interpreters and a seer stone, Lucas and Neville reject a modern form of that traditional model because it doesn't demand enough from Joseph to make him a “translator” doing the intense mental effort of translating a foreign language (in an unknown script, for the record). Part of their problem is an overly narrow scope for what *translate* can mean. In his response, Lucas insists that one particular definition for *translate* is what the word obviously means. With Nida's teachings being so important to his work, I might have thought that he would consider how Joseph applied the word *translate* in a variety of contexts before assuming that a standard modern dictionary definition is what Joseph always meant when speaking of translating the Book of Mormon. While I think the specific definition might be OK, it's how Lucas “translates” that definition that creates the problem:

Just as the stone-in-the-hat narrative makes the plates and interpreters superfluous, it also renders the concept of Joseph as translator meaningless. And Joseph Smith and

38. Mark E. Petersen, “Evidence of Things Not Seen,” *Ensign*, May 1978, 61, churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/1978/04/evidence-of-things-not-seen.

his fellow early Saints understood perfectly well that the word *translate* meant "to render into another language; to express the sense of one language in the words of another."³⁹

Lucas gives us definition #6 from Webster's 1828 dictionary.⁴⁰ There is no reason this does not fit either the use of a Urim and Thummim or the seer stone to translate. There is not even a requirement to first decipher a script or to have mastered the grammar and vocabulary of the language or to exert great mental effort in providing the translation. There is no reason this does not fit Joseph acting as a composer who creates words from impressions to his mind or from near-literal text displayed to him, or as a seer who gains revelation that enables him to see a finished translation in a revelatory device or even just in his mind. There are many possible technical details for a translation to be made, but if there is a foreign text and a human agent is able to "to render" that text "into another language" such as English, then we are in the realm of Webster's sixth definition of "translate." As Lucas continues, he doesn't seem to recognize that this definition does not really bring the perceived victory of ruling out the seer stone or a vision of a finished translation versus an imperfect one.

This was a difficult part of his argument for me to grasp, but I think the point is that "everyone knows" that translating means heavy mental lifting to create a translation (from the known script of a known language, I must add), while "merely" miraculously seeing the finished divine translation (as opposed to the incomplete or literal translation proposal that B. H. Roberts found to be offensive) is just not good enough to count—it's not enough work on Joseph's part. That's not what Webster said, though, and it's not what Joseph or the Lord said.

I feel that if Lucas and Neville had begun with the question of "What did 'translate' mean to Joseph?," they might have developed a more reasonable theory. Better still, they might have realized that translating without studying a script or even staring at it could still occur with divine aid, as it did repeatedly, with intelligible English sometimes given right away.

An important clue on the meaning of *translate* is found in the scriptures. In Doctrine and Covenants 45, the Lord reminded Joseph of the need to have the New Testament be "translated" (v. 60) and said,

39. Lucas, "Joseph and Oliver Told the Truth about the Translation," 88–89.

40. Noah Webster, ed., *An American Dictionary of the English Language* (New York: S. Converse, 1828), s.v. "translate," webstersdictionary1828.com/Dictionary/translate.

“Wherefore I give unto you that ye may now translate it” (v. 61). This was part of Joseph Smith’s translation of the Bible, a divinely appointed project in which he had no original Greek nor Hebrew text to work with, and still no knowledge of Greek nor Hebrew as he began. Rather, he would ponder the English text and create interpretations, revisions, or new material. This was all *translation* according to the Lord and as understood by Joseph. There is no record of using either the Urim and Thummim or a seer stone for this project. The first part of the work was the miraculous delivery of the “Vision of Moses,” a document given purely by revelation. It was followed by further revelations that build on Genesis 1–6, apparently with a recently purchased Bible before Joseph, to give us our current Book of Moses and the rest of his translation of the Bible.

Before that, in April 1829, Joseph inquired through the Urim and Thummim and was shown the translation of a hidden parchment written by John. Here Joseph saw a translation without having the source document before him. If divine translation could occur of a lost manuscript on another continent, if it even still exists, then why the strident objections to translating gold plates that might be a couple of feet away or covered on the table? Likewise for the Book of Abraham, we aren’t sure if the Joseph Smith papyri contained the text that was given to Joseph as the Book of Abraham. Joseph and his peers were obviously interested in studying out the meaning of the Egyptian script, but that was an apparently unsuccessful process which appears to have begun *after* the translation was done, not as a precursor to translation.⁴¹

Clearly there was great diversity in Joseph’s role as a translator. We must not reject divinely approved modes of translation using narrow definitions to exclude unlikely theories.

Misreading Brigham Young’s statement

In Lucas’s reply, he discussed a statement of Brigham Young as if it rebuts the allegedly muddled statement of Wilford Woodruff in 1841 that calls a seer stone a Urim and Thummim:

The earliest reference stone-in-the-hat advocates can point to is a garbled entry in Wilford Woodruff’s journal of a meeting with Joseph in 1841. However, even this is problematic,

41. John Gee, *An Introduction to the Book of Abraham* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2017).

as Brigham Young's description of the same meeting makes clear that Joseph continued to use the term in connection with the translation of the Book of Mormon only to refer to the interpreters, while referring to other seer stones separately. Brigham recorded that Joseph "explained to us the Urim and Thummim which he found with the plates, called in the Book of Mormon the Interpreters. He 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." "History of Brigham Young," *The Latter-day Saints' Millennial Star* 26, no. 8 (20 February 1864), 118–19, archive.org/details/MStarVol26/page/n133/mode/2up; and Elden J. Watson, ed., *Manuscript History of Brigham Young 1801–1844* (Salt Lake City: Smith Secretarial Service, 1968), 112a.⁴²

Lucas makes it sound as if Brigham were supporting his and Neville's theory, when his statement is showing that both devices can be sacred visionary tools. After mentioning the Urim and Thummim that came with the plates (the Nephite interpreters with two stones), Brigham immediately moves to the topic of the seer stone that all should have were it not for wickedness. Then he displayed his seer stone. The concept of a single, sacred, visionary stone that can be called a Urim and Thummim fits perfectly with Doctrine and Covenants 130:8–11:

The place where God resides is a great Urim and Thummim. This earth, in its sanctified and immortal state, will be made like unto crystal and will be a Urim and Thummim to the inhabitants who dwell thereon, 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 Christ's.

Then the white stone mentioned in Revelation 2:17, will become a Urim and Thummim to each individual who receives one, whereby things pertaining to a higher order of kingdoms will be made known; And a white stone is given to each of those who come into the celestial kingdom, whereon

42. Lucas, "Joseph and Oliver Told the Truth about the Translation," 85n10.

is a new name written, which no man knoweth save he that receiveth it. The new name is the key word.

These single stones or other objects, each called a Urim and Thummim, can reveal visions of sacred things, including sacred writing (“a new name written”), clearly related to the role of divine seer stones used by seers to see sacred things and translate sacred writing. Thus, canonized scripture teaches that there is not just one and only one Urim and Thummim that can be used for revelatory purposes, but that a single stone can also serve that purpose and bear that epithet.

This brings me to an overall objection to Lucas’s reply: he seems to insist on making all issues purely black and white, with no middle ground. Thus, Lucas writes that “we argue that the conflict between the stone-in-the-hat narrative and Joseph and Oliver’s testimonies is fundamental and irreconcilable.”⁴³ We either fully accept a quote from the Prophet or make him a liar. Likewise, the Urim and Thummim can *only* be the Nephite interpreters, two clear stones set in a frame; to suggest otherwise is an “effort to obfuscate.”⁴⁴ Such a polarized, extreme view verges on a fundamentalism that cannot consider a nuanced argument and the unavoidable conflicts that arise in complex matters of which we know very little. But at least we should recognize that scripture teaches us that there has been more than one Urim and Thummim in antiquity and that there will be many in the future, not all having the same form. Recognizing this helps us appreciate the potential for “Urim and Thummim” to refer to more than one object over the years. This is hardly obfuscation. It’s necessary nuance for approaching a complex issue.

Mischaracterizing Royal Skousen

In an offensively sarcastic mistreatment of one of the most dedicated and careful Book of Mormon scholars, Lucas offers feigned praise for Royal Skousen’s “courage” in coming out and declaring what stone-in-the-hat supporters allegedly really believe about the honesty of Joseph Smith: that he “lied about the translation of the Book of Mormon.” Lucas hypes the implications of Skousen’s new declaration made in the final weeks of 2024 (actually Skousen’s document, as mentioned in footnote 33 of my review, has been online on The Interpreter Foundation website since 2021), in which Skousen notes

43. Lucas, “Joseph and Oliver Told the Truth about the Translation,” 84.

44. Lucas, “Joseph and Oliver Told the Truth about the Translation,” 86.

that Joseph's statement about translating the Book of Mormon by means of the Urim and Thummim "is only partially true"⁴⁵ since he also used a seer stone that is not mentioned. "Only partially true" here could equally well be expressed as "incomplete" or even "deliberately incomplete." The data seem to indicate that a seer stone was used, in addition to the Urim and Thummim. Yes, the seer stone could be called a Urim and Thummim and sometimes was, but Joseph's statement includes the context of the Nephite interpreters, so "partially true" seems a reasonable expression.

For Oliver, Skousen suggests that claiming to translate with the Urim and Thummim "appears to be deliberately misleading" since he understands that there was a transition to the seer stone by the time Oliver translated. While we don't have statements from others supporting the use of the Urim and Thummim while he was translating, it's possible that there were episodes since both revelatory tools were apparently available. We just don't know. I think this is why Skousen uses the cautious phrasing that his statement "appears" to be deliberately misleading. But perhaps it was not. (See the following section for another perspective.)

In this matter, we see the "problem" with careful scholars: when the data point to something uncomfortable for us, such as tensions between details and general statements, they discuss it, warts and all. Skousen lets us know that there were strong incentives for both Joseph and Oliver to downplay the seer-stone issue for the public given the harmful harassment and even legal threats previously experienced. As noted earlier, there will be some tension on this issue no matter what we say or what creative new theories we devise (like the Demonstration Hypothesis) to try to cancel what irritates us. Instead, I recommend considering the context and the pressures faced and not be too quick to judge good people dealing with complex issues. That includes leaders like Joseph, Oliver, or Russell M. Nelson and modern scholars like Royal Skousen.

Failure to consider Joseph's and Oliver's statements

While Lucas accuses me of ignoring Joseph's and Oliver's statements indicating that the Urim and Thummim was used to translate,

45. Skousen, "The Witnesses of the Book of Mormon," 62 (or p. 22 of the preprint in "Update of the Pre-Print of a Discussion of the Book of Mormon Witnesses," *Interpreter Foundation Blog*.)

the conflict between those statements and the seer stone theory was certainly addressed in my review:

At the same time, we have statements from Joseph and Oliver (these are included and discussed in Skousen's chapter, along with many other witness statements) that don't mention the seer stone and only speak of the Urim and Thummim. Skousen proposes that both men felt a need to downplay the role of the seer stone given the trouble Joseph had already faced in that area. There's no way to eliminate tension here: either many witness statements need to just be disregarded, or we must accept incomplete or inaccurate reporting on some details of the translation from Joseph and Oliver. Again, I appreciate the desire of Lucas and Neville to create a tidy scenario, but I feel they create more problems than they believe they have solved.⁴⁶

As noted previously, one can say that Joseph was incomplete or only "partially true" and that Oliver appears to have been misleading to avoid causing trouble with respect to the public's misunderstanding of seer stones. However, the possibility certainly arises that during the time that Oliver served as a scribe, both the Nephite interpreters and the seer stone were employed at different times, as the Church's Gospel Topics Essay states. Both can be called the "Urim and Thummim" or "interpreters"—after all, the Nephite interpreters were really two seer stones set in a frame.⁴⁷ Thus, the statements of both Joseph and Oliver, even when also referencing the Nephite interpreters, could be understood to mean that the translation was done by interpreters or by Urim and Thummim, whether the Nephite interpreters/seer stone provided with the plates or the interpreters/seer stones that Joseph had found (a white one and a brown one).

Despite the failure to specifically mention the seer stone, the affirmation that the translation was done by the Urim and Thummim may be more defensible than Lucas allows. A seer stone can be "in effect" a Urim and Thummim if used to translate, as Joseph Smith III observed

46. Lindsay, "Through a Glass Darkly," 197–98.

47. Note that the frame was too large to work as dual-lensed "spectacles," contrary to the image Lucas and Neville employ on the cover of their book showing Joseph viewing "the literal translation," per the caption on their copy-right page, of some passage within the gold plates while he has both stones over his eyes like eyeglasses.

in his alleged repudiation of the seer stone theory.⁴⁸ Oliver does not say that the tools Joseph used were limited to the Nephite interpreters. It's possible that both were used (an added reason for this follows). Here are the two key statements of Oliver:

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."⁴⁹

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 the means of the Urim and Thummim, or, as it is called by that book, "Holy Interpreters."⁵⁰

These statements associate the translator aids that Joseph used with the Nephite interpreters, but is it an association of exact identity or of the class and function of the device? A reasonable reading might be that he was saying, perhaps with deliberate lack of specificity, that Joseph translated with the Urim and Thummim, a tool identical to or equivalent to the tool known to the Nephites, who called this kind of tool "interpreters." There is the issue of saying "*the* Urim and Thummim" rather than "a Urim and Thummim," which may make Oliver's statement still incomplete or "partially true."

This prepares us to understand the real gap that Lucas is seeking to widen. In light of what we learn from Lucas's objections, I propose that the use of one vs. two seer stones is not the source of the visceral reaction against the "stone-in-a-hat" theory. Rather, the real issue may be the hat.

Facing the real gap: Looking in a hat or at the plates?

Whether a revelatory aid that would gradually be called a Urim and Thummim employed one or two seer stones may be a minor detail. The real fundamental gap in the physical details of the clashing theories is whether a hat can be used versus staring openly at the plates

48. Smith III, "David Whitmer Reviewed," 707.

49. Oliver Cowdery, letter to W. W. Phelps, 7 September 1834, published the next month in the *Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate*, as cited by Skousen, "The Witnesses of the Book of Mormon," 62.

50. Oliver Cowdery, as recorded by Reuben Miller in his journal, 21 October 1848, published in 1859 in the *Deseret News*, as cited by Skousen, "The Witnesses of the Book of Mormon," 62.

while translating, as depicted in some paintings and drawings that many of us often saw years ago. On this issue, Lucas's and Neville's insistence that we consider Doctrine and Covenants 9 to understand the translation leads to a meaningful advance in approaching the problem of what Oliver experienced and how translation was done.

Part of the divide that Lucas and Neville offer is the insistence that the only way to translate with the Urim and Thummim is as shown in the questionable image on their cover, namely, studying and trying to make sense of a "close-to-Nephite literal" translation while peering directly at the visible plates through the dual stones of the Nephite interpreters to engage with the specific passage being translated. This is strictly a hat-free process. But, as I pondered Lucas's reply and his insistence on a fundamental and irreconcilable gap between his preferred method and theories involving a seer stone, an important new gap emerged in light of Doctrine and Covenants 9, a key factor motivating Lucas's and Neville's work.

The context for the revelation about the burning of the bosom in Doctrine and Covenants 9:7–9 is an episode in April 1829 when Oliver sought to translate. In fact, *he attempted translation* but failed. As Stan Spencer notes, "Doctrine and Covenants 9:5 observes that Oliver Cowdery 'began to translate,' which suggests that he actually did translate and must have known how to do so." (This important verse is not treated by Lucas and Neville.) Understanding that Oliver had attempted to translate helped Spencer identify the antecedent context behind the "it" of vv. 7–9, which likely refers to the issue of whether it was right for Oliver to translate then, not the basic question of *how* to translate in the first place.

A key question now is *how did Oliver attempt to translate?* There are two reasonable possibilities: (1) he looked into the Nephite interpreters, as Joseph may have been doing at the time or certainly had done, or (2) he looked into a seer stone. But it seems that we can be certain he was not looking *through* the Nephite Urim and Thummim *at the plates* in an attempt to decipher a foreign script and come up with proposals to test in prayer. Why? Because *Oliver had not yet become a witness to the plates*, which would not happen until June 1829 — he did not yet have permission to look at the plates. Thus, whichever form of a seer stone Oliver was attempting to use, one or two from the Nephite interpreters or one of Joseph's non-Nephite seer stones, he wasn't looking at the plates.

So, what was Oliver doing? If he were using the Nephite seer

stones, perhaps he was following the method that faithful Latter-day Saint Joseph Knight Sr. described regarding Joseph's work:

Now the way he translated was he **put the urim and thummim into his hat** and Darkned his Eyes then he would take a sentence 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.⁵¹

Whether it was the Nephite dual-seer-stone Urim and Thummim (of which only one seer stone might have been used at a time) or a single seer stone, the only way that seems to work for an attempted translation was for Oliver to be looking into a seer stone. How? If he was not able to look at the plates, then what? Then he may have done what so many witnesses saw Joseph doing: looking at the seer stone(s) in a hat. I don't know that for sure, but I think it seems clear he was not staring at the plates that he was still forbidden to see, trying to work out a translation of what he saw.

Since this was Oliver's first attempt at translation, it would make sense that Joseph allowed him to use the "premier" translation tool, the original Nephite Urim and Thummim, to have the best shot at success, but that's just speculation. Either way seems possible. But if Joseph was using the Nephite interpreters at the time and shared them with Oliver (with divine permission, of course), then Oliver would have been translating while the Nephite tool was in use. Joseph may have started relying on the seer stone shortly after this, accounting for the witnesses statements about the seer stone. If so, Oliver's statements are less objectionable than the alternative possibility of only having translated with the seer stone.

Here it seems that canonized scripture gives us an important clue that may rule out some of the strident claims made by Lucas and Neville about how the translation *must* have been done and mitigates their denouncements of those who believe a seer stone was used. It also makes the possibility of a hat being used even more plausible, for the other option of necessarily staring at the plates was certainly not required.

Doctrine and Covenants 9 turns out to be more important than I previously appreciated.

51. Joseph Knight Senior, reminiscence in his own hand dated between 1835 and 1847 (the year of his death), as cited by Skousen, "The Witnesses of the Book of Mormon," 62, emphasis added.

Minor Issues

Lucas claims that I said Joseph never used the Nephite Urim and Thummim after they were returned, citing my article at p. 170. To say that the seer stone was used after the Urim and Thummim was returned does not indicate that the Urim and Thummim was never used. Thereafter I quote the Church's Gospel Topics Essay on Book of Mormon translation which says "Apparently for convenience, Joseph often translated with the single seer stone rather than the two stones bound together to form the interpreters. These two instruments — the interpreters and the seer stone — were apparently interchangeable."⁵² This suggests that both could be used. I did not intend to provide any speculation on exactly when the two instruments were used. But see Emma's 1870 letter to Emma Pilgrim discussed earlier.

I also disagree with the claim that those of us who think a seer stone was used for some of the translation believe that "all instances where Joseph and Oliver used the term [Urim and Thummim], they meant the scrying stone as well as the interpreters."⁵³ That's certainly not what I said. Even noting that the term Urim and Thummim can be used to describe both items does not mean that a dual reference was always or even regularly meant.

A Final Note on Terminology

I'm frustrated by the insistence of using pejorative terminology to cast emotional shade on the established term "seer stone." Calling it a "scrying stone" highlights the folk magic controversy that had caused so much trouble for Joseph. "Scrying stone" is a rarely used term except in some fantasy games. Why not use the term that significant witnesses used (including Wilford Woodruff and Brigham Young), that modern leaders of the Church have used, that the Church's Gospel Topics Essay on Book of Mormon translation used — seer stone? Yes, "scrying stones" or peep stones were part of Joseph's environment, but in the translation work, he was acting as a seer and the stones he used — whether in the Nephite interpreters or the single stone he placed in a hat — should be called seer stones. To call them "scrying stones" is to echo the hostile critics who attacked Joseph and demeaned his role as a seer, just as the authors' pejorative term

52. "Book of Mormon Translation," *Gospel Topics Essays*.

53. Lucas, "Joseph and Oliver Told the Truth about the Translation," 85.

"SITH" associates the use of a seer stone with forces of evil in the Star Wars tradition. Cute, but inappropriate.

Conclusions

When it comes to the details of how the translation was done, if they really matter, there is room for a variety of theories that faithful people may hold. For those who care about the details, debate is inevitable because of the lack of definitive statements that clarify exactly how the translation process worked and because of gaps and conflicts in some of the evidence.

What we have are a mountain of clues including:

- recorded statements of Joseph, his scribes, his peers, observers, and others;
- the written manuscripts themselves, especially the Original Manuscript and the Printer's Manuscript, which provide intriguing details about the oral dictation;
- hints from scripture;
- the analysis of scholars and students of the Book of Mormon who examine various aspects of the evidence, sometimes introducing additional arguments from further considerations (e.g., analogies to modern translation methods and tools or consideration of historical context and its impact on the motivations for or potential agenda behind various statements); and
- official statements from the Church, such as the Gospel Topics Essay, "Book of Mormon Translation," which remains strongly at odds with the thesis of Lucas and Neville.

Unfortunately, our ignorance of the details of how the divine translation was done is not easily overcome by considering the mountain of clues, for there is no simple, satisfying, unifying theory that neatly resolves the apparent clashes in some of the evidence. No matter which theory one selects for whatever reason, there is a need for nuance and a recognition of tension between one's preferred theory and the evidence.

I can respect the desire of Lucas and Neville to defend the prophetic role of Joseph Smith in their approach. Their approach, however, so often seems to force the evidence to fit their agenda, sometimes at the cost of poorly characterizing the evidence. While it is possible that their overall theory is correct, their methodology is not,

and that is the fundamental shortcoming in their work. Unfortunately, Lucas's response to my book review provides further examples of this problem in addition to those I previously detailed. I hope the authors will redirect their efforts or revise their theories to not be as extreme and inflexible as they seem to me, often leading to ironic and undesirable results like the Demonstration Hypothesis.

It's time we recognize the real miracle of Joseph's translation as the work of God in marvelous ways that gave us such a consistent, rich, and powerful text. The Book of Mormon is majestic, the fruit of a marvelous translation process through a great Seer. Whatever the translation aids and whatever mental processes were involved in the remarkably swift pace of translation, the result required no massive rewrites as each new dictated phrase from an unknown language and unknown script could fit into complex rhetorical structures including chiasmus, make subtle textual allusions even to text not yet translated (both in the Book of Mormon and the Book of Moses), maintain remarkable consistency in terminology, provide powerful poetry, and be able to touch the hearts and change the lives of millions in its witness of Jesus Christ. We can squabble over the cloudy details of the translation, but let's focus on the marvelous work and wonder that has yet many miracles to work if we will take it seriously.



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