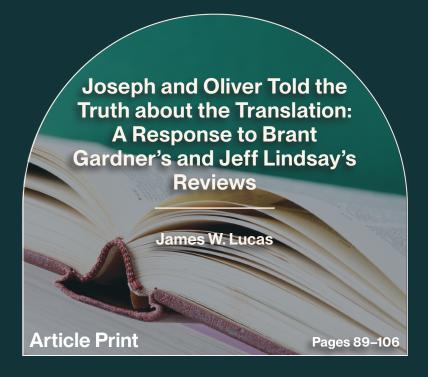


# Interpreter

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### Joseph and Oliver Told the Truth about the Translation: A Response to Brant Gardner's and Jeff Lindsay's Reviews

#### James W. Lucas

Abstract: Two recent reviews of By Means of the Urim & Thummim: Restoring Translation to the Restoration by Jeff Lindsay and Brant Gardner seriously misrepresent the book's argument. Perhaps most significantly, they largely sidestep the book's central thesis that the statements by Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery that the Book of Mormon was translated from the plates using the "Urim and Thummim" interpreters which God provided with the plates should be at the center of any account of the Book of Mormon's production. Prioritizing problematic and unreliable seer stone accounts conflicts with the testimonies of these primary eyewitnesses, and thus is not a useful basis for formulating any faithful understanding of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon.

[Editor's note: We are pleased to present this response to two recent book reviews in the pages of Interpreter. Consistent with practice in many academic journals, we are also publishing a rejoinder from the authors of those reviews immediately following this response.]

Volume 63 (2025) of the *Interpreter* includes two reviews of the book *By Means of the Urim & Thummim: Restoring Translation to the Restoration* by Jonathan E. Neville and me. These are "Trust Us, We're Lawyers: Lucas and Neville on the Translation of the Book of Mormon" by Brant A. Gardner (pp. 135–68) and "Through a Glass Darkly: Restoring Translation to the Restoration?" by Jeff Lindsay (pp. 169–202).

Both reviews are so replete with misunderstandings and misrepresentations of our book that I find myself chagrined to be in the position of authors I previously would have chuckled at, wondering if the reviewers actually read the book as opposed to skimming through it just to find points to attack. On point after point, despite sixty-seven combined pages, they ignore the book's explicit responses to issues they raise, leaving the reader with an inaccurate and distorted misinterpretation of the book's argument.

I appreciate the *Interpreter*'s editors' willingness to allow me to: (1) succinctly summarize the book's argument since readers would not be able to garner that from these reviews, and (2) lay out how going forward we might better construct a faithful narrative of the Book of Mormon's production. (My co-author and I have posted a detailed commentary on the reviews elsewhere.)

## The Key Question: Joseph and Oliver's Honesty in the Shadow of Royal Skousen's Honesty

In what is called the Wentworth Letter, Joseph Smith gave the following particulars on the source of the Book of Mormon:

These records were engraven on plates which had the appearance of gold, each plate was six inches wide and eight inches long, and not quite so thick as common tin. They were filled with engravings, in Egyptian characters and bound together in a volume, as the leaves of a book with three rings running through the whole. . . . With the records was found a curious instrument which the ancients called "Urim and Thummim," which consisted of two transparent stones set in the rim of a bow fastened to a breast plate. Through the medium of the Urim and Thummim I translated the record by the gift, and power of God.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1.</sup> Jonathan E. Neville, "Review of Jeff Lindsay's Review of *By Means of the Urim and Thummim*," *Interpreter Peer Reviews* (blog), 16 December 2024, interpreter peerreviews.blogspot.com/2024/12/review-of-jeff-lindsays-review-of-by .html; and James W. Lucas, "Review of Brant Gardner's Review of *By Means of the Urim and Thummim*," *Interpreter Peer Reviews* (blog), 3 December 2024, interpreterpeerreviews.blogspot.com/2024/12/review-of-brant-gardners -review-of-by.html.

<sup>2. &</sup>quot;Church History," *Times and Seasons*, 1 March 1842, josephsmithpapers .org/paper-summary/church-history-1-march-1842/2, emphasis added.

Oliver Cowdery, principal scribe for the Book of Mormon we have today, gave a similar account:

These were days never to be forgotten to sit under the sound of a voice dictated by the inspiration of heaven, awakened the utmost gratitude of this bosom! Day after day I continued, uninterrupted, to write from his mouth, as he translated. with the Urim and Thummim, or, as the Nephites would have said, "Interpreters," the history or record called "The book of Mormon."3

By Means of the Urim & Thummim includes an appendix with thirty written or other reliably sourced statements from Joseph and Oliver attributing the translation to the use of the "Urim and Thummim" interpreters which were deposited with the plates, but neither Gardner nor Lindsay mentioned this in their reviews. Instead, both reviews studiously avoid any material references to Joseph Smith or Oliver Cowdery as historical sources. This is disappointing but expected as it is the common practice of all advocates of the stone-in-the-hat narrative.

As we suggest in the book, the quantity of these statements from Joseph and Oliver on this specific point may be due to the appearance of the stone-in-the-hat narrative in 1834 in the first anti-LDS book, E. B. Howe's *Mormonism Unvailed*. Howe states that Joseph produced the Book of Mormon using "the old 'peep stone,' which he formerly used in money-digging [which was] placed in a hat, or box, into which he also thrust his face." Decades later other accounts relating to Joseph's use of a scrying stone with the Book of Mormon appeared. (I use the term scrying stone rather than seer stone for the rock Joseph may have used in his possible folk magic related activities to distinguish it from the two stones in the interpreters which some also refer to as seer stones.) The longest chapter of By Means of the Urim & Thummim provides a critical analysis of these accounts, which

<sup>3. &</sup>quot;History, 1834-1836," p. 47, Joseph Smith Papers, josephsmithpapers.org /paper-summary/history-1834-1836/49?p=49,emphasisadded.AlsoinJoseph Smith—History 1:71, footnote, churchofjesuschrist.org/study/scriptures/pgp /js-h/1.

<sup>4.</sup> Eber B. Howe, Mormonism Unvailed: Or, A Faithful Account of That Singular Imposition and Delusion, from Its Rise to the Present Time [...] (Painesville, OH: Eber D. Howe, 1834),18, archive.org/details/mormonismunvaile00howe. On the same page. Howe referred to the Urim and Thummim as an alternative narrative.

scholars have largely accepted at face value, i.e., without detailed examination as to their credibility. Our chapter 2 examines the most frequently used stone-in-the-hat accounts and finds them to be of questionable reliability.

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. 5 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.6 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.

In *By Means of the Urim & Thummim*, we argue that the conflict between the stone-in-the-hat narrative and Joseph and Oliver's testimonies is fundamental and irreconcilable. For example, the source of the largest number of stone-in-the-hat accounts, David Whitmer, repeatedly claimed that the reason Joseph had to use the scrying stone was because the Urim and Thummim interpreters were not returned to him after the 116 pages entrusted to Martin Harris were lost (despite David not even being in Harmony when these events occurred). According to Whitmer, this punishment was due to Joseph's "transgressions." However, Joseph specifically claimed

<sup>5.</sup> Joseph Smith III, "Last Testimony of Sister Emma," *The Saints' Herald* 26, no. 19 (10ctober 1879), 289, archive.org/details/TheSaintsHerald\_Volume\_26\_1879 /page/n288; and latterdaytruth.org/pdf/100130.pdf.

<sup>6.</sup> Joseph Smith III, "David Whitmer Reviewed," *The Saints' Herald* 33, no. 45 (13 November 1886), 707, catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/3182cac9 -6923-46c2-a228-769e6421db1d/0/2.

<sup>7.</sup> Zenos H. Gurley, *Questions asked of David Whitmer at his Home in Richmond, Ray County, Missouri, 1885*, questions 20 and 25, catalog.churchofjesus christ.org/assets/cbff7497-0764-4f7d-9aec-702b5f9b8f27/0/5; and Lyndon W. Cook, ed., *David Whitmer Interviews: A Restoration Witness* (Provo, UT: Grandin Book, 1991), 156–58. Other statements by Whitmer asserting that the plates

that, although he was rebuked for the fiasco with the lost pages, the interpreters were, in fact, returned to him and he used them for the rest of the translation.8 Both accounts cannot be true. Either Joseph got the interpreters back, or he did not. We each must decide whether to believe either David or Joseph (and Oliver) on what, for believers, is a critical factual matter.

For non-believers this is not a critical question, since they generally do not believe that either the plates or interpreters existed, and think that Joseph and Oliver were lying about them entirely. That he was contradicting Joseph Smith was not an issue for David Whitmer either. as he came to believe that Joseph was a fallen prophet in all respects except for the Book of Mormon.9

However, this should present a dilemma for believers who want to accept E. B. Howe's stone-in-the-hat narrative. David Whitmer is the most prominent corroborator for the stone-in-the-hat narrative, and he was adamant that Joseph never got back the interpreters. To argue otherwise—that the interpreters were returned to Joseph but then he never or almost never used them — is unsupported by, and indeed contradicts, both sources. Yet this is what Lindsay argues (p. 170).

Supporters of the stone-in-the-hat narrative have also tried to dodge this dilemma by obfuscating the term "Urim and Thummim." They argue that in all instances where Joseph and Oliver used the term, they meant the scrying stone as well as the interpreters. This contradicts the historical record. 10 Mormonism Unvailed clearly distin-

- and interpreters were never returned to Joseph are at Cook, David Whitmer Interviews, 53-56, 62-63, 72, 174-75, 200, 210. However, Whitmer appears to contradict this in statements at Cook, David Whitmer Interviews, 143, 191–92, 211. On Whitmer's inconsistent and changing views generally see H. Michael Marquardt, "David Whitmer: His Evolving Beliefs and Recollections," in Newell G. Bringhurst and John C. Hamer, eds., Scattering of the Saints: Schism within Mormonism (Independence, MO: John Whitmer Books, 2007), 46-77.
- 8. Joseph Smith, Jr., "History, circa June 1839-circa 1841 [Draft 2]," p. 11, Joseph Smith Papers, josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-circa-june -1839-circa-1841-draft-2/13, and Lucy Mack Smith, "History 1845," p. 138, josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/lucy-mack-smith-history-1845/145.
- 9. See David Whitmer, An Address to All Believers in Christ (Richmond, MO: selfpub., 1887), archive.org/details/addresstoallbeli00whit/mode/2up.
- 10. 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, 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

guished between the two on a single page. Joseph and Oliver almost always qualify their use of the term by indicating that these were the instruments which came with the plates. Even those who claimed to be witnesses of the translation who are used to support the stone-in-the-hat narrative, such as Emma Smith and David Whitmer, always use the term "Urim and Thummim" to refer only to the interpreters, and referred to the scrying stone as a separate object.

For example, Edward Stevenson recorded the following in his journal about a visit with David Whitmer in December 1886:

David Whitmer says that the Josephites was displeased with him because he maintained that the 116 pages which were translated & written by Martin Harris was translated by the Urim & Thummim or Interpreters as he preferred calling them, but after the loss of the 116 pages the remainder of the translation was done with the Seer stone.<sup>11</sup>

By Means of the Urim & Thummim includes a number of other quotes along these lines, and an entire subchapter addressing the issue. However, again, no one would learn that from the reviews, even though both resort to this effort to obfuscate the term in order to dodge the unavoidable conflict between Joseph and Oliver's testimonies and the stone-in-the-hat narrative.

Which brings us to Royal Skousen.

The historical record gives stone-in-the-hat advocates a clear choice for how we received the Book of Mormon we have today. Either accept that Joseph and Oliver were telling the truth about the plates being translated using the interpreters, or follow Howe, Whitmer, and a

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.

11. Edward Stevenson, Journals of Edward Stevenson (1820–1897), Book 4, 1886 January 14 to 20 August 1887, Volume 28, 52, catalog.churchofjesuschrist .org/assets/bc546251-522d-430a-a259-964bd8bde02f/0/0.Somespelling and punctuation corrected. The "Josephites" refers to the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints led by Joseph Smith III. This interview was after Joseph III had repudiated David's stone-in-the-hat accounts. few other late, largely secondhand reports that Joseph used the scrying stone without the plates. Believers in the Book of Mormon accept claims by David Whitmer (and one attributed to Emma Smith) that the interpreters were used for the lost pages. However, that is largely irrelevant as this narrative makes the scrying stone, rather the plates and interpreters, the source for the entire Book of Mormon as published in 1830.

Those who profess belief in the Book of Mormon have not wanted to acknowledge this dilemma, and have instead resorted to historically untenable dodges as described above. However, in the final weeks of 2024, one of the most prominent LDS Book of Mormon scholars courageously confronted the issue straight-on and acknowledged that accepting the stone-in-the-hat narrative means that Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery lied about the translation of the Book of Mormon.

I assume that readers of *Interpreter* need no introduction to Royal Skousen. Although not a named author of either review, he is listed as having commented upon Lindsay's review, and indirectly figures significantly in Gardner's as well. Thus, it is relevant that in the newest volume of his work on the Book of Mormon manuscripts Skousen plainly concludes that

Joseph Smith's claim that he used the Urim and Thummim is only partially true; and Oliver Cowdery's statements that Joseph used the original instrument while he, Oliver, was the scribe appear to be intentionally misleading.<sup>12</sup>

Just to quickly unpack this, Skousen, like Gardner and Lindsay, is basing this on David Whitmer. Joseph's claim is partially true only because he did use the Urim and Thummim for the lost pages whereas Oliver's claim is entirely false because, according to David Whitmer, the entire Book of Mormon Oliver scribed came from the scrying stone and not from the plates using the Urim and Thummim interpreters.

Skousen's courageous clarifying confession allows us to finally set aside several decades of muddled speculation from "trained LDS historians" (Gardner's term, pp. 144, 165) who, driven by their acceptance of the stone-in-the-hat narrative and unacknowledged rejection of Joseph and Oliver's plates-and-interpreters narrative, have generated

<sup>12.</sup> Royal Skousen, *The History of the Text of the Book of Mormon*, Part Seven, *The Early Transmission of the Text* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Studies, 2024), 62.

many theories about the Book of Mormon's translation. These theories are, unfortunately, unmoored from the primary eyewitness' testimonies and the rest of the historical record. (In the interest of space, I will only address translation theories directly relevant to the reviews. See *By Means of the Urim & Thummim* for fuller discussion of the broader topic.)

#### Translation and the Stone-in-the-Hat Narrative

As Richard Bushman has pointed out, many people in Joseph's time had visions of Jesus.<sup>13</sup> It was launching his ministry by declaring himself a translator that set Joseph apart.<sup>14</sup> The Lord gave "Joseph to be a presiding elder over all my church, to be *a translator*, a revelator, a seer and prophet" (Doctrine and Covenants 124:125). And the foundation upon which the Restored Gospel was presented to the world was the translation of the Book of Mormon. This was the testimony born to proselytes from the beginning. Testimony of ancient prophets and scribes who struggled to preserve their nation's sacred history for a millennium on metal plates, those plates being passed by angelic labor to Joseph, who risked his and his family's life and safety to protect them and the even more ancient instruments provided for the plates' interpretation (Joseph Smith — History 1:35).

Yet modern advocates of the stone-in-the-hat narrative have made the entire divine saga of the coming forth of the 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?<sup>15</sup>

Just as the stone-in-the-hat narrative makes the plates and

<sup>13.</sup> Richard Lyman Bushman, "The Visionary World of Joseph Smith," *BYU Studies* 37, no. 1 (1997): 138–204, scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol37/iss1 /10/.

<sup>14.</sup> Richard Lyman Bushman, "Joseph Smith as Translator," in Bryan Waterman, ed., *The Prophet Puzzle: Interpretive Essays on Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1999), 69–86.

<sup>15.</sup> Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith's Gold Plates: A Cultural History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023), 181.

interpreters superfluous, it also renders the concept of Joseph as translator meaningless. Joseph and 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."16 To their south lay the largest non-English speaking immigrant group of the early United States, the Germans of Pennsylvania (progenitors of the Whitmers) and to their north were French Canadians. Many New York Knickerbockers like the Roosevelts still spoke Dutch at home and western New York was home to many Native Americans of the Iroquois Confederacy who still spoke their tribal languages. These Protestants all knew the history of their Reformation forebearers' struggle to have the Bible "translated out of the original tongues" as the first page of every one of their Bibles declared. Christian ministers who had formal training typically studied those original tongues.

Joseph explained in History, circa 1841:

The title page of the Book of Mormon is a literal translation taken from the last leaf on the left hand side of the collection of plates which contained the record which has been translated; the language of the whole running the same as all Hebrew writings; and that said title page ... [of the English version of the Book of Mormon] . . . is a genuine and literal translation of the title page of the Original Book of Mormon recorded on the plates.<sup>17</sup>

Unlike the rest of the Book of Mormon, the title page is a series of sentence fragments rather than full (if run-on) English sentences, suggesting that this "literal translation" was different from the more functional translation of the rest of the record. Joseph appears wellacquainted with the nature of translation and of the text and document he was working with. As well, it was under his purview that every copy of the Book of Mormon printed after 1830 bears the legend "Translated By Joseph Smith, Jun." The 1840 edition reads "Carefully revised by the translator." Obviously, he differed from traditional translators in that he did not go to school to learn the source language. This is why he (and Oliver) so emphasized the role of the Urim and

<sup>16.</sup> Webster's Dictionary of American Language (1828), s.v., "translate," websters dictionary1828.com/Dictionary/translate.

<sup>17. &</sup>quot;History, circa 1841, fair copy," p. 60, Joseph Smith Papers, josephsmithpapers .org/paper-summary/history-circa-1841-fair-copy/60.

Thummim interpreters, which gave him some kind of rendering of the text in English to work with.

While I am working on a longer paper on how the widespread acceptance of the stone-in-the-hat narrative has derailed study of the translation of the Book of Mormon, the reviews by Gardner and Lindsay illustrate some of the damage. They take somewhat different approaches (although they end up in the same place), so I will discuss them separately.

Lindsay openly tracks Royal Skousen's theory. Skousen argues that Joseph was lying not only about the translation process, but in his claim to be a translator as well. Briefly, Skousen and his colleague Stanford Carmack contend that the entire Book of Mormon was not only given through the scrying stone, but that the text Joseph saw in the scrying stone "must have involved serious intervention from the English-language translator, who was not Joseph Smith." Skousen and Carmack have never identified who this real translator is, but claim that he or they, for some unexplained reason, wrote their translation in the Early Modern English of the 1400s and 1500s.

By Means of the Urim & Thummim devotes two subchapters to the problems with this theory. But again, one would not know that from Lindsay's review. Instead of addressing our critique of his preferred translation theory, Lindsay devotes a third of his review (pp. 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.)

I am not going to reproduce those rather long subchapters here. For purposes of this response, I note just that Skousen's Early Modern English theory (and those who support it like Lindsay) are arguing not only that Joseph Smith lied about the translation process, but about being a translator altogether. I do not see rejecting the testimony of the primary eyewitness and first prophet of this dispensation as helpful in coming to a faithful understanding of the Book of Mormon's origins.

Initially, Gardner appears to take a different approach. The abstract of his review declares that he agrees "Joseph was an active participant in the translation," although he disagrees with our explanation

<sup>18.</sup> Royal Skousen, *Critical Text of the Book of Mormon*, Volume 3, *The History of the Text*, Part Five, *The King James Quotations in the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: FARMS and BYU Studies, 2019), 6.

(p. 135). However, in the end Gardner effectively rejects Joseph as an active participant in the translation almost as much as Skousen and Lindsay. Gardner does not share his theory of the translation process in his review but, as one of the more elaborate stone-in-the-hat-based explanations, it merits a brief review as it underlies the problems with Gardner's review of *By Means of the Urim & Thummim*.

Briefly, Gardner adopts a proposal from Steven Pinker (which in turn is based on Noam Chomsky's theories on the origin of human language) to argue that Joseph received some sort of awareness of the text's meaning in a part of the mind that precedes linguistic formation.<sup>19</sup> Pinker calls this "mentalese."<sup>20</sup> We unconsciously think something before forming it into language. In Gardner's theory, God put the meaning of the text into this subconscious mentalese faculty of Joseph's brain, which then was filtered through Joseph's conscious language faculty. The difficulty of this argument that God skipped the plates and interpreters (after all the effort to get them to Joseph) and just put the meaning directly into Joseph's brain is that such a process does not account for how Joseph came up with Hebraisms and other non-English grammatical structures, as well as the Book of Mormon's very complex and detailed narrative and literary framework.

Of course, it could be that God put all of those into Joseph's brain as well, but it would then be hard to see what might be left to make Joseph an "active participant" in the translation, as it is this unconscious mentalese precognition which controls the mind, not our linguistic faculties. In that case, Gardner ends up the same place as Skousen, with Joseph having no real involvement with the formation of the Book of Mormon, despite Gardner having written entire books arguing otherwise. It would also note that Gardner presents this mentalese concept as settled science, but fails to inform readers of his

Brant A. Gardner, Engraven Upon Plates, Printed Upon Paper: Textual and Narrative Structures of the Book of Mormon (Salt Lake City, UT: Greg Kofford Books, 2023), 61–67; Brant A. Gardner, The Gift and Power: Translating the Book of Mormon (Salt Lake City, UT: Greg Kofford Books, 2011), 264–77.

<sup>20.</sup> Steven Pinker, *The Language Instinct: How the Mind Creates Language* (New York: Harper Collins, 1994), 44–73.

<sup>21.</sup> I should also note that Skousen and Carmack do not acknowledge this connection, as Carmack has derided Gardner by name as following the "underinformed consensus" in a recent *BYU Studies* article on the Early Modern English theory. Stanford Carmack, "Book of Mormon Grammar and Translation," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (2024): 21n69, scholarsarchive. byu.edu/byusq/vol63/iss3/4iry.

review or his books that the concept is, in fact, highly controversial and far from universally accepted in linguistics and cognitive science.<sup>22</sup>

At some point Gardner (among other LDS apologists) has come across the term "functional equivalence," although it is unclear whether he (or they) understand what it really is supposed to mean. In LDS apologetics it generally means that "Joseph used his own words," which is useful in explaining issues such as anachronisms and poor grammar in the Book of Mormon. This is not inaccurate as such, but the term is part of a much larger understanding of translation which Gardner seems to not have processed, even after reading our book where we try to explain it at length and use it as the center pole of our theory of the translation.

Briefly, that theory is based on the work of the dean of modern Bible translation, Eugene Nida, who served for decades as the chief linguist of the American Bible Society, overseeing hundreds of Bible translations. In Nida's framework, translation can run on a spectrum from "formal" equivalence to "functional" equivalence. Formal equivalence is not a word-for-word translation; it is a translation which hews as closely as possible to the source text given the grammatical and semantic requirements for it to be coherent in the receptor language. Functional equivalence is not just the translator using his own words. Even a formal translation uses the translator's own words; he has no others. Functional equivalence rather centers on translating meaning, allowing the translator greater range in conveying ideas within not just the receptor language but its host culture as well.

Our theory uses this framework to propose that the interpreters provided Joseph a more formally equivalent translation, giving him a direct sense of the voice of the Nephite writers (including linguistic structures like chiasmus, etc.). Joseph then rendered this into a functionally equivalent text which would be better understood by his contemporaries, including the use of language and style from the KJV and the sermons and speech he knew from his culture. This two-step process can account for the peculiar double nature of the English translation of the Book or Mormon. The interpreters supplied Joseph

<sup>22.</sup> See Nicholas Evans and Stephen C. Levinson, "The Myth of Language Universals: Language Diversity and its Importance for Cognitive Science," Behavioral and Brain Sciences 32 (2009): 429–92; Vyvyan Evans, The Language Myth: Why Language Is Not an Instinct (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Morten H. Christiansen and Nick Chater, The Language Game: How Improvisation Created Language and Changed the World (New York: Basic Books, 2022).

with a formally equivalent text preserving ancient linguistic forms and an elaborate narrative structure. Joseph then adapted this text (while preserving much of the ancient substrata from the interpreters) into a functionally equivalent text which reflected Joseph's linguistic and cultural environment.

Yet again, no reader would understand this from either review. Both reviewers misrepresent what we say Joseph received from the interpreters. Lindsay calls it "a crude, possibly literal translation—I prefer the term 'fractional translation'" (p. 173) and a "crude or literal translation… word-for-word translation… crudely translated" (p. 187). Even Gardner, who I thought would know the term "formal equivalence," instead calls it a "literal translation" (p. 158) and a "deficient translation" (p. 161). He even becomes quite testy when discussing our discussion of his own terminology (pp. 166–67).

After reading Gardner's review and rereading his books on translation, I now think that we have been talking past each other, so to speak. Given the widespread influence and acceptance of Nida's framework in modern translation scholarship, and Gardner's use of the term "functional equivalence," which was coined and first explicated by Nida, I assumed Gardner was familiar with this scholarship.<sup>23</sup> However, I now realize he is not, even after supposedly reading By Means of the Urim & Thummim where it is discussed at some length. Instead, I now realize that Gardner is working within his own idiosyncratic framework and definitions developed in opposition to Royal Skousen's ironclad/tight/ loose translation framing.<sup>24</sup> (Note that neither Gardner's nor Skousen's terminology would fit into current translation scholarship.) However, even Gardner's definition of "literal translation" allows that "there are times when syntax or semantics might require changes in the target language to retain sense."25 First, Gardner does not even allow that much flexibility in describing our translation theory. Second, and more important, Nida's concept of formal equivalence which we use in the book is much broader and more supple than what Gardner labels as "literal translation."

Both Gardner and Lindsay ask why the interpreters would give such translations, but ignore our book's extensive response to that very

On Nida's influence, see Philip C. Stine, Let the Words Be Written: The Lasting Influence of Eugene A. Nida (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004).

<sup>24.</sup> Gardner. The Gift and Power. 155-56.

<sup>25.</sup> Gardner, The Gift and Power, 156.

question. Basically, we argue that Joseph's translation of the plates is another example of God working through humans to help them learn and grow. God does not hand us learning on a gold platter—we need to search and study first, and the translation of the Book of Mormon followed this process. This is the same process which modern scholars (including LDS scholars) see in the production of the Bible—the word of God passed through the minds and cultures of the prophetic and apostolic writers (see Doctrine and Covenants 1:24). The reviewers are certainly free to disagree with the book's explanation that this same process applied to the translation of the Book of Mormon. However, to criticize the book for not addressing the issue of why God tasked Joseph with reframing the formally equivalent text from the interpreters while ignoring the response the book does give is a serious disservice to readers. 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.

Gardner offers one more critique of the book's translation theory. He states that there was not enough time for Joseph to study out text in his own mind before conveying it to the scribe. Gardner's basis for this is an amalgamation of sources apparently drawn from his most recent book.<sup>26</sup> These include a David Whitmer quote that Gardner acknowledges is both late and includes details Whitmer could not have seen, a writing experiment by Jeannie and John Welch, and Royal Skousen's surmises about the number of words written at a time. These sources simply do not add up to support Gardner's conclusion that "Joseph" would dictate to the scribe who wrote it down. No historical account ever hints at any time passing as Joseph worked out what to dictate. Instead, it seemed to be a flow of words" (p. 157). The Welches' experiment shows how fast the manuscript could be written, but not that it was actually written so quickly. Royal Skousen was not present for the dictation and, like Gardner, his claims to know how the translation took place all, in the end, rely on David Whitmer.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26.</sup> Gardner, Engraven Upon Plates, 53-55.

<sup>27.</sup> Unlike Skousen, who is fairly forthright about prioritizing David Whitmer over Joseph as a source, Gardner sometimes obscures this reliance on Whitmer by using secondary sources. For example, see *The Gift and the Power*, 291n24–25, where he adopts Whitmer's claim about the angel not returning the interpreters after the lost pages episode, but cites other, more authoritative-looking sources that are just repeating Whitmer.

However, there is no direct evidence that David Whitmer ever saw the actual translation process. As discussed more fully in our book, I agree with Richard Lloyd Anderson that decades of bitter enmity against Joseph led David Whitmer to reform his secondhand and hearsay memories in a way that fit his belief that Joseph was a fallen prophet. As Professor Anderson points out, David had an inerrantist view of scripture and could not conceive of a human, especially a fallen prophet as he considered Joseph to be, as having any input into the text of the Book or Mormon. For his part, Gardner seems to be of two minds on this last issue. At one point in his review he says that Joseph was "an active participant in the translation" (p. 135) yet then also argues against our agreement with this point by claiming that Joseph did not have time "for any pondering or working out of the translation" (p. 158).

Fortunately, the historical record does resolve this contradition. While we argue that David Whitmer was not a witness to the translation itself, we certainly can agree that he was around his family home while Joseph and Oliver were working on translating the small plates of Nephi. Contrary to Gardner's assertion that no "historical account ever hints at any time passing as Joseph worked out what to dictate" (p. 157), E. C. Briggs reported that David told him that Joseph and Oliver "worked hard, early and late, while translating the plates. It was slow work, and they could only write a few pages a day." This would

<sup>28.</sup> Richard Lloyd Anderson, "David Whitmer Interviews: A Restoration Witness by Lyndon W. Cook" (book review), *Journal of Mormon History* 20, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 191, jstor.org/stable/23286328.

<sup>29.</sup> E. C. Briggs, letter dated 4 June 1884, The Saints' Herald 31, no. 25 (21 June 1884): 396, sidneyrigdon.com/dbroadhu/ia/sain1882.htm. Although he was not a scribe and therefore only a secondhand hearsay witness to the actual translation process, David was in his family home while the later translation was happening, and thus would be a firsthand witness as to the length of Joseph and Oliver's workdays, and how they appeared as a result of their labors. We also note that Briggs presented this as a direct quote from David (and we have no reason to doubt Briggs' report) but says David said Joseph and Oliver were "translating the plates," which contradicts David's claim that Joseph was no longer using the plates during the later translation work at the Whitmer home. I would also note that another report of a David Whitmer interview David says the translation took eight months, which corroborates what Joseph said; i.e., that he began translating in the fall after he received back the plates and the interpreters in September 1828. This expands the translation beyond the traditional 90-day framework, at least with respect to the Book of Mosiah. "The Book of Mormon," The Chicago Daily Tribune XLV (17 December 1885): 3, en. wikisource.org/wiki/Chicago\_Daily\_Tribune,\_December\_17,\_1885.

certainly accommodate Joseph carefully and prayerfully studying out in his mind how to express in his contemporary English the sacred words of the ancient text God entrusted to him.

#### **Translation and the Restoration**

The explanations of Gardner, Skousen, and Lindsay are not the only ones for the production of the Book of Mormon. LDS scholars' rejection of Joseph and Oliver's testimonies has engendered a free-for-all on this question. In addition to Gardner and Skousen, Blake Ostler, Samuel Brown, Michael Ash, Michael Mackay, and Gerrit Dirkmaat, among others, have all seized the opportunity to travel back in time two centuries to tell us with great confidence exactly what was going on in Joseph Smith's head (and hat) as he dictated the Book of Mormon. And, as illustrated by the analysis above of Gardner's mentalese translation model, these prolific theories raise more issues than they solve.

Moreover, there is another team on the field. They contend that Joseph and Oliver lied not only about the translation of the Book of Mormon, but about the restoration of the priesthood and temple keys as well. As with the translation process, these key elements of the Restored Gospel are also only sourced in the historical record from Joseph and Oliver, and are far more sparsely documented than their claims about translating from the plates using the interpreters. By discarding the testimonies of the first and second elders of the restored Church of Christ, pro-stone-in-the-hat Book of Mormon defenders at best turn it into a Quran instead of a Bible, something poured into the prophet's brain (or scrying stone) rather than the product of a man's struggle to understand the mind and will of God. From an objective external point of view, it is these real physical objects—the plates and interpreters—which distinguish the Book of Mormon from the ephemeral spiritual origins of other worthy texts. These stone-in-thehat based theories about the Book of Mormon unloose the sacred book from this mooring in reality. Furthermore, what is the reason for the Witnesses if nothing they saw was used for the translation sent out into our modern world?

I would extend two invitations to these defenders of the Book of Mormon. First, examine the stone-in-the-hat accounts critically rather than just accepting them at face value like Skousen, Mackay, and Dirkmaat. The stone-in-the-hat sources do exist in the historical record, but they are all late, secondhand, and/or contradictory,

and all are unreliable.<sup>30</sup> They were well-known to Joseph's contemporaries and successors in Church leadership who dismissed them and repeatedly emphasized that Joseph translated from the plates by means of the Urim and Thummim. Most importantly, as discussed in *By Means of the Urim & Thummim*, there are several satisfactory alternative explanations for the origins of the stone-in-the-hat accounts. These explanations show how these sources could have mistaken what they saw for the actual translation. (Note that the Demonstration Hypothesis, discussed in the reviews, is only one of these, and that that hypothesis is based upon an interview with the stone-in-the-hat advocates' favorite source, David Whitmer, yet another point unmentioned in either review.<sup>31</sup>)

Second, please reconsider your rejection of the testimony of the two primary eyewitnesses in favor of these unreliable stone-in-the-hat accounts. Such a rejection is inherent in the stone-in-the-hat narrative and has been so since E. B. Howe first presented it (although only Royal Skousen has had the gumption to openly say so). With the exception of Skousen (and apparently Jeff Lindsay), I believe that most Book of Mormon defenders, like Gardner, think their theories leave room for Joseph's engagement with the production of the Book of Mormon beyond simple dictation of someone's else's translation.<sup>32</sup>

In addition to the afore-mentioned, I believe I have seen this view advanced by many others, such as Stephen Ricks, Dan Peterson, and Brian Hales. They may not use the specific term "functional equivalence," but I think that there may even be a consensus that Joseph had conscious input into the English translation of the Book of Mormon he dictated (making Skousen the outlier<sup>33</sup>). There are many good reasons for this position in addition to its usefulness in rebutting most criticisms of the Book of Mormon. It helps explain why the text is the way it is, reenforces the idea that the Book of Mormon speaks to our times, and shows its deep kinship with the Bible.

<sup>30.</sup> Note that our book does not argue that they are unreliable because the sources were hostile to Joseph. Indeed, some appear to have been motivated by a desire to defend the Book of Mormon against the then-prevalent Spalding theory. Their problems are based on neutral, widely accepted criteria for evaluating the reliability of historical sources.

<sup>31. &</sup>quot;Book of Mormon," Chicago Daily Tribune.

<sup>32.</sup> Focusing for this article on Gardner, see *The Gift and Power* chapters 16, 17, 19 and 20.

<sup>33.</sup> See Gardner, *The Gift and Power*, 155, 163–65, 252–58; and *Engraven Upon Plates*, 5–16, for Gardner's critique of Skousen's theory.

Yet, that argument is fatally debilitated if it relies on speculative historical mind-reading, stone-in-the-hat accounts which contradict the primary eyewitnesses, and otherwise lacks support in the historical record. Joseph himself told us how he was engaged in helping produce the Book of Mormon. He translated (as he and his contemporaries understood the term) the engravings from the plates using the Urim and Thummim interpreters, supplied by God for that purpose (Joseph Smith — History 1:35), studying it out in his mind as guided and confirmed by the Holy Spirit (Doctrine and Covenants 9:8). Would not the argument that Joseph had conscious input in the Book of Mormon be far stronger if it was grounded in this eyewitness testimony of the translator himself and his chief scribe?<sup>34</sup>



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<sup>34.</sup> There seems to be a recent tendency to contrast *translation* against *revelation*, asserting that the Book of Mormon is the latter rather than the former. However, this is a distinction without a difference since (1) Joseph and all early Saints saw it as a translation of another language into English as that term is commonly understood and (2) the revelation describing the translation process, Doctrine and Covenants 9, clearly contemplates spiritual guidance and confirmation as an integral part of the process. The distinction only makes sense if one rejects Joseph's narrative and instead adopts the stone-in-the-hat narrative which eliminates the inspired translation process described in Doctrine and Covenants 9. I will be discussing this further in an upcoming paper.

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