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A Man That Can Translate and Infinite Goodness: A Response to Recent Reviews

Jonathan E. Neville

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A MAN THAT CAN TRANSLATE AND INFINITE GOODNESS: A RESPONSE TO RECENT REVIEWS

Jonathan E. Neville

Abstract: *Since 1829, various theories about the production of the Book of Mormon have been proposed. Modern scholarship has moved away from the idea that Joseph Smith actually translated ancient engravings into English. Two books, A Man That Can Translate and Infinite Goodness, propose a “neo-orthodox” view, offering evidence that Joseph did translate ancient engravings into English. Recent reviews in the Interpreter of these two books significantly misunderstand and misrepresent the argument. This response corrects some of those misconceptions.*

[**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 author of those reviews, immediately following this response.]

Spencer Kraus recently penned separate reviews¹ of two of my books: *A Man That Can Translate*² and *Infinite Goodness*.³ These companion volumes make a case for Joseph Smith as the actual translator of the

1. See Spencer Kraus, “An Unfortunate Approach to Joseph Smith’s Translation of Ancient Scripture,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 52 (2022): 1–64, <https://interpreterfoundation.org/an-unfortunate-approach-to-joseph-smiths-translation-of-ancient-scripture/>; and Spencer Kraus, “Jonathan Edwards’s Unique Role in an Imagined Church History,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 52 (2022): 65–102, <https://interpreterfoundation.org/jonathan-edwardss-unique-role-in-an-imagined-church-history/>.

2. Jonathan Neville, *A Man That Can Translate: Joseph Smith and the Nephite Interpreters* (Salt Lake City: Digital Legends Press, 2021).

3. Jonathan Neville, *Infinite Goodness: Joseph Smith, Jonathan Edwards, and the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Digital Legends Press, 2021).

ancient engravings on the Nephite plates. Because the books introduce the Demonstration Hypothesis to reconcile disparate historical accounts, they have generated considerable discussion, both positive and negative, and I welcome robust, respectful, and candid dialogue about these topics.

The Demonstration Hypothesis offers a faithful alternative reconciliation of the conflict between (i) what Joseph and Oliver claimed — that Joseph Smith translated the plates with the Urim and Thummim that came with the plates — and (ii) what others claimed — that Joseph produced the Book of Mormon by dictating words that appeared on a stone he placed in a hat. In my books, I propose that Joseph, who had covenanted with God not to display the plates or the Urim and Thummim (D&C 5:3), used the seer stone to “satisfy the awful curiosity” of his supporters by demonstrating how the actual translation worked. Later, some of these supporters conflated the demonstration with the translation to refute the allegations of the Spalding theory.

While I appreciate the attention brought to the Demonstration Hypothesis by Kraus’s reviews, they seriously misrepresent the purpose and content of my books. Because the *Interpreter* serves as an academic record of Latter-day Saint thought, clarification is appropriate, and I appreciate the *Interpreter* publishing this brief response.

In his review of *Infinite Goodness*, Kraus summarizes his review of *A Man That Can Translate*:

My previous review responded to his claims that (1) Joseph Smith memorized and recited Isaiah from memory rather than translate it from the Book of Mormon record; (2) Joseph Smith tricked his close friends and family, making them believe that he was translating the aforementioned sections of the Book of Mormon; (3) many witnesses to the Book of Mormon are not to be believed; and (4) we should instead rely on sources hostile to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to properly understand Joseph’s translation effort.⁴

These caricatures of my proposals are inaccurate, as I discuss shortly. Because Kraus’s claims and my response are best evaluated in context — specifically, the ongoing faith crises generated by confusion about the origins of the Book of Mormon — we need to review the context Kraus omitted from his reviews.

4. Kraus, “Jonathan Edwards’s Unique Role,” 65–66.

Context: Competing Narratives About the Origin of the Book of Mormon

At the outset, I recognize that, for many people, the origin of the Book of Mormon doesn't matter because they have a spiritual witness of its truthfulness. That's a perfectly legitimate approach that I take no issue with.

For other people, however, the origin of the Book of Mormon is a foundation upon which to build either belief or unbelief. Joseph Smith apparently thought the origin was important. His declaration that he translated the Book of Mormon record "through the medium of" and "by the means of" "the Urim and Thummim" *that came with the plates* is a fundamental truth claim that can be tested not only spiritually, but empirically by consulting historical references, linguistic studies, extrinsic scientific data, etc.

Joseph didn't make his specific claims in a vacuum. The 1834 book *Mormonism Unveiled* had set out the stone-in-the-hat theory in some detail:

The translation finally commenced. They were found to contain a language not now known upon the earth, which they termed "reformed Egyptian characters." The plates, therefore, which had been so much talked of, were found to be of no manner of use. After all, the Lord showed and communicated to him [Joseph] every word and letter of the Book. *Instead of looking at the characters inscribed upon the plates, the prophet was obliged to resort to the old "peep stone," which he formerly used in money-digging.* This he placed in a hat, or box, into which he also thrust his face. Through the stone he could then discover a single word at a time, which he repeated aloud to his amanuensis, who committed it to paper, when another word would immediately appear, and thus the performance continued to the end of the book.⁵

This description of the stone-in-the-hat theory is familiar to modern Latter-day Saints because it is now the prevailing narrative among many LDS scholars.

5. See Eber D. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled: or, A Faithful Account of that Singular Imposition and Delusion from its Rise to the Present Time* (Painesville, OH: printed by the author, 1834), 18, <https://archive.org/details/mormonismunvaile00howe/page/18>, emphasis added.

Continuing on the same page, *Mormonism Unveiled* provided readers a second, alternative description of the translation, based on the Urim and Thummim explanation that Joseph and Oliver always gave, albeit embellished with sarcasm:

Another account they give of the transaction, is, that it was performed with the big spectacles before mentioned, and which were in fact, the identical *Urim and Thumim* mentioned in Exodus 28–30, and were brought away from Jerusalem by the heroes of the book, handed down from one generation to another, and finally buried up in Ontario county, some fifteen centuries since, to enable Smith to translate the plates *without looking at them!*⁶

In a sense, this alternative narrative is also a stone-in-the-hat theory, i.e., the spectacles-in-a-hat theory. But as *Mormonism Unveiled* explained, the distinction is insignificant if both scenarios ignored the plates:

Now, whether *the two methods for translating, one by a pair of stone spectacles “set in the rims of a bow,” and the other by one stone*, were provided against accident, we cannot determine — perhaps they were limited in their appropriate uses — at all events the plan meets our approbation.

We are informed that Smith used a stone in a hat, for the purpose of translating the plates. The *spectacles and plates were found together*, but were taken from him and hid up again before he had translated one word, and he has never seen them since — this is Smith’s own story.⁷ *Let us ask, what use have the plates been or the spectacles, so long as they have in no sense been used?* or what does the testimony of Martin Harris, Oliver Cowdery and David Whitmer amount to?⁸

In his first review, Kraus provides the following abstract:

6. Ibid. Intentionally or not, the author missed the points that (i) the Urim and Thummim that Joseph received was not brought from Jerusalem by Lehi but instead had been used by the Jaredites in America, and (ii) Joseph actually looked at the plates with the spectacles.

7. Joseph and Oliver responded to this claim by emphasizing that Joseph translated the entire Book of Mormon with the Urim and Thummim. Separately, Joseph explained that the angel returned the Urim and Thummim to Joseph in September 1828 following the loss of the 116 pages.

8. Neville, *A Man That Can Translate*, 56–57.

This is the first of two papers that explore Jonathan Neville's two latest books regarding the translation of the Book of Mormon. Neville has long argued that Joseph Smith did not use a seer stone during the translation of the Book of Mormon, and he has more recently expanded his historical revisionism to dismiss the multitude of historical sources that include the use of a seer stone.⁹

We see how far “historical revisionism” has come when modern LDS scholars deem a traditional understanding based on what Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery said — that Joseph translated the plates by means of the Nephite interpreters — is now considered “historical revisionism,” while the stone-in-the-hat theory narrative from *Mormonism Unveiled* is deemed the only acceptable faithful narrative.

Kraus' claim that I “dismiss” the stone-in-the-hat sources is an allegation which I'll address below.

Conflict: Joseph and Oliver Versus Other Witnesses

The fulcrum of the translation issue is the direct conflict between what Joseph and Oliver claimed versus what others (the original stone-in-the-hat theory proponents) claimed they observed.

On three notable occasions post-*Mormonism Unveiled*, Joseph Smith provided an explanation of the translation that leaves no room for the stone-in-the-hat theory. Because Joseph's teachings have been omitted from many discussions of this issue — including from Kraus's review — we need to quote them here:

How, and where did you obtain the book of Mormon?

Moroni, the person who deposited the plates, from whence the book of Mormon was translated, in a hill in Manchester, Ontario County, New York, being dead; and raised again therefrom, appeared unto me, and told me where they were, and gave me directions how to obtain them. I obtained them, *and the Urim and Thummim with them, by the means of which, I translated the plates*; and thus came the Book of Mormon.¹⁰

With the records was found a curious instrument which the ancients called “Urim and Thummim,” which consisted of

9. Kraus, “An Unfortunate Approach,” 1.

10. “Elders' Journal, July 1838,” p. 42–43, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/elders-journal-july-1838/10>, emphasis added.

*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.*¹¹

For space reasons, I'll omit Oliver's corroborating statements. The key point here is that had Joseph merely used the term "Urim and Thummim" without specifying the origin of the instrument, modern historians who seek to conflate the term with the "peep stone" of *Mormonism Unveiled* might have a plausible argument. *But Joseph specified that the sole instrument he used to translate came with the plates.*

There are three basic explanations for the Book of Mormon. Proponents of each find support in historical documentation, which indicates the evidence is inconclusive and can support multiple working hypotheses.

1. Joseph Smith translated the ancient engravings into English, using "translate" in the ordinary sense of the word of converting the meaning of a manuscript written in one language into another language.
2. Joseph Smith (and/or confederates) composed the text and Joseph read it surreptitiously, recited it from memory, or performed it based on prompts or cues.
3. Joseph Smith dictated words that supernaturally appeared on a seer stone he placed in a hat.

Until recently, explanation 1 was the "faithful" explanation, while explanations 2 and 3 were the critical or unbelieving explanations. Lately, explanation 3 has been embraced by many believers (including Kraus) as a faithful explanation that replaces explanation 1.

Nevertheless, any of these explanations can be accepted by faithful Latter-day Saints. No one ought to be shunned or accused of apostasy for assigning different weight to particular historical evidence than someone else.

The underlying premise of Kraus' reviews of my books — that explanation 3 is the only acceptable explanation — both explains the tone of the reviews and misses the entire point of my books. I simply

11. "Church History," in *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 9 (1 March 1842), 707, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/church-history-1-march-1842/2>, emphasis added. This passage from the Wentworth letter is also found in Joseph Smith, "Latter Day Saints," in *He Pasa Ekklesia [The whole church]*, ed. Israel Daniel Rupp (Philadelphia: James Y. Humphreys, 1844), 404–10, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/latter-day-saints-1844/3>.

sought to determine whether the historical evidence could be construed to be congruent with what Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery said about the translation (explanation 1).

In my books, I readily recognize and discuss the evidence in favor of explanation 3. I differ with Kraus and other proponents of the stone-in-the-hat theory because I find that evidence unpersuasive not only on its face, but because it contradicts what Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery claimed.

Kraus's Allegations

To return to Kraus's specific allegations, let me repeat his recap that I earlier quoted:

My previous review responded to his claims that (1) Joseph Smith memorized and recited Isaiah from memory rather than translate it from the Book of Mormon record; (2) Joseph Smith tricked his close friends and family, making them believe that he was translating the aforementioned sections of the Book of Mormon; (3) many witnesses to the Book of Mormon are not to be believed; and (4) we should instead rely on sources hostile to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to properly understand Joseph's translation effort.¹²

In the following sections I'll examine these four allegations, in turn.

(1) Joseph Smith Memorized and Recited Isaiah From Memory Rather Than Translate It From the Book of Mormon Record

Kraus's argument is a semantic mess because he argues that Joseph read words off a seer stone instead of translating the Book of Mormon record. Nevertheless, in *A Man That Can Translate*, I observed (in a passage that Kraus forgot to quote) that

There are multiple accounts of Joseph putting a stone in a hat, covering his face with the hat, and then reading out loud the words that appeared on the stone.

The accounts lack specifics about times and dates. None mention what words Joseph actually dictated during the observed performance, so it is impossible to determine what

12. Kraus, "Jonathan Edwards's Unique Role," 65–66.

portion of the Book of Mormon was being dictated, if in fact it was Book of Mormon text.¹³

I proceeded to observe that, *if* what Joseph dictated on these occasions is *actually in* our Book of Mormon, the evidence suggests it was some part of the Isaiah chapters in 2 Nephi, such as 2 Nephi 16–17. I cited a previous article in *Interpreter* that pointed out that “there are 29 differences, or variants, in these two Book of Mormon chapters relative to the KJV. None of these variants has any obvious purpose or value. Certainly, none clarifies Isaiah’s message or substantially improves the grammar.”¹⁴

Stone-in-the-hat proponents (including Kraus) argue that Joseph did not translate these chapters from the plates using the Urim and Thummim. This leaves two alternatives: either Joseph dictated those chapters by reading them off the seer stone or from memory. Which alternative is correct is unknowable, but I lean toward memory, because whatever Joseph was doing with the seer stone, it was — by his own declarations — not translating the plates.

(2) Joseph Smith Tricked His Close Friends and Family, Making Them Believe That He Was Translating the Aforementioned Sections of the Book of Mormon

I never wrote nor implied that Joseph tricked anyone. As we’ve seen, by at least 1834, the stone-in-the-hat narrative co-existed with the alternative Urim and Thummim narrative. The Demonstration Hypothesis reconciles these with two components. The first is that Joseph was under a strict command to not display the plates or the Urim and Thummim, a command he repeated openly (and inexplicably if he never used the Urim and Thummim or the plates). The second, as Zenas Gurley put it, “That Joseph had another stone called seers’ stone, and ‘peep stone,’ is quite certain. This stone was frequently exhibited to different ones and helped to assuage their awful curiosity; but the Urim and Thummim never, unless possibly to Oliver Cowdery.”¹⁵

13. Neville, *A Man That Can Translate*, 91–92.

14. Stan Spencer, “Missing Words: King James Bible Italics, the Translation of the Book of Mormon, and Joseph Smith as an Unlearned Reader,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 38 (2020): 45–106, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/missing-words-king-james-bible-italics-the-translation-of-the-book-of-mormon-and-joseph-smith-as-an-unlearned-reader/>.

15. Neville, *A Man That Can Translate*, 24.

Throughout the book, I discuss the differences between what a witness observed and what that witness inferred or assumed. Again, *if what Joseph dictated during the stone-in-the-hat sessions is actually in our Book of Mormon*, I propose that he introduced the sessions by explaining that he was going to show the audience how the translation process worked. I further propose that they all understood this, but decades later, under the duress of the prevailing Spalding theory, the stone-in-the-hat witnesses cited the stone-in-the-hat sessions to refute the Spalding theory.

Thus, what was once perfectly clear — that Joseph demonstrated the process while conducting the actual translation in seclusion using the Urim and Thummim and the plates — was conflated by a handful of Joseph’s associates in a misguided apologetic effort. There was no trickery on Joseph’s part. To the contrary, Joseph and Oliver both explicitly explained that Joseph translated the plates with the Urim and Thummim that came with the plates. Whatever people incorrectly inferred about the stone in the hat was not the fault of Joseph and Oliver.

(3) Many Witnesses to the Book of Mormon Are Not to Be Believed

This allegation misrepresents one of the key points of my books. To repeat: throughout the books I discuss the differences between what a witness *observed* and what that witness *inferred* or *assumed*. The modern proponents of the stone-in-the-hat theory have long taken the statements of the stone-in-the-hat witnesses out of context and accepted them on their face, two errors that may be common but are nevertheless inexcusable.

While some authors do reject outright what the stone-in-the-hat witnesses said (just as the modern proponents of the stone-in-the-hat theory currently reject what Joseph and Oliver said), I prefer to accept what the witnesses claimed they observed but distinguish between what they observed and what they inferred or assumed. This is an important distinction that contemporaneous cross-examination would have brought out. Because we’re dealing with historical accounts, we rely on careful analysis to separate the two elements of a witness’s statement, which I’ve done throughout the book.

(4) We Should Instead Rely on Sources Hostile to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to Properly Understand Joseph’s Translation Effort

It’s difficult to know what to make of this allegation. In my view, as explained in the books, the primary source for understanding Joseph’s translation effort is what Joseph and Oliver said about the translation, including the three statements by Joseph I quoted above. Other sources are ancillary, vague, muddled, and self-contradictory — and they mix observation with inference. Yet in his review, Kraus never once quotes what Joseph and Oliver said about the translation. Instead, he relies on the stone-in-the-hat sources and parrots *Mormonism Unveiled’s* explanation of the stone-in-the-hat theory.

This brief response cannot possibly address all the details of Kraus’s 24,000+ word reviews. Most of Kraus’s objections involve a different weighing of the evidence, and I invite readers to consider that weighing. If and when I do a detailed review, I’ll post it on academia.edu.

With regard to Kraus’ review of *Infinite Goodness*, Kraus has misrepresented the premise and conclusions of the book. I view the influence of Edwards as solid evidence that Joseph translated the plates, i.e., this evidence corroborates Joseph’s account (and contradicts the stone-in-the-hat theory). Briefly, here are excerpts from Kraus’s abstract with my responses:

Kraus’s Abstract: This is the second of two papers reviewing Jonathan Neville’s latest books on the translation of the Book of Mormon. In *Infinite Goodness*, Neville claims that Joseph Smith’s vocabulary and translation of the Book of Mormon were deeply influenced by the famous Protestant minister Jonathan Edwards. Neville cites various words or ideas that he believes originate with Edwards as the original source for the Book of Mormon’s language.¹⁶

My Response: Throughout the book I emphasize that Joseph Smith’s translation was the original source for the language of the Book of Mormon because I believe he translated the plates using his own lexicon while guided by revelation (D&C 9). Edwards was one of several influences on Joseph Smith, just as each of us learns our respective native languages from a variety of influences.

16. Kraus, “Jonathan Edwards’s Unique Role,” 65.

Kraus’s Abstract: However, most of Neville’s findings regarding Edwards and other non-biblical sources are superficial and weak, and many of his findings have a more plausible common source: the language used by the King James Bible.¹⁷

My Response: This caricature of my findings is incoherent because (i) although Kraus claimed “most” of my findings are superficial and weak, he did not consult my database of over 1,000 nonbiblical terms and phrases used by Edwards which are also found in the Book of Mormon, and (ii) the database focuses specifically on terms and phrases *not found* in the King James Bible. My separate biblical intertextual database, which Kraus also did not consult, includes several examples of rephrasing and blending of biblical passages that are found in the works of Edwards, suggesting Edwards was a closer source than the KJV itself. Furthermore, Kraus’s review invokes sources not known to be readily available to Joseph Smith.

Generational Divide and the Ongoing Problem

The Kraus reviews reflect a generational divide in Latter-day Saint understanding of Church history and the historicity of the Book of Mormon. Recently someone of my generation, responding to the Demonstration Hypothesis, remarked, “You mean that everything I was taught about the translation was true?” Younger generations who have been taught the stone-in-the-hat theory respond to the Demonstration Hypothesis by saying, “You mean that everything I was taught about the stone in the hat was wrong?”

This is obviously an oversimplification — there are older people who accept the stone-in-the-hat theory and younger people who reject the stone-in-the-hat theory — but the origin of the Book of Mormon remains at the forefront of issues related to conversion, retention, and activity. Latter-day Saints deserve to know about alternative faithful interpretations of the historical evidence so they can make informed decisions for themselves.

To be sure, these discussions should have no bearing on an individual’s standing as a Latter-day Saint. None of these rise to the level of temple-recommend questions. None impede or enhance one’s ability

17. Ibid.

to serve in Church callings, to minister to others, or to love, share, and invite.

Nevertheless, the problems with the stone-in-the-hat theory are not merely academic exercises. They strike at the “keystone of our religion” in two fundamental ways.

1. **The stone-in-the-hat theory repudiates what Joseph Smith explicitly taught.** The problems with the stone-in-the-hat theory were outlined in the 1834 book *Mormonism Unveiled*. Joseph and Oliver apparently recognized the implications, because they both taught that Joseph translated the record by means of the Urim and Thummim that came with the record. Their explanation left no room for another “translation instrument.” Modern efforts to conflate the Urim and Thummim with the stone from the well directly contradicts what Joseph and Oliver taught.
2. **The stone-in-the-hat theory replaces the ancient origins of the Book of Mormon with mystical origins.** The stone-in-the-hat theory teaches that Joseph produced the Book of Mormon by dictating words that appeared on a stone he put in a hat.

The second point is critical because a key element of the stone-in-the-hat theory is that Joseph did not consult the plates during the dictation. Looking at the stone-in-the-hat theory from an objective perspective, once the text Joseph dictated is detached from the ancient plates, the focus becomes the source of the words on the stone. Believers axiomatically argue it is a divine source. Nonbelievers axiomatically argue it is another source, whether Joseph’s imagination, a performance based on an outline, or even (for non-LDS religious believers) an evil or mischievous entity.

Thus, replacing the ancient origins with mystical origins allows readers to confirm whatever bias they want.

In my view, Joseph and Oliver did not leave us with a murky origin of the Book of Mormon. In these books, I have proposed a new way to reconcile the stone-in-the-hat accounts with what Joseph and Oliver said. Now known as the Demonstration Hypothesis, this approach has engendered many misunderstandings, as exemplified in the Kraus review.

I encourage readers to consider the evidence for themselves.

Jonathan E. Neville is a retired lawyer, educator and author who has written ten books on LDS Church history and Book of Mormon topics. He has presented at the Mormon History Association, the Joseph Smith Papers Symposium, the John Whitmer Historical Society, and other venues. He has visited over 60 countries and has lived in Europe, Asia, Africa, and in several of the United States. He currently lives with his wife on the Oregon coast. His next book advancing his research on the origins and translation of the Book of Mormon, co-authored with James Lucas and titled *Confound the Wise: Restoring Translation to the Restoration*, will be released in Fall 2022.

