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Seers and Stones: The Translation of the Book of Mormon as Divine Visions of an Old-Time Seer

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SEERS AND STONES: THE TRANSLATION OF THE BOOK OF MORMON AS DIVINE VISIONS OF AN OLD-TIME SEER

Stan Spencer

Abstract: Joseph Smith used the term the Urim and Thummim to refer to the pair of seer stones, or “interpreters,” he obtained for translating the Book of Mormon as well as to other seer stones he used in a similar manner. According to witness accounts, he would put the stone(s) in a hat and pull the hat close around his face to exclude the light, and then he would see the translated text of the Book of Mormon. By what property or principle these stones enabled Joseph Smith to see the translated text has long been a matter of conjecture among Mormons, but the stones have commonly been understood as divinely powered devices analogous to the latest human communications technology. An alternative view, presented here, is that the stones had no technological function but simply served as aids to faith. In this view, the stones did not themselves translate or display text. They simply inspired the faith Joseph Smith needed to see imaginative visions, and in those visions, he saw the text of the Book of Mormon, just as Lehi and other ancient seers saw sacred texts in vision. Although Joseph Smith also saw visions without the use of stones, the logistics of dictating a book required the ability to see the translated text at will, and that was what the faith-eliciting stones would have made possible.

And now he translated them by the means of those two stones. ... And whosoever *has these things* is called *seer*, after the manner of old times. (Mosiah 28:13–16)

In this passage, Mormon is speaking of the interpreters, the stones used by King Mosiah in translating the Jaredite record and provided to Joseph Smith for translating the Book of Mormon. Mormon refers to the interpreters as “stones” of a “seer” — seer stones. Joseph Smith

also had and used other seer stones, primarily a brown, oblong one and a slightly smaller, white, egg-shaped one.¹ He used the brown one to receive several of his early revelations and in translating the Book of Mormon. He then gave it to Oliver Cowdery in early 1830.² He retained and continued to use the white seer stone. Both stones are apparently in possession of the Church.³

Joseph Smith and some of his associates referred to the interpreter stones as well as other seer stones as urim and thummim, considering urim and thummim to be a class of revelatory instruments.⁴ The term *Urim and Thummim* was used in this sense by Joseph Smith in his comment on the white stone mentioned in the Book of Revelation: “The white stone mentioned in Revelation 2:17 will become a Urim and Thummim to each individual who receives one” (D&C 130:10). The “Urim and Thummim” mentioned in the introductory headings of some of the early sections of the Doctrine and Covenants was, according to David Whitmer, the brown seer stone.⁵ In a meeting on December 27, 1841, Joseph Smith taught some of the apostles about urim and thummim. Regarding the meeting, Brigham Young wrote in his journal:

I met with the Twelve at brother Joseph’s. He conversed with us in a familiar manner on a variety of subjects, and explained to us the Urim and Thummim which he found with the plates, called in the Book of Mormon the Interpreters. He 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.*⁶

Since Joseph Smith had given his brown seer stone to Oliver Cowdery, the stone he showed the apostles was most likely his white one.⁷ Wilford Woodruff recorded the same experience in his journal, but used a different label for the seer stone: “The twelve or a part of them spent the day with Joseph the Seer. . . . I had the privilege of seeing for the first time in my day *the Urim and Thummim.*”⁸ Less than two months later, Woodruff again called Joseph Smith’s seer stone “the Urim and Thummim” in reference to its use in translating the Book of Abraham,⁹ and apostle Parley Pratt made a similar statement in a church newspaper a few months later.¹⁰ In 1959, apostle Joseph Fielding Smith also referred to Joseph Smith’s seer stone as a urim and thummim.¹¹ According to a

journal entry of Wandle Mace, Joseph Smith even applied the term *urim and thummim* to a pair of stones brought over from England that had been “consecrated to devils.”¹² For Joseph Smith, a urim and thummim was an object used to obtain revelation, and “*the Urim and Thummim*” was whatever object he was currently using for that purpose.

Joseph Smith’s seer stones and the interpreters had another label in common: *directors*. Elizabeth Ann Whitmer Cowdery, who observed Joseph Smith translating with his brown seer stone, called it a “director” in her statement describing the translation; and in the Book of Mormon, Alma refers to the interpreter stones as “directors” and relates them to a prophecy of “a stone which shall shine forth in darkness unto light” to reveal ancient records (Alma 37:21–24, 1830 edition).¹³

The fact that the interpreter stones and Joseph Smith’s own seer stones were referred to in the same way (as seer stones, urim and thummim, and directors) and used interchangeably in translating suggests that they functioned in the same manner. This paper explores a possible mechanism by which these seer stones enabled Joseph Smith to receive the Book of Mormon and other revelations.

Old-time Seers were “See-ers” of Visions

The Book of Mormon, speaking of the two interpreter stones, says that “whosoever has these things is called *seer*, *after the manner of old times*” (Mosiah 28:13–16) and “whosoever is commanded to look in them, the same is called *seer*” (Mosiah 8:13). To understand how these and other seer stones functioned in the translation of the Book of Mormon, it may be helpful to know what a seer “after the manner of old times” is.

In the Old Testament, *seer* is translated from *rō’eh* or *hōzeh*. Both words, as active participle forms of verbs meaning “to see,” indicate “one who sees” but with the implication that what is seen is not seen in the usual sense. *Rō’eh* is used most often as a title for Samuel “the Seer” but is also used to refer to seers or visions generally, as in Isaiah 30:10 (“Which say to the *seers*, See not”) and Isaiah 28:7 (“they reel while having *visions*” [NASB]). *Hōzeh* is the usual word for seer in the Old Testament. It is closely related to *hāzôn* and *hizzāyôn*, both terms for visions, and indicates a beholder of visions. When Sariah derisively called Lehi a “visionary man” (1 Nephi 5:2, 4), she was likely using this Hebrew word.¹⁴ Visions and dreams were the usual means of revelation to the early biblical prophets, as the Lord reminded Moses’s siblings (Numbers 12:6): “And he said, Hear now my words: If there be a prophet among you, I the Lord will make myself known unto him in a vision,

and will speak unto him in a dream.”¹⁵ Accordingly, prophets in the earliest biblical times were called seers (1 Samuel 9:9): “Beforetime in Israel, when a man went to enquire of God, thus he spake, Come, and let us go to the seer: for he that is now called a Prophet was beforetime called a Seer.” In the Book of Moses also, a seer is one who sees visions (Moses 6:35–36). Although the understanding of what it means to be a seer has evolved in the Church as well as in the broader culture,¹⁶ the Old Testament concept of seer as a “see-er” of visions was still understood in Joseph Smith’s day. Noah Webster’s 1828 dictionary defines *seer* as “1. One who sees; as a seer of visions.”¹⁷ By seeing divine visions, a seer becomes a medium for revealing whatever God sees fit to show him. As Ammon explained, “a seer can know of things which are past, and also of things which are to come, and by them shall all things be revealed” (Mosiah 8:17). Because of this limitless nature of revelatory visions, “a gift that is greater, can no man have” (Mosiah 8:16).

Old-time seers were beholders of visions. If the possession and use of the interpreter stones made Joseph Smith a “seer, after the manner of old times,” it must have done so by enabling him to see visions. This raises the question of whether the translation of the Book of Mormon, as well as the other revelations Joseph Smith received by seer stone, came to him simply as spiritual visions. If the Book of Mormon text was, in fact, given to Joseph Smith in vision, it was not the first time a keystone scripture was revealed that way. Lehi, the founding seer of the Nephite nation, saw and read a book of scripture in vision. The Book of Mormon begins with an account of Lehi lying on his bed and “carried away in a vision” in which he “thought he saw God sitting upon his throne, [and] ... One descending out of the midst of heaven,” who, in Nephi’s words,

came and stood before my father, and gave unto him a book, and bade him that he should read. And it came to pass that as he read, he was filled with the Spirit of the Lord. And *he read*, saying: Wo, wo, unto Jerusalem, for I have seen thine abominations! Yea, and many things did my father read concerning Jerusalem — that it should be destroyed, and the inhabitants thereof; many should perish by the sword, and many should be carried away captive into Babylon. (1 Nephi 1:7–13)

The things that Lehi read in the envisioned book provided his people with an explicit Christ-centered focus for their religion (1 Nephi 1:19; see also 10:2–17), and his written record of this and other visions formed the beginning of the sacred record of the Nephite nation (1 Nephi 1:14–17;

6:1; 9:1). Ezekiel, who lived around the same time as Lehi and also prophesied of the destruction of Jerusalem, saw and read a “roll of a book” in his own vision (Ezekiel 2:8–10). Much later, John the Revelator saw a “little book” in vision (Revelations 10).

If the text of the Book of Mormon was revealed to Joseph Smith in vision, the seer stones may have simply been aids to faith that helped him attain a state of mind conducive to seeing visions. This idea differs from more conventional theories of how the Book of Mormon was revealed. Believers have commonly supposed that “the Urim and Thummim” revealed the translation of the Book of Mormon in some mysterious technological way. Prominent Mormon scholars have imagined these revelatory stones as mechanical devices made by God,¹⁸ as instruments for transmitting light and intelligence,¹⁹ as objects made from celestial material,²⁰ as light-emitting radioactive instruments,²¹ as precision receivers of divine communication analogous to television and radio,²² and as revelation technology analogous to a tablet computer.²³ Others, citing Doctrine and Covenants sections 8 and 9, have emphasized Joseph Smith’s role in working out a translation in his mind.²⁴ Apostle John Widtsoe summarized this view: “As nearly as can be understood, the ideas set forth by the characters were revealed to the Prophet. He then expressed the ideas in English as best he could.”²⁵ Early church leader and historian B. H. Roberts held somewhat of a hybrid view, with Joseph Smith translating in his head based on inspired thoughts and his translation subsequently reflected back to his eyes by the seer stone.²⁶ More recently, Brant Gardner proposed an explanation similar to that proposed by B. H. Roberts, but with the translated text appearing to Joseph Smith as vivid mental images.²⁷

It is not my intent to argue against these or any other theories of how the Book of Mormon was translated. God who turned water to wine might well have turned a stone into a communication or translation device, or he might as easily have given an unlearned farmer the ability to compose the English text. My intent is rather to explore the possibility that neither the stone nor Joseph Smith produced the translated text but rather that it was simply shown to him in vision, just as other texts have been shown in vision to other seers. I will do so by assessing whether this idea is consistent with the way witnesses described Joseph Smith’s revelatory use of seer stones, with the way seer stones were used by others in Joseph Smith’s day, and with the way the scriptures portray the revelation of texts and revelatory use of stones. I will then explore the

possible function of seer stones as aids that helped Joseph Smith focus the faith he needed to see visions.

The Principal Accounts of Translation of the Book of Mormon

In January of 1849, Oliver Cowdery shared with Samuel W. Richards his understanding of how the Book of Mormon was translated. Over 58 years later, on May 21, 1907, Richards recorded his recollection of what Oliver Cowdery had said. According to that recollection, Cowdery told him that when Joseph Smith was translating, words appeared and “remained *in* the *translator*” until transcribed correctly.²⁸ The “translator” could have referred to the interpreters or, alternatively, to Joseph Smith’s brown seer stone. The need for the seer to look “in” the stone agrees with the Book of Mormon’s description of how seer stones are used (Mosiah 8:13). A typed copy was soon made of Richards’s recollection and dated May 25, 1907. Because Richards’s original account did not read smoothly in some spots, someone (probably the typist) did some light editing. As a result of this editing, Oliver Cowdery is represented in the typed copy as saying that the words Joseph Smith saw while translating appeared and “remained *on* the ‘*interpreter*.’”²⁹ These changes in the text reflect assumptions both about what instrument was used and about how it functioned. There may be even greater differences between Richards’s May 21 account and what Cowdery actually said many decades previously — differences due to Richards’s own faulty recollection and assumptions. Because of such probable but unknowable differences, we must use Richards’s account and all other secondhand (and third-hand, and fourth-hand) accounts with caution, if at all.

Even secondhand accounts written shortly after an interview are likely to have errors. In 1881, after an interview that David Whitmer granted the *Kansas City Daily Journal* was published with several errors, he wrote a letter of correction to the editor:

I notice several errors in the interview had with me by one of your reporters as published in the DAILY JOURNAL of June 5th, ‘81, and wish to correct them.

I am reported as saying that “the young men in the neighborhood saw the plates in the hill.” The language used was, that “we saw the place (not the plates) in the hill from which the plates were taken, just as he described them to us before he obtained them.” ... I do not wish to be understood as saying that those referred to as being present were all of the

time in the immediate presence of the translator, but were at the place and saw how the translation was conducted. I did not say that Smith used “two small stones” as stated nor did I call the stone “interpreters.” I stated that “he used one stone (not two) and called it a sun [seer] stone.” The “interpreters” were as I understood taken from Smith and were not used by him after losing the first 116 pages as stated. It is my understanding that the stone refer[r]ed to was furnished him when he commenced translating again after losing the 116 pages.

My statement was and now is that in translating he put the stone in his hat and putting his face in his hat so as to exclude the light and that then the light and characters appeared in the hat together with the interpretation which he uttered and was written by the scribe and which was tested at the time as stated.³⁰

Before the use of recording equipment became standard practice, interviewers had to reconstruct statements from hastily written notes, filling in gaps and smoothing over rough spots with their own words based on their sometimes-faulty memories of what was said and assumptions of what was meant. The chance for error was high. (The problem was made worse by faulty typesetting, such as “sun stone” instead of “seer stone” in the letter quoted above.)³¹ This tendency for error limits the utility of secondhand accounts for reconstructing historical events. For this reason, and for the sake of brevity, I will rely primarily on firsthand accounts for reconstructing the process by which Joseph Smith translated the Book of Mormon. These include accounts written or dictated personally by those who witnessed the translation, as well as interview transcripts that were reviewed and explicitly approved by the interviewed witnesses. I will also include firsthand accounts of those who heard Joseph Smith describe aspects of the translation process. When I do quote secondhand or third-hand accounts, I will make it clear that I am doing so. All the known firsthand accounts that provide details of the translation process are provided or summarized below.

In Joseph Smith’s description of the translation in the earliest manuscript of his history, he says that “the Lord provided spectacles for to read the book.”³² Near the end of his life, in a letter he wrote to the *Times and Seasons*, Joseph Smith quoted Mormon 9:34 and then stated: “Here then the subject is put to silence, for ‘none other people knoweth

our language,’ therefore the Lord, and not man, had to interpret, after the people were dead.”³³ In his other published statements, Joseph Smith provided little additional information, indicating only that he translated “through the medium of the Urim and Thummim ... by the gift and power of God.”³⁴

The only firsthand statement describing the translation we have from Oliver Cowdery is equally spare and vague:

I ... commenced to write the Book of Mormon. 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 whould [sic] have said, ‘Interpreters.’³⁵

In this description, Cowdery has Joseph Smith translating “with the Urim and Thummim” but also dictating “by the inspiration of heaven.” The means of divine inspiration is not specified, and could refer to either thoughts or visual images presented to Joseph Smith’s mind. *Inspiration* in a religious context is often equated with the direct instilling of thoughts by the Holy Ghost, but the word also has a more general meaning of influence, and it is unclear in which sense Cowdery is using it.

Cowdery’s statement is also equivocal regarding the instrument being used to translate. “The Urim and Thummim” could refer to the interpreters or to one of Joseph Smith’s own seer stones. By mentioning “interpreters,” Cowdery may have intended the reader to infer that Joseph Smith translated in his presence with the Nephite interpreters, but that is not exactly what he said. All he necessarily said was that the Nephite term for urim and thummim was *interpreters*: “the *urim and thummim*, or as the Nephites would have said, ‘interpreters.’” Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery both avoided using the term “seer stone” in their public statements. Talk of revelation by seer stone in a society increasingly intolerant of folk religious practices would have only increased the hostility Joseph Smith and his followers faced because of their unconventional religious views. That may have been why, when Joseph Smith was asked during an 1831 conference in Ohio to relate information regarding the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, he opined that “it was not intended to tell the world all the particulars of the coming forth of the book of Mormon” and “it was not expedient for him to relate these things.”³⁶ The Church has since made efforts to inform the public about Joseph Smith’s use of a seer stone in translating.³⁷

Martin Harris granted an interview to Joel Tiffany, editor of the spiritualist periodical, *Tiffany's Monthly*, in 1859. Tiffany's report of the interview begins by noting efforts to assure that Martin Harris's statements were accurately recorded: "The following narration we took down from the lips of Martin Harris, and read the same to him after it was written, that we might be certain of giving his statement to the world." The account relates Martin Harris's description of the interpreter stones and how they might have been used:

The two stones set in a bow of silver were about two inches in diameter, perfectly round, and about five-eighths of an inch thick at the centre; but not so thick at the edges where they came into the bow. They were joined by a round bar of silver, about three-eighths of an inch in diameter, and about four inches long, which, with the two stones, would make eight inches.

The stones were white, like polished marble, with a few gray streaks. I never dared to look into them by placing them in the hat, because Moses said that "no man could see God and live," and we could see anything we wished by looking into them; and I could not keep the desire to see God out of my mind.³⁸

The two round stones set in a metal frame superficially resembled spectacles. With the dimensions that Martin Harris gave for the interpreters, however, they were too wide to have been worn like eyeglasses. Martin Harris's statement that the interpreters were used by placing them in a hat is corroborated by an account written by Joseph Knight Sr., a close friend of Joseph Smith who remained true to him and the church he established throughout his life. Joseph Knight was present at the Smith home when Joseph Smith first obtained the plates and interpreters. He also provided material support, including paper, for the translation and visited Joseph Smith several times during the translation period. He likely would have been permitted to observe Joseph translating. In his account, Joseph Knight describes Joseph Smith's reaction to obtaining the interpreters and gold plates and how he used the "glasses" in translating.

But he seemed to think more of *the glasses or the urim and thummim* than he did of the Plates for says he I can see any thing they are Marvelous Now they are written in Characters and I want them translated Now he was Commanded not to let no one see those things But a few for witness at a givin time.

... Now he Bing an unlearned man did not know what to Do. then the Lord gave him Power to Translate himself then ware the Larned men Confounded, for he By the means he found with the plates he Could translate those Caricters Better than the Larned. 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

But if it was not Spelt rite it would not go away till it was rite so we see it was marvelous thus was the hol translated. Now when he Began to translate he was poor and was put to it for provisions and had no one to write for him But his wife and his wifes Brother would sometimes write a little for him through the winter.³⁹

This account confirms that the “glasses or the urim and thummim” were used in translating, not by wearing them, but by placing them in a hat.⁴⁰

Joseph Smith’s brother William may have also witnessed the Book of Mormon translation in the earliest days. If not, he must have been privy to discussions about the process. In a pamphlet that he published in 1883, he wrote,

He translated them by means of the Urim and Thummim, (which he obtained with the plates), and the power of God. The manner in which this was done was by looking into the Urim and Thummim, which was placed in a hat to exclude the light, (the plates lying near by covered up), and reading off the translation, which appeared in the stone by the power of God.⁴¹

William Smith’s statement agrees with those of Knight and Harris that the interpreters were used by placing them in a hat.

The remaining firsthand accounts of translation describe Joseph Smith using a single seer stone rather than the two interpreter stones to translate. David Whitmer indicated in his letter to the *Kansas City Daily Journal* that the interpreters were not used after the loss of the 116 manuscript pages. Whitmer’s statement is supported by a letter written by Emma Smith to Emma Pilgrim in 1870, in which she describes Joseph Smith’s brown seer stone: “Now, the first part

my husband translated, was translated by the use of the Urim, and Thummim, and that was the part that Martin Harris lost, after that he used a small stone, not exactly black, but was rather a dark color.”⁴²

Emma Smith was interviewed in 1879 by her son Joseph Smith III, who was careful to verify that he had recorded her words correctly: “These questions and the answers she had given to them, were read to my mother by me ... and were affirmed by her.”⁴³ In the transcript of the interview, she speaks of the manner of translation and of her belief in the authenticity of the Book of Mormon:

In writing for your father I frequently wrote day after day, often sitting at the table close by him, he sitting with his face buried in his hat, with the stone in it, and dictating hour after hour with nothing between us. ... He had neither manuscript nor book to read from. ... If he had had anything of the kind he could not have concealed it from me. ... The plates often lay on the table without any attempt at concealment, wrapped in a small linen table cloth....

Joseph Smith ... could neither write nor dictate a coherent and well-worded letter, let alone a book like the Book of Mormon....

My belief is that the Book of Mormon is of divine authenticity — I have not the slightest doubt of it. I am satisfied that no man could have dictated the writing of the manuscripts unless he was inspired; for, when acting as his scribe, your father would dictate to me hour after hour; and when returning after meals, or after interruptions, he would at once begin where he had left off, without either seeing the manuscript or having any portion of it read to him. This was a usual thing for him to do. It would have been improbable that a learned man could do this; and for one so ignorant and unlearned as he was, it was simply impossible.⁴⁴

In early June of 1829, Joseph, Emma, and Oliver Cowdery moved to the Peter Whitmer home in Fayette, New York, to complete the translation, with Oliver Cowdery as the principal scribe. The translation was conducted in plain view of others, as described in 1870 by Elizabeth Ann Whitmer Cowdery, David Whitmer’s sister who later married Oliver Cowdery:

I cheerfully certify that I was familiar with the manner of Joseph Smith’s translating the Book of Mormon. He translated

the most of it at my Father's house. And I often sat by and saw and heard them translate and write for hours together. Joseph never had a curtain drawn between him and his scribe while he was translating. He would place the director in his hat, and then place his face in his hat, so as to exclude the light.⁴⁵

Both Elizabeth Cowdery and David Whitmer retained a firm belief in the Book of Mormon the remainder of their lives. David Whitmer, having given many interviews to newspaper reporters and other interested persons and often being misquoted, issued a corrective statement in 1879 through his friend, John Traughber:

With the sanction of David Whitmer, and by his authority, I now state that he does not say that Joseph Smith ever translated in his presence by aid of Urim and Thummim; but by means of one dark colored, opaque stone, called a "Seer Stone," which was placed in the crown of a hat, into which Joseph put his face, so as to exclude the external light. Then, a *spiritual light* would shine forth, and *parchment would appear* before Joseph, upon which was a line of characters from the plates, and under it, the translation in English; at least, so *Joseph said*.⁴⁶

This statement names Joseph Smith as the ultimate source of information.⁴⁷ It also names Joseph Smith's dark seer stone as the instrument used. While Joseph Smith, his mother, Oliver Cowdery, Wilford Woodruff, and some others close to him consistently referred to Joseph Smith's seer stone as urim and thummim, others, including Joseph Knight, Emma Smith, and David Whitmer, were content to call it a seer stone or glass and reserved *urim and thummim* for the interpreters. David Whitmer was a firm believer in the sacred use of seer stones and consistently testified that Joseph Smith translated by the "gift and power of God."⁴⁸

David Whitmer's statement agrees with those of the other translation witnesses that the instrument was placed in a hat, which served to exclude the light. Like Joseph Knight, Whitmer mentions the appearance of words, but describes the translation in terms even more suggestive of a visionary experience. A "parchment would appear" by "spiritual light" and on it, the Book of Mormon text.⁴⁹ This accords with the visionary experiences of Lehi, Ezekiel, and John, in which a text appeared on an envisioned "book." The book Lehi saw in vision would have most likely been a "roll of a book" like that read by Ezekiel in his great vision. The

standard books at the time of Lehi and Ezekiel were rolls of papyrus or leather. By the time John envisioned a “little book,” writing on sheets of parchment was becoming more common.⁵⁰

None of these accounts indicate words appearing *on* a stone, as is sometimes assumed. The words simply “appear” (Joseph Knight’s account), or they appear “in the hat” (David Whitmer’s 1881 letter) or “*in* the stone” (William Smith’s account) or on a “parchment” that “would appear before Joseph” (Whitmer’s 1879 account). Martin Harris had indicated that a person might “see anything we wished” by “looking into” stones placed in a hat. These different descriptions are all consistent with one another if the translation was a visionary experience. In the darkness of Joseph Smith’s hat, a stone may not have been visible at all. As he gazed in the direction of the stone(s) and saw a vision of words on parchment, he may have thought of the vision as appearing in or through the stone(s).

David Whitmer published a pamphlet in 1887 in which he testified that he was “an eye-witness to the translation of the greater part of the Book of Mormon” and again shared his understanding of the translation process:

God gave to an unlearned boy, Joseph Smith, the gift to translate it by the means of a STONE. See the following passages concerning the “*Urim and Thummin*,” *being the same means* and one by which the Ancients received the word of the Lord. (1 Sam. xxviii:6. Neh. vii:65. Ezra ii:63. Num. xxvii:21. Deut. xxxiii:8. Exodus xxviii:30. Lev. viii:8). But this is a great stumbling-block to the people now. They cannot understand why God would work in this manner to bring forth his word; and why he would choose such a man as Joseph Smith to translate it; and they think the canon of scripture is full: and that angels do not minister unto men in these days....

I will now give you a description of the manner in which the Book of Mormon was translated. Joseph Smith would put the seer stone into a hat, and put his face in the hat, drawing it closely around his face to exclude the light; and in the darkness the *spiritual light* would shine. A piece of something resembling parchment *would appear* and on that appeared the writing. One character at a time would appear, and under it was the interpretation in English. Brother Joseph would read off the English to Oliver Cowdery, who was his principal scribe, and when it was written down and repeated to Brother

Joseph to see if it was correct, then it would disappear, and another character with the interpretation would appear. Thus the Book of Mormon was translated *by the gift and power of God*, and not by any power of man....

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

Brother Joseph did not write a word of the Book of Mormon; it was already written by holy men of God who dwelt upon this land. God gave to Brother Joseph *the gift to see* the sentences in English, when he looked into the hat in which was placed the stone. Oliver Cowdery had the same gift at one time.⁵¹

Whitmer's account of the translation process is consistent with those of other witnesses and puts the translation in a larger context of divine revelation. The means by which Joseph Smith translated the Book of Mormon was, according to Whitmer, the same means by which he received other early revelations and the same means by which ancient Israel's high priests received the word of God through the Urim and Thummim. Specifically, "the gift and power of God" by which Joseph Smith translated was "the gift to see."

These are the surviving firsthand accounts of those who witnessed or likely witnessed Joseph Smith translating the Book of Mormon. To these principal accounts can be added the firsthand accounts of those who apparently heard Joseph Smith describe some aspect of the translation process. There are only seven such accounts that provide any relevant information beyond Joseph Smith's stating that he translated by the gift or power of God or by urim and thummim.⁵² Although the authors of these accounts were unbelieving of or even hostile toward Joseph Smith's claims, their statements agree in most details with the accounts of the believing witnesses.⁵³

The earliest known account of the translation process was published in August of 1829 by Jonathan A. Hadley, editor of the *Palmyra Freeman*, after Joseph Smith came to him seeking a publisher for the Book of Mormon. Hadley reported that Joseph Smith had found a "huge pair of Spectacles" with the engraved gold plates and that "by placing the Spectacles in a hat, and

looking into it, Smith could (*he said so*, at least) interpret these characters⁵⁴ Hadley's report that the interpreters were used by placing them in a hat accords with the statements of Harris, Knight, and William Smith.

Ezra Booth, a Methodist minister who converted to Mormonism after meeting Joseph Smith, was one of the first high priests and missionaries in the Church, but he soon became disillusioned with Joseph Smith and returned to his former religion. In a letter to another Methodist minister dated October 24, 1831, Booth notes the similarity between Joseph Smith's visions of celestial beings and his translation of the Book of Mormon:

Smith is the only person at present, to my knowledge, who pretends to hold converse with the inhabitants of the celestial world. It seems *from his statements*, that he can have access to them, when and where he pleases. He does not pretend that he sees them with his *natural*, but with his *spiritual*, eyes; and *he says* he can see them as well with his eyes shut, as with them open. So also in *translating*. — *The subject stands before his eyes in print*, but it matters not whether his *eyes are open or shut*; he can see as well one way as the other.

...

These treasures were discovered several years since, by the means of the dark glass, the same with which *Smith says* he translated the most of the Book of Mormon.⁵⁵

The "dark glass" that Joseph Smith used to translate "most of the Book of Mormon" in Booth's account accords with the stone of "rather a dark color" mentioned by Emma Smith and the "dark colored, opaque stone" mentioned by David Whitmer. Booth's claim that Joseph Smith himself provided this information suggests that, at least in his private conversations, he was initially more open about the translation process and objects used.

According to Booth's letter, Joseph Smith could see the translation of the Book of Mormon whether his eyes were "open or shut," just as when he saw visions of heavenly beings. As traditionally understood, the visions of Lehi, Ezekiel, and other prophets were dreamlike experiences in which persons and objects were seen that were not physically present, or were seen with other than the physical eyes. These are traditionally called "imaginative visions."⁵⁶ *Imaginative* in this sense does not mean *imaginary*. It simply means that a vision is perceived through the brain's imaginative faculty or the mind's eye, as one perceives a dream or other

vivid mental image, rather than through the physical senses. Booth and others of his time would say such visions were perceived by “spiritual eyes” with “spiritual light,” rather than by the “natural eye.” In D&C 76, Joseph Smith relates seeing such a vision: “And while we meditated upon these things, the Lord touched the *eyes of our understandings* and they were opened, and the glory of the Lord shone round about. And we ... saw the holy angels, and them who are sanctified before his throne. ... And while we were yet *in the Spirit*, the Lord commanded that we should write the *vision*” (D&C 76:19–28). Imaginative visions include revelatory dreams, which are described in the Bible as visions of the night (Job 4:13; 33:15, Genesis 46:2; Daniel 2:19, 26–18; 7:1–2). Revelatory dreams and visions are also equated in the Book of Mormon, as Lehi said: “Behold, I have dreamed a dream; or, in other words, I have seen a vision” (1 Nephi 8:2).

Nancy Towle, an itinerant preacher who met with Joseph Smith in October of 1831, reported in 1832 that he claimed to have found with the gold plates, “a pair of ‘interpreters,’ (as he called them,) that resembled spectacles; by *looking into* which, he could read a writing engraven upon the plates, though to himself, in a tongue unknown.” The translated book, she learned, was regarded by believers as the “Word of Inspiration.”⁵⁷

In a sworn statement in about 1833, Henry Harris, a neighbor of the Smiths in New York, recalled how Joseph Smith described the translation: “By looking on the plates he said he could not understand the words, but it was made known to him that he was the person that must translate them, and on *looking through the stone* was enabled to translate.”⁵⁸

Peter Bauder, a minister who interviewed Joseph Smith at the Whitmer home in 1830, reported in a book he published in 1834 that Joseph Smith told of having “obtained a parcel of plate resembling gold, on which were engraved what he did not understand, only by the aid of a glass which he also obtained with the plate, by which means he was enabled to translate the characters on the plate into English.”⁵⁹ Bauder refers to the interpreters as a “glass,” a local term for seer stone.⁶⁰

Truman Coe, a pastor in Kirtland, Ohio, reported the following in 1836:

The manner of translation was as wonderful as the discovery. By putting his finger on one of the characters and imploring divine aid, then looking through the Urim and Thummim, he would see the import written in plain English on a screen placed before him. After delivering this to his emanuensi, he would again proceed in the same manner and obtain the

meaning of the next character, and so on till he came to a part of the plates which were sealed up, and there was commanded to desist: and he says he has a promise from God that in due time he will enable him to translate the remainder. *This is the relation as given by Smith.* ...The book thus produced, is called by them The Book of Mormon, and is pretended to be of the same Divine Inspiration and authority as the Bible.⁶¹

Coe's mention that the translated text would appear on a "screen" accords with David Whitmer's mention of the text appearing on "something like parchment." Coe's account differs from those of Whitmer and others in having Joseph Smith interacting physically with the plates, which may describe Joseph Smith's initial perusal of the plates rather than his later manner of translating with the plates covered.

In a letter to his wife in 1840, Mathew Davis, a journalist, summarized a speech he heard Joseph Smith give the previous evening: "The Mormon Bible, he said, was communicated to him, direct from heaven. If there was such a thing on earth, as the author of it, then he (Smith) was the author; but the idea that he wished to impress was, that he had penned it as dictated by God."⁶²

Although "dictated" usually implies that words are spoken aloud, that interpretation is not consistent with any of the other principal accounts of translation. Based on the rest of the statement, Joseph Smith was more likely trying to communicate the idea that the words of the Book of Mormon were divinely revealed. In any case, Davis's account portrays the translation as a revelation of words rather than of ideas or impressions and as a direct revelation from God rather than something produced in Joseph Smith's mind or by a translating device.

These are the principal accounts of the translation of the Book of Mormon. Taken together, they suggest that Joseph Smith would look seemingly "into" or "through" one or more stones in the darkened interior of a hat and see the translation written on a parchment or similar surface. This description is consistent with a visionary experience.

Joseph Smith's Other Revelations by Seer Stone

There are several accounts of Joseph Smith's using a stone to translate or receive other revelations besides the translation of the Book of Mormon. I will here mention those that are most credible.⁶³ In doing so, it is not my intention to settle the discussion of how Joseph Smith translated the Book of Abraham or the Book of Moses or how he received any other revelation. I will attempt only to demonstrate that when there is credible

evidence that Joseph Smith used a stone to receive a revelation, the evidence is consistent with revelation by imaginative vision.

In April of 1829, during the translation of the Book of Mormon, Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery had a difference of opinion regarding whether John the Revelator died or was to continue living until the second coming of Christ. In his history, Joseph Smith recounts:

We mutually agreed to settle [it] by the Urim and Thummim, and the following is the word which we received.

A Revelation given to Joseph Smith jr, and Oliver Cowdery in Harmony Pensylvania April 1829. when they desired to know whether John, the beloved disciple, tarried on earth. — Translated from parchment, written and hid up by himself. [D&C 7]⁶⁴

As in David Whitmer's account of the translation of the Book of Mormon, Joseph Smith is here represented as obtaining a translation from a piece of parchment he apparently saw in vision.⁶⁵

Four individuals close to Joseph Smith made statements suggesting he used a stone in translating the Book of Abraham.⁶⁶ As Wilford Woodruff was assisting with setting the type for the first printing of the Book of Abraham, he recorded in his journal that the Lord was blessing Joseph "the Seer" to "translate through the *urim & Thummim* Ancient records & Hieroglyphics as old as Abraham or Adam."⁶⁷ Upon publishing the first installment of the Book of Abraham in England, Parley Pratt announced, "The record is now in course of translation by means of the Urim and Thummim." According to a report of a discourse by Orson Pratt in 1859, he saw Joseph Smith "translating, by inspiration, the Old and New Testaments, and the inspired book of Abraham from Egyptian papyrus."⁶⁸ In an 1878 discourse, he reportedly spoke of Joseph Smith's translating the Book of Abraham "by the aid of the Urim and Thummim."⁶⁹ Also, Howard Coray, who first met Joseph Smith in 1840 and served as his clerk in 1840 and 1841, wrote in a letter to his daughter that he had "seen him translate by the Seer's stone."⁷⁰

The only firsthand account of the translation of the Book of Abraham is from William Parrish. He served as scribe for a portion of the translation and later reported, "I have set by his side and penned down the translation of the Egyptian Hieroglyphicks as he claimed to receive it by direct inspiration of Heaven."⁷¹ Parrish's use of the word *inspiration* does not rule out the possibility the Book of Abraham was revealed in the same manner as the Book of Mormon, since the statements of Oliver

Cowdery, Emma Smith, Nancy Towle, and Truman Coe all connect the Book of Mormon translation with inspiration as well as with the use of stones. That the heavenly “inspiration” by which Joseph Smith translated the Book of Abraham may have come in visionary form is suggested in the revelation calling Warren Parrish as Joseph Smith’s scribe: “Therefore this shall be his calling . . . the Lords Scribe, for the Lords *Seer*.”⁷² Parrish was called to write for a *seer*. Wilford Woodruff, in reporting the use of the “urim and thummim” to translate the book, also called Joseph Smith a *seer*. John Whitmer’s history of the Church also portrays Joseph Smith as translating the Book of Abraham in the capacity of *seer*: “Joseph the *Seer* saw these Record[s] and by the revelation of Jesus Christ could translate these records.”⁷³

The only other account of the translation of the Book of Abraham from a potential witness is from Lucy Smith, although it is secondhand at best. A group of Quakers who visited Lucy Smith reported in 1846 that she told them that

when Joseph was reading the papyrus, he *closed his eyes*, and held a hat over his face, and that the revelation came to him; and where the papyrus was torn, he could *read* the parts that were destroyed equally as well as those that were there; and that scribes sat by him writing, as he expounded.⁷⁴

This account parallels the account of William Parrish, with the scribe sitting by Joseph and writing as the revelation was received. It also parallels David Whitmer’s account of the Book of Mormon translation, with Joseph Smith reading from a document that appears to him when he covers his face with a hat. And it accords with Booth’s assertion that Joseph Smith claimed to see text while translating with his eyes closed.

Joseph Smith may have also used a *seer* stone in his translation of the Book of Moses. The Book of Moses includes major additions to Genesis revealed to Joseph Smith at the beginning of his translation of the Bible. In 1880, Lorenzo Brown reported having heard Joseph Smith tell of using a stone to “read” the Bible:

After I got through translating the Book of Mormon, I took up the Bible to read with the Urim and Thummim. I read the first chapter of Genesis and I saw the things as they were done. I turned over the next and the next, and the whole passed before me like a grand panorama; and so on chapter after chapter until I read the whole of it. I saw it all!⁷⁵

It is unlikely that Brown could accurately quote Joseph Smith from memory after more than four decades, but this account does suggest that, after translating the Book of Mormon, Joseph Smith somehow used a seer stone for a visionary experience relating to the Bible. If he used a stone for some sort of visionary scan of the Bible, that may help explain a statement he made in June of 1833. As he was nearing completion of his Old Testament translation, he reported, “We have not found the Book of Jasher, nor any other of the lost books mentioned in the Bible as yet; nor shall we obtain them at present.”⁷⁶ *Found* is an odd word to use in the context of translation but would have made sense if Joseph Smith had been translating by seer stone, which, according to Mosiah 8:13, could be used to “look for” things.⁷⁷

On the other hand, Orson Pratt is reported to have said in a discourse in 1874 that he was present many times while Joseph Smith “was translating the New Testament” and wondered “why he did *not* use the Urim and Thummim, as in translating the Book of Mormon.” Joseph Smith reportedly replied that “the Lord gave him the Urim and Thummim when he was inexperienced in the Spirit of inspiration,” but he had now “advanced so far that he understood the operations of that Spirit and did not need the assistance of that instrument.”⁷⁸ This is a late, third-hand account of what Joseph Smith said. Its accuracy is doubtful, since Joseph Smith continued to use seer stones after translating the Book of Mormon, and even after his revision of the New Testament.⁷⁹ He received at least one revelation by seer stone during the period he was translating the Bible.⁸⁰ Even if accurate, this account does not address the translation of the Book of Moses, which was completed before the translation of the New Testament began. Also, the translation of the Book of Moses and the translation of the New Testament likely involved two different processes. While Joseph Smith translated the New Testament mostly by making short edits that served to smooth, modernize, and make doctrinal clarifications in the text,⁸¹ he translated the Book of Moses by dictating a series of long texts, called revelations in the manuscripts, that are more reminiscent of his dictations of the Book of Mormon and other early revelations by seer stone.⁸²

Joseph Smith dictated the first revelations of the Book of Moses to Oliver Cowdery, Emma Smith, and John Whitmer, who had served as scribes for the Book of Mormon translation. Then, in early December, Sidney Rigdon was called as his scribe to “write for him; and the scriptures shall be given, even as they are in mine own bosom” (D&C 35:20). Rigdon took over the duties of scribe from John Whitmer during

Joseph Smith's dictation of a part of the Book of Moses containing the words of Enoch. In his history of the Church, John Whitmer left the closest thing we have to a witness account of the translation of the Book of Moses:⁸³

Now, after the Lord had made known, what he would that his servant Sidney should do, he went to writing the things which the Lord *showed* unto his servant the *seer*. The Lord made known, some of the hidden things of the kingdom of God; for he unfolded the prophesy of Enoch the sevanth from Adam. After they had written this prophecy, the Lord spake to them again, and gave further directions. Behold I say unto you, that it is not expedient in me that ye should *translate* any more until ye shall go to the Ohio; and this because of the enemy and for your sakes.⁸⁴

That the Lord “showed” this record to his “seer” suggests that the translation was a visionary experience.

The introductory headings of D&C sections 3, 6, 7, 11, 14, and 17 indicate that they were given by “the Urim and Thummim,” which was, at the time, the brown seer stone.⁸⁵ Joseph Smith used his seer stones for other revelations as well. Regarding the revelation in D&C 18, David Whitmer stated: “I was present when Brother Joseph received this revelation through the stone.”⁸⁶ Whitmer described how Joseph Smith used the brown stone to receive another revelation soon after completing the Book of Mormon translation: “Brother Hyrum ... persuaded Joseph to inquire of the Lord about it. Joseph concluded to do so. He had not yet given up the stone. Joseph looked into the hat in which he placed the stone, and received a revelation.”⁸⁷ When Orson Pratt asked him for a revelation in November of 1830 (see D&C 34), Joseph Smith is reported to have “produced a small stone called a seer stone, and putting it into a hat soon commenced speaking.”⁸⁸ As this revelation was given after Joseph Smith gave his brown seer stone to Oliver Cowdery, the “small stone” mentioned was most likely the white one.

These statements suggest that Joseph Smith used the same technique — looking “into a hat in which he placed a stone” — to receive his other early revelations, as he used in translating the Book of Mormon and that revelation by seer stone was a visual or visionary experience (he “looked”). Lucy Smith was even more explicit than David Whitmer in equating Joseph Smith's method of translating the Book of Mormon with his method of receiving other revelations by seer stone. In her history

recorded in 1844 and 1845, she reports how Joseph Smith received one unexpected revelation:

As he one morning applied them [“the urim and thummim”] to his eyes to look upon the record *instead of the words of the book* being given him he was commanded to write a letter to one David Whitmore.⁸⁹

The difference between “translating” an ancient record and receiving a commandment by urim and thummim was not the mode of revelation, but the content of the message. There is no indication in any of these accounts that the use of a stone to either translate or to receive other revelations was anything more than a purely visual, or visionary, experience. Joseph Smith was known for his many visions, and there is no reason that his visions could not have included written words. Joseph Smith’s ability to see words in vision is further supported by records of patriarchal blessings he gave to David Whitmer and other leaders at about the same time he was translating the Book of Abraham. After recording Whitmer’s blessing, Oliver Cowdery noted that it was “given like the foregoing blessings, by *vision*, to Joseph Smith, jr. the *Seer*, September 22, 1835.”⁹⁰ Cowdery didn’t say whether a seer stone was used to see these visions, but he did record that a patriarchal blessing given to Newel K. Whitney just two weeks later was “through the Urim and Thummim.”⁹¹

In 1844, William Clayton recorded in his journal that Joseph Smith said he had learned “the g[rand] key word ... the first word Adam spoke,” and that he “found the word by the Urim and Thummim.”⁹² One would normally speak of receiving — not finding — a revelation. As with Joseph Smith’s statement regarding his Bible translation and the Book of Jasher, *found* makes sense here for a visionary experience in light of Mosiah 8:13. This time the use of a seer stone is explicit.

These are the most credible accounts of Joseph Smith’s use of seer stones to receive revelations of texts other than the Book of Mormon. They are consistent with the idea that the revelations came as visions of written documents like those seen by Lehi and other ancient seers. They also illuminate how Joseph Smith may have understood the term *translate* in reference to the ancient records he revealed. To translate as he did was to produce a translated text, not in the conventional manner as a scholar would, but as a seer, by “seeing” the translation and dictating it to a scribe.

Seer Stones and Translation in the Doctrine and Covenants

In D&C 130, Joseph Smith expresses his belief that the celestialized earth, the place where God dwells, and the white stone mentioned in Revelation 2:17 will all be urim and thummim by which things are made manifest to celestial beings.

In answer to the question — Is not the reckoning of God’s time, angel’s time, prophet’s time, and man’s time, according to the planet on which they reside? I answer, Yes. But there are no angels who minister to this earth but those who do belong or have belonged to it. The angels do not reside on a planet like this earth; But they reside in the presence of God, on a globe like a sea of glass and fire, where all things for their glory are manifest, past, present, and future, and are continually before the Lord. 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 is a new name written, which no man knoweth save he that receiveth it. The new name is the key word. (D&C 130:4–11)

The introductory heading of D&C 130 does not present these statements as revelation but calls them “items of instruction given by Joseph Smith.” They represent an informal conversation between Joseph Smith and William Clayton, reconstructed ultimately from an entry in Clayton’s journal from April of 1843, perhaps informed by recollections of the conversation by others.⁹³ They are Joseph Smith’s interpretation of the seas of glass mentioned in Revelation 4:6 and 15:2 and the white stone of Revelation 2:17 that will be given to “him that overcometh.” The manifestations of these urim and thummim, as Joseph Smith portrays them, are visual in nature — writing on a stone; past, present, and future revealed in a sea of glass and “continually before the Lord.” Joseph Smith interprets these biblical references as celestial rather than earthly

phenomena. He applies them to his own seer stones only by analogy. Immediately following the phrase, “continually before the Lord,” in Clayton’s journal is this sentence: “The Urim & Thummim is a small representation of this globe.” The object that served as “the Urim and Thummim” in 1843 was Joseph Smith’s white, egg-shaped seer stone. That stone was not a miniature version of a celestial sea of fire and glass but rather a “representation,” or symbol of one. We need not suppose that Joseph Smith’s stone functioned in the same way as a celestial globe any more than any other symbol functions like the thing it represents. The sacramental bread is a representation of Christ, but the bread itself does not cleanse us of sin. In religious usage, symbols such as broken bread, baptismal water, and anointing oil do not function in some mysterious technological manner. They function as aids to faith. A stone that represented a fiery celestial globe in Joseph Smith’s mind might have served to spark the faith he needed for divine revelation.

The Lord’s instructions to Oliver Cowdery in D&C 9:7–9 to “study it out in your mind” and “ask me if it be right” are sometimes interpreted as a description of the process by which Joseph Smith translated. The context of these verses suggests an alternative view — that these instructions refer to the expediency of Oliver Cowdery’s *desire* to translate rather than to his translating technique, and were provided to teach him how to obtain the faith he would need to overcome his fear so he could translate by seer stone.⁹⁴

During the period Joseph Smith was translating the Book of Mormon, the Lord gave him the following commandment, which provides some context regarding his gift of translation:

And you have a *gift to translate* the plates; and this is the *first gift* that I bestowed upon you; and I have commanded that you should pretend to no other gift until my purpose is fulfilled in this; for I will grant unto you no other gift until it is finished. (D&C 5:4)

According to this passage, Joseph Smith’s first and only spiritual gift up to that point was the “gift to translate.” Yet, even before he began translating, he was seeing visions (JS-H 1:21–58). It was his claim of seeing visions that provoked the persecution of ministers who believed divine visions had ceased with the apostles (JS-H 1:21–27, 58). If Joseph Smith’s “gift to translate the plates” was his “first gift,” it must have been the same as his gift for seeing visions.⁹⁵

References to Joseph Smith’s gift elsewhere support this conclusion. Brigham Young referred to Joseph Smith’s use of seer stones as “the gift

of seeing.”⁹⁶ Apostle Orson Pratt equated “the gift of seeing” with the use of the Urim and Thummim, and David Whitmer equated it with the ability to see visions.⁹⁷ Perhaps the Lord was referring to the gift of seeing when he spoke of “the sight and power to translate”:

Behold, thou art Joseph, and thou wast chosen to do the work of the Lord, but because of transgression, if thou art not aware thou wilt fall. But remember, God is merciful; therefore, repent of that which thou hast done. ... Except thou do this, thou shalt be delivered up and *become as other men, and have no more gift*. And when thou deliveredst up that which *God had given thee sight and power to translate*, thou deliveredst up that which was sacred into the hands of a wicked man. ... And this is the reason thou hast lost thy privilege for a season — For thou hast suffered the counsel of thy director [“directors” in the earliest manuscript] to be trampled upon from the beginning. (D&C 3:9–15)⁹⁸

Here again, the Lord indicates that the “sight and power to translate” is Joseph Smith’s only gift — that if he were to lose it, he would “become as other men,” with “no more gift.” Joseph Smith had temporarily lost the use of this gift when the seer stones (“directors”) were taken from him because he had suffered the counsel received through them to be “trampled upon.”⁹⁹ Having lost his access to the “spiritual light” of divine visions, his “mind became darkened” (D&C 10:1–3).

The idea that Joseph Smith produced the inaugural work of his ministry by seeing visions is consistent with these scriptures.¹⁰⁰ It is also consistent with the role of visions in restoration as portrayed elsewhere in scripture. The absence of divine visions is associated with periods of apostasy, as at the time of Samuel’s birth: “The word of the Lord was precious in those days; there was no open vision” (1 Samuel 3:1; see also Isaiah 29:10; Lamentations 2:9; Micah 3:6). The abundance of visions is associated with periods of restoration or revival: “And I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh; and your ... old men shall dream, your young men shall see visions” (Joel 2:28; see also Moses 1; 6:27–42; Abraham 3; Nephi 5:2–5; Acts 2:16–17; JS-H 1:11–50). Accordingly, the Book of Mormon speaks of Joseph Smith bringing forth the Lord’s word as a “seer” at the commencement of the latter-day restoration (2 Nephi 3:11–13).

How Young Joseph Smith and His Contemporaries Used Seer Stones

Lucy Smith told of her son's use of "a urim and Thummim" for seeing visions:

The thing which [I] spoke of that Joseph termed a Key was indeed nothing more nor less than a *urim and Thummim* by which the angel manifested those things to him that were shown him *in vision* by the which also he could at any time ascertain the approach of danger Either to himself or the record and for this cause he kept these things constantly about his person.¹⁰¹

Always keeping the interpreters "about his person" would have been difficult because of their size and because he was commanded not to let anyone see them (JS-H 1:42). The urim and thummim by which Joseph Smith monitored the plates and by which the angel showed him things "in vision" likely included one or more of his own seer stones.¹⁰² One of the things the angel showed Joseph Smith in vision was the location of the plates: "While he was conversing with me about the plates, the *vision* was opened to my mind that I could see the place where the plates were deposited" (JS-H 1:42). Although Joseph Smith didn't mention using a seer stone for seeing this vision, people close to him, including Brigham Young, reported that he did use a stone to locate the plates.¹⁰³ Martin Harris, in his interview with Joel Tiffany, also mentioned that Joseph Smith used a seer stone to find the plates, as well as to see visions of other things:

Joseph had a stone which was dug from the well of Mason Chase, twenty-four feet from the surface. *In* this stone he could see many things to my certain knowledge. It was by means of this stone he *first discovered* these plates.

In the first place, he told me of this stone, and proposed to bind it on his eyes, and run a race with me in the woods. A few days after this, I was at the house of his father in Manchester, two miles south of Palmyra village, and was picking my teeth with a pin while sitting on the bars. The pin caught in my teeth, and dropped from my fingers into shavings and straw. I jumped from the bars and looked for it. Joseph and Northrop Sweet also did the same. We could not find it. I then took Joseph on surprise, and said to him — I said, "Take your

stone,” I had never seen it, and did not know that he had it with him. He had it in his pocket. He took it and placed it in his hat — the old white hat — and placed his face in his hat. I watched him closely to see that he did not look one side; he reached out his hand beyond me on the right, and moved a little stick, and there I saw the pin, which he picked up and gave to me. I know he did not look out of the hat until after he had picked up the pin.

Joseph had had this stone for some time. There was a company there in that neighborhood, who were digging for money supposed to have been hidden by the ancients. . . . When Joseph found this stone, there was a company digging in Harmony, Pa., and they took Joseph to *look in* the stone for them, and he did so for a while, and then he told them the enchantment was so strong that he could not see, and they gave it up....

Joseph said the angel told him he must quit the company of the money-diggers. That there were wicked men among them. He must have no more to do with them. He must not lie, nor swear, nor steal. He told him to go and *look in* the spectacles, and he would show him the man that would assist him. That he did so, and he saw myself, Martin Harris, standing before him.¹⁰⁴

Here Martin Harris notes that Joseph Smith looked in his stone as well as in the “spectacles” to see things not present. Joseph Knight recorded in his journal that Joseph Smith saw his future wife, Emma Hale, in a seer stone: “Then he looked in his glass and found it was Emma Hale.”¹⁰⁵ Others who knew the young Joseph told of his ability to look into his stone (his “glass”) and see lost items and other things that were not physically present.¹⁰⁶ As Martin Harris noted, Joseph Smith’s seer stone was not so useful for finding buried money, and he was admonished by the angel to give up money-digging and to refrain from possibly related sins.¹⁰⁷ Isaac Hale, Emma’s unbelieving father, certainly would have agreed with the angel. In an affidavit, he expressed a disdain for Joseph Smith’s money-digging and an associated skepticism of his claim to have found and translated a sacred record:

I first became acquainted with JOSEPH SMITH, Jr. in November, 1825. He was at that time in the employ of a set of men who were called “money diggers;” and his occupation was that of *seeing*, or pretending to see by means of a stone

placed in his hat, and his hat closed over his face. In this way he pretended to discover minerals and hidden treasure.....

Smith stated to me, that he had given up what he called “glass-looking,” and that he expected to work hard for a living, and was willing to do so.....

The manner in which he pretended to read and interpret, was the same as when he *looked* for the money-diggers, with the stone in his hat, and his hat over his face, while the Book of Plates were at the same time hid in the woods!¹⁰⁸

Joseph Smith’s preoccupation with the monetary value of buried gold disqualified him from obtaining the gold plates for a time, but he eventually left treasure hunting behind and focused on his prophetic calling.¹⁰⁹ The Lord may have been referring to Joseph Smith’s transformation from a glass-looker and money-digger to an old-time seer and revelator of ancient scripture when he said that “out of weakness” Joseph Smith would be “made strong” in revealing the Nephite record (2 Nephi 3:11–15).

Joseph Smith was not the only one of his time to use stones for “seeing.” Placing stones in hats to look for stolen, lost, or hidden things was an accepted practice among a portion of society in early 19th century America, especially in New England and upstate New York.¹¹⁰ About 1815, an 18-year-old boy in Rochester, New York, found “a round stone of the size of a man’s fist” and used it to search for buried treasure “after adjusting the stone in his hat.”¹¹¹ A local history reported that around 1812 in Maine, a rumor circulated of a boy who “could place a perforated stone which he had in his possession, in his hat, and immediately he could reveal the hiding places of buried treasure.”¹¹² A Palmyra resident, Sally Chase, used a seer stone in the same manner. Her friend said that “she would place the stone in a hat and hold it to her face, and claimed things would be brought to her view. Sallie let me have it several times, but I never could see anything in or through it.”¹¹³

Sally Chase was probably the one who taught Joseph Smith how to use a seer stone, after, according to a secondhand account, he “heard of a neighboring girl some three miles from him, who could look into a glass and see anything however hidden from others and he was seized with a strong desire to see her and her glass.”¹¹⁴ Joseph Smith soon gained the reputation for having “certain keys, by which he could discern things invisible to the natural eye.”¹¹⁵ The method by which Joseph Smith saw these things and by which he translated the Book of Mormon — looking

into a hat in which he had placed a stone — was not unique. It was the same method by which others saw images of things hidden, distant, or even nonexistent — things that must have been seen, not with the “natural eye,” but rather with the mind’s eye, or by “spiritual eyes.”

We need not assume that all these purported visions — or even all those seen by Joseph Smith — were from the same source. The fact that buried money seen with stones was rarely unearthed suggests some degree of imagination, hallucination, or deception in the purported visions. The Bible warns of lying visions (Ezekiel 13:6–9; Lamentations 2:14; Zechariah 10:2), which could refer to pretended visions, to hallucinations, or to visions from devils. The ancient warnings still apply today. The spiritualist craze beginning in the mid 19th century produced a plethora of communications purportedly from deceased persons, angels, Martians, and other extraterrestrials. These communications included envisioned writing.¹¹⁶ Hiram Page was deceived by Satan in writings he saw with the aid of a seer stone in 1830, perhaps because he was looking for what he “ought not” in seeking revelation regarding matters over which he had no stewardship (D&C 28:11–13; Mosiah 8:13). A few years later, James Brewster, a Mormon boy who had “the gift of seeing in vision distant objects not seen by the natural eye,” also saw religious themed texts in vision. Some of these texts were shown to Joseph Smith, who declared them to be false.¹¹⁷ Other members of the Church in Ohio also experienced strange visions.¹¹⁸ These visions and other unholy spiritual manifestations prompted revelations through Joseph Smith warning the Church of deceptions by false spirits and providing direction on how to avoid and detect false revelations (D&C 46; 50).

According to David Whitmer, even Joseph Smith was temporarily deceived by a false revelation telling some of the brethren to go to Canada to secure and then sell a copyright of the Book of Mormon. When the mission to Canada failed, Joseph Smith, according to Whitmer, “enquired of the Lord about it, and behold the following revelation came through the stone: ‘Some revelations are of God: some revelations are of men: and some revelations are of the devil.’” Whitmer concluded that the revelation was either “of the devil or of the heart of man.”¹¹⁹ Although the thought that Joseph Smith could have been temporarily deceived by a lying vision may be unsettling to some, it need not be. Being called of God does not make one infallible or immune to the deceptions of Satan.¹²⁰

According to Matthew, even Jesus was presented a vision by the devil after many days of fasting (Matthew 4:1–11).¹²¹ Thus, the source of

a revelation cannot necessarily be discerned based solely on the intent of the seeker or on the circumstances under which the revelation is given, whether those circumstances are conventional, such as fasting, or more unusual, such as having one's eyes covered with a hat containing a stone. To avoid deception, one must "believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God" (1 John 4:1–3; also 1 Corinthians 12:10; Moroni 7:14–19; D&C 46 and 50).¹²²

The Peculiar Optics of Seer Stones

Both the brown and the white seer stones that Joseph Smith could "look in" to translate or to "see" hidden things were opaque in the normal sense of the word. But what about the interpreters? As far as we know, only Joseph Smith, Martin Harris, David Whitmer, and Oliver Cowdery were permitted to see the interpreters and so could describe their optical qualities from personal observation. In addition, Lucy Smith was permitted to examine the interpreters through a cloth. She reported that they "consisted of two smooth stones con[n]ected with each other in the same way that old-fashioned spectacles are made."¹²³ This statement is consistent with Martin Harris's description of the interpreters quoted previously. All other statements describing the physical characteristics of the interpreter stones appear to be secondhand at best, except for one published by Joseph Smith in 1842 in a short history of the Church known as the "Wentworth Letter."¹²⁴ In this letter, the stones are described as "two transparent stones." This description seemingly contradicts Martin Harris's description of the stones as "white, like polished marble, with a few gray streaks." There are at least three plausible explanations for this seeming contradiction.

First, the description of the stones as transparent in the Wentworth Letter may have not been intended by Joseph Smith. The portion of the letter that describes the interpreters was taken from an earlier publication by Orson Pratt.¹²⁵ Pratt's text describes the stones as "two transparent stones, clear as crystal" (a reasonable assumption for "spectacles" in most circumstances). The phrase "clear as crystal" however, was omitted from the Wentworth letter, suggesting that, whatever optical qualities the stones had, they were not considered to be "clear as crystal" by whoever adapted Pratt's text for use in the letter. Had Joseph Smith written this portion of the letter himself, he might not have even chosen to call the stones "transparent." He did not describe the stones as transparent in any of his other writings. His earlier history simply describes them as "two stones."¹²⁶ Although the Wentworth letter is printed over his name, it is

unclear how involved he was in its composition and how much control he exerted over the text.¹²⁷

Second, as used in the Wentworth letter, *transparent* may have meant merely translucent. The word was sometimes used this way in Joseph Smith's day. For example, British diplomat James Morier published a book in 1818 in which he mentioned hot springs in Persia that produced "that beautiful *transparent* stone, commonly called Tabriz Marble."¹²⁸ Tabriz marble is a somewhat *translucent*, often banded, travertine used as a decorative stone in Persian palaces, tombs, and baths. The interpreter stones, described by Harris as "white, like polished marble, with a few gray streaks," may have been similar in appearance to Tabriz marble and perhaps even more like Joseph Smith's own white seer stone. Richard Robinson, who was shown the seer stone in 1900 by President Lorenzo Snow, described it as "the shape of an egg though not quite so large, of a gray cast something like granite but with white stripes running around it. It was *transparent* but with no holes."¹²⁹ Had Robinson or Morier seen the marble-like interpreter stones, they might have called them "transparent" as well.

Third, Joseph Smith may have been using *transparent* in a mystical or metaphorical sense. According to an 1851 history of the Palmyra area of New York, Martin Harris told Palmyra residents that the interpreter "stones or glass ... were opaque to all but the Prophet."¹³⁰ Ammon, in Mosiah 8:13, might have meant the same thing when he said, "And the things are called interpreters, and no man *can* look in them *except* he be commanded." Nineteenth-century seer stones likewise were transparent only for some individuals. William Stafford, who lived near the Smiths in Manchester, had, according to his son, a "stone which *some* thought they could *look through*."¹³¹ A notice in the 1842 issue of *Times and Seasons* warned of false revelations from a boy (James Brewster) who claimed to have "the gift of seeing and *looking through or into* a stone."¹³² Whether a seer stone was transparent depended not only on who was using it but also on how it was used. An article published in a Palmyra newspaper in 1825 described a stone used for treasure hunting "which *becomes* transparent when *placed in a hat and the light excluded* by the face of him who looks into it."¹³³ After describing the interpreter stones as having the appearance of white marble, Martin Harris said that he dared not "look *into* them by placing them in the hat," as though placing the stones in a hat would have made them transparent. In the same account, he also described Joseph Smith's own seer stone as transparent while in use: "*In* this stone he could see many things to my certain knowledge."

Whether a stone is transparent to physical light becomes irrelevant once it is placed in a hat and “the light excluded.” The stone disappears in the darkness and anything that is seen must be seen, in David Whitmer’s words, by “spiritual light.” According to a report of an interview by James H. Hart in 1884, David Whitmer described the disappearing act of Joseph Smith’s seer stone as it was replaced by a vision of sacred text:

The way it was done was thus: Joseph would place the seer-stone in a deep hat, and placing his face close to it, would see, *not the stone*, but what appeared like an oblong piece of parchment, on which the hieroglyphics would appear, and also the translation in the English language.¹³⁴

Wandle Mace, an early convert to Mormonism, related in his journal how a pair of stones were “looked into” to see visions:

In Staffordshire, a branch of the church was organized at the Potteries and Elder Alfred Cordon was president among those who embraced the gospel at this place were some who had practiced magic, or astrology. They had books which had been landed down for many generations, they also had two stones, about the size of goose eggs, they were *rough uncouth looking stones*, one end was flattened so they could be placed on a table.

When they wished to gain information from this source, they would place these stones upon a table, and kneel down and pray to one who they addressed as Sameazer, which they called charging the stones, when upon *looking into them they saw what they sought*, for instance, a young woman, whose sister joined the church and emigrated to Nauvoo, not hearing from her, became very anxious, and to learn something about her went to one of these astrologers, or magicians to inquire if her sister was well — or something about her. The magician after charging the stones as before explained, told her to *look into them*.

The young woman did so and said she saw her sister....

This is the substance of the narration as I heard it from Uncle John [Smith, uncle to Joseph Smith]. Sometime after I moved to Nauvoo I became acquainted with Elder Alfred Cordon, who related to me the same, he also said, the books with the stones were placed in his hands by these men after they joined

the church, and he gave them to Apostle George A. Smith who destroyed the books, but put the stones in the bottom of his trunk and brought them to Nauvoo. He gave them to Joseph the prophet who pronounced them to be a Urim and Thummim as good as ever was upon the earth but he said, “they have been consecrated to devils.”¹³⁵

This story describes even “rough uncouth” stones being looked into and becoming effectively transparent as they give way to imaginative visions. The story also affirms that visions can come from false spirits as well as from God and that Joseph Smith considered urim and thummim to be any visionary instrument, however profane, rather than a single biblical object.

The description of the interpreters and other seer stones as opaque objects that could nonetheless be looked into is consistent with the idea that Joseph Smith’s use of seer stones was not an interaction with physical light, but with the “spiritual light” of a visionary experience.

Revealed Texts and the Urim and Thummim in the Bible and Book of Abraham

The gift of visions was one of the means by which biblical prophets received revelation. The prophetic visions of Ezekiel and John included written text. Some of the important revelations of other biblical seers may have also involved visions of written text. The words of chastisement and warning that Lehi saw in his vision concerning Jerusalem resemble the prophetic warnings (“burdens” in the King James Bible) provided by vision to Old Testament prophets concerning Jerusalem and other wicked cities. For example, the book of Isaiah begins, “The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.” After the introduction, we read what Isaiah “saw” in vision — Jehovah’s words of warning: “I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against me. ... I will turn my hand upon thee, and purely purge away thy dross” (Isaiah 1:1–2). The thirteenth chapter of Isaiah tells of the seer seeing another verbal warning from God: “The burden of Babylon, which Isaiah the son of Amoz did see. ... I have commanded my sanctified ones, I have also called my mighty ones for mine anger, even them that rejoice in my highness” (Isaiah 13:1–3). The first chapter of Amos is similar: “The words of Amos ... which he saw concerning Israel. ... Thus saith the LORD; For three transgressions of Damascus, and for four, I will not turn away the punishment thereof” (Amos 1:1–3). The first chapter of Micah also has a message from God being seen: “The

word of the LORD that came to Micah ... which he saw concerning Samaria and Jerusalem. ... Therefore I will make Samaria as an heap of the field” (Micah 1:1–6).

These passages indicate that God’s messages of warning were somehow seen, and in the first chapter of Isaiah, a vision is explicitly indicated. It is plausible that these prophets saw visions in which the words of warning were only heard or that they saw future events in vision and composed the related messages themselves, but another way of reading these passages is that the prophets saw the messages in vision the way messages are usually *seen* — as writing.

We don’t know if Isaiah and other Old Testament seers used stones to see their visions, but the idea of looking in or on a stone to see written revelation is expressed in Revelations 2:17: “To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the hidden manna, and will give him a white stone, and in the stone a new name written, which no man knoweth saving he that receiveth it.” Some Bible scholars have seen in the white stone an allusion to the Urim and Thummim used by the high priest in ancient Israel.¹³⁶ As indicated in D&C 130, Joseph Smith explicitly identified the white stone as a urim and thummim.

The Urim and Thummim is mentioned by name in the Hebrew Bible only seven times. Four of these are in the Pentateuch:

And they shall bind the breastplate by the rings thereof unto the rings of the ephod with a lace of blue, that it may be above the curious girdle of the ephod, and that the breastplate be not loosed from the ephod. ... And thou shalt put in the breastplate of judgment the Urim and the Thummim; and they shall be upon Aaron’s heart, when he goeth in before the LORD: and Aaron shall bear the judgment of the children of Israel upon his heart before the LORD continually. (Exodus 28:28–30)

And he put upon him the coat, and girded him with the girdle, and clothed him with the robe, and put the ephod upon him, and he girded him with the curious girdle of the ephod, and bound it unto him therewith. And he put the breastplate upon him: also he put in the breastplate the Urim and the Thummim. (Leviticus 8:7–8)

Moreover, he shall stand before Eleazar the priest, who shall inquire for him by the judgment of the Urim before the Lord. At his command they shall go out and at his command they

shall come in, both he and the sons of Israel with him, even all the congregation. (Numbers 27:21 NASB)

And of Levi he said, Let thy Thummim and thy Urim be with thy holy one, whom thou didst prove at Massah, and with whom thou didst strive at the waters of Meribah; (Deuteronomy 33:8)

The Urim and Thummim consisted of one or more objects kept in the ephod, which was part of the sacred garment of Israel's high priest. A national leader who wanted divine counsel would convey his question to the high priest, who would "ask counsel for him after the judgment of Urim before the LORD" (Numbers 27:21; "inquire ... before the Lord" in the NASB).

The Urim and Thummim is next mentioned in 1 Samuel 28:6:

And when Saul inquired of the LORD, the LORD answered him not, neither by dreams nor by Urim, nor by prophets.

Urim and Thummim is sometimes abbreviated as *Urim*, as it is here and in Numbers 27:21. This suggests that *Urim* represents the main function or idea of the instrument. Alternatively, given the lack of the definite article, *Urim* in this passage may be referring more generally to a class of oracular instruments, not just the divinely sanctioned Urim and Thummim. In fact, Saul could not have inquired of the Lord by *the* Urim and Thummim because Abiathar had fled with the ephod to the camp of David (1 Samuel 23:9). Saul may have attempted to use a different "urim." The last mentions of the Urim and Thummim in the Hebrew Bible are in Ezra 2:63 and Nehemiah 7:65, which are practically identical:¹³⁷

And the Tirshatha said unto them, that they should not eat of the most holy things, till there stood up a priest with Urim and Thummim. (Nehemiah 7:65)

Urim and *Thummim* are transliterated Hebrew words. They are traditionally interpreted as "light(s)" and "perfection(s)" based on their Hebrew associations and some renderings in the Septuagint, or as "revelation" and "truth" based on other ancient translations.¹³⁸ In the Septuagint's translation of Ezra 2:63 and Nehemiah 7:65, *Urim* is rendered by forms of the Greek *photizo*, which means "to shine" or "to give light." The translation of *Urim* as light suggests that revelation by Urim and Thummim may have been a visual or even a visionary experience. This interpretation is supported by another early source, the Peshitta. Its translations of these same passages indicate that what was

awaited was a priest who could “inquire” and who could “see.” Since there were presumably priests available who could see in the usual sense, a different kind of sight must have been indicated. The term for “see” here (*hz*) is used of seers in the Old Testament.¹³⁹ This suggests that what was needed may have been a priest who could inquire of God (Numbers 27:21) and “see” the answers in vision. Not all early translations of Ezra and Nehemiah support this idea. In the Vulgate, for example, *Urim* is interpreted more in the sense of enlightenment than of light, and a priest is called for who is “learned and mature” (*doctus atque perfectus*) or “learned and accomplished” (*doctus et eruditus*).

In some Bible translations, explicit mention of the Urim and Thummim also occurs in 1 Samuel 14:41, based on the rendering of this passage in the Septuagint:

Therefore Saul said, “O LORD God of Israel, why have you not answered your servant this day? If this guilt is in me or in Jonathan my son, O LORD, God of Israel, give Urim. But if this guilt is in your people Israel, give Thummim.” And Jonathan and Saul were taken, but the people escaped. Then Saul said, “Cast the lot between me and my son Jonathan.” And Jonathan was taken. (1 Samuel 14:41–42 ESV)

This interpretation of the passage is key evidence for the dominant theory that the Urim and Thummim was a lot oracle.¹⁴⁰ The Hebrew Bible (Masoretic Text) does not mention the Urim and Thummim in this passage, but implies that an ordinary lot was used. The King James Bible, following the Hebrew, states,

Therefore Saul said unto the LORD God of Israel, Give a perfect lot. And Saul and Jonathan were taken: but the people escaped. And Saul said, Cast lots between me and Jonathan my son. And Jonathan was taken.

It is not known if reference to the Urim and Thummim was somehow deleted from the Hebrew Bible, or if the Hebrew is correct, and reference to the instrument in the Septuagint was inserted to fill a perceived gap. Based on the available evidence, the latter explanation seems more likely.¹⁴¹ As presented in the Bible, the lot functioned by mechanically selecting among individuals or groups. The phrases used reflect the mechanical, impersonal nature of the selection process: when cast, the lot “came up” (Joshua 18:11; 19:10) or “came out” (Joshua 19: 17, 24, 32, 40; 21:4) or “fell” (1 Chronicles 26:14) to indicate the decision. The Urim

and Thummim, in contrast, functioned by providing verbal answers to explicit questions. In some cases, the answers were short and simple:¹⁴²

And it came to pass, when Abiathar the son of Ahimelech fled to David to Keilah, that he came down with an ephod in his hand. ... And David knew that Saul secretly practiced mischief against him; and he said to Abiathar the priest, Bring here the ephod. Then said David, O LORD God of Israel ... Will the men of Keilah deliver me up into his hand? will Saul come down, as your servant has heard? O LORD God of Israel, I beseech you, tell your servant. And the LORD said, *He will come down*. Then said David, Will the men of Keilah deliver me and my men into the hand of Saul? And the LORD said, *They will deliver you up*. (1 Samuel 23:6, 9–12)

And it came to pass after this, that David inquired of the LORD, saying, Shall I go up into any of the cities of Judah? And the LORD said to him, *Go up*. And David said, Where shall I go up? And he said, *To Hebron*. (2 Samuel 2:1)

And David inquired of the LORD, saying, Shall I go up to the Philistines? will you deliver them into my hand? And the LORD said to David, *Go up: for I will doubtless deliver the Philistines into your hand*. (2 Samuel 5:19.)

In other cases, the responses were more complex, or even diverged from the question asked:

Now it came about after the death of Joshua that the sons of Israel inquired of the Lord, saying, Who shall go up first for us against the Canaanites, to fight against them? The Lord said, *Judah shall go up; behold, I have given the land into his hand*. (Judges 1:1–2 NASB)

And the children of Israel inquired of the LORD, (for the ark of the covenant of God was there in those days, And Phinehas, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron, stood before it in those days,) saying, Shall I yet again go out to battle against the children of Benjamin my brother, or shall I cease? And the LORD said, *Go up; for to morrow I will deliver them into your hand*. (Judges 20:27–28)

Therefore David inquired of the LORD, saying, Shall I go and smite these Philistines? And the LORD said to David, *Go, and smite the Philistines, and save Keilah*. And David's men said to

him, Behold, we be afraid here in Judah: how much more then if we come to Keilah against the armies of the Philistines? Then David inquired of the LORD yet again. And the LORD answered him and said, *Arise, go down to Keilah; for I will deliver the Philistines into your hand.* (1 Samuel 23:2–4)

And David said to Abiathar the priest, Ahimelech's son, I pray you, bring me here the ephod. And Abiathar brought thither the ephod to David. And David inquired at the LORD, saying, Shall I pursue after this troop? shall I overtake them? And he answered him, *Pursue: for you shall surely overtake them, and without fail recover all.* (1 Samuel 30:7–8)

Therefore they inquired of the LORD further, if the man should yet come thither. And the LORD answered, *Behold he has hid himself among the stuff.* (1 Samuel 10:22)

And the Philistines came up yet again, and spread themselves in the valley of Rephaim. And when David inquired of the LORD, he said, *You shall not go up; but fetch a compass behind them, and come on them over against the mulberry trees. And let it be, when you hear the sound of a going in the tops of the mulberry trees, that then you shall bestir yourself: for then shall the LORD go out before you, to smite the host of the Philistines.* (2 Samuel 5:22–24)

Complex and divergent responses like these could not have been readily produced by casting lots. They are more consistent with spiritual impressions or with visionary experiences in which words are heard or seen.

The ancient Urim and Thummim is certainly portrayed as a visionary instrument in the Book of Abraham. Abraham used the Urim and Thummim to see a great vision (Abraham 3:1–11). He not only saw stars and spirits but also heard God speak to him by the Urim and Thummim, which experience he described as talking with the Lord “face to face, as one man talketh with another.”¹⁴³

Seer Stones and Translation in the Book of Mormon

Echoing language in Omni 1:20, the title page of the Book of Mormon states that the book would “come forth by the gift and power of God unto the interpretation thereof. . . . The interpretation thereof by the gift of God.”

Seer stones or translation are described in several other passages in the Book of Mormon, all of which are provided or referenced below. The interpreters were given to the brother of Jared by the Lord:

And behold, these two stones will I give unto thee, and ye shall seal them up also with the things which ye shall write. For behold, the language which ye shall write I have confounded; wherefore I will cause in my own due time that these stones shall magnify to the eyes of men these things which ye shall write. And when the Lord had said these words, he showed unto the brother of Jared all the inhabitants of the earth which had been, and also all that would be; and he withheld them not from his sight, even unto the ends of the earth. For he had said unto him in times before, that if he would believe in him that he could show unto him all things — it should be shown unto him; therefore the Lord could not withhold anything from him, for he knew that the Lord could show him all things. And the Lord said unto him: Write these things and seal them up; and I will show them in mine own due time unto the children of men. And it came to pass that the Lord commanded him that he should seal up the two stones which he had received. (Ether 3:23–28).

This passage indicates that the brother of Jared saw a great vision immediately after receiving the interpreter stones, with the stones being referenced again immediately after the vision. This suggests that the stones may have enabled him to see that vision, just as the Urim and Thummim would later enable Abraham to see his great vision. The passage also describes translation by the interpreters in an unusual way: “these stones shall magnify to the eyes of men these things which ye shall write.” If read literally, this statement would indicate that the stones had a physical function — to focus light and produce a larger image of the Jaredite engravings. The purpose of the interpreters, however, was to provide a translation, not an enlarged image of an unintelligible text. The statement is best interpreted figuratively, perhaps as indicating that the stones would serve to make the meaning of the Jaredite writing clear.

The Lord later commanded Moroni to again “seal up” the two interpreter stones with his copy or abridgment of the brother of Jared’s writing (Ether 4:5).

Ammon explained the use of the interpreters to King Limhi:

Now Ammon said unto him: I can assuredly tell thee, O king, of a man that can translate the records; for he has wherewith that he can *look*, and translate all records that are of ancient date; and it is *a gift from God*. And the things are called interpreters, and no man can *look in them* except he be commanded, lest he should *look for that he ought not* and he should perish. And whosoever is commanded to look in them, the same is called seer. ... And now, when Ammon had made an end of speaking these words the king rejoiced exceedingly, and gave thanks to God, saying: Doubtless a great mystery is contained within these plates, and these interpreters were doubtless prepared for the purpose of unfolding all such mysteries to the children of men. (Mosiah 8:13, 19)

According to Ammon, a seer can translate because he has a “gift from God” — perhaps the gift of visions — that enables him to “look.” He says that the interpreters are an instrument that a person might “look in” to “look for” things. Both Joseph Smith (as quoted by Joseph Knight) and Martin Harris (in his interview with Joel Tiffany) expressed their belief that a person could “see anything” by looking into the interpreters. That effectively describes an object that produces or elicits imaginative visions.

Alma told his son, Helaman, that the translation of the Jaredite record with the aid of the interpreters fulfilled, “thus far,” an old prophecy:

And now, I will speak unto you ... that ye preserve these interpreters. For behold ... the Lord said: I will prepare unto my servant Gazelem, a stone, which shall shine forth in darkness unto light, that I may discover unto my people who serve me, that I may discover unto them the works of their brethren, yea, their secret works, their works of darkness, and their wickedness and abominations. And now, my son, these interpreters were prepared that the word of God might be fulfilled. ... And thus far the word of God has been fulfilled; yea, their secret abominations have been brought out of darkness and made known unto us. (Alma 37:21–26)

Alma’s statement that “a stone” would “shine forth in darkness unto light” may simply be a figurative portrayal of the revelation of ancient secrets, but it also accords with David Whitmer’s description of the “spiritual light” of vision that “would shine” in Joseph Smith’s darkened

hat. Moroni later alluded to Alma's words and perhaps to Joseph Smith's darkened hat, in referring to the future translation of the Nephite record:

And blessed be he that shall bring this thing to light; for it shall be brought out of darkness unto light, according to the word of God; yea, it shall be brought out of the earth, and it shall shine forth out of darkness, and come unto the knowledge of the people; and it shall be done by the power of God (Mormon 8:16).

The Book of Mormon's description of its own translation suggests it was revealed in the same manner as the sacred texts seen by Lehi, Ezekiel, and John (and perhaps Isaiah, Amos, and Micah):

Wherefore it shall come to pass, that the Lord God will deliver again the book and the words thereof to him that is not learned; and the man that is not learned shall say: I am not learned. *Then* shall the Lord God say unto him: The learned shall not read them, for they have rejected them, and I am able to do mine own work; wherefore thou shalt *read the words* which I *shall* give unto thee." (2 Nephi 27:19–20)

After delivering "the book and the words thereof" (the gold plates with their inscriptions) to the unlearned man (Joseph Smith), the Lord would then say to him, "thou shalt read the words that I *shall* give thee." It was not the first set of words (the inscriptions on the plates) but the second set of words, given later, that the unlearned man would "read." This passage accords with witness accounts in describing the translation as a matter of *reading* divinely provided words. It also agrees with Joseph Smith's statement in his history that "the Lord provided spectacles for *to read* the book." The scriptures describe at least three ways by which God delivers words to his prophets: as mental impressions by the spirit of prophecy and revelation (D&C 8:2–5);¹⁴⁴ as audible speech, as when he spoke with Moses (Exodus 33:11); or as written text in vision, as when he delivered messages to Lehi and other seers. Of these, only the latter method would have enabled Joseph Smith to "read the words."

These Book of Mormon passages are all consistent with the idea that seer stones function by eliciting visions and that translating by seer stone is a matter of reading words provided in vision.¹⁴⁵

If Joseph Smith merely read the translated text, who composed it? B. H. Roberts proposed that Joseph Smith saw the translated text only after he had composed it in his own mind based on inspired thoughts.¹⁴⁶ Roberts's theory is not without its difficulties, and there are other

plausible sources for the translated text.¹⁴⁷ Perhaps God himself produced it. That may have been the belief of Joseph Smith, who reasoned, based on Mormon 9:34, that “the Lord, and not man, had to interpret, after the people were dead.”¹⁴⁸ Moroni, who was given “the keys of the record of the stick of Ephraim” (D&C 27:5), has also been proposed as a possible heavenly translator.¹⁴⁹ God generally has mortals do his earthly work, including translating texts. It is plausible that sometime during the decades or centuries before the plates were delivered to Joseph Smith, one or more unknown mortals translated them by conventional means, and that translation, written on parchment, was what Joseph Smith saw in vision.¹⁵⁰

Why Would Joseph Smith have Needed a Hat and Stone to See Visions?

The hat over Joseph Smith’s face would have served to block out visual distractions so he could better attend to receiving revelation. By depriving his eyes of any clear image to focus on, the hat may have also served to interrupt the normal visual function and allow the brain’s internal imaging system to take over, as happens during dreaming sleep, sensory deprivation, and some forms of scrying.¹⁵¹

Joseph Smith’s seer stone might have had a similar function. One possibility is that it was something he gazed at to focus his attention and clear his mind of other concerns, as one might gaze at an object while meditating. Or, perhaps there is something about the visual appearance of seer stones that serves to disrupt the normal visual function and elicit visions.¹⁵² The problem with both of these explanations is that, with a hat pressed over the face “to exclude the light” in a lamp-lit room (or in the dark of night while money-digging), a seer stone would not have been much to look at, if visible at all. In the dark, a shiny stone would not be reflective, a translucent stone would not transmit light, a colored or patterned stone would fade to gray or black, and a dark stone like the one Joseph Smith used would have not likely been discernible at all. Also, 19th century seer stones were quite diverse, making it unlikely that their effect was due to any particular aspect of their appearance. Joseph Smith’s brown seer stone was smooth, shiny, opaque, dark-colored, and banded, but seer stones of his time could also be rough, dull, translucent, light-colored, plain, or variously patterned. The one physical characteristic 19th century seer stones had in common that set them apart from ordinary stones was that their appearance was *not* ordinary. They were each peculiar in some way that captured the interest

of a seer.¹⁵³ What made these stones effective at eliciting vision must not, then, have been any particular physical characteristic, but rather their psychological effect on or significance to the seer.¹⁵⁴ And that brings us into the realm faith.

Joseph Smith's First Vision came because of faith inspired by James 1:5–6: "If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him. But let him ask in faith." (JS-H 1:11–16). His next sacred vision also came as a result of his faith, or his "full confidence in obtaining a divine manifestation" (JS-H 1:29). Like all spiritual gifts, the gift of visions comes by faith, or in other words, expectation, confidence, or belief (Moroni 10:7–20). In telling the story of the great visions of the brother of Jared, Moroni explained the dependence of visions on belief:

And when the Lord had said these words, he showed unto the brother of Jared all the inhabitants of the earth which had been, and also all that would be; and he withheld them not from his sight, even unto the ends of the earth. For he had said unto him in times before, that if he would *believe* ... that he could show unto him all things — it should be shown unto him; therefore the Lord could not withhold anything from him, for he knew that the Lord could show him all things. (Ether 3:25–26)

If faith is the principal requirement for visions, and if Joseph Smith translated by seeing visions, then his ability to do so would have depended primarily on his faith. The scriptures support this conclusion. When Oliver Cowdery desired the privilege to translate, the Lord told him, "ask ... that you may translate ... and according to your faith shall it be done" (D&C 8:11). In the Book of Mormon, the Lord says, regarding the eventual translation of the gold plates, "I am a God of miracles ... and I work not among the children of men save it be according to their faith" (2 Nephi 27:22–24). Ammon observed that a seer could use the interpreters to "look and translate all records that are of ancient date" and that such miracles were possible "through faith" (Mosiah 8:13, 18). Every time Joseph Smith sat down with his scribe to translate, he would have needed the present faith to see a vision of the translated text. How might he have roused that faith?

Enoch was a seer who saw great visions, but not until he followed some rather strange instructions:

And the Lord spake unto Enoch, and said unto him: Anoint thine eyes with clay, and wash them, and *thou shalt see*. And he did so. And he beheld ... things which were not visible to the natural eye; and from thenceforth came the saying abroad in the land: A seer hath the Lord raised up unto his people. (Moses 6:35–36)

For Enoch, it was not looking into a hat, but anointing his eyes with clay, that enabled him to see visions as a seer. The Lord didn't need the clay to open Enoch's spiritual eyes. It was Enoch who needed the clay. Like the brother of Jared, he had to believe that the Lord could show him visions. God's promise that "thou shalt see" was the seed to that belief. The seed grew into sufficient faith as Enoch followed the Lord's precise instructions. Upon pressing the clay to his eyes and washing it off again, Enoch expected a new kind of sight, and that expectation, that belief, was the faith that enabled him to see "things which were not visible to the natural eye."

Expectation, or faith, operates in a similar manner in miraculous healings (D&C 46:19; Acts 14:9, 3 Nephi 17:8). For the most believing, a simple word of assurance may be enough to rouse the faith for the miracle to occur. The centurion's request of Jesus to "speak the word only, and my servant shall be healed" was answered by Jesus's assurance, "go thy way; and as thou hast believed, it shall be done" (Matthew 8:5–13). More often, a physical act helps to rouse the healing faith. That physical act may be something that has special significance to the person being healed — a touch to the skin of the leper (Matthew 8:2–3), clay pressed on the eyes of the blind (John 9:6), an upward tug on the arm of the lame (Acts 3:1–6). It is not the action itself, but how that action affects a person's faith that is important. A woman with an issue of blood created her own faith-building scenario:

And a certain woman ... when she had heard of Jesus, came in the press behind, and touched his garment. For she said, If I may touch but his clothes, I shall be whole. And straightway the fountain of her blood was dried up. ... And he said unto her, Daughter, *thy faith* hath made thee whole. (Matthew 5:25–34)

Sometimes a physical object is helpful as an aid to faith. When certain Israelites were bitten by poisonous serpents, the Lord instructed Moses to make a brass serpent and to tell the people that whoever would look upon it would live (Numbers 21:5–9; John 3:14–15). Brass images don't

heal, and God didn't need one to heal the Israelites. But they needed faith to be healed, and the act of looking upon a physical object helped them attain the required faith in the healing power of their otherwise invisible God.

The acts or objects effective at producing faith vary by culture. Metal images representing gods inspired confidence in Moses's day. In Jesus's day, olive oil was associated with healing (Luke 10:34), and so James recommended that prayers by the elders on behalf of the sick be accompanied by "anointing ... with oil in the name of the Lord." (James 5:14–15). Yet James assured his readers that it was "the prayer of faith" that would heal them. Deriving our religious heritage from the New Testament, we follow the same practice of using olive oil in healing blessings. Now, as in James's day, the oil is a recommended aid, not an absolute requirement. Whether the person being anointed believes the oil to be miraculously infused with the healing power of God, or views it simply as a focal point for rousing faith, doesn't matter. What matters is the belief that healing can or will occur. Likewise, it did not matter how Joseph Smith believed seer stones to have functioned or what other purposes they were used for. In his culture, stones were associated with seeing visions, and that is what they would have given him the faith to do.

The function of seer stones in Joseph Smith's culture, then, may have been quite simple. They worked for those who believed in their efficacy and were naturally visionary (that is, who had "the gift of seeing"). For such an individual, a meaningful stone could prompt the faith (expectation) required to see a vision (or mere hallucination) from whatever source.

If Joseph Smith "translated" by seeing visions, he would have needed the faith to see those visions when he was ready to dictate and his scribe was ready to write. He would have needed faith "on demand." Through his earlier experiences of seeing visions with his stone and hat, he had developed an aid to faith that worked for him.¹⁵⁵ A stone in a hat would have been to Joseph Smith what clay on the eyes was to Enoch — a faith-producing ritual. The Urim and Thummim of the Bible may have similarly functioned as an aid to faith for seeing visions at will. Abraham used it for experiencing visions, and it later served to provide quick revelations to Israel's high priest on the battlefield and in other situations of national emergency.¹⁵⁶

The established Christianity of Joseph Smith's day could not teach him how to see divine visions — it rejected their very occurrence in the

modern age. But the art of seeing visions was still alive in folk religion, and so Joseph Smith became a glass-looker. Although that sounds strange in our day, all it means is that he was an old-time seer — a beholder of visions, a “visionary man.” In other words, he was a prophet-seer in the Old Testament tradition.¹⁵⁷

As physical objects used for spiritual communication, seer stones are analogous to the Urim and Thummim and teraphim of the Bible as well as to the crystal balls of spiritualism.¹⁵⁸ But Joseph Smith’s seer stones were neither crystal nor balls, and more important, he was not a wizard. In making use of the stones to receive revelations, he neither sought to conjure up the dead nor to summon familiar spirits, but to “enquire of the Lord” directly in doing God’s work.¹⁵⁹ In this way, Joseph Smith was more like Israel’s high priest, and his stone like the biblical Urim and Thummim.

Conclusions

An unlearned farmer covered his face with a hat containing a stone and dictated a book of over 500 pages — a sophisticated religious text that calls the world to repentance, affirms the Bible, and ardently testifies of the divinity of Jesus Christ and the power and necessity of his atonement.¹⁶⁰ Book of Mormon passages regarding translation suggest that Joseph Smith translated as a “seer after the manner of old times”; in other words, as a beholder of visions. The idea that the translation of the Book of Mormon was revealed as a series of imaginative visions is consistent with the way seer stones were used by others in Joseph Smith’s day, with the way witnesses described Joseph Smith’s use of seer stones in translating and receiving revelations, with the revelatory use of stones as portrayed in scripture, and with the way sacred texts were revealed to old-time seers such as Lehi, Ezekiel, and Isaiah.

In preparing Joseph Smith to be “a seer after the manner of old times,” God met him in his ignorance and folk religious beliefs and perhaps used those beliefs to develop in him the ability to see imaginative visions. As a visionary aid, “the Urim and Thummim” would have been neither magic nor divine communication technology, but simply a meaningful object that, like the clay applied to Enoch’s eyes, helped the seer focus his faith enough to see things “not visible to the natural eye.” Although other explanations of the function of seer stones in the translation of the Book of Mormon are plausible, the idea that the book was received by faith-elicited vision is a relatively simple explanation that fits well within the scriptural tradition of divine revelation.

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Endnotes

1. For an overview of Joseph Smith's use of seer stones, including a photograph of the brown stone, see Richard E. Turley, Jr., Robin S. Jensen, and Mark Ashurst-McGee, "Joseph the Seer," *Ensign*, October 2015, 49–55; also Michael Hubbard MacKay and Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, *From Darkness Unto Light: Joseph Smith's Translation and Publication of the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University, 2015); Michael Hubbard MacKay and Nicholas J. Frederick, *Joseph Smith's Seer Stones* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University, 2016). For descriptions and uses of Joseph Smith's seer stones, see Mark Ashurst-McGee, "Pathway to Prophethood: Joseph Smith Jr. as Rodsman, Village Seer, and Judeo-Christian Prophet" (master's thesis, Utah State University, 2000), 230–283. The brown seer stone measures 5.5 cm x 4 cm x 3.5 cm. "Note on Seer Stone Images," The Joseph Smith Papers; <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/site/note-on-seer-stone-images>.
2. Referring to the revelations in D&C sections 3 through 18, David Whitmer wrote, "The revelations in the Book of Commandments up to June, 1829, were given through the 'stone,' through which the Book of Mormon was translated." David Whitmer, *An Address to All Believers in Christ: By a Witness to the Divine Authenticity of the Book of Mormon* (Richmond, MO: by the author, 1887), 53. Joseph Smith then gave the stone to Oliver Cowdery in early 1830. Whitmer, *Address to All Believers*, 32.
3. Since Joseph Smith did not have the brown seer stone after 1830 (having given it to Oliver Cowdery), Wilford Woodruff must have been referring to the small white seer stone in possession of the Church when he wrote in his journal in 1888: "I Consecrated upon the Altar the seer stone that Joseph Smith found by Revelation some 30 feet under the Earth [and] *Carried by him through life.*" Wilford Woodruff journal, 18 May 1888,

quoted in Ashurst-McGee, “Pathway to Prophethood,” 251-252, emphasis added. While president of the church, Lorenzo Snow allowed various members of the Church to see the brown and white seer stones. He showed the white stone to a recently returned missionary in January of 1900 and told him it “was the Seer Stone that Joseph Smith used.” Richard M. Robinson, “The History of a Nephite Coin,” typescript, signed by R. M. Robinson 30 December 1934, MS 5147, Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah (hereafter Church History Library), 4–5. After being shown the brown seer stone in 1899, Frederick Kesler wrote in his journal that President Snow “showed me the Seerers Stone that the Prophet Joseph Smith had by which he done some of the Translating of the Book of Mormon with. I handeled it with my own hands. I felt as though I see & was handling a very Sacred thing.” Frederick Kesler diary, 1 February 1899, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, UT, quoted in D. Michael Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1998), 243.

4. Apostle Orson Pratt taught that “the Urim and Thummim is a stone or other substance sanctified and illuminated by the Spirit of the living God, and presented to those who are blessed with the gift of seeing.” Orson Pratt, in *Journal of Discourses*, 19:214 (9 December 1877).
5. See note 2.
6. “History of Brigham Young,” *Millennial Star* 26 (20 February 1864): 118–119.
7. Although he had other seer stones, he was not known to have used them in his role as prophet.
8. Wilford Woodruff journal, 27 December 1841, quoted in Richard Van Wagoner and Steven C. Walker, “Joseph Smith: The Gift of Seeing,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 15/2 (1982), 59–60, emphasis added.
9. Wilford Woodruff journal, 19 February 1842, quoted in H. Donl Peterson, “The History and Significance of the Book of Abraham,” in *Studies in Scripture, Volume Two: The Pearl of Great Price*, eds. Robert L. Millet and Kent P. Jackson (Salt Lake City: Randall, 1985), 169.
10. Parley P. Pratt, “Editorial Remarks,” *Millennial Star* 3 (July 1842): 47.

11. In 1959, Joseph Fielding Smith stated: “We have been taught since the days of the Prophet that the Urim and Thummim were returned with the plates to the angel. We have no record of the Prophet having the Urim and Thummim after the organization of the Church. Statements of translations by the Urim and Thummim after that date are evidently errors. The statement has been made that the Urim and Thummim was on the altar in the Manti Temple when that building was dedicated. The Urim and Thummim so spoken of, however, was the seer stone which was in the possession of the Prophet Joseph Smith in early days. This seer stone is now in the possession of the church.” *Doctrines of Salvation: Sermons and Writings of Joseph Fielding Smith*, vol. 3, comp. Bruce R. McConkie (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1956), 255. See note 3 herein regarding Wilford Woodruff’s consecration of this seer stone. Regarding the interpreters having been returned with the plates, see Joseph Smith — History 1:60. Also, minutes of a meeting on April 17, 1853 represent Brigham Young as stating that “Joseph put the U.T. back with the plates when he had done translating.” Brigham Young, minutes, 17 April 1853, in *The Complete Discourses of Brigham Young*, vol. 2, ed. Richard S. Van Wagoner (Salt Lake City: Smith-Pettit Foundation, 2009).
12. Wandle Mace autobiography (1809–1846), as told to his wife, Rebecca E. Howell Mace ca. 1890, typescript, Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah (hereafter Harold B. Lee Library).
13. “Elizabeth Ann Whitmer Cowdery Affidavit, 15 February 1870,” in *Early Mormon Documents*, vol. 5, ed. Dan Vogel (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2003), 260. Regarding Alma’s reference to the interpreters as “directors,” see Stan Spencer, “Reflections of *Urim*: Hebrew Poetry Sheds Light on the Directors-Interpreters Mystery,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 14 (2015): 187–207. See also note 98 regarding “directors” in D&C 3.
14. John A. Tvedtnes, “Notes and Communications: ‘A Visionary Man,’” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 6/2 (1997): 260–61.
15. Although the particular method by which the Lord’s words came to prophets in the Old Testament isn’t always apparent, visions are clearly indicated for the patriarchs and the early prophets that followed them: Abram (Genesis 15:1; 17:1–22), Isaac (Genesis 26:2); Jacob (Genesis 14:2; 28:10–17; 31:10–13; 46:2–

- 4), Joseph (37:1–11), Moses (Exodus 3:2; 24:9–10; 33:18–23), Balaam (Numbers 24:2–9), Samuel, (1 Samuel 3:15) and Nathan (2 Samuel 7:17).
16. As the word is commonly used today, a seer is a person who foresees the future or has supernatural insight. Within the Mormon tradition, Ammon's statement in Mosiah 8:16 is frequently presented as a definition of *seer*: "a seer is a revelator and a prophet also." The context suggests Ammon was not intending to provide a definition but rather an observation in response to King Limhi's statement that "a seer is greater than a prophet" (Mosiah 8:15). Something closer to a definition of *seer* comes three verses earlier, where Ammon speaks of the interpreter stones: "whosoever *is commanded to look in them, the same is called seer*" (Mosiah 8:13). If a seer were simply "a revelator and a prophet also," the designation of the president of the Church as "prophet, seer, and revelator" would be unnecessarily repetitive, as "seer" would encompass the entire meaning. A seer is a revelator if he reveals the content of his divine visions, and a prophet if he preaches it.
 17. *Webster's Dictionary 1828 – Online Edition*, s.v. "seer"; <http://webstersdictionary1828.com/Dictionary/seer>
 18. Apostle Orson Pratt taught that "the Urim and Thummim is ... something made by the Lord. He is a good mechanic; he understands how to make things." Orson Pratt, in *Journal of Discourses*, 19:214 (9 December 1877).
 19. President John Taylor believed the urim and thummim to be an instrument for "communicating light perfectly, and intelligence perfectly, through a principle that God has ordained for that purpose." John Taylor, in *Journal of Discourses*, 24:262–63 (24 June 1883).
 20. Mormon scholar Sidney Sperry believed that, "in all probability the active elements in the instrument, that is to say, the two stones, were composed of celestial material. ... Somehow or other, celestial material seems to have helped both ancient and modern seers to bridge the chasm of the unknown." Sidney B. Sperry, *Book of Mormon Compendium* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1968), 29.
 21. In a letter he wrote in 1933, B. H. Roberts stated that he had examined the seer stone Joseph Smith used to translate the Book of Mormon and "while handling it had the impression

- that doubtless it was radium or it had been made radio active by contact with radium and hence its power to become luminous when placed in the dark.” B. H. Roberts, letter to C. M. Dewsnap, 30 March 1933, photocopy of original typescript, Scott G. Kenney Research Collection, MSS 2022, Box 4, fd. 19, Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, quoted in Don Bradley, “Joseph Smith and the Technologies of Seership,” 2013 Conference of the Mormon Transhumanist Association, 5 April 2013, Salt Lake City, Utah.
22. Apostle Spencer Kimball observed that “precision instruments such as the Liahona and Urim and Thummim ... have far exceeded the most advanced radar, radio, television, or telescopic equipment” and, “exactly how this precious instrument, the Urim and Thummim operates, we can only surmise, but it seems to be infinitely superior to any mechanism ever dreamed of yet by researchers. It would seem to be a receiving set or instrument.” Spencer Kimball, “Spiritual communication,” *Improvement Era*, 7 April 1962, 434–436.
 23. In 2015, Mormon scholar Richard Bushman opined that seer stones “suggest there is a technology of revelation, somewhat resembling iPads, that assist us in getting divine intelligence.” Richard L. Bushman, “On Seerstones,” *By Common Consent*, 5 August 2015; <https://bycommonconsent.com/2015/08/05/on-seerstones/>.
 24. For example, B. H. Roberts, after quoting D&C 8:2 (“I will tell you in your mind and in your heart, by the Holy Ghost ...”) and D&C 9:7–9 (“You must study it out in your mind; then you must ask me if it be right ...”), declared, “This is the Lord’s description of how Oliver Cowdery could have translated with the aid of Urim and Thummim, and is undoubtedly the manner in which Joseph Smith did translate the Book of Mormon through the medium of Urim and Thummim.” B. H. Roberts, “Translation of the Book of Mormon,” *Improvement Era*, April 1906, 428–430.
 25. John A. Widtsoe, *Joseph Smith: Seeker After Truth, Prophet of God* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1951), 42, quoted in Brant Gardner, *The Gift and Power: Translating the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford, 2011), 150.
 26. Roberts, “Translation of the Book of Mormon,” 428–430. For a defense of Roberts’s basic idea, see Gardner, *Gift and Power*, 147–277, particularly 148–150 and 274–275.
 27. Gardner, *Gift and Power*, 274–277. In Gardner’s explanation,

the English text is composed in Joseph Smith's subconscious. Although Gardner does not use the term *vision* in his explanation of the translation process, the mental images he describes could be considered divine visions.

28. "Oliver Cowdery Interview with Samuel W. Richards, January 1849," in *Early Mormon Documents*, vol. 2, ed. Dan Vogel (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996), 500–501, emphasis added.
29. "By Samuel Whitney Richards," signed by S. W. Richards 25 May 1907, Americana BX 8608.Ala #1678, Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library.
30. "David Whitmer to Kansas City Journal 13 June 1881," in *Early Mormon Documents*, 5:81–82.
31. "David Whitmer to Kansas City Journal 13 June 1881," 82n1.
32. In about summer of 1832, Joseph Smith wrote in his personal history that "the Lord had prepared *spectticke* spectacles for to read the Book." "History, circa Summer 1832," 5, The Joseph Smith Papers; <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/history-circa-summer-1832?p=5>.
33. Joseph Smith, *Times and Seasons* 4 (15 May 1843): 194.
34. "Church History," 1 March 1842," 707, The Joseph Smith Papers; <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/church-history-1-march-1842?p=2>. Joseph Smith may have found his words in Omni 1:20. For Joseph Smith's other accounts, see John W. Welch, "The Miraculous Translation of the Book of Mormon," in *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations, 1820–1844*, ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: Brigham Young University, 2005), 121–129.
35. Oliver Cowdery to W.W. Phelps, 7 Sep 1834, *Messenger and Advocate* 1 (Oct 1834), 14, spelling and italics as in the original.
36. "Minutes, 25–26 October 1831," 13, The Joseph Smith Papers; <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/minutes-25-26-october-1831?p=4>.
37. For example, Turley *et al.*, "Joseph the Seer," 49–55, n16.
38. "Martin Harris Interview with Joel Tiffany, 1859," in *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:302, 305.
39. "Joseph Knight, Sr., Reminiscence, Circa 1835–1847," in *Early Mormon Documents*, 4:15–18, emphasis added.
40. In this same account, Joseph Knight refers to Joseph Smith's seer stone as "his glass" as opposed to "the glasses or the urim and thummam," meaning the interpreters. "Joseph Knight, Sr.,

- Reminiscence, Circa 1835–1847,” 13.
41. “William Smith, On Mormonism, 1883,” in *Early Mormon Documents*, vol. 1, ed. Dan Vogel (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996), 497.
 42. “Emma Smith Bidamon to Emma Pilgrim, 27 March 1870,” in *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:532–533.
 43. Joseph Smith III, “Last Testimony of Sister Emma,” *Saints’ Herald* 26 (October 1, 1879), 290.
 44. Smith, “Last Testimony of Sister Emma,” 289–290.
 45. “Elizabeth Ann Whitmer Cowdery Affidavit.”
 46. John L. Traughber Jr., “Testimony of David Whitmer,” *Saints’ Herald* 26 (November 15, 1879): 341.
 47. As quoted in 1885 by Zenas H. Gurley, editor of the *Saints’ Herald*, David Whitmer reported Joseph Smith “*stating to me and others that the original character appeared upon parchment and under it the translation in English.*” Questions asked of David Whitmer at his home in Richmond, Ray County, Missouri, 1885, by Elder Z. H. Gurley, manuscript, MS 4633, Church History Library, quoted in Van Wagoner and Walker, “Gift of Seeing,” 54, emphasis added.
 48. See “The Testimony of the Three Witnesses,” The Book of Mormon; also, Whitmer, *Address to All Believers*, 6, 12, 42.
 49. An object appearing out of nowhere would seem to indicate an imaginative vision, unless one surmises that an actual piece of parchment materialized in Joseph Smith’s hat. In our technological world, we might alternatively imagine the seer stone physically projecting an image of a parchment into Joseph Smith’s eyes. Although such a miraculous transformation of stone to projector is plausible, it is not required to explain the witness accounts. Also, none of those who watched Joseph Smith translate reported seeing any light escape from Joseph Smith’s hat, and the light in Whitmer’s account is described as “spiritual,” not physical.
 50. Jack Finegan, *Encountering New Testament Manuscripts: A Working Introduction to Textual Criticism* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1974), 19–29.
 51. Whitmer, *Address to All Believers*, 6, 12, 30, 37, emphasis added.
 52. For more accounts of the translation, see Welch, “Miraculous Translation,” 121–198.
 53. The hostility of a witness does not itself justify dismissing a statement as unreliable. Defenders as well as opponents can be

- motivated to misrepresent facts.
54. "Palmyra Freeman, circa August 1829," in *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:221.
 55. Booth's sources of information included "several interviews with Messrs. Smith, Rigdon and Cowdery." "Ezra Booth Accounts, 1831," in *Early Mormon Documents*, 5:308–309, emphasis added.
 56. Supernatural visions that are thought to be perceived by physical light entering through the eyes of the body, or the "natural eye," are traditionally called "corporeal visions." L. Roure, "Visions and Apparitions," in *Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1912), 15:477.
 57. Nancy Towle, *Vicissitudes Illustrated in the Experience of Nancy Towle, in Europe and America* (Charleston, SC: James L. Burges, 1832), 138–39.
 58. "Henry Harris Statement, circa 1833," in *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:76, emphasis added.
 59. "Joseph Smith Interview with Peter Bauder, October 1830," in *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:17.
 60. For examples of the use of "glass" and "glass-looking" in reference to seer stones, see statements by Ezra Booth, Isaac Hale, and Joseph Knight herein. Seer stones were also called diamonds. Quinn, *Early Mormonism*, 171.
 61. "Truman Coe Account, 1836," in *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:47. There is no record of Coe's having interviewed Joseph Smith. In his introduction to Coe's account, Dan Vogel suggests that Joseph Smith may have provided the information while preaching to Coe's congregation.
 62. *History of the Church*, 4:79.
 63. I will not discuss, for example, unsubstantiated reports in newspapers of Joseph Smith's using his "spectacles" for translating the Book of Abraham or other records. These are as likely based on rumor as upon reliable sources.
 64. "Joseph Smith History, 1839," in *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:74
 65. The placement of the comma after parchment suggests that it was the record, not the parchment, that was "written and hid up" by John. If so, the parchment could have contained the translated (and perhaps the source) text, as in Whitmer's account of the Book of Mormon translation.
 66. There are no sources of comparable authority that contradict these assertions that a stone was used in translating the

- Book of Abraham. For an overview of Book of Abraham translation theories, see Kerry Muhlestein, “Assessing the Joseph Smith Papyri: An Introduction to the Historiography of their Acquisitions, Translations, and Interpretations,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 22 (2016):32–39.
67. Wilford Woodruff journal, 19 February 1842, quoted in “Introduction to Book of Abraham Manuscripts,” The Joseph Smith Papers; <http://josephsmithpapers.org/intro/introduction-to-book-of-abraham-manuscripts>.
 68. Orson Pratt, in *Journal of Discourses*, 7:176 (10 July 1859).
 69. His 1878 discourse report reads: “The Prophet translated the part of these writings which, as I have said, is contained in the Pearl of Great Price, and known as the Book of Abraham. Thus you see one of the first gifts bestowed by the Lord for the benefit of His people, was that of revelation — the gift to translate, by the aid of the Urim and Thummim, the gift of bringing to light old and ancient records.” Orson Pratt, in *Journal of Discourses*, 20:65 (25 August 1878).
 70. Howard Coray letter, Sanford, Colorado, to Martha Jane Lewis, 2 August 1889, manuscript, MS 3047, Church History Library. The process of translating the Book of Abraham extended from 1835 into 1842. “Introduction to Book of Abraham Manuscripts.”
 71. Warren Parrish, letter to the editor dated 5 February 1838, *Painesville Republican*, 15 February 1838.
 72. The revelation was given in November of 1835. “Joseph Smith Journal, 1835–1836,” 36, The Joseph Smith Papers; <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/journal-1835-1836?p=37>
 73. “John Whitmer, History, 1831–circa 1847,” 76, The Joseph Smith Papers; <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/john-whitmer-history-1831-circa-1847?p=80>. John Whitmer had earlier been called to keep a history (D&C 47:1).
 74. *Friends’ Weekly Intelligencer*, 3 October 1846, 211, quoted in “Introduction to Book of Abraham Manuscripts.”
 75. Lorenzo Brown in “Sayings of Joseph, by Those Who Heard Him at Different Times,” Joseph Smith, Jr., Papers, Church History Library, quoted in Robert J. Matthews, *A Plainer Translation: Joseph Smith’s Translation of the Bible, a History and Commentary* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1985), 25, 25n12. Matthews presents evidence that Joseph Smith’s conversation with Brown was in 1837, not 1832.

76. *History of the Church*, 1:362–363.
77. William Clayton later spoke of Joseph Smith’s using “the Urim and Thummim” when he successfully “found” another text (see note 92).
78. “Two Days’ Meeting at Brigham City, June 27 and 28, 1874,” *Millennial Star* 36 (11 August 1874): 498–99. Pratt made a similar statement in 1871. As recorded in the minutes of the School of the Prophets, “He [Elder Pratt] mentioned that as Joseph used the Urim and Thummim in the translation of the Book of Mormon, he wondered why he did not use it in the translation of the New Testament. Joseph explained to him that the experience he had acquired while translating the Book of Mormon by the use of the Urim and Thummim had rendered him so well acquainted with the Spirit of Revelation and Prophecy, that in the translating of the New Testament he did not need the aid that was necessary in the 1st instance.” Minutes of the School of the Prophets, Salt Lake City, 14 January 1871, Church History Library, quoted in Robert J. Matthews, *A Plainer Translation: Joseph Smith’s Translation of the Bible, a History and Commentary* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1985), 40.
79. On February 2, 1833, Frederick G. Williams recorded in the Kirtland High Council minutes: “This day completed the translation and the reviewing of the New Testament.” “Kirtland, 2 day of Febry, 1833,” in *Kirtland Council Minute Book*, 2nd ed., eds. Fred C. Collier and William S. Harwell (Salt Lake City: Collier’s Publishing, 2002), 7. See note 91 regarding Joseph Smith’s use of a seer stone in October of 1835.
80. The revelations comprising the Book of Moses were given to Joseph Smith from June into December of 1830. Joseph Smith used a seer stone to receive a revelation for Orson Pratt in November of that year (see note 88).
81. Kent P. Jackson, “Joseph Smith’s New Translation of the Bible,” in *Joseph Smith, the Prophet and Seer*, ed. Richard Neitzel Holzapfel and Kent P. Jackson (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2010), 51–76.
82. “Old Testament Revision 1,” 1, 3, 8, The Joseph Smith Papers; <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/old-testament-revision-1?p=3>. Major additions to Genesis are found in Moses 4:1–4 (regarding Satan), Moses 5:1–15 (regarding Adam and Eve), Moses 5:23–31 (regarding Cain), Moses 5:49–59 (regarding Lamech), and Moses 6:26–7:69 (regarding Enoch).

83. Orson Pratt spoke in 1859 of seeing Joseph Smith “translating, by inspiration, the Old and New Testaments, and the inspired book of Abraham from Egyptian papyrus” (see note 68). This statement does not necessarily apply to the Book of Moses, which may not have been part of the Bible translation observed by Pratt. Also, “inspiration” has an imprecise meaning. In this statement, Pratt also indicates the Book of Abraham as translated by inspiration, but later spoke of the translation of that book by “Urim and Thummim” (see note 69).
84. “John Whitmer, History, 1831–circa 1847,” 4, The Joseph Smith Papers; <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/john-whitmer-history-1831-circa-1847?p=8>. For the manuscript dictated to Whitmer and Rigdon, see “Old Testament Revision 1,” 15.
85. See note 2.
86. Whitmer, *Address to All Believers*, 58.
87. Whitmer, *Address to All Believers*, 30–32.
88. James R. B. Vancleave to Joseph Smith III, 29 Sep 1878, quoted in “Historical Introduction” to “Revelation, 4 November 1830 [D&C 34],” The Joseph Smith Papers; <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/revelation-4-november-1830-dc-34>.
89. “Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1844–1845,” [8], bk. 8, The Joseph Smith Papers; <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/lucy-mack-smith-history-1844-1845?p=100>.
90. “Blessing to David Whitmer, 22 September 1835,” 2, The Joseph Smith Papers; <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/blessing-to-david-whitmer-22-september-1835?p=2>.
91. In introducing the blessing, Oliver Cowdery wrote: “The following blessing was given by President Joseph Smith, Jr through the Urim and Thummim, according to the spirit of prophecy and revelation.” “Blessing to Newel K. Whitney, 7 October 1835,” The Joseph Smith Papers; <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/blessing-to-newel-k-whitney-7-october-1835>
92. Clayton reported that Joseph Smith was “conversing with Dr. J. Wakefield and others ... spoke concerning key words. The g[rand] key word was the first word Adam spoke and is a word of supplication. He found the word by the Urim and Thummim. It is that key word to which the heavens is opened.” William Clayton journal, 15 June 1844, quoted in William V. Smith, *A Joseph Smith Commentary on the Book of Abraham: An*

Introduction to the Study of the Book of Abraham, 3rd ed. (Provo, UT: Book of Abraham Project, 2009), 163.

93. "Appendix: William Clayton, Journal Excerpt, 1–4 April 1843," 68–70, The Joseph Smith Papers; <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/appendix-william-clayton-journal-excerpt-1-4-april-1843/4>.
94. 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):219–232.
95. The gift of visions is not one of the spiritual gifts mentioned by Paul (1 Corinthians 12), but it is mentioned in the seventh Article of Faith. Joseph Smith's visions did not stop. The entry in his journal for April 10, 1843 reads: "It is my meditati[o]n all the day & more than my meat & drink to know how I shall make the Saints of God comprehe[n]d the visions that roll like an overflowing surge before my mind." "Journal, December 1842–June 1844; Book 2, 10 March 1843–14 July 1843," 144, The Joseph Smith Papers; <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/journal-december-1842-june-1844-book-2-10-march-1843-14-july-1843?p=152>.
96. In his Journal entry for May 6, 1849, Brigham Young recorded: "We spent the time in interesting conversation upon old times, Joseph, the plates, Mount Cumorah, treasures and records known to be hid in the earth, the gift of seeing, and how Joseph obtained his first seer stone." Brigham Young, "May 6, 1849," in *Manuscript History of Brigham Young 1847–1850*, ed. William S. Harwell (Salt Lake City: Collier's Publishing, 1997), 200.
97. For Orson Pratt's statement, see note 4. While president of the High Council in Zion, David Whitmer condemned false visions seen by members of the Hulet Branch of the Church in Ohio, saying that their "gift of seeing" was of the devil. "History, 1838–1856, volume A-1 [23 December 1805–30 August 1834]," 530, The Joseph Smith Papers; <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/history-1838-1856-volume-a-1-23-december-1805-30-august-1834?p=536>.
98. The earliest manuscript of this revelation had "thy directors" instead of "thy director," perhaps referring to the interpreters as well as to the "director" (as Elizabeth Whitmer called his brown seer stone) by which Joseph Smith received his early revelations.

- “Revelation, July 1828 [D&C 3],” 2, The Joseph Smith Papers; <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/revelation-july-1828-dc-3?p=2>.
99. “History, 1838–1856, volume A-1 [23 December 1805–30 August 1834],” 11, The Joseph Smith Papers; <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/history-1838-1856-volume-a-1-2-3-december-1805-30-august-1834?p=13>. See also Ashurst-McGee, “Pathway to Prophethood,” 325–326.
 100. Joseph Smith’s translation by the “gift” or “power” of God is also mentioned in passing in D&C 6:25 and D&C 20:8.
 101. “Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1844–1845,” [1], bk. 6, The Joseph Smith Papers, emphasis added; <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/lucy-mack-smith-history-1844-1845?p=69>.
 102. Before Joseph Smith obtained the plates and the interpreters, Josiah Stowell asked for his help finding buried silver, “having heard that he possessed certain *keys*, by which he could discern things invisible to the natural eye.” Lucy Mack Smith, *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith, the Prophet, and His Progenitors for Many Generations*, by Lucy Smith, Mother of the Prophet (Liverpool: S. W. Richards for Orson Pratt, 1853), 91–92, emphasis added.
 103. Minutes of an April 17, 1853 meeting represent Brigham Young as stating, “I have Josephs first seer stone which he had from OC [Oliver Cowdery], the one found in the well by which he got the plates of the B of Mormon.” Brigham Young, minutes, 17 April 1853, in Van Wagoner, *Complete Discourses*.
 104. “Martin Harris Interview with Joel Tiffany, 1859,” 302–304, 309.
 105. “Joseph Knight, Sr., Reminiscence, Circa 1835–1847,” in *Early Mormon Documents*, 4:13.
 106. In an 1826 trial, several people testified of his ability to see lost, hidden, or distant objects by use of his hat and stone. Russell Anderson, “The 1826 Trial of Joseph Smith,” FAIR Conference presentation, 2002; <http://www.fairmormon.org/perspectives/fair-conferences/2002-fair-conference/2002-the-1826-trial-of-joseph-smith>.
 107. If not for the sins of his youth and the mental anguish they caused him, Joseph Smith might not have sought out God and experienced his First Vision. “First Vision Accounts,” online at <https://www.lds.org/topics/first-vision-accounts>. Had he not continued to struggle with sin, he might not have sought out God again and received his divine commission. Speaking of the

few years after his First Vision when he was involved in treasure hunting, he confessed, “I was left to all kinds of temptations; and, mingling with all kinds of society, I frequently fell into many foolish errors, and displayed the weakness of youth, and the foibles of human nature; which, I am sorry to say, led me into divers temptations, offensive in the sight of God. ... In consequence of these things, I often felt condemned for my weakness and imperfections; when, on the evening of the above-mentioned twenty-first of September, after I had retired to my bed for the night, I betook myself to prayer and supplication to Almighty God for forgiveness of all my sins and follies.” What followed was the appearance of the angel Moroni, who told Joseph Smith that God had a work for him to do (JS-H 1:28–33; D&C 20:5–6). Being called to the work did not purge Joseph Smith of all human weakness, and the Lord continued to chastise and correct him (D&C 3: 4–15; 5:21–22) even as he did Moses (Numbers 20:12) and Jonah (Jonah 4:1–10).

108. “Isaac Hale Statement, 1834,” in *Early Mormon Documents*, 4:284–287, emphasis added.
109. In his 1832 history, Joseph Smith confessed that he “saught the Plates to obtain riches and kept not the commandmen[n]t of that I should have an eye single to the Glory of God.” Joseph Smith, “History, circa Summer 1832,” 5. See also Joseph Smith — History 1:53.
110. Ronald W. Walker, “The Persisting Idea of American Treasure Hunting,” *BYU Studies*, 24/4 (Fall 1984): 429–59.
111. “Imposition and Blasphemy!! — Money-Diggers, &c,” *The Gem, A Semi-Monthly Literary and Miscellaneous Journal* (Rochester, New York), 15 May 1830, 13.
112. J. W. Hanson, *History of Gardiner, Pittston and West Gardiner, with a sketch of the Kennebec Indians, & New Plymouth Purchase, Comprising Historical Matter from 1602 to 1852; with Genealogical Sketches of Many Families* (Gardiner, ME: William Palmer, 1852), 169.
113. “S. F. Anderick Statement, 1887,” in *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:209.
114. “William D. Purple Reminiscence, 28 April 1877,” in *Early Mormon Documents*, 4:133.
115. See note 102.
116. One of the most prolific spiritualist mediums was Pearl Curran,

who received texts from an entity claiming to be the deceased Patience Worth. Curran reported that words came into her mind, along with images: “When the poems come, there also appear before my eyes images of each successive symbol, as the words are given me. ... When the stories come, the scenes become panoramic, with the characters moving and acting their parts, even speaking in converse. ... If the people talk a foreign language, as in *The Sorry Tale*, I hear the talk, but over and above is the voice of Patience, either interpreting or giving me the part she wishes to use as story.” Pearl Curran, “A Nut for Psychologists,” *The Unpartizan Review* 13 (March–April 1920): 359–360. *The Sorry Tale: A Story of the Time of Christ* was a book dictated by Pearl Curran on the life of Jesus that diminishes his divinity and atonement.

117. Dan Vogel, “James Colin Brewster: The Boy Prophet Who Challenged Mormon Authority,” in *Differing Visions: Dissenters in Mormon History*, ed. Roger D. Launius and Linda Thatcher (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 124–126.
118. See “Historical Introduction” to “Revelation, 9 May 1831 [D&C 50],” *The Joseph Smith Papers*; <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/revelation-9-may-1831-dc-50>.
119. Whitmer, *Address to All Believers*, 31. For the revelation to go to Canada, see “Revelation, circa Early 1830,” *Joseph Smith Papers*; <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/revelation-circa-early-1830>. It is also plausible that the revelation was from God, that the mission to Canada failed because conditions specified in the revelation were not met, and that Whitmer fabricated the part about the follow-up revelation. Before accusing Whitmer of such a fabrication, however, we might consider that there is nothing in Church doctrine that would preclude the possibility that Joseph Smith and his associates were temporarily deceived. There are several reasons to believe Whitmer was telling the truth and the Canada revelation was not from God. First, the Canada revelation was one of the few items in Joseph Smith’s manuscript book of revelations that he never published. “Historical Introduction” to “Revelation Book 1,” *The Joseph Smith Papers*; <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/revelation-book-1>. Second, the revelation is uncharacteristically dramatic for a revelation concerning a business matter (compare D&C sections 48, 51, and 96). Third,

the revelation inexplicably claims to be from “the Father,” while the published revelations are from Jesus Christ, as expected. Fourth, giving up the copyright of the keystone Mormon text to outsiders would not seem to be in the best interest of the Church. Fifth, as Martin Harris discovered, the Book of Mormon was not financially profitable, yet the revelation implies that Joseph Smith and others would profit financially from it if they were righteous, and that the Holy Ghost would inspire someone to invest a large sum of money into buying its copyright. Sixth, Hiram Page, the only other witness who left a record of the events, agreed with David Whitmer that the circumstances under which the revelation was sought were not conducive to beneficial revelation. In a letter to William McLellin, he wrote that plans to sell the copyright came out of a “desire for filthy lucre” that ran counter to previous revelation, that, even before the revelation was received, preparations for the trip were made “in a Sly manor So as to keep martin Haris from drawing a Share of the money,” and that the would-be travelers “were all anctious to get a revilation to go.” “Hiram Page to William E. McLellin, 2 February 1848,” in *Early Mormon Documents*, 5:257–259. This incident happened before Joseph Smith received instructions (D&C 46 and 50) that might have helped him avoid such circumstances. It is unclear from Page’s letter whether he believed the revelation to have been from a non-divine source, although he noted that the Canada trip was a failure and the revelation did not benefit Joseph Smith. Page was commenting on a letter (no longer extant) he had received from McLellin, and he may have felt it unnecessary to repeat assertions that McLellin had already made. B. H. Roberts saw the Canada incident as an important and efficient lesson to Joseph Smith and his followers that “not every impression made upon the mind is an impression from a divine source,” that, in questions of church governance, we must be willing to accept “uncertainty, even errors; manifestations of un wisdom, growing out of human limitations,” and that the “uncertainty in the midst of which we walk by faith, is the very means of our education. What mere automatons men would become if they found truth machine-like, of cast-iron stiffness.” Brigham H. Roberts, “History of the Mormon Church: Chapter XI,” *Americana* 4 (December 1909):1024–1 025.

120. Some might accuse Joseph Smith of being a false or fallen prophet

based on Deuteronomy 18:20; however, that scripture refers to intentional deception. His occasional failings did not mean that Joseph Smith was false or fallen, just fallible. Paul says we should expect prophecies to fail because of human limitations: “whether there be prophecies, they shall fail ... for we know in part, and we prophesy in part ... for now we see through a glass, darkly” (1 Corinthians 13: 8–12). Joseph Smith, like the imperfect prophets of whom Paul spoke, may have not always been able to discern what he was seeing through his “glass.” In the case of the Canada revelation, he may have even opened himself up for a deceptive revelation by thinking to profit from the Nephite record, as he had done when first trying to obtain the plates. To be a prophet is not to be a perfect model for emulation and adoration (that is Christ), but to teach, warn, and direct. Prophets are fallible even when acting as prophets. In response to the question, “Do you believe that the President of the Church, when speaking to the Church in his official capacity is infallible?” President Charles W. Penrose answered in the 1912 *Improvement Era*, “We do not believe in the infallibility of man. When God reveals anything it is truth, and truth is infallible. No President of the Church has claimed infallibility.” Charles W. Penrose, “Editor’s Table — Peculiar Questions Briefly Answered,” *Improvement Era*, September 1912, 1045. The scriptures likewise teach only that *when God is the ultimate source* of a statement is it infallible (D&C 1:38; 68:4).

121. According to Matthew 4:1–11, Satan showed Jesus “all the kingdoms of the world,” which suggests a visionary experience (see also Nephi 11:1; Ezekiel 40:1–4; Revelation 17:3; 21:1–10). Although Satan likely appeared as an angel of light (2 Corinthians 11:14), Jesus discerned the vision to be Satanic because of its content.
122. The Book of Mormon itself asks us to test to see if it is of God (Moroni 10). Moroni tells us we can receive a spiritual witness of the book’s truthfulness, but the message of the book also gives us reason to believe in its divine provenance. Nephi’s writings focus on the divinity of Jesus Christ and the necessity and power of his atonement, and subsequent prophets repeat and reinforce his teachings. For example, see witnesses of Christ from Nephi (2 Nephi 25:12–29), Jacob (2 Nephi 9:5–24), Enos (Enos 1), King Benjamin (Mosiah 3:5–11; 5:7–10), Abinadi (Mosiah 15:1–25),

Alma (Alma 7:10–13; 36:12–24; 38:8–11; 42:11–15), Amulek (Alma 34:5–16), Mormon (Moroni 7:41; 9:25–26), and Moroni (Moroni 10:32–24). With Christ as its central message, the Book of Mormon affirms the Bible and becomes “Another Testament of Jesus Christ” for the “convincing of the Jew and Gentile that Jesus is the Christ, the Eternal God” (title page). The Book of Mormon affirms the Bible, not only by directly endorsing it (1 Nephi 13:40; Mormon 7:8–9), but also by echoing its messages, by quoting large sections of it, and by frequent phrasal allusions to its text.

123. “Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1844–1845,” [7–8], bk. 5, The Joseph Smith Papers; <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/lucy-mack-smith-history-1844-1845?p=61>. This is the original wording in the earliest (1844–1845 “rough draft”) manuscript of her history. In the final (1845 “fair copy”) manuscript, “stones” is replaced by “3 cornered diamonds set in glass and the glass was set in silver bows.” “Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1845,” 107, The Joseph Smith Papers; <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/lucy-mack-smith-history-1845?p=114>. This phrase was also later inserted in blue ink into the earlier manuscript along with a note indicating that the interpreters had been examined “with no covering but a silk handkerchief.” There is reason to believe that the description of the interpreters as “diamonds set in glass” was not from Lucy Smith, or if it was, that it was speculative. The more authoritative descriptions of the interpreters — Mosiah 28:13, Ether 3:23–24, Ether 3:28, Joseph Smith’s History (JS-H 1:35), Martin Harris’s interview with Tiffany, and Lucy Smith’s original dictation of her history — all referred to them as “stones,” not diamonds or glass. Also, if Lucy Smith examined the instrument only through a cloth, she could have discerned texture (hence her original description of the instrument as “two smooth stones”) but could have only speculated that they were diamonds or glass. Martha Jane Coray and her husband, Howard, composed the 1845 manuscript based on the earlier draft as well as other notes and sources (see the “Historical Introduction” to the 1844–1845 manuscript). The idea that the interpreters were diamonds in glass may have come from one of those other sources or from the Corays’ own understanding and assumptions. Both “diamond” and “glass” were local terms for seer stones (see note 60), and the Corays or their source likely had heard those terms used for

the interpreters at some point. They may have even heard Lucy Smith use them to label (rather than describe) the Nephite stones. Brigham Young believed the manuscripts contained many errors and requested that church historian George A. Smith and Elias Smith produce a corrected text for publication. The description of the interpreters as “diamonds set in glass” was apparently one of those errors. It was struck from the 1845 manuscript and omitted from the corrected history, which was published in book form in 1902. *History of the Prophet Joseph by His Mother Lucy Smith as Revised by George A. Smith and Elias Smith* (Salt Lake City: Improvement Era, 1902). Even if we take the description of the interpreters as “diamonds set in glass” at face value, it does not tell us how clear the “diamonds” were or whether the “glass” was transparent.

124. “Church History,’ 1 March 1842,” 707.
125. “Appendix: Orson Pratt, A[n] Interesting Account of Several Remarkable Visions, 1840,” 13, The Joseph Smith Papers; <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/appendix-orson-pratt-an-interesting-account-of-several-remarkable-visions-1840/13>.
126. “History, 1838–1856, volume A-1 [23 December 1805–30 August 1834],” 5, The Joseph Smith Papers; <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/history-1838-1856-volume-a-1-23-december-1805-30-august-1834?p=5>.
127. See the “Historical Introduction” to “Church History,’ 1 March 1842,” The Joseph Smith Papers; <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/church-history-1-march-1842>.
128. James Morier, *A Second Journey through Persia, Armenia, and Asia Minor, to Constantinople, Between the Years 1810 and 1816* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1818), 284.
129. “The History of a Nephite Coin,” 4–5.
130. O. Turner, *History of the Pioneer Settlement of Phelps and Gorham’s Purchase, and Morris’ Reserve: Embracing the Counties of Monroe, Ontario, Livingston, Yates, Steuben, Most of Wayne and Allegany, And Parts of Orleans, Genesee, and Wyoming. To Which Is Added, A Supplement or Extension of the Pioneer History of Monroe County* (Rochester, NY: William Alling, 1851), 215.
131. “Kelley Notes, 6 March 1881,” in *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:87, emphasis added.
132. *Times and Seasons* 4 (1 December 1842): 32. In her history,

- Lucy Smith told of a girl who claimed to discover hidden knowledge and objects by “looking through a certain black stone.” “Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1844–1 845,” [8], bk. 14, The Joseph Smith Papers; [http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/lucy-mack-smith-history-1844-1 845?p=174](http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/lucy-mack-smith-history-1844-1845?p=174).
133. “Wonderfull Discovery,” *Wayne Sentinel*, 27 December 1825, 2, quoted in Ashurst-McGee, “Pathway to Prophethood,” 171, emphasis added.
 134. “David Whitmer Interview with James H. Hart, 21 August 1883 & 10 March 1884,” in *Early Mormon Documents*, 5:104.
 135. Wandle Mace, *Autobiography* (1809–1846), emphasis added.
 136. Cornelis Van Dam, *The Urim and Thummim: A Means of Revelation in Ancient Israel* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1997), 30, including notes. The mention of manna sets the temporal reference to the wilderness period of Israel when the Urim and Thummim is first mentioned in the Bible. *White* is translated from *leukēn*, meaning “light,” “bright,” or “brilliant” as well as “white,” echoing “urim,” which is traditionally interpreted as “light” or “lights.” The Urim and Thummim was used by Israel’s high priest, and all who receive a white stone will likewise be made priests (Revelation 1:6). Many traditions have explained the Urim and Thummim as a precious stone or a secret or sacred name seen only by the high priest (Van Dam, 16–3 1). *Stone* is translated from *psēphon*, meaning a small, smooth stone. While most Bible translations have the “new name” written “on” the stone, the King James translator used “in,” perhaps seeing the stone as a visionary instrument.
 137. Ezra has “and with Thummim.”
 138. Although *’ûrîm* can mean “flames” or “fires” in Hebrew, the *Urim of Urim and Thummim* is as likely related to *’ôrîm*, meaning “lights” (as in Psalm 136:7). There is currently, however, no consensus on the word’s origin, and many other derivations have been proposed. For traditional interpretations of *Urim and Thummim*, and *Urim* as “light” or “lights,” see Van Dam, *Urim and Thummim*, 83–95, 132–136. For derivations related to the lot theory, see Van Dam, 94–98. For a short summary of proposed derivations, see Ann Jeffers, *Magic and Divination in Ancient Palestine and Syria* (New York: Brill, 1996), 210–211.
 139. Van Dam, *Urim and Thummim*, 89n29, 222n17.
 140. Van Dam, *Urim and Thummim*, 34–37, 44n25. Preference among

scholars for the lot theory is not universal. Carl Van Dam, for example, believes that *Urim* refers to the verifying light that emitted from what was probably a single gem (p. 230). There are many and diverse traditions of how the Urim and Thummim functioned, but none date back to the time the instrument was used. In his book, Van Dam provides a thorough discussion of the instrument based on tradition and biblical and linguistic evidence.

141. Although no evidence from Qumran is available, the version in the Masoretic Text is supported by *Targum Jonathan* and the Peshitta (Van Dam, *Urim and Thummim*, 200n25, 201). The Old Latin version is not helpful, as it is derived from the Septuagint (Van Dam, 90). For a full review of the evidence, including Biblical evidence, linguistic evidence, and proposed Near Eastern analogues, see Van Dam, 39–44, 197–217.
142. Even though the Urim and Thummim is not mentioned in these passages, it is implied by the presence of the ephod and the use of Hebrew phrases translated as “inquired of the Lord” and “inquired of God” in the NASB. Emil G. Hirsch, W. Muss-Arnolt, Wilhelm Bacher, and Ludwig Blau, “Urim and Thummim” in *Jewish Encyclopedia* 12:384; also, Van Dam, *Urim and Thummim*, 182–189. The passages presented here are those that are considered by both Hirsch et al. (who favor the lot theory) and Van Dam (who does not) as referencing the Urim and Thummim, and in which an answer from the Lord is recorded. Other passages that likely refer to the Urim and Thummim include Joshua 9:14, Judges 20:18–23, 1 Samuel 14:3–37, 1 Samuel 22:10–13, and 2 Samuel 21:1.
143. This suggests the possibility that Moses, who also saw God “face to face” in his great vision on a high mountain (Moses 1:2), was likewise seeing that vision by urim and thummim, which he possessed (Exodus 28:30). Although God’s physical presence might be inferred based on the need for Moses to have been “transfigured” by “the glory of God” (Moses 1:2, 11), transfiguration may also be required to survive the mere visual manifestation of God (see Exodus 33:18–20). That Moses was seeing God with his “spiritual eyes” (Moses 1:11) suggests an imaginative vision, which would have also enabled him to see things not physically present (v. 8). Enoch saw a similar vision in which he talked with God “even as a man talketh one with

another, face to face” and saw things future and distant (Moses 7:4, 9). Moses must have been seeing God in imaginative vision when he perceived him in the flames of a fire and talked with him “face to face” (Deuteronomy 5:4).

144. The spirit of prophecy and spirit of revelation are associated with each other throughout the Book of Mormon, including the title page, and throughout the Doctrine and Covenants, and with mental impressions by the gift of the Holy Ghost in D&C 8:2–5. Joseph Smith’s early revelations were received through the “Urim and Thummim” (as noted in headings of D&C sections 3, 6, 7, 11, 14, and 17), but beginning in about April of 1830, he received revelation more often by “the spirit of prophecy and revelation” (see heading to D&C 20).
145. Although consistent with visions, these passages do not compel belief that translating by seer stone is a visionary experience. In *Joseph Smith’s Seer Stones*, 119–122, MacKay and Frederick refer to some of these same passages and come to the opposite conclusion — that seer stones were *not* “an object meant to inspire visions.” They base this conclusion in part on Nephi’s description of the function of the brass ball, which they see as an instrument resembling seer stones. Even if the instruments are analogous, however, this does not mean they did not function by eliciting visions. The faith-enabled appearances of writing on the brass ball (1 Nephi 16:26–29) could have been visions. The Book of Mormon does not indicate that the writing appeared to anyone but the seer Lehi, but even if it appeared to the group generally, this does not mean it was not a visionary experience. Multiple individuals may see a vision together, as, for example, in D&C 76 (particularly vv. 19–49).
146. See notes 26.
147. Royal Skousen’s monumental study of the Book of Mormon manuscripts suggests that Joseph Smith was dictating a text that he did not compose himself and with which he was unfamiliar. Royal Skousen, “How Joseph Smith Translated the Book of Mormon: Evidence from the Original Manuscript,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 7/1 (1998): 25–31. After reviewing some of the findings from his study, Skousen observed: “These new findings argue that Joseph Smith was not the author of the English-language translation of the Book of Mormon. Not only was the text revealed to him word for word, but the words

themselves sometimes had meanings that he and his scribes would not have known, which occasionally led to a misinterpretation. The Book of Mormon is not a 19th-century text, nor is it Joseph Smith's. The English-language text was revealed through him, but it was not precisely in his language or ours." Royal Skousen, "The Archaic Vocabulary of the Book of Mormon," *Insights* 25/5 (2005): 6. Stanford Carmack has also argued against the idea that Joseph Smith produced the English text. See, for example, "A Look at Some 'Nonstandard' Book of Mormon Grammar," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 11 (2014): 209–262, and "Joseph Smith Read the Words," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 18 (2016): 41–64. Also problematic for Roberts's theory are Joseph Smith's poor language skills compared to the sophisticated vocabulary and complex sentence and chiasmic structures in the Book of Mormon, and his lack of biblical knowledge compared to the Book of Mormon's copious phrasal allusions to, and quotations from, the King James Bible. Roger Terry, "The Book of Mormon Translation Puzzle," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 23 (2014): 182–84. While both witness accounts and scripture (2 Nephi 27:20) indicate that Joseph Smith saw words as he translated, neither of those sources indicate that he first formed those words in his mind (see the reference in note 94 regarding D&C 9:7–9).

148. Joseph Smith, *Times and Seasons* 4 (15 May 1843): 194.
149. Roger Terry, "Archaic Pronouns and Verbs in the Book of Mormon: What Inconsistent Usage Tells Us about Translation Theories," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 47/3 (2014): 59–63.
150. Moroni's statement in Mormon 9:34 that "none other people knoweth our language" does not necessarily invalidate this option. God could have directed a surviving Nephite to translate the plates from Reformed Egyptian into Hebrew (which the Nephites used in some form, according to Mormon 9:33) and then had a later individual translate that text from Hebrew into English. Alternatively (or additionally), a Semitic scholar might have used the Isaiah chapters on the plates along with a Hebrew Bible as a sort of Rosetta stone to decipher the Nephite language. In a third scenario, God could have extended the life of a Nephite (perhaps even Moroni) long enough for him to learn English and translate the record, just as he may have extended the life of the

prophet Ether long enough for him to learn the Nephite language and produce a translation of the Jaredite plates, to subsequently be delivered in vision to King Mosiah (Ether 15:33–34; Mosiah 28:10–17). There may be other equally plausible scenarios; and multiple translators and times of translation and editing could have been involved. An obvious weakness of these ideas is that neither scripture nor tradition give any hint of mortal involvement with the plates between the time that Moroni sealed them up (Moroni 10:2) and the time he delivered them to Joseph Smith.

151. For an explanation of how interruption of the normal visual system can induce imaginative vision, see Gardner, *Gift and Power*, 261–274.
152. People in many cultures throughout history have looked into bright, reflective, or clear deep surfaces of glass, metal, crystals, polished stone, ink, water, flames, or other substances to elicit hallucinations or visions. Northcote Whitridge Thomas, *Crystal Gazing, Its History and Practice: With a Discussion of the Evidence for Telepathic Scrying* (London: Moring, 1905), 32–59. Moses’s vision of God in the flames of a burning bush may have been such an experience (Exodus 3). For an experimental investigation of mirror gazing and the physiology of its visions, see Giovanni B. Caputo, “Strange-face-in-the-mirror illusion,” *Perception* 39 (2010): 1007–1008.
153. Ashurst-McGee, “Pathway to Prophethood,” 158–174.
154. A story Martin Harris related in 1870 is sometimes used to argue that seer stones have more than psychological importance to a seer. Harris said he found a stone similar in appearance to Joseph Smith’s seer stone and put it in the hat in place of the regular stone, and that Joseph Smith, upon looking into the hat, paused for a while and said, “Martin! What is the matter? All is as dark as Egypt!” Edward Stevenson’s account of Harris’s Sunday morning lecture in Salt Lake City on 4 September 1870, *Millennial Star* 44 (6 February 1882): 87. There are, however, other explanations for what Harris observed. Joseph Smith may have noticed the different stone and played along, or God may have withheld the revelation because of Harris’s irreverence.
155. The gold plates may have also served to bolster Joseph Smith’s faith. Even though he didn’t use them directly in translating, their presence would have given him confidence that there was

- an ancient record to be revealed.
156. Some authorities have explained the Urim and Thummim as an object for eliciting visions. See, for example, E. H. Plumptre, "Urim and Thummim," in *A Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 3, ed. W. Smith (Boston: Little, Brown, 1863), 1604–1605. This idea was more widely accepted prior to the 20th century. See J. Aubrey, *Miscellanies upon Various Subjects* (London, 1784), 217; also E. S. Hartland, *The Legend of Perseus* (London: Grimm Library, 1895), 2:17.
 157. See JS-H 1:21–27, 58; 2 Nephi 27: 5–6, 20–26; 1 Samuel 9:9.
 158. A relationship between the interpreters, the Urim and Thummim, and teraphim was suggested in January of the 1833, apparently by W. W. Phelps, in the first Latter Day Saint newspaper. "The Book of Mormon," *Evening and the Morning Star* 1 (January 1833):58. Teraphim were various types of oracular objects going back at least to patriarchal times. Their connotation in the Bible is usually negative, but Rachel had some sort of teraphim (Genesis 31 ASV), and so did David (1 Samuel 19 ASV), as well as others who worshipped the Lord (Judges 17). Teraphim were used to make spiritual inquiries, and sometimes associated with an ephod in place of the Urim and Thummim (Judges 17:5, 2 Kings 23:24 ASV; Hosea 3:4; Ezekiel 21:26 ASV; Zechariah 10:2 NAS), and there is some evidence suggesting that their function could involve (spiritual?) light. Van Dam, *Urim and Thummim*, 149–151, 226–229. Some teraphim may have functioned as the seer stones of their time.
 159. The phrase "inquire of the Lord" or "enquire of the Lord" and variations thereof characterize the use of Joseph Smith's seer stones as well as the biblical Urim and Thummim. For example, speaking of an 1829 revelation now found in D&C 6, Joseph Smith's history states: "I enquired of the Lord through the Urim and thummim and obtained the following revelation." "History, 1838–1856, volume A-1 [23 December 1805–30 August 1834]," 13, The Joseph Smith Papers; <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/?target=X8A3C8B36-FB0B-4E3B-8858-0CA36CEC99A7>. See also Whitmer, *Address to All Believers*, 31. Regarding "inquiring of the Lord" by the biblical Urim and Thummim, see references in note 142. Both wizards and prophets practice divination, which is the seeking of hidden knowledge by supernatural means. What differentiates wizards from prophets

of God is not so much the methods employed in seeking that knowledge as it is the spiritual contacts made or attempted.

160. For the Book of Mormon as a Christ centered, Bible affirming document, see note 122. The Book of Mormon itself gives reasons it was revealed through an unlearned man. The learned of Joseph Smith's day rejected it (2 Nephi 27: 15–20). God wanted to show the world that he was “a God of miracles ... the same yesterday, today, and forever,” and that he works among his children “according to their faith” (2 Nephi 27:22–26). See also Acts 4:13. If God had revealed the Book of Mormon to the world directly through a scholar or educated cleric, people would have conveniently concluded that the learned man wrote it himself. Public display of the gold plates (if even practicable) would not have necessarily changed anyone's mind, as their authenticity would have been easily doubted. God reveals his work, not primarily through physical evidence, but through witnesses and spiritual confirmation provided to those who desire to believe (2 Nephi 27: 12–14, 23, 26, 29; D&C 46:14; Matthew 13:13–16; Alma 32:27–28).

