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## **Seeing with a Hat: How Joseph Smith Used a Hat in Translating the Book of Mormon**

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**Stan Spencer**

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# Seeing with a Hat: How Joseph Smith Used a Hat in Translating the Book of Mormon

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Stan Spencer

**Abstract:** *Joseph Smith's use of a seer stone and hat in producing the Book of Mormon has been a point of confusion, dismay, and even embarrassment among some believers. These feelings may reflect a lack of understanding of the functions of these objects in enabling Joseph to receive divine revelation. As the term was used in the Bible and commonly used in Joseph Smith's day, a seer was a "seer" of visions. Accordingly, a seer stone was a stone used for seeing visions. Joseph was reported to have used seer stones to receive the translation of the Book of Mormon in vision. This is how he reportedly described the experience of translation to others. According to these reports, Joseph said that he read the translation from a manuscript that appeared before him. The revelation of the Book of Mormon translation to Joseph in vision places him in the company of ancient seers such as Ezekiel and Lehi, who also read from sacred manuscripts seen in vision. This paper specifically addresses the nature of Joseph's hat and its function in the revelation of the translation of the Book of Mormon.*

**T**he Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints provides a gospel topics essay entitled "Book of Mormon Translation." It gives an overview of the stones and the method Joseph used in translating the Book of Mormon as related in witness accounts:

Joseph Smith and his scribes wrote of two instruments used in translating the Book of Mormon. According to witnesses of the translation, when Joseph looked into the instruments,

the words of scripture appeared in English. One instrument, called in the Book of Mormon the “interpreters,” is better known to Latter-day Saints today as the “Urim and Thummim.” Joseph found the interpreters buried in the hill with the plates. . . .

The other instrument, which Joseph Smith discovered in the ground years before he retrieved the gold plates, was a small oval stone, or “seer stone.” As a young man during the 1820s, Joseph Smith, like others in his day, used a seer stone to look for lost objects and buried treasure. As Joseph grew to understand his prophetic calling, he learned that he could use this stone for the higher purpose of translating scripture.

Apparently for convenience, Joseph often translated with the single seer stone rather than the two stones bound together to form the interpreters. These two instruments—the interpreters and the seer stone—were apparently interchangeable and worked in much the same way such that, in the course of time, Joseph Smith and his associates often used the term “Urim and Thummim” to refer to the single stone as well as the interpreters.<sup>1</sup>

The Church essay goes on to state that, according to most witness accounts of the translation of the Book of Mormon, Joseph would see the English translation when he “placed either the interpreters or the seer stone in a hat [and] pressed his face into the hat to block out extraneous light.”

In Joseph’s day, the natural propensity for seeing visions was called “the gift of seeing,” and the experience of seeing visions was called “seeing.” A seer was understood to be a “see-er” of visions. Accordingly, a “seeing stone” or “seer stone” was a stone used for seeing visions.<sup>2</sup> Although the term *vision* can be used for various

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1. “Book of Mormon Translation,” Gospel Topics Essays, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, [churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics-essays/book-of-mormon-translation](https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics-essays/book-of-mormon-translation).

2. For *the gift of seeing*, see Stan Spencer, “Seers and Stones: The Translation of the Book of Mormon as Divine Visions of an Old-Time Seer,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 24 (2017): 50–51, 53, 84n96, 84n97, [journal.interpreterfoundation.org/seers-and-stones-the-translation-of-the-book-of-mormon-as-divine-visions-of-an-old-time-seer/](https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/seers-and-stones-the-translation-of-the-book-of-mormon-as-divine-visions-of-an-old-time-seer/). For the meaning of *seer*, see Spencer, “Seers and Stones,” 29–30, 76n16. For the contemporary use of *seeing stone*, see “James Colin Brewster Account, 1843,” in *Early Mormon*

kinds of religious and nonreligious experiences, I use it in the common sense of "something which is apparently seen otherwise than by ordinary sight."<sup>3</sup> Regarding Joseph's use of seer stones prior to obtaining the plates, his mother said that he was known for being "in possession of certain means, by which he could discern things, that could not be seen by the natural eye."<sup>4</sup> Regarding Joseph's later use of the interpreters—the two seer stones he found with the plates (Joseph Smith—History 1:35)—she observed that "it was by this that the angel showed him those things which he saw in vision."<sup>5</sup> Joseph and other individuals of his time used seer stones to experience visions of things that were hidden, distant, or imaginary. With Joseph's reputation for being able to see things not discernable to the natural eye, he was sometimes asked to help find lost items and assist "money diggers" looking for buried treasure.<sup>6</sup>

Seer stones, although not usually clear, were colloquially called *glasses*, presumably because the seer would look seemingly into or through the stones to see what could not otherwise be seen. Accordingly, the use of stones for seeing visions was called "glass looking."<sup>7</sup> Rather than functioning in any technological way, these stones perhaps functioned as aids to faith or focus that prompted the belief or expectation needed to experience visions of what was sought, whether real or imaginary.<sup>8</sup> Joseph and his associates learned that the ability to see visions was but a modality of perception and that the source of the visioned images—whether God, other unseen entities, or one's own mind—was not always apparent.<sup>9</sup>

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*Documents*, ed. Dan Vogel (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2000), 3:316–18, [archive.org/details/volume-3\\_202011/page/315/mode/2up](https://archive.org/details/volume-3_202011/page/315/mode/2up). For use of seer stones in seeing visions, see Spencer, "Seers and Stones," 52–55.

3. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "vision," definition 1.a., [oed.com/dictionary/vision\\_n](https://www.oed.com/dictionary/vision_n).

4. "Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1845," p. 95, Joseph Smith Papers, [josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/lucy-mack-smith-history-1845/102?p=102](https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/lucy-mack-smith-history-1845/102?p=102).

5. "Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1845," p. 113.

6. Spencer, "Seers and Stones," 52–56. For more on Joseph's money digging, see Steven C. Harper, "Was Joseph Smith a Money Digger?" *BYU Studies* 62, no. 4 (2023): 37–55, [scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol62/iss4/4/](https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol62/iss4/4/).

7. Stan Spencer, "What Did the Interpreters (Urim and Thummim) Look Like?" *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 33 (2019): 231, [journal.interpreterfoundation.org/what-did-the-interpreters-urim-and-thummim-look-like/](https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/what-did-the-interpreters-urim-and-thummim-look-like/).

8. Spencer, "Seers and Stones," 68–72.

9. Spencer, "Seers and Stones," 55–56, 84n97.

Joseph was eventually commanded by an angel to quit the company of the treasure seekers, but he was not told to give up his use of seer stones. Rather, he was permitted to use them in his new role of revelator.<sup>10</sup> With his natural gift of seeing (the gift of visions) that he had further developed in glass looking, Joseph was able to enter a state of consciousness in which he could perceive the revelatory visions that awaited him. Accordingly, he was called “the seer” in the oldest surviving copies of his early revelations and became known for his many revelatory visions.<sup>11</sup> I explore these topics in a previous paper, “Seers and Stones: The Translation of the Book of Mormon as Divine Visions of an Old-Time Seer,” and recommend that the reader review that paper before proceeding with this one.

In “Seers and Stones,” I address the nature and function of the stones used for translation. Specifically, I propose that Joseph used the two interpreter stones and his own seer stone in a hat to see, in vision, the translation of the Book of Mormon in the same manner he used a stone in a hat to see visions of other things. This contrasts with an idea that has often been expressed: that the stones functioned in some advanced technological way as light-emitting devices that displayed the translated text. God showed sacred texts to seers such as Lehi (1 Nephi 1:7–13) and Ezekiel (Ezekiel 2:8–10) in vision, and it is reasonable that he could have revealed the words of the Book of Mormon to Joseph Smith in vision also without the need for advanced physical technology. The way the Book of Mormon describes the use of the interpreter stones, the way it describes its own translation, and the way Joseph Smith described his subjective experience of translating are all consistent with a visionary experience.<sup>12</sup>

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10. Spencer, “Seers and Stones,” 53–54.

11. Joseph once remarked, “It is my meditation all the day . . . to know how I shall make the saints of God to comprehend the visions that roll like an overflowing surge before my mind.” “Discourse, 16 April 1843, as Reported by Willard Richards,” p. [144], Joseph Smith Papers, [josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-16-april-1843-as-reported-by-willard-richards/6](https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-16-april-1843-as-reported-by-willard-richards/6). The earliest surviving record of Joseph Smith’s revelations begins, “A Book of Commandments & Revelations of the Lord given to Joseph the Seer,” and then the first revelation in that record is introduced as, “Given to Joseph the Seer after he had lost certa[i]n writings.” “Revelation Book 1,” Joseph Smith Papers, [josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/revelation-book-1/3](https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/revelation-book-1/3). For a summary of Joseph’s many visions, see Alexander L. Baugh, “Parting the Veil: The Visions of Joseph Smith,” *BYU Studies* 38, no. 1 (1999): 22–489, scholars archive.byu.edu/byusq/vol38/iss1/8/.

12. Spencer, “Seers and Stones,” 64–68. For Joseph’s reported descriptions

The present paper continues with the idea of the translation of the Book of Mormon as a visionary experience, specifically addressing the nature and function of the hat. It addresses how Joseph made use of his hat in seeing the Book of Mormon translation, what his "seeing hat" looked like,<sup>13</sup> and how the hat may have functioned to help him attain a visionary state of consciousness. As a basis for this investigation of the role of Joseph's hat in the translation, I provide, in an appendix, a discussion of the most informative historical accounts of the translation.

### **The Purpose and Function of the Hat**

In discussions of the means of the translation of the Book of Mormon, emphasis has generally been placed on the purpose and function of the seer stones, with the seer's hat being considered relatively unimportant or even an embarrassment because of its connotations of magic or trickery.<sup>14</sup> But the hat must have been critical to the translation process, as it was consistently used. Although witness accounts assert that the hat was used to block the ambient light, none say why blocking the light was necessary.<sup>15</sup>

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of his experience of translation, see the last section of the appendix.

13. The seer stone, or "seeing stone," was consistently used in conjunction with a hat, which must have therefore had some kind of important role in the "seeing." In over 30 occurrences in this paper, I refer to the hat he used for seeing as a "seeing hat" to make it clear I am talking of that particular hat rather than any of his other hats.
14. For example, Michael Hubbard MacKay and Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, in their discussion of the instruments of translation of the Book of Mormon, state, "The mention of the hat Joseph used often causes modern interpreters to relate the translation with magic. Yet the hat itself is as insignificant to the process as the table Oliver Cowdery used to write on during the translation. It was simply a tool that Joseph apparently used to block out all extraneous light." "Firsthand Witness Accounts of the Translation Process," in *The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon: A Marvelous Work and a Wonder*, ed. Dennis L. Largey, Andrew H. Hedges, John Hilton III, and Kerry Hull (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2015), 68, [rsc.byu.edu/coming-forth-book-mormon/firsthand-witness-accounts-translation-process](http://rsc.byu.edu/coming-forth-book-mormon/firsthand-witness-accounts-translation-process).
15. Most of the surviving firsthand accounts of those who witnessed or likely witnessed Joseph Smith translating the Book of Mormon say that the translation was accomplished by placing a stone or stones in a hat. None appear to describe any alternate method. David Whitmer, William Smith, and Elizabeth Cowdery all said the hat was used to exclude the light. Spencer, "Seers and Stones," 32–43.

## Excluding ambient light

A common explanation is that the translation appeared on the seer stone, and Joseph used the hat to shade the stone so he could more easily read the displayed text, just as we might use our body to shade a smart phone to better read a text message in bright outdoor light.<sup>16</sup> This idea differs from Joseph's reported descriptions of the experience of translation, which portray him as reading, with "spiritual eyes" or by "spiritual light" from a visioned manuscript.<sup>17</sup> It is unclear why shading would be needed to read something seen with spiritual eyes or by spiritual light.

Even if we ignore Joseph's reported descriptions of the translation experience, the idea that the purpose of the hat was to shade the stone for easier reading still runs into some logical difficulties. Witness accounts have Joseph burying his face in the hat, not positioning it to cast a shadow on the stone or using it to hold the stone at a comfortable reading distance. Also, if Joseph placed his seer stone in a hat in order to shade it so he could better see the light it was emitting, why did other individuals of his time use stones in the same manner?<sup>18</sup> Did their stones also produce light?

An alternative explanation is that Joseph used the hat to help him attain a state of consciousness that was conducive to experiencing a vision of the English text. Certainly, by looking into the hat, Joseph would have experienced less visual distraction and so could have better focused and attended to the revelation. Or perhaps it was by interrupting Joseph's normal vision, as perceived through his physical eyes, that the hat enabled Joseph to better see a vision with his spiritual eyes, or "the eyes of [his] understanding."<sup>19</sup>

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16. For an example of a discussion of the stone as a device that displays the English translation on its surface and is easier to read in low light, along with illustrative works of art, see "Joseph Smith's Seer Stone," Gospel Lessons (YouTube channel), 11:45 to 12:20, [youtu.be/amGVHecmPAO](https://youtu.be/amGVHecmPAO).

17. "Ezra Booth Accounts, 1831," in *Early Mormon Documents*, ed. Dan Vogel (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2003), 5:308, [archive.org/details/volume-5\\_202011](https://archive.org/details/volume-5_202011); David Whitmer, "Testimony of David Whitmer," interview by John Traughber, *Saints Herald* 26 (15 November 1879): 341, [archive.org/details/TheSaintsHerald\\_Volume\\_26\\_1879/page/n339/mode/2up?view=theater](https://archive.org/details/TheSaintsHerald_Volume_26_1879/page/n339/mode/2up?view=theater).

18. For examples of use of seer stones and hats by others of Joseph's time, see the section of the appendix on Lucy Mack Smith's translation account.

19. Brant Gardner has proposed that Joseph's use of a stone and hat served to disrupt the normal visual function and bring about a brain state in which Joseph could more readily see internally generated images. Brant Gardner, *The Gift and Power: Translating the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Greg



We can evaluate these two explanations of the purpose of the hat—to shade the stone for easier reading, or to help Joseph attain a visionary state of consciousness—in light of the observations of witnesses in their personally prepared or authorized statements or (when those are lacking) in the principal reports of interviews with them. These and other principal witness accounts of the translation are discussed in the appendix. There are eight principal witness accounts of the translation that describe how Joseph used the hat:

- “Now the way he translated was he put the urim and thummim into his hat and Darkened his Eyes.” (Joseph Knight’s circa 1835–1847 statement)<sup>20</sup>
- “He would place the director in his hat, and then place his <face in his> hat, so as to exclude the light.” (Elizabeth Cowdery’s 1870 statement)<sup>21</sup>
- “J[oseph] put the seer stone in a hat and leaning forward would place his face in the hat.” (1879 record of Michael Morse interview)<sup>22</sup>
- “He sitting with his face buried in his hat, with the stone in it.” (1879 report of Emma Smith interview)<sup>23</sup>
- “One dark colored, opaque stone . . . was placed in the crown of a hat, into which Joseph put his face, so as to exclude the

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Kofford, 2011), 261–77, particularly 262–63, [google.com/books/edition/The\\_Gift\\_and\\_Power/OVxIEAAAQBAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&pg=PA263](https://books.google.com/books/edition/The_Gift_and_Power/OVxIEAAAQBAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&pg=PA263). For a discussion of Joseph seeing visions with spiritual eyes, or the eyes of his understanding, see the last section of the appendix.

20. “Joseph Knight, Sr., Reminiscence, Circa 1835–1847,” in *Early Mormon Documents*, ed. Dan Vogel (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002), 4:17, [archive.org/details/volume-4\\_202011](https://archive.org/details/volume-4_202011).
21. “Elizabeth Ann Whitmer Cowdery Affidavit, 15 February 1870,” in *Early Mormon Documents*, ed. Dan Vogel (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2003), 5:260, [archive.org/details/volume-5\\_202011/page/259/mode/2up](https://archive.org/details/volume-5_202011/page/259/mode/2up). In this and other quoted transcriptions of original documents, above-the-line insertions are enclosed in angle brackets. Clarifications as well as conjectural readings are in square brackets. In many instances, square brackets indicate a conjectural reading of a damaged source document.
22. “Michael Morse Interview with William W. Blair, 8 May 1879,” in *Early Mormon Documents*, 4:340–42, [archive.org/details/volume-4\\_202011/page/341/mode/2up](https://archive.org/details/volume-4_202011/page/341/mode/2up).
23. Emma Smith, “Last Testimony of Sister Emma,” interview by Joseph Smith III, *Saints Herald* 26, no. 10 (October 1, 1879): 289, [archive.org/details/TheSaintsHerald\\_Volume\\_26\\_1879/page/n287/mode/2up?view=theater](https://archive.org/details/TheSaintsHerald_Volume_26_1879/page/n287/mode/2up?view=theater).

external light.” (David Whitmer’s 1879 corrective statement through John Traughber)<sup>24</sup>

- “In translating he put the stone in his hat and putting his face in his hat . . . so as to exclude the light.” (David Whitmer’s 1881 statement)<sup>25</sup>
- “He was allowed to go on and translate by the use of a ‘Seers stone’ which he had, and which he placed in a hat into which he buried his face.” (David Whitmer’s 1885 statement through Zenas Gurley)<sup>26</sup>
- “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.” (David Whitmer’s 1887 statement)<sup>27</sup>

Four of these eight accounts mention the purpose of the hat: to exclude the light. To exclude means to shut out, not slightly reduce. If Joseph had been using an upturned hat merely to shade the stone, peering into the hat from a few inches away, the hat would not have been excluding the ambient light. Seven of the eight accounts specifically describe the relative positions of Joseph’s face and hat. They say Joseph would “put” or “place” his face “in” or “into” the hat or that he “buried” his face in the hat. In other words, the hat was covering Joseph’s face. The remaining account has him darkening his eyes (not the stone), which is also more consistent with the idea of the hat covering his face rather than just shading the stone. These descriptions from witnesses are mutually consistent and, taken together, unambiguous. When translating, Joseph was not peering into a hat from a few inches away; the hat was covering his face.

The most detailed description of how Joseph made use of his hat in translating comes from the testimony of his friend, Josiah Stowell. Stowell testified on Joseph’s behalf when Joseph stood trial 30 June 1830, in Broome County, New York, for “looking through a certain

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24. Traughber Interview, “Testimony of David Whitmer,” 341, [archive.org/details/TheSaintsHerald\\_Volume\\_26\\_1879/page/n339/mode/2up?view=theater](https://archive.org/details/TheSaintsHerald_Volume_26_1879/page/n339/mode/2up?view=theater).

25. “David Whitmer to *Kansas City Journal*, 13 June 1881,” in *Early Mormon Documents*, 5:81–82, [archive.org/details/volume-5\\_202011/page/81/mode/2up](https://archive.org/details/volume-5_202011/page/81/mode/2up).

26. “David Whitmer Interview with Zenas H. Gurley, 14 January 1885,” in *Early Mormon Documents*, 5:138, [archive.org/details/volume-5\\_202011/page/137/mode/2up](https://archive.org/details/volume-5_202011/page/137/mode/2up).

27. David Whitmer, *An Address to All Believers in Christ: By a Witness to the Divine Authenticity of the Book of Mormon*, pamphlet (Richmond, MO: self-published, 1887), 12, [archive.org/details/addresstoallbeli00whit/page/12/mode/2up](https://archive.org/details/addresstoallbeli00whit/page/12/mode/2up).

stone to find hid treasures, &c.”<sup>28</sup> According to an 1832 account of the trial based on notes taken by the presiding justice, Stowell described how Joseph used a stone and hat both in looking for hidden valuables and in translating the Book of Mormon:

*Josiah Stowell*[I] being by me sworn, saith . . . prisoner put a certain stone into his hat, put his face into the crown, then drew the brim of the hat around his head to prevent Light—he could then see as prisoner said, and translate; . . . and the prisoner, when looking for money, salt springs, hid treasures, &c. looked in the same manner.<sup>29</sup>

According to this description of the translation process, Joseph would not only put his face in the crown of the hat, but would also extend the brim around the sides of his head to further block out the light. These words were not written or reviewed by Stowell, and are probably not his exact language, but it is unlikely that the justice would have added such details as an embellishment. Stowell had hired Joseph to use his stone to look for a silver mine in Harmony, where Joseph would later do much of the translating.<sup>30</sup> After that effort was abandoned, Joseph continued to work for Stowell, including in the role of seeing with his stone, and lived with him the winter of 1825–1826.<sup>31</sup> Stowell was at Joseph’s home when he first obtained the plates and remained a close friend of Joseph and a believer in his divine calling and abilities as a seer.<sup>32</sup> Given his close association with Joseph and his belief in his abilities and calling, Stowell was likely given the

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28. “Trial Report, 28 August 1832 [State of New York v. JS–C],” p. [2], Joseph Smith Papers, [josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/trial-report-28-august-1832-state-of-new-york-v-js-c/1](http://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/trial-report-28-august-1832-state-of-new-york-v-js-c/1).

29. “Trial Report, 28 August 1832, [State of New York v. JS–C],” p. [2], emphasis in the original. For more on this report and charges against Joseph related to his glass-looking activities, see “Introduction to State of New York v. JS–B and State of New York v. JS–C,” Joseph Smith Papers, [josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/introduction-to-state-of-new-york-v-js-b-and-state-of-new-york-v-js-c/1#transcript-1-1830](http://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/introduction-to-state-of-new-york-v-js-b-and-state-of-new-york-v-js-c/1#transcript-1-1830).

30. See the “Historical Introduction” to “Appendix 1: Agreement of Josiah Stowell and Others, 1 November 1825,” Joseph Smith Papers, [josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/appendix-1-agreement-of-josiah-stowell-and-others-1-november-1825](http://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/appendix-1-agreement-of-josiah-stowell-and-others-1-november-1825).

31. “Introduction to State of New York v. JS–B and State of New York v. JS–C.”

32. Mark Ashurst-McGee, “The Josiah Stowell Jr.– John S. Fullmer Correspondence,” *BYU Studies* 38, no. 3 (1999): 114, 115n8, [scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol38/iss3/10/](http://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol38/iss3/10/).

opportunity to observe Joseph use the hat and stone for seeing, but even if not, he would have been knowledgeable of how it was done.

Even looking more broadly at other, less authoritative nineteenth-century accounts provide the same picture: accounts of the translation that address the function of the hat relative to the ambient light all state that the function of the hat was to exclude or prevent light from entering, not to produce shade:

- “He translated . . . by looking into the Urim and Thummim, which was placed in a hat to exclude the light.” (William Smith’s 1883 statement)<sup>33</sup>
- “He did not use the plates in the translation, but would hold the interpreters to his eyes and cover his face with a hat, excluding all light.” (*Kansas City Journal* 1881 report of interview with David Whitmer)<sup>34</sup>
- “In speaking of the translating he said that Joseph had the stone in a hat from which all light was excluded.” (George Q. Cannon’s 1884 report of his interview with David Whitmer)<sup>35</sup>
- “When Joseph received the plates he a[ll]so received the Urim and Thummim, which he would place in a hat to exclude all light.” (C. E. Butterworth’s 1884 report of sermon by William Smith)<sup>36</sup>
- “Smith would bend over the hat with his face buried in it so that no light could enter it.” (Rhamanthus M. Stocker’s 1887 report of interview with Joseph Fowler McCune, neighbor of Joseph)<sup>37</sup>

If we expand this search beyond accounts of the translation to include references to Joseph’s use of a seer stone for treasure seeking,

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33. “William Smith, On Mormonism, 1883,” in *Early Mormon Documents*, ed. Dan Vogel (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996), 1:497, [archive.org/details/volume-1\\_202010/page/496/mode/2up](https://archive.org/details/volume-1_202010/page/496/mode/2up).

34. “David Whitmer Interview with *Kansas City Journal*, 1 June 1881,” in *Early Mormon Documents*, 5:76, [archive.org/details/volume-5\\_202011/page/75/mode/2up](https://archive.org/details/volume-5_202011/page/75/mode/2up).

35. “David Whitmer Interview with George Q. Cannon, 27 February 1884,” in *Early Mormon Documents*, 5:113, [archive.org/details/volume-5\\_202011/page/113/mode/2up](https://archive.org/details/volume-5_202011/page/113/mode/2up).

36. “William Smith Testimony, 1884,” in *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:505–6, [archive.org/details/volume-1\\_202010/page/506/mode/2up](https://archive.org/details/volume-1_202010/page/506/mode/2up).

37. Rhamanthus M. Stocker, *Centennial History of Susquehanna County, Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia: R. T. Peck, 1887), 556, [archive.org/details/cu31924028854689/page/556/mode/2up](https://archive.org/details/cu31924028854689/page/556/mode/2up).

we do see a few mentions of shading. An 1874 article in the Danville, Vermont *North Star* says that young Joseph would look for stolen property and hidden treasure with a stone that was a "much more efficient agent when darkened or shaded in his hat."<sup>38</sup> An 1877 history of Wayne County, New York, says that when Joseph used his stone for visioning buried treasure, "the stone was finally placed in his hat to shade its marvelous brightness when its services were required."<sup>39</sup> An 1893 article in the *New York Herald* says that Joseph "would look at the stone shaded in his hat and see visions."<sup>40</sup> The sources behind these statements are not identified, but based on wording in the surrounding text, they all appear to be derived from Pomeroy Tucker's 1867 *Origin, Rise, and Progress of Mormonism*, in which Tucker says, sarcastically, that Joseph's visions of treasure were "too dazzling for his eyes in daylight" so he "had to shade his vision by looking at the stone in his hat!"<sup>41</sup> The problem, according to Tucker, was not that the light from the stone was so dim that it had to be shaded to be seen, but that it was too bright to look at. The whole idea, of course, is illogical. Joseph could not have blocked the light coming from the stone without also blocking the images the light contained. More likely, these details were invented by Tucker or his source for sensational effect. I have found no nineteenth-century account that claims that the purpose of the hat was to shade the stone to better see its dim light.

### Seeing into stone

Historical accounts that describe where Joseph saw the text while translating with a hat and stone may also shed light on the function of the hat. Any valid description would, of course, need to derive ultimately from Joseph Smith.

According to reports of how Joseph described the translation experience (see appendix for a discussion of these reports), the words of the translation appeared "before him" (Elizabeth Cowdery's

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38. "Joseph Smith, Jr., the Mormon Prophet," *The North Star*, vol. 68, no. 13 (Danville, VT), 27 March 1874, [sidneyrigdon.com/dbroadhu/ne/miscne04.htm](http://sidneyrigdon.com/dbroadhu/ne/miscne04.htm).

39. "W. H. McIntosh, History of Wayne County (NY), 1877," in *Early Mormon Documents*, ed. Dan Vogel (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2000), 3:373, [archive.org/details/volume-3\\_202011/page/373/mode/2up](http://archive.org/details/volume-3_202011/page/373/mode/2up).

40. "Palmyra-Manchester Residents Account, 1893," in *Early Mormon Documents*, 3:205, [archive.org/details/volume-3\\_202011/page/205/mode/2up](http://archive.org/details/volume-3_202011/page/205/mode/2up).

41. Pomeroy Tucker, *Origin, Rise, and Progress of Mormonism* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1867), 20–21, [archive.org/details/originriseprogre00tuck/page/n27/mode/2up](http://archive.org/details/originriseprogre00tuck/page/n27/mode/2up).

1870 statement), “it matters not whether his eyes are open or shut” (Ezra Booth’s 1831 statement), or on a visioned parchment (David Whitmer’s 1879 corrective statement through John Traughber and his 1885 statement through Zenas Gurley).<sup>42</sup> Whitmer’s 1881 statement on the translation says the words appeared “in the hat.”<sup>43</sup> Another individual who likely heard Joseph describe the experience of translation was Joseph Knight, a close friend who assisted with the translation effort. In his circa 1835–1847 statement, Knight says the words simply “would apper” after Joseph “Darkned his Eyes” with the hat.<sup>44</sup>

Secondhand reports of how Joseph may have described his experience (i.e., reports of interviews with individuals who may have heard Joseph describe his experience) say that the words would appear “before the Prophet” (Edward Stevenson’s 1886 report of a conversation with Martin Harris) or “in the stone” (George Q. Cannon’s 1884 report of an interview with David Whitmer) or on a parchment that appeared in place of the stone (James Hart’s 1884 report of an interview with David Whitmer).<sup>45</sup>

These accounts are all consistent with one another if we understand the translation as a visionary experience in which Joseph, after covering his eyes with his hat, would seemingly see before him an image of a parchment containing the English translation. As Joseph gazed in the direction of the stone and saw instead a parchment manuscript, he may have thought of the vision as appearing in or through (not on) the stone, at least in a figurative sense, and expressed it this way to others.<sup>46</sup>

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42. “Elizabeth Ann Whitmer Cowdery Affidavit, 15 February 1870,” 5:260; “Ezra Booth Accounts, 1831,” 308; Traughber Interview, “Testimony of David Whitmer,” 341; “David Whitmer Interview with Zenas H. Gurley,” 5:138.

43. “David Whitmer to *Kansas City Journal*, 13 June 1881,” 5:81–82.

44. “Joseph Knight, Sr., Reminiscence, Circa 1835–1847,” 4:17–18.

45. “Martin Harris Interview with Edward Stevenson, 1870,” in *Early Mormon Documents*, ed. Dan Vogel (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1998), 2:324, archive.org/details/volume-2\_202011/page/323/mode/2up; “David Whitmer Interview with George Q. Cannon, 27 February 1884,” 5:113; “David Whitmer Interview with James H. Hart, 21 August 1883 & 10 March 1884,” in *Early Mormon Documents*, 5:104, archive.org/details/volume-5\_202011/page/103/mode/2up.

46. It could be argued that the visioned parchment itself appeared on the seer stone, but there is no evidence for this in the historical accounts, which say that the parchment would either appear “before Joseph” (Whitmer’s 1879 corrective statement through Traughber) or “before his eyes” when he would “hold the interpreters to his eyes and cover his face with a hat” (“David Whitmer Interview with *Kansas City Journal*, 1 June 1881,” 76) or that Joseph “would see,

Only the most problematic accounts speak of words appearing on Joseph's seer stone. There are three: a December 1885 *Chicago Tribune* report of a purported interview with David Whitmer, an October 1886 *Omaha Herald* report of an interview with David Whitmer, and a January 1888 *Richmond Democrat* article on David Whitmer. The December 1885 *Chicago Tribune* report says that "on covering his face with the hat the characters and translation would appear on the stone."<sup>47</sup> There is reason to doubt, however, that David Whitmer ever said this. David Whitmer's son reportedly insisted that his father was not interviewed for this report as claimed and that it was inaccurate, but that his father was tired of always contradicting such reports and so let it pass.<sup>48</sup> A close look at the report supports the son's contention. Based on similarity in word choice, phrasing, and ideas covered, the description of the translation process in this article appears to be an amalgamation of descriptions of the process from three previously published reports of interviews with Whitmer. None of those reports say the words appeared on the seer stone.<sup>49</sup> This suggests that the idea of words appearing on the stone was an assumption made by the reporter, not something Whitmer taught. The October 1886 *Omaha Herald* report of an interview with Whitmer says that on one occasion Joseph was unable to translate because "the surface of the magic stone remained blank." By the context, the "magic stone" could be

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not the stone, but . . . an oblong piece of parchment" (Hart's 1884 report of interview with Whitmer) or that the parchment simply "would appear" after Joseph covered his face with the hat (Whitmer's 1887 statement).

47. "David Whitmer Interview with *Chicago Tribune*, 15 December 1885," in *Early Mormon Documents*, 5:155, emphasis added.
48. "David Whitmer Interview with Nathan Tanner, Jr., 13 May 1886," in *Early Mormon Documents*, 5:166, [archive.org/details/volume-5\\_202011/page/165/mode/2up](http://archive.org/details/volume-5_202011/page/165/mode/2up). The reporter himself states that most of his information was provided by a relative, not David Whitmer. "David Whitmer Interview with *Chicago Tribune*, 15 December 1885," 150–51.
49. These are "David Whitmer Interview with *Chicago Times*, August 1875," in *Early Mormon Documents*, 5:21; "David Whitmer Interview with *Kansas City Journal*, 1 June 1881," in *Early Mormon Documents*, 5:76; and "David Whitmer Interview with *Chicago Times*, 14 October 1881," in *Early Mormon Documents*, 5:85–86. To see the similarities in these accounts, compare the 1885 text from "affixing the magical spectacles" to "intrusted with the precious plates" with the 1875 text from "plates were not before Joseph" to "scribe put them together;" with the June 1881 text from "would hold the interpreters to his eyes" to "the translation in English" and with the October 1881 text from "The tablets or plates" to "a word or two words;" and also note the unusual use of "tablets" instead of "plates" and of "oval" to describe the shape of the brown seer stone.



the interpreters or Joseph's seer stone. Whitmer later noted that this article also contained errors and that the reporter took no notes during the "so-called interview."<sup>50</sup> The lack of notetaking means that the reported description of the translation process was not Whitmer's wording but was composed by the reporter based on other sources or on his own imperfect recollection of what was said during the interview and his assumptions of what was meant. Based on similarity in phrasing and word choice, the reporter appears to have taken language from the problematic 1885 *Chicago Tribune* report and probably adopted the idea of words appearing on a stone from that report as well.<sup>51</sup> The January 1888 *Richmond Democrat* article on David Whitmer says that, in translating, "the prophet would place the stone in a hat, then put his face in the hat and read the words that appeared thereon."<sup>52</sup> Based on similarity in wording in the surrounding text, the idea of words appearing on the stone as well as much of the language appear to have been copied from the October 1886 *Omaha Herald* interview report.<sup>53</sup> Based on this textual evidence, the idea of words appearing on the seer stone appears to have originated as a reporter's assumption in the 1885 *Chicago Tribune* report.

If we look at historical accounts that describe where Joseph saw text while using the white, marble-like interpreter stones, the results are similar.<sup>54</sup> The only statement from someone who likely heard Joseph describe his experience with the interpreter stones says words would appear "in the stone" (William Smith's 1883 statement), although it is possible that this phrase is referring to Joseph's own seer stone.<sup>55</sup>

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50. "David Whitmer Interview with *Omaha (NE) Herald*, 10 October 1886," in *EarlyMormonDocuments*, 5:171–73, 178, [archive.org/details/volume-5\\_202011/page/171/mode/2up](https://archive.org/details/volume-5_202011/page/171/mode/2up).

51. Compare the language in the two reports regarding "the work" of translating taking "eight months," 116 pages being "stolen" from a "bureau drawer," and Joseph being provided a "Urim and Thummim" replacement in the form of an "oval" shaped stone—all of which language is rare in or absent from previous accounts.

52. "David Whitmer Interview with *Richmond (MO) Democrat*, January 1888," in *Early Mormon Documents*, 5:211, 214, emphasis added, [archive.org/details/volume-5\\_202011/page/211/mode/2up](https://archive.org/details/volume-5_202011/page/211/mode/2up). There is no indication in the report that Whitmer provided this information or that an actual interview with the dying Whitmer took place.

53. Read from "again found favor" to "Phineas Young."

54. Regarding Truman Coe's report that Joseph said words would appear "on a screen placed before him," see note 229. "Journal, 1835–1836," Joseph Smith Papers, p. 25, [josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/journal-1835-1836/26](https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/journal-1835-1836/26).

55. "William Smith, On Mormonism, 1883," 1:497. William mentions the



While on a mission in Germany in 1842, Orson Hyde published a pamphlet that, speaking of the interpreters, said they "were placed where all light was excluded . . . and the answer appeared written with letters of light *on* the Urim and Thummim."<sup>56</sup> It is possible that Orson Hyde had retrospectively discussed details of the translation with Joseph Smith after he joined the Church in late 1831. Another possibility is that Hyde discussed the translation with Samuel Smith, who was his companion during an earlier mission in 1832 and had probably talked with Joseph about the translation experience. Especially in the latter case, being a thirdhand account, Hyde's description of the translation may not have faithfully conveyed seemingly minor details such as *in* versus *on*.

Newspaper reports of interviews with individuals to whom Joseph described or may have described his experience translating with the interpreters are thirdhand at best and therefore of limited reliability. One of these is an 1884 report by E. C. Briggs of an interview with David Whitmer that says "the letters appeared *on* them in light." But the report also twice has words appearing *in* the stones—an inconsistency that suggests *on* may have been an error.<sup>57</sup> The 1888 *Richmond Democrat* report mentioned above not only has words appearing on Joseph's seer stone, but also "*on* the lenses" of the interpreters.<sup>58</sup> Again, the reporter is relying on the language and ideas of the 1886 *Omaha Herald* report, which in turn relies on the dubious 1885 *Chicago Tribune* report. Samuel Richards's 1907 recollection of his interview with Oliver Cowdery has words appearing "distinctly *in* the instrument" and remaining "*in* the translator" that Joseph held over the words on the plates.<sup>59</sup>

Instead of asking where Joseph saw the words while translating, we might ask where he was looking in relation to the stone when he saw them. Firsthand accounts from individuals who credibly claim that Joseph described this element of the translation to them report that

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interpreters in the previous sentence, but then uses the singular, "the stone."

56. "Orson Hyde Account, 1842," in *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:167, emphasis added, [archive.org/details/volume-1\\_202010/page/166/mode/2up](http://archive.org/details/volume-1_202010/page/166/mode/2up).

57. "David Whitmer Interview with E. C. Briggs and R. Etzenhouser, 25 April 1884," in *Early Mormon Documents*, 5: 121–22, emphasis added.

58. "David Whitmer Interview with *Richmond (MO) Democrat*, January 1888," 5:213–14, emphasis added.

59. This is the language in Richards's original handwritten and signed statement. For more discussion on this reminiscence, see Spencer, "Seers and Stones," 32.

Joseph said he was looking “through” his seer stone (Henry Harris’s circa 1833 statement) or “into” the interpreters (Nancy Towle’s 1832 report).<sup>60</sup>

Nineteenth-century individuals familiar with the use of seer stones knew that a seer would see things by looking through or into a stone, not at a stone.<sup>61</sup> This understanding applied to Joseph’s use of seer stones. Referring to Joseph’s seer stone, Martin Harris said that Joseph had been employed to “look in the stone” for buried treasure.<sup>62</sup> It was for the crime of “looking through a certain stone” that Joseph was charged in 1830, and at the trial, his friend Newel Knight (son of Joseph Knight Sr.) testified in 1830, as reported by the presiding justice, that Joseph could indeed “see in a stone.”<sup>63</sup> According to an entry in Wilford Woodruff’s journal, John Taylor spoke of “the gift of seeing through seer stones” as a means of divine revelation.<sup>64</sup>

No special gift would have been needed to look into or through a clear stone; any person with normal vision could have done that. Opaque or translucent stones such as Joseph’s seer stones or the white interpreters, on the other hand, could be looked into or through only in a figurative sense (as in, “I explore the world *through* books”)

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60. “Henry Harris Statement, circa 1833,” in *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:76, [archive.org/details/volume-2\\_202011/page/75/mode/2up](https://archive.org/details/volume-2_202011/page/75/mode/2up); Nancy Towle, *Vicissitudes Illustrated in the Experience of Nancy Towle, in Europe and America* (Charleston, SC: James L. Burges, 1832), 138, [google.com/books/edition/Vicissitudes\\_Illustrated/iXYoAAAAAYAAJ](https://google.com/books/edition/Vicissitudes_Illustrated/iXYoAAAAAYAAJ).

61. A notice in the 1842 issue of the Mormon newspaper, *Times and Seasons*, warned of false revelations of a Latter-day Saint boy, James Brewster, who claimed to have “the gift of seeing and looking through or into a stone” (*Times and Seasons* 4 [1 December 1842]: 32), [books.google.com/books?id=YSEsAQAAMAAJ&pg=PA32](https://books.google.com/books?id=YSEsAQAAMAAJ&pg=PA32). In her history, Lucy Smith told of a girl living with David Whitmer who “pretended to be able to diccover [discover] hidden things and to prophecy by looking through a certain black stone” and thus turned some of the Church leadership and members against Joseph. “Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1844–1845,” pp. [8]–[10], bk. 14, Joseph Smith Papers, [josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/lucy-mack-smith-history-1844-1845?p=174](https://josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/lucy-mack-smith-history-1844-1845?p=174). See also the language used (of looking “through” or “into” seer stones) in the several accounts of the nineteenth-century use of seer stones by Latter-day Saints in Ian G. Barber, “Mormon Women as ‘Natural’ Seers: An Enduring Legacy,” in Maxine Hanks, ed., *Women and Authority: Re-emerging Mormon Feminism* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), 168–71, 173, 176.

62. “Martin Harris Interview with Joel Tiffany, 1859,” in *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:304, [archive.org/details/volume-2\\_202011/page/309/mode/2up](https://archive.org/details/volume-2_202011/page/309/mode/2up).

63. “Trial Report, 28 August 1832,” p. [2].

64. “Journal (January 1, 1860–October 22, 1865),” February 11, 1861–February 12, 1861, The Wilford Woodruff Papers, [wilfordwoodruffpapers.org/p/Z4M5](https://wilfordwoodruffpapers.org/p/Z4M5).

or in a visionary sense. Looking through or into an opaque stone with the unaided eye in a literal sense is impossible by definition. But even if it were possible, the results would be uninteresting. If Joseph, with some sort of x-ray vision, had actually looked through his brown seer stone placed in his hat, he would have seen the bottom of the hat. If he had looked into the stone, he would have seen the inside of the stone, which would have looked a lot like the outside. The banality of seeing through or into stones in the usual sense suggests that Joseph was not seeing with normal vision, when shading might be helpful, but rather "seeing" as a seer—seeing a vision.

Individuals close to Joseph understood his method of translating with a stone and hat to involve the same visioning abilities—his gift of "seeing" as a seer and the art of "looking" as a glass looker—that he had previously used in visioning lost or hidden things:

- Isaac Hale, in his 1834 statement – "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. . . . Smith stated to me, that he had given up what he called '*glasslooking*,' and that he expected to work hard for a living. . . . 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."<sup>65</sup>
- Josiah Stowell, in his 1830 trial testimony as reported by the presiding justice – "Prisoner put a certain stone into his hat . . . he could then see as prisoner said, and translate the same . . . and the prisoner, when *looking* for money, salt springs, hid treasures, &c., *looked* in the same manner."<sup>66</sup>
- Newel Knight, in his 1830 trial testimony as reported by the presiding justice – "Prisoner could see in a stone as stated by Stowel; that formerly he *looked* for Money &c."<sup>67</sup>
- William E. McLellin, early apostle, in his 1872 letter to Joseph Smith III – "When he finished the translation of the Book [of Mormon,] thereafter he did not see—that is he did not use his stone. . . . In Oct[ober], 1831 I wrote a revelation as he

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65. "Isaac Hale Statement, 1834," in *Early Mormon Documents*, 4:284–85, 287, emphasis added, [archive.org/details/volume-4\\_202011/page/283/mode/2up](http://archive.org/details/volume-4_202011/page/283/mode/2up).

66. "Trial Report, 28 August 1832," p. [2].

67. "Trial Report, 28 August 1832," p. [2].

delivered it [D&C 66]. And I know he used no stone *to see* then.”<sup>68</sup>

These statements reflect a contemporary understanding by Joseph’s close associates that the translation was a visionary experience of the kind he had while looking for hidden things, not a novel kind of experience involving normal vision, a light-emitting stone, and the need for shading. This supports the idea that the hat served to facilitate a visionary state of consciousness rather than to aid normal visual perception.

The Book of Mormon describes the use of the white interpreter stones in terms reminiscent of glass looking. In Mosiah 8:13, Ammon describes how a “seer” could “look in” the stones to see visions. The seeing of visions is implied in this passage not only by the idea of seeing hidden things, but also by the use of the word *seer*, since a seer “after the manner of old times” (Mosiah 28:16) was a see-er of visions.<sup>69</sup>

When the Book of Mormon translation process is understood as a visionary experience, comparisons to magic become moot, cultural connections to money digging are logically explained, and Joseph can be appreciated as an Old Testament style seer like the ancient prophet-seers Lehi and Ezekiel, who also saw sacred manuscripts in vision.

### What Did Joseph’s Seeing Hat Look Like?

The only historical accounts that mention the style of Joseph’s hat are relatively late in the century and refer to the hat as a top hat. Here I use *top hat* to mean a tall, cylindrical hat with a stiff brim.<sup>70</sup>

In the early part of the nineteenth century, hats were commonly made of felted wool. More expensive felt hats were constructed of a mixture of wool and rabbit or other animal fur.<sup>71</sup> Felt hats came in vari-

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68. “William E. McLellin to Joseph Smith III, July & September 1872,” in *Early Mormon Documents*, 5:328.

69. Regarding old-time seers, see Spencer, “Seers and Stones,” 29–32. Regarding the idea of seeing in or through the white interpreter stones, see Spencer, “What Did the Interpreters Look Like,” 232–34, 241–42.

70. Collins, s.v. “top hat,” [collinsdictionary.com/us/dictionary/english/top-hat](http://collinsdictionary.com/us/dictionary/english/top-hat).

71. For a description of hat making in the early nineteenth century, see Arthur Aikin, *Illustrations of Arts and Manufactures* (London: John Van Voorst, 1841), 160–74, [google.com/books?edition=Illustrations\\_of\\_Arts\\_and\\_Manufactures/W6s-AAAACAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&pg=PA160](https://books.google.com/books?edition=Illustrations_of_Arts_and_Manufactures/W6s-AAAACAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&pg=PA160); also, Charles Tomlinson, *The Useful Arts and Manufactures of Great Britain* (London: Clay,

ous styles, from the relatively low-crowned, broad brimmed, soft felt hats seen on the heads of farmers and other outdoor laborers to the more fashionable top hats obligatory for the gentry and professional class. The felt in top hats was typically stiffened with shellac and covered with a nap composed of fur (not skin) of beaver, muskrat, rabbit or other animal (see figure 1).<sup>72</sup> These top hats were commonly called *beaver hats*, or just *beavers*. Beginning around 1830, top hats were increasingly covered with silk plush instead of fur and were called *silk hats*, although *beaver* could still refer to a hat covered with either fur or silk. Pasteboard, cork, whalebone, cemented layers of fabric, or other stiff material could be used instead of stiffened felt to form the hat body.<sup>73</sup> Near the end of the century, the term *top hat* came into use, along with *high hat* and *tall hat*, which meant the same thing. *Stovepipe hat* (or *stove-pipe hat*) and *chimney-pot hat* were informal terms used especially for the tallest hats.<sup>74</sup>

If Joseph's seeing hat was a top hat, as the late nineteenth-century accounts suggest, it was most likely made of beaver or other animal fur, since silk hats were less common at the time. Both black and white beaver hats were fashionable in the early part of the century, even in rural areas, as can be seen in figure 2. Although a new beaver hat

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Son, and Taylor, 1866), 588–604, [google.com/books/edition/The\\_Useful\\_Arts\\_and\\_Manufactures\\_of\\_Grea/qZblCTDmvlUC?gbpv=1&pg=PA588](https://books.google.com/books/edition/The_Useful_Arts_and_Manufactures_of_Grea/qZblCTDmvlUC?gbpv=1&pg=PA588).

72. P. T. Barnum, whose first top hat, purchased about 1830, had a rabbit fur nap, listed the variety of nap options in his autobiography: "Among the furs used for the nap of hats in those days, were otter, beaver, Russia, nutria otter, cony, muskrat, etc., etc. The best fur was otter, the poorest was cony. . . . If a 'peddler' wanted to trade with us for a box of beaver hats worth sixty dollars per dozen, he was sure to obtain a box of 'conies,' which were dear at fifteen dollars per dozen." Phineas T. Barnum, *The Life of P. T. Barnum* (London: Willoughby, 1855), 75, [google.com/books/edition/The\\_Life\\_of\\_P\\_T\\_Barnum\\_written\\_by\\_himself/LLpcAAAAcAAJ?gbpv=1](https://books.google.com/books/edition/The_Life_of_P_T_Barnum_written_by_himself/LLpcAAAAcAAJ?gbpv=1).

73. Thomas Webster, *An Encyclopædia of Domestic Economy* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1845), 994–95, [google.com/books/edition/An\\_Encyclopædia\\_of\\_Domestic\\_Economy/L7M2AQAAMAAJ?gbpv=1](https://books.google.com/books/edition/An_Encyclopædia_of_Domestic_Economy/L7M2AQAAMAAJ?gbpv=1). Also see references on hat making cited previously.

74. For a short history of top hats, see "The Centennial Jubilee of the High Hat," *Scientific American Supplement*, 29 May 1897, 17851–52, [google.com/books/edition/Scientific\\_American/KKxPAQAAMAAJ?gbpv=1&pg=PA17851](https://books.google.com/books/edition/Scientific_American/KKxPAQAAMAAJ?gbpv=1&pg=PA17851). Silk became fashionable beginning in the 1820s (p. 17852). It was not until the 1830s, however, that hat making technology improved to the point that silk hats became more affordable, and soon much more common, than beaver hats. Madeleine Ginsburg, *The Hat: Trends and Traditions* (Hauppauge, NY: Barrons, 1990), 86.



**Figure 1.** Beaver-style top hat (this one of rabbit fur) purchased by a young Connecticut businessman around 1830 (Barnum Museum, Bridgeport, Connecticut). This basic shape was fashionable in the 1820s when Joseph Smith was using a hat for seeing.<sup>75</sup>



**Figure 2.** Detail of *Barroom Dancing*, circa 1820, John Lewis Krimmel (Library of Congress).<sup>76</sup>

75. Image used with permission of The Barnum Museum; accession number AN-1971-002-001\_v0001\_2012. More information from the museum on P. T. Barnum's first top hat, see "The Greatest Showman Top Hat," [youtube.com/watch?v=fxjdfDw1AU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fxjdfDw1AU). For a presentation of images of 1820s style top hats, see Ellie Valsin, "Men's fashion ca. 1830: Accessories," (Tumblr), [ellie-valsin.tumblr.com/post/129716351246/mens-fashion-ca-1830-accessories](https://ellie-valsin.tumblr.com/post/129716351246/mens-fashion-ca-1830-accessories).

76. This image is in the public domain. John Lewis Krimmel, *Barroom dancing*, Library of Congress, [loc.gov/item/2004661961/](https://loc.gov/item/2004661961/).



would have been expensive, there was a used hat market, and Joseph might have purchased an old hat.<sup>77</sup>

On the other hand, it is possible that the late century descriptions of Joseph's hat, which describe it as a top hat, were invented. Earlier descriptions, published before 1875, make no mention of the form or style of the hat. This lack of labeling suggests the hat may have been of a style that was unremarkable or did not have a widely recognized name. For example, various shapes of soft felt hats apparently not stylish enough to have their own identifying names appear in depictions of early nineteenth-century country life in genre paintings such as John Lewis Krimmel's *The village politicians* (1819, Pennsylvania), William Sidney Mount's *Winding up* (1836, New York) and *The raffle* (1837, New York), and George Caleb Bingham's *Country politician* (1849, Missouri). These paintings can be viewed by image search on the Internet.

Joseph Smith was a farmer and laborer.<sup>78</sup> One shape of soft felt hat that was particularly suited for farming and other outdoor labor had a rounded crown and broad brim. These hats can be seen on the heads of New York farmers in Mount's *Dancing on the barn floor* (1831), which can be viewed on the Internet, and *Bargaining for a horse* (1835), shown in figure 3. Based on genre paintings from the latter part of the 18<sup>th</sup> and first half of the nineteenth centuries, such hats were commonly worn by farmers and laborers of this period.<sup>79</sup>

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77. I am grateful to Mark Staker for sharing with me some of his research on Joseph Smith's translating hat and early nineteenth-century hat styles that he conducted for the Historic Sites Division of the LDS Church History Department. Thanks also to Henry Cooke of Historical Costume Services for sharing his knowledge of early nineteenth-century hats and hat making. On the existence of used hat markets, see Ginsburg, *The Hat*, 86.

78. Joseph's history summarizes his occupation in the early 1820s: "As my father's worldly circumstances were very <limited> we were under the necessity of laboring with our hands, hiring by days works and otherwise as we could get opportunity." In 1825, he was employed by Josiah Stowell in digging and other labor. In 1827 he moved to Manchester to farm with his father and then to Emma's parents' home in Pennsylvania, where he translated with Martin Harris as scribe and continued "laboring with my hands upon a small farm which I had purchased . . . to provide for my family." "History, circa June 1839–circa 1841 [Draft 2]," p. [1]n4, 7–9, 11, Joseph Smith Papers, josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-circa-june-1839-circa-1841-draft-2.

79. For genre paintings depicting farmers in the latter part of the eighteenth century, see George Stubbs' various *Haymakers* (1785) and his *Men loading sheaves of corn onto a cart, with two young girls gleaning* (1785). For the



**Figure 3.** Detail of *Bargaining for a horse*, 1835, William Sidney Mount (New York Historical Society).<sup>80</sup> The farmer on the left wears a common round-crowned, broad-brimmed felt hat. The more fashionable hat worn by the farmer on the right suggests that he is the buyer who has traveled to negotiate the purchase.

These hats were not only less expensive than top hats, but were, for outdoor labor, more functional. Broad brims provided protection from the sun. The relatively low center of gravity and snug fit made the hats stable enough to stay on the head when bending over, making sudden movements, and in windy conditions. And the soft felted wool was resilient enough to take a beating without becoming permanently deformed. This contrasted with the expense, poor shading, instability, and fragility of top hats.<sup>81</sup>

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first half of the nineteenth century, see works by John Lewis Krimmel, William Sidney Mount, and George Caleb Bingham.

80. See the complete painting in the digital collections of the New York Historical Society at [digitalcollections.nyhistory.org/items/284157-nyhsv04n03quarterlyreport192010022](https://digitalcollections.nyhistory.org/items/284157-nyhsv04n03quarterlyreport192010022).

81. An 1851 article observed that a top hat was “as rigid as a helmet and almost as fragile as a piece of pottery. A smart blow breaks it, and the look of the article is destroyed. . . . In windy weather, owing to the comparatively large surface it shows, and the comparatively small hold it has upon the head, it is very apt to be blown off. . . . Again, the article affords no shade to the face.” “The Great Exhibition,” *The Illustrated London News*, 14 June 1851, 564, [google.com/books/edition/The\\_Illustrated\\_London\\_News/ErNLAACAAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&pg=PA564](https://www.google.com/books/edition/The_Illustrated_London_News/ErNLAACAAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&pg=PA564).



To further explore what Joseph's translating hat may have looked like, I will consider two questions: What limits do the mechanics of translation place on the hat style? And how do historical accounts describe Joseph's hat?

### **Evidence from the mechanics of the translation**

Portrayals of Joseph translating with various styles of hat positioned in various ways can be found on the Internet by searching for "Joseph Smith's hat" (without the quotation marks). Witness statements that mention the mechanics of translation are discussed in the appendix. They say either that Joseph "buried" his face in his hat<sup>82</sup> or that he "placed" or "put" his face in his hat,<sup>83</sup> with the purpose of excluding the light. Whitmer's 1887 statement says that Joseph would "put his face in the hat, drawing it closely around his face."<sup>84</sup> Burying one's face in a hat snugly enough to exclude the ambient light would require a hat flexible enough to bend into a shape that would admit the face and soft enough to mold around the face to fill gaps where light would enter. With their shellac-stiffened crowns and brims, top hats would have been ill-suited for this purpose. A soft, wool felt hat would have been more pliable and more easily molded around the face. The most detailed explanation of how Joseph would position the hat over his face, based on Josiah Stowell's 1830 trial testimony, says that after he "put his face into the crown," he "drew the brim of the hat around his head to prevent Light."<sup>85</sup> Drawing the brim of a hat around one's head implies a broad, flexible brim. Although early nineteenth-century beaver hats varied in brim width and perhaps stiffness, a brim flexible and broad enough to be drawn "around his head" was more characteristic of a farmer's soft wool felt hat.<sup>86</sup>

### **Historical descriptions of the hat**

If we were to accept all nineteenth-century descriptions of Joseph Smith's seeing hat at face value, we would conclude that Joseph not only used this hat for seeing, but also "invariably wore" it even though it

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82. "David Whitmer Interview with Zenas H. Gurley," 5:138.

83. "Elizabeth Ann Whitmer Cowdery Affidavit, 15 February 1870," 5:260; Traugher Interview, "Testimony of David Whitmer," 341; "David Whitmer to *Kansas City Journal*, 13 June 1881," 5:82; Whitmer, *Address to All Believers*, 12.

84. Whitmer, *Address to All Believers*, 12.

85. "Trial Report, 28 August 1832," p. [2].

86. A "soft beaver hat" and beaver hats of various brim widths are mentioned in "The Centennial Jubilee of the High Hat," 17851–52.

was “antiquated” and so “old” and “battered” that “his uncombed hair” could be seen “sticking through the holes”; that it was a “very large . . . stovepipe” style of “beaver” hat; and that it was “black” but also “white.”<sup>87</sup> But not all historical accounts are of equal value in discerning the facts. To get as close to the truth as possible, we must favor those accounts that are most credible and question those that are likely invented. Each account must be evaluated for credibility and its claims tested against other sources and for logical consistency. Most of the accounts describing Joseph’s seeing hat are secondhand at best and do not state their sources of information. Many are copied, sometimes with embellishments, from earlier unsourced accounts. When sources are provided, they are not always credible and there is always a chance that details from interviews were remembered or interpreted incorrectly or that embellishments were added to fill in gaps or for literary effect.

The earliest description of Joseph Smith’s seeing hat is in an 1841 issue of the *Christian Advocate and Journal*:

Gladly would he while engaged in “peeping,” sometimes into an *old hat*, and at others into the spectacles, “called Urim and Thummim,” *through* which he was enabled to read “the plates,” and dictate to Oliver Cowdery, his amanuensis.<sup>88</sup>

In his 1842 exposé on Mormonism, John C. Bennett referred to Joseph Smith as “the Holy Old White Hat Prophet.”<sup>89</sup>

The next oldest description of Joseph’s hat appears in an 1851 book of grievances against Mormons, compiled by Nelson Slater:

This was in keeping with the practice of Smith in former days when he was a money digger. He was in the habit of putting his head into an *old black hat*, pulling it up so as to

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87. An 1890 article in the *Elmira Telegram* says that Joseph “invariably wore a tall white stovepipe hat,” in which he would place a stone and pretend to see buried items. Ausburn Towner, “Some Interesting Facts Suggested by The Mormon Articles,” *Elmira [NY] Telegram*, 19 January 1890, PDF at [sidneyrigdon.com/dbroadhu/ny/miscNYS5.htm](http://sidneyrigdon.com/dbroadhu/ny/miscNYS5.htm). References for the remaining descriptive terms will be provided as these nineteenth-century descriptions of Joseph’s hat are now discussed.

88. “Prevalence of Mormonism,” *Christian Advocate and Journal*, 8 December 1841, emphasis added, contentdm.lib.byu.edu/digital/collection/BOMP/id/2532.

89. John C. Bennett, *The History of the Saints, or, an Expose of Joe Smith and Mormonism* (Boston: Leland & Whiting, 1842), 221, [archive.org/details/historyofsaintso00benne/page/n235/mode/2up](http://archive.org/details/historyofsaintso00benne/page/n235/mode/2up).

exclude the light, and then by various motions with his head, as if looking here and there, he would pretend that he saw money beneath the surface of the ground.<sup>90</sup>

These articles do not provide a source for their descriptions of Joseph's seeing hat. Neither does an 1858 article in the *Boston Cultivator*, which similarly mentions how "Mormon Joe could read the mystic stone in his *old hat*."<sup>91</sup>

The earliest description of Joseph's seeing hat from a witness of the translation of the Book of Mormon is from Martin Harris's 1859 statement, in which he tells of Joseph using his seer stone and hat to find a lost pin:

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. . . . When Joseph found this stone, there was a company digging in Harmony, Pa., and they took Joseph to look in the stone for them.<sup>92</sup>

Harris's account says the pin incident happened a few days after Joseph first told him about his stone and before Joseph obtained the plates (September of 1827). A little later in the account, Harris mentions

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90. Nelson Slater, *Fruits of Mormonism* (Coloma, CA: Harmon & Springer, 1851), 65, emphasis added.

91. "To the Bachelors," *Boston Cultivator* (Boston), 21 August 1858, 271, emphasis added.

92. "Martin Harris Interview with Joel Tiffany, 1859," 2:303–04.

Joseph's seeing hat again while speaking of the interpreters that Joseph obtained with the plates: "I never dared to look into them by placing them in the hat."<sup>93</sup> The apparent antecedent of "the hat" in the second quote is "the old white hat" in the first one, suggesting that Joseph used his old white hat in translating the Book of Mormon when Harris was scribe in 1828. The fact that the 1841 account in the *Christian Advocate and Journal*, which names Oliver Cowdery as scribe, and the 1859 account with Martin Harris as scribe, both describe the hat similarly as "old" suggests that Joseph used the same hat for translating the entire Book of Mormon.<sup>94</sup>

These descriptions from the 1840s and 1850s tell us that the age and color of the hat were the notable characteristics, not the style or shape. The common theme is that Joseph's seeing hat was old. Harris's account, which is the most authoritative, also confirms that the hat was white, as suggested by Bennett's 1830 moniker for the prophet. The one mention of Joseph's hat as "black," by Nelson Staker in 1851, is unsourced. An 1830 account that says that Joseph would translate with "a dark hat before his eyes" is more likely referring to Joseph's need to look into a *darkened* hat (with the light excluded) rather than a black or dark-colored hat.<sup>95</sup>

Besides Harris's description, the only nineteenth-century account of Joseph's seeing hat that is traceable to someone known to have witnessed his seeing activities is James Hart's 1884 record of an interview with David Whitmer. Hart reported Whitmer's description of the translation as follows:

The way it was done was thus: Joseph would place the seer-stone in a *deep hat*, and placing his face close to it,

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93. "Martin Harris Interview with Joel Tiffany, 1859," 2:305.

94. Although it is possible that "old" means an old style of hat, this seems unlikely since all five mentions of the hat—in 1841, 1842, 1851, 1858, and 1859—call it "old" without making any reference to its style. This suggests that "old" is being used in the most common sense of the term to indicate aged, not to indicate old-fashioned. Moreover, Noah Webster's 1828 dictionary does not list old-fashioned as a meaning of *old*. The dictionary includes *old-fashioned* and *antiquated* as separate dictionary entries, and either of these terms could have been used if the style of hat were being discussed. *Websters Dictionary*, 1828, s.v. "old," [webstersdictionary1828.com/Dictionary/old](http://webstersdictionary1828.com/Dictionary/old).

95. "Brattleboro' (VT) Messenger, 20 November 1830," in *Early Mormon Documents*, 4:213, [archive.org/details/volume-4\\_202011/page/213/mode/2up](http://archive.org/details/volume-4_202011/page/213/mode/2up).

would see, not the stone, but what appeared like an oblong piece of parchment.<sup>96</sup>

"A deep hat" is descriptively consistent with a top hat, but also with deep-crowned versions of other hat styles, including broad-brimmed, soft felt hats.<sup>97</sup> If Whitmer wanted to communicate that the hat was a top hat, he could have used one of the other terms commonly used to refer to top hats, such as *high hat*, *tall hat*, *beaver hat*, or *stovepipe hat*. Even without Hart's account, we can estimate that the hat would have needed to be fairly deep — with a crown height of about 5 inches or more — to comfortably accommodate both Joseph's face and the stone.<sup>98</sup>

This combination of the earliest and most authoritative descriptions of Joseph's seeing hat paints a picture of an old, white (perhaps gray or off-white), fairly deep hat that was otherwise unremarkable for an early nineteenth-century farmer, perhaps something like the hat shown in figure 4.

### Charles W. Brown account

All of the remaining nineteenth-century descriptions of Joseph's seeing hat are from a half century or more after the events described. The earliest of these accounts is from an article by Charles W. Brown published in the *Ontario County Times* in 1875. In it, Brown relates a "well authenticated anecdote" of a treasure-seeking expedition involving Joseph Smith, his father, and Joseph's Manchester era neighbor, William Stafford, in which Joseph looks into a hat. Brown calls the hat a "well worn and antiquated beaver" and mentions Joseph "looking into the cavernous depths of the superannuated *chapeau*" to vision the treasure.<sup>99</sup> "Beaver" could refer to any top hat, whether of fur or

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96. "David Whitmer Interview with James H. Hart," 5:104.

97. For example, see variations in crown heights in genre paintings such as John Lewis Krimmel's *The village tavern* (1813–1814), William Sidney Mount's *The raffle* (1837), and George Caleb Bingham's *In a Quandary, or Mississippi Raftsmen at Cards* (1851), all of which can be viewed by image search on the Internet.

98. This estimate is based on my experimentation, placing a replica of Joseph's brown seer stone in hats of different crown depths that I then pulled over my face. In a crown of less than 5 inches, the stone would bump up against my fairly prominent nose. Joseph's brown seer stone was nearly an inch and a half thick. "Note on Seer Stone Images," Joseph Smith Papers, [josephsmithpapers.org/site/note-on-seer-stone-images](http://josephsmithpapers.org/site/note-on-seer-stone-images).

99. "Manchester in the Early Days," *The Ontario County (NY) Times*, 23 June



**Figure 4.** An “old white” hat of felted wool with a fairly deep crown, alongside a replica of Joseph Smith’s brown seer stone.<sup>100</sup>

silk.<sup>101</sup> Brown’s “well worn and antiquated beaver” with “cavernous depths” implies a very tall, old top hat. Brown’s description of Joseph’s hat as a very tall top hat was followed over the next two decades by many published mentions of Joseph’s “tall” or “large” “stovepipe” hat and may have been the ultimate inspiration for them.

There are reasons to believe that Brown invented this description of Joseph’s seeing hat. First, Brown does not provide a source for his description. His article draws from Orsamus Turner’s 1851 local history, Pomeroy Tucker’s 1867 history of early Mormonism, and William Stafford’s 1833 affidavit as published Eber D. Howe in 1834.<sup>102</sup> But none of these works provide any information on the style of Joseph’s

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1875, PDF at [sidneyrigdon.com/dbroadhu/ny/miscNYS5.htm](http://sidneyrigdon.com/dbroadhu/ny/miscNYS5.htm).

100. Use of this image requires permission from the author (stanspencer1@gmail.com) and, generally, a link back to this paper. No derivatives are permitted.

101. According to an 1889 dictionary, beaver could mean “(b) A hat of the shape of a beaver hat, but made of silk or other material, in imitation of the fur. The modern stiff silk hat was commonly called a *beaver* until recently.” *Century Dictionary*, s.v. “beaver” (New York: T. Fisher Unwin, The Century Co., 1889), [google.com/books/edition/The\\_Century\\_Dictionary/eaTN38hW980C?gbpv=1&pg=PA496](https://books.google.com/books/edition/The_Century_Dictionary/eaTN38hW980C?gbpv=1&pg=PA496).

102. Orsamus Turner, *History of the Pioneer Settlement of Phelps and Gorham’s Purchase, and Morris’ Reserve* (Rochester, NY: William Alling, 1851); “William Stafford Statement, 8 December 1833,” in *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:60–61.

hat. Brown does not claim to have interviewed any local residents who may have seen Joseph's hat. William Stafford died in 1863, which was too early for him to have been a source. It is possible that Brown obtained some information from Stafford's son, John, who happened to be Brown's father-in-law, but Brown does not mention this connection or any personal interview. Because Brown did not provide a source for his description of Joseph's seeing hat, it cannot be considered authoritative.

Second, a comparison with Stafford's 1833 affidavit, which is the most authoritative account of the story Brown is telling, suggests that Brown's descriptions of Joseph's hat are embellishments to the story.<sup>103</sup> Brown introduces the story with, "the following well-authenticated account is related." The authentication that Brown refers to is apparently William Stafford's own 1833 account of treasure digging in Manchester, probably between 1822 and 1825.<sup>104</sup> The similarity in phrasing and order of ideas in Stafford's and Brown's accounts suggests that Brown was looking at Stafford's affidavit as he was writing his account. In the comparison of Stafford's and Brown's accounts below, similar phrases and ideas in the same or nearly the same order in the two accounts are in small caps. The underlined portions of Brown's account have no counterpart in Stafford's. References to Joseph Smith's hat are bolded.

Stafford's 1833 Account:

THEY WOULD SAY, ALSO, THAT . . . JOSEPH, JR., COULD SEE, BY PLACING A STONE of singular appearance IN HIS HAT . . . [and] could also discover the spirits in whose charge these treasures were. . . . THESE TALES I regarded as visionary. However, being prompted by curiosity, I AT LENGTH accepted of their invitations, TO JOIN THEM IN THEIR NOCTURNAL EXCURSIONS. I will now relate a few incidents. . . . I ACCORDINGLY CONSENTED TO GO, and early in THE EVENING repaired to the place of deposit. Joseph, Sen. first made a circle, twelve or fourteen feet in diameter. THIS CIRCLE, SAID HE, CONTAINS THE TREASURE. . . . [he] then ENJOINED

103. The 1833 Stafford affidavit may also contain inaccuracies. See Richard Lloyd Anderson, "Joseph Smith's New York Reputation Reappraised," *BYU Studies*, no. 3 (1970): 286–89, 289n10, 293–96.

104. The dig for "kegs of gold and silver" near the Smith home in Manchester would have been one of the earliest. Dan Vogel, "The Locations of Joseph Smith's Early Treasure Quests," *Dialogue*, 27, no. 3 (1994): 202, 230, [dialoguejournal.com/articles/the-locations-of-joseph-smiths-early-treasure-quests/](http://dialoguejournal.com/articles/the-locations-of-joseph-smiths-early-treasure-quests/).



PROFOUND SILENCE UPON US, lest we should arouse THE EVIL SPIRIT who had the charge of these treasures. After we had dug a trench . . . [Joseph, Sr.] went to the house to inquire of young Joseph the cause of our disappointment. He soon returned and said, that Joseph had remained all this time in the house, looking in his stone and watching the motions of the evil spirit [which] . . . caused the money to sink. We then went into the house, and the old man observed, THAT WE HAD MADE A MISTAKE in the commencement of the operation; if it had not been for that, said he, we should have got the money.<sup>105</sup>

#### Brown's 1875 Account:

The following well authenticated anecdote is related: IT WAS CLAIMED THAT JOSEPH, JR., BY PLACING IT IN A HAT COULD DISCOVER by looking into the hat the precise spot where the hidden TREASURE was buried. Among the many dupes which were victimized by this story, was one William Stafford. They repeated THE TALE to him time and time again, with such solemn asseverations of its truth, that at LAST HE began to believe that there might be something in it, and so CONSENTED TO JOIN THEM IN ONE OF THEIR MIDNIGHT EXPEDITIONS. When THE EVENING which had been agreed upon came around, he hied him to the Smith domicile, and there awaited developments. Soon Joseph joined the circle before the hearth, bearing with him the stone carefully concealed in a **well worn and antiquated beaver**. Seating himself, he placed his face where his pate ought to have been, and after peering intently into the recesses thereof, made the encouraging announcement that he saw a pot full to overflowing with glittering shiners, and that he could lead the assembled coterie to the precise spot, where by a little dilligent digging combined with a strict observation of all the conditions imposed, they could speedily exhume the same, and make a *pro rata* division of the contents thereof. — No time was now lost in getting under way, and arming themselves with shovels, pick axes and implements of a like nature, they started forth with Joseph and the magic stone at the head of the column. “Tramp, tramp, tramp” they went “marching on,” through the

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105. “William Stafford Statement, 8 December 1833,” in *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:60–61.



forests and across the fields, until after a long and weary march their leader commanded a halt. . . . A solemn INJUNCTION TO PRESERVE THE STRICTEST SILENCE WAS NOW LAID UPON EVERY ONE of the party, as it was said that THE EVIL ONE was around. . . . [Joseph, Sr.] proceeded to strike out, and "swing around," the magic CIRCLE WITHIN WHICH THE TREASURE WAS TO BE FOUND. Work was now commenced in earnest. . . . [Joseph, Jr.] with drew himself into a thicket, and after looking into the cavernous depths of the superannuated chapeau, dolorously announced to his followers, THAT SOME OF THE PRESCRIBED CONDITIONS HAD BEEN VIOLATED, and that Satan had carried off the concentrated riches to some other locality. They dug no longer but went to their homes, where it is suspected that they did ample justice to the matutinal meals. Before separating however, Joseph took another look into the hat, and made the encouraging announcement that his precious pebble had revealed to him the precise spot where *Le Diable* had secreted his ill gotten and recently acquired wealth.<sup>106</sup>

The underlined portions of Brown's account relate incidents and details that do not appear in Stafford's account and in fact contradict his account. Specifically, according to Stafford, he did not join any meeting at Joseph's house but rather went directly to the digging spot where he found Joseph's father and others. Joseph did not join the expedition but remained in his house with his seeing stone and hat the entire time. This also means that Joseph never withdrew from the group into a thicket and that he was not with the digging crew at any time during the operation. The idea that Joseph led the group to the digging site was probably borrowed from Tucker's 1867 reworking of Stafford's account. The remainder of the underlined portions are apparently Brown's own embellishments. The description of Joseph's seeing hat is within these apparent embellishments.

Third, additional evidence that Brown's hat descriptions are fanciful is found in his tone and word choice. "Tramp, tramp, tramp" marks Brown's account as satire. Brown creates the mocking tone of his satire with hyperbole and flowery language. For example, in place of Stafford's straight-forward phrase, "observed that we had made a mistake," Brown substitutes, "dolorously announced to his followers,

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106. "Manchester in the Early Days," *The Ontario County (NY) Times*, 23 June 1875.



**Figure 5.** Group portrait of students, probably members of The Ranters, at Bethany College, Virginia, 1850–1851. Two are costumed in large, white, beaver-style hats consistent with Brown’s satirical description of Joseph’s seeing hat as being a “cavernous” “antiquated beaver.”<sup>107</sup>

that some of the prescribed conditions had been violated.” Where Stafford mentions “the evil spirit who had the charge of these treasures,” Brown has “the Evil One . . . Satan . . . *Le Diable*.” Brown’s avoidance of simple, accurate language is most evident in the portions of the text that have no counterpart in Stafford’s account, and it is here that we find the descriptions of Joseph’s hat. Here, he uses fancy and often inaccurate words: hied, domicile, bearing, pate, glittering, coterie, exhume, pro rata, arming, magic, column, marching, halt, cavernous, superannuated, *chapeau*, etc. We can see by his use of such ill-fitting words as *exhume* to refer to digging up treasure, *arming* to mean gathering digging equipment, *Satan* to mean an evil spirit, *coterie* to mean assembled workers, *marching* to mean walking, and *cavernous* to mean merely deep, that precision in meaning was not always his principal concern in choosing words. His choice to call Joseph’s hat an “antiquated beaver” and “superannuated *chapeau*” instead of an “old . . . hat,” as previous and more straightforward accounts had done, fits this pattern of substituting flowery and hyperbolic language. This

107. “Group portrait of students, probably members of The Ranters, at Bethany College, Virginia.” Daguerreotype, [1850–1851], from Library of Congress: Daguerreotype Collection, [loc.gov/resource/ppmsca.38824/](http://loc.gov/resource/ppmsca.38824/).

pattern, together with the mocking tone of Brown's writing, suggests that "antiquated beaver" is no more informative as a definitive description of Joseph's hat than is "superannuated *chapeau*," and that Brown was using these phrases to paint a comical picture of Joseph, not an accurate one.

### **Lewis brothers account**

Chronologically, the next description of Joseph's hat is in a statement by Joseph and Hiel Lewis that appeared in 1879 in the *Amboy Journal*. In their statement, the Lewises say they are relating "what they saw and heard of the sayings and doings of the prophet Joseph Smith." In other words, not all of the information they provide is firsthand. Their claim to authority is that they lived "within one mile of where he lived and transacted his business" in Harmony, Pennsylvania. They report being in the presence of Joseph on multiple occasions and also had a sister, Elizabeth L. McKune, who worked in the Smith home and observed him translate. In their statement, they relate what they had heard of Joseph's activities while he boarded with their uncle, Isaac Hale:

But while he was engaged in looking through his peep-stone and *old white hat*, directing the digging for money, and boarding at Uncle Isaac Hale's, he formed an intimacy with Mr. Hale's daughter Emma.<sup>108</sup>

This statement describes the hat in the same way Martin Harris had described it twenty years earlier. The Lewises do not say whether they got their understanding of Joseph's seeing hat from their own observation, from Harris's published description, from circulating rumors, from their sister Elizabeth, or from some other source. But whatever their source, this account does not contain anything new.

### **Frederick G. Mather account**

The next year, in July of 1880, a description of Joseph's seeing hat appeared in the *Binghampton Republican* (Broome Co., New York) in an article written by an unnamed newspaper reporter:

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108. "Joseph and Hiel Lewis Statements, 1879," in *Early Mormon Documents*, 4:300, 303, 305, emphasis added. On their sister having observed Joseph translate, see "Hiel Lewis to [James T. Cobb?], 29 September 1879," in *Early Mormon Documents*, 4:320, [archive.org/details/volume-4\\_202011/page/299/mode/2up](http://archive.org/details/volume-4_202011/page/299/mode/2up).

No matter how it got there, there can be no doubt that a ton of silver bars was buried in the hill, for the Prophet saw it through his “peek-stone.” Before proceeding further with this narrative we will give a description of the Prophet as it was given to the reporter by several aged persons who saw him. He was six feet or a trifle over in height; stout built but wiry; light complexion; light hair and light blue eyes. One aged lady said “he didn’t look as though he knowed enough to fool people so.” He wore a *tall white stovepipe hat*. Now imagine this athletic form kneeling down and burying his face in his *white stovepipe hat*, in which was placed the “peek-stone,” and you have in your mind’s eye a view of the first Latter Day Saint discovering the treasures in the earth which no other fellow ever discovered. It was just like looking into water, he said; he could not tell just how deep it was any more than a man can who looks down into a lake; and the deflection of light sometimes took him out of the right course a few inches. Then, too, the “rock-ribbed hills” — and the hills about here are “rock-ribbed” with a vengeance — were so insecure, and treasure so unstable that things in the bowels of the earth were liable to get mixed up every day. When his party would dig almost to a great treasure the enchantment would move it sometimes several rods out of the way. That sort of enchantment must have “tried the patience of a saint,” and all the saints of Mormondom. As soon as he could collect followers enough about him to do the work — the Latter Day Saint, unlike St. Paul, did not labor with his own hands — an excavation was commenced to recover the lost Spanish silver bars. . . . Down, down they went, the distance being measured by slow shovelfuls and tedious blasts in the rocks until they were just ready, or would be next day, to stoop down and pick up the ton of silver bullion. “Hocus, pocus, presto, change.” The “charm” moved the silver away three hundred feet to the north-east. It was an uphill job, but the charm was sufficient for the task. This was terribly hard on the new church, but the ambitious Saint was not to be cheated in that way. He got down on his marrow bones with his peek-stone and tracked it to its exact hiding place. It was not so far under ground this time — only about twenty feet. The faithful went for it again with sleeves rolled

up. It was a case of necessity. . . . At it they went again, with a will known only to those who work with a religious zeal or a worldly hope of a "bar'l of money." Hush, it's here: pick it up! No, it's gone again. Not a rumble nor a jar marked its going, but it went like riches on wings. Softly and silently it flitted away, and lighted fifty feet beyond the big hole. The Saint and faithful followers were exasperated, and fully determined to capture it if they had to take the hill to pieces and shake it through a sieve.<sup>109</sup>

A somewhat condensed version of the article appeared the following month in *Lippincott's Magazine of Popular Literature and Science*, identifying the reporter as Frederick G. Mather.<sup>110</sup> According to the original article, Mather "visited Susquehanna and other towns on the Susquehanna river for the purpose of authenticating rumors of Mormon history, and interviewed several of the oldest inhabitants." Unfortunately, most of the local residents who knew Joseph had died or moved away. The elderly inhabitants Mather found to interview did not claim to have any firsthand knowledge of Joseph's seeing activities but were able to repeat stories they had heard or read. Most of the stories of Joseph's activities that Mather ended up including in his articles had previously been published in Emily Blackman's 1873 history of the area.<sup>111</sup>

The portion of Mather's article presented above is a sensationalized account of Joseph's, and his father's, work for Josiah Stowell in Harmony, Pennsylvania, in November 1825. Stowell had been digging for Spanish treasure he believed was buried in the area and brought on Joseph and his father to assist with the ongoing effort.<sup>112</sup> In other

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109. "Sally McKune, Mehetable Doolittle, Elizabeth Squires, Jacob I. Skinner, and Samuel Brush Interviews with Frederick G. Mather, July 1880," in *Early Mormon Documents*, 4:345, 350–52, emphasis added.

110. Frederic G. Mather, "The Early Days of Mormonism," *Lippincott's Magazine of Popular Literature and Science*, August 1880, 198–211, PDF at Joseph Smith's History Vault (website), [olivercowdery.com/smithhome/1880Math.htm](http://olivercowdery.com/smithhome/1880Math.htm).

111. Compare Emily C. Blackman, *History of Susquehanna County, Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia: Claxton Remsen & Haffelfinger, 1873), 577–82, [archive.org/details/historyofsusqueh00blac/page/576/mode/2up](http://archive.org/details/historyofsusqueh00blac/page/576/mode/2up). Mather mentions Blackman's history in his bio of Samuel Brush near the end of each of his accounts.

112. For the November dig, Joseph boarded with Isaac Hale. "Sally McKune, Mehetable Doolittle," 352. Mather locates this dig on land that, at the time of his interviews, was owned by Jacob I. Skinner. "Sally McKune, Mehetable Doolittle," 350. For more on this dig, see Vogel, "The Locations of Joseph

words, Mather is speaking of the same dig and the same “old white hat” the Lewis brothers mentioned in their account of the previous year. But Mather describes the hat as a tall stovepipe hat. Mather’s description of Joseph’s seeing hat is suspect for the same reasons Brown’s is: he does not provide a source for this information, there are many incorrect details in his story, and it is written as satire.

Mather based his article partially on interviews with local residents, none of whom are presented as having personally witnessed the treasure-seeking activities described. At the end of his article, he tells us what information was contributed by each interviewed resident. He names Jacob Skinner as the source for the description of Joseph’s appearance and his manner of searching for treasure, Samuel Brush as the source for the explanation of the principle of deflected light, and Sally McKune as the source for the description of the charm moving the treasure, but he provides no source for the hat description. Mather’s failure to provide attribution for the description of the hat suggests it may have been his own invention or reinterpretation of previously published descriptions.

If the description of Joseph’s seeing hat was not Mather’s but was provided by one of the individuals he interviewed, Jacob Skinner seems the most likely source. This is because the hat description comes after the description of Joseph’s appearance and is integrated into his manner of searching for hidden treasure. Skinner, who was born in 1815, would have been about ten years old at the time of the diggings, not sixteen years old as Mather claims. He was, therefore, too young to be of much use on a treasure dig where he might have observed Joseph using a seeing hat.<sup>113</sup> Even if Joseph made a habit of wearing his “old” seeing hat in public where a ten-year-old boy might have seen it, it is not clear why the boy would have remembered that hat among the ubiquitous hats on other men’s heads. If Joseph’s hat was so unusual (an exceptionally tall hat?) as to be memorable to a

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Smith’s Early Treasure Quests,” 213–19; also, “Historical Introduction” to “Appendix 1: Agreement of Josiah Stowell and Others, 1 November 1825,” [josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/appendix-1-agreement-of-josiah-stowell-and-others-1-november-1825](http://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/appendix-1-agreement-of-josiah-stowell-and-others-1-november-1825).

113. Jacob Israel Skinner (variously referred to as Jacob I. Skinner and Jacob J. Skinner) was born 5 January 1815. He died in 1897 and was buried in the McKune Cemetery in Susquehanna County, Pennsylvania. See “Jacob Israel Skinner,” Find a Grave (website), [findagrave.com/memorial/186608619/jacob-israel-skinner](http://findagrave.com/memorial/186608619/jacob-israel-skinner); also, “Descendants of Thomas Skinner: Generation No. 1,” RootsWeb (website), [sites.rootsweb.com/~wijuneau/SkinnerGen.htm](http://sites.rootsweb.com/~wijuneau/SkinnerGen.htm).

ten-year-old, why was such a hat not mentioned for five decades in which Joseph was frequently ridiculed with any information that could be used for that purpose? It is as likely that any description of Joseph's hat provided by Skinner or any other elderly resident was based on circulating rumors or previously published accounts such as Martin Harris's 1859 account, the Lewis brothers' 1879 account, or Brown's 1875 account. Mather's version of events surrounding Joseph's obtaining and transporting of the gold plates — in which Joseph is assaulted by "the chief devil" but escapes and then transports the plates to Harmony in a "barrel of beans" — suggests that either Mather or one of his sources was familiar with Harris's 1859 account and could have borrowed and embellished his "old white hat" description.<sup>114</sup>

The details in Mather's article are often incorrect, as might be expected from rumors circulating decades after the subject events. For example, in the portion of Mather's article provided above, Mather has Joseph organizing the dig and being involved from the start, while more authoritative sources say Stowell and others initiated the effort and that it had already been underway before Joseph was hired to help.<sup>115</sup> Mather's account speaks of involvement of "the saints of Mormondom" and Joseph's "new church," yet Joseph did not organize the Church until several years later. He had not even obtained the gold plates at this time. Mather has "peek-stone" as a colloquial term for seer stone, while previous accounts have "peep" rather than "peek." The overall level of inaccuracy in the article does not inspire confidence in the details it presents.

Mather's account, like Brown's, is satire. Instead of "tramp, tramp, tramp" signaling the satirical nature of his piece, Mather gives us "hocus, pocus, presto, change." The sensational tone and high level of sarcasm serve as a warning to the reader that the details of the

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114. In Harris's account, Joseph is assaulted by "what appeared to be a man" (implying that Harris wasn't certain whether the assailant was a man or a devil) and later hid the plates in a "barrel about one-third full of beans." "Martin Harris Interview with Joel Tiffany, 1859," 2:306, 310. Alternatively, Mather or his source could have learned about these same events from Lucy Mack Smith's 1853 history, but that work has three assailants, unquestionably identifies them as men, and has the plates (along with the breastplate) being hid in a "cask" (not a "barrel") of beans. Lucy Mack Smith, *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith, the Prophet, and His Progenitors for Many Generations* (Liverpool: S. W. Richards, 1853), 105, 113, [contentdm.lib.byu.edu/digital/collection/NCMP1820-1846/id/16421](http://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/digital/collection/NCMP1820-1846/id/16421).

115. See "Historical Introduction" to "Appendix 1: Agreement of Josiah Stowell and Others, 1 November 1825."



account were not necessarily intended as facts and cannot be relied upon. While Brown paints a comical picture of Joseph peering into his “antiquated beaver,” Mather creates an even more comical picture of Joseph with his “athletic form kneeling down and burying his face” in his “tall, white stovepipe hat,” or, as an author a few years later summarized Mather’s imagery, “What a spectacle to see such an athletic form kneeling with his face buried in the stovepipe hat . . . to see into the bowels of the earth!”<sup>116</sup> At this time, *stovepipe* was an informal and humorous or derisive term for a top hat.<sup>117</sup> Like his description of the hat, Mather’s overall account of Joseph’s treasure-seeking venture surpasses even Brown’s in humor and sensationalism. As stories often do, Joseph Smith’s treasure-seeking ventures got more entertaining with the retelling. While Stafford’s 1833 account had the treasure merely sinking out of reach, and Brown’s 1875 derivative account had Satan carrying off the buried riches “to some other locality,” Mather’s story has “the charm” moving the treasure hundreds of feet away. When the diggers had chased the “bar’l of money” down, Mather tells us it “waltzed around on the other side” and evaded all attempts at being “cornered by tunneling” as it was “dodging about” like “a nimble sixpence.”

Whether Mather actually modeled his account on Brown’s account, independently created a similar piece, or faithfully conveyed the rumors his elderly sources shared with him, the account appears to have been intended to be more funny than factual.

### Daniel Hendrix account

After Mather’s 1880 accounts, published descriptions of Joseph’s seeing hat suddenly became much more frequent. There were more descriptions of the hat published in the 1880s than in all prior decades combined. Some of these accounts describe Joseph’s hat only as old or as old and white. Since we have already established through Harris’s authoritative account that Joseph’s hat was old and white, and

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116. Towner, “Some Interesting Facts,” PDF at [sidneyrigdon.com/dbroadhu/ny/miscNYS5.htm](http://sidneyrigdon.com/dbroadhu/ny/miscNYS5.htm).

117. An 1897 history of top hats mentions “the derisive terms stovepipe, chimney pot, plug, tile, etc.” “The Centennial Jubilee of the High Hat,” 17851. For an example of a humorous use of *stovepipe*, see Loyal Publication Society, *The Life and Services as a Soldier of Major-General Grant* (Philadelphia: Peterson and Brothers, 1864), 30, [google.com/books/edition/Pamphlets/FaeKrQcylGYC?gbpv=1&pg=RA3-PT10](https://www.google.com/books/edition/Pamphlets/FaeKrQcylGYC?gbpv=1&pg=RA3-PT10).



since these later accounts are all unsourced, I will not discuss them further.

One account, purportedly the transcript of Henry G. Tinsley's 1893 interview with one Daniel Hendrix, goes beyond "old" to describe Joseph's hat as "battered." The account has Hendrix stating:

I was a lad, or a very young man, in a store in Palmyra, N.Y., from 1822 until 1830 . . . and among the daily visitors at the establishment was Joseph Smith, Jr. Every one knew him as Joe Smith. He had lived in Palmyra a few years previous to my going there from Rochester. Joe was the most ragged, lazy fellow in the place, and that is saying a good deal. He was about 25 years old. I can see him now, in my mind's eye, with his torn and patched trousers, held to his form by a pair of suspenders made out of sheeting, with his calico shirt as dirty and black as the earth, and his uncombed hair sticking through the holes in his old battered hat.<sup>118</sup>

Just as with Brown's and Mather's accounts, the sensational, hyperbolic language of this account reduces its believability. Also, it is unclear whether this statement is referring to the hat Joseph would have used for seeing, since it is not mentioned in context of translation or treasure seeking activities, and a holey hat would have had limited utility for excluding ambient light. But it does not matter—the description of the hat is a fabrication. There was no interview, nor, apparently, any Daniel Hendrix. Efforts by researchers to confirm his existence have failed.<sup>119</sup> The bulk of the published text was not, it turns out, from an 1893 interview, but was plagiarized from the reminiscence of Joseph Franklin Peck, published 6 years earlier.<sup>120</sup> It was Peck, not Hendrix, who was the young attendant in the Palmyra store. And since Peck's original account makes no mention of Joseph's appearance, the battered and holey hat seen in the "mind's eye" of the young store attendant must have been an embellishment from Tinsley's own imagination.

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118. "Daniel Hendrix Reminiscence, 1893," in *Early Mormon Documents*, 3:211, [archive.org/details/volume-3\\_202011/page/211/mode/2up](http://archive.org/details/volume-3_202011/page/211/mode/2up).

119. "Daniel Hendrix Reminiscence, 1893," 208–11.

120. J. F. Peck, "The Beginnings of Mormonism," *Springfield Republican*, 18 October 1887, [sidneyrigdon.com/dbroadhu/NE/miscne03.htm#101887](http://sidneyrigdon.com/dbroadhu/NE/miscne03.htm#101887).

## Derivatives of Mather's account

The remaining descriptions of Joseph's hat published in the 1880s and 1890s call it a stovepipe hat, usually a large white one. Most of these appear to have been derived, either directly or indirectly, from Mather's 1880 *Binghampton Republican* account, as evidenced by contextual similarity in wording and structure. Specifically, based on topics covered, order, and word choice in the surrounding text, an 1894 mention of a "white 'stove-pipe hat'" in the *Democrat and Chronicle* and an 1887 mention of an "old stove-pipe hat" by Selah Brown in the *Los Angeles Times* appear to be derived from an 1885 mention of a "white stove-pipe hat" in Ellen E. Dickinson's *New Light on Mormonism*.<sup>121</sup> In turn, Dickinson's wording as well as an 1888 mention of a "large white stovepipe hat" in *The New York Times* and an 1899 mention of a "large white 'stovepipe' hat" by H. S. Caswell in the *New York Tribune* all appear to be derived from an October 1881 mention of a "large white stove-pipe hat" in Eaton's *The Origin of Mormonism*.<sup>122</sup> Eaton's wording is in turn derived from Mather's 1880 *Binghampton Republican* account, as is an 1890 mention of a "tall white stovepipe hat" by Auburn Towner in the *Elmira Telegram*.<sup>123</sup> This relationship of accounts suggests that one reason descriptions of Joseph's hat become much more frequent after 1880 was that Mather's account provided an amusing description to adopt or adapt. Since these hat descriptions appear to all trace back to Mather, they are no more credible than is his.

## Joseph Fowler McKune account

Only one of the late "stovepipe" accounts names a potentially

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121. "Chroniclings," *Democrat [and] Chronicle*, 21 February 1894, [sidneyrigdon.com/dbroadhu/ny/miscNYS5.htm#022194](http://sidneyrigdon.com/dbroadhu/ny/miscNYS5.htm#022194); "The Mormon Problem," *Los Angeles Times*, 29 July 1887, [sidneyrigdon.com/dbroadhu/ca/misccalf.htm#072987](http://sidneyrigdon.com/dbroadhu/ca/misccalf.htm#072987); and Ellen E. Dickinson, *New Light on Mormonism* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1885), 30, [archive.org/details/newlightonmormon00dick/page/30/mode/2up](http://archive.org/details/newlightonmormon00dick/page/30/mode/2up).

122. "A Looked-For Exposure: Secrets of the Original Mormon Bible," *The New York Times*, 26 February 1888, [sidneyrigdon.com/dbroadhu/NY/miscnyc3.htm#022688](http://sidneyrigdon.com/dbroadhu/NY/miscnyc3.htm#022688); "Enlightening the Public: Mrs. H. S. Caswell Tells of the Origin and History of Mormonism," *New York Tribune*, 30 January 1899, [sidneyrigdon.com/dbroadhu/NY/miscnyc3.htm#013099](http://sidneyrigdon.com/dbroadhu/NY/miscnyc3.htm#013099); and Mrs. Dr. Horace Eaton [Anna Ruth Eaton], *The Origin of Mormonism* (New York: Woman's Executive Committee of Home Missions, 1881), p. [2], [loc.gov/resource/rbpe.12900800](http://loc.gov/resource/rbpe.12900800).

123. Towner, "Some Interesting Facts."

authoritative source. This is an account in Rhamnus Stocker's 1887 *Centennial History of Susquehanna County, Pennsylvania*, which reports information provided by many local residents, including Joseph Fowler McKune:

Joseph Fowler McCune [McKune], now residing in Windsor, Broome County, N.Y., boarded in this neighborhood and attended school at Hickory Grove while Smith was engaged in translating the Bible [Book of Mormon], and was quite often in Smith's house. Mr. McCune states that Reuben Hale acted as scribe a part of the time. He says Smith's hat was a *very large one*, and what is commonly called a "stove-pipe." The hat was on the table by the window and the stone in the bottom or rather in the top of the hat. Smith would bend over the hat with his face buried in it so that no light could enter it, and thus dictate to the scribe what he should write.<sup>124</sup>

Joseph Fowler McKune, born in 1815, would have been around 13 or 14 in 1828 and 1829 when Joseph was translating the Book of Mormon. Whether Joseph wore his old seeing hat in public at this time, or used it only for seeing, is not known. This account mentions the hat only in the context of the translation, which was reportedly conducted in an upstairs room in the Smith home.<sup>125</sup> Stocker reports that McKune told him that Joseph's seeing hat was "a very large" hat of the "stove-pipe" style and that Joseph used this hat for translating at a table by a window. Stocker does not say how McKune obtained his understanding of the translation process or hat, but notes, as McKune's

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124. Stocker, *Centennial History*, 556, emphasis added.

125. Charles Anthon, who had visited with Martin Harris years earlier, stated his understanding in an 1834 letter that Joseph translated "behind a curtain, in a garret of a farm house." Eber D. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled* (Painesville, OH: printed and published by the author, 1834), 270–71, [archive.org/details/mormonismunvaile00howe/page/270/mode/2up](http://archive.org/details/mormonismunvaile00howe/page/270/mode/2up). After interviewing Sally McKune and Samuel Brush, Frederic G. Mather reported in 1880 that "the translating and writing were done in the little low chamber of Joe Smith's house" and that Sally McKune's "husband bought the Smith place, built an addition to the house, and Mrs. McKune lived in the house about forty years. She remembers the arrangement of the nails used for hooks to hang blankets on during the translation." Mather reported further that Samuel Brush "called often to see Reuben Hale, the scribe. Reuben would always quit work and come down stairs." "Sally McKune, Mehetable Doolittle," 355, 358–59. Webster's 1828 dictionary defines *chamber* as "an apartment in an upper story, or in a story above the lower floor of a dwelling house," [webstersdictionary1828.com/Dictionary/chamber](http://webstersdictionary1828.com/Dictionary/chamber).



**Figure 6.** A very large stovepipe hat consistent with McCune's description of Joseph's seeing hat. This hat, with a nap of beaver fur, was made around 1830 (Oregon Historical Society Museum, 68–418.3).

basis of authority, that McKune attended school in the area and lived in the neighborhood while Joseph was translating, and further, that McKune had “quite often” been in the Smith house. There is no claim that McKune personally observed Joseph translating or ever saw the hat used for that purpose. There are many reasons a young teenage neighbor might have been in the Smith’s house, such as buying, selling, or bartering items; delivering messages; or even visiting, but these do not necessarily provide him with access to the upstairs translating chamber. It is unlikely that McKune personally observed the translation. All known or likely witnesses to the translation were very close friends or relatives of the Smiths, except for Elizabeth L. McKune, who was a household employee.<sup>126</sup> McKune was none of these. If McKune

126. William Riley Hine is one person without a close relationship to the Smiths who dubiously claimed to have witnessed the translation. Dan Vogel, in his comments on Hine’s statement, observes that “Hine’s statement should be approached with caution since it makes claims contrary to established chronology and history.” “William R. Hine Statement, Circa March 1885,” in *Early Mormon Documents*, 4:181, 184–86, [archive.org/details/volume-4\\_202011/page/181/mode/2up](https://archive.org/details/volume-4_202011/page/181/mode/2up). With his mixture of farcical claims and well-known facts, Hines seems to be attempting some kind of satire. For example, in Hine’s narrative, Joseph carries the sacred, very heavy gold plates around in public, holding them in one hand, and then translates them in a tavern.

had been privileged enough to have witnessed the translation, he probably would have said so and Stocker would have mentioned that as the basis of McKune's authority on the topic.

Joseph and Emma moved out of the house and sold it to McKune's uncle, Joseph McKune, Jr., in 1833. McKune's uncle, his aunt, Sally, and his cousins lived in the house for many years and McKune also remained in the area.<sup>127</sup> However frequent Joseph Fowler McKune's visits may have been to the Smith house during the translation period, he was probably "quite often" in the house after his uncle's family moved in. During such familial visits he may have even been shown the former translating chamber, perhaps with the translating table still by the window. These visits, of course, would not have afforded him the opportunity to observe the translation or to see the hat used for that purpose.

In describing Joseph's translating technique and hat to Stocker, McKune may have simply been repeating what he heard from other residents or had himself read, most likely in Mather's 1880 account or Eaton's 1881 account. As a resident of Broome County, McKune would have had access to Mather's original 1880 account published in the area newspaper, which included a report of an interview with his own Aunt Sally. Copies of Eaton's account were also widely available.<sup>128</sup>

McKune's description of Joseph bending over, with his "face buried" in his "very large . . . stove-pipe" hat is reminiscent of Mather's 1880 description of Joseph kneeling and "burying his face" in his "tall white stovepipe hat." It is also possible that Mather and Joseph Fowler McKune both got their language from McKune's Aunt Sally. But even in that case, we would still not know whether the idea of a large top hat had its ultimate source in someone's (possibly Sally's) personal observation of the hat or in Brown's likely invented description of the hat as

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127. The given name of Sally (Sallie) McKune, wife of Joseph McKune, Jr., was Sarah Clark. The sale of the Smith's house was recorded in a deed dated 28 June 1833. "McKune, Joseph, Jr.," Biography, Joseph Smith Papers, [josephsmithpapers.org/person/joseph-mckune-jr](http://josephsmithpapers.org/person/joseph-mckune-jr). At the time of the 1860 census, Joseph Fowler McKune was a farmer in Windsor, Broome County, New York, about 8 miles from the former Joseph Smith home in Harmony. "Rhamanthus M. Stocker Account, 1887," in *Early Mormon Documents*, 4:402n10, [archive.org/details/volume-4\\_202011/page/401/mode/2up](http://archive.org/details/volume-4_202011/page/401/mode/2up).

128. Eaton's account was not only published in *The Origin of Mormonism*, but also in the *Wayne County Journal* of July 1881 and in John McCutchen Coyner's 1882 *Hand-Book on Mormonism*. "Anna Ruth Eaton Statement, 1881," in *Early Mormon Documents*, 3:146.

a “cavernous” “beaver.” Given the local interest in Joseph Smith’s seeing activities and the fact that published accounts describing Joseph’s translation methods and seeing hat had been around for several years, it is likely that the idea of Joseph using a large top hat was circulating among the local residents, along with a general understanding of his translating technique and the identities of his scribes.<sup>129</sup> If McKune was merely repeating what he heard or read from unspecified sources, his description of Joseph’s hat as a large top hat is no more helpful than Mather’s. In the end, we are left not knowing whether to take McKune’s description of Joseph’s seeing hat as a confirmation of Mather’s questionable 1880 description, or as a derivative of it.

Another indication that McKune may have been relaying what he had heard or read rather than his own personal knowledge of Joseph’s hat is that he did not describe the hat’s color or age, as the earliest accounts most often did, but instead described its size and style in a way similar to descriptions in recently published accounts.

By the turn of the century, most of the individuals who knew Joseph during the time of his seeing activities had died, and reporters had to rely more heavily on circulating rumors and previously published accounts for their stories about Joseph’s younger days. I have found no twentieth century accounts that provide any credible additional information regarding Joseph’s seeing hat.<sup>130</sup>

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129. If McKune didn’t pick up his understanding of Joseph’s method of translating by putting his face in his hat from other local residents, he could have read it described in any of several works published before 1887, including those mentioned above that were written by or attributed to Josiah Stowell (report of Joseph’s 1830 trial), Emma Smith (1879 report of interview), David Whitmer (1879 corrective statement through John Traughber, and his 1881 and 1887 statements), or William Smith (1883 statement, 1884 report of sermon). The fact that Reuben Hale acted as scribe was also available from Mather’s 1880 account and was probably common knowledge among the locals.

130. There is a 1904 account that describes Joseph’s seeing hat as a “high hat” (a top hat) in the context of a treasure dig at Monument Hill. In this account, Joseph uses his stone to look for treasure by, nonsensically, “placing it in his high hat while he examined it closely with his head on the ground.” “Mormon’s Religion Had Its Birth in Broome County,” *Binghampton Press*, 14 April 1904, [sidneyrigdon.com/dbroadhu/ny/miscNYS4.htm#041404](http://sidneyrigdon.com/dbroadhu/ny/miscNYS4.htm#041404). The article contains many errors in details and chronologies of events, suggesting it is based ultimately on circulating stories or unreliable, previously published accounts. The author of the article does not state his source for this story but does seem to have interviewed Addison Wilder, who lived in Center Village, not far from Monument Hill. The dig at Monument Hill is estimated to have been in late 1825 or early 1826. Vogel, “The Locations of Joseph Smith’s Early Treasure

## Summary of hat descriptions

In summary, there are three potentially independent nineteenth-century accounts that describe Joseph's seeing hat as a top hat, and these portray it as a notably large one: Brown's 1875 "cavernous" "beaver," Mather's 1880 "tall white stovepipe hat," and McKune's 1887 "very large" "stove-pipe." All other nineteenth-century descriptions of Joseph's seeing hat as a top hat appear to ultimately derive from one of these three. Thus, based on historical descriptions of Joseph's seeing hat, if it was a top hat, it was an unusually large one.

Although it is possible that Joseph's seeing hat was an exceptionally large top hat, this is not the only option. The firsthand and earliest descriptions of the hat make no mention of its size or style, which suggests that the hat was unremarkable for a farmer—perhaps a common wool felt hat of unremarkable dimensions. (Based on these earliest descriptions, the hat's remarkable characteristics were its age and color, not its size or style.) Comparisons of the various accounts that describe Joseph's hat as a top hat, along with a consideration of Brown's account as satire, provide evidence for one possible derivation of the idea that Joseph's seeing hat was a very large white top hat:

- Brown took the well-known idea that Joseph's hat was an old hat—this having been the common theme in previously published descriptions—and expressed it in hyperbolic, satirical language as a "cavernous" "antiquated beaver."
- Mather or one of his sources took Brown's description at face value and understood it to mean an unusually large top hat, which, when combined with the "white hat" in Harris's 1859 account (which independently appears to have been a source for Mather's article), resulted in Mather's "tall white stovepipe hat."
- The other descriptions of Joseph's hat as a top hat published

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Quests," 230. Wilder would have been only about 4 years old, too young to have been a witness to the event. "Addison S. Wilder," Find a Grave (website), 15 July 2011, [findagrave.com/memorial/73392305/addison-s.-wilder](http://findagrave.com/memorial/73392305/addison-s.-wilder). A story in the article of Joseph attempting to walk on water but his efforts being sabotaged by George Collington suggests a reliance on Mather's 1880 *Broome Republican* article, with its similar story and mention of a top hat. Since we don't know the ultimate source of this very late description of Joseph's seeing hat, and since the idea that Joseph used a top hat had already been circulating in the area due to Mather's questionable 1880 account and its derivatives, this 1904 account is of little value.



over the subsequent two decades ultimately derive from Mather's amusing-yet-influential account.

The best corroborated and most detailed descriptions of how Joseph used a hat in the translation of the Book of Mormon—drawing the hat closely around his face and the brim around his head to exclude ambient light—are most consistent with a soft, broad-brimmed felt hat.

## Summary and Conclusions

The characterization of Joseph in historical accounts as a seer (traditionally, a “see-er” of visions), his use of seer stones (both the interpreters and his own) in translating, the way he described the experience of translation to others, and scriptural accounts of the revelation of sacred books to other seers such as Lehi and Ezekiel in vision, all suggest that the translation of the Book of Mormon was revealed to Joseph in vision. The seer stones he used for translating, rather than being advanced technological devices, more likely served as an aid to faith for seeing the revelatory visions.

Joseph said that he translated by “the gift and power of God.”<sup>131</sup> David Whitmer, to whom Joseph described his experience, explained that the gift by which Joseph translated was “the gift to see the sentences in English, when he looked into the hat in which was placed the stone.”<sup>132</sup> This “gift to see” when he looked into a hat containing a seer stone was the gift of seeing as a seer. It was the gift of visions. The hat, held close over Joseph's face, would have blocked his normal vision and provided a space for focus in the presence of others, facilitating a state of consciousness more conducive to revelatory vision. Functioning in this way, the hat would have been a visionary instrument.

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131. See, for example, the preface to the 1830 Book of Mormon. For more of Joseph Smith's 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: BYU Press, 2005), 121–29, [archive.dev-bookofmormoncentral.org/content/miraculous-translation-book-mormon](https://archive.dev-bookofmormoncentral.org/content/miraculous-translation-book-mormon). See a discussion of Joseph's principal accounts in the appendix.

132. Whitmer, *Address to All Believers*, 37, [archive.org/details/addressstoallbeli00whit/page/36/mode/2up](https://archive.org/details/addressstoallbeli00whit/page/36/mode/2up). See the last section in the appendix for a discussion of Whitmer's account.



**Figure 7.** Portrayal of Joseph Smith using a white, broad-brimmed, soft felt hat to attain a state of consciousness in which he could vision the translation of the Book of Mormon.<sup>133</sup>

Based on historical evidence, Joseph used an old white hat in translating the Book of Mormon, but the style of the hat is less certain. It may have been a very tall top hat of beaver or other animal fur, as suggested by late nineteenth-century accounts. But more likely, the idea of an oversized top hat was invented for literary effect, and Joseph's seeing hat was actually a more ordinary looking hat — perhaps a broad-brimmed, soft wool felt hat like those commonly worn by farmers of the time. The latter is more consistent with accounts describing how Joseph used the hat for translating — drawing the hat closely around his face and the brim around his head.

The established Christianity of Joseph's day could not teach him

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133. I would like to recognize my son, Michael Spencer, for portraying Joseph Smith for this photograph. Elder Spencer is currently serving in the Washington DC North Mission. Use of this image requires permission from the author and, generally, a link back to this paper. No derivatives permitted.

how to attain a visionary state of consciousness, but the art of seeing visions had been preserved in the traditional use of seer stones, and that is where Joseph learned how to use a hat and a meaningful stone to attain a visionary state. With this ability and his gift of seeing, he became a seer through whom God could reveal the Book of Mormon.

## **Appendix: Historical Accounts of the Translation of the Book of Mormon**

Many of the historical accounts of the translation are found in reports of interviews with witnesses. Before the use of recording equipment became standard practice, interviewers had to reconstruct statements from hastily written notes, if any were taken at all. They often filled in gaps and smoothed over rough spots with their own words based on their imperfect memories of what was said and assumptions of what was meant. Reporters were not bound by modern journalistic standards and frequently borrowed text or ideas from previously published reports, however erroneous. The chance for error was high and limited the utility of secondhand accounts for reconstructing historical events. When firsthand accounts are unavailable, secondhand accounts may be helpful, if they are used carefully and compared against other sources. When I do quote secondhand, thirdhand, or fourth-hand accounts, I will make it clear that I am doing so. The agreement of multiple independent sources increases the credibility of information and, all else being equal, reports closer in time to an event or interview tend to be more reliable than those further removed.

### **The Urim and Thummim in Joseph Smith's time**

A cause of confusion particular to the translation of the Book of Mormon is the frequently ambiguous use of the term *Urim and Thummim*. For most of history, the Urim and Thummim was universally understood to mean the revelatory instrument, often presumed to consist of one or two stones, used by Israel's high priest. Joseph Smith expanded that definition.<sup>134</sup> William Clayton, in his journal entry

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134. For more discussion on Joseph's seer stones as "the Urim and Thummim," see Spencer Kraus, "An Unfortunate Approach to Joseph Smith's Translation of Ancient Scripture," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 52 (2022): 3–6, [journal.interpreterfoundation.org/an-unfortunate-approach-to-joseph-smiths-translation-of-ancient-scripture/](https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/an-unfortunate-approach-to-joseph-smiths-translation-of-ancient-scripture/); also, Richard Van Wagoner and Steven C. Walker, "Joseph Smith: The Gift of Seeing," *Dialogue* 15, no. 2 (1982): 49–68.

of 2 April 1843, related a conversation he had with Joseph in which Joseph said that the planet where God dwells, which is like crystal or glass, is "the Great Urim & Thummim," that "the Urim and Thummim" is a small representation of this globe, and that the white stone spoken of in Revelation 2:17 would be "the Urim and Thummim" to those who received one.<sup>135</sup>

To Joseph, *the Urim and Thummim* no longer meant just the revelatory stones used by Israel's High priest, but other revelatory stones as well. Joseph had his own white stone that he used for revelation, in addition to his brown one.<sup>136</sup> It was most likely this white stone that Joseph used when he gave patriarchal blessings "through the Urim and Thummim" to Hyrum Smith in 1833 and Newel K. Whitney in 1835.<sup>137</sup> By this time, Joseph had already returned the interpreters to the angel with the plates and given his brown seer stone to Oliver Cowdery.<sup>138</sup> When Cowdery copied Hyrum's patriarchal blessing into the Church patriarchal blessing book, he introduced it by writing, "The following blessing was given by Joseph Smith, jr. by prophecy and revelation, through the Urim and Thummin, December, 1833." His preface to Whitney's 1835 blessing is similar.

Brigham Young, in his journal entry for 27 December 1841, wrote, "I met with the Twelve at brother Joseph's. . . . He said that every man who lived on the earth was entitled to a seer stone, and should have one . . . he showed us his seer stone."<sup>139</sup> Wilford Woodruff recorded the same experience and mentioned the same stone in his journal:

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135. "Appendix 2: William Clayton, Journal Excerpt, 1–4 April 1843," 68–70, Joseph Smith Papers; [josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/appendix-2-william-clayton-journal-excerpt-1-4-april-1843/5](http://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/appendix-2-william-clayton-journal-excerpt-1-4-april-1843/5).

136. For descriptions of these two seer stones, see descriptions and references in Spencer, "Seers and Stones," 28, 57, 73n1, 73n3.

137. For Whitney's blessing, see "Historical Introduction" to "Blessing to Newel K. Whitney, 7 October 1835," Joseph Smith Papers; [josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/blessing-to-newel-k-whitney-7-october-1835/2#historical-intro](http://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/blessing-to-newel-k-whitney-7-october-1835/2#historical-intro). For Hyrum Smith's blessing, see "Blessing to Hyrum Smith, between circa 15 and 28 September 1835, Oliver Cowdery Copy," Joseph Smith Papers, [josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/blessing-to-hyrum-smith-between-circa-15-and-28-september-1835-oliver-cowdery-copy/1](http://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/blessing-to-hyrum-smith-between-circa-15-and-28-september-1835-oliver-cowdery-copy/1).

138. Regarding the interpreters having been returned with the plates, see Spencer, "Seers and Stones," 75n11. According to David Whitmer, Joseph Smith gave his brown seer stone to Oliver Cowdery in early 1830. Whitmer, *Address to All Believers*, 32.

139. "History of Brigham Young," *Millennial Star* 26 (20 February 1864): 118–19, [google.com/books/edition/The\\_Latter\\_Day\\_Saints\\_Millennial\\_Star/v1YoAAAYAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&pg=PA118&](http://google.com/books/edition/The_Latter_Day_Saints_Millennial_Star/v1YoAAAYAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&pg=PA118&).

“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 & THUMMIM.”<sup>140</sup>

The headings to the revelations in Doctrine and Covenants sections 3, 6, 7, 11, 14, and 17 indicate that they were received through the Urim and Thummim. In his 1877 book, David Whitmer noted that he was present when Joseph received most of the early revelations and that “the revelations in the Book of Commandments up to June, 1829,” which include the foregoing, “were given through the ‘stone,’ through which the Book of Mormon was translated.”<sup>141</sup>

In his 1874 affidavit regarding Joseph’s revelation on celestial marriage (Doctrine and Covenants 132), William Clayton, who was Joseph’s scribe at the time, recalled that “Hyrum very urgently requested Joseph to write the revelation by means of the Urim and Thummim, but Joseph in reply, said he did not need to.”<sup>142</sup> For Joseph and those around him, the Urim and Thummim was whatever revelatory stone or stones Joseph was using or possessed at the time.

In his history and other published statements, Joseph never explicitly mentions his own seer stones but refers to the interpreter stones as the Urim and Thummim.<sup>143</sup> Due to the influence of these statements, the term eventually came to be used almost exclusively among believers in the Restoration to refer to the interpreter stones. This was how Emma used the term in a letter she wrote to Emma Pilgrim in 1870 regarding the translation of the Book of Mormon:

Now, the first that my <husband> translated, [the book] was translated by the use of the Urim, and Thummim, and that

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140. Wilford Woodruff journal, 1841 January–1842 December,” MS 1352, p. [126], Church History Catalog, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, [catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/28b53d73-2ba2-418b-8ef7-dafcc935bee3/0/125](https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/28b53d73-2ba2-418b-8ef7-dafcc935bee3/0/125).

141. Whitmer, *Address to All Believers*, 53, 58–59. Whitmer would not have been present for revelations received prior to June 1829 (i.e., Sections 3, 6, and 7). On p. 58 of his book, he says he was present during the revelation of Section 16, today’s Section 18 and that it was given through Joseph’s seer stone. For more discussion of Joseph’s revelations through seer stones, see Spencer, “Seers and Stones,” 43–48.

142. “William Clayton affidavit, 16–17 February 1874,” MS 3423, p. [3], Church History Catalog, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, [catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/d091310b-4d88-43dd-a141-bb7ec1579934/0/2](https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/d091310b-4d88-43dd-a141-bb7ec1579934/0/2).

143. If the interpreters were the same object that ancient Israel’s high priest used, the Book of Mormon probably would have said so, since it was written with the Books of Moses in view.

was the part that Martin Harris lost, after that he used a small stone, not exactly, black, but was rather a dark color.<sup>144</sup>

Here, Emma associates the interpreters with the first part of the translation and Joseph's brown seer stone with the rest, including what he translated after the loss of the 116 manuscript pages.

Joseph was strictly forbidden from letting anyone see the interpreters or the plates (Joseph Smith — History 1:42). Although Martin Harris, Oliver Cowdery, and David Whitmer desired to see the plates and would eventually see them and the interpreters, they did not have that privilege until the translation was complete or nearly so.<sup>145</sup> Even so, it is possible that Joseph translated with one or both of the interpreter stones in the presence of others by keeping them carefully hidden from view in his hat.

If the interpreters were used in a different manner, or if the uncovered plates were being used, Joseph would have presumably been behind some kind of curtain to prevent his scribe or anyone else from inadvertently seeing these objects. Firsthand witness statements do not, however, mention any such curtain. Elizabeth Ann Whitmer Cowdery (see below) explicitly denies that there was a curtain between Joseph and his scribe and further states that she, as a member of the household, often watched Joseph translate for hours at a time. Other witness statements and reports of interviews also suggest that household and family members were able to freely observe the translation. The best evidence for a curtain is secondhand and comes from reports of interviews with Martin Harris that occurred after Joseph had copied characters from the open plates (Joseph Smith — History 1:62) but before the sequential translation of the record began.<sup>146</sup> This

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144. "Emma Smith Bidamon to Emma Pilgrim, 27 March 1870," in *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:532–33, [archive.org/details/volume-1\\_202010/page/532/mode/2up](http://archive.org/details/volume-1_202010/page/532/mode/2up).

145. See Doctrine and Covenants 17; also, "Historical Introduction" to "Appendix 4: Testimony of Three Witnesses, Late June 1829," Joseph Smith Papers, [josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/appendix-4-testimony-of-three-witnesses-late-june-1829/1#historical-intro](http://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/appendix-4-testimony-of-three-witnesses-late-june-1829/1#historical-intro).

146. Michael Hubbard MacKay and Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, *From Darkness Unto Light: Joseph Smith's Translation and Publication of the Book of Mormon* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University, 2015), 91. Also, see discussion of a sheet or other partition in "Original Manuscript of the Book of Mormon," Joseph Smith Papers, [josephsmithpapers.org/intro/introduction-to-revelations-and-translations-volume-5](http://josephsmithpapers.org/intro/introduction-to-revelations-and-translations-volume-5). John A. Clark, who interviewed Harris before and again soon after he visited Professor Anthon with a copy of characters from the plates, describes a curtain being used as Joseph was making "transcripts



suggests that if Joseph used a curtain, it was while copying characters from the plates and perhaps very early in the translation. Without a curtain, Joseph would not have been translating with the uncovered interpreters or plates. Furthermore, his scribes and others present would have been able to tell whether he was using the interpreters or his own seer stone, since, if using the former, he would have been taking strict precautions to prevent them from being seen.

### **Witness statements on the mechanics of translation**

Although any witness would have been able to describe the outward mechanics of translation, only Joseph would have been able to describe, firsthand, the subjective experience of translation, including what he saw while translating and where he saw it. I will address Joseph's subjective experience of translation at the end of this appendix.

First, though, I focus on the mechanics of translation and provide the firsthand statements of individuals who observed Joseph translate as well as firsthand statements from other individuals who heard him describe the mechanics of translation. For known witnesses who left no firsthand statements describing the mechanics of the translation, I summarize reports of interviews that do. For the sake of brevity, I do not provide the entire texts of witness statements in this section, but only those portions that indicate that the witness was present for the translation and what they observed. I quote additional portions of these same statements later in this appendix and in the body of the paper as they are relevant.

#### ***Emma Smith Bidamon***

Joseph's wife Emma served at times as Joseph's scribe both before and after the loss of the first 116 manuscript pages.<sup>147</sup> Her only personally written statement on the means of translation was her 1870

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and transcriptions" from the plates for Harris, which describes Joseph's initial investigation of the writings on the plates before Harris visited Professor Anthon. Clark admits he has no similar knowledge of the later method of translation, as he soon moved from the area. John A. Clark, *Gleanings by the Way* (Philadelphia: Robert Carter, 1842), 230-231, [archive.org/details/bywaygleanings00clarrich/page/230/mode/2up?q=Martin+Harris](https://archive.org/details/bywaygleanings00clarrich/page/230/mode/2up?q=Martin+Harris).

147. "Joseph Knight, Sr., Reminiscence, Circa 1835–1847," 4:18, [archive.org/details/volume-4\\_202011/page/17/mode/2up](https://archive.org/details/volume-4_202011/page/17/mode/2up); "History, circa Summer 1832," p. 6, Joseph Smith Papers; [josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/history-circa-summer-1832?p=5](https://josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/history-circa-summer-1832?p=5); "Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1844–1845," p. [11], bk. 7, Joseph



letter to Emma Pilgrim, quoted above. Of lesser authority is a report by her son, Joseph Smith III, who interviewed her in February 1879. The report of the interview, published several months after her death in the October 1879 *Saints' Herald*, represents her as saying:

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.<sup>148</sup>

An editorial in the 13 November 1886 *Saints' Herald*, of which Joseph Smith III was editor, appears to favor the idea that most or all of the Book of Mormon was translated by the interpreters. Regarding Joseph's use of a seer stone, it acknowledges statements by David Whitmer but oddly fails to cite Emma's testimony.<sup>149</sup> This suggests that Joseph Smith III may have had doubts about Emma's published testimony, perhaps because it appeared to contradict his father's published statements regarding the translation. Another possibility is that the editorial was not written by Joseph Smith III, but by the associate editor, William W. Blair.<sup>150</sup> In any case, the editorial concedes that if Joseph used a single seer stone in translating, "it was in effect a Urim and Thummim," and that it did not "detract from the Seeric powers of Joseph Smith. It rather confirms and exalts them, showing that the gift of translation and revelation was bestowed of God upon the Seer in person," not on the stones.

### ***Martin Harris and minor scribes***

In 1859, Martin Harris, who served as Joseph's scribe early in the translation process, granted an interview to Joel Tiffany, editor of the

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Smith Papers, [josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/lucy-mack-smith-history-1844-1845/91](http://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/lucy-mack-smith-history-1844-1845/91).

148. Joseph Smith III Interview, "Last Testimony of Sister Emma," 289–90, [archive.org/details/TheSaintsHerald\\_Volume\\_26\\_1879/page/n287/mode/2up?view=theater](http://archive.org/details/TheSaintsHerald_Volume_26_1879/page/n287/mode/2up?view=theater).

149. "David Whitmer Reviewed," *Saints' Herald* 33 (13 November 1886), 707, latterdaytruth.org/pdf/100200.pdf.

150. James Lucas and Jonathan Neville, in their book, *By Means of the Urim and Thummim: Restoring Translation to the Restoration* (Salt Lake City: Museum of the Book of Mormon Press, 2023), 50, discuss the editorial's odd lack of endorsement of Emma's testimony. They do not consider the possibility that the editorial was written by Blair. The continuation of the editorial in the November 20 issue uses "we" but refers to Joseph Smith III in the third person. "David Whitmer Reviewed," 723, latterdaytruth.org/pdf/100200.pdf.

spiritualist periodical *Tiffany's Monthly*. Tiffany's report of the interview begins by noting efforts to assure that Harris's words 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." Because Harris personally authorized, dictated, and reviewed the narration, it serves as an authoritative statement of his experiences surrounding the translation. In his statement, he does not directly describe the mechanics of translation or say which stones were used, but he does say that the interpreters as well as the seer stone would have been used for seeing visions by placing them in a hat.<sup>151</sup> This is the method of translation Harris apparently described to publisher Jonathan A. Hadley in 1829, who provided the earliest published account of the method of translation. Soon after visiting with Harris, Hadley reported that "by placing the spectacles in a hat, and looking into it, Smith could (he said so, at least) interpret these characters."<sup>152</sup> Other reports from individuals who heard Harris describe the translation say that Joseph translated with the interpreters, with his own stone in a hat, or both.<sup>153</sup>

I will discuss Oliver Cowdery's statements later in this section. The remaining individuals who reportedly served as scribes—Reuben Hale, Samuel Smith, John Whitmer, and Christian Whitmer—left no firsthand statements describing the translation.<sup>154</sup> John Whitmer, however, is sometimes given credit for a description of the translation that was reported by S. F. Walker. In Walker's 1879 synopsis of

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151. "Martin Harris Interview with Joel Tiffany, 1859," in *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:302–03, 305, [archive.org/details/volume-2\\_202011/page/309/mode/2up](https://archive.org/details/volume-2_202011/page/309/mode/2up).

152. "Palmyra Freeman, circa August 1829," in *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:221, [archive.org/details/volume-2\\_202011/page/221/mode/2up](https://archive.org/details/volume-2_202011/page/221/mode/2up).

153. Welch, "Miraculous Translation," 132–41, [archive.dev-bookofmormoncentral.org/content/miraculous-translation-book-mormon](https://archive.dev-bookofmormoncentral.org/content/miraculous-translation-book-mormon).

154. Samuel Smith is sometimes assumed to be the sources of an 1832 statement that the translation "was made known by the spirit of the Lord through the medium of the Urim and Thummim . . . which were found with the plates." "Questions Proposed to the Mormonite Preachers and Their Answers Obtained before the Whole Assembly at Julien Hall, Sunday Evening, August 5, 1832," *Boston Investigator*, 10 August 1832, [bhroberts.org/records/OiSghu-78K4Mb/boston\\_investigator\\_reports\\_that\\_joseph\\_used\\_the\\_urim\\_and\\_thummim\\_two\\_crystal\\_stones\\_to\\_translate\\_the\\_bom](https://bhroberts.org/records/OiSghu-78K4Mb/boston_investigator_reports_that_joseph_used_the_urim_and_thummim_two_crystal_stones_to_translate_the_bom). Although Samuel was present, it was Orson Hyde who made this statement, according to his own journal entry for 5 August 1832. "Orson Hyde journal, 1832 February–December," MS 1386, pp. [36]–[37], Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, [catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/5f701d17-0604-462a-a4b1-696c24c6c93a/0/35](https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/5f701d17-0604-462a-a4b1-696c24c6c93a/0/35).

a discourse delivered by Zenas Gurley several years after Gurley had interviewed John Whitmer, Walker reports Gurley as saying that Joseph would sit at a table with the breastplate and attached interpreters, into which he would look and see the translation and then dictate it to John Whitmer.<sup>155</sup> The account does not mention use of the plates or a hat. Since Joseph had been commanded not to show the breastplate or interpreters to others, John Whitmer would not have been able to describe this method of translation firsthand, so this is a fourth-hand account at best (Joseph to John Whitmer to Zenas Gurley to S. F. Walker). It may be even further removed, as the synopsis does not say that Gurley heard this description of the translation from John Whitmer. It may have been Gurley's own assumption based on other sources. John Whitmer was scribe during the last month of the translation, when more direct accounts from other witnesses say that Joseph was using his own seer stone.

***Elizabeth L. McKune, Elizabeth Ann Whitmer Cowdery, and Michael Morse***

There were other individuals who credibly claimed to have observed Joseph translating the Book of Mormon, either in Harmony, Pennsylvania or Fayette, New York:

- Elizabeth L. McKune, who was household help for Emma when Joseph was translating in Harmony
- Elizabeth Ann Whitmer Cowdery, who married Oliver Cowdery in 1832 and was sister of John and David Whitmer
- Michael Morse, who was married to Emma's sister and lived in Harmony during the translation period

In a statement quoted in a 29 September 1879 letter written by her brother, Hiel Lewis, Elizabeth L. McKune asserts that she was able to observe Joseph translate:

I worked in the families of Joseph Smith and uncle Isaac Hale for about nine months . . . I saw Smith translating his book by the aid of the stone and hat. Reuben Hale, acted as scribe, writing down the words from Joseph Smith's mouth, but after a short time Martin Harris did the writing.<sup>156</sup>

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155. S. F. Walker, "Synopsis of a Discourse" delivered at Lamoni, Iowa, *Saints' Herald* 26 (15 December 1879): 370, [archive.org/details/TheSaintsHerald\\_Volume\\_26\\_1879/page/n369/mode/2up](http://archive.org/details/TheSaintsHerald_Volume_26_1879/page/n369/mode/2up).

156. "Hiel Lewis to [James T. Cobb?], 29 September 1879," 4:320, [archive.org](http://archive.org)

Elizabeth Cowdery, a firm believer in the divinity and truth of the events to which her husband was a special witness, prepared a certificate on 15 February 1870 regarding the Book of Mormon translation.<sup>157</sup> The certificate has been lost but was copied by William E. McLellin into a letter. It states:

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, and then [read?] to his scribe the words (he said) as they appeared before him.<sup>158</sup>

Michael Morse left no statement regarding the translation, but he mentioned it while being interviewed by William Blair on 8 May 1879. That same day, after the interview, Blair recorded in his journal that

Morse . . . says he many times called in at Jos[e]phs on business, when J[oseph]. would be engaged [in] translating the plates. J[oseph] put the seer stone in a hat and leaning forward would place his face in the hat, and then Dictate to his scribe, Sentence by Sentence.<sup>159</sup>

A couple of weeks later, on May 22, Blaire reported in a letter to the *Saints' Herald* that Morse "further states that when Joseph was translating the Book of Mormon, he, (Morse), had occasion more than once to go into his immediate presence, and saw him engaged at his work of translation."

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/details/volume-4\_202011/page/319/mode/2up.

157. For her belief in her husband's witness, see "A Letter From O. Cowdery's Wife," *The Return* 3, no. 5 (December 1892): 7, [catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/9fad70f7-4638-4127-afdc-f418ff9cf9a8/0/12](https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/9fad70f7-4638-4127-afdc-f418ff9cf9a8/0/12).

158. "Elizabeth Ann Whitmer Cowdery Affidavit, 15 February 1870," 5:260, emphasis added, brackets in original, [archive.org/details/volume-5\\_202011/page/259/mode/2up](https://archive.org/details/volume-5_202011/page/259/mode/2up). In this and other quoted transcriptions of original documents, above-the-line insertions are enclosed in angle brackets. Clarifications as well as conjectural readings are in square brackets. In this instance, the square brackets indicate a conjectural reading of the damaged document.

159. "Michael Morse Interview with William W. Blair, 8 May 1879," 4:340–42, [archive.org/details/volume-4\\_202011/page/339/mode/2up](https://archive.org/details/volume-4_202011/page/339/mode/2up).

### David Whitmer

Although he was excommunicated in 1838 and believed Joseph had led the Church astray, David Whitmer maintained a firm belief in the divine calling of Joseph in bringing forth the Book of Mormon and was unwavering in his testimony that the Book of Mormon had been translated by the gift and power of God. Whitmer considered his role as one of the three witnesses to the Book of Mormon a solemn responsibility. To maintain his credibility as witness, he placed special value on communicating truthfully and was regarded as a man of the highest integrity by those who knew him well.<sup>160</sup>

His accounts of the translation have been discounted by some because of their inconsistency.<sup>161</sup> Such discounting is justified when applied broadly to the many reports of interviews with him. Newspaper reports of his interviews are quite inconsistent, as might be expected. Some reports of interviews or purported interviews with him, such as the problematic 1881 *Kansas City Journal*, 1885 *Chicago Tribune*, and 1886 *Omaha Herald* articles, the latter two of which were discussed earlier in this paper, are particularly unreliable. Such sources are as apt to mislead as to enlighten.

In contrast, the statements describing the translation that Whitmer personally wrote, dictated, or reviewed and authorized are quite consistent. There are four:

- his 1879 corrective statement issued in a letter to the *Saints' Herald* through his friend, John Traugher
- his 1881 statement in his corrective letter to the *Kansas City Journal*
- his 1885 statement in answering questions presented by Zenas Gurley, which answers were recorded and corrected in Whitmer's presence; and

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160. Richard Lloyd Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981), 67–76. In an 1882 letter to S. T. Mouch, Whitmer says, "I have always in the fear of God, tried to give a true statement to the best of my recollection in regard to all matters which I have attempted to Explain." "David Whitmer to S. T. Mouch, 18 November 1882," in Lyndon W. Cook, ed., *David Whitmer Interviews: A Restoration Witness* (Orem, UT: Grandin Book, 1991), 241.

161. Joseph Fielding McConkie and Craig J. Ostler, "The Process of Translating the Book of Mormon," in *Revelations of the Restoration: A Commentary on the Doctrine and Covenants and Other Modern Revelations* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2000), 89–98.

- his 1887 statement in his self-published pamphlet, *An Address to All Believers in Christ*.

Whitmer's 1879 statement through John Traughber was in response to erroneous reports of his interviews that had been published a few years prior in the *Chicago Times* and more recently in the *Saints' Herald*. Whitmer's corrective statement through Traughber was printed on 15 November 1879 *Saints' Herald*, and reads in part:

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.<sup>162</sup>

This statement clarified that Whitmer observed Joseph translating with his brown seer stone in a hat, but not with the interpreters. The quality of reporting did not immediately improve, however, and Whitmer continued to be frustrated at being so frequently misquoted. In a 5 June 1881 report of an interview with Whitmer in the *Kansas City Journal*, the reporter who had sought the interview recorded Whitmer's frustration:

Young man, you are right. I am the only living witness to the Book of Mormon, but I have been imposed upon and misrepresented so many times by persons claiming to be honorable newsmen, that I feel a delicacy in allowing my name to come before the public in newspaper print again.<sup>163</sup>

Whitmer agreed to the interview, but when he read the published report, he found it as misrepresentative as he had feared. He complained in a letter to S. T. Mouch that "it is Seldom that my Statements are correctly reported" and that "there were So many Errors in it as published that I felt compelled to correct what I thought to be the most damaging Errors."<sup>164</sup>

Whitmer issued a corrective letter to the editor of the *Kansas City Journal*, dated 13 June 1881. When used in combination with the June

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162. Traughber Interview, "Testimony of David Whitmer," 341, [archive.org/details/TheSaintsHerald\\_Volume\\_26\\_1879/page/n339/mode/2up?view=theater](https://archive.org/details/TheSaintsHerald_Volume_26_1879/page/n339/mode/2up?view=theater).

163. "David Whitmer Interview with *Kansas City Journal*, 1 June 1881," 5:73, [archive.org/details/volume-5\\_202011/page/73/mode/2up](https://archive.org/details/volume-5_202011/page/73/mode/2up).

164. Cook, "Whitmer Interviews," 241–42.

5 report of the interview, it is a firsthand statement that affirms that Whitmer was an eyewitness to the translation. The June 5 report of the interview had stated that David Whitmer "as well as all of my father's family, Smith's wife, Oliver Cowdery, and Martin Harris were present during the translation."<sup>165</sup> Concerned that this wording implied that these individuals were immediately present all the time during the translation, Whitmer clarified, in his June 13 letter, that the observers were not always present, as well as correcting other details:

I did not wish to be understood as saying that those referred to as being present were all 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.' . . . My statement was and now is that in translating he put the stone in his hat and [that this was accomplished by] putting his face in his hat so as to exclude the light and then the light and characters appeared in the hat together with the interpretation.<sup>166</sup>

This accords with the statements of Elizabeth McKune and Elizabeth Cowdery and with Blair's report of his interview with Michael Morse in characterizing the translation as observable by household members and close relations when they happened to be present.

On 14 January 1885, Zenas Gurley presented David Whitmer with a list of questions. Gurley writes, "Brother Whitmer was too feeble to write . . . the answers . . . Yet it was with his consent and in his presence that I wrote them and corrected them, as they appear here. Jan. 21—1885. [signed] Z. H. Gurley." In answer to "Were you present during any of the translation, if so, state how it was done?" Whitmer replied, implying that he was present by describing the manner of translation:

He was allowed to go on and translate by the use of a "Seers stone" which he had, and which he placed in a hat into which he buried his face.<sup>167</sup>

Whitmer's statement in his 1887 self-published pamphlet reaffirmed his status as eyewitness to the translation:

165. "David Whitmer Interview with *Kansas City Journal*, 1 June 1881," 5:76.

166. "David Whitmer to *Kansas City Journal*, 13 June 1881," 5:81–82, [archive.org/details/volume-5\\_202011/page/81/mode/2up](https://archive.org/details/volume-5_202011/page/81/mode/2up).

167. "David Whitmer Interview with Zenas H. Gurley," 5:138.



I testify to the world that I am an eye-witness to the translation of the greater part of the Book of Mormon. Part of it was translated in my father's house . . .

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.<sup>168</sup>

Emma, Martin Harris, Elizabeth McKune, Elizabeth Cowdery, Michael Morse, and David Whitmer did not need Joseph to describe for them the mechanics of the translation process; they could directly observe him translating. While Martin Harris, Emma, Elizabeth Cowdery, and David Whitmer remained firm believers in the divine origin of the Book of Mormon throughout their lives, Elizabeth McKune and Michael Morse were non-believers. All of these individuals mention a stone or stones being placed in a hat. Elizabeth McKune's statement may refer to a single time observing the translation, but the firsthand statements of Elizabeth Cowdery and David Whitmer indicate frequent or regular observations, and reports of interviews with Michael Morse and Emma Smith agree.

### ***Joseph Knight Sr. (probable witness)***

Joseph Knight Sr. was another likely eyewitness to the translation who left a firsthand statement. He was a close friend of Joseph Smith and remained true to him and the Church he established throughout his life. He 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 the Smiths while Joseph was translating with Oliver Cowdery as his scribe.<sup>169</sup> He likely would have been permitted to observe Joseph translating at that time. In his handwritten history, Joseph Knight notes Joseph's confidence in the utility of the interpreter stones for seeing visions. He also reported that he was commanded to not let anyone see them except as witnesses at a given time, and described how he translated:

But he seemed to think more of the glasses or the urim and thummim than [than] he did of the Plates for says he I can see any thing they are Marvelous Now they are

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168. Whitmer, *Address to All Believers*, 11–12.

169. "Joseph Knight, Sr., Reminiscence, Circa 1835–1847," 4:11, 15, 19–20, archive.org/details/volume-4\_202011/page/11/mode/2up.

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 given time. . . .

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.<sup>170</sup>

Joseph Knight refers to the interpreters as "glasses," the local term for seer stones. In his history he also refers to Joseph's own seer stone as "his glass."<sup>171</sup> Knight states that Joseph was able to translate with "the means he found with the plates" but then describes Joseph translating with "the urim and thummim," perhaps doing so to cover both instruments in his description.

### ***Lucy Mack Smith (possible witness)***

Lucy Mack Smith likely discussed her son's method of translating with him. In her written history, she says she visited Joseph and Emma in Harmony after Joseph had been permitted to resume translating. This was following the loss of the 116 pages but before the arrival of Oliver Cowdery.<sup>172</sup> It is possible that she observed Joseph translate during her visit, although Joseph translated little during this period, with Emma as scribe.<sup>173</sup> In her history, she describes one instance during the translation with Oliver Cowdery as scribe in Harmony:

Joseph was 150 miles distant and knew naught of the matter e[x]cept an intimation that was given through the urim and thummim for as he one morning applied the<m> latter 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 [Whitmer].<sup>174</sup>

170. "Joseph Knight, Sr., Reminiscence, Circa 1835–1847," 4:15, 17–18.

171. "Joseph Knight, Sr., Reminiscence, Circa 1835–1847," 4:13.

172. "Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1844–1845," p. [11], bk. 7, josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/lucy-mack-smith-history-1844-1845/91.

173. "Original Manuscript of the Book of Mormon," Joseph Smith Papers, josephsmithpapers.org/intro/introduction-to-revelations-and-translations-volume-5.

174. "Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1844–1845," p. [8], bk. 8, Joseph Smith Papers, josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/lucy-mack-smith-history-1844-1845/100.

Lucy would not have been present during the period of the translation when Cowdery was scribe but is reporting what she understood the process to have been. “The urim and thummim” in Lucy’s original dictation could have referred to the interpreter stones or to Joseph’s own seer stone. According to Elizabeth McKune, Michael Morse, and Emma, it would have been the latter at this time. The phrase, “applied the latter to his eyes to look upon the record” is also vague. An 1831 article in a Palmyra newspaper mentions individuals who “applied their eyes” after placing a seer stone in a hat.<sup>175</sup>

Even if Lucy is envisioning Joseph using the interpreters, he would not have worn them like eyeglasses. Although Joseph sometimes called them “spectacles,” these seer stones were white, not clear, and were set too far apart to be worn like eyeglasses.<sup>176</sup> The one thing this description does clearly imply is that Joseph used the same method for translating the Book of Mormon that he used for obtaining other revelations.<sup>177</sup>

Regardless of which stone or stones Lucy is referring to, the fact that she does not explicitly mention a seer stone or stones or a hat is unsurprising. She never explicitly mentions Joseph’s seer stones in her history even when relevant to the events she is relating. When she tells how Joseph was hired by Josiah Stowell to use his seer stone and hat to look for buried silver, she refers to these obscurely as “*certain*

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175. Obediah Dogberry [Abner Cole], “Gold Bible, No. 3,” *Palmyra Reflector* (Palmyra, NY), 1 February 1831.

176. Zenas Gurley, in his transcription of David Whitmer’s answers to several questions, taken and corrected in David Whitmer’s presence, recorded Whitmer as saying, “I saw the ‘Interpreters’ in the holy [vision]. They looked like whitish stones p[ut in the] rim of a bow, looked like spectacles only much larger.” “David Whitmer Interview with Zenas H. Gurley,” 5:135–36, 138. Martin Harris described the interpreter stones as about two inches in diameter, “white, like polished marble, with a few gray streaks,” and “joined by a round bar of silver . . . about four inches long, which, with the two stones, would make eight inches.” “Martin Harris Interview with Joel Tiffany, 1859,” 2:305. For other descriptions of the interpreters, see Spencer, “What Did the Interpreters Look Like,” [journal.interpreterfoundation.org/what-did-the-interpreters-urim-and-thummim-look-like/](http://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/what-did-the-interpreters-urim-and-thummim-look-like/). For more discussion on the dimensions of the interpreters compared to eyeglasses, see Michael R. Ash, *Rethinking Revelation and the Human Element in Scripture: A Prophet’s Role as Creative Co-Author* (Redding, CA: FAIRLatterDaySaints.org, 2021), 495–98, PDF download at [fairlatterdaysaints.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Rethinking-Revelation-chapter-23.pdf](http://fairlatterdaysaints.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Rethinking-Revelation-chapter-23.pdf).

177. For Joseph’s use of a seer stone (and hat) to receive other revelations, see Spencer, “Seers and Stones,” 43–48.

*means*, by which he could discern things that could not be seen by the natural eye."<sup>178</sup>

Lucy's avoidance of direct mention of Joseph's seer stones in her history is best considered in light of the negative contemporary public perceptions of glass looking with stone and hat. Looking into hats containing stones was not something Joseph invented. It was practiced by other individuals in early nineteenth-century upstate New York, and it was covered in the press in a generally negative way. The general public, influenced by Enlightenment ideas of rationalism and skepticism, increasingly considered such folk practices as fraudulent or ignorant superstition and incompatible with Christianity.<sup>179</sup>

Nathaniel Stacy, a prominent Universalist minister in western and central New York, recalled in his 1850 memoir how a fellow preacher had hired a treasure seer around 1806. This seer, "by looking into a mysterious glass, or rather stone, pretended to be able to discover hidden treasures . . . which he could plainly see by looking into his dark hat, having this stone in the crown." The fellow preacher was subsequently disfellowshipped by his local church leaders for his "puerile and visionary" search for buried treasures and for engaging the services of a glass looker who, they assumed, was "practicing this deception . . . to gratify his idleness and his avarice."<sup>180</sup> The state of New York had an 1813 disorderly persons statute against "pretending to tell fortunes, or where lost or stolen items may be found," which was the justification for Joseph's arrest after he used his seer stone to assist Josiah Stowell in his money-digging efforts.<sup>181</sup>

An 1817 magazine article derisively mentions a girl in western New York who "put a certain stone into a hat, and placing her face in front so as entirely to exclude the light, pretended . . . she could see the whole world."<sup>182</sup> Critics of Joseph Smith promulgated a darker image

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178. "Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1845," p. 95, josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/lucy-mack-smith-history-1845/102?p=102.

179. Harper, "Was Joseph Smith a Money Digger?," 38–40, 43–47, 54–55, scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol62/iss4/4/.

180. Nathaniel Stacy, *Memoirs of the Life of Nathaniel Stacy, Preacher of the Gospel of Universal Grace* (Columbus, PA: W. Heughes, Monroe Hall 1850), 171–72, books.google.com/books?id=uWxFg8WA8WYC&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false.

181. "Introduction to State of New York v. JS–B and State of New York v. JS–C." josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/introduction-to-state-of-new-york-v-js-b-and-state-of-new-york-v-js-c/1#transcript-1-1830.

182. "J. Kidd, "A Geological Essay on the imperfect evidence in support of a theory of the earth," *The American Monthly Magazine and Critical Review* 2 (November

of glass looking. A February 1831 article in a Palmyra newspaper told of “pebbles . . . placed in a hat or other situation excluded from the light” to which “some wizzard or witch . . . applied their eyes” to guide deluded money diggers in their search for buried treasure.<sup>183</sup> Eber Howe’s 1834 *Mormonism Unveiled* continued the theme.

Although some who used seer stones may have done so fraudulently, others appear to have indeed had visionary experiences of some kind while looking into stones.<sup>184</sup> As for Joseph, he was certainly not a wizard as his critics implied. In making use of stones to seek divine revelation, including the translation of the Book of Mormon, he was emulating Israel’s high priests. It was they who inquired of the Lord through the biblical Urim and Thummim, not the witches and wizards of public imagination.<sup>185</sup> Nevertheless, given the negative public perception of seer stones, had Lucy spoken of Joseph receiving revelation by use of “a seer stone and hat” instead of “the urim and thummim,” many readers would have interpreted her words through the lens of contemporary prejudices. They would have formed an unfairly negative impression of the miraculous translation.

### *Oliver Cowdery*

Oliver Cowdery’s only written statement describing the translation is in the first of a series of letters he wrote as a history of the Church and

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1817): 355, [google.com/books/edition/The\\_American\\_Monthly\\_Magazine\\_and\\_Critic/F1HOAAAAMAAJ?gbpv=1](https://books.google.com/books/edition/The_American_Monthly_Magazine_and_Critic/F1HOAAAAMAAJ?gbpv=1).

183. Obediah Dogberry [Abner Cole], “Gold Bible, No. 3,” [sidneyrigdon.com/dbroadhu/ny/wayn1830.htm](http://sidneyrigdon.com/dbroadhu/ny/wayn1830.htm).

184. For example, Harriet Carter, a young Latter-day Saint girl in nineteenth-century Alberta, after hearing “a lot of talk about Peep-stones” in her community and finding a “beautiful creamy stone” in a friend’s collection, decided to look into it. She recorded, “Well, I had it up to my eye, with both hands cupped around it, so that no light could get in. At first it was all dark, and then gradually it cleared, and I could see a room. . . . At the far side was one door. As I looked for a few seconds, this door opened, and in came a very tall man. . . . He smiled at me and made a sweeping bow, and the scene was gone,” quoted in Barber, “Mormon Women as ‘Natural’ Seers,” 171. For a discussion of seeing with stones in Joseph’s day, see Harper, “Was Joseph Smith a Money Digger?,” 38–55, [scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol62/iss4/4/](http://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol62/iss4/4/). It seems unlikely that the use of seer stones would develop as a tradition without some basis in genuine experience or that God would associate his prophet with a tradition that was entirely fraudulent.

185. For a comparison of Joseph’s use of his seer stones and the biblical use of the Urim and Thummim, see Spencer, “Seers and Stones,” 59–64, 93n142, 97n159.

that he, as editor, printed in the October 1834 edition of *Messenger and Advocate*:

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 . . . to write from his mouth, as he translated, with the *Urim* and *Thummim*, or, as the Nephites whould [should] have said, "Interpreters."<sup>186</sup>

Fourteen years later, in October 1848, as he addressed a conference in Kanesville, Iowa, Cowdery used very similar wording, which we have secondhand from the journal of Reuben Miller:

I wrote with my own pen the intire book of Mormon (Save a few pages) as it fell from the Lips of the prophet. As he translated <it> by the gift and power of god, By means of the urum and thummim, or as it is called by that book holy Interpreters.<sup>187</sup>

The similarity in terminology, phrasing, choice, and sequence of ideas in these two statements, separated by over a decade, is notable. Whether in preparing for his 1848 address Cowdery decided to use the language of his 1834 letter or had long settled on this way of describing the translation, the similarities suggest careful wording. His use of the ambiguous term, *the Urim and Thummim* is also notable, as is his use of the circuitous phrase, "or, as the Nephites should have said," instead of simply saying, "or."

Because these two statements are very similar, and because the 1834 statement is firsthand and also much closer in time to the event described, we can expect to gain the most accurate understanding of Cowdery's thinking by giving it priority. With casual reading, this statement implies that Joseph was using the interpreters while Cowdery was scribe. This differs from firsthand statements of the

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186. Oliver Cowdery to W.W. Phelps, 7 Sep 1834, *Messenger and Advocate* 1 (Oct 1834), 14, emphasis in original, [contentdm.lib.byu.edu/digital/collection/BOMP/id/827](http://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/digital/collection/BOMP/id/827). The typo "whould" was resolved to "should" when Frederick G. Williams, under Joseph's or Oliver Cowdery's supervision, copied the letter into Joseph's history some time before November 1835. "History, 1834–1836," p. 48, Joseph Smith Papers, [josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1834-1836/50](http://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1834-1836/50). It became "would" in a footnote to Joseph Smith—History 1:71.

187. "Reuben Miller journals, 1848–1849 / Journal, 1848," MS 1392, p. [15], Church History Catalog, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, [catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/2222322-f4fe-41e3-aa86-bfc54b94df92/0/14](http://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/2222322-f4fe-41e3-aa86-bfc54b94df92/0/14).

other witnesses, which report the use of Joseph's seer stone. A closer reading reveals that Cowdery's statement is ambiguous. "The Urim and Thummim" could refer to either the interpreters or to Joseph's own seer stone. Around the time Cowdery wrote this statement, he was referring to Joseph's seer stone as the Urim and Thummim in recording patriarchal blessings, as noted previously. (Like Lucy, Oliver Cowdery never explicitly mentions Joseph's seer stones in his writing even when relevant to the discussion.<sup>188</sup>)

The phrase, "or, as the Nephites should have said, 'Interpreters,'" is also ambiguous. It can be understood as saying either that the interpreters were the instrument used, or, alternatively, as stating only that the Nephite term for *Urim and Thummim* (which is plural in form) was *Interpreters*.<sup>189</sup>

Because Cowdery's statement is silent on the manner in which the stone or stones were used in translating, we are left to rely on reports from others for any information on what he might have said about this aspect of the translation. These less authoritative reports all have Joseph translating with the interpreters but do not imply that he did so while Cowdery was scribe or that Cowdery observed him doing so. Nor do they imply that Cowdery handled the interpreters or saw the plates during the translation.<sup>190</sup> Cowdery was at one time authorized

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188. For example, when telling of Joseph's arrests resulting from his use of a seer stone for Josiah Stowell's money digging operation, he mentions the charge (disorderly person) but not the underlying reason. Oliver Cowdery, "Letter VIII," *Messenger and Advocate* 2, no. 1 (October 1835): 201, [archive.bookofmormoncentral.org/sites/default/files/archive-files/pdf/cowdery/2018-06-29/letter\\_viii.pdf](http://archive.bookofmormoncentral.org/sites/default/files/archive-files/pdf/cowdery/2018-06-29/letter_viii.pdf).

189. Historian Mark Ashurst-McGee notes that "Cowdery did not say that the Nephites *did* call the speculum in question 'interpreters,' but that they *would* have. As the Nephites called the spectacles 'interpreters,' it was reasonable for Cowdery to state that they would have used the same term to describe other seer stones." Mark Ashurst-McGee, "A Pathway to Prophethood: Joseph Smith Jr. as Rodsman, Village Seer, and Judeo-Christian Prophet" (master's thesis, Utah State University, 2000), 324n13, [mormonpolygamymdocuments.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/JS1699.pdf](http://mormonpolygamymdocuments.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/JS1699.pdf).

190. A published account that does say, incorrectly, that Oliver handled the interpreters is a misquotation of Cowdery's 1884 discourse as recorded in Reuben Miller's journal. The erroneous account has Cowdery saying, "I beheld with my eyes, and handled with my hands, the gold plates from which it was transcribed. I also saw with my eyes and handled with my hands the 'holy interpreters.' That book is true." "Last Days of Oliver Cowdery," *Deseret News*, 13 April 1859, 48, [contentdm.lib.byu.edu/digital/collection/desnews2/id/7557/rec/21](http://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/digital/collection/desnews2/id/7557/rec/21). The original record in Miller's journal has "the gold plates from which it



to translate but had limited success (Doctrine and Covenants 9:1–11). In attempting to translate, he would have likely used Joseph's brown seer stone. This was the stone that David Whitmer (1879 corrective statement through John Traugher) and Emma (1870 letter) remembered Joseph using at the time and which Joseph gave to Cowdery after the translation was complete.

In November 1830, Josiah Jones interviewed Cowdery, who was in Kirtland, Ohio, on his way to Missouri to preach to the Native Americans in that region. Jones wrote in 1831 (published in 1841) that Cowdery and his missionary companions had told him that Joseph translated by looking "through the stone spectacles" and specifically, by looking "into a stone or two stones, when put into a dark place." Jones further reported Cowdery stating that "Smith looked into or through the transparent stones to translate what was on the plates." When he asked Cowdery if he "had ever looked through the stones to see what he could see in them," Cowdery replied that he "was not permitted to look into them."<sup>191</sup> The seemingly contradictory and odd language of looking "into" and "through" stones to see what one can see "in" them is characteristic of glass looking, in which a seer stone is called a glass, and the seer looks seemingly into or through it to see a vision.<sup>192</sup> Descriptions of looking through or into stones in this sense do not imply that the stones resembled glass or that they were clear to normal vision, although hearers unfamiliar with the parlance of glass looking could have interpreted them that way. Such misinterpretation may have influenced the language of some of the reports by others of what Cowdery and other witnesses said. Also, *transparent* at that time could mean merely translucent, and in the context of seeing with stones, even opaque stones could be considered transparent.<sup>193</sup>

The mention of both one stone and two stones, if reported accurately, could have been an acknowledgment that Joseph used his

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was translated. I also beheld the Interpreters. That book is True." Reuben Miller journals, 1848–1849 / Journal, 1848, p. [16], [catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/22222322-f4fe-41e3-aa86-bfc54b94df92/0/14](http://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/22222322-f4fe-41e3-aa86-bfc54b94df92/0/14).

191. Josiah Jones, "History of the Mormonites," *The Evangelist* 9 (1 June 1841): 133–34, [contentdm.lib.byu.edu/digital/collection/BOMP/id/4487](http://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/digital/collection/BOMP/id/4487).

192. Spencer, "What Did the Interpreters Look Like," 231; "Trial Report, 28 August 1832," p. [2], [josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/trial-report-28-august-1832-state-of-new-york-v-js-c/1](http://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/trial-report-28-august-1832-state-of-new-york-v-js-c/1); "Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1844–1845," p. [8], bk. 14, [josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/lucy-mack-smith-history-1844-1845/174?p=174](http://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/lucy-mack-smith-history-1844-1845/174?p=174).

193. Spencer, "What Did the Interpreters Look Like," 231–34.

own seer stone in addition to the two interpreter stones. Alternatively, it could be an indication that he disassembled the interpreters so one or both of the stones could more easily fit in his hat.

If the “dark place” where Joseph put the stones to translate meant his hat, this report accords with Martin Harris’s description of Joseph placing the interpreters in a hat. The idea of Joseph using a hat with the interpreters is supported by an independent report of how Cowdery described the method of translation later that same month to a group of Shakers in Union Village, Ohio.<sup>194</sup> This report of what Cowdery said was recorded in January of 1831 by Richard McNemar in his diary. McNemar wrote that Cowdery had recently told some of his fellow Shakers that Joseph translated with “stones in the form of spectacles thro which the translator looked on the engraving & afterwards put his face into a hat & the interpretation then flowed into his mind.” Since Cowdery would not have been permitted to see the interpreters or the plates, this report, if accurate, would be fourth-hand at best (Joseph to Cowdery to an unknown Shaker to McNemar).

Another description of translation with the interpreters, that is at least thirdhand, was printed in the April 1831, *Evangelical Magazine and Gospel Advocate*. It reports on Joseph’s 29 June 1830 trial in Chenango County, New York, stemming from his use of a seer stone in the region after being hired in 1825 by Josiah Stowell to use it to look for silver.<sup>195</sup> The report says that Cowdery testified that Joseph “was able to read in English, the reformed Egyptian characters, which were engraved on the plates” by “looking through” the “two transparent stones, resembling glass, set in silver bows.”<sup>196</sup> This is similar to what Cowdery told Josiah Jones a few months earlier. The differences could be due to these both being summaries of what Oliver said, as expressed in the words of the reporters and based on their assumptions of what Oliver meant.<sup>197</sup>

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194. Christian Goodwillie, “Shaker Richard McNemar: The Earliest Book of Mormon Reviewer,” *Journal of Mormon History* 37, no. 2 (Spring 2011): 138, 142–43, [digitalcommons.usu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1065&context=mormonhistory](https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1065&context=mormonhistory).

195. “Introduction to State of New York v. JS–B and State of New York v. JS–C,” [josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/introduction-to-state-of-new-york-v-js-b-and-state-of-new-york-v-js-c/1#transcript-1-1830](https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/introduction-to-state-of-new-york-v-js-b-and-state-of-new-york-v-js-c/1#transcript-1-1830).

196. “Abram W. Benton Reminiscence, March 1831,” in *Early Mormon Documents*, 4:97, [archive.org/details/volume-4\\_202011/page/97/mode/2up](https://archive.org/details/volume-4_202011/page/97/mode/2up).

197. For example, instead of saying the stones looked like glass, Cowdery may have called them *glasses*, i.e., seer stones. For analysis of this report

An entirely different description of the mechanics of translation was reported in a very late account by Samuel W. Richards, who visited with Oliver Cowdery in 1849. In 1907, Richards wrote down what he remembered from his visit a half century prior. His recollection has Cowdery saying that Joseph translated "by holding the translators over the words of the written record, and the translation appears distinctly in the instrument."<sup>198</sup>

### Joseph's statements on the mechanics of translation

Beginning in 1829, newspaper reports began to appear stating that Joseph used a hat in translating. By late 1831, these reports had been widely published, some saying he translated by placing the interpreter stones in the hat and others saying he used a single seer stone.<sup>199</sup> The reports may have derived from discussions and preaching of Martin Harris and Oliver Cowdery during their early missionary and other labors. This seems plausible given that, as mentioned above, (1) the first of these reports was published by Jonathan Hadley soon after he visited with Harris, and (2) Cowdery and his companions were willing to discuss the method of translation by "a stone or two stones, when put into a dark place" in their early missionary efforts.<sup>200</sup>

The published reports put Joseph in a difficult situation. To deny that he translated with a stone and hat would be to make a false statement; to confirm that he did, given the contemporary public preconceptions of glass looking, would be to elicit an unfairly negative impression of the nature of the translation in many readers. Joseph did neither.

In his preface to the 1830 Book of Mormon, he wrote only that he

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relative to the parlance of seeing, see Spencer, "What Did the Interpreters Look Like," 239, [journal.interpreterfoundation.org/what-did-the-interpreters-urim-and-thummim-look-like/](http://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/what-did-the-interpreters-urim-and-thummim-look-like/).

198. "Oliver Cowdery Interview with Samuel W. Richards, January 1849," in *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:500–501, [archive.org/details/volume-2\\_202011/page/499/mode/2up](http://archive.org/details/volume-2_202011/page/499/mode/2up).

199. For examples featuring the interpreters in a hat, see "Martin Harris Interview with Rochester (NY) Gem, Circa June 1829," in *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:273; "Palmyra Freeman, Circa August 1829," 2:221, [archive.org/details/volume-2\\_202011/page/221/mode/2up](http://archive.org/details/volume-2_202011/page/221/mode/2up); "Brattleboro' (VT) Messenger, 20 November 1830," 4:213, [archive.org/details/volume-4\\_202011/page/213/mode/2up](http://archive.org/details/volume-4_202011/page/213/mode/2up); for a single seer stone in a hat, see "Wayne County (PA) Inquirer, circa May 1830," in *Early Mormon Documents*, 3:274, [archive.org/details/volume-3\\_202011/page/273/mode/2up](http://archive.org/details/volume-3_202011/page/273/mode/2up).

200. Jones, "History of the Mormonites," 133.

translated “by the gift and power of God,” echoing words from the title page of the Book of Mormon.

At an 25 October 1831 conference of elders, perhaps in response to these early newspaper reports, Joseph was invited by Hyrum to explain the particulars of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon. He declined, saying it was not expedient for him to relate those things.<sup>201</sup> To the end of his life, Joseph remained true to that determination. He did not provide particulars on the translation in his public statements or history other than mentioning the interpreters and saying that the translation involved the gift and power of God, reading words, and use of “the Urim and Thummim.”<sup>202</sup> Like Lucy and Oliver Cowdery, he chose not to explicitly mention his seer stones in his written history or published statements.<sup>203</sup>

In his 1832 history, Joseph says, speaking of Martin Harris and the characters copied from the gold plates:

He returned to me and gave them to <me> <to> translate and I said I ~~said~~ cannot for I am not learned but the Lord had prepared ~~spectticke~~ spectacles for to read the Book.”<sup>204</sup>

Since the interpreters were too large to be worn like glasses, and the book was in another language, this description of the translation must be figurative. Based on the context, Joseph is alluding to 2 Nephi 27:19–20, which portrays the translation as a matter of Joseph reading words that the Lord shows him:

The Lord God will deliver again the book and the words thereof to him that is not learned; and the man that is not

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201. “Minutes, 25–26 October 1831,” p. 13, Joseph Smith Papers, [josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/minutes-25-26-october-1831/4](https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/minutes-25-26-october-1831/4).

202. For Joseph Smith’s accounts, see Welch, “Miraculous Translation,” 121–29.

203. For example, in summarizing the testimony of his two June 1830 trials stemming from his use of seer stones for treasure seeking, Joseph does not tell the principal justification for his arrest or relate any testimony mentioning his use of seer stones. “History, 1838–1856, volume A-1 [23 December 1805–30 August 1834],” pp. 44–47, Joseph Smith Papers, [josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-a-1-23-december-1805-30-august-1834/52](https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-a-1-23-december-1805-30-august-1834/52). For more on charges against Joseph related to his glass-looking activities, see “Introduction to State of New York v. JS–B and State of New York v. JS–C.” [josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/introduction-to-state-of-new-york-v-js-b-and-state-of-new-york-v-js-c/1#transcript-1-1830](https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/introduction-to-state-of-new-york-v-js-b-and-state-of-new-york-v-js-c/1#transcript-1-1830).

204. “History, circa Summer 1832,” p. 5, [josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/history-circa-summer-1832?p=5](https://josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/history-circa-summer-1832?p=5). Compare the surrounding text with 2 Nephi 27: 15–20.

learned shall say: I am not learned. Then shall the Lord God say unto him: . . . thou shalt read the words which I shall give unto thee.

A 9 November 1835 entry in Joseph's journal relates his report of what the angel Moroni told him about the purpose of the interpreters twelve years earlier:

Also that the Urim and Thumim, was hid up with the record, and that God would give me power to translate it, with the assistance of this instrument.<sup>205</sup>

In a portion of his history recorded in 1839, Joseph expresses his memory of this same experience in different words:

Also, that there were two stones in silver bows and these (~~put in~~ <stones fastened> to a breast plate) which constituted what is called the Urim & Thummin deposited with the plates, and <the possession and use of these stones> ~~that~~ was what constituted seers in ancient or former times and that God <had> *prepared them for the purpose of translating the book.*<sup>206</sup>

An edited version of this statement was later canonized (Joseph Smith — History 1:35). It is unlikely that Joseph remembered the angel's exact wording twelve years after the fact, still less after sixteen, but the basic idea is the same in these two accounts: the two seer stones were provided to assist Joseph with the translation. They must have been critical at the beginning of the translation, since Emma said that they were the first stones Joseph used. Perhaps these two polished, white, specially prepared seer stones were superior to Joseph's own seer stone in inspiring the faith he needed to get started. As Joseph Knight reported, Joseph was quite impressed with the stones: "I can see any thing they are Marvelus!"<sup>207</sup> Once Joseph had some initial

205. "Journal, 1835–1836," p. 25, Joseph Smith Papers, emphasis added.

206. "History, 1838–1856, volume A-1 [23 December 1805–30 August 1834]," p. 5, emphasis added, [josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-a-1-23-december-1805-30-august-1834/5#source-note](http://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-a-1-23-december-1805-30-august-1834/5#source-note). Although the edited and canonized version of this statement (Joseph Smith — History 1:35) implies that "the Urim and Thummim" consisted of the combination of the interpreters and the breastplate, Doctrine and Covenants 17 identifies "the Urim and Thummim" as the stones only.

207. "Joseph Knight, Sr., Reminiscence, Circa 1835–1847," 4:15, [archive.org/details/volume-4\\_202011/page/11/mode/2up](http://archive.org/details/volume-4_202011/page/11/mode/2up).

success translating, his own seer stone may have been sufficient and served the same purpose. While these statements say that the interpreters were prepared or provided to assist Joseph in translating, they are silent on whether other stones had been made available or could be used for the same purpose.

The November 1837 issue of the *Elders' Journal*, of which Joseph had the title of editor, promised answers in an upcoming issue to several questions frequently asked of the prophet. Among these, were “Was not Jo Smith a money digger?” and “How, and where did you obtain the book of Mormon?”<sup>208</sup> The 8 May 1838 entry in Joseph’s journal indicates he was working on answers to the questions.<sup>209</sup> On May 12, Sidney Rigdon was appointed to “correct the matter for the ‘Elders Journal’ (that is) the Orthography and the Prosody of the different letters &c.”<sup>210</sup> Whether his assignment included editing Joseph’s contribution is unclear. Joseph’s answers, edited or not, were published in July 1838, issue of the *Elders' Journal*.<sup>211</sup> The answer to the first of these two questions confirmed that Joseph had been involved in money digging and gave his monthly wage, though not the reason for his hiring. The answer to the second question related how an angel had told him about the plates, and that

I obtained them, and the Urim and Thummim with them; by the means of which, I translated the plates; and thus came the book of Mormon.

The first portion of this statement, to the second semicolon, does not contradict any of the firsthand witness statements, none of which deny that the interpreters were ever used in translating the plates. The only potential contradiction is in the phrase, “and thus came the book of Mormon.” “The book of Mormon” could refer to the published Book of Mormon, as we have it today, or to the larger book compiled by Mormon, including the portion Martin Harris lost and which Emma stated was translated with the aid of the interpreters. The phrase, “thus came the book of Mormon,” implies that the interpreters were the only

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208. “Elders’ Journal, November 1837,” pp. 28–29, Joseph Smith Papers, [josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/elders-journal-november-1837/12](http://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/elders-journal-november-1837/12).

209. “Journal, March–September 1838,” p. 39, Joseph Smith Papers, [josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/journal-march-september-1838/25](http://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/journal-march-september-1838/25).

210. “Minute Book 2,” p. 140, Joseph Smith Papers, [josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/minute-book-2/143](http://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/minute-book-2/143).

211. “Elders’ Journal, July 1838,” pp. 42–43, Joseph Smith Papers, [josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/elders-journal-july-1838/10](http://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/elders-journal-july-1838/10).

stones used for the entire translation. It does not, however, strictly rule out the use of another stone as well. By using the term, *the Urim and Thummim* in reference to the two interpreter stones, Joseph expands its definition for the reader. It no longer means only the biblical Urim and Thummim, as most readers at the time would have assumed, but now encompasses other revelatory stones. With Joseph's expanded definition of this term, his statement reads:

I obtained them, and *revelatory stones* with them; by the means of which, I translated the plates; and thus came the book of Mormon.

With this understanding, his summary phrase, "thus came the book of Mormon," can now be read in at least three ways:

1. the book of Mormon came by translation with revelatory stones,
2. the book of Mormon came by translation with the revelatory stones found with the plates, or
3. the book of Mormon came in a manner exemplified by translation with the revelatory stones found with the plates.

Only the second possible reading contradicts the statements of witnesses who reported seeing Joseph translate with his own seer stone. If Joseph (or Rigdon, if he edited the statement) had wanted to state unequivocally that he used only the interpreters in translating Mormon's record, he could have done so, in fewer words, by using direct and unambiguous language.

In his 1 March 1842 article, "Church History," published in *Times and Seasons*, Joseph made similar mention of his translation of the Book of Mormon:

With the records was found a curious instrument which the ancients called "Urim and Thummim," which consisted of two transparent stones set in the rim of a bow fastened to a breastplate.

Through the medium of the Urim and Thummim I translated the record by the gift, and power of God.<sup>212</sup>

The latter part of this statement uses Joseph's nonspecific term for revelatory stones and is also set off from the description of the interpreters by a paragraph break, allowing the term to be more easily

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212. "Church History," 1 March 1842," p. 707, Joseph Smith Papers; josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/church-history-1-march-1842/2.



interpreted as referring to both the interpreter stones and Joseph's own seer stone. Even if this phrase is interpreted as referring only to the interpreters, the statement does not exclude the use of another stone in addition to the interpreters in translating the record.

### **Statements of Joseph Smith's interviewers and close relations**

Since Joseph's own statements use ambiguous language for the stones of translation and are silent on whether a hat was used, we might turn to statements of individuals who heard him, or likely heard him, describe the translation in person. Below, I review statements made by such individuals regarding the instruments and mechanics of translation.

#### ***Accounts by close relations***

Two individuals who had a close relationship with Joseph during the translation period and who left descriptive statements are Joseph's father-in-law, Isaac Hale, and his younger brother William. There is no record of William having witnessed the translation, but he would have surely been privy to family discussions on the topic and to have at some point discussed the translation with Joseph. In his 1883 self-published pamphlet, he states that Joseph would translate by placing "the Urim and Thummim" in a hat:

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.<sup>213</sup>

Although this account reports translation by placing the interpreters in a hat, it is unclear whether "the stone" in which words appeared refers to the interpreter stones, Joseph's own seer stone, or perhaps both.

When Joseph and Emma moved to Harmony, Pennsylvania, to

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213. "William Smith, On Mormonism, 1883," 1:497, [archive.org/details/volume-1\\_202010/page/496/mode/2up](https://archive.org/details/volume-1_202010/page/496/mode/2up). For discussion of J. W. Peterson's 1924 report of an interview with William Smith that says Joseph translated by looking through the interpreters attached to a breastplate, see Spencer, "What Did the Interpreters Look Like," 253n73.

translate, they briefly lived with Emma's parents, the Hales, and then in a nearby house the Hales agreed to sell them.<sup>214</sup> Isaac Hale had been familiar with Joseph's role as a glass looker — Joseph having boarded at his house while looking for buried silver for Josiah Stowell — and disapproved of it. Given his disapproval of his son-in-law's glass looking, Hale would have been interested to know how Joseph claimed to read the contents of the plates. He could have heard about Joseph's method of translating from his daughter, Emma, or his son, Reuben, both of whom served as scribes; during his discussions related to the translation with Martin Harris; or Joseph himself.<sup>215</sup> Hale signed an affidavit in March 1834 (first published in the May 1 *Susquehanna Register*), in which he states:

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!<sup>216</sup>

### ***Accounts by others who interviewed Joseph***

There are four other individuals who left statements describing the mechanics or instruments of translation, based apparently on what Joseph Smith told them.

Ezra Booth joined the Church in May 1831 after meeting Joseph. He was soon called on a mission to go to Missouri along with Joseph and others. While there, he became disillusioned and "condemned for evil that thing in which there was no evil" (Doctrine and Covenants 64:15–16). Beginning in September, he wrote a series of letters, published in the *Ohio Star*, condemning Joseph. His sources of information for his letters included his own experiences as well as "several interviews with Messrs. Smith, Rigdon and Cowdery."<sup>217</sup> In his 24 October 1831 letter (published 27 October), he says:

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214. Mark L. Staker and Curtis Ashton, "Joseph and Emma Smith's Home," Church History, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (website), February 27, 2019, [history.churchofjesuschrist.org/content/historic-sites/pennsylvania/joseph-and-emma-smiths-home?lang=eng](https://history.churchofjesuschrist.org/content/historic-sites/pennsylvania/joseph-and-emma-smiths-home?lang=eng).

215. In his statement, Hale says that Joseph assured him he would give up glass looking, that Joseph permitted him to heft the plates in a box, and that he discussed the plates with both Joseph and Martin Harris. "Isaac Hale Statement, 1834," 4:281–88, [archive.org/details/volume-4\\_202011/page/283/mode/2up](https://archive.org/details/volume-4_202011/page/283/mode/2up).

216. "Isaac Hale Statement, 1834," 4:281, 287.

217. "For the Ohio Star: Nelson, Portage County, Sept. 12th, 1831," *Ohio Star*,

These treasures were discovered several years since, by means of the dark glass, the same with which *Smith* says he translated the most of the Book of Mormon.<sup>218</sup>

Here, Booth reports Joseph as saying he translated with the “dark glass,” the brown seer stone he had used for treasure seeking.

Nancy Towle, an itinerant preacher who met with Joseph Smith in October of 1831, reported in her 1832 book 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.<sup>219</sup>

Henry Harris, a neighbor of the Smiths in Manchester, New York, recalled in a sworn statement in about 1833 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.<sup>220</sup>

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.<sup>221</sup>

Here, Bauder, like Joseph Knight and Ezra Booth, uses the

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13 October 1831, emphasis added, [sidneyrigdon.com/dbroadhu/oh/miscohio.htm](http://sidneyrigdon.com/dbroadhu/oh/miscohio.htm).

218. “Ezra Booth Accounts, 1831,” 5:308–9, emphasis added, [archive.org/details/volume-5\\_202011](http://archive.org/details/volume-5_202011).

219. Towle, *Vicissitudes Illustrated in the Experience of Nancy Towle, in Europe and America*, 151, [google.com/books/edition/Vicissitudes\\_Illustrated/iXYoAAAYAAJ](http://google.com/books/edition/Vicissitudes_Illustrated/iXYoAAAYAAJ).

220. “Henry Harris Statement, circa 1833,” 2:76, emphasis added, [archive.org/details/volume-2\\_202011/page/75/mode/2up](http://archive.org/details/volume-2_202011/page/75/mode/2up).

221. “Joseph Smith Interview with Peter Bauder, October 1830,” in *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:17, [archive.org/details/volume-1\\_202010/page/16/mode/2up](http://archive.org/details/volume-1_202010/page/16/mode/2up).

colloquial term *glass* in reference to seer stones, in this case the interpreter stones.

### **Summary of statements on the mechanics of translation**

Joseph Smith's and Oliver Cowdery's own published statements have Joseph translating with "the Urim and Thummim." They imply that this refers to the interpreters, but the wording leaves open the possibility that Joseph's seer stone is being obliquely referred to, or that it was used in addition to the interpreters. Joseph Knight (probable witness) said that Joseph was able to translate with the interpreters, then described how he would translate with "the urim and thummim." Lucy Mack Smith (possible witness) ambiguously mentioned translation with "the urim and thummim." Statements by Emma, Elizabeth McKune, Elizabeth Cowdery, and David Whitmer and a report of an interview with Michael Morse, all of whom credibly claimed to have observed Joseph translate in either Harmony or Fayette, say he translated with his own seer stone. Emma's statement says Joseph first used the interpreters to translate, and later, his own brown seer stone.

Statements by Elizabeth Cowdery, David Whitmer, and Elizabeth McKune and reports of interviews with Emma and Michael Morse describe Joseph translating with the stone placed in a hat. Joseph Knight's statement implies that the interpreters were placed in a hat. Martin Harris stated that the interpreters would have been used by placing them in a hat. The statements of Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery neither confirm nor deny the use of a hat. An early report derived from Cowdery and his missionary companions, however, does say that Joseph translated by looking into one or both interpreter stones put in a dark place, and another report derived from Cowdery mentions a hat. Other individuals who heard or likely heard Joseph describe his manner of translating imply he used the interpreter stones in a hat (William Smith), his own seer stone in a hat (Isaac Hale), the interpreters with no mention of a hat (Nancy Towle, Peter Bauder), or a single stone with no mention of a hat (Ezra Booth, Henry Harris).

These statements are all consistent with the idea that Joseph first translated with one or both of the interpreter stones in a hat and later substituted his own seer stone. Having obtained the two interpreter stones and knowing they were seer stones (Joseph Smith—History 1:35), Joseph would have naturally thought to use them in the same manner he used his own seer stones.

Three of the accounts reviewed above describe distinctly different methods of translation:

- looking through the interpreters at the open plates (“looked on the engravings”) and then into a hat (1831 record of report of Oliver Cowdery preaching),
- looking into (not through) the interpreters while attached to the breastplate, with no plates mentioned (1879 synopsis of discourse on John Whitmer), and
- holding the interpreters over the words of the plates and reading what appeared in them (1907 report of Oliver Cowdery interview).

These accounts are quite far removed in either time or connection from the translation, mutually contradictory, and uncorroborated by credible accounts.

None of the accounts reviewed above clearly describes Joseph translating by simply looking through the interpreters at the open plates, a method that is sometimes assumed to have been used, perhaps inspired by Joseph’s early references to the interpreters as “spectacles.” The resemblance of the white, widely set, relatively large interpreter stones to spectacles was only superficial, however, and they could not have been used in the same way.

With a casual reading, Nancy Towle’s report of her visit with Joseph Smith (given above) may seem to describe this method, but it has Joseph looking “into” the stones to read the contents of the plates in English, not through them, and does not definitively state whether the plates were present. Her report says that Joseph could read the writing (the record) that was engraved on the plates, but this may refer only to reading the English translation of the record rather than reading directly from the plates. The summary of Oliver’s testimony at Joseph’s 1830 trial, which is a thirdhand description of Joseph’s experience at best, has Joseph looking through the interpreters but is also unclear on whether he was looking at the plates or only at the translation.

While it is possible that Joseph translated with another method in addition to looking into a hat containing one or two seer stones, it is not clear what that additional method would have been.

Whether Joseph translated with a single stone or the two interpreter stones in a hat makes no difference as far as the miraculous nature of the translation is concerned. Either way, he was seeing the translation when he looked in the hat, not dictating it from notes or a

manuscript. Witnesses who spoke of both Joseph's seer stone and the interpreters — Joseph Knight, Emma, David Whitmer, and Martin Harris — gave no indication that they saw any important difference in the implications of Joseph's use of his own seer stone versus those provided with the plates.

Similarly, the evidence that Joseph used stones in his hat in the translation process should not diminish the vital roles that the plates served in the Restoration. Since he did not know the Nephite language, he could not have understood the record by reading directly from the plates; the translation had to be revealed to him.<sup>222</sup> However, the plates were often present and so must have been important.<sup>223</sup> Their presence would have given Joseph confidence that there was an ancient record to be revealed and sustained the faith he needed to experience the revelation. They were also of vital importance for other reasons. Of course, if the plates had not been made and passed down through the centuries by Nephite record keepers, there would be no record to translate, and we would have no Book of Mormon. Joseph's possession of plates also served as tangible evidence that the record was a real history of real people, not just inspirational literature. Even though we do not have access to the plates, we have the testimonies of three witnesses who saw them in joint divine visions, and eight witnesses who handled them, turned the pages, and saw the engravings. Their sober testimonies were and still are foundational to the message of the Restoration.

### **Reports of how Joseph described the experience of translation**

In his 24 October 1831, letter, Ezra Booth reported how Joseph described experiences of seeing heavenly beings and of translating the Book of Mormon:

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

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222. In a letter to the editor of *Times & Seasons*, Joseph 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 all dead." "Letter to Editor, circa 20 May 1843," Joseph Smith Papers, [josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-to-editor-circa-20-may-1843/1](https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-to-editor-circa-20-may-1843/1).

223. For more on the importance of the plates to the translation, see Scripture Central Staff, "Why Were the Plates Present During the Translation of the Book of Mormon?," *KnoWhy* 366, 20 August 2020, [scripturecentral.org/knowwhy/why-were-the-plates-present-during-the-translation-of-the-book-of-mormon](https://scripturecentral.org/knowwhy/why-were-the-plates-present-during-the-translation-of-the-book-of-mormon).

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.<sup>224</sup>

According to Booth's report, Joseph said he was able to see heavenly beings and also the translation of the Book of Mormon whether his eyes were open or shut, because he was seeing with "spiritual eyes." Joseph expressed a similar idea—of seeing with other than the physical eyes—in describing two of his visions of heavenly beings as reported in the Doctrine and Covenants. In Doctrine and Covenants 76, Joseph Smith relates how he and Sidney Rigdon, in Hiram, Ohio, simultaneously experienced a vision of divine beings after the Lord "touched the eyes of our understandings and they were opened." They were commanded to write the vision while yet "in the Spirit." Others in the room saw and heard Joseph and Sidney Rigdon describe what they were seeing but did not themselves see the vision.<sup>225</sup> In another vision, Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery saw Christ standing on a platform of gold in the Kirtland Temple. They reported that "the vision" was seen through "the eyes of our understanding" when "the veil was taken from our minds." The experience ended when the "vision closed" (Doctrine and Covenants 110:1–2, 11). Joseph's nephew, Joseph F. Smith, used similar language in reporting his 1918 vision of the redemption of the dead (Doctrine and Covenants 138:11).

In her 1870 statement, Elizabeth Cowdery reports that Joseph said that after he placed the stone in the hat and the hat over his face, "the words (he said) . . . appeared before him." Royal Skousen, in his analysis of the original manuscript of the Book of Mormon, estimated that Joseph was seeing and dictating up to 20 words of the translation at a time, based on instances of anticipation in the text as the scribe took down Joseph's dictation.<sup>226</sup>

224. "Ezra Booth Accounts, 1831," 5:308, emphasis added.

225. Philo Dibble, "Recollections of the Prophet Joseph Smith," *The Juvenile Instructor*, 15 May 1892, 303–04, [ia801600.us.archive.org/21/items/juvenileinstruct2710geor/juvenileinstruct2710geor.pdf](https://ia801600.us.archive.org/21/items/juvenileinstruct2710geor/juvenileinstruct2710geor.pdf).

226. Royal Skousen, "The Witnesses of the Book of Mormon," chapter from *The History of the Text of the Book of Mormon*, vol. 3, part 7 (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, in press), 28–29, pre-print available at "Update of the Pre-Print of a Discussion of the Book of Mormon Witnesses," Interpreter Foundation (website), 25 August 2021, [interpreterfoundation.org/blog-update-of-the-pre-print-of-a-discussion-of-the-book-of-mormon-witnesses-by-royal-skousen/](https://interpreterfoundation.org/blog-update-of-the-pre-print-of-a-discussion-of-the-book-of-mormon-witnesses-by-royal-skousen/).



In his 1885 statement through Zenas Gurley, David Whitmer says that Joseph described the translation experience to multiple individuals. He reports Joseph "*stating to me and others* that the original Character[s] appeared upon parchment and under it the translation in english."<sup>227</sup> In his 1879 corrective statement through John Traughber, Whitmer reports in similar language how he heard Joseph describe the translation — as words on a parchment that appeared before him in "spiritual light":

A spiritual light would shine forth, and parchment would appear before Joseph, upon which was a line of characters from the plates, and under it, the translation in English; *at least, so Joseph said.*<sup>228</sup>

These are the reports of how Joseph described the subjective experience of translation that are most likely to be firsthand.<sup>229</sup> They give no indication that the stone or stones were still visible once the words were seen. The words simply appear before Joseph (Elizabeth Cowdery and Ezra Booth reports) or on parchment that appears before him (David Whitmer reports). These reports are mutually consistent and suggest a visionary experience reminiscent of Lehi reading from a visioned manuscript as described in 1 Nephi 1. With the words appearing before Joseph with no apparent connection to the stone, seen with his spiritual eyes, and seen whether his physical eyes were open or shut, these reports are less evocative of advanced light-emitting stone technology.

In his 1887 statement, Whitmer again expresses his understanding that Joseph saw the translation on a visioned parchment, and says, echoing Joseph's 1830 statement, "Thus the Book of Mormon was translated by *the gift and power of God*, and not by any power

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227. "David Whitmer Interview with Zenas H. Gurley," 5:138, emphasis added.

228. Traughber Interview, "Testimony of David Whitmer," 341, emphasis added, [archive.org/details/TheSaintsHerald\\_Volume\\_26\\_1879/page/n339/mode/2up?view=theater](http://archive.org/details/TheSaintsHerald_Volume_26_1879/page/n339/mode/2up?view=theater).

229. A report by Truman Coe is sometimes cited as description of the translation process by Joseph Smith, but there is no record of Coe 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. Alternatively, Coe may have been repeating what he had heard others report. If Coe had spoken with Smith, he probably would have said so. Coe's statement claims that Joseph said the words would appear "on a screen placed before him." "Truman Coe Account, 1836," in *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:46–47, [archive.org/details/volume-1\\_202010/page/46/mode/2up](http://archive.org/details/volume-1_202010/page/46/mode/2up).

of man.”<sup>230</sup> Whitmer summarizes his understanding of this gift of God: “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.”<sup>231</sup> The gift and power of God by which Joseph said he translated, in Whitmer’s understanding, was the ability to see the words on the visioned parchment—the gift of seeing, or the gift of visions.<sup>232</sup> In an early revelation, this gift was called the “*sight and power to translate*” (Doctrine and Covenants 3:11–12). This gift was temporarily taken from Joseph after he lost the 116 pages, with the result that his “mind became darkened” (Doctrine and Covenants 10:2–3). The gift of visions is one of the spiritual gifts mentioned in the seventh Article of Faith. Doctrine and Covenants 5:4 says the gift Joseph used in translating was the first gift the Lord had bestowed upon him, which also suggests that it was the same gift as his gift of visions. After the translation was complete, Joseph received other sacred texts by vision.<sup>233</sup>



**Stan Spencer** earned a BS from Brigham Young University and a PhD from Claremont Graduate University, both in botany. He has worked as a research scientist at Brigham Young University and the Smithsonian Institution’s Laboratory of Molecular Systematics and now works as a consultant in California. He has a particular interest in the textual origins of Mormon scripture.

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230. Whitmer, *Address to All Believers*, 12, emphasis added, [archive.org/details/addressstoallbeli00whit/page/12/mode/2up](https://archive.org/details/addressstoallbeli00whit/page/12/mode/2up).

231. Whitmer, *Address to All Believers*, 37, emphasis added, [archive.org/details/addressstoallbeli00whit/page/36/mode/2up](https://archive.org/details/addressstoallbeli00whit/page/36/mode/2up).

232. For the gift of seeing as equivalent to the gift of visions, see Spencer, “Seers and Stones,” 50–51, including notes.

233. For a discussion of other revealed texts Joseph reportedly received by vision, see Spencer, “Seers and Stones,” 43–48. Regarding the revelation in Doctrine and Covenants 52 being received by vision, see “Historical Introduction” to “Revelation, 6 June 1831 [D&C 52],” Joseph Smith Papers, [josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/revelation-6-june-1831-dc-52/1#historical-intro](https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/revelation-6-june-1831-dc-52/1#historical-intro).



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