

Chapter Two

DIVINATION AS TRANSLATION

The Function of Sacred Stones in Ancient Mesopotamia and the Book of Ether

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The Book of Mormon presents particular uses of sacred stones throughout the text. While comparisons to the biblical Urim and Thummim are commonplace in Latter-day Saint scripture studies, seer stones and other consecrated stones have a much broader scope and function in the Book of Mormon than many people realize. Properly contextualizing the use of sacred stones in ritual requires a review of the historical context of divination in ancient Mesopotamia. I begin by noting geographical clues in the book of Ether that point to Mesopotamia as the homeland of the Jaredites. Next I analyze the cultural milieu relating to luminous stones and their use in Jaredite barges. Details of the two interpreter stones that were sealed up with the record of the brother of Jared's panoptic vision suggest a secondary context for better understanding the Jaredites' use of sacred stones—"magnification," a process seemingly related to translation. I explain further how Mesopotamian divination rites informed the use of

sacred stones in Jaredite culture, particularly in relation to the notion of “translation” itself. With this groundwork laid, it will be seen that the use of divine stones for translation in the book of Ether fits comfortably within a larger Mesopotamian paradigm of interpretation of divine symbols and signs.

GEOGRAPHICAL ORIGINS OF THE JAREDITES

Curiously, the term *Jaredite* appears only once in the Book of Mormon, and it occurs *outside* the book of Ether. Mormon used the term to refer to the group to which the brother of Jared and his family belonged (Moroni 9:23).¹ What do we know of the Jaredites and their homeland? First, the Jaredites were expressly non-Israelite because they preceded Jacob (Israel) by hundreds of years.² Geographical data in Ether 2 places the Jaredites in the region of Mesopotamia. After the Lord confounded the languages at Babel, the brother of Jared and other families “went down into the valley which was northward, (and the name of the valley was Nimrod, being called after the mighty hunter)” (v. 1). Nimrod was Noah’s great-grandson, “a mighty one in the earth” and “a mighty hunter before the Lord” who ruled over “Babel, and Erech, and Accad, and Calneh, in the land of Shinar” (Genesis 10:8–10). These four cities and the “land of Shinar” provide a likely geographical range for the valley of Nimrod. Unfortunately, there is still considerable debate on the identification of several of these locales.

NIMROD AND THE TOWER OF BABEL

That the Jaredites left the Tower of Babel³ and went immediately down into the valley of Nimrod suggests a relatively proximate location. While the term “valley of Nimrod”⁴ appears only in the Book of Mormon, Micah 5:6 does mention the “land of Nimrod” in reference to Mesopotamia or Assyria.⁵ Therefore, biblical evidence may suggest a region in Mesopotamia or Assyria for the Jaredite heartland since Nimrod initially settled the former and then moved north into the latter.⁶

If we could securely identify Nimrod with a known historical character mentioned outside the Bible, we would know more about the full extent of his kingdom, and by extension the likely boundaries of the Jaredites. But such an identification remains elusive. What we can say is that Nimrod

has often been linked with the Mesopotamian god Ninurta (“the first among the great gods”),⁷ although there is seemingly little evidence that Nimrod was viewed as a god or even as semidivine.⁸ Possible variants of his name include Umunurta in Emesal (a dialect of Sumerian), *nrt* or *nwšt* in first-millennium-BC Aramaic texts, and *nurti*, *urti*, or *urtu* in late-Babylonian anthroponyms.⁹ Nimrod has been linked to Nimurata, son of the Assyrian Ellil¹⁰ and founder of Mesopotamia in cuneiform literature.¹¹ Other views posit Nimrod as a corruption of Sumerian *Mardu* (= *mar-dú*)¹² and identify him with the famed Izdubar (i.e., Gilgamesh)¹³ or with the LUGAL-MARAD-DA, a patron god of the city of Marad.¹⁴ More convincingly, the Poebel dynastic tablet specifies that LUGAL-MARAD-DA was “an old, semimythical king, the third ruler of the first kingdom of Erech,”¹⁵ one of cities built by the biblical Nimrod according to Genesis 10:10.

Determining the political boundaries of Nimrod’s regnal territory mentioned in Genesis 10:9–10 should help us to better approximate the area from which the Jaredite group originated and the general direction they traveled. The Tower of Babel is a good point of departure. While the Bible does not state that Nimrod constructed that tower, later sources attribute it to him. For example, Josephus states that Nimrod sought to build the tower as “revenge” against God in case he tried to drown the world in a deluge again.¹⁶ The book of Jubilees states that the tower was so tall that it took forty-three years to build (see 10:20–21), although the ancient records widely vary as to its height and the number of years for completion. The Tower of Babel is said to have been built in Shinar (see Genesis 11:2), spelled in various sources as Sanhar, Sanhara, Singara, Sinar, Sanar, and Sennaar. Shinar refers to Mesopotamia more generally¹⁷ and may derive from a Semitic form meaning “land of two rivers,” thereby closely associating with the term *Mesopotamia* (Greek for “between the two rivers”) itself.¹⁸

Erech is a city safely associated with the modern Tall al-Warkā’ along the Euphrates, northwest of Ur, equivalent to the Sumerian city of Uruk.¹⁹ The name *Accad* (*Akkad*) was discovered at the mound Abu Hubba, north of Babylon, in 1881 and appears in various other texts;²⁰ it is likely located just north of Babylon.²¹ Various possibilities exist for the location of Calneh

(or Calno), if it is an actual city name.²² It may correspond to the Babylonian Kul-unu, located near Erech (see Amos 6:2), and is “stated to be in Shinar or Sumir in order to distinguish it from another Calneh, called Kullania by the Assyrians, in northern Syria.”²³ Another view is that Calneh, a name deriving from *Ki-illina*, “the city of the god Enlil,”²⁴ is Nippur,²⁵ a city located about 100 km south of modern-day Bagdad, Iraq. Calneh has also been equated with the Sumerian term *kalama*, linking it to Hursagkalama, twin city to Kish founded by Sargon, located just north of Nippur.²⁶ While we are unable to confidently pinpoint the location of Calneh, the best evidence points to a likely location near central Mesopotamia.

NORTHERN CITIES IN ASSYRIA

The Bible reports that after building Babel, Erech, Accad, and Calneh, Nimrod went into Assyria to establish Nineveh, Rehoboth-ir, Calah, and Resen. “For Assyriologists [these cities mentioned in Genesis 10:8–12 have been] a veritable crux, since neither Nimrod nor Calneh, Rehoboth-ir, and Resen could be unambiguously identified from Assyrian sources.”²⁷ Indeed, while “Nineveh (modern Kuyunjik) and Calah (Assyrian: Kalhu, modern Nimrud) are well-known cities that flourished under the neo-Assyrian empire,” cuneiform texts have not satisfactorily identified Rehoboth-ir and Resen with any neo-Assyrian cities.²⁸ However, with the four cities in Babylon and the others to the north in Assyria said to be part of Nimrod’s kingdom, we have a broad idea of the likely geographic range of the valley of Nimrod spoken of in the Ether account. This range probably extended from central Mesopotamia at least as far south as Erech and up into Ninevah in Assyria. It is therefore noteworthy, as Hugh Nibley has pointed out, that

in the north end of Mesopotamia all the places bear the name Nimrod. There’s Bir Nimrod and dozens of Nimrod names up north in Mesopotamia where you go through. Then you go east and what do you do? You cross many waters.²⁹

The valley of Nimrod, speculates Nibley, “certainly looks toward the steppes” of northern Mesopotamia (present-day Syria).³⁰ A northern Mesopotamian homeland for the Jaredites and the valley of Nimrod would

therefore be a reasonable supposition. Consequently, the journey of the Jaredites from the valley of Nimrod³¹ likely included crossing the Caspian and Aral Seas (see Ether 2:6–7), eventually reaching the shores of the Yellow Sea or East China Sea,³² where their company spent approximately four years before voyaging to the Americas.³³

LIGHTING THE VESSELS

After preparing the vessels for their sea journey, the brother of Jared ascended an “exceedingly” high mountain³⁴ called Shelem³⁵ (Ether 3:1). He carried with him sixteen small stones that he had molten out of rock in response to the Lord’s question, “What will ye that I should do that ye may have light in your vessels?” (2:23). The stones were said to be “white and clear, even as transparent glass” (3:1). The brother of Jared then prayed, “Touch these stones, O Lord, with thy finger, and prepare them that they may shine forth in darkness; and they shall shine forth unto us in the vessels which we have prepared, that we may have light while we shall cross the sea” (3:4). The Lord then touched each stone individually, imbuing them with sacred power.³⁶ It was only later when the two stones were placed in each boat, one at each end, that they became illuminated and provided light for the passengers (see 6:2; note the earlier detail in 3:4: “and *prepare* them that they *may* shine forth in darkness”).

In wrestling with the problem of light in the vessels, why did the brother of Jared first consider clear stones as a solution? Did stones have illuminative functions in his culture? Why would such an ordinary object be considered capable of being invested with divine power?³⁷ And in more general terms, what role did sacred stones play in ancient Mesopotamian and related societies that might inform their use among the Jaredites?

ILLUMINATING STONES

Researcher John A. Tvedtnes has assembled a lengthy compilation of medieval sources that show the antiquity of illuminated stones in Jewish, Christian, and Mandaean lore. Stones as lights in seagoing vessels are also attested in various ancient sources. According to Tvedtnes,

Several early Jewish sources indicate that God told Noah to suspend precious stones or pearls inside the ark to light it; in some

traditions, it is a jewel-encrusted heavenly book. The gem would glow during the night and grow dim during the day so that Noah, shut up in the ark, could tell the time of day and how many days had passed.³⁸

In Genesis 6:16 (KJV) the Lord commands Noah, “A window (Heb. *tsohar*) shalt thou make to the ark.” The Hebrew term *tsohar* (from *tsahar*, “to glisten”) means “noon,” “clear,” “shine,” or “radiant.” While some modern translators assume it refers to a window (ASV, NASB), an opening of some kind (NLT), or even to a “roof” (RSV, NIV, ESV, CSB), *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* states that the *tsohar* was a luminous stone. Commenting on Genesis 6:16 it states: “Go to the river Pishon and take a brilliant stone from there and place it into the ark, to illuminate it for you.”³⁹ E. Newton Harvey, referring to this same “rabbinical tradition,” recounts that “Noah had a luminous stone in the Ark which shone more brightly by night than by day, thus serving to distinguish day and night when the sun and moon were shrouded by dense clouds.”⁴⁰ The account of the sixteen stones used in eight barges in the book of Ether finds itself in good company in these ancient traditions.

Other Jewish traditions describe luminous stones relating to Jonah and the whale. The ninth-century rabbinical work *Pirqe Rabbi Eliezer* provides in chapter 10 a midrash on the *tsohar* stone, stating that a similar stone in the form of a pearl was suspended within the roof of the whale’s stomach that provided light to Jonah.⁴¹ According to Rabbi Meir, “One pearl was suspended in the belly of the fish and it gave illumination to Jonah, like the sun which shines with its might at noon; and it showed to Jonah all that was in the sea and in the depths, as is said, ‘Light is sown for the righteous’ [Psalm 97:11].”⁴²

Thus the use of luminescent stones is clearly attested in the broader biblical tradition, especially in later rabbinic thought. Yet while rabbinic expansions on the Hebrew Bible are informative, we look to the brother of Jared’s cultural background in Mesopotamia to more fully explain the use of supernatural stones in the book of Ether.⁴³ If the Jaredites were indeed of a Mesopotamian cultural background, as the preponderance of evidence suggests, examining this region’s divinatory practices could shed

light on the function and meaning of Jaredite seer stones as well as on similar methods of divine communication.

JAREDITE DIVINING AND SEER STONES

The Ether account mentions two sets of divine stones. After commanding the brother of Jared to write his panoptic vision in an unfamiliar language, the Lord gave him two stones that were to be sealed up with the record (see Ether 3:22–23). These stones would serve as seer stones for those who would later find the cached text. The brother of Jared was also instructed not to reveal the stones to anyone “until the Lord should show them unto the children of men” (6:28).⁴⁴ More than two thousand years later, Moroni would be commanded to “hide” these same stones “up *again* in the earth” (4:23), indicating either that Moroni possessed Jaredite “interpreters” or that they had been previously unearthed by another Nephite prophet, perhaps Mosiah.⁴⁵

The second set of divine stones comprises the sixteen stones that the brother of Jared “did molten out of a rock” (Ether 3:1).⁴⁶ The Lord himself touched each of the stones, causing them to illuminate, thereby providing a light source for the vessels as they crossed the sea (3:4). Similar luminous stones are also found in ancient biblical traditions. A Talmudic legend dated to about AD 400–600 recounts how “Abraham was so jealous of his wives, and they were not few, that he incarcerated them in a city of iron with walls so high that the poor women saw neither the sun, the moon nor the stars. He generously, however, provided a great bowl filled with jewels which lighted up the whole building.”⁴⁷ Ezekiel 28:2 represents the king of Tyre as Adam himself, walking proudly “on the holy mount of God . . . among the fiery stones.” There may be an earlier Babylonian origin for this story and imagery, the “fiery stones”⁴⁸ being related to “precious stones which impart brilliance and splendor to the Babylonian Paradise.”⁴⁹

AKKADIAN *ELMĒŠU* STONES

Perhaps the closest parallel to the stones of the Jaredite barges and possibly the Jaredite seer stones is the Akkadian *elmēšu*. The earliest interpretation of *elmēšu* is found in the Greek Septuagint, which translates it as ἤλεκτρον (*ēlektron*).⁵⁰ Jerome similarly rendered it as *electrum* in his Latin

translation of the Bible.⁵¹ In both cases the terms usually refer to the stone amber or to a natural alloy composed of gold and silver (compare Egyptian *d'm*). Eminent Assyriologist A. Leo Oppenheim described the Akkadian *elmēšu* as “a precious stone of characteristic sparkle and brilliancy”⁵² and “a characteristic color,” and he once viewed it as a rock crystal.⁵³ The resplendence of *elmēšu* in Akkadian texts is associated with the heavens and celestial objects,⁵⁴ in one case a heavenly lamp that the goddess Ištar of Arbela lights in the sky.⁵⁵ The term *elmēšu* appears in the Epic of Gilgamesh,⁵⁶ where Ishtar tells Gilgamesh:

10 *lušašmidka narkabti abnuuqnî u hurāši*
 11 *ša magarrūša hurāšamma elmēšu qarnāša*

10 I will harness for you a chariot of lapis and gold,
 11 whose wheels are gold and whose horns are *elmēšu*.⁵⁷

Daniel Bodi points out that the chiasmic structure of the verses argues against *elmēšu* being a metal alloy since one would expect another type of stone to correspond to lapis.⁵⁸ In addition, elsewhere the term *elmēšu*, “amber,” appears in Akkadian texts with the ^{aban} “stone” determinative,⁵⁹ showing that it was interpreted at times as a stone.⁶⁰

The Akkadian *elmēšu* is likely cognate with the Hebrew *ḥašmal*.⁶¹ The term *ḥašmal* is a hapax legomenon found in the book of Ezekiel (1:4, 27; 8:2):

Then I beheld, and lo a likeness as the appearance of fire: from the appearance of his loins even downward, fire; and from his loins even upward, as the appearance of brightness (*tsohar*) as the color of amber (*ḥašmal*). (Ezekiel 8:2)

The brilliance of the amber (*ḥašmal*) is compared to the “brightness” of the divine presence by Ezekiel. Indeed, both the Akkadian *elmēšu* and Hebrew cognate *ḥašmal* “evoke quasi-mythical overtones.”⁶² The luminous, radiant sheen of *elmēšu* and *ḥašmal* was associated with the glorious light of divine beings, locations, and objects. Yet the terms seem shrouded in mystery. According to one scholar, “Jewish tradition did everything possible to obscure” the meaning of *ḥašmal*, and “rabbis considered it mortally

dangerous even to think about the nature of *ḥašmal*, let alone speak or write about it, and the fashion among Hebrew commentators for fantastic etymologies only served to compound the magic and mystery surrounding the word.⁶³ The *ḥašmal* stone, however, played a key role in Israelite religion, for *elmēšu* was one of the stones on the high priest's breastplate in Exodus 28:15–21.⁶⁴ This would link the luminous *ḥašmal* directly to the Urim and Thummim, and even closer in type to the Jaredite seer stones.⁶⁵

In ancient Mesopotamia a powerful type of divine radiance, a “supernatural awe-inspiring sheen,”⁶⁶ was known as *melammu*, which may relate to Jaredite seer stones and to the luminous stones of the Jaredite barges. It is said to be “a radiance of divine effulgence surrounding beings or sacred objects that have divine power,”⁶⁷ and it encompasses the “brilliance of *elmešu* with a kind of brilliance found in the heavens” that also gives cultic objects their shine.⁶⁸ *Melammu* is a “lordly radiance” or “royal shine,” “a covering or outward appearance of a person, being or object which perceptibly demonstrates the irresistible or supreme power of that person, being, or object.”⁶⁹ Through *melammu*, objects such as “beads, cylinder seals, and inscriptions crafted from semi-precious stones and precious metals”⁷⁰ were understood to be “representative of aspects of the gods themselves.”⁷¹ Therefore, when the Lord touched each of the sixteen stones brought by the brother of Jared in order to make them luminous, in a Mesopotamian context this may have been interpreted as an endowment of *melammu* since it was something thought to be “transferred from gods to material and manifest as light.”⁷² The brother of Jared requested that the Lord “*prepare* [the stones]” by touching them, language strongly suggestive of a transference of divine power to the stones (Ether 3:4).⁷³

In summary, the luminescence of *elmēšu* strongly resembles both types of sacred stones in the book of Ether. The *elmēšu*, a stone or material imbued with supernatural qualities, including *melammu*, is a close correlate with the sixteen stones the brother of Jared used to illuminate the barges. Furthermore, use of the *elmēšu* stone in oracular divination in Mesopotamia⁷⁴ and its close connection to the Urim and Thummim make it intriguingly analogous to, if not prototypical of, the Jaredite seer stones.

MESOPOTAMIAN DIVINATORY PRACTICES

Although divination in the ancient world often served a sociopolitical purpose, it could also be employed strictly as a political tool.⁷⁵ For example, ancient Babylonian society's reliance on divination stemmed from an effort to maintain a structural inequality, that is, keeping privileged certain types of knowledge of divination and its "technical apparatus" by claiming an "independent access to divine will."⁷⁶ Divination was also closely aligned with correct legal decision making and dispensing fair justice in society, which partly explains why the royal establishment allied itself so closely with diviners—themselves usually elite members of society.⁷⁷ In other words, lay people would remain continually reliant on the ruling class for most forms of divination, while civic order (*mīšaru*) would simultaneously be maintained.⁷⁸

The most common forms of divination in Mesopotamia involved the liver (hepatoscopy), arrows (belomancy), heavenly bodies (astrology), flour (aleuromancy), incense (libanomancy), oil (lecanomancy), and the inspection of animal entrails or lungs (extispicy). Among all of these forms of divination, extispicy (*nēpešti bārūti*), which dates back as far as the third millennium BC,⁷⁹ was held in the highest regard in Mesopotamia.⁸⁰ It was usually performed by a *bārū*, or "examiner," a title that corresponds to the Sumerian ^{lú}hal or ^{lú}máš-šu-gíd-gíd.⁸¹ The term *bārū* derives from the verb *bārū*, "to see," and literally translates as "observer, seer." A *bārū* would not only engage in extispicy but also perform lecanomantic and libanomantic divination.⁸² Extispicy was under any definition "nothing less than a source of revelation" and "tantamount to the divinely revealed word."⁸³ That the extispicer was thought to "read"⁸⁴ the viscera or lungs of an animal in a literal sense is evident in that the liver was called *amūtum*, a term that resonates with *awātum*, which means "word."⁸⁵ This form of Babylonian hepatoscopy is found in Ezekiel 21:21: "For the king of Babylon standeth at the parting of the way, at the head of the two ways, to use divination; he shaketh the arrows to and fro, he inquireth of the teraphim,⁸⁶ he looketh in the liver" (Darby Bible Translation). Physical depictions of stone sheep livers with inscribed divining prayers extend this metaphor to the haruspex's reading of actual words on the object.⁸⁷

Stones were used in various types of divination throughout Mesopotamia. One particular stone, *šadānu šābitu* in Akkadian,⁸⁸ is described in ancient texts as “black and red containing red streaks” and is said to be a “‘stone of truth’ [NA₄ *ki-na-a-ti*]. Its quality is that it speaks the truth.”⁸⁹ The Orphic *Kerygmat* recounts that Babylonian magi used the liparaios stone for magical rituals such as divination.⁹⁰ The bilingual text *Lugal-e* contained instructions for exorcists and healers with a list of divine stones that could be used for those purposes.⁹¹ Even Mesopotamian cylinder seals functioned as protective amulets with supernatural properties.⁹² Stones serving as amulets in Mesopotamia commonly underwent a consecration ceremony in which “a spirit is induced to enter it and to endow it with power” from a supernatural source.⁹³ In this context, stones often came in groups of twelve, thirteen, or fourteen and were consecrated together.⁹⁴ Note that in a separate context the brother of Jared similarly requested that the Lord touch sixteen stones to imbue them with sacred power.

The Mesopotamian practice of using sacred stones for divination maintained a strong influence over later cultures in the ancient Near East. The later Persian magi, who inherited various aspects of Mesopotamian divinatory practices, used exotic gems in divination.⁹⁵ Among the Greeks, the Trojan seer Helenos is said to have consecrated a *sidêritês*, or “speaking stone,” in a ritual to prepare for face-to-face communication with deity.⁹⁶ During Imperial Rome, Pliny recounted that “Zachalias of Babylon, in the volumes which he dedicates to King Mithridates, attributes man’s destiny to the influence of precious stones.”⁹⁷ Also, as recorded by Pliny in *Biblical Antiquities*, Kenaz asks God what he should do with magical stones owned by sinners whom God had ordered killed. God counters the power of those stones by giving Kenaz twelve other sacred stones to be kept in the ark of the covenant for Israel.⁹⁸

A Latin proverb states, *Judaeos fidem in lapidibus pretiosis, et Paganos in herbis ponere*, “Jews put their trust in precious stones, and Pagans put it in herbs.” Together with plants, sacred stones also figured prominently in other rituals, such as healing in the ancient Near East and related areas, although stones were usually understood to be more potent. For example, in the poem *Lithika*, part of the pseudepigraphal word recorded under the name Orpheus in lines 410–11 states: μέγα μὲν σθένος ἐπλετο ρίζης,

ἀλλα λίθου πολύ μείζον, “The power of herbs was great, but that of stones is even greater.”⁹⁹ As both stones and plants were deemed to have curative and protective properties,¹⁰⁰ they were often ground up and included in recipes for ointments and potions. Consequently, “plant” and “stone” became the two primary subdivisions of drug types in ancient Babylonian and Assyrian society.¹⁰¹

OTHER STONE DIVINATION: CASTING LOTS

Divination in the ancient Near East was also commonly based on the yes/no-response dichotomy.¹⁰² Binary divination took the forms of libanomancy, hepatoscopy, cleromancy, extispicy, and belomancy in Mesopotamia. In this way it closely resembled the use of the Urim and Thummim, which were also said to specifically give a “decision” or “judgment” (Heb. *mishpat*),¹⁰³ that is, reveal the divine will, usually through a yes/no answer. Sumerian and Akkadian omen divination was similarly understood as a “decision,” “judgment” (*dajānu*), and “verdict” (*dīnu*) of the gods.¹⁰⁴ Gods were “deciders of decisions” (*pārisū purussī*), and stars are said to be “divine judges” who give a “divine verdict.”¹⁰⁵ A lithic form of this binary yes/no divination was psephomancy—divining by means of small pebbles.

The inhabitants of ancient Mesopotamia (and elsewhere in the Near East) practiced sortilege, or divining by casting lots, often employing stones. An Akkadian text discovered in Aššur (labeled *LKA 137*) contains a description of psephomancy, specifically the use of black and white stones or dice that gave yes/no answers to inquiries.¹⁰⁶ The subscript of the text states the true function of these two stones: [IN] IM.INIM.MA EŠ.BAR NA₄.GIŠ.NU_x.GAL NA₄.KUR-*nu* [DIB.BA TAR.RE], “conjunction to foretell the future by means of a white stone (lit. alabaster) and a black stone (lit. haematite).”¹⁰⁷ There is a close parallel between this Mesopotamian practice and the Urim and Thummim,¹⁰⁸ and these similarities are “noticeable and invite investigation.”¹⁰⁹ Indeed, many have argued that the Urim and Thummim were a binary type of psephomancy¹¹⁰ since they too gave yes/no answers to inquiries. However, while in ancient Israel casting lots could be done by anyone, commoner or priest, it seems clear that the Urim and Thummim were a form of “sacred lots” (distinguished from

their quotidian cousins; see Proverbs 18:18) that were employed only for priestly divination.¹¹¹

Casting lots, also known as cleromancy, was not simply a random game of chance; rather, it was often a divinely led process in the ancient Near East, even in the Old Testament (e.g., Leviticus 16:8; Numbers 26:55; Joshua 18:6; 1 Samuel 14:42; 1 Chronicles 25:8; Jonah 1:2, 7) and in the New Testament (Matthew 27:35; Acts 1:26). Proverbs 16:33 provides a clear example of how God was thought to determine the outcome in sortilege: “The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord” (NASB).¹¹² One form of casting lots practiced by pre-Islamic Arabs was the drawing of arrow shafts, one of which contained the written phrase “My Lord has commanded me.” Whoever drew that shaft was said to have been chosen directly by God.¹¹³ In 1 Nephi 3:11, Nephi and his brothers cast lots to see who should see Laban about obtaining the brass plates. The lot fell on Laman, the eldest and the birthright holder, as directed by God, not as happenstance. Casting lots in this way was a common means of finding out God’s will on a subject in ancient Israel. “The lot-casting procedure was regarded as an inquiring of Yahweh and its result as an answer from Yahweh. This is shown by the account of Saul’s making king (1 Samuel x 19–22). . . . Lot-casting in such serious affairs was regarded as a sacral act, and the decision was held to come from Yahweh. . . . Accordingly, it was quite as it should be that the procedure was introduced by a prayer pronounced by Saul: ‘O God of Israel, give a true decision.’”¹¹⁴

In the Jaredite region of Mesopotamia, the connection between casting lots and divination is explicit in a commentary on *Marduk’s Address to the Demons* (tablet 11 of *Utukkū Lemnūtu*). In this passage, the etymology of “lots” (*halhallu*) is overtly linked to the root *hal* for both “divination” and “secret”:

6 (= XI 65). GE U-*hi* ^{lú}HAL EŠ.BAR *pa-ri-is hal-hal-la* : KI ^{mál}PA.
BIL.SAG ^{lú}HAL u ^{lú}šá-’-i-lu : *hal-hal-la* : HAL : *bi-ri* HAL : *pi-riš-tú*

6 (= XI 65) I am Asalluhi, seer who gives decisions, who assigns lots: Region of Sagittarius; diviner and dream-interpreter: lots (*halhallu*): hal = “divination”, hal = “secret.”¹¹⁵

In Babylon and Assyria, seven small pebbles were used in casting lots, a practice closely related with the goddess Ishtar. A prayer to Ishtar reads:

5. “All seven lots hast thou received;
6. My Lady, the great arbiter of lots art thou.
7. Thou liftest up the lots, thou shakest them in thy hand,
8. Thou easiest the lots, thou layest the lots (again) in thy bosom.¹¹⁶

Casting lots here is fully viewed as a divinely guided process, one through which Ishtar would make her providential will known.

Similarly, at the site of Emar in Syria, the installation of a high priestess involved the casting of lots: “the sons of Emar will take lots (?) from the temple of ^dNIN.URTA (and) manipulate them before ^dIM.”¹¹⁷ Even the gods of Mesopotamia are said to use the divine method of sortilege; they first divided up the world¹¹⁸ by casting lots:

‘They took the box (of lots) . . . , cast the lots; the gods¹¹⁹ made the division’: Anu acquired the sky, Enlil the earth and Enki the bolt which bars the sea.¹²⁰

Most remarkably, the gods themselves rely on casting lots, showing it to be a Mesopotamian prototype for proper decision making. Key to the present discussion is the fact that casting lots represents the use of stones, sometimes bearing written messages,¹²¹ as a form of divination. Sacred stones in these contexts enabled the practitioner to query the gods and expeditiously receive an answer. Considering the wide variety of stone use in divinatory rites throughout ancient Mesopotamia, it is not surprising that the brother of Jared instinctively turned to stones as the medium for interacting with the divine.

SEER AND TRANSLATOR

None of the uses of sacred stones in Mesopotamia discussed so far overtly pertain to textual translation. The role of seer (or other ritual specialists) in that region, however, does overlap in some intriguing ways with that

of translator. But first it will be helpful to review the function of a seer in biblical and Book of Mormon tradition.

Limhi declared to Ammon that “a seer is greater than a prophet,” to which Ammon added, “a seer is a revelator and a prophet also” (Mosiah 8:15–16). Ammon also taught the king that a seer could employ a seeric device, consisting of two sacred stones called “interpreters,” to translate “all records that are of ancient date” (8:13). It seems that at times the very possession of these “interpreters” qualified one to bear the title of “seer” (28:16). In different eras, however, the notion of a “seer” could and in fact did vary. In the time of Samuel in the Old Testament, we read of three distinct titles (in Hebrew), two of which are translated as “seer” in 1 Chronicles 29:29 (NIV):

As for the events of King David’s reign, from beginning to end, they are written in the records of Samuel the seer [*rōēh*], the records of Nathan the prophet [*nābī*] and the records of Gad the seer [*hōzeh*].

Here Samuel is referred to as a *rōēh*, a term deriving from the verb *rāāh*, “to see” or “to perceive.”¹²² Nathan, on the other hand, is called a *nābī*, meaning a “spokesperson” (literally “to declare,” “to call,” or “to utter”). Finally, Gad is said to be a *hōzeh* (from the verb *hōzez*, “to see” or “to perceive”; compare Aramaic *hzh*), also translated as “seer.”¹²³ Seers are rare in the Old Testament, with fewer than ten men bearing one of the above titles. Of the nine instances of *rōēh* in the Old Testament, seven refer to Samuel and two to Hanani. During the monarchical period (1000–586 BC), the function of *rōēh*, *nābī*, and *hōzeh* began to shift, and *nābī* seems to have superseded *rōēh* and *hōzeh*, although they appear to have been used somewhat interchangeably at times.¹²⁴

From the Book of Mormon we know that seership often included the ability to translate languages. Tellingly, one of the Hebrew words for “seer,” *hōzeh*, also means “a keeper of records,”¹²⁵ linking seership to written and/or translated texts. What, however, is actually meant by “translation” in the context of holy seers? Is it safe to assume that our current concept of translation is appropriately applied to the work of divine seers? I suggest we need to reevaluate the notion of “translation” when performed by a seer of God under his inspiration.

TRANSLATION VERSUS MEDIATION

In the book of Ether, ostensibly one function of seer stones was to translate unknown languages: “these stones shall magnify to the eyes of men these things which ye shall write” (Ether 2:24). From the early days of the Church in this dispensation the concepts of “seer” and “translator” have been intimately linked. In 1835 the Lord described the responsibility of the president of the high priesthood “to be a seer, a revelator, a *translator*, and a prophet, having all the gifts of God which he bestows upon the head of the church” (Doctrine and Covenants 107:92; emphasis added). To the more common tripartite descriptor of “prophet, seer, and revelator” the Lord added “translator” in this instance. Keeping in mind the context and time period, how does one properly define *translator* and the process of “translation”—terms that figure so prominently in Latter-day Saint discourse and history? “Every translation is an interpretation—a version.”¹²⁶ When Joseph Smith used the term *translate*, it must be understood in this context, as an *interpretive* event, not simply a re-linguaging of the original text into English. This accords perfectly with the following statement by Brigham Young:

Should the Lord Almighty send an angel to re-write the Bible, it would in many places be very different from what it now is. And I will even venture to say that if the Book of Mormon were now to be re-written, in many instances it would materially differ from the present translation.¹²⁷

Brigham Young fully recognized that “translation” is not monolithic; rather, there are numerous ways to convey the overall meaning of the original text for a modern audience.

In the Lord’s statement “these stones shall magnify to the eyes of men these things which ye shall write” (Ether 3:24), it is noteworthy that this process is not stated to be “translation” per se (i.e., rendering words from one language into another), but rather the stones would *magnify* that which was written for a later audience. The distinction is a crucial one. *To magnify*, meaning “to make great or greater” in Webster’s 1828 dictionary, suggests more than a straightforward word-for-word translation. Perhaps the account of Daniel and the writing on the temple wall could serve as a

proper analogy. In Daniel 5, during a great feast in the court of Belshazzar, a mysterious message appeared on a wall of a temple (a “hand sent from [God],” v. 24). When his magicians and astrologers were unable to read the writing, Belshazzar, following the advice of his wife, sent for Daniel. When Daniel gazed upon the inscription, he stated, “This is the *interpretation* of the thing [Aram. ‘matter/word’]” (v. 26; emphasis added). Note that Daniel *interprets* (Heb. *peshet*)¹²⁸ the unknown writing through a hermeneutic rendering and does not simply “translate” the short message for the king. The notion of straightforward “translation” in this context is insufficient.

The English word *translate* comes from the Latin *translates*, literally “carried over” or “carried across,” that is, to bring the meaning across from one language system to another (compare Gk. *metapherein*). The notion of “translation” too often gets associated with what Cicero criticized as the *verbum pro verbo* (word-for-word) approach.¹²⁹ A more accurate understanding of translation would be to view it as the process of interpretation or mediation. This notion of mediation with the underlying semantics of “interpret” finds support in the etymology of the English word itself, deriving from the Latin *interpres*, “agent, translator.” The preposition *inter* means “between,” and the root *per-* likely comes from a Proto-Indo-European root **per-*, meaning “to traffic in, sell.” Thus, to “interpret” means to be “between prices,” that is, to mediate the sale or value to ensure fairness.

It seems highly productive to me to view the concept of “translation” in regard to the Book of Mormon as a form of “mediation,” what one scholar describes as “a performative act of power.”¹³⁰ In this line of thought, Joseph Smith *mediated* the message of the original plates in creating the English text from the record, just as ancient seers such as Mosiah₂ *mediated* the message of the Jaredite record for a Nephite/Mulekite audience through divine seer stones. Under this rubric, the questions of “loose control” or “tight control” translation¹³¹ in the Book of Mormon need not be mutually exclusive ones; rather, Joseph Smith would be free to “mediate” meaning outside the strict confines of an either/or paradigm, occasionally incorporating his own culture, idiom, and understandings to advance reader comprehension.¹³² As Latter-day Saint scholars Michael MacKay and Nicholas Frederick have noted, the fact that Joseph Smith regularly stated that he had a “gift” strongly hints “at his own role in the translation

process.”¹³³ Other scholars refer to precisely this type of mediation as “the extent to which text producers and receivers feed their own beliefs into their processing of a given text”¹³⁴—a point echoed in the argument that as an “agent of communication across linguistic and cultural boundaries, the translator is in a mediating position between the writer and reader and also between the cultures of composition and reception.”¹³⁵ Translation, in its purest sense, is therefore an interpretive process, one in which translators “bring into those texts *their own interpretative frames*.”¹³⁶ In this way translators and interpreters “actually mediate rather than merely translate, as their task is to facilitate the process of intercultural communication.”¹³⁷

DIVINATION AS “TRANSLATION”

In the expanded view of “translation” as mediated interpretation espoused in this study, I would further suggest that divination by ritual specialists should be seen as an extension of the notion of translation. By definition, divination refers to ascertaining information through supernatural intervention, but the interpretation of divine signs and auguries is often veiled, only to be understood through professional interpretation.¹³⁸ For example, hepatoscopy requires specific training to interpret the liver, just as extispicy does for animal entrails or lungs. The ritual practitioner must interpret the meaning for the populace and, in a real sense, “translate” the signs or divine messages. Mesopotamian divination involved just such interpretation of the “writing” (i.e., signs) provided by the gods:

Divination worked on the premise that the gods would respond to questions by “writing” the answers in the medium used by the diviner. The most usual method of divination involved the examination of the entrails of sacrificial animals (extispicy), and in particular the liver (hepatoscopy). The diviner would pray to the oracle gods Shamash or Adad, framing the question (frequently to require a yes/no answer) and inviting the god to *write his answer* in the entrails or on the liver of an animal, generally a lamb.¹³⁹

The extispicer “reads”¹⁴⁰ the “writing” of the entrails, a message given by the gods¹⁴¹ for that express purpose. Linguistic and ominous signs were in

fact so closely associated that diviners would sometimes look for cuneiform letter shapes in the viscera.¹⁴² For example,

when (the) lobe is like the grapheme (named) PAB (*ki-ma-pa-ap-pi-im*), (then) the sun wants an *ugbabtun*-priestess.¹⁴³

Furthermore, the liver was called the “tablet of the gods” (*tuppi ša ilī*), a *tabula rasa* of sorts, upon which the gods would “write.”¹⁴⁴ Thus, in one story Enmeduranki is said to receive “the Tablet of the Gods, the liver, a mystery of Heaven and the Netherworld” (*tuppi ilāni takalta niširti šamē u eršeti*).¹⁴⁵

Throughout Mesopotamia,¹⁴⁶ writing and interpreting signs (*ittu*) were “conceptually linked.”¹⁴⁷ In astral divination the stars were said to form a type of “writing” that the initiated were able to “read.” This led to the ancient belief that “the [Mesopotamian] gods at the beginning of time . . . had written the stars onto the sky in the forms of specific images.”¹⁴⁸ The idea of a heavenly writing in the stars (Akkadian *šītir šamē* or *šītir burūme*, “writing of heaven”) was well known throughout Mesopotamia.¹⁴⁹ These celestial signs were said to be “writing on the sky,”¹⁵⁰ which was then “decoded by diviners, which meant that they had already been encoded.”¹⁵¹ The role of the diviner was key in synthesizing the information given from such divination.¹⁵²

It was the responsibility of the scribe-diviners¹⁵³ “to render the heavens readable” through proper application of divinatory rites.¹⁵⁴ Mesopotamian diviners “regarded nature as a book, or rather a tablet, that could be read by those who knew the underlying code.”¹⁵⁵ Writing, in this context, was “not only central to the practice of divination in Mesopotamia, but served as a fundamental metaphor for divination itself.”¹⁵⁶ The movements of the stars and the constellations themselves were considered “heavenly writing” that the gods “draw” and the Mesopotamian priests “observe” (*amāru*) and “read.” Thus, *Enūma Anu Enlil* tablet 22 states that “when . . . the great gods created heaven and earth and made manifest the celestial signs, . . . they drew¹⁵⁷ the constellations.”¹⁵⁸ In lines 36–37 of *Ludlul bēl nēmeqi*, the speaker asks two questions about the message of the stars and their “decree”:

ayyu tēm ilī qereb šamē ilammad
milik ša anzanunzē iḥakkim mannu

Who can ascertain the god's decree in the midst of heaven?

Who can *read out* the gods' order in the abyss?¹⁵⁹

Even the light of Shamash, the sun god and god of divination, is said to “scan the totality of lands as if they were cuneiform signs. You never weary of divination.”¹⁶⁰

Importantly, the concept of divine signs as “writing” by the gods appears to have applied to yet other areas of Mesopotamian divination, including those employing stones:

Impetrated omens [i.e., those obtained by request] came about through such techniques as oil divination, in which the diviner dropped oil into water, smoke divination, in which the smoke rising from a censer was interpreted as a response from the god, and extispicy, in which the diviner, in an incantation before an extispicy, sometimes requested that the gods “write” their answer on the liver. The idea that the gods provide, or “write,” signs, whether in the liver, in the divination bowl of the lecanomancer, or in the heavens, further testifies to the distinction between the deductive and hermeneutical methods of the diviner and the auditory hallucinations of the [Mesopotamian] prophet.¹⁶¹

For example, one type of divination in the Near East utilizing stones was hydromancy (Gk. ὑδρομαντεία), which usually involved pouring liquid into a vessel and using the light of the sun, moon, or fire to divine from its reflection. Using bowls with reflective surfaces increased the refractive experience, as did the addition of shiny stones¹⁶² placed into the container.¹⁶³ Joseph of Egypt's silver cup (see Genesis 44:3–5), which was expressly used “for divination” (Heb. *Nâchash*; see Genesis 44:5, NIV), is an example of hydromancy or cyclomancy.¹⁶⁴ His cup is also said to have contained a precious stone used in divination, according to some Jewish traditions.¹⁶⁵ Further crossover between stones and related objects (such as astragali, or knucklebones) and translation can be seen in cleromantic devices with inscribed symbols or words that the diviner translates. Such objects “as inscribed rune stones are capable of creating complex and nuanced readings with meanings for the client that go far beyond a simple toss of the dice.”¹⁶⁶

In its numerous manifestations, it could therefore be argued that divination should be considered a form of “translation,” or reading and interpreting divine knowledge—that which one scholar calls “the divinatory code.”¹⁶⁷ In this sense, while we do not find abundant evidence of sacred stones being used for the translation of written texts in antiquity, it is important that we do not define the term too narrowly. As those who held “hermeneutic keys,” diviners and seers “translated” divine messages “written” in entrails, in the stars in the sky, in divination bowls, and in other divine signs. Stones in various contexts played key roles in precisely these processes, including at times being the objects that could be “read.” Furthermore, many of the objects used in divination that were “read” were metaphorically viewed as stone writing surfaces. Indeed, “Mesopotamian divinatory professionals considered their literate gods capable of using a variety of writing surfaces to communicate their intentions, from clay and stone to animal livers and constellations.”¹⁶⁸ Even the heavens were “*as a stone surface upon which a god could draw or write*, as a scribe would a clay tablet,” which “complements the metaphoric trope of the heavenly writing.”¹⁶⁹ For Mesopotamians, the stars were an “organic body . . . seen as a text” in which “the gods wrote the future into the universe,” to be “read [only] by those who were wise enough (certain priests and scholars).”¹⁷⁰ This broader view of translation as mediation and interpretation of the “writing” of the gods through divination, especially in relation to the use of sacred stones, better accords with ancient divinatory practices and conceptions.

This brings us back to the concept of “translation” both of and within the Book of Mormon. First, it is abundantly clear that Joseph Smith did not translate records (e.g., the Book of Mormon, the Book of Abraham, the lost parchment of John, and the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible) in the traditional sense,¹⁷¹ but rather in a nuanced, generative form of revelation.¹⁷² Perhaps the notion of divination as discussed in this study allows us to bridge the gap. I would argue that the use of stones at times in these “translations” locates the practice squarely in the art of divination—the deduction and production of a text directly inspired of God. For parts of the Book of Mormon translation process, Joseph Smith did not translate while reading off the plates; they sat idle on the side when he was using

his personal seer stones rather than the “interpreters.” The message of the original text was divined through seeing devices—a method that certainly does not conform to standard conceptions of document “translation.” In my view, Joseph Smith engaged in a type of ritual divination to receive the text of the Book of Mormon, the Book of Abraham, and the JST in a process closely associated with stones and seeing instruments in ancient times. The resulting text was ostensibly “given” to him through divinatory inspiration,¹⁷³ usually involving sacred stones,¹⁷⁴ but just as with Mesopotamian diviners, a practitioner may also participate in some way in the final production of the message. By way of analogy, a Mesopotamian diviner would interpret messages “written” by the gods on or in various objects. Likewise, the Lord states the he had “written” the words for Joseph Smith to interpret as they appeared on the seer stone (see Doctrine and Covenants 84:57). God clearly *translated* the text; Joseph functioned as a mediator in its actualization.¹⁷⁵ The resulting *product* was the focus; the conventionality of the methods to attain that goal was clearly not.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The book of Ether contains two distinct uses of sacred stones: (1) a seeing device consisting of two interpreter stones and (2) luminous stones that brought light into Jaredite vessels through supernatural means. In this study, I have argued that both of these traditions can be more properly contextualized through an examination of the function of divine stones in ancient Mesopotamian tradition. Based on evidence in the text of Ether, it is clear that Mesopotamia was the original home of the Jaredites and is the correct region to which we should look for cultural elements that can inform our understanding of the initial portions of the Ether record.

Mesopotamian lapidary practices inform the Ether account by providing a clearer understanding of the roles that sacred stones played in different cultures. This study has noted ancient traditions of luminous stones in boats and other contexts that have very close correlates in the book of Ether, which accurately portrays the use of lighted stones in Mesopotamia and the ancient Near East. The widespread use of stones in various forms of Babylonian and Assyrian divination reveals their cultural salience more generally. This study has attempted to establish a logical link between

divination (with or without stones) and translation. Divination, according to clear Mesopotamian precedents, can be an act of translation. Initiated practitioners who possess the hermeneutic code interpret (“read”) the “writing” (i.e., the signs given by deity). In this light, the use of stones as instruments of “translation” in the book of Ether has both pragmatic and conceptual ties to Mesopotamian divination practices involving stones. Moreover, the notion of “mediation” properly subsumes that of “translation” in these contexts, allowing for interpretive frames grounded in the culture and experience of the mediator to influence the final product.

NOTES

1. Despite the surprising rarity of the term *Jaredites* in the Book of Mormon, I retain it for the remainder of this study because it is the name by which this group of people is commonly known among Book of Mormon readers.
2. For arguments on a later chronology for the Jaredites, see pp. 146–54 of Brant A. Gardner, *Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon, Volume Six: Fourth Nephi through Moroni* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007).
3. It is often assumed that the “great tower” mentioned in Ether 1:33 is in fact the Tower of Babel in the Genesis account. However, as Gardner has argued, this connection may simply be part of “Mosiah’s interpretive additions to the Jaredite history.” *Analytical and Contextual Commentary*, 6:164.
4. It was in the valley of Nimrod that the Lord appeared to the brother of Jared “in a cloud” and commanded the group to set out “into the wilderness, yea, into that quarter where there never had man been” (Ether 2:4–5).
5. See Karel van der Toorn and P. W. van der Horst, “Nimrod before and after the Bible,” *Harvard Theological Review* 83, no. 1 (1990): 14.
6. “Nimrod founded the first empire and some of Babylonia’s most ancient cities; then he went to Assyria and built more cities.” Emil G. Kraeling, “The Earliest Hebrew Flood Story,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 66, no. 3 (1947): 289.
7. See Van der Toorn and Van der Horst, “Nimrod before and after the Bible,” 11–16.
8. See Yigal Levin, “Nimrod the Mighty, King of Kish, King of Sumer and Akkad,” *Vetus Testamentum* 52, no. 3 (2002): 357. Levin does note, however, that “several divine figures have been offered as the prototypes for the Nimrod legend,

- especially those of Nergal, the Babylonian Marduk and the Sumerian Ninurta—all of whom were renowned as great hunters” (p. 356).
9. See Van der Toorn and Van der Horst, “Nimrod before and after the Bible,” 14–15.
 10. See Emil G. Kraeling, “The Death of Sennacherib,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 53, no. 4 (1933): 337.
 11. See Van der Toorn and Van der Horst, “Nimrod before and after the Bible,” 6.
 12. See Arno Poebel, “The Assyrian King List from Khorsabad,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 1, no. 3 (1942): 256.
 13. See Paul Haupt, “The Cuneiform Account of the Deluge,” *Old Testament Student* 3, no. 3 (1883): 78.
 14. See E. G. H. Kraeling, “The Origin and Real Name of Nimrod,” *American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures* 38, no. 3 (1922): 214.
 15. Kraeling, “Name of Nimrod,” 219.
 16. Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, book 1, chapter 4.
 17. William F. Albright agrees that the “Plain of Shinar” is Mesopotamia. “Shinar-Šanḡar and Its Monarch Amraphel,” *American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures* 40, no. 2 (1924): 130. Van der Toorn and Van der Horst largely concur, locating Shinar in southern Mesopotamia (“Nimrod before and after the Bible,” 1). Shinar, according to Kraeling, refers to “Sumer and Akkad” (“Earliest Hebrew Flood Story,” 280–81).
 18. See Anne Habermehl, “Where in the World Is the Tower of Babel?,” *Answers Research Journal* 4 (2011): 26, www.answersingenesis.org/arj/v4/where-tower-babel.pdf.
 19. Levin, “Nimrod the Mighty,” 353.
 20. The cities of Accad and Calah, according to Levin, “are well-attested in cuneiform literature, the former being the capital of the Sargonid empire that ruled Mesopotamia in the 23rd century BC, the latter being the capital of the Assyrian empire from the ninth century BC until the founding of *Dur-Sarru-kin* (Khorsabad) by Sargon II in 707.” Levin, “Nimrod the Mighty,” 353.
 21. See Christophe Wall-Romana, “An Areal Location of Agade,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 49, no. 3 (1990): 205–6.
 22. William F. Albright has argued that Calneh is not a city, but rather a miswriting of the expression “all of them.” See Albright, “The End of ‘Calneh in Shinar,’” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 3 (1944): 254n17. The RSV follows this

- interpretation, which has since gained wide acceptance. See Levin, “Nimrod the Mighty,” 353.
23. Archibald H. Sayce, “The Hittite Version of the Epic of Gilgameš,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 55, no. 4 (1923): 569.
 24. See Kraeling, “Name of Nimrod,” 215n3; and Joseph Poplichia, “The Biblical Nimrod and the Kingdom of Eanna,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 49 (1929): 310n28.
 25. The Talmud likewise states that Calneh is a name for Nippur (Niphor). See Henry H. Howorth, “The Early History of Babylonia,” *English Historical Review* 16, no. 61 (1901): 12.
 26. See Kraeling, “Name of Nimrod,” 234.
 27. Poebel, “Assyrian King List,” 256.
 28. Van der Toorn and Van der Horst, “Nimrod before and after the Bible,” 4.
 29. Sharman B. Hummel, ed., *Nibley’s Commentary on the Book of Mormon* (EPUB, 2014), 2:253.
 30. Hugh Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon: Course of Study for the Melchizedek Priesthood Quorums of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1957), 288–89.
 31. That is, according to Nibley and amplified by Lynn and David Rosenvall. The Jaredite migration is beyond the scope of this study. See Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 3rd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1998), 198, 202; and Lynn Rosenvall and David Rosenvall, “Jared, His Brother and Their Friends: A Geographical Analysis of the Book of Ether,” 5–10, <http://www.achoiceiland.com/jaredites/Jaredites.pdf>.
 32. Josephus notes that after the Tower of Babel, “there were some, also, who passed over the sea in ships and inhabited the islands.” *Antiquities of the Jews*, book 1, chapter 5, note 1.
 33. Identifying the sea the Jaredites crossed to get to the New World is speculation. Other suggestions are that they traveled overland to the Mediterranean and set sail from there. See Gardner, *Analytical and Contextual Commentary*, 6:177–79.
 34. Narratives describe Assyrian kings who would also procure precious stones from mountains while traveling. See Scott C. Jones, “Lions, Serpents, and Lion-Serpents in Job 28:8 and Beyond,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 130, no. 4 (2011): 680.
 35. The term *Shelem* possibly derives from the Akkadian term *simmiltu*, “ladder” or “stairs.” Yitzhak Peleg, “What Do Jacob’s ladder, the Tower of Babel, and the

- Babylonian Ziggurat Have in Common?,” in *Bethsaida in Archaeology, History and Ancient Culture*, ed. J. Harold Ellens (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), 330–59. Nibley has also suggested cognates such as *silma*, *selma*, and *sullam*, also meaning “ladder.” See Hugh W. Nibley, *Ancient Documents and the Pearl of Great Price*, ed. Robert Smith and Robert Smythe (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Division of Continuing Education, 1986), 5.
36. This process of investing an object with divine power is reminiscent of a Babylonian ritual used to “irradiate” objects by placing them under the stars at night to “imbue them with numinous power.” Roy D. Kotansky, “Textual Amulets and Writing Traditions in the Ancient World,” in *Guide to the Study of Ancient Magic*, ed. David Frankfurter (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 518. See also Erica Reiner, *Astral Magic in Babylonia* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1995), 127–28.
37. See John A. Tvedtnes, *The Most Correct Book* (Salt Lake City: Cornerstone, 1999), 287–88. Platonic philosopher Proclus argued that material objects such as stone can be infused with “ontological power.” See Peter T. Struck, “The Poet as Conjuror,” in *Magic and Divination in the Ancient World*, ed. Leda Ciraolo and Jonathan Seidel (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 128n37. Proclus, according to Struck, asserted “that the basest material has a special connection with the highest truths” (p. 128). A divinatory object’s sacrality is not contingent upon its material, no matter how seemingly mundane. See Jongsu Park, “Priestly Divination in Ancient Israel: Its Characteristics and Roles” (PhD diss., Drew University, 1993), 38. See Michael Hubbard MacKay and Nicholas J. Frederick, *Joseph Smith’s Seer Stones* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2016), 125–38, for a discussion against the notion of seer stones as simply mundane objects of perceived cultural significance in the case of Joseph Smith.
38. Tvedtnes, *Most Correct Book*, 287–88. Nibley likewise pointed out that the *Talmud Yerušalmi*, untranslated in Joseph Smith’s day, contains an account of Noah closely parallel to the luminous stones of the brother of Jared. The tradition states that “in the midst of the darkness of the Ark Noah distinguished day from night by the aid of pearls and precious stones, whose lustre turned pale in the daylight and glittered at night.” Nibley, *Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 338.
39. Howard Schwartz, *Tree of Souls: The Mythology of Judaism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 87.

40. E. Newton Harvey, *A History of Luminescence from the Earliest Times until 1900* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1957), 15.
41. See Schwartz, *Tree of Souls*, 87; and Alicia Ostriker, "Jonah: The Book of the Question," *Georgia Review* 59, no. 2 (2005): 282.
42. Quoted in Yvonne Sherwood, *A Biblical Text and Its Afterlives: The Survival of Jonah in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 109n62.
43. Some stones in Babylonian tradition have an inherent power (*šiknu* = "nature"). See Kotansky, "Textual Amulets," 517; and Reiner, *Astral Magic in Babylonia*, 119–20. In Mesopotamian divination, alabaster stones known in Akkadian as *gišnugallu* are said to be "shining." Wayne Horowitz and Victor A. Hurowitz note that the Sumerian word for this stone is translated into Akkadian as "great light," related to the term *namāru*, "to shine, be radiant, glow, etc." Horowitz and Hurowitz, "Urim and Thummim in Light of a Psephomancy Ritual from Assur (LKA 137)," *Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society* 21 (1992): 110.
44. It is unclear in the Book of Mormon whether this set of "interpreters" is the one Mosiah₂ used to translate the twenty-four gold plates found by Limhi's people (see Mosiah 21:27) or if Mosiah's own interpreting stones were employed. See MacKay and Frederick, *Seer Stones*, 96–102.
45. See Michael Hubbard MacKay and Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, *From Darkness unto Light: Joseph Smith's Translation and Publication of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2015), 64–65.
46. The word *molten* is the past participle of the verb *melt*, and in 1828 the only meaning associated with the term referred to melted or cast metal: "Made of melted metal; as a *molten* image." Noah Webster, ed., *An American Dictionary of the English Language* (New York: S. Converse, 1828), s.v. "molten." *The Oxford English Dictionary*, however, contains only a single reference from 1425 to *molten* as a transitive verb as it appears in Ether 3:1. A similar usage is found in 1 Nephi 17:19 ("whither shall I go that I may find ore to molten that I may make tools to construct the ship"). Skousen rightly suggests the use of *molten* as a verb is likely an archaic form in English, almost exclusively attested only in its past participle, adjectival form. (For a fuller discussion, see Royal Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon*, Part 6: 3 Nephi 19–Moroni 10 [Provo, UT: FARMS, 2006], 3754.) In the early nineteenth century, the adjective *molten* commonly occurred in association with silver, copper, zinc, lead, brass, nickel, gold, and so on. However, contemporary usage around the time the Book of

- Mormon was translated included “molten minerals” (see George Berkeley, *The Works of George Berkeley, D.D., Late Bishop of Cloyne in Ireland* [. . .] [London: J. F. Dove, 1820], 1:xxvi) and “molten lava,” clearly indicating that stones and ore could also become “molten.” (It may be significant, then, that the word *elmēšu* discussed below is most often listed among mineral dyes in Akkadian texts.) As Nibley has pointed out, there is an ancient tradition stretching from India to China and to the West of a stone that when exposed to “exceedingly hot fire” over enormous periods of time would transform into “a perfectly clear, transparent crystal” (Nibley, *Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 353). Smelting technology developed in Mesopotamia by at least the fourth millennium BC (see Paul T. Craddock, *Early Metal Mining and Production* [Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995]), and early glass working appears possibly as early as the third millennium BC (see Peter R. S. Moorey, “The Archaeological Evidence for Metallurgy and Related Technologies in Mesopotamia, c. 5500–2100 B.C.,” *Iraq* 44, no. 1 [1982]: 35–36). So the proper, elementary technology was certainly present at the time of the brother of Jared. Another possibility is that the “melting” process referred to the coating of stones in a metallic substance, a well-attested practice in ancient Greece, Egypt, and Mesopotamia. For example, the Book of the Dead tells of a scarab “fashioned from a hard stone, coated with gold, and placed on the heart of the man after he has been anointed with oil.” George Frederick Kunz, *The Curious Lore of Precious Stones* (New York: Dover, 1971), 228. *Sù-gan*, a Sumerian term corresponding to the Akkadian *elmēšu*, “a quasi-mythical precious stone of great brilliancy” (*The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago* [Chicago: Oriental Institute, 1958; hereafter *CAD*], 4:108), was used to plate or inlay certain objects. See M. Civil, “The ‘Message of Lú-Dingir-ra to His Mother’ and a Group of Akkado-Hittite ‘Proverbs,’” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 23, no. 1 (1964): 7.
47. Sydney H. Ball, “Luminous Gems, Mythical and Real,” *Scientific Monthly* 47, no. 6 (1938): 499.
 48. The Hebrew term *עֶשֶׂה* (*‘esh*), “fiery,” can also mean “burning,” “blazing,” “fire” (both literal and figurative, such as supernatural fire co-occurring with theophany), or “flash.”
 49. William McKane, *Prophets and Wise Men* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2009), 75.
 50. Syriac versions leave the word untranslated. See Danijel Kevesevic, “Radical and Subversive Theology of Ezekiel 1—An Intertextual Reading” (PhD diss., Flinders University, 2016), 153.

51. The Greek and the Latin terms are cognate with the English *electricity*. Electrical current can be generated by rubbing pieces of amber together, a fact known to the ancient Greeks and other cultures.
52. A. Leo Oppenheim, in *CAD*, 4:107–8. The Sumerian SUD.ÁG corresponds to the Akkadian *elmēšu*; *sù-gan* has the similar figurative meaning of “bright light” and “shining, brilliant.” Civil, “Message of Lú-Dingir-ra to His Mother,” 7. While there are contexts in which *sud-ága* is clearly a metal, there are others where it must be stone. See Daniel Bodi, *The Book of Ezekiel and the Poem of Erra*, *Orbis Biblicus Orientalis* 104 (Leuven, Belgium: Peeters, 1991), 88–90; and Adam Falkenstein, “Kleine Beiträge: *sù-ud-ága*,” *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie* 52 (1957): 304–7).
53. A. Leo Oppenheim et al., *Glass and Glass-Making in Ancient Mesopotamia* (New York: Corning Museum of Glass, 1970), 16n31.
54. See Michael R. Simone, “On Fire: Preternatural and Hypostatic Fire in Ancient Israelite Religion” (PhD diss., Johns Hopkins University, 2015), 180.
55. See A. Winitzer, “Assyriology and Jewish Studies in Tel Aviv: Ezekiel among the Babylonian Literati,” in *Encounters by the Rivers of Babylon: Scholarly Conversations between Jews, Iranians, and Babylonians in Antiquity*, ed. U. Gabbay and S. Secunda (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 170.
56. *Gilgamesh*, tablet VI, 10–11.
57. R. Campbell Thompson, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1930), 38.
58. See Bodi, *Book of Ezekiel*, 88.
59. Bodi, *Book of Ezekiel*, 90.
60. Edward Lipiński reconstructs **hammiš* > *elmešu* for “a precious stone.” See his *Semitic Languages: Outline of a Comparative Grammar*, *Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta* 80 (Leuven, Belgium: Peeters, 2001), 176.
61. See Ronald Hendel and Jan Joosten, *How Old Is the Hebrew Bible? A Linguistic, Textual, and Historical Study* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018), 118; and Scott C. Jones, *Rumors of Wisdom: Job 28 as Poetry* (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2009), 160–61.
62. Jones, *Rumors of Wisdom*, 161. The conceptual connection between *elmēšu* (*ēlektron* in the Greek LXX and *electrum* in the Latin Vulgate) and the Hebrew *ḥašmal* is reflected in the use of *ḥašmal* in Modern Hebrew for “electricity.”
63. Peter Kingsley, “Ezekiel by the Grand Canal: Between Jewish and Babylonian Tradition,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 3 (1992): 339–40.

64. See J. M. Todd, "Baltic Amber in the Ancient Near East: A Preliminary Investigation," *Journal of Baltic Studies* 16, no. 3 (1985): 299.
65. Seer stones in the Book of Mormon are said to "shine forth in darkness unto light," such as the Gazelem stone mentioned in Alma 37:23. It seems that consecrated seer stones are infused with a divine quality that can manifest itself as luminescence. It is noteworthy that, according to Joseph Knight Sr., when Joseph Smith put a seer stone in a hat, "Brite Roman Letters" would appear. "Joseph Knight Sr., Reminiscence, Circa 1835–1847," in *Early Mormon Documents*, ed. Dan Vogel (Salt Lake City: Signature, 1996), 4:1–18. John Quincy Adams similarly noted that while Joseph Smith was translating, "the light became so dazzling that he was obliged to look through his hat." Adams, *The Birth of Mormonism* (Boston: Gorham Press, 1916), 36. Additionally, David Whitmer stated that when Joseph put his face into the hat, then "in the darkness the spiritual light would shine." Whitmer, *An Address to All Believers in Christ, Richmond, Mo.* (1887).
66. Kiersten Neumann, "Laying Foundations for Eternity: Timing Temple Construction in Assyria," in *Sounding Sensory Profiles in the Ancient Near East*, ed. Annette Schellenberg and Thomas Krüger (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2019), 268.
67. Daniel Bodi, "Ezekiel," in *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary: Daniel*, ed. J. H. Walton and D. W. Baker (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 408.
68. Simone, "Preternatural and Hypostatic Fire in Ancient Israelite Religion," 180.
69. Shawn Zelig Aster, "Ezekiel's Adaptation of Mesopotamian *Melammu*," *Die Welt des Orients* (2015): 10–21.
70. Even inscribed metal plates could be imbued with *melammu*, such as the tablets made of precious metals discovered in Sargon's Dur-Šarrukin palace. See Kiersten Neumann, "Laying Foundations for Eternity: Timing Temple Construction in Assyria," in *Sounding Sensory Profiles in the Ancient Near East*, Ancient Near East Monographs 25, ed. Annette Schellenberg and Thomas Krüger (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2019), 268. Perhaps the reference to the large plates of the Book of Mormon retaining "their brightness" (Alma 37:5) relates to a similar notion of "a radiance of divine effulgence." Bodi, "Ezekiel," 408.
71. Neumann, "Timing Temple Construction in Assyria," 269.
72. Irene J. Winter, "Radiance as an Aesthetic Value in the Art of Mesopotamia (with Some Indian Parallels)," in *Art, the Integral Vision: A Volume of Essays in Felicitation of Kapila Vatsyayan*, ed. Baidyanath Saraswati, S. C. Malik, and Madu Khanna (New Delhi: Printworld, 1994), 124; emphasis added.

73. A parallel expression describes another seeric device—the Liahona, given to Lehi and his family. Alma 37:38 states that “the Lord *prepared* it,” and 2 Nephi 5:12 adds that it “was *prepared* for my father by the hand of the Lord,” perhaps referring to how the Lord spiritually endowed the object to work miraculously according to faith (see Alma 37:40; compare Mosiah 1:16). Furthermore, the Liahona was made of “fine brass” (1 Nephi 16:10), precisely one of the radiant metals of cultic objects inherent with *elmēšu* in Mesopotamia, according to Simone, “Preternatural and Hypostatic Fire in Ancient Israelite Religion,” 180. In the 1828 Webster’s dictionary, *fine* in reference to metals meant “clear; pure; free from feculence or foreign matter; as *fine* gold or silver.” It is therefore possible that the “new writing, which was plain to read” that appeared on the second spindle of the Liahona (1 Nephi 16:26) was illuminated on the highly reflective surface of brass in a way similar to other radiant seeric devices.
74. See Henry Rawlinson, *Cuneiform Inscriptions of Western Asia* (London: British Museum, 1893), 4:13n3; Victor Avigdor Hurowitz, “True Light on the Urim and Thummim,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 88, no. 3/4 (January–April 1998): 269; and Bodi, *Book of Ezekiel*, 91.
75. See Eugene L. Mendonsa, *The Politics of Divination; A Processual View of Reactions to Illness and Deviance among the Sisala of Northern Ghana* (Los Angeles: University of California, 1982), 118–19.
76. Seth F. Richardson, “On Seeing and Believing: Liver Divination and the Era of Warring States (II),” in *Divination and Interpretation of Signs in the Ancient World*, ed. Amar Annus (Chicago: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago).
77. See Robert R. Wilson, *Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), 97.
78. See Beate Pongratz-Leisten, “The King at the Crossroads between Divination and Cosmology,” in *Divination Politics and Ancient Near Eastern Empires*, ed. Alan Lenzi and Jonathan Stökl (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2014), 34.
79. See Francesca Rochberg, “Observing and Describing the World through Divination and Astronomy,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Cuneiform Culture*, ed. Karen Radner and Eleanor Robson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 622.
80. See A. Leo Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia: Portrait of a Dead Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), 212–17.
81. See David Brown, “Astral Divination in the Context of Mesopotamian Divination, Medicine, Religion, Magic, Society, and Scholarship,” *East Asian Science, Technology, and Medicine* 25 (2006): 98.

82. See Reiner, *Astral Magic in Babylonia*, 63, 65; and Brown, “Astral Divination,” 100.
83. A. Winitzer, “The Divine Presence and its Interpretation in Early Mesopotamian Divination,” in Annus, *Divination and Interpretation of Signs*, 281.
84. That there was often a razor-thin line between literal and metaphorical notions of “reading” entrails is made clear by a story said to be from Attulus I of Pergamon (*Strategemata* 1.11.14) in which a Chaldean seer wrote “victory of the king” (Βασιλέως νίκη) in reverse fashion on his hand and then imprinted it onto an animal liver. The liver was then held up for the army to see and take courage from so they would be successful in battle. See Derek Collins, “Mapping the Entrails: The Practice of Greek Hepatoscopy,” *American Journal of Philology* 129, no. 3 (2008): 342–43.
85. See Jean Nougayrol, “Note sur la place de ‘présage historiques’ dans l’extispicine babylonienne,” *École pratique de hautes études, 5^e section, Annuaire* (1944–45): 14n54; and Brown, “Astral Divination,” 98.
86. The Hebrew word *tērāpîm* is of unknown meaning; previous interpretations have suggested idols, household gods, cultic masks, and ancestors of the dead. See Harry A. Hoffner Jr., “The Linguistic Origins of Teraphim,” *BSac* 124 (1967): 230–38; and Karel van der Toorn, “The Nature of the Biblical Teraphim in the Light of the Cuneiform Evidence,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 52, no. 2 (1990): 22. Shawn W. Flynn has argued that teraphim include Egyptian deity images that were consulted in divination. Flynn, “The Teraphim in Light of Mesopotamian and Egyptian Evidence,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 74, no. 4 (2012): 711. Another intriguing possibility is that, as Herbert G. May has argued, the Urim and Thummim could be one form of the teraphim. May, “Ephod and Ariel,” *American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures* 56, no. 1 (1939): 51. Based on the Greek of Hosea 3:4, the teraphim seem related to sacred lots (δῆλος). C. J. Labuschagne proposes that the original form of the word was *p^etārîm*, changing through metathesis to *t^erāphîm*, thereby linking it to the Hebrew root *ptr*, meaning an object used to “interpret” (compare Akkadian *paṣāru* and Aramaic *ptr*). See Labuschagne, “Teraphim: A New Proposal for Its Etymology,” *Vetus Testamentum* 16 (January 1966): 116. Another possible etymology for the term *teraphim* is the root *rpp*, cognate with the Arabic *raffa*, meaning “shine, glisten,” suggesting the teraphim had a luminous quality similar to the Urim and Thummim. See Cornelis van Dam, *The Urim and Thummim: A Means of Revelation in Ancient Israel* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns), 227–28. Furthermore,

- Rabbi Geoffrey W. Dennis notes that some teraphim were made of luminous stones, suggesting a connection to the Akkadian *elmēšu* stone.
87. See *The Liver Tablet* in the British Museum, no. 92668. Liver models with cuneiform writing began to appear in Babylonia by the early second millennium BC. See M. Rutz, *Bodies of Knowledge in Ancient Mesopotamia: The Diviners of Late Bronze Age Emar and Their Tablet Collection* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 227.
 88. The *šadāu šābitu* stone is likely magnetite or magnetic ore. See Anais Schuster-Brandis, *Steine als Schutz-und Heilmittel: Untersuchung zu ihrer Verwendung in der Beschwörungskunst Mesopotamiens im 1. Jt. v. Chr* (Münster, Germany: Ugarit-Verlag, 2008), 46:424–25; Ulrike Steinert, “K. 263+ 10934, A Tablet with Recipes against the Abnormal Flow of a Woman’s Blood,” *Sudhoffs Archiv* 96, no. 1 (2012): 64–94; and Irving L. Finkel, “On Three Tablet Inventories,” in *Assyrian and Babylonian Scholarly Text Catalogues: Medicine, Magic and Divination*, ed. Ulrike Steinert (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2018), 28.
 89. Horowitz and Hurowitz, “Urim and Thummim,” 111.
 90. See Richard L. Gordon, “‘Straightening the Paths’: Inductive Divination, Materiality, and Imagination in the Graeco-Roman Period,” in *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome*, supplementary vol. 13, *Ritual Matters: Material Remains and Ancient Religion*, ed. Claudia Moser and Jennifer Knust (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017), 132–33. The use of stones or crystal in divination is properly called lithomancy.
 91. See Markham J. Geller, “A Babylonian Hippocrates,” in Steinert, *Assyrian and Babylonian Scholarly Text Catalogues*, 45.
 92. See D. Collon, *First Impressions: Cylinder Seals in the Ancient Near East* (London: British Museum, 1987), 100. For a further discussion of the protective use of cylinder seals, see Edith Porada, “The Iconography of Death in Mesopotamia in the Early Second Millennium B.C.,” in *Death in Mesopotamia*, ed. B. Alster (Copenhagen: Akademisk Forlag, 1980), 259–70.
 93. Reiner, *Astral Magic in Babylonia*, 127–28.
 94. See Reiner, *Astral Magic in Babylonia*, 126–29. Assyrian sources describe seven luminous stones that the king wore as an amulet, stones that were so powerful that they were also said to be an ornament for the gods. See Kunz, *Curious Lore of Precious Stones*, 230.
 95. See Gordon, “‘Straightening the Paths,’” 132.
 96. See Gordon, “‘Straightening the Paths,’” 135.
 97. Pliny, *Natural History* 37.60, line 169.

98. See Murphy J. Frederick, "God in Pseudo-Philo," *Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman Period* 19, no. 1 (June 1988): 3.
99. Marbode, the bishop of Rennes (1035–1123), similarly penned in the preface of his famous *De lapidibus*: "Quin sua sit gemmis divinitus insitia virtus; Ingens est herbis virtus data, maxima gemmis," "The potency of gems stems from the divine power within them. The potency of herbs is extraordinary, but the very greatest power is that of gems." See Marbode of Rennes, *De lapidibus*, ed. John M. Riddle (Wiesbaden, Germany: Franz Steiner, 1977), line 23.
100. The importance of plants and stones in Mesopotamia is made clear in the tale of Marduk, who carried both herbs and a red protective stone with him when he went to battle Tiamat. See E. A. Wallis Budge, *Amulets and Magic* (London: Kegan Paul, 2001), xx.
101. See Morris Jastrow, "The Medicine of the Babylonians and Assyrians," *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Medicine* 7 (1914): 234n2. Jastrow further argues that the use of stones as protective amulets likely played a role in their eventual use in medicinal compounds (p. 154).
102. See Ulla S. Koch, "Sheep and Sky: Systems of Divinatory Interpretation," in *The Oxford Handbook of Cuneiform Culture*, ed. Karen Radner and Eleanor Robson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 462.
103. In Exodus 28:30 the breastplate is called "the breastplate of decision,"^s following the CSB and NET Bible translations.
104. See Francesca Rochberg, *The Heavenly Writing: Divination, Horoscopy, and Astronomy in Mesopotamian Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 79–80, 185–202.
105. Rochberg, *Heavenly Writing*, 195.
106. See Horowitz and Hurowitz, "Urim and Thummim," 95–115; and E. Smith, "The Magi: A Summary of Divination Practices in the Ancient Near East," online paper, <http://cdn2.hubspot.net/hubfs/2145813/Magi%20-%20DIVINATION%20SUMMARY.pdf?t=1482350543985>.
107. Edward Lipiński, "Ūrīm and Tummīm," *Vetus Testamentum* 20, no. 4 (1970): 496; see Victor Hurowitz, "Oracles," in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 544–45.
108. Lipiński, "Ūrīm and Tummīm," 496. See Erica Reiner, "Fortune-Telling in Mesopotamia," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 19 (1960): 25n4.
109. Horowitz and Hurowitz, "Urim and Thummim," 107.

110. James Orr similarly argued that “the Urim and Thummim was simply a case of sortilege, though in this case, as in the cases enumerated above, God was supposed to control the result.” Orr, in *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Chicago: Howard-Severance, 1915), s.v. “augury.”
111. See Park, *Priestly Divination in Ancient Israel*, 82, 86n22.
112. The Darby Bible Translation reads, “The lot is cast into the lap; but the whole decision is of Jehovah” (Proverbs 16:33).
113. See Nibley, “The Liahona’s Cousins,” *Improvement Era*, February 1961, 103.
114. Johannes Lindblom, “Lot-Casting in the Old Testament,” *Vetus Testamentum* 12, no. 1 (1962): 170, 173.
115. J. Cale Johnson, “Towards a New Perspective on Babylonian Medicine: The Continuum of Allegoresis and the Emergence of Secular Models in Mesopotamian Scientific Thought,” in Ulrike, *Assyrian and Babylonian Scholarly Text Catalogues*, 81.
116. E. Douglas van Buren, “The Seven Dots in Mesopotamian Art and Their Meaning,” *Archiv Für Orientforschung* 13 (1939): 278.
117. Daniel E. Fleming, *The Installation of Baal’s High Priestess at Emar* (Atlanta: Scholar’s Press, 1992), 49; see Robert Taylor, “An Analysis of Celestial Omina in the Light of Mesopotamian Cosmology and Mythos” (master’s thesis, Vanderbilt University, 2006), 23.
118. The English homophones *lot* (divided-up item) and *lot* (parcel of land) have a common etymological origin, showing the close relationship of lot casting and dividing up lands. Compare Gk. *klēros*, “lot,” with a similar dual meaning.
119. In the *Acts of Thomas*, the lands were divided among the apostles by casting lots. See A. F. J. Klijn, *The Acts of Thomas. Introduction, Text, and Commentary*, 2nd rev. ed. (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 17.
120. Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* (Bethesda, MD: CDL Press, 2005), 229; see Patricia Crone and Adam Silverstein, “The Ancient Near East and Islam: The Case of Lot-Casting,” *Journal of Semitic Studies* 55, no. 2 (2010): 424.
121. In the *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan*, the diviner is directed to “put into the breast-plate the Urim [one of two stones], which illuminate their words and make manifest the hidden things of the House of Israel.” Van Dam, *Urim and Thummim*, 23.
122. To Enoch the Lord declared that a seer is one who sees “things which [are] not visible to the natural eye” (Moses 6:36).

123. The Arabic cognate is used only in the context of seeing visions. See Charles F. Kent, *The Sermons, Epistles and Apocalypses of Israel's Prophets, etc.* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1910). Compare Ar. *ḥāzī*, “seer, soothsayer.” See Edward William Lane and Stanley Lane-Pool, *Arabic-English Lexicon* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1984), 562–63. Additionally, Pognon translates the Syriac cognate *hzy* as “*voyant*” (“seer”), “*devin*” (“soothsayer”), and “*prophete*” (“prophet”). See H. Pognon, *Inscriptions sémitiques de la Syrie, de la Mésopotamie et de la région de Mossoul* (Paris: Victor Lecoffre, J. Gabalda, 1907), 167.
124. Note that this corresponds to the time when “forms of divination associated with the prophets began to supplant the priestly oracular functions in the course of the ninth century B.C.” J. R. Porter, “Ancient Israel,” in *Oracles and Divination*, ed. Michael Loewe and Carmen Blacker (Boulder, CO: Shambhala, 1981), 194. According to David L. Petersen, the role of the *ḥōzeh* and the *nābī* overlapped, both as “the central morality prophet”; however, he argues that *ḥōzeh* was commonly used to refer to Judahite prophets, whereas before 721 BC *nābī* was associated more with northern or Israelite contexts. See Petersen, *The Roles of Israel's Prophets* (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1981), 69–70.
125. James Strong, *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2009), 2335.
126. Robert J. Matthews, “Joseph Smith as Translator,” in *Joseph Smith: The Prophet, the Man*, ed. Susan Easton Black and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1993), 84.
127. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses* (London: Latter-day Saints Book Depot, 1854–86), 9:311.
128. Compare Akkadian *pišru*. On the significance of Hebrew *pesher* in this context, see I. Rabinowitz, “‘Pēsher/Pittārōn’: Its Biblical Meaning and Its Significance in the Qumran Literature,” *RevQ* 8 (1973): 219–32.
129. Jerome, with a nod to Cicero's statement, agreed, saying that a word-for-word translation “obscures the sense in the same way as the thriving weeds smother the seeds. . . . Let others stick to syllables, or even to letters, [one] should try to grasp the sense!” André Lefevre, *Translation/History/Culture: A Sourcebook* (London: Routledge, 2002), 48–9.
130. Krzysztof Ulanowski, “Mesopotamian Divination: Some Historical, Religious, and Anthropological Remarks,” *Miscellanea Anthropologica et Sociologica* 15, no. 4 (2014): 22.

131. See Royal Skousen, "Translating the Book of Mormon: Evidence from the Original Manuscript," in *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited: The Evidence for Ancient Origins*, ed. Noel B. Reynolds (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1997), 67–87.
132. With respect to translation theory, Maria Tymoczko has argued that translation equivalencies "have depended on the manifold factors of human culture, including, for example, characteristics of the culture's language, the conditions of 'text' production, the role (if any) of literacy, the material culture, economics, social customs, social hierarchies, values, and so forth." Tymoczko, "Computerized Corpora and the Future of Translation Studies," *Meta* 43, no. 4 (1998): 3. In other words, "translation" is not a simple one-to-one process, but is continually mediated through the translator's life experiences. The resulting translation, according to Tymoczko, "will be correlated not simply with the conditions of one culture, but with those of *at least two cultures in interface*" (p. 3; emphasis added).
133. Mackay and Frederick, *Seer Stones*, 52.
134. Basil Hatim and Ian Mason, *The Translator as Communicator* (London: Routledge, 2005), 242.
135. Anthony J. Liddicoat, "Translation as Intercultural Mediation: Setting the Scene," *Perspectives* 24, no. 3 (2016): 347.
136. Liddicoat, "Translation as Intercultural Mediation," 347; emphasis added.
137. Richard Clouet, "Intercultural Language Learning: Cultural Mediation within the Curriculum of Translation and Interpreting Studies," *Ibérica* 16 (2008): 148.
138. Mesopotamian divination texts often end with this proviso: "He who knows, may see it, he who does not know, may not." Koch, "Sheep and Sky," 445.
139. Jane McIntosh, *Ancient Mesopotamia: New Perspectives* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2005), 218–19; emphasis added.
140. See Ilona Zsolnay, "The Misconstrued Role of the Assinnu in Ancient Near Eastern Prophecy," in *Prophets Male and Female: Gender and Prophecy in the Hebrew Bible, the Eastern Mediterranean, and the Ancient Near East*, ed. Jonathan Stökl and Corrine L. Carvalho (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2013), 81.
141. Fransesca Rochberg expands upon the causative relationship between gods and humans in the divinatory process: "Mesopotamian scholarly divination texts do not reflect directly on [a] divine–human relation, but rather indirectly in the form of lists of omens. Just as in extispicy, in which the gods were thought to

- ‘write upon the liver’ a forecast encoded in the cracks and coloration of the liver, the gods were also believed to act on (we might say ‘cause’) the signs observed in the natural world.” Rochberg, *Heavenly Writing*, 187.
142. See Scott B. Noegel, *Nocturnal Ciphers: The Allusive Language of Dreams in the Ancient Near East* (New Haven: American Oriental Society, 2007), 275.
143. Yale Oriental Series, Babylonian Texts, YOS 10 17:47. This refers to a cuneiform text in the Metropolitan Museum of Art.
144. Pongratz-Leisten, “Crossroads between Divination and Cosmology,” 39; compare YOS 11 23.
145. W. G. Lambert, “The Qualifications of Babylonian Diviners,” in S. M. Maul, ed., *Festschrift für Rykle Borger zu seinen 65. Geburtstag am 24. Mai 1994* (Groningen, The Netherlands: Styx Publications, 1998), 152; see Winitzer, “Divine Presence,” 181.
146. Similar notions are part of Hellenistic philosophy and early Christian thought. Plotinus claimed the gods “furnish the incidental service of being letters on which the prognostication, those acquainted with that alphabet [γραμματικὴν], may look and read [εἰδόμενος ἀναγινώσκει] the future from the pattern.” Plotinus, *The Enneads*, trans. Stephen MacKenna, 3rd ed. (London: Faber and Faber, 1962), 3:6. Origen, inspired by Isaiah 34:4 (“heavens rolled up like a scroll,” NIV), Jeremiah 10:2 (“be not dismayed at the signs of heaven,” ASV), and the pseudepigraphic book *Prayer of Joseph* (“I have read in the tablets of heaven all that shall befall you and your sons”), also stated the sky was “like a book of God” that contained “heavenly letters” (τὰ οὐράνια γράμματα) (*Philokalia*, XXIII, 20).
147. Scott B. Noegel, “‘Sign, Sign, Everywhere a Sign’: Script, Power, and Interpretation in the Ancient Near East,” in Annus, *Divination and Interpretation of Signs*, 150–51. This connection is clear in Babylonian Aramaic, in which the term *ātā*’ refers to a consonantal letter and the cognate form *yūtā*’ to “constellation”; similarly, the Syriac *ātuw* means “sign,” “alphabetic letter,” but also “constellation.” Noegel, “Script, Power, and Interpretation,” 152n33. Furthermore, the Sumerian word *mul* (“star”) can also refer to a cuneiform sign on a tablet, showing their intimate conceptual relationship. See Michael Roaf and Annette Zgoll, “Assyrian Astroglyphs: Lord Aberdeen’s Black Stone and the Prisms of Esarhaddon,” *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie und vorderasiatische Archäologie* 91, no. 2 (2001): 289.

148. Bess Connolly, "Yale Assyriologist Decodes the 'Writing of the Heavens' by Ancient Stargazers," *Yale News*, February 22, 2019, <https://news.yale.edu/2019/02/22/yale-assyriologist-decodes-writing-heavens-ancient-stargazers>.
149. See Reiner, *Astral Magic in Babylonia*, 9.
150. David R. Brown, *Mesopotamian Planetary Astronomy-Astrology* (Groningen, The Netherlands: Styx, 2000), 112. The king Esarhaddon depicted "lumāšu-stars" on stelaē "which represent the writing of [his] name." Reiner, *Astral Magic in Babylonia*, 9.
151. Brown, "Astral Divination," 88.
152. Philip M. Peek emphasizes this point in his study "African Divination Systems," in *African Divination Systems: Ways of Knowing*, ed. Philip M. Peek (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 194.
153. The title is best (but insufficiently) translated as "scribe-diviner." See Rochberg, *Heavenly Writing*, 45. The Babylonian and Assyrian term for "scribe" (Lú A.BA = *tušarrū*) was used for those who specialized in "scholarly divination," general knowledge of the natural world, astrology, and standard meaning related to physical writing. See Rochberg, *Heavenly Writing*, 210. In addition, a *tušarrū* had "a working knowledge of the relevant aversive rituals." Koch, "Sheep and Sky," 455. It is perhaps significant that the Hebrew *hōzeh*, "seer," may have also "read" external signs such as the movement of the stars or the flight patterns of birds. See Kent, *Sermons, Epistles, and Apocalypses*, 8–9.
154. Brown, "Astral Divination," 89.
155. Krzytof Ulanowski, "Communication with Gods: The Role of Divination in Mesopotamian Civilization," in *Cultural Crossroads in the Middle East: The Historical, Cultural and Political Legacy of Intercultural Dialogue and Conflict from the Ancient Near East to the Present Day*, ed. Vladimir Sazonov, Holger Mölder, and Peeter Espak (Tartu, Estonia: University of Tartu Press, 2019), 51.
156. Marian Broida, "Textualizing Divination: The Writing on the Wall in Daniel 5:25," *Vetus Testamentum* 62, no. 1 (2012): 4.
157. Similarly, Babylonian texts, such as *LKA* 109:1–8, commonly refer to stars as "cosmic designs" (giš.hur.an.ki / *uṣurāt šamê u erṣēti*). See Rochberg, *Heavenly Writing*, 199.
158. Rochberg, *Heavenly Writing*, 198.
159. I. Tzvi Abusch, "Alaktu and Halakhah Oracular Decision, Divine Revelation," *Harvard Theological Review* 80, no. 1 (1987): 19–20; emphasis added.

160. Adam Falkenstein and Wolfram von Soden, *Sumerische und Akkadische Hymnen und Gebete* (Zurich: Artemis, 1953), 247–48.
161. Rochberg, *Heavenly Writing*, 48.
162. See Pliny, *Natural History* 37.192, for an example of stones used in hydromancy. Stones such as *anancitis*, *topazios*, and *smaragdus* are mentioned in Greek sources for stones that were used in hydromancy to facilitate the appearance of god images in the reflective water. See Gordon, “Straightening the Paths,” 134n76.
163. See Max Nelson, “Narcissus: Myth and Magic,” *Classical Journal* 95, no. 4 (2000): 374–75.
164. Cyclomancy is a type of hydromancy specifically using a cup (Gk. κύλιχ, “cup”). Compare Coptic ϩⲉϩⲉⲛⲛⲓⲛ (*refšenhin*), “diviner” (der. ϩⲓⲛ “vessel, cup” [*Coptic Dictionary Online*], which translates as “the one who inquires of a cup/glass”). Jean Leclant, *Éléments pour une étude de la divination dans l’Égypte pharaonique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1968), 20.
165. This stone is said to be the *tsohar* (see Genesis 6:16) that also illuminated the ark for Noah. See H. Schwartz, *Reimagining the Bible: The Storytelling of the Rabbis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 18; and Schwartz, *Tree of Souls*, 87.
166. Alan M. Greaves, “Divination at Archaic Branchidai-Didyma: A Critical Review,” *Hesperia* 81, no. 2 (2012): 189.
167. Koch, “Sheep and Sky,” 454.
168. Noegel, “Sign, Sign, Everywhere a Sign,” 150n21a.
169. Rochberg, *Heavenly Writing*, 2; emphasis added.
170. Ulanowski, “Mesopotamian Divination,” 13.
171. See Michael H. MacKay, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Brian M. Hauglid, eds., *Producing Ancient Scripture: Joseph Smith’s Translation Projects and the Making of Mormon Christianity* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2020).
172. I concur with Don Bradley that Joseph “received a visual or conceptual revelation of the book’s contents.” See Bradley, *The Lost 116 Pages: Reconstructing the Book of Mormon’s Missing Stories* (Draper, UT: Greg Kofford Books, 2019), 40.
173. According to a secondhand account, Oliver Cowdery stated that the translation process involved two distinct processes. First, through “two transparent stones in the form of spectacles,” Joseph Smith “looked on the engraving & afterwards put his face into a hat & the interpretation then flowed into his mind.” Christian Goodwillie, “Shaker Richard McNemar: The Earliest Book of Mormon Reviewer,” *Journal of Mormon History* 37 (Spring 2011): 143; quoted in Michael

- Hubbard MacKay, Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, Grant Underwood, Robert J. Woodford, and William G. Hartley, eds., *Documents, Volume 1: July 1828–June 1831*, vol. 1 of the Documents series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, ed. Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, Richard Lyman Bushman, and Matthew J. Grow (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2013), xxxi–xxxii. Note that in this account “translation” occurred not simply by looking at the plates through the interpreters, but by looking into a hat with a seer stone in it, whereupon “the interpretation then flowed into [Joseph’s] mind.”
174. Stan Spencer has similarly argued that the seer stones functioned as “aids to faith that helped [Joseph Smith] attain a state of mind conducive to seeing visions.” 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): 31.
175. In a broad perspective, deity provides, in a Saussurean sense, the *signifier* through supernatural means, and the practitioner fully interprets the *signified* through inspiration, training, cultural understanding, and so on. As Anne Marie Kitz remarks, “the deity manipulates and the diviner explicates.” Kitz, “Prophecy as Divination,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 65, no. 1 (2003): 39. Mesopotamian diviners would often consult compendia or handbooks, ponder, and even discuss with others before declaring a “reading” of a message. By the third millennium BC, Mesopotamian scribe-diviners were recording divinations and their aftermath in handbooks, which were then consulted by later practitioners when divining. See McIntosh, *Ancient Mesopotamia*, 218; Reiner, *Astral Magic in Babylonia*, viii; Ulla Susanne Koch, *Secrets of Extispicy: The Chapter Multābiltu of the Babylonian Extispicy Series and Niširti Bārūti Texts Mainly from Aššurbanipal’s Library* (Münster, Germany: Ugarit-Verlag, 2005), 273–97; and Van der Toorn, *Making of the Hebrew Bible*, 56–59. For example, *tāmītus* (“ocular answer”) records were copied by Mesopotamian scholars to reference in the future. Koch, “Sheep and Sky,” 450. The final pronouncement of the meaning of the heavenly message could be consultative, ponderous, and collaborative. I would suggest that, in general terms, these factors were sometimes present in documents Joseph Smith mediated through divinatory revelation.