

Firsthand Witness Accounts of the Translation Process

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For decades, most Latter-day Saints have had little reason to examine the miraculous translation of the Book of Mormon beyond its most basic details. In recent years, however, references to the translation on national television and the internet have piqued the curiosity of many, and a much broader interest in the translation process has been the result, despite the fact that scholars have been addressing many of these questions for decades.¹ In 2014 the Church released a five-page statement on its website about the translation, one reflecting an understanding of the translation outlined in the introduction to *The Joseph Smith Papers, Documents, Volume 1*. This volume analyzed the documentary record surrounding the translation process and explained what witnesses said about the translation.² These two publications mark a concerted effort by the Church to help members understand the details of the translation process.

This chapter will help satisfy the rising interest in the translation of the Book of Mormon by analyzing what witnesses and close associates of Joseph Smith said about the manner in which Joseph Smith translated the gold plates.³ Both believers and nonbelievers asked Joseph and his associates to explain the process numerous times, and Joseph Smith and his scribes left records of their responses.⁴ We have gathered and evaluated these historical

documents to help clarify how Joseph Smith and those close to him experienced the translation process. By analyzing the statements of those who witnessed the translation (primarily his scribes), we address what they believe happened. Because they watched Joseph translate, their witness was primarily based on what they saw or what Joseph explained to them about the process. The scribes explained a process that involved physical objects such as seer stones, a hat to block ambient light, and gold plates.

One caveat: Latter-day Saints have always believed that the Book of Mormon came into the world as the result of a series of miraculous events, starting with the appearance of the angel Moroni and proceeding through the completion of a translation of an ancient record. As with any miracle, it is difficult to reconstruct or even understand what happened without having experienced the event firsthand. This limits our ability to understand the translation beyond what witnesses saw and described. As valuable as witness statements are, they do not offer a perfect window into the consciousness of Joseph Smith. We will focus primarily on the historical record and avoid theoretical models or approaches that attempt to identify Joseph's cognition or state of mind during the translation. What Joseph was thinking or experiencing as he translated the book is essentially beyond the realm of historical inquiry. Unless he spoke about it, one can only guess or speculate.

JOSEPH'S WITNESS (BY THE GIFT AND POWER OF GOD)

Joseph Smith declared that he translated the Book of Mormon from an ancient language (reformed Egyptian) into English, but he spoke only one language. His parents provided him with only a limited education, and though he did have a bright mind, he did not have the education necessary to translate one language into another. He later explained that he was taught to read and write, but that these skills "const[itu]ted my whole literary acquirements."⁵ His wife, Emma, and others emphasized this point to make the production of the Book of Mormon appear even more astounding than it already was. Emma wrote that he "could neither write nor dictate a coherent and well-worded letter, let alone dictat[e] a book like the Book of Mormon."⁶ Joseph maintained that he did not possess the ability to write the Book of Mormon on his own. He occasionally referenced his gift to translate throughout his life. In each account he consistently gave God credit for the translation and never claimed that he produced the Book of Mormon from his own efforts or through independent volition.⁷

Unfortunately, Joseph left very little indication about how he translated. In the preface to the 1830 edition to the Book of Mormon, he wrote, “I would inform you that I translated, by the gift and power of God.”⁸ His friends and family provided further details about the process, but Joseph’s public statements consistently described the translation in vague terms associated with the power of God. Yet there were parallels to Joseph’s gift in the Book of Mormon. Ammon, for example, described King Mosiah as a person who also had the gift to translate. Ammon declared that “a gift which is greater can no man have, except he should possess the power of God, which no man can; yet a man may have great power given him from God” (Mosiah 8:16). Joseph’s and Ammon’s statements say little about how God’s power enabled them to translate ancient records, but both of them emphasized their callings as seers and prophets.

Some historical accounts claim Joseph explained the process further, but it is also clear that at times Joseph insisted on saying less. For example, in Orange, Ohio, during a conference in the fall of 1831, Joseph explained to the whole conference, “It was not intended to tell the world all the particulars of the coming forth of the book of Mormon.”⁹ Yet at another conference in Norton, Ohio, in 1834, Joseph apparently “gave a relation of obtaining and translating the Book of Mormon.”¹⁰ Nonetheless, Joseph continued to declare ambiguously that by “the gift and Power of God” he translated the Book of Mormon—a statement that by itself leaves readers to wonder about the mechanics of the translation itself. This vagueness has allowed many people to speculate about whether or not any of the produced text was the consequence of Joseph’s own thought process and cognition or volition.

Even before Joseph wrote the preface to the Book of Mormon, his July 1828 revelation (Doctrine and Covenants 3:9) provided some insight into how he was able to translate it. In the wording of the earliest manuscript, the revelation explains, “God had given thee sight <and power> to Translate.” This suggests that Joseph’s gift was his ability to *see* things that others could not. Thus he was a seer. The concept of sight could possibly be a metaphor for a broader interpretation, but there is a parallel in the Book of Mormon that may help make sense of Joseph’s revelation. The Book of Mormon explained that King Mosiah was a seer and that he could translate because “he has wherewith that he can *look*, and translate all records that are of ancient date; and it is a gift from God” (Mosiah 8:13). This parallel is even more germane to how Joseph translated because it appears that they both may have used the same device to translate ancient records.

PRIMARY SCRIBES

The basic idea found within most of the historical accounts is that Joseph saw the translation of the Book of Mormon on seer stone interpreters, from which he dictated the text to a scribe who recorded the words. Nevertheless, the procedure appears to have differed slightly from scribe to scribe, as the accounts left by each person include unique elements. Joseph's scribes are extremely important witnesses because they watched the process for hours at a time, and though they apparently never witnessed the words appear on the seer stones, they conversed with Joseph about the translation for months during 1828 and 1829. They offer accounts of the process that are deeply personal and provide experiences that are second only to the experience of Joseph Smith. Therefore, it will be particularly helpful to observe the process through the eyes of Emma Smith, Martin Harris, and Oliver Cowdery—Joseph Smith's three primary scribes.

In December 1827, Joseph and Emma moved to a fourteen-acre farm in Harmony, Pennsylvania, where Joseph began translating the plates. Joseph's history states that in February 1828 he began peering into the interpreters, where he saw the words of the translation. Between that month and the spring of 1828, Joseph Smith may have dictated to Emma as much as two-thirds of a manuscript known as the Book of Lehi.¹¹

During a private interview with her son Joseph Smith III in 1879, Emma responded to questions about the translation after a lifetime of thought and contemplation. Just months before her death, Emma told her son that she "frequently wrote day after day" at a small table in their house in Harmony. Joseph could not have concealed anything from Emma, as she sat "at the table close by him"—close enough to see exactly how the translation occurred. Believing that her husband could not have produced the text of the Book of Mormon on his own, Emma was as astonished by the translation as anyone. "Though I was an active participant in the scenes that transpired, and was present during the translation of the plates," she told one interviewer, as mentioned above, "it is marvelous to me, 'a marvel and a wonder,' as much so as to anyone else."¹²

By mid-April 1828, Martin Harris began recording the translation. He was much more outspoken about the translation of the Book of Mormon. Like Emma, Harris sat at the table near Joseph and wrote down the words as Joseph dictated. He likewise mentioned the plates lying on the table, wrapped in or covered with a small tablecloth. He left at least twenty-five statements about his involvement, declaring that "he was favored to write

direct from the mouth of the Prophet Joseph Smith.” Knowing that Joseph could not translate the ancient characters on the plates, he marveled at the complexity of the text and at how fluidly Joseph dictated the Book of Mormon to him.¹³

Oliver Cowdery began serving as Joseph Smith’s scribe on April 7, 1829, in Harmony, Pennsylvania. From April until the end of May, the translation advanced at Joseph Smith’s house in Harmony, and the remainder was finished in Fayette, New York, at Peter Whitmer Sr.’s house by the end of June. During that period, Cowdery recorded most of the original manuscript of the Book of Mormon, with some assistance from two unidentified scribes (probably John Whitmer and possibly Christian Whitmer) who helped in June. Unlike Martin Harris and David Whitmer, who lived much longer and spoke often in their later years about their perception of the translation process, Oliver Cowdery died comparatively young, at age forty-three, so he left only a few statements.¹⁴

THE SEER STONES

The scribes mentioned at least two types of seer stones: the spectacles, or interpreters, and one or more additional seer stones that Joseph had found.¹⁵

SPECTACLES, OR INTERPRETERS

Joseph explained that Moroni, “the same heavenly messenger” that delivered the plates, also gave him a device that held two stones, which Joseph referred to as “spectacles,” and a breastplate to hold the spectacles.¹⁶ (For more about this story, see chapter 2 herein.) Joseph’s description of the stones as “spectacles” led to a misunderstanding of the way the stones actually functioned, according to witnesses.¹⁷ The spectacles were simply two seer stones bound together like glasses without the earpieces, though they were not intended to sit on the bridge of a person’s nose or wrap around the user’s ears. The spectacles were larger than typical glasses.¹⁸ Though most glasses are about six inches from one side to the other, Harris explained that the spectacles were about “eight inches” long.¹⁹

In the fall of 1830, Cowdery described the interpreters as “two transparent stones in the form of spectacles thro which the translator looked on the engraving & afterwards put his face into a hat & the interpretation then flowed into his mind.”²⁰ In 1831 Cowdery testified under oath that Joseph Smith “found with the plates, from which he translated the

book, two transparent stones, resembling glass, set in silver bows” and “that by looking at these, he was able to read in English, the reformed Egyptian characters, which were engraven on the plates.”²¹ One of Cowdery’s earliest converts in Ohio wrote, “In the last part of October, 1830, four men appeared here . . . with a book, which they said contained what was engraven on gold plates found . . . about three years ago by a man named Joseph Smith Jr. who had translated it by looking into a stone or two stones, when put into a dark place, which stones he said were found in the box with the plates.”²² He explained that Cowdery had said, “While [Joseph] looked through the stone spectacles another sat by and wrote what he told them.”²³ These statements can be compared with a newspaper article, not associated with Oliver Cowdery but published just a few weeks after the translation work was finished in June 1829. In this article Jonathan Hadley, one of the printers Joseph Smith approached in Palmyra to print the Book of Mormon, claimed that the “very illiterate” Joseph told him the plates were found with a “huge pair of Spectacles” and that “by placing the Spectacles in a hat, and looking into it, Smith could (he said so, at least,) interpret these characters.”²⁴

Whether this report refers to Joseph’s use of the Urim and Thummim in 1829 or to what was done in 1828 before Oliver’s time is not certain, but it could refer to both. Drawing similarities between these stones and two stones that constituted the biblical Urim and Thummim, Joseph and others eventually called the Book of Mormon stones Urim and Thummim.²⁵ Though Oliver Cowdery later used the Book of Mormon term *interpreters*, it is not found in many other accounts, and the term *spectacles* was later used interchangeably with Urim and Thummim.²⁶ William W. Phelps’s article in the January 1833 issue of *The Evening and the Morning Star* exemplifies the use and confusion of these interchangeable terms. It claimed that the Book of Mormon “was translated by the gift and power of God, by an unlearned man, through the aid of a pair of Interpreters, or spectacles—(known, perhaps, in ancient days as Teraphim, or Urim and Thummim).”²⁷

OTHER SEER STONES

Martin Harris saw Joseph Smith use the Urim and Thummim, but he also saw Joseph use a single stone. Harris explained that Joseph Smith “possessed a seer stone, by which he was enabled to translate as well as from the Urim and Thummim, and for convenience he then used the seer stone,”²⁸ which is understandable because the spectacles may have been somewhat awkward to use, making the long hours of translation more difficult.²⁹

Harris claimed that he knew how Joseph was translating. He explained that by the “aid of the seer stone, sentences would appear and were read by the Prophet and written by [Martin], and when finished he would say, ‘Written,’ and if correctly written, that sentence would disappear and another appear in its place, but if not written correctly it remained until corrected.” Harris was apparently an active participant in the translation, and his audible exchanges with Joseph made it apparent to him that words were appearing on the seer stone or stones in the hat. Harris believed that this process eliminated the possibility of any volition on the part of Joseph Smith. Joseph did not determine what was included in the text of the Book of Mormon; the translation apparently came directly from that which appeared on the seer stones.³⁰

Emma Smith began transcribing again for Joseph Smith in the fall of 1828 and early 1829, but it is unknown what she wrote down for Joseph at this time. Emma wrote to Emma Pilgrim in 1870 that Joseph first “translated by the use of the Urim and Thummim [i.e., spectacles or interpreters], and that was the part that Martin Harris lost [the Book of Lehi], after that he [Joseph Smith] used a small stone, not exactly black, but rather a dark color.”³¹ Historical documents do not allow us to conclude whether Emma was speaking from actual knowledge or from supposition when she suggested that Joseph Smith carried out the remainder of the translation with this brown stone. She was not a scribe during the period from April to June 1829, but she was in the same house when the translation was taking place.

Because of Emma’s statement about the brown stone, some historians have concluded that Joseph Smith used a single seer stone exclusively during this period of the Book of Mormon translation, but Joseph likely used another seer stone, or set of stones used as one device, at that time as well. For example, interviews with Cowdery or speeches by him,³² as well as one very early account close to the time when Oliver worked as Joseph’s scribe, mention the interpreters or Urim and Thummim, which suggests their importance during the time Oliver scribed for Joseph.

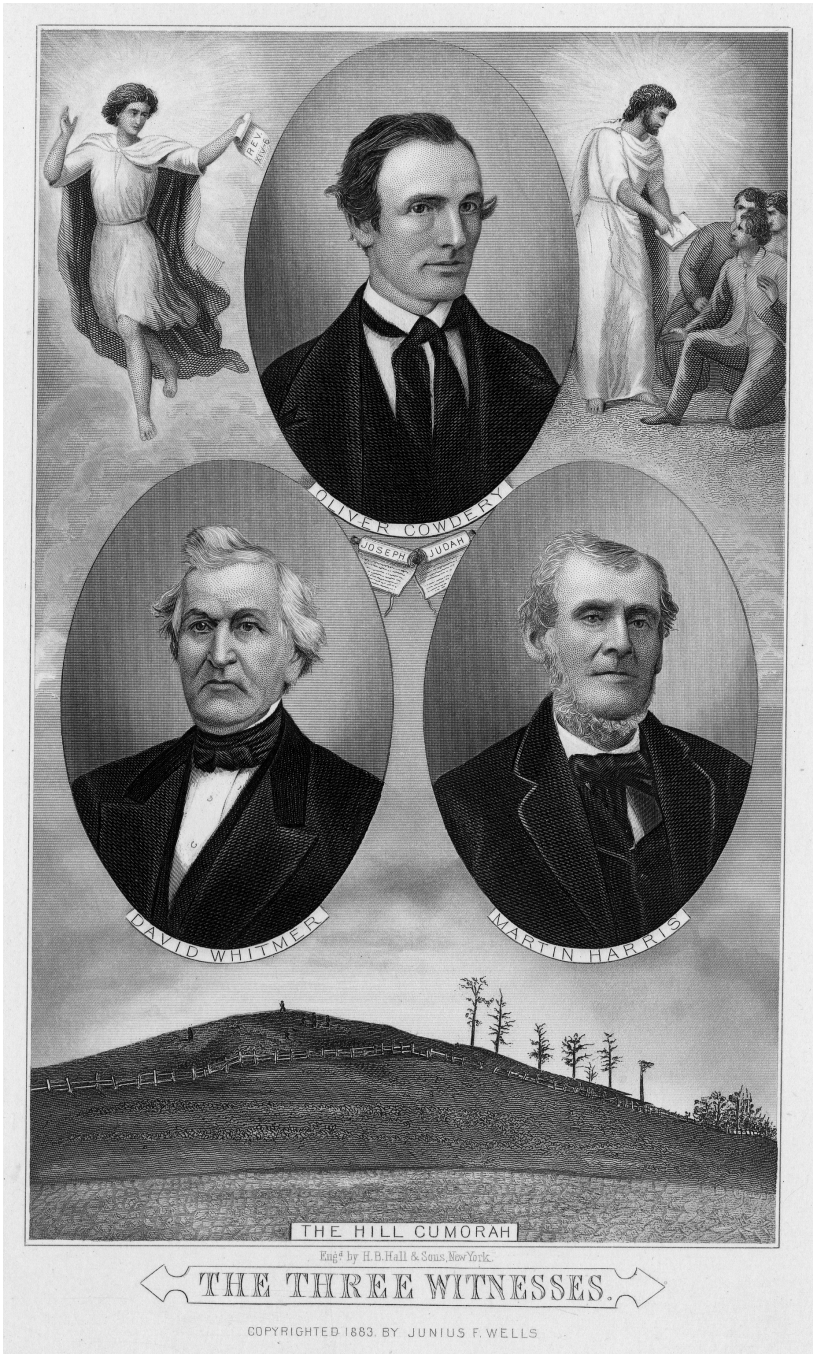
USE OF A HAT TO BLOCK AMBIENT LIGHT

Significantly, the use of a hat appears in important witness statements relating to translation in Harmony (Emma Smith, Martin Harris),³³ as well as in Fayette (David Whitmer, Elizabeth Whitmer Cowdery).³⁴ In fact, before the printing of the Book of Mormon had even begun, in the earliest known account of the translation of the plates, the spectacles were described as

being used in conjunction with a hat. The mention of the hat Joseph used often causes modern interpreters to relate the translation to magic. Yet the hat itself is as insignificant to the process as the table Oliver Cowdery used to write on during the translation. It was simply a tool that Joseph apparently used to block out all extraneous light.

According to several accounts, when Joseph used his hat he began the process by placing the stone in the hat in order to read the words that would appear on the stone. Joseph then dictated the words he saw to his scribe. Joseph Knight Sr., who provided financial support for Joseph Smith during the translation, recounted, “Now the way he translated was he put the urim and thummim into his hat and Darkened his Eyes” so that he could see the words a sentence at a time.³⁵ David Whitmer, one of the Three Witnesses of the Book of Mormon, gave many interviews about the translation between 1878 and 1888. Though he never claimed to have actually seen the words on the stone himself, his statements often spoke of the words appearing on something resembling parchment.³⁶ His statements typically testified with words to the effect that “Joseph Smith would put the seer stone into a hat, and put his face in the hat, drawing it closely around his face to exclude the light; and in the darkness the spiritual light would shine. Thus the Book of Mormon was translated by the gift and power of God, and not by any power of man.”³⁷

This process echoes the Book of Mormon account of a stone that “shall shine forth in darkness unto light” (Alma 37:23).³⁸ In addition, the placing of the seer stone and his face in the hat significantly suggests that Joseph was not reading from notes or a book.³⁹ In whatever way it happened, David Whitmer and some other commentators believed that the characters and the translation came into Joseph’s fields of vision and understanding and he was able to convey those emerging words to his scribes. This validates Joseph’s lack of volition in the process and emphasizes Joseph’s statements about the translation that it was by the “gift and power of God” that he translated the Book of Mormon. Emma explained that Joseph sat across from her “with his face buried in his hat, with the stone in it, and dictating hour after hour with nothing between us.” Addressing criticisms that Joseph read from a prepared script or the Bible, Joseph III carefully inquired about her experience. Emma declared, “He had neither manuscript nor book to read from.” In Emma’s understanding, Joseph could not have read from anything that was not inside the hat, which was too small to encompass a large manuscript or a sizable Bible. “If he had had anything of the kind [books or manuscripts],” Emma declared, “He could not have concealed it from me.”



The Three Witnesses, engraving by H. B. Hall & Sons, 1883. Courtesy of Church History Library.

The seer stone in the hat was central to the translation; it was small enough to fit easily inside the hat, and according to Emma, the words appeared on the stone. Additionally, she explained that the plates “often lay on the table without any attempt at concealment, wrapped in a small linen table cloth.”⁴⁰

Witnesses testify that Joseph relied on divine assistance in carrying out the translation. As with the Liahona described in the Book of Mormon (see 1 Nephi 16:26–28), all these sacred objects required righteousness and diligence on Joseph’s part in order to provide connectivity with divine inspiration. David Whitmer said that the seer stones worked only when Joseph was “humble and possessed the right feeling towards everyone.”⁴¹ Whitmer remembered a time in June 1829 when Joseph had a “stormy quarrel” with Emma. Still upset about their disagreement, Joseph went upstairs to resume the translation, only to find that “he could not translate a single syllable.” The miraculous nature of the translation required Joseph Smith to be right before God and man; when this was not the case, his divine gift was temporarily withdrawn. Whitmer said Joseph went “out into the orchard and made supplication to Lord [and] was gone about an hour.” He returned to the house, asked Emma for forgiveness, and returned to translating with Oliver Cowdery. The words again began to appear on the stone.⁴²

CONTROVERSY REGARDING SEER STONES

Despite their significance to the translation process, the seer stones have become a topic of mystery and even controversy. The most public and successful early attempt to denigrate Joseph Smith’s use of the seer stones came with the publication of a book compiled by Eber D. Howe in 1834 called *Mormonism Unveiled*.

Motivated by the conversion of his sister and wife to the restored gospel and funded by a society in Kirtland, Ohio, that opposed the Church, Howe sent Doctor Philastus Hurlbut to New York in 1833 to gather evidence against Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon. Howe attempted to prove to the public at large that Solomon Spaulding wrote a manuscript that Joseph Smith plagiarized in order to create the Book of Mormon. Howe claimed that, with Sidney Rigdon’s help, Joseph plagiarized and appropriated Spaulding’s text and manufactured the Book of Mormon.⁴³ In the process, he deliberately associated Smith’s seer stone instrument with the culture of treasure seeking in New York. Instead of viewing the devices as instruments prepared by God for Joseph Smith, he associated them with mystical practices of using “peep stones” to find buried treasure. Howe’s

false claims stoked public sentiment against the Church and has continued to do so for almost two centuries by encouraging people to understand Joseph Smith's translation of the Book of Mormon as part of his agrarian folk practices. Though the more educated classes often derided folk practices, the agrarian lower and middle classes, most of whom were presumably Christians, openly embraced them. In fact, these practices were often described through natural processes or "scientifically," but Howe attempted to reassociate Smith's seer stones as tools used for money digging.⁴⁴

Folk practices like using a divining rod to find water can potentially represent the antithesis of our modern scientific worldview. Yet in Joseph's lifetime, using stones to see lost or hidden objects was relatively normal, in much the same way that many people today believe that essential oils offer health benefits despite the skeptical response of the scientific community. Joseph occasionally joined with other local youth in attempts to use stones to find valuable objects. E. D. Howe and others negatively portrayed Joseph as a money digger because he knew about Joseph's treasure-seeking adventures with his friends.⁴⁵

Modern historians have seen Joseph's money digging either as part of his religious radicalism or as a developmental period for his religious calling as a prophet. Either way, it has been difficult for historians to detach Joseph Smith's use of a seer stone from 1822 to 1826 from his use of seer stones after 1827 (when he began translating the Book of Mormon). Some historians have attempted to make his early experiences as a treasure digger insignificant, while others have described the same experiences as foundational for Smith's religious experiences as a translator.⁴⁶ These polarized views are supported by our knowledge of the culture at the time and by dozens of accounts taken from *Mormonism Unveiled* and other Church-critical sources produced decades later. Rectifying the differences of opinion will likely never happen, and firm conclusions about Joseph's interest in treasure digging may be possible only with the discovery of new documents.⁴⁷

PURPOSE OF THE GOLD PLATES

With Joseph looking into the hat at the seer stones, what need was there for him to even have the plates in his possession? While most of the Book of Mormon translation accounts say little in this regard, the plates may well have served several purposes. Their mere existence may have instilled Joseph with confidence that the words that appeared on the stones were from an

ancient record. In the face of persistent pestering, carrying and possessing the plates would have sustained his confidence that the translation process was authentic. His mission was to “translate the engravings which are on the plates” (Doctrine and Covenants 10:41), and he spent some time scrutinizing and transcribing some of the characters on them. Yet the translation usually occurred while the plates lay covered on the table (although some accounts suggest that the plates were sometimes kept in a nearby box under the bed or even hidden in the Whitmers’ barn during translation).⁴⁸ In addition, the plates encouraged belief in the minds of needed supporters, such as Emma, the Whitmer family, and the Three and the Eight Witnesses, each of whom spoke of having various experiences touching, hefting, feeling, and seeing the plates. The text of the Book of Mormon is abnormally self-aware of the plates; it focuses again and again on the provenance of the gold plates and the sources from which Mormon and Moroni compiled them. It essentially tracks the gold plates and their source material from person to person until the plates end up in the hands of Joseph Smith. The Book of Mormon even prophesies of Joseph’s possession and translation of the record. Therefore, the physical plates fulfill thousands of years of preparation, and the witnesses provide authentication of the historicity of the plates. The plates were therefore indispensable for validating the ancient nature of the Book of Mormon.

CONCLUSION

Pulling together the accounts from witnesses and our understanding of the sacred instruments used for translation, we can now understand three components of Joseph Smith’s translation process. He explained that he translated (1) by the gift and power of God (like Mosiah) and (2) by way of an instrument (the seer stones), which (3) functioned through “sight” (as Doctrine and Covenants 3:12 indicates). Some of Joseph’s close associates also elaborated on what he revealed—most spoke of Joseph’s use of the term *Urim and Thummim* (either the spectacles or the seer stone),⁴⁹ while a few refer to his use of a single stone⁵⁰ placed into a hat used to shield his eyes from extraneous light. Given the different experiences of each of Joseph’s scribes discussed above, it seems possible that he was not particular about using a single, consistent procedure. He seems to have alternated between one stone and two. In addition, as Joseph looked into his hat at the seer stones, he left the gold plates covered on the table or locked in a box.

Finally, though an examination of the translation process relying on witness statements alone could be criticized as limited, it provides a historical

foundation for others to expand on. Research that utilizes literary theory, historical-cognition studies, textual criticism, and psychological approaches will continue to produce interesting and thought-provoking theories and analyses, but the bedrock of such studies should be a well-documented religious experience given in the words of those who experienced it.⁵¹

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Michael Hubbard MacKay and Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, “Firsthand Witness Accounts of the Translation Process,” in *The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon: A Marvelous Work and a Wonder*, ed. Dennis L. Largey, Andrew H. Hedges, John Hilton III, and Kerry Hull (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2015), 61–79.

NOTES

1. For examples of apologetic scholarship that openly discusses the translation process, see the following works: Richard Lloyd Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981), 108; Hyrum Andrus, *Joseph Smith: The Man and the Seer* (American Fork, UT: Covenant Communications, 2005), 160–62; Leonard J. Arrington and Davis Bitton, *The Mormon Experience: A History of the Latter-day Saints* (New York: Vintage Books/Random House, 1979), 10–12; Milton V. Backman Jr., *Eyewitness Accounts of the Restoration* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1986), 84; LeGrand L. Baker, *Joseph and Moroni: The 7 Principles Moroni Taught Joseph Smith* (West Valley, UT: Eborn Books, 2007), 44; Susan Easton Black and Andrew Skinner, *Joseph: Exploring the Life and Ministry of the Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005), 62–63, 266, 270; Steven C. Harper, *Joseph the Seer* (Provo, UT: Harper Publishing, 2005), 49, 62–63; Larry C. Porter and Susan Easton Black, *The Prophet Joseph: Essays on the Life and Mission of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988), 13–14; John W. Welch, *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations, 1820–1844* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2005), 87; John W. Welch, *The Worlds of Joseph Smith: A Bicentennial Conference at the Library of Congress* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2006), 14–15.
2. See “Book of Mormon Translation,” Gospel Topics Essays, churchofjesuschrist.org; and *The Joseph Smith Papers, Documents*, 1:xxviii–xxxii (hereafter *JSP*, D1).
3. See Neal A. Maxwell, “By the Gift and Power of God,” *Ensign*, January 1997, 26–41; and Russell M. Nelson, “A Treasured Testament,” *Ensign*, July 1993, 61.
4. The following are a few publications that try to address the extant sources: John W. Welch, “The Miraculous Translation of the Book of Mormon,” in *Opening the Heavens*, 82–98; and 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: FARMS, 1997), 61–93. A hierarchy of sources is described in *JSP*, D1:xxviii–xxxii. For a speculative piece

- about the translation, see Brant A. Gardner, *The Gift and Power: Translating the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2011).
5. Joseph Smith, History, ca. summer 1832, in *JSP, Histories*, 1:11 (hereafter *JSP*, H1).
 6. Joseph Smith III, "Last Testimony of Sister Emma," *Saints' Herald*, October 1, 1879, 289–90. Emma declared that "the Book of Mormon is of divine authenticity—I have not the slightest doubt of it. I am satisfied that no man could have dictated the writing of the manuscripts unless he was inspired; for, when acting as his scribe, your father would dictate to me hour after hour; and when returning after meals, or after interruptions, he would at once begin where he had left off, without either seeing the manuscript of having any portion of it read to him. This was the usual for him to do. It would have been improbable that a learned man could do this; and, for one so ignorant and unlearned as he was, it was simply impossible." William Smith, Joseph's youngest brother, assessed Joseph's writing abilities by claiming that to say Joseph was illiterate was an exaggeration because he "wrote [with] a plain intelecable hand." William Smith, "Notes Written on 'Chambers' Life of Joseph Smith," ca. 1875, Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City (hereafter CHL).
 7. As early as 1834, E. D. Howe in *Mormonism Unveiled* claimed that the text was taken from a manuscript by Solomon Spaulding and through the efforts of Sidney Rigdon. See Matthew P. Roper, "Myth, Memory, and 'Manuscript Found,'" *FARMS Review of Books* 21, no. 2 (2009): 179–223. Other, more nuanced theories have emerged over the years, most of which included Joseph Smith having at least partial volition as he dictated the text. For examples, see Gardner, *The Gift and Power*, part 2; Brigham H. Roberts, *New Witnesses for God*, vol. 2 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1909); and Skousen, "Translating the Book of Mormon," 61–93.
 8. Book of Mormon (Palmyra, NY: Grandin, 1830), iv. The statement specifically refers to the way Joseph Smith translated the book of Lehi in the spring of 1828; Joseph used the same phrase, "gift and power of God," in later years when referring to the translation as a whole.
 9. General Conference, Minutes, October 25, 1831, in *JSP*, D2:78–86. Perhaps his most detailed account came in an 1843 letter written to his friend James Arlington Bennet. The characters inscribed on the gold plates, Joseph said, represented a language that "was lost to the world." Reflecting back on the translation, he said, "I stood alone, an unlearned youth, to combat the worldly wisdom and multiplied ignorance of eighteen centuries, with a new revelation." Even here, however, he does not describe the process beyond saying, "by the power of God I translated the Book of Mormon from hieroglyphics." Joseph Smith to James Arlington Bennet, November 13, 1843, Joseph Smith Collection, CHL.
 10. See Minute Book 1, 43–47, Joseph Smith Collection, CHL. It was recorded at that meeting that Joseph "gave a relation of obtaining and translating the Book of Mormon."
 11. *Saints' Herald*, May 24, 1884, 324. Anthony Metcalf claimed that Harris told him that he "wrote a great deal of the Book of Mormon . . . as Joseph Smith translated or spelled the words out in English." Anthony Metcalf, *Ten Years before the Mast* (Malad City, ID: n.p., 1888), 70–71. In Joseph Smith's 1839 history he writes that Martin Harris "had written one hundred and sixteen <pages> of manuscript on foolscap paper." But there is some doubt about this account since he edited the text to read, "we continued, until the 14th of June; having written. 216—pages of manuscript, on foolscap paper." In *JSP*, H1:244–45.

12. Edmund C. Briggs, "A Visit to Nauvoo in 1856," *Journal of History* (October 1916), 454; and Skousen, "Translating the Book of Mormon," 75–84.
13. Edward Stevenson, "One of the Three Witnesses: Incidents in the Life of Martin Harris," *Millennial Star* 44, nos. 5–6 (January 30 and February 6, 1882): 78–79, 86–87. See Welch, *Opening the Heavens*, 132–41.
14. See Welch, "Miraculous Translation," 141–44; statements recorded by Ashbel Kitchell (1830), Josiah Jones (1841), Reuben Miller (1848), George Q. Cannon (1881), Edward Stevenson (1886), William Frampton (1901), Samuel W. Richards (1907), and Jacob F. Gates (1912).
15. Joseph Smith, History, ca. summer 1832, 5. Joseph Smith seems to have used "spectacles" and "interpreters" interchangeably during the early years. Nancy Towle, an itinerant Methodist preacher, recounted Joseph Smith telling her about "a pair of 'interpreters,' (as he called them,) that resembled spectacles, by looking into which, he could read a writing engraven upon the plates, though to himself, in a tongue unknown." Nancy Towle, *Vicissitudes Illustrated in the Experience of Nancy Towle, in Europe and America* (Charleston: James L. Burges, 1832), 138–39.
16. Smith, History, vol. A-1, in *JSP*, H1:7–8.
17. See "Golden Bible," *Palmyra Freeman*, August 11, 1829. See also Diedrich Willers to Reverend Brethren, June 18, 1830, in Welch, "Miraculous Translation," 173.
18. Martin Harris told Charles Anthon that the spectacles were "too large for the breadth of the human face." Charles Anthon to E. D. Howe, February 17, 1834, in *Mormonism Unveiled*, 270–71. One of Joseph Smith's neighbors, Parley Chase, who would not have seen them, improbably exaggerated the size by stating that "the glasses were as big as a breakfast plate." Parley Chase, April 3, 1879, in W. Wyl, *Joseph Smith the Prophet, His Family and His Friends* (Salt Lake City: 1886), 276. A late source more moderately claimed that Joseph had described them as "having very large round glasses, larger than a silver dollar." See Henry G. Tinsley, "Origin of Mormonism," *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 14, 1893, 12.
19. Joel Tiffany, "Mormonism," *Tiffany's Monthly*, June 1859, 165–66. Speculating about this point, we can surmise that the size of the spectacles may have made it difficult for Joseph to focus on the text that appeared on its two stones and possibly forced him to focus on just one of its stones at a time to read the text.
20. Christian Goodwillie, "Shaker Richard McNemar: The Earliest Book of Mormon Reviewer," *Journal of Mormon History* 37, no. 2 (Spring 2001): 143.
21. A. W. Benton, "Mormonites," *Evangelical Magazine and Gospel Advocate* 2 (April 19, 1831).
22. Josiah Jones, "History of the Mormonites," *The Evangelist* 9 (June 1, 1841): 134–35.
23. Jones, "History of the Mormonites," 134–35.
24. "Gold Bible," *Palmyra Freeman*, August 11, 1829.
25. See *JSP*, D1:xxx, xxxiii; and Cornelis van Dam, *The Urim and Thummim: A Means of Revelation in Ancient Israel* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1997). Wilford Woodruff apparently saw one of Joseph's seer stones. See Wilford Woodruff Journal, December 27, 1841, CHL; and Richard Van Wagoner and Steven C. Walker, "Joseph Smith: 'The Gift of Seeing,'" *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 15 (Summer 1982): 58–59. See also Mark Ashurst-McGee, "A Pathway to Prophet-hood: Joseph Smith Junior as Rodsman, Village Seer, and Judeo-Christian Prophet" (master's thesis, Utah State University, 2000), 230–32, 247–48.
26. See Exodus 28:30; Leviticus 8:8; Numbers 27:21; Deuteronomy 33:8; 1 Samuel 14:41–42; 28:6. On the biblical Urim and Thummim, see van Dam, *Urim and*

- Thummim*. The “Urim and Thummim” mentioned in the Bible is apparently not the same object connected with the Book of Mormon in the book of Ether. In Doctrine and Covenants 17:1, the instrument is described as “the Urim and Thummim, which were given to the brother of Jared upon the mount.”
27. “The Book of Mormon,” *Evening and the Morning Star*, January 1833, [2]. W. W. Phelps was editor of the paper.
 28. Martin Harris, reported by Edward Stevenson to the editor, *Deseret Evening News*, December 13, 1881, 4. The interview occurred in 1870.
 29. Each of the following sources describes the seer stones as large and even cumbersome: Tiffany, “Mormonism,” 165–66; *Deseret Evening News*, December 13, 1881, 4; W. Wyl, *Joseph Smith the Prophet*, 276n; and Henry G. Tinsley, “Origin of Mormonism,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 14, 1893, 12.
 30. Stevenson, “One of the Three Witnesses,” 78–79, 86–87. Regarding the spelling out of names or difficult English words, Joseph may have done this more often when Harris was the scribe than when Cowdery was the scribe. Although there is evidence in the original manuscript that Joseph sometimes spelled out proper names, the idea that he could not proceed without every word being spelled correctly is contradicted by a number of misspellings in the original manuscript, such as *obediant*, *immaginations*, *treasurey*, *fateagued*, and *miricles* (by Cowdery), *inherence*, *tortereeth*, *covanants*, and *passified* (by scribe 2), and *treashury*, *diligent*, *desirus*, and several others (by scribe 3), as shown in Skousen, “Translating the Book of Mormon,” 65–66, 75–82. Many of these misspellings, written in the rush of dictation, were corrected by Cowdery when he copied the entire text over to make the printer’s manuscript from which most of the Book of Mormon was typeset.
 31. Emma S. Pilgrim to Emma Bidamon, March 27, 1870, Community of Christ Library-Archives.
 32. When Cowdery returned to the Church in 1848, he declared that he “wrote with my own pen the intire book of mormon (Save a few pages) as it fell from the Lips of the prophet.” Cowdery further explained, “As he translated it by the gift and power of god, By means of the urum and thummim, or as it is called by that book holy Interpreters. I beheld with my eyes. And handled with my hands the gold plates from which it was translated. I also beheld the Interpreters.” Focusing on his experiences while they translated, he emphatically stated, “That book [the Book of Mormon] is true.” Reuben Miller, journal, October 21, 1848, CHL.
 33. See Smith III, “Last Testimony of Sister Emma,” 289–90; “The Three Witnesses to the Book of Mormon,” *Millennial Star* 48 (June 21, 1886): 389–90; and R. W. Alderman reminiscence, in *Naked Truths about Mormonism* (Oakland, CA), January 1888, 3. In addition, Isaac Hale, Joseph Knight, and W. R. Hine also attested to use of the hat in translation that took place in Harmony. “Modern Superstition,” *Visitor, or Monthly Instructor* (1841): 154–55; Joseph Knight Sr., History, in Dean Jessee, “Joseph Knight’s Recollection of Early Mormon History,” *BYU Studies* 17 (Autumn 1976): 353–6; and W. R. Hine statement, in *Naked Truths about Mormonism*, 2.
 34. J. L. Traugher Jr., “Testimony of David Whitmer,” *Saints’ Herald*, November 15, 1879, 341; Eri B. Mullin, Letter to the editor, *Saints’ Herald*, March 1, 1880, 76; *Kansas City Daily Journal*, June 5, 1881; George Q. Cannon interview, February 27, 1884, CHL; Zenas H. Gurley, “Questions Asked of David Whitmer,” Gurley Collection, CHL; “The Book of Mormon,” *Chicago Tribune*, December 17, 1885, 3; *Richmond (Missouri) Democrat*, January 26, 1888; Nathan A. Tanner Jr. to Nathan A. Tanner, February 17, 1909, CHL; and William E. McLellin to “My

- Dear Friends,” February 1870, Community of Christ Library-Archives. In addition, William Smith also attested to use of the hat in translation that took place in Fayette. William Smith, *William Smith on Mormonism* (Lamoni, IA: Herald Steam Book, 1883), 80; “The Old Soldier’s Testimony,” *Saints’ Herald*, October 4, 1884, 644; and “Statement of J. W. Peterson Concerning William Smith,” May 1, 1921, Community of Christ Library-Archives.
35. Joseph Knight Sr., History, 35. Joseph Knight continues: “Then he [Joseph Smith] would take a sentence and it would appear in Brite Roman Letters. Then he would tell the writer and he would write it. Then that would go away the next sentence would Come and so on. But if it was not Spelt rite it would not go away till it was rite, so we see it was marvelous. Thus was the hol [whole] translated.” Knight’s belief that misspellings caused the sentence to remain on the stone until it was corrected, allowing Joseph Smith to move on with translation, has been refuted by the lack of such corrections in the original manuscript except in the case of a few proper names. Skousen, “Translating the Book of Mormon,” 66–82.
 36. *David Whitmer Interviews: A Restoration Witness*, ed. Lyndon W. Cook (Provo, UT: Grandin Book, 1991). For example, in 1887 he said: “A piece of something resembling parchment would appear, and on that appeared the writing. One character at a time would appear, and under it was the interpretation in English. Brother Joseph would read off the English to Oliver Cowdery, who was his principal scribe, and when it was written down and repeated to Brother Joseph to see if it was correct, then it would disappear, and another character with the interpretation would appear.”
 37. David Whitmer, *An Address to All Believers* (Richmond, Mo: David Whitmer, 1887). David Whitmer repeated this description many times. While many of the details about the use of the seer stone in the hat are similar to Emma Smith’s statements, the accounts of both Knight and Whitmer differ to some degree. According to Royal Skousen, leading scholar of the text of the Book of Mormon, the original manuscript supports the idea that Joseph saw and dictated multiple words or phrases, one cluster at a time, and that unusual names seem to have been sometimes spelled out and corrected if necessary, as David Whitmer indicated. The English text would not disappear from Joseph’s view until he confirmed that what he heard from the scribe was correct. See Briggs, “Visit to Nauvoo in 1856,” 454; and Royal Skousen, “How Joseph Smith Translated the Book of Mormon: Evidence from the Original Manuscript,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 7, no. 1 (1998): 5.
 38. David Whitmer explained that the hat would “exclude the external light. Then, a spiritual light would shine forth, and parchment would appear before Joseph.” William Smith said that the hat, by blocking out the light, relieved Joseph’s eyes from “strain.” See Welch, “Miraculous Translation,” 146, 156, 165.
 39. Thus Emma Smith, who mentioned the stone in the hat, could testify with assurance: “He [Joseph] had neither manuscript nor book to read from.” Smith III, “Last Testimony of Sister Emma,” 289.
 40. Smith III, “Last Testimony of Sister Emma,” 289–90.
 41. Whitmer, *Address to All Believers*, 36.
 42. Whitmer, *Address to All Believers*, 30; David Whitmer, interviews with William H. Kelly and G. A. Blakesless, January 15, 1882; and *Omaha Herald*, October 17, 1886, in Cook, *David Whitmer Interviews*, 86, 199.
 43. See *JSP*, D3:116–20.
 44. See Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth and Seventeenth-Century England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971),

- 186, 215–18, 230, 242, 258, 410, 439, 635–36; David H. Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989); Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 225–88; Stephen A. Marini, *Radical Sects of Revolutionary New England* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982); and Ann Taves, *Fits, Trances, and Visions: Experiencing Religion and Explaining Experience from Wesley to James* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), part 1.
45. See Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 64–76; Ronald W. Walker, “The Persisting Idea of American Treasure Hunting,” *BYU Studies* 24, no. 4 (1984): 429–59; and Richard Lloyd Anderson, “The Mature Joseph Smith and Treasure Searching,” *BYU Studies* 24, no. 4 (1984): 489–560.
 46. See Ashurst-McGee, “Pathway to Prophethood,” 157–82; D. Michael Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, rev. ed. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1998), 30–65; Ronald W. Walker, “Joseph Smith: The Palmyra Seer,” *BYU Studies* 24, no. 4 (Fall 1984): 461–72; and Alan Taylor, “The Early Republic’s Supernatural Economy: Treasure Seeking in the American Northeast, 1780–1830,” *American Quarterly* 38 (Spring 1986): 6–33.
 47. For more, see the following document and its historical introduction: *JSP*, D1:345–52.
 48. For accounts of the plates being “in the box,” see Clark, *Gleanings by the Way*, 228, in Welch, “Miraculous Translation,” 134; for accounts of the plates being “on the table,” see Smith III, “Last Testimony of Sister Emma,” 51, in Welch, “Miraculous Translation,” 130.
 49. See Joseph Smith, History A-1, in *JSP*, H1:222; “Mormonism—No. II,” *Tiffany’s Monthly*, May 1859, 163, 165–66; Josiah Jones, “History of the Mormonites,” *Evangelist* 9 (June 1, 1841): 132–34; *New Hampshire Gazette*, October 25, 1831; and John Corrill, *A Brief History of the Church of Christ of Latter Day Saints* (St. Louis: By the author, 1839), 7, 12.
 50. It is possible that Joseph Smith detached one of the stones from the metal rims of the interpreters. In addition to the three accounts of Martin Harris and two accounts of David Whitmer that speak of him using first the Urim and Thummim and then a single stone, only the report by J. L. Traughber Jr. of a David Whitmer interview insisted that Joseph never used anything but the seer stone. According to Traughber, David Whitmer said that, in his presence, Joseph always used “a dark colored, opaque stone, called a ‘seer-stone,’” and never the Urim and Thummim.” Traughber Jr., “Testimony of David Whitmer,” 341; in Welch, “Miraculous Translation,” 145–46. David Whitmer, however, was speaking only of what he saw during the last stage of the translation in June 1829 in Fayette, for he never saw how the translation was conducted elsewhere. Furthermore, David objected that he was misquoted by Traughber. He clarified that he did not say that he “saw Joseph Smith translate” or that he was in the “immediate presence of the translator,” but rather was simply “at the place and saw how the translation was conducted.” David Whitmer to the editor, *Kansas City Journal*, June 19, 1881.
 51. For a more complete discussion of this topic, see Michael Hubbard MacKay and Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, *From Darkness unto Light: Joseph Smith’s Translation and Publication of the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2015).