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TRANSLATING THE BOOK OF MORMON

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*J*OSEPH SMITH WAS CALLED OF GOD TO TRANSLATE THE GOLDEN PLATES, resulting in the Book of Mormon. The very idea that a New York farm boy with limited education might translate an ancient document is so unimaginable that it could only have occurred through, as Joseph himself declared, “the gift and power of God.” Because Joseph told us nothing more about the way the translation occurred, modern readers and thinkers wonder and speculate. When we look back on the process of translation with our modern perspective, we often see more questions than answers. What was the method of translation, and why did it happen in the way it did?

In an unknown year after AD 400, the prophet Moroni buried the golden plates. What Mormon had begun, Moroni finished and entrusted to the Lord’s care in the Hill Cumorah. Although the record was safe, there was still a crucial problem. When Moroni later died, the last person who could read what was written on those plates was gone. Moroni himself had declared, “none other people knoweth our language.”¹ What was true when Moroni died was even more true when Joseph received those plates over fourteen hundred years later. No one had known the plate language for almost one and a half millennia. Translating the text on the plates would take a miracle.

Actually, it would take two miracles. Not only must an unreadable text be read, but a young man who, according to his wife, could barely compose a coherent letter would be asked to do it.² The Lord declared that he would “call upon the weak things of the world, those who are unlearned and despised, to thresh the nations by the power of my Spirit.”³ Before the translation miracle

could occur, the Lord had to miraculously transform a young, unlearned, and despised weak thing of the world into a prophet of God.

THE FAITH TO TRANSLATE AND A ROCK CALLED A SEER STONE

Joseph couldn't learn to read the text on the plates—there was no Nephite dictionary available. What God used to effect the transformation was yet another weak thing. God used the folk beliefs of the rural population that had been part of the way the world was understood for millennia. Even in Joseph's day the learned had come to despise them, but in the community where Joseph lived, those folk beliefs were alive and well.

For the Smiths and other rural families, the supernatural world was very real. At times and for specific purposes, Christian religion accessed and entreated the spiritual world. At other times and for other purposes, it could be accessed and manipulated more directly by people with particular talents. Each method had its place, and each assisted its believers in surviving their difficult circumstances. In churches on Sundays, Christian religion saved the soul. Every other day of the week, traditional Christian practices, which some have labeled magic, healed the sick, found the lost, and grew the crops.

One of the professions of this Christian magic, or Christian folk belief, was that of a seer, whose talent was to see something hidden. The seers in Joseph's day typically used unusually shaped stones they called seer stones, which were just the more recent instrument that a seer would use to see hidden objects, hidden meaning, or hidden futures. By contrast, in the Old Testament, the story of Joseph in Egypt describes a stratagem Joseph used to keep his brother Benjamin close. Joseph had his servants hide money in his brothers' bags, but a cup in Benjamin's. It was not an ordinary cup. Genesis 44:5 reports, "Is not this it in which my lord drinketh, and whereby indeed he divineth?" In the time and place of this story, seers would see their visions by pouring oil and water into a bowl or cup. When Joseph placed that particular cup in Benjamin's pack, it wasn't simply dinnerware. It was a very important religious object.⁴

By the time seers in England began appearing in the records (between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries), the functions to which they applied their talents had evolved into two general forms: seeing a hidden future, seeing the location of lost things, or seeing the identity of the thief of stolen things.⁵ The New England region of the relatively new United States of Joseph Smith's day inherited those English traditions. There were seers in Palmyra, and they used seer stones to find lost or hidden things, just as others had in England. In Joseph Smith's Palmyra, this ancient specialty not only survived but was widely practiced there and in neighboring communities that also perpetuated these ancient skills. Joseph was only one of several

seers in that region.⁶ As a local seer, he was consulted to find things that were lost or to see into the future.⁷

Modern science has no good explanation for why such practices existed for so long. Nor does it have a good explanation for what the seers saw when they were successful. The actual effectiveness of seeing in the stone really isn't the important issue for the translation of the Book of Mormon. What is important is that Joseph believed that he could see hidden things that others could not, and there were others who believed that Joseph had that particular talent. It was Joseph's belief that he could see the unseeable that the Lord used as the fulcrum to leverage the village seer into a translator and then into a prophet of God.⁸

The meaning on the plates was certainly hidden and lost. Joseph could not translate as the scholars did. However, with God's help, he would do so using the instrument and methods he had successfully used before. This time he wasn't finding a lost object, but rather a lost meaning. Nevertheless, it wasn't the instrument that would translate, but the power of God. Joseph never claimed any other method of translating other than that it happened by "the gift and power of God."⁹

Joseph's faith in the process led him to use the seer stone to receive revelations in the early years of the Church. However, as Joseph grew into his calling as a prophet, he realized that *he* was the real instrument of revelation, not the stone. He stopped using it. Nevertheless, descriptions of Joseph receiving revelation show enough parallels to the descriptions of how he translated that we can be sure that it was always Joseph receiving revelation—the seer stone was simply the crutch the Lord used to prop up Joseph's nascent faith in his calling.¹⁰

Joseph's experience with seeing in a stone, however that had happened, was the trigger the Lord used to establish Joseph's faith that with the Lord's aid he could see the translation that was hidden in the unreadable characters on the plates. It was a method the Lord had used before when Mosiah was asked to translate the plates of Ether:

Therefore he took the records which were engraven on the plates of brass, and also the plates of Nephi, and all the things which he had kept and preserved according to the commandments of God, after having translated and caused to be written the records which were on the plates of gold which had been found by the people of Limhi, which were delivered to him by the hand of Limhi;

And this he did because of the great anxiety of his people; for they were desirous beyond measure to know concerning those people who had been destroyed.

And now he translated them by the means of those two stones which were fastened into the two rims of a bow.

Now these things were prepared from the beginning, and were handed down from generation to generation, for the purpose of interpreting languages;

And they have been kept and preserved by the hand of the Lord, that he should discover to every creature who should possess the land the iniquities and abominations of his people;

And whosoever has these things is called seer, after the manner of old times.¹¹

THE PLATES AND THE TRANSLATION PROCESS

The descriptions of how Joseph used a seer stone prior to the Book of Mormon have him placing the stone in the crown of his hat and then drawing the hat to his face so that his vision was obscured. All methods of seeing with objects required some method whereby normal vision was masked. Perhaps this allowed the seer, and those who saw the seer work, to know that what was seen came from a different source than normal vision.

Placing the stone in a hat would have made it difficult to look at the plates and work out a translation. It is probable that for much of the translation process the plates were not visible. What, then, was the purpose of the plates if they were not to be used? Actually, they were used—just not in the way we may think they should have been. From the beginning, the physical presence of the plates declared the reality of the angelic revelation. Moroni had not been a dream. The plates Moroni gave to Joseph were real, and that tangible reality allowed Joseph's faith to deepen and develop. The physical plates became important again when witnesses were selected to view and handle them. They had text on them, and those who saw them could see the engravings. The plates provided the physical touchstone for the faith of the early believers in Joseph's mission. Seeing the plates and the characters on them demonstrated to those witnesses that there was information on the plates. What they could not do was read that text. What Joseph could not do, by himself, was read that text. No one could read that text. Only through the gift and power of God would the translation be known. No matter how many times Joseph looked at those characters, the translation would come through God and not the engravings. Knowing that there was something to translate required the plates. Translating through the gift and power of God did not.

A SEER STONE AND THE URIM AND THUMMIM

The gift and power of God came to Joseph as the translator, not to a stone—whether the stone came from the Nephites or (as one of Joseph's stones did) from digging a well for a neighbor. During much of the early

history of the Church, the two stones that accompanied the plates were called the interpreters. About the time of the publication of the Book of Commandments in 1833, W. W. Phelps began using the biblical term *Urim and Thummim* to describe both the interpreters and Joseph's seer stone. It was a reference of convenience that lent a more sophisticated feeling to the translation. Christians knew of the Urim and Thummim from the Bible, where they were connected with the high priest and receiving revelation.¹² Particularly for newer converts, that was a more familiar reference than the seer stones, and it soon became the way to refer to the process by which the translation occurred, even though the term was technically inaccurate.

The term *Urim and Thummim* was inserted later into sections of the Doctrine and Covenants. For example, in our current version, D&C 10:1 reads, "Now, behold, I say unto you, that because you delivered up those writings which you had power given unto you to translate by the means of the Urim and Thummim, into the hands of a wicked man, you have lost them." The same text from the 1833 Book of Commandments reads, "Now, behold I say unto you, that because you delivered up so many writings, which you had power to translate, into the hands of a wicked man, you have lost them."¹³ The addition of the information about the Urim and Thummim is in the 1835 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants, and that meaning was firmly entrenched by that time.¹⁴

Although the use of *Urim and Thummim* is now pervasive among Church members, it is not the correct designation for the instruments used in the translation of the Book of Mormon. For a short period of time, the Nephite interpreters were used. For most of the translation, Joseph used one of the seer stones that he had used prior to his calling to receive the golden plates.

WHY DON'T THE ARTISTS GET IT RIGHT?

When Mosiah translated, he used "two stones which were fastened into the two rims of a bow."¹⁵ That description matches the two stones that were given to Joseph along with the plates. His brother William remembered:

[They were] set in two rims of a bow. . . . A silver bow ran over one stone and under the other, around over that one and under the first in the shape of a horizontal figure 8 much like a pair of spectacles. That they were much too large for Joseph and he could only see through one at a time using sometimes one and sometimes the other. By putting his head in a hat or some dark object it was not necessary to close one eye while looking though the stone with the other. In that way sometimes when his eyes grew tires [tired] he relieved them of the strain.¹⁶

When LDS artists depict the translation of the Book of Mormon, it doesn't look like William Smith's description of Joseph placing the interpreters, or the seer stone, in a hat and holding it to his face to block out the light. Most typical is a picture that has Joseph looking at the plates as he dictated—with some showing him moving his finger across the letters. How did the artists get it so wrong?

There is little mystery behind their art. They simply followed a very long tradition of imagining or reinterpreting the translation process. As early as 1836, Truman Coe, who was a Presbyterian minister living among the Saints in Kirtland, Ohio,¹⁷ related the story of the translation as he understood it: "The manner of translation was as wonderful as the discovery. By putting his finger on one of the characters and imploring divine aid, then looking through the Urim and Thummim, he would see the import written in plain English on a screen placed before him. After delivering this to his emanuensi [scribe], he would again proceed in the same manner and obtain the meaning of the next character, and so on till he came to the part of the plates which were sealed up."¹⁸

Coe did not witness the translation, so he must have heard this story from the Saints in Kirtland, who constituted a fairly large colony by 1836. Although Coe certainly did not accept the story at face value, he seems to have reported it without sarcasm or distortion. Assuming that it represents the understanding of the Kirtland Saints—or at least of Coe's informant—it provides a picture of the translation that has endured from at least 1836 to modern times. Latter-day Saint artists who depict Joseph's finger on the plates are simply following a story about the translation that the Saints themselves were telling as early as 1836.

Modern historians have access to various documents that provide the information about the mechanism that produced the translation. The majority of Saints in Kirtland didn't have those documents. They had word of mouth, and that word of mouth transformed the less-than-familiar into the more common. By 1836 the world of the community seers was fading, and many of the converts had come from cities or other locations unfamiliar with that tradition. When they told the story of the translation, it was in terms that they could better understand, and moving a finger across the plates seemed obvious to them. That oral tradition became the standard explanation, not to intentionally disguise what had actually happened, but because it was simply the natural human process of the communal creation of their own history.¹⁹ This natural human process repeats hearsay along with eyewitness accounts, and often *adapts* the stories to make them more understandable to the current community.²⁰ With the passage of time, those stories were codified into an official history. The process that led to the artists' depictions is simply the result of a different way of developing

a historical understanding, one which developed differently from the way modern historians look back on earlier times.²¹

We live in the times of the modern historian, and we are now much more concerned with what we perceive to be an accurate picture of the past. Those historical interests are manifest in the recent description of the translation of the Book of Mormon found on the Church's official website:

Joseph Smith and his scribes wrote of two instruments used in translating the Book of Mormon. According to witnesses of the translation, when Joseph looked into the instruments, the words of scripture appeared in English. One instrument, called in the Book of Mormon the "interpreters," is better known to Latter-day Saints today as the "Urim and Thummim." Joseph found the interpreters buried in the hill with the plates. Those who saw the interpreters described them as a clear pair of stones bound together with a metal rim. The Book of Mormon referred to this instrument, together with its breastplate, as a device "kept and preserved by the hand of the Lord" and "handed down from generation to generation, for the purpose of interpreting languages."

The other instrument, which Joseph Smith discovered in the ground years before he retrieved the gold plates, was a small oval stone, or "seer stone." As a young man during the 1820s, Joseph Smith, like others in his day, used a seer stone to look for lost objects and buried treasure. As Joseph grew to understand his prophetic calling, he learned that he could use this stone for the higher purpose of translating scripture.²²

WHY HAVE THERE BEEN CHANGES IN THE TEXT?

Perhaps the most commonly misunderstood statement Joseph Smith ever made is that the Book of Mormon is "the most correct book." He said this, but it is misunderstood as meaning that Joseph thought the Book of Mormon was without error. When we find that there have been changes from the originally dictated text,²³ those who believe it should be without error point out this apparent contradiction.

It helps to know what Joseph actually meant by the phrase "most correct book." The more complete quotation states, "I told the brethren that the Book of Mormon was the most correct of any book on earth, and the key-stone of our religion, and a man would get nearer to God by abiding by its precepts, than by any other book."²⁴ For Joseph, the correctness was in the precepts it taught, not in the absolute infallibility of the words on the page. We know that Joseph didn't consider the actual words to be perfect, because he himself participated in making editorial changes after the first edition.

Royal Skousen, a professor of linguistics and English language at Brigham Young University, has done the most extensive work examining all versions of the Book of Mormon from manuscripts through printed copies. He notes that because the original manuscript had no punctuation, all punctuation is technically a change from the original. Counting those, he indicates that “there are about 105,000 places of variation” from the earliest manuscript portion extant through all editions.²⁵ The proper question is not whether or not there have been changes, but what type of changes there have been. Changes in words are more interesting than changes in punctuation. Changes in words that might also change interpretation are the most interesting, and there are very few of those.²⁶

But why should the text be changed at all? Wasn't it perfectly translated? Doesn't the “gift and power of God” assure a perfect translation? The answer to all of these questions depends entirely upon the precise method by which Joseph was able to translate using the gift and power of God. Unfortunately, Joseph never gave any more details than that. The process he used is open to speculation, but it is only speculation. One might speculate that because God inspired the translation that it should be without error. However, that is an assumption of what God would have done. The evidence for what God did do suggests that he worked through his human instrument—and Joseph, his human instrument, might have decided there was a better way to express the meaning of the plates in English. Perhaps Joseph even made a mistake that was later corrected. Even the inspired writers of the original text made human errors, enough that Moroni cautioned in the title page, “And now, if there are faults they are the mistakes of men.”

Although we don't know how God was able to inspire Joseph to translate, we can piece together some information about the nature of the process by looking at the result of it. The most important lesson from looking at what Joseph produced is that he was willing to change words in the text after they had been dictated. In all important cases, the changes were made under Joseph's supervision. Both as the original translator and as a prophet, he was in a position to understand whether or not the words of the text accurately portrayed the meaning intended for the text.

Brigham Young interpreted the situation this way: “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.”²⁷ Brigham believed that the translation of the Book of Mormon was a miracle, but not that it was an infallible translation that could never be changed. It is the meaning that is most important in the Book of Mormon, not the words. That is the reason so many Saints have come to love the book in their native languages. The native meaning was translated into English, and that meaning

continues to be translated into other languages. We believe that it can be translated because we believe that the meaning is much more important than the originally dictated words, which may not have an exact translation in another language.

JOSEPH SMITH, TRANSLATOR

The original title page of the Book of Mormon differed in one important concept from the one that we have today. Where today it lists Joseph Smith as the translator, the first title page had Joseph Smith as the author and proprietor. That was certainly not an indication that Joseph was the author, but rather a recognition of the copyright law in New York.²⁸ The law provided copyright protection only to the “author and proprietor.” When the law no longer applied, the title page was changed to provide the more accurate relationship of Joseph to the text.

Joseph Smith Jr. did not author the Book of Mormon. Mormon was its principal author and compiler. Moroni also authored a portion. In addition, there are books that Nephi and Jacob authored. The authorship was ancient and the translation was modern. Although we do not know how Joseph translated, he was the one and only translator of the plates. It fell to Joseph to provide us with a text we could read that embodied the words and meaning that Mormon, Moroni, and others meant for us to have.

A small handful of Joseph’s acquaintances had the opportunity to base their faith on the tangible presence of the plates. For the rest of us, it is the tangible presence of the text of the Book of Mormon that becomes our witness of Joseph’s divine call. For many, the spirituality of the text speaks to their hearts and minds and declares the divine hand that gave us that text. For some, the presence of ancient literary forms testifies of the antiquity of the text. For others, the examination of the historical context that can be discerned for the Nephites and Lamanites provides sufficient connections to a real-world time and place that they see in the Book of Mormon—an unknown. However we as Saints may approach and understand the Book of Mormon, it stands as the cornerstone of our religion because it has become the tangible witness to the divine calling to Joseph Smith—first as a translator, and then as the first prophet of the restored Church established by Christ.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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NOTES

1. Mormon 9:34.

2. Emma Smith Bidamon, "As Interviewed by Joseph Smith III (1879)," in *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations, 1820–1844*, ed. Jack Welch and Eric Carlson (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005), 131: "Joseph Smith could neither write nor dictate a coherent and well-worded letter, let alone dictating a book like the Book of Mormon." Near the end of his life, Martin Harris told Simon Smith, "Joseph Smith's education was so limited that he could not draw up a note of hand." Martin Harris, "Martin Harris Interview with Simon Smith, 5 July 1875," in *Early Mormon Documents*, ed. Dan Vogel, 5 vols. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996–2003), 2:381.

3. D&C 35:13.

4. E. A. Speiser, "Genesis: Introduction, Translation, and Notes," in *The Anchor Bible* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1981), 333, n. 5.

5. Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons/Macmillan, 1971), 215, 217.

6. D. Michael Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1987), 38: "Until the Book of Mormon thrust young Smith into prominence, Palmyra's most notable seer was Sally Chase, who used a greenish-colored stone. William Stafford

also had a seer stone, and Joshua Stafford had a 'peepstone' which looked like white marble and had a hole through the center."

7. Joseph found a lost wallet for a local judge. See Samuel D. Green, "Joseph Smith, the Mormon," *The Christian Cynosure* 10, no. 12 (December 20, 1877), <http://www.sidneyrigdon.com/dbroadhu/IL/mischig.htm#122077>.

8. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, "Book of Mormon Translation," <https://www.lds.org/topics/book-of-mormon-translation>.

9. Joseph Smith Jr., *Book of Mormon* (1830; repr., Independence, MO: Herald House, 1970), 1.

10. Parley P. Pratt, *Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt*, ed. Parley P. Pratt Jr., 3rd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1938), 62.

11. Mosiah 28:11–16.

12. Cornelis Van Dam, *The Urim and Thummim: A Means of Revelation in Ancient Israel* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1997), 27–31.

13. Joseph Smith Jr., *Book of Commandments, 1833* (repr., Herald Heritage 1972), 22. This is section IX in the Book of Commandments.

14. Joseph Smith Jr., *Doctrine and Covenants, 1835*, 163. This revelation is section 36 in this edition.

15. Mosiah 28:13.

16. J. W. Peterson, "William Smith, interview with J. W. Peterson and W. S. Pender, 1890," in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:508. For the practice of placing the stone in a hat, see "Martin Harris Interview with Joel Tiffany, 1859," in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:303; and Martin Harris, "Martin Harris as interviewed by Edward Stevenson, 1886," in Welch, *Opening the Heavens*, 136–37.

17. Matthew B. Brown, *Plates of Gold: The Book of Mormon Comes Forth* (American Fork, UT: Covenant Communications, 2003), 162.

18. Truman Coe, "Truman Coe to Mr. Editor, *Hudson Ohio Observer*, August 11, 1836," in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:47. See also Coe, "Truman Coe to Mr. Editor," in Welch, *Opening the Heavens*, 124.

19. Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 8.

20. Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History*, 9.

21. William A. Wilson observes, "I consider folklore to be the unofficial part of our culture. When a Sunday School teacher reads to his class from an approved lesson manual, he is giving them what the Correlation Committee at least would call official religion; but when he illustrates the lesson with an account of the Three Nephites, which he learned from his mother, he is giving them unofficial religion. Folklore, then, is that part of our culture that is passed through time and space by the process of oral transmission (by hearing and repeating) rather than by institutionalized means of learning or by the mass media." William A. Wilson, "The Paradox of Mormon Folklore," *BYU Studies* 17, no. 1 (1976): 40.

22. Church of Jesus Christ, "Book of Mormon Translation."

23. Royal Skousen, *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009). Skousen presents his reconstruction of what that earliest dictated text would have been. It is a study based on careful examination of the remaining text of the Original Manuscript, supplemented with the information in the Printer's Manuscript.

24. *History of the Church*, 4:461.

25. Royal Skousen, "Changes in the Book of Mormon," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 11 (2014): 162.
26. Skousen suggests that there are only five. He discusses each, and interested readers are directed to his online article for the specifics. Skousen, "Changes in the Book of Mormon," 169.
27. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 9:311 (July 13, 1862).
28. Royal Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon*, 6 parts, The Critical Text of the Book of Mormon Series, 4 vols. (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2004), 1:35.