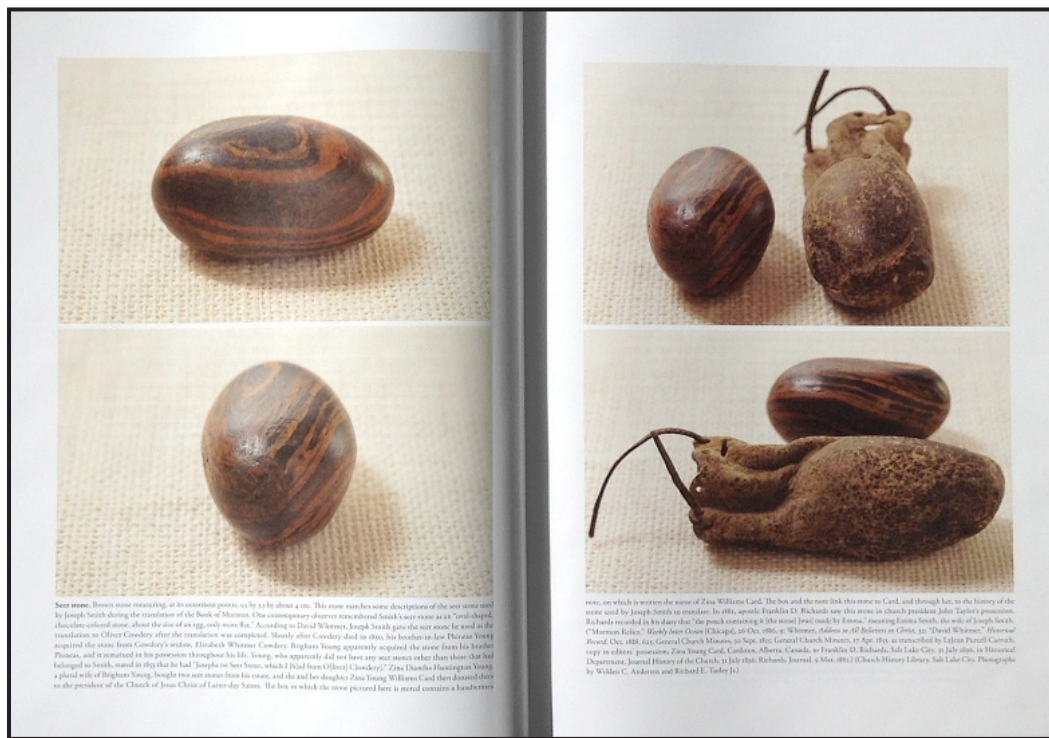


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“UPON THIS ROCK”



Joseph Smith's Seer Stone

By: Robert M. Bowman Jr.
(Director of Institute for Religious Research - IRR.org)

On August 4, 2015, the LDS Church issued a press release that was picked up and reported on National Public Radio and Fox News, by the Associated Press, and by many other news outlets. The focus of the story was the publication that day of high-resolution photographs and a printed transcript of the Printer's Manuscript of the Book of Mormon. Judging from the press release and the news stories, one would never know that the text of the Printer's Manuscript had already been published in 2001. There wasn't much newsworthy there, although scholars will appreciate being able to examine photographs of the manuscript.

The real story is that the LDS Church also has published color photographs of the seer stone (including the photo shown here¹) that Joseph Smith used to dictate his translation of the Book of Mormon. Until the end of 2013, the Church had generally represented Joseph as having translated the Book of Mormon by reading the gold plates through transparent stone spectacles that he had found along with the plates in a stone box buried near his home. Prior to that time the LDS Church had only occasionally mentioned Joseph's seer stone, sometimes admitting he used it in translating and sometimes questioning if he did so, and never with any explanation as to what it was.

1 Utah Lighthouse Ministry photo of pages xx-xxi in *The Joseph Smith Papers: Revelations and Translations, Volume 3, Part 1: Printer's Manuscript of the Book of Mormon, 1 Nephi 1—Alma 35*, Facsimile Edition, ed. Royal Skousen and Robin Scott Jensen (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2015).

The explosion of easily accessible information online about Joseph's treasure hunting using seer stones and about his using one of those seer stones when he dictated the Book of Mormon finally caught up with the LDS Church in 2013. At the very end of that year, they quietly published an article under Gospel Topics Essays on their official website (LDS.org) admitting that Joseph had used a seer stone for treasure hunting and later used the same stone for translating at least part of the Book of Mormon. As the article acknowledged, Joseph's method was the same for both activities: he would place the stone inside a hat, bury his face in the hat to block outside light, and call out what he claimed to be able to see through or on the stone—either the location of hidden treasure or the translation of the supposed gold plates.²

Unless you were an avid Mormon-watcher, however, you could easily miss that article, which the LDS Church posted with no press release and no effort to make even its own rank and file membership aware of it. By contrast, on August 4, 2015, the LDS Church made sure as many people as possible would hear about the seer stone photos by presenting them in a larger story about the Printer's Manuscript being published by the Church Historian's Office in its "Joseph Smith Papers" project. (The Joseph Smith Papers is a years-long undertaking to publish online and in print all of the writings of Joseph Smith, including diaries, letters, and the manuscripts for his histories and revelations.) The message the Church hopes people will hear is that they are serious about being "transparent" in addressing "sensitive" or "controversial" matters. In addition to the press release, the LDS Church posted on its website advance copies of articles discussing Joseph's seer stones scheduled for the September and October 2015 issues of *Ensign*, its official monthly magazine.³

The fact that Joseph Smith used a seer stone in dictating the text of the Book of Mormon is something that has been known by Mormon and non-Mormon researchers and scholars for decades. It's nice that the Church Historian's office has published a picture of it, but we already knew about it and even knew what it looked like (a small, smooth, chocolate-colored stone). Our organization, the Institute for Religious Research, has had an article about Joseph using the seer stone to dictate the Book of Mormon on its website since 1999.⁴

Although the LDS Church is now at least talking about the seer stone, it is still far from addressing the issues adequately.

2 "Book of Mormon Translation," posted on LDS.org, Dec. 30, 2013; online at lds.org/topics/book-of-mormon-translation

3 Steven E. Snow, "Joseph in Harmony," *Ensign*, (Sept. 2015); Richard E. Turley Jr., Robin S. Jensen, and Mark Ashurst-McGee, "Joseph the Seer," *Ensign*, (Oct. 2015).

4 Joel B. Groat, "Translation or Divination?" IRR (1999).

Joseph Smith's Seer Stones

Historians agree now that Joseph had at least two seer stones and probably more. The first seer stone Joseph used, though, belonged to a neighbor girl named Sally Chase.⁵ According to a later story, Joseph looked at her stone and saw the location of a stone far away under the roots of a tree a mile from Lake Erie; he later went there, dug, and found his first stone. It is well established that he found one of his seer stones on Sally's farm in 1822 when he was supposedly helping her older brother Willard to dig a well.⁶ Most likely, Joseph and Willard were digging for treasure, perhaps with Joseph using his other stone if he already had it, or perhaps using the stone that belonged to Sally. The stone found on the Chase farm is usually said to have been the brown stone, though one LDS scholar has argued it was the whitish stone.⁷ What is certain is that Willard considered the stone found on his family farm to be his property. Ironically, it may be that Joseph dictated his "translation" of the Book of Mormon using a seer stone stolen from someone else.

Mormons seem somewhat conflicted with regards to how to view Joseph's exploits with the seer stone. On the one hand, LDS writers have pointed out that using seer stones to look for lost property or buried treasure was a feature of common folklore in Joseph's culture, even if viewed with disdain by most of the educated or elites.⁸ The point here seems to be that believing today in Joseph's calling as a prophet does not entail believing in the use of seer stones or similar divining objects. On this way of looking at the issue, the stone was not important; God simply chose to work through Joseph's belief in the power of the stone.

On the other hand, Mormons sometimes try to validate Joseph's use of seer stones in ways that imply that the stone was important. Two examples supposedly proving that Joseph could really see something in the stone are usually given. Both of these examples come from one of Joseph Smith's scribes, Martin Harris, who may fairly be said to have been the least credible witness among Joseph's associates.⁹ In one story, Harris claimed that he hid a pin in a haystack and that Joseph found it immediately without even looking in the hay by gazing at his seer stone in his hat while reaching his hand into

5 Mark Ashurst-McGee, "A Pathway to Prophethood: Joseph Smith Junior as Rodsman, Village Seer, and Judeo-Christian Prophet" (M.A. thesis, Utah State University, 2000), 204.

6 "Book of Mormon Translation," LDS.org; Snow, "Joseph in Harmony."

7 *Ibid.*, 198-283. Ashurst-McGee went on to become an editor with the Joseph Smith Papers project of the LDS Church Historian's Office.

8 E.g., Turley, Jensen, and Ashurst-McGee, "Joseph the Seer."

9 See Joel Groat, "Facts on the Book of Mormon Witnesses—Part One," IRR (1996).

the hay to extract the pin.¹⁰ Since “a needle in a haystack” was a familiar idiom in Harris’s day, some skepticism about this story seems appropriate. Whether one accepts this story as factual or not, it shows that Harris, at least, believed that the stone itself had a special power.

Harris’s other story was that he once secretly substituted a lookalike stone in Joseph’s hat when they were translating the gold plates, and that when Joseph looked in the hat he expressed surprise that he could not see anything.¹¹ This story implies not only that Joseph needed a stone to function as a “seer” but that it had to be a *genuine* seer stone. The story conflicts with the idea that God was merely working through Joseph’s belief in seer stones inherited from his culture. It implies instead that the power really was in some sense in the stone. If the stone was necessary only because Joseph thought it was, then Joseph’s mistaken belief that the stone in his hat was the seer stone should have been sufficient for him to continue receiving revelation. A Mormon can accept this story at face value as testifying to Joseph’s ability to see things in the stone only if he also accepts the notion that the ability depended on having the *right* stone. Unless we accept the belief that certain stones were specially invested in magical or supernatural power, we will need to view Harris’s story with some skepticism.

Mormons sometimes also argue that as Joseph matured as a prophet, he became less dependent on such instruments, to the point of not needing them to produce his later translations and revelations.¹² Again, the implication is that the instrument was not crucial to Joseph’s “gift.” The problem is that Joseph claimed that the instruments *were* essential. For example, he stated with regard to the “Urim and Thummim” that “the possession and use of these stones were what constituted ‘seers’ in ancient or former times” (*Pearl of Great Price*, Joseph Smith–History 1:35). This is why the fact that Joseph actually dug up the stone he used to translate the gold plates five years or so before he obtained the “Urim and Thummim”—perhaps when supposedly digging a well on his neighbor’s farm—has come as shocking news to some Mormons.

10 “Mormonism—No. II,” *Tiffany’s Monthly*, (July 1859), 164, cited in Turley, Jensen, and Ashurst-McGee, “Joseph the Seer.”

11 Cited, e.g., in Kenneth W. Godfrey, “A New Prophet and a New Scripture: The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon,” *Ensign*, (Jan. 1988).

12 E.g., Neal A. Maxwell, “By the Gift and Power of God,” *Ensign*, (Jan. 1997); Turley, Jensen, and Ashurst-McGee, “Joseph the Seer.” This was the larger thesis of Ashurst-McGee’s “Pathway to Prophethood.”

Joseph’s Treasure Hunting with a Seer Stone

Until recently, the LDS Church avoided acknowledging that Joseph was engaged in hunting for buried treasure using a seer stone prior to his claiming to have found and translated the Book of Mormon. When the issue did come up, their spokesmen generally questioned that he did so or commented on the issue in such a way as to imply that Joseph’s reputation in this regard was undeserved.¹³ In skirting this issue, the LDS Church was simply following Joseph’s lead. In Joseph Smith–History, printed in the *Pearl of Great Price*, he claimed that his reputation as a treasure-hunter was a misunderstanding. In October 1825 Joseph had, he said, gone to live in the home of Josiah Stowell as a hired hand. Stowell had learned about a lost silver mine supposedly located in Harmony (PA). Joseph reported, “After I went to live with him, he took me, with the rest of his hands, to dig for the silver mine, at which I continued to work for nearly a month, without success in our undertaking, and finally I prevailed with the old gentleman to cease digging after it. Hence arose the very prevalent story of my having been a money-digger” (*Pearl of Great Price*, JS–H 1:56).

Now that Joseph’s treasure-hunting is well known, Mormons are claiming that his reference to the Stowell expedition shows that he did not try to hide his involvement in such activities.¹⁴ However, Joseph *did* try to hide the nature and extent of his involvement. He was actually the defendant in a court case in 1826 in regards to the expedition with Stowell in late 1825. In the records of that case, Joseph admitted that he had a stone that he had used “occasionally” for three years to locate lost items and buried treasures. This would be three years prior to the Stowell expedition in late 1825, taking us back to 1822, the year Joseph found his seer stone on the Chase farm. Joseph suspended the use of his seer stone in money-digging for most or all of 1826 due to the trial, but resumed the practice for

13 E.g., Dean Jessee, “Joseph Smith’s Reputation among Historians,” *Ensign*, (Sept. 1979); Dallin H. Oaks, “Recent Events Involving Church History and Forged Documents,” *Ensign*, (Oct. 1987); Kenneth W. Godfrey, “A New Prophet and a New Scripture: The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon,” *Ensign*, (Jan. 1988); William G. Hartley, “The Knight Family: Ever Faithful to the Prophet,” *Ensign*, (Jan. 1989). In one article, Richard Lloyd Anderson acknowledged that the Smiths had engaged in treasure hunting but questioned various sources that mentioned them using or having seer stones: “The Alvin Smith Story: Fact and Fiction,” *Ensign*, (Aug. 1987). The burst of articles in the late 1980s was a response to controversial evidence that the Smiths had pursued magical or occult activities.

14 E.g., “Book of Mormon Translation.” Royal Skousen makes the same argument, though he also concedes that Joseph exercised “caution” in referring to his treasure-hunting activities: *Printer’s Manuscript*, ed. Skousen and Jensen, xv-xvi.

part of 1827.¹⁵ Years later, Martin Harris claimed that Joseph had told him that an angel commanded him to quit money-digging.¹⁶ In reality, Joseph quit because it was a condition for financial help from his father-in-law Isaac Hale, as both Hale and another witness, Peter Ingersoll, attested. It is also worth noting that according to Ingersoll, Joseph admitted to Hale that “he could not see in a stone now, nor ever could; and that his former pretensions in that respect, were all false.”¹⁷ This testimony fits the facts since, in Joseph’s five years of treasure hunting, he never actually acquired anything of value, unless one counts the gold plates.

The fact that Joseph was engaged in “money-digging” for years prior to working for Stowell is not mentioned in any of the recent LDS Church articles for general readers. However, it has been acknowledged in a couple of Mormon books published in 2015 on the subject of Joseph’s translation of the Book of Mormon.¹⁸ Since Joseph had been using his seer stone to find buried treasure for three years when Stowell hired him to search for the silver mine, Joseph’s claim that his reputation as a money-digger arose from that one short-lived effort at the end of 1825 is false.

Worse still, Joseph’s account omits the most controversial and relevant aspect of his “money-digging”: his claim to be able to locate buried treasure using a seer stone. Stowell hired Joseph for his silver mine quest, not to perform the manual labor of digging as Joseph Smith–History would lead readers to believe, but to use his reputed gift with the seer stone to locate the mine. We know this both from the 1826 trial and from the later account of Joseph’s mother Lucy, who said that Stowell hired Joseph because he had heard that Joseph “possessed certain keys, by which he could discern things invisible to the natural eye.”¹⁹ Mormon scholars have acknowledged that these “keys” were Joseph’s seer

stones.²⁰ In an article in the September 2015 *Ensign*, the LDS Church admitted for the first time that Stowell had hired Joseph because of his reputation for finding treasure using a seer stone.²¹

The reason why Joseph tried to cover up his years of treasure-hunting is not hard to discern: this was the original context in which Joseph’s supposed discovery of the gold plates took place. In the folklore of Joseph’s early American culture, buried treasure was commonly guarded by spirits—typically either demons or the ghosts of the departed—and thus divination instruments such as divining rods or seer stones were required to locate the treasure. According to Joseph, the gold plates were buried in the ground and guarded by a supernatural being, later identified as the angel Moroni, who refused to allow Joseph to take the plates until various conditions were met. Thus, the story of the finding of the Book of Mormon is a story of buried treasure, one that some LDS scholars have admitted fit comfortably into the folklore beliefs accepted by the Smiths and their associates.²² One recent LDS article explains that Joseph’s account merely “emphasized his visions and other spiritual experiences,”²³ but this understatement ignores Joseph’s attempt to explain away his notoriety as someone who for several years had claimed the ability to find lost treasures by looking in a stone.

Joseph also says in this same account that he was visited annually by the angel Moroni, shown the gold plates, and instructed at length about his mission, from 1823 to 1827. As we have seen, this was the very period during which he was often engaged in searching for buried treasures supposedly guarded by spirits. The coincidence raises the reasonable suspicion that the five annual visits of Moroni are a later fiction to replace Joseph’s youthful career as a treasure hunter with a more religiously edifying story about a heavenly angel.

Joseph’s Seer Stone and the Book of Mormon

Mormon scholars and leaders now concede that Joseph used his seer stone to dictate at least a large part of the Book of Mormon. They have not always agreed this

15 See especially Dan Vogel, “The Locations of Joseph Smith’s Early Treasure Quests,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 27/3 (1994): 197-231. Vogel identifies eighteen locations where Joseph searched for buried treasure in 1822-1825 and 1827.

16 “Mormonism—No. II,” 169; repeated in “Book of Mormon Translation”; Snow, “Joseph in Harmony,” n. 4.

17 See their accounts in *Early Mormon Documents*, ed. Vogel, 2:42-43; 4:284-86. A recent Mormon book admits that Hale had persuaded Joseph to quit but misrepresents the issue as Hale objecting to Joseph’s manual labor of digging: Michael Hubbard MacKay and Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, *From Darkness unto Light: Joseph Smith’s Translation and Publication of the Book of Mormon*, Foreword by Richard Lyman Bushman (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, BYU; Salt Lake City: Deseret, 2015), 33.

18 MacKay and Dirkmaat, *From Darkness unto Light*, 3, 10 (although they are unclear on the chronology); *Printer’s Manuscript*, ed. Skousen and Jensen, xv-xvi.

19 See *Early Mormon Documents*, ed. Dan Vogel (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996-2003), 1:309-310.

20 Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*, with Jed Woodworth (New York: Knopf, 2005), 48; Mark Ashurst-McGee, “Moroni as Angel and as Treasure Guardian,” *FARMS Review* 18/1 (2006): 42.

21 Snow, “Joseph in Harmony.”

22 Bushman, *Joseph Smith*, 50; Ashurst-McGee, “Moroni as Angel and as Treasure Guardian,” 39; *Printer’s Manuscript*, ed. Skousen and Jensen, xv-xvi. Ashurst-McGee tries to argue (unsuccessfully, in my view) that Joseph’s story of the angel and the gold plates was always primarily a story of revelation and faith, but even he admits that it would sound like a tale of a spirit and buried treasure.

23 Turley, Jensen, and Ashurst-McGee, “Joseph the Seer.”

was the case. For example, Joseph Fielding Smith, the tenth President of the LDS Church, dismissed all of the accounts of Joseph using his seer stone: “The information is all *hearsay*, and personally, I do not believe that this stone was used for this purpose.” Smith admitted that the accounts might be true but suggested that the witnesses were confused due to the fact that Joseph did have a seer stone but used it for other purposes.²⁴ A few LDS Church publications after the time of Joseph Fielding Smith mentioned without explanation Joseph using a seer stone to translate,²⁵ while others made reference to the seer stone but implied some doubt as to whether he actually had used it to translate.²⁶ (None of these earlier publications, it should be noted, explained what the seer stone was.) As recently as 2013, an official LDS Church publication hedged on the issue by saying that “Joseph *may* have used a seer stone he found in his youth to translate a portion of the Book of Mormon.”²⁷ Such uncertainty is now officially gone, as the LDS Church now states explicitly that Joseph did use his seer stone for that purpose.²⁸

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Joseph’s wife Emma and the men who were supporting and working with Joseph when he produced the Book of Mormon gave numerous statements years later that all agree as to how Joseph did it. LDS historian Richard

24 Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation: Sermons and Writings of Joseph Fielding Smith*, comp. Bruce R. McConkie (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1956), 3:226.

25 Notably in “A Peaceful Heart,” *Friend*, (Sept. 1977); Godfrey, “A New Prophet and a New Scripture”; Russell M. Nelson, “A Treasured Testament,” *Ensign*, (July 1993); Maxwell, “By the Gift and Power of God.”

26 E.g., Richard Lloyd Anderson, “By the Gift and Power of God,” *Ensign*, (Sept. 1977); Oaks, “Recent Events Involving Church History and Forged Documents.”

27 “Lesson 34: Doctrine and Covenants 28,” in *Doctrine and Covenants and Church History Seminary Teacher Manual* (LDS Church, 2013), emphasis added.

28 E.g., “Book of Mormon Translation”; *Foundations of the Restoration Teacher Manual* (LDS Church, 2015).

Bushman summarized the method as follows: “Joseph put the seer stone in a hat to exclude the light and read off the translated text by looking in the stone. All the while, the plates lay wrapped in a cloth on the table. Apparently Joseph did not look at the plates through most of the translation.” As Bushman conceded, “The actual process by which the Book of Mormon was translated, according to the witnesses of the event and the earliest sources, is generally unknown to members of the Church.”²⁹

That the gold plates were not in view as Joseph dictated his “translation” bears emphasizing. While at times the plates lay covered on a table, at other times they were apparently not even in the room. David Whitmer, for example, stated frankly that Joseph “did not use the plates in the translation.” According to Whitmer, “The plates were not before Joseph while he translated, but seem to have been removed by the custodian angel.”³⁰ Isaac Hale commented that Joseph dictated his translation “with a stone in his hat, and his hat over his face, while the Book of Plates were at the same time hid in the woods!”³¹

The LDS Church for many years fostered the belief that Joseph Smith actively studied the plates as part of his work of translating them. For example, Joseph Fielding Smith described Joseph’s translation work in this way: “He was busy studying the characters and making himself familiar with them and the use of the Urim and Thummim. He had a great deal more to do than merely to sit down and with the use of the instrument prepared for that purpose translate the characters on the plates.”³² According to a 1988 *Ensign* article, “The scriptures indicate that translation involved sight, power, transcription of the characters, the Urim and Thummim or a seerstone, study, and prayer.”³³ A curriculum manual for upper elementary students currently on the LDS website states: “At first Joseph spent a lot of time becoming familiar with the plates and the language in which they were written. As he studied and prayed, the Urim and Thummim helped him understand the characters on the plates.”³⁴ This understanding was reinforced in LDS artwork depicting Joseph closely

29 Richard Lyman Bushman, “Foreword,” in MacKay and Dirkmaat, *From Darkness unto Light*, vi.

30 David Whitmer, “The Golden Tables [*sic*],” *Chicago Times*, (Aug. 7, 1875).

31 In *Early Mormon Documents*, ed. Vogel, 4:287.

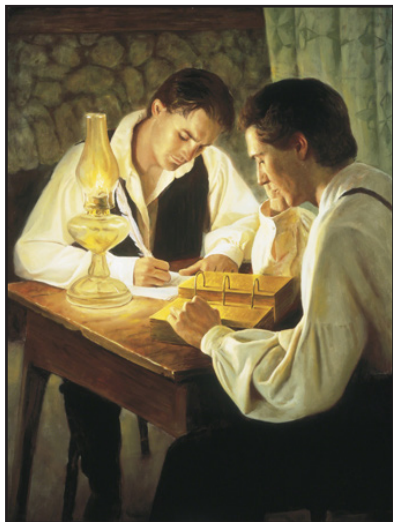
32 Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, 3:215-16.

33 Godfrey, “A New Prophet and a New Scripture.”

34 “Lesson 6: Joseph Smith Begins to Translate the Gold Plates,” in *Primary 5: Doctrine and Covenants and Church History* (1997), 26-30.

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examining the plates, often with his finger touching a plate as if he were examining a specific word or character. (Below is an example by Del Parson.)



Del Parson drawing,
LDS Media Library, LDS.org

Once again, the misunderstanding goes back to Joseph Smith, who never mentioned the seer stone or the hat in connection with the translation of the Book of Mormon. Rather, he consistently claimed that he translated the gold plates using spectacles made of transparent stones that he found with the plates at the location revealed by the angel Moroni. According to his official history, Moroni told him that “there were two stones in silver bows—and these stones, fastened to a breastplate, constituted what is called the Urim and Thummim—deposited with the plates; and the possession and use of these stones were what constituted ‘seers’ in ancient or former times; and that God had prepared them for the purpose of translating the book” (JS–H 1:35). In another statement issued in 1838 he said, “I obtained them [the plates], and the Urim and Thummim with them; by the means of which, I translated the plates; and thus came the book of Mormon.”³⁵ In his 1842 Wentworth Letter, Joseph said, “With the records was found a curious instrument which the ancients called ‘Urim and Thummim,’ which consisted of two transparent stones set in the rims of a bow fastened to a breastplate. Through the medium of the Urim and Thummim I translated the record by the gift and power of God.”³⁶ Naturally, Mormons have assumed that these miraculous spectacles with transparent stones were used to read the gold plates but, as scholars have known for many years, Joseph did no such thing.

³⁵ Joseph Smith, “Answers to Questions,” *Elders’ Journal*, July 1838, in *Early Mormon Documents*, ed. Vogel, 1:52.

³⁶ In *Early Mormon Documents*, ed. Vogel, 1:171; see his similar account in 1843, 1:185.

Mormons have offered two explanations to harmonize Joseph’s repeated, unqualified statement that he translated the Book of Mormon using the stone spectacles he found with the gold plates and the multiple testimonies from witnesses who observed Joseph dictating the Book of Mormon with a seer stone in his hat. The first is that Joseph and his associates began using the term “Urim and Thummim” to refer to *both* the stone spectacles and the individual seer stone, resulting in some confusion as to which instrument was meant.³⁷ While this might be a possible explanation for other statements using the term, it cannot explain away Joseph’s explicit statements, quoted above, describing the Urim and Thummim as transparent stone spectacles found in the stone box with the gold plates.

The other harmonization goes back to statements made by Joseph’s associates in the decades following his death. According to Joseph’s widow Emma, David Whitmer, and former LDS apostle William McLellin, Joseph used the stone spectacles when he dictated the 116 pages of manuscript that Martin Harris lost in 1828, but used his seer stone when he dictated in 1829 the text of the published Book of Mormon.³⁸ If one assumes that the stone spectacles existed, this would seem to be the only satisfactory explanation.

On the other hand, no one ever saw Joseph using the stone spectacles to translate the gold plates. Harris, who served as Joseph’s scribe for the lost 116 pages, never saw Joseph during the process, as a curtain or blanket was hung that shielded him (and the reported plates and stone spectacles) from view. Harris told at least two different individuals, John A. Clark and Charles Anthon, about the curtain or blanket.³⁹ Harris’s own understanding was that Joseph began with the stone spectacles but soon switched during their translation work to the seer stone “for convenience.”⁴⁰ Thus, the claim made by Emma and others that Joseph used the stone spectacles for the lost 116 pages is at least largely negated by Harris’s story.

In short, according to the testimonies of his associates (other than Oliver Cowdery), Joseph used the seer stone for much if not most of the lost 116 pages dictated in 1828 and for all of the pages they witnessed him dictating in 1829 that became the published Book of Mormon. This makes his unqualified claim to have

³⁷ “Book of Mormon Translation”; Alexander L. Baugh, “Joseph Smith: Seer, Translator, Revelator, and Prophet,” *BYU Speeches*, (June 24, 2014); Turley, Jensen, and Ashurst-McGee, “Joseph the Seer”; *Printer’s Manuscript*, ed. Skousen and Jensen, xix.

³⁸ See *Early Mormon Documents*, ed. Vogel, 1:532; 5:138, 327.

³⁹ See *Early Mormon Documents*, ed. Vogel, 2:268; 4:379, 384; accepted as fact by Bushman, *Joseph Smith*, 66.

⁴⁰ See *Early Mormon Documents*, ed. Vogel, 2:320; affirmed in *Printer’s Manuscript*, ed. Skousen and Jensen, xix.

translated the Book of Mormon with the stone spectacles at least misleading if not an outright lie.

Translating with the Seer Stone: Was It a Miracle?

Granting that Joseph dictating of the Book of Mormon with his face in his hat is contrary to his own account of what happened, many Mormons have argued that the method confirms that the translation was a divine miracle. After all, they ask, how could Joseph have dictated the Book of Mormon using his own natural knowledge or resources with his face buried in his hat? No doubt his dictating pages of manuscript without looking up from his hat impressed Joseph's original circle of supporters who watched him do so. Richard Bushman has commented, "Although the witnesses' explanations of the translation process differ from what is generally understood by Church members, the testimonies of these witnesses affirm that the use of the seer stones—placed as they were in a hat to block out the light so the words of God could be read—was the greatest evidence to them of the miraculous nature of the translation process."⁴¹ As impressed as Joseph's associates may have been, there are reasons to conclude that Joseph's dictation was not a divine miracle.

First, *the method of "translation" was the same divination method Joseph and others in his society used in trying to find the location of buried treasure.* Divination, which is a form of magic, and miracle are two distinct concepts even though both of them involve unseen forces. Mormon scholar John Welch's comment that religion seeks "a deity's actions" and "makes petitions to God" while "magic typically tries to command, control, or manipulate the supernatural" helpfully points in the right direction.⁴² Divination was and is an art performed by individuals especially adept or skilled at utilizing certain objects as instruments for tapping into unseen sources of knowledge. The knowledge is accessed by using the right kind of objects or paraphernalia and performing the right actions according to very specific instructions and under the right conditions. Whereas in the Bible God has the freedom to deny or to approve a request for a miracle however well or poorly presented, in magic the desired result comes automatically as long as the proper procedure is carried out to the letter; failure is always due to some mistake or imperfection in the process used by the practitioner.⁴³ Thus, the fact

that Joseph's translation was produced using a form of divination common in the folkloric magical practice of his culture is evidence against it having been a genuine miracle.

Second, *Joseph's method of dictating with his face in the hat meant that no one could actually observe the instrument of the seer stone working.* His associates were given to understand that when Joseph looked into his hat with all outside light blocked, he could see words in light emanating from or in the stone. But the same method that kept outside natural light from coming into the hat kept any supposed supernatural light from coming out of the hat. Joseph's associates could only take his word for it that he saw anything in the hat at all.

Third, *assuming that the witnesses truthfully reported watching Joseph dictate with his face in his hat, this does not mean that all of the Book of Mormon original manuscript was dictated or written in that fashion.* There is no journal recording what pages or text of the Book of Mormon were dictated from day to day. We also do not have detailed records telling us on which days the various witnesses actually sat and watched Joseph dictating the text to Oliver Cowdery, the main scribe for the Book of Mormon. About three-quarters of the original manuscript is no longer extant (having apparently suffered irreparable water damage), complicating any study to determine if it had all been produced in the same way. Thus, it is possible that some of the manuscript was dictated with Joseph not looking in his hat. This possibility leads us to the next point.

Fourth, *there is good evidence that Joseph used a Bible when he dictated the Book of Mormon material that parallels chapters of the Bible.* There are well over 600 verses of the Bible that are duplicated in the Book of Mormon (representing 27 chapters of the Bible), and this material is at least 96 per cent verbally identical to the King James Version. Hypothetically, one can imagine three explanations for this fact: Joseph supernaturally had the words of the KJV revealed to him, he memorized the chapters before sitting for his dictation, or he had a Bible in hand when he dictated those chapters.

The supernatural explanation is the easiest to disprove, because if true one would expect that the text would match the KJV *exactly* except where the KJV wording was somehow wrong. That is, if God had supernaturally revealed the words of the Book of Mormon translation to Joseph, and if God had chosen

41 Bushman, "Foreword," in MacKay and Dirkmaat, *From Darkness unto Light*, xiv.

42 John W. Welch, "Miracles, Maleficium, and Maiestas in the Trial of Jesus," in *Jesus and Archaeology*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 359.

43 Cornelis Van Dam, *The Urim and Thummim: A Means of Revelation in Israel* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1997), 122-25.

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Material available in several languages
Online support group for those leaving Mormonism

to use the KJV as the basis for biblical quotations, one would expect variations from the KJV only where there was some problem with the KJV wording. However, the four per cent of verbal variations from the KJV in biblical quotations in the Book of Mormon are generally not corrections of problems in the KJV. For example, in duplicating the Beatitudes more or less as they appear in Matthew 5, the Book of Mormon has the trivial word “and” inserted at the beginning of all but the first of the Beatitudes (3 Nephi 12:4-11).⁴⁴ The only point to such a trivial deviation from the KJV text is to make it seem as if the “translation” is not simply copied from the KJV.

The hypothesis that Joseph memorized chapters or sections of the Bible before dictating them is not as implausible as today’s Google-dependent readers might imagine. In Joseph’s day it was not at all uncommon for young men to have memorized whole chapters and even books of the Bible.⁴⁵

The third hypothesis, that Joseph dictated the biblical chapters into the Book of Mormon with Bible in hand, is however the most likely explanation. This follows from the fact that Joseph introduced minor as well as major variations into the biblical material, something that might be difficult to do while reciting from memory.

Many of the insignificant variations from the KJV in biblical quotations are placed either at the beginning of a verse or are associated with the italicized words in the KJV. The KJV used italics to indicate that an English word did not correspond to a specific word in the original Hebrew or Greek text. So, for example, Matthew 5:11 in the KJV reads, “Blessed are ye, when *men* shall revile you, and persecute *you*, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake.” The Book of Mormon parallel reads exactly the same except for two changes: it adds “And” to the beginning of the verse (as mentioned earlier), and it omits the italicized word “you” after the word “persecute” (3 Nephi 12:11). These minor variations (and there are many of them throughout the Book of Mormon) are strong evidence that these passages were composed by someone who had a KJV in hand, reading along and making mostly minor verbal changes at what seemed to be opportune places.

Some respected Mormons have agreed that Joseph used a KJV when dictating passages from the Bible. Historian B. H. Roberts, President Joseph F. Smith,

⁴⁴ I discuss this example and many more in “The Sermon at the Temple in the Book of Mormon: A Critical Examination of Its Authenticity through a Comparison with the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew” (Ph.D. diss., South African Theological Seminary, 2014), chapter 7.

⁴⁵ See further Robert M. Bowman Jr., “Did the Young Joseph Smith Study the Bible?” (IRR, 2010).

Apostle Bruce McConkie, and BYU professor Kent Jackson are just some of the LDS scholars and leaders who have put forward this conclusion.⁴⁶ Evidently, Joseph dictated most of the Book of Mormon with his face in his hat, but not all of it, as is shown by his use of the KJV.

Thus, far from showing that the translation of the Book of Mormon was a miracle, Joseph’s use of the divination practice of gazing at his seer stone in a hat raises a number of difficulties for the belief that Joseph was divinely inspired in his translation.

The Seer Stone: What Difference Does It Make?

What is the significance of the fact that Joseph dictated his translation of the Book of Mormon using a seer stone in his hat rather than a pair of stone spectacles? Michael Ash, a popular Mormon apologist, puts the question this way: Does it really matter whether Joseph dictated the Book of Mormon using one stone or two stones?⁴⁷

1. *The difference is not merely a matter of one stone versus two stones, but of two very different instruments and two very different methods.* Whereas Joseph claimed to have translated the Book of Mormon using transparent stone spectacles that were in the box where the gold plates were found, in fact he dictated his translation by looking at a non-transparent, chocolate-colored stone in his hat. Not only are the instruments very different, the method is very different: Joseph did not “read” the gold plates with the stone spectacles or even look at the plates while dictating his translation, but instead had his face buried in his hat.

2. It makes a difference that Joseph used a seer stone because it means that *Joseph Smith did not tell the truth when he claimed that he used the stone spectacles found with the gold plates.* This falsehood is part of the official account contained in Mormon scripture (Joseph Smith–History), making it a very serious problem. Moreover, this is not the only such instance, which leads to the third point.

3. Joseph’s use of the seer stone in the hat reveals that *the Book of Mormon originated in the context of Joseph’s disreputable magical “money-digging” enterprises.* We showed earlier that Joseph falsified his official history by claiming that his involvement in treasure hunting was limited to a month-long expedition in which he was

⁴⁶ B. H. Roberts, *New Witnesses for God, II: The Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Press, 1909), 3:425-40, quoting with approval Joseph F. Smith; Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 302; Kent P. Jackson, “New Discoveries in the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible,” *Religious Educator* 6/3 (2005): 150-51.

⁴⁷ Michael R. Ash, *Shaken Faith Syndrome: Strengthening One’s Testimony in the Face of Criticism and Doubt*, 2nd ed. (Redding, CA: FAIR, 2013), 286.

just one of several manual laborers who dug for Josiah Stowell. In fact Joseph engaged in treasure-hunting operations with his family and others over a five-year period, and his main implement was not a shovel but a seer stone. This makes *two* deliberate falsehoods in Joseph's scriptural account. Now we have seen that treasure-hunting was the context not only of Joseph's claim to have found the gold plates but also of his claim to translate them by divine power. It thus becomes clear that the motivation for Joseph's falsifying his history with regard to the instrument used to translate the plates was the same as the motivation for his falsifying his history with regard to his involvement in money-digging. Joseph wished to persuade people that he was a prophet of God who found and translated the Book of Mormon by divine revelation. He recognized that this claim would not be credible if the Book of Mormon was viewed as originating in his years-long career of using a magical stone to lead people to buried treasure.

4. The preceding two points establish that *Joseph Smith's account of the origins of the Book of Mormon cannot be considered reliable*. That Joseph was not forthright about the origins of the Book of Mormon is hard to deny. When his brother Hyrum in 1831 directly asked him at a general conference of the LDS Church to explain how he translated the Book of Mormon—a question Hyrum asked in full faith that the translation was inspired—Joseph “said that it was not intended to tell the world all the particulars of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon; and also said that it was not expedient for him to relate these things.”⁴⁸ The most he would ever say was that he did so using the Urim and Thummim that he had found with the gold plates—which we know was not true—and that he did so “by the gift and power of God.” Mormon apostle Neal A. Maxwell admitted, “The Prophet Joseph alone knew the full process, and he was deliberately reluctant to describe details.” Maxwell, however, dismissed the question as unimportant: “Our primary focus in studying the Book of Mormon should be on the principles of the gospel anyway, not on the process by which the book came forth.”⁴⁹ In view of the evidence that Joseph deliberately misled people as to “the full process,” anyone who honestly wants to know the truth should be concerned.

5. *The fact that Joseph Smith did not use the stone spectacles to translate the Book of Mormon stands in conflict with the teaching of the Book of Mormon itself*. Joseph's statement that “the possession and use of these stones [of the spectacles called the Urim and Thummim] were what constituted ‘seers’ in ancient or former times”

(JS-H 1:35) clearly implies that if Joseph did not use those stones (but instead a seer stone he found years earlier) then he was not genuinely functioning as a “seer” in his translation. This implication is supported by the Book of Mormon.

In one passage, a figure named Ammon is quoted as saying that he knows of a man that can translate records written in an unknown language, “for he has wherewith that he can look, and translate all records that are of ancient date; and it is a gift from God.” These “things are called interpreters,” and whomever God commands “to look in them, the same is called seer” (Mosiah 8:13). After hearing more about the powers of a seer, the king agreed that “these interpreters were doubtless prepared for the purpose of unfolding all such mysteries to the children of men” (8:19). The interpreters were “two stones which were fastened into the two rims of a bow” and that were “prepared from the beginning, and were handed down from generation to generation, for the purpose of interpreting languages” (28:13-14).

These are the same “interpreters” that Joseph claimed he used to translate the Book of Mormon. Yet it turns out that he did *not* do so. If the use of these specific stones as spectacles were what enabled certain men to function as “seers,” it follows that anyone falsely claiming to have used those stone spectacles would not be a genuine seer. Thus the problem goes beyond the fact that Joseph falsified his testimony about how he translated the plates, as bad as that is. According to his own claim and the very text he claimed to have translated supernaturally, the fact that he did not use the ancient stone spectacles and yet claimed to do so disqualifies him as a genuine seer.

6. The fact that Joseph did not look at the gold plates when dictating his “translation” means that *the Book of Mormon need have no relation to the supposed gold plates at all*. Joseph's method of producing the text of the Book of Mormon in effect renders the gold plates irrelevant. There was no need for Moroni (whom the Book of Mormon identifies as its last ancient author) to carry the gold plates (weighing forty pounds or more according to Joseph's associates, though if they really were gold they should have weighed closer to two hundred pounds) thousands of miles from Central America to upstate New York (a tall order, to put it mildly) in order to bury them for Joseph to discover fourteen centuries later. (The people of ancient Mesoamerica had no pack horses or other beasts of burden, so Moroni would have had to carry the plates,

48 Joseph Smith, *History of the Church*, 1:220 n.

49 Maxwell, “By the Gift and Power of God,” 39.

And I [Jesus] say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. (Matthew 16:18 KJV)

along with the stone spectacles and the breastplate, on his own.) Yet Joseph did not need the plates, the stone spectacles, the breastplate, or anything other than what he already had, his small treasure-hunting seer stone and his hat, along with the divine revelation Mormons claim he received.

The best Mormon apologists have been able to say in response to this point is that Joseph needed to have contact with the gold plates as physical assurance that the Book of Mormon was based on something real.⁵⁰ There are two objections to this explanation. The first is that if the point of having the plates was to be assured that the Book of Mormon was an ancient text, then Joseph should have used the transparent stone spectacles he claimed had been provided. Doing so would have produced a much more direct, tangible demonstration to Joseph—and anyone else permitted to watch—that the Book of Mormon was really translated from ancient scriptures. Second, the explanation is out of sync with the constant refrain of Mormon leaders, scholars, and apologists that knowledge of the truth of the Book of Mormon must be gained by a witness of the Holy Ghost and not by physical evidence (cf. Moroni 10:4-5).

Joseph Smith's use of a seer stone when dictating the Book of Mormon is extremely consequential with regard to the truth claims of Mormonism. It discredits the honesty and credibility of his account of the origins of the Book of Mormon, establishes the folkloric, superstitious context of Mormon beginnings, contradicts the teaching of the Book of Mormon itself, undermines the reliability of the LDS Church's teaching about its history, and disconnects the Book of Mormon from its supposed ancient physical basis. No wonder that many erstwhile faithful Mormons have been shocked by this news, as was a Mormon leader in New Zealand last year:

Today I am reeling from the translation of the "Book of Mormon" essay. Exactly how was I to know that Joseph Smith got the words to the Book of Mormon by burying his head in a hat. How was I to know that a stone he found in a well was instrumental in this process of translation? . . . What am I to make of a story I find confounding and frankly bizarre?⁵¹

What indeed. ■

50 E.g., Neal Rappleye, "Why Did Joseph Smith Need the Gold Plates?" *Studio et Quoque Fide* (blog), (June 21, 2010). Rappleye cites BYU scholar Daniel C. Peterson as having offered the same explanation.

51 Ganesh Cherian, "A Former Bishop's Doctrinal Dilemmas," *KiwiMormon* (blog), posted by Gina Colvin, (Feb. 12, 2014).

Utah Christian Radio AM 820

Give Brother Joseph a break?

By Sandra Tanner

Over the last two years the LDS Church has issued a number of essays in an attempt to answer some of the troubling aspects of Joseph Smith's life and teachings, such as Smith's stone in the hat, lack of evidence for the Book of Mormon, marrying married women and girls as young as 14, failed translation of the Book of Abraham, etc. However, many Mormons have found these essays troubling, not just because of new information but also due to the minimizing of the depth of the problems.

At the October 2015 semi-annual conference of the LDS Church there were several talks admonishing the faithful to follow the brethren, set aside their doubts and seek faith. Speaking at the Saturday evening Priesthood session, Apostle Neil L. Andersen admonished:

The questions concerning the prophet Joseph Smith are not new. They have been hurled by his critics since this work began. To those of faith who, looking through the colored glasses of the 21st century, honestly question events or statements of the prophet Joseph from nearly 200 years ago, may I share some friendly advice? For now, give Brother Joseph a break! In a future day you will have 100 times more information than from all of today's [Internet] search engines combined. And it will come from our all-knowing Father in Heaven.¹

But must we wait until we stand before God for such answers? Andersen pleads "Give Brother Joseph a break," but there are already enough facts for the average rational person to conclude that Joseph doesn't measure up as a prophet of God. We are regularly receiving visits and phone calls from troubled LDS members who are struggling with their faith in Mormonism. Many of them say it all started after just reading the various Gospel Topics essays. The problem isn't that we lack sufficient information, the problem is that the information counters a lifetime of indoctrination.

How much of a break are Mormons willing to extend to some of the prophets of the breakoff polygamist groups? Couldn't the FLDS just as rightly call for giving Warren Jeffs a break, even though he is serving a lifetime sentence in Texas for relations with twelve to fourteen-year-old girls? How is this any different than Joseph Smith taking fourteen-year-olds as secret polygamist wives?² Both Jeffs and Smith claimed revelation for their acts.

When Paul preached to the Jews in Berea that Jesus was the Messiah, they were not told to just have faith in what Paul told them, they were commended because they "searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so" (Acts 17:11). In today's world of competing truth claims we would do well to examine the evidence, not just rely on our feelings. ■

1 Comment starts at the 7 minute mark. <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/watch/2015/10?lang=eng&vid=4529826038001&cid=3>

2 "Problems in the LDS Essays on Plural Marriage," *Salt Lake City Messenger*, no. 124, (May 2015).

Magic Rock or Sacred Seer Stone?

By Sandra Tanner

Many readers were surprised when they opened their copy of the *Salt Lake Tribune*, August 5, 2015, to see a photo of Joseph Smith's long concealed "seer stone," which is kept in the LDS First Presidency's vault.¹ This stone had been unearthed while Joseph Smith was digging a well for a neighbor in the early 1820s and used to discover hidden objects and later to decipher the text of the Book of Mormon.

During the four-year time period that an angel was supposedly grooming Smith for the role of "Seer" (before allowing him to retrieve the plates) Joseph and his father were consulting the stone while engaged in treasure digging. While Smith's use of a divining rock has been known since the early days of Mormonism, this is the first time the LDS Church has released photographs of the stone.

In the recent LDS article "Book of Mormon Translation" it is conceded that he used both the interpreters (spectacles) stored with the plates and the seer stone. However, the article still minimizes the use of the stone:

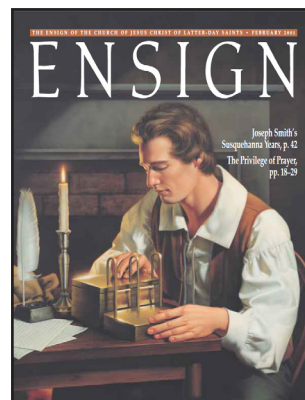
Apparently for **convenience**, Joseph often translated with the **single seer stone** rather than the two stones bound together to form the interpreters. These two instruments—the interpreters and the seer stone—were apparently interchangeable and worked in much the same way such that, in the course of time, Joseph Smith and his associates often used the term "Urim and Thummim" to refer to the single stone as well as the interpreters.²

However, the eye-witnesses to the translation only described Joseph Smith staring at his stone in a hat, not of him looking at the plates through large spectacles. David Whitmer explained the process:

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

read off the English to Oliver Cowdery, who was his principal scribe, and when it was written down and repeated to Brother Joseph to see if it was correct, then it would disappear, and another character with the interpretation would appear. Thus the Book of Mormon was translated by the gift and power of God, and not by any power of man.³

Curiously, after examining a number of LDS manuals no illustrations were found depicting Smith using his stone. Instead, he is almost always shown sitting at a desk and simply looking at the plates, as though he were doing a regular translation. The cover for the February, 2001, *Ensign* is an example of this.



Smith Family Magic

An article in the October 2015 *Ensign*, "Joseph the Seer," concedes the Smith's magic involvement:

The young Joseph Smith accepted such familiar folk ways of his day, including the idea of using seer stones to view lost or hidden objects. Since the biblical narrative showed God using physical objects to focus people's faith or communicate spiritually in ancient times, Joseph and others assumed the same for their day. Joseph's parents, Joseph Smith Sr. and Lucy Mack Smith, affirmed the family's immersion in this culture and their use of physical objects in this way, and the villagers of Palmyra and Manchester, New York, where the Smiths lived, sought out Joseph to find lost objects before he moved to Pennsylvania in late 1827.⁴

However, the Smiths' involvement with the occult was more extensive than the LDS article describes.

1 "LDS Church offers photos of founder Smith's 'seer stone'", Peggy F. Stack, *Salt Lake Tribune*. (August 5, 2015), pp. A1, 4.

2 "Book of Mormon Translation," online at lds.org/topics/book-of-mormon-translation

3 David Whitmer, *An Address To All Believers in Christ*, (Richmond, Mo., 1887), p. 12.

4 "Joseph the Seer," *Ensign* (October 2015); online at lds.org/ensign

Smith's 1826 Arrest

In the early 1820s the Smiths were known to be searching for hidden treasures. In fact, a man named Josiah Stowell hired Joseph Smith to use his stone to help find a long lost silver mine. Researchers H. Michael Marquardt and Wesley P. Walters provide background on this event:

When Joseph Smith recalled his money-digging activities for his official history, he wrote only about searching for a lost mine in 1825 for Josiah Stowell. But contemporary records suggest that this had been one of the Smith family occupations in the Palmyra/Manchester area since the early 1820s. For example, Joshua Stafford of Manchester recalled that he “became acquainted with the family of Joseph Smith, Sen. about the year 1819 or 20. They then were laboring people, in low circumstances. A short time after this, they commenced digging for hidden treasures, . . . and told marvellous stories about ghosts, hob-goblins, caverns, and various other mysterious matters.” Willard Chase, another friend of the family, similarly recalled, “I became acquainted with the Smith family . . . in the year 1820. At that time they were engaged in the money digging business.”⁵

While Mormons often defend Smith's employment as a money-digger as simply a matter of being a hired hand, Smith's mother states that Mr. Stowell traveled across the state to hire Joseph Smith specifically due to his reputation of special powers. Lucy Smith wrote:

A short time before the house was completed [1825], a man by the name of Josiah Stowell came from Chenango county, New York, with the view of getting Joseph to assist him in digging for a silver mine. He came for Joseph on account of having heard that he possessed **certain keys by which he could discern things invisible to the natural eye.**⁶

In November of 1825 Mr. Stowell and a group of men, including the Smiths, signed an agreement to share any gold or silver recovered from their dig. LDS Apostle Russell M. Nelson recently mentioned this money-digging agreement, but didn't explain that Joseph was specifically hired to serve as the medium to locate the treasure.⁷

⁵ H. Michael Marquardt and Wesley P. Walters, *Inventing Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1998), p. 64.

⁶ Lucy Mack Smith, *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith the Prophet, and His Progenitors for Many Generations* (Liverpool, England: S. W. Richards, 1853), pp. 91-92, as quoted in *Early Mormon Documents*, ed. Dan Vogel, vol. 1 (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996), p. 309.

⁷ Russell M. Nelson, “President Nelson Dedicates Priesthood Restoration Site,” (September 19, 2015). Online at <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/president-nelson-dedicates-priesthood->

When no treasure was found, a relative of Josiah Stowell, fearing that his uncle was being swindled, brought charges against Joseph Smith for fraudulently claiming powers he did not have. According to court records, in 1826 Joseph Smith, the “glass looker,” was arrested and brought before Judge Albert Neely on charges of being a “disorderly person” due to his professed power to use his seer stone to find buried treasure. Smith's defense was that he truly had such powers, “**but of late had pretty much given it up on account its injuring his health, especially his eyes.**” The court record was published in the *New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* in 1883:

People of State of New York vs. Joseph Smith.

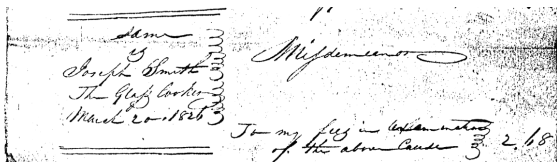
Warrant issued upon oath of Peter G. Bridgman, who informed that one Joseph Smith of Bainbridge was a **disorderly person and an imposter**. Prisoner brought into court [March 20, 1826]. **Prisoner examined.** Says that he came from town of Palmyra, and had been at the house of Josiah Stowell in Bainbridge most of time since; had small part of time been employed in looking for mines, but the major part had been employed by said Stowell on his farm, and going to school; that he had a **certain stone**, which he had occasionally looked at to determine where hidden treasures in the bowels of the earth were; that he professed to tell in this manner where gold-mines were a distance under ground, and had looked for Mr. Stowell several times, and informed him where he could find those treasures, and Mr. Stowell had been engaged in digging for them; that **at Palmyra he pretended to tell, by looking at this stone, where coined money was buried in Pennsylvania**, and while at Palmyra he had frequently ascertained in that way where lost property was, of various kinds; that he has occasionally been in the habit of looking through **this stone** to find lost property for three years, **but of late had pretty much given it up on account its injuring his health, especially his eyes**—made them sore; that he did not solicit business of this kind, and had always rather declined having anything to do with this business. . . . And thereupon the Court finds the defendant **guilty**.

In 1971 Wesley P. Walters located the Chenango county documents relating to Smith's 1826 arrest and hearing in the damp, musty basement of the jail in Norwich, New York. In these bundles of papers were two documents that related to Smith's 1826 hearing. Mr. Walters explained:

The discovery among the 1826 Chenango County bills of two bills from the officials who participated in

restoration-site. The comment starts at the 27 minute mark of the video. Further information on the agreement may be found in *Early Mormon Documents*, ed. Dan Vogel, vol. 4, pp. 407-413.

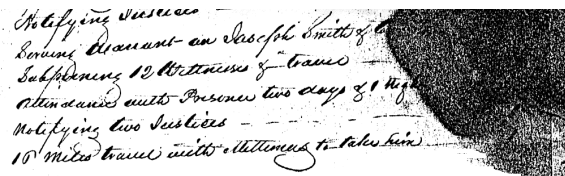
the arrest and trial of Joseph Smith at South Bainbridge in 1826 now confirms this story beyond question. The bill of Justice Albert Neely carries this entry:



same
vs
Joseph Smith
The Glass looker
March 20, 1826

Misdemeanor
To my fees in examination
of the above cause 2.68

The phrase “Glass looker” appearing on Mr. Neely’s bill is the precise terminology preferred by Joseph Smith himself to describe his crystal gazing occupation. The bill of Constable Philip De Zeng gives further historical evidence and details concerning this trial, by listing:⁸



Serving Warrant on Joseph Smith & travel.....1.25
Subpoening 12 Witnesses & travel2.50 (3.50?)
Attendance with Prisoner two days & 1 night.....1.75
Notifying two Justices1.—
10 miles travel with Mittimus to take him1.—

The documents suggest that Joseph Smith appeared before Justice Neely for what was known as an “examination.”⁹ This seems to be like a preliminary hearing we have today where the accused is bound over for trial at a later date. It would appear from page 109 of *A New Conductor Generalis* that since Justice Neely found Joseph Smith “guilty” of being a “disorderly person” he could have immediately sentenced him to “sixty days” in the “bridewell or house of correction, at hard labor,” but instead he bound him over to be tried by three justices at a later date. These justices could have ordered “him to be detained at hard labor, for any future time not exceeding six months, and during his confinement to be corrected by whipping, according to the nature of the offense, as they shall think fit.”

8 Wesley P. Walters, *Joseph Smith’s Bainbridge, N.Y., Court Trials*, (Salt Lake City: Modern Microfilm Co. [Utah Lighthouse Ministry], 1977), pp. 129-130.

9 See *A New Conductor Generalis: Being a Summary of the Law Relative to the Duty and Office of Justices of the Peace, Sheriffs, Coroners, Constables, Jurymen, Overseers of the Poor, &c, &c*, (Albany, New York, 1819), pages 141-143.

Since we do not have the rest of Justice Neely’s docket book or any other extant record concerning the matter, it is difficult to determine what finally happened in this case. It is possible that Joseph Smith could have admitted his guilt and struck an agreement with the county. Often officials who wanted to cut expenses would be willing to let prisoners go if they would agree to leave the county where the crime took place. The main point is that his arrest as a “glass looker” confirms Joseph Smith’s role as village magician.

Smith’s father-in-law, Isaac Hale, claimed that after Joseph married Emma in 1827 he promised to give up money-digging and seek regular employment. However, he seems to have simply moved from claiming to find lost treasures through his stone to translating hidden scriptures through the same means. Mr. Hale stated;

Smith stated to me, that he had given up what he called “**glass-looking,**” and that he expected to work hard for a living, and was willing to do so . . . Soon after this, I was informed they had brought a wonderful book of Plates down with them . . . The manner in which he pretended to read and interpret, was **the same as when he looked for the money-diggers, with the stone in his hat, and his hat over his face,** while the Book of Plates were at the same time hid in the woods!¹⁰

Faculty of Abrac

Another example of the Smith’s involvement with magic is found in mother Smith’s preliminary draft of her biography. She acknowledged the family’s “sooth saying” but assured her readers that this never interfered with their regular efforts to earn a living:

Let not the reader suppose that because I shall pursue another topic for a season that we stopt our labor and went at trying to **win the faculty of Abrac [.] drawing Magic circles or sooth saying [sic] to the neglect of all kinds of buisness[.]** [W]e never during our lives suffered one important interest to swallow up every other obligation but whilst we worked with our hands we endeavored to remmember [sic] the service of & the welfare of our souls.¹¹

10 *The Susquehanna Register*, (May 1, 1834).

11 “Lucy Smith’s History,” *Early Mormon Documents*, ed. Vogel, vol. 1, p. 285.

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The “faculty of Abrac” relates to the belief that by possessing an amulet with Abracadabra written in a special way the owner would be assured of good health. Below is an example of this:¹²

A B R A C A D A B R A
 A B R A C A D A B R
 A B R A C A D A B
 A B R A C A D A
 A B R A C A D
 A B R A C A
 A B R A C
 A B R A
 A B R
 A B
 A

Researcher Robert N. Hullinger tied Abrac with Masonic practices:

Abrac, from Abracadabra and Abraxis, is a magic word or formula used on amulets to work magic charms. Eighteenth century Masons were said to know how to conceal “the way of obtaining the faculty of Abrac,” which implied that they knew how to get it.¹³

In regards to Lucy Smith’s statement about magic circles, William Safford, a friend of the Smiths, testified:

I, William Stafford, having been called upon to give a true statement . . . do say, that I first became acquainted with Joseph, Sen., and his family in the year 1820. . . . A great part of their time was devoted to **digging for money: especially in the night time.** . . . I have heard them tell marvellous tales, respecting the discoveries they had made in their peculiar occupation of **money digging.** They would say, for instance, that in such a place, in such a hill, on a certain man’s farm, there were deposited **keys, barrels and hogsheds of coined silver and gold—bars of gold, golden images, brass kettles filled with gold and silver—gold candlesticks, swords, &c. &c.** They would say, also, that nearly all the hills in this part of New York, were thrown up by human hands, and in them were large caves, which Joseph, Jr., could see, **by placing a stone of singular appearance in his hat,** in such a manner as to exclude all light; at which time they pretended he could see all things within and under the earth,—that he could see within the above mentioned caves, large gold bars and silver plates—that **he could**

¹² Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *Mormonism, Magic and Masonry*, (Salt Lake City: Utah Lighthouse Ministry, 1988), p. 55.

¹³ Robert N. Hullinger, *Joseph Smith’s Response to Skepticism*, (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), p. 105; online at signaturebookslibrary.org

also discover the spirits in whose charge these treasures were, clothed in ancient dress. . . . These tales I regarded as visionary. However, being prompted by curiosity, I at length accepted of their invitations, to join them in their nocturnal excursions. I will now relate a few incidents attending these excursions.

Joseph Smith, Sen., came to me one night, and told me, that Joseph Jr. had been looking in his glass, and had seen, not many rods from his house, two or three kegs of gold and silver, some feet under the surface of the earth; and that none others but the elder Joseph and myself could get them. I accordingly consented to go, and early in the evening repaired to the place of deposit. Joseph, Sen. first **made a circle,** twelve or fourteen feet in diameter. This circle, said he, contains the treasure. He then stuck in the ground **a row of witch hazel sticks, around the said circle, for the purpose of keeping off the evil spirits.** Within this circle he made another, of about eight or ten feet in diameter. He walked around three times on the periphery of this last circle, muttering to himself something which I could not understand. He next stuck a steel rod in the centre of the circles, and then enjoined profound silence upon us, lest we should arouse the evil spirit who had the charge of these treasures. After we had dug a trench about five feet in depth around the rod, the old man by signs and motions, asked leave of absence, and went to the house to inquire of young Joseph the cause of our disappointment. He soon returned and said, that **Joseph had remained all this time in the house, looking in his stone and watching the motion of the evil spirit**—that he saw the spirit come up to the ring and as soon as it beheld the cone which we had formed around the rod, it **caused the money to sink.**¹⁴

Sinking Treasures

The common belief that treasures could sink is also present in the Book of Mormon. In Mormon 1:18-19 we read that the people “began to **hide up their treasures** in the earth; and they became **slippery**, because the Lord had **cursed the land**, that they could not hold them, nor retain them again. . . . there were sorceries, and witchcrafts, and magics; and the power of the evil one was wrought upon the face of the land, . . .”

The Book of Mormon also makes these statements concerning hidden treasures:

And behold, if a man **hide up a treasure** in the earth, and the Lord shall say—Let it be accursed, because of the iniquity of him who hath hid it up—behold, it shall be accursed.

And if the Lord shall say—Be thou accursed, that no man shall find thee from this time henceforth and

¹⁴ E. D. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled*, (Painesville, Ohio, 1834), pp. 237-239.

forever—behold, no man getteth it henceforth and forever. (Book of Mormon, Helaman 12:18-19)

. . . whoso shall **hide up treasures** in the earth shall find them no more, because of the great curse of the land, save he be a righteous man and shall hide it up unto the Lord.

For I will, saith the Lord, that they **shall hide up their treasures** unto me; and cursed be they who hide not up their treasures unto me; for none hideth up their treasures unto me save it be the righteous; and he that hideth not up his treasures unto me, cursed is he, and also the treasure, and none shall redeem it because of the curse of the land. (*Ibid.*, Helaman 13:18-19)

Behold, we lay a tool here and on the morrow it is gone; and behold, our swords are taken from us in the day we have sought them for battle.

Yea, we have hid up our **treasures** and they have **slipped away** from us, because of the **curse** of the land.

O that we had repented in the day that the word of the Lord came unto us; for behold the land is **curse**d, and all things are become **slippery**, and we cannot hold them.

Behold, we are surrounded by demons, yea, we are encircled about by the angels of him who hath sought to destroy our souls. . . . (*Ibid.*, Helaman 13:34-37)

Even Oliver Cowdery, one of the three witnesses to the Book of Mormon, said that when Joseph Smith went to the hill to get the gold plates he was concerned about not being able to obtain them because “he had heard of the power of enchantment, and a thousand like stories, which held the hidden treasures of the earth.”¹⁵

Seer Stone or Interpreters?

The LDS Church has traditionally written about the translation of the Book of Mormon in terms of Smith’s use of the “Urim and Thummim” without explaining that the term was applied to two different items. Smith first used the “interpreters” (large spectacles) preserved with the plates but soon switched to using the seer stone found in a well. When questioned in 1870 as to the process of translation, Emma Smith wrote:

“Now the first that my husband translated, was translated by the use of the Urim and Thummim [interpreters], and that was the part that Martin Harris lost, **after that he used a small stone**, not exactly black, but was rather a dark color.”¹⁶

While David Whitmer was not a scribe during the dictating of the first 116 pages of text, he did state that

he never saw Smith use the spectacles. In 1879 J. L. Traugher reported his earlier conversation with Whitmer:

“With the sanction of David Whitmer, and by his authority, I now state **he does not say that Joseph Smith ever translated in his presence by aid of Urim and Thummim** [the spectacles], **but by means of one dark colored, opaque stone** called a ‘Seer Stone,’ which was placed in the crown of a hat, into which Joseph put his face, so as to exclude the external light. Then, a spiritual light would appear before Joseph, upon which was a line of characters from the plates, and under it, the translation in English; at least, so Joseph said.”¹⁷

Many years ago M. T. Lamb made some important observations regarding Joseph Smith’s strange habit of using his seer stone instead of the instruments preserved with the plates:

Finally, according to the testimony of Martin Harris, Mr. Smith often used the “seer stone” in place of the Urim and Thummim, even while the latter remained in his possession—using it as a mere matter of convenience.

It seems almost too bad that he should thus inadvertently give the whole thing away. You must understand that the Urim and Thummim spoken of, and called throughout the Book of Mormon “the Interpreters,” had been provided with great care over 2500 years ago by God himself, for the express purpose of translating these plates. They are often mentioned in the Book of Mormon as exceedingly important. They were preserved with the greatest care, handed down from one generation to another with the plates, and buried with them in the hill Cumorah over 1400 years ago; as sacred as the plates themselves. So sacred that only one man was allowed to handle or use them, the highly favored prophet, Joseph Smith himself. But now, alas! After all this trouble and pains and care on the part of God, and on the part of so many holy men of old, this “Urim and Thummim” is found at last to be altogether superfluous; not needed at all. This “peep stone” found in a neighbor’s well will do the work just as well—and is even more convenient, **“for convenience he used the seer stone.”** So we are left to infer that when he used the Urim and Thummim at all, it was at some inconvenience. And probably he only did it out of regard to the feelings of his God, who had spent so much time and anxiety in preparing it so long ago, and preserving it to the present day for his special use!¹⁸

15 Oliver Cowdery, *Messenger and Advocate*, vol. 2, p. 198.

16 James E. Lancaster, “The Method of Translation of the Book of Mormon,” *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal*, vol. 3, (1983), p. 53.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 54.

18 M. T. Lamb, *The Golden Bible: The Book of Mormon—Is It From God?* (1887), pp. 250-251.

Joseph's Jupiter Talisman

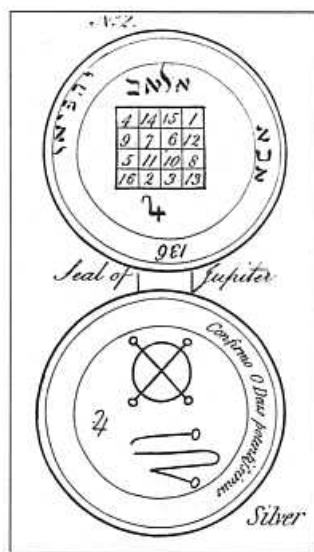
Contrary to the Bible's strong denunciation of magic and necromancy, such as in Deuteronomy 18:9-14 and elsewhere, Joseph Smith and many, if not all, of the witnesses had been involved in the magic practices of the area, believing in ghosts who guarded buried treasures, using magic spells and paraphernalia.

Besides Joseph Smith's seer stone, he also owned a magic Jupiter talisman (a silver medallion worn on a string around the neck).¹⁹ LDS historian Reed C. Durham made these observations about Smith's talisman in his presidential address to the Mormon History Association on April 20, 1974:

All available evidence suggest that Joseph Smith the Prophet possessed a **magical Masonic medallion, or talisman**, which he worked during his lifetime and which was evidently on his person when he was martyred. His talisman is in the shape of a silver dollar and is probably made of silver or tin. . . . [it] can now be identified as a **Jupiter talisman**. It carries the sign and image of Jupiter and should more appropriately be referred to as the Table of Jupiter. . . . In astrology, Jupiter is always associated with high positions, getting one's own way, and all forms of status.²⁰



Joseph Smith's
Jupiter Talisman



Jupiter Talisman from Barrett's
The Magus 1801

According to Emma Smith's stepson, the talisman passed from Joseph to Emma after his death. The stepson later sold the object to Wilford C. Wood, a Mormon collector in Woods Cross, Utah. Charles E. Bidamon

stated: "I certify that I have many times heard her [Emma Smith Bidamon] say, when being interviewed, and showing the piece. That it was in the Prophets pocket when he was martyred at Carthage Ill." Mr. Bidamon also claimed that Emma "prized this piece very highly on account of its being one of the prophet's intimate possessions."²¹

Hyrum Smith's Magic Papers

Hyrum Smith, Joseph's older brother, also owned magic paraphernalia. Among his possessions were several magic parchments, a pouch for storage, and a magic dagger.²²



One of Hyrum Smith's magic parchments

These artifacts are currently in the possession of the Eldred G. Smith family. Eldred, who died in 2013, was Patriarch emeritus of the LDS Church and great, great-grandson of Hyrum Smith. Mormon writer Pearson H. Corbett described these relics of Hyrum Smith in his book, *Hyrum Smith—Patriarch*:

Dagger, Masonic ten inch, stainless steel—wooden handle—Masonic symbols on blade.

Emblematic parchments—Masonic—three, original hand painted on heavy bodied paper—on border appears initials "I.H.S." . . .

Pouch, Masonic cotton fabric 4" x 4" with draw string attached.²³

21 Statements by Charles E. Bidamon, as quoted by the Tanners, in *Mormonism, Magic and Masonry*, p. 5; silver pendant referenced in *Wilford C. Wood Collection*, by LaMar C. Berrett, Wilford C. Wood Foundation, (1972) vol. 1, p. 71 (4-N-a-36), and p. 173 (7-J-b-21).

22 Photos of the objects in *Mormonism, Magic and Masonry*, pp. 6-11. See Quinn, *Early Mormonism and Magic World View* (1998).

23 Pearson H. Corbett, *Hyrum Smith—Patriarch*, p. 453, as cited in *Mormonism, Magic and Masonry*, p. 5.

19 Tanner, *Mormonism, Magic and Masonry*, pp. 2-5.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 2. See also D. Michael Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1998), chapter 3.

Historian D. Michael Quinn made the following observation about the Smith family's magic artifacts:

The three magic parchments possessed by the Smith family have three different purposes, all interrelated. The "Holiness to the Lord" parchment is a lamen of ceremonial magic to receive visitation from "good angels." The "Saint Peter bind them" parchment is a talisman for personal protection. The faded "Jehovah, Jehovah, Jehovah" parchment is a house-amulet.²⁴

These artifacts certainly demonstrate a deeper level of involvement with magic than simply using a "seer stone" to translate the Book of Mormon.

Unlike the early converts to Christianity in Acts 19:19 who burned their magic artifacts, Joseph and Hyrum Smith preserved theirs.

Smith and the Methodists

It is interesting to note that as early as 1828 members of the Methodist Church were forced to evaluate Joseph Smith's involvement with magic. He had taken steps to join their church, but they felt his dealings in magic made him unfit to be a member.

In the book *Inventing Mormonism* we read:

In 1879 Joseph and Hiel Lewis, cousins to Joseph's first wife, Emma Hale, stated that Joseph joined the Methodist Episcopal church or class in Harmony, Pennsylvania, in the summer of 1828. There was disagreement about how long Joseph's name remained on class rolls. See the articles in the *Amboy [Illinois] Journal* . . . It is possible that Joseph attended class with his wife Emma because of the death of their first son on 15 June 1828. That Joseph was a member of the class was not questioned, only the length of time his name remained on the class record.²⁵

Joseph and Hiel Lewis recounted that Smith had "presented himself in a very serious and humble manner, and the minister, not suspecting evil, put his name on the class book, in the absence of some of the official members."²⁶ When Joseph Lewis learned of this act, he felt that Smith was not truly repentant of his magic involvement and felt him to be unfit for membership. Mr. Lewis further details the incident:

I with Joshua McKune . . . thought it was **a disgrace to the church to have a practicing necromancer, a dealer in enchantments** and bleeding

ghosts in it. So on Sunday we went . . . and talked to him some time . . . Told him that his occupation, habits and moral character were at variance with the discipline . . . that there should have been recantation, confession and at least promised reformation—That he could that day publicly ask that his name be stricken from the class book, or stand investigation. He chose the former, and did that very day make request that his name be taken off the class book.²⁷

It is certainly strange that Joseph Smith would try to join the Methodist Church if, in fact, he had been instructed by God in 1820 not to join any church. According to Smith's history:

I asked the Personages who stood above me in the light, which of all the sects was right (for at this time it had never entered into my heart that all were wrong)—and which I should join.

I was answered that I must join none of them, for they were all wrong; and the Personage who addressed me said that all their creeds were an abomination in his sight . . . (*Pearl of Great Price*, Joseph Smith—History 1:18-19)

Animal Sacrifices

Animal sacrifices were often a part of the magic rituals that accompanied money-digging. In the first edition of his book, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, page 144, Dr. D. Michael Quinn gives this information: "A cousin of Smith's wife Emma reported that Smith 'translated the book of Mormon by means of the same peep stone, and under the same inspiration that directed his enchantments and dog sacrifices; it was all by the same spirit' (H. Lewis 1879)."

In a magic book known as *The Greater Key of Solomon*, page 122, we read that "In many operations it is necessary to make some sort of sacrifice unto the demons, and in various ways . . . Such sacrifices consist **of the blood and sometimes of the flesh.**"

The evidence seems to show that Joseph Smith did make sacrifices to the demons. In an affidavit published in 1834, William Stafford, one of the neighbors of the Smith family, reported the following:

Joseph Smith, Sen., came to me one night, and told me that Joseph Smith Jr. had been looking in his glass, and had seen, not many rods from his house, two or three kegs of gold and silver . . . Joseph, Sen. first made a circle, twelve or fourteen feet in diameter. This circle, said he, contains the treasure. He then stuck in the ground a row of witch hazel sticks, around the said

24 Quinn, *Early Mormonism and Magic World View*, (1998), p. 104.

25 Marquardt and Walters, *Inventing Mormonism*, p. 61, n. 49.

26 *The Amboy Journal* (April 30, 1879), p. 1; also in *Early Mormon Documents*, vol. 4, p. 305.

27 *The Amboy Journal* (June 11, 1879), p. 1; also in *Early Mormon Documents*, vol. 4, pp. 310-311.

circle, for the purpose of keeping off the evil spirits. . . . another time, they devised a scheme, by which they might satiate their hunger, with the mutton of one of my sheep. They had seen in my flock a sheep, a large, fat, black weather. Old Joseph and one of the boys came to me one day, and said that **Joseph Jr.** had discovered some very remarkable and valuable treasures, which could be procured only in one way. That way, was as follows:—That a **black sheep** should be taken to the ground where the treasures were concealed—that after **cutting its throat**, it should be led around in a circle **while bleeding**. This being done, **the wrath of the evil spirit would be appeased**: the treasures could then be obtained, and my share of them was to be four fold. To gratify my curiosity, I let them have a large fat sheep. They afterwards informed me, that the sheep was killed pursuant to commandment; but as there was some mistake in the process, it did not have the desired effect. This, I believe, is the only time they ever made money-digging a profitable business. (*Mormonism Unveiled*, 1834, pp. 238-239; also reproduced in *Early Mormon Documents*, vol. 2, pp. 59-61)

The reader will notice that it was a “**black**” sheep that was supposed to have been sacrificed. This is interesting because *The Greater Key of Solomon*, page 122, says that, “Sometimes white animals are sacrificed to the good Spirits and **black to the evil**.”

In any case, BYU professor Richard L. Anderson said that, “If there was such an event of a borrowed sheep, it had nothing to do with dishonesty.”²⁸ Anderson also quotes the following from BYU Professor M. Wilford Poulson’s notes of a conversation with Wallace Miner: “I once asked Stafford if Smith did steal a sheep from him. He said no, not exactly. He said, he did miss a **black sheep**, but soon Joseph came and admitted he took it **for sacrifice** but he was willing to work for it. He made wooden sap buckets to fully pay for it.”²⁹

C. R. Stafford testified concerning the same incident:

Jo Smith, the prophet, told my uncle, William Stafford, he wanted a fat, **black sheep**. He said he wanted to **cut its throat** and make it walk in a circle three times around and it would prevent a pot of money from leaving.³⁰

The current leaders of the Mormon Church have turned away from the early occultic practices, which played such an important role in the church Joseph

Smith founded. In fact, the church hierarchy has publicly condemned magic. In the LDS manual *Gospel Principles* we read:

Mediums, astrologers, fortune tellers, and sorcerers are inspired by Satan even if they claim to follow God. Their works are abominable to the Lord (see Isaiah 47:12-14; Deuteronomy 18:9-10). We should avoid all associations with the powers of Satan.³¹

Most Mormons are not aware of Joseph Smith’s involvement in the occult because their leaders have systematically covered up the more embarrassing parts of Smith’s history.

A Book of Mormon Witness with a Stone

Hiram Page, one of the eight witnesses to the Book of Mormon, also had a seer stone which he used to obtain revelations. Joseph Smith charged that Page gave false revelations through his stone and believed that the other witnesses to the Book of Mormon were being influenced by his revelations:

To our great grief, however, we soon found that Satan had been lying in wait to deceive, . . . Brother **Hiram Page** had in his possession a **certain stone**, by which he obtained certain “revelations” . . . all of which were entirely at variance with the order of God’s house, . . . the Whitmer family and Oliver Cowdery, were believing much in the things set forth by this stone, we thought best to inquire of the Lord concerning so important a matter . . .³²

Seeing a threat to his leadership, Joseph Smith countered with a revelation stating that “no one shall be appointed to receive commandments and revelations in this church excepting my servant Joseph Smith, Jun., for he receiveth them even as Moses” (*Doctrine and Covenants* 28:2). Then in verse eleven, Oliver Cowdery was instructed to tell Hiram Page that “those things which he hath written from that stone are not of me, and that Satan deceiveth him.”

Cowdery’s Divining Rod

Oliver Cowdery and his family, along with the Smiths, were involved in the folk magic of the New England states. When Cowdery met Smith he evidently brought with him a reputation of working with a divining rod, a forked witch hazel stick used to locate water or minerals.

The money-diggers used divining rods to find buried treasure. They were also used as “a medium of

28 Richard L. Anderson, “Joseph Smith’s New York Reputation Reappraised,” *Brigham Young University Studies* (Spring 1970), p. 295.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 294.

30 *Naked Truths About Mormonism*, (January 1888), p. 3; also reproduced in *Early Mormon Documents*, vol. 2, p. 197.

31 *Gospel Principles*, (Salt Lake City: LDS Church, 2009), p. 131.

32 Joseph Smith, *History of the Church* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), vol. 1, pp. 109-110.

revelation.” Those who used divining rods were at times referred to as “rodsman.” Richard P. Howard, RLDS church historian, observed:

Several writers have established that both in Vermont and in western New York in the early 1800’s, one of the many forms which enthusiastic religion took was the adaptation of **the witch hazel stick**. . . . For example, the “**divining rod**” was used effectively by one Nathaniel Wood in Rutland County, Vermont, in 1801. Wood, Winchell, William Cowdery, Jr., and his son, Oliver Cowdery, all had some knowledge of and associations with the various uses, both secular and sacred, of the **forked witch hazel rod**. Winchell and others used such a rod in seeking buried treasure; . . . when Joseph Smith met Oliver Cowdery in April, 1829, he found a man peculiarly adept in the use of the **forked rod** . . . and against the background of his own experiments with and uses of oracular media, Joseph Smith’s April, 1829, affirmations about Cowdery’s unnatural powers related to working with the rod are quite understandable . . .³³

Smith gave a revelation to Cowdery in 1829 commending him for his “**gift of working with the rod**: behold it has told you things: behold there is no other power save God, that can **cause this rod of nature, to work in your hands**” (*Book of Commandments*, section 7:3, 1833).

However a couple of years later Smith revised this revelation to hide its magical overtones. It now reads: “Now this is not all thy gift, for you have another gift, which is the **gift of Aaron**; behold, it has told you many things; Behold, there is no other power, save the power of God, that can **cause this gift of Aaron to be with you**” (*Doctrine and Covenants* 8:6-7). Richard P. Howard explained:

By the time that Joseph Smith approached the reinterpretation and rewording of this document for the 1835 edition of the *Doctrine and Covenants*, he had had time and experience necessary to place his 1829 assessment of the meaning of Cowdery’s gift of working with the rod in a somewhat more accurate perspective. Both he and Cowdery had developed away from an emphasis on the religious or mystical meanings in such mechanical objects as the water witching rod. **Joseph’s 1835 wording of this document . . . left behind the apparent 1829 reliance upon external media**, which by 1835 had assumed in Joseph’s mind overtones of superstition and speculative experimentation.³⁴

³³ Richard P. Howard, *Restoration Scriptures*, (Independence, MO: Herald Publishing, 1969), pp. 211-214.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 214.

The Implications

Mormon historians are now conceding the reality of the Smith family’s involvement with magic. In D. Michael Quinn’s second edition of his book, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View* he observes:

Friendly sources corroborate hostile non-Mormon accounts. As historian Richard L. Bushman has written: “There had always been evidence of it (‘money-digging in the Smith family’) in the hostile affidavits from the Smith’s neighbors, evidence which Mormons dismissed as hopelessly biased. But when I got into the sources, I found evidence from friendly contemporaries as well, Martin Harris, Joseph Knight, Oliver Cowdery, and Lucy Mack Smith. All of these witnesses persuaded me treasure-seeking and vernacular magic were part of the Smith family tradition, and that the hostile witnesses, including the 1826 trial record, had to be taken seriously.” BYU historian Marvin S. Hill has likewise observed: “Now, most historians, Mormon or not, who work with the sources, accept as fact Joseph Smith’s career as village magician.”³⁵

Most people would not feel that a few youthful mistakes by Joseph Smith would disqualify him as a prophet. However, since Joseph Smith’s failed treasure seeking and translation method for the Book of Mormon were both accomplished through the use of the same magic stone, it raises the question of the validity of both. There is no physical evidence for either his buried treasures or gold plates.

As LDS Apostle Jeffrey R. Holland declared:

“To consider that everything of saving significance in the Church stands or falls on the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon and, by implication, **the Prophet Joseph Smith’s account of how it came forth** is as sobering as it is true. It is a ‘sudden death’ proposition. Either the Book of Mormon is what the Prophet Joseph said it is, or this Church and its founder are false, a deception from the first instance onward.”³⁶

Given Joseph Smith’s involvement with magic and the occult, how does one reconcile that with the Bible³⁷ and his claim of being a prophet? ■

³⁵ Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, (1998), p. 59.

³⁶ Jeffrey R. Holland as quoted by Joseph B. Wirthlin in “The Book of Mormon: The Heart of Missionary Proselyting,” *Ensign* (September 2002).

³⁷ Deuteronomy 18:9-14; Leviticus 19:26, 31; Galatians 5:19-21; Revelation 21:8.

Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” (John 14:6 NIV)

Excerpts from Emails and Letters

May 2015: What a whirlwind these last few days have been! . . . Yesterday (Saturday) my son, ___ and his wife, ___ unexpectedly showed up . . . [My son], a real estate agent, asked why I didn't tell [the neighbor] to list her home with him. Without thinking, I blurted out, "I haven't been to church in 4 months. I don't [know] anything that's going on in the ward." To which [my son] immediately replied, "What?! Did [a friend] convert you to her church?!" . . .

To make a long story less long, [my daughter-in-law] scrubbed [my] walls and cupboards, [my son] kept the two toddlers out of mischief, and I rocked the baby while telling them the story of my journey over the last few months. Every once in awhile I'd stop talking to let them absorb it. After a few moments, [my son] would say, "Keep talking." So I did. I prayed God would give me the words to speak, and that they would have ears to hear.

I told them about the day my world came crashing down unexpectedly as I hadn't been questioning or doubting . . . at least not on a conscience level. I told them about calling my Christian friend, ___ who gave me a copy of "Unveiling Grace." Then about calling Lynn [Wilder], and how each person I met led me to another wonderful Christian woman who knew and loved Christ . . . After a few hours, [my daughter-in-law] asked if she could talk to [my Christian friend]. I made the phone call, and within 20 minutes, she and her husband [a local pastor] were in my home to answer their questions and stayed for 2 1/2 hours!

My darling [daughter-in-law] sobbed! She said as soon as I started talking she knew she had lost [her husband]. (This was a surprise to me as I'd thought [my son] was solid in his testimony and loyalty to the church.) She also cried because she knows that if she leaves the church, she will lose the newly found relationship of love and acceptance she has finally cultivated with her mother. Poor girl. I felt exactly the same way about my relationship with them! By the time they left last night, [my daughter-in-law] was pretty shell-shocked, but [my son] seemed calm and curious.

As we talked last night, [my son and wife] were both surprised at some of the church doctrine regarding the LDS teachings of the origin of God and other theology, and I was surprised they didn't know it. [My son] commented, "I guess I'm not a very good Mormon since I didn't know this stuff." My thought was, "I wasn't a very good Mormon Mom as I hadn't taught him this in Family Home Evening." But who am I kidding! I had 5 rowdy little boys! He was short and to the point and was usually about character development: kindness, tolerance, love, sharing, honesty, etc.

Then [the pastor] pointed out something I hadn't realized. The doctrine this generation is learning is different than what my generation had learned. But as we talked and I told them about changes in the temple ceremony and other church-related teachings, we were all pleasantly surprised to discover they held more Christian beliefs than any of us realized.

When they asked why I'd kept it a secret all these months, I told them I didn't want the stress of this revelation to interfere with [my daughter-in-law's] health or the health of the unborn baby . . . and I was fearful they would turn their backs on me and take away my grandchildren. [My son's] reply was: "Mom! Really?!" [His wife] commented, "I could tell you weren't wearing your garments anymore, and that you didn't get upset if someone bought something on Sunday. . . .

So now it's Sunday. When I opened the front door this morning, [my son] announced, "We brought your grandchildren back!" And I was so happy to see them! I had offered to watch the boys if they wanted to go to CenterPoint church [in Orem] . . . and they took me up on it! I'd really love to be at church with them, but I wanted them to enjoy their first Christian service and meet new people without the worry of 3-year-old [son having] autistic meltdowns that are triggered by crowds and loud noises. We'll figure out a way to worship as a family if they choose to return.

Before they left this morning, they shared with me that they had both been contemplating what life would be like if they weren't Mormons, but hadn't shared that thought with each other. . . .

I asked [my friend] to bring a copy of "Unveiling Grace" for them and I had bought an extra copy of an NIV Bible that I gave them as well. I pray their journey to Christ will be as healing and rapid as mine . . . if not more so!

And that, my friends, is the beauty of this weekend! One son knows I'm not a "true believing Mormon" anymore, and it hasn't harmed our relationship! We are now on this journey together.

May 2015: Thank you for your wonderful work. Very enlightening and life changing for me. I have watched and listened to Sandra Tanner on MormonStories [mormonstories.org — #472-475] with John Dehlin and have been consumed with studying the history of my mormon faith over the past few months. I cannot seem to stop.

I am a 6th generation Utah Mormon who has been shocked by what I have learned The Church has intentionally hid/lie about all of my life. I am 34 and am seriously considering leaving the church but have all the reservations anyone in my shoes would have. All of my family, extended family and those in my community are staunchly active LDS and if I leave I fear I will send my family/friends into shock and be ostracized.

The hardest thing for me to accept is that as an LDS missionary in South Africa I taught and baptized many by using the teachings I had been taught to regurgitate in the MTC and now these converts could easily look to Google and see that I (unintentionally) had lied to them. That hurts immensely. I taught what I had been taught, and what I had been told was true from a young age. Now my son is turning 8 . . . and will want to be baptized. This is a dilemma for me to overcome. Your work, websites, and books have helped me so much. With all sincerity and gratitude, thank you!

May 2015: Thank you SO much. Just a quick praise report after three LONG years after I busted free (praise be to God) my mom has seen the light! She is RS president and everyone she knows is Mormon. She just decided this week to leave for good so we were doing research to arm her with ammo and I told her you have already done all the grunt work but I couldn't find this specific thing. So thanks so so much for the link. Thanks for all you do, God bless! Please add her to your prayer list, she needs strength for sure.

May 2015: It is against my wishes but I must ask to be removed from your messenger mailing list . . . my husband is getting way too mad about it. I guess I have been getting them but my husband just throws them in the trash. . . . I'm exmormon and my husband is jack Mormon. . . . it's so difficult on our marriage. . . . I get so frustrated. I appreciate what you do. Keep on telling The truth!!!

May 2015: Thank you, Mrs. Tanner for your devotion to the true gospel. God saved me out Mormonism, granted me repentance and taught me saving faith in Christ alone. I have found many of your materials and research very helpful and encouraging and I want to express my deep gratitude for the work that you are doing. Blessings.

May 2015: Sandra is an Anti Christ . . . keep following her.

May 2015: God has led me to your youtube videos and website, they were crucial to keeping me from joining the lds church. I have learned so much that my church is having me teach a class on Mormonism in the fall.

May 2015: I saw your website. I am the member of the church of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints in Europe (Hungary) I have been a member for my whole life basically. I was 3 years old when the missionaries found my family. I have served a mission and served in many callings just as a branch president as well. I [now have] a lot more time to read and get to know more about the history of the church the doctrine of the church and have a lot of questions about everything and started to feel that maybe what I believe in is false.

I read a couple of things online what is against the church and make sense, but still I am so confused. The only thing what I want just to know the truth but now as I learn a lot about my church I feel that if it is not a reliable source of truth then where is it? What can I trust? If my church is not true, then where is the real one. If my God is not the real God then where is he and how can I know. I also question if the Bible is true. I think you probably know what I am going through.

June 2015: Just wanted to write you a quick note and thank you for all of the hard work that you and Gerald have put in to Lighthouse Ministries. I was really touched by your interview with John Dehlin, particularly the way you talked about your relationship with Gerald. It's interesting how in spite of all of the evidence I have found that would lead me to walk away from Mormonism, it was the sincerity and love I felt from people like you that ultimately gave me the courage to stand apart. Your example has changed my life's course. Thank you.

June 2015: Due to God's grace and love, and the material you've blessed me with, a fellow inmate has now left his Mormon faith and accepted Jesus Christ into his heart as personal Lord and Saviour. He is scheduled to be baptize in a few weeks.

July 2015: I turned in my church resignation the 13th of June, and had my named removed and letter back by the 22nd of June. So all is good. I've been over a year at this, And it was hard to do after 76 years with the church. It was Quite devastating at first, And in some ways still is. I love the members and Know they are good people that have been mislead by the leaders of the church as I was. I would like to help them, but I know they will not listen to me now. I live about 2hrs from the Hill Cumorah.

July 2015: Please put me on your mailing list of the messenger. Also, any other info that would be pertinent to a 56 year old "member" that is beginning to have serious questions on what I have been taught my whole life.

July 2015: Truly. I especially appreciate you sharing feedback and letters from other fellow travelers who have come or are in the process of coming to realize the tremendous mis-truths the Mormon church continues to delve out. When I read their stories and experiences . . . I feel so much less alone. There is such peace in knowing I'm not the only one gullible enough to have believed for so long . . . nor am I alone in my decision to walk away. Thank you for the tremendous contribution you have made and continue to make in countless lives. "I throw my past behind me like a robe worn threadbare at the seams."

July 2015: Thank you for your timely response. I really appreciate all you have done over the years.

I married a return missionary when I was 18 (1997). I was baptized and went through the temple on our one year anniversary. I never could gain a testimony of Joseph Smith or the church. I was made to feel unworthy no matter how hard I tried to fit in. I actually felt physically ill as I went through the temple ceremonies. Jesus was rarely mentioned at church. We spent an entire year learning about the prophets (the white-washed version of course).

I began to research history and doctrine and was horrified by what I found. I would show it to my husband and he would become very angry about me reading "anti-mormon literature". We divorced in 2005 and he has now become a born again christian with the help of his new wife.

I recently finished reading a book purchased from your store. It was written by Carma Naylor. I have given it to my father and he has agreed to read it with an open mind. I told him that if he would do that, I would never bug him about the church again.

It breaks my heart that Mormons refuse to believe anything that goes against what they have been told. I have found that they refuse to look into things even when provided with well documented proof. I pray that more mormons will be bothered by the information that is out there and will come to discover the Real Jesus. I have found a new love for the Bible and have never been so content with my life. I am truly grateful for you and others like you.

Thanks again for all of your hard work and dedication to finding the truth and for sharing it with others.

August 2015: Having a personal testimony founded on personal revelations, . . . [I know] that the LDS Church is the only living and true church in the whole world, increased, and greatly. Through your different publications, I can easily see how much you hurt inside, and find yourselves in so much misery of the pain from jealousy . . . revenge . . . hate . . . feelings which are clearly seen and perceived through the many enraged and despiseful words you use . . . Truth will always find oposition, like in the time of Enoch, Noah, Jeremiah, Jesus, . . . I beg you to come back.

September 2015: I just wanted to thank you for all the research and documents you and Jerald have put out! I wouldn't have come out of the church if it wasn't for, *Mormonism: Shadow or Reality*, and *3,913 Changes* . . . These have led me and some of my friends at BYU out and now to knowing the true Jesus! My brother and his family just came to know the true God also! I am seeing this happen more frequently and cannot begin to explain my gratefulness to you and your ministry!

September 2015: “Hello Mrs. Sandra Tanner. Thank you so much. Your website, utlm.org is the best. To tell you the truth as I grew up in mormonism, I was taught all my life that you and your husband were evil apostates. I was born as a bic in the mormon church and for 50 years i was in it until 5 years ago. To make a long story short, I am now a christian. I enjoyed your interviews with Shawn and saw many of your videos on youtube. I was appalled when I learned the truth about the lds church. I feel ashamed for thinking you and your late husband were evil. I lost most of my mormon friends and now, in the eyes of my former mormon friends and parents I am the evil apostate. God bless you always and abundantly.”

Three New LDS Apostles: All From Utah By Sandra Tanner

Following the death of three of the fifteen top leaders of the LDS Church, new apostles were appointed on October 3, 2015, at the semiannual conference of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. While many members were hoping for a foreign-born appointment, those chosen were all white men from Utah.¹

Prior to conference, Brady McCombs, of the Associated Press, reported that “scholars predict that for the first time ever, at least one could be from outside North America and Europe.”² Those hoping for a sign of diversity were certainly disappointed. The *New York Times* reported:

The Mormon church didn’t go far to select three new members for a top governing body that sets policy and runs the worldwide faith’s business operations—choosing two former business executives and a cardiologist from Utah who had already been serving in lower church leadership positions.

Ronald A. Rasband, 64, is a former CEO of the Huntsman Chemical Corporation. Gary E. Stevenson, 60, was the co-founder of an exercise equipment manufacturing company. Dale G. Renlund, 62, was a cardiologist and directed a cardiac transplant program.

Their appointments—announced Saturday at church conference in Salt Lake City—surprised many outside religious scholars who speculated that the Utah-based faith would choose at least one new member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles from a country outside the U.S., perhaps from Latin America or Africa.

That would have been a symbol and recognition of the expanding global reach of a religion that has more than half of its 15 million members outside of the United States.

Instead, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints made safe, solid and comfortable decisions that fit the template for choosing modern apostles in the church, said Patrick Mason, associate professor of religion at Claremont Graduate University in California . . .³

1 “Mormons Select 3 New Leaders; All From Utah,” *New York Times*, (October 3, 2015).

2 Brady McCombs, “Mormon church expected to name new leaders at conference; scholars predict historic decision,” *US News and World Report*, (October 2, 2015).

3 *New York Times*, (October 3, 2015).

The article then quoted Ignacio Garcia, a BYU professor:

Saints of color always have to respond to: “Why do [we] belong to that white church?” . . . It becomes harder and harder as we go further into the 21st Century: We still can’t point to a more diversified leadership.⁴

Garcia was also quoted in a *Salt Lake Tribune* article:

The real challenge “is not whether we get a person of color—people of color are ready to serve,” says BYU history professor Ignacio Garcia. “The question is whether the church is ready for the changes a person of color might make necessary.”

Right now, the church is perceived as a white institution, he says, and so it needs to prepare itself for the evolving demographics that will come both in the church and outside.

“It isn’t just picking a brown or black face as an apostle, says Garcia, author of *Chicano While Mormon: Activism, War and Keeping the Faith*. “It’s about what that says about us and about our faith.”⁵

One event that might have raised hopes for the appointment of an apostle outside of the usual pioneer descended members was the Fall 2014 short-lived experiment of allowing foreign-born speakers at General Conference to deliver their talks in their native language. At that time four men elected to speak in their mother tongue. Writing for the *BYU Digital Universe*, Annmarie Moore reported that students expected “that the Church’s decision to allow general conference talks in foreign languages would help its international image.”⁶ That it was not repeated in 2015 may be a matter of logistics. When those talks were broadcast, instead of someone hearing the leader speak in Spanish or Portuguese, the voice of someone speaking in English was dubbed over the sound of the original language, thus losing the whole point. One person commented “I was really excited to hear some general authorities speak their native language but was disappointed when I heard a translator speak for them.”

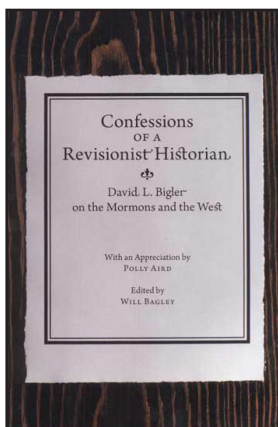
LDS apostles are appointed for life and are ranked in order of ordination to the office. Thus the next president of the church is not chosen by a vote, but is the apostle with the most seniority. Although during the early days of the LDS Church the apostles ranged in age from 24 to 36, with a system of lifetime appointments, the age of succeeding apostles and presidents continually advanced. By the time of Brigham Young’s death, his replacement was 69-year-old John Taylor. Current president Thomas S. Monson was 81 when he became president. Next in line for the presidency is 91-year-old Russell M. Nelson. Thus we see that the system of lifetime appointments guarantees that the top leaders of the LDS Church will always be older men. And with no diversity in the apostleship, the future presidents will continue to be white. ■

4 *New York Times*, (October 3, 2015).

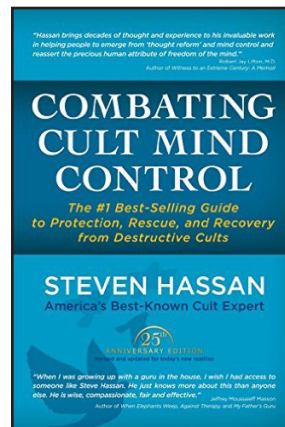
5 Peggy Fletcher Stack, “Mormon church has a chance to diversify its top leadership—will it?” *Salt Lake Tribune*, (August 7, 2015).

6 Annmarie Moore, “Speakers use their native language at 184th Semiannual General Conference,” *Digital Universe*, (October 8, 2014).

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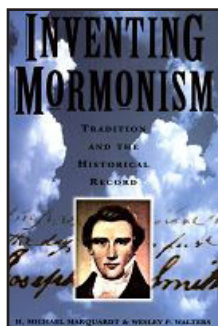


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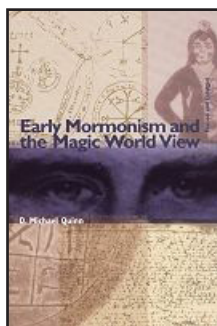


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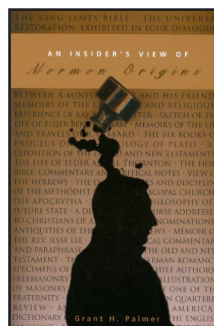
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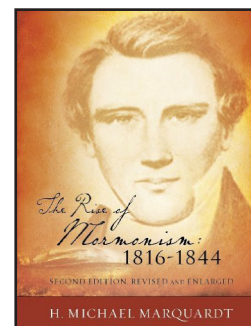
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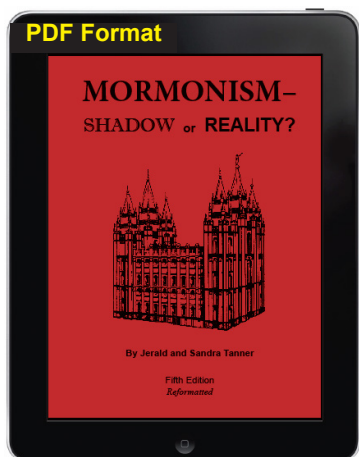
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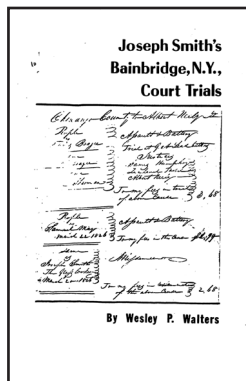
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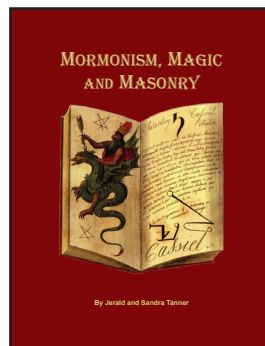
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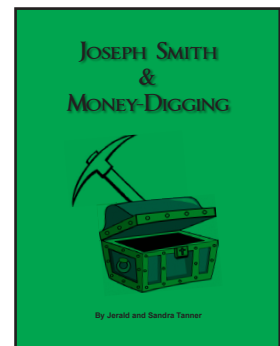
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