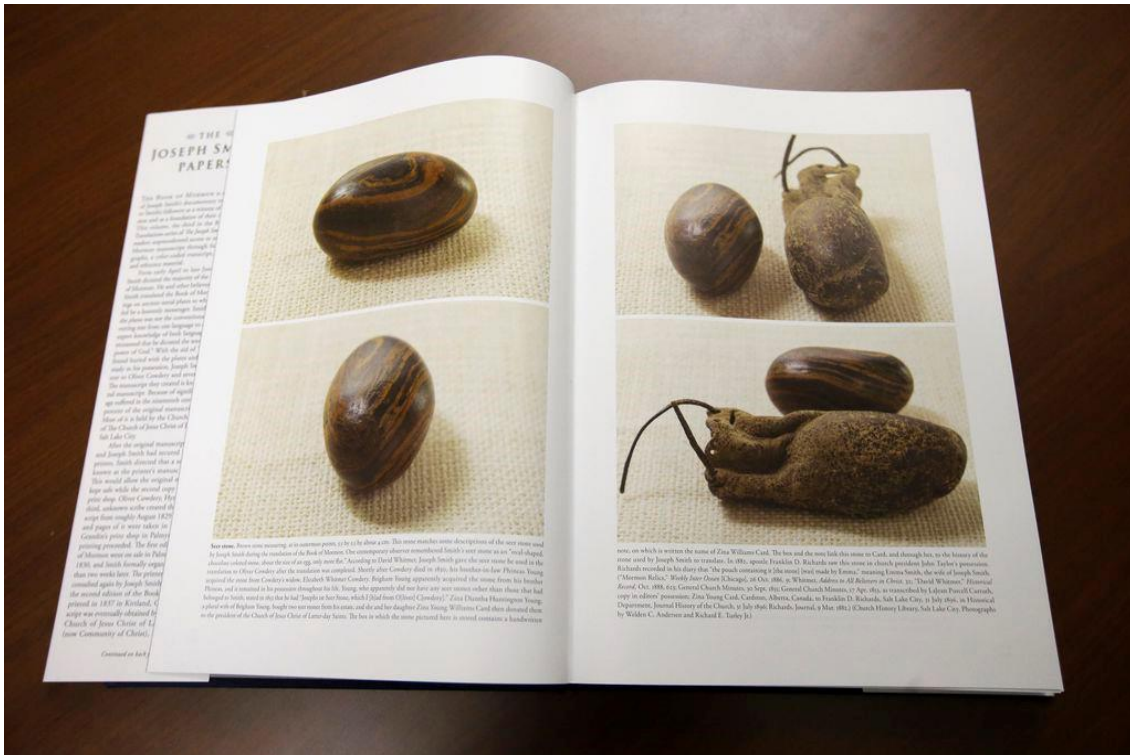


Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Mormon Church Releases Photos of "Seer Stone" Used by Founder Joseph Smith

PEGGY FLETCHER STACK

A bid for transparency • Mormon historians say physical objects help make the past "more tangible."



Pictures of a smooth, brown, egg-sized rock are shown in the printer's manuscript of the Book of Mormon following a news conference Tuesday, Aug. 4, 2015, at the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints Church History Library, in Salt Lake City. The Mormon church for the first time is publishing photos of a small sacred stone it believes founder Joseph Smith used to help translate the story that became the basis of the religion. The Mormon church is taking another step in its push to be more transparent, and is releasing more historical documents that shed light on how Joseph Smith formed the religion. (AP Photo/Rick Bowmer)

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The LDS Church provided a new glimpse of its origins Tuesday by publishing the handwritten “printer’s manuscript” of the Book of Mormon and photos of the “seer stone,” a dark, egg-size polished rock founder Joseph Smith claimed to have used to produce the faith’s sacred scripture.

Both items are included in the just-released *Revelations and Translations: Volume 3*, the 11th publication in the groundbreaking Joseph Smith Papers Project, as part of an effort to be “more transparent” about Mormonism’s past, LDS Church Historian Steven E. Snow said at a news conference.

Smith said he was led to a set of buried gold plates, which recorded the history of ancient American civilizations and a visit to this continent by Jesus Christ. The Mormon prophet said he was able to “translate” the “reformed Egyptian” language, using spiritual tools, including his “seer stone.”

He dictated the narrative to various scribes, including schoolteacher Oliver Cowdery, who took down the LDS leader’s words in longhand. Cowdery then painstakingly copied the original manuscript for the printer to set in type. More than 70 percent of that original document suffered water damage. The LDS Church History Library in Salt Lake City has most of what’s left.

The “printer’s copy,” however, remained with Smith’s followers who stayed in the Midwest rather than trekking to Utah, and, in 1903, it was purchased by the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, now the Community of Christ.

Through the years, tensions simmered between those two wings of Mormonism. But, during the past couple of decades, historians have built scholarly bridges between the Community of Christ and the much-larger, Utah-based Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Community of Christ officials have been “careful stewards of the manuscript,” Snow said Tuesday. “Both faiths are trying to move forward in sharing their collections.”

Community of Christ minister and Seventy Robin Linkhart, who was at the news conference, praised her Utah colleagues for their part in the joint project.

The two-volume work, Linkhart said, “truly is an exceptional contribution to the study of LDS history and culture, representing decades of research.”

Begun by Mormon scholar Royal Skousen in 1988, she said, “it’s been a long, long journey to the finish line.”

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

The Community of Christ long ago accepted the notion that “revelation includes a human component,” said Lachlan Mackay, coordinator of the denomination’s historic sites.

The Independence, Mo.-based faith published articles about the seer stone as early as the 1960s, he said, but “it might still be news to some people.”

“I’m incredibly excited,” Mackay said Tuesday. “These efforts have served to unite us.”

Both he and Richard E. Turley Jr., assistant LDS historian, said physical objects “help us connect to the past, make it more realistic, more tangible.”

In a recent essay, the LDS Church explained how Smith, according to some accounts, used the seer stone. He peered into a hat, to block out exterior light, and “read aloud the English words that appeared on the instrument.”

“As a young man during the 1820s, Joseph Smith, like others in his day, used a seer stone to look for lost objects and buried treasure,” the essay said. “As Joseph grew to understand his prophetic calling, he learned that he could use this stone for the higher purpose of translating scripture.”

Smith also used two bound stones — known as the Urim and Thummim — as “interpreters.”

“Some accounts indicate that Joseph studied the characters on the plates,” the essay added. “Most of the accounts speak of Joseph’s use of the Urim and Thummim (either the interpreters or the seer stone).”

After Smith’s murder in 1844, the seer stone went to Cowdery, then to his widow, then to Brigham Young’s brother, then to Young himself, who was Smith’s successor in the Utah church. After Young died, one of his wives, Zina D. H. Young, donated it to the LDS Church.

Members have known about the stone for years, Turley said. Historian B.H. Roberts wrote about it in his “Comprehensive History of the Church.” The church’s official magazine, *The Ensign*, had an article about the stone in 1974.

But almost no one had seen an actual photo of it.

Now the seer stone’s image will be on display at the LDS visitors’ center opening soon in Harmony, Pa., and in the nearly completed makeover of the LDS Church History Museum in downtown Salt Lake City.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

“I had read descriptions of it and had an idea of what it looked like,” Snow said. “It is an unusual object to focus faith on.”

As more members learn of the stone, Snow is confident it will “enhance their understanding” — and be “faith promoting.”



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Lion and Lamb Apologetics



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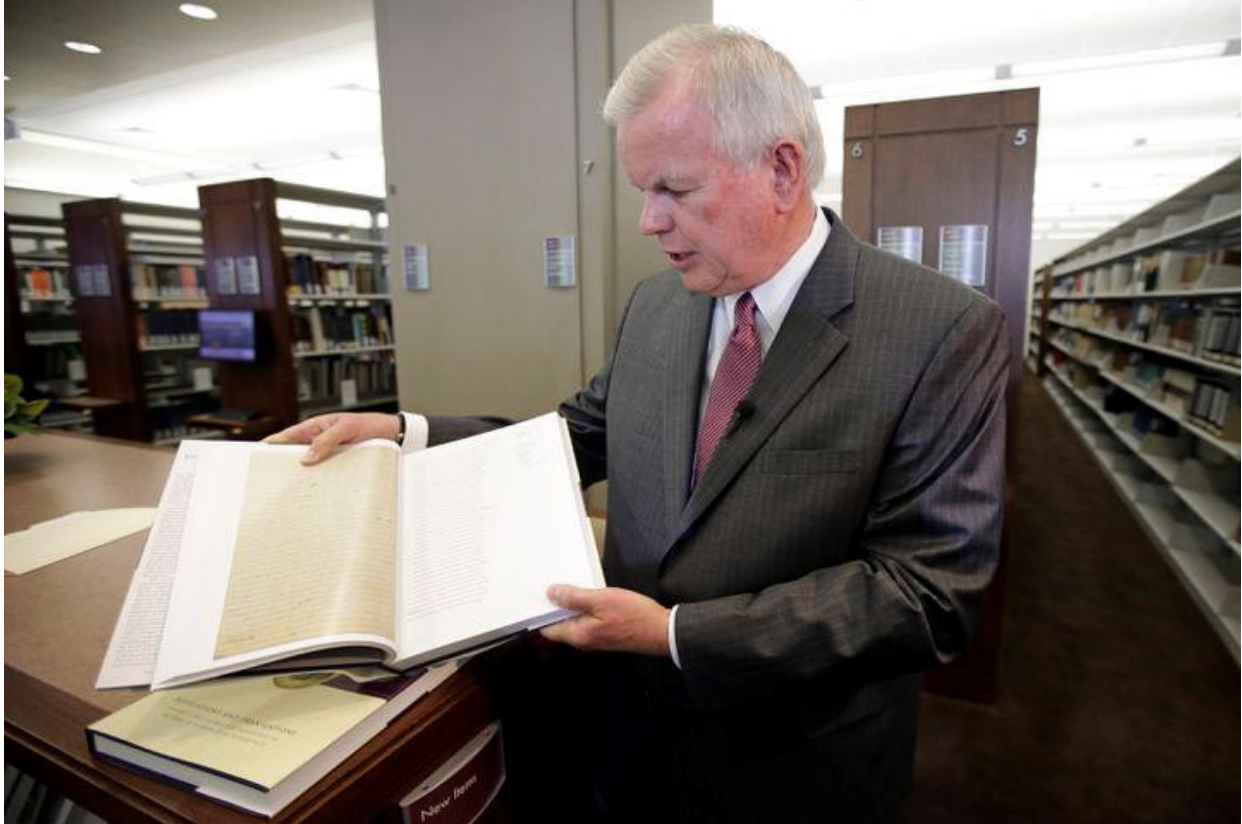
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Lion and Lamb Apologetics



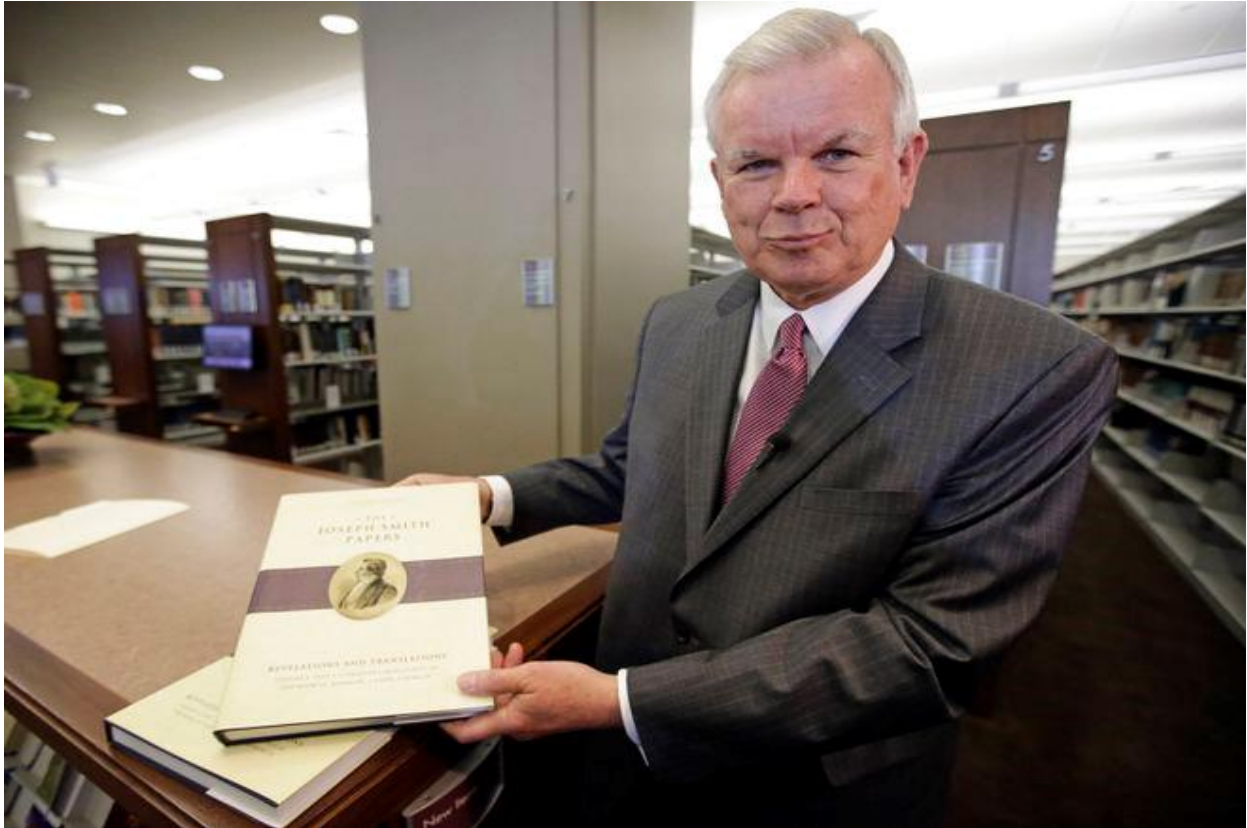
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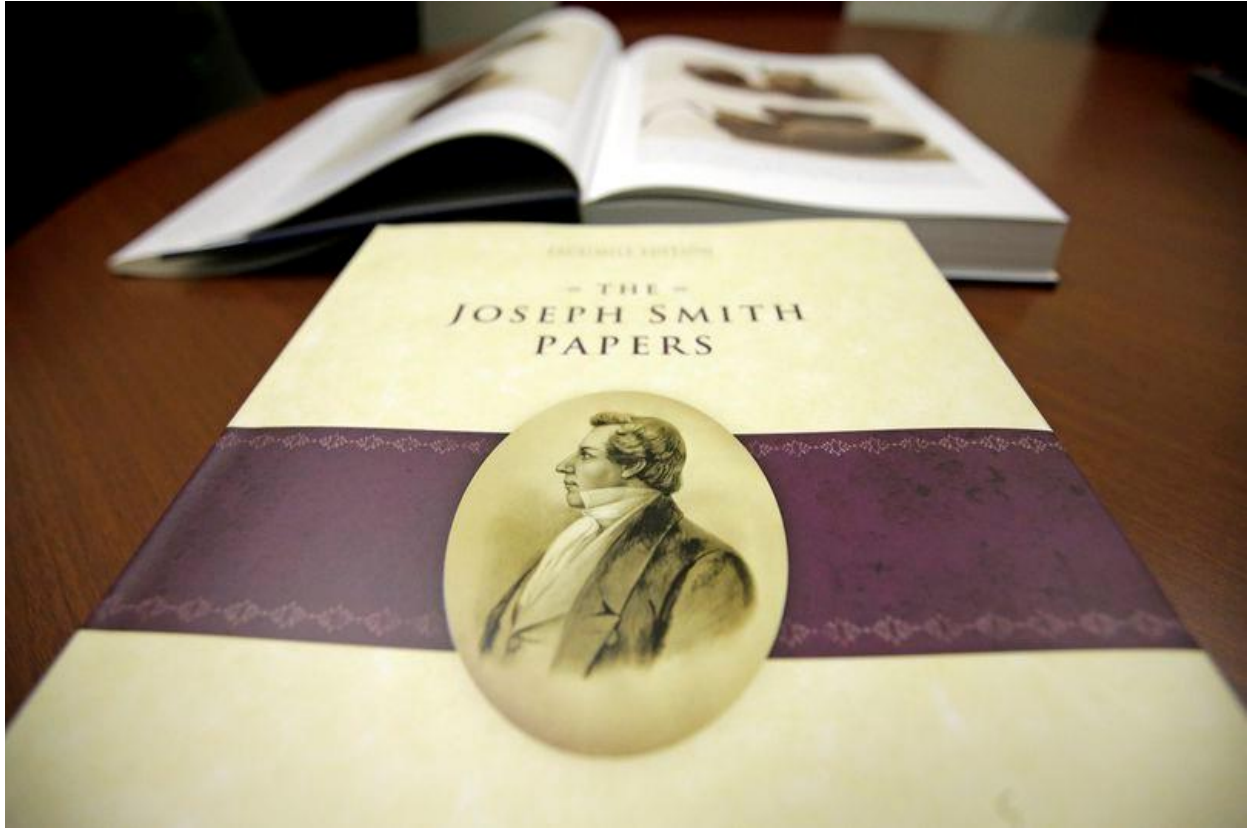
The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints historian Steven E. Snow displays the third volume of the Joseph Smith Papers, which includes the printer's manuscript of the Book of Mormon, during a news conference Tuesday, Aug. 4, 2015, in Salt Lake City. The Mormon church is taking another step in its push to be more transparent, and is releasing more historical documents that shed light on how Joseph Smith formed the religion. (AP Photo/Rick Bowmer)

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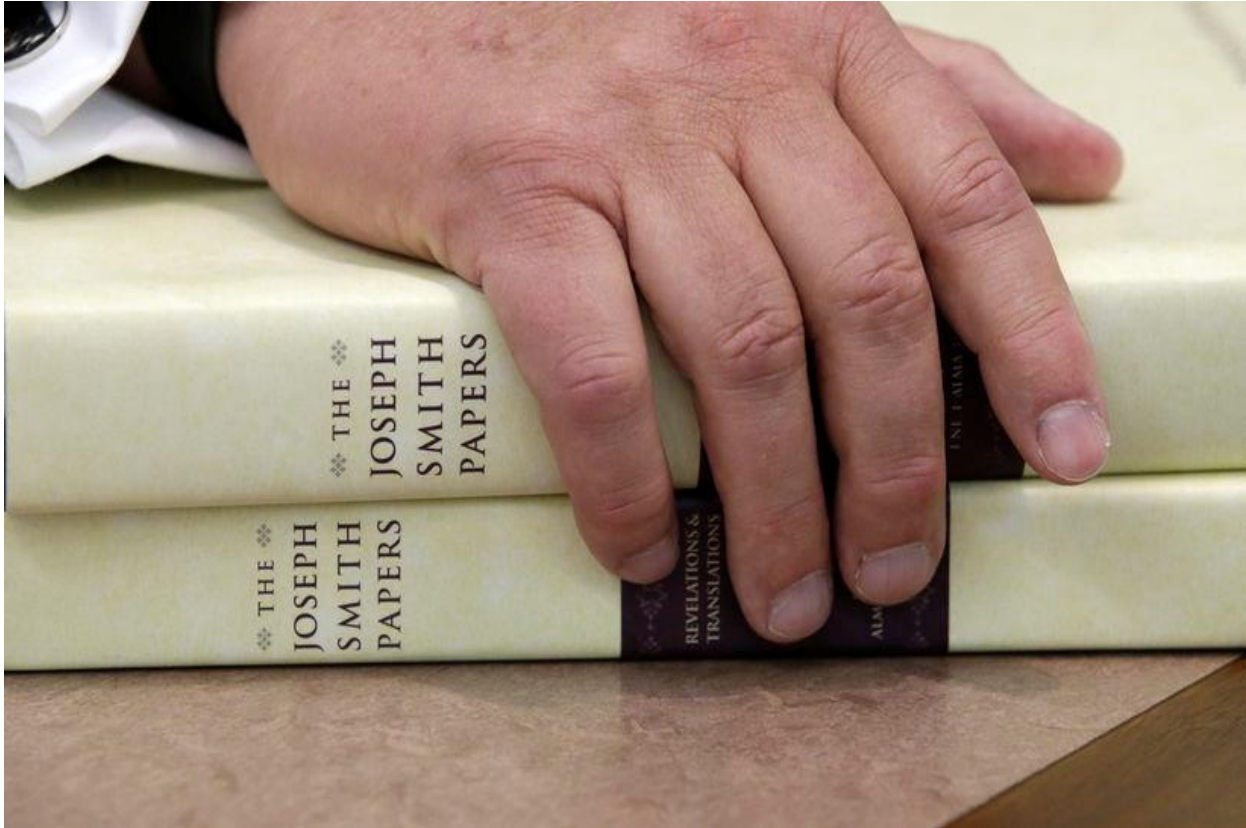
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By Peggy Fletcher Stack: *The Salt Lake Tribune*

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