

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Did Joseph Smith Use the Seer Stone...or Didn't He?

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1

For many years, many Mormons have denied that Joseph Smith used a “seer stone” to translate the Book of Mormon. They were led to believe that he used the “urim and thummim,” special instruments even mentioned in the Old Testament, to aid him in the translation. Tenth Mormon President Joseph Fielding Smith was quite adamant on the topic when he wrote:

While the statement has been made by some writers that the Prophet Joseph Smith used a seer stone part of the time in his translating of the record, and information points to the fact that he did have in his possession such a stone, yet there is no authentic statement in the history of the Church which states that the use of such a stone was made in that translation. The information is all hearsay, and personally, I do not believe that this stone was used for this purpose. The reason I give for this conclusion is found in the statement of the Lord to the Brother of Jared as recorded in Ether 3:22-24 (*Doctrines of Salvation* 3:225. Italics in original).

Did Joseph Smith use a magical seer stone as an aid to translating the Book of Mormon? This apostle who later became the tenth president of the church denied such a thing in 1954. However, according to today's leaders of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the stone was a tool certainly used by Smith to do his translation.

That was then, this is now



In early August 2015 the Mormon Church released a picture of the Seer Stone that Joseph Smith apparently used in his translation of the Book of Mormon. ([Source](#), with the stone is shown in the picture to the right.) Published in the [October 2015 Ensign magazine](#), the unattributed article reports:

“Seeing” and “seers” were part of the American and family culture in which Joseph Smith grew up. Steeped in the language of the

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Bible and a mixture of Anglo-European cultures brought over by immigrants to North America, some people in the early 19th century believed it was possible for gifted individuals to “see,” or receive spiritual manifestations, through material objects such as seer stones.

The article continues:

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.

Suggesting that people today might misunderstand the 19th century use of the stone, the article states:

For those without an understanding of how 19th-century people in Joseph’s region lived their religion, seer stones can be unfamiliar, and scholars have long debated this period of his life. Partly as a result of the Enlightenment or Age of Reason, a period that emphasized science and the observable world over spiritual matters, many in Joseph’s day came to feel that the use of physical objects such as stones or rods was superstitious or inappropriate for religious purposes.

It is admitted that Smith had “the ability to work with them”:

In later years, as Joseph told his remarkable story, he emphasized his visions and other spiritual experiences. Some of his former associates focused on his early use of seer stones in an effort to destroy his reputation in a world that increasingly rejected such practices. In their proselyting efforts, Joseph and other early members chose not to focus on the influence of folk culture, as many prospective converts were experiencing a transformation in how they understood religion in the Age of Reason. In what became canonized revelations, however, Joseph continued to teach that seer stones and other seeric devices, as well as the ability to work with them, were important and sacred gifts from God.

It is then explained how the Urim and Thummim were special instruments delivered with the plates and supposedly useful in making translations. While Smith and the Mormon leadership have claimed that the Urim and Thummim were included with the

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

Book of Mormon plates, very little is said about these instruments. The idea that they could be used as a means of making a translation from one language to another is without precedence. It would be like taking a compass to help in making a cake or a protractor to help determine how fast a car is going. The instruments had their use in their day (today we have GPS and calculators); however, they were never intended to do something for which they were not designed. According to the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (ISBE), the Urim and Thummim were designed as “a means of revelation used by the high priest in giving Yahweh’s answer to inquiries” and were stored in the high priest’s breastpiece (4:957).

3

Furthermore, the use of the Urim and Thummim most likely ceased being used by the high priest after Saul (around 1000 BC) when the use of counselors and prophets began to become more popular. According to the ISBE article:

Present opinion tends to favor the view that this oracular means was not utilized after the time of David; there is no certain evidence of its use after this period. . . . when King Abijah extolled the prerogatives of the Aaronide priesthood ([2 Ch. 13:10-12](#)), he did not mention this means (which [Dt. 33:8](#) had placed first). Finally, the advice of prophets was sought when one would have expected consultation of the Urim and Thummim had they still been used.

The ISBE essay then makes an interesting point:

The basic reason for their demise seems to have been that God was weaning His people away from a physical means of revelation to a greater dependence on His word as written or as spoken by the prophets. Thus the prophets grew in importance at the expense of the high priest in answering inquiries with divine revelation. This meant that the easy certainty offered by a mechanical aid for revelation (such as the Urim and Thummim in whatever manner they may have functioned) gave way to the more difficult application of the norms of true and false prophecy ([Dt 13:1-4](#) [MT 2-5]; 18:20-22). This development demanded greater spiritual discernment; consequently the priestly duty of teaching the will of God ([Dt. 33:10](#)) received an even greater stress than before.

Theories abound about how the high priest was able to garner the answers from the stones. Still, we must admit that very little is known about the exact process. As the *New Illustrated Bible Dictionary* puts it, “No one knows the exact nature of the Urim and Thummim or precisely how they were used.” But as it has been said, it is clear that these were never used to translate scripture from one language to another.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

Smith, though, had something else available in his toolbox, as the October 2015 *Ensign* article reports.

In fact, historical evidence shows that in addition to the two seer stones known as “interpreters,” Joseph Smith used at least one other seer stone in translating the Book of Mormon, often placing it into a hat in order to block out light. According to Joseph’s contemporaries, he did this in order to better view the words on the stone.

4

The process is described in the Gospel Topics essay titled “[Book of Mormon Translation](#)”:

According to these accounts, Joseph placed either the interpreters or the seer stone in a hat, pressed his face into the hat to block out extraneous light, and read aloud the English words that appeared on the instrument.

Apparently references in Mormonism to the urim and the thummim as well as the seer stone became synonymous:

By 1833, Joseph Smith and his associates began using the biblical term “Urim and Thummim” to refer to any stones used to receive divine revelations, including both the Nephite interpreters and the single seer stone. This imprecise terminology has complicated attempts to reconstruct the exact method by which Joseph Smith translated the Book of Mormon. In addition to using the interpreters, according to Martin Harris, Joseph also used one of his seer stones for convenience during the Book of Mormon translation. Other sources corroborate Joseph’s changing translation instruments.

A clear distinction between the Urim and Thummim had already been made in the previous month’s *Ensign* (“Joseph Smith in Harmony, September 2015) by Seventy/Church Historian Steven E. Snow. On page 55 he wrote,

Not all the details about the translation of the Book of Mormon are known, but Joseph and his scribes did mention his use of two instruments. One was the Urim and Thummim (called the “interpreters” in the Book of Mormon), which Joseph received with the plates and “which consisted of two transparent stones set in the rim of a bow.” The other instrument was a seer stone that Joseph had found some years before. Both of these instruments helped him translate the plates “by the gift and power of God.”

The seer stone is described in further detail in the Gospel Topics essay “Book of Mormon Translation”:

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

The other instrument, which Joseph Smith discovered in the ground years before he retrieved the gold plates, was a small oval stone, or “seer stone.” As a young man during the 1820s, Joseph Smith, like others in his day, used a seer stone to look for lost objects and buried treasure. As Joseph grew to understand his prophetic calling, he learned that he could use this stone for the higher purpose of translating scripture. Apparently for convenience, Joseph often translated with the single seer stone rather than the two stones bound together to form the interpreters.

5

This begs the question: If Smith had been provided a set of “interpreters” to help him translate the Book of Mormon, why was there even a need to utilize a seer (magic) stone that had been used previously to search for buried treasure? It would seem that the Urim and Thummim—if Smith really did have them—should have been plenty sufficient. Why would God care about the “convenience” for Smith? If God knows all things and He knew Smith would later have a magic rock, why even have the Urim and Thummin included? And furthermore, how did the priest’s Old Testament Urim and Thummim get placed with the plates since it appears that there was only one set of these instruments and they would have been controlled by the high priest? If these were taken to the Americas by Lehi at the end of the 7th century BC, shouldn’t they be considered stolen goods? As it was pointed out earlier, the Urim and Thummim were undoubtedly no longer in use for two or three centuries by the time Lehi is supposed to have made his voyage to the Americas.

Sorting out the history

Over the past few years, the LDS Church has been attempting to come to grips with some of its unique history. Hence, a number of “[Gospel Topics Essays](#)” have been released to explain such controversial issues as plural marriage (including the “30-40” wives of Joseph Smith), race and the priesthood, and the First Vision accounts. The article in the October 2015 *Ensign* appears to be another article related to “damage control.”

A year after the Book of Mormon was printed in 1830, Joseph apparently spoke at a conference where he gave few details about the translation process. The conclusion of the October 2015 *Ensign* article then reports:

The most salient point Joseph Smith made about the translation of the Book of Mormon was that he did it “by the gift and power of God.” The book itself, he taught Church leaders, “was the most correct of any Book on earth & the keystone of our religion,” and by obeying its precepts, readers would get “nearer to [G]od ... than [by] any other book.”

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

The article, which had to have been approved by Mormonism's leaders since the magazine is an official organ of the church, described how Joseph Smith used the seer stone along with the Urim and the Thummim to "translate" the Book of Mormon. This idea has been taught by other church leaders. Consider the words of Russell M. Nelson, who currently serves as the President of the Twelve Apostles:

The details of this miraculous method of translation are still not fully known. Yet we do have a few precious insights. David Whitmer wrote: "I will now give you a description of the manner in which the Book of Mormon was translated. Joseph Smith would put the seer stone into a hat, and put his face in the hat, drawing it closely around his face to exclude the light; and in the darkness the spiritual light would shine. 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 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" ("A Treasured Testament," *Ensign*, July 1993, p. 61. Citing David Whitmer, *An Address to All Believers in Christ*, p. 12).

Referring to the confusion about whether or not the seer stone or the Urim and Thummim were used, early twentieth century church historian and Seventy B.H. Roberts explained:

There will appear between this statement of David Whitmer's and what is said both by Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery a seeming contradiction. Joseph and Oliver both say the translation was done by means of the Urim and Thummim, which is described by Joseph as being two transparent stones 'set in a rim of a bow fastened to a breastplate;' while David Whitmer says that the translation was made by means of a "Seer Stone." The apparent contradiction is cleared up, however, by a statement made by Martin Harris, another of the Three Witnesses. He said that the Prophet possessed a "Seer Stone," by which he was enabled to translate as well as from the Urim and Thummim, and for convenience he then (i.e., at the time Harris was acting as his scribe) used the Seer Stone. * * * Martin said further that the Seer Stone differed in appearance entirely from the Urim and Thummim that was obtained with the plates, which were two clear stones set in two rims, very much resembling spectacles, only they were larger (*New Witnesses for God* 2:107. *** in original).

Roberts described the seer stone:

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

The “Seer Stone” referred to here was a chocolate-colored, somewhat egg-shaped stone which the Prophet found while digging a well in company with his brother Hyrum. It possessed the qualities of Urim and Thummim, since by means of it—as described above—as well as by means of the “Interpreters” found with the Nephite record, Joseph was able to translate the characters engraven on the plates (*New Witnesses for God* 2:108).

7

A Gospel Topics essay written on the Book of Mormon translation makes it appear that there were many errors in the Printer’s Manuscript (P) that eventually made it into the original printing of the Book of Mormon and [were fixed at later periods of time](#). As this essay explains,

The manuscript that Joseph Smith dictated to Oliver Cowdery and others is known today as the original manuscript, about 28 percent of which still survives. This manuscript corroborates Joseph Smith’s statements that the manuscript was written within a short time frame and that it was dictated from another language. For example, it includes errors that suggest the scribe heard words incorrectly rather than misread words copied from another manuscript. In addition, some grammatical constructions that are more characteristic of Near Eastern languages than English appear in the original manuscript, suggesting that the base language of the translation was not English.

But how can this be? After all, according to Roberts, the sentence would not disappear unless it was correctly written down!

By aid of the Seer Stone, sentences would appear and were read by the Prophet and written by Martin, and when finished he would say “written,” and if correctly written, that sentence would disappear and another appear in its place, but if not written correctly it remained until corrected, so that the translation was just as it was engraven on the plates, precisely in the language then used (B. H. Roberts, *New Witnesses for God* 2:109. Quoting Martin Harris from his statement to Edward Stevenson, *Millennial Star* 24:86,87).

Citing David Whitmer, Roberts further explained:

David Whitmer, another of the Three Witnesses, is more specific on this subject. After describing the means the prophet employed to exclude the light from the “Seer Stone,” he says: “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

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

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" (*Defense of The Faith and The Saints* 1:163).

In case someone would like to know what this would have looked like, Joseph's wife Emma described the process in more detail:

In writing for your father I frequently wrote day after day, often sitting at the table close by him, he sitting with his face buried in his hat, with the stone in it, and dictating hour after hour with nothing between us ("Last Testimony of Sister Emma," *Saints Herald*, October 1, 1879, p. 289).

In 2007, BYU professor Daniel Peterson added his analysis to the topic when he was interviewed for the PBS series titled *The Mormons*:

We know that Joseph didn't translate the way that a scholar would translate. He didn't know Egyptian. There were a couple of means that were prepared for this. One was he used an instrument that was found with the plates that was called the Urim and Thummim. This is a kind of a divinatory device that goes back into Old Testament times. Actually most of the translation was done using something called a seer stone. He would put the stone in the bottom of a hat, presumably to exclude surrounding light. And then he would put his face into the hat, it's a kind of a strange image for us (Act One: Revelation).

It ought to be pointed out that the award-winning producer, Helen Whitney, did not include the background/pedigree of those whom she interviewed. For those who didn't know the players, this ended up causing confusion. For example, in the days after its broadcast, some Latter-day Saints assumed Peterson was an "anti-Mormon" because what he said above was so different from what they thought was the truth. If they only knew that Dr. Peterson has spent much of his life defending LDS truth claims, perhaps they would not have been so critical.

But who can blame the average Latter-day Saint for not knowing about the rock-in-the-hat translation process? It is sure different from what is portrayed in the church art featured in official magazines and manuals over the years. For instance, consider the February 2001 front cover of the *Ensign* magazine. Or consider the painting used in a church manual titled *Church History in the Fulness of Times* student manual (right). Today, I am sure, more faithful



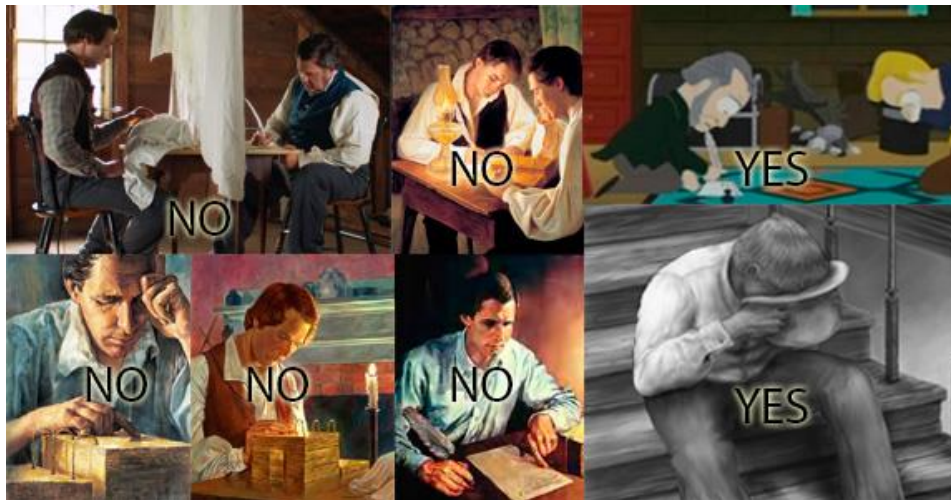
Lion and Lamb Apologetics

members know about the rock and the hat. If they didn't before August 2015, many of them know now. As a Christian apologist, I am grateful that the church has become more transparent during the past three years than I have ever seen in my lifetime. Let's hope this continues.

Conclusion

The very idea that Joseph Smith utilized a magical "peep" stone that had been previously used to discover buried treasure should draw suspicion from thinking members. After all, God apparently thought it was important to include a "urim" and "thummim" with the plates. If these instruments were important, why hasn't the church talked more about them and explained their use in translation? I also wonder if we should expect pictures of these instruments any time soon. While the Church now admits that this chocolate-colored stone was used by Smith to do his translation work, it appears a can of worms has been opened and many faithful Latter-day Saints—many of whom never knew that a rock in a hat was part of the process in translating the Book of Mormon—could end up losing their faith because of how strange all of this really is.

This compilation from thecrossunveiled.com perhaps puts it best:



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<https://www.mrm.org/bom-seer-stone>

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