



JOSEPH THE Seer

*The historical record clarifies how
Joseph Smith fulfilled his role as a seer
and translated the Book of Mormon.*

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On April 6, 1830, the day Joseph Smith organized the Church of Christ (later to be called The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints),¹ he proclaimed the words of a revelation to those assembled. “Behold,” the voice of God declared in it, “there shall be a record kept among you; and in it thou [Joseph Smith] shalt be called a seer” (D&C 21:1).

The most visible sign of Joseph Smith’s role as a seer in the newly formed Church was the Book of Mormon, which he repeatedly explained was translated “by the gift and power of God.”² Many of those closest to Joseph in the year before the Church’s organization had witnessed the process by which the Book of Mormon came forth and had some understanding of the meaning of the word *seer*.

The Meaning of Seer

What did *seer* mean to the young prophet and his contemporaries? Joseph was raised in a family that read the Bible, which mentions seers repeatedly. In 1 Samuel, for example, the writer explains: “Beforetime in Israel, when a man went to inquire of God, thus he spake, Come, and let us go to the seer: for he that is now called a Prophet was beforetime called a Seer” (1 Samuel 9:9).

The Bible also mentions people receiving spiritual manifestations by means of physical objects such as rods,³ a brass serpent on a pole (which became a widespread symbol of the medical profession),⁴ an ephod (a part of the priestly clothing that included two precious stones),⁵ and the Urim and Thummim.⁶



Joseph and his wife, Emma Hale Smith, lived in the single-story portion of this home during part of the translation of the Book of Mormon. The two-story structure on the right of the home was a later addition.



For thousands of members during his lifetime and millions since his death, Joseph Smith has been known as prophet, seer, and revelator.

“Seeing” and “seers” were part of the American and family culture in which Joseph Smith grew up. Steeped in the language of the 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.⁷

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 1827.⁸

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.

In later years, as Joseph told his remarkable story, he emphasized his visions and other spiritual experiences.⁹ 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 proselytizing 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.¹⁰

Instruments Used to Translate the Book of Mormon

Seer stones also appear in historical accounts describing Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon translation. Joseph’s official history, begun in 1838, describes the visit of an angel, identified as Moroni, who told him about golden plates buried in a nearby hill. Joseph recounts that while he was conversing with the angel, a “vision was opened” so clearly in his mind that he “knew the place” when later seeing it in person (Joseph Smith—History 1:42).

In the history Joseph began drafting in 1838, Moroni warns him “that Satan would try to tempt me (in consequence of the indigent circumstances of my father’s family), to get the plates for the purpose of getting rich.” This the angel forbade, Joseph recounts, saying that if he had “any other motive” than building God’s kingdom, he “could not get them” (Joseph Smith—History 1:46). In his earlier 1832 history, Joseph explains, “I . . . sought the Plates to obtain riches and kept not the commandme[n]t that I should have an eye single to the Glory of God.”¹¹ As a result, he was required to return to the hill annually for four years until

he was prepared to receive the plates (see Joseph Smith—History 1:53–54).

Joseph related that when he finally obtained the plates from Moroni in 1827, he also received two stones to be used in translating them. He and close acquaintances left accounts of these stones, describing them as white or clear in appearance, set in silver bows or rims like modern eyeglasses or spectacles, and connected to a large breastplate.¹² As described, this seeric device would have been bulky. Joseph Smith’s mother said that he detached the stones from the breastplate for convenience while using them.¹³

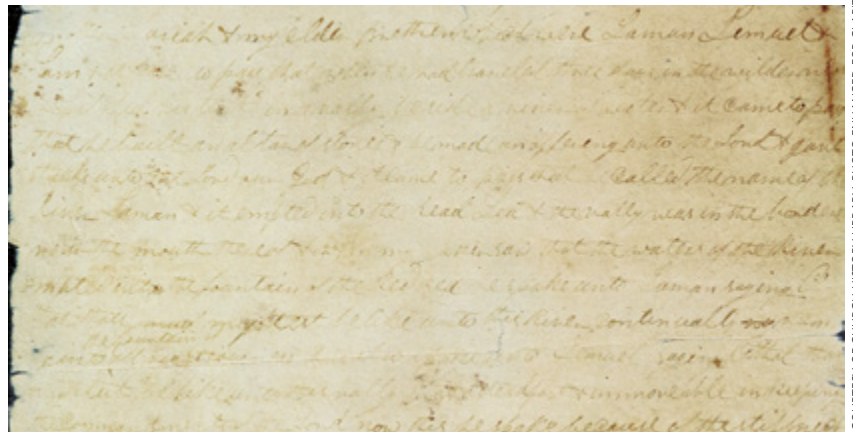
The text of the Book of Mormon calls these stones “interpreters” and explains that they “were prepared from the beginning, and were handed down from generation to generation, for the purpose of interpreting languages,” being “kept and preserved by the hand of the Lord” (Mosiah 28:14–15, 20).

The book also recounts how the Lord gave “two stones” to the brother of Jared, with a promise that they would aid future generations to recover his words. “Write these things and seal them up,” the Lord directs him, “and I will show them in mine own due time unto the children of men.” These stones, the Lord explains, “shall magnify to the eyes of men these things which ye shall write” (Ether 3:24, 27).

By the time Joseph Smith finished dictating his translation of the Book of Mormon to scribes in mid-1829, the meaning of *seer* had been further clarified in the text. The Book of Mormon contains a prophecy attributed to Joseph of Egypt declaring that one of his descendants—clearly Joseph Smith—would be “a choice seer” bringing other descendants

“to the knowledge of the covenants” that God made with their ancestors (2 Nephi 3:6, 7).

In another Book of Mormon account, Alma the Younger gives the interpreters to his son Helaman. “Preserve these interpreters,” Alma



counsels him, referring to the two stones in silver bows. But Alma also quotes a prophecy that appears to refer to a single stone: “And the Lord said: I will prepare unto my servant Gazelem, a stone, which shall shine forth in darkness unto light” (Alma 37:21, 23).

Notably, although given in the context of “interpreters” (plural), this prophecy speaks about giving a future servant “a stone” (singular), “which shall shine forth in darkness unto light.”¹⁴ Early Latter-day Saints believed this prophesied servant was Joseph Smith.¹⁵

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.¹⁶

Detail from a page of the original Book of Mormon manuscript containing the departure of Lehi’s family from Jerusalem in what is today 1 Nephi 2. Joseph Smith dictated the Book of Mormon to several scribes, including Oliver Cowdery, who was the scribe for these lines.



THE ANGEL MORONI DELIVERING THE PLATES TO JOSEPH SMITH, BY C. C. A. CHRISTENSEN

Members of the Church throughout its history have sought to understand the early history of Joseph Smith and his finding and translating the golden plates. This image by artist C. C. Christensen in 1886 depicts Joseph Smith obtaining the plates from the angel Moroni.

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.¹⁷ 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.¹⁸

After the Book of Mormon Was Published

Following the publication of the Book of Mormon in March 1830, Joseph Smith and his clerks began work on what is now known as the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible, a prophetic revision of the King James Version.¹⁹ By Joseph’s account, using the Nephite interpreters for this translation project was not an option because he no longer had them.

Joseph’s history explains that “by the wisdom of God, [the plates and interpreters] remained safe in my hands, until I had accomplished by them what was required at my hand. When, according to arrangements, the messenger called for

them, I delivered them up to him; and he has them in his charge until this day” (Joseph Smith—History 1:60).

As President Brigham Young (1801–77) explained it, “Joseph put the U[r]im and] T[h]ummim] back with the plates when he [h]ad done translating.”²⁰

Joseph had other seer stones, but in the words of Elder Orson Pratt (1811–81), a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles and later Church Historian, Joseph had also matured by this time in his spiritual understanding. At a meeting on June 28, 1874, attended by President Brigham Young and many other General Authorities, Elder Pratt told his audience about being “present many times” when Joseph Smith “was translating the New Testament.” Seeing no interpretive instruments in use during the translation process, he wondered why Joseph “did not use the Urim and Thummim, as in translating the Book of Mormon.”

As Elder Pratt watched the Prophet translate, “Joseph, as if he read his thoughts, looked up and explained that the Lord gave him the Urim and Thummim when he was inexperienced in the Spirit of inspiration. But now he had advanced so far that he understood the operations of that Spirit, and did not need the assistance of that instrument.”²¹

Brigham Young told an audience of his thoughts about receiving a seer stone. “I don’t [k]no[w] that I have ever had a desire to have one,” he reflected.²² Brigham’s statement expressed his understanding that seer stones were not essential to being a seer.

On October 25, 1831, Joseph Smith attended a conference in Orange, Ohio. During the conference, his brother Hyrum said he “thought best that the information of the coming forth of the book of Mormon be related by Joseph himself to the Elders present that all might know for themselves.” According to the minutes of the meeting, Joseph “said that it was not intended to tell the world all the particulars of the coming forth of the book of Mormon” and “that it was not expedient for him to relate these things.”²³ Having matured in his role as seer and coming to believe



PHOTOGRAPH CIRCA 1866, COURTESY OF CHURCH HISTORY LIBRARY

Phineas Young, sitting in the middle of the Young brothers and to Brigham Young's left, acquired a seer stone used in translating the Book of Mormon from Oliver Cowdery and gave it to his brother Brigham.



PHOTOGRAPH BY WELDEN C. ANDERSEN AND RICHARD E. TURLEY, JR.

The stone pictured here has long been associated with Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon translation. The stone Joseph Smith used in the Book of Mormon translation effort was often referred to as a chocolate-colored stone with an oval shape. This stone passed from Joseph Smith to Oliver Cowdery and then to the Church through Brigham Young and others.

WHAT HAPPENED TO THE SEER STONE?

According to Joseph Smith's history, he returned the Urim and Thummim, or Nephite "interpreters," to the angel. But what became of the other seer stone or stones that Joseph used in translating the Book of Mormon?

David Whitmer wrote that "after the translation of the Book of Mormon was finished, early in the spring of 1830, before April 6th, Joseph gave the stone to Oliver Cowdery and told me as well as the rest that he was through with it, and he did not use the stone any more."¹

Oliver, who was outside the Church for a decade until being rebaptized in 1848, planned to go west to be with the Saints in Utah, but he died in 1850 in Richmond, Missouri, before making the trip.² Phineas Young, who had helped bring Oliver Cowdery back into the Church, obtained the seer stone from Oliver's widow, who was David Whitmer's sister, Elizabeth Ann Whitmer Cowdery. Phineas in turn gave it to his brother Brigham Young.³

"I have Joseph[']s 1st Seer Stone which I [h]ad from O[liver] C[owdery]," President Young acknowledged in 1853. There were others as well. "Joseph [h]ad 3 which Emma has," he added, "2 small ones and 1 large one."⁴ Two years later, Brigham Young told a group of assembled Church leaders that "Oliver sent me Joseph's first Seer stone, Oliver always kept it until he sent it to me."⁵

After Brigham Young died, one of his wives, Zina D. H. Young, who later became the third Relief Society general president, obtained a chocolate-colored seer stone from his estate that matched descriptions of the stone Joseph used to translate the Book of Mormon, and donated it to the Church.⁶ Since that time, subsequent Church leaders have acknowledged the Church's ownership of the seer stone.⁷

NOTES

1. David Whitmer, *An Address to All Believers in Christ* (1887), 32.
2. For more information about Oliver Cowdery's return to the Church before his death, see Scott F. Faulring, "The Return of Oliver Cowdery," in John W. Welch and Larry E. Morris, eds., *Oliver Cowdery: Scribe, Elder, Witness* (2006), 321–62.
3. See Minutes, Sept. 30, 1855, Church History Library, Salt Lake City; "David Whitmer," *The Historical Record*, Oct. 1888, 623; Maria L. Cowdery Johnson to David Whitmer, Jan. 24 1887, Community of Christ Library-Archives, Independence, Missouri; and Franklin D. Richards, *Journal*, Mar. 9, 1882, Church History Library.
4. Minutes, Apr. 17, 1853, Church History Library.
5. Minutes, Sept. 30, 1855, Church History Library.
6. See Zina Young to Franklin D. Richards, July 31, 1896, in *Journal History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, July 31, 1896, 4, Church History Library.
7. See B. H. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of the Church*, 6:230–31; Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, comp. Bruce R. McConkie, 3 vols. (1954–56), 3:225; Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (1966), 818–19.



COURTESY OF CHURCH HISTORY LIBRARY

In 1883, the Contributor, a magazine published by the Church, highlighted the Three Witnesses of the Book of Mormon. Latter-day Saints have long recognized the crucial role each man played in helping Joseph Smith translate and publish the Book of Mormon.

that seer stones were not essential to revelation, perhaps he worried that people might focus too much on how the book came forth and too little on the book itself.

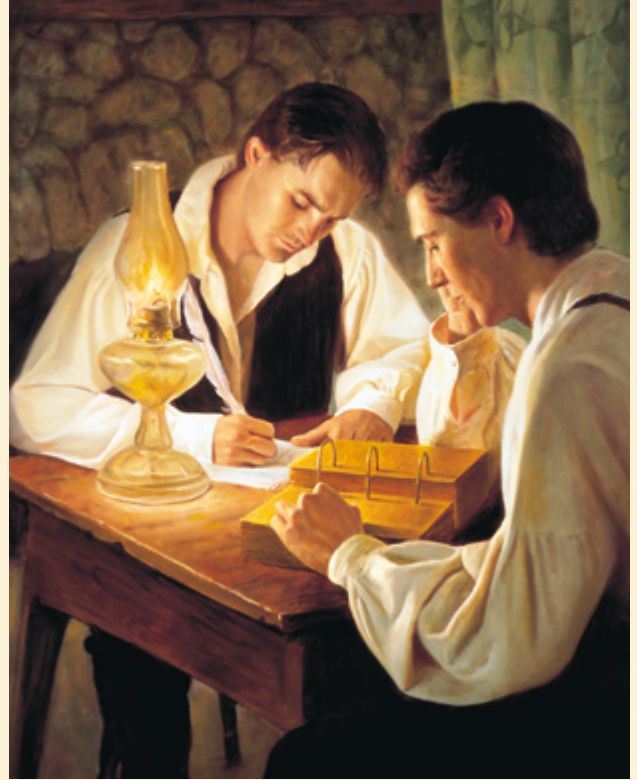
The most salient point Joseph Smith made about the translation of the Book of Mormon was that he did it “by the gift and power of God.”²⁴ The book itself, he taught Church leaders, “was the most correct of any Book on earth & the keystone of our religion,” and by obeying its precepts, readers would get “nearer to [G]od . . . than [by] any other book.”²⁵ ■

NOTES

1. See Doctrine and Covenants 115.
2. Preface to Book of Mormon, ca. Aug. 1829, in *Documents, Volume 1: July 1828–June 1831*, vol. 1 of the Documents series of *The Joseph Smith Papers* (2013), 93. See also “The Testimony of Three Witnesses,” Book of Mormon.
3. See Exodus 4:1–5, 17, 20–21; 7:8–21; 8:16–19; 9:22–26; 10:12–15; 14:15–18; 17:1–13; Numbers 17:1–10; 20:7–11; Hebrews 9:4.
4. See Numbers 21:7–9; John 3:14–15.
5. See Exodus 28:12; 35:9, 27; 1 Samuel 23:9–12; 30:7–8.
6. See Exodus 28:30; Leviticus 8:8; Numbers 27:21; Deuteronomy 33:8; 1 Samuel 28:6; Ezra 2:63; Nehemiah 7:65.
7. For more information on this 19th-century religious culture, see *Journals, Volume 1: 1832–1839*, vol. 1 of the Journals series of *The Joseph Smith Papers* (2008), xix; and *Revelations and Translations, Volume 3: Printer’s Manuscript of the Book of Mormon*, vol. 3 of the Revelations and Translations series of *The Joseph Smith Papers* (2015), xv–xvi; Dallin H. Oaks, “Recent Events Involving Church History and Forged Documents,” *Ensign*, Oct. 1987, 68–69.
8. See statement of Joseph Smith Sr., as quoted in Francis W. Kirkham, *A New Witness for Christ in America: The Book of Mormon*, vol. 2 (1959), 366; see also Lucy Mack Smith, “Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1844–1845,” book 3, page 10, josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummarylucy-mack-smith-history-1844-1845. Martin Harris recalled testing Joseph’s ability by having him find a pin in a haystack (see “Mormonism—No. II,” *Tiffany’s Monthly*, July 1859, 164).
9. See, for instance, Joseph Smith—History in the Pearl of Great Price.
10. See Doctrine and Covenants 130:10–11. See also the earliest wording of what is now Doctrine and Covenants 8, directed to Oliver Cowdery as he desired to assist Joseph Smith in translating the Book of Mormon (Revelation, Apr. 1829–B, in *Documents, Volume 1: July 1828–June 1831*, 44–47).
11. Joseph Smith, “History, ca. Summer 1832,” in *Histories, Volume 1: 1832–1844*, vol. 1 of the Histories series of *The Joseph Smith Papers* (2012), 14.
12. See Joseph Smith—History 1:35; Joseph Smith, “Church History,” in *Histories, Volume 1: 1832–1844*, 495; Martin Harris, in “Mormonism—No. II,” 165–66; “Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1844–1845,” book 5, pages 7–8, josephsmithpapers.org.
13. See, for instance, “Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1844–1845,” book 5, josephsmithpapers.org.
14. Understandably, this distinction has puzzled commentators. See, for instance, Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (1966), 307–8; Joseph Fielding McConkie and Robert L. Millet, *Doctrinal Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, 4 vols. (1987–92), 3:278; and Matthew B. Brown, *All Things Restored: Confirming the Authenticity of LDS Beliefs* (2000), 62.
15. See William W. Phelps, Funeral Sermon of Joseph Smith and Hyrum Smith, Church History Library, Salt Lake City; Orson Pratt, “Explanation of Substituted Names in the Covenants,” *The Seer*, Mar. 1854, 229; William W. Phelps, letter to Brigham Young, Apr. 10, 1854, in Brigham Young, Office Files, 1832–1878, Church History Library, Salt Lake City; and *Revelations and Translations, Volume 2: Published Revelations*, vol. 2 of the Revelations and Translations series of *The Joseph Smith Papers* (2011), 708–9.
16. For more information on the translation, see “Book of Mormon Translation,” available at lds.org/topics/book-of-mormon-translation. See also Russell M. Nelson, “A Treasured Testament,” *Ensign*, July 1993, 61–65; Neal A. Maxwell, “By the Gift and Power of God,” *Ensign*, Jan. 1997, 36–41.
17. Wilford Woodruff, for instance, called a seer stone he saw in Nauvoo a Urim and Thummim (Wilford Woodruff journal, Dec. 27, 1841, Church History Library). See also *Revelations and Translations, Volume 3: Printer’s Manuscript of the Book of Mormon*, xix.
18. See *Revelations and Translations, Volume 3: Printer’s Manuscript of the Book of Mormon*, xviii–xix.
19. For a brief summary of the beginnings of this effort, see *Documents, Volume 1: July 1828–June 1831*, 150–52.
20. Minutes, Apr. 17, 1853, Church History Library.
21. “Two Days’ Meeting at Brigham City, June 27 and 28, 1874,” *Millennial Star*, Aug. 11, 1874, 498–99.
22. Minutes, Sept. 30, 1855, Church History Library.
23. Minutes, Oct. 25–26, 1831, in *Documents, Volume 2: July 1831–January 1833*, vol. 2 of the Documents series of *The Joseph Smith Papers* (2013), 84.
24. Preface to Book of Mormon, ca. Aug. 1829, in *Documents, Volume 1: July 1828–June 1831*, 93. See also the “Testimony of Three Witnesses,” Book of Mormon.
25. Joseph Smith, in Wilford Woodruff journal, Nov. 28, 1841, Church History Library; or introduction to the Book of Mormon.

ILLUSTRATING THE TRANSLATION PROCESS

Over the years, artists have sought to portray the Book of Mormon translation, showing the participants in many settings and poses with different material objects. Each artistic interpretation is based upon its artist's own views, research, and imagination, sometimes aided by input and direction from others. Here are a few scenes produced throughout the years.



JOSEPH SMITH TRANSLATING THE BOOK OF MORMON, BY DEL PARSON

Artist's rendition of Joseph Smith studying the plates. Joseph recalled that he "copied a considerable number" of characters from the plates. After he translated these characters "by means of the Urim and Thummim," Martin Harris took the characters to Charles Anthon and other scholars to confirm the translation (Joseph Smith—History 1:62–64).

Artist's portrayal of Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery working on the translation of the Book of Mormon. Unlike what is depicted here, Oliver Cowdery stated that he did not see the plates until after the translation was finished. Witnesses of the process reported that during the translation, the plates were shielded from view, such as by being covered with a linen cloth.



Artist's rendition of Joseph Smith translating while wearing the breastplate with the attached interpreters or spectacles, later referred to as the Urim and Thummim.



TRANSLATION OF THE PLATES, BY EARL JONES, COURTESY OF CHURCH HISTORY MUSEUM

Artist's depiction of Joseph Smith and a scribe translating with a blanket between them. Although no blanket is mentioned in most descriptions of the translation process, one was apparently used at an early point to shield the scribe from a view of the plates, spectacles, or breastplate. During the latter part of the translation effort, a blanket may have been used to shield the translator and scribe from other individuals curious to observe the translation.



ILLUSTRATION BY ROBERT T. BARRETT