

Inaccurate portrayals of the translation of the Book of Mormon

esp. with respect to the usage of a seer stone

Several examples of what appear to be deception and obfuscation by prominent church leaders and organizations between 1830-2020

Brief synopsis of what happened

- About 1820
 - Joseph acquired the brown stone, likely from Chase, during either digging for a well or during a treasure dig. According to Chase he borrowed the stone, returned it, and then borrowed it again (via Hyrum) and failed to return it the second time.
- 1827
 - Plates said to have been obtained along with some “spectacles” used to translate
 - Spectacles were used for a short period with Harris and possibly Emma, after which the brown stone was used (by placing it in a top hat and putting his face to the rim to cover the hat. The plates had no role in the translation. See: (<https://youtu.be/53z8Tly8IX0?t=3770>)
- 1828
 - 116 pages lost (Harris). Spectacles possibly lost (or taken by the angel at this time according to some accounts)
 - Joseph continues translating with the brown seer stone and hat with various scribes.
- 1829
 - Joseph translates the rest of the Book of Mormon using the brown seer stone and with the help of Oliver. All of current BOM translated using this method as confirmed by Church Historians (<https://youtu.be/53z8Tly8IX0?t=3446>).
 - Effort to publish starting in the fall.
- 1830
 - Joseph stops using the brown seer stone for revelations no later than early spring and gives the stone to Oliver.
 - Summer – Joseph put on trial for use of seer stones. Oliver claims that Joseph used the spectacles in the translation.
- 1831
 - Joseph moves to Ohio. Most NY members move to Missouri. There are two centers for the early church, both with very different backgrounds. The Ohio saints are anti-Baptists (Campbellites). In contrast, the NY saints are more steeped in folk magic with beliefs and practices closer to Methodists.

Account – published 9 April 1831
regarding events from Summer 1830

Deception: Oliver Cowdery V1

- Oliver testified that the “spectacles” were used with two transparent stones.
 - Stones were probably grey and opaque
 - Spectacles were never used after the 116 pages were lost.
- Probably motivated by trying to get Joseph acquitted of the charge of glass looking.
- Oliver had in his possession the brown stone which Joseph had actually used for all of the translation (while Oliver was scribe).

...(Joseph Smith) was again arraigned before a bar of Justice, during last Summer, to answer to a charge of misdemeanor. This trial led to an investigation of his character and conduct, which clearly evinced to the unprejudiced, whence the spirit came which dictated his inspirations. During the trial it was shown that the Book of Mormon was brought to light by the same magic power by which he pretended to tell fortunes, discover hidden treasures, &c. **Oliver Cowdry**, one of the three witnesses to the book, **testified under oath, that said Smith found with the plates, from which he translated his book, two transparent stones, resembling glass, set in silver bows. That by looking through these, he was able to read in English, the formed Egyptian characters, which were engraved on the plates.** So much for the gift and power of God. by which Smith says he translate his book. Two transparent stones, undoubtedly of the same properties, and the gift of the same spirit as the one in which he looked to find his neighbor’s goods...

Link to quote: <https://www.mrm.org/mormonites>

Source considered authentic by the church. Used in Gospel Topics essay here:

<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/manual/gospel-topics-essays/book-of-mormon-translation?lang=eng#note31>

Journal Account – Events from the Fall of 1830;
recorded Jan 1831, and published 2011.

Deception: Oliver Cowdery V2

- Oliver taught as a missionary that Joseph looked at the plates through the spectacles first and then put his head in a hat and the inspiration flowed.
- Probably an extension of the story with the glasses that he taught under oath, but closer to the actual events where the hat was used.
- *Oliver had in his possession the brown stone which Joseph had actually used for all of the translation (while Oliver was scribe).*

...The engraving being unintelligible to learned & unlearned. There is said to have been in the box with the plates **two transparent stones in the form of spectacles thro which the translator looked on the engraving & afterwards put his face into a hat & the interpretation then flowed into his mind.** Which he uttered to the amanuensis who wrote it down, The said amanuensis by name Oliver Cowdery, was lately at the North lot & gave this account. He & others being on their way to Missouri to open this new revelation to the Indians whose genealogy it professes to trace from the line of Joseph & from the time of their first settlement in America at the period of the Babylonian captivity...

Source: Goodwillie, Christian. "Shaker Richard McNemar: The Earliest Book of Mormon Reviewer." Journal of Mormon History, vol. 37, no. 2, 2011, pp. 138–145. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/23291640.

Source considered authentic by the church. Used in Gospel Topics essay here:

<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/manual/gospel-topics-essays/book-of-mormon-translation?lang=eng#note32>

Minutes of church conference: Oct 26, 1831
(Ohio)

Obfuscation: Joseph Smith V1

- Joseph knew exactly how the Book of Mormon was created and that he used the brown seer stone for everything except a portion of the 116 lost pages.
- Joseph refused to tell the saints in Ohio, even though presumably this was an open narrative/knowledge among the NY saints.

Br. Hyrum Smith said that 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.

Br. Joseph Smith jr. said that it was not intended to tell the world all the particulars of the coming forth of the book of Mormon, & also said that it was not expedient for him to relate these things &c.

Source: <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/minute-book-2/15>

Source considered authentic by the church. Used in Gospel Topics essay here:

<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/manual/gospel-topics-essays/book-of-mormon-translation?lang=eng>

Joseph Smith History (written by Joseph Smith), Summer 1832

Obfuscation: Joseph Smith V2

- Joseph knew exactly how the Book of Mormon was created and that he used the brown seer stone for everything except a portion of the 116 lost pages.
- By 1832, he used the spectacle narrative. This was roughly accurate for part of the early portion of the plates (before the 116 pages were lost), but he fails to mention the hat or that these spectacles were not used for the current Book of Mormon
- No mention of the Urim and Thummim because this narrative had not yet been invented.

Joseph telling the story of Martin Harris bring characters to Charles Anton:

...characters so we proceeded to cobby some of them and he took his Journy to the Eastern Cittys and to the Learned <saying> read this I pray thee and the learned said I cannot but if he would bring the blates [plates] they would read it but the Lord had forbid it and he returned to me and gave them to <me> <to> translate and I said I said cannot for I am not learned but the Lord had prepared speetticke spectacles for to read the Book therefore I commenced translating the characters and thus the Propicy [prophecy] of Isiaah was fulfilled...

Additional Accounts

Joseph Smith V2

- Multiple 2nd hand accounts recording what Joseph Smith said between 1832-1834 survive.
- Nancy Towle (1832)
- Peter Bauder (1834)
- Spectacle or glass account persists. No mention of Urim and Thummim at this point.

Source: Opening the Heavens, pg 132-134

<https://byustudies.byu.edu/content/opening-heavens-coming-forth-book-mormon-chapter-only>

He accordingly went; and was directed by the angel to a certain spot of ground, where was deposited a “Box” —and in that box contained “Plates,” which resembled gold; also, a pair of “interpreters,” (as he called them,) that resembled spectacles; by looking into which, he could read a writing engraven upon the plates, though to himself, in a tongue unknown.

[Joseph Smith] went, and after the third or fourth time, which was repeated once a year, he obtained a parcel of plate resembling gold, on which were engraved what he did not understand, only by the aid of a glass which he also obtained with the plate, by which means he was enabled to translate the characters on the plate into English. . . . and after he had a part translated, the angel commanded him to carry the plate into a certain piece of woods, which he did:—the angel took them and carried them to parts unknown to him.

“The Book of Mormon,” *The Evening and the Morning Star*, January 1833

Invention: W.W. Phelps

- Met Joseph on Dec 24, 1830 and was baptized on June 10, 1831 in Kirtland.
- Given that he joined in Kirtland, he may have never known about seer stones and their usage by Joseph and others in New York.
- Nevertheless, his speculation and willingness to propose a new narrative probably resulted in the term Urim and Thummim being adopted by the early church (esp. Cowdery and Smith).
- He applied Urim and Thummim to the spectacles – which Oliver Cowdery was presumably still teaching. Hence, he was *working off of Oliver's deception* and may not have known about the seer stone.

- the Book of Mormon “was translated by the gift and power of God, by an unlearned man, through the aid of a pair of Interpreters, or spectacles— (known, perhaps, in ancient days as Teraphim, or Urim and Thummim).

Source considered authentic by the church. Used in Gospel Topics essay here:

<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/manual/gospel-topics-essays/book-of-mormon-translation?lang=eng#note17>

Messenger and Advocate, Vol 1 No 1. October 1834.

<https://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/digital/collection/NCMP1820-1846/id/7012>

Deception: Oliver Cowdery V3

- Completely leaves out the spectacles, seer stones, and hat and continues the “Urim and Thummim” narrative Phelps proposed.
- Oliver had in his possession the brown stone which Joseph had actually used for all of the translation (while Oliver was scribe).

- ...on Tuesday the 7th, commence to write the book of Mormon. These were days never to be forgotten – to sit under the sound of a voice dictated by the inspiration of heaven, awakened the utmost gratitude of this bosom! Day after day I continued, uninterrupted, to write from his mouth, as he translated, **with the Urim and Thummim, or, as the Nephites would have said, “Interpreters,”** the history, or record, called “The book of Mormon.”

Source considered authentic by the church. Used in Gospel Topics essay here:

<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/manual/gospel-topics-essays/book-of-mormon-translation?lang=eng#note7>

Not published until 1977, and again in 1993. See
<https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms/vol2/iss2/14/>

Deception: Oliver Cowdery V4

- Personal statement - 2nd hand as retold by Samuel W. Richards on 25 May 1907. Harold B. Lee Library, BYU, Special Collections.
- Richards worked with Oliver years before and repeated the account which Oliver had relayed to him.
- Numerous words in the early manuscript were misspelled, so this account seems somewhat problematic.
- Few Mormon scholars (faithful or skeptic) accept that the translation was a mechanical word-for-word effort.

He represented Joseph as sitting at a table with the plates before him, translating them by means of the **Urim and Thummim**, while he (Oliver) sat beside him writing every word as Joseph spoke them to him.

This was done by holding the "translators" over the hieroglyphics, the translation appearing distinctly on the instrument, which had been touched by the finger of God and dedicated and consecrated for the express purpose of translating languages. **Every word was distinctly visible even to every letter; and if Oliver omitted a word or failed to spell a word correctly, the translation remained on the "interpreter" until it was copied correctly.**

Source considered authentic by the church. Quoted by Richard Anderson, "By the Gift and Power of God," Ensign 7 (September 1977): 79-85

Deception: Joseph Smith V3

- Starting in 1835 when Cowdery was his scribe, Joseph assumes the Urim and Thummim narrative of W.W. Phelps and Cowdery and claimed on at least 4 occasions that he translated the Book of Mormon with the “Urim and Thummim” which he found with the plates.
- Joseph knew exactly how the Book of Mormon was created and that he used the brown seer stone for everything except a portion of the 116 lost pages.
- In no instance did Joseph mention the use of the brown stone, the size or shape of the stone, or the use of a hat in the translation process.
- He did however show at least one of his stones (white?) to some members of the 12 in Nauvoo and called it the “Urim and Thummim”.

Sources: Various as noted.

“Answers to Questions,” Elders’ Journal, July 1838 and various accounts, some of which are canonized in Joseph Smith History in the Pearl of Great Price.

- ...if obedient to the commandments of the Lord, to obtain, and translate the same by the means of the **Urim and Thummim**, which were deposited for that purpose with the record.
 - Letter IV, Messenger and Advocate 1 (Feb 1835): 80. <https://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/digital/collection/NCMP1820-1846/id/7058>
- The manner of translation was as wonderful as the discovery. **By putting his finger on one of the characters and imploring divine aid, then looking through the Urim and Thummin**, he would see the import written in plain English on a screen placed before him.
 - Joseph Smith as recorded by Truman Coe (1836): Truman Coe to Mr. Editor, (Hudson) Ohio Observer, August 11, 1836; Vogel, Early Mormon Documents, 1:47
- 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.”
 - Joseph Smith, “Answers to Questions,” Elders’ Journal, July 1838, in Early Mormon Documents, ed. Vogel, 1:52.
- “I copied a considerable number of them, and by means of the **Urim and Thummim** I translated some of them...”
 - Joseph Smith History, 1:62. (1838)
- “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.”
 - In Early Mormon Documents, ed. Vogel, 1:171; see his similar account in 1843, 1:185.

Willaim E. McLellin to "My Dear Friends," February 1870, Miscellaneous Letters and Papers, Community of Christ Library-Archives, Independence, Missouri.

The real story: Oliver Cowdery's wife

- Consistent with the accounts of Emma, David Whitmer, and Martin Harris.
- *The only ones who were personal witnesses of the events who are pushing the Urim and Thummim narrative are Oliver and Joseph.*
- Oliver has at least 3 different versions of what happened.
- In Kirtland, Joseph starts by saying that he's not going to say what happened (1831), then later adopts Cowdery's 3rd version of events in Missouri (1838).

Richmond, Ray Co., Mo. Feb 15th 1870

I cheerfully certify that I was familiar with the manner of Joseph Smith's translating the book of Mormon. He translated the most of it at my Father's house. And I often say by and saw and heard them translate and write for hours together. Joseph never had a curtain drawn between him and his scribe while he was translating. He would place the director in his hat, and then place his face in his hat, so as to exclude the light, and then [read?] to his scribe the words (he said) as they appeared before him...

Elizabeth Ann Whitmer-Affidavit, 15 Feb 1870

<http://theearlyanthology.tripod.com/18211827/id6.html>

Deception: Lucy Mack Smith

- Lucy was around Joseph for most of his life, including in the 1820s when he acquired and used his brown and white seer stones.
- In 1853 her book – Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith the Prophet, and His Progenitors for many Generations was published.
- Quotes extensively from JS history, but also adds her own tidbits which she modified to match the then dominant narrative on the Urim and Thummim.
- She seems to understand that Joseph used his own seer stone for translation as it was what he “kept...about his person”, but always calls it the Urim and Thummim and only uses the spectacle/breast plate narrative to describe the Urim and Thummim.

Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith the Prophet, and His Progenitors for many Generations (1853)

- Joseph kept the Urim and Thummim constantly about his person, by the use of which he could in a moment tell whether the plates were in any danger. (pg 103. See similar account on pg 106.)
- One morning when they sat down to their work, as usual, and the first thing which presented itself through the Urim and Thummim, was a commandment for Joseph and Oliver to repair to the water and attend to the ordinance of Baptism (pg 131)
- “...Joseph saw this, and said, ‘Do not be uneasy mother, all is right—see here, I have got a key.’ I knew not what he meant, but took the article of which he spoke into my hands, and, upon examination, found that it consisted of two smooth three-cornered diamonds set in glass, and the glasses were set into silver bows, which were connected with each other in much the same way as old fashioned spectacles.”

Source: 1853 book – Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith the Prophet, and His Progenitors for many Generations.

<https://archive.org/details/BiographicalSketchesOfJosephSmithTheProphet/page/n79/mode/2up/search/urim>

Nov 10, 1881 - Deseret News

Deception or ignorance? Deseret News

- Republishing a story from the Chicago Times, Oct 14 1881.
- Took pains to “correct” the accurate description given by Whitmer, who noted that the (brown) oval shaped seer stone was (later) called the Urim and Thummim by Smith.

Quote from the article (David Whitmer)

The tablets or plates were translated by Smith, who **used a small oval or kidney shaped stone, called Urim and Thummim**, that seemed endowed with the marvelous power of converting the characters on the plates, when used by Smith, into English, who would then dictate to Cowdery what to write.

Correction from Editor

The next error is that the seer stone which Joseph used in the translation “was called Urim and Thummim.” The instrument thus denominated was composed of two crystal stones “set in the two rims of a bow.” **The seer stone was separate and distinct from the Urim and Thummim.** The latter was delivered to the angel as well as the plates after the translation was completed; the former remained with the Church and is now in the possession of the President...

<https://newspapers.lib.utah.edu/ark:/87278/s6pk4g1b/23173965>

Source considered authentic by the church. Used in Gospel Topics essay here:

<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/manual/gospel-topics-essays/book-of-mormon-translation?lang=eng#note30>

Dec 13, 1881 - Deseret Evening News

Deception: Deseret News

- Second hand telling of story which Martin Harris told to Edward Stevenson, presumably after he arrived in SLC around Aug 31, 1870
- Published in 1881 as a faith promoting narrative
- Concept of “**for convenience**” often repeated by apologists, starting with Roberts around 1907.
- The story is not particularly credible as some faithful historians point out. They assume that Joseph was probably tricking Martin. See <https://youtu.be/53z8Tly8IX0?t=3360>
- Furthermore, **details regarding the hat seem to be deliberately removed**. The evidence is found in Stevenson’s later account which he published without interference from an editor (next page...)

Martin Harris related an *incident that occurred* during the time that he wrote that portion of the translation of the Book of Mormon which he was favored to write direct from the mouth of the Prophet Joseph Smith. **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 used the seer stone.** Martin explained the translation as follows: **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.** Martin said, after continued translation they would become weary, and would go down to the river and exercise by throwing stones out on the river, etc. While so doing on one occasion, Martin found a stone very much resembling the one used for translating, and on resuming their labor of translation, Martin **put in place the stone** that he had found. He said that the Prophet remained silent unusually gazing in darkness, no traces of the usual sentences appearing. Much surprised, Joseph exclaimed, “Martin! What is the matter? All is dark as Egypt!” Martin’s countenance betrayed him, and the Prophet asked Martin why he had done so. Martin said, to stop the mouths of fools, who had told him that the Prophet had learned those sentences and was merely repeating them, etc.

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.** Martin said there were not many pages translated while he wrote, after which Oliver Cowdery and others did the writing.

Reprinted Dec 28, 1881 in Deseret News and Feb 6, 1882 in the Millennial Star.

Source considered authentic by the church. Used in Gospel Topics essay here:

<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/manual/gospel-topics-essays/book-of-mormon-translation?lang=eng#note30>

Martin Harris via Edward Stevenson, 1886 Millennial Star, June 21

Accurate account: Edward Stevenson Account II

- Second hand telling of story which Martin Harris told to Edward Stevenson, presumably after he arrived in SLC around Aug 31, 1870
- Edwards was on a mission in Great Britain from Feb 1886 and probably published this account directly – without the interference of an editor. (see <https://history.churchofjesuschrist.org/missionary/individual/edward-stevenson-1820?lang=eng>)
- Details regarding the hat are clearly included
- *The apologetic “for convenience” phrase is not used.*
- While the 1881 account (without the hat) was repeated several times in church literature, this more accurate account was not widely republished.

He also stated that the Prophet translated a portion of the Book of Mormon, with the seer stone in his possession. **The stone was placed in a hat that was used for that purpose**, and with the aid of this seer stone the Prophet would read sentence by sentence as Martin wrote, and if he made any mistake the sentence would remain before the Prophet until corrected, when another sentence would appear. When they became weary, as it was confining work to translate from the plates of gold, they would go down to the river and throw stones into the water for exercise. Martin on one occasion picked up a stone resembling the one with which they were translating, and on resuming their work Martin placed the false stone **in the hat**. He said that the Prophet looked quietly for a long time, when he raised his head and said: “Martin, what on earth is the matter, all is dark as Egypt.” Martin smiled and the seer discovered that the wrong stone was placed **in the hat**. When he asked Martin why he had done so he replied, to stop the mouths of fools who had declared that the Prophet knew by heart all that he told him to write, and did not see by the seer stone; when the true stone was placed **in the hat**, the translation was resumed, as usual.

Missing from Gospel Topics essay: <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/manual/gospel-topics-essays/book-of-mormon-translation?lang=eng>

Deception: B.H. Roberts

- Roberts knew about the seer stone and the hat and was the principle force behind the relative openness with respect to the seer stone between 1906 and 1936.
- Nevertheless, he de-emphasized some details (i.e. that the seer stone was the only instrument used) and changed a quote to downplay certain parts of the narrative including the use of the hat.
- This modified quote was repeated a number of times in official church publications through at least 1930.
- Correct/complete quote is used by the church in the Ensign in 1977 (Anderson) and again in 1993 (Nelson) along with various disclaimers

Translation of the Book of Mormon, Improvement Era, Apr 1906
pg 427

As quoted by Roberts:

A piece of something resembling parchment did appear (i.e. in the Urim and Thummim), and on that appeared the writing, one character at a time would appear and under it was the translation in English. Brother Joseph would read off the English to Brother Oliver Cowdery, who was his principal scribe, and then it was written down and repeated to Brother Joseph to see if it was correct; then it would disappear and another character with the translation would appear. Thus the Book of Mormon was translated by the gift and power of God, and not by any power of man.

Original/Actual Quote:

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...

*NOTE: The hat *is in fact mentioned* in Defense of the Faith, Roberts, Pg 261 (1907). This account is substantively identical to that in "New Witness for God Vol II" which was more widely published.

Gospel topics essay does not include this quote or speak of the parchment, but references it indirectly in Nelson's talk in note 26:

<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/manual/gospel-topics-essays/book-of-mormon-translation?lang=eng#note26>

Deception or ignorance? Francis Kirkham V1

- Francis Kirkham collected early newspaper accounts of Mormonism and published these later in a volume which would become the most read apologetic/historical book on the subject for his generation (*A New Witness for Christ in America – The Book of Mormon* pub 1942).
- His book largely displaced/replaced Roberts' *New witnesses for God: Vol II. The Book of Mormon* which discussed seer stones in some detail.
- Kirkham was a lawyer and seems to be more interested in defending the church than in finding the truth about the process of translation

“The Manner of Translating the Book of Mormon”, Kirkham, Improvement Era, Oct 1939

Kirkham's (soft?) denial of seer stones in translation

...they (Whitmer and Harris) refer to the use of a seer stone by the Prophet. But no publication during his life contains such a statement.

A neighbor, Willard Chase, asserted Joseph stole a “singularly appearing stone” which he had found in 1822 when Joseph and his brother Alvin were employed by him in digging a well. “Joseph put it into his hat and then his face into the top of his hat... alleging that he could see in it.” *Mormonism Unveiled*, Eber D. Howe, 1834.

This is an attempt to explain the alleged power of Joseph Smith to translate the plates by a person who denounced him as a fraud and an ignorant deceiver.

In the opinion of the writer, the Prophet used no seer stone in translating the Book of Mormon, neither did he translate in the manner described by David Whitmer and Martin Harris. The statements of both of these men are to be explained by the eagerness of old age to call upon a fading and uncertain memory for the details of events which still remained real and objective to them.

Improvement Era, Oct 1939, vol 42 no 10 pg 597-632, see esp. 630-632. <https://archive.org/details/improvementera4210unse/page/n57>.

Gospel topics essay does not mention Kirkham or the period of widespread denial of seer stones between 1937-1974

Deception Widtsoe (Q12) 1946

- Widtsoe was alive when Roberts was publishing about the seer stone and was a scholar. He arrived in Utah in 1883. It is reasonable to believe that he knew about the seer stone and Roberts position on it.
- Faun Brodie published “No Man Knows my History” in 1946.
- The church initially did little, but within a year decided to excommunicate Brodie and proceeded to publish a number of articles denouncing and denying her most controversial claims including that
 - Joseph Smith had multiple wives which included married women
 - Joseph was involved in treasure seeking
 - Joseph used a peep-stone or seer stone to translate the book of mormon.
- Widtsoe was the associate editor of the Improvement Era from 1935-1952.

Improvement Era: Evidences and Recollections, Aug 1946 pg 543
John A. Widtsoe (Q12 apostles)

...These effusions of hate may be reduced to three charges: 1, The Smith family were unworthy people; 2, Joseph Smith, the Prophet, was a money digger; and 3, he was a user of peepstones...

Honest historians cannot safely make the charge that Joseph Smith was a professional money digger.

Likewise, no credence can be placed upon the charge that Joseph was a peepstone user. Anti-Mormon writers are prone to suggest that the Prophet spent his time in leading people into many a fruitless chase for lost money supposed to be revealed by peepstones. Included in these stories are incantations, digging in the full of the moon, sprinkling the chosen spot with blood from a black sheep, and other like absurdities. According to these writers, every form of black art was practiced by this lad. From the age of fourteen on, he must have had the whole community by the ear. It is curious that in the Paymyra newspaper of the day, seldom is mention made of such affairs! Perhaps the editor was himself a party to these negotiations with Lucifer!

The claims that Joseph Smith had had communication with the supernatural beings furnished the foundation for the later [tales of Mormon-haters about Joseph's peepstone activities](#). Then, by the usual accretions from many lips, the story grew, and was fed and fostered by those in whose hearts was a hate for the work to which Joseph Smith was called by God. All of the Prophet's history points away from superstition, and towards belief in an unseen world in which God and his associates dwell.

Carefully examine, the charges against the Smith family and Joseph Smith, the boy and young man, fail to be proved. There is no acceptable evidence to support them, only gossip, and deliberate misrepresentation. The Smith family were poor but honest, hard-working, and religious people. [Joseph Smith was not a money digger, nor did he deceive people with peepstone claims](#). It is almost beyond belief that writers who value their reputations, would reproduce these [silly and untrue charges](#). It suggests that they may have set out to destroy “Mormonism,” rather than to detail true history.

The life of Joseph Smith as boy and youth, was normal, and worthy of imitation by all lovers of truth.

Improvement Era, Aug 1946 Volume 49 number 8 pg 542-543. <https://archive.org/details/improvementera4908unse/page/n63?q=peepstone>.

Gospel topics essay does not mention this article or the period of widespread denial of seer stones between 1937-1974

Deception

Francis Kirkham V2

- **Kirkham was a lawyer** (University of Utah law school) who later received his Ph.D from UC Berkley. He seems to be making a legal defense rather than searching for the truth.
- Faun Brodie published “No Man Knows my History” in 1946. This article appears to be one of several direct responses to the book with each addressing different sub-topics.
- While living in New York in the 1930s(?) he collected early source (including news paper publications) about the Book of Mormon. He published these in 1937 as “Source Material on the Book of Mormon” which was later transformed into “A New Witness for Christ in America”.
- Kirkham had access to the LDS church archives.
- The article seems to be saying that it’s impossible to prove that Joseph used a seer stone – which may be true in the legal sense - but which completely overlooks the historical fact that this is what he did.

Improvement Era: Evidences and Recollections, Mar 1947.,
Francis Kirkham

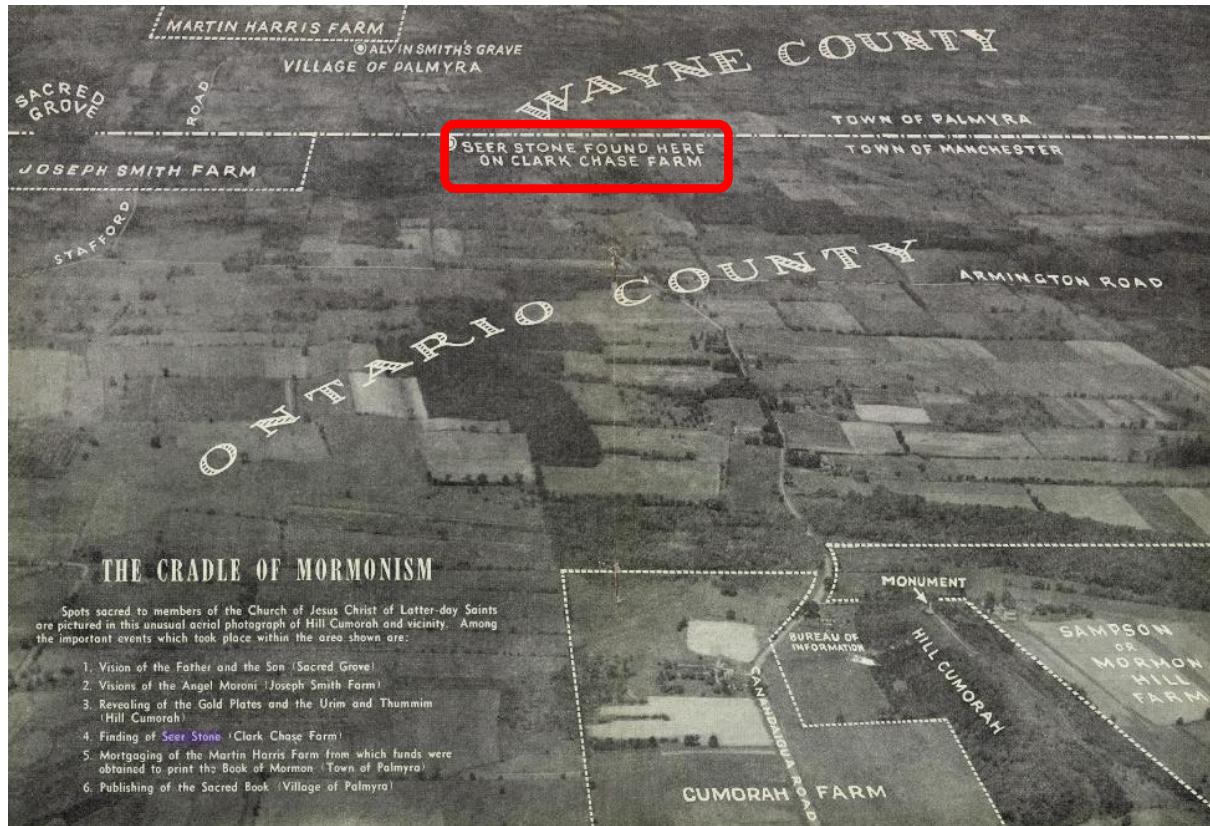
If any evidence had been in existence that Joseph Smith had used a seer stone for fraud and deception, and especially had he made this confession in a court of law as early as 1826, or four years before the Book of Mormon was printed, and this confession was in a court record, *it would have been impossible* for him to organize the restored Church...

The conclusion must be: Joseph Smith during the four years of 1823-1827... spent considerable of his time in Chenango County, New York. Here *he worked as a common laborer...* There exists no evidence to *prove* he lived other than a normal life. No record exists, and there is *no evidence to prove* one was ever made in which he confessed in a justice of the peace court that he had used a seer stone to find hidden treasure *for purposes of fraud and deception.*

Joseph Smith in Chenango County, New York and Its Alleged Court Record, Francis W. Kirkham, Ph.D, Improvement Era, Mar 1947, Volume 50 number 3 pg149, 182-184.
<https://archive.org/details/improvementera5003unse/page/n55/mode/2up/search/seer+stone>.

Gospel topics essay does not mention this article or the period of widespread denial of seer stones between 1937-1974

Altering the Narrative Improvement Era – 1949-1950



In 1949, a photograph from the “Cradle of Mormonism” shows that “[Seer Stone Found here on Clark Chase Farm](#)”

In 1950, “A Church History Travel Service” is announced to “...provide information and assistance for Era readers to enable them not only to visit important places in Church history, but also to enjoy to the fullest extent their visits to such points.” Listed among the sites to visit in the Paymyra (New York) area is the “[Clark Chase Farm \(Seer Stone found here\)](#)”.

The series of articles continued on a monthly basis and in July 1950 published the [detailed article about the Palmyra area](#), but this time there was *no mention of the Chase farm or Seer Stone*. Locations mentioned in the expanded article include most of those listed in the Mar 1950 issues including the farm mortgaged by Harris, the grave site of Alvin, the Exchange building where the Book of Mormon was published, Hill Cumorah, the Sacred Grove, and the Smith family farm. The updated hand-drawn map (right) also fails to mention Chase or the seer stone.



Improvement Era. Vol 52 No 01. Jan 1949. Pg 32-33. <https://archive.org/details/improvementera5201unse/page/n33?q=seer+stone>

Improvement Era. Vol 53 No 03. Mar 1950. Pg 182. <https://archive.org/details/improvementera5303unse/page/n23?q=seer+stone>

Improvement Era. Vol 53 No 07. July 1950. Pg 564, 585-586. <https://archive.org/details/improvementera5307unse/page/n29?q=palmyra>

Deception Joseph Fielding Smith

- Joseph Fielding Smith, in addition to being the son of Joseph F. Smith and grandson of Hyrum Smith, was the assistant church historian from 1906 and became the church historian in 1921.
- He continued as church historian until 1970.
- Roberts worked under him as a historian for 10+ years. He would have been privy to numerous 1st and 2nd hand accounts of the seer stone and likely had access to the actual stone.
- After Brodie used deceit to gain access to some church history documents, the department was largely closed. Access to researchers during his tenure was highly guarded.
- Some documents were probably removed from general circulation for safekeeping in his private vault including “a very strange account” of the first vision written by Joseph Smith in 1832.

Doctrines of Salvation – 1956

Title (explicit denial) probably added by Bruce R. McConkie (editor)

SEER STONE NOT USED IN BOOK OF MORMON TRANSLATION.

We have been taught since the days of the Prophet that the Urim and Thummim were returned with the plates to the angel. We have no record of the Prophet having the Urim and Thummim after the organization of the Church. **Statements of translations by the Urim and Thummim after that date are evidently errors.** The statement has been made that the Urim and Thummim was on the altar in the Manti Temple when that building was dedicated. The Urim and Thummim so spoken of, however, was the seer stone which was in the possession of the Prophet Joseph Smith in early days. This seer stone is now in the possession of the Church.

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.

These stones, the Urim and Thummim which were given to the Brother of Jared, were preserved for this very purpose of translating the record, both of the Jaredites and the Nephites. Then again the Prophet was impressed by Moroni with the fact that these stones were given for that very purpose. **It hardly seems reasonable to suppose that the Prophet would substitute something evidently inferior under these circumstances.** It may have been so, but it is so easy for a story of this kind to be circulated due to the fact that the Prophet did possess a seer stone, which he *may have used for some other purposes.*

Improvement Era, Oct 1939, vol 42 no 10 pg 597-632, see esp. 630-632. <https://archive.org/details/improvementera4210unse/page/n57>.

Wording in green is similar to Kirkhams 1939 denial

Deception

1958 – Mormon Doctrine – Bruce R. McConkie

Entry on “Peep Stones”

- *See DEVIL, REVELATION, URIM AND THUMMIM.*
- In imitation of the order of heaven whereby seers receive revelations from God through a Urim and Thummim, the *devil gives his own revelations to some of his followers through peep stones* or crystal balls. An instance of this copying of the true order occurred in the early days of this dispensation.
[Hiram Page had such a stone...](#)

- Joseph's peep stones are not mentioned
- As editor of Joseph F. Smith's *Doctrines of Salvation*, McConkie would have known that the church possessed at least one of Joseph Smith's seer stones.

Soft Denial – Sept 1977 Ensign

Richard Lloyd Anderson (BYU religion professor and apologist)

- long article, not all key parts included in this summary
- Seer stone sources quoted, but largely discounted
- Urim and Thummim emphasized.

As Joseph Smith's first scribe (during the summer of 1828), Martin Harris spoke with authority of that phase of the translation. But *quoting him raises a key issue*: everything attributed to him does not necessarily represent his exact words. **This caution is necessary because his statements on translation details are filtered through reporters...**

...Stevenson reported, "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 used the seer stone.**"

...Toward the end of this new work of 1829, David Whitmer on occasion watched and afterwards spoke of the seer stone. Yet **as an intimate assistant, Oliver Cowdery stressed the Urim and Thummim** in his statements. While editor of the Church newspaper in 1834, he made the comment already quoted on the inspiration of writing for Joseph Smith. Then the Prophet's exscribe added:

"Day after day I continued uninterrupted to write from his mouth as he translated, with the Urim and Thummim, or as the Nephites would have said, 'interpreters,' the history, or record called 'The Book of Mormon.'"

...(text from David Whitmer's *Address to All Believers in Christ*)

It is tempting to accept the above statement at face value. However, since David Whitmer had not personally translated, his accuracy on details depends on whether he correctly understood what Joseph Smith told him in the first place, and whether he correctly remembered such details after that.

Probable Deception

Neil A. Maxwell - 1986

- Maxwell was born in 1926 when seer stones were still being taught in Sunday school (i.e. through 1934).
- Neil Maxwell was the foremost scholar in the Q12 between 1981 and 2004.
- During the early 1980s, Arrington was removed from his position as Church historian and sent to BYU, in part due to increased openness and transparency which he had espoused in this role.
- Between 1980-1984, a number of controversial documents related to early church history (mostly forgeries) surface. This caused considerable discussion surrounding Joseph Smith and the translation process.
- Maxwell *very likely* knew about the seer stone and specifically avoided the topic on a 30 minute speech about seers.

Joseph Smith: A Choice Seer – Devotional at BYU

We naturally would like to know about that process of translation. In October 1831, Joseph Smith was asked by his brother Hyrum, at a conference held in Orange, Ohio, to give a firsthand account concerning the coming forth of the Book of Mormon. The Prophet replied “that it was not intended to tell the world all the particulars of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon; and. . . it was not expedient for him to relate these things” (HC 1:220).

Since Joseph, who knew the “particulars,” chose not to describe them in detail then, we *cannot presently be definitive about methodology.*

Source: <https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/neal-a-maxwell/joseph-smith-choice-seer/>

Gospel topics essay mentions this quote by Joseph – that Joseph was reluctant to describe the method of translation.

<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/manual/gospel-topics-essays/book-of-mormon-translation?lang=eng>

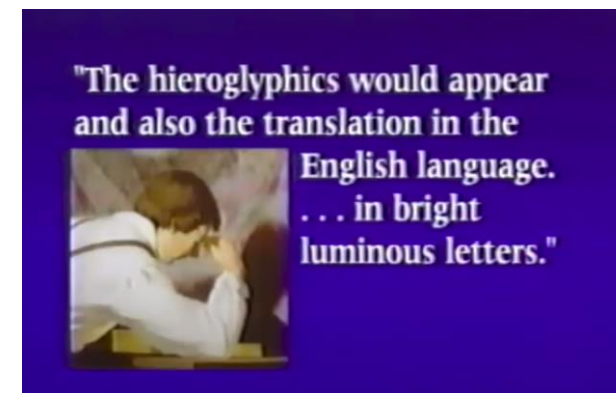
Obfuscation and Deception – Neil Maxwell, 1993, 1997

The Prophet Joseph alone knew the full process, and he was deliberately reluctant to describe details. We take [passing notice](#) of the words of David Whitmer, Joseph Knight, and Martin Harris, who were observers, not translators. David Whitmer indicated that as the Prophet used the [divine instrumentalities](#) provided to help him, “the hieroglyphics would appear, and also the translation in the English language ... in bright luminous letters.” Then Joseph would read the words to Oliver (quoted in James H. Hart, “About the Book of Mormon,” *Deseret Evening News*, 25 Mar. 1884, 2). Martin Harris related [of the seer stone](#): “Sentences would appear and were read by the Prophet and written by Martin” (quoted in Edward Stevenson, “One of the Three Witnesses: Incidents in the Life of Martin Harris,” *Latter-day Saints’ Millennial Star*, 6 Feb. 1882, 86–87). Joseph Knight made similar observations (see Dean Jessee, “Joseph Knight’s Recollection of Early Mormon History,” *BYU Studies* 17 [Autumn 1976]: 35).

Oliver Cowdery is reported to have [testified in court that the Urim and Thummim](#) enabled Joseph “to read in English, the reformed Egyptian characters, which were engraved on the plates” (“Mormonites,” *Evangelical Magazine and Gospel Advocate*, 9 Apr. 1831). If these reports are accurate, they suggest a process indicative of God’s having given Joseph “sight and power to translate” ([D&C 3:12](#)).

- Clearly knows about the seer stone
- Limits quotes to not mention the hat, the parchment which would appear, etc.
- Frames it in terms of the Urim and Thummim – a phase which Oliver *did not use* in his 1831 testimony.
- When he talks about the seer stone and bright luminous letters, they insert a picture of Joseph looking at the plates – clearly inaccurate – to ensure members maintained the original (false) narrative in their memories.

<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1997/01/by-the-gift-and-power-of-god?lang=eng>



<https://youtu.be/1KIdaOLJgS8?t=964>

Talk recorded in 1993 – published in 1997

Changing deceptive quotes:

1993 – Nelson to newly called Mission Presidents
Published in the July 1993 Ensign

Ellipses added by Nelson to remove the inaccurate or misleading term “Urim and Thummim”.

I am intrigued, as you are, with the process Joseph Smith used to translate the Book of Mormon, which he said was done through “**the gift and power of God.**” ...

...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.”

...As Oliver Cowdery testified a few years later: “These were days never to be forgotten—to sit under the sound of a voice dictated by the inspiration of heaven, awakened the utmost gratitude of this bosom! Day after day I continued, uninterrupted, to write from his mouth, as he translated... the history or record called ‘The Book of Mormon.’” (JS—H 1:71n.)

The details of this miraculous method of translation are **still not fully known**. Yet we do have a few precious insights. David Whitmer wrote:

“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....

(Nelson proceeds to give full and correct quote from An Address to All Believers in Christ, pg 12).

- Nelson lists seer stones as a possibility only after first talking about the “gift and power of God” and the “two stones in silver bows”. The spectacles were NOT used for the Book of Mormon. There is only one problematic witness of the breastplate, which probably did not exist.
- Complete Oliver quote: “Day after day I continued uninterrupted to write from his mouth as he translated, **with the Urim and Thummim, or as the Nephites would have said, ‘interpreters,’** the history, or record called ‘The Book of Mormon’”

General Deception:

The hat is *generally missing* when the seer stone is mentioned (1850-2013)

Known exceptions – i.e. times when the hat is acknowledged

1. Mentioned by Roberts in his writings (**1907, 1909**), but only in one quote (Whitmer). In another quote he removed the mention of the hat.
2. Mentioned in **1939** by Kirkham (Improvement Era) *as part of a denial* that either the seer stone or hat were used
3. Mentioned in **1977** by Richard Anderson (BYU, Ensign), but the account is called into question and he favors the Urim and Thummim account by Cowdery.
4. Mentioned in **1993** by Nelson (Ensign) as one of several possibilities for the translation process.

Roberts quoting Whitmer (1907, 1909)

At times when Brother Joseph would attempt to translate **he would look into the hat in which the stone was placed**, he found he was spiritually blind and could not translate. He told us that his mind dwelt too much on earthly things, and various causes would make him incapable of proceeding with the translation. When in this condition he would go out and pray, and when he became sufficiently humble before God, he could then proceed with the translation...

In this particular quote, the hat is clearly mentioned. This quote is exceptional for this reason.

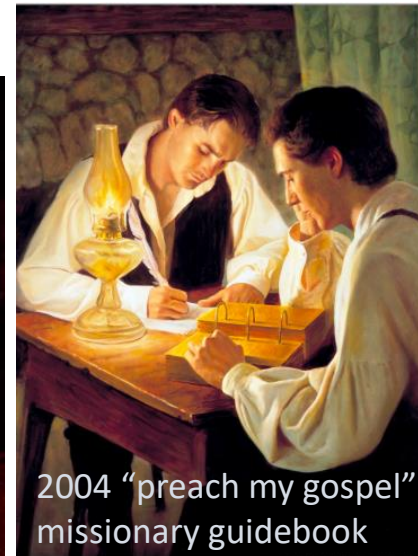
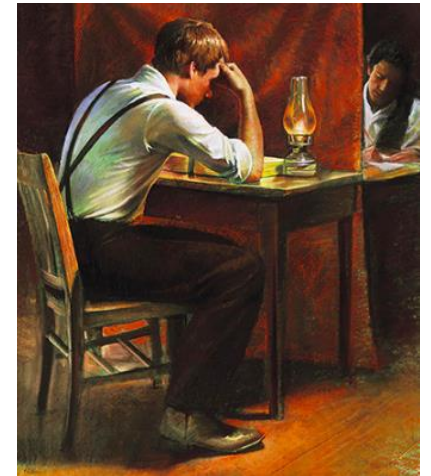
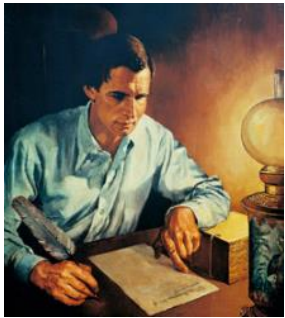
Missing: *No mention in the various Sunday School lesson outlines (1918-1934)*

Deceptive Artwork: 1939-2012

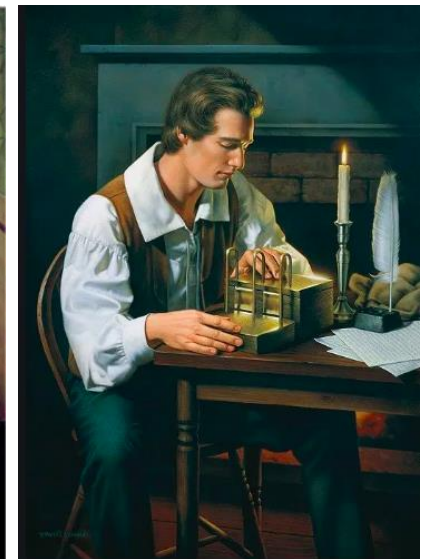
Artists often go to the church for direction before painting commissioned works.

“Friberg turned to Church leaders for historical and doctrinal suggestions. He had questions about antiquity and archeological findings as well as about hair length and clothing but was surprised to find that opinions varied from leader to leader.”

Setting a Standard in LDS Art, BYU Studies Journal 44:2, pg 33.



2004 “preach my gospel”
missionary guidebook



Deception - Gospel topics essay: Book of Mormon Translation – 2013

<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics-essays/book-of-mormon-translation?lang=eng>

Accurate history

- All of the current Book of Mormon was created using the brown rock in the hat method
- The phrase “apparently for convenience” is taken from the highly problematic 2nd hand account in an 1881 Deseret News article. Joseph ALWAYS used the single seer stone when creating what we have today as the Book of Mormon.
- The phrase “Urim and Thummim” to refer to the seer stone was introduced by Phelps in 1832 – long after the translation was complete - and adopted by Cowdery (1834) and later Joseph.
- While it is true that the spectacles or a rock from this combination was placed in the hat early on while Martin was scribe, the brown seer stone was used exclusively for all of the translation after about 1828 and the spectacles were abandoned as a translation instrument before the 116 pages were lost.

Claims of the article

- Joseph Smith and his scribes wrote of two instruments used in translating the Book of Mormon.
- **Apparently for convenience**, Joseph **often** translated with the single seer stone rather than the two stones bound together to form the interpreters.
- Joseph Smith and his associates often used the term “Urim and Thummim” to refer to the single stone as well as the interpreters.
- 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.

Note: This is an abbreviated list of only some of the deceptive claims of the article.

Deception:

Gospel Topics Essay - Note 19

As quoted from note 19 of the Gospel Topics essay

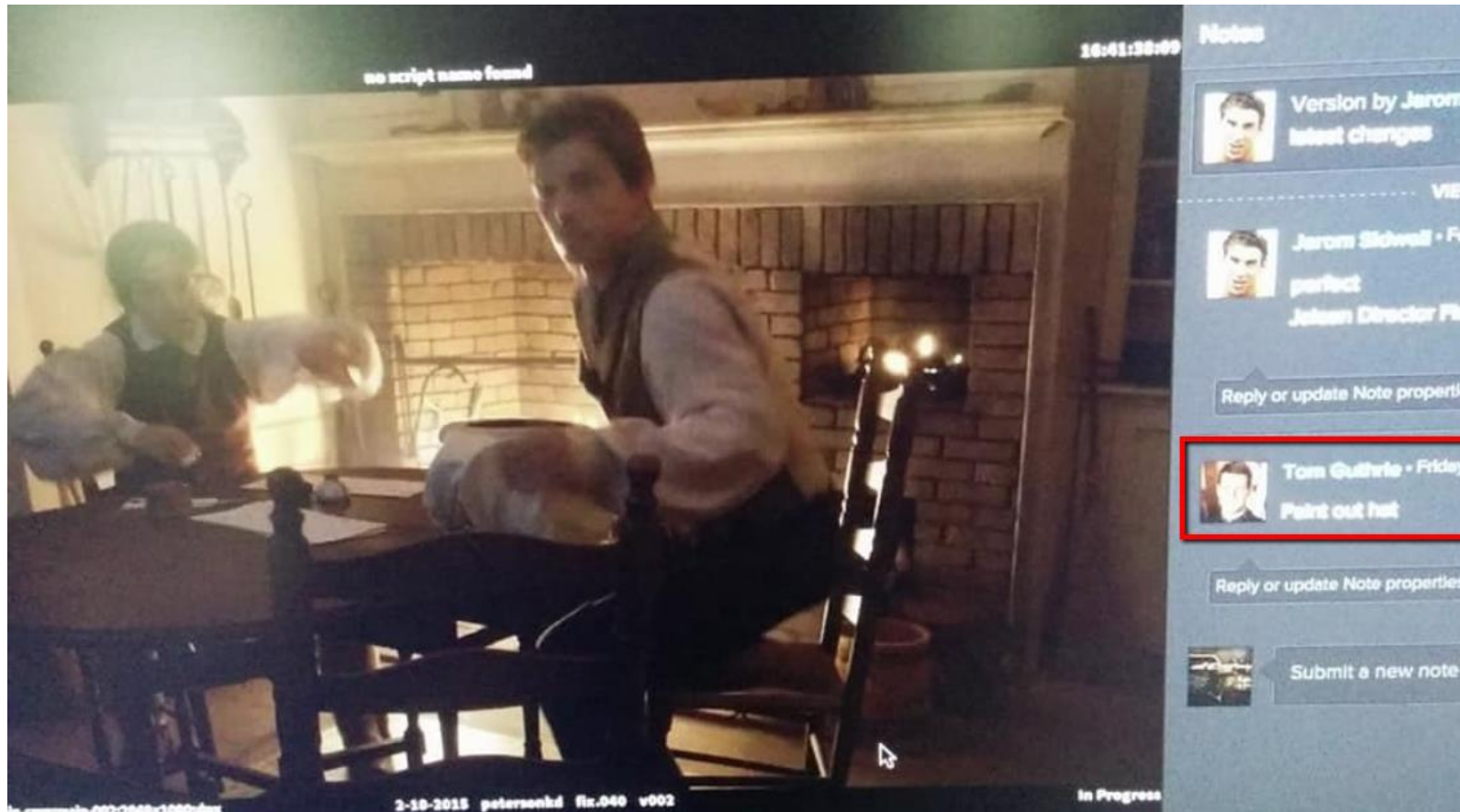
- Joseph continued to look for money in various ways both in 1827 and again in 1836 (see D&C section 111).
- **Joseph Smith History 1:56** (canonized): In the month of October, 1825, I hired with an old gentleman by the name of Josiah Stool, who lived in Chenango county, State of New York. He had heard something of a silver mine having been opened by the Spaniards in Harmony, Susquehanna county, State of Pennsylvania; and had, previous to my hiring to him, been digging, in order, if possible, to discover the mine. 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.

- According to Martin Harris, an angel commanded Joseph Smith to stop these activities (money digging), which he did by 1826.
- **Joseph did not hide his well-known early involvement in treasure seeking.** In 1838, he published responses to questions frequently asked of him. “Was not Jo Smith a money digger,” one question read. “Yes,” Joseph answered, “but it was never a very profitable job to him, as he only got fourteen dollars a month for it.”

- According to some historians including Dan Vogel, Smith continued digging for treasures “until the latter part of the season of 1827” (Howe, Mormonism Unveiled, 240).
 - See: http://undergroundnotes.com/graphics7/Dialogue_V27N03_211.pdf
 - See also: https://youtu.be/qJq_-sBykZs?t=1870
- The official canonized version of church history denies that Joseph was a frequent money digger in the 1820s (1880-present).

Deception - 2015 – “Days of Harmony” Film

- Seer stone included in filming
- Editors were instructed to “paint out hat” in post-production.
- May indicate mixed views regarding transparency among leadership



Film: <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/media-library/video/2018-03-1000-days-of-harmony?lang=eng>

One frame remaining at 9:10 shows the hat.

“Paint out hat”

These images:

<https://www.missedinsunday.com/memes/scripture/paint-out-the-hat/>

Incomplete information

Multiple Stones

- Pictures published as part of the JS papers (Aug 2015):
 - *Revelations and Translations, Volume 3: Printer's Manuscript of the Book of Mormon*
- Oct 2015 Ensign includes article "Joseph the Seer" which also includes the images.
- This is an example of openness, but the church has not published any pictures of the [white seer stone](#) (which multiple sources confirm that it has in its possession).
- The church also likely has at least 1-2 additional historic seer stones including the [Belcher stone](#) which according to a private account was probably donated to the church in 1993.

<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/church/news/book-of-mormon-printers-manuscript-photos-of-seer-stone-featured-in-new-book?lang=eng& r=1>

Belcher stone: <https://www.lostmormonism.com/josephs-green-seer-stone/>



Seer stone – Iron banded Jasper, found on the Chase farm while digging for buried treasure (ostensibly digging for a well), about 1820. Image first published by the LDS church in 2013

Deceptive images – Ensign Dec 2017

First official images showing hat

Emma's Witness



Late in her life, Emma Smith recalled that at the time her husband translated the golden plates, he “could neither write

This strengthening will occur even in seemingly small things.



Images: Hat shown, but Joseph not looking at it; stone inferred; plates wrapped in cloth, hat always at a distance and always with bright light coming in from the window.

Accurate Images: Would show Joseph with his head pressed against the hat holding it at a 45 degree angle.



2015 film scene that was removed from “Days of Harmony”

Deceptive imaging and analogy - Mar 2018

- “Joseph Smith explained that he translated the Book of Mormon through the medium of the Urim and Thummim by the gift and power of God. **But he didn’t explain further than that...**
- “Joseph takes the lenses out of the rim and puts them in the hat, which is the way he used the seer stone. So if he uses his own seer stone rather than the Urim and Thummim, he can put the Urim and Thummim and the breastplate away somewhere safe and just use his seer stone; and *that’s more convenient.*
- OK. That makes sense, but also sounds a little bit strange to think of it then as Joseph Smith looking in a hat.
- Yeah, that’s an image that we’re unfamiliar with... But *actually it’s not that strange*, he’s just trying to block out light. That’s the point. So **it’s like on a really sunny day, if you get a text message and you pull out your cell phone, and you can’t see it because of the sun, and you make shade**; you block out light so that you can see what it says. It’s the same kind of idea. So in the stone he sees the translation in light, and he puts his face in the hat so that he can block out light and see what’s on the seer stone.



Images from the video

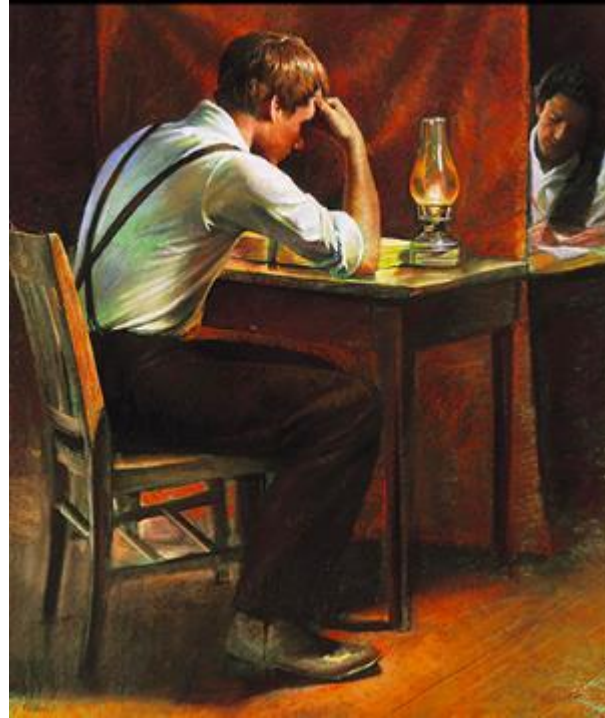
Images of translation are not accurate. Joseph is described in all accounts as having his face against the rim of the hat

engraving. With the records was found a curious instrument which the ancients called “Urim and Thummim,” which consisted of two transparent stones set in the rim 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.



Deceptive images: Churchofjesuschrist.org today

- Current images in the church media library (2019.12.14)
- Plates shown, blanket shown in one image, no hat, no seer stone, no spectacles or Urim and Thummim.



Note: More accurate images can be found on the site, but you have to know where to search for them

<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/media-library/images/category/church-history-all-gospel-art?lang=eng&start=41&end=80&order=>
<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/media-library/images/joseph-smith-translating-mormon-parson-153741?lang=eng>

Inaccuracy – Kate Holbrook (w/ Elder Cook)

Sept 2018

Starting around 49:15 into the presentation. See <https://youtu.be/kpLN6AomRQY?t=2955>

Reprinted in part in July 2020 here: <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2020/07/church-history-a-source-of-strength-and-inspiration?lang=eng>

Article

[After trying to get help from scholars translating the book of Mormon] he [Joseph] turned to the revelatory approach. And with the revelatory approach, he used both the **Urim and Thummim** and a seer stone to help him with the translation process. And the word “translation” is still relevant, but also “revelation” is relevant in understanding what was going on here.

Now the **Urim and Thummim you might have read mentioned in the Book of Mormon** – it was buried with the plates. So when Moroni gave Joseph Smith the golden plates he also gave him the Urim and Thummim. The seer stone was not buried with the plates. It was something that **Joseph had found on his own** years earlier that helped him to feel in tune with spiritual revelation. **So he used both. Seems like he used the seer stone a little more often.**

Comments

- **The Urim and Thummim are not mentioned in the Book of Mormon.**
 - The Book of Mormon does mention “interpreters” which are used to translate ancient records. It says that “no man can look in them except he be commanded, lest he should look for that he ought not and he should perish.” (Mosiah 8:13-19). See also: Alma 37: 21, Ether 4:5, Mosiah 28:20. Harris claimed that he never looked into the spectacles for fear that he would be tempting God.
 - Joseph Smith does mention the Urim and Thummim in relation to the Book of Mormon in 1838 after the narrative was well established by earlier create writers (Phelps, Cowdery).
- Most historians (Quinn, Vogel, etc) believe **that the brown stone was found by Chase** when they were digging for buried treasure together. Chase claimed that he lent it to Joseph and later Hyrum, but that they failed to return it when he requested it back. Joseph likely did find at least one seer stone (his white one) on his own.
- Joseph only used the spectacles which he claimed to be given with the plates very early on. After the 116 pages were lost, **all of the Book of Mormon was translated with the seer stone. So it was not “a little more often” – it was the whole time.**
- Holbrook is differentiating between the Urim and Thummim (i.e. spectacles) and the seer stone. This is more accurate than the gospel essay which claims that all 3 terms are interchangeable, but fails to recognize that the term Urim and Thummim was added later and does not accurately describe the magical spectacles as Smith would have during the translation process.

Deception – Ulisses Soares

“The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon – 2020

<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2020/04/23soares?lang=eng>

Comments

- Soares acknowledges for the first time in General conference that “Translate” doesn’t mean “Translate”. This was suggested by Bushman no later than 2005 and applied to the JSP project where they combined “Revelations and Translations” into a single volume so that they did not have to specify which was which.
- He speaks however of “physical instruments provided by the Lord”. The brown seer stone is not mentioned and was found digging a hole, probably by Chase. It was borrowed and not returned (i.e. it was stolen from Chase). It was the only instrument used to produce the current Book of Mormon. Was it provided by the Lord during a treasure dig?
- Joseph Smith claimed “translation”. Soares is claiming “revelation”. The two are inconsistent. This is not acknowledged
- **“Urim and Thummim” is *again* removed from the Oliver Cowdery quote as has become standard practice since 1993.**
- “Seer stone” not mentioned. The words “seer stone” were only used once in General conference –in 1883- in reference to Hyrum Page.

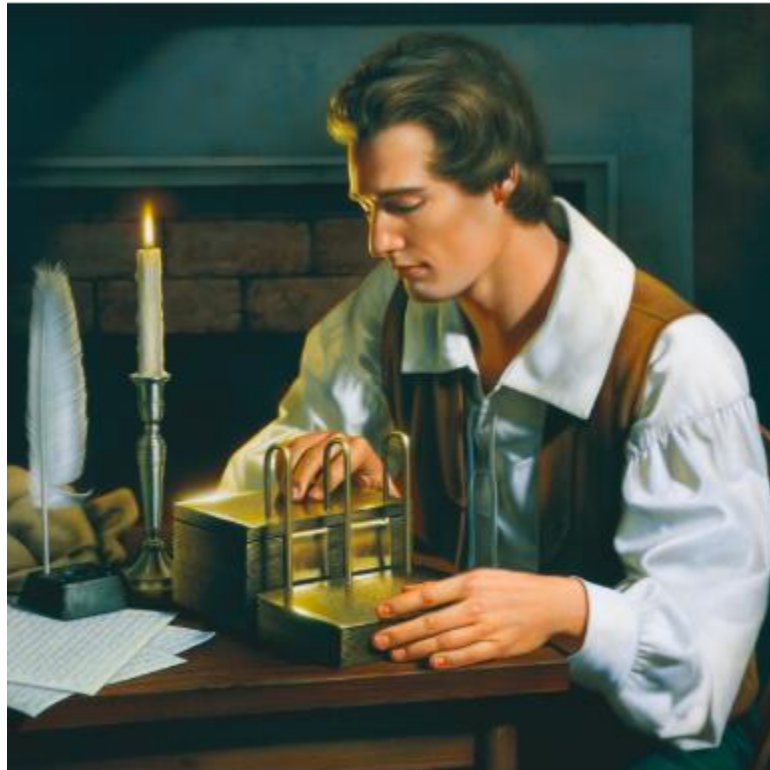
Quotes from address

- This sacred ancient record was not “translated” in the traditional way that scholars would translate ancient texts by learning an ancient language. **We ought to look at the process more like a “revelation” with the aid of physical instruments provided by the Lord**, as opposed to a “translation” by one with knowledge of languages. Joseph Smith declared that through God’s power he **“translated the Book of Mormon from [hieroglyphs]**, the knowledge of which was lost to the world, in which wonderful event [he] stood alone, an unlearned youth, to combat the worldly wisdom and multiplied ignorance of eighteen centuries, with a new revelation.” The Lord’s help in the **translation of the plates—or revelation, so to speak**—is also evident when considering the miraculously short time Joseph Smith took to **translate** them.
- Joseph’s scribes testified of the power of God that was manifested while working on the translation of the Book of Mormon. Oliver Cowdery once said: “These were days never to be forgotten—to sit under the sound of a voice dictated by the inspiration of heaven, awakened the utmost gratitude of this bosom! Day after day I continued, uninterrupted, to write from his mouth, **as he translated ... ‘The Book of Mormon.’**”

The church appears to want to have it both ways

Mar 2020 New Era

Magazine for North American Youth



By the Gift and the Power of God, by Simon Dewey

<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/new-era/2020/03/3-ways-joseph-smith-reveals-jesus-christ-to-us?lang=eng>

Apr 2020 Liahona

Magazine for international youth and adults



<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/liahona/2020/04/youth/what-do-you-say-when-your-friends-dont-believe-that-things-like-the-first-vision-could-happen/how-did-joseph-smith-translate-the-book-of-mormon?lang=eng>

An accurate rendering would show his elbows on his knees and his face against the rim of the hat

Obfuscation - Liahona

Apr 2020

<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/liahona/2020/04/youth/what-do-you-say-when-your-friends-dont-believe-that-things-like-the-first-vision-could-happen/how-did-joseph-smith-translate-the-book-of-mormon?lang=eng>

Article

Before hiding the gold plates, Moroni, the last prophet of the Book of Mormon, wrote on the book's title page that the book would be translated "by the gift and power of God." This remains the best description of the translation of the Book of Mormon.

Joseph Smith dictated the words of the translation to scribes, mostly Oliver Cowdery. Because Joseph was translating a completely unknown language, he needed to rely on the Lord. One way the Lord helped was to provide physical instruments to aid Joseph in translating. Witnesses said Joseph looked into the instruments and that words appeared to him in English. The translation instruments included the "interpreters" or "Urim and Thummim"—two clear stones fastened in a metal rim so that Joseph could look through them. These had been given to Joseph along with the plates. Another instrument Joseph used was a "seer stone" that he would look into, often by placing it in a hat. Joseph had found this stone earlier and had used it to find hidden or lost things. He used both the interpreters and the seer stone as he translated, always relying on the inspiration of heaven.

The translation of the Book of Mormon was truly miraculous and was done "by the gift and power of God."

Comments

- The best description of the translation process is that Joseph placed the brown stone in a white hat, held it close to his face to block out light at about a 45 degree angle, and that as he did so he claimed that a single hieroglyph would appear with the translation in English of 1-2 sentences below this symbol on a piece of parchment which he could see. The symbol and translation would remain until he confirmed that his scribe had written it down correctly.
- The stones in the metal rim or spectacles were not used to translate ANY of the current Book of Mormon. Their usage was discontinued prior to the loss of the 116 pages. There is insufficient evidence to claim that he ever looked through these spectacles to translate. There is a claim that he looked at the plates through the spectacles and then put his face in the hat (Oliver), but this claim is also highly suspect.
- Joseph likely *did not discover* the brown seer stone. This was probably found by Chase while he was digging for treasure under the direction of Joseph.

Summary of deception

- On several occasions, the church has modified quotes to make them more consistent with whatever narrative they are trying promote
- The church has been selective in which accounts they have favored, often given credence to quotes from Joseph and Oliver which are inaccurate.
- The church seems particularly hesitant to talk about or show pictures of the hat Joseph used.
- The church continues to portray the hat (as used in translation) incorrectly
- Starting in 2013, the church has provided a more accurate version of how the seer stone was used.
- The church continues to imply and express dual-methods for translation of the Book of Mormon (*Urim and Thummim or the brown seer stone*) which is inaccurate. All of the current Book of Mormon was translated with the brown seer stone.

Historically accurate narrative

For reference

The historical translation process

- The plates were *generally not in the room* during the translation process
- When the plates were present, they were covered with a cloth
- *All of the current Book of Mormon was created using the rock in the hat method*
 - Brown seer stone
 - White top hat
 - Face *pressed against the hat*
 - *Elbows likely resting on his knees*



There is really no need to mention the Urim and Thummim because even the church's historians agree that the spectacles (ostensibly called the Urim and Thummim after 1833) were not used to create the Book of Mormon of today. After the 116 pages were lost, they were never used again.

More accurate images

1. Face is buried in the hat
2. Plates are most often not in the room

Accurate version is acknowledged in official text, but not in official images:

- “Joseph placed either the interpreters or the seer stone in a hat, **pressed his face into the hat** to block out extraneous light, and spoke aloud the English words inspired by the instrument...”

<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/history/topics/book-of-mormon-translation?lang=eng>



Images by Anthony Sweat –
not available on lds.org

What are the “interpreters” or “spectacles”

- A pair of spectacles
- About 6 inches between the lenses*
 - Too large for any 19th century person to use
- Probably white stones with grey streaks.
- The account by Lucy Mack Smith regarding clear crystals with triangle shaped lenses is highly suspect. The accounts by Harris are more likely accurate.
- According to one account (1830, Oliver Cowdery, 3rd hand), Joseph would look into the spectacles at the plates and then put his face into the hat and inspiration would flow.
- Only used for a short period in 1827-1828. Abandoned prior to the loss of the 116 pages. Possibly lost along with the 116 pages. Not used to produce any of the current book of Mormon
- First called the “*Urim and Thummim*” by W.W Phelps in 1832 or 1833.
- By 1834, Oliver Cowdery had adopted the term Urim and Thummim and used it to describe the translation process



*The spectacles had this large/unusable size based on the belief that ancient Americans were “giants”.

No official images of the spectacles (or “Urim and Thummim”) on church’s web site(?)

Seer stones that the LDS church has in their collection

1982 account*

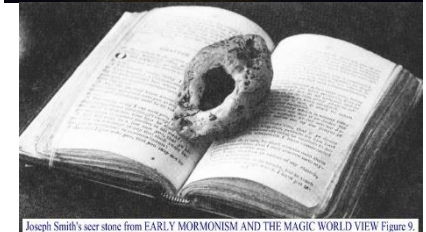
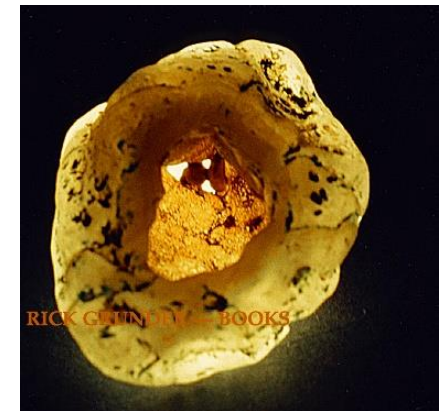
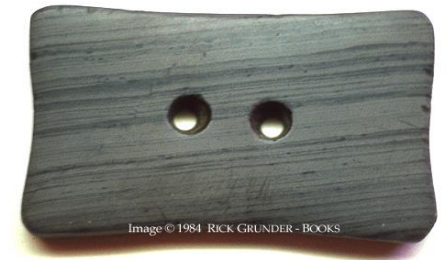
- 3 stones in collection
 - Brown stone, egg shaped
 - White stone, baby's foot shaped
 - Mystery stone(?)
- Brown stone was shown to descendant of Brigham Young



*Mary Brown Firmage interview with Richard S. Van Wagoner, 11 Aug 1986. *Van Wagoner papers*, Marriott Library

Additional stones acquired?

- 1985(?) – David or Jacob Whitmer Stone
 - *Not confirmed - Could be in a private collection*
- 1991 – Green Stone
 - Associated with Joseph Smith
 - Sold to a private party in 1991 and probably donated to the LDS church at that time.



Summary of Narratives

- Church leaders developed the Urim and Thummim narrative between 1832-1834, possibly due to embarrassment surrounding the seer stone and hat narrative or the lack of traditions regarding seer stones in Ohio among Rigdon's congregation. Phelps appears to have suggested the narrative which was then propagated by Cowdery (1834) and Smith (1835). This narrative is an extension of the spectacles which Joseph used for a brief period in 1827-1828 prior to the loss of the 116 pages.
- In the 1880s several 1st and 2nd hand accounts emerged pointing to the use of a seer stone in the creation/translation process.
- By 1905, at least some apologists & leaders addressed and accepted at least parts of the seer stone narrative including the use of the brown stone
- The seer stone narrative was taught regularly in Sunday school between 1918 and 1934. It was addressed in church literature between about 1905 and 1937. Details about the hat were almost always omitted.

Summary, cont

- After Roberts death in 1934, the church moved away from the seer stone narrative with active/strong denials starting in 1946 in response to *No Man Knows My History* by Brodie.
- Apart from a few hints at the accurate narrative in church magazines, the church first embraced a more accurate depiction of translation in 2013
- In spite of this increased accuracy/openness, the church seems reticent to provide a truly accurate image where Joseph buries his face in the hat. They created a new false image/narrative between 2015-2017 based around a cell phone usage scenario. The church fails to acknowledge that the “spectacles” or “Urim and Thummim” were not used to create the current Book of Mormon.

Select scholars who assert that Joseph Smith used the brown seer stone (alone) in a hat and not the spectacles (Urim and Thummim) to create all of the existing Book of Mormon

- Larry Morris - Joseph Smith Papers Project
 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=53z8Tly8IX0&feature=youtu.be&t=3446>
- D. Michael Quinn – historian and former BYU professor
 - See *Early Mormonism and the Magical World view* pp 171-175.
- Dan Vogel – independent scholar & historian
 - https://youtu.be/HvtUh_sekps?t=105
 - See also:
 - <https://youtu.be/ksnbSh51itg>
 - <https://youtu.be/uawcYN-O8t4>
- FairMormon – the pseudo-official apologetics site for the Mormon church:

“Text translated with the Nephite interpreters was lost with the 116 pages given to Martin Harris—see D&C 3. [The Church's *Historical Record* records Joseph's use of the seer stone to translate all of our current Book of Mormon text.](#)”

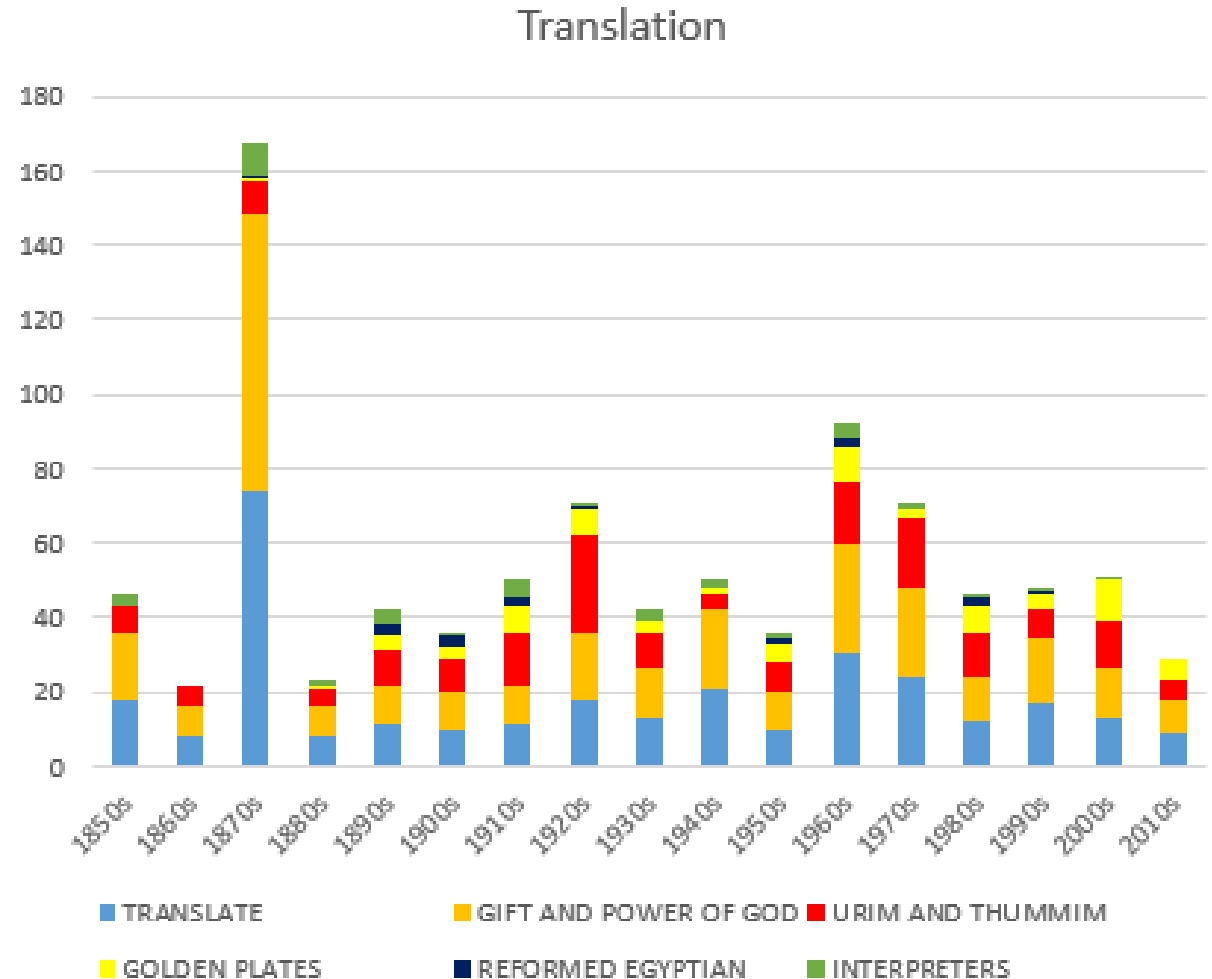
https://www.fairmormon.org/answers/Question: Has_the_Church_tried_to_hide_Joseph%27s_use_of_a_seer_stone%3F#

How leaders talk about translation in General Conference

Part of the transparency regarding the seer stone is association with how often it is mentioned relative to competitive narratives.

Although the Urim and Thummim have been mentioned 195 times in General Conference, *there has not been a single mention of the seer stone with respect to the translation of the Book of Mormon.*

Number of references per decade to various translation related terms



Implications of the true narrative

1. Joseph and Oliver lied about the translation process. They invented a narrative and embellished it changing the usage and nature of the spectacles
2. Those who related the seer stone narratives suggest that Joseph read the translation as it appeared. If this is the case, why have there been 1000s of grammatical and other corrections?
 1. If Joseph wasn't reading from the stone or a piece of parchment which appeared when he looked at the stone, was he lying about this to the early scribes (Whitmer, Harris)?

If Joseph and Oliver lied about the Book of Mormon translation, did they also lie about the priesthood? John the Baptist? Peter James and John?

Whitmer (who recorded an accurate account of the translation process) says that they made up these events about 1834-1835.

Given the huge implications on the truthfulness of the movement, it is perfectly logical for the LDS church to lie about this part of its history

Primary witnesses to the Book of Mormon

Joseph Smith - Translator

Oliver Cowdery

Martin Harris

David Whitmer

Spectacles *or* spectacles + hat *or* glass *or* Nephite Interpreters *or* Urim and Thummim *or* spectacles attached to a breastplate...

Joseph Smith - Translator

Oliver Cowdery

Evolving accounts

Told by Joseph, Oliver, and Joseph's family members

Rock in the Hat
(after the 116 pages lost)

Martin Harris

David Whitmer

Largely consistent accounts backed up by many other primary and secondary witnesses including Oliver's wife and Joseph's brother-in-law.

A detailed list of all accounts printed by the LDS church in official publications between 1850-1980 and references

- See this document: <https://docdro.id/bl67Qyk>

Disclaimers

- The author has attempted to present the information in an accurate and fair manner
- Please note:
 - I'm human. I make mistakes. Please e-mail corrections, questions, or feedback to feedback@mormonscholar.org.
 - This presentation is influenced by my personal bias. I do not believe that Joseph Smith was divinely influenced or inspired to create a church, and this bias will inevitably be reflected in this presentation.

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