

# The Gift and Power

Translating the Book of Mormon

Brant A. Gardner

GREG KOFFORD BOOKS  
SALT LAKE CITY, 2011

Copyright © 2011, Brant A. Gardner  
Cover design copyright © 2011 by Greg Kofford Books, Inc.

Cover seerstone image courtesy of Rick Grunder; manuscript image  
courtesy of Community of Christ

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any  
form or by any means without permission in writing from the  
publisher, Greg Kofford Books. The views expressed herein are the  
responsibility of the author and do not necessarily represent the  
position of Greg Kofford Books, Inc.

2015 14 13 12 11 5 4 3 2

[www.koffordbooks.com](http://www.koffordbooks.com)

---

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Gardner, Brant, author.

The gift and power : translating the Book of Mormon / Brant A.  
Gardner.

p. cm.

Summary: Book length treatment of the wide spectrum of  
questions about the Joseph Smith's translation of the Book of  
Mormon. Includes discussion about the role of folk magic, how the  
English text replicates the original plate text, and the use of seer  
stones.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-58958-131-9 (alk. paper)

1. Book of Mormon--Translating. 2. Smith, Joseph, 1805-1844. 3.  
Occultism--Religious aspects--Mormon Church. I. Title.

BX8627.G35 2011

289.3'22--dc23

2011017572

To Val



# Contents

Introduction ix

## Part 1

### History and the Translation Process

Chapter 1: Translation Stories Become History	3
Chapter 2: Understanding Joseph: Magician or Prophet?	11
Chapter 3: What Is a Magic Worldview?	23
Chapter 4: The Social Interface between Magic and Religion	31
Chapter 5: Magic and Religion in Tradition and Transition	45
Chapter 6: Joseph's Two Palmyras	53
Christianity and Christian Magic in Joseph's Palmyra	55
The English Heritage of American Magic	57
Chapter 7: Magic in Palmyra: Divining Rods and Seer Stones	65
Chapter 8: Money-Digging, Confidence Men, and Joseph	79
Chapter 9: The Event that Changed Everything	91
Chapter 10: Miracle, Not Magic: Establishing Mormonism	103
Chapter 11: The Creation of a Sacred Communal Story	109
Chapter 12: Important Stories, Told Importantly	119
A Transcript Becomes a Sealed Book	121
Interpreters Become the Urim and Thummim	127
A Hill Becomes Cumorah	129
Indians Become Lamanites	131
Reformed Egyptian Becomes Hebrew	133

## Part 2

### What Kind of Translation Is the Book of Mormon?

Chapter 13: What Does It Mean to Translate?	137
Chapter 14: Theories of Book of Mormon Translation	147
The Early Inerrant Theory of Translation	147
In the Language of the Prophet	148
Royal Skousen's Theory of the Translation	152
Analytical Categories for Examining the Evidence	155

Chapter 15: Evidence for Literalist Equivalence	157
The Process of Translating Names	157
The Archaic Vocabulary of the English Translation	163
Hebraisms and the Plate Text	165
Intertextual Quotations	176
Chapter 16: Evidence for Functional or Conceptual Equivalence	183
Translation and Grammatical Structure	183
Vocabulary and Cultural Content	185
Modern Vocabulary and Idiomatic Expressions	187
The Influence of the King James Version	192
Chapter 17: Structures in the Book of Mormon	197
Chapter 18: Joseph’s Translations Involving Biblical Texts	205
The Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible	206
Translating Biblical Texts in the Book of Mormon	215
Chapter 19: From Plate Text to English Translation	227
Vocabulary-Based Evidence	233
Syntax-Based Evidence	239
Structure-Based Evidence	239
Deciding between Functional or Conceptual Equivalence	241

### **Part 3**

#### **Translating the Book of Mormon**

Chapter 20: Who Translated the Book of Mormon?	251
Chapter 21: How Did Joseph Translate?	259
Using a Seer Stone	261
Seeing in a Stone	264
Translating with a Stone	274
Chapter 22: Assembling the Puzzle	279
Why Was Most of the Translation Functionalist Equivalence Rather than Literal?	279
Why Were Some Translations Literalist Equivalence?	280
Why Were Some Translations Conceptual Equivalence?	282
Why Didn’t Joseph Re-translate the Book of Lehi?	284
Why Did Joseph Believe the Interpreters or Seer Stone Were Essential?	288
Why Did Joseph Stop Translating with the Interpreters?	290

Why Did Joseph Stop Using the Seer Stone for Revelations?	291
Why Is the Book of Mormon Translated Correctly, But Not the Bible?	293
Why Do Skousen and Others See Specificity in the Text?	296
Why Does the Book of Mormon Use King James Version Style?	302
How Did We Get the Isaiah Passages?	303
How Did We Get the New Testament-Influenced Passages?	307
How Did We Get Revival Language?	308
How Did Literary Structures Survive Translation?	309
Why Couldn't Oliver Translate?	310
Epilogue: The Divine and Mundane in Translation	317
Bibliography	323
Index	361



# Introduction

We believe the Bible to be the word of God as far as it is translated correctly; we also believe the Book of Mormon to be the word of God. —Eighth Article of Faith

Within the framework of literary translation, the linguistic context is regarded as raw material to the translation process. Literary texts have a more sophisticated context, which implies the approximation of two cultures, two different ways of thinking, two different methods of realization and above all, two different mentalities. —Said M. Shiyab, Translation Studies Department, United Arab Emirates<sup>1</sup>

**T**his is a book about translation, but it is not about translating. It is not about how words in one language become words in another. It is not an examination of how translation should be done, but of how a particular translation was done.

The Book of Mormon was presented to the world as a translation of an ancient text recorded on golden plates that had been hidden in a hill. Through the “gift and power of God”<sup>2</sup> the text on those plates was translated from “a language that cannot be read” (Ether 3:18, see also Mormon 9:34) into English. It is perhaps the most controversial translation ever made. While millions accept it, other millions declare it a fraud. The Book of Mormon presents almost every conceivable translation controversy; from whether it is a translation, to what *kind* of translation it is, to *how* the translation was done.

I enter the controversy cautiously. There is a tremendous amount of ground to be covered if we are to understand the issues surrounding the translation of the Book of Mormon. We must range from the modern history

---

<sup>1</sup>Said M. Shiyab, *A Textbook of Translation: Theoretical and Practical Implications*, 19.

<sup>2</sup>*Book of Mormon* (1830; rpt., Independence, Mo.: Herald House, 1970), 1. This is the only statement that Joseph Smith ever gave (though repeated multiple times) to explain how he translated the Book of Mormon. James E. Lancaster, “The Translation of the Book of Mormon,” in Dan Vogel, ed., *The Word of God: Essays on Mormon Scripture*, 98, “None of Smith’s statements give detailed information about the translation of the Book of Mormon. He consistently emphasized that it was “by the gift and power of God” that the record of the Nephites was made available to the world.”

surrounding its translation to questions of correspondences between language and culture in widely disparate worlds—the ancient and the modern, the Old and the New. My intent is to discover the most economical explanation for all aspects of the Book of Mormon: from story to history, vocabulary to syntax, syntax to structure, and structure to text.

The task is doubly difficult because it requires that we understand that the Book of Mormon is a translation before any discussion of it as a translation becomes relevant. Although the arguments for its being a historical document are important, I will not address them here. I will simply begin with the assumption of its historicity. That assumption might seem to be ahead of the evidence, but it is a beginning of convenience, not of investigation. I have already been through the rest of the data and am finding a linear way to present the set of complex and interrelated evidence.<sup>3</sup>

Unfortunately for dispassionate investigation, the story of the translation of the Book of Mormon is inseparable from its claim of divine provenance. The Book of Mormon is not only a translation of an ancient text. It is a translation, miraculously accomplished, of a text miraculously preserved and miraculously delivered. The very fact of its supernatural origin has often been sufficient to decide its fate, as Catholic scholar Thomas O'Dea understood when he wrote: "The *Book of Mormon* has not been universally considered by its critics as one of those books that must be read in order to have an opinion of it."<sup>4</sup>

Douglas Robinson, professor of English at the University of Missouri and author of several books on translation and culture, puts a more focused lens on the problem: "What of writers who claim to be inspired by God, or the muse? Must we discredit their claims? They say they were inspired, they say they surrendered their will to the speaking of a higher voice from within or above, but of course *we know* that is merely a figure of speech, a metaphor, a primitive or perhaps even superstitious way of saying that they were geniuses whose creative subjectivity so far exceeds our own as translators that we might even be inclined to believe them when they speak of divine inspiration—if we didn't already know better."<sup>5</sup>

And there we have it. The presumably scientific among us already know better. The devoutly faithful already know that it came through divine power. For many, the end of their critical examination of the Book of Mormon

---

<sup>3</sup>Although not presented in any concise format, my reasons for understanding the historicity of the text are woven throughout Brant A. Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007).

<sup>4</sup>Thomas F. O'Dea, *The Mormons*, 26.

<sup>5</sup>Douglas Robinson, *Who Translates? Translator Subjectivities Beyond Reason*, 4; emphasis his.

has already been dictated by the way they began. For this reason, I must be clear about how I am approaching this task.

I begin as one of the faithful. Were that not true, I might not be willing to give sufficient weight to any evidence that sees the Book of Mormon as a translation.<sup>6</sup> In spite of that faithful beginning point, however, I have attempted to keep the investigation based on the same principles as might be applied to a secular text. Philip L. Barlow, currently in a chaired professorship at Utah State University, laid out a framework that I support:

Like all language, the term *objectivity* is ultimately metaphorical and relative; *the word has meaning only in relation to other words*. I use it broadly here as a shorthand to connote a method that embraces such values as balance, fairness, openness, integrity, the willingness to be self-critical, honesty in the attempt to present and follow even difficult or painful evidence, a modesty which respects opposing competent views, an absence of dogmatism, and the ability to produce history which seems responsible to diverse but intelligent and informed people of good will.<sup>7</sup>

I should also declare my perspective on the nature of the divine manifestations that are inherently intertwined with the Book of Mormon. I firmly believe that the works of God on earth are seen in and through very human actors. The prophets I believe in are human beings, their frail humanity blessed with a touch of the divine. I believe that God works through very natural means much more often than He displays transcendent power. Therefore, while I do believe in the text's declared provenance, I will end up with a description that is predominantly naturalistic—with a touch of the divine.

I have divided the complex task of explaining the translation of the Book of Mormon into three sections. The first deals with the history of the translation process—or how the story became history. To understand those stories the way the people who told them understood them, I will attempt to

---

<sup>6</sup>For example, note how a beginning assumption predetermines the outcome of an examination. Dan Vogel, a biographer of Joseph Smith, describes his approach to one question concerning Joseph Smith: "I do not believe in real magicians, slippery treasures, bleeding ghosts, and so I regard Smith's discovery of the tail feather as an example of fraud." Dan Vogel, *Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet*, xv. Without discussing the incident, the initial assumption required a particular interpretation of the event—an interpretation that someone with perhaps a different perspective might draw differently, even though based upon the same historical datum. In fact, the person relating the incident drew the opposite conclusion than Vogel. Josiah Stowell's testimony, in "Bainbridge, NY, Court Record, 20 March 1826," in Dan Vogel, comp. and ed., *Early Mormon Documents*, 4:251–52.

<sup>7</sup>Philip L. Barlow, *Mormons and the Bible: The Place of the Latter-day Saints in American Religion*, xvi.

recreate how people of Joseph Smith's time and location viewed their reality and how those perceptions led to both the translation process and the translation stories.

The second section moves away from the stories about the Book of Mormon's translation and into the text itself. In that section, I will examine both the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith's work on the Bible for evidence of the type of translation he produced. The goal is to establish a plausible relationship between the vocabulary, syntax, and structure of the English text and the plate text.

Third, with great trepidation, I essay to examine the most difficult question of them all. How was it done? I fully acknowledge the hubris of attempting to go beyond Joseph's simple insistence that it occurred through "the gift and power of God." Nevertheless, I present a hypothesis that I believe accounts for the discernible features and descriptions of the translation.

While the conclusions are entirely my own, I must thank Gordon C. Thomasson, who kindly reviewed the first section of this book and made numerous helpful suggestions. The Internet has allowed me to interact with Book of Mormon defenders and critics alike, both of whom have helped to define the necessary parameters of the section dealing with magic and Mormonism as well as the nature of translation. Finally, I express my heartfelt appreciation to Lavina Fielding Anderson for editing beyond the prose with her unfailing care to improve my arguments. She brings out my best thinking while still leaving me to say it.

In the interests of internal stylistic consistency and clarity for the reader, I have standardized abbreviations of books of scriptures in parenthetical citations, including in quotations, lowercased words that are in all capitals in the King James Version (e.g., "Lord"), and removed the italics that appear in the King James Version passages.

# 6

## Joseph's Two Palmyras

Although there was only one city, Palmyra, New York, was a place where two cultures met. Old ways met new ways. A primarily agricultural and traditional world was in close proximity with a newer urbanization. It was a process that played out in many American cities. By 1810, Palmyra was no longer a frontier village. It had become a town of about four thousand inhabitants. By the time the Smith family settled on the outskirts of Manchester Village, just south of Palmyra, Manchester could boast a woolen mill, a flour mill, a paper mill, a school, and a library of around six hundred volumes.<sup>1</sup> By 1812, Richard L. Bushman reports, Palmyra “offered its residents the services of two tailors, a blacksmith, several saddlers, a cooper, two lawyers, and a physician. Along the main street there were a harness shop, a tannery, a distillery, a clothier, two drugstores, a bookstore, eight other stores of unspecified contents, and four taverns.”<sup>2</sup>

The Palmyra region was part of the great diversification of the times. The Erie Canal, which passed within a few hundred feet of the city center, connected Palmyra with the larger population centers in the east. The early 1800s saw Palmyra in the beginning stages of the inexorable march to modernity. At that time the old ways lived side by side with the new. The 1820 census listed eighteen people in commerce and 190 in manufacturing, but still had 748 people who still declared agriculture as their occupation.<sup>3</sup>

Alan Taylor, a fellow at the Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, Virginia, and an assistant professor at the College of William and Mary, paints a remarkable picture of the juxtaposition of the two social worlds in Palmyra by simply focusing on Martin Harris:

[Martin Harris] was an honest, hard-working, astute man honored by his townsmen with substantial posts as fence-viewer and overseer of highways but never with the most prestigious offices: selectman, moderator, or assemblyman. In the previous generation in rural towns like Palmyra substantial farmers like Harris would have reaped the highest status and most prestigious offices. But

---

<sup>1</sup>Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith*, 9–10.

<sup>2</sup>Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism*, 43–44.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 45.

Harris lived in the midst of explosive cultural change as the capitalist market and its social relationships rode improved internal transportation into the most remote corners of the American countryside. The agents of that change were the newly arrived lawyers, printers, merchants, and respectable ministers who clustered in villages and formed a new elite committed to “improving” their towns and their humbler neighbors. The village elites belonged to a new self-conscious “middle class,” simultaneously committed to commercial expansion and moral reform. Because of their superior contacts with and knowledge of the wider world, the new village elites reaped higher standing and prestigious posts from their awed neighbors.

Utterly self-confident in their superior rationality and access to urban ideas, the village elites disdained rural folk notions as ignorant, if not vicious, superstitions that obstructed commercial and moral “improvement.” Through ridicule and denunciation, the village middle class aggressively practiced a sort of cultural imperialism that challenged the folk beliefs held by farmers like Martin Harris. Harris’s material prosperity was comparable to the village elite’s but, because of his hard physical labor and limited education, culturally he shared more with hardscrabble families like the Smiths. A village lawyer needed only scan Harris’s gray homespun attire and large stiff hat to conclude that a farmer had come to town.<sup>4</sup>

If the newly arrived elite looked to the traditions of the cities and institutions of learning, the world of the older settlers turned to common traditions of rural communities. In Palmyra, the urban tradition was represented by the new elite. They embraced the worldview of the new industrialization and modern institutions of learning. The rural tradition fed the practices of the agricultural base of the area.<sup>5</sup>

Those who lived in Palmyra at least recognized both worlds, and many understood how to move from one to the other in appropriate social situations. Both of Palmyra’s conceptual worlds were intertwined with Christian religion, but they were divided when it came to the pragmatic religion of everyday life. It is the uneasy coexistence of a rural and urban tradition in

---

<sup>4</sup>Alan Taylor, “Rediscovering the Context of Joseph Smith’s Treasure Seeking,” 21; internal references silently removed.

<sup>5</sup>Ronald W. Walker, “Joseph Smith, the Palmyra Seer,” 465: “The role of this [magic] culture in America should not be exaggerated. While some influential early Americans, such as John Wentworth, Jr., were attracted to it, by the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries Enlightenment rationalism dominated most educated circles. Thus by Joseph Smith’s time, the old ways persisted largely as a people’s movement, often in cultural backwaters like New England’s hill country, German Pennsylvania, or the emerging frontier areas of the Old Northwest.”

Palmyra that unravels some of the most crucial mysteries about Joseph Smith Jr. and the things his community had to say about him.

### Christianity and Christian Magic in Joseph's Palmyra

As part of the unprivileged farming community, Joseph received little formal education. Nevertheless, he was schooled in the home to understand life's fundamental assumptions. One was Christian religion; but like many citizens in the new United States, the Smith family was often unchurched.<sup>6</sup> Both Lucy and Joseph Sr. were unmistakably Christian but each had a different approach to organized religion. Lucy longed for it, and her husband avoided it. After recovering from a serious illness, Lucy wrote: "While we were yet living in the Town of Tunbridge I was very seriously impressed the subject of religion occasioned probably by my singular experience while sick at Randolph and I endeavored to persuade my husband to attend the methodist meeting with me he went a few times to gratify me for he had so little faith in the doctrines taught by them that my feelings were the only inducement for him to go."<sup>7</sup>

Along with their relationship to organized religion, both Lucy and Joseph Sr. were deeply involved in unorganized religion. It was the air they breathed and the science that informed their actions. One of the facets of that folk religion was a belief in the more personally accessible reality and presence of the heavenly world, a world that might be touched and understood through visions or symbolic dreams. Both Lucy and Joseph Sr. received dreams with religious content and assigned importance to them.

For example, dictating her memoirs some four decades later, Lucy took the trouble to report a symbolic dream that came as a comfort after she had retired to a grove to pray.<sup>8</sup> She similarly records her husband's symbolic dreams, dreams that were interpreted in a Christian context.<sup>9</sup> Joseph Jr.'s early home education occurred in an atmosphere of devout Christian belief that included an understanding of ways in which the reality of the heavenly world manifested itself on earth. Symbolic dreams or visions were his natural inheritance.

---

<sup>6</sup>Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People*, chap. 2.

<sup>7</sup>Lavina Fielding Anderson, ed., *Lucy's Book: A Critical Edition of Lucy Mack Smith's Family Memoir*, 291; the account is taken from Lucy's 1844–45 rough draft.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 291–92.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 294–98.

In addition to the more or less standard Christian understanding of the reality and presence of the heavenly realm, young Joseph received another cultural inheritance that consisted of understandings even older than Christianity. That understanding also dealt with a heavenly realm that was present and accessible, but one that was only sometimes considered part of the Christian religion. Lacking any better term, we call it magic, though no one who understood the world in that way would have used that label. The Joseph Smith Sr. family was hardly alone in accepting this relationship to the heavenly realm. They were simply part of a class of people, marginalized and less well educated, that followed traditional ways. Those ways were informed by an ancient science that explained how the world worked and how one worked with the world.

Jon Butler, Howard R. Lamar Professor of American Studies, History, and Religious Studies at Yale University, describes the range of religious belief in the United States during the late 1700s and early 1800s: "Laypeople held views on the natural and the supernatural that ranged from church-approved orthodoxies to officially denounced varieties of magic and the occult, with an occasional village atheist thrown in for good measure."<sup>10</sup>

The Smiths were participants in the part of the culture that took their Christianity with a heavy dose of the supernatural. They saw no contradiction between the two understandings of the spiritual world. For them, the other world was very real and very present. At times, and for specific purposes, the Christian religion accessed and entreated that other world. At other times and for other specific purposes, it could be accessed and manipulated more directly. Each technology had its place, and each assisted its believers in surviving their difficult circumstances. In churches on Sundays, Christian religion saved the soul. Every other day of the week, traditional Christian magic healed the sick, found the lost, and grew the crops. As Grant Wacker, professor of Christian history at Duke University, explains:

Many Masons attended their own lodge meetings on Saturday, then church on Sunday. . . . Thousands of rank-and-file Christians perpetuated the religious practices of their ancestors. They used divining rods to find water, amulets to ward off evil spirits, and special potions to stir affection in the opposite sex. They consulted the stars to learn their future. They sought to heal through the use of white magic and to curse through the use of black magic (terms that may have held racial overtones). Some clergymen worried about

---

<sup>10</sup>Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith*, 7.

all this mixing and matching, but most ordinary people thought nothing of it.<sup>11</sup>

Laypeople thought nothing of it because it was a world that worked for them.<sup>12</sup> Theirs were traditional ways. Theirs were inherited practices. Theirs were adaptations to a type of life that had been virtually unchanged for thousands of years.<sup>13</sup> At least portions of their understanding reflected a perspective that has been termed a magic worldview.

### The English Heritage of American Magic

To understand Christian magic in Joseph's Palmyra, we need to understand its roots in English history at least a century earlier, around the time many of Joseph Smith Jr.'s ancestors arrived in the New World.<sup>14</sup> England during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was a study in widely contrasting social achievement. It was a period that produced some of the most important literature in the English language, but up to two thirds of the male population could not read and could not write beyond signing their mark.<sup>15</sup> It was a time with high standards of living for the elite, but with an enormous population that did not share in those standards. It was a time of rapid intellectual and social change; but for a large portion of the population

---

<sup>11</sup>Grant Wacker, "Religion in Nineteenth-Century America," 168.

<sup>12</sup>Richard Godbeer, *The Devil's Dominion: Magic and Religion in Early New England*, 16: "Layfolk used magic because it was embedded in their cultural heritage and because it seemed useful."

<sup>13</sup>Taylor, "Rediscovering the Context of Joseph Smith's Treasure Seeking," 20, cautions that we must understand tradition in its living context and not assume that it remains entirely unchanged. Speaking specifically of discussions on authors writing about the connection between the magic world view and the beginnings of Mormonism, he warns:

They stress the ancient roots, continuity, and unity of occult beliefs across time and space. . . . By treating occult beliefs as a whole they miss the fact that specific beliefs are extremely revealing about the particular culture in place and time that develops them. Consequently they imply that the early Republic's treasure-seekers subscribed to a set of beliefs unchanged from the ancient Egyptians. Surely they are correct that venerable folk beliefs provided the intellectual raw materials exploited by the treasure-seekers, but they slight a second critical element: the degree to which those seekers actively, energetically, and innovatively reworked those beliefs to meet the challenges of their own place and time. To recognize the treasure-seekers' creativity we need to shed our assumption that what we call tradition was an immutable monolith. We cannot fully understand the treasure seekers if we continue to think of them as simple anachronism, as practitioners of the timeless occult who were oblivious to, or rebellious against, the larger, cosmopolitan culture's trend toward empirical rationalism.

<sup>14</sup>Val D. Rust, *Radical Origins: Early Mormon Converts and Their Colonial Ancestors*, 142–45.

<sup>15</sup>Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, 4.

very little changed in those two centuries. For the majority, the struggle continued to be, as Keith Thomas, professor of modern history at Oxford University, declares “a preoccupation with the explanation and relief of human misfortune.”<sup>16</sup>

One of the most prevalent issues of human misfortune was illness or disease. England in the eighteenth century had begun to regulate and certify its doctors, but most of the countryside had little or no access to them. In many cases, however, that may not have been to their disadvantage. Thomas Hobbes expressed undiluted skepticism: “If there were never a doctor of physic in the world, people would live longer and live better in health.”<sup>17</sup>

The country folk had long before learned to care for themselves. They met their needs as they could and petitioned God for better circumstances. Their medicine did not begin with a doctor, but more often with the backyard. Most homes grew some medicinal herbs.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, most villages had a person or persons with a more specialized knowledge of such herbs. When the need exceeded the bounds of the home, these village specialists were consulted. Men and women so designated were recognized for possessing talents above those of the rest of the community.<sup>19</sup>

Keith Thomas summarizes: “The deficiencies of contemporary medicine drove the sick into the hands of the cunning men and wise women. The slowness of communications and the lack of a police force fostered dependence upon village wizards for the recovery of stolen goods and missing persons. Ignorance of the future encouraged men to grasp at omens or to practice divination as a basis for making decisions. All such devices can be seen as attempts to counter human helplessness in the face of the physical and social environment.”<sup>20</sup>

When the Protestant reformation swept over England in the latter part of the sixteenth century, the social position of the cunning men and wise women was one of the casualties. Under Catholicism, the folk magic of the cunning men and women had enjoyed considerable acceptance. Folk magic

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 5.

<sup>17</sup>Thomas Hobbes, qtd. in *ibid.*, 14.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 12.

<sup>19</sup>Janet Oppenheim, *The Other World: Spiritualism and Physical Research in England, 1850–1914*, 24: “The other names used in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England to designate village magicians—charmers, blessers, sorcerers, witches, cunning men, wise women—all connote something more than the ability to perform clever tricks. They imply a deeper knowledge of nature, a certain affiliation with forces, both natural and supernatural, far beyond any prowess ever attributed to a nineteenth-century conjuror.”

<sup>20</sup>Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, 649–50.

was considered perhaps a gray area of religion, but it was not stigmatized.<sup>21</sup> Thomas explains how magical concepts were once intimately connected with Christian practice:

The medieval Church thus acted as a repository of supernatural power which could be dispensed to the faithful to help them in their daily problems. It was inevitable that the priests, set apart from the rest of the community by their celibacy and ritual consecration, should have derived an extra cachet from their position as mediators between man and God. It was also inevitable that around the Church, the clergy and their holy apparatus there clustered a horde of popular superstitions, which endowed religious objects with a magical power to which theologians themselves had never laid claim. A scapular, or friar's coat, for example, was a coveted object to be worn as a preservative against pestilence or the ague, and even to be buried in as a short cut to salvation. . . . The church and churchyard also enjoyed a special power in popular estimation, primarily because of the ritual consecration of the site with salt and water. The key of the church door was said to be an efficacious remedy against a mad dog; the soil from the churchyard was credited with special magical power; and any crime committed on holy ground became an altogether more heinous affair, simply because of the place where it had occurred.<sup>22</sup>

One goal of the Protestant Reformation was to remove such magical overtones from Christianity.<sup>23</sup> It was only partially successful. Jon Butler reminds us that "Protestants castigated Catholic miracles as 'magic' and, therefore, as blasphemous, but they themselves prayed for relief from drought and famine. That common people found little difference in these traditions is suggested in the history of England's Essex County, east of London. There, in the birthplace of English Puritanism, some thirty Elizabethan-era wise men and wise women invoked supernatural power each year to relieve local

---

<sup>21</sup>Karen Louise Jolly, "Magic, Miracle, and Popular Practice in the Early Medieval West: Anglo-Saxon England," 176:

Although there was conflict in early medieval society between the extremes of magic and religion—a product of the Christianizing process in which the converted and the church hierarchy redefined the acceptable and unacceptable—there were also gray areas of assimilation in which practices stemming from a similar outlook were transformed into something acceptable. The Christian Church, though openly countering magic with miracle, was not blind to this assimilation process as another means of conversion.

The extremes of magic and religion or science, although well defined in most cultures, would necessarily have such gray areas between them, a product of the influences of change over time, as the acceptable and the unacceptable were redefined.

<sup>22</sup>Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, 32.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, 51.

residents from disease, disability, and distress, even as Calvinist clerics inveighed against both Catholicism and magic.”<sup>24</sup>

The official denunciation of the practices of the cunning men and wise women created a duality in the way they were perceived. For the official, educated, and economically superior portion of English society, they were a nuisance or perhaps even associated with disreputable con artists perpetuating fraud on the local credulous communities. For those who patronized them, cunning men and wise women were respected members of the community performing valued services. This duality of perception is apparent in a brief description of a fraud trial in Kent, in 1850: “The defendant, who had the appearance of an agricultural labourer, resided at Rolvenden, where he enjoyed the reputation of being ‘a cunning man’, able to cure diseases, to explain dreams, to foretell events, to tell fortunes, and to recover lost property. He was resorted to as a wizard by the people of miles around, principally by the ignorant, but also by parties who might have been expected to know better.”<sup>25</sup>

The person writing this description was clearly part of the social group that had brought the suit. Nevertheless, it contains the indication that this particular cunning man had a wide following of believers both among the uneducated class and among those who “should have known better.”

In spite of official attempts to remove them, cunning men and wise women are reported in England’s more rural communities in 1867; at least as late as 1901, a travel book documented their presence in eastern England.<sup>26</sup> What the official position created was not the removal of these practices, but a social division defined along the lines of those who believed in the old ways and those who embraced the new. The official attempts separated the urban tradition from the rural tradition, both of which persisted even as the urban tradition attempted to eradicate portions of the rural tradition.

Those with institutionalized educations, those who lived in the larger cities, those with greater economic prosperity, and those with more sophisticated understandings of their religion viewed all forms of magic as degener-

---

<sup>24</sup>Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith*, 9.

<sup>25</sup>David Vincent, *Literacy and Popular Culture: England 1750–1914*, 172.

<sup>26</sup>Andrew Lang, “The Poltergeist Historically Considered,” 320: “It was in the summer of 1867, the year after the cattle plague had raged in the Marshes, when there was an extraordinary reversion amongst the numerous small freeholders and little tenant farmers to the use of charms and spells to safeguard their cows; and ‘wise-men’ and ‘wise-women’ reaped a harvest accordingly.” According to William Alfred Dutt, *Highways and Byways in East Anglia*, 175: “Belief in the supernatural wisdom of ‘wise women’ and ‘cunning men’ is not yet quite dead in East Anglia; but fear of exciting ridicule makes the rustics shy of admitting it.”

ate and unworthy of their religion or position. Those whose lives continued to follow the ancient rhythms of the land tended to be more practical and continue to resort to practices that had been part of the way they had lived for centuries if not millennia. Thomas quotes Jacob Burckhardt as saying that “the religion of the nineteenth century . . . was ‘rationalism for the few and magic of the many.’”<sup>27</sup>

The more educated called the village practices magic, if they were being generous, and occult in a less generous tone. Neither the practitioners nor the patrons of what outsiders called magic would have understood their practices in those terms. For them, it was simply the way to explain and alleviate human misfortune—no less religious than prayer. Indeed, prayer was often part of the magical ritual. The dividing line between what was magic and religion was then, as it had almost always been, a social definition.<sup>28</sup>

Andrew Lang, a British anthropologist of the last generation, provides an amusing example of the dual traditions in British society: “I am glad to say my people are not superstitious,” said a worthy Welsh clergyman to a friend of mine, a good folklorist, now, alas, no more, and went on to explain that there were no ghosts in the parish. His joy was damped, it is true, half-an-hour later, when his guest inquired of the schoolchildren which of them could tell him where a *buggan* was to be seen, and found there was not a child in the school but could put him on the track of one.”<sup>29</sup> Thus, urban and rural traditions persisted side by side.

British emigrants brought both urban and rural traditions to the New World. Along with the hopeful, the adventurers, and the farmers, cunning men and wise women also disembarked in the New World.<sup>30</sup>

Ideas great and small lay behind the establishment of England's New World colonies,<sup>31</sup> but life in American villages was far removed from the cities. There life replicated the conditions that had allowed the cunning

---

<sup>27</sup>Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, 666.

<sup>28</sup>Sarah Iles Johnston, “Magic,” 140: “In antiquity, *magic* (a term that I use as a shorthand way of referring to a variety of ancient Mediterranean words) almost always referred to someone else's religious practices; it was a term that distanced those practices from the norm—that is, from one's own practices, which constituted religion.”

<sup>29</sup>Andrew Lang, *Crystal Gazing: Its History and Practice, with a Discussion of the Evidence for Telepathic Scrying*, 1.

<sup>30</sup>Catherine L. Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion*, 68; see also Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith*, 67.

<sup>31</sup>Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Americans: The Colonial Experience*, describes the intent behind the development of the various colonies. The range included religious ideals in New England and Pennsylvania, a vision of an ideal society (creating a place for England's displaced), and a transplanting of the English social dream.

men and wise women to thrive for centuries in the Old Country. When the New World villages turned to the solutions of the Old World villages, it was the practicality of experience that reestablished the English rural tradition.

Richard Godbeer, a historian at the University of Miami, notes: "New Englanders turned to magic in part because it served practical ends and answered specific psychological needs. But in doing so, I do not mean to suggest that utilitarian factors alone can explain recourse to magic. People believe because they have been raised to do so, and because their beliefs made sense of the world; both inherited tradition and cognitive value are crucial factors in the persistence of a belief."<sup>32</sup>

The rural tradition of folk magic was established in the context of a very similar urban tradition that was also transported to the New World. Godbeer points out that "Puritan ministers condemned magic as blasphemous and diabolical. Magic had no place in their vision of New England"—to which he adds—"and so they were appalled to discover that colonists were using magical techniques."<sup>33</sup> Jon Butler describes the formation of both traditions without specifically using those labels:

By traditional accounts, magic and occultism died out in the eighteenth century: the rise of enlightenment philosophy, skepticism, and experimental science, the spread of evangelical Christianity, the continuing opposition from English Protestant denominations, the rise in literacy associated with Christian catechizing, and the cultural, economic, and political maturation of the colonies simply destroyed the occult practice and belief of the previous century in both Europe and America. Yet significant evidence suggests that the folklorization of magic occurred as much in America as in England. As in England, colonial magic and occultism did not so much disappear everywhere as they disappeared among certain social classes and became confined to poorer, more marginal segments of early American society.<sup>34</sup>

The pressures to eradicate magical practices were much stronger in England, though perhaps only slightly more effective. In the New World, however, the greater pressures of carving out a living in an untamed land simply increased the need to reach back in time to their less sophisticated roots. Historian Daniel Boorstin pointed out:

When a man finds himself plunged back into the conditions of an earlier age, he inevitably discovers many things. He rediscovers forgotten uses of his

---

<sup>32</sup>Godbeer, *The Devil's Dominion: Magic and Religion in Early New England*, 24.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., 5.

<sup>34</sup>Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith*, 83.

tools, and learns to think about them in the cruder categories of a primitive age. The sharp stone which early man used for killing was hardly different from the one he used for cutting, but in more developed cultures there arose a distinction between “weapon” and “tool” as each of them became a more specialized implement. Thus, in 18th-century Europe, the firearm became primarily a weapon; but for the colonial American backwoodsman, who had to protect himself and his family from marauding savages and who often shot meat for his table, the distinction between weapon and tool once again had little meaning. What was true of implements was also true of institutions and occupations. Under primitive conditions, there seem to have been few distinctions among those who practiced the different modes of healing and curing—between the man who muttered the incantation, the man who inserted the knife, and the man who mixed the potion.<sup>35</sup>

The combination of tradition and renewed necessity guaranteed that, as Godbeer notes: “Cunning folk lived and provided magical services in every kind of New England town: in farming communities, seaports, and on the frontier.”<sup>36</sup> Traditional communities held on to the old ways, including folk magic, well into the early part of the twentieth century.<sup>37</sup> Palmyra in the 1820s was no exception.

---

<sup>35</sup>Boorstin, *The Americans*, 192.

<sup>36</sup>Godbeer, *The Devil's Dominion*, 30.

<sup>37</sup>Herbert Passin and John W. Bennett, “Changing Agricultural Magic in Southern Illinois: A Systematic Analysis of Folk-Urban Transition,” 314–28, and Vance Randolph, *Ozark Magic and Folklore*.



# 7

## Magic in Palmyra: Divining Rods and Seer Stones

It is probable that the direction of Joseph Smith's early life was influenced by wells. When his family moved to Palmyra, they spent a year and a half as poor laborers while they scraped together enough funds to buy the land that made them poor farmers. Lucy painted oilcloth table coverings. Joseph Sr. and his sons hired out during the seasonal labor of haying or harvesting and also dug wells.<sup>1</sup> As one of the laborers, digging wells would certainly have taught Joseph Jr. something about hard work. More importantly for future events, however, it was also likely his introduction to a particular folk conception of the supernatural world. Moroni would later tell Joseph that his "name should be had for good and evil among all nations, kindreds, and tongues, or that it should be both good and evil spoken of among all people" (JS—History 1:33). Some of the good and ill may be traced to digging wells and what he learned beyond how to use a shovel.

Both Joseph Smith Sr. and Joseph Smith Jr. performed functions that would place them in the tradition of cunning men with special talents. Although the evidence is somewhat thin, it appears that Joseph Sr. was a "dowser," or "water witch,"<sup>2</sup> a useful and respected profession. It is most like-

---

<sup>1</sup>Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*, 31. Mark Ashurst-McGee, "A Pathway to Prophethood: Joseph Smith Junior as Rodsman, Village Seer, and Judeo-Christian Prophet," 85, cites several secondary historical sources.

<sup>2</sup>The evidence is reasonably good that Joseph Smith Sr. used a divining rod, which was the prime tool of the dowser. Richard L. Anderson, "The Mature Joseph Smith and Treasure Searching," 527, quotes a letter from Joseph Sr.'s brother Jesse Smith, in which Jesse indicates that Joseph Sr. had "a wand or rod." Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, 30–31, also cites Jesse Smith's letter and the Hurlbut affidavits concerning Joseph Sr.'s use of a divining rod in Palmyra. The strongest evidence appears to connect the use of the rod to money-digging, but that is probably a function of the way the affidavits were collected rather than a complete picture of how such things were used. Dan Vogel, *Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet*, 10, places a rod in Joseph Sr.'s hands by way of a recollection by James Colin Brewster, "who claimed to have participated with Joseph Sr. and others in hunting for treasure using mineral rods in Kirtland, Ohio." Brewster also claimed that the elder Smith had

ly that the Smith family was employed not only for their muscle to dig wells, but for the skill to find them in the first place. The value of this talent can be seen in the Ozarks. As late as the 1940s, nearly all of the older wells had been located by a “water witch.”<sup>3</sup> A Massachusetts magazine printed in 1825 lays down the common understanding of both the device used and those who used it: “Men of reputation and character, whose intelligence would prevent a deception upon their own minds, and whose known honesty forbids the suspicion of any attempt to lead others into error, have used the . . . art of discovering streams of water or veins of minerals beneath the surface of the earth by the mysterious properties of the hazel wand.”<sup>4</sup>

Folklorist Vance Randolph’s experiences in the Ozarks during the 1930s and ‘40s provide an important glimpse into a living culture that supported these specialists. He specifically notes that these were not talents unique to the uneducated. He developed an acquaintance with a physician, the only college-educated person in the village, who finally admitted to being a water witch. Randolph went with the doctor as he demonstrated the technique. As Randolph describes the occasion:

After a little more talk we went to an old peach orchard, where the doctor trimmed up a nice witch stick. The thing looked very much like a slingshot handle, except that it was nearly three feet long. Climbing through the fence, we strode out into a big pasture. Thrusting the stick forward, St. John walked across the rocky hillside, with me close at his heels. Suddenly, he hesitated, then moved forward very slowly, the green switch turning and twisting in his hands. There he stood, holding the thing as if it were a living, writhing reptile.

“Look at that!” he cackled triumphantly. “I couldn’t hold it still if I tried! It would twist the bark right off the God damn’ stick!”

I shivered a little and felt as if the hair were rising on the back of my neck. There was something uncanny and obscene about that witch stick.

“Let me have the thing a minute,” I said shakily.

St. John handed it over, and I carried it back and forth exactly as he had done. But nothing happened. The stick in my hands was just a stick, and nothing more.

---

been participating in money digging for “more than thirty years.” The context implies that he would have used a mineral rod at that time as well. A mineral rod is another term for the witching wand, probably associated with its use at times to discover metal or other non-water substances below the surface of the earth.

<sup>3</sup>Vance Randolph, *Ozark Magic and Folklore*, 82.

<sup>4</sup>“The Divining Rod,” *Worcester Magazine and Historical Record* 1 (October 1825): 27–29, quoted in Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, 29.

The moment I returned it to the doctor the thing began to twist about and point to the ground, just as it had before. Evidently the power, whatever it is, resides in the man and not in the witch stick itself.<sup>5</sup>

As Randolph discovered, these were talents that not all shared. For that reason, those who possessed an ability (such as finding water so that a well might be dug) were respected in the community that supported them. David Frankfurter, professor of religious studies and history at the University of New Hampshire, explains how folk magic worked in the communities supporting that rural tradition:

Certainly everyone in every culture knows some of this lore—or at least has the ability to construct ritual and amulet out of available materials. But some individuals gain this knowledge as members of families that maintain sizeable ritual traditions, handed down along male or female lines. And some individuals, whether by virtue of this inheritance, their skill at ritual synthesis, their professed intimacy with divine beings, or some other attribute, function as community experts in the ritual negotiation of life and its vicissitudes. That is, one seeks out their blessings, their cures, their talents. It is a type of *charisma*, in the sense of a supernatural prestige with which someone is endowed in the eyes of others: a social *status*.<sup>6</sup>

Many of the practices were understood precisely in the way that Vance Randolph described his experience with Dr. St. John. In the hands of the one with the gift, the physical medium (in his case, the witching stick) was a thing alive—imbued with supernatural capabilities. In other hands, it was a dead stick.

This is the essence of most early American folk magic. Suprahuman powers were controlled by a few special people who had been gifted with the ability to touch the supernatural and harness it for the community's benefit. These special practitioners held a social status that was not the same as that of a religious practitioner. The cunning men, wise women, and the official religious leader performed their respective social functions without a perceived conflict or overlap in the eyes of their rural constituents.

It is probable that Joseph Jr.'s first experiences with his talent came in the context of water witching.<sup>7</sup> He would have not only learned about it

---

<sup>5</sup>Randolph, *Ozark Magic and Folklore*, 83.

<sup>6</sup>David Frankfurter, "Dynamics of Ritual Expertise in Antiquity and Beyond: Towards a New Taxonomy of 'Magicians,'" 160–61.

<sup>7</sup>*Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, 36, provides several secondary sources opining that Joseph Jr. had used a divining rod. The water witching context is not clear in Quinn's use of the references.

from his father but found in his father's use of the rod a favorable climate in which he might discover if he had a similar talent. Historian Mark Ashurst-McGee summarizes the statements indicating Joseph's early work with, and use for, the divining rod:

In 1885, Isaac Butts, a former school-mate of Joseph's, stated that "Young Jo had a forked witch-hazel rod with which he claimed he could locate buried money or hidden things. . . ." Sarah F. Anderick, an old school friend of Joseph's older sister Sophronia, reminisced about Joseph's claims. She stated, "when a young man, he could tell where lost or hidden things and treasures were buried or located with a forked witch hazel . . . ."

Investigators gathered similar reports. Frederic G. Mather, who interviewed Orlando Saunders in 1880, affirmed that Smith used a rod. . . . Ellen E. Dickinson, who interviewed New York neighbors the following year, also affirmed that "he carried a rod of witch-hazel, to assist in the discovery of water." Disciples of Christ preacher Clark Braden, who corresponded with old Palmyrans in preparation for his 1884 debate with RLDS elder Edmund L. Kelley, spoke of Joseph's "primitive, supernatural capacity as a water-witch." James H. Kennedy, who interviewed neighbors in preparation for his 1888 publication, confirmed Butts and Anderick: "The first venture made by young Smith in the line of mystification was as a 'Water Witch.'"<sup>8</sup>

Although young Joseph most likely learned to use the divining rod from his father, his particular talent would not be in finding wells with the rod. Young Joseph's talent differed from that of his father, though it partook of the same spiritual understanding that credited power to a dowser and his or her instrument. Where Joseph Sr. *felt* the rod tell him where water was hidden, Joseph Jr.'s talent was to *see* that which was hidden.

The cunning men and wise women covered a range of specialized talents. They were rarely (if ever) all present in the same person. Nevertheless, each special talent had its special uses. Each community understood both the individuals upon whom they could call, and what type of service each might provide.<sup>9</sup> Although there was some overlap in the functions to which one

---

<sup>8</sup>Ashurst-McGee, "A Pathway to Prophethood," 132–33. I have removed statements that mentioned Joseph's seer stone or peep stone. The important information for this discussion concerns Joseph's use of the rod in connection with finding water. For Joseph's use of seer stones, see the remainder of this chapter.

<sup>9</sup>Frankfurter, "Dynamics of Ritual Expertise in Antiquity and Beyond," 161: "The variety of concerns that ritual experts address extends from healing and protection to the finding of lost things and the retention of husbands and lovers. Indeed, local cultures invariably have a diversity of ritual experts in various forms of healing and divination; and much as some cultures 'map' their regional saint-shrines according to specialty, so also do people perceive and map the diversity of ritual experts according to such features as their specialties, their talents, their

might apply the divining rod, the use of a seer stone (also called a peep stone) was a different specialty and was usually consulted for different reasons. In the Palmyra area, the specialty had become more or less codified to the use of a stone. In other areas and throughout history, the same art that allowed specialists to see in a stone was expressed through other media, such as crystal balls, the sheen of spilt ink, or the glare of a sword blade in the sun.<sup>10</sup>

Those who saw with and through the various media were called scryers or seers.<sup>11</sup> The religious history of seeing through the use of these special media stretches to (and beyond) the Old Testament. The story of Joseph in Egypt has a tense moment when Joseph has his servants hide money in his brother's bags, but a cup in Benjamin's. It was not an ordinary cup. Genesis 44:5 reports (from the King James Version): "Is not this it in which my lord drinketh, and whereby indeed he divineth?" E. A. Speiser, chairman of the Department of Oriental Studies at the University of Pennsylvania, comments on this verse: "Divination by means of liquids is well attested, especially in Mesopotamia. Oil or water was poured into a bowl or cup, and omens were then based on the appearance of the liquids inside the container; thence the importance of the receptacle was likely to exceed its intrinsic value."<sup>12</sup> Scrying was not only an old profession but a holy one, since Christian practitioners could trace it to the Bible.

By the time scryers or seers in England begin appearing in the records (between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries), the functions to which they applied their talents had evolved into two general forms; seeing a hidden future, and seeing the location of lost things (or the identity of the thief of stolen things). In the absence of police forces, this last ability was

---

means of power, their relative proximity or marginality, their adherence to an official religion or tradition, and their relative novelty."

<sup>10</sup>Deanna J. Conway, *Crystal Enchantments: A Complete Guide to Stones and Their Magical Properties*, 291–93. According to Andrew Lang, *Crystal Gazing: Its History and Practice, with a Discussion of the Evidence for Telepathic Scrying*, 32:

Not only is the plain crystal, or its congener the black stone, used, together with its first cousin the mirror, and the primitive substitute of water, but almost any bright object seems to have been employed at one time or another. Thus we find the sword among the Romans; and in mediaeval Europe polished iron is suggested in Faust's Höllenzwant; lamp-black is sometimes smeared on the hand, or . . . a pool of ink poured into it; visions are seen in smoke and flame, in black boxes, in jugs, and on white paper.

<sup>11</sup>The term used to describe the practice, "scrying," is derived from "descry," meaning to reveal. Conway, *Crystal Enchantments*, 291. See also Donald Tyson, *Scrying for Beginners*, 5.

<sup>12</sup>E. A. Speiser, *Genesis: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, THE ANCHOR BIBLE, 333 note 5.

particularly valuable.<sup>13</sup> In Joseph Smith's Palmyra, this ancient specialty not only survived, but was widely practiced there and in neighboring communities holding to the rural tradition. In historian D. Michael Quinn's words: "Until the Book of Mormon thrust young Smith into prominence, Palmyra's most notable seer was Sally Chase, who used a greenish-colored stone. William Stafford also had a seer stone, and Joshua Stafford had a 'peepstone which looked like white marble and had a hole through the center.'"<sup>14</sup>

Although the historical record has become distorted to focus primarily on use of seer stones in treasure-digging, Sally Chase and her fellow seers would have more commonly fulfilled the typical seeric functions of telling fortunes and seeing things that were lost, hidden, or stolen.<sup>15</sup> Richard Bushman specifically notes that Chauncy Hart and an unnamed man in Susquehanna County both had seer stones, which they used to find lost objects.<sup>16</sup>

The historical record concerning the Palmyra seers is simultaneously better and worse than for other communities. It is better because more information remains. It is worse because that information exists in direct connection to Joseph Smith and has often been distorted by the presence of that strong historical magnet.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, we can discern from some of the reports that, before the Golden Bible complicated matters, Joseph and the other Palmyra seers served their traditional functions.<sup>18</sup>

Community members Lorenzo and Benjamin Saunders gave affidavits in response to questions about Joseph Smith, but their reminiscences contain important information about Sally Chase. In 1884, Lorenzo recollected:

<sup>13</sup>Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, 215, 217.

<sup>14</sup>Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, 38.

<sup>15</sup>Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, 656. Richard Godbeer, *The Devil's Dominion: Magic and Religion in Early New England*, 33, suggests that the functions of seers evolved in the New World: "The use of divination to recover stolen property may have been rendered unnecessary by the informal but effective system of surveillance that New Englanders exercised over each other and that facilitated the detection of criminal activity. New England diviners operated primarily as fortune-tellers." Perhaps he is correct for early Puritan New England, but the evidence specifically for Palmyra shows that lost items were perhaps even more important than fortune-telling in that community.

<sup>16</sup>Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism*, 70.

<sup>17</sup>"William Smith Interview with E. C. Briggs, 1893," in Dan Vogel, comp. and ed., *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:512, provides a fascinating perspective on how Joseph altered local perceptions. "We never knew we were bad folks until Joseph told his vision. We were considered respectable till then, but at once people began to circulate falsehoods and stories in a wonderful way."

<sup>18</sup>Ronald W. Walker, "Joseph Smith, the Palmyra Seer," 465, wrote: "[Joseph] blessed crops, found lost articles, predicted future events or prophesied—the classic labor of an Old Testament-oriented village seer." I agree with Walker's assessment except for his claim that Joseph predicted future events and discuss the reasons for my disagreement in Chapter 9.

I tell you when a man will <tell> me that anyone can get a stone, & see knowledge of futurity, I say that he is a liar & the truth is not in him. Steve Mungou lost his pocket book in the road with some \$50 in money in it. He went right to Sally Chase to get her to look & see where it was; She went & looked. He was drawing wood out of the woods. She said that pocket book lays right at the side off a log in the woods where you loaded that wood. It lays right at the side of the log well we went & hunted & raked the ground over where she said but could not find it. It past along & finally one night got a paper from Canadagua [Canandaigua, New York], & in it was that a pocket book was found & taken to an old Ontario Bank[.] Took it there & the owner could come & describe his book. And he went & found his pocket book at the bank. I lost [a] drag tooth out of my drag, dragging on my brothers premises there; I says: Sally, tell me where is that drag tooth? She told me "it lays in a log heap." She says I think it lays a little past you will find it.

I went & hunted & hunted but could not find it there. I afterwards found it away over in one corner of the field.<sup>19</sup>

Benjamin added: "My oldest Brother had some Cattle stray away. She claimed she could see them but they were found right in the opposite direction from where she said they were."<sup>20</sup>

These two statements each do two things. The first is that they confirm that Sally Chase's clients consulted her as they would have a traditional seer. Caroline Rockwell Smith confirms that: "Sally Chase, a Methodist, had one [a peepstone] and people would go for her to find lost and hidden or stolen things."<sup>21</sup> When something was lost, you consulted the local seer. The second aspect of both affidavits was the very specific denial that she found anything. Those statements are equally instructive, but of something very different. Had Sally Chase never been right, she would never have had clients. She certainly wouldn't have had repeat clients (as even the Saunders brothers appear to have been).

The addition of the qualification that she was wrong should be seen as responding to the conditions under which the affidavits were collected long after the fact, not to the historical situation itself.<sup>22</sup> The man collecting the

---

<sup>19</sup>Laurenzo Saunders Interview, 12 November 1884," in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:154–55.

<sup>20</sup>Benjamin Saunders Interview, Circa September 1884," in *ibid.*, 2:139.

<sup>21</sup>Caroline Rockwell Smith Statement, 25 March 1885," in *ibid.*, 2:199.

<sup>22</sup>Richard L. Anderson, "Joseph Smith's New York Reputation Reappraised," 288–90, discusses how the collector may influence the contents of such affidavits. However, Rodger I. Anderson, *Joseph Smith's New York Reputation Reexamined*, chap. 1 summarizes the issues and the following chapters analyze the affidavits. He challenges Richard Anderson's conclusions and argues that the affidavits are representative of authentic remembrances. Marvin S. Hill,

affidavits represented both the urban tradition sentiments and specifically the antagonism of that tradition to the rural tradition folk magic. The Saunders brothers had been participants in the rural tradition; but in the context of the questioner and the reasons for the questions, it was in their own best interest to distance themselves from folk magic—which they did by giving details about Sally’s failures. Werner H. Kelber, Isla Carroll and Percy E. Turner Professor Emeritus in Biblical Studies at Rice University, describes what was likely the process that generated the denials of effectiveness:

If a message is alien to an audience, or a matter of indifference, or socially unacceptable, it will not be continued in the form in which it was spoken. It will either have to be altered, that is, adjusted to prevailing social expectations, or eliminated altogether. This fundamental fact of *preventive censorship* has not adequately been taken into account by a scholarship whose prime focus was (and is) on linear growth patterns. But auditory amnesia and resultant discontinuity constitute an epistemological issue for oral transmission no less important than the indeterminacy principle for classical physics. Forgetting is a form of death ever present in oral life.<sup>23</sup>

Vance Randolph noticed some of the same tendency in his informants: “In all the years of my collecting I have never known a hillman to admit a belief in anything which he regarded as superstition. ‘I aint superstitious myself,’ one old man told me, ‘but some things that folks *call* superstitious is just as true as God’s own gospel!’ Most of the real old-timers adhere to traditions wild and strange, and the fact that many of them contradict each other matters not at all.”<sup>24</sup>

The Saunders brothers told what they knew, which was that Sally Chase was considered a seer. They provided information that clearly allows us to see her in the context in which she operated. However, the obvious negative information is more likely coming from the Saunders brothers’ need to sepa-

---

Review of Rodger I. Anderson, *Joseph Smith’s New York Reputation Reexamined*, 71, designates the “he said/then he said” nature of the problem: “Richard Anderson rejected conversations attributed to Joseph Smith by the Hurlbut witnesses because they may have been garbled. Rodger Anderson responds that it is equally likely that they were recalled accurately.” The issue is certainly complicated and certainly important. My personal analysis of the affidavits suggests that they all seem to include hints that something other than simple recollection has informed parts of what has been recorded, and I conclude that both Andersons are probably correct to some degree. These affidavits contain important information, but not information that can be used without understanding the context in which they were collected and the pressures that may have distorted their memories, no matter how subtly.

<sup>23</sup>Werner H. Kelber, *The Oral and the Written Gospel: The Hermeneutics of Speaking and Writing in the Synoptic Tradition, Mark, Paul, and Q*, 28–29.

<sup>24</sup>Randolph, *Ozark Magic and Folklore*, 6.

rate themselves from a context that was clearly no longer acceptable (and certainly not acceptable to the person collecting the affidavits). Canadians Michael Ross of the University of Waterloo and Anne E. Wilson of Wilfred University (both in their respective psychology departments), state it succinctly: "Autobiographical memory is a constructive process. . . . People's current goals and knowledge influence recollections."<sup>25</sup>

All seers would have their failures as well as their successes, so the Saunders brothers should not be seen as prevaricating.<sup>26</sup> In the more typical context of the rural tradition, we can confidently expect that they would tell stories of successes. But when confronted by the urban tradition, the Saunders brothers focused on the failures. They simply selected the tales based on the audience to whom they were speaking. Their social context for their reminiscences created the filter for their remembrances.<sup>27</sup>

Joseph Smith, long before Moroni's plates altered his position as a local seer, appears to have functioned very much the same way Sally Chase did. In one story, Joseph was consulted in connection with a lost pocket-book:

But the crowning of his reputation is yet to be told. Judge Clark, mentioned above, went to Canandaigua and got money from the bank. He wore, as was the fashion at that time, a large overcoat with pockets in each side, where a large pocket-book and handkerchief found a deposit. Judge Clark, when he got to my house, found his pocket-book and money missing, and he was extremely troubled about it. Some one said, "Why don't you ask Joe Smith to look into his stones and tell you where you lost it and where it can be found?" And so much was said, the Judge says, "Well, Smith, look into your stones and tell me where it is and whether I shall find it." Smith knew well the road from Canandaigua to Buffalo, and as soon as the cunning scamp looked into his stones, says, "I can see it. Didn't you ride down into the Honeyough to water your horse?" (a living spring of running water, a steep bank down to it, and muddy, between Bloomfield and Genesee river). The Judge thought a moment, and said, "Yes, I believe I did." Smith says in a moment, "I see it. You

---

<sup>25</sup>Michael Ross and Anne E. Wilson, "Constructing and Appraising Past Selves," 232, 233.

<sup>26</sup>Elizabeth Lloyd Mayer, *Extraordinary Knowing: Science, Skepticism, and the Inexplicable Powers of the Human Mind*, 45–46, reports that one seer she consulted warned: "I'm pretty good, maybe ninety percent, but I gotta tell you, I'm not a hundred percent."

<sup>27</sup>Michael Schudson, "Dynamics of Distortion in Collective Memory," 346: "Memory is social. It is social, first of all, because it is located in institutions rather than in individual human minds in the form of rules, laws, standardized procedures, and records, a whole set of cultural practices through which people recognize a debt to the past (including the notion of 'debt' itself) or through which they express moral continuity with the past (tradition, identity, career, curriculum. These cultural forms store and transmit information that individuals make use of without themselves 'memorizing' it."

stooped over to let your horse's head down, and your pocket-book fell out of your pocket and fell into the creek, and it floated down the stream, and I can see it lodged against a limb fallen into the creek." The Judge went back to the Honeyough and down the creek, but no pocket-book was to be seen. He returned to the place where he rode into the creek, which was a muddy place, and upon the bank, he saw the object of his search. It seemed, as his horse plunged out of the mud, the pocket-book was thrown out upon the bank. The Judge returned much elated, and although what Smith said and saw was not true, only the shrewd thought to ask the Judge about watering his horse in the Honeyough, knowing, no doubt, it was a steep, muddy place. But it raised Smith's reputation.<sup>28</sup>

Quinn reports another consultation about a lost horse: "E. W. Vanderhoof [writing in 1905] remembered that his Dutch grandfather once paid Smith seventy-five cents to look into his 'whitish, glossy, and opaque' stone to locate a stolen mare. The grandfather soon 'recovered his beast, which Joe said was somewhere on the lake shore and [was] about to be run over to Canada.' Vanderhoof grouched that 'anybody could have told him that, as it was invariably the way a horse thief would take to dispose of a stolen animal in those days.'"<sup>29</sup> Both of these stories conclude with the same flavor of disapproval as the Saunders brothers' stories about Sally Chase, but with the small difference that they report a favorable outcome to the consultation. Nevertheless, the important aspect of both sets of stories is not whether they were later considered effective but the basic fact that Sally Chase's clients consulted her to find lost things and so did Joseph Smith's on at least two occasions.

Although the historical focus on Palmyra seers tends to overemphasize their function in money-digging, the proper context for seer stones is much

---

<sup>28</sup>Samuel D. Green, "Joseph Smith, the Mormon," *The Christian Cynosure* 10, no. 12 (December 20, 1877), <http://www.sidneyrigdon.com/dbroadhu/IL/mischig.htm#122077> (accessed February 2010).

<sup>29</sup>Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1987), 39. This incident is also reported in Mark Ashurst-McGee, "A Pathway to Prophethood," 243–44. Although both describe the same event, Quinn adds the disclaimer that it was a logical guess, and Ashurst-McGee ends the quotation with the success of the enterprise. Quinn does not appear to want Joseph's seeric ability to actually be effective, but Ashurst-McGee sees the incident as confirmation of Joseph's talent. I find the two historians' use of the same incident an interesting reflection of their own selection bias. In this case, however, the statement confirms both the hypothesis that Joseph operated in the same way as other seers as well as the social pressures that eventually led to the need to distance oneself from a belief in such things. Vanderhoof and the Saunders brothers related historical events and colored their responses with a then-current social reaction to a rural tradition event.

broad, not only in function but also in geographic spread.<sup>30</sup> One of the seer stones that Joseph owned had reportedly been owned by earlier seers. The story has some historical problems and may not tell us much about Joseph's association with this particular stone, but the description of the stone's history tells us that it came credentialed with the ability to perform the expected functions:

Mr. J. B. Buck narrates the following: —The stone which [Joe Smith] afterwards used was then in the possession of Jack Belcher, of Gibson, who obtained it while at Salina, New York, engaged in drawing salt. Belcher bought it because it was said to be “a seeing stone.” I have often seen it. It was a green stone, with brown, irregular spots on it. It was a little longer than a goose's egg, and about the same thickness. When he brought it home and covered it with a hat, Belcher's little boy was one of the first to look into the hat, and as he did so he said he saw a candle. The second time he looked in he exclaimed, “I've found my hatchet!” —(it had been lost two years)—and immediately ran for it to the spot shown him through the stone, *and it was there*. The boy was soon beset by neighbors far and near to reveal to them hidden things, and he succeeded marvelously. Even the wanderings of a lost child were traced by him—the distracted parents coming to him *three* times for directions, and in each case finding signs that the child had been in the places he designated, but at last it was found starved to death.<sup>31</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup>Wayland D. Hand, “Magic and the Supernatural in Utah Folklore,” 59: “These New England and Pennsylvanian treasure tales recall a body of material familiar in German and European folklore. As I searched contemporary American traditions chronicled by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century writers, I found tales of the Erdspiegel (earth mirror), a device for divining what lies beneath the surface of the earth, which has been used for generations, and is still found in the folklore of the Pennsylvania-German country.”

Priddy Meeks, “Journal of Priddy Meeks,” typescript, [http://arrollhalladay.familytreeguide.com/Priddy Meeks1234.doc](http://arrollhalladay.familytreeguide.com/Priddy%20Meeks1234.doc) (accessed February 2010): “Seer Stones, or peep-stones as they are more commonly called, were very plenty [plentiful] about Parowan [Utah]. I[,] rather being a gifted person in knowing a peep-stone when seeing one, altho [sic] I have never found one yet that I could see in, a seer-stone appears to me to be the connecting link between the visible and invisible world.”

<sup>31</sup>E. C. Blackman, “History of Susquehanna County, Pa.,” 1873, p. 477, as quoted in I. Woodbridge Riley, *The Founder of Mormonism: A Psychological Study of Joseph Smith, Jr.*, 187. This is the only report that Joseph purchased a stone from someone else. Although such an event is possible, I suspect that it is a recollection of convenience. It allowed Buck to relate a story he knew about a seer stone in conjunction with the requested reminiscence of Joseph Smith. While perhaps not an accurate description of one of Joseph Smith's stones, it is nevertheless accurate in its depiction of the uses of such stones. “J. B. Buck Account, Circa 1873,” in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 4:335, has the same account.

A report from 1886 assigns at least some credit for the discovery of the Comstock lode to Mrs. Eilley Bowers, the “Washoe Seeress,”<sup>32</sup> who used a seer stone to see the rich ore beneath the earth. “I can find out all manner of things with it,” said the seeress. “If anything is stolen I can find the thief, and the article stolen. By looking into the peep-stone I can see the faces of the dead; can trace persons that are missing; can see hidden treasure, and can see rich ore lying deep in the ground.”<sup>33</sup> This is a rather full description of the classic functions of a seer.

Seeing with seer stones was never unique to Palmyra, or to Joseph Smith. Many others held to such a tradition, and some took it with them after joining the Church and journeying to Utah. Folklorists have found stories of seer stones used in Cache Valley—significantly, to find lost or hidden objects rather than treasure seeking.<sup>34</sup> The common thread tying together the various reports of seers and their stones outside of Palmyra emphasizes the traditional uses for the stone.<sup>35</sup>

---

<sup>32</sup>Rich Moreno, “Backyard Traveler by Rich Moreno,” Blog for Wednesday, December 13, 2006, “Home of the ‘Washoe Seeress’” <http://backyardtraveler.blogspot.com/2006/12/home-of-washoe-seeress.html>, accessed March 2011. “Eilley Bowers was born Allison Orum in Scotland in 1826 (her nickname was Eilley). At the age of 15, she married a Mormon missionary and traveled to the United States. The couple first settled in Illinois, then moved to Salt Lake City.”

The Bowers would have settled in Nauvoo or close by. It is therefore possible that she learned of seer stones from that environment. However, the Nauvoo period saw the seer stones in the context of revelation, not of fortune telling or discovering hidden ore. Those were the older functions. Because those functions were also important in Scottish lore (known as Scottish second sight), it is probable that she learned to use the stone from her Scottish background.

<sup>33</sup>William Wright (pen name Dan De Quille), “Snow-Shoe Thompson,” 429–30. Wright gives the name L. S. Bowers, but clearly intends Eilley Bowers who was called the “Washoe Seeress.”

<sup>34</sup>According to Hand, “Magic and the Supernatural in Utah Folklore,” 59, “The use of peepstones in Utah is reported, so far as I know, only in the Logan area, but may have been known in other parts of the state. The woman who used the peepstone in Cache Valley recovered lost items and located straying livestock but was not involved in treasure seeking. According to the Fifes, this fabled stone also revealed two ‘peepstone brides,’ beautiful twins destined for plural marriage.”

<sup>35</sup>J. W. Gunnison, *The Mormons, or Latter-Day Saints, in the Valley of the Great Salt Lake: A History of Their Rise And Progress, Peculiar Doctrines, Present Condition, and Prospects*, 89, reports: “They used what in Scotland are denominated ‘Seer-stones,’ through which persons, born under peculiar circumstances, can see things at a distance, or future events passing before their eyes, or things buried in the earth.” Wright, “Snow-Shoe Thompson,” 429, reports that the “Washoe seeress” brought her seer stone with her from Scotland. See Lewis Spence, *Second Sight: Its History and Origins*, 147, for the story of a seer from the town of Brahan who used a stone with a hole in the middle.

Seen in this wider and longer view, both Sally Chase and Joseph Smith fulfilled the expected functions of a wise woman and cunning man. Even through their failures, local seers performed valuable community functions.<sup>36</sup> If the traditions of Old England still held true, village seers (along with the other specialties of the cunning men and wise women) were both important and respected. Thomas describes their social position in the old English villages: “The attempt by the theologians to wipe out the distinction between black and white witches by branding them both as diabolical never got through to the people to whom these witches ministered. On the contrary, they were more likely to believe that the cunning folk were taught by God, or that they were helped by angels, or even that they possessed some divinity of their own. The common people, wrote Thomas Cooper, assumed that the power of these wizards came by ‘some extraordinary gift of God’. They honoured cunning men, wrote another, ‘no less than demi-gods.’”<sup>37</sup>

The attempt by the New World preachers to declare such practices diabolical similarly had little effect on those who practiced and patronized the American cunning men and wise women.<sup>38</sup> Although all of the evidence we have for these Palmyra seers comes from long after it was no longer fashionable for all of society to respect them, the widespread continuing presence of wise women and cunning men strongly suggests that they were revered within the community that patronized them.<sup>39</sup> D. Michael Quinn recognized this dichotomy of perception: “Early Americans who did not share the magic world view condemned such beliefs and practices as irrational and anti-religious, but intelligent and religious Americans who perceived reality from a magic view regarded such beliefs and practices as both rational and religious.”<sup>40</sup> Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that such practices were accommodated into a religious framework rather than assuming that they *were* religious. In the folk communities, both methods touched a supernatural reality, but the priests held sway over religion and Sunday practice. The

---

The connection between seers and Scotland led to an interesting denial of Joseph Smith's talent. Riley, *The Founder of Mormonism*, 189, asserts: “The story that Joseph's ‘gift’ was ‘Scotch second sight’ is well founded but not true; his ancestry was English.”

<sup>36</sup>Mayer, *Extraordinary Knowing*, 45–46.

<sup>37</sup>Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, 266.

<sup>38</sup>Richard Godbeer, *The Devil's Dominion: Magic and Religion in Early New England*, chap. 2; Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People*, 228.

<sup>39</sup>See Godbeer, *The Devil's Dominion*, 24, and Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith*, 229 for the widespread presence of wise women and cunning men.

<sup>40</sup>Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, 225.

wise women and cunning men dealt in the quotidian. Both were *true* and *real*, but each dealt with different social constructions of reality.

# 21

## How Did Joseph Translate?

Due to Joseph's poverty and the necessity of providing for his family, Joseph Fielding Smith takes the position that Joseph translated little from the time he acquired the plates in September 1827 through the end of that year. During this time, Elder Smith suggested, "He was busy studying the characters and making himself familiar with them and the use of the Urim and Thummim. He had a great deal more to do than merely to sit down and with the use of the instrument prepared for that purpose translate the characters on the plates."<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, that preparation may not have resulted in an ability to translate. In Joseph's 1832 record of his history he remarked:

In December following we mooved to Susquehana by the assistance of a man by the name of Martin Haris who became convinced of the visions and gave me fifty Dollars to bare my expences and because of his faith and this rightheous deed the Lord appeared unto him in a vision and shewed unto him his marvilous work which he was about to do and <he> imediately came to Su[s]quehanna and said the Lord had shown him that he must go to new York City with some of the c<h>aracters so we proceeded to copy some of them and he took his Journey to the Eastern Cittys and to the Learned <saying> read this I pray thee and the learned said I cannot but if he wo=uld bring the plates they would read it but the Lord had fo<r>bid it and he returned to me and gave them to <me to> translate and I said I said [I]cannot for I am not learned but the Lord had prepared ~~spectticle~~ spectacles for to read the Book therefore I commenced translating the char=acters.<sup>2</sup>

According to this account, Joseph was unable to translate until *after* Martin Harris returned from his journey to the East.<sup>3</sup> Joseph's mother appears to confirm this version: "It soon became necessary to take some measures to

---

<sup>1</sup>Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, 3:215–16.

<sup>2</sup>Dean C. Jessee, ed., *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, 1:9.

<sup>3</sup>David E. Sloan, "The Anthon Transcripts and the Translation of the Book of Mormon: Studying It Out in the Mind of Joseph Smith," 57–81 makes this argument.

accomplish the translation of the record into English but he was instructed to take off a fac simile of the ~~alphabet Egyptian~~ characters <composing the alphabet which were called reformed Egyptian> Alphabetically and send them to all the learned men that he could find and ask them for the translation of the same. Joseph was very solicitous about the work but as yet no means [funds] had come into his hands of accomplishing ~~the same~~ it.”<sup>4</sup> According to Lucy’s recollection, the facsimile of the characters was prepared prior to any translation effort. Although Joseph had the interpreters at this time, even if he had attempted to work it out in his own mind in any way similar to the way a linguist might, there is no indication that the effort bore fruit.

What we do know is that the translation of the Book of Mormon somehow involved objects. Karl C. Sandberg, professor emeritus of French and humanities at Macalester College in St. Paul, Minnesota, pondered:

What was the role of the stone in this process? We may surmise that for Joseph the stone was a catalyst—because of his belief in the stone and his attunement to the world of the numinous, or the unconscious, where unseen powers moved, collided, contended, danced, and held their revels, the stone became the means of concentrating his psychic energies and giving them form. . . . But let us recognize that having said this much we still have not said the essential. We cannot say precisely how we got the theory of relativity, or the *Ninth Symphony*, or the Koran, or such recent claimants of divine revelation as the *Urantia Book* or the *Course in Miracles*.<sup>5</sup>

Sandberg ties the mystery about how the stones functioned in the translation to the entire mystery of creativity. For those who accept that the Book of Mormon is the translation of an ancient document, the mystery of creativity surrounds Mormon more than Joseph. Still, between that ancient text and our modern translation sits Joseph staring at a stone in the crown of his hat.

The use of the seer stone provides some kind of link to Joseph’s days as a village seer. But what kind of link? That is the question Clay L. Chandler, an architect, posed: “What is not clear from the historical record is how he

---

<sup>4</sup>Lavina Fielding Anderson, *Lucy’s Book: A Critical Edition of Lucy Mack Smith’s Family Memoir*, 393.

<sup>5</sup>Karl C. Sandberg, “Knowing Brother Joseph Again: The Book of Abraham and Joseph Smith as Translator,” 327–28. According to Richard P. Howard, “Latter Day Saint Scriptures and the Doctrine of Propositional Revelation,” 12, comments: “For Smith, translation was something very different. Through what he perceived as the power of the Holy Spirit, his mind and heart intuited language symbols and a flow of ideational content which was specified as the stories of Book of Mormon migrations, wars, and civilizations.”

transitioned from diviner to translator to prophet. Was Joseph's dabbling in magic a youthful indiscretion or was it a catalyst of change?"<sup>6</sup>

My answer to Chandler's question is, "Neither." Joseph was part of a culture that understood and accepted a world where lost articles might be found by consulting a village seer. There is no reason to see Joseph in any other context. (See Chapter 7.) However, the evidence also suggests that Moroni's visit catapulted him into another arena. Joseph was to become a prophet—the Prophet—of the gospel's restoration. The initial task in that restoration was translating the golden plates. This task is precisely where attempts to link Joseph's understanding of magic and his production of the Book of Mormon fail. Although human beings may have been using some method of scrying for about as long as we have been translating from one language to another, the two activities (to my knowledge) have come together only in the case of Joseph Smith.<sup>7</sup> This unusual variation on thousands of years of folk practice complicates our picture of Joseph Smith.

What Joseph became had no obvious connection to what he was. The only bridge connecting those two Josephs was the use of the seer stone in the translation of the Book of Mormon. Nothing in the common world of seers and seer stones predicts a conceptual path from village seer to seeric translator. What the interpreters—and later the seer stone—did was provide a means whereby Joseph could understand that he might be able to translate and therefore have the courage to undertake the task.

### Using a Seer Stone

Early in the twentieth century, anthropologist Andrew Lang became interested in the claimed ability to see in a stone. He conducted a nonrigorous experiment. Purchasing a crystal ball, he simply offered it to a number of friends to see if they could see anything in it. Though he saw nothing, many of those who tried did.<sup>8</sup> None of the people who saw anything had previous-

---

<sup>6</sup>Clay L. Chandler, "Scrying for the Lord: Magic, Mysticism, and the Origins of the Book of Mormon," 43. He sees only three options for how Joseph translated the Book of Mormon: pious deceiver, true believer in magic and altered states of consciousness, or true believer and mystic (61–73).

<sup>7</sup>Mosiah 28:13 states that Mosiah also translated by means of two stones or *interpreters*. Although I accept this passage as historical, I also acknowledge that we would not have this example without Joseph Smith.

<sup>8</sup>The idea that not all have seeric talent has historical confirmation in Priddy Meeks, "The Journal of Priddy Meeks," 26, written around 1879: "Seer stones, or peepstones, as they are more commonly called, was very plenty about Parowan, I rather being a gifted person in knowing a peepstone when seeing one altho I had never found one yet that I could see in."

ly claimed any such ability, and none was attempting to see anything in particular. Based on his informal experiments, Lang concluded:

I have mainly been arguing that all my “sryers” are not practical jokers. In corroboration, when I examined savage practice, and barbaric and ancient practice, I found that from the Australian black fellows to the Maoris, the Samoyeds, the Iroquois, the Incas, the Aztecs, the Malagasies, the Negroes, the Arabs, the Egyptians, the Greeks, and the mediaeval European nations, all were crystal gazers. If they saw no pictures at all in crystals, polished basalt, obsidian mirrors, blood drops, ink, water, livers of animals, and so on, it is not in nature that all should go on “srying.” They must have made the discovery of the faculty by accident, like the lady already mentioned, who, as a child, amused herself by “srying” in ink; and like George Sand, who, in childhood, used the polished back of a screen, and appears never to have heard of any other instance of the practice.<sup>9</sup>

Although srying has been performed across numerous cultures and for thousands of years, only a few are able to see in stones. From Lang’s informal experiments, he concluded: “If after two or three trials you see nothing in the ball (which may seem to vanish, leaving only the pictures) you will probably never succeed.”<sup>10</sup>

Sryers *see*, but they certainly don’t see with normal vision. The combination of the declaration that srying involves vision and that not all are capable of that kind of vision suggests that it is a process that circumvents normal vision. When we examine how a sryer works with his or her medium, that is precisely what we find. Srying is seeing when one shouldn’t be able to see.

The most common method Joseph Smith used was to place the seer stone in the crown of his hat and then put his face in so as “to exclude the light.”<sup>11</sup> That wasn’t the only way Joseph used his stone, however. Arad Stowell testified in the 1826 Bainbridge hearing that Joseph held up a stone to a candle

<sup>9</sup>Andrew Lang, *Crystal Gazing: Its History and Practice, with a Discussion of the Evidence for Telepathic Srying*, xvi. See also Deanna J. Conway, *Crystal Enchantments: A Complete Guide to Stones and Their Magical Properties*, 291.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 39. Donald Tyson, *Srying for Beginners*, 18, notes that a person will probably not see anything the first time he or she tries looking into a crystal but that the visions may come after continued practice.

<sup>11</sup>“William Smith, On Mormonism, 1883,” in Dan Vogel, comp. and ed., *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:497; “Elizabeth Ann Whitmer Cowdery, Affidavit, 15 February 187,” *ibid.*, 5: 260.

when he read a covered book.<sup>12</sup> The two methods differ in the way light reaches the eyes. In the stone-in-the-hat method, Joseph looked at the stone in very low light. When he held the stone before a candle, the stone was back-lit and blocked the light in the center of his vision. In both cases, seeing in a stone involved disrupting normal vision.

The principle of visual disruption in descriptions of how Joseph used his stone is replicated in other descriptions of the seeric process. Lang reported that an engineer friend “tried excluding all light, and gazing into a funnel. The field of vision, in his case, became luminous, and pictures appeared.”<sup>13</sup> A modern scryer reports his grandfather’s method:

The method of my grandfather was quite simple. He constructed a small box out of wood about the size of a square shoe box and lined the inside with black velvet. This box had a hinged door that opened on the top. Within it he kept his crystal ball on its small wooden stand. When he wished to gaze into the crystal, he would set the box on the kitchen table and open the lid, then completely cover the box and his head and shoulders with a large piece of black velvet as he sat on a chair before the table peering through the darkness at the crystal.

This always struck my mother as very odd, because, as she said, it would have been impossible to see the crystal itself, never mind what was inside the crystal, so she and the rest of the family always wondered what he was staring at.<sup>14</sup>

The requirement of disrupting the normal process of vision explains the nature of many of the scrying methods, from shiny surfaces to staring at an egg white in a glass, a method popular in early America.<sup>15</sup>

The widely varied scrying media warn us that it is the scryer who sees, not the object. Only a prescientific explanation credited power to the stones themselves or to any other scrying medium. That assumption led to the search for “better” seer stones,<sup>16</sup> and Joseph certainly believed that part of

---

<sup>12</sup>Bainbridge, NY, Court Record, 20 March 1826,” *ibid.*, 4:253, states: “Prisoner laid a Book open upon a White Cloth, and proposed looking through another stone which was white and transparent; held the stone to the candle, turned his back to book and read.” Lang, *Crystal Gazing*, 39, reported that he had heard of one scryer “who looked at a candle flame through an egg-shaped crystal, and got equally good results.”

<sup>13</sup>Lang, *Crystal Gazing*, xvi.

<sup>14</sup>Tyson, *Scrying for Beginners*, xiii.

<sup>15</sup>Richard Godbeer, *The Devil’s Dominion: Magic and Religion in Early New England*, 34. See also Carol F. Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: Witchcraft in Colonial New England*, 9.

<sup>16</sup>Mark Ashurst-McGee, “A Pathway to Prophethood: Joseph Smith Junior As Rodsman, Village Seer, and Judeo-Christian Prophet,” 158–59, comments: “Though now almost entire-

the lore. When he first used the interpreters, he indicated that they were superior to any seer stone he had previously used.<sup>17</sup>

That understanding may have been acceptable for Joseph's time (and earlier), but it is quite inadequate now. Now, we can be sure that there was no magic in any of the stones. They were simply rocks that served the person with seeric talent as a means of expressing that talent. As modern scryer Donald Tyson explains: "Scrying does not depend on objects such as a crystal ball, or a black mirror, or a Ouija board. These are aids to scrying, nothing more. In themselves they have no power whatsoever."<sup>18</sup>

Both then and now, the stones contributed the context, but not the experience. Then, as now, it was the person who saw. The medium was, and is, a tool to distort normal vision into what must have been inexplicable vision. Seer stones and other media work only in the sense that what the seer does is conceptually transferred to the medium. But if the stones don't work, what does? To answer that question in terms of the Book of Mormon translation, we have two tasks. First, we must understand how Joseph saw, and then we must understand how he saw a translation.

### Seeing in a Stone

How one sees in a stone and what one sees in a stone involve two different aspects of the brain's visual system. To understand those mechanisms, we must more accurately understand the science of sight, which is very different from our semi-scientific perception of what vision is. V. S. Ramachandran, M.D., Ph.D., and professor and director of the Center for Brain and Cognition, University of California, San Diego, provided a personal example of the difference between common assumption and actual science:

Many people cling to the misconception that seeing simply involves scanning an internal mental picture of some kind. For example, not long ago I was at a cocktail party and a young fellow asked me what I did for a living. When I

---

ly forgotten, there was once a large body of seer stone lore, 'a science of seer stones,' which involved a discriminating eye for the right sort of stone. . . . A survey of several relevant sources produces a list of ten qualities that seers valued in a stone; size, shape, smoothness, luster, translucency, color, shade, encasing, the history of the stone, and whether it had been consecrated."

<sup>17</sup>Joseph Smith initially believed the "interpreters" to be superior to any of his current seer stones. "Joseph Knight, Sr., Remembrance, Circa 1835-47," in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 4: 15: "[Joseph] seemed to think more of the glasses or the urim and thummim then he Did of the Plates for said he I can see any thing they are Marvelus."

<sup>18</sup>Tyson, *Scrying for Beginners*, 20.

told him that I was interested in how people see things—and how the brain is involved in perception—he looked perplexed. “What’s there to study?” he asked.

“Well,” I said, “what do you think happens in the brain when you look at an object?”

He glanced down at the glass of champagne in his hand. “Well, there is an upside-down image of this glass falling in my eyeball. The play of light and dark images activates photoreceptors on my retina, and the patterns are transmitted pixel by pixel through a cable—my optic nerve—and displayed on a screen in my brain. Isn’t that how I see this glass of champagne? Of course, my brain would need to make the image upright again.”

Though his knowledge of photoreceptors and optics was impressive, his explanation—that there’s a screen somewhere inside the brain where images are displayed—embodies a serious logical fallacy. For if you were to display an image of a champagne glass on an internal neural screen, you’d need another little person inside the brain to see that image. And that won’t solve the problem either because you’d then need yet another, even tinier person inside his head to view that image, and so on and so forth, ad infinitum. You’d end up with an endless regress of eyes, images and little people without really solving the problem of perception.<sup>19</sup>

We are so accustomed to the interaction of light with our eyes that it is counterintuitive to think that vision does not happen in the eyes. It doesn’t. Vision happens in the brain. Additionally, the brain does not passively see; it creates vision. We do not see the real world but rather what the brain interprets as the real world. Two factors that are part of our visual system remind us that what we see is sometimes more, and sometimes less, than what light carries into our eyes.

The location where the optic nerve enters the retina is called a blind spot because it is insensitive to light. We literally cannot see any part of an image that falls on that part of our retina, a process that happens all of the time. Nevertheless, we do not perceive this blind spot because our brain fills in the missing data. This same ability fills in other blind spots that might occur due to injury to small parts of the retina. A scotoma is an area where vision is suppressed, surrounded by a larger area where the patient can see. Many patients with a scotoma are unaware of it, because the brain creates the visual scene that lies in the blind spot, just as it does for the blind spot

---

<sup>19</sup>V. S. Ramachandran and Sandra Blakeslee, *Phantoms in the Brain: Probing the Mysteries of the Human Mind*, 65–66. A less informal description of the same problem is found in Ian Glynn, *An Anatomy of Thought: The Origin and Machinery of the Mind*, 191.

created by the optic nerve.<sup>20</sup> V. S. Ramachandran highlights the importance of the brain's ability to fill in the visual field: "It's clear that the mind, like nature, abhors a vacuum and will apparently supply whatever information is required to complete the scene."<sup>21</sup> Thus, one of the important characteristics of our brain's visual capacity is that it is generative rather than passive. We not only see what is before us, but we also see what we create before us.<sup>22</sup>

A second important aspect of our visual system is that, in addition to being able to see more than the light brings to our retina, we also see less. Marcus E. Raichle, professor of radiology and neurology at the Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis, comments: "Of the virtually unlimited information available in the world around us, the equivalent of 10 billion bits per second arrives on the retina at the back of the eye. Because the optic nerve attached to the retina has only a million output connections, just six million bits per second can leave the retina, and only 10,000 bits per second make it to the visual cortex."<sup>23</sup> Ian Glynn, professor and former head of the Physiological Laboratory, University of Cambridge, England, states: "What is sent . . . is neither a point by point description of the retinal image, nor a summary of crucial features in that image; it is simply the results of the first steps towards an analysis of the retinal image aimed at revealing such features, an analysis which will be taken further by the parts of the brain concerned with vision."<sup>24</sup> The funneling of possible data to produce the resulting processed data requires the brain to make some choices in what we see.

Robert A. Burton, M.D., chief of the Department of Neurosciences, Mt. Zion-UCSF Hospital, describes an amusing experience that illustrates the brain's selective processing of visual inputs:

My wife and I are among a small group of neurologists and psychologists attending a University of California at Berkley neuropsychology seminar. The lecturer announces that he is going to show us a thirty-second video of two basketball teams, one team dressed in white, the other in black, three players

---

<sup>20</sup>Glynn, *An Anatomy of the Mind*, 197.

<sup>21</sup>Ramachandran and Blakeslee, *Phantoms in the Brain*, 89. See pp. 98–102 for a description of Ramachandran's experiment with a man with a scotoma (blind spot created though damage to the retina rather than damage to the optic nerve). The man was able to describe, in real time, the way the brain was filling in his visual field across the scotoma.

<sup>22</sup>No author, "The Future, Predicted by Your Brain," 12, states: "Our brain generates predictions of likely visual inputs so it can focus on dealing with the unexpected."

<sup>23</sup>Marcus E. Raichle, "The Brain's Dark Energy," 47.

<sup>24</sup>Glynn, *An Anatomy of the Mind*, 159.

to a team. Our assignment is to count the number of times the men in black uniforms passed the ball back and forth.

There is plenty of time for an accurate count, yet I counted ten and my wife counts eleven. Most of the audience counted eleven, so I am wondering if my wife has once again out-observed me when the lecturer stops, asks the group if anyone has seen anything unusual in the video.

No response.

“Anything at all?”

A sea of shaking heads.

“How many saw the gorilla?” the lecturer asks.

No one raises their hand.

“You’re sure there was no gorilla?”

Most nod, though they are concerned. They know there wasn’t a gorilla, but there must be a point to the video.

The lecturer reruns the tape. Toward the end of the tape, a person dressed in a black gorilla suit walks onto the court, stops in the center of the picture, thumps his chest for about nine seconds, and then walks off. The players continue passing the ball as if nothing unusual had happened. The audience laughs with amusement and embarrassment at not having spotted the gorilla.<sup>25</sup>

The experience is both funny and incredible. How could that many professionals completely miss something that was not only clearly in the video, but clearly unusual and worth noting? Their oblivion to the unusual is called “inattention blindness” and occurs as the brain selects the important information and filters out data that it deems nonessential.<sup>26</sup> We can have something directly in our field of vision, yet our brain will not register its presence so we do not see it. The brain isn’t processing the picture; it is processing data and elects not to process some of the information received.

The ability of the brain to create vision is amazingly present even in the case of those with congenital blindness. Cesare Cornoldi, a professor of psychology at the University of Padova, and Rosanna DeBeni, also a professor at the University of Padova, report:

---

<sup>25</sup>Robert A. Burton, *On Being Certain: Believing You Are Right Even When You’re Not* (New York: St Martin’s Griffin, 2008), 154–55.

<sup>26</sup>Burton, *On Being Certain*, 155, reported: “Each of us in the audience told our unconscious what to look for. To carry this [task] out with maximal efficiency, an implicit second instruction was sent to the unconscious—to downplay or ignore irrelevant visual inputs. As we can’t anticipate all inputs to be considered, this latter instruction is open-ended. The unconscious has free rein as to what should or should not be seen.” Glynn, *An Anatomy of the Mind*, 359, provides a more biologically oriented explanation of the role of attention in vision.

The issue of mental imagery and blindness is particularly critical in the case of individuals both congenitally and totally blind. In this case, no visual trace based on visual experience is stored in the person's memory. If mental imagery is based on the mechanisms and the content of visual sensory experiences, blind people should not be able to generate mental images.

This, however, contrasts with congenitally blind people often reporting imagery rich in visual elements. There have also been reports showing that blind people tend to use linguistic expressions referring to a visual experience (e.g., "I lost sight of you" or "See you tomorrow") more often than sighted people do, including expressions which directly refer to a visual act (e.g., "Let's go and watch TV." Blind people's dreams also often include visual elements. One blind person, for example, told us of [his] anxiety after a dream in which [he] clearly saw a disturbing puddle of blood on a concrete floor.<sup>27</sup>

All of this information becomes important when we attempt to understand how we can "see" without light or when the visual input is disrupted. Although vision typically involves the light entering the eyes, vision does not ride the light but is constructed from the light. Information about our visual field activates at least thirty different areas in the brain.<sup>28</sup> Because the creation of an image occurs in the brain, the eyes-to-vision process can be reversed. The brain can create the image and send it to what we perceive to be the eyes.<sup>29</sup> We can "see" an image even when no light contacts the eyes.

The most common example of this phenomenon is what we call "imagining," which comes from the root of "image."<sup>30</sup> Cognitive scientist Steven Pinker asks:

What shape are a beagle's ears? How many windows are in your living room: What's darker, a Christmas tree or a frozen pea? What's larger, a guinea pig or a gerbil? Does a lobster have a mouth? When a person stands up straight, is her navel above her wrists? If the letter *D* is turned on its back and put on top of a *J*, what does the combination remind you of?

Most people say that they answer these questions using a "mental image." They visualize the shape, which feels like conjuring up a picture available for

<sup>27</sup>Cesare Cornoldi and Rosanna DeBeni, "Imagery and Blindness," 370.

<sup>28</sup>Ramachandran and Blakeslee, *Phantoms in the Brain*, 72.

<sup>29</sup>Steven Pinker, *How the Mind Works*, 287, describes: "The brain is also ready for the second computational demand of an imagery system, information flowing down from memory instead of up from the eyes. The fiber pathways to the visual areas of the brain are two-way. They carry as much information down from the higher, conceptual levels as up from the lower, sensory levels."

<sup>30</sup>Cornoldi and DeBeni, "Imagery and Blindness," 369, states: "Mainly based on sensory experiences, we may represent (imagine) objects and contexts in the visuospatial component of our working memory system in a format which shares many features with perceptions."

inspection in the mind's eye. The feeling is quite unlike the experience of answering abstract questions, such as "What is your mother's maiden name?" or "What is more important, civil liberties or a lower rate of crime?"

Mental imagery is the engine that drives our thinking about objects in space.<sup>31</sup>

The ability of the brain to generate vision explains how we imagine a cat.<sup>32</sup> Stephen Michael Kosslyn, John Lindsley Professor of Psychology in Memory of William James and dean of Social Science at Harvard University, explains: "All contemporary scientists studying imagery begin with the assumption that images are not literally pictures in the head. . . . According to the cognitive science approach, an image is a representation in the mind that gives rise to the experience of 'seeing' in the absence of the appropriate visual stimulation from the eyes."<sup>33</sup>

For most of us, our mental image is not nearly as visually present as the one that we see with our eyes fully functioning. Nevertheless, some people can combine the brain's visual abilities with a type of memory that can reproduce vivid pictures.<sup>34</sup> In the 1930s, E. R. Jaensch reported a type of visual

<sup>31</sup>Pinker, *How the Mind Works*, 284. See also Ramachandran and Blakeslee, *Phantoms in the Brain*, 110.

<sup>32</sup>According to Pinker, *How the Mind Works*, 289: "These discoveries implicate the visual brain as the seat of imagery, and recently there has been a positive identification."

<sup>33</sup>Stephen Michael Kosslyn, *Ghosts in the Mind's Machine*, 29.

<sup>34</sup>Steven Pinker, *The Language Instinct: How the Mind Creates Language*, 70, observes:

Many creative people insist that in their most inspired moments they think not in words but in mental images. Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote that visual images of scenes and words once appeared involuntarily before him in a dreamlike state (perhaps opium-induced). He managed to copy the first forty lines onto paper, resulting in the poem we know as 'Kubla Khan,' before a knock on the door shattered the images and obliterated forever what would have been the rest of the poem. Many contemporary novelists, like Joan Didion, report that their acts of creation begin not with any notion of a character or a plot but with vivid mental pictures that dictate their choice of words. The modern sculptor James Surls plans his projects lying on a couch listening to music; he manipulates the sculptures in his mind's eye, he says, putting an arm on, taking an arm off, watching the images roll and tumble.

Physical scientists are even more adamant that their thinking is geometrical, not verbal. Michael Faraday, the originator of our modern conception of electric and magnetic fields, had no training in mathematics but arrived at his insights by visualizing lines of force as narrow tubes curving through space. James Clerk Maxwell formalized the concepts of electromagnetic fields in a set of mathematical equations and is considered the prime example of an abstract theoretician, but he set down the equations only after mentally playing with elaborate imaginary models of sheets and fluids. Nikola Tesla's idea of the electrical motor and generator, Friedrich Kekulé's discovery of the benzene ring that kicked off modern organic chemistry, Ernest Lawrence's conception of the cyclotron, James Watson and Francis Crick's discovery of the DNA double helix—all came to them in images. The most famous self-described visual thinker is Albert

memory he called *eidetic* memory<sup>35</sup> (from the Greek *eidōs*, “form”). Jaensch used the term to describe a type of memory that retains a sharp visual image that can be recalled as if looking at a photograph:

These [eidetic images], like the contents of the imaginal life, are closely bound up with it, with this *one* exception, that they, too, are always literally visible to the eyes. Like memory images, their colours always correspond to those of the real objects or test pictures. They never appear in complementary colours, and if the test-object was three-dimensional, the [eidetic images], too, are three-dimensional. They are as flexible and changeable as memory images, willingly and smoothly following every change in the flow of ideas. Their occurrence, stability and disappearance hardly depend on sense—physiological or optical factors at all, but most decisively on psychological factors. Fixation of on the test picture is unnecessary and even an hindrance. On the contrary, the picture or object should be inspected with an unforced, sweeping glance, which makes the attentive perception of all the details possible. If the colouring is homogeneous, or at any rate similar in large parts of the picture, it presents favourable conditions for the first type of [eidetic images], but not for the second. For these, the best picture is one rich in detail, which keeps attention and interest alive.<sup>36</sup>

The important characteristic of this type of memory is that the individual possessing this ability perceives the mental image and examines it as though it were an object seen through the normal visual system. Robert Sommer explains: “An *eidetiker*, Jaensch’s term for someone possessing this kind of imagery, reports *seeing* his images, in the same sense that he would see an object in the environment. If an *eidetiker* is to describe an image, he will move his eyes as if picking out specific features and display an extraordinary degree of confidence, rarely found in other people, in describing what he sees. He will also tend to use the present tense in making his description.”<sup>37</sup> Ian Glynn describes “S,” one such individual:

Luria began by giving S. a series of words, then letters, then numbers, reading to him slowly or presenting them written on a blackboard. Provided there was a gap of three-to-four seconds between items, he could remember seventy

---

Einstein, who arrived at some of his insights by imagining himself riding a beam of light and looking back at a clock, or dropping a coin while standing in a plummeting elevator.

<sup>35</sup>Eidetic imagery is often conflated with “photographic memory,” or the idea that one can retain all types of information. Eidetic memory specifically deals with visual recall, not total recall.

<sup>36</sup>E. R. Jaensch, *Eidetic Imagery and Typological Methods of Investigation*, 28–29.

<sup>37</sup>Robert Sommer, *The Mind’s Eye: Imagery in Everyday Life*, 89.

or more words or numbers, and it did not matter whether the words were real words or nonsense syllables. He could reproduce the series in reverse order, or state what preceded or followed any given word or number. If the numbers were presented as a table, he could, as it were, “read off” diagonal rows. As if this were not remarkable enough, Luria later found that S., though he needed a little more time in which to do it, could recall these series fifteen years later, together with the context in which they had been given. . . .

S. told Luria that there were two things that helped him remember. The first was an ability to continue to “see” the numbers he had imprinted in his memory, just as they had appeared on the blackboard or the piece of paper. Seeing the pattern of numbers it was as easy for him to read off diagonals as to read off horizontally or vertically, though a number carelessly written might later be “misread.” The second thing was an involuntary habit of associating visual images with words that he heard.<sup>38</sup>

S.’s remarkable memory is far beyond normal, but the important aspect of his memory system for our discussion is his ability to recall and see the image of the data, from which he could then read as easily as if the text were physically present.

This visual recall (not the prodigious memory) is the type of ability I suggest that Joseph Smith may have possessed.<sup>39</sup> Our brain’s ability to run visually in reverse, its generative capacity, and the ability to retain vivid mental images, provides the basic answer to how Joseph (or any scryer) could see in a rock (or crystals, suspended egg whites, or obsidian mirrors). Some people are more capable of this process of visual generation; and when their visual input is altered, they can reverse the visual system and generate a vivid image. They can see when they should not be seeing. They can see in an inert stone.

The content of what the person sees ranges from the explicable to the mysterious. In many cases, the content of the generated vision is related to what the seer is “primed” to see. Experiments in priming suggest that it occurs on a subconscious level. Daniel Schacter describes the results of an experiment in priming where volunteers were primed with a list of words and later tested on them: “Something other than a conscious memory of seeing the word is responsible for priming on the word fragment-completion test,” he concluded. “Equally intriguing, priming occurred even when people said

---

<sup>38</sup>Glynn, *An Anatomy of the Mind*, 331–32.

<sup>39</sup>This capability has been suggested for both English poet and painter William Blake and Irish philosopher George Berkeley. Morton D. Paley, *The Traveller in the Evening: The Last Works of William Blake*, 302–3. See also David Berman, *Berkeley and Irish Philosophy*, 11, 113–14.

they did not remember seeing a word during the study phase; in fact, the priming effect was just as strong for words that people did not remember seeing earlier as for words they did remember seeing. The results pushed us toward a strong, seemingly unavoidable conclusion: priming occurs independent of conscious memory.<sup>40</sup>

If the scryer is asked about a person, he will see a person. If she is asked about a lost wallet, she sees a wallet.<sup>41</sup> Keith Thomas, professor of modern history, Oxford University, suggests that, in many of the cases of English theft-magic (where scrying might be used to discern the identify of a thief) the process was open to manipulation that often confirmed existing suspicions.<sup>42</sup>

It is just possible to construct a naturalistic explanation for Joseph's discovery of Martin Harris's lost pin. The combination of memory and our visual ability rapidly categorizes objects in our natural environment, even without focused attention.<sup>43</sup> However, providing more detailed identification requires greater resources and attention.<sup>44</sup> Thus, it may be possible that Joseph subconsciously saw the pin drop but was unable to recover the location until he altered his perception and could access that subconscious information. Jaensch noted that: "Very often the [eidetic image] is richer than the memory image. Questions about certain particulars can at first not be answered. But when the [eidetic image], which often only develops gradually, has become clear in all its details, these questions can be answered."<sup>45</sup> Perhaps in this way, Joseph could actually see certain things better with his seer stone triggering his visual memory.

In spite of the possibility of explaining some of the results of the seers with naturalistic means, others remain beyond our current understanding.

<sup>40</sup>Daniel L. Schacter, *Searching for Memory: The Brain, the Mind, and the Past*, 167.

<sup>41</sup>I infer this possibility from the concepts of visual priming. See Gérard Emilien et al., *Memory: Neuropsychological Imaging, and Psychopharmacological Perspectives*, 33, "Perceptual priming refers to the unconscious facilitation of performance following exposure to a target item or a related stimulus." Also: "Neuro-imaging data suggest that perceptual priming of visually presented stimuli depends on the extrastriate cortical visual pathways that are ordinarily involved in processing visual stimuli. Visual priming appears to take place within perceptual processing systems, where neural changes occur well before information reaches the medial temporal lobe and diencephalic brain systems that transform visual perception into conscious visual memory" (34).

<sup>42</sup>Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, 218.

<sup>43</sup>Sachiro Otsuka and Jan Kawaguchi, "Natural Scene Categorization with Minimal Attention: Evidence from Negative Priming," 1126–39.

<sup>44</sup>*Ibid.*, 1135.

<sup>45</sup>Jaensch, *Eidetic Imagery and Typological Methods of Investigation*, 11.

Joseph's distance seeing (the ability to "see" distant places that he had not visited) is a phenomenon that remains under examination in modern practitioners. In harmony with the assertion that the stone as a medium is not the instrument of the vision, the modern cases do not involve seer stones or other media.<sup>46</sup>

These examinations remain controversial, precisely because they do not fall into normal explicable categories. Dr. Elizabeth Lloyd Mayer, a fellow of the International Consciousness Research Laboratories at Princeton University, and a member of the research faculty of the Institute for Health and Healing at California Pacific Medical Center, reports a telling response to some of this research:

A colleague who's a high-energy physicist sent me an article from the *Proceedings of the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers*, one of the foremost journals in engineering and electronics. As it happened, the article was by Puthoff and Targ and offered an overview of past and recent research into remote perception. What really caught my attention, however, was an introductory note from the journal's editor in chief. He explained why, over objection from his reviewers, he'd decided to publish the article. To make his case, he quoted one reviewer who had assessed the article as methodologically impeccable and could find no substantive basis for rejection. However, that reviewer recommended rejecting it for publication with the following declaration: "This is the kind of thing that I would not believe in even if it existed."<sup>47</sup>

Certainly charlatans have used belief in the ability to see in crystal balls or other media as a means of making money from their clients' credulity.<sup>48</sup> Nevertheless, the very foundation on which the charlatans create their charade are practices of the more sincere and betimes effective seers. Regardless of the means by which they saw, the village seers (and other sincere practitioners) both saw and were correct enough times that others were willing to believe.

---

<sup>46</sup>Elizabeth Lloyd Mayer, *Extraordinary Knowing: Science, Skepticism, and the Inexplicable Powers of the Human Mind*, 107–28.

<sup>47</sup>*Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>48</sup>Lang, *Crystal Gazing*, ix, writes: "Do you believe in crystal gazing?" is a question which one is often asked. One can only reply: "What do you mean by believing in crystal gazing? If you mean, Do I believe that it is worth a fee to a person who professes to discover by crystal gazing the whereabouts of lost property, or of a missing friend, or to foretell events?—I do not "believe in crystal gazing." One hears wonderful tales of successes in this kind, but not at first-hand; and the people who tell them are not very critical, while the practisers are, to begin with, breaking the law. But if the question means, Do I believe that some people have the faculty of seeing faces, places, persons in motion, sometimes recognisable, in a glass ball, or in water, ink, or any clear deep?—then I do believe in the existence of this faculty."

How, then, does one see anything in a stone? The obvious answer is that one cannot. However, to answer so simply is to impose modern perceptions and modern science on a less scientifically oriented world. They saw something, and provided the best explanation that was available to them.

### Translating with a Stone

We now have a means that explains how Joseph Smith could legitimately see in a stone, but that still doesn't tell us how he saw *what* he saw. Nothing in the standard repertoire of scryers' visions parallels Joseph's use of this medium to translate. We need a mechanism that explains how Joseph could be the translator and still read what he saw on the interpreters or his seer stone. That ability is also found in the brain—in the interface between thought and expression.

Steven Pinker, explains the relationship of the mind to language: “We have all had the experience of uttering or writing a sentence, then stopping and realizing that it wasn't exactly what we meant to say. To have that feeling, there has to be a ‘what we meant to say’ that is different from what we said.”<sup>49</sup> Pinker coined the term *mentalese* to describe this process:

Mentalese [is] the language of thought in which our conceptual knowledge is couched. When you put down a book, you forget almost everything about the wording and typeface of the sentences and where they sat on the page. What you take away is their content or gist. (In memory tests, people confidently “recognize” sentences they never saw if they are paraphrases of the sentences they did see.) Mentalese is the medium in which content or gist is captured. . . . Mentalese is also the mind's lingua franca, the traffic of information among mental modules that allows us to describe what we see, imagine what is described to us, carry out instructions, and so on.<sup>50</sup>

I hypothesize that mentalese, or the prelanguage of the brain, holds the answer to how Joseph Smith translated the Book of Mormon. According to this hypothesis, divine intervention implanted the plate text in Joseph's brain in the brain's native prelanguage.<sup>51</sup> This process is actually quite simi-

<sup>49</sup>Pinker, *The Language Instinct*, 57.

<sup>50</sup>Pinker, *How the Mind Works*, 90. Kate Douglas, “The Subconscious Mind: Your Unsung Hero,” comments, “The subconscious mind may even have a hand in our unique talent for language. Often we are only consciously aware of words as we speak them.”

<sup>51</sup>It is at this point that Royal Skousen and I come closest in our descriptions of the translation process. He posits a divine translator giving the specific English to Joseph. I posit a divine translator giving Joseph an understanding of the plate text. We differ in that I see Joseph generating the English rather than the divine translator.

lar to the way B. H. Roberts described the translation process: “The translation thought out in the seer’s mind may also have been reflected in the interpreters and held there until recorded by the amanuensis, all of which would be incalculably helpful. But since the translation is thought out in the mind of the seer, it must be thought out in such thought-signs as are at his command, expressed in such speech-forms as he is the master of.”<sup>52</sup>

Karl F. Best suggests a very similar idea when he describes the changes made in Joseph’s revelations:

Another possible explanation for changes in the revelations is that Joseph Smith had to interpret or transcribe the ideas that God placed in his mind; the words that he wrote or dictated were only his imperfect interpretation of what God intended. Joseph could then later rewrite or change the revelation to make it better fit what he remembered. (This, of course, fits the “word of God,” rather than the “words of God,” model.) This concept could be likened to transcribing a vision, a nonword event: any written account could be edited later to clarify the prophet’s memory or interpretation of the experience, or to change the emphasis for a particular audience or purpose.<sup>53</sup>

Although Best likens the nonword event to a vision, the level at which the communication is expressed is the same. The Lord communicated understanding in mentalese, or a nonword event in Best’s terminology. This process is not completely unlike what occurs in the mind of a linguistic translator, who reads from a different language and creates a translation. Knowing both languages, a linguistic translator first understands what the source text intends to convey and then translates it into the target language. Although the translation may occur at the level of individual words, it rarely does. The translator works to transmit meaning using the target language.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>52</sup>B. H. Roberts, *Defense of the Faith and the Saints*, 1:281. Roberts’s “thought-signs” would appear to be a direct parallel to Pinker’s “mentalese.”

<sup>53</sup>Karl F. Best, “Changes in the Revelations, 1833 to 1835,” 105–6.

<sup>54</sup>The difference between a word-for-word translation and one that is a more typical result of translation can be seen in Allen Christensen’s translation of the *Popol Vuh*, where he provides both the literal and literary translations. See his *Popol Vuh: The Sacred Book of the Maya* and *Popol Vuh: Literal Poetic Version, Translation and Transcription*. For comparison, here are the first lines from the more literary and then the more literal translations:

This is the beginning of the ancient traditions of this place called Quiché. Here we shall write. We shall begin to tell the ancient stories of the beginning, the origin of all that was done in the citadel of Quiché, among the people of the Quiché nation. (Christenson, *Popol Vuh: The Sacred Book of the Maya*, 59)

This its root ancient word, Here Quiché its name. Here we shall write, We shall plant ancient word, Its planning. Its root-beginning as well, Everything done in Citadel Quiché, Its nation Quiché people. Christenson, *Popol Vuh: Literal Poetic Version, Translation and Transcription*, 13.

It is in this way that Joseph remains a translator, even when it was the Lord (or another divine entity) that placed the meaning of the plates in Joseph's mind.

Whatever mentalese might be, it occurs prior to consciousness. Science is discovering that our subconscious is not the stuff of nonthought but of thought prior to the time that we are aware of it.<sup>55</sup> Arnold Trehub, professor of psychology at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, describes the effects of the subconscious on creative production:

One of the many intriguing aspects of human cognitive activity is that of associative sequential recall. The stream of passive thought is often not constrained by the principles of deduction or the application of the rules of inference; the succession of conscious impression seems to proceed rather along analogical and metaphorical links. A given situation may evoke a wide variety of imaginal recollections. Some may be obviously similar to the immediate stimuli; other recalled images may be so dissimilar to the initial perception as to be surprising and seemingly completely fortuitous. Useful insights and creative ideas often occur without our awareness or logical procession.<sup>56</sup>

This process is so pervasive that Christopher C. French and Krissy Wilson suggest: "Research has shown that most human information processing occurs outside of awareness."<sup>57</sup>

The subconscious assembles information and processes its meaning outside of the stream of our consciousness, rising to the level of our conscious understanding in our "eureka" moments.<sup>58</sup> Thus, any understanding that the Lord implanted in Joseph's subconscious would effectively create the foundation on which Joseph constructed the language he dictated, but Joseph would have been unaware of the process itself. Therefore, he was only able to describe the process in terms of the "gift and power of God."

Because this process occurred in Joseph Smith's mind, the conversion of thought to language had access to his normal vocabulary, grammar, and cultural contexts. As Pinker explains: "Grammar is only one component of language, and it has to interface with at least four other systems of the mind: perception, articulation, conceptual knowledge (which provides the meanings of words and their relationships), and social knowledge (how language

<sup>55</sup>"How Powerful Is the Subconscious?," 32.

<sup>56</sup>Arnold Trehub, *The Cognitive Brain*, 169.

<sup>57</sup>Christopher C. French and Krissy Wilson, "Cognitive Factors Underlying Paranormal Beliefs and Experiences," 17.

<sup>58</sup>Douglas, "How Powerful Is the Subconscious?," 32; Douglas, "The Subconscious Mind: Your Unsung Hero."

can be used and interpreted in a social context).”<sup>59</sup> Meaning from the plates was translated into modern idioms because they were the tools of Joseph’s linguistic capabilities.

A second process turned this subconscious mental language into a visual image. This is not unprecedented, though rare. One of Andrew Lang’s casual scryers was a girl who picked up the crystal ball and saw in it a paper with writing. The image was so real that she turned the ball over, assuming that the paper was physically on the other side.<sup>60</sup> Joseph Smith also saw words in English (perhaps on something he identified as parchment).<sup>61</sup> He saw the translation when his normal vision was sufficiently distorted or limited in ways that he could see the mental image better. He really read, but not from the stone. Joseph read from the inside out.<sup>62</sup>

---

<sup>59</sup>Steven Pinker, “Language as an Adaptation to the Cognitive Niche,” 21.

<sup>60</sup>Lang, *Crystal Gazing*, 23.

<sup>61</sup>“David Whitmer, as Interviewed by J. L. Traughber Jr. (1879),” in John W. Welch with Erick B. Carlson, eds., *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations, 1820–1844*, 146, stated: “A ‘Seer Stone,’ was placed in the crown of a hat, into which Joseph put his face so as to exclude the external light. Then, a spiritual light would shine forth, and parchment would appear before Joseph, upon which was a line of characters from the plates, and under it, the translation in English; at least, so Joseph said.”

<sup>62</sup>According to Jaensch, *Eidetic Imagery*, 1–2: “Optical perceptual (or eidetic) images are phenomena that take up an intermediate position between sensations and images. Like ordinary physiological after-images, they are always *seen* in a literal sense.”

