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“Translating” Restoration Scriptures

As explained in Chapter 1, the LDS Mythicalist approach to the scriptures often concludes that the scriptures are partly, mostly, or perhaps wholly fictitious. The LDS Extensibilist on the other hand, may accept that scripture can contain fictitious tales, but that they also contain factual realities about the culture and people described in the scriptures. In Chapters 9, 11, and 13, I argued that the Old Testament contained a number of historical inaccuracies, and perhaps even some mythicized legends, but that these historical inaccuracies don't prove that everything in the Bible is fictional. I also argued throughout this book that God works through fallible humans who unknowingly and automatically create narratives based on their understanding of their worlds and not according to the best historical scholarship.

I believe that scriptures that Joseph Smith produced (or “translated”) *also* contain some historical inaccuracies. For example, in Chapter 22 I argued that the Doctrine and Covenants is not an infallible book and may not also always depict the historical situation of Joseph's world with unflinching precision. In Chapter 32 I will argue for the possibility that the Book of Abraham is not necessarily based on a narrative supposedly written on the papyri that came into Joseph's possession. I don't believe that the Book of Abraham is necessarily fictional, but that the narrative which God revealed to Joseph Smith might not be entirely accurate as an historical narrative. Some LDS Mythicalists, I pointed out in Chapter 1, may not

only conclude that the Book of Abraham is fictitious, but that the Book of Mormon is really inspired fiction.

While a rejection of the historicity of the Book of Abraham is an unorthodox position, the belief that the Book of Mormon is inspired fiction (rather than a record based on historical events) presents—in my opinion—a unique set of problems. According to the Inspired Fiction Theory, the Book of Mormon can simultaneously be fiction and the inspired Word of God because it moves the reader to become closer to God. This approach often attracts those who struggle with the lack of physical evidence for the Book of Mormon, yet allows the believer to accept Joseph Smith as a prophet. While each person is free to believe what they want about God, Joseph Smith, and the nature of the Book of Mormon, I—and several other Latter-day Saints—find the logic behind the Inspired Fiction Theory to be flawed. The late William Hamblin addressed this issue in 1993:

The historical argument for the necessity of the antiquity of the Book of Mormon is as follows:

1. Joseph Smith claimed to have had possession of golden plates written by the Nephites and to have been visited by Moroni, a resurrected Nephite.
2. If the Book of Mormon is not an ancient document, there were no Nephites.
3. If there were no Nephites, there were no golden plates written by Nephites; and there was no Nephite named Moroni.
4. If there was no Moroni and no golden plates, then Joseph did not tell the truth when he claimed to possess and translate these nonexistent plates, and to have been visited by a resurrected man.
5. Hence, Joseph was either lying (he knew there were no plates or angelic visitations but was trying to convince others that there were), or he was insane or deluded (he believed there were golden plates and angelic visitations which in fact did not exist).¹

LDS scholar Stephen Smoot likewise explained:

1. William J. Hamblin, “An Apologist for the Critics: Brent Lee Metcalfe’s Assumptions and Methodologies,” *FARMS Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* (1994), 6:1 452–53.

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[I]f a resurrected Jesus’ wounds were never really felt by a real group of ancient people ...and if he really didn’t lay his hands on twelve Nephites and give them authority to administer real ordinances..., or actually declare what the fundamental principles of his Gospel were..., then the primary witness of the Book of Mormon has absolutely none of the efficacy it proclaims to have.

...If what the Book of Mormon reports about Jesus and these other prophets is nothing more than fiction, then the Book of Mormon’s witness of Christ is no more a witness for Christ than any other fictional work. To view the Book of Mormon as nothing more than “inspiring” fiction like any other book would ...destroy the power of the Book of Mormon.²

I believe that scripture is more than just writings that make you feel good about God or which inspire you to become a better person. Lots of self-help books and fictional stories can do that. As Hamblin posted elsewhere,

[S]cripture is scripture because of something in its nature and essence, not in our response to it. ...Scripture is a manifestation of God to humans that humans can accept or reject. But human rejection of scripture does not change its scriptural nature; that comes from God. Scripture is scripture whether we believe it or not.³

Coming from my Extensibilist conclusion that the Book of Mormon is based on real events and real people that lived in Ancient America, the next chapters explore the worldview that may have influenced Joseph’s reception and translation of the golden plates.

Ten Tribes

When the Assyrians sacked the Northern Kingdom of Israel in about 722 B.C., the ten tribes that resided within that kingdom were abducted and scattered (1 Chronicle 5:26; Ezekiel 39:23). The tribes never returned to claim their lands and were therefore referred to by Bible readers as the

2. Stephen O. Smoot, “The Imperative for a Historical Book of Mormon,” (20 October 2013), <https://interpreterfoundation.org/blog-the-imperative-for-a-historical-book-of-mormon/> (accessed 10 October 2020).

3. William Hamblin, “What is Scripture? and is it relevant?” (11 July 2014), <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/enigmaticmirror/2014/07/11/what-is-scripture-and-is-it-relevant/> (accessed 4 October 2014).

“lost tribes” because they were “lost to the record keepers of Judah.”⁴ Isaiah prophesied that the dispersed Jews would eventually return “from far: and, lo, these from the north and from the west; and these from the land of Sinim” (Isaiah 49:12).

Biblical commentators have struggled and debated on the meaning of this verse from Isaiah. Some scholars suggest that Isaiah’s “from far” (translated as “afar” in some versions of the Bible) simply means from the “most remote parts of the earth,”⁵ and Isaiah’s “north” refers to north of Palestine (perhaps Babylon). This corresponds with Jeremiah’s claim that the tribes would come from the north—the direction in which they were initially driven (Jeremiah 16:15). Most commentators agree that Isaiah’s “west” is a term commonly meant to refer to the sea, or specifically the Mediterranean Sea, and those islands or lands beyond the sea.⁶

Isaiah’s “land of Sinim” has created the most discussion. It’s possible that Isaiah was referring to the “Sinai Peninsula just off of Egypt,” which was occupied by groups of Canaanites,⁷ or it could refer to a much more distant Sinim. The Arabians, for example, once referred to China as Sin and “Greek geographers call China ‘Sinois.’”⁸ The debate over Isaiah’s Sinim and the designation of China is fueled by the fact that “Sin” (also “Qin” or “Chin”) was not a word used to refer to China until hundreds of years after Isaiah made his prophecy. Most critics claim that Isaiah could not have used the word for China, because that is not what the word meant in his day. In contrast, others argue that just as Isaiah “prophetically call[ed] the future king Cyrus by his name” (Isaiah 44:28 and 45:1), “...it would not have been unusual for Isaiah to have referred to the name of a future nation.”⁹

I will leave the resolution to this problem for others to discuss. For our purposes, it’s important to note that through the centuries, Bible readers have wondered, pondered, and argued about where the ten tribes were taken, and from where they will return. Various theories have been

4. John A. Tvedtnes, “The ‘Other Tribes’: Which Are They?” *Ensign* (January 1982), <https://www.lds.org/ensign/1982/01/the-other-tribes-which-are-they?lang=eng> (accessed 12 August 2019).

5. “Isaiah 49,” *Benson Commentary*, <http://biblehub.com/commentaries/benson/isaiah/49.htm> (accessed 12 August 2019).

6. *Ibid.*

7. Bodie Hode, *Tower of Babel: The Cultural History of Our Ancestors* (Green Forest, AR: New Leaf Publishing Group, Inc., 2012), 130.

8. *Ibid.*

9. “‘Sinim’ or ‘Syrene/Aswan’ in Isaiah 49:12?,” <http://www.kjvtoday.com/home/sinim-or-syreneaswan-in-isaiah-4912> (accessed 12 August 2019).

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formulated over the years, and those theories have impacted the way that many people recontextualized their scriptural readings.

Before people traveled around the globe, world geography was unknown and confusing, and foreign labels were applied with considerable ambiguity. Commenting on the travels of seventeenth-century Father Jerome Lobo, for instance, one writer points out that the “Ancients called all the countries that extend beyond Egypt on each side of the Red Sea, India or Ethiopia, indifferently.”¹⁰ In Marco Polo’s day, “India was used to refer to anywhere from the Persian Gulf in the west to the spice islands in the east.”¹¹ The term “Middle India” eventually came to designate (loosely and not universally) the expansive area from the known Old World to somewhere before the land we now know as India.¹²

As explorers from the Old World began to travel beyond their familiar lands, they often theorized that the new people they encountered were descendants of the ten lost tribes. Twelfth-century Jewish traveler Benjamin of Tudela, for example, preceded Marco Polo’s travels by hundreds of years as he visited Europe, Asia, and Africa. He claimed to find remnants of the exiled Jews in what is now called Persia, Iraq, and Afghanistan¹³—lands loosely embodied, by some, as parts of “India.”

In the fourteenth century, Sir John Mandeville of England (also spelled Maundeville), traveled throughout the Old World, exploring places in Turkey, Egypt, Libya, Persia, Ethiopia, Syria, India, and more. By the 1360s, his book describing those travels became “one of the most important books of later medieval and early modern Europe.... and was translated into many languages.”¹⁴ Mandeville claims to have encountered the ten lost tribes—whom he called Gog and Magog—confined between two mountain ranges by the Persian Sea.¹⁵

The names Gog and Magog are mentioned a few times in the Bible either independently or together. Ezekiel 38:2 mentions Gog (which could

10. Vincent J. Dimarco, “The Historical Basis of Chaucer’s Squire’s Tale,” *Chaucer’s Cultural Geography*, ed., Kathryn L. Lynch, (New York: Routledge, 2002), 58.

11. *The Travels of Marco Polo the Venetian*, translated by W. Marsden, revised by T. Wright, and newly revised by and edited by Peter Harris (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008), 329 n. 25.f

12. J. R. S. Phillips, *The Medieval Expansion of Europe, 2nd Ed.* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 192.

13. *Ibid.*, 191–199.

14. John Mandeville, *Book of Marvels and Travels* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2012), X; there is question whether John Mandeville was a real person or if his travels were written by others.

15. Claude Reignier Conder, *Syrian Stone-Lore* (London: Richard Bentley and Son, 1886), 163.

be an individual or group of people) in the land of Magog and implies that they are enemies to God's people. In Revelation 20:8, we read of a prophecy that Gog and Magog will gather to fight against the Church. According to medieval legends, Alexander the Great built a great wall along the border of his empire to keep out attacking barbarians—sometimes referred to as Gog and Magog.¹⁶ According to Mandeville, Alexander drove the ten tribes between the two mountains, after which God closed the mountain range trapping in the wayward Israelites.¹⁷

Legends of the day already suggested that the Mongols were descendants of the ten lost tribes and that Genghis Khan (the Mongolian leader) planned to free his Jewish brethren, to subjugate the Christians, and “to attain Jewish rule over the entire world.”¹⁸ The ten tribes, the Gog and Magog, were not only barbarians but viewed by some as the army of the Anti-Christ “who at the end of time would come to conquer the church.”¹⁹ Fluid and sometimes confusing geographical speculations placed the ten tribes in various Old World locations, including Ethiopia,²⁰ Persia, and India.²¹

It is reasonable to assume that when Christopher Columbus set sail for “India” that he was familiar with the legends as well as the material found in John Mandeville's travel tales. According to some legends, the first Jewish person to settle in America was Luis de Torres, a recently converted Christian and the interpreter which Columbus brought with him in 1492. Torres, Columbus recorded, knew various Old World languages including Hebrew, Chaldee, and Arabic. Torres might have been brought along to communicate with any descendants of the ten tribes in India, should such a group be encountered.²²

16. Sverre Bøe, *Gog and Magog: Ezekiel 38–39 as Pre-text for Revelation 19, 17–21 and 20, 7–10* (Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2001), 20.

17. Iain Macleod Higgins, *Writing East: The “Travels” of Sir John Mandeville* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 182.

18. Israel Jacob Yuval, *Two Nations in Your Womb: Perceptions of Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, translated from Hebrew by Barbara Harshav and Jonathan Chipman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 284.

19. Higgins (1997), 182.

20. Bøe (2001), 144.

21. Valerie I. J. Flint, *The Imaginative Landscape of Christopher Columbus* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992), 13; E. A. H. Blunt, *The Caste System of Northern India* (New Gupta Colony, Delhi: Gian Ridhi Offset Printers, 2010), 179.

22. David S. Katz, “Israel in America: The Wanderings of the Lost Ten Tribes From *Mikveh Yisreal* to Timothy McVeigh,” *The Jews and The Expansion of Europe to the West, 1450 to 1800*, eds., Paolo Bernardini and Norman Fiering (New York: Berhahn Books, 2001), 107.

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And, as humans are wont to do, Columbus found what he was looking for. We (all of us) tend to create ad hoc explanations to confirm what we already believe. As Michael Shermer notes, for example, Columbus based his trip estimation on the miscalculation of others and, after 5000 kilometers, “encountered land in the exact place where he had calculated the Indies would be, and thus he dubbed the people he engaged there ‘Indians.’”²³ It didn’t matter that the flora and fauna were nothing like what had been described by Marco Polo.

Because of the power of the paradigm to shape perceptions, Columbus’s cognitive map told him what he was seeing. When his men dug up some common garden rhubarb, *Rheum rhaponticum* (used in pies), for example, the ship’s surgeon determined that it was *Rheum officinale*, the medicinal Chinese rhubarb. The native American plant gumbo-limbo was mistaken for an Asiatic variety of the mastic evergreen tree that yields resin used to make lacquer, varnish, and adhesives. The South American *nogal de pais* nut was classified as the Asian coconut, or at least what Marco Polo had described as such. Columbus deemed a plant with the aroma of cinnamon to be that valuable Asian spice.²⁴

Columbus died, notes David Katz, “in the belief that he had landed on the east coast of Asia; the Indians were Asiatics, and their presence was interesting but unremarkable.”²⁵ In the years that followed, many others joined in the discussion as to the origin of the Native Americans. And while there was no utterly universal opinion, “virtually all of those who wrote” about the topic, notes Katz, “...agreed that they [the Native Americans] must in some way be descended from Adam and Eve, if not from Noah as well.”²⁶

Probably the most prevailing theory—and indeed the most enduring theory—was that the native people of newly discovered lands were descendants of the ten lost tribes. This theory, explains Katz, “was one convenient and popular solution that found advocates not only in the Spanish-speaking world, but also in England and continental Europe.”²⁷

23. Shermer (2011), 282.

24. Ibid., 283.

25. Katz (2001), 107.

26. Ibid., 108.

27. Ibid.

As explorations throughout the world expanded, the biased assumptions fed expectations which were then supported by ad hoc “evidences.” Remnants of lost tribes, for example, were supposedly discovered in Asia, Japan, Scotland, Africa, and South America,²⁸ and have been allegedly linked to nearly every group imaginable including Celts, Eskimos, Finns, Lembas, the Maya, Zulus, and Native Americans.²⁹ The theory that the lost tribes were the ancestors of the Native Americas became more and more popular in the American colonies. It was supported by travelers, traders, and a variety of authors who wrote books with supporting pieces of evidence.³⁰

In the land where Joseph received the golden plates, ancient Native Americans had built a variety of earthen mounds.³¹ Many of the Smiths’ Christian neighbors believed that the Indians had left buried treasure in these mounds or hills, and even believed that any seer stones recovered from such hills had Indian origins.³²

A Different World

While most people today can appreciate that nineteenth-century Americans were vastly different than modern Americans, sometimes we fail to recognize just *how* different past generations actually were. As noted in Chapter 6, when we examine the past (and alternative perspectives), the past will remain forever inescapably strange to us. We cannot fully get into the heads of our spouses, neighbors, co-workers, or peoples of foreign cultures, let alone those from past generations.

Each person is unique—not only in spirit, but unique because of the different influences of nature and nurture. While we might be like our parents or siblings (especially for twins), each person is slightly (if

28. Sabine Lang, “How Solomon Bibo from Germany Became an Indian Chief; And Other Glimpses of Jewish Life in the Wild West,” *Migration Network Skills: Anthropological Perspectives of Mobility and Transformation*, eds., Astrid Wonneberger, Mijal Gandelsman-Trier, and Hauke Dorsch (University of Hamburg, 2006), 105; see also Zvi Ben-Dor Benite, *The Ten Lost Tribes: A World History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

29. Ben-Dor Benite (2009), 6.

30. See, for example, James Adair, *The History of the American Indians...* (London: 1775), and Ethan Smith, *View of the Hebrew* (Smith & Shute, 1823).

31. William Hamblin and Daniel Peterson, “Mysteries of the ‘Mound Builders,’” *Deseret News* (19 September 2015), <https://www.deseret.com/2015/9/19/20572634/mysteries-of-the-mound-builders#a-copper-bird-found-at-the-hopewell-sites-in-ohio-birds-are-common-symbols-in-the-surviving-artwork-of-pre-columbian-north-americans> (accessed 4 March 2020).

32. Michael Hubbard Mackay and Nicholas J. Frederick, *Joseph Smith’s Seer Stones* (Provo and Salt Lake City: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University and Deseret Book Company, 2016), 17.

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not exceedingly) different because of chemical, physical, educational, and environmental influences. That is why we are not like the Borg and why we have different personalities and different thoughts. The further we separate ourselves from other people—through a distance of culture or time—the more divergent our thinking becomes. We can assume some things about nineteenth-century Americans, but we can never fully appreciate their thoughts, logic, rationale, fears, and joys. Some things that made sense to them do not make sense to us.

Strange (and sometimes dangerous) medical procedures, folk remedies, magic, superstitions, dowsing, and treasure digging were all commonplace in rural nineteenth-century America. Many people, of various faiths and intellects, believed that water could be dowsed with sticks, or that treasures buried in the earth could be discovered with a variety of magical procedures or tools, and that lost or hidden objects could be seen by looking into crystals or special stones. It was not uncommon to believe that the spirits of the dead guarded buried treasures and that only a special person, or person with a special gift, spell, or tool, could gain access to the guarded treasure. One of the tools and techniques used by some nineteenth-century folk magicians was to place a *seer stone* into the dark of an upside-down hat to see if it shined with visions locating the lost objects.

Like all people, Joseph Smith’s thoughts and worldviews were influenced by his environment. Joseph and his family—like their neighbors—were Christians. They believed in God, Jesus, and the Bible. Most of Joseph’s contemporaries in the Palmyra area were Protestant, and many Protestants in early New England were anti-Catholic.³³ Being Christian, however, does not mean that their thoughts were always like that of twenty-first-century Christians. Just as the religious culture of first-century Christians was different than our culture today, so likewise, the religious culture of Joseph’s rustic New York Christianity was different than our modern Christian culture.

In Joseph’s day and environment, many Christians accepted beliefs that, today, might be labeled *magic* or, even worse, *occultic*.³⁴ The modern application of those labels on past Christians, however, is based on *our* assumptions of what Christianity should resemble and doesn’t dictate the

33. Josh Zeitz, “When America Hated Catholics,” *Politico Magazine* (23 September 2015), <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2015/09/when-america-hated-catholics-213177>; Susan Curtis, “Early Nineteenth-Century America and the Book of Mormon,” *The Word of God*, ed., Dan Vogel (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1990), <http://signaturebookslibrary.org/the-word-of-god-06-2/> (both accessed 6 March 2020).

34. Mackay and Frederick, (2016), 14.

boundaries of what Christianity looked like to all nineteenth-century Americans. From within a paradigm of a people who accepted the Bible, miracles, and God’s ability to communicate with humans, some of the Christians in Joseph’s milieu (and even some people today) believed in the power of seer stones and divining rods. Some also believed that God could communicate to humans through mystical signs, graphics, rituals, or languages—such as were found in the paradigms of the Masons or Kabbalah.

All these circles of influence affected Joseph Smith’s cultural and religious worldview. Regarding the influence Masonry had on Joseph, for example, LDS historian Samuel Brown explains that Joseph “grew up around Masonry.” His older brother Hyrum was a Mason in the 1820s, as were many of the Smith’s neighbors.

To not be at least dimly aware of Masonry in western New York in the middle of the 1820s was impossible. This need not imply any rigorous esoteric training derived from these encounters, but the young Joseph Smith was almost certainly aware of the basic social structures and at least one version of the founding myths of Masonry.³⁵

The degree to which Masonry might have influenced Joseph Smith before his prophetic calling and during his process of translating the Book of Mormon, Book of Moses, and Book of Abraham, is debated by various scholars. By 1841, however, Joseph had embraced the organizational brotherhood of Masons by helping to establish a Masonic Lodge in Nauvoo,³⁶ and by 1842, Joseph has become a Master Mason.

Masonry (or Freemasonry) is not a religion; it’s a fraternal brotherhood of men with shared values and goals. Most scholars believe that the fraternity began in the Middle Ages among guilds of stonemasons—especially those who built cathedrals. As cathedral building declined, lodges allowed the entrance of non-stonemasons into the general Masonic brotherhood.

Although Masonry isn’t a religion, through time, it adopted religious-like qualities and rituals, and appropriated many ancient Christian and Jewish esoteric teachings.³⁷ While no known Masonic documents date before about 1400, Masonic traditions in Joseph Smith’s day claimed that

35. Samuel Morris Brown, *In Heaven as in Earth: Joseph Smith and the Early Mormon Concept of Death* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012a), 174.

36. “Masonry,” *LDS.org*, <https://www.lds.org/study/history/topics/masonry?lang=eng> (accessed 13 August 2019).

37. “Freemasonry: Secret Organization,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/order-of-Freemasons> (accessed 13 August 2019).

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the organization traced back to stonemasons who worked on Solomon’s temple.³⁸ Some traditions claimed that Abraham and Enoch were also early Masons.³⁹ Modern scholars argue that Masonry is a relatively late creation and was unknown in biblical times.

The Masonry of Joseph’s day was influenced by the teachings from the Bible but may have also been influenced by the esoteric teachings of the early Jewish and Christian Kabbalah.⁴⁰ “Kabbalah” refers to a mystical way of understanding the scriptures or other truths. Masonry and Christian Kabbalism were both popular during the Renaissance period (fourteenth- to seventeenth-century Europe), and likely influenced some of the thoughts present in Joseph Smith’s environment.

We note, for instance, the writings of Emanuel Swedenborg—an eighteenth-century Swedish Lutheran theologian. His writings were well known in America and advertised in Joseph Smith’s day and vicinity. Joseph mentioned Swedenborg’s books in 1839, and some scholars believe that Swedenborg’s language about the hereafter influenced the way Joseph described the hereafter in D&C 76.⁴¹ Some scholars believe that Swedenborg was likewise influenced by the Kabbalistic writings of his own day. “Swedenborg,” explains Susanna Akerman-Hjern, “appears to have been in part familiar with Jewish mystical ideas and there is a soft, but definite, influence from Kabbalah on his thinking.”⁴²

All of us could create unique and individual Venn diagrams depicting the circles of influence that shape our thoughts, attitudes, language, and assumptions. So likewise, the spheres of influence that affected Joseph’s thoughts, ideas, expressions, and language, were probably vast, at times contradictory, and perhaps eclectic. When Joseph received revelation from

38. “Masonry,” *LDS.org*

39. *Biographical Record of Bartholomew County Indiana* (B.F. Bowen: 1904), 151.

40. W. Kirk McNulty, “Kabbalah and Freemasonry,” *Heredom*, V7 (Washington, D.C.: The Scottish Rite Research Society), pdf in author’s possession; Peter Paul Fuchs, “Masonry and Kabbalah,” *Masonic Sourcebook* at http://www.masonicsourcebook.com/masonry_and_kabbalah.htm (accessed 13 August 2019).

41. J. B. Haws, “Joseph Smith, Emmanuel Swedenborg, and Section 76: Importance of the Bible in Latter-day Revelation,” *The Doctrine and Covenants, Revelations in Context: The 37th Annual Brigham Young University Sidney B. Sperry*, eds., Andrew H. Hedges, J. Spencer Fluhman, and Alonzo L. Gaskill (Provo: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University and Deseret Book, 2008), 142–67, at <https://rsc.byu.edu/archived/selected-articles/joseph-smith-emanuel-swedenborg-and-section-76> (accessed 13 August 2019).

42. Susanna Akerman-Hjern, “De Sapientia Salomonis: Emmanuel Swedenborg and the Kabbalah,” *Lux in Tenebris: The Visual and Symbolic in Western Esotericism*, ed., Peter J. Forshaw (Boston: Brill, 2017), 212.

God, it was inescapable that he would have conveyed the meaning of those revelations in language cobbled from those various influences.

God Speaking through Joseph's Worldview

It was in this environment, in 1823, that Joseph Smith received a visitation from the Angel Moroni, who informed the young man that golden plates, containing a record of the early inhabitants of the Americas, were buried in the side of a hill near his home. In the box with the plates, Joseph was told, were two stones which had been prepared for translating the ancient record. The connection to what Joseph already believed about the early Americans, buried treasure, and spirits was inescapable. The pattern of Joseph's worldview ultimately influenced how he must have initially understood the Book of Mormon people and the coming forth of the Nephite record.

Although Moroni was not a descendant of the ten lost tribes and was not granting Joseph access to a financial treasure trove, it seems silly to deny that Joseph's System 1 brain didn't immediately connect the dots of the pattern in his environment. How could he not? Just as Columbus intuitively recognized that the Native Americans were "Indians," so likewise, Joseph must have intuitively fit his Moroni vision and the details of plates into his broader community context of spirits and buried treasure.

Critics claim that Joseph created the Moroni and Golden Plates stories from elements in his environment, but that is not the only way to understand Joseph's story. If we assume that Joseph actually experienced the visitation as described (and critics must *assume* that he *didn't*, if they want their argument to work), then it would have been impossible for Joseph not to recontextualize the experience according to the worldview he had at the time. That, as noted repeatedly in this book, is what we humans do.

To make sense of new data, we must understand it from within a framework we already accept. That paradigm can change over time, but the initial introduction of information must somehow blend—even if we create ad hoc appendages—to how we already understand the world. While the Nephites were not descendants of the ten lost tribes, it seems reasonable to assume that the early Latter-day Saints did not notice this distinction.

It's possible—perhaps even likely—that God chose Joseph's time and place *because* it would conform more readily to an existing worldview. A twenty-first-century prophet, for example, would still need to have a visitation from Moroni, still receive buried golden plates, and would still "translate" that record into English. A twenty-first-century public would

have to accept the story and commit (perhaps with their careers, lives, or reputations) to the reality of the story in order to build up and sustain a Church that should eventually flood the world.

In my opinion, that would be a much more difficult task to accomplish in the twenty-first century (with a higher degree of supernatural skepticism) than in the nineteenth century. More likely, God chose the right person, place, time, and location to restore the Church and reveal the Nephite record. Once the Church became established, and hindsight came into play, nineteenth- and twentieth-century Church leaders would look back at the original data and recontextualize the information with more biblical support—such as the Urim and Thummim—and deemphasize the focus on seer stones once used for treasure digging.

To reveal a new direction for Joseph, however, God utilized the thinking of Joseph’s day to further His purposes. He leveraged nineteenth-century recontextualizations of the Nephites and the buried record (even though those recontextualizations were wrong) to begin re-establishing the truth. He gave unto his “servants in their weakness, after the manner of their language, that they might come to understanding” (D&C 1:24).

The Power of the Seer Stone

I believe that the power connected with the seer stone in the translation process is the key to the power of the Book of Mormon as scripture. So, let’s examine the history of the stones and how they were utilized, as well as how they factor into the salvific power of the Book of Mormon.

What was the Seer Stone?

Like many historical reconstructions (both inside and outside of Mormonism), we don’t always have every puzzle piece to fully understand a past event. There are always missing pieces and unanswered questions. We have enough of the pieces, however, to get a big picture of Joseph Smith and his pre-Book-of-Mormon seer stone use, as well as his use of the seer stone in the Book of Mormon translation process.

The fact is, that long before Moroni appeared to Joseph, Joseph was using seer stones to search for things that were lost. Joseph and the earliest Saints believed that God had guided Joseph “to find the seer stones during his treasure-seeking days.”⁴³

After Joseph retrieved Moroni’s plates, he initially used the Nephite “interpreters” (included in Moroni’s stone box) for the first 116 pages of

43. Mackay and Frederick (2016), 29, 39.

translation. He apparently used one or more of his seer stones to translate the rest of the Book of Mormon once the 116 pages were lost or stolen. Many Latter-day Saints have been shocked or confused when they discovered the *true* mechanics used to translate the Book of Mormon. For decades, the Church curriculum taught that Joseph translated by way of the Urim and Thummim. That teaching is technically correct, but the terminology is confusing and was recontextualized as time went by, as shown below.

Who First Used the Term “Urim and Thummim?”

On 5 August of 1832, while serving as missionaries in Boston Massachusetts, Orson Hyde and Samuel Smith (Joseph’s brother) gave a lecture at Boston’s Julien Hall. A few days later the *Boston Investigator*, a weekly newspaper, printed some of the questions and answers which the townspeople had posed to the “Mormonite Preachers.” When asked how the Book of Mormon was interpreted from golden plates, Hyde responded:

It was made known by the spirit of the Lord through the medium of the Urim and Thummim.... The same as were used by the prophets of old, which were two crystals, placed in bows, something in the form of spectacles, which were found with the plates.⁴⁴

This is the first known recorded instance wherein the spectacles are referred to as the “Urim and Thummim,” but as researcher H. Michael Marquardt notes, Hyde’s response would indicate that the term “Urim and Thummim” was used “even earlier, at least by January 1832 before they left Ohio on their mission.”⁴⁵ Prior to 1832, or possibly late 1831, the Nephite crystals were referred to as either the interpreters or spectacles.

What about D&C 17, some might ask? This section of the Doctrine and Covenants is a record of a revelation given to the Three Witnesses through Joseph Smith in June 1829. In that revelation, God tells the Witnesses that if they have faith, they will see not only the golden plates, but also the “breastplate, the sword of Laban, [and] the Urim and Thummim” (v. 17:1). Doesn’t this demonstrate that God called the interpreters the “Urim and Thummim” in 1829? And what about Joseph Smith—History 1:35 (in the Pearl of Great Price) where Joseph claims that in 1823, when Moroni

44. “Questions proposed to the Mormonite Preachers and their answers obtained before the whole assembly at Julien Hall, Sunday Evening, August 5, 1832,” *Boston Investigator* (10 August 1832) 2:20.

45. H. Michael Marquardt, “Joseph Smith uses Stone in a Hat” (2010), <https://user.mission.com/~research/early/stone.htm> (accessed 13 August 2020).

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visited Joseph for the first time in the middle of the night, the angel told him that the stone box in the hill contained the gold plates and the “Urim and Thummim”? Doesn’t this demonstrate that, from the beginning, the Angel Moroni (and likely Joseph Smith) was referring to the spectacles as the Urim and Thummim?

The problem with such assumptions is that both D&C 17 and JS-H 1 were written (as we have them in the scriptures) years after the events happened. The narrative we have for D&C 17, for instance, was written in 1834 or 1835 by Joseph’s scribe Frederick G. Williams. This late copy was based on the original 1829 revelation before it was lost, but we don’t know what edits Joseph or Frederick G. Williams made to the 1835 version before it was published. So, likewise, Joseph’s retelling of his 1823 encounter with the Angel Moroni (JS-H 1) was not written in its current form until 1838.

Although both of these scriptural passages suggest that the term “Urim and Thummim” was used to denote the spectacles from the start, the truth is that these scriptures were probably edited to reflect later LDS usage of the time. As explained by LDS historians Michael Mackay and Nicholas Frederick, “the term *Urim and Thummim* may have become part” of early LDS “...jargon... as early as 1830 when Joseph began translating the Bible,” but “it was likely not until later that consistent usage of the term began.”⁴⁶ Joseph and the Saints probably adopted the more biblical “Urim and Thummim” to describe the “spectacles,” once they connected the dots in the pattern from the crystals given by Moroni to the ancient Israelite crystals that conveyed the Word of God in ancient biblical times.

It was not the first time (or last time) that imprecise language in the scriptures relied on colloquialisms rather than accuracy. In the 1832 First Vision account, for instance, Moroni told Joseph that engraved “plates of gold” were deposited nearby. In the 1838 account, Joseph repeats the claim that Moroni referred to a book, “written upon gold plates,” which were deposited not far away. While these descriptions suggest that the plates were made of gold, Joseph once described them as having the “appearance of gold.”⁴⁷

In reality, the plates were not likely made of pure gold (they would have been too heavy, and too soft to take the engraving without distortion) and were most likely a composite of gold and other alloys (like modern jewelry).

46. Mackay and Frederick (2016), 50.

47. Joseph Smith Jr., *The Wentworth Letter* (1842), <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2002/07/the-wentworth-letter?lang=eng> (accessed 7 March 2020).

LDS scholars suggest that the plates may have been made of a different metal, not unlike Mesoamerican tumbaga.⁴⁸

While “gold plates” versus “appearance of gold” may be quibbling, it’s essential to understand that the account given by Joseph Smith can be *true* in the sense that it speaks of an actual encounter with an angel who told Joseph that he would translate a metal record of ancient Americans who had been visited by the resurrected Christ, but still recognize that from the precise perspective of scholars and historians, there can be subtle inaccuracies in the account that might be uncovered through the process of historical investigation.

When Joseph quoted Moroni as claiming that the box contained “gold plates,” he wasn’t likely repeating a word-for-word quotation of Moroni’s conversation. He was, instead, citing the substance of what Moroni had told him (or what Joseph believes he remembered that Moroni told him). The difference may seem trivial, but it makes a big and important point—Joseph’s memory was human. The recitals he shared about Moroni, the plates, the First Vision, and so forth, were culled from an imperfect human memory and according to how Joseph understood his recollection *at the time he shared those recollections* (which likely differed from how he might have shared those recollections ten years earlier or ten years later).

There is nothing inherently wrong with using familiar terms to describe foreign objects, events, places, people, animals, and so on. If you go on a modern cruise, you might set “sail” near sunset even though the cruise ship has no sails. Your computer “save” icon may depict a floppy disk, although computers today do not use floppy disks. Is it wrong to refer to Roman “soldiers” knowing that the word “soldier” is a French word that was not created for at least six hundred years after there were Roman soldiers?

By the time Joseph recounted his history, and by the time the Doctrine and Covenants was printed, the “spectacles” were known among the Latter-day Saints as the “Urim and Thummim.” Using the then-current LDS (and biblical) term more clearly communicated the intent of the term to an LDS audience. From a historical and memory-study standpoint, however, it demonstrates the difficulty of understanding how much of a report is based on what actually transpired during an event and how much of the report was modified (either subconsciously or intentionally) to facilitate understanding by a different audience—and Joseph, himself, was a different audience/author in 1832 than he was in 1823.

48. Read H. Putnam, “Were the Golden Plates Made of Tumbaga?” *The Improvement Era* (September 1966), 69:9, 788–789, 828–831.

Joseph Smith’s retelling of Moroni’s visit and instructions were all filtered and reconstructed through Joseph’s 1832 mind and not his 1823 mind. The near-decade which had elapsed between the occurrence of the event and the recording of the event, would absolutely have affected the retelling of the story. The term “Urim and Thummim” substantiates this point but it also opens the door to acknowledging that other details in the 1832 account might have also been recontextualized by Joseph’s mind at later dates and were not necessarily the precise descriptions employed by Moroni.

The Spectacles

The known historical record indicates that until about 1833, the Nephite interpreters were called “spectacles” because of their configuration. Joseph’s mother Lucy, for instance, felt the spectacles through a thin handkerchief and described them as “two smooth three-cornered diamonds set in glass, and the glasses were set in silver bows connected with each other in much the same way that old-fashioned spectacles are made.”⁴⁹ William Smith, Joseph’s brother, said that “a silver bow ran over one stone, under the other, around over that one and under the first in the shape of a horizontal figure 8 much like a pair of spectacles.”⁵⁰ Parley P. Pratt described them as “two transparent stones, clear as crystal, set in two rims of a bow.”⁵¹

Most artwork depicting the spectacles illustrates something which looks like old-fashioned glasses. In 2019 LDS historian Don Bradley suggested a fascinating and novel characterization of the spectacles. In his book *The Lost 116 Pages*, Bradley makes a strong argument demonstrating that the Book of Mormon (and especially the first 116 pages which were lost by Martin Harris) was deeply immersed in the world of the Old Testament. From early Israelite festivals to temple motifs, to the Ark of the Covenant, the earliest plates of the Book of Mormon referred to a Hebrew people who—in Exodus fashion—fled their homeland for a new land of promise.

49. Lucy Mack Smith, *Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1844–1845*, Page [7], bk. 5, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/lucy-mack-smith-history-1844-1845/61> (accessed 12 August 2019).

50. Quoted in John W. Welch, “The Miraculous Translation of the Book of Mormon,” *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations: 1820–1844*, ed., John W. Welch (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2005), 169.

51. Quoted by John Taylor “Three Nights’ Public Discussion Between the Revds. C. W. Cleeve, James Robertson, and Philip Carter, and Elder John Taylor of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,” p.14 in Orson Pratt, *A Series of Pamphlets on the Doctrines of the Gospel* (Liverpool: R. James, 1851).

Bradley's theory about the shape of the spectacles is based, in large part, on an 1870 report by non-LDS Palmyra businessman Fayette Lapham, who interviewed Joseph Smith Sr. in 1830.⁵² Forty years had elapsed from the time Lapham wrote and submitted the details of the interview and when he had conducted the interview. It stands to reason that Lapham would have garbled some details, misremembered some specifics, forgotten some information, conflated various elements, and undoubtedly recontextualized some of the information he had gleaned over the intervening four decades since he interviewed the prophet's father.

While Lapham gets several details wrong or garbles other elements of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, Bradley argues that "Lapham's narration is filled with firsthand information" that suggests Lapham worked from detailed notes taken during the interview, or had an incredible memory. Lapham correctly recounted, for example, "obscure but confirmable details, such as the order in which Joseph Smith translated Mormon's abridgement and Nephi's small plates after the manuscript loss."⁵³

In fairness, however, Lapham recounts Joseph Smith Sr.'s description of Moroni as "a very large man... dressed in an ancient suit of clothes" (while contemporary Latter-day Saints such as Oliver Cowdery and David Whitmer described him as ordinary sized and Joseph, the prophet, claimed that Moroni wore a white robe⁵⁴). In Lapham's account, notes historian Mark Ashurst-McGee, Moroni is also described dangerously violent and possibly evil.⁵⁵ According to Lapham's interview, Joseph Sr. claimed that Moroni's suit was all "bloody."⁵⁶ So, it appears that Lapham's 1870 recital of Joseph Sr.'s interview was both a mix of accurate retelling and inaccurate recollections.

In describing the spectacles and plates, Joseph Sr. supposedly told Lapham, that under "the first plate, or lid, he found a pair of spectacles, about one and a half inches longer than those used at the present day, the eyes not of glass, but of diamond."

52. Bradley (2019), 121–123.

53. *Ibid.*, 122.

54. Mark Ashurst-McGee, "Moroni as Angel and as Treasure Guardian," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* (2006), 18:1, 71–72.

55. *Ibid.*, 73–74.

56. Fayette Lapham, Esqr., "Interview With the Father of Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet, Forty Years Ago. His Account of the Finding of the Sacred Plates," *The Historical Magazine and Notes and Queries Concerning The Antiquities, History and Biography of America*, ed., Henry B. Bawson (Morrisania, New York: Henry B. Bawson, May 1870), 3:5, 306.

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On the next page were representations of all the masonic implements, as used by masons at the present day. The remaining pages were closely written over in characters of some unknown tongue, the last containing the alphabet of this unknown language.⁵⁷

Bradley accepts the description that “masonic implements” were depicted on the plates. Since the “compass” and “square” are, by far, the most basic and ubiquitous masonic characters, Bradley suggests that, at the very least, these figures were represented in Joseph Sr.’s description. And this factors into how he theorizes the design of the spectacles.

The *compass* of Masonry is the architect’s drawing compass or set of calipers. When opened, it looks like a single-bladed pocketknife halfway open. The tip of one of the V’s legs is usually a pin or sharp point that secures the compass to the drawing material, while the other V’s leg (holding a pencil, or a bit of chalk) moves around in a circle—drawing a circle—while the other V stays locked in place in the center of the circle.

A *square* is an L-shaped tool (both parts are a right angle from each other) which allows a carpenter or stonemason to draw straight lines or square up joists, frames, and so on. The compass and square are essential tools, even in today’s architectural work. In Masonry, the two intertwined symbols came to represent wisdom, virtue, and God’s architectural work in creating the earth.

In Bradley’s theory, the glasses of Nephite spectacles resembled pre-1830 spectacles known as *lorgnettes*. Instead of utilizing “temples” to hold the glasses to the sides of the head by wrapping behind each ear, a lorgnette was simply two glasses in a frame (sometimes in the shape of a figure 8) with a single rod coming from a side which the wearer would use to hold the glasses in place (almost like old-time opera glasses). The glass frames (with lenses) were sometimes hinged where it connected to the rod, or handle. In some designs, the handle and frame would fold together to make it more portable.

According to Bradley’s theory, the Nephite “spectacles” more closely resembled an outdated style of lorgnette known as a *folding lorgnette*. Instead of being hinged between the lens frames and the handle, a folding lorgnette was typically hinged at the bridge directly between the lenses and could be folded together when not in use. When opened, they were V-shaped—hinged at the V point, with a lens on each of the tops of the V. The spectacles could be widened and narrowed to suit the reader’s eyes like

57. Ibid., 307.

the folding and unfolding of a pocket-knife, an architect's compass, or a pair of binoculars. The rims were round frames encompassing the Nephite interpreter stones—almost like two magnifying glasses joined at the handles so they could spread wider (open), or close with each rim on top of the other. In the center of each magnifying rim were secured triangular-shaped stones (as described by Lucy Mack Smith), set at different angles.

When opened half-way (so they were still bent and hinged in the middle at about the same angle a compass when drawing a circle), one of the triangular stones would look like an upside-down triangle (or upside-down compass as depicted in Masonic symbolism). At the same time, the other rim contained a second triangular stone on its side (which would represent the L-shape of the Masonic square). When the interpreters were folded closed, the masonic symbols of the compass and square would have become intertwined Vs—a right side up V, and an upside-down V (\wedge) laying top of each other. The shape of the two overlapping triangular stones (one right-side-up and one upside-down) would depict the *Magen David* or Star of David.⁵⁸

Bradley's theory, that the spectacles were meant to resemble the Masonic compass and square as well as the Star of David, is fascinating and convincing on the surface—but I find that it fails to account for all the data. There are at least five problems I see with his model of the spectacles.

1) Joseph Smith Jr., and Joseph Smith Sr., were very conversant with Masonry and most likely Masonic symbols. Even if Lapham was correct in claiming that Joseph Sr. said the plates depicted "Masonic implements," that only tells us that Joseph Sr. *interpreted* depictions on the plates as masonic implements. Like seeing the face of Jesus in the burn marks on a piece of toast, it's just as likely that Joseph Sr.'s mind created a Masonic pattern where none really existed. It would not be hard to find Vs, or even overlapping Vs, in foreign art.

According to Charles Anthon (the scholar to whom Martin Harris took some Book of Mormon characters in hopes of obtaining a verification of Joseph's translation), some of the graphics in the sketching Joseph made of the plate characters resembled "the Mexican Calendar given by Humboldt"—a reference to the drawing of an Aztec calendar published by Alexander Von Humboldt in 1814. Not only does the Aztec calendar contain multiple V shapes (both the compass and the square), but it also

58. That the stones from the "Urim and Thummim" were triangles and could create a Star of David when layered over each other, might be a theory which originated with LDS Daniel Rona; see <https://israelrevealed.com/wp-content/uploads/NTsummary06.pdf> (accessed 3 March 2020).

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contains graphics that could be interpreted as overlapping V shapes (the Masonic symbol depicting both the compass and square intertwined).

It seems reasonable to assume that if the graphics on Moroni’s plates looked anything like the Aztec calendar, there would also have been enough Vs and overlapping Vs that someone steeped in Masonry might have connected the imaginary dots to conclude that the graphics depicted Masonic implements.

2) While the hexagram (the Star of David) was known in various parts of the Old World in ancient times, the earliest Semitic example (with which Lehi might have been familiar) was known in the “seventh century B.C. in Sidon (now Saida in Lebanon).”⁵⁹ The symbol did not become part of Jewish symbology, however, until the middle ages—long after Lehi left Jerusalem.⁶⁰ While compass and square symbols—as upright or inverted “Vs”—were known in various ancient cultures, it doesn’t appear that the two interlaced symbols had any more than an artistic meaning to the people of Lehi’s day.⁶¹ It wasn’t until medieval times, after brotherhoods of Masonry were formed, before the intertwined Vs of the compass and square became an obvious cultic symbol. Without the Masonic connection to the plates, there is less need to make a Masonic connection to the spectacles.

3) More than a decade after having handled the spectacles (spectacles she never saw), Joseph’s mother, Lucy Mack Smith, recorded the details of her experience. Lucy described the interpreter stones as “two smooth three-cornered diamonds set in glass,” while Joseph Sr. (who had *seen* the spectacles) described “the eyes” (according to Lapham) as “...not of glass, but of diamond.”⁶² In an 1842 interview, Lucy Mack Smith said that the Urim and Thummim “resembled two large bright diamonds set in a bow like a pair of spectacles.”⁶³

Bradley accepts Lucy’s “three-cornered” description of the stones, which work for his theory. He suggests that when the spectacles were folded

59. Earnest G. McClain, “The ‘Star of David’ as Jewish Harmonical Metaphor,” *International Journal of Musicology* (1997), 6:25.

60. Marc Michael Epstein, *Dreams of Subversion in Medieval Jewish Art and Literature* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), 61; Joaneath Spicer, “The Star of David and Jewish Culture in Prague Around 1600, Reflected in Drawings of Roelandt Savery and Paulus van Vianen,” *The Journals of the Walters Art Gallery* (1996), 54: 208–209; Mark Stavish, *Freemasonry: Rituals, Symbols & History of The Secret Society* (Woodbury, MI: Llewellyn Publications, 2007), 34–35.

61. See Gershom Scholem, “The Curious History of the Six-Pointed Star: How the ‘Magen David’ Became the Jewish Symbol,” *Commentary* (1949), 8:244.

62. Lapham (1870), 307.

63. Welch (2005), 162.

closed, the intertwining triangles depicted the Masonic compass and square as well as the Star of David. In Bradley's model, however, the triangular "diamonds" in the rims of the spectacles would have to be flat (or nearly flat), in order to fold so they layered one over the other.

Yet flat-cut glass is nothing like the "bright diamonds" of Lucy's description. Diamonds sparkle brightly, in part, because of their shape and *depth*. Jewelry diamonds are cut for specific measurements, angles, depth, and number of facets, in order to make them bright and sparkly. Flat, triangular diamonds would lack this sparkle. Even real, triangular-cut diamonds (which are much less common than round or square-cut diamonds), still have *depth*.

Joseph Sr. does not tell us that the stones were triangular, but merely that they were made not of glass, but of "diamond." Lucy, on the other hand, claims that the lenses were "three-cornered diamonds set in glass." This certainly indicates triangular cut stones. Perhaps she was confused—she *handled* the spectacles while they were covered in a cloth, but never *saw* them. Her claim that said diamonds were "set in glass" adds to this confusion. I don't see how diamonds can be physically "set in glass" unless there were encased in an inner binding within the lens frames. Lucy's description of "three-cornered diamonds" appears to be unique among descriptions of the spectacle's lenses, and her comment of them being "set in glass" suggests that she was either confused or inadvertently made poor word choices when she described the *interpreters*.

Bradley's theory assumes that Lapham recorded Joseph Sr.'s words accurately and that he didn't conflate Joseph Sr.'s words with what Lapham might have read from Lucy's account (printed in 1853) before publishing his own interview with Joseph Sr. (1870). It makes more sense to suggest that Joseph Sr.'s "diamond" description characterized the optical or mystical qualities of the stone rather than the overall shape. According to Stan Spencer, for example, the terms "diamond" and "glass" may have been local colloquialisms which referred to seer stones.⁶⁴

4) Bradley acknowledges that a lorgnette of the between-lens hinged variety would have been uncommon in Joseph's day. He addresses this concern by noting Lucy's description of the Urim and Thummim as being "connected with each other in much the same way as old fashioned spectacles." *Old-fashioned*, Bradley argues, suggests that the spectacles were different than what was common in Joseph's day. David Whitmer, however, claims that the spectacles were "shaped like a pair of ordinary

64. Stan Spencer, "What Did the Interpreters (Urim and Thummim) Look Like?" *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* (2019), 33:235.

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spectacles, though much larger, and at least a half inch in thickness.”⁶⁵ Thus, according to Whitmer, the spectacle frames were not unusual. Also, according to Whitmer, the lenses (stones) were ½ inch thick—probably too thick to lay over the top of each other if folded to resemble a Star of David. If each stone (or lens frame) were ½ thick, the spectacles would have been at least an inch thick when folded—very unusual for lorgnettes.

5) If the spectacles were hinged at the bridge so they could be opened fully and closed on top of each other, it does not make any sense that Joseph had problems seeing through both lenses simultaneously. As will be discussed below, Joseph complained that he could only see through one lens at a time. If he could bring the lenses more closely together, however, he should have been able to see through them simultaneously, or he could have folded them together, creating the Star of David, and used them as a single lens.

Ill-Fitting Glasses

Martin Harris’s description of the spectacles helps us understand why the interpreters were difficult for Joseph to use.

The two stones set in a bow of silver were about two inches in diameter, perfectly round, and about five-eighths of an inch thick at the centre; but not so thick at the edges where they came into the bow. They were joined by a round bar of silver, about three-eighths of an inch in diameter, and about four inches long, which, with the two stones, would make eight inches.⁶⁶

If Harris was correct, then the spectacles were about 8 inches wide. By comparison, my own glasses (small lenses) are about 5 inches wide. Many years ago, I had large-lens glasses that were probably about 6 inches wide. The Nephite spectacles, in comparison, were enormous. This was, in fact, a frequent description of the spectacles. David Whitmer described them as “much larger” than ordinary spectacles. In Lapham’s interview with Joseph Sr., the prophet’s father described the spectacles as “about one and a half inches longer than those used at present day.”⁶⁷

If early nineteenth-century glasses were anywhere near 6 inches wide, like the personal glasses of the 1990s, then the extra “one and a half inches

65. David Whitmer interview in “The Golden Fables,” *The Chicago Times* (7 August 1875), quote by Richard Van Wagoner and Steve Walker, “Joseph Smith: ‘The Gift of Seeing,’” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* (Summer 1982), 15:2, 67 n. 78.

66. Quoted in Morris, (2019), 194.

67. Lampham (1870), 307.

longer” would make the Nephite spectacles nearly 8 inches wide—very close to what Harris described as well.

While most of the contemporary accounts talk about the size of the spectacles, they typically focus on the size of the stones (lenses). Harris said they were about two inches in diameter, while a neighbor who had talked with Joseph said that the glasses were “larger than a silver dollar” (which was 1.5 inches in that day). Similarly, Orson Hyde compared the lenses to an English crown coin, which was also 1.5 inches in diameter. One contemporary who wrote about a visit with Joseph’s father said (with obvious exaggeration) that the glasses in the spectacles were as big as a “breakfast plate.”⁶⁸

Several accounts claim that the size of the spectacles made the translating process difficult. William (Joseph’s brother) said that the spectacles were “much too large for Joseph,” and, referring to the lenses, that Joseph “could only see through one at a time using sometimes one and sometimes the other.”⁶⁹

By putting his head in a hat or some dark object it was not necessary to close one eye while looking through the stone with the other. In that way sometimes when his eyes grew tires [tired] he [relieved] them of the strain.⁷⁰

“The size of the spectacles,” notes historian Mark Ashurst-McGee, “made them inconvenient to translate with.”⁷¹ But if we examine this more closely, we find that it wasn’t the size of the lenses that created the problem. The problem was with what opticians refer to as the *interpupillary distance* (IPD)—or the distance between your pupils. In regular eyeglasses, the interpupillary distance is an important measurement necessary to place the corrective lens in front of your pupils properly. I realize that the Nephite spectacles were not ordinary glasses, but it seems that the interpupillary distance was what caused Joseph such difficulty in using them for translation.

Charles Anthon, to whom Martin Harris went seeking a translation, said that (according to Harris) the spectacles “were so large, that, if a person

68. W. Wyl, *Mormon Portraits or the Truth About Mormon Leaders: From 1830 to 1886* (Salt Lake City: Tribune Printing and Publishing Company, 1886), 276.

69. “William Smith Interview by J. W. Peterson and W. S. Pender, 1890,” quoted in Welch (2005), 164.

70. Ibid.

71. Mark Ashhurst-McGee, “A Pathway to Prophethood: Joseph Smith Junior as Rodman, Village Seer, and Judeo-Christian Prophet,” Master’s Thesis, Utah State University (2000), 322.

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attempted to look through them, his two eyes would have to be turned towards one of the glasses” because they were “...altogether too large for the breadth of the human face.”⁷² He is describing a problem which happens when the interpupillary distance between lenses is much wider than the person’s eyes.⁷³

The lenses/stones were set much further apart than we would traditionally find in typical glasses. As Harris described, the stones “were joined by a round bar of silver, ...about four inches long.”⁷⁴ This means there were about four inches between the two lenses, or that the bridge of the spectacles, was four inches long (and notice that Harris doesn’t say the bar was “hinged” so the spectacles could be folded in half).

The mean adult interpupillary distance is about 2.48 inches, with most adults falling in the range of 1.97 inches to 2.96 inches. While the distance can vary, it’s unlikely, notes Neil Anthony Dodgson, that any adults have an IPD of more than 3.14 inches.⁷⁵

Keep in mind that the 4” rod separating the two stones on the spectacles was the bridge measurement, not the IPD measurement. The average bridge measurement for modern glasses is typically between 0.5 to 1 inch.⁷⁶ This means that the bridge distance between the lenses was a least four times greater than regular glasses. With two-inch lenses (and a thin band of silver to hold the lenses in the frame), the IPD of the Nephite spectacles must have been around 5.5 inches, or over double the IPD of the average human face and probably more than two inches greater than the distance of any human’s IPD. In my opinion, this leads to the inescapable conclusion that the spectacles were *not* meant to be used like spectacles. No human could have worn the “spectacles” on the bridge of his or her nose and could have looked simultaneously through both lenses.

The fact that they were framed in a figure-8 fashion undoubtedly led the early Saints to believe (it fit their “pattern”) that they were *spectacles*.

72. Charles Anthon’s Letter to E. D. Howe (17 February 1834), quoted in Morris (2019), 230.

73. Four years after I had finished my first draft of this chapter, I read an article by Brian Hales, wherein he also recognized that the “spectacles” would have been too wide for Joseph to use like glasses. See Brian C. Hales, “The Book of Mormon Translation: Four Theories” (13 September 2018), 19–20 (copy of Hales article in author’s possession).

74. Martin Harris, “Mormonism—No. 2,” *Tiffany’s Monthly* May-July, 1859, quoted in Morris (2019), 194.

75. Neil Anthony Dodgson, “Variation and Extrema of Human Interpupillary Distance,” *Proceedings of the Society for Optical Engineering* (December 2003), 2, 10.

76. “Measuring Your Eyeglasses,” <https://www.marveloptics.com/how-to-guide/frame-sizing-guide> (accessed 12 August 2019).

Assuming they were spectacles caused other pieces of the pattern to fit into place. Lucy, for example, claimed that, attached to one of the spectacles, was a “rod which was connected with the outer edge of the right shoulder of the breast-plate. By pressing the head a little forward, the rod held the Urim and Thummim before the eyes much like a pair of spectacles.”⁷⁷ As discussed above, some eighteenth- and nineteenth-century eyeglasses were known as *lorgnettes*. Except for the wide bridge between the lenses, the Nephite spectacles may have looked like a lorgnette—but not a “folding” lorgnette, as suggested by Bradley.

According to William, Joseph’s brother, when the spectacles were attached to the breastplate by the rod, Joseph was able to translate with “both hands free to hold the plates.”⁷⁸ But William might have been mistaken. It is possible that Joseph attempted this arrangement early on, but if the rod really held the spectacles in front of Joseph’s face, he would not have been able to see through both lenses simultaneously to look at the plates. No source, of which I’m aware, describes Joseph looking at the plates through the lenses. Instead, most sources describe Joseph looking at the lenses in an upturned hat. There is no way Joseph could place his face in the hat—with rod and spectacles still in their frames—while attempting to translate. To remedy the spectacle size and hat dilemma, most historians agree that “Joseph apparently disassembled the spectacles” from their frames and turned the lenses into seer stones.⁷⁹

While the early Saints called the interpreters “spectacles” because, when recontextualized, they loosely fit the pattern of what they expected spectacles or lorgnettes to look like, I think the evidence suggests that no human could have worn these “spectacles” in the same fashion that one would wear glasses. This makes me wonder if, perhaps, they were not spectacles at all. I approach this question as a believing Latter-day Saint who accepts the physical reality of the “spectacles” and that they were included in a stone box buried (and later revealed) by the Angel Moroni.

77. Quoted in James E. Lancaster, “By the Gift and Power of God—The Method of Translation of the Book of Mormon,” *Saints’ Herald* (15 November 1962), 110:24, reproduced at <http://www.sidneyrigdon.com/criddle/Smith-Source2.htm> (accessed 7 March 2020).

78. J. W. Peterson, *Rod of Iron* 1/3, February 1924, 6–7, quoted in James E. Lancaster, “The Method of Translation of the Book of Mormon,” *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* (1983), 3:56.

79. Ashurst-McGee (2000), 322.