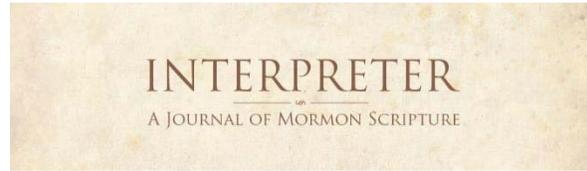




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## Reflections of *Urim*: Hebrew Poetry Sheds Light on the Directors-Interpreters Mystery

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Stan Spencer

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# REFLECTIONS OF *URIM*: HEBREW POETRY SHEDS LIGHT ON THE DIRECTORS- INTERPRETERS MYSTERY

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**Stan Spencer**

*Abstract: In the early editions of the Book of Mormon, Alma refers to the Nephite interpreters as directors. Because director(s) elsewhere refers to the brass ball that guided Lehi's family through the wilderness, Alma's use of the term was apparently considered a mistake, and directors was changed to interpreters for the 1920 edition of the Book of Mormon. There are reasons, however, to believe that Alma's use of directors was intentional. I present contextual evidence that Alma was actually using the Hebrew word urim, which was later translated into English as directors (for the interpreters) and director (for the brass ball), and biblical evidence that those translations are appropriate. Alma may have called the instruments urim to emphasize their sacred importance. As English prose, Alma's discussion of these sacred instruments is wordy and at times confusing. As Hebrew poetry built around the word urim, it makes more sense. Alma's apparent sophisticated use of this word suggests that he had a thorough understanding of the ancient connotations of urim and remarkable talent as a classical Hebrew poet.*

## **Instrument Confusion in the Book of Mormon**

**O**ne of the more substantial changes to the Book of Mormon since its 1830 publication was the replacement of the word *directors* in Alma chapter 37 with *interpreters* (Alma 37:21, 24). The change was made for the 1920 edition of the Book of Mormon and has been preserved in all subsequent Latter-day Saint (LDS) editions. The change made sense because Alma is speaking of the two sacred stones used to interpret ancient writings, and everywhere else in the Book of Mormon those stones are fittingly called *interpreters*. Also, *director* (i.e., in the singular) in the Book of Mormon and *directors* in the Doctrine and Covenants

always refer to the brass ball that guided the Nephites to their promised land, not to the two interpreter stones.<sup>1</sup>

So was the use of *directors* to refer to the interpreters in Alma 37 an error? Did Joseph Smith dictate the wrong word during the translation process, or did Alma forget what the interpreter stones were called? Not likely. There are reasons to believe that the use of *directors* in Alma's message was intentional.

First, even though Joseph Smith made many corrections and clarifications in the Book of Mormon text for the 1837, 1840, and 1847 editions, he apparently saw no need to change *directors* to *interpreters*. Being intimately familiar with the interpreters and the translation process, he should have known if a correction was needed.

Second, Alma uses *director(s)* to refer to both the interpreters and the brass ball in Alma 37 and seems to be aware of that fact. He calls the interpreters "these directors" and the brass ball "this director" (not "the director"), suggesting that he considers directors to be a class of instruments of which the interpreters and the brass ball are two examples.

Third, even the brass ball is rarely called a director in the Book of Mormon. While it's called a ball or compass 17 times, it's called a director only three times, and two of those are in Alma 37. The third instance, which may also be based on Alma's writing, is in Mormon's list of names for the instrument in Mosiah 1:16. The interpreters are called *directors*

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1 The earliest manuscript of the revelation in Doctrine and Covenants (D&C) 17 reads, "directors which was given to Lehi." Revelation, June 1829-E [D&C 17], The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed 26 Nov. 1014, <http://josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/revelation-june-1829-e-dc-17>. The singular verb *was* suggests that *directors* may have been an error and *director* was intended. Alternatively, *directors* in this case may refer to the two pointers within the brass ball. On the other hand, *director* in D&C 3 may be referring to the interpreters or a seer stone: "And this is the reason that thou hast lost thy privileges for a season — for thou hast suffered the counsel of thy director [*directors* in the earliest manuscript] to be trampled upon from the beginning" (D&C 3:14-15). That the earliest manuscript had *directors* in the plural suggests that it is referring to the interpreters through which the counsel may have been received rather than to the one who gave it. For the earliest manuscript of this revelation, see Revelation, July 1828 [D&C 3], The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed 26 Nov. 1014, <http://josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/revelation-july-1828-dc-3>. Elizabeth Ann Whitmer Cowdery, a witness to the translation of the Book of Mormon, referred to the instrument with which Joseph Smith translated (and through which he may have received the trampled counsel) as a "director." "Elizabeth Ann Whitmer Cowdery Affidavit, 15 February 1870," in *Early Mormon Documents*, ed. Dan Vogel (Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books, 1870), 5:260.

twice — both times in Alma 37. If *director(s)* should refer exclusively to one instrument, it isn't obvious from these few occurrences that the instrument is the brass ball and not the interpreters. More likely, Alma intentionally applied the term to both instruments.

Fourth, there is no closely preceding occurrence of *director(s)* in the Book of Mormon that might have prompted Joseph Smith to dictate (or his scribe to record) *directors* when *interpreters* was intended. The only previous instance is *director* in Mosiah 1:16.

If the word *directors* in Alma 37 was not a mistake, why was it used? Why didn't Alma just call the interpreters ... *interpreters*? For that matter, why did he call the brass ball a *director* instead of referring to it by its more usual names?

I will present evidence that, in Alma's original composition of his message, he was actually using the Hebrew word *urim*, which was later translated into English as *directors* (for the interpreters) and *director* (for the brass ball).<sup>2</sup> He may have called the instruments *urim* for the same reason Joseph Smith eventually called the interpreters *Urim* and *Thummim* — to emphasize their sacred importance.

I will show that the interpreters and brass ball are similar to the biblical *Urim* and *Thummim* in being physical instruments of divine revelation, that the *Urim* and *Thummim* was sometimes simply called *Urim* or belonged to a class of instruments called *Urim* in the King James Bible, that *directors* and *director* are reasonable English translations of *urim*, that *urim* is an appropriate label for the interpreters and brass ball given Alma's purpose in writing, and that *urim* fits naturally in the poetry of his message.

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2 As Hebrew was the predominant language in Jerusalem at the time of his departure in about 600 BCE, it would have been the most likely language spoken by Nephi. According to Mosiah 24:4, the "language of Nephi" was still spoken in Alma's father's generation. Also, according to Omni 1:15-17, the people of Zarahemla were of Jewish descent, but "their language had become corrupted; and they had brought no records with them; and they denied the being of their Creator; and Mosiah, nor the people of Mosiah, could understand them," implying that, had it not become corrupted, their Hebrew language would have been understandable to the Nephites. Even if some alteration of Hebrew wasn't a spoken language in Alma's day, it must have been a written language familiar to the Nephite recordkeepers, given Moroni's statement in Mormon 9:33 that "if our plates had been sufficiently large we should have written in Hebrew; but the Hebrew hath been altered by us also."

## Instruments Like the Urim and Thummim

The Urim and Thummim was an instrument through which the word of the Lord was revealed to ancient Israel. Its first mention in scripture is when the Lord commands Moses to place it in the breastplate of the ephod worn by the high priest (Exodus 28:30). The Bible says nothing of its physical nature or of how it communicated the Lord's word, but in several of the early traditions, revelation by Urim and Thummim involved light-emitting stones, or luminous or projecting letters that formed messages. A king or other important person who desired to consult the Urim and Thummim would make his question known to the high priest, who would then "inquire of the Lord" and receive the Lord's response (Numbers 27:21).<sup>3</sup>

The Nephite interpreters were two seer stones given by the Lord to the Jaredites and later used by the Nephites and by Joseph Smith in translating ancient records. Like the biblical Urim and Thummim, they were associated with a breastplate. Joseph Smith also had other seer stones. He used one of these interchangeably with the interpreters in receiving the translation of the gold plates. He also used seer stones to receive other revelations. These revelations were prompted by his "inquiring of the Lord," after which he would look into a hat in which he had placed the stone, for the answer. At least in the case of the Book of Mormon translation, the answer appeared in the form of written words.<sup>4</sup>

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3 Cornelis Van Dam, *The Urim and Thummim: A Means of Revelation in Ancient Israel* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1997). See pages 9-23 and 27-32 for identification of the Urim as stones, and 24-25, 33 for identification as luminous or projecting letters. The prevailing modern theory is that the Urim and Thummim was a lot oracle (see pp. 34-37). This theory, however, is hardly compatible with the biblical evidence, as explained by Van Dam (pp. 197-217), who believes that Urim refers to the verifying light that emitted from what was probably a single gem (p. 230). The lot theory does not readily explain, for example, how Saul could fail to get an answer when consulting the Urim (1 Samuel 28:6) or how the Urim could provide answers such as "Behold, he is hiding himself by the baggage" in response to an inquiry of "Has the man come here yet?" (1 Samuel 10:22 NASB). Nor does the lot theory accord well with early traditions regarding the instrument. For persons who could consult the Urim, see Van Dam, *Urim and Thummim*, 181. Also see note 15 below regarding the significance of the phrase "inquired of the Lord."

4 For a description of the interpreters as seer stones and their relationship to the breastplate, see Joseph Smith — History 1:35. For a discussion and references relating to Joseph Smith's use of the interpreters and his seer stones, see Richard Van Wagoner and Steven C. Walker, "Joseph Smith: The Gift of Seeing," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 15/2 (1982): 48-68, especially 57-58. David Whitmer,

Joseph Smith initially called the interpreters “spectacles.” The first recorded identification of the interpreters with the biblical Urim and Thummim was in 1833, nearly three years after the Book of Mormon was published, when W. W. Phelps suggested that the interpreters may have been known anciently as Urim and Thummim.<sup>5</sup> Thereafter Joseph Smith and his associates often referred to the interpreters as well as his individual seer stones as “the Urim and Thummim,” apparently considering Urim and Thummim to be a class of revelatory instruments.<sup>6</sup>

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among others, speaks of Joseph Smith inquiring of the Lord: “Joseph did not know how it was, so he enquired of the Lord about it, and behold the following revelation came through the stone.” David Whitmer, *An Address to All Believers in Christ* (Richmond, MO: n.p., 1887), 31. Orson Pratt, a close associate of Joseph Smith beginning in late 1830, in 1887 provided a signed report of a meeting held that same year, during which he “explained the circumstances under which several revelations were received by Joseph, the Prophet, and the manner in which he received them, he being present on several occasions of the kind. Declared that sometimes Joseph used a seer stone when enquiring of the Lord, and receiving revelation.” “Report of Elders Orson Pratt and Joseph F. Smith,” *Millennial Star* 15 (17 Sep 1878): 787. The first revelation Orson Pratt witnessed was directed at him. Upon meeting Joseph Smith, Orson Pratt asked if there was a revelation for him. Joseph took him and John Whitmer upstairs, “produced a small stone called a seer stone, and putting it into a hat soon commenced speaking.” James R. B. Vancleave to Joseph Smith III, 29 Sep 1878, in *David Whitmer Interviews: A Restoration Witness*, ed. Lyndon W. Cook (Orem, UT: Grandin, 1991), 239-240. That revelation is now found in D&C 34.

5 In about summer of 1832, Joseph Smith recorded in his personal history that “the Lord had prepared spectacles for to read the book.” History, circa Summer 1832, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed 24 Nov. 2014, <http://josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/history-circa-summer-1832>. In January 1833, *The Evening and the Morning Star*, edited by William W. Phelps, reported that the Book of Mormon “was translated by the gift and power of God, by an unlearned man, through the aid of a pair of Interpreters, or spectacles — (known, perhaps, in ancient days as Teraphim, or Urim and Thummim),” “The Book of Mormon,” *Evening and the Morning Star* 1 (Jan 1833): 58.

6 After a meeting with other apostles in which Joseph Smith showed one of his seer stones, Wilford Woodruff wrote in his journal, “I had the privilege of seeing, for the first time in my day, the Urim and Thummim.” Van Wagoner, 59-60. Oliver Cowdery referred to the seer stone by which Joseph Smith translated the Book of Mormon as “the Urim and Thummim,” then added that the Nephites would have considered it an interpreter: “Day after day I continued, uninterrupted, to write from his mouth, as he translated, with the Urim and Thummim, or, as the Nephites would [sic] have said, ‘Interpreters.’” Oliver Cowdery to W.W. Phelps, 7 Sep 1834, *Messenger and Advocate* 1 (Oct 1834): 14. On another occasion, Oliver Cowdery referred to the same stone as a “Urim and Thummim” in connection with Joseph

The term is used this way in Doctrine and Covenants 130:10, and Orson Pratt, a close associate of Joseph Smith, taught that “the Urim and Thummim is a stone or other substance sanctified and illuminated by the Spirit of the living God, and presented to those who are blessed with the gift of seeing.”<sup>7</sup>

The brass ball (or *Liahona*, interpreted as *compass*) contained two spindles, or pointers.<sup>8</sup> At least one of the spindles pointed the way Lehi’s group should travel in their journey to their promised land (1 Nephi 16:10; Alma 37:40). While the brass ball guided Lehi’s family as a physical compass, it also gave them “understanding concerning the ways of the Lord” in the form of written messages on the spindles (1 Nephi 16:29). In one instance, written “directions” (1 Nephi 16:30) were given after Lehi, the group’s high priest, “did inquire of the Lord” (1 Nephi 16:24). In this second function, that of revealing the word of the Lord, it served a similar purpose for the first Nephites as the Urim and Thummim did for the biblical Israelites and as the interpreters and Joseph Smith’s seer stones did for the early Mormons. They were all oracular instruments.

After making early use of these instruments for divine direction, the Nephites, biblical Israelites, and Joseph Smith all eventually came to rely less on them and more on the spirit of prophecy and revelation (i.e., the

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Smith’s use of it to receive an 1830 revelation (Van Wagoner and Walker, “Gift of Seeing,” 57–58). See Van Wagoner and Walker, 49–63, for additional examples of the use of this term for Joseph Smith’s seer stones and the Nephite interpreters.

7 *Masterful Discourses of Orson Pratt*, ed. N. B. Lundwall (Salt Lake City, UT: Bookcraft Publishers, 1962), 552.

8 *Liahona* appears to be a properly constructed Hebrew word from *li*, which can indicate the possession of something; *iaho*, which is a short form of *Jehovah*, used in coining words; and *ona*, which can be translated as “whither,” as it is in “whither wilt thou go?” in Genesis 16:8. Together they mean, more or less, “whither of Jehovah” or “direction of the Lord,” or by analogy, the Lord’s compass. See Jonathan Curci, “Liahona: ‘The Direction of the Lord’: An Etymological Explanation,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 16/2 (2007): 60–67, 97–98. *Compass* is more an analogy than a translation for *Liahona*. Although the brass ball, like a compass, was a navigational instrument, it worked by faith, not magnetism, and pointed toward a destination, not magnetic north. The unexpected “and the Lord [Jehovah] prepared it” following the word *Liahona* in Alma 37:38 may be a wordplay on its *iaho* (Jehovah) element. The prophet Nephi seems to introduce this instrument with the same type of wordplay whenever he refers to it as a compass (presumably *Liahona* in the original Hebrew text; 1 Nephi 18:12–21, 2 Nephi 5:12) but not when he refers to it as a ball (1 Nephi 16:10–16; 1 Nephi 10:26–30).

power of the Holy Ghost) and on their growing collections of written revelations.<sup>9</sup>

### Translations of *Urim*

*Urim and Thummim* is a transliterated Hebrew phrase. It has usually been interpreted as “lights and perfections” based on its Hebrew associations, or as “manifestations and truth” based on some of the Greek renderings in the Septuagint.<sup>10</sup> *Urim* probably expresses the main idea of the name, with *Thummim* being of secondary importance. Accordingly, *Thummim* is sometimes omitted altogether and the instrument simply called *Urim*, as in 1 Samuel 28:6 (NASB; see also Numbers 27:21): “When Saul inquired of the LORD, the LORD did not answer him, either by dreams or by Urim or by prophets.” Alternatively, given the lack of the definite article, *Urim* in this passage may be referring more generally to oracular instruments, not just the divinely sanctioned Urim and Thummim. In fact, Saul could not have inquired of the Lord by the Urim and Thummim, because Abiathar had fled with the ephod to the camp of David (1 Samuel 23:9). Saul may have attempted to use a different “urim.”

*Urim* can mean “flames” or “fires” in Hebrew, but the *Urim* in *Urim and Thummim* is as likely derived from *orim*, meaning “lights”

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9 There is no clear scriptural indication of use of the revelatory instruments by the Nephites after the second King Mosiah or by the biblical Israelites after King David. David Whitmer reported: “After the translation of the Book of Mormon was finished early in the spring of 1830 before April 6th, Joseph gave the stone to Oliver Cowdery and told me as well as the rest that he was through with it, and he did not use the stone anymore.” Whitmer, “All Believers,” 32. The spirit of revelation is equated to the power of the Holy Ghost in D&C 8:2-3. The spirit of prophecy and spirit of revelation are associated with each other throughout the Book of Mormon, including the title page, and throughout the Doctrine and Covenants. While many of the early revelations contained in the Doctrine and Covenants were received through the “Urim and Thummim” (as noted in headings of D&C sections 3, 6, 7, 11, 14, and 17; Van Wagoner and Walker, “Gift of Seeing,” 61), the heading to D&C 20 is consistent with David Whitmer’s statement, indicating it was given in April 1830 “by the spirit of prophecy and revelation.” However, Joseph Smith reportedly used another seer stone on later occasions, including for a revelation given to Orson Pratt (now D&C 34), on November 4, 1830 (James R. B. Vancleave to Joseph Smith III, 239-240), and in translating the Book of Abraham (Van Wagoner and Walker, 60) in 1835.

10 For traditional interpretations of *Urim and Thummim*, see Van Dam, *Urim and Thummim*, 93, 132-136.

in classical Hebrew.<sup>11</sup> (There is currently, however, nothing approaching consensus on the word's origin, and numerous other derivations have been proposed.<sup>12</sup>) Even though *Urim* referred specifically to an oracular instrument, it would have anciently carried some degree of connotation of fire and light due to its similarity to these words. In fact, evidence from ancient Greek translations tends to confirm an association of *Urim* with light. In the Septuagint's Ezra and Nehemiah, *Urim* was translated into Greek by forms of *photizo*, which means "to shine" or "to give light." Translations of *Urim* elsewhere in the Septuagint suggest that it had other ancient connotations as well. In the books of Moses, it was translated by forms of *deloi*, likely signifying "manifestations," and by *delosis*, signifying "manifestation" or "revelation," or perhaps "direction" or "instruction."<sup>13</sup> These Greek renderings suggest that the light implied in *Urim* was understood anciently as a spiritual or metaphorical light — a light that manifested or revealed what was hidden, or that provided direction.

The *Urim* represented the word of the Lord to ancient Israel, for when the high priest inquired of the Lord, his word came by *Urim*. Not only did the *Urim* and *Thummim* convey and represent the word of the Lord, it also belonged explicitly to him, as Moses said to the Lord, "Let thy *Thummim* and thy *Urim* be with thy holy one" (Deuteronomy 33:8). Although plural in form, *Urim* may be a plural of respect referring to a

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11 Although modern Hebrew creates the plural of *or* ("light") with a feminine ending to give *orot*, "lights" could be represented in classical Hebrew by *orim* (a masculine ending), as it is in Psalms 136:7. The gender of *or* is given as masculine but "sometimes f." in David J. A. Clines (ed.), *Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*, vol. 1 (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993). For *urim* as "light" or "lights," see Van Dam, *Urim and Thummim*, 93, 132-136. *Ur*, the singular form of *urim*, is translated as "light" (of fire) in Isaiah 50:11.

12 For derivations of *urim* related to the lot theory, see Van Dam, 94-98. For a short summary of proposed derivations, see Ann Jeffers, *Magic and Divination in Ancient Palestine and Syria* (New York: Brill, 1996), 210-211.

13 Those who translated the Hebrew Old Testament into English generally chose to simply transliterate (not translate) *Urim and Thummim*, thus preserving it in English as a proper name. Those who produced the Septuagint, in contrast, chose to render *Urim and Thummim* into Greek by translating its connotations. For translations of *urim* in the Septuagint, see Van Dam, *Urim and Thummim*, 85, 132-135, including footnotes, and particularly page 85 for connotations relating to *deloi* and *delosis*. *Delosis* is "a pointing out, manifestation, explaining, shewing" or "a direction, order." Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 8th ed. (New York: American Book Co., 1897), 338.

single object. In classical Hebrew, single objects belonging to royalty or other important persons were sometimes named in the plural.<sup>14</sup>

Given the possible connotations of *Urim* in the Bible, including that of direction, *director(s)* is a reasonable English translation. If *urim* was used by Alma as a plural of respect, it could have been translated with both a plural and a singular meaning — as *directors* (for the interpreters) and as *director* (for the brass ball) — just as *elohim* is translated as both *gods* and *God* in the Bible.

Not only is *director* a reasonable translation of *urim*, it also aptly describes how the Urim was used in ancient Israel. The Lord’s instructions regarding the use of the instrument are given in Numbers 27:21 (NASB):

Moreover, he shall stand before Eleazar the priest, who shall inquire for him by the judgment of the Urim before the LORD. At his command they shall go out and at his command they shall come in, both he and the sons of Israel with him, even all the congregation.

In this passage, the Lord indicates that Joshua, the national leader, is to inquire (through the high priest) “by the judgment of the Urim” in order to receive the Lord’s directions for matters of national importance. Although there is no record of Joshua making use of the Urim and Thummim, the Bible does relate at least twelve cases in which subsequent leaders “inquired of the Lord” and received a response, apparently by the Urim and Thummim.<sup>15</sup> In eight of these cases (Judges 1:1-2; 20:18; 20:23; 20:27-28; 1 Samuel 23:2-4; 30:8; 2 Samuel 5:19; 5:23), the Lord provides military direction. In one case (1 Samuel 10:22), he provides information regarding the whereabouts of Saul in the context of directing his ascension to the throne. In two cases, he provides strategic information to David to help him in his struggle with Saul (1 Samuel

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<sup>14</sup> See Van Dam, *Urim and Thummim*, 137, including footnotes; and Ronald J. Williams, *Williams Hebrew Syntax*, revised and expanded by John C. Beckman, 3rd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 2. Cornelis Van Dam, arguably the foremost authority on the biblical Urim and Thummim, believes that it most likely consisted of a single object (Van Dam, 230).

<sup>15</sup> The Hebrew phrases translated as “inquired of the Lord” and “inquired of God” in the New American Standard Bible (NASB) likely indicate the use of the Urim and Thummim when no other means of revelation are indicated, even when the instrument is not mentioned by name (see Van Dam, *Urim and Thummim*, 109, 182-189). All of the twelve cases mentioned include such a phrase except 1 Samuel 23:1-4, which specifically states that the ephod (which contained the Urim and Thummim) was involved.

22:10-13; 23:10-12), and in the final case (2 Samuel 2:1), he directs David in his ascension to the throne. In addition, Numbers 31:6 indicates that Moses sent men to war “with the holy instruments.” Targum Pseudo-Jonathan renders this as “with the Urim and Thummim to inquire by them,” again suggesting that the Lord directed Israelite warfare through the Urim and Thummim. Judging from these likely instances of the use of the Urim and Thummim in ancient Israel, its principal function was to provide divine direction in practical matters of national importance. *Director* would be a pretty good — and perhaps the best — one-word English description of that function.

*Directors* and *director* could have been translated from the Hebrew word *urim* in Alma’s original text. But why would Alma have wanted to use this label for the instruments?

### Alma’s Motivation to Use a Special Word

In Alma chapter 37, Alma charges his son Helaman with the keeping of the Nephites’ sacred instruments and records. He instructs Helaman regarding the plates of Nephi, the plates of brass, the twenty-four Jaredite plates and the interpreters used to translate them, and the brass ball. Alma is clearly concerned that Helaman realize the importance of his charge:

And I also command you that ye ... keep all these things sacred which I have kept.... And now remember, my son, that God has entrusted you with these things, which are sacred, which he has kept sacred, and also which he will keep and preserve for a wise purpose in him, that he may shew forth his power unto future generations. (Alma 37:2, 14)

Alma reiterates the sacred nature of the charge as he sums up his message to Helaman in verse 47: “And now, my son, see that ye take care of these sacred things.”

In order to impress upon Helaman the seriousness of his charge, Alma emphasizes the importance of the records and instruments in spiritual terms. The plates of brass were the means of bringing thousands of souls to repentance. The interpreters are not just for translating, but are also the subject of a prophecy concerning the fate of a nation. The brass ball is not just a compass, but a type of the word of Christ. Since his message is to be an important and enduring testament to his son, Alma

follows the classical Hebrew practice of using chiasmus and other poetic devices to highlight its most important elements.<sup>16</sup>

With Alma's efforts to emphasize the sacred nature of the interpreters and brass ball, it makes sense that he would use the most sacred labels available to refer to them. In the English text, *directors* and *director* don't seem to be any better in this regard than the usual labels, but *urim*, the name of one of the most sacred objects to the ancient Israelites, would have certainly met the need. With its connotation of manifestation or revelation, *urim* would have also been a fitting label for the two revelatory instruments — the interpreters that manifested hidden truths, and the brass ball that provided divine direction and instruction.

The fact that *urim* would have been a fitting label for these instruments doesn't in itself tell us whether Alma used the term. Evidence for Alma's use of *urim*, however, may be found in the context. When a word at a key location in a poem has been obscured, it can sometimes be revealed again by analysis of nearby words.

Consider the following poem:

Roses are red, violets are blue.

The called are many, but the chosen are \_\_\_\_.

With a little scriptural knowledge and attention to rhyme, meter, and meaning, most readers would be able to correctly fill in the blank with the missing word *few*. *Few* is a good fit because it agrees with the words found in parallel positions — its sound is reflected in *blue* while its meaning is reflected in *many*. It also agrees in number with *are* and completes a meaningful scriptural allusion (to Matthew 22:14). A similar method of analysis is used in exegesis of ancient writing to address text-critical and lexicographical questions. Although rhyme and meter aren't typically apparent as poetic devices in classical Hebrew writing, parallelism of meaning usually is, and other rhetorical devices such as repetition, imagery, and allusion can also be important. Alma's writing is in the form of a classical Hebrew poem, and an analysis of its poetic features can show just how well *urim* fits where the English text has *director(s)*.

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<sup>16</sup> A chiasm is an inverted parallel structure. Chiasmus was used as a poetic device by the ancient Hebrews and other Semitic peoples, and is common in the Bible and Book of Mormon.

## The Interpreters or “Directors” as Urim

In his instructions to Helaman, Alma speaks of the interpreters (or “directors”) in the context of making known the sins of the extinct Jaredites. He uses repetition as a poetic device to establish a theme. In the passage below, the words and phrases shown in bold all express the idea of manifestation, or revealing what is hidden:<sup>17</sup>

And now, I will speak unto you concerning those twenty-four plates, that ye keep them, that the mysteries and the works of darkness, and their secret works — or the secret works of those people who have been destroyed — may be **made manifest** unto this people — yea, all their murders and robbings, and their plunderings, and all their wickedness and abominations, may be **made manifest** unto this people — yea, and that ye preserve these directors. For behold, the Lord saw that his people began to work in darkness; yea, work secret murders and abominations; therefore the Lord said, if they did not repent they should be destroyed from off the face of the earth. And the Lord said: I will prepare unto my servant Gazelem a stone which shall **shine forth in darkness unto light**, that I may **discover** unto my people who serve me, that I may **discover** unto them the works of their brethren, yea, their secret works, their works of darkness, and their wickedness and abominations.

And now, my son, these directors were prepared that the word of God might be fulfilled, which he spake, saying: I will **bring forth out of darkness unto light** all their secret works and their abominations; and except they repent I will destroy them from off the face of the earth; and I will **bring to light** all their secrets and abominations, unto every nation that shall hereafter possess the land. And now, my son, we see that they did not repent; therefore they have been destroyed, and thus far the word of God hath been fulfilled; yea, their secret

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17 For these and other Book of Mormon passages in this paper, I have used the reconstructed earliest text from the Book of Mormon Critical Text Project (*Royal Skousen, The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text* [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009]) and have adjusted the punctuation in some instances for clarity. Punctuation was almost completely lacking in the original Book of Mormon manuscript, being added later by the printer. Biblical passages are from the King James Version unless otherwise indicated.

abominations have been **brought out of darkness** and **made known** unto us. (Alma 37:21-26)

While the subject of this poem is the importance of the interpreters, the theme is manifestation (the idea of manifestation is repeated nine times in the five sentences).

An unusual word choice in a poem can sometimes be explained by its contribution to the theme. *Directors* is certainly an unusual word choice for a translating instrument, but it makes no obvious contribution to the theme in the English text. In Hebrew, with *urim* (connoting manifestation or revelation) in place of *directors*, the word choice would have aptly reinforced the theme.

Not satisfied with repetition as his principal poetic device, Alma set this poem in chiasmic form. The parallel elements that form the framework of the chiasm are in italics, below. The first half of the chiasm tells of an ancient prophecy, and the second half describes its fulfillment.

- A And now, I will speak unto you concerning those twenty-four plates, *that ye keep* them,  
that the mysteries and the works of darkness, and their secret works — or the secret works of those people who have been destroyed — may be *made manifest unto this people* —  
yea, all their murders and robbings, and their plunderings, and all their wickedness and abominations, may be *made manifest unto this people* —  
yea, and *that ye preserve* these directors.
- B For behold, the Lord saw that his people began to work *in darkness*, yea, work *secret murders and abominations*;
- C therefore the Lord said, *if they did not repent they should be destroyed* from off the face of the earth.
- D And the Lord said: I will *prepare* unto my servant Gazelem a stone which shall shine forth *in darkness unto light*, that I may discover *unto my people* who serve me, that I may discover *unto them* the works of their brethren, yea, *their secret works, their works of darkness, and their wickedness and abominations*.
- D' And now, my son, *these directors were prepared* that the word of God might be fulfilled, which *he spake*, saying: I will bring forth out of darkness *unto light* all their secret works and their abominations; and except they repent I will destroy them from off the face of the earth; and I will bring to light all their secrets and abominations, *unto every nation* that shall hereafter possess the land.
- C' And now, my son, we see that *they did not repent*; therefore they have been destroyed, and thus far the word of God hath been fulfilled;
- B' yea, their *secret abominations* have been brought out of darkness
- A' and made known unto us.

Note that element **A** is itself a chiasm. In the outer level of this small chiasm, Alma tells his son to preserve the sacred instrument and to “keep” (which can also mean preserve, as in Genesis 2:15) the sacred plates. However, it is only the subject of the inner level — the manifestation of secrets and sins — that is mirrored in **A’**.

The arrangement of text in chiasmic form draws the reader’s attention to the center, and that’s where the main message is often focused. In this case, *a stone, which shall shine forth in darkness unto light* and *directors* are at the two focal points at the center of the large chiasm, so they might be expected to reflect the chiasm’s overall theme of manifestation. The Gazelem stone shining “in darkness unto light” certainly does, but *directors* doesn’t, at least not in the English text.<sup>18</sup> As *urim* (connoting manifestation or revelation), it would.

The theme of this chiasm is further reinforced by a chiasm of similar size that immediately follows it (Alma 37:27–32).<sup>19</sup> The four levels of the second chiasm have more or less the same topics as the corresponding levels of the first. The innermost and outermost levels are about what should (or should not) be made known, or manifest, to the people, and the second and third levels are, again, about darkness and destruction.

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18 Whether *Gazelem* refers to the servant or the stone is unclear, but it could refer to either one without changing the structure or message of the chiasm. If it is the name or title of a servant, *Gazelem* could refer to the brother of Jared, who received the interpreters from the Lord, or to Mosiah, who used them to translate the Jaredite record for the benefit of the Nephites. In any case, Alma declares that the Gazelem prophecy has “thus far ... been fulfilled” with the interpreters having “made known” the secrets and sins of the Jaredites to the Nephite people (Alma 37:26). If *Gazelem* refers to a class of instruments — perhaps the Jaredite counterpart to *Urim* — then “a stone which shall shine forth in darkness unto light” may have been intended as its parenthetical definition. The mismatch in number between the singular *Gazelem stone* and the plural *interpreters* may well be an artifact of translation. But even in English, the interpreters could be described as “a shining *stone*” (referring to the material of which they are made) or as “shining *stones*” (speaking of the stones as individual objects).

19 The structure of the chiasm in Alma 37:27–32 is as follows: (A) *And now, my son, I command you ...* (B) *lest peradventure they should fall into darkness and be destroyed. For behold, there is a curse ...* (C) *therefore I desire that this people might not be destroyed.* (D) *Therefore ye shall keep these secret plans of their oaths and their covenants from this people,* (D’) *and only their wickedness and their murders and their abominations shall ye make known unto them ..* (C’) *and ye shall also teach them that these people were destroyed....* (B’) *Yea, and cursed be the land forever... .* (A’) *And now, my son, remember the words which I have spoken unto you; trust not those secret plans unto this people, but teach them an everlasting hatred against sin and iniquity.* Elements A, D’, and C’ are themselves chiasms.

The theme of manifestation that characterizes these paired chiasms is also associated with the interpreters elsewhere in the Book of Mormon:

And the things are called interpreters.... And whosoever is commanded to look in them, the same is called seer.... And by them ... shall secret things be made manifest, and hidden things shall come to light. (Mosiah 8:13, 17)

The same idea of manifesting hidden things is associated with the biblical Urim in the Targum Pseudo-Jonathan reading of Exodus 28:30:

And you shall put into the breastplate the Urim, which illuminate their words and make manifest the hidden things of the House of Israel.

Both of these passages associate the idea of illumination or light, as well as manifestation, with the sacred instrument. Light is a prominent element in Alma's poetry as well. In the center of his first interpreters chiasm, *directors* is parallel to *a stone which shall shine forth in darkness unto light*. With its connotations of light and shining, *urim* (in place of *directors*) would have properly mirrored the shining stone. The interpreters are not only associated with the shining Gazelem stone poetically, but also prophetically. Alma says that the interpreters are the fulfillment of a prophecy that a shining stone would be prepared. The interpreters must therefore be shining stones, at least metaphorically. The label *urim* would have properly expressed that identification.<sup>20</sup>

In addition to using repetition to establish a theme for his chiasmic poem, Alma uses it to create a dark mood. In the paired chiasms, he repeats *secret(s)* twelve times, *darkness* and *abominations* each ten times, and *murders*, *destroyed*, and *wickedness* each five times. *Blood*, *robbings*, *plunderings*, *cursings*, and *destruction* add to the gloom. The Jaredites are "workers of darkness"; and the Nephites, if not careful, will "fall into darkness also and be destroyed." The only nouns (excluding proper names) or adjectives that suggest light or goodness in these chiasms are *light*, which appears three times, and *prophets*. The situation is the reverse in the remainder of the chapter, where words with positive connotations predominate. The effect of this contrasting mood is that

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<sup>20</sup> The beginning of the fulfillment of the Gazelem prophecy is recorded in Ether 3. The brother of Jared, apparently invoking the prophecy, asks the Lord to touch 16 stones and "prepare them that they may shine forth in darkness ... that we may have light." The Lord grants his request, causing the stones to produce physical light, and also gives him the two interpreter stones to provide eventual spiritual enlightenment.

the light of the sacred stones appears even brighter as it shines forth “in darkness.” The imagery of light is a key element in the poem, and *urim*, with its connotation of light, would have been an obvious word choice for the interpreter stones.<sup>21</sup>

While *interpreters* is the usual word for the instrument under discussion, with its mundane connotation of translation, it wouldn’t have worked particularly well in apposition to the shining Gazelem stone or at a focal point of a dark chiasm about manifesting secrets and sins. Alma understandably chose a different word. Although in English (as *directors*) his word choice appeared so poor that it was eventually rejected by editors, in Hebrew (as *urim*) it would have made sense.

### The Brass Ball or “Director” as Urim

Alma’s discussion of the brass ball with its two internal spindles consists of two chiasms set within a larger parallel structure.<sup>22</sup> Parallel words and phrases are shown in italics in Alma’s text (Alma 37:38-46) below.

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21 The dark mood becomes starkly evident when all neutral words are removed from the two chiasms. The following sequence of words is Alma’s interpreters poem reduced to nouns (excluding proper names) and adjectives that have connotations of physical or metaphysical light or darkness, with the positive/light words in capital letters and negative/dark words in bold: **mysteries darkness secret secret murders robbings plunderings wickedness abominations darkness secret murders abominations destroyed darkness LIGHT secret darkness wickedness abominations darkness LIGHT secret abominations LIGHT secrets abominations destroyed secret abominations darkness secret abominations darkness destroyed curse destruction darkness destroyed secret wickedness murders abominations wickedness abominations murders destroyed wickedness abominations murders** PROPHETS **iniquities blood vengeance murderers judgments darkness secret cursed darkness secret destruction secret hatred sin iniquity**. Notice the three instances of *light* shining out of the uniform darkness of the interpreters poem. The same process applied to the remainder of Alma 37 produces the following sequence of words: SACRED WISE HOLY SCRIPTURES LORD **mysteries** BRIGHTNESS BRIGHTNESS HOLY **foolishness** WISE WISE SALVATION WISDOM **error** KNOWLEDGE GOD SALVATION **incorrect** REPENTANCE KNOWLEDGE GOD REDEEMER **stiffnecked sin iniquities** KNOWLEDGE REDEEMER **mysteries** WISDOM SACRED SACRED SACRED **chaff** SACRED **hell** DILIGENT DILIGENT — [interpreters poem] — REPENTANCE FAITH MEEK **temptation devil** FAITH GOOD MEEK WISDOM GOOD **night sleep** DAY **wilderness** FAITH FAITH MIRACLE MIRACLES DAY DAY MIRACLES **slothful** FAITH DILIGENCE **wilderness transgressions shadow slothful** BLISS **sorrow slothful** SACRED SOBER.

22 Whether intentional or not, the morphology of the brass ball is represented in the morphology of Alma’s discussion of the instrument. The same morphological

- A And now, my son, I have somewhat to say concerning the thing which *our fathers* call a ball or director — or our fathers called it Liahona, which is, being interpreted, a compass, and the Lord *prepared* it. And behold, there cannot any man work after the manner of so curious a workmanship. And behold, *it was prepared to shew unto our fathers*
- B *the course which they should travel in the wilderness.*
- C And it did work for them according to *their faith* in God; therefore, if *they had faith* to believe that God could cause that those spindles should point the way they should go, behold, *it was done*;
- D therefore they had *this miracle*, and also many *other miracles*, wrought by the power of God, day by day.
- D' Nevertheless, because *those miracles were worked by* small means (nevertheless it did shew unto them marvelous works),<sup>23</sup>
- C' *they were slothful* and forgot to exercise *their faith* and diligence, and then those marvelous *works ceased*, and they did not progress in their journey;
- B' Therefore, *they tarried in the wilderness, or did not travel a direct course*, and were afflicted with hunger and thirst, because of their transgression.
- E And now, my son, I would that ye should understand that these things are not without a shadow; *for as our fathers were slothful* to give heed to this compass (now these things were temporal) they did not prosper; even so it is with things which are spiritual.
- F For behold, it is as easy to give heed to *the word of Christ*, which will *point to you a straight course to eternal bliss*,
- G as it was for *our fathers* to give heed to *this compass*, which would *point unto them a straight course to the promised land*.
- G' And now I say: Is there not a type in this thing? For just assuredly as *this director did bring our fathers*, by following its *course, to the promised land*,
- F' shall *the word of Christ*, if we follow its *course, carry us* beyond this vale of sorrow *into a far better land of promise*.
- E' O my son, *do not let us be slothful* because of the easiness of the way, *for so was it with our fathers*;
- A' *for so was it prepared for them*, that if they would *look* they might live; even so it is with us: the way is *prepared*, and if we will *look*, we may live forever.

The first internal chiasm tells how the brass ball provided physical direction for the Nephite fathers in their journey through the wilderness. The second internal chiasm presents that miracle as a shadow of a

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relationship exists between the pair of interpreter stones and the pair of chiasms in which they and the Jaredite record are discussed.

23 This line is confusing in LDS editions of the Book of Mormon because the second *nevertheless*, which was present in the original manuscript, is missing. Royal Skousen (ed.), *The Original Manuscript of the Book of Mormon: Typographical Facsimile or the Extant Text*. (Provo, UT: The Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2001), 333. The punctuation is mine.

greater truth — that the word of Christ gives us vital spiritual direction. This word of Christ analogy is in the form a double parallel in which *director* (or *urim*) is parallel to both *compass* and *word of Christ*. With its connotation of the word of the Lord, *urim* would have fit well parallel to *word of Christ*; and with its likely connotation of direction, it would have also fit well parallel to *compass* and expressed the poem’s overall theme of direction.

*Urim* also provides plausible answers to a couple of mysteries in Alma’s word of Christ analogy.

First, it’s unclear, based on the English text, why Alma refers to the brass ball as a *compass* through most of his discussion and then suddenly calls it a *director* when he gets to his word of Christ analogy. In fact, in his analogy, Alma seems to be doing nothing more than repeating himself — the compass pointed the fathers to the promised land, and the director brought the fathers to the promised land. In the English reading, there’s no obvious reason for the use of *director* instead of the usual word, *compass*. However, if *director* is translated from *urim*, with its connotations of *light* and *fire*, possible reasons for the change of labels become apparent.

While a compass can only point the way, a light can also direct a traveler by illuminating the path. As a compass, the brass ball “would point ... a straight course” to the promised land, but as a director (or *urim*, suggesting light), it “did bring” the fathers to the promised land, just as the word of Christ will, if we follow its course, “carry” us beyond our valley of sorrow.<sup>24</sup> The Old Testament uses similar imagery in presenting light as a metaphor for the word of the Lord that shows us the path to higher ground.<sup>25</sup> In Psalm 119:105, his “word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path”; and in Psalms 43:3, we read, “O send out thy light and thy truth: let them lead me; let them bring me unto thy holy hill.” The Hebrew word for *light* in both of these psalms comes from the same root that *urim* is potentially related to. In fact, the phrase “thy light and thy truth” in Psalm 43 has been seen by some authors as a reference to the Urim and Thummim.<sup>26</sup> Alma himself compares the

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24 *Carry* in King James English meant to take something to a different place, but not necessarily by holding or supporting it. For example, Moses “carried” the Israelites out of Egypt (Exodus 14:11).

25 While the current LDS edition of the Book of Mormon has the director being compared to the *words* (plural) of Christ, the earliest text has *word* (Skousen, 2009). It is the singular *word* of the Lord that is compared to a light in Psalm 119.

26 Van Dam, *Urim and Thummim*, 225, including footnotes.

word of the Lord to a light elsewhere (Alma 5:7; 32:35). Also, the Lord had told the first Nephites that he, as their “light in the wilderness,” “did bring” them out of Jerusalem and would, according to their obedience, prepare the way before them and lead them towards the promised land (1 Nephi 17:13-14). *Urim*, with its connotation of light, would have thus fit naturally in Alma’s analogy and could have strengthened it by bringing to mind these earlier writings.

*Urim*’s alternative meaning of “flames” or “fires” would have created another biblical allusion in Alma’s text, especially if *urim* were read as a plural of respect referring to the Lord’s “fire.” The fire that “did bring our fathers ... to the promised land” in Alma’s poem would have brought to the Hebrew mind the pillar of cloud and fire that directed the Israelite fathers under Moses to their promised land (Exodus 13:21).

That Alma was thinking in biblical terms, and particularly in terms of the Israelite fathers journeying to their promised land, is evidenced by his allusion to Moses’s brass serpent in his closing sentence. Alma echoes his own words from an earlier sermon referencing the brass serpent when he says that the brass ball was prepared for the fathers “that if they would look they might live.”<sup>27</sup> Together with this allusion, Alma’s use of *urim* for the brass ball would have portrayed it as a three-in-one instrument for the Nephite fathers in their journey to their promised land. It played the role of the biblical Urim in providing instruction, the role of the fiery pillar in showing physical direction, and the role of the brass serpent in testing their faith.

The second mystery relates to Christ typology. After comparing the “compass” to the word of Christ, Alma asks, “Is there not a type in this thing?” But where is his answer? The *for* that begins the next sentence suggests he is about to provide an answer, but then he essentially repeats the comparison he just made, this time substituting *director* for *compass*. It reads as if, by using the word *director*, Alma is providing the answer to his question. This makes no sense in English — a *director* is no more

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<sup>27</sup> After referring to the brass ball as a type of the word of Christ for the Nephite fathers in their wilderness, Alma says, “Do not let us be slothful because of the easiness of the way, for so was it with our fathers; for so it was prepared for them, that if they would look they might live” (Alma 37:46). This phrase echoes Alma’s words from an earlier sermon, in which he had warned against being “slothful” and spoken of Moses’s brass serpent, which, as a “type” of Christ, was “raised up in the wilderness, that whosoever would look upon it might live” (Alma 33:19,21; also Numbers 21:8-9). Nephi had similarly taught that “because of the simpleness of the way, or the easiness of it, there were many which perished” because they would not look at the brass serpent (1 Nephi 17:41).

a type of the word of Christ than is a *compass*. In Hebrew, however, with *urim* in place of *director*, it would have made more sense. The Urim was, as the word of the Lord to the Israelite fathers, a fitting type of the word of Christ.

Alma's use of *urim* to create these biblical references would have not only provided greater depth to his word of Christ analogy, but would have also suited his purpose in emphasizing the sacredness of the brass ball. As *urim*, the ball is no longer just a pointer — it's the Nephite counterpart of the biblical Urim and Thummim and pillar of cloud and fire, and a physical representation of the light and word of the Lord.

## Conclusions

Although we can't say for certain whether *directors* and *director* in Alma 37 represent the Hebrew word *urim*, the circumstantial evidence suggests they do. When Alma's work is read as English prose, his uses of *directors* and *director* seem unnecessary, awkward, or even erroneous. If these terms are translations of *urim*, however, his word choices make sense. *Urim* aptly expresses the revelatory function as well as the sacred nature of the interpreters and brass ball. It also fits naturally in Alma's chiasmic poetry.

Given its likely connotation of manifestation, *urim* would have reflected the principal theme of Alma's interpreters poem. With its connotation of light or shining, it would have focused the imagery of light "in darkness" and properly mirrored the shining Gazelem stone at the center of a chiasm. At the same time, with a connotation of direction, *urim* would have reflected the principal theme of Alma's brass ball poem.

*Urim* would have also strengthened Alma's comparison of the brass ball to the word of Christ by echoing biblical imagery of God's word as a directing light and by creating an allusion to the fiery pillar that guided Israel in the wilderness. Finally, as a reference to the biblical Urim and Thummim that revealed the word of the Lord, *urim* would have answered Alma's question regarding a type of the word of Christ.

While *interpreters*, *ball*, *directors* and *director* are mundane words ill-suited for poetic reference to divine instruments, *urim* is rich in sacred meaning. It suits Alma's resplendent poetry and appears to be reflected in it. Alma's apparent sophisticated use of this word suggests he had a thorough understanding of the ancient connotations of *urim* and remarkable talent as a classical Hebrew poet. Together with the chiasmic structure of the text, it also suggests that this portion of the Book of Mormon was originally composed in Hebrew.

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