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What Did the Interpreters (Urim and Thummim) Look Like?

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WHAT DID THE INTERPRETERS (URIM AND THUMMIM) LOOK LIKE?

Stan Spencer

ABSTRACT: *The interpreters were a pair of seer stones used by Book of Mormon prophets and provided to Joseph Smith for translating the Nephite record. Martin Harris described them as two white, marble-like stones that could be looked into when placed in a hat. Joseph Smith described them as spectacles with which he could read the record and later as two transparent stones set in the rim of a bow. Others described them as smooth stones, diamonds, or glasses. Reconciling these various descriptions and determining the actual appearance of the interpreters requires an assessment of the credibility of each source and an understanding of how the interpreters were used in translating. It also requires an understanding of how words such as glasses, transparent, and diamonds were used in Joseph Smith's day, particularly in reference to seer stones. An assessment of the various descriptions of the interpreters in light of these factors lends support to both Martin Harris's and Joseph Smith's accounts. By these accounts, the interpreters were smooth, mostly white, perhaps translucent stones set in a long metal frame. Although they superficially resembled eyeglasses, the stones were set much too far apart to be worn as such. They were not clear like eyeglasses but were transparent in the sense that they, like other seer stones, could be "looked into" by a person gifted as a seer of visions.*

Joseph Smith used the term *the Urim and Thummim* to refer to the both the "interpreters," a pair of seer stones he obtained for translating the Book of Mormon, and his own seer stones, which he used for the same purposes and in the same manner.¹ There is no mystery regarding the description of the single seer stone that Joseph Smith used to translate most of the Book of Mormon — we have pictures. It is brown, banded, opaque, oblong, and about two inches in length. The other seer stone

Joseph Smith sometimes used in his revelatory work has also been described quite well. It is about the same size as the brown one, but white, translucent, and egg-shaped.²

Historical descriptions of the interpreters, on the other hand, vary widely. Martin Harris described them as “white, like polished marble, with a few gray streaks,” set in a silver frame about eight inches long.³ An account attributed to Lucy Mack Smith describes them as “smooth three-cornered diamonds set in glasses.”⁴ Orson Pratt described them as “two transparent stones, clear as crystal.”⁵ It is the image of clear eyeglasses suggested by the latter two descriptions that has most inspired the imaginations of artists and Sunday school teachers. Martin Harris’s odd description of the interpreters cannot, however, be easily dismissed. He saw the interpreters, whereas Lucy Mack Smith only handled them through a cloth. Pratt did neither. In addition, Martin Harris’s description was personally dictated and then checked for accuracy, while the description attributed to Lucy Mack Smith was likely composed by someone else.⁶

This article is an attempt to derive an accurate image of the interpreters from scripture and descriptions of the instrument in the most authoritative historical accounts. Each account will be assessed for credibility and its meaning evaluated in light of the local culture and language of the time.

Descriptions of the Interpreters in Scripture

The interpreters are described by Mormon as two seer stones fastened together:

And now he translated them by the means of those two stones which were fastened into the two rims of a bow ... And whosoever has these things is called seer, after the manner of old times. (Mosiah 28:13, 16).

When first obtained by the Jaredites, the interpreters were simply “two stones” (Ether 3:23, 28). Although both passages, in referring to the interpreters as “stones” without mention of any clarity or gem-like quality, may be seen as supporting Harris’s account, they are not inconsistent with the other accounts.⁷

A seer “after the manner of old times” was a “see-er” of visions.⁸ This meaning of *seer* accords with the way the stones were used, as noted by Ammon:

I can assuredly tell thee, O king, of a man that can translate the records; for he has wherewith that he can *look*, and translate all records that are of ancient date; and it is a gift from God. And the things are called interpreters, and no man can *look in* them except he be commanded, lest he should *look for that he ought not* and he should perish. And whosoever is commanded to *look in* them, the same is called *seer*. (Mosiah 8:13)

The statement that the stones could be looked into suggests they were clear; yet even Harris, in speaking of the interpreters as white, marble-like stones, uses similar language: “I never dared to *look into* them.”⁹ Apparently, seer stones need not be clear to be “looked into.” Moreover, if the interpreters were clear like eyeglasses, we might expect them to be looked *through* rather than into. Because of their ambiguous language, these passages are ultimately of little help in evaluating the disparate nineteenth century descriptions of the interpreter stones.

Use of Stones in Translating the Book of Mormon

All of the most authoritative accounts of the translation of the Book of Mormon have been reviewed in a previous article: “Seers and Stones: The Translation of the Book of Mormon as Divine Visions of an Old-Time Seer.”¹⁰ These consist of a few firsthand accounts by Joseph Smith and individuals who likely saw him translate, along with several accounts by other individuals to whom he apparently described the translation process. A few of these accounts are presented or summarized below.

In Joseph Smith’s reference to the translation in the earliest manuscript of his history, he says, “the Lord had prepared spectacles for to read the book.”¹¹ This accords with the description of the translation process in the Book of Mormon itself: “thou shalt read the words which I shall give unto thee” (2 Nephi 27:20). Near the end of his life, in a letter he wrote to the *Times and Seasons*, Joseph Smith quoted Mormon 9:32–34 and then stated:

Here then the subject is put to silence, for “none other people knoweth our language,” therefore the Lord, and not man, had to interpret, after the people were dead.¹²

According to these accounts, Joseph Smith’s part in translating the Book of Mormon was not a matter of interpreting but of reading a text that God provided.¹³ In his other published statements, Joseph Smith gave little additional information, indicating only that he translated

“[t]hrough the medium of the Urim and Thummim ... by the gift, and power of God.”¹⁴

David Whitmer provided the most detailed account of the process of translation. In a pamphlet he published in 1887, he testified that he was “an eye-witness to the translation of the greater part of the Book of Mormon” and shared his understanding of the translation process and testimony of its divine nature:

I will now give you a description of the manner in which the Book of Mormon was translated. Joseph Smith would put the seer stone into a hat, and put his face in the hat, drawing it closely around his face to exclude the light; and in the darkness the spiritual light would shine. A piece of *something resembling parchment would appear*, and on that appeared the writing. One character at a time would appear, and under it was the interpretation in English. Brother Joseph would *read* off the English to Oliver Cowdery, who was his principal scribe, and when it was written down and repeated to Brother Joseph to see if it was correct, then it would disappear, and another character with the interpretation would appear. Thus the Book of Mormon was translated by *the gift and power of God*, and not by any power of man. ...

God gave to Brother Joseph *the gift to see* the sentences in English, when he looked into the hat in which was placed the stone. Oliver Cowdery had the same gift at one time.¹⁵

According to Whitmer, then, “the gift and power of God” by which Joseph Smith translated was nothing more than the “gift to see the sentences in English.” In this, Whitmer’s account is consistent with 2 Nephi 27:20 and Joseph Smith’s accounts quoted above.¹⁶

David Whitmer did not observe Joseph Smith translating until he began using a single seer stone.¹⁷ Joseph Smith’s brother William and Joseph Knight knew of the translation from an earlier period, when Joseph Smith was using the interpreters. Except for the instrument used, their descriptions of the translation process agree quite well with David Whitmer’s. In a pamphlet he published in 1883, William Smith wrote,

[H]e translated them by means of the Urim and Thummim, (which he obtained with the plates), and the *power of God*. The manner in which this was done was by *looking* into the Urim and Thummim, which was placed in a hat to exclude the

light, (the plates lying near by covered up), and *reading* off the translation, which *appeared* in the stone *by the power of God*.¹⁸

Joseph Knight was a close friend of Joseph Smith, who remained true to him and the church he established throughout his life. He was present at the Smith home when Joseph Smith first obtained the plates and interpreters. He also provided material support for the translation and visited Joseph Smith several times during the translation period. He likely would have been permitted to observe Joseph translating. In his history of Joseph Smith's early life, Joseph Knight describes Joseph Smith's reaction to obtaining the interpreters and gold plates and how he used the interpreters in translating.

But he seemed to think more of the glasses or the urim and thummim than he did of the Plates for says he I can *see any thing* they are marvelous Now they are written in Characters and I want them translated Now he was Commanded not to let no one see those things But a few for witness at a given time.

... Now he being an unlearned man did not know what to Do. then *the Lord gave him Power* to Translate himself then were the Larned men Confounded, for he By the means he found with the plates he Could translate those Characters Better than the Larned. Now the way he translated was he put the urim and thummim into his hat and Darkened his Eyes then he would take a sentence and it *would appear* in Brite Roman Letters then he would tell the writer and he would write it.¹⁹

The other firsthand accounts by those who saw Joseph Smith translate or heard him describe the process are consistent with these descriptions. These accounts indicate that he would place either the interpreter stones or one of his own seer stones in a hat, pull the hat to his face to exclude the light, and then read the English text that miraculously appeared. The text is described as appearing “in the hat” (Whitmer's 1881 account), “in the stone” (William Smith's 1883 account), or on “parchment” that “would appear” (Whitmer's 1879 and 1887 accounts).²⁰ None of the most authoritative accounts claim the text appeared on the surface of a stone, as is sometimes assumed. The different descriptions of where the text appeared are all consistent with a visionary experience.²¹ In David Whitmer's 1887 statement quoted above, he portrays the translation as an imaginative (though not *imaginary*) vision in which Joseph read the scriptural text from something like parchment.²² This is reminiscent of how the founding scripture of the Nephite nation was revealed to

the seer Lehi. Lehi read the scriptural text from a book (likely a roll of papyrus or leather) that he saw in imaginative vision (1 Nephi 1:8–13, 16–17; 6:1).²³ Ezekiel (Ezekiel 2:8–10) and John (Revelations 10) had similar visionary experiences. Isaiah, Amos, and Micah also “saw” the words of the Lord (Isaiah 1:1–2; Amos 1:1–3; Micah 1:1–6). As the word *seer* implies, seer stones were traditionally used for facilitating visions — perhaps as aids to faith or objects of mental focus — and Joseph Smith used both his individual seer stones and the interpreter stones for that purpose.²⁴ It makes sense that a translation obtained by the use of seer stones would be revealed in vision.²⁵ As portrayed in the Book of Abraham, the biblical Urim and Thummim by which God revealed his word anciently was itself a visionary instrument.²⁶

We know that Joseph Smith’s brown seer stone was completely opaque, as were most seer stones of his time, yet these were used in the same manner as the interpreter stones. Thus, there is no obvious reason for the interpreter stones to have been clear, as Pratt described them. Moreover, in the interior of a hat pulled “closely around his face to exclude the light” in a room lit only by candle or lamplight, the stones would probably not have been seen, much less seen *through* in the normal sense. This doesn’t mean the interpreters could not have been clear, but only that clarity in the stones was not needed for the stones to function as visionary aids.

Martin Harris: “White, Like Polished Marble”

The most detailed description of the interpreters is from an 1859 statement by Martin Harris:

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. The stones were white, like polished marble, with a few gray streaks. I never dared to look into them by placing them in the hat, because Moses said that “no man could see God and live,” and we could see anything we wished by looking into them; and I could not keep the desire to see God out of my mind.²⁷

This account of the interpreters and how they were used is particularly strong. Martin Harris was one of only four individuals (including Joseph Smith) chosen to see the interpreters (D&C 17:1) and thus qualified to describe their visual characteristics. The account was dictated by him and read back to him to check for errors in transcription.²⁸ Few if any of the other witness descriptions of the interpreters received this degree of verification. As it relates to the translation of the Book of Mormon, Harris's account is corroborated by scripture and by other authoritative accounts, as quoted and summarized above. It agrees with these accounts in indicating that the interpreters were used, not by wearing them like eyeglasses, but by placing them in a hat. It agrees with these accounts and with Mosiah 8:13 in indicating that the interpreters were used by looking into them rather than through them or at their surfaces. It agrees with Mosiah 8:13 in suggesting the stones might be used to see or look for things that one "ought not." In addition, the account is specific, with the most detailed and precise description of the interpreters of any surviving account.



A translucent alabaster stone matching Harris's description of "white, like polished marble, with a few gray streaks"²⁹

Harris describes the interpreter stones as white and marble-like with gray streaking. He provides relatively precise measurements and shape characteristics — the stones were perfectly round, slightly convex disks, about two inches in diameter and five-eighths of an inch thick at the center.

The only other detailed description of the interpreters attributed to Martin Harris is somewhat less credible. Edward Stevenson heard Martin Harris speak at a Sabbath meeting on August 4, 1870. In a letter he wrote to the editor of the *Deseret Evening News* eleven years later, Stevenson reported his recollection of what Harris had said:

Martin said further that the seer stone differed in appearance entirely from the Urim and Thummim that was obtained with the plates, which were two clear stones set in two rims, very much resembled spectacles, only they were larger.³⁰

Stevenson's account differs from Harris's detailed description in calling the interpreters "clear stones." Note, however, that these are not presented as Harris's words. They are Stevenson's words and represent his memory and understanding of ideas Harris had been trying to convey eleven years earlier. If Harris spoke of looking *into* the stones as he did in his 1859 account, especially after having compared them to spectacles, Stevenson may have just assumed the stones were clear, and that assumption may have influenced his memory and choice of words.

The Interpreters as "Spectacles"

Set in metal frames, the interpreters as described by Harris would have superficially resembled spectacles but would have been much too large to be worn as such. According to the measurements he provided, the stones were set about twice as far apart (six inches, center to center) as would be needed to align with the eyes. Stevenson's account agrees that the interpreters were too large to be used as spectacles. The extraordinary size of the "spectacles" is also attested by descriptions attributed to David Whitmer and William Smith that will be discussed below, as well as by other sources. For example, the earliest known account of Joseph Smith's method of translating mentions both the extraordinary size of the "spectacles" as well as how they were used. This account was published in August 1829 by Jonathan A. Hadley, editor of the *Palmyra Freeman*, soon after Martin Harris and perhaps Joseph Smith came to him, seeking a publisher for the Book of Mormon. Hadley reported that Joseph Smith had found a "huge pair of Spectacles" with the engraved

gold plates and that “[b]y placing the spectacles in a hat, and looking into it, Smith could (he said so, at least) interpret these characters.”³¹

Hadley’s account suggests that Joseph Smith was calling the interpreters spectacles as early as 1829, just as he did in his 1832 history. Besides their superficial resemblance to eyeglasses, the interpreters could be considered spectacles by analogy, since they were used to “read the words” of “the book” as they were divinely given (2 Nephi 27:19–20).

Seer Stones as “Glasses”

In Joseph Knight’s account quoted previously, he calls the interpreters “glasses” yet notes they were used, not by wearing them, but by placing them in a hat. In calling the interpreters *glasses*, he was not likely thinking of eyeglasses as Joseph Smith had been, since eyeglasses were usually called “spectacles,” not glasses. *Glass* was a colloquial term for a seer stone. Knight had previously referred to one of Joseph Smith’s seer stones as “his glass.”³² Ezra Booth called Joseph Smith’s brown seer stone a “dark glass.”³³ A neighbor had a seer stone Lucy Mack Smith called “a green glass.”³⁴ Peter Bauder, a minister who interviewed Joseph Smith at the Whitmer home in 1830, referred to the interpreters as “a glass.”³⁵ Isaac Hale, Joseph Smith’s father-in-law, reported that Joseph Smith referred to his use of seer stones to search for buried items as “glass-looking.”³⁶ Accordingly, the two seer stones comprising the interpreters, whether clear or not, would be two “glasses.”

In Joseph Smith’s day, *glass* was also a common term for a telescope, spy-glass, or other instrument used for viewing distant objects, and it may have been by analogy to such instruments that seer stones were called glasses.³⁷ According to Lucy Mack Smith’s history, Joseph Smith had a reputation for using his seer stone to “discern things that could not be seen by the natural eye.”³⁸ Joseph Knight quotes Joseph Smith as saying, after using the interpreters, “I can see any thing they are Marvelus.”

Joseph Smith: “Two Stones in Silver Bows”

While Joseph Smith referred to the interpreters functionally as “spectacles” in his 1832 history, he gave a purely physical description in the Manuscript History of the Church. The portion of this history describing the interpreters was first published in *Times and Seasons* in April 1842:

Also that there were two stones in silver bows, and these stones fastened to a breastplate constituted what is called the Urim and Thummim.³⁹

Here the interpreters are simply “two stones in silver bows.” An article published by Joseph Smith as “Church History” in *Times and Seasons* in March 1842 includes greater detail:

With the records was found a curious instrument which the ancients called “Urim and Thummim,” which consisted of two transparent stones set in the rim of a bow fastened to a breastplate.⁴⁰

Here the two stones are “transparent” and “set in the rim of a bow.” Although Joseph Smith may have written parts of “Church History” himself or more likely dictated them to one of his scribes, some of the text was borrowed from at least one other source. The section of the article that includes the description of the interpreters was taken with some modification from an earlier publication by Orson Pratt, *A[n] Interesting Account of Several Remarkable Visions, and of the Late Discovery of Ancient American Records*. Pratt’s description of the interpreters reads as follows:

With the records was found “a curious instrument, called by the ancients the Urim and Thummim, which consisted of two transparent stones, clear as crystal, set in the two rims of a bow ...”⁴¹

In using Pratt’s description of the interpreter stones, Joseph Smith (or his scribe) made one substantial change: the phrase, “clear as crystal,” was excised. The specific rejection of this phrase by Joseph Smith or his scribe suggests that whatever the “transparent stones” looked like, they were not, exactly, “clear as crystal.”

Seer Stones as “Transparent”

If “transparent” in Joseph Smith’s description of the stones did not mean clear, what did it mean? There are two possibilities.

“Transparent” may have meant merely translucent (semi-transparent). The word was sometimes used this way in Joseph Smith’s day. For example, British diplomat James Morier published a book in 1818 in which he mentioned hot springs in Persia that produced “that beautiful *transparent* stone, commonly called Tabriz marble.”⁴² Tabriz marble is a somewhat translucent, often banded travertine used as a decorative stone

in Persian palaces, tombs, and baths. The interpreter stones, described by Harris as “white, like polished marble, with a few gray streaks,” may have been similar in appearance to Tabriz marble. They may have also been similar in their color and optical qualities to Joseph Smith’s own white seer stone. Richard Robinson, who was shown the white seer stone in 1900 by President Lorenzo Snow, described it as “the shape of an egg though not quite so large, of a gray cast something like granite but with white stripes running around it. It was *transparent* but with no holes.”⁴³ Had Robinson or Morier seen the marble-like interpreter stones described by Martin Harris, they might have called them “transparent” as well. At least one early source unambiguously describes the interpreter stones as translucent. An 1830 article in the *Auburn Free Press* states that Joseph Smith translated by “looking through two semi-transparent stones.”⁴⁴

Stones that are *semi-transparent*, by definition cannot be looked through in the usual sense. The seemingly self-contradictory statement in the *Auburn Free Press* article suggests a second possible meaning of “transparent” in Joseph Smith’s account. According to an 1851 history of the Palmyra area of New York, Martin Harris told Palmyra residents that the interpreter “stones or glass . . . were opaque to all but the Prophet.”⁴⁵ Other seer stones were likewise said to be transparent only for some individuals. William Stafford, who lived near the Smiths in Manchester, had, according to his son, a “stone which *some* thought they could *look through*.”⁴⁶ A notice in the December 1, 1842 issue of *Times and Seasons* warned of false revelations from a boy (James Brewster) who claimed to have “the gift of seeing and looking through or into a stone.”⁴⁷ The “gift of seeing” is the gift Brigham Young, David Whitmer, and Orson Pratt all attributed to Joseph Smith in his use of seer stones. It is the gift of a seer, the gift of looking seemingly “through or into a stone” to see visions.⁴⁸ While this ability was expressed in Joseph Smith’s gift of visions by which he experienced many divine communications, it must also have been expressed in his prior use of seer stones, which his father-in-law referred to as the occupation of “seeing.”⁴⁹

Whether a seer stone was transparent in this sense depended not only on who was using it but also on how it was used. An article published in a Palmyra newspaper in 1825 described a stone used for treasure hunting “which *becomes transparent when placed in a hat and the light excluded* by the face of him who looks into it.”⁵⁰ After describing the interpreter stones as having the appearance of white marble, Martin Harris said that he dared not “look *into* them *by placing them in the hat*,”

as though placing the stones in a hat would have made them clear. In the same account, he also described Joseph Smith's own seer stone as transparent while in use: "*In this stone he could see many things to my certain knowledge.*"⁵¹

Whether a stone is transparent to physical light becomes irrelevant once it is placed in a hat and "the light excluded." The stone disappears in the darkness and anything that is seen must be seen, in David Whitmer's words, by the "spiritual light" of a vision.⁵² According to a report of an interview by James H. Hart in 1884, Whitmer described the disappearing act of Joseph Smith's seer stone as it was replaced by a vision of sacred text:

The way it was done was thus: Joseph would place the seer-stone in a deep hat, and placing his face close to it, would see, *not the stone*, but what appeared like an oblong piece of parchment, on which the hieroglyphics would appear, and also the translation in the English language ... When the seer-stone was not placed in a hat, no characters or writing could be seen *therein*.⁵³

The English text of the Book of Mormon is described as appearing in the stone, not because the stone becomes a viewing device, but because the stone is no longer seen, being replaced by a visioned document. The stone thus seemingly becomes transparent to the seer.

Lucy Mack Smith: "Two Smooth Stones"

According to her written history, Lucy Mack Smith was permitted to examine the interpreters "with no covering but a silk handkerchief."⁵⁴ Through the cloth, she could have discerned shapes and textures but not much more. The most credible description of the interpreters attributed to her is found in the original, dictated (1844–1845) manuscript of her history, which says that the interpreters

consisted of 2 smooth stones con[n]ected with each other in the same way that old fashioned spectacles are made.⁵⁵

As expected, this statement describes the texture and shape of the instrument but says nothing of its color or of the clarity of the stones. Neither does it call the instrument spectacles but simply notes the similarity in construction. This statement is similar to Martin Harris's 1859 description of the interpreters, although less detailed.

Seer Stones as “Diamonds”

In a later (1845) manuscript of Lucy Mack Smith’s history, “2 smooth stones” is replaced with “two smooth three-cornered diamonds set in glasses, and the glasses were set in silver bows.”⁵⁶ A similar phrase, but with “glass” instead of “glasses,” was also inserted in blue ink into the earlier, dictated manuscript of her history. By examining the interpreter stones through a cloth, Lucy could have only speculated that they were made of diamonds or glass. This description of the interpreters as “diamonds” is also unexpected since there is no hint that the interpreter stones were precious gems in Lucy’s original manuscript, in the scriptural accounts (Mosiah 28:13, Ether 3:23–28), or in accounts attributed to Joseph Smith or the three witnesses. The idea that the stones were three-cornered in shape likewise lacks support from other accounts. Brigham Young believed the manuscripts of Lucy’s history contained errors and requested that Church historian George A. Smith produce a corrected text for publication.⁵⁷ The description of the interpreters as three-cornered diamonds was apparently one of those errors. It was struck from the 1845 manuscript and omitted from the corrected history, which was published in book form in 1902.⁵⁸

Martha Jane Coray and her husband Howard apparently composed the 1845 manuscript based on the original (dictated) manuscript as well as other notes and sources. The idea that the interpreters were three-cornered diamonds in glass(es) may have come from one of those other sources or from the Corays’ own assumptions.⁵⁹ It is likely, however, that Lucy Mack Smith did at times refer to the interpreters as glasses and diamonds, not as descriptions of their appearance but rather as colloquial terms for seer stones. As mentioned above, she once referred to a neighbor’s green seer stone as a glass. She is quoted as calling the interpreters “large bright diamonds set in a bow like a pair of spectacles” in an 1842 interview with Henry Caswall, and her husband apparently referred to the interpreters as diamond or diamonds in an 1830 interview with Fayette Lapham.⁶⁰ Both the Caswall and Lapham reports contain many inaccuracies, but the reference to diamond or diamonds in each does seem significant. *Diamond*, like *glass*, was a local term for a seer stone in the New York area, and Lucy and her husband may have both been using the term in that sense.⁶¹ Because of these uncertainties, along with Lucy’s limited contact with the interpreters and the lack of corroboration from other sources, the description of the interpreters as diamonds in Lucy’s history is of little help in determining what the instrument looked like.

Descriptions Attributed to David Whitmer

David Whitmer left no firsthand description of the interpreters, although they are mentioned in reports of some of the many interviews he gave to newspaper correspondents and others. The accounts of these interviews are inconsistent in many details, probably due mostly to the interviewers' inability to accurately remember and convey what Whitmer had told them. On occasion, Whitmer issued corrections to statements he was purported to have made. Before the use of recording equipment became standard practice, interviewers had to reconstruct statements from hastily written notes, filling in gaps and smoothing over rough spots with their own words based on their sometimes-faulty memories of what was said and assumptions of what was meant. The chance for error was high, especially when interviews included such esoteric topics as seer stones. This tendency for error limits the utility of secondhand accounts for reconstructing historical facts.

Three accounts of interviews with Whitmer include detailed descriptions of the interpreters.

On August 16, 1878, the *Deseret Evening News* published portions of a letter from Wilhelm Poulson that related an interview he had with David Whitmer, including a conversation regarding the interpreters:

I — Did Joseph use the Urim and Thummim when he translated

He — The Urim and Thummim were two white stones, each of them cased in as spectacles are, in a kind of silver casing, but the bow between the stones was more heavy, and longer apart between the stones, than we usually find it in spectacles.⁶²

In his letter, Poulson notes that the “conversation was mostly written down word for word half an hour after the interview with David Whitmer, Esq., who will recognize it as his words.”⁶³ It is doubtful that Poulson could have accurately reproduced Whitmer’s statements word for word after leaving the interview, and, in fact, Whitmer wrote a letter to a friend a few years later complaining that he was misquoted in Poulson’s letter.⁶⁴ Despite the possible errors, Poulson’s account of Whitmer’s description of the interpreter stones — two white stones set in a long silver frame — accords well with Harris’s detailed 1859 description. This suggests, at least, that Whitmer and Harris had similar visual recollections of the interpreters.

On June 5, 1881, the *Kansas City Journal* published a report of an interview conducted with David Whitmer a few days earlier. It includes

a description of the interpreters, presented as a quotation of Whitmer's words:

He [Joseph Smith] had two small stones of a chocolate color, nearly egg shaped and perfectly smooth, but not transparent, called interpreters, which were given him with the plates.⁶⁵

This statement appears to be an amalgamation of descriptions of the interpreters and Joseph Smith's brown seer stone. There were other errors in the report, and Whitmer soon wrote a letter of correction to the editor:

I notice several errors in the interview had with me by one of your reporters as published in the DAILY JOURNAL of June 5th, '81, and wish to correct them.

I am reported as saying that "the young men in the neighborhood saw the plates in the hill." The language used was, that "we saw the place (not the plates) in the hill from which the plates were taken, just as he described them to us before he obtained them." ... I did not say that Smith used "two small stones" as stated nor did I call the stone "interpreters." I stated that "he used one stone (not two) and called it a sun [seers] stone." The "interpreters" were as I understood taken from Smith and were not used by him after losing the first 116 pages as stated. It is my understanding that the stone refer[r]ed to was furnished him when he commenced translating again after losing the 116 pages.

My statement was and now is that in translating he put the stone in his hat and putting his face in his hat so as to exclude the light and that then the light and characters appeared in the hat together with the interpretation which he uttered and was written by the scribe and which was tested at the time as stated.⁶⁶

Whitmer later complained to a friend:

As to the interview published in the Kansas City Journal of June 5th 1881 there were So many Errors in it as published that I felt compelled to correct what I thought to be the most damaging Errors ... and Even in publishing the Statement Correcting their former publication where I had written "Seers Stone" they made it read "Sun Stone."⁶⁷

On July 16, 1844, the *St. Louis Republican* published a report of an interview with David Whitmer. The report represents Whitmer as describing the translation of the Book of Mormon as follows:

In translating from the plates, Joseph Smith looked through the Urim and Thummim, consisting of two transparent pebbles set in the rim of a bow, fastened to a breastplate. He dictated by looking through them to his scribes.⁶⁸

This description of the translation is uncharacteristic of David Whitmer, who, in the most credible statements attributed to him, spoke of Joseph Smith using a single seer stone and hat, not the interpreters.⁶⁹ The reporter may have augmented his recollection of Whitmer's words with other sources. In fact, this description of the interpreters appears to derive not from the interview with Whitmer but from Joseph Smith's 1842 article, "Church History," quoted previously. That article describes the interpreters as "two transparent stones set in the rim of a bow fastened to a breastplate." The only difference is that *stones* is replaced by *pebbles* in the 1844 report.

These are the most detailed descriptions of the interpreters attributed to David Whitmer. All have credibility problems, but the first is clearly the strongest and agrees well with Harris's detailed 1859 account.

Descriptions Attributed to Oliver Cowdery

There are no firsthand descriptions of the interpreters from Oliver Cowdery. The best we have are two reports from individuals who heard him describe the translation process.

Oliver Cowdery was interviewed by Josiah Jones in 1830. A summary of the interview was recorded in an 1831 letter. In the letter, Jones reports what he learned from Cowdery:

He stated that Smith looked into or through the transparent stones to translate what was on the plates. I then asked him if he had ever looked through the stones to see what he could see in them; his reply was that he was not permitted to look into them. I asked him who debarred him from looking into them; he remained sometime in silence; then said that he had so much confidence in his friend Smith, who told him that he must not look into them, that he did not presume to do so lest he should tempt God and be struck dead.⁷⁰

Jones is ambivalent as to whether the stones were looked "into" or "through," but either word works in describing how a seer sees visions

with a stone. Jones calls the stones “transparent.” Oliver Cowdery, like Joseph Smith, may have used this term in describing the stones, or Jones’s use of the term may reflect his assumption that stones that can be looked “into or through” must be clear. Ultimately, this account tells us little about the physical appearance of the interpreters.

In April of 1831, the *Evangelical Magazine and Gospel Advocate* published a letter by Abram Benton, dated March 1831. In the letter, Benton reports on testimony he heard in a July 1830 court hearing in which Oliver Cowdery and other acquaintances of Joseph Smith described how Joseph Smith used the interpreters as well as his own seer stone. Benton states:

For several years preceding the appearance of his book, he was about the country in the character of a glass-looker: pretending, by means of a certain *stone, or glass*, which he put in a hat, to be able to discover lost goods, hidden treasures, mines of gold and silver, &c.

... During the trial it was shown that the Book of Mormon was brought to light by the same magic power by which he pretended to tell fortunes, discover hidden treasures, &c. Oliver Cowdery, one of the three witnesses to the book, testified under oath, that said Smith found with the plates, from which he translated his book, *two transparent stones, resembling glass*, set in silver bows. That by looking *through* these, he was able to read in English, the reformed Egyptian characters, which were engraved on the plates.⁷¹

Like Joseph Knight, Benton refers to Joseph Smith’s own seer stone as a “glass.” He refers to the interpreters as “two transparent stones, resembling glass.” He does not say how they resembled glass. Was it in their smooth surfaces, as in Harris’s “smooth, like polished marble,” or in their clarity? Likewise, “transparent” could mean either clear or merely translucent, or its meaning may be metaphorical. In any case, Benton does not claim to be quoting Oliver Cowdery. This is Benton’s summary, perhaps using his own words, of what he remembered and understood Cowdery to have meant. Benton’s understanding that Joseph Smith used the stones by “looking through” them may have led him to assume the stones were clear, and that assumption may have in turn influenced the language he used in his summary. Alternatively, if Cowdery referred to the interpreters as “glasses” (as Joseph Knight did) or as “spectacles” (as Joseph Smith did), that may have elicited the same

hasty assumption. The assumption that stones looked into or through are clear would be a reasonable one in most cases but not when “the gift of seeing and looking through or into a stone” is the topic at hand. Looking “through” or “into” opaque stones to see visions is what seers like Joseph Smith did.⁷² Due to its secondhand source and the ambiguity of the language, this account tells us little about the physical appearance of the interpreters.

Descriptions Attributed to William Smith

As Joseph Smith’s younger brother, William Smith would likely have been privy to discussions about the interpreters and may have been permitted, like his mother, to examine them through a cloth.⁷³ In July 1890 or 1891, William was interviewed by J. W. Peterson and W. S. Pender. About thirty years later, in May 1921, Peterson recorded his recollection of how William had described the interpreters:

Explaining the expression as to the stones in the Urim and Thummim being set in two rims of a bow he said: 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. That they were much too large for Joseph and he could only see through one at a time using sometimes one and sometimes the other.⁷⁴

In a report of the same interview published three years later, Peterson provided a slightly different description:

He said a double silver bow was twisted into the shape of the figure eight, and the two stones were placed literally between the two rims of a bow ... He also informed us that the instruments were too wide for his eyes, as also for Joseph’s, and must have been used by much larger men.⁷⁵

Any implication that Joseph Smith used the interpreters in translating by wearing them like spectacles, however awkwardly, is contradicted by William Smith’s personally published account, quoted previously, in which he states that “the Urim and Thummim, (which he obtained with the plates) ... was placed in a hat to exclude the light” in order to translate.

Besides Martin Harris’s 1859 description and the 1878 description attributed to David Whitmer, these are the only authoritative descriptions of the interpreters that provide any detail about the form of the metal frame that held the stones. We must use these descriptions

with caution, however. They are second- or thirdhand at best, and were recorded decades after the interview with William Smith, on which they were based. Even so, the descriptions of the interpreter stones in a metal frame are roughly consistent with those of Harris and Whitmer. The main difference is that the descriptions attributed to William Smith mention two lengths of wire extending between the stones, while Harris mentions a single “round bar.” All these detailed descriptions refer to the interpreters simply as stones (not diamonds, glasses, or spectacles) and describe them as set too far apart to be worn like eyeglasses.

Conclusions

In the discussion above, I have reviewed all the historical accounts that contain detailed descriptions of the interpreters and are attributed to persons who may have seen or handled the instrument. None of the descriptions of the interpreters in these accounts can be taken at face value, except for Joseph Smith’s description in the Manuscript History of the Church, Lucy Mack Smith’s description in the original 1844–1845 dictated manuscript of her history, and Martin Harris’s 1859 description. These three descriptions were dictated or reviewed by the respective witnesses and use relatively unambiguous language. Together, they describe two round, mostly white, perhaps translucent, smooth stones set in a long silver frame.⁷⁶ Although superficially resembling spectacles, the instrument would have been much too large to have been worn as such. Joseph Smith instead used the stones by placing them in a hat the same way he and others of his time used individual seer stones.

Harris’s description of the stones as opaque suggests they functioned in the same way as other seer stones — not as optical instruments, but as objects for facilitating imaginative visions. The idea that the Book of Mormon and other revelations by “the Urim and Thummim” were received as visions is consistent not only with witness accounts but also with the way the Bible and Book of Mormon portray the revelation of new scripture to ancient seers such as Isaiah, Amos, Micah, Ezekiel, John, and Lehi.

Most other accounts describing the interpreters are secondhand at best, and many include terminology used differently in the past. When quoting such accounts, which may have been written from memory hours or even years after an interview, we cannot simply say “Lucy Mack Smith said ...,” or “According to David Whitmer ...,” or “Oliver Cowdery testified under oath that ...” To be used responsibly, each account must be evaluated for credibility, its possible meanings explored in light of the

culture and language of the time and place of its writing, and its claims tested against other sources.

Two descriptive phrases that have disproportionately influenced the popular perception of the interpreters — “three-cornered diamonds set in glass” and “clear as crystal”— are especially dubious. These descriptions have no apparent connection to any witness experience with the interpreters and were specifically rejected from histories prepared under the direction of Brigham Young and Joseph Smith, respectively.

The most credible description of the interpreters attributed to David Whitmer is similar to Martin Harris’s 1859 description but less detailed. Both say the stones were white and set in a long silver frame. The two secondhand descriptions attributed to Oliver Cowdery, like Joseph Smith’s 1842 description in “Church History,” refer to the stones as transparent.

Descriptions of the interpreter stones as transparent make sense from the perspective of the early nineteenth century and Joseph Smith’s local culture, where *transparent* could mean translucent, and even opaque seer stones became transparent to those who had the gift to “look into” them. Joseph Knight’s description of the stones as glasses made sense within a cultural perspective in which a glass was an instrument used to see what was otherwise invisible, and even opaque seer stones were called glasses. Descriptions of the interpreters as diamonds were also acceptable within the cultural context in which they were written. In the world of a New York seer, a “diamond” was a seer stone, “glasses” were placed in hats to see visions, and what was “transparent” was not always clear. This was the world in which Joseph Smith developed his “gift of seeing,” and he and others used the vocabulary of that world to describe the ancient seer stones that constituted the interpreters.

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Endnotes

- 1 For the interpreters as seer stones, see Mosiah 8:13; Mosiah 28:13, 16; and Richard E. Turley, Jr., Robin S. Jensen, and Mark Ashurst-McGee, “Joseph the Seer,” *Ensign* (October 2015): 49–55. For the interpreters and Joseph Smith’s individual seer stones as “the Urim and Thummim,” see Stan Spencer, “Seers and Stones: The Translation of the Book of Mormon as Divine Visions of an Old-Time Seer,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 17 (2017):27–29.
- 2 For an overview of Joseph Smith’s use of seer stones, including a photograph of the brown stone, see Turley, Jensen, and Ashurst-McGee, “Joseph the Seer,” 49–55; also Michael Hubbard MacKay and Nicholas J. Frederick, *Joseph Smith’s Seer Stones* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University, 2016). For descriptions and uses of Joseph Smith’s seer stones and the interpreters, see Mark Ashurst-McGee, “Pathway to Prophethood: Joseph Smith Jr. as Rodsman, Village Seer, and Judeo-Christian Prophet” (master’s thesis, Utah State University, 2000), 230–319. The brown seer stone measures 5.5 cm x 4 cm x 3.5 cm. “Note on Seer Stone Images,” *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/site/note-on-seer-stone-images>.
- 3 “Martin Harris Interview with Joel Tiffany, 1859,” in *Early Mormon Documents*, ed. Dan Vogel (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996), 2:305.
- 4 “Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1845,” *The Joseph Smith Papers*, 107, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/lucy-mack-smith-history-1845/114>.
- 5 “Appendix: Orson Pratt, A[n] Interesting Account of Several Remarkable Visions, 1840,” 13, *The Joseph Smith Papers*; <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/appendix-orson-pratt-an-interesting-account-of-several-remarkable-visions-1840/13>.
- 6 References for these points will be provided with the discussions of the respective accounts below.
- 7 In contrast, the sixteen small stones placed in the eight Jaredite barges are described in relative detail as “small stones; and they were white and clear, even as transparent glass” (Ether 3:1).

- 8 Spencer, “Seers and Stones,” 29–31.
- 9 “Martin Harris Interview with Joel Tiffany, 1859,” in *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:305, emphasis added.
- 10 Spencer, “Seers and Stones,” 32–43.
- 11 In about summer of 1832, Joseph Smith wrote in his personal history that “the Lord had prepared ~~spectticke~~ spectacles for to read the Book.” “History, circa Summer 1832,” 5, The Joseph Smith Papers, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-circa-summer-1832/5>.
- 12 Joseph Smith, *Times and Seasons* 4 (15 May 1843):194.
- 13 The Lord’s instructions to Oliver Cowdery in D&C 9:7–9 to “study it out in your mind” and “ask me if it be right” are sometimes interpreted as a description of the process by which Joseph Smith translated, which, if true, would imply that he did more than read a visioned text. The context of these verses suggests an alternative interpretation — that these instructions refer to the expediency of Oliver Cowdery’s desire to translate rather than to his translating technique, and were provided to teach him how to obtain the faith he would need to overcome his fear so he could translate by seer stone. Stan Spencer, “The Faith to See: Burning in the Bosom and Translating the Book of Mormon in Doctrine and Covenants 9,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 18 (2016):219–32.
- 14 “‘Church History,’ 1 March 1842,” 707, The Joseph Smith Papers, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/church-history-1-march-1842/2>. Joseph Smith may have found his words in Omni 1:20. For Joseph Smith’s other accounts, see John W. Welch, “The Miraculous Translation of the Book of Mormon,” in *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations, 1820–1844*, ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005), 121–29. Oliver Cowdery’s description of the translation process is equally spare and vague. For an interpretation of his sole firsthand account describing the translation process, see Spencer, “Seers and Stones,” 34.
- 15 David Whitmer, *An Address to All Believers in Christ: By a Witness to the Divine Authenticity of the Book of Mormon* (Richmond, MO: by the author, 1887), 12, 37, emphasis added.
- 16 The most straightforward reading of 2 Nephi 27:19–20 suggests that it is not the words written on the plates that Joseph Smith

would read. According to this passage, after “the book and the words thereof” had already been delivered to Joseph Smith (v. 19), the Lord would tell him that he would read words yet to be given (v. 20). However, there is an alternative way of interpreting this passage that does not require that there be two sets of words. If “give unto thee” in this passage is taken to mean “grant unto thee [to read],” it is then the granting of the authorization or power (not another set of words) that God would provide. For this meaning of give in reference to the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, see Mormon 8:15.

- 17 “David Whitmer to Kansas City Journal 13 June 1881,” in *Early Mormon Documents*, ed. Dan Vogel (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2003), 5:81–82.
- 18 “William Smith, On Mormonism, 1883,” in *Early Mormon Documents*, ed. Dan Vogel (Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books, 1996), 1:497, emphasis added.
- 19 “Joseph Knight, Sr., Reminiscence, Circa 1835–1847,” in *Early Mormon Documents*, ed. Dan Vogel (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002), 4:15, 17–18, emphasis added.
- 20 For Whitmer’s 1881 letter, see “David Whitmer to Kansas City Journal 13 June 1881,” 81–82. For his 1879 account, see John L. Traughber Jr., “Testimony of David Whitmer,” *Saints’ Herald* 26 (November 15, 1879), 341.
- 21 In his 1859 account, Martin Harris notes Joseph Smith’s ability to see visions by looking “in” his seer stone as well as the interpreters. “Martin Harris Interview with Joel Tiffany, 1859,” in *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:302, 309. Also note the phrase, “look in them” in Mosiah 8:13. In the darkness of Joseph Smith’s hat, a stone may not have been visible at all. As he gazed in the direction of the stone(s) and saw a vision of words on parchment, he may have thought of it as appearing in or through the stone(s).
- 22 Imaginative in this sense does not mean imaginary. It simply means that a vision is perceived through the brain’s imaginative faculty, or the mind’s eye, as one perceives a dream or other vivid mental image, rather than through the physical senses. L. Roure, “Visions and Apparitions,” in *Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1912), 15:477. An object (such as a piece of parchment) appearing out of nowhere would seem

to indicate an imaginative vision, unless one surmises that an actual piece of parchment materialized in Joseph Smith's hat. In our technological world, we might alternatively suppose that the seer stone physically projected an image of a parchment into Joseph Smith's eyes. Although such a miraculous transformation of stone to projector may be plausible, it is not required to explain the witness accounts. Also, none of those who watched Joseph Smith translate reported seeing any light escape from Joseph Smith's hat, and the light in Whitmer's account is described as "spiritual," not physical.

- 23 The standard books at the time of Lehi and Ezekiel (who also read from a book in vision) were rolls of papyrus or leather. By the time John envisioned a "little book," writing on sheets of parchment was becoming more common. Jack Finegan, *Encountering New Testament Manuscripts: A Working Introduction to Textual Criticism* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1974), 19–29.
- 24 This is not to say that all or even most visions purportedly seen by those who used seer stones were spiritual, divine, or representative of reality. Images seen in the mind's eye (see note 22) can have different origins, even while being mediated and experienced in a similar way through the brain's imaginative faculty. Visions without revelatory content would have been nothing more than imagination or visual hallucinations, while those with revelatory content were not necessarily divine. See Spencer, "Seers and Stones," 55–59; Brant Gardner, *The Gift and Power: Translating the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford, 2011), 261–74. The established Christianity of Joseph Smith's day could not teach him how to see divine visions — it rejected their very occurrence in the modern age. But the art of "seeing" was still alive in folk religion, and Joseph's use of seer stones to facilitate visions reflects that source of training. For the traditional use of seer stones, see "Seer Stone," The Joseph Smith Papers, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/topic/seer-stone>; Spencer, "Seers and Stones," 54–56, 96n152. For Joseph Smith's use of the interpreters and other seer stones for seeing visions, see Michael Hubbard MacKay and Gerrit Dirkmaat, *From Darkness Unto Light: Joseph Smith's Translation and Publication of the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University, 2015), 69, 76n44, 77n45, 77n48; Spencer, "Seers and Stones," 52–54. Seers in many cultures throughout history have looked into objects or surfaces to attain a visionary state, including,

perhaps, ancient Israel's high priest with the Urim and Thummim (see note 26). For an exploration of how seer stones and hats may have functioned in facilitating imaginative visions, see Spencer, "Seers and Stones," 68–72.

- 25 The idea that God provided Joseph Smith with a vision of the English translation does not imply that God was the translator, nor does it imply that the translation was perfect; God could have shown Joseph a translation produced by someone else, whether immortal or mortal. Accounts of two of Joseph Smith's other translation projects have him being shown, in vision, parchment or papyrus documents presumably written by mortals (see Spencer, "Seers and Stones," 44–45, regarding the parchment of John and a visioned papyrus of the Book of Abraham).
- 26 Abraham used the Urim and Thummim to see a great vision (Abraham 3:1–11). He not only saw stars and spirits but also heard God speak to him by the Urim and Thummim, which experience he described as talking with the Lord "face to face, as one man talketh with another." Old Testament passages involving the Urim and Thummim are consistent with its usage as a visionary instrument. Spencer, "Seers and Stones," 59–64; also Ashurst-McGee, "Pathway to Prophethood," 56–58.
- 27 Martin Harris granted an interview to Joel Tiffany, editor of the spiritualist periodical, *Tiffany's Monthly*, in 1859. "Martin Harris Interview with Joel Tiffany, 1859," in *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:305.
- 28 Tiffany's report of the interview begins by noting efforts to assure that Martin Harris's statements were accurately recorded: "The following narration we took down from the lips of Martin Harris, and read the same to him after it was written, that we might be certain of giving his statement to the world." "Martin Harris Interview with Joel Tiffany, 1859," in *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:302. In other words, Harris, according to Tiffany, dictated and then personally verified and approved the account.
- 29 White Alabaster, photograph, 512x522 pixels, The Compleat Sculptor, <https://shop.sculpt.com/mother-nature-2-7-8d-x-3-1-2h-white-alabaster-cyli.html>. Used with permission.
- 30 Edward Stevenson to the editor, November 30, 1881, *Deseret Evening News*, 13 December 1881, 4.

- 31 “Palmyra Freeman, circa August 1829,” in *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:221.
- 32 “Joseph Knight, Sr., Reminiscence, Circa 1835–1847,” in *Early Mormon Documents*, 4:13.
- 33 “Ezra Booth Accounts, 1831,” in *Early Mormon Documents*, 5:309.
- 34 “Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1844–1845,” The Joseph Smith Papers, 3, bk. 6, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/lucy-mack-smith-history-1844-1845/71>.
- 35 “Joseph Smith Interview with Peter Bauder, October 1830,” in *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:17.
- 36 “Isaac Hale Statement, 1834,” in *Early Mormon Documents*, 4:285.
- 37 *Webster’s Dictionary 1828* – Online Edition, s.v. “glass,” definition 8, accessed July 21, 2019, <http://webstersdictionary1828.com/Dictionary/glass>. Also Francis Lieber, ed., *Encyclopaedia Americana: A Popular Dictionary of Arts, Sciences, Literature, History, Politics and Biography, Brought Down to the Present Time; Including a Copious Collection of Original Articles in American Biography; on the Basis of the Seventh Edition of the German Conversations-Lexicon* (Philadelphia: Carey and Lea, 1831), 5:511.
- 38 “Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1845,” The Joseph Smith Papers, 95, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/lucy-mack-smith-history-1845/102>.
- 39 “Times and Seasons 15 April 1842,” 753, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/times-and-seasons-15-april-1842/3>. For the manuscript, see “History, 1838–1856, volume A-1 [23 December 1805–30 August 1834],” 5, The Joseph Smith Papers, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-a-1-23-december-1805-30-august-1834/5>. Although Joseph Smith may not have written or dictated this text, he personally reviewed and corrected the early portion of the manuscript, which includes it (see “Historical Introduction” to the manuscript).
- 40 “‘Church History,’ 1 March 1842,” 707.
- 41 “Appendix: Orson Pratt, A[n] Interesting Account of Several Remarkable Visions, 1840,” 13. The quotation marks within Orson Pratt’s description indicate that he is, in turn, borrowing language from a theological summary written by his brother

Parley. See Parley P. Pratt, “Discovery of an Ancient Record in America,” *Millennial Star* 1 (June 1840): 30. Parley’s description of the interpreters appears to have been taken from Mosiah 28:13, to which he added “transparent” and “clear as chrystal.”

- 42 James Morier, *A Second Journey through Persia, Armenia, and Asia Minor, to Constantinople, Between the Years 1810 and 1816* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1818), 284, emphasis added.
- 43 Richard M. Robinson, “The History of a Nephite Coin” (unpublished manuscript, 30 December 1934), typescript, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets?id=8b11984f-244a-4795-986e-fca0f5649e3b>, emphasis added.
- 44 “The Book of Mormon,” *Auburn Free Press* 7, no. 29 (8 December 1830):2, emphasis added.
- 45 O. Turner, *History of the Pioneer Settlement of Phelps and Gorham’s Purchase, and Morris’ Reserve: Embracing the Counties of Monroe, Ontario, Livingston, Yates, Steuben, Most of Wayne and Allegany, And Parts of Orleans, Genesee, and Wyoming. To Which Is Added, A Supplement or Extension of the Pioneer History of Monroe County* (Rochester, NY: William Alling, 1851), 215
- 46 “Kelley Notes, 6 March 1881,” in *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:87, emphasis added.
- 47 *Times and Seasons* 4 (1 December 1842):32, emphasis added.
- 48 Apostle Orson Pratt 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.” *Masterful Discourses and Writings of Orson Pratt*, ed. N. B. Lundwall (Salt Lake City: N. B. Lundwall, 1946), 552. In his Journal entry for May 6, 1849, Brigham Young recorded: “We spent the time in interesting conversation upon ... the gift of seeing, and how Joseph obtained his first seer stone.” Brigham Young, “May 6, 1849,” in *Manuscript History of Brigham Young 1847–1850*, ed. William S. Harwell (Salt Lake City: Collier’s Publishing, 1997), 200. In David Whitmer’s statement quoted previously, he says that “God gave to Brother Joseph the gift to see ... Oliver Cowdery had the same gift at one time.” While president of the High Council in Zion, David Whitmer condemned false visions seen by members of the Hulet Branch of the Church in Ohio, saying

that their “gift of seeing” was of the devil. “History, 1838–1856, volume A–1 [23 December 1805–30 August 1834],” 530, The Joseph Smith Papers, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-a-1-23-december-1805-30-august-1834/536>. The gift of visions is not one of the spiritual gifts mentioned by Paul (1 Corinthians 12), but it is mentioned in the seventh Article of Faith. Noah Webster’s 1828 dictionary defines seer as “1. One who sees; as a seer of visions.” *Webster’s Dictionary 1828* – Online Edition, s.v. “seer,” <http://webstersdictionary1828.com/Dictionary/seer>. The December 26, 1860 *Deseret News* reported that President Brigham Young had preached “that the gift of seeing was a natural gift, that there are thousands in the world who are natural born Seers, but ... the Lord selected Joseph Smith to be his vicegerent and mouthpiece upon the earth in this dispensation.” “Tabernacle,” *Deseret News*, 26 Dec. 1860.

- 49 For the gift of visions, see previous note. Isaac Hale stated in an affidavit in 1834: “I first became acquainted with JOSEPH SMITH, Jr. in November, 1825. He was at that time in the employ of a set of men who were called ‘money diggers;’ and his occupation was that of seeing, or pretending to see by means of a stone placed in his hat, and his hat closed over his face. In this way he pretended to discover minerals and hidden treasure.” “Isaac Hale Statement, 1834,” in *Early Mormon Documents*, 4:284–87.
- 50 “Wonderfull Discovery,” *Wayne Sentinel*, 27 December 1825, quoted in Ashurst-McGee, “Pathway to Prophethood,” 171, emphasis added.
- 51 “Martin Harris Interview with Joel Tiffany, 1859,” in *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:302, 305, emphasis added.
- 52 See Whitmer’s 1887 account quoted previously. A fictional story written (though not published) in Joseph Smith’s time tells of a pretended seer who had “a stone which he pronounced transparent — tho’ it was not transparent to common eyes. — Thro’ this he could view things ... & discover hidden treasures, secluded from the eyes of other mortals.” Solomon Spaulding, The “Manuscript Found”: Manuscript Story (Salt Lake City: *Deseret News*, 1886), 74–75. In pronouncing the opaque stone “transparent,” the pretended seer must have been speaking, not of its appearance, but of the traditional understanding that seer stones were looked “through or into” to see visions.

- 53 “David Whitmer Interview with James H. Hart, 21 August 1883 & 10 March 1884,” in *Early Mormon Documents*, 5:104–5, emphasis added.
- 54 “Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1844–1845,” The Joseph Smith Papers, 7–8, bk. 5, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/lucy-mack-smith-history-1844-1845/61>. One report, by Henry Caswall, includes a claim that she saw the interpreters. “Lucy Smith Interview, 1842,” in *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:221. This was not a formal interview in which Caswall could have easily taken careful notes, and he may have incorrectly remembered some details. In fact, this short account also includes other incredible and unsubstantiated claims — that Lucy saw the gold plates, that the breastplate was made of pure gold, that the number of believers in the Book of Mormon had reached 100,000 by 1842, and that the plates were found in a cave and were bound by a single ring at the corner. His report tends toward embellishment and exaggeration. See Craig Foster, “Henry Caswell: Anti-Mormon Extraordinaire,” *BYU Studies* 35, no. 4 (1995–96):150–52. Lucy never otherwise claimed to have seen the plates or the interpreters uncovered.
- 55 “Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1844–1845,” The Joseph Smith Papers, 7–8, bk. 5. This is the original wording in the earliest (1844–1845 “rough draft”) manuscript of her history. Later, “stones” was crossed out with blue ink and replaced with “3 cornered diamonds set in glass and the glass was set in silver bows,” along with a note indicating that she examined the instrument “with no covering but a silk handkerchief.”
- 56 “Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1845,” The Joseph Smith Papers, 107. For edits in the dictated manuscript, see the preceding note.
- 57 See the “Historical Introduction” in “Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1845,” The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/lucy-mack-smith-history-1845/7#historical-intro>.
- 58 *History of the Prophet Joseph by His Mother Lucy Smith as Revised by George A. Smith and Elias Smith* (Salt Lake City: Improvement Era, 1902).
- 59 See the “Historical Introduction” in “Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1845,” The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/lucy-mack-smith-history-1845/7#historical-intro>.

- 60 For Caswall’s interview, see Lucy Smith Interview, 1842,” in *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:221. For Lapham’s interview, see “Joseph Smith, Sr., Interview with Fayette Lapham, 1830,” in *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:462. For a sample of inaccuracies in the Caswall report, see note 54. Also see note 61 regarding Lapham’s account.
- 61 For examples of the use of “glass” and “glass-looking” in reference to seer stones, see statements by Ezra Booth, Isaac Hale, and Joseph Knight herein. For seer stones as “diamonds,” see “Gold Digging in Brighton! The Spiritual Humbug on a Grand Scale — A Thousand Dollar Swindle,” *The Rochester Daily Times*, 28 May 1851; and George H. Harris, “Myths of Ononda,” (unpublished manuscript, H. Michael Marquardt papers, ca. 1887). Ashurst-McGee disputes the idea that diamond was a folk term for a seer stone that could be applied to a stone of any type, citing Lapham’s recollection of Joseph Smith Senior’s descriptions of the interpreters (“a pair of spectacles ... the eyes not of glass, but of diamond”) as contradicting that idea, if accurate. Ashurst-McGee, “Pathway to Prophethood,” 197–98, 305, 305n496. He is correct in saying that Lapham’s statement contradicts the idea that Smith was using the word diamond in reference to seer stones, since both diamond and glass in Lapham’s recollection refer to materials, not objects. The accuracy of Lapham’s recollection of Smith’s words, however, is far from certain. First reported forty years after his interview with Smith, Lapham’s account contains many inaccuracies. His wording is certainly a paraphrase, not a quotation, and may reflect his own misinterpretation of Smith’s colloquial use of diamond. Lapham’s recollection that the interpreters had lenses “not of glass, but of diamond” could have easily resulted from his misinterpretation of a statement by Smith that the interpreters had lenses “of diamonds” (meaning seer stones).
- 62 “David Whitmer Interview with P. Wilhelm Poulson, Circa April 1878,” in *Early Mormon Documents*, 5:40.
- 63 Ibid.
- 64 Ibid., 5:36.
- 65 “David Whitmer Interview with Kansas City Journal, 1 June 1881,” in *Early Mormon Documents*, 5:76.

- 66 “David Whitmer to Kansas City Journal 13 June 1881,” in *Early Mormon Documents*, 5:81–82.
- 67 “David Whitmer Interview with Kansas City Journal, 1 June 1881,” in *Early Mormon Documents*, 5:72.
- 68 “David Whitmer Interview with St. Louis Republican, July 1884,” in *Early Mormon Documents*, 5:131.
- 69 For the three most authoritative accounts from David Whitmer, see Spencer, “Seers and Stones,” 32–33, 38–40. For other accounts attributed to David Whitmer, see Welch, “The Miraculous Translation of the Book of Mormon,” 145–58. The account listed by Welch that makes most mention of the interpreters appeared in the Chicago Tribune in 1885. Whitmer’s son insisted that his father was not a source for this account as alleged and that it was inaccurate, but that his father was tired of always contradicting such reports and so let it pass. “David Whitmer Interview with Nathan Tanner, Jr., 13 May 1886,” in *Early Mormon Documents*, 5:166.
- 70 “Oliver Cowdery Interview with Josiah Jones,” in *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:415.
- 71 “Abram W. Benton Reminiscence, March 1831,” in *Early Mormon Documents*, 4:95, 97, emphasis added.
- 72 This does not mean that all or even most of the visions purportedly seen by these individuals were divine or representative of reality. The fact that buried money seen with stones was rarely unearthed suggests some degree of mere imagination or deception in the purported visions. For more on this topic, see Spencer, “Seers and Stones,” 55–56.
- 73 Nearly 100 years after the event would have taken place, a report of an interview with William Smith was published in which it is claimed that “William informed us that he had, himself, by Joseph’s direction, put the Urim and Thummim before his eyes, but could see nothing, as he did not have the gift of a Seer.” J. W. Peterson, “The Urim and Thummim,” *The Rod of Iron* 1, no. 3 (February 1924):7. This report is hardly convincing given its extremely late date and lack of corroboration from other accounts, including William Smith’s own 1883 account quoted previously. Also, it is unlikely that William Smith would have been permitted to see the interpreters since Joseph Smith had been commanded to show

them to no one except a few special witnesses (per Joseph Knight's account, quoted previously; see also Mosiah 8:13). It is possible that Peterson, who did not publish this report until decades after the interview was conducted, remembered William Smith's words incorrectly. Smith may have said something more like, "Even had I, by Joseph's direction, put the Urim and Thummim before my eyes, I could have seen nothing, as I did not have the gift of a Seer." Peterson, at the end of his report, admits he is working from memory rather than notes taken at the time of the interview. As readily available reproductions of this report are incomplete and tend to have errors, I provide the full report here:

On the fourth of July, about 1891, in company with Elder W. S. Pender, I first met Elder William B. Smith, brother of Joseph Smith, the Martyr. He was then in his eightieth year. We remained with him at his home in Osterdock, Iowa, for several days, and our conversation often turned upon the early scenes with which he and his father's family were connected during the rise of the church. Among other things we inquired minutely about the [begin p. 7] Urim and Thummim and the breastplate. We asked him what was meant by the expression, "two rims of a bow," which held the former. He said a double silver bow was twisted into the shape of the figure eight, and the two stones were placed literally between the two rims of a bow. At one end was attached 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. A pocket was prepared in the breastplate on the left side, immediately over the heart. When not in use the Urim and Thummim was placed in this pocket, the rod being of just the right length to allow it to be so deposited. This instrument could, however, be detached from the breastplate and his brother said Joseph often wore it detached when away from home, but always used it in connection with the breastplate when receiving official communications, and usually so when translating, as it permitted him to have both hands free to hold the plates.

In answer to our question, William informed us that he had, himself, by Joseph's direction, put the Urim and Thummim before his eyes, but could see nothing, as he did not have the gift of a Seer. He also informed us that the instruments were too wide for his eyes, as also for Joseph's, and must have been used by much larger men. The instrument caused a strain on Joseph's eyes, and he sometimes resorted to the plan of covering his eyes with a hat to exclude the light in part. William Smith imparted to us much information regarding other things, but this is about all I remember with regard to the Urim and Thummim. — J. W. Peterson.

- 74 “William Smith Interview with J. W. Peterson and W. S. Pender, 1890,” in *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:508.
- 75 Peterson, “The Urim and Thummim,” 7. See note 73 for the full article and concerns about its credibility.
- 76 After reviewing these and other descriptions of the interpreters, Ashurst-McGee comes to a different conclusion. He suggests that the descriptions of the stones as clear or diamond-like and descriptions of the stones as opaque may not be contradictory, but rather complementary, with the former perhaps referring to “clear diamonds” and the latter to “circular lenses of cloudy white crystal” or glass in which the clear, three-cornered diamonds were encased. Ashurst-McGee, “Pathway to Prophethood,” 305–8, 310, 318. This explanation is worth considering, since it brings together the most detailed descriptions of the interpreters. But it prompts the questions of why Harris, in his careful and detailed description of the instrument, would have left out any mention of the diamonds or the nested construction of the lenses, and why two descriptions that are central to this explanation — the description of the interpreters as “three-cornered diamonds set in glass(es)” and “clear as crystal,” if accurate, would be specifically rejected by Brigham Young and Joseph Smith (or those editing under their direction), respectively. In their book on the translation and publication of the Book of Mormon, MacKay and Dirkmaat reconcile the various descriptions of the interpreter stones in another way. While they accept that the term diamonds was used to identify the stones as seer stones, they suggest that Pratt called them “crystals” to “express the value of the stones and to set them apart from others,” and they suggest that the stones

were described as clear or transparent, not because they were transparent in the usual sense, but rather “possibly in the same way that an unpolished diamond or crystal was translucent.” They conclude that the interpreters were thick, “cloudy crystalline stones” that were convex on both sides and “shaped in a way that might magnify if they were transparent.” MacKay and Dirkmaat, *From Darkness Unto Light*, 62–63.