

FAIR

Joseph the Seer—or Why Did He Translate With a Rock in His Hat?

Two pictures:



(/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/2009_gardner_01.jpg)[*To the left*] The manner of translation was as wonderful as the discovery. By putting his finger on one of the characters and imploring divine aid, then looking through the Urim and Thummim, he would see the import written in plain English on a screen placed before him. After delivering this to his emanuensi,[sic] he would again proceed in the same manner and obtain the meaning of the next character, and so on till he came to the part of the plates which were sealed up.¹



Brant A. Gardner

Truman Coe, Presbyterian Minister living among the Saints in Kirtland, 1836

(/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/2009_gardner_02.jpg)[*To the right*] I cheerfully certify that I was familiar with the manner of Joseph Smith's translating the book of Mormon. He translated the most of it at my Father's house. And I often sat by and saw and heard them translate and write for hours together. Joseph never had a curtain drawn between him and his scribe while he was translating. He would place the director in his hat, and then place his [face in his] hat, so as to exclude the light, and then [read] to his scribe the words as they appeared before him.²



Elizabeth Ann Whitmer Cowdery, Oliver Cowdery's wife, 1870

These two descriptions of Joseph Smith translating the golden plates paint radically different pictures of the same event. It is easy to accept the finger-on-the-plates translation, but the rock-in-the-hat feels completely foreign. Nevertheless, it is a much better attested description of the process than the first.

Why do we have both of these pictures if the second better fits the majority of descriptions? To answer that question, there are two stories that must be told: first—why would anyone think of translating with a rock in a hat?—and second—why we are so surprised at that?

Why Do You Look At Rocks in Your Hat?

When the English left their villages and emigrated to the New World, they brought their customs and beliefs with them. Along with the hopeful, the adventurers, and the farmers,—cunning men and wise women disembarked in the New World.³ To be a cunning man or a wise woman was to play a well defined and important role in pre-industrial villages. Keith Thomas, retired Professor of Modern History

specialists performed such important functions that Thomas notes that the community was likely to believe that the cunning folk were taught by God, or that they were helped by angels, or even that they possessed some divinity of their own. The common people, wrote Thomas Cooper, assumed that the power of these wizards came by 'some extraordinary gift of God'.⁵

The cunning men and women exhibited their extraordinary talents in many ways, but there is one that provides the backdrop against which young Joseph Smith is more clearly defined. He belonged to a class of cunning men whose specialty was scrying, or seeing the hidden. It was a specialty with a very long and almost universal history.⁶ Anthropologist Andrew Lang, writing in 1905, describes the tools of their trade:

Not only is the plain crystal, or its congener the black stone, used, together with its first cousin the mirror, and the primitive substitute of water, but almost any bright object seems to have been employed at one time or another. Thus we find the sword among the Romans; and in mediaeval Europe polished iron . . . lamp-black is sometimes smeared on the hand, or . . . a pool of ink poured into it; visions are seen in smoke and flame, in black boxes, in jugs, and on white paper. . . .⁷

All of these methods sound strange to our modern ears, but they were not only accepted but revered for most of human history. By the time we find scryers or seers in England between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, their tools were often stones and their functions had evolved into two general forms; seeing a hidden future, and seeing the hidden location of things that were lost (or the thief who made them get "lost"). The conservative nature of such practices dictated that when the traditions of the cunning men and wise women are found in the Palmyra area of the 1820s they still performed their traditional functions of telling fortunes and seeing things that were lost, hidden, or stolen.⁸

Young Joseph Smith was a member of a specialized sub-community with ties to these very old and very respected practices, though by the early 1800s they were respected only by a marginalized segment of society. He exhibited a talent parallel to others in similar communities. Even in Palmyra he was not unique. In D. Michael Quinn's words: "Until the Book of Mormon thrust young Smith into prominence, Palmyra's most notable seer was Sally Chase, who used a greenish-colored stone. William Stafford also had a seer stone, and Joshua Stafford had a 'peepstone which looked like white marble and had a hole through the center.'"⁹ Richard Bushman adds Chauncy Hart, and an unnamed man in Susquehanna County, both of whom had stones with which they found lost objects.¹⁰

There are some reminiscences that tell us how the village seers operated before modern history either forgot or dismissed them.. Lorenzo and Benjamin Saunders gave interviews in 1884 remembering their dealings with the Palmyra seer, Sally Chase. Lorenzo reported:

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

I went & hunted & hunted but could not find it there. I afterwards found it away over in one corner of the field.¹¹

Saunders brothers could have been describing events from an English village or over a hundred years earlier. In the drier descriptions that have survived, we know that Lorenzo consulted her at least twice himself, once to find the drag tooth and once to find lost cattle. He also tells us of another client, Steve Mungou. Both brothers, however, found it necessary to append that, of course, Sally was mistaken in the location she gave, a qualification that apparently didn't stop them from consulting her again.

Joseph Smith, long before golden plates complicated his position as a local seer, appears to have functioned just as Sally Chase did. Quinn reports that: "E. W. Vanderhoof [writing in 1905] remembered that his Dutch grandfather once paid Smith seventy-five cents to look into his 'whitish, glossy, and opaque' stone to locate a stolen mare. The grandfather soon 'recovered his beast, which Joe said was somewhere on the lake shore and [was] about to be run over to Canada.' Vanderhoof grouched that 'anybody could have told him that, as it was invariably the way a horse thief would take to dispose of a stolen animal in those days."¹³ While Vanderhoof reported a positive result of the consultation, it is interesting that his statement includes a qualifier that has the same intent as those added by the Saunders' brothers. By the end of the century, one wouldn't want to actually credit a village seer when describing their activities. Nevertheless, it isn't the effectiveness that is important—it is the nature of the consultation. Sally Chase's clients consulted her to find things which were lost, and Joseph Smith had at least one client who did the same.

The social expectations of the village seer also explain two contradictory statements about what Joseph Smith did as a village seer. The first statement comes from Henry Harris in 1833: "Joseph Smith, Jr. the pretended Prophet, used to pretend to tell fortunes; he had a stone which he used to put in his hat, by means of which he professed to tell people's fortunes."¹⁴ Compare that statement to a story Lorenzo Saunders told to Edmund L. Kelley during his 1884 interview:

We went to Smiths one day, it was a rainy day; We went into the old mans shop, he was a cooper, and the old man had a shirt on it was the raggedest & dirtiest shirt, and all full of holes. & we got Jo. Smith to look & tell us what color our Girls hair was. well you see by & by some of them says go to Jo. says he Jo. come look into futurity & tell us how it is there? Jo. says I can not do that, I can not look into futurity I can not look into anything that is holy. The old man stood there and says: "I guess he can not look into my shirt then."¹⁵

Both Henry Harris and Lorenzo Saunders expected that Joseph Smith told fortunes. Of course they would have that expectation, because everyone knew that was one of the typical functions of the seer. However, where Harris may simply be repeating the assumption, Saunders describes what happened when he asked Joseph to act on that assumption. At least in this case, Joseph refused. The fact that the joke in the account depends upon young Joseph's comment about not looking at that which is Holy and his father's holey shirt suggests that this was a remembered incident and that Joseph Smith, Jr. actually had refused. I suspect that the refusal tells us about the spheres in which Joseph believed that particular talent operated. That refusal suggests Joseph made a distinction between that which was holy (which I believe he classified as religion) and his other functions (which I believe he classified as a talent).

What the modern world tends to know about the village seers is the result of only one of the ways in which their talents were put to use. Since they could see that which was hidden, local seers became involved in the mania of digging for lost treasure. As with the other functions of the cunning men and wise women, the idea of digging for treasure traced its roots to England, including much of the accompanying lore. In England, the semi-scientific root of treasure seeking was the habit of the wealthy burying their goods for safe-keeping in the absence of a deposit banking system.¹⁶ In the New World, the plausible explanation was based on the riches reputedly buried by Spaniards or pirates. It is probable that everyone could cite cases of people who had struck it rich through their digging, though none of them had, nor anyone they personally knew.¹⁷

many contemporary formulae survive. —

It is therefore no surprise that we see the Palmyra seers engaged in the local mania for treasure digging. As with the English practice, however, it is important to note that money-digging didn't require the seer. They were simply seen as useful. Note the relationship of the diggers to their guides in this series of descriptions Ronald W. Walker compiled:

The adepts often played a major role in money digging. The two men who in 1827 sought neatly boxed Spanish dollars below the old pier at New London, Connecticut, were directed by an elderly wise woman. Seeking pirate treasure in Maine, three men imported from Connecticut, a "far-famed and wonderfully skillful rodsman" to assist them. In turn, treasure-hungry farmers of Rose, New York, sought the help of a "medium," while the 1825 expedition to the Susquehanna hills began with a "peeper" named Odle, whose power of "seeing underground" piqued William Hale's interest. Moreover, the longtime diggers around Bristol, Vermont, made use of expert advice. They consulted a series of "prophets," including two women, an "old Frenchman" east of the mountains, and finally a conjuror who promised that by removing a few rocks and "shunning the solid ledge" the long-sought cave might be entered.¹⁹

This places an important context around the best-known case of Joseph Smith, Junior's participation in treasure-digging. Josiah Stowell, Sr., believed that he had found a lost Spanish silver mine and had his hired hands dig for it in 1825. When they were unable to find it, he hired Joseph Smith, Jr. to help them find what they had dug for and missed.²⁰ This incident was the reason that in 1826, Stowell's wife's nephew took Joseph to court as a "disorderly person," a term that was then defined in such a way that we might consider it a case of fraud.²¹ Presumably, Peter Bridgeman believed that Joseph had defrauded his uncle because he used a seer stone. This would not be the last time that Joseph's activities with a seer stone were described as fraud. In terms coined only later, Joseph would be accused of being a "confidence man."²² One of Joseph Smith's biographers, Dan Vogel, picks up and continues this theme. As Vogel describes the reason why one might see Joseph as a con man, he also provides the information that allows us to see the important ways in which that label is a distortion of the actual historical situation:

A typical confidence scheme in Smith's time involved a transient who entered an area that was known for its tales of lost treasures and the charlatan's magical powers could be put to good advantage. Using a "peep" stone or mineral rod, he would lead the credulous to a remote spot where he had previously deposited a few coins and was able to impress them by "finding" the coins. In the ensuing excitement, he would ask to be paid for his services or, more boldly, suggest that a company be established and that shares be sold. Thereupon, he would disappear with the money. On the other hand, he might string the people along by leading them to subsequent spots, then offer magical explanations for the failure to locate or secure the treasure. For instance, he might tell them that the treasure was protected by an evil spirit or that they had not precisely followed the magical formula he had given them. Eventually he would suggest that the undertaking be abandoned, whereupon he would slip out of town with the money.²³

The implication is that since Joseph used a peep stone, he must be seen in the same category as those who ran a scam with one. Clearly the 1826 court appearance tells us that some contemporaries considered him in that category. However, although the evidence is complex, it appears that Joseph was acquitted of the charge at that time.²⁴ Should he also be redeemed from the continuing charges?

Undoubtedly there were those who preyed upon the folk beliefs of the too-trusting rural communities. However, the fact that the communities would be willing to follow the confidence scheme simply tells us that there was an existing belief system in which seer stones were considered effective and acceptable. The confidence men played off inherited traditions. Nevertheless, the fact that there are dishonest pretenders in any profession does not suggest that the entire profession is designed for dishonesty. Scams were run

There are two critical differences between the con men and the village seers. First, the con men were transients and the village seers were residential. The second is that the con man elicited money for his talents, and the village seers were consulted. We have at least three descriptions of how Joseph related to his clients, including Josiah Stowell, and in each case the client came to him with their problem.²⁵ The con men created the scam for money and left so they would not have to deal with the consequences. The true village seers were part of the community, and remained so through success and failure. Their clients came to them because of a cumulative reputation. Against the records of a few scam artists we have the long tradition of village seers stretching back to England and covering hundreds of years of respectable service in their communities.

It is this traditional context of a finder of lost things, a seer of the unseen, that explains how rocks in the hat figure in to the story of Joseph Smith and the translation of the Book of Mormon. The plates were accompanied by the Nephite Interpreters, which were two stones set in a silver bow.²⁶ These stones appear to have functioned in a way Joseph understood from his experience with a seer stone. Although he began translation with the Nephite Interpreters, the record indicates that he changed to using his own seer stone. Why put the stone in a hat to translate? That part of the picture is easy. That was how such a stone was used. For Joseph's community, that aspect was not unusual at all.²⁷

Why translate with a stone? The conceptual link in Joseph's mind would have been that he had been able to see that which was hidden, and the meaning of the script on the plates was certainly hidden to understanding. Nevertheless, this wasn't a simple transition from seer to translator, even for Joseph. Joseph's talent was for the mundane, but his gift was for the Holy. Joseph understood the difference between the two when Benjamin Saunders wanted him to see into futurity. Joseph understood that when he was asked to translate, he was being asked to do something very different from what village seers did. He was being asked to do something very different from what learned men did (2 Ne. 27:15-18).

Joseph learned from his community how to operate as a village seer, but he didn't begin to understand how to be God's seer until Moroni appeared to him. He did not fully make that transition until the sacred interpreters helped him move from finding lost objects to finding a lost people and lost gospel. Then, having learned to see that which was Holy, Joseph never returned to the mundane functions of the village seer. Eventually, he learned that he could use a seer stone just as well as the Interpreters. Only when he learned to see that which was Holy could he translate—and then it didn't matter the lens through which he saw.

It is at this point that some might wonder if I believe that all seers saw things in their seer stones. I believe that seers believed that that they saw things in their seer stones. Do I believe that the seer stone prepared Joseph to translate?²⁸ Only in that it allowed him to believe that he had a God-given talent that could be used for the purpose. Nothing in the world view of the seers prepared him for translating. He didn't originally believe that his secular stones could translate, only the sacred interpreters. Even later when he learned that he could also translate through his own seer stone, he consistently said that the translation was done through the gift and power of God, not through any kind of rock. He knew that no other village seer could do it; he knew that he could not do it, save God alone intervened. Translating the plates was beyond the realm of the village seer and firmly and exclusively in the realm of God's Seer.

Why Are We Surprised that Joseph Used a Rock in His Hat to Translate?

If we can find a context in which Joseph translating with a seer stone makes sense, why do we have to look so hard to find it? Why isn't it as natural for us as it was for Joseph? That story also requires that we delve into history; in this case, the history of the interconnections between what we understand to be religion and what we understand to be magic.

times. The fact is, in these civilizations that were contemporary with biblical Israel, magic and religion were only beginning to be differentiated. Evidence especially from Mesopotamia shows that this dichotomy is not an inherent one, but one that gradually develops over a period of time and is intimately tied to increasing social complexity.²⁹

Many of the Old Testament stories that we accept as religion have much in common with magical practices. They are difficult to separate because their differentiation depended not upon the things that were done, but the way those things were perceived. Sarah Iles Johnston, professor of Greek and Latin at Ohio State University explains:

The modern scholarly quest to establish a division between magic and religion does have some roots in antiquity, insofar as both ancient and modern discussions hinge on terminology: what one chooses to call any particular activity (and, it follows, who is doing the choosing) determines whether the activity is understood as acceptable or discredited, pious or blasphemous, religion or magic. In antiquity, *magic* (a term that I use as a shorthand way of referring to a variety of ancient Mediterranean words) almost always referred to someone else's religious practices; it was a term that distanced those practices from the norm—that is, from one's own practices, which constituted religion.³⁰

Stated simply, "what I do is religion, what you do is magic."³¹

Although it is difficult to see without close examination, the Old Testament exhibits this internal/external dichotomy between religion and magic. On the one hand, it is clearly antagonistic to people who perform certain acts. For example, we find in Exodus 22:18 the verse that underlay so many later tragedies: "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live." Deuteronomy 18:10-12 provides a list of magical practices that should be avoided: "There shall not be found among you any one that maketh his son or his daughter to pass through the fire, or that useth divination, or an observer of times, or an enchanter, or a witch, or a charmer, or a consulter with familiar spirits, or a wizard, or a necromancer. For all that do these things are an abomination unto the Lord."

In spite of these obvious prohibitions, Dolansky notes that when you examine the nature of the practices, it isn't the magic but the magician that is the problem. She concludes that "magic in the Hebrew Bible refers to the mediation of divine power; and in the hands of priests and prophets it is perfectly legal."³² It is not the act, but the actor that creates the separation between religion and magic.³³ David Frankfurter, Professor of Religious Studies and History at the University of New Hampshire, notes that: "people in their own cultural systems use such descriptive labels for political, sectarian, or simply taxonomic reasons, even with little reality behind the labels. Practically any practice, that is, might be labeled 'magical' or 'sorcery' under certain conditions."³⁴

Because these terms and concepts were socially constructed, they played an important role when social relationships changed. The division between religion and magic that affected Joseph Smith's world (and which is perpetuated in ours), followed the tremendous social disruption of the Protestant Reformation and the Age of Enlightenment. As the Western world emerged from the Middle Ages, the Catholic Church had become the sole repository of answers to questions about how the world worked. As the Church had grown and conquered new territories, it often incorporated local religious practices into its own doctrines and understandings. In particular, local concepts of sacred space and sacred ritual often retained their sacrality while nominally moving from pagan to Christian spheres.³⁵ The Protestant Reformation changed the definition of what was to be considered religion and what was deemed magic, and with that change, triggered massive social realignments—first in England and later in the Americas.

Where the Catholic tradition had accepted all types of sacred place and practice, the Reformation severely limited both. In redefining religion, it labeled as magic many of the aspects of Catholic sacred space and ritual.³⁶ Richard Bushman has noted that "The

by traditional accounts, magic and occultism died out in the eighteenth century: the rise of enlightenment philosophy, skepticism, and experimental science, the spread of evangelical Christianity, the continuing opposition from English Protestant denominations, the rise in literacy associated with Christian catechizing, and the cultural, economic, and political maturation of the colonies simply destroyed the occult practice and belief of the previous century in both Europe and America. Yet significant evidence suggests that the folklorization of magic occurred as much in America as in England. As in England, colonial magic and occultism did not so much disappear everywhere as they disappeared among certain social classes and became confined to poorer, more marginal segments of early American society.³⁸

It is precisely this folklorization that created the social dichotomy in practices that were accepted by, in Butler's terms, the more marginal segments of early American society. This separation with parallel persistence is what anthropologist Robert Redfield of the University of Chicago called a Little and Great Tradition. He explained:

Let us begin with a recognition, long present in discussions of civilizations, of the difference between a great tradition and a little tradition. . . In a civilization there is a great tradition of the reflective few, and there is a little tradition of the largely unreflective many. The great tradition is cultivated in schools or temples; the little tradition works itself out and keeps itself going in the lives of the unlettered in their village communities. The tradition of the philosopher, theologian, and literary man is a tradition consciously cultivated and handed down; that of the little people is for the most part taken for granted and not submitted to much scrutiny or considered refinement and improvement.³⁹

Although some aspects of Redfield's separation of the traditions have been criticized,⁴⁰ the basic idea of the two separate but interrelated aspects of religion in a culture has great explanatory power. Irving Hexham, professor of Religion at the University of Calgary, describes the complex modern religious history of Korea in terms of the intertwining of a Little and Great Tradition:

When a Great Tradition is in decline its Little Tradition can continue with a vigorous religious life until another Great Tradition seeks to impose its beliefs as the religion of the people. This situation of religious change is well illustrated by the course of religious history in Korea, where the shamanism of the Silla kings was officially replaced by Buddhism. But with the decline of Buddhism and the imposition of Confucian rituals by the Yi Dynasty shamanism once more emerged as the enduring Little Tradition. Later in the nineteenth century when Confucianism declined, Christianity entered Korea and shamanism once more reasserted its traditional role.⁴¹

It is this ability to persist parallel to and intertwined with the Great Tradition that tells us how the social complex of the cunning men and wise women not only crossed the ocean from England, but formed a vibrant part of a defined segment of American society. The duality of traditions also explains the mutual antagonism between them. As competing explanations of reality, the two are uneasy bedfellows at best and feuding relatives at worst. D. Michael Quinn noted this division in approaches to the Little and Great Traditions: "Early Americans who did not share the magic world view condemned such beliefs and practices as irrational and anti-religious, but intelligent and religious Americans who perceived reality from a magic view regarded such beliefs and practices as both rational and religious."⁴²

Almost by definition, we perceive history through the eyes of the Great Tradition; the tradition with the greater social and economic standing and the tradition with greater ability to create a written legacy through the Enlightenment's association with education. The Great Tradition writes the history that colors our perception of the Little Tradition. In the case of what we call magic, the anti-magical stance of the Great Tradition makes the folk magic Little Tradition an embarrassment. Andrew Lang, a British anthropologist of the last generation, provides a fascinating example of what happens when the Great Tradition expectation meets the Little Tradition reality: "'I am glad to say my people are not superstitious,' said a worthy Welsh clergyman to a friend of mine, a good folklorist, now, alas, no more,

The disdain of the Great Tradition for the Little Tradition is evident in an account of a trial for fraud, held in Kent, England, in 1850: “The defendant, who had the appearance of an agricultural labourer, resided at Rolvenden, where he enjoyed the reputation of being ‘a cunning man’, able to cure diseases, to explain dreams, to foretell events, to tell fortunes, and to recover lost property. He was resorted to as a wizard by the people of miles around, principally by the ignorant, but also by parties who might have been expected to know better.”⁴⁴ The facts of the case are that many in the community consulted this cunning man. Of course, they had to have been ignorant folk. Nevertheless, there were some who didn’t appear so ignorant, although even they—should have known better.

Alan Taylor, a fellow at the Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, Virginia, and an assistant professor at the College of William and Mary, explains the chasm between the Great and Little Tradition by focusing on Martin Harris:

[Martin Harris] was an honest, hard-working, astute man honored by his townsmen with substantial posts as fence-viewer and overseer of highways but never with the most prestigious offices: selectman, moderator, or assemblyman. In the previous generation in rural towns like Palmyra substantial farmers like Harris would have reaped the highest status and most prestigious offices. But Harris lived in the midst of explosive cultural change as the capitalist market and its social relationships rode improved internal transportation into the most remote corners of the American countryside. The agents of that change were the newly arrived lawyers, printers, merchants, and respectable ministers who clustered in villages and formed a new elite committed to “improving” their towns *and* their humbler neighbors. The village elites belonged to a new self-conscious “middle class,” simultaneously committed to commercial expansion and moral reform. Because of their superior contacts with and knowledge of the wider world, the new village elites reaped higher standing and prestigious posts from their awed neighbors.

Utterly self-confident in their superior rationality and access to urban ideas, the village elites disdained rural folk notions as ignorant, if not vicious, superstitions that obstructed commercial and moral “improvement.” Through ridicule and denunciation, the village middle class aggressively practiced a sort of cultural imperialism that challenged the folk beliefs held by farmers like Martin Harris. Harris’s material prosperity was comparable to the village elite’s but, because of his hard physical labor and limited education, culturally he shared more with hardscrabble families like the Smiths. A village lawyer needed only scan Harris’s gray homespun attire and large stiff hat to conclude that a farmer had come to town.⁴⁵

We should not expect that because the Little Tradition is associated with the less educated that they were therefore simple or naïve. Martin Harris might have been a participant and believer in the Little Tradition, but that doesn’t mean that he threw caution to the wind. The new elite might have seen Martin Harris as an ignorant and credulous farmer, but he would have seen himself as a cautious believer. His credulity allowed for true seers, but his caution told him that there were charlatans abroad. He pointedly told Joseph: “I said, Joseph, you know my doctrine, that cursed is every one that putteth his trust in man, and maketh flesh his arm; and we know that the devil is to have great power in the latter days to deceive if possible the very elect; and I don’t know that you are one of the elect. Now you must not blame me for not taking your word.”⁴⁶

To resolve his question of whether or not he should support the Book of Mormon, Martin tested Joseph. When a pin Martin was using to pick his teeth fell into straw around his feet, he first attempted to find it. Not succeeding, he asked Joseph to use his seer stone to find the pin. Joseph did, bolstering Martin’s confidence that Joseph had the talent he professed.⁴⁷ I find it particularly apt that the nature of the test was to find something lost. That is, of course, what a seer did.

Nevertheless, believing in Joseph as a true prophet and true seer had Martin straddling two traditions. The village seer belonged to the

themselves from it when they were later part of the Great Tradition, or when an interviewer from the Great Tradition asked about the old days. Richard Bushman demonstrates how this pressure affected the reminiscences of some of Joseph Smith's neighbors:

The forces of eighteenth-century rationalism were never quite powerful enough to suppress the belief in supernatural powers aiding and opposing human enterprise. The educated representatives of enlightened thought, newspaper editors and ministers particularly, scoffed at the superstitions of common people without completely purging them. The scorn of the polite world put the Palmyra and Manchester money diggers in a dilemma. They dared not openly describe their resort to magic for fear of ridicule from the fashionably educated, and yet they could not overcome their fascination with the lore that seeped through to them from the past. Their embarrassment shows in the affidavits Hurlbut collected. William Stafford, who admitted participation in two "nocturnal excursions," claimed he thought the idea visionary all along, but "being prompted by curiosity, I at length accepted of their invitations." Peter Ingersoll made much more elaborate excuses. One time he went along because it was lunchtime, his oxen were eating, and he was at leisure. Secretly, though he claimed to be laughing up his sleeve: "This was rare sport for me."⁴⁸

Not only does understanding the Great and Little Traditions explain the antagonism we see in the Great Tradition histories, but the dual traditions also help explain one of the features of a Little Tradition religion when it is transformed into a Great Tradition religion. That shift in social acceptance and expectation triggers a responsive shift in the way the new religion sees itself and its history.

Morton Smith, a professor of History at Columbia University, examined this tendency in early Christianity, which began as a Little Tradition religion, but became a Great Tradition religion. Smith notes that the earliest forms of Christianity had a strong affinity with magical practices—practices that remain in descriptions of the healing miracles and turning water to wine. By the time of the gospels, however, that history was being written to remove references to magic. He concludes:

What evidence did the Christian tradition, as presented in the gospels, have in common with the picture of Jesus the magician? Since the authors of the gospels wished to defend Jesus against the charge of magic, we should expect them to minimize those elements of the tradition that ancient opinion . . . would take to be evidence for it, and to maximize those that could be used against it.

This expectation is, in the main, confirmed. The evangelists could not eliminate Jesus' miracles because those were essential to their case, but John cut down the number of them, and Matthew and Luke got rid of the traces of physical means that Mark had incautiously preserved.⁴⁹

The New Testament presented its message to, and participated in, a Great Tradition that Morton Smith notes was: "hostile to magic."⁵⁰ So also did the modern Saints tell their story within and to a Great Tradition that was hostile to magic.

As the early saints transitioned from a collection of believers into a formal religion, they began to see themselves within the Great Tradition. As with early Christianity, the stories they told of themselves naturally were recast to distance themselves from their Little Tradition heritage and provide an acceptable Great Tradition history. One of the obvious places to see this process in action is with the tools of the translation. We all know that Joseph used the Urim and Thummim to translate the Book of Mormon—except he didn't. The Book of Mormon mentions *interpreters*, but not the Urim and Thummim. It was the Book of Mormon interpreters which were given to Joseph with the plates. When Moroni took back the interpreters after the loss of the 116 manuscript pages, Joseph completed the translation with one of his seer stones. Until after the translation of the Book of Mormon, the Urim and Thummim belonged to the Bible and the Bible only.⁵¹ The Urim and Thummim became part of the story when it was presented within and to the Great Tradition. Eventually, even Joseph Smith used Urim and Thummim indiscriminately as labels generically representing either the Book of Mormon

From the Great Tradition perspective, their presence in the Bible made them religion, not magic. I suspect that the two interpreters made a natural comparison to the two stones, one Urim and one Thummim, from the Bible. Calling the biblical divinatory tools “rocks” instead of Urim and Thummim seems to demean them. The reverse process, calling the interpreters and seer stones Urim and Thummim, places them in a more appropriate religious category where they belong because of the sacred use to which they were put in translating the Book of Mormon.

This recasting of history was a story the Saints told themselves as much as what they presented to the world. I doubt that there was any conscious attempt to reconcile their history with Great Tradition expectations, let alone any attempt at deception. It was simply the natural response to their self-definition as a religion rather than a folk belief. It was a story told in a way that they subliminally knew was appropriate for a Great Tradition religion. The new history did not deny the past or alter the facts, but recolored them with a new vocabulary.⁵⁴

Why, then, are we so surprised to learn that Joseph translated with a rock in his hat? That is a Little Tradition description and we are now firmly in the Great Tradition. We share the Great Tradition antipathy to those elements of the Little Tradition. Time has made the gap even greater than it was in Joseph’s day. Why do we have the two pictures with which we began? The more accurate, but more uncomfortable picture is a Little Tradition image. The other is a Great Tradition image. We have both because we can tell the story from two different perspectives.

Regardless of the perspective from which we tell the story, the essential fact of the translation is unchanged. How was the Book of Mormon translated? As Joseph continually insisted, the only real answer, from any perspective, is that it was translated by the gift and power of God.

Notes

¹ Truman Coe to Mr. Editor, *Hudson Ohio Observer*, August 11, 1836 cited in Dan Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 5 vols. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1998), 1:47.

² Elizabeth Ann Whitmer Cowdery, “Elizabeth Ann Whitmer Cowdery Affidavit, 15 February 1870,” in *Early Mormon Documents*, ed. Dan Vogel, 5 vols. (Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books, 1870), 5:260.

³ Catherine L. Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 68. Also Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), 67.

⁴ Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1971), 649-50.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 266.

⁶ Deanna J. Conway, *Crystal Enchantments: A Complete Guide to Stones and Their Magical Properties* (Berkeley, Calif.: The Crossing Press, 1999), 291-3.

⁷ Andrew Lang, *Crystal Gazing: Its History and Practice, with a Discussion of the Evidence for Telepathic Scrying* (New York: Dodge

magic in Southern Illinois: A Systematic Analysis of Folk-Urban Transition, (reprint of a 1943 article) in *The Study of Folklore*, edited by Alan Dundes (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1965), 316-17, discuss agricultural magic in an Illinois town as collected in 1939, when the practices were beginning to fade. They note that they were practices that followed the Old English pattern.

⁹ D. Michael Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1987), 38.

¹⁰ Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 70.

¹¹ Lorenzo Saunders, "Lorenzo Saunders Interview, 12 November 1884," in *Early Mormon Documents*, ed. Dan Vogel, 5 vols. (Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books, 1884), 2:154-55.

¹² Benjamin Saunders, "Benjamin Saunders Interview, Circa September 1884," in *Early Mormon Documents*, ed. Dan Vogel, 5 vols. (Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books, 1884), 2:139.

¹³ Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, 39.

¹⁴ Henry Harris, "Henry Harris Statement, Circa 1833," in *Early Mormon Documents*, ed. Dan Vogel, 5 vols. (Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books, 1833), 2:75.

¹⁵ Lorenzo Saunders, interviewed by E. L. Kelley, 12 November 1884, "Miscellany," E. L. Kelley Papers, RLDS Church Library-Archives, Independence, Missouri, p. 11, in *Early Mormon Documents*, ed. Dan Vogel, 5 vols. (Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books, 1833), 2:155.

¹⁶ Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, 234.

¹⁷ Ronald W. Walker, "The Persisting Idea of American Treasure Digging," *BYU Studies*, 24, no. 4 (Fall 1984):433, notes: "The reality of actual treasure finds hardly explains the power and tenacity of the reassure myth 'Finds' were never commensurate with actual digging and were more a matter of accidental discovery than conscious magical enterprise. Even the discovery of mines, allegedly the most successful of the diggers' pursuits, evoked skepticism and lacked documented results."

¹⁸ Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, 236.

¹⁹ Walker, "The Persisting Idea of American Treasure Hunting," 439-40.

²⁰ Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 48.

²¹ Bruce A. Van Orden, "Joseph Smith's Developmental Years, 1823-29 (JS ñ H 50-67)," In *Studies in Scripture, Vol. 2: The Pearl of Great Price*, edited by Robert L. Millet and Kent P. Jackson, (Salt Lake City: Randall Book, 1985),373.

²² Dale R. Broadhurst, "Joseph Smith: Nineteenth Century Con Man?" accessed July 2009 from <http://sidneyrigdon.com/criddle/Smith-ConMan.htm>, provides a long and nicely documented piece that clearly argues that Joseph Smith was precisely a con man, and was described as one. That he would have been seen as a con man by the writers from the Great Tradition is certainly understandable (see later in this paper). However, seem from inside his own social and economic class, the term is unwarranted and inaccurate. It is a

²⁴ Previous records of what happened at the hearing have been supplemented by the discovery of court documents that have allowed a more complete legal analysis of the conclusions. The discussion of what happened at this hearing is beyond the scope of this papers. Sources to be consulted are: Marvin S. Hill, "Joseph Smith and the 1826 Trial: New Evidence and New Difficulties," *BYU Studies* 12, no. 2 (1972):223-33, Gordon A. Madsen, "Joseph Smith's 1826 Trial: The Legal Setting," *BYU Studies* 30, no. 2 (1990):91-108, "Just the Facts: The 1826 Trial (Hearing) of Joseph Smith," Accessed July 2009 from <http://www.lightplanet.com/response/1826Trial/facts.html>.

²⁵ Vanderhoof's grandfather came to Joseph to ask about the lost mare. Josiah Stowell came to Joseph to hire him to help find the silver mine. Martin Harris asks Joseph to find the pin he dropped in the straw (discussed below).

²⁶ J. W. Peterson, "William Smith Interview with J W. Peterson and W. S.Pender, 1890," in *Early Mormon Documents*, ed. Dan Vogel, 5 Vols., vol. 1 (Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books, 09/03/23 1890), 508. A. W. Benton, "Mormonites," *Evangelical Magazine and Gospel Advocate* 2:15 (April 9, 1840), 201, as quoted in Stephen D. Ricks, *Joseph Smith's Means and Methods of Translating the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1986), 3.

²⁷ "Palmyra Reflector, 1 February 1831," in *Early Mormon Documents*, ed. Dan Vogel, 5 vols., (Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books), 2:243, "'Peep stones' or pebbles, taken promiscuously from the brook or field, were placed in a hat or other situation excluded from light, when some wizzard or witch (for these performances were not confined to either sex) applied their eyes, and nearly starting [staring?] their [eye] balls from their sockets, declared they saw all the wonders of nature, including of course, ample stores of silver and gold." Bracketed text retained from Vogel.

²⁸ Mark Ashurst-McGee appears to see a developmental path from Joseph's use of folk magic into his abilities as a prophet. Clearly there is a connection, but I seem to see a greater separation than he does. Mark Ashurst-McGee, *A Pathway To Prophethood: Joseph Smith Junior As Rodsman, Village Seer, And Judeo-Christian Prophet*, Master's Thesis (Logan, Utah: Utah State University, 2000), iii, "For the most part, I present Joseph Smith's divinatory development as he himself experienced it. Dowsing with a rod, seeing things in stones, and receiving heavenly revelations were as real to Smith as harvesting wheat. In order to understand his progression from rodsman to seer to prophet, one must first understand his worldview. The mental universe of early American water witches and village seers forms one of the historical and cultural contexts in which Joseph Smith developed his divinatory abilities." Reacting specifically to this statement, my objection would be that Joseph Smith did not "develop his divinatory abilities," but rather that they were bestowed upon him as a gift from God, leveraging a talent he already had into the confidence to do what otherwise he would never have believed he could have done.

Alan Taylor also indicates a developmental path: Taylor, "Rediscovering the Context of Joseph Smith's Treasure Seeking," 21, "Indeed, I would argue that Joseph Smith, Jr.'s transition from treasure-seeker to Mormon prophet was natural, easy, and incremental and that it resulted from the dynamic interaction of two simultaneous struggles: first, of seekers grappling with supernatural beings after midnight in the hillsides, and, second, of seekers grappling with hostile rationalists in the village streets during the day." Although these factors certainly contributed to the development of Joseph Smith the person, I do not see them as foundational for Joseph the Prophet. I see Moroni's visit as creating a fundamental shift in his worldview, requiring that he relearn his place and reassign his talent to the Lord. It may not have been world-wrenching, but it still was dramatically different from the context of his daily life prior to that event.

²⁹ Shawna Dolansky, *Now You See It, Now You Don't: Biblical Perspectives on the Relationship Between Magic and Religion* (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2008), 21.

SUBSTANTIVE DISTINCTIONS.

³¹ Dolansky, *Now You See It, Now You Don't*, 4: “The problem of differentiating between actions that are magical and those that are religious is important in the fields of anthropology and religious studies. Both magic and religion claim access to realms outside of ordinary reality and attempt to manipulate supernatural forces for desired outcomes in the natural world. Scholars have approached the categories of magic and religion from a variety of perspectives, distinguishing them on the basis of their techniques, social effects, and the status of their chief proponents. Some have suggested that there is no real difference, that the categories merely denote social conventions (“what I do is religion, what you do is magic”) and that the terms themselves should be dissolved altogether.

“The problem of defining magic has been a major portion of most LDS responses to the accusation that Joseph Smith participates in magic or the occult. In all cases, the problem is not with the facts, but with the connotations of the labels. See the following discussions of the use of the term “magic,” and to what it might apply: John Gee, “Abracadabra, Isaac and Jacob,” A review of “The Use of Egyptian Magical Papyri to Authenticate the Book of Abraham: A Critical Review” by Edward H. Ashment, *FARMS Review*, 7, no. 1, (1995): 47-67, John Gee, “Early Mormonism and the Magic World View, revised and enlarged edition,” A review of “Early Mormonism and the Magic World View, revised and enlarged edition” by D. Michael Quinn, *FARMS Review*, 12, no. 2, (2000):2-6, William J. Hamblin, “That Old Black Magic,” A review of “Early Mormonism and the Magic World View, revised and enlarged edition” by D. Michael Quinn, *FARMS Review*, : 12,no. 2 (2000): 3-9, Rhett S. James, “Writing History Must Not Be an Act of ‘Magic,’” A review of “Early Mormonism and the Magic World View, revised and enlarged edition” by D. Michael Quinn, *FARMS Review*, 12, no. 2 (2000):2-4.

³²Dolansky, *Now You See It, Now You Don't*, 99.

³³ Ibid., 99-100.

³⁴ David Frankfurter, “Dynamics of Ritual Expertise in Antiquity and Beyond: Towards a New Taxonomy of “Magicians”,” in *Magic and Ritual in the Ancient World*, ed. Paul Mirecki and Marvin Meyer (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2001), 159.

³⁵ Karen Louise Jolly, “Magic, Miracle, and Popular Practice in the Early Medieval West: Anglo-Saxon England,” in *Religion, Science, and Magic: In Concert and in Conflict*, ed. Jacob Neusner, Ernest S. Fredrichs and Paul Virgil McCracken Flesher (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 176, “Although there was conflict in early medieval society between the extremes of magic and religion—a product of the Christianizing process in which the converted and the church hierarchy redefined the acceptable and unacceptable—there were also gray areas of assimilation in which practices stemming from a similar outlook were transformed into something acceptable. The Christian Church, though openly countering magic with miracle, was not blind to this assimilation process as another means of conversion.

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

³⁶ Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, chapter 3, “The Impact of the Reformation,” provides extensive examples of the way in which this process moved through the Protestant rejection of Roman Catholicism. He concludes (75-76): “Protestantism thus presented itself as a deliberate attempt to take the magical elements out of religion, to eliminate the idea that the rituals of the church had about them a mechanical efficacy, and to abandon the effort to endow physical objects with supernatural qualities by special formulae of consecration and exorcism.”

³⁹ Robert Redfield, *The Little Community and Peasant Society and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960, rpt 1989.), 41-42.

⁴⁰ Edith Badone, "Introduction," in *Religious Orthodoxy and Popular Faith in European Society*, ed. Edith Badone (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 6: "Redfield's work is in the tradition of the "two-tiered" models of religion that Brown seeks to escape. Like the term popular religion itself, the great tradition-little tradition distinction has helped to perpetuate the misconception that popular religion is always rural, primitive, unreflective, and traditional, as opposed to the urban, civilized, intellectual, and modern religion of the elite." Stanley Brandes, "Conclusion: Reflections on the Study of Religious Orthodoxy and Popular Faith in Europe," in *Religious Orthodoxy and Popular Faith in European Society*, ed. Edith Badone (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 187: "Despite these theoretical advances, Redfield and his followers—like the evolutionists before them—implicitly denigrated the religion of the masses. Not only did they view popular religion as less reflective and creative—in other words, more reactive—than that of the elite but they also believed that popular religion lagged behind elite religion temporally; elite beliefs and practices of one century might be discovered among the peasantry of the next."

⁴¹ Irving Hexham, "Modernity or Reaction in South Africa: The Case of Afrikaner Religion," in *Modernity and Religion: Papers Presented at the Consultation on Modernity and Religion Held at the University of British Columbia, Dec. 15-18, 1981*, ed. William Nicholls (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1988), 81.

⁴² Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, 225.

⁴³ Lang, *Crystal Gazing*, 1.

⁴⁴ David Vincent, *Literacy and Popular Culture: England 1750-1914*, Cambridge Studies in Oral and Literate Culture, ed. Peter Burke and Ruth Finnegan, vol. 19 (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 172.

⁴⁵ Alan Taylor, "Rediscovering the Context of Joseph Smith's Treasure Seeking," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, 19, no. 4 (Winter 1986):21. Internal references silently removed.

⁴⁶ Martin Harris interview with Joel Tiffany, *Tiffany's Monthly*, V, 169.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 164.

⁴⁸ Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism*, 71-72.

⁴⁹ Morton Smith, *Jesus the Magician* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1978), 92.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 146. As might be expected, Morton Smith's presentation of Jesus as a magician is even more controversial than calling Joseph Smith a magician. John Gee, "An Obstacle to Deeper Understanding." Review of D. Michael Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, revised and enlarged edition, in *FARMS Review of Books*, 12 no. 2 (2000):188 notes that Morton Smith's idea that there were itinerant Greek magicians has been discredited. Gee does note (p. 186), "If Jesus can be seen in such a context [as a magician], why not Joseph Smith?"

spectacles! what a blessed thing it is that the more dignified instrument came soon enough to get into the second edition of the revelations, at the same time belated Moroni makes his advent!"

⁵² Richard Van Wagoner and Steve Walker, "Joseph Smith: 'The Gift of Seeing'", *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* vol. 15, no. 2 (Summer 1982):62, "These stones could not have been the Nephite interpreters, yet Joseph specifically calls them 'Urim and Thummim.' The most obvious explanation for such wording is that he used the term generically to include any device with the potential for 'communicating light perfectly, and intelligence perfectly, through a principle that God has ordained for that purpose,' as John Taylor would later put it." See also Mark Ashurst-McGee, "Moroni as Angel and as Treasure Guardian," *FARMS Review* 18, no. 1 (2006):42.

⁵³ This is an intentional distillation of the tradition, which would never have accepted the crude designation of "rocks" for the tradition stones the Urim and Thummim represented. There is a long tradition that they were associated with the gems on the ephod. See Cornelis Van Dam, *The Urim and Thummim: A Means of Revelation in Ancient Israel* (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbruans, 1997), 16-23, 27-31.

⁵⁴ The saints themselves would not have perceived a great division in their participation in the two cultural spheres. For them, the transition was likely imperceptible, even though they began to see themselves from the perspective of the religion they had joined. Bill Hamblin notes that they never did label themselves with any of the terms that the Great Tradition would have used to describe their Little Tradition practices. William J. Hamblin, "That Old Black Magic," Review of D. Michael Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, revised and enlarged edition in *FARMS Review of Books* 12 no. 2 (2000):233, makes this point in reference to Quinn's association

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