

## Chapter 1 Magic Rocks?

On August 4, 2015, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints released photos of Joseph Smith's *seer stone*—a stone by which Joseph purportedly received revelation when translating the Book of Mormon. LDS historians Nicholas Frederick and Michael MacKay said the photos “ignited a firestorm of curiosity and controversy. People wanted more information and wondered why they hadn't been aware of the stone's existence.”<sup>2</sup>

The fact that Joseph used a seer stone during the translation process was not news to LDS scholars or members who followed LDS scholarship,<sup>3</sup> but it unquestionably was news to *some* members of the Church. It's also significant to note that not many decades ago, even some *informed* members denied that Joseph Smith used a seer stone when translating the plates. In 1964, when the LDS critics Jerald and Sandra Tanner accused Joseph of “glass-looking,” digging for treasure by way of a “seer stone,” and being charged for his activities in an 1826 trial,<sup>4</sup> most LDS apologists disregarded the accusations as coming from the anti-Mormon contemporaries of Joseph's day. “LDS church historians,” wrote Marvin Hill (also an LDS historian), “have responded over the years with accounts which minimize or deny any money-digging connections.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Announcement page, *Joseph Smith's Seer Stones* by Michael Hubbard MacKay and Nicholas J. Frederick, <https://us9.campaign-archive.com/?u=82ac310aab4a3077a64a55ec6&id=70b3992180&e=7e02f44be7> (accessed 24 August 2023).

<sup>3</sup> For examples of LDS works that mention Joseph's seer stones, see George Q. Cannon, *Life of Joseph Smith the Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1888 [reprinted 1986]), 54; B.H. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1957; 6 vols.), 1:129; B.H. Roberts, “The Probability of Joseph Smith's Story,” *Improvement Era* (March 1904), 420–421; B.H. Roberts, “Translation of the Book of Mormon,” *Improvement Era* (April 1906), 427; and more.

<sup>4</sup> Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *Mormonism: Shadow or Reality?* (Salt Lake City: Modern Microfilm Co., 1964), 33–36.

<sup>5</sup> Marvin S. Hill, “Money-Digging Folklore and the Beginnings of Mormonism: An Interpretative Suggestion,” *BYU Studies* (1984) 24:4, 473.

The discoveries kept coming, however. In 1971, an 1826 court document was discovered that referred to charges against Joseph as a “glass looker.”<sup>6</sup> Before this discovery, some LDS apologists denied such a court case ever happened.<sup>7</sup> With the emergence of the Hofmann forgeries (the 1980s), and especially the “Salamander Letter,”<sup>8</sup> the Saints saw a renewed interest in Joseph Smith and his early seer stone activities. LDS scholars began to seriously study the issue, and new conclusions were the result—some of which were not far different from the critics’ claims.

As Hill pointed out, “Both sides have seemingly assumed, until very recently, that if Joseph Smith believed in and practiced magic to find buried treasure then his story of the inspired discovery of the plates of the Book of Mormon may be suspect.”<sup>9</sup> Now, however, we understand that treasure digging and divining were simply part of Joseph Smith’s culture.<sup>10</sup>

### The Stage is Set

In nineteenth-century frontier America, many people (even educated people) believed firmly and sincerely in strange (and sometimes dangerous) medical procedures, folk remedies, magic, superstitions, dowsing, and treasure digging. In the nineteenth century, for instance, many people believed in alchemy—believing that baser metals could be turned into gold. Some of New England’s practicing alchemists were graduates from Yale and Harvard; one alchemist was Massachusetts’s Chief Justice.

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<sup>6</sup> Wesley P. Walters, “Joseph Smith’s Bainbridge, NY, Court Trials,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 36:3 (Winter 1974); see also Gordon A. Madsen, “Joseph Smith’s 1826 Trial: The Legal Setting,” *BYU Studies* (1990), 30:2, 91-108, and Russell Anderson, “Joseph Smith’s 1826 Trial,” 2002 *FAIR Conference*, <https://www.fairlatterdaysaints.org/conference/august-2002/the-1826-trial-of-joseph-smith> (accessed 31 August 2023).

<sup>7</sup> Francis W. Kirkham, *A New Witness for Christ in America: The Book of Mormon*, Vol. 2 (Independence, Missouri: Zion’s Printing and Publishing, 1951), 87; Hugh Nibley, *Tinkling Cymbals and Sounding Brass: The Art of Telling Tales About Joseph Smith and Brigham Young*, ed., David Whittaker (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1991), 137.

<sup>8</sup>Hofmann Forgeries, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/history/topics/hofmann-forgeries?lang=eng> (accessed 17 August 2023).

<sup>9</sup> Hill, 473.

<sup>10</sup> See D. Michael Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1984) and *BYU Studies* 24:4 (Summer 1984).

Other frontier Americans (of various faiths and intellects) were actively pursuing treasure-digging by supernatural means. They often used divining rods or peep stones (seer stones) in their search. It was also commonly believed that the spirits of the dead (sometimes Spanish explorers, pirates, and even dwarves) guarded these buried treasures.<sup>11</sup>

While “dowsers” often used rods or sticks to locate water or treasures, some nineteenth-century crystal gazers believed that lost or hidden objects could be seen—in vision—by looking into crystals or special stones. These folk magicians (and “magicians” is used here to denote those who believed in the power of supernatural tools) would sometimes place a seer stone into the dark of an upside-down hat to see if the stone shined with visions of lost objects. For instance, an 1825 New Orleans newspaper recorded the details of treasure-seeking through supernatural methods and a mineral stone’s help. This stone was placed into the bottom of an upside-down hat, and the diviner then placed his face in the hat to exclude all light. This caused the stone to become transparent and allowed the diviner to see supernatural visions.<sup>12</sup>

Nineteenth-century treasure digging was more than a passing fad. Philadelphia, for instance, was known as a money-digging center in the early eighteenth century. Among those who engaged in frontier treasure digging, we can include devout Christians and clergymen. Only a particular person, or person with a special gift, spell, or tool, could gain access to the guarded treasure. Generally, frontier American Christians believed that the magical powers connected to “divining” (by seer stone or divining rod) were manifestations from God or of godly gifts.<sup>13</sup>

In this environment, in 1823, Joseph Smith received a visitation from the Angel Moroni, who informed Joseph that golden plates containing a record of the early inhabitants of the Americas were buried in the side of a hill near his home.

## Joseph the Diviner

Joseph Smith was not raised in a cultural vacuum. Like all people, Joseph Smith’s thoughts and worldviews were influenced by his

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<sup>11</sup> See Michael R. Ash, *Shaken Faith Syndrome: Strengthening One’s Testimony in the Face of Criticism and Doubt* (Provo: Foundation for Apologetic Information and Research, 2013), 282.

<sup>12</sup> “Wonderful Discovery” *The Orleans Advocate* (December 1825), <http://olivercowdery.com/smithhome/smithtrs.htm> (accessed 25 August 2023).

<sup>13</sup> See Ash (2013), 281-287.

environment. Joseph and his family—like their neighbors—were Christians. They believed in God, Jesus, and the Bible.

In Joseph's day and environment, many Christians accepted beliefs that today might be labeled *magic* or, even worse, *occultic*.<sup>14</sup> However, the modern application of those labels on past Christians is based on *our* assumptions of what Christianity should resemble. It doesn't dictate the boundaries of what Christianity looked like to all nineteenth-century Americans. From within a paradigm of a people who accepted the Bible, miracles, and God's ability to communicate with humans, some Christians in Joseph's milieu (and even some people today) believed in the power of seer stones and divining rods. Many "magical" beliefs melded with their interpretation of Christianity, angels, and unseen forces. This could have prepared Joseph for the unearthing and translating of the Book of Mormon plates.

There is ample evidence that the Smith family was no different in cultural beliefs than the rest of their contemporaries, and we now know that Joseph owned and used more than one seer stone to divine for lost objects. He and some of his closest contemporaries believed that he had a God-given gift. When Joseph was given the plates and received revelation on Gospel restoration, he would likely have framed all this new information in light of his pre-existing ideas about magic.

Joseph was possibly more open-minded to miracles and visions and was, therefore, a perfect candidate for receiving angelic visitations and divine translations. In a sense, magic served its purpose in Joseph's early years as preparation for what would come when he received the Book of Mormon plates. He was not one to automatically dismiss the "supernatural."

When the Angel Moroni introduced Joseph to the Book of Mormon plates, it may have struck a familiar chord with Joseph. Our brains are wired to look for patterns and see coincidences. Joseph might have drawn a parallel to the visitation from Moroni (who told of golden plates) and the folklore of spirits who guarded buried treasure. Moroni's visit may have helped to confirm Joseph's belief in supernatural powers.

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<sup>14</sup> Michael Hubbard Mackay and Nicholas J. Frederick, *Joseph Smith's Seer Stones* (Provo and Salt Lake City: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University and Deseret Book Company, 2016), 14.

## Lost and Found

Many Americans in Joseph's day believed that the earliest New World inhabitants originally came from the ten lost tribes. When Joseph saw Moroni and learned of a record that early New World inhabitants kept, Joseph probably assumed that Moroni and the Book of Mormon were proof of the common theory regarding New World colonization. It's also likely that Moroni's visitation confirmed his existing belief about buried treasure and guardian spirits. Here was an angel (the spirit of a deceased ancient New World warrior) who appeared as the guardian of golden plates buried in a hill near his home. The patterns in Joseph's worldview ultimately influenced how he must have initially understood the Book of Mormon people and the coming forth of the Nephite record.

Although Moroni was *not* a descendant of the ten lost tribes and was *not* granting Joseph access to a financial treasure trove, it seems silly to deny that Joseph may have automatically connected the dots to the pre-existing treasure-guardian-spirit belief that was common in his environment. How could he not? Just as Columbus intuitively (yet incorrectly) recognized that the Native Americans were "Indians" (he thought he had reached the Indies), so likewise, Joseph must have intuitively (and incorrectly) fit his Moroni vision and the details of plates into his broader community context of spirits and buried treasure.

## Fitting the Worldview

Critics argue that Joseph's story of the Angel Moroni and golden plates evolved from what was originally a tale of treasure-digging and a guardian spirit into a narrative modified to reflect a religious twist. While Joseph was likely primed for the angel and the plates because he believed in treasure digging and guardian spirits, the earliest accounts of Moroni's visit tell of an "angel" in the context of a divine mission of gospel restoration—something very different than what was happening in his treasure-digging environment. If we assume that Joseph actually experienced the visitation as described (and critics must *assume* that he *didn't* if they want their argument to work), then it would have been impossible for Joseph not to recontextualize the experience according to the worldview he had at the time. That is what we humans do.

To make sense of new data, we must understand it within a framework we already accept. Our paradigms can change over time, but the initial introduction of information must somehow blend—even if we create *ad hoc* appendages—with how we already understand the world

(see my book, *Rethinking Revelation*, for full details on how our brains—and a prophet’s brain—would handle new data in light of existing assumptions).

It’s possible that God chose Joseph’s time and place to reveal the Book of Mormon *because it would conform* more readily to an existing worldview. A twenty-first-century prophet, for example, would still need to have a visitation from Moroni, would still need to receive buried golden plates, and would still need to “translate” that record into English. A twenty-first-century public would still have to accept the story and commit (perhaps with their careers, lives, or reputations) to the reality of the story in order to build up and sustain a Church that should eventually flood the world. That would be a much more difficult task in the twenty-first century (with a higher degree of supernatural skepticism) than in the nineteenth century. God likely chose the right person, place, time, and location to restore the Church and reveal the Nephite record.

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

### Stone Box Stuff

In Moroni’s stone box, Joseph retrieved not only the plates but also two small stones that had been “prepared” for translating the ancient record (JS-H 1:35). These two stones were set in the rims of a bow, like large spectacles, and were known in the Book of Mormon, as the *Interpreters* (see Mosiah 8:13). Because the Interpreters looked like large eyeglasses, they were initially referred to, by Joseph and his contemporaries, as “spectacles.” It wasn’t long, however, before they were referred to as the “Urim and Thummim.”

For decades, the LDS Church curriculum (and leaders) taught that Joseph translated the golden plates using the Urim and Thummim. That teaching is technically correct, but, in hindsight, this terminology has proved confusing because the designation, “Urim and Thummim,” recontextualizes a biblical phrase that was then applied to the Interpreters and Joseph’s seer stone.