

## The Book of Lehi: Its Genesis and Exodus

According to Willard Chase, Joseph Smith worked for him in 1822 to help with digging a well. About twenty feet down, a stone was found that Smith claimed to be a seer stone. He took possession of it for his use.<sup>165</sup> At that point he would have been about seventeen years old. By 1825 he already had a reputation for this activity. Based on this renown, Josiah Stowell sought him out to assist in locating treasure on his property in the latter half of that year.<sup>166</sup> This is how it all began.

### Joseph Smith's 1826 Pretrial Examination

According to Smith's account, he stayed on the Stowell farm and worked for about a month. According to his mother's account, he worked for him "by the month," while the account of Oliver Cowdery reports the period as having been "a few months."<sup>167</sup> Smith admitted that he failed. Josiah Stowell was apparently not unhappy with the situation. The original legal proceeding (20 March 1826), a pretrial examination, was for disorderly conduct, which included pretending to find lost goods.<sup>168</sup> It appears that this proceeding did not lead to an actual trial. After the publication of the *Book of Mormon*, there was a new attempt to try him on the same charge. The constable's bill is dated 4 July 1830.

Smith was apparently acquitted. He was subsequently arraigned on similar charges before another judge and in a different jurisdiction for his activities, but it appears he was acquitted or charges were dismissed. In the case of farmer Stowell, the person who might have standing was not complaining. In another case, apparently the statute of limitations had run out.<sup>169</sup> In any case, he was only doing what so many other seer stone scryers and rodsman were doing. One assumes that it was even difficult

<sup>165</sup> The statement of Willard Chase was printed in Eber D. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2015), 338. The first edition was in 1834. See also Marquardt, *Rise of Mormonism*, 33-46.

<sup>166</sup> Marquardt, *Rise of Mormonism*, 38.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid*, 38-39.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid*, 40-45.

<sup>169</sup> For a detailed discussion, see Marquardt, *Rise of Mormonism*, 140-47.

to find a statute that specifically applied. *Nullum crimen sine lege*. The details of the trials are not important here. The cases indicate the extent to which Joseph Smith Jr. was involved in gold hunting with his seer stone.

New England settlers were sorely aware of the fact that while the English were farming the stubborn stony New England ground, Spanish ships were carrying tons of gold back to their homeland. They can be forgiven for thinking that certainly there must also be gold to be found in their vicinity, and possibly on their own farm. On 1 February 1831, a Palmyra newspaper, *The Reflector*, taking a critical look at Smith's "GOLDEN BIBLE," can be quoted here as a reflection of the atmosphere in Palmyra in the 1820's:

It may not be amiss in this place to mention that the MANIA of money-digging soon began rapidly to diffuse itself through many parts of the country; men and women without distinction of age or sex became marvelous wise in the occult sciences, many dreamed, and others saw visions disclosing to them deep in the bowels of the earth, rich and shining treasures and to facilitate those *mighty* mining operations, (money was usually if not always sought after in the night time,) divers devices and implements were invented, and although the *SPIRIT* was always able to retain his precious charge, these discomfited as well as deluded beings, would on a succeeding night return to their toil, not in the least doubting that success would eventually attend their labors.

Mineral rods and balls, (as they were called by the impostor who made use of them,) were supposed to be infallible guides to these sources of wealth—"PEEP STONES" or pebbles taken promiscuously from the brook or field, were placed in a hat or other situation excluded from the light, when some WIZARD or WITCH (for these performances [sic] were not confined to either sex) applied their eyes and nearly starting their balls from their sockets, declared they saw all the wonders of nature, including of course, ample stores of silver and gold.<sup>170</sup>

Edward Augustus Kendall observed in his *Travels Through the Northern Parts of the United States in the Years 1807 and 1808*, "The settlers of Maine, like all the other settlers in New England, indulge an

<sup>170</sup> Reprinted in Francis W. Kirkham, *A New Witness for Christ in America, "The Book of Mormon"* (Independence, MO: Press of Zion's Publishing Company, 1951), vol. 2, 69.