

The Two Translations

Unpacking the Book of Mormon's Origin Story



A Search for Informed Consent



This presentation is not meant to persuade, but to provide information. Our goal is informed consent. For many, encountering this history can be uncomfortable. As one former member described it, it's like being in a dark room full of cracked bricks. You can shine a flashlight on one brick at a time, but the real understanding comes when you are ready to turn on the light switch for the whole room. This is for those who are ready.

"It is what it is. It sucks when you're a believing member and you come across this stuff and you go, 'Why was I never taught this?'"

The Story We Were Taught



For decades, the official narrative of the Book of Mormon translation has been consistent: Joseph Smith, sitting at a table with the golden plates in view, meticulously translated the characters using a set of sacred interpreters called the Urim and Thummim—a pair of spectacles set in a silver bow, which came with the plates.

The Story Told by Eyewitnesses



However, the primary witnesses to the translation, including Joseph's wife Emma Smith, David Whitmer, and Martin Harris, described a different process. They consistently stated that Joseph placed a seer stone into a hat, buried his face in the hat to block out all light, and then dictated the words that appeared to him.

When Satire is More Accurate Than Scripture



2003: The animated series *South Park* depicts the historical head-in-hat translation.



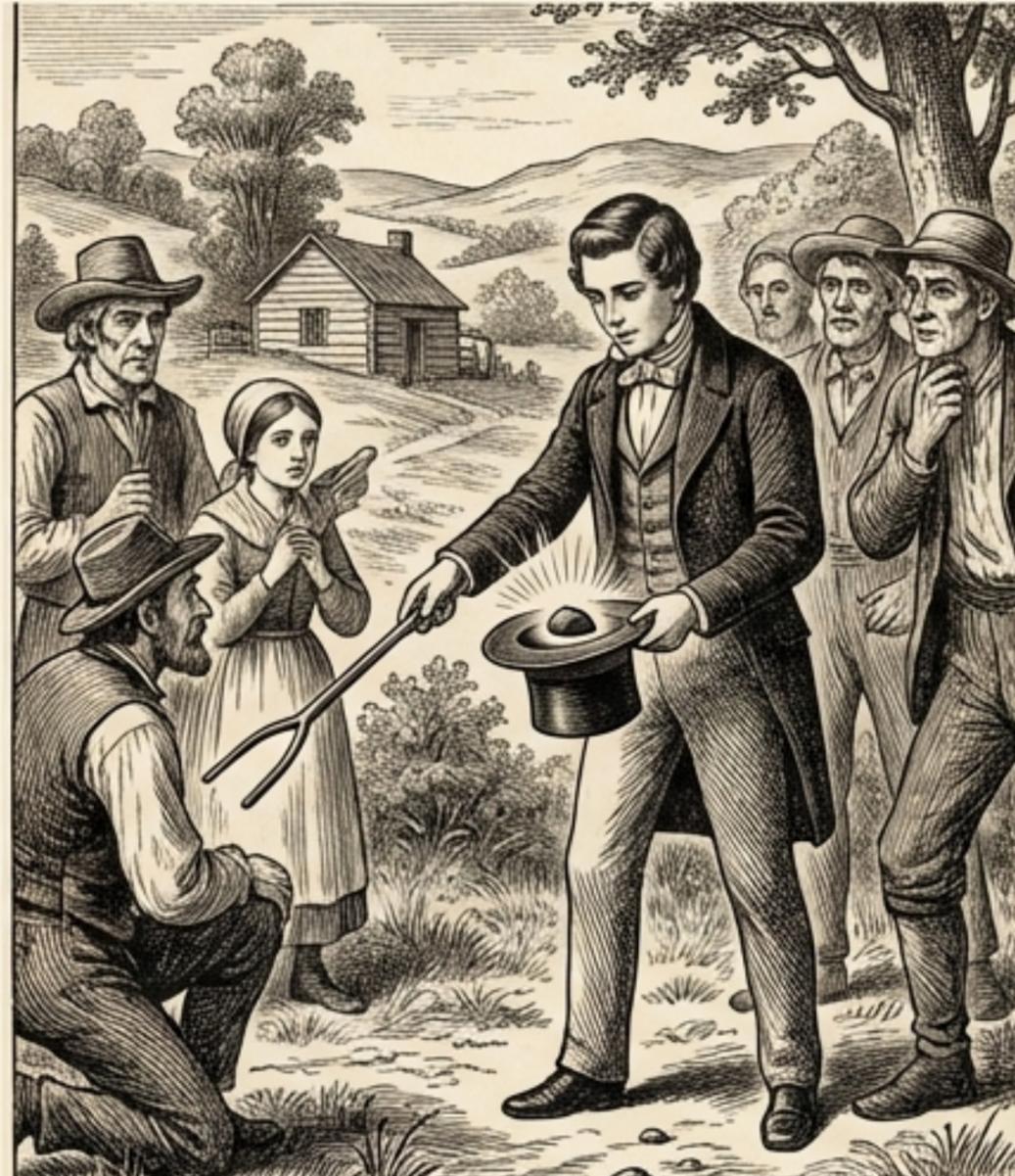
2005: The Church releases its official film, "Joseph Smith: The Prophet of the Restoration," promoting the plates-on-the-table narrative.

The church was aware of the historical accounts. Yet, two years *after* a satirical TV show correctly depicted the translation process, the church's official visitor center film promoted the inaccurate version.

This pattern continued, with official publications using the misleading imagery as recently as 2021.

The Key: Joseph Smith's Folk Magic Background

To understand the translation, we must first understand Joseph Smith's early career as a treasure-seer. From a young age, he used a specific seer stone to find buried treasure. Eyewitnesses to his treasure-digging activities describe his method precisely.



“The stone was placed in a hat in such a manner as to exclude all light... This light of the stone, he pretended, enabled him to see anything he wished.” – Joseph Capron, 1833

“Joseph Jr. could see by placing a stone of singular appearance in his hat in such a manner as to exclude all light, at which time they pretended he could see all things within and under the earth.” – William Stafford, 1833

An Identical Method for an Identical Stone

The method described by Joseph's scribes for the Book of Mormon translation is indistinguishable from the method he used for treasure digging. He used the very same stone.

Treasure Digging Method	Book of Mormon Translation Method
	
1. Place stone in hat	1. Place stone in hat
2. Exclude all light	2. Exclude all light
3. See hidden things/text	3. See hidden things/text

"...placing a stone... in his hat... to exclude all light... he could see all things." – William Stafford, 1833

"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... in the darkness the spiritual light would shine." – David Whitmer

"He sitting with his face buried in his hat, with the stone in it, and dictating hour after hour with nothing between us." – Emma Smith

The accounts describe a "tight translation": if a word was written or spelled incorrectly, the text on the stone would not change until it was corrected. The stone itself seemed to be listening.

The Unused Artifact



The eyewitness accounts create a significant logical problem: if Joseph translated by looking at a stone in a hat, what was the purpose of the golden plates?

The scribes confirm the plates were typically covered with a cloth or not even in the room during the translation process.

After all the effort to create, preserve, and retrieve them, they were not used.

“It also raises the strange question: What in the world are the plates for? Why do we need them on the table if they're just wrapped up in a cloth while he looks into a seer stone?” – Richard Bushman, LDS Historian

The “Reformed Egyptian” Characters



Martin Harris took a transcript of characters, purportedly copied from the plates, to Professor Charles Anthon in New York City for verification. While the accounts of that visit differ, the sheet of characters survives. This is the only existing sample of the language from the golden plates, which the Book of Mormon calls “Reformed Egyptian.”

Ancient Language or “Deformed English”?

A detailed analysis of the characters reveals that nearly every symbol is a modified version of a 19th-century English letter (both cursive and print) or number. They are twisted, mirrored, or have flourishes added, but their origins are unmistakable.

19th-Century
English

Anthon Transcript
“Deformed”

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Joseph Smith claimed these characters are **reformed Egyptian**. Some critics however feel they are **deformed English**.



The “Unlearned Farm Boy” Defense



A cornerstone argument for the Book of Mormon’s divinity is that Joseph Smith was too uneducated to have written such a complex book.

“Joseph... could neither write nor dictate a coherent and well-worded letter, let alone dictate a book like the Book of Mormon.” – Emma Smith, as quoted in the *LDS Gospel Topics Essay*

A More Complex Reality

1. The Original Manuscript was Rough.

The Book of Mormon we read today has undergone over 100,000 changes, mostly to grammar and spelling. The original manuscript was a single run-on sentence, full of folksy grammar like “as I was a goin’ thither.”



original run-on sentence

2. Joseph Was a Capable Writer.

In 1829, the same year he finished the Book of Mormon, Joseph wrote this coherent letter to Oliver Cowdery:

“...There begins to be a great call for our books in this country. The minds of the people are very much excited...”

3. He Was a Gifted Storyteller.

His mother, Lucy Mack Smith, said years before the translation he would “describe the ancient inhabitants of this continent... with as much ease... as if he had spent his whole life among them.”



4. The Timeline is Feasible.

The book was produced in about 85 working days. At 273,000 words, that averages ~3,200 words per day. At a normal dictation speed, this requires only **2 hours and 40 minutes of work per day**, leaving ample time for thought and composition.

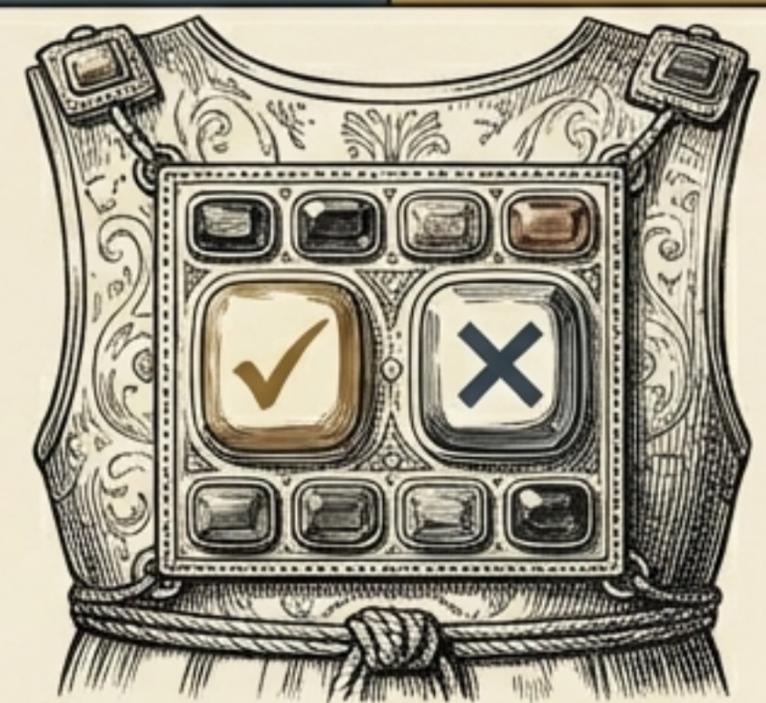


The Urim and Thummim Retrofit

The term “Urim and Thummim” does not appear in early revelations or the Book of Mormon. It was retroactively applied to Joseph’s translation tools around 1832 to make the process sound more biblical. This is misleading because the biblical Urim and Thummim were not used for translation. They were two stones used for yes/no divination.



Joseph's Seer Stone: Revealed detailed text.



Biblical Urim & Thummim: Provided yes/no answers.

Conflating the two tools obscures the translation's actual roots in 19th-century folk magic.

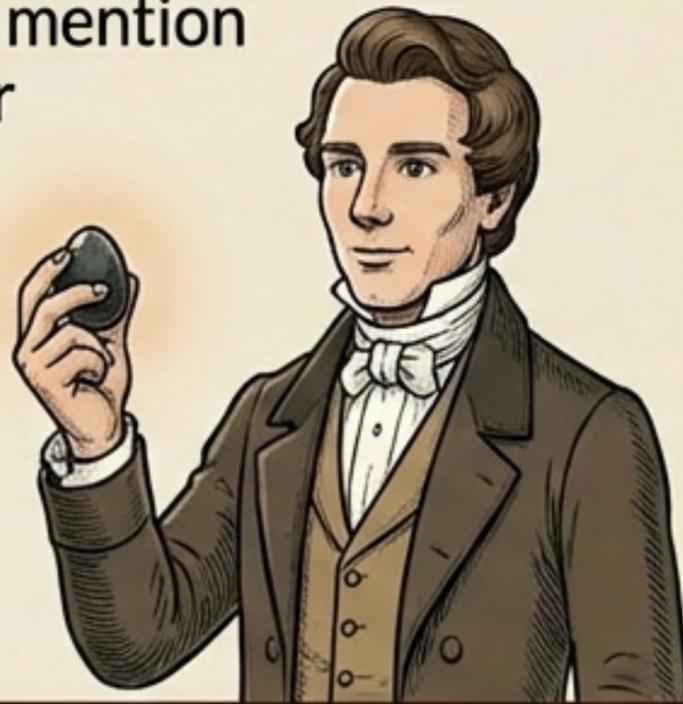
Modern Obfuscation

The pattern of misrepresenting the translation continues in modern church media, which “inoculates” members with partial truths while omitting problematic details.

The “Now You Know” Video

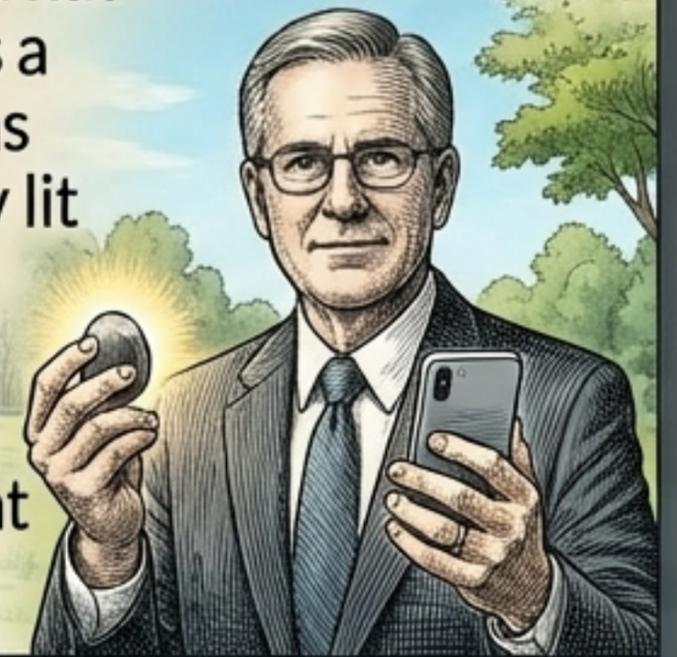
An official church animated video claims Joseph used his stone to “locate lost objects,” omitting any mention of treasure digging for financial gain.

When showing the method, it omits the crucial step of putting his head in the hat.



The “Cell Phone” Analogy

Apologist and BYU Professor Brad Wilcox compares the seer stone to a cell phone, arguing Joseph put it in a hat to block out glare. This is a false analogy; Joseph was translating inside a dimly lit 19th-century home, not outside on a sunny day. The hat was to achieve total darkness, consistent with scrying practices.



The Lingering Question

The historical evidence points to a translation process rooted in 19th-century **folk magic**, utilizing a treasure-digging stone to dictate a book without reference to the **physical** plates. The details are complex and **challenging** to the traditional narrative. But perhaps the most difficult question is not about the **history** itself, but about the institutional response to it.

If the Church was proud of how the Book of Mormon was truly translated, why was the process hidden, denied, and misrepresented for nearly 200 years?