The accuracy of the Book of Mormon’s rendering into English was so important for Mormonism’s founding claims that—like the divine Sonship of Jesus in the biblical narratives of the Baptism and the Transfiguration—it needed to be declared from heaven (Matthew 3:13–17; 17:1–5; D&C 5:11–13). In June 1829, the Three Witnesses to the Book of Mormon saw the golden plates in vision and heard the voice of God declare: “These plates have been revealed by the power of God, and they have been translated by the power of God. The translation of them which you have seen is correct.”

Yet despite the divine declaration that the translation was “correct,” even a number of the Book of Mormon’s staunchest defenders assert that the English translation is sometimes over-literal, ungrammatical, and inaccurate. These difficulties have brought into question how the Book of Mormon was translated. Were the words of the Book of Mormon, errors and all, delivered verbatim to Joseph Smith as was widely believed in the early Church and often still today? If so, how does one explain the textual errors or his later revisions? Are the Book of Mormon’s difficulties better explained by regarding Joseph Smith as an interpreter instead of a transcriber? If so, what should one make of the significant eyewitness testimony suggesting that Smith received the translation word for word?

Part I of this article lays the groundwork for discussing these questions by offering a brief overview of how the translation was described by its witnesses and Smith’s contemporaries. What do these sources assert about the translation process and the instruments Smith employed? The article will then trace the controversy that has arisen more recently over the method of translation and assess the evidence for competing claims. Part II, which will appear in the next issue of SUNSTONE, will explore the theological dimensions and implications of the translation question. What cultural factors have made the translation question so urgent for many Mormons? What significance does the process used to translate the Book of Mormon have for living Latter-day Saint faith?

The Basics of the Translation

Early Mormon accounts consistently affirm that Joseph Smith obtained the plates on which the Book of Mormon was written, along with other sacred relics, on 22 September 1827. The plates reportedly “had the appearance of gold,” with characters engraved on them—the grooves filled with what one account describes as “a black, hard stain.”

Smith began translating the Book of Mormon between December 1827 and April 1828 at his home in Harmony, Pennsylvania, and finished in late June 1829 at the home of Peter Whitmer, Sr. in Fayette, New York. At both locations, the work of translation was done in the “chamber” or upstairs room of the house. Smith and his scribe would open a translation session with prayer, but if Smith found himself unable to proceed, he would go outside to pray in solitude until he felt ready.
What would happen next is a matter of controversy. Some assert that the prophet always translated by looking into a scrying instrument that he found with the plates. The Book of Mormon called this instrument “the interpreters.” From the descriptions, the instrument consisted of two seer stones bound together by a curved rim, like the lenses of “old-fashioned spectacles.” The stones were held in front of the eyes by a rod attached to a “breastplate” worn by the user. The instrument was understood to be equivalent to the biblical Urim and Thummim, and early Mormons came to refer to it by that name; the term “Urim and Thummim” is also employed for the interpreters in D&C 17:1.7 (The term “Urim and Thummim” will hereafter be used interchangeably with “interpreters” and “spectacles.”) Joseph reportedly used the interpreters only when separated from his scribe by a veil. However, another view holds that Joseph used the interpreters (and perhaps also a seer stone) to translate only the first 116 pages of the Book of Mormon. After these pages were stolen an angel reportedly took back the interpreters and Smith used a brown seer stone to continue the translation.8 A number of early accounts report that he placed the stone in his white stovepipe hat, then set the hat on the desk, table, or floor and peered within.9 But whether Smith is understood to have used the Urim and Thummim only or to have employed the seer stones as well, the various accounts concur that he used a seeing instrument. This consistency tends to confirm William James’ observation that in early Mormonism, and particularly in the case of Joseph Smith, “the inspiration seems to have been predominantly sensorial.”10

Another controversy surrounds what Joseph experienced when he looked into the scrying instrument. All witnesses who purport to describe his translation process have Smith seeing words to be dictated to the scribe. The most specific translation accounts state that Smith would see, on “something like parchment,” a “Reformed Egyptian” character from the plates and below it the English rendering. A single character would render sometimes just a word or two in English and sometimes several words, with Joseph apparently dictating on average about twenty to thirty words at a time.11 These details do not, however, come from Smith’s accounts; they are all secondhand. Whatever method Smith used to obtain the text, he next dictated it to a nearby scribe. The scribe would record the dictated snippet of text and then read it back to Smith, who, apparently comparing it with the supernatural writing he saw, would either pronounce the text “correct” or instruct the scribe to modify it.12 Those who filled the scribal role include Joseph’s wife Emma Hale Smith, her brothers Alva and Reuben Hale, Joseph’s brother Samuel Harrison Smith, Martin Harris, Oliver Cowdery, and one or more sons of Peter Whitmer, Sr.13

**THE MEANS OF TRANSLATION**

Researchers of Mormon history have overwhelmingly agreed that Joseph Smith employed one or more instruments of translation in the process but, as noted, have disagreed over the identity of the instruments. “Official” accounts of the translation process, such as those provided by Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery in their narratives written for the public, say simply that Smith translated the book “by the interpreters” or “by the Urim and Thummim.”14 But some accounts by Smith’s scribes or by other witnesses to the process state explicitly that he translated the book, or some portion of it, via the stone in his hat.

A further complexity is introduced by revelations to Joseph Smith suggesting that Oliver Cowdery also translated or attempted to translate a portion of the book without either instrument (D&C 6, 8, 9).

Despite these complications, the testimony that Joseph translated with a seer stone as well as with the interpreters is overwhelming. Newspaper accounts from as early as the spring of 1830 have Joseph “reading” the translation by “put[ting] his face into a hat” to look into his seer stone.15 More direct testimony was offered by members of Joseph Smith’s family, his scribes, those he selected as formal witnesses to the Book of Mormon, and others close to the translation work. Members of Joseph’s extended family who explicitly described him as using a seer stone to translate include his brother William16 and wife Emma,17 two of Emma’s first cousins, and her father.18 Also reporting Smith’s use of the seer stone were Martin Harris and David Whitmer, two of the Three Witnesses who testified to hearing the voice of God validate the translation.19 Harris based his report on his experience as one of Smith’s scribes, and Whitmer on firsthand observation of the process. Willard Chase, the Smith family neighbor in whose well the stone
was found, concurred, claiming his information from Joseph's brother Hyrum.20

But if Joseph Smith's use of the seer stone for part of the translation is so clearly evidenced, why the accounts implying that the "Urim and Thummim" was used throughout?

Two major factors have confused the issue. First, some of the eyewitness accounts that refer to the "Urim and Thummim" may in fact be referring to the seer stone, not to the spectacle-like instrument. At the time Joseph Smith recovered, along with the golden plates, the stones of "the Urim and Thummim, which were given to the brother of Jared upon the mount" (D&C 17:1; Ether 2:22–23, 28), he already possessed his own personal set of two seer stones—a white stone and a brown stone, both acquired in 1822–1823.21 These two sets of stones—Smith's personal stones and the Jaredite stones—were equivalent in purpose and operation. The stones mediated revelation through a literally or metaphorically visual process. Furthermore, in each case, the two stones of a set were used individually instead of simultaneously: the Jaredite stones were reportedly set too wide in the frame of the "spectacles" for Joseph to look through both at once.22 If the Jaredite stones could be regarded as a Urim and Thummim by parallel with the biblical instrument, so could Joseph's. Consequently, Smith and his associates would refer to either set of seer stones, or to any one of the stones, as "the Urim and Thummim."23 Given that "Urim and Thummim" became a general term for Joseph Smith's seeing instruments, confusion was inevitable, and references to use of "the Urim and Thummim" in the translation process are ambiguous.

Another factor promoting the impression that the Book of Mormon was translated using only the Jaredite interpreters is public relations. Twenty-first century Mormons and their critics are not the first to think it a little odd that Joseph Smith used the same stone to treasure-search and translate the golden plates. In October 1831, disillusioned Mormon Ezra Booth wrote that the Mormon prophet’s "[buried] treasures were discovered several years since, by means of the dark glass, the same with which Smith says he translated most of the Book of Mormon."24 That same month at a conference in Orange, Ohio, Hyrum Smith asked Joseph to recount the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, but the prophet refused: "Bro. Joseph Smith jr. said that it was not intended to tell the world all the particulars of the coming forth of the book of Mormon, & also said that it was not expedient for him to relate these things &c."25 Both Hyrum's question and Joseph's stonewalling may have been defensive reactions to disclosures about Smith using his brown stone for both the translation and treasure-seeking operations.26 As one researcher has noted, "Booth was definitely not the first to make this negative connection, neither was he the last."27

The early Saints thus had a motive for highlighting the role of the Urim and Thummim, or "interpreters," in the translation and eliding that of the seer stone. But regardless of how the seer stone's role might have been obscured, friendly accounts are emphatic that it was used.

When using the seer stone, Smith did not directly consult the plates, which sometimes lay nearby concealed in a cloth and at other times were hidden in a remote location, such as the woods. Rather, he would dictate from the stone in his hat. But when translating through the interpreters, Smith was much more likely to use the plates and their associated artifacts from Cumorah's reliquary.

Smith reportedly used the interpreters for part of the lost 116 pages ("the Book of Lehi"), which he worked on between November 1827 and mid-June 1828. While using the instrument, he would seclude himself, sometimes by sitting in a room apart from the scribe but usually by surrounding himself with a curtain or veil.28

Based on his 1836 interview with Joseph Smith, Truman Coe gave the following description of what would happen next:

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, he would again proceed in the same manner and obtain the meaning of the next character.29

As described, the device would have worked like a modern projector or one of the Masonic slide lanterns of Joseph Smith's day.30 Viewed through the lens, the minute character on the plate would be projected, along with its translation, onto the screen. This might be understood as a literal fulfillment of Jesus' words to the Brother of Jared: "the language which ye shall write I have confounded; wherefore I will cause in my own due time that these stones shall magnify to the eyes of men these things which ye shall write" (Ether 3:24, emphasis added).

DIFFERING INTERPRETATIONS OF THE TRANSLATION PROCESS

SEVERAL INTERPRETATIONS OF the Book of Mormon translation process have been promoted over time, but they generally posit one of two basic modes of translation: literal-visual or conceptual.

The notion that Joseph Smith acquired the Book of Mormon's English translation by seeing it through an external instrument found its way into print within seven years of the book's production and was supported by a number of translation scribes and witnesses.

According to this interpretation, Joseph Smith and his scribe created a transcript, not of the characters from the plates, but of their English equivalent from the supernatural "parchment" shown to him. Joseph would read this English text and dictate it to the scribe, who would record it, after which the pair would proofread it against the divinely revealed original to achieve a precise match. The translation
process would therefore actually be a process of transcribing a text revealed directly from heaven, presumably one super-naturally guarded from error. The text was “translated” in the sense of being literally transferred (or copied) from one document to the other.

However, since at least the 1870s, a number of LDS thinkers have identified anomalies in the Book of Mormon that have caused them to pass over the testimonies of the translation witnesses in favor of evidence derived from the English text. Noting apparent flaws in the translation, such as ungrammatical expressions and anachronisms, these thinkers reason that the translation must have been made by fallible humans through an imprecise process. This model suggests that Smith was given concepts via spiritual impressions, which he then had to clothe in familiar and appropriate language. The task was like that of an artist trying to capture a scene with paint, or of a poet attempting to capture an emotion using what Smith once called the “crooked, broken, scattered and imperfect language” of human beings. In this view, the translation of the Book of Mormon sprang from an interaction between God and Joseph Smith: it was a co-creative effort.

This model has considerable explanatory and apologetic potential and, moreover, corresponds to the process of personal revelation as many Latter-day Saints have experienced it. Notwithstanding the model’s appeal, important questions about it need to be raised. For instance, why would this process require translation instruments, and how can such a model be reconciled with eyewitness accounts describing a visual revelation of the text?

These two models—“transcription” and “co-creation”—have been at loggerheads since the late nineteenth century. The history of each, and of the conflict between them, will illuminate present-day controversies around the translation question.

**The Literal-Visual Model**

From the earliest sources, the translation of the Book of Mormon has been framed as a visual process. If sight was not the literal medium of translation, it was at least its defining metaphor, shaping even the basic actions of the process. Smith looked into instruments that he defined using visual terms: seer stones and spectacles. Smith wrote of using “spectacles” to “read” the translation. And an 1833 revelation told him that God had given him “sight and power to translate.”

Joseph went beyond merely hinting at the visual nature of the translation. Truman Coe, cited above, reported Smith’s description of literally “seeing” the words of the translation “written in plain English.” Further accounts of visual translation were recorded in the 1840s by Joseph’s mother Lucy Mack Smith, translation benefactor Joseph Knight, and Palmyra minister John A. Clark. And numerous parallel accounts were collected over the succeeding decades in interviews with surviving Book of Mormon witnesses (most pro-}

Some witnesses’ accounts of the translation process describe what Royal Skousen, director of the Book of Mormon Critical Text Project, has called “iron clad control”: the stones would not show Smith a new segment of text until the previous segment had been transcribed verbatim from the divine parchment manuscript. Other witnesses went only so far as to describe what Skousen calls “tight control”: visual presentation of the text to Joseph through the instrument, but without a supernatural proofreading system. In each case, those describing the translation process in detail characterize it as rising at least to the level of “tight control.”

The testimony favoring visual translation is extensive and can only be summarized here. Some testimonies imply or suggest a visual method while others explicitly detail it.

The testimonies that imply a visual method do not detail the process but nonetheless employ the language of vision, reading, optical instruments, and the like. Such statements come from Joseph Smith, some witnesses, and references to the translation process in revelations. In most of his comments about the translation, Joseph said no more than that he accomplished it “by the gift and power of God” or “by the Urim and Thummim.” However, in his 1832 private history, written just three years after the fact, he gave his own (and only extant) characterization of his activity in the translation process: “the Lord had prepared spectacles for to read the Book therefore I commenced translating the characters.”

An 1831 account from non-Mormon evangelist Nancy Towle reported that Smith found with the golden plates “a pair of ‘interpreters,’ (as he called them,) that resembled spectacles: by looking into which, he could read a writing engrafted upon the plates.”

Other early accounts that describe the translation in visual terms—e.g., that Joseph “looked” into the spectacles or seer stone to “read” the translation—come from Lucy Mack Smith (the translator’s mother), Oliver Cowdery (the book’s principal scribe, one of its Three Witnesses, and an attempted translator himself), Pomeroy Tucker and John H. Gilbert (participants in the book’s Palmyra printing), and contemporaneous (1829) newspapers in Palmyra and nearby Rochester.

The Book of Mormon itself supports a visual model. It prophesies of “Gazelem” for whom the Lord would prepare “a stone, which shall shine forth in darkness unto light” to reveal the wickedness of the Jaredites (Alma 37:23). The book describes a revelatory instrument, the Liahona, whose operations combined those of a divining rod and a seer stone along with a compass to communicate information to Lehi’s family “by a new writing” which appeared on the pointers and “was written and changed from time to time” (1 Nephi 16:29).

The idea that Joseph Smith saw the translation when he looked into the interpreters or stone, much as Lehi saw words on the Liahona, is further implied in several passages of LDS scripture: a statement that Smith had been given “sight” to translate, Book of Mormon prophecies about the golden plates’ translation, and descriptions of ancient prophets translating (D&C 3:12; 2 Nephi 3:11; 2 Nephi...
27:15–22; Mosiah 8:12–17; and Alma 37: 23–25).

Although Latter-day Saints have come to associate seership with translation because of Joseph Smith's experience, the connection is neither a natural one nor one that was part of the culture of supernaturalism familiar to Joseph Smith. A “seer” in that milieu was not someone with preternatural linguistic ability, but rather someone possessing supernatural sight, able to see things that were real but not present or invisible to the natural eye. Seers were called on for tasks such as finding lost or hidden objects, not for translating scripture into other languages.46

In this milieu, to translate or receive revelation as a seer would have most naturally been understood to mean seeing the translated or revealed text. And this is certainly what it meant in the other known case of early Mormon revelation through a seer stone. One of Smith's revelations refers to Hiram Page receiving revelations in 1830 by “writing from a stone,” implying that the revelation appeared on the stone (D&C 28:11). While the language used in the Doctrine and Covenants to describe Page's revelatory process is ambiguous, disaffected Mormon Ezra Booth described the process much more concretely in 1831:

Hiram Page, one of the eight witnesses . . . found a smooth stone, upon which there appeared to be a writing, which when transcribed upon paper, disappeared from the stone, and another impression appeared in its place. This when copied, vanished as the former had done, and so it continued, alternately appearing and disappearing.47

Page's revelatory method was likely modeled on Smith's method, which Page would have known as a witness to the work of translation.

Joseph's visual translation process is explicitly detailed by many, including several translation witnesses. Those who explicitly attested to the visual nature of the process include Oliver Cowdery,46 (a scribe and one of the Three Witnesses); Martin Harris49 (a scribe and another of the Three Witnesses); David Whitmer50 (a translation witness and the third of the Three Witnesses); John Whitmer51 (a scribe and one of the Eight Witnesses); William Smith52 (the translator's brother); Elizabeth Whitmer Cowdery53 (a translation witness and Oliver's wife); Joseph Knight, Sr.54 (benefactor of the translation effort and probable witness); and even Joseph Smith himself via three secondhand accounts: Ezra Booth in 1831, Truman Coe in 1836, and David Whitmer in 1879.

In a letter published in a newspaper in the fall of 1831, Ezra Booth reported Smith's claim that "in translating," he used his dark seer stone, by means of which "[t]he subject stands before his eyes in print."55 Coe, whose testimony on visual translation through the Urim and Thummim was discussed earlier, concluded his narration with an attribution of source: "This is the relation as given by Smith."56 And Whitmer, who left no fewer than fourteen extant testimonies to visual translation, reported in 1879 that "Joseph said" that "a spiritual light would shine forth" from the stone and "parchment would appear before Joseph, upon which was a line of characters from the plates, and under it, the translation in English."57

Others close to the process provided similar details without actually naming Smith as their source. For instance, Joseph Knight, Sr., writing sometime between 1833 and 1847, said of Joseph Smith: "Now the way he translated was he put the urim and thummim into his hat and Darkned his Eyes then he would take a sentence and it would apper in Brite Roman Letters."58

A diverse array of persons left extant accounts detailing the mechanics of the translation. They include believers and skeptics; the faithful and dissidents; family, friends, and near strangers; acquaintances of Joseph Smith from Palmyra, Colesville, Harmony, Fayette, and Kirtland; and persons who recorded their testimonies over a time span from 1831 to 1887. Yet all those who left accounts purporting to explain the translation process describe a method that was visual, in which Joseph Smith saw the text and read it to his scribe.

Given the geographical and religious diversity of the witnesses, and Joseph Smith's known links to these varied persons and their locales, he is the plausible thread that connects them—the one from whom all could have heard the same explanation of the process. And, although not explicitly identifying him as their immediate informant, these sources could only have understood such details to derive from Smith: no else could have disclosed what he alone saw in the hat. If Joseph Smith did not report seeing the words of translation through the spectacles or stone, then it seems inexplicable that those assisting him in the work uniformly and emphatically thought he did.

All extant sources that present Joseph Smith's specific actions and experiences as translator paint them in visual terms. The more detailed an account of the process, the more likely it will say that Joseph saw and read the translation as it was provided to him. Similarly, the closer an informant was to Joseph and the translation process, the more likely the informant will report that he saw the words of the translation.

Further evidence for a visual process is afforded by the translation manuscript (the original manuscript of the Book of Mormon), which contains clues to the method by which it was produced. Royal Skousen has written:

There is clear evidence in the original manuscript that Joseph Smith, as part of the translation process, could see the English spelling of names. Frequently, in the original manuscript, when a Book of Mormon name first occurs (or has not occurred for some time), that name is first written out in a more phonetic but incorrect spelling, then this incorrect spelling is crossed out and the correct spelling immediately follows.59
This manuscript evidence confirms testimony by translation scribes Emma Smith and Martin Harris and probable scribe John Whitmer that when Joseph encountered novel or difficult names from the golden plates, he spelled them out. It also dovetails with Emma's additional testimony that her husband could not pronounce the name “Sariah” when it arose in the text early in the translation. Joseph's trouble was with pronouncing the name, not with spelling it, indicating that there was a name in front of his eyes for him to read. Smith's knowledge of how the names in the text were to be spelled but not necessarily how they were pronounced is more consistent with a visual mode of translation than with a nonvisual, conceptual one.

Reasoning from language usage patterns, instead of the methods of textual criticism, Skousen has made two further arguments that Joseph Smith was merely reading the work and not actively engaged in rendering its concepts into English. First, Skousen has reported the perplexing conclusion that the Book of Mormon's grammar and word usage make a poor fit for nineteenth-century America—but are characteristic of sixteenth-century England. Using the Oxford English Dictionary and similar sources, Skousen argues that many seemingly misused or meaningless words and phrases in the Book of Mormon make sense if understood in this earlier linguistic context. Second, he has argued that some awkward Book of Mormon phrasing is not merely poor English but “non-English,” non-English that nonetheless makes good sense if understood as a literal translation from Hebrew.

Skousen's intriguing arguments for visual translation should not be taken as definitive. The debate with other scholars that would tend to confirm, disconfirm, or reformulate Skousen's claims has not concluded, nor even yet begun. Nevertheless, there does appear to be manuscript evidence for visual translation, and the witnesses' evidence for it is clear, extensive, and long-standing.

The Conceptual Model

Evidence favoring a nonvisual translation process—in which concepts were delivered to Smith impressionistically, and not spelled out—emerged around the 1870s in response to perceived difficulties in the Book of Mormon's text. Among the view's first advocates were apostles of the Reorganized Church who, under the influence of biblical higher criticism, rejected the verbal, “plenary” inspiration of scripture (the idea that scripture is inspired by God word for word). That the conceptual model also gained currency among Utah saints is attested by an 1881 quotation from Joseph Smith's nephew, apostle Joseph F. Smith: “[The Prophet] Joseph did not render the writing on the gold plates into the English language in his own style of language as many people believe, but every word and every letter was given to him by the gift and power of God.”

To account for this apparent contradiction, some LDS thinkers, most notably president of the Seventy B. H. Roberts, began promoting the co-creative or conceptual translation model. Writing at the time Joseph F. Smith took the reins of the Church, Roberts objected to President Smith's earlier theory of literal translation, arguing that the grammatical errors in the Book of Mormon excluded the possibility that the text was a divinely authored translation.

If . . . the divine instrument, Urim and Thummim, did all, and the prophet nothing—at least nothing more than to read off the translation made by Urim and Thummim—then the divine instrument is responsible for such errors in grammar and diction as did occur. But this is to assign responsibility for errors in language to a divine instrumentality, which amounts to assigning such error to God. But that is unthinkable, not to say blasphemous . . . [T]hat old theory cannot be successfully maintained . . . . To advance such a theory before intelligent and educated people is to unnecessarily invite ridicule, and make of those who advocate it candidates for contempt.

Roberts believed that the conceptual model was supported by D&C 9, the April 1829 revelation which states
that Oliver Cowdery’s attempt to translate failed partially because of his misunderstanding of the process. According to the revelation, Oliver mistakenly thought he could passively receive the translation in his mind. Instead, he needed to actively work it out—he needed to “take thought” (D&C 9:7). “You must study it out in your mind; then you must ask me if it be right, and if it is right I will cause that your bosom shall burn within you .... But if it be not right you shall have no such feelings, but you shall have a stupor of thought that shall cause you to forget the thing which is wrong” (D&C 9:8–9). Because this was the only revelation providing specific instruction about the mechanics of translation, Roberts argued that it was also the primary source on the subject, overriding secondary evidence provided by those who were present during the translation but not involved in the process.

As influential as Roberts’s reasoned approach was, not everyone was persuaded. The early twentieth century saw a backlash against conceptual models such as Roberts’s. When Joseph F. Smith died and Heber J. Grant became president of the Church, Grant’s brother-in-law Heber Bennion held to the authority of the witness accounts in support of a literal-visual model. Despite such opposition, a review of publications on the Book of Mormon indicates that the conceptual model of translation predominated throughout the twentieth century. However, this dominance was never absolute. The transcription model was retained in the Mormon cultural memory and continued to appear in the literature, if often only as a point of departure for authors arguing in favor of conceptual translation.

Three lines of historical evidence have been offered for a nonvisual conceptual translation process. First, certain early accounts can be read to imply such a process. Second, D&C 9 describes a nonvisual process. Third, Joseph Smith did not treat the Book of Mormon text as an infallible, word-for-word revelation—he freely made revisions prior to the book’s 1837 and 1840 printings.

That the translation was made by spiritual impressions, without visual input, has been argued from early accounts that speak of the translation as a process of inspiration or revelation by the Holy Ghost. An 1841 news account summarized statements by William Smith, Joseph Smith’s brother, as follows: “Joseph Smith was supernaturally assisted to read and to understand the inscription.” The Evangelical Inquirer reported in 1831 that “the angel ... informed him [Joseph Smith] that he would be inspired to translate the inscription without looking at the plates.” Political correspondent Matthew L. Davis reported the following in a letter he published in a newspaper after hearing the prophet speak: “The Mormon Bible, he said, was communicated to him, direct from heaven.” And, in one of the earliest surviving accounts of the translation (from 1830), Diedrich Willers, the German Reformed pastor to the family of Peter Whitmer, Sr., wrote: “By using these spectacles, he [Smith] would be in a position to read these ancient languages ... the Holy Ghost would reveal to him the translation in the English language.”

It should be noted that none of these statements was made by a known witness of the translation process, and three of the four are journalistic restatements. They do not detail an alternative to reports of a visual process; they are, rather, vague about the translation process. However, what they do say is potentially consistent with visual translation. “Revelation” or “inspiration” could be “communicated direct from heaven” by the Holy Ghost through a conceptual process, but also via an auditory or visual process. The statements identify the divine source of the translation but communicate nothing of the specific actions or experiences of the translator. They are process-neutral.

As demonstrated above in the discussion of B.H. Roberts, D&C 9 is a primary source that has been cited to support a nonvisual and impressionistic translation process. The revelation prescribes a process of “studying out” the scriptural text in one’s mind and confirming it through a “burning in the bosom” or disconfirming it through “a stupor of thought” (D&C 9:8–9). A potential objection to the argument from D&C 9 is that the revelation prescribes this process for one translating by “the spirit of revelation,” like Oliver, not for one translating by the gift of seeing, like Joseph (D&C 8:1–4). Thus, on the logic of this objection, because Oliver was not a seer and therefore unable
to translate by the seer's gift, his mode of translation would be nonvisual. But the revelation does not necessarily indicate that Joseph Smith would have translated in this same manner. Instead, D&C 9 can be understood as suggesting that the method of translation was tailored to the gifts of the translator, a concept consistent with Book of Mormon teaching on spiritual gifts (such as Moroni 10:8: “there are different ways that these gifts are administered”). By this logic, Joseph’s translation of the Book of Mormon, made in his capacity as a seer employing the spectacles or seer stone, would have capitalized on his gift of second sight.

The third argument for a conceptual model is that Joseph Smith did not treat the Book of Mormon like a text divinely and infallibly translated. He treated it as something over which he had some right of authorship—and which he could improve using his expanding mental and spiritual faculties. In the two post-1830 editions of the Book of Mormon published during his lifetime, he reworded the text and allowed others to do so. He displayed no self-consciousness in sending out to the world, without explanation or justification, a Book of Mormon containing hundreds of revisions to the grammar and clarity of his original translation, and even a handful of doctrinal revisions or clarifications.

These revisions are difficult to reconcile with the considerable testimony that the translation was supernaturally provided to him by a visual-literal process. There is also internal textual evidence to support a conceptual model. As explained earlier, the original Book of Mormon manuscript shows signs that Joseph spelled out names to the scribes (a fact tending to confirm that he saw the text “letter by letter”); and the text may also contain usage patterns from outside Smith’s environment. Yet the text displays other features more readily ascribed to Smith. The rustic grammar and provincial expressions that vexed B. H. Roberts, the book’s verbal tangles, limited vocabulary, and exaggerated use of King-Jamesisms may also contain usage patterns from outside Smith’s environment. Yet the text displays other features more readily ascribed to Smith. The rustic grammar and provincial expressions that vexed B. H. Roberts, the book’s verbal tangles, limited vocabulary, and exaggerated use of King-Jamesisms all suggest that Joseph Smith’s voice manifests itself strongly in, if not throughout, the translated text.

Recent years have seen contrasting developments in which each “side” marshals stronger arguments. The conceptual model has been extended and systematized by scholars such as Book of Mormon commentator Brant Gardner who argues that adopting the conceptual model eliminates many of the objections to Book of Mormon historicity, such as its possible misnaming of ancient American flora and fauna. At the same time, the visual transcription model has garnered renewed respect from such scholars as Royal Skousen. Skousen has refuted the hypothesis of “iron clad control” by demonstrating the presence of misspelled and omitted words in the translation manuscript. Yet Skousen argues for “tight control” from manuscript evidence that Joseph read the text and often spelled out names to the scribes letter by letter, supporting witness reports that he saw them letter by letter.

Neither side in the traditional debate between the visual transcription and conceptual co-creation models can claim a monopoly even on one type of evidence, such as participant testimony or textual features. Nor, after all this time and inquiry, does the evidence for either position seem likely to prove merely illusory. This debate, on the terms under which it has been conducted, almost certainly cannot be resolved.

The problem may not be that the translation issue is itself irresolvable, but that it needs to be engaged differently. Albert Einstein once said of encountering heady difficulties, “The significant problems we face cannot be solved at the same level of thinking we were at when we created them.” So it may be with this issue. Arguments on the historical and textual “level” of the traditional debate will not resolve the controversy and integrate the evidence if the conflict is rooted in unexamined theological assumptions. Nor does a sifting of the historical evidence about the translation method provide anything resembling a complete understanding of the translation’s meaning and implications, nor of why it has inspired a generations-long intellectual debate that is with us still. Part II of this paper will attempt to illuminate the causes of the conflict by taking up the translation’s theological, cultural, and rhetorical-symbolic meanings.

NOTES

1. The Three Witnesses in their formal testimony printed with virtually every edition of the Book of Mormon, affirmed that they saw the golden plates on which the book’s original was written and knew “that they have been translated by the gift and power of God, for his voice hath declared it unto us.” Several issues raised by the testimonies of the Book of Mormon witnesses will be treated in a forthcoming Mapping Mormon Issues paper in SUNSTONE.


4. Orson Pratt attributed this description of the “black, hard stain” in the grooves of the plates to witnesses who had examined them. Sermon dated 2 January 1859, Journal of Discourses (Liverpool, England: 1853–1885) 7:31. Francis Gladden Bishop offered this parallel description: “The characters are rubbed over with a black substance so as to fill them up, in order that the dazzling of the gold between the characters would not prevent their being readily seen.” Bishop, A Proclamation from the Lord to His People, Scattered throughout All the Earth (Kirtland, Ohio, n. p., 1851). Bishop’s description of other features of the plates (e.g., their dimensions) closely follows that separately given by his close associate Martin Harris, but Bishop claimed to have received this knowledge by examining the plates himself.

5. Most of the sources cited on the translation of the Book of Mormon in this piece are available in John W. Welch’s near-comprehensive compilation of sources, “The Miraculous Translation of the Book of Mormon,” in John W. Welch, editor, Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations, 1820–1844 (Provo and Salt Lake City, Utah: Brigham Young University and Deseret Book, 2005), 77–214. Sources that may be found in this compilation will be cited as given by Welch, with both the original reference and the page numbers where they are quoted in Welch’s work. The details that the translation was done in the “chamber” and opened with prayer may be found in J. L. Traughber, Jr., “Testimony of David Whitmer,” Saints’ Herald 26 (15 November 1879): 341, in Welch, 145–146; and David Whitmer interview, 15 December 1883, as reported in “The Book of Mormon,” Chicago Tribune, 17 December 1883, 3, in Welch, 153–154, also Orson Hyde, Ein Ruf aus der Wuste, eine Stimme aus dem Schoeze der Erde (“A Cry from the Wilderness, A Voice from the Dust of the Earth”), translation by Marvin H. Folsom, provided in Dan Vogel, editor, Early Mormon Documents (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996), 1:167. See also Frederick G. Mathes interviews, July 1880, in Vogel, Early Mormon Documents (2002), 3:355.
6. In Joseph Smith History 1:35, Smith describes this instrument: “there were two stones in silver bows—and these stones, fastened to a breastplate, constituted the Urim and Thummim and called the Urms and Thumms in the Plates of Morehit.” In a late reminiscence of an 1890 interview with William Smith, J. W. Peterson wrote, “Explaining the expression as to the stones in the Urms and Thumms 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.” Statement of J. W. Peterson Concerning William Smith, May 1, 1921, Miscellaneous Letters and Papers, Community of Christ Library-Archives, in Welch, 164. Lucy Mack Smith describes them in her memoir as consisting of “two smooth three-cornered diamonds set in glass, and the glasses were set in silver bows, which were connected with each other in the same way as old fashioned spectacles.” Lavina Fielding Anderson, editor, Lucy’s Book: A Critical Edition of Lucy Mack Smith’s Family Memoir (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2001), 379.

7. The translation device has been called the Urms and Thumms since at least the earliest extant recording of Joseph Smith’s 1829 revelation D&C 17, but this earliest available text is in 1834 copy in the Kirksville Revelations Book. It is possible that the earlier manuscripts used the term “interpreters.” The term “Urim and Thummim” for the instrument is not attested in contemporaneous documents until early 1833, when it was used by W. W. Phelps in the January issue of the Evening and Morning Star. (For discussion see Richard S. Van Wagoner and Steven C. Walker, “Joseph Smith: The Gift of Seeing,” Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought 15 [Summer 1982], 49–63; and Stephen D. Ricks, “Joseph Smith’s Translation of the Book of Mormon,” http://maxwellinstitute.byu.edu/publications/ transcripts/?id=10, accessed 12 November 2010.) However, as will become clear in this paper, the Book of Mormon translation device was used in conscious parallel to the Urms and Thumms as early as 1828.

8. See Emma Smith to Emma Pilgrim, 23 March 1870, in Welch, 129. The lost manuscript is addressed in greater detail in the author’s 21 November 2010 Sunstone lecture “The Lost Book of Lehi: Reconstructing the Book of Mormon’s Missing 116 Pages.” available via recording on the SUNSTONE website.


12. Martin Harris, as reported in Edward Stevenson to the editor, 30 November 1881, published in the Deseret Evening News, 13 December 1881, in Welch, 135; and David Whitmer, as reported in the Kansas City Daily Journal, 5 June 1881, in Welch, 147–148.

13. For sources on the scribes to the translation, see Welch, Opening the Heavens, 121, 125–126, 129–134, 143, 145, 150, 168, 190, 196; Jesse, The Papers of Joseph Smith, 1:234, 293; Dean C. Jesse, “The Original Book of Mormon Manuscript,” Brigham Young University Studies, 10:3 (Spring 1970): 259–278; and David Whitmer, as reported in the Daily Missouri Republican (St. Louis, MO), 16 July 1884, available online at http://sidneyrigdon.com/dbr/dbrooks/OM95s1850.pdf.

14. In an 1838 Elder’s Journal editorial intended to answer frequently asked questions, Joseph wrote that he “obtained [the plates], and the Urms and Thumms with them; by the means of which, I translated the plates; and thus came the book of Mormon.” “Answers to Questions,” Elder’s Journal of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints 1 (July 1838): 43. Oliver Cowdery wrote that he acted as scribe “day after day” while Joseph “translated, with the Urms and Thumms, or, as the Nephites would have said, ‘interpreters.’” Oliver Cowdery to W. W. Phelps, Messenger and Advocate (October 1834): 14.

15. Cincinnati Advertiser and Ohio Phoenix (2 June 1830). Reprinted from Wayne County Inquirer, Pennsylvania, circa May 1830.


19. The documents in which Martin Harris and David Whitmer affirm that Joseph Smith translated via a seer stone are too numerous to list individually. See Welch, Documents # 52, 55, 57, 61, 85, 86, 89, 90, 92, 96, and 98.


21. Joseph Smith’s influential contemporary Adam Clarke, commenting on “I . . . will give him a white stone” in Revelation 2:17, described an ancient divinatory practice in which decisions were made by means of a set of two stones, one white, one dark. Adam Clarke, The New Testament of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ: The Text, Carefully Printed from the Most Correct Copies of the Present Authorized Version, including the Marginal Readings and Parallel Texts, with a Commentary and Critical Notes (New York: A. Paul, 1823), 2:897. Joseph Smith’s recovery of his own “white stone,” his first seer stone, is examined at length in Richard S. Van Wagoner, “Phenomenology of Mormon’s ‘Acquiring an All-seeing Eye: Joseph Smith’s First Vision as Seer Initiation and Delification Ritual’.”


23. For instance, several years after Joseph Smith is understood to have returned the interpreters to the angel, Oliver Cowdery blessed him that “[i]n his hands shall the Urms and Thumms remain,” employing the term “Urms and Thumms” for Joseph’s white seer stone: http://www.saintswithouthalos.com/c/1835.php, accessed 19 November 2010.


27. Ibid.


29. Truman Coe to Mr. Editor, Hudson Ohio Observer, 11 August 1836, in Welch, 124. An obituary for David Whitmer described differently where the translation would appear: “Smith would put on the scriptures, when a few words of the text of the Book of Mormon would appear on the lenses.” However, it is not clear that David Whitmer provided these details. Whitmer was not present during the time Smith used this instrument and appeared from his published interviews to know relatively little about it. “The Last Witness Dead!”, Richmond Democrat (Richmond, MO), 26 January 1888.

30. An example of one of the Masonic slides used with these lanterns (this one from the later nineteenth century) may be found in Don Bradley, “The Grail in Fundamental Principles of Masons’ Joseph Smith’s Unfinished Reformation,” in SUNSTONE, April 2006, 40.

31. I owe thanks to Benjamin Park for suggesting the analogy of visual translation to transcription.

32. As discussed below, this position has most prominently been advocated by B. H. Roberts. For more recent arguments that anachronisms in the text were present early according to Joseph Smith to have translated and influenced it, see Blake T. Osler, “The Book of Mormon as a Modern Expansion of an Ancient Source,” Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought, 20:1 (Spring 1987): 66–123.


34. The description of revelation as a “co-creation” was suggested by Blake Osler and has been applied to the Book of Mormon by Michael Ash. Michael

35. This text appears in Joseph Smith’s 1833 revision of his earliest written revelation (D&C 3:12). The earliest attested phrase is “right and power,” but the 1835 edit changed “right” to “sight,” indicating not only that he had the ability to translate, but that he did so through a visual medium.

36. Coe to Editor, in Welch, 124.

37. Each of these accounts will be discussed below.


41. Lucy Mack Smith, “Preliminary Manuscript,” 1845, LDS Church History Library, in Welch, 163.

42. Oliver Cowdery, as reported to Josiah Jones, “History of the Mormonites,” Evangelist 9 (1 June 1841), 132–134, in Welch, 142.


44. John H. Gilbert to James T. Cobb, 10 February 1879, Theodore A. Schroeder Papers, Rare Books and Manuscript Division, New York Public Library, New York, in Welch, 192.

45. “Golden Bible,” Palmyra Freeman, August 1829, reprinted in Rochester Advertiser and Telegraph, 31 August 1829, in Welch, 170. (No original copies of the Palmyra Freeman article have been located.) “Golden Bible,” Rochester Gen. 5 September 1829, 70, in Welch, 171.


47. Ezra Booth, letter, dated 29 November 1831, published as “Mormonism No. VIII,” in The Ohio Star (Ravenna, Ohio), 8 December 1831.

48. Cowdery’s only extant testimony on the actual translation process comes to us secondhand, through an 1831 newspaper account of his 1830 court testimony: “Oliver Cowdery[e], one of three witnesses to the book, testified under oath, that said Smith [looking into the Urim and Thummim] … was able to read in English, the reformed Egyptian characters, which were engraved on the plates.” A.W.B. [Abram W. Benton], “Mormonites,” Evangelical Magazine and Gospel Advocate (Utica, New York) 2:15 (9 April 1831): 120.


50. David Whitmer’s testimonies to visual translation are numerous and appear in Welch’s Opening the Heavens compilation as Documents 81, 83, 84, 85, 86, 88, 89, 90, 93, 94, 95, 96, 97, and 98.

51. John Whitmer interview with Zenas H. Gurley, in Welch, 139.

52. William Smith, William Smith on Mormonism, 80, in Welch, 164.


56. Coe to Editor, in Welch, 124.


61. See the discussion of RLDS apostle Jason W. Briggs and biblical higher criticism in Roger D. Laurnius, Joseph Smith: Pragmatic Prophet (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 274–275.


64. For grammatical errors in the Book of Mormon, see Skousen, “The Original Language of the Book of Mormon.” For a critical attempt to catalog changes to the Book of Mormon text, including the correction of errors, see Jerald and Sandra Tanner, 3913 Changes in the Book of Mormon, rev. (Salt Lake City: Utah Lighthouse Ministry, 1996).

65. Though Joseph F. Smith had in 1881 accepted David Whitmer’s position that the Book of Mormon was revealed letter by letter, he may well have abandoned this position as he articulated a theory of conceptual translation during his presidency over the church.


69. For a detailed comparison of the Book of Mormon’s first three editions, see Curt A. Bench, editor, The Parallel Book of Mormon: The 1830, 1837, and 1840 Editions (Salt Lake City: Smith-Pettit Foundation, 2008).

70. William Smith, as reported in James Murdock, “The Mormons and Their Prophet,” Hartford and New Haven, Conn. Congregational Observer 2 (3 July 1841): 1, in Welch, 164. William Smith later reported that Joseph would “read off the translation, which appeared in the stone by the power of God” and that the translation was revealed “letter by letter.” William Smith on Mormonism, 80; and “The Old Soldier’s Testimony,” Saints’ Herald 31 (4 October 1884): 644–645. Evangelical Inquirer, 7 March 1831, in Welch, 176. Far from describing a loose and impressionistic process of translation, the Evangelical Inquirer account describes the translation process producing an “infallible reading” of the content of the plates.


72. History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1902), 479. Davis’s letter was written 6 February 1840 from Washington, DC.

73. Letter from Diedrich Willers to “Reverend Brethren,” 18 June 1830, in Welch, 208.

74. This may be contrasted with Joseph’s perceived need for a preface in the original edition to explain the loss and replacement of the 116 pages. See Bench, ed., The Parallel Book of Mormon, and Douglas Campbell, “White or ‘B’ Vignettes.” Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought 20:4 (Winter 1996): 119–135. Joseph Smith’s most substantive doctrinal clarification to the Book of Mormon involved changing a statement that Christ was “the Eternal Father” to read that he was “the Son of the Eternal Father” (1 Nephi 11:21). Brigham Young believed that “if the Book of Mormon were now to be rewritten, in many instances it would materially differ from the present translation” because the Saints had progressed in their readiness to receive more advanced spiritual truths. Discourse in the Tabernacle, 17 April 1870, Journal of Discourses 9:311.


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