

Scrying for the Lord: Magic, Mysticism, and the Origins of the Book of Mormon

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JOSEPH SMITH GREW UP in a time and place where folk magic was an accepted part of the landscape. Before he was a prophet, he was a diviner, or more specifically, a scryer who used his peepstone to discover the location of buried treasure. While most members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the twenty-first century know nothing of Joseph's magical practices, there is ample evidence to support the claim that they occurred. From a series of articles published in the Palmyra *Reflector* in 1830 and 1831, to the 1834 publication of Philastus Hurlbut and E. D. Howe's polemical *Mormonism Unveiled*, to Fawn Brodie's 1945 biography of Joseph Smith *No Man Knows My History*, to D. Michael Quinn's 1987 *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, Joseph Smith's involvement with magic has been well documented. Even the respected Mormon historian Richard L. Bushman reports that Joseph possessed a seerstone and was probably involved in "helping people find lost property and other hidden things."¹ Quinn's book in particular, which more than doubled in size when it was revised and reissued in 1998, is encyclopedic in its coverage of the Smith family's magical activities and those of their early Mormon contemporaries. To the objective reader of Mormon history, there can be little doubt that Joseph Smith practiced magic. There is also no question that just a few years later Joseph would become the leader of a vibrant new religion with thousands of followers who considered him a "prophet, seer, and revelator." What is not clear from the historical record is how he transitioned from diviner to translator to prophet. Was Joseph's dabbling in magic a youthful indiscretion or was it a

1. Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 69-70.

catalyst of change? This paper is an attempt to understand the role magic played in that transition.

The paper is divided into three sections: first, an account of the events leading to the discovery of the plates and of the translation process, because it is here where the intersecting worlds of magic and religion are most discernible and where Joseph's use of magic first transitions from secular to religious; second, a presentation of three theories that may explain why Joseph so assiduously followed magical procedures during this time, including a discussion of how Joseph Smith's experiences with magic may have introduced him to the world of religious mysticism where ineffable spiritual experiences provide enlightenment (and under the right circumstances can lead to the development of new doctrine and a new religion); and third, an examination of magic's role in transforming Joseph Smith from translator to prophet.

SECTION I: FROM DIVINER TO TRANSLATOR

The mystery of Mormonism cannot be solved until we solve the mystery of Joseph Smith.

— Jan Shipp²

The available historical evidence demonstrates that throughout the long process of acquiring and translating the golden plates Joseph Smith behaved in a manner consistent with that of a true believer in magic. The facts presented in this section have been published elsewhere and may seem redundant to students of this subject, but for the benefit of those who aren't familiar with the literature, they require repeating. Moreover, to discern the connection between Joseph's actions and his beliefs requires a basic understanding of the underlying magical principles gleaned from the various occult texts and *grimoires* (manuals of ceremonial magic that describe how to invoke and control spirits) that were available in the early nineteenth century.

Solving the "prophet puzzle" is complicated by the fact that much of the information available about the early life of Joseph Smith is either polemic or apologetic. The official history of Joseph Smith as canonized in the Pearl of Great Price makes no reference to either magic or treasure hunting. Joseph Smith acknowledged that he wrote his history in 1838 to dispel "reports which have been put in circulation by evil disposed and designing persons."³ He was probably referring to the dozens of affidavits from residents of Palmyra/Manchester, New York, and Harmony, Pennsylvania, collected by Philastus Hurlbut

2. Jan Shipp, "The Prophet Puzzle: Suggestions Leading toward a More Comprehensive Interpretation of Joseph Smith," in Bryan Waterman, ed., *The Prophet Puzzle: Interpretive Essays on Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1999), 43.

3. Pearl of Great Price, Joseph Smith History 1:1.

and E. D. Howe and published in the book *"Mormonism Unveiled."*⁴ The affidavits make frequent reference to the Smith family's involvement with magic and money digging and generally impugn the family's character. Mormon apologists have tried for years to dismiss these affidavits as biased and unreliable. While they are likely correct in some of their assertions, other firsthand accounts and newspaper articles predating the affidavits have provided independent support for many of the claims.

One likely reason Joseph Smith downplayed his involvement in magic is that in 1826 he was tried and convicted of being "a disorderly person" due to his treasure hunting activities. A well-to-do farmer named Josiah Stowell hired him to help locate a lost silver mine that was rumored to have been worked by the Spaniards. Stowell's nephew, Peter Bridgeman, filed a complaint against Joseph for being "a disorderly person and an imposter."⁵ It was not a crime in the state of New York to be an "imposter," but there was at that time a statute in New York defining "disorderly persons" as "all jugglers [deceivers], and all persons pretending to have skill in physiognomy, palmistry, or like crafty science, or pretending to tell fortunes, or to discover where lost goods may be found."⁶ In the course of the trial, Joseph testified in his own behalf and acknowledged he had a stone which enabled him to see "where hidden treasures in the bowels of the earth were" and that he had used this stone to help others look for treasure. Joseph Smith, Sr., confirmed his son's story, as did the alleged victim, Josiah Stowell, who testified that Joseph had not deceived him but saw genuine visions in the stone. Stowell was a respected member of the Presbyterian Church and had a good reputation in his community. He, like many men of his time, had little difficulty reconciling his Christian beliefs with a belief in folk magic. Also testifying on Joseph's behalf was one of the workmen hired to dig for the treasure, who explained how his spade struck what he believed was a treasure chest before it sank into the ground due to an enchantment.⁷

Central to Joseph Smith's abilities as a seer was his seerstone. Sources both friendly and unfriendly to Smith provided verification that by the age of fourteen Joseph had acquired his first seerstone or peepstone, as they were more commonly known, and that he possessed at least three of them during his teenage years. Joseph dug up his first seerstone after he saw its location while gazing into a stone that belonged to Sally Chase, a schoolgirl who lived about

4. Eber D. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled* (Painesville, Ohio: E. D. Howe, 1834).

5. Dan Vogel, "Rethinking the 1826 Judicial Decision," 1 December 2002, <http://mormonscripturestudies.com/ch/dv/1826.asp>.

6. *Ibid.*

7. Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1987), 57; Donna Hill, *Joseph Smith: The First Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1999), 61-66. Dale Morgan, *Dale Morgan on Early Mormonism: Correspondence and a New History*, ed. John Phillip Walker (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1986), 327-28, also avail on *New Mormon Studies CD-ROM*, Smith Research Associates [CD-ROM], 1998.

three miles away. According to William D. Purple, a non-Mormon and the scribe for the 1826 trial, Joseph said that he had heard Sally

could look into a glass and see anything however hidden from others; that he was seized with a strong desire to see her and her glass; that after much effort he induced his parents to let him visit her. He did so, and was permitted to look in the glass, which was placed in a hat to exclude the light. He was greatly surprised to see but one thing, which was a small stone, a great way off. It became luminous, and dazzled his eyes, and after a short time it became as intense as the mid-day sun. He said that the stone was under the roots of a tree or shrub. . . . [H]e borrowed an old ax and a hoe, and repaired to the tree. With some labor and exertion he found the stone.⁸

This occurred sometime around 1819-1820. Ironically, this same Sally Chase years later looked into her green stone to discover where Joseph Smith had hidden his "golden bible."⁹ Two years later, while helping dig a well for Willard Chase near the Smith family farm, Joseph discovered another stone, which his wife Emma described as "a small stone, not exactly black, but was rather a dark color."¹⁰ Another report described it as "almost black with light colored stripes. . . about the size but not the shape of a hen's egg."¹¹ It was this stone that Joseph's mother, Lucy Mack Smith, said enabled him to see things "invisible to the natural eye,"¹² and it was with this stone that Smith would later translate most of the Book of Mormon.¹³ Joseph used the seerstone in the same manner that he had seen it used by Sally Chase: With the stone in his hat, he placed his face into the opening of the hat so as to block out all the light. Numerous firsthand accounts describe this process.¹⁴

According to the following article, which ran in 1831 in *The Reflector*, a Palmyra newspaper, the use of "mineral rods [i.e., divining rods] and balls" and "peep stones" was a common practice in the area where Joseph Smith grew up:

Men and women without distinction of age or sex became marvelous wise in the occult sciences, many dreamed, others saw visions disclosing to them, deep in the

8. William D. Purple, "Joseph Smith, the Originator of Mormonism: Historical Reminiscences of the Town of Afton," *Chenango Union* (Norwich, N.Y.), 2 May 1877, p. 3, reprinted in Quinn, *Early Mormonism*, 42.

9. Lucy Mack Smith, *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith the Prophet, and his Progenitors for many Generations* (Liverpool: S. W. Richards, 1853), 109.

10. Emma Smith Bidamon to Emma Pilgrim, 27 March 1870, in Dan Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 5 vols. (Salt Lake City, Utah: Signature Books, 1998), 1:553.

11. Jaunita Brooks, ed., *On The Mormon Frontier, The Diary of Hosea Stout*, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press/Utah Historical Society, 1964), 2:593.

12. Lucy Smith, *Biographical Sketches*, 91-92.

13. Richard S. Van Wagoner and Steven C. Walker, "Joseph Smith: 'The Gift of Seeing,'" in Waterman, *The Prophet Puzzle*, 2:87-112.

14. See Quinn, *Early Mormonism*, ch. 2; LaMar Petersen, *The Creation of the Book of Mormon: A Historical Inquiry* (Salt Lake City: Freethinker Press, 2000), ch. 3; Van Wagoner and Walker, "Joseph Smith: 'The Gift of Seeing,'" 87-112; Hill, *The First Mormon*, 67.

bowels of the earth, rich and shining treasures, and to facilitate those *mighty* mine operations, (money was usually if not always sought after in the night time,) divers devices and implements were invented.

Mineral rods, (as they were called by the imposters who made use of them,) were supposed to be infallible guides to these sources of wealth—"peep stone" 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 were not confined to either sex) applied their eyes, and nearly starting their [eye]balls from their sockets, declared they saw all the wonders of nature, including of course, ample stores of silver and gold. (emphasis in original)¹⁵

Peeping, or glass looking, is an ancient and universal form of divination known today as *scrying*, *crystal-gazing*, or *crystallomancy*. It involves gazing upon an object like a crystal ball or a mirror until visions are seen. *Scrying* comes from *descrie*, meaning "to discern." The tool used by scryers is called a *speculum*, and it typically has a reflective surface. The oldest and most common form of scrying is gazing at the reflective surface of still water in a lake or pond. Egyptians practiced scrying centuries ago. The French physician and astrologer Nostradamus used a bowl of water on a brass tripod to make his prophecies. The magic mirrors in the fairy tales of Snow White and Beauty and the Beast are *specula*, as were the crystal egg and black obsidian mirror used by Edward Kelley, the assistant of John Dee, Queen Elizabeth I's royal mathematician and magician. Kelley, an adept scryer, claimed that his black shiny stone, cut in the shape of a diamond, allowed him to communicate with angels in the Enochian language. People with this ability tend to manifest it in early childhood. In Arab countries young children, primarily boys, are employed as thumbnail scryers: The backs of their thumbnails are filed smooth and polished, and they stare at their nails until they begin to see visions. Usually these boys are used only until the age of ten or eleven, when their abilities typically start to diminish.¹⁶

Scrying is just one of many methods of divination. A *diviner* is a "religious specialist who seeks from the spirits hidden information about the past, present, or future. In addition, the diviner's method of inquiry is usually said to involve the manipulation or interpretation of physical objects or natural phenomena."¹⁷ Through the centuries divination has provided a means for determining the will

15. "Gold Bible No. 3," *The Reflector* (Palmyra, N.Y.), 1 Feb. 1831, 92-93, reprinted in Francis W. Kirkham, *A New Witness for Christ in America: The Book of Mormon*, 2 vols. (Independence, Mo.: Zion's Printing and Publishing, 1951), 1:69.

16. Rosemary Ellen Guiley, *Harper's Encyclopedia of Mystical and Paranormal Experience* (Edison, N.J.: Castle Books, 1991), 533-34; Nevill Drury and Gregory Tillett, *The Occult: A Sourcebook of Esoteric Wisdom* (New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 1997), 98-99; Quinn, *Early Mormonism*, 40.

17. Robert R. Wilson, *Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 26; see also Guiley, *Harper's Encyclopedia*, 151-152.

of the gods and for solving problems or disputes. The responsibility for divining has historically been assigned to a "priest, prophet, oracle, witch, shaman, witch doctor, medicine man, psychic, or other person reputed to have supernatural powers."¹⁸ Some forms of divination, such as horoscopes, tarot cards, palm reading, and water witching (the use of a divining rod to locate an underground source of water),¹⁹ remain popular among segments of western culture, while others, such as the reading of entrails, are less common.

Joseph Smith came by his practice of divination through a long history of oral and written traditions. Numerous occult manuals and grimoires were compiled over the centuries, and as historian Michael Quinn has shown, many were likely available in the Manchester/Palmyra area. Notable among these are Ebenezer Sibly's 1784 book, the *New and Complete Illustration of the Occult*; the pseudoepigraphic *Fourth Book of Occult Philosophy* by Cornelius Agrippa; and *The Magus*, Francis Barrett's 1801 compendium of magic that was based on pseudo-Agrippa's *Fourth Book of Occult Philosophy*. Even Reginald Scot's book, *The Discoverie of Witchcraft*—a 1584 compilation of magical rites and rituals from various medieval texts that had been out-of-print for over 150 years—was "available in America's rural areas in the mid-nineteenth century."²⁰ Inexpensive paper-bound chapbooks explaining the magic arts were also available in the Palmyra area at the time of Joseph Smith,²¹ although there is no direct evidence that the Smiths owned any books of magic. There is evidence that Joseph's mother, Lucy Mack Smith, used seer stones,²² and Joseph may have gained most of his knowledge regarding their use from her, but Quinn also points to the probability that Joseph had one or more occult mentors, Luman Walters being primary among them.²³ Regardless of whether the family owned any magic manuals, Joseph Smith and his family did possess several tools used in ritual magic, including a silver Jupiter talisman, which Quinn has shown relied on *The Magus* as its source, as well as a magic dagger featuring symbols from the same book. Daggers inscribed with planetary sigils (seals or signets), signs, and various names of God were used for creating magic circles. Quinn has also established Sibly's the *New and Complete Illustration of the Occult* as the source for one of the Smith family's magic parchments (small folded parchment sheets, also known as lamens, used in ritual magic, on which are written various magical names, phrases, and symbols).²⁴

18. *Ibid.*, 151.

19. During my twenty-year career as an architect, land planner, and builder, I have encountered numerous engineers, soil scientists, and hydrologists who claim to have seen "water witching" performed successfully where more scientific efforts to locate a well have failed.

20. Quinn, *Early Mormonism*, 100-101.

21. *Ibid.*

22. *Ibid.*, 42.

23. *Ibid.*, 116-135.

24. *Ibid.*, 83-85, 98-116.

The use of divination and magic ritual to discover buried treasure is part of a belief system wherein subterranean spirits control precious metals that can be captured by a knowledgeable magician. In the *Fourth Book of Occult Philosophy*, we are told "there are Spirits of the earth, which inhabit in groves, woods and wildernesses, and are the plague and mischief of hunters. . . . There are also subterranean Spirits, which do inhabit in dens and caverns of the earth, and in remote concavities of mountains, that they might invade deep pits, and the bowels of the earth; these do dig up metals, and keep treasures, which oftentimes they do transport from one place to another, lest any man should make use thereof."²⁵ Ebenezer Sibly's 1787 book, *A New and Complete Illustration of the Occult Sciences*, elaborates:

Distinct from fiery spirits are a species which properly belong to the metallic kingdom, abiding in mountains, caves, dens, deeps, hiatus or chasms of the earth, hovering over hidden gold, tombs, vaults, and sepulchers of the dead. These spirits are termed by the ancient philosophers "protectors of hidden treasure," from a principle of quality in their nature whence they exceedingly delight in mines of gold and silver, and places of hidden treasure; but are violently inimical to man. . . . ever haunting those places where money is concealed, and retaining malevolent and poisonous influences to blast the lives and limbs of those who attempt to make such discoveries; and therefore extremely dangerous for magicians to exorcise or call up.²⁶

In order to wrest a treasure away from one of these "fiery spirits" one must, of course, discover the treasure's whereabouts. *The Discoverie of Witchcraft*, a 1584 compilation of magical rites and rituals from various medieval texts, contains an elaborate conjuration that involves the use of a "christall stone" to force a spirit to divulge its knowledge about hidden treasure:

I conjure thee spirit, by God, the father, that thou shew true visions in the christall stone, where there be anie N. [the specific name], in such a place or no, upon paine of everlasting condemnation, *Fiat*, Amen. Also I conjure thee spirit N. by God the sonne Jesus Christ, that thou doo shew true visions unto us, whether it be gold or silver, anie other metals, or whether there were anie or no, upon paine of condemnation, *Fiat*, Amen. Also I conjure thee spirit N. by God the Holie-ghost, the which dooth sanctifie all faithfull soules and spirits, and by their virtues and powers I constreine thee spirit N. to speake, open, and to declare, the true waiae, how we may come by these treasures hidden in N. and how to have it in our custodie, & who are the keepers thereof, and how manie there be, and what be their names, and by whom

25. Henry Cornelius Agrippa [alleged], *Fourth Book of Occult Philosophy*, (Montana: Kessering Publishing Company, n. d.), 116. The unknown author is often referred to as pseudo-Agrippa. The book was first published in 1655 and reprinted in 1665 and 1783.

26. Ebenezer Sibly, *A New and Complete Illustration of the Occult Sciences*, Book 4, pp. 1084-85, 3 March 2001, <http://www.esotericarchives.com/solomon/sibly4.htm>.

it was laid there, and to shew me true visions of what sort and similitude they be, and how long they have kept it, and to know in what daies and houres we shall call such a spirit, N. to bring unto us these treasures, into such a place N. upon paine of everlasting condemnation.²⁷

Once the treasure has been located, the magician must go about the task of digging it up very carefully, due to the dangerous nature of these spirits. In the medieval grimoire, *The Key of Solomon the King*, the subterranean spirits are called gnomes, and we are told that they put workmen to death who fail to heed their warnings.²⁸ The author assures us, however, that with the information provided in the book, "thou shalt be able. . .to make them submit unto thine orders." Upon arrival at the treasure site, the magician's first task is the formation of a magic circle in order to protect the treasure seekers from harm. Sibly tells the story of a British magician and his associates who were "instantaneously crushed into atoms. . .in the twinkling of an eye" when they left the protection of their magic circle.²⁹

The author of *The Key of Solomon the King* describes how a magic circle is made, as does Sibly, and similar descriptions can be found in other grimoires. The details vary widely from source to source, with some descriptions being simple and others very elaborate. According to *The Key of Solomon*, one should draw a circle on the ground with a "Sword of Magical Art" and then consecrate it with incense three times during the day. At night, when the magician goes to enter the circle, he must be properly attired and must suspend a lamp "whose oil should be mingled with the fat of a man who had died in the month of July."³⁰ Sibly's magic circle is far less morbid but more detailed. The plot of ground needs to be about nine feet square, and two circles are drawn, one inside the other. A square is drawn inside the circle where the magician sits with his companion. The spaces inside the circle are to be filled with drawings of various crosses and with different names of God. If a spirit is to be summoned, then a separate triangle is drawn outside the circle to contain it. Elsewhere we are told that the triangle should be drawn using a consecrated sword and that the spirit can be compelled to swear an oath on the sword.³¹ *The Key of Solomon* says that

27. Reginald Scot, *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1964), 357. Scot's book is a polemic document intended to expose witchcraft's practices.

28. The legends of leprechauns and their pots of gold are undoubtedly rooted in similar wide spread beliefs. J. K. Rowling, for instance, in her book *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, borrowed from these legends when she introduced Gringotts, a bank of sorts where gold, money, and other valuables are kept in underground vaults magically guarded by goblins.

29. Sibly, *Occult Sciences*, 1085-86.

30. S. Liddel MacGregor Mathers, trans. and ed., *The Key of Solomon the King* (Clavicula Salomonis) (York Beach, Me.: Samuel Weiser, Inc., 2000), 57-58.

31. Francis Barrett, *The Magus or Celestial Intelligencer; Being a Complete System of Occult Philosophy* (London: Lackington, Allen, and Co., 1801), 100-101, in *New Mormon Studies CD-ROM*, Smith Research Associates [CD-ROM], 1998.

each of the magician's companions should hold a sword in his naked hand. These swords are in addition to the "Sword of the Art" used to make the circle.³² Here also the proper attire is necessary. Both grimoires specify that white linen be worn, linen being frequently specified in magic rituals for clothing, altar covers, and as a covering for magic tools.³³ Sibly also specifies that a black priest's robe be worn over the white linen and that the magician have a magic parchment of virgin paper on which are drawn certain seals attached to his clothes.³⁴ The Smith family had several magic parchments, and the symbols on their "Holiness to the Lord" magic parchment were based on symbols in Sibly's book.³⁵ Scot's book similarly specifies the attachment of parchments to the breast of the magician and is the source for the Smith's "Jehovah, Jehovah, Jehovah" parchment.³⁶ According to *The Magus*, the main purpose of that particular lamén was the conjuring of spirits. *The Magus* was first published in England in 1801 and was the source of a magic talisman that belonged to Joseph Smith, his silver Jupiter medallion.³⁷ Ritual purifications—including washings, anointings, fasting, prayer, incantations, incense, and sprinkling with holy water—also feature prominently in the various manuals.

It was Joseph Smith's reputed abilities with a seerstone that brought him to the attention of the treasure seekers of the Burned-over District. Josiah Stowell traveled a considerable distance to hire Joseph Smith at relatively high wages because of Joseph's ability.³⁸ One of the best firsthand accounts of the Smiths' treasure hunting activities was provided by fellow treasure hunter William Stafford. His statement to Philastus Hurlbut on December 8, 1833, is generally negative in his appraisal of Joseph Smith's activities, but he provides many insightful details. He points out that most of the money digging was carried out at night when it was believed the money could be most easily obtained.³⁹ This is consistent with the directions in the *Key of Solomon*, which states that it is

32. Mathers, *The Key of Solomon*, 99-100.

33. *The Key of Solomon* recommends "Silk" if the means is available. It also says that "Instruments of the Art should be wrapped in Silk" after they are consecrated. See Mathers, *The Key of Solomon*, 92, 116.

34. Sibly, *Occult Sciences*, 1104, 1105, 1110; see also Scot, *The Discoverie of Witchcraft*, 337.

35. Quinn, *Early Mormonism*, 107

36. *Ibid.*, 110

37. *Ibid.*, 20, 67, 113; Barrett, *The Magus*, 93-94.

38. Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 91-92; Hill, *The First Mormon*, 61. In 1838 Joseph Smith answered a series of questions for the Kirtland, Ohio, Elder's Journal including the question, "Was Jo Smith a money digger?" He replied, "Yes, but it was never a very profitable [sic] job to him, as he only got fourteen dollars a month for it." While Smith may not have considered the wages substantial, they should be compared to the eight to twelve dollars a month that the workers on the Erie Canal were paid. Lucy Smith said that Stowell offered "high wages" (Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:52-53).

39. William Stafford Statement, 8 December 1833; Eber D. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled*, 237-40, reprinted in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:59-61.

"much better to perform these experiments at night, seeing that it is more easy to the Spirits to appear in the peaceful silence of night than during the day."⁴⁰ Stafford said that Joseph

could see by placing a stone of singular appearance in his hat, in such a manner as to exclude all light; at which time [he] pretended he could see all things within and under the earth. . . . At certain times, these treasures could be obtained very easily; at others, the obtaining of them was difficult. The facility of approaching them, depended in a great measure on the state of the moon. New moon and good Friday, I believe, were regarded as the most favorable times for obtaining these treasures. I at length accepted of their invitations, to join them in their nocturnal excursions.

Joseph Smith, Sen., came to me one night, and told me, that Joseph Jr. had been looking in his glass, and had seen, not many rods from his house, two or three kegs of gold and silver, some feet under the surface of the earth: and that none others but the elder Joseph and myself could get them. I accordingly consented to go, and early in the evening repaired to the place of deposit. Joseph, Sen. first made a circle, twelve or fourteen feet in diameter. This circle, said he, contains the treasure. He then stuck in the ground a row of witch hazel sticks,⁴¹ around the said circle, for the purpose of keeping off the evil spirits. Within this circle he made another, of about eight or ten feet in diameter. He walked around three times on the periphery of this last circle muttering to himself something which I could not understand. He next stuck a steel rod in the centre of the circles, and then enjoined profound silence upon us, lest we should arouse the evil spirit who had the charge of these treasures. After we had dug a trench about five feet in depth around the rod, the old man by signs and motions, asked leave of absence, and went to the house to inquire of young Joseph the cause of our disappointment. He soon returned and said, that Joseph had remained all this time in the house, looking in his stone and watching the motions of the evil spirit—that he saw the spirit come up to the ring and as soon as it beheld the cone which we formed around the rod it caused the money to sink. We then went into the house, and the old man observed, that we had made a mistake in the commencement of the operation; if it had not been for that, said he, we should have got the money.⁴²

Stafford then tells the story of another outing where a black sheep was killed and its blood spread in a circle to appease the wrath of the evil spirit controlling the treasure they hoped to obtain.⁴³ Stafford, Pomeroy Tucker, and

40. Mathers, *The Key of Solomon*, 80.

41. "Hazel rods" are featured as essential tools for treasure hunting in Scot's *Discoverie of Witchcraft*, 163.

42. William Stafford Statement, 8 December 1833.

43. In an 1881 interview, Stafford's son John Stafford said that his father also had a stone, and Lucy Smith tried to borrow it at one time. He confirmed the stories of the Smith's money digging, but when asked about the sheep incident, he said, according to the interviewer's notes, "My father is

Stephen S. Harding tell the story in separate accounts, and they all assume the killing of the sheep was an elaborate ruse concocted by the Smiths to put meat on their table. Both Tucker and Harding believed that Joseph asked for the black sheep because it was "large and in excellent condition for mutton." As Harding tells the story, "Stafford hesitated, and was loth [sic] to give him up, offering a white wether of smaller size, yet in good condition. But the coming prophet was not to be foiled in his purpose, and resorted to logic that confounded the objector. 'The reason why it must be a black sheep,' said the young deceiver, 'is because I have found the treasure by means of the black art.' This, of course was unanswerable, and the black wether was given up."⁴⁴ Unnoticed by previous chroniclers of Joseph Smith's magical practice is the fact that this story, always told to disparage him, actually confirms the depth of his knowledge of magic lore. According to the *Key of Solomon the King*, sacrifices are required in some magical operations; white animals are sacrificed to good spirits and *black ones to evil spirits*.⁴⁵ Joseph Capron, a neighbor of the Smiths who lived south of them, similarly gave an affidavit in which he described a treasure-digging incident next to his home. He said Joseph Smith had discovered a chest of gold watches in the possession of an evil spirit by placing a stone in a hat "in such a manner as to exclude all light, except that which emanated from the stone itself." Capron also describes sticks being stuck in the ground in a circular pattern directly over the spot where the treasure was located. According to his affidavit, a messenger was sent to Palmyra to procure a polished sword, and then one of their party, "drawn sword in his hand, marched around to guard any assault which his Satanic majesty might be disposed to make." Unfortunately, the "devil" was victorious and carried away their prize.⁴⁶

In Joseph Smith's 1838 history, he explained that in the three years following his first vision he had been subject to "temptations; and, mingling with all kinds of society. . . which led [him] into diverse temptations, offensive in the sight of God." It is in this context that Joseph establishes his need for repentance on the evening of September 21, 1823, which led to the first appearance of the angel Moroni. While many Mormons might take comfort in the idea that Joseph's dabbling with the magic arts was only a youthful indiscretion that ended with this angelic visitation, such a belief cannot be sustained. Joseph's 1826 trial and other

said to have furnished a sheep—but I don't think my father was there at [the] times they say [the] sheep was sacrificed." This wording was changed in the printed version to read, "I have heard the story but don't think my father was there at the time they say Smith got the sheep." Some have used these statements to discredit the William Stafford statement, but as Vogel points out, when the added material is removed, the two Staffords' statements are consistent. See Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:121-22, 122n9.

44. Stephen S. Harding to Thomas Gregg, February 1882; Thomas Gregg, *The Prophet of Palmyra* (New York: John B. Alden, 1890), 34-56, reprinted in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 3:166.

45. Mathers, *The Key of Solomon*, 119 (emphasis added).

46. Joseph Capron Statement, 8 November 1833, Eber D. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled*, 237-40, reprinted in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 2: 24-25.

accounts show that he continued to participate in treasure hunting until he received the golden plates in 1827. According to Martin Harris, Smith had been involved in an unsuccessful treasure hunt earlier that same evening in 1823.⁴⁷

Joseph Smith began praying late on a Sunday night. According to Oliver Cowdery, Smith began praying "to commune with some kind of messenger" at about eleven or twelve o'clock,⁴⁸ which is the time that Scot's *Discoverie of Witchcraft* specifies for conjuring the dead.⁴⁹ In all his attempts to locate treasure, Joseph had used his stone to see the location of the treasure in the ground, but on this night, according to his official history, he would learn the location of "a book deposited, written upon gold plates" after an angel appeared in his room in response to his fervent prayer. Joseph goes on to say that while the angel was "conversing with me about the plates, the vision was opened to my mind that I could see the place where the plates were deposited, and that so clearly and distinctly that I knew the place again when I visited it."⁵⁰

Questions arise about the reliability of Joseph's account of how he learned the location of the plates. If, as he described it, the room filled with a light that "was lighter than at noonday" and he then spent the entire evening conversing with an angel,⁵¹ we have to wonder why none of the five siblings who shared the small attic bedroom with him were awakened. It becomes apparent to visitors to the reconstructed cabin in Palmyra that was the Smith family home that Joseph and the angel would not have been alone in the room together, though this has not been reported in the many retellings of Moroni's visit.⁵² In the earliest accounts we have of this experience, Joseph claimed to have seen the angel in a dream.⁵³ In his earliest autobiography, written in 1832, he acknowledged having questions about the nature of the experience, "I supposed it had been a dream [sic] of Vision," he wrote, "But when I consid[e]red I knew that it was not."⁵⁴ For Joseph to have equated dreams with visions would not have been surprising. The Bible equates visions and dreams (Job 7:14). In the Book of Mormon, Lehi, the first prophet named in the book, proclaims: "I have dreamed a dream; or, in other words, I have seen a vision" (1 Nephi 8:2). In the magical world, dreams were one way to learn the location of treasure. Scot's *Discoverie of Witchcraft* discusses the "art and order to be used in digging for monie, revealed by dreams."⁵⁵

47. Quinn, *Early Mormonism*, 143.

48. Oliver Cowdery to W.W. Phelps, February 1835, cited in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:428.

49. Scot, *Discoverie of Witchcraft*, 334.

50. Pearl of Great Price, Joseph Smith History 1:42.

51. Pearl of Great Price, Joseph Smith History 1:30, 47.

52. During a July 2001 visit to Mormon historical sites in Palmyra, N.Y., I noticed a painting of Moroni's visit to Joseph Smith which showed Joseph sitting up in bed with the angel hovering nearby while his five siblings continued to sleep. I have never encountered a written counterpart to this painting, however.

53. Quinn, *Early Mormonism*, 138-39.

54. *Ibid.*, 139.

55. Scott, *Discoverie of Witchcraft*, 163.

As described above, most buried treasure is guarded by dangerous spirits. It was not, however, unprecedented for a good spirit to appear and provide information. *The Key of Solomon* describes how a magician can conjure an "intelligence" and interrogate him by forming a magic circle and reciting a special prayer. Francis Barrett in *The Magus* defines intelligences as "the presiding good angels that are set over the planets" and further, "the spirits or daemons are subject to the intelligences, or good spirits."⁵⁶ Interrogating an intelligence would allow one to gain information required to locate a treasure and wrest it away from its guardian. *The Key of Solomon* continues, "When thou shalt be desirous to make thine interrogations, choose the night of full or of new moon, and from midnight until daybreak. Thou shalt transport thyself unto the appointed spot if it be for the purpose of discovering a treasure; if not, any place will serve provided it be clean and pure." Also required is a virgin parchment on which special characters and names are written. This parchment is to be held to the magician's forehead while he lies prostrate and recites an additional prayer. Having done so, the magician should be able to hear the answers he seeks.⁵⁷

In spite of Joseph's 1838 claim that he saw the location of the plates in a vision, Mormon and non-Mormon sources state that Joseph found the plates through the use of his seerstone. Martin Harris recalled in 1859, "Joseph had before this described the manner of his finding the plates. He found them by looking in the stone found in the well of Mason Chase. The family had likewise told me the same thing."⁵⁸ Willard Chase claimed that in 1827 Joseph Smith, Sr., told him "that some years ago, a spirit had appeared to Joseph his son, in a vision, and informed him that in a certain place there was a record on plates of gold; and that he was the person that must obtain them. He [Joseph Smith] then observed that if it had not been for that stone, he would not have obtained the

56. Barrett, *The Magus*, 146. This definition may explain the puzzling Mormon belief that prior to being created as spirit children in the pre-existence, we existed as intelligences. In his King Follett discourse, Joseph Smith said, "Intelligence is eternal and exists upon a self-existent principle. It is a spirit from age to age, and there is no creation about it" (Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1967], 354). In 1907 B. H. Roberts, one of the seven presidents of the Seventies, expanded on Smith's statements, claiming that even before spiritual birth in the pre-existence, man existed as an individual, self-conscious entity known as an "intelligence." The First Presidency appended their approval: "Elder Roberts submitted the following paper to the First Presidency and a number of the Twelve Apostles, none of whom found anything objectionable in it, or contrary to the revealed work of God, and therefore favor its publication" (B. H. Roberts, "The Immortality of Man," *Improvement Era*, April 1907, 401-23). See also Blake T. Ostler, "The Idea of Preexistence in Mormon Thought," in Gary James Bergera, ed., *Line Upon Line: Essays on Mormon Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989), 137.

57. Barrett, *The Magus*, 146.

58. "Mormonism—No. II," *Tiffany's Monthly: Devoted to the Investigation of the Science of Mind, in the Physical, Intellectual, Moral and Religious Planes Thereof*, 5 August 1859, 163-70 as reprinted in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:309.

book."⁵⁹ If we theorize that Joseph either dreamed about the location of the plates or saw their location through the use of his seerstone and then followed the magical procedures with which he was familiar, he would have gone to the location where they were buried, formed a magic circle, said the requisite prayers, and only then attempted to dig them up. Without precisely following the magical procedures, he would have been unable to possess the plates, and they would have remained under the control of their guardian spirit, Moroni. There is no historical evidence known to me that Joseph formed a magic circle or used any magical implement other than his seerstone on this occasion, but we do know that had he chosen to do so, the Smith family possessed magic parchments and the requisite magic dagger, and Joseph was familiar with the making and operation of magic circles. We also know that Joseph was unsuccessful in his first attempt to obtain the plates. According to Oliver Cowdery, when Joseph reached out to take the plates, he received a "shock. . . upon his system" three different times. Joseph wondered if this was because of an "enchantment," and when he asked aloud, "Why can I not obtain this book?" the angel appeared and told him "Because you have not kept the commandments of the Lord."⁶⁰ According to his mother, when he returned to the same spot the following year, he was able to take the plates, but he set them down to search the box for anything else that might be "of some pecuniary advantage." Then he ". . . turned round to take the Record again, but behold it was gone, and where, he knew not, neither did he know the means by which it had been taken from him."⁶¹ On at least this one occasion, the "golden plates" behaved like the elusive "slippery treasures" of Joseph's treasure quests. That Joseph thought his failure was due to an "enchantment" indicates that he viewed the process magically. It would be another two years before he would take and keep possession of the plates.

It is interesting to note that Smith specifically recalls the exact date of this first Moroni appearance while providing only a general time frame, spring of 1820, for his vision of God and Christ. Astrology has long played an essential role in magical practice, and September 21 was a day of great significance. There had been a full moon the night before, and the time of the full moon was considered advantageous to search for buried treasure. *The Key of Solomon* says in its first chapter that without knowing the "order of hours and of days, and of

59. Willard Chase Statement, c. 11 December 1833, in Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled*, 240-48, as reprinted in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:71-72. Other accounts of using the stone to find the plates were given by Henry Harris, Orsamus Turner, John H. Gilbert, W. D. Purple, and Hosea Stout. See Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:72n27, and Van Wagoner and Walker, "Joseph Smith: The Gift of Seeing," 96.

60. Oliver Cowdery to W. W. Phelps, October 1835, Letter VIII in *Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate* 22 (October 1835): 195-202, reprinted in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:458-459.

61. Lucy Smith, *Biographical Sketches*, 83. See also Oliver Cowdery's description of this event in *Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate* 2 (October 1835): 197.

the position of the moon" the magician's efforts will be of no effect.⁶² Similarly, Barrett's *The Magus* says, "you must observe the Moon. . .for you shall do nothing without the assistance of the Moon."⁶³ Perhaps more significantly, it was the day of the autumnal equinox, although Mormon apologists have argued that the connection is Jewish rather than astrological.⁶⁴ Anciently, the autumnal equinox was celebrated as the Day of Atonement, and it was the only day of the year when the Isrealite High Priest was allowed to enter the Holy of Holies in the temple. Since the temple faced east, this was the day the sun penetrated all the way to the back of the structure where the Holy of Holies was located. There is, however, no evidence that Joseph Smith was aware at this time of Jewish practices regarding the High Holy Days. In any case, it was on this day every year that Joseph Smith returned to the same spot in his efforts to get the plates.

On the night he finally received the plates, he made some unusual preparations, dressing in black clothes that night and borrowing a black horse and a carriage from Joseph Knight.⁶⁵ As we have seen, a black robe or black garment can be required for some rituals, and Quinn has elaborated on the importance of black in magic lore. However, no one has yet discussed the importance of the "linen frock" which his mother mentions Joseph wearing.⁶⁶ According to Sibly, the attire for a magician who intends to conjure a spirit should be made of black cloth and white linen, linen having an "abstracted quality for magic."⁶⁷ *The Key of Solomon* tells a magician that prior to engaging in the magic arts, he and his companions should disrobe, bathe, perfume, and clothe themselves in clean white garments over which the "exterior habiliments," preferably linen or silk, are placed. It further requires that certain magical "characters. . .should be embroidered on the breast with the needle of Art in red silk."⁶⁸

Joseph and Emma left the house at around midnight and didn't return until morning. No one knows whether Joseph inscribed a magic circle around the location where the plates were buried, nor does anyone know whether he recited any incantions or used a magic parchment, but their use would have been consistent with magical practice. The record is unclear regarding what part Emma played in the process. According to one account, they arrived at the hill where the plates were buried, and Joseph disappeared into the woods, reappearing sometime later with a bundle wrapped in his linen coat, which he claimed was

61. Mathers, *The Key of Solomon*, 11.

63. Barrett, *The Magus*, 148.

64. See Quinn, *Early Mormonism*, 167-68

65. Willard Chase Statement 11 December 1833, in Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled*, 237-40, reprinted in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:66-67; see also Lucy Smith, *Biographical Sketches*, 100.

66. Lucy Smith, *Biographical Sketches*, 104. The word "linen" is only used three times in the book, two of which are in reference to the "frock" Joseph Smith wrapped the plates in while transporting them.

67. Sibly, *Occult Sciences*, 1104, 1105, 1110; see also Quinn, *Early Mormonism*, 166.

68. Mathers, *The Key of Solomon*, 88-93.

the plates.⁶⁹ According to Emma's cousins, she "stood with her back toward him, while he dug up the box."⁷⁰ Martin Harris stated that while Joseph was retrieving the plates, Emma "kneeled down and prayed."⁷¹ Joseph claimed the angel required Emma's presence if he were ever to get the plates, and that was the reason he took her with him, but the question remaining unanswered is why she was required to be there. If her presence were essential to a successful operation, she would probably not have remained behind in the wagon while Joseph retrieved the plates. It would also have been inconsistent with magical practice for Joseph to have attempted to retrieve buried treasure, i.e. golden plates, from a spirit without the aid of a companion. Most magic rituals described in the various grimoires require the magician to have companions who assist in various ways. Sibly explains that, when forming a magic circle, it is always necessary to have two people, "the master and his associate."⁷² *The Key of Solomon* recommends three companions:

When the Master of the Art wisheth to put in practice any Operation or Experiment, especially one of importance, he should first consider of what Companions he should avail himself. This is the reason why in every Operation whose Experience should be carried out in the Circle, it is well to have three Companions. And if he cannot have Companions, he should at least have with him a faithful and attached dog.⁷³

The book makes no mention of a wife serving as a companion, but it does say that a young girl or boy "will be still better" than the dog provided that he "ordain them as he hath ordained the dog."⁷⁴

Joseph did not return home with the plates, but instead stopped and hid them in a hollow tree, still wrapped in his coat. He did bring with him what he called "a key." Lucy Mack Smith described it as follows: "Upon examination, [I] found that it consisted of two smooth three-cornered diamonds set in glass, and the glasses were set in silver bows, which were connected with each other in much the same way as old fashioned spectacles."⁷⁵ It would be referred to as the "spectacles," "interpreters," and later on as the "Urim and Thummin." Lucy did not handle the key directly but through a silk handkerchief which Joseph had

69. Linda King Newell and Valeen Tippetts Avery, *Mormon Enigma: Emma Hale Smith* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1984), 20-21.

70. Lewis and Lewis, "Mormon History"; Wyl, pseud. [Wymetal], *Mormon Portraits*, 80, reprinted in Quinn, *Early Mormonism*, 477n288.

71. Martin Harris Interview with Joel Tiffany, 1859, in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:304.

72. Sibly, *Occult Sciences*, 1102-1103.

73. Mathers, *The Key of Solomon*, 86.

74. *Ibid*, 87.

75. Lucy Smith, *Biographical Sketches*, 101.

wrapped it in.⁷⁶ She also described being allowed to handle the "breastplate" found with the plates, which was "wrapped in a thin muslin handkerchief,"⁷⁷ and she eventually "hefted" the plates, which were similarly wrapped.⁷⁸ By wrapping each of these items in linen or silk, Joseph was following prescribed magical guidelines. As *The Key of Solomon* says, "When an Instrument of the Art is properly consecrated, it should be wrapped in silk and put away."⁷⁹

Joseph used the "spectacles" to translate the original 116 manuscript pages of the Book of Mormon. He placed them into his hat and placed the hat to his face, blocking out all light. After Martin Harris lost the manuscript pages, Joseph reverted to using his seerstone, so virtually all of the existing Book of Mormon was translated with the stone.⁸⁰ Emma described the process of translation in an 1879 interview by her son Joseph Smith III:

In writing for your father I frequently wrote day after day, often sitting at the table close by him, he sitting with his face buried in his hat, with the stone in it, and dictating hour after hour with nothing between us. . . . The plates often lay on the table without any attempt at concealment, wrapped in a small linen table-cloth, which I had given him to fold them in.⁸¹

Again, the plates are wrapped in linen. According to Emma, she never attempted to uncover the plates but did acknowledge touching them through the tablecloth and moving them around so she could dust.⁸² In an 1883 interview, William Smith, Joseph, Jr.'s, brother, similarly described being able to hold and feel the plates through cloth.⁸³

In 1838, after leaving the church, Oliver Cowdery confirmed that the plates were not actually referred to during the translation process: "I have sometimes had seasons of skepticism, in which I did seriously wonder whether the Prophet and I were men in our sober senses, when he would be translating from plates,

76. Lucy Smith, "Preliminary Manuscript," 19-115, Frags. 1-10, in LDS Church Archives, Salt Lake City, Utah, cited in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:328, 328n137.

77. Lucy Smith, *Biographical Sketches*, 111.

78. Sally Parker to John Kempton, 26 August 1838, in private possession (microfilm, Family History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah), cited in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:218-219.

79. Mathers, *The Key of Solomon*, 116.

80. Emma Smith Bidamon to Emma S. Pilgrim, 27 Mar. 1876, cited in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:532. Oliver Cowdery and others wrote that the plates were translated using the Urim and Thummin, but Joseph's seerstone was also often referred to as a Urim and Thummin (see Van Wagoner and Walker, "Joseph Smith: 'The Gift of Seeing,'" 89-90; Quian, *Early Mormonism*, 174-75).

81. Emma Smith Bidamon interview with Joseph Smith III, February 1879, cited in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:539; Van Wagoner and Walker, "Joseph Smith: 'The Gift of Seeing,'" 89. See also pages 88-93 for additional accounts of the translation process.

82. *Ibid.*, 539-540; Newell and Avery, 25.

83. William Smith, *On Mormonism*, 1883, cited in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:497. William says that the plates were contained in a pillow case.

through 'the Urim and Thummim,' and the plates not be in sight at all."⁸⁴ That Joseph Smith "translated" the Book of Mormon with his face buried in a hat and the plates carefully hidden away or sitting nearby is not well known within Mormonism. The actual mechanics of how the Book of Mormon was created are generally not discussed, as can be seen by the following extract taken from the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, published in 1992:

Little is known about the translation process itself. Few details can be gleaned from comments made by Joseph's scribes and close associates. Only Joseph Smith knew the actual process, and he declined to describe it in public. At a Church conference in 1831, Hyrum Smith invited the Prophet to explain more fully how the Book of Mormon came forth. Joseph Smith responded that "it was not intended to tell the world all the particulars of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon; and. . . it was not expedient for him to relate these things."⁸⁵

This author claims that little is known of the translation process, and understandably, Joseph Smith would not have been eager to share the details with the congregation at a church conference. However, a paper trail of documents written by both friend and foe does exist, and while it is impossible to conclude exactly what was happening, there is enough information for us to focus our attention on some plausible explanations.

SECTION 2: TRANSLATING THE BOOK OF MORMON—THREE THEORIES

Considering the information given above regarding Joseph Smith's activities in magic and his use of some of those magical practices in obtaining the gold plates and in translating the Book of Mormon, it should be apparent that the official history of Joseph Smith neglects the facts: It does not mention that Joseph was engaged in treasure hunting up until 1827 and had been put on trial because of it, nor that he had been engaged in a treasure hunt on the same day that Moroni is said to have first appeared; nor does it explain why an astrologically significant day, the autumnal equinox, was chosen for the annual visits; it also doesn't explain how Joseph could have had a vision lasting all night without disturbing the five siblings who shared the room or even the two who shared his bed. Neither does the official history acknowledge reports that Joseph originally

84. Oliver Cowder, *Defense in a Rehearsal of My Grounds for Separating Myself from the Latter Day Saints* (Norton, Ohio, 1839); also *Saints' Herald* 54 (20 May 1907): 229-230, cited in Van Wagoner and Walker, "Joseph Smith: 'The Gift of Seeing,'" *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 15, no. 2 (Summer 1982): 50-51. When this article was reprinted in Waterman, *The Prophet Puzzle*, this quote was omitted.

85. Daniel H., Ludlow, ed., *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1992); "Book of Mormon Translation by Joseph Smith," in *Infobases Collectors Library*, Bookcraft [CD-ROM], 1996.

claimed to have encountered the angel in a dream, that he claimed to have found the site where the plates were buried using his brown seerstone, that the angel shocked him three times to prevent him from taking the plates, or that the plates mysteriously vanished when he set them down. Nor does it explain why the angel required him to be married and bring Emma with him the night he finally received the plates, why he wrapped the plates in his linen coat and later in a linen tablecloth, why they went to the site in the middle of the night and didn't return until morning; or why Joseph translated the plates without referring to them physically but instead dictated the Book of Mormon to his scribes while his face was buried in a hat into which he had placed his seerstone. This paper is an attempt to connect these puzzle pieces, collected by others, into some sort of unified theory accounting for them all. I will present here three possibilities. In the first theory, Joseph Smith appears as a pious deceiver; in the second, Joseph Smith is a true believer in magic who may have used some deception; and in the third, Joseph's magical experiences introduce him to the world of mysticism, which gives rise to his unique religious beliefs and convictions, which nonetheless he may have supported through pious deception. All three theories involve some degree of deception, and while that may be disquieting to some, it should be remembered that Joseph Smith, later in his life, was involved in numerous deceptions regarding the secret practice of polygamy and on at least one occasion wrote in justification of what today we would call a situational ethic:

That which is wrong under one circumstance, may be and often is right under another. God said, "Thou shalt not kill"; at another time He said, "Thou shalt utterly destroy" This is the principal on which the government of heaven is conducted—by revelation adapted to the circumstances in which the children of the kingdom are placed. Whatever God requires is right, no matter what it is although we may not see the reason thereof 'til long after the events transpire. . . .But in obedience there is joy and peace unspotted.⁸⁶

Theory 1: Pious Deceiver

The first theory postulated by skeptics for decades goes something like this: Joseph Smith, Jr., and his father were knowledgeable in magical practices but had no magical, supernatural, or paranormal abilities. As poor farmers doing anything they could to supplement their income and keep food on the

86. Joseph Smith, Jr., et. al., *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: The Deseret News, 1902-1912), 5:134-5; in *New Mormon Studies CD-ROM*. The statement was originally part of a letter written to Nancy Rigdon after she refused to become one of Joseph's plural wives. See Richard S. Van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy: A History* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989), 32-33. For a broader discussion of truth and deception, see Clay Chandler, "The Truth, the Partial Truth, and Something Like the Truth," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 33, no. 3 (Fall 2000): 97-119.

table, they exploited the gullibility of the local population by providing them with what they wanted—belief in a quick and easy route to a better life. According to this theory, Joseph pretended to be able to see things in his seerstone so that people like Josiah Stowell would hire him to aid in their treasure quests. They sacrificed the black sheep in one of their treasure quests because they wanted the meat. After Joseph's trial, he wanted to find a different way to supplement the family income and concocted a scheme wherein he would claim to have finally succeeded in taking a treasure away from a spirit or angel, but this gold treasure was, as it turned out, a history, a written record with religious significance that would confirm that America was a blessed land and that the American Indians were descended from the lost tribes of Israel. During those four years when Smith was making his annual trips to the hill where the plates were buried, he was, according to this theory, secretly writing and memorizing the Book of Mormon, and when it came time to "translate," he simply recited what he had memorized. He took Emma with him because magical formulas called for a companion, and he would be expected to take a companion. He also took her because he wanted a witness to substantiate his story. He wore a black linen coat and wrapped the plates in linen because that was what people knowledgeable about magic would expect him to do if he really had found an "enchanted" book. And, finally, Joseph didn't use the plates in the translation process because he had faked them. He and the eleven witnesses who claimed to have seen the plates were part of a larger conspiracy whose purpose was to gain credibility for him and his family and make money from the sales of the completed book.

There are a number of problems with this theory. First, there is no evidence of a conspiracy. Emma, according to the historical record, seems to have been a true believer in her husband's gifts. Also, the three witnesses who claimed to have seen the plates and the angel all remained basically true to their stories, even after excommunication or disassociation from the church Joseph founded. Perhaps the most significant problem with this theory is that it doesn't explain why Joseph would have proceeded to found a church after the Book of Mormon was published and then commit the rest of his life to it in spite of persecution, hardships, and physical danger to himself and his family. Critics point to a narcissistic personality and a need to remain in the spotlight when explaining Joseph's founding of the church. They cite his personal charisma to explain his success in gathering followers. Apologists for the church have spent a considerable amount of time and effort pointing out these and other problems with the pious deceiver theory, but those same apologists have also argued against the magical connection in general. Believers see in Joseph, above all, a God-given ability to lead and a prophetic calling. Neither the skeptic's nor the apologist's arguments are particularly satisfying, but this first theory may be the simplest explanation that accounts best for the available evidence, and as such would survive Occam's razor's insistence on minimal complexity.

Theory 2: True Believer in Magic and Altered States of Consciousness

A second theory that could account for all the available facts does not require that we believe in magic, but requires us to believe that Joseph Smith *did*. Before I can explain the theory, however, it will be necessary to better understand the mechanics of scrying.

Harper's *Encyclopedia of Mystical and Paranormal Experience* describes the techniques used by scryers to induce their visions and provides some insights as to how the process works:

Some who use crystals focus on points of light on the surface. Others enter an altered state of consciousness and allow images to float into their inner awareness. Some images are couched in symbols, which the scryer must learn to interpret. In the Middle Ages, there was a belief that the images formed on a crystal ball or other tools were caused by demons that had been trapped inside by magic.

It is possible to learn the art of scrying with patience and practice. Paramount to success is the ability to relax both mind and body and put the mind in a passive, unfocused state. Some scryers say that when clairvoyance develops the speculum will appear to cloud over with a curtain or mist, which then parts to reveal shapes and colors. With more skill the shapes and colors sharpen to reveal discernible objects, people, and symbols.⁸⁷

According to this description, some scryers enter into altered states of consciousness (ASC). Although the existence of ASCs has long been known in both advanced and primitive cultures, systematic study of them began only recently. Our western culture, rooted in rationalism, has resisted acknowledging the value and even the existence of these states.⁸⁸

Contemporary researchers list the major ASCs as sleep, the hypnagogic (drowsy pre-sleep) state, hypnosis, various types of meditation, mystical or transcendental experiences, experimental sensory deprivation experiences, and states associated with psychoactive drugs. Any method used to deliberately produce an altered state of consciousness is referred to as an induction technique, and they generally can be sorted into four categories: changes in external stimulation (amount and variety), changes in physical activity (amount and variety), changes in physiological state (e.g., psychoactive drugs, hypoxia, dehydration, starvation, malnutrition), and changes in focus of attention (e.g., meditation). Many induction methods are centuries old and often were used in combination.

87. Guiley, *Harper's Encyclopedia*, 534.

88. R. Walsh, "States and Stages of Consciousness: Current Research and Understandings" in *Toward a Science of Consciousness II: The Second Tucson Discussions and Debates*, ed. S. R. Hameroff, A. W. Kaszniak, and A. C. Scott (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1998), 677-86.

Ancient Gnostics induced sensory deprivation by sitting quietly in pitch-black caves for days while waiting for enlightenment. They would also fast for days and very likely used some kind of psychoactive drug. The Whirling Dervishes, a variety of Sufi mystic, induce motor overload by spinning while repetitively chanting until they collapse in ecstasy. American Indians have long undergone "spirit quests" through the use of Peyote, an hallucinogenic cactus. Yoga-trained mystics have for centuries sought union with the divine through exercise, diet, maintaining certain postures (which may reduce or increase the flow of oxygen to the brain), controlled breathing (which can also effect brain chemistry), and inwardly focused concentration. Many of today's youth attend "rave" parties where they attempt to achieve altered states of consciousness through a combination of motor and sensory overload involving rhythmic dancing, flashing lights (including glow sticks waved rapidly before their eyes), pulsating repetitive music, and the appropriately named drug, Ecstasy.

Some crystal gazers prefer to stare into their speculum by the light of a flickering candle to achieve an altered state of consciousness. Whether focusing on the flickering lights of a crystal ball or the flickering reflections of the surface of a still lake, the change in external stimulation could induce an ASC. Modern psychologists use a similar technique of flashing lights combined with rhythmic auditory pulses to access parts of their patients' psyche that would otherwise be unavailable.⁸⁹ For other scryers, the device may act as a "blank screen," and as they focus more intently on the object, sensory deprivation may occur. In his 1931 book, *Witchcraft Magic & Alchemy*, Grillot De Givry described how English crystal gazers operated by "maintaining a complete silence and remaining in meditation, without thinking of anything, for a quarter of an hour before consulting the mirror (crystal); they call this 'letting the mind remain blank.' They make use by preference of an egg-shaped globe of crystal."⁹⁰ His description is consistent with what has been described as an altered state of consciousness.

In most descriptions of the translation process, Joseph Smith placed his stone in a hat and held it up to his face, blocking out all light. If these descriptions are accurate, he was likely doing two things: First, he was creating a state of sensory deprivation; and second, he was changing his blood chemistry. What should be pointed out here and, I believe, has been overlooked heretofore, is what Joseph Smith was *not* doing: Technically, he was not crystal gazing, since with no light in the hat, it would have been impossible for him to see the stone. Unless one is willing to grant the stone actual magical powers or the ability to glow in the dark, then the stone becomes irrelevant to the proceedings except for

89. This process is known as EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing). EM'DR Institute, web site, <http://www.emdr.com/>, 1 Jan 2003.

90. Grillot De Givry, *Witchcraft Magic & Alchemy*, trans. J. Courtenay Locke (New York: Bonanza Books, no date), 307. This book was first published in English in 1931.

a possible placebo effect. Nonetheless, by staring into the darkness, Joseph was likely inducing an altered state of consciousness where his mind could become blank as described above. It's also possible that Joseph, much like a hyperventilating person who breathes into a paper bag, changed his blood chemistry slightly, increasing the amount of carbon dioxide and reducing the amount of oxygen getting to his brain. This state, known as hypoxia, can cause brain damage and even death if the oxygen deprivation is complete, but minor changes in blood oxygen level may have helped Joseph induce a trance state. Prolonged periods of even mild hypoxia would likely have impaired Joseph's judgment and reduced his motor coordination,⁹¹ so we must consider the possibilities that his hat was either porous enough to let him breathe freely, he didn't really hold it tight around his face, or he was constantly removing his head from the hat in order to get oxygen. If either of the first two is correct, then some light may have gotten in, and Joseph may indeed have been crystal gazing. If the third possibility is correct, it's unlikely that Joseph could have maintained the trance state for the long periods of time that he was reported to have spent dictating.

If the second theory is correct, then a combination of sensory deprivation, hypoxia, and/or Joseph's natural aptitude induced an ASC, allowing him to dictate the contents of the Book of Mormon. It is an admittedly huge leap from the former to the latter, but while highly unusual, this form of auto-dictation is not unheard of and is very similar to what is known in the occult as automatic writing or spirit writing. A number of books have allegedly been written in this way, some of which are scripture-like, others very literary. The popular New Age book, "A Course in Miracles," for example, was created by Helen Schucman, Ph. D., between 1965 and 1972 through a process she called "inner dictation." According to Schucman, she began writing her 1500-page book when a clear inner voice spoke to her with the words, "This is a Course in Miracles, please take notes." The voice would later identify itself as Jesus Christ.⁹² Scott C. Dunn, in his article, "Spirit Writing: Another look at the Book of Mormon," documents that people with this ability are capable of writing for hours at a time without stopping, as Joseph Smith did. In some cases, the "author" communicates with a person who has died. A person with this ability is a *medium*, which is a "broad designation for anyone who acts as a channel of communication between the human and divine realms."⁹³ Often the author exhibits paranormal writing skill and knowledge of historical events to which he or she was never exposed, as may have been the case with Smith. Many, including Smith and

91. "Cerebral Hypoxia," MEDLINEplus Medical Encyclopedia, <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/001435.htm>, 27 Dec 2002.

92. "The Scribing of a Course in Miracles," 5 July 01, http://www.acim.org/about_acim_section/scribes.html.

93. Wilson, *Prophecy and Society*, 25.

Schucman, could stop dictating and resume later at the exact same point without having to review what had been previously dictated.⁹⁴

It has often been pointed out that the Book of Mormon is filled with quotes from the King James Version of the Bible. Their presence is easily explained if the source of the Book of Mormon was Joseph Smith's subconscious. Joseph Smith was, prior to the dictation of the Book of Mormon, well-versed in the Bible. Mormon apologists have tried to claim that during the translation process Joseph had a copy of the Bible nearby, and whenever he recognized a quote he would just look it up. However, none of the known accounts of the translation process support that theory. As Dunn points out, automatic writing provides a very simple explanation:

Just as individuals under hypnosis have been able to quote lengthy passages in foreign languages which they heard at the age of three, so have automatic writers produced detailed information from books which they have read but in some cases cannot remember reading. Thus, if Joseph Smith's scriptural productions borrow material from the Bible he was known to study, this is entirely consistent with other cases of automatic writing. This phenomenon of memory, known as cryptomnesia, may also explain the presence of writing styles and literary patterns which are found both in the Book of Mormon and the Bible.⁹⁵

Whether through auto-dictation, automatic writing or some other means, Joseph Smith may have generated the Book of Mormon through an ecstatic process. If the descriptions of people experienced at scrying are to be believed, then Joseph emptied his mind and words or images flooded in to fill the void. Joseph would have needed to interpret those words or images, form them into coherent sentences, and dictate them to his scribe. Joseph's response to Oliver Cowdery's failed attempt at translating takes on new meaning when viewed in this light. Oliver came to Joseph as a trained rodsman—i.e., someone trained in the use of divining rods—and as such, would probably have expected that the correct translations would be received from an outside source. Instead, he was told that it was necessary

to 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; therefore, you shall feel that it is right. 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; therefore, you cannot write that which is sacred save it be given you from me. Now, if you had known this you could have translated (D&C 9:7-10).

94. Scott C. Dunn, "Spirit Writing: Another look at the Book of Mormon" *Sunstone* 10, no. 6 (June 1985): 17-26.

95. *Ibid.*, 25.

Staring into the darkness of the hat, Joseph's mind could have filled with images or visions, which he then "studied out in his mind" until he felt that they were correct, creating a coherent text as he went along. Whether or not the words or images he saw came from God or from his own subconscious is impossible to determine and is ultimately a matter of personal belief.

If Joseph Smith was a true believer in magic, as proposed by the second theory, then it becomes clear why Joseph chose to seek a divine visitation on the date of the autumnal equinox and why he began the prayer late at night. In the world of magic, dreams and visions are equivalent, so he could have dreamed that he was visited by the angel Moroni and then used his seerstone the next day to locate the area seen in his dream. He followed precise magical procedure because he believed it was necessary to be successful. A somewhat large leap of faith, involving altered states of consciousness and the efficacy of scrying, also explains why Joseph didn't need the plates to translate. But the question of whether he actually found gold plates and why they were necessary if he wasn't going to translate from them remains unanswered. It makes no sense that Smith would spend four years trying to get an actual history written on plates and then leave it wrapped in linen, unopened. One possible explanation, however, is consistent with the theory and is rooted in the same magic texts and traditions that informed his treasure hunting. To my knowledge, this explanation has never been suggested. In Barrett's *The Magus*, we find instructions on how to make a magic book. After explaining how to construct the book using virgin parchment, Barrett says:

let [the book] be brought, in a clear and fair night, to a circle prepared in a cross-way, according to the art which we have before delivered; and there, in the first place, the book is to be opened, and to be consecrated according to the rites and ways which we have before delivered concerning consecration. . .then let the book be wrapped up in a clean linen cloth, and bury it in the midst of the circle, and stop the hole so as it may not be perceived or discovered: the circle being destroyed after you have licensed the spirits, depart before sun-rise; and on the third day, about the middle of the night, return and make the circle anew and on thy knees make prayer unto God, and give thanks to him; and let a precious perfume be made, open the hole in which you buried your book and take it out, and so let it be kept, not opening the same. Then after licensing the spirits in their order and destroying the circle, depart before sun rise. And this is the last rite and manner of consecrating, profitable to whatever writings, experiments, &c. that direct the spirits, placing the same between two holy lamens or pentacles, as is before mentioned.⁹⁶

Sibly and Agrippa describe similar procedures.⁹⁷ If Joseph had been aware of this procedure and followed it, it would explain why he went out late at night

96. Barrett, *The Magus*, 91.

97. Agrippa, *Occult Philosophy*, 58-59; Sibly, *Occult Sciences*, 1123-24.

and didn't return until sunrise on the day he retrieved the plates. Since this procedure is a magical one, he would have required a companion, which explains why he took Emma along. Wrapping the book in linen and leaving it unopened are two specific magical requirements that explain why he wore the linen coat, used a linen table cloth for a covering, and kept the book wrapped up at all times. If this is what occurred—that is, if Joseph Smith was making a magic book according to a traditional formula—then he deliberately deceived Emma, his family, the eleven witnesses to the Book of Mormon, and countless others when he claimed to have found a written record on gold plates.

There are, of course, a number of problems with this theory. Reports from people who "felt" the plates say that the pages sounded and felt like metal, not the virgin parchment required above. There are also the eleven witnesses who claimed to have actually seen the plates. There are questions as to whether the witnesses saw the plates with their own eyes or in vision, but their testimonies cannot be ignored.⁹⁸ These magic books are intended to be used by the magician as aids in summoning spirits and demons, so Joseph's use of the book in translation would be new and unusual. But if Joseph Smith, as part of his training in magic, learned how to make a magic book that would be "profitable to whatever writings, experiments, &c." he required, then he could have created a book, consecrated it, buried it, dug it up again after three days, wrapped it in linen, and then, being careful not to open it, used it in writing the Book of Mormon. It's not the simplest explanation, but it is possible.

If, as described in our first theory, Joseph's sole motivation for creating the Book of Mormon was to make money, we are left wondering why he went on to found a religion and suffer the persecutions that resulted. It is difficult to believe that Joseph would have continued down this religious path without compelling religious conviction that the doctrines he was sharing were true.

Theory 3: True Believer and Mystic

A third theory to explain the available evidence proposes that Joseph Smith's early experiences with magic and scrying inadvertently unlocked the door to the world of religious mysticism, a world where suddenly illumination and encounters with the divine are hallmarks. Joseph's "First Vision" may have been just such a mystical encounter, and his subsequent activities, including the cre-

98. Of the three witnesses who saw both the plates and the angel, two—Martin Harris and David Whitmer—were later quoted as saying they saw the plates only in vision. Martin Harris also claimed that the eight other witnesses who only saw the plates never saw them with their eyes (Stephen Burnett to Lyman E. Johnson, 15 April 1838, cited in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:288-293; see also the "editorial note." See Warren Parrish to E. Holmes, 11 August 1838, in the Carthage, Ohio, *Evangelist* 6 (1838): 226-27, quoted in Edward H. Ashment, "'A Record in the Language of My Father': Evidence of Ancient Egyptian and Hebrew in the Book of Mormon," in *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon: Explorations in Critical Methodology*, ed. Brent Lee Metcalfe (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1993), 332n10, 391.

ation of the Book of Mormon, follow paths traveled by other known mystics.

Definitions of mysticism abound, but in general we understand it as the experience of communion with Ultimate Reality. Gershom Scholem, the great scholar of Kabbalah (a form of Jewish mysticism), defined a mystic as someone who has been favored with an immediate, and to him or her real, experience of the divine, of ultimate reality, or someone who at least strives to attain such experience. This experience may come through sudden illumination, or it may be the result of long and often elaborate preparations.⁹⁹ Modern researchers have divided mystical experiences into two categories, Apophatic and Kataphatic. Apophatic mystical experiences are trophotropic and devoid of sensory content. They are oriented toward emptying. Kataphatic mystical experiences are ergotropic and involve activity. They are oriented toward images and can involve hallucinations and visions.¹⁰⁰ More simply stated, "meditative techniques fall into two categories. There are passive approaches, in which the intention is to clear the mind of all conscious thought, and active approaches, in which the goal is to focus the mind completely on some object of attention—a mantra, for example, or some symbol or scriptural verse."¹⁰¹ Focusing on a crystal or stone would be another example of an active approach, while gazing into the darkness of a hat would be passive. The similarities between these descriptions of mystical experiences and the earlier descriptions of induction techniques for alternate states of consciousness are obvious.

Mystical experiences vary, depending on the mystic's religious tradition, but they tend to share the following four characteristics. They are (1) *ineffable*—the experience cannot be described in words; (2) *noetic*—they give insight into deep truths; (3) *transient*—these mystical states cannot be sustained for long periods and generally last from a few seconds to a few minutes; and (4) *passive*—the oncoming of mystical states can be induced through voluntary operations like meditation, but once established, the mystic feels out of control, as if he or she were grasped by a superior power.¹⁰² Additionally, mystical experiences are often characterized by strong, contradictory emotions such as terrifying fear and incredible joy.

There have been recent studies supporting the belief that when entering into ecstatic states, a certain part of the mind is quieted. In 2001, Andrew Newberg, M.D., and Eugen D'Aquili, M.D., reported the results of studies on Buddhists and Franciscan nuns who meditated and prayed. Using SPECT cameras (Single Photon Emission Computed Tomography), they were able to analyze brain func-

99. Gershom Scholem, *On The Kabbalah and Its Symbolism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1996), 5.

100. Robert K. C. Forman, "What Does Mysticism Have To Teach Us About Consciousness?" <http://www.imprint.co.uk/Forman.html>, 27 December 2002.

101. Andrew Newberg, M.D., Eugen D'Aquili, M.D., and Vince Rause, *Why God Won't Go Away: Brain Science and the Biology of Belief* (New York: Balantine Books, 2001), 117.

102. F. C. Happold, *Mysticism: A Study and an Anthology* (London: Penguin Books, 1990).

tion in their subjects while the subjects were in ecstatic states as a result of meditation and fervent prayer, respectively. What they discovered was that the posterior superior parietal lobe of the brain became unusually quiet during those periods when the subjects were in ecstatic states. This particular part of the brain is responsible for orienting individuals in physical space, and it helps us distinguish where we end and our surroundings begin. As Newberg and D'Aquili explain:

With no information flowing in from the senses the OAA (orientation association area) wouldn't be able to find any boundaries. . . . In that case, the brain would have no choice but to perceive that the self is endless and intimately interwoven with everyone and everything the mind senses. And this perception would feel utterly and unquestionably real.¹⁰³

The ultimate goal of most mystics is to achieve the *unio mystica* (mystical union), the ultimate union of the mind with the divine. Descriptions of this experience tend to emphasize the complete connection between, the intermingling of, the mystic and God. As one Sufi master reported:

I am He Whom I love, and He whom I love is I:
We are two spirits dwelling in one body.
If thou Seest me, thou seest Him,
And if thou seest Him, thou seest us both¹⁰⁴

The medieval Catholic mystic Meister Eckhart explained:

How then am I to love the Godhead: Thou shalt not love him as he is: not as a God, not as a spirit, not as a Person, not as an image, but as sheer, pure One. And into this One we are to sink from nothing to nothing, so help us God.¹⁰⁵

This is not the kind of God described by Joseph Smith in his official history. The God of Mormonism is discrete and separate, and Joseph Smith never claimed to have had a union with him. But as many researchers have pointed out, mystical experiences come in all shapes and sizes and with a variety of intensities. The Jewish Merkebah (Chariot) Mystics of the first and second centuries attempted through ecstatic ascents to see "the one who sits on the Throne,"¹⁰⁶ but did not attempt to unite with God. Kabbalah mystics seek an "intimate union" called *Devekut* (cleaving to God) but carefully distinguish *devekut* from complete unification.

103. Newberg et al., *Why God Won't Go Away*, 4-7.

104. cited in Newberg et al., *Why God Won't Go Away*, 102.

105. cited in *Ibid.*

106. Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah* (New York: Penguin Books, 1978), 16.

None of Joseph Smith's experiences with the plates or with Moroni could be categorized as an "experience of communion with Ultimate Reality." Joseph Smith's first vision was unarguably a communion with the divine, but not an *unio mystica*. In Doctrine and Covenants 137, Joseph describes his vision of the celestial kingdom and seeing the "blazing throne of God" in terms that would be the envy of any Merkebah mystic. He describes the heavens being opened and seeing the "transcendent beauty of the gate. . .which was like unto circling flames of fire. . .the beautiful streets. . .which had the appearance of being paved with gold." Most importantly, in verse 1 he says he "cannot tell" whether his vision was "in the body or out."¹⁰⁷ According to Joseph, this vision came to him while he was in the Kirtland Temple during administration of the endowment ordinances. The vision was apparently noetic, transient, and passive, but not necessarily ineffable.

Mystics who have experienced the *unio mystica* typically describe a universal, absolute reality that encompasses and accepts all religious beliefs. Religious intolerance, however, is based on the presumption of "exclusive" truth. Newberg and D'Aquili speculate that this form of intolerance "may rise out of incomplete states of neurobiological transcendence":

If religions and the literal Gods they define are in fact interpretations of transcendent experience, then all interpretations of God are rooted, ultimately, in the same experience of transcendent unity. This holds true whether this ultimate reality actually exists, or is only a neurological perception generated by an unusual brain state. All religions, therefore, are kin. None of them can exclusively own the realist reality, but all of them, at their best, steer the heart and the mind in the right direction.¹⁰⁸

The available evidence indicates that Joseph Smith's encounters with God, whether ecstatic or otherwise, were less than total union. Joseph Smith was not trained in mysticism as a Kabbalist or a Buddhist would be, and no one showed him the way to enlightenment. Whatever mystical states he attained would have come through his own abilities and/or through his experiences with magic.

David Steindl-Rast, a monk at Mount Savior Monastery in the Finger Lake Region of New York, who has also practiced Zen with Buddhist masters and holds a Ph.D. in psychology, explains the process by which the mystic attempts to make sense of his mystical experience and how that leads to the formation of new doctrine:

How does one get from mystic experience to an established religion? My one word answer is: inevitably. What makes the process inevitable is that we do with our mystical experience what we do with every experience, that is, we try to understand it;

107. Similar wording can be found in 2 Cor 12:2-3 and 3 Nephi 28:14-15.

108. Newberg et al., *Why God Won't Go Away*, 165.

we opt for or against it; we express our feelings with regard to it. Do this with your mystical experience and you have all the makings of a religion. This can be shown.

Moment by moment, as we experience this and that, our intellect keeps step; it interprets what we perceive. This is especially true when we have one of those deeply meaningful moments: our intellect swoops down upon that mystical experience and starts interpreting it. Religious doctrine begins at this point. There is no religion in the world that does not have its doctrine. And there is no religious doctrine that could not ultimately be traced back to its roots in the mystical experience—that is, if one had time and patience enough, for those roots can be mighty long and entangled.¹⁰⁹

However, mysticism is inevitably held suspect by established religions,¹¹⁰ and the vocal mystics—the ones who try to explain their experiences and, thus, find their places in the history of religion—inevitably come into conflict with established religion. Whereas some mystics like St. Theresa or Moses de Leon manage to remain within their traditions, the most radical of the revolutionary mystics aspire to establish a new authority based on their own experience. As we will see in the next section, these people are usually referred to as prophets. Mohammed, Joseph Smith, Mary Baker Eddy (founder of Christian Science), and Ellen Harmon White (founder of the Seventh-day Adventists) were all prophets, but as we will see, mystics and prophets are closely related and their roles often overlap.

Prophets base their teachings on the claim of personal revelation from the supernatural rather than from the study and interpretation of a preexisting theology.¹¹¹ It shouldn't be surprising that they feel free to invalidate the literal or historical meanings of the scriptures of their respective traditions and replace them with their own mystical interpretations.¹¹² Joseph may have been deliberately deceptive when he claimed that the Book of Mormon was an ancient work, but like other mystic/prophets before him, he would have felt inspired by God to do so. *The Zohar*, the primary literary work in Kabbalah, is a prime example. *The*

109. David Steindl-Rast, "The Mystical Core of Organized Religion," *Council for Spiritual Practices*, 5 July 2001, <http://www.csp.org/experience/docs/steindl-mystical.html>.

110. Joseph Blenkinsopp, *A History of Prophecy in Israel* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 38. Blenkinsopp quotes I. M. Lewis, who said, "The more strongly based and entrenched religious authority becomes, the more hostile it is towards haphazard inspiration. New faiths may announce their advent with a flourish of ecstatic revelations, but once they become securely established they have little time or tolerance for enthusiasm. For the religious enthusiast, with his direct claim to divine knowledge, is always a threat to the established order (I. M. Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion* [Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1971], 29).

111. Victor W. Turner and Edith Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, Lectures on the History of Religions Series, 1978), 81-82, cited in Richley H. Crapo, *Anthropology of Religion: The Unity and Diversity of Religions* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2003), 221-22.

112. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 13-14.

Zohar (The Book of Splendor) first appeared in Spain around 1275. There is very little question that the book was written by the Spanish mystic Moses of Leon over a period of approximately twenty years. The book is pseudepigrapha, falsely attributed to the third-century Talmudist Simeon ben Yohai.¹¹³ The doctrines expounded in *The Zohar* were initially given added weight and credibility because they were believed to have come from an ancient and respected source. Joseph Smith may have similarly felt that the truths he was conveying would be better received if they seemed to come from an ancient source.¹¹⁴

The third theory—that Joseph Smith's practice of magic inadvertently unlocked the door to the world of religious mysticism—differs from the first theory primarily with regard to Joseph's motives. This last theory does not require a belief in magic or the paranormal, but it does require a belief in the altered states of consciousness that accompany mystical states, as verified by Newberg and D'Aquili, and it also requires a belief that Joseph Smith had at least one such experience. Joseph's ecstatic experience(s) may have been the call he needed to begin creating new doctrine, and the Book of Mormon was his response. This final theory is far simpler than the second theory, and it accounts for as many, if not more, of the known facts than the first two. Unlike the first theory, however, this one would explain why Joseph remained so committed to his chosen path.

Section 3: *Becoming a Prophet*

Behold there shall be a record kept among you, and in it thou shalt be called a seer, a translator, a prophet, an apostle of Jesus Christ, an elder of the church through the will of God the Father, and the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

—A Book of Commandments, 22:1

Regardless of which translation theory is correct, if indeed any of them are, Joseph Smith was fated to become a prophet in the eyes of some members of his society once the Book of Mormon was published, although it's questionable whether he knew this at the time. To understand why, we need to explore what a prophet is and what is required to become one.

In his book, *Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel*, Robert R. Wilson surveys a wide range of anthropological studies and then defines a variety of terms commonly applied to prophetic figures. His list includes Prophets, Shamans, Witches/Sorcerers, Mediums, Diviners, Priests, and Mystics, and he considers

113. Karen Armstrong, *A History of God: The 4,000 Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1993), 247; see also Gershom Scholem, ed., *Zohar: The Book of Splendor, Basic Readings from the Kabbalah* (New York: Schocken Books, 1977), xii-xxi.

114. Compare this to Robert M. Price, "Prophecy and Palimpsest," *Dialogue: a Journal of Mormon Thought* 35, no. 3 (Fall 2002): 67-82.

each a specialty with titles that often overlap and distinctions that are not always clear.¹¹⁵ According to Wilson, most anthropologists avoid using the word "prophet" in reference to modern religious specialists because of the inevitable biblical comparisons and also because the word is ambiguous even in its biblical context.¹¹⁶

"Prophet" comes from the Greek *prophetes*, meaning one who "speaks forth" or "proclaims" the message of a deity.¹¹⁷ In ancient Greece "the prophet" was a member of the temple staff whose office was to interpret the ecstatic and unintelligible utterances of the priestess of Zeus or the Pythia respectively.¹¹⁸ It was substituted for a variety of Hebrew words during the translation of the Greek Septuagint. As Wilson explains, "The Septuagint translators thus apparently did not distinguish the various types of Israelite prophetic figures but applied to all of them the title "prophetes," which the translators must have understood as a general term capable of characterizing diverse religious specialists."¹¹⁹ The Jewish scholars who translated the ancient Hebrew apparently chose to emphasize the more controlled aspects of religion by using *prophetes* over similar words like *mantis* or *manteuomai* which connote an ecstatic element.¹²⁰ The closest Wilson comes to defining "prophet" is to say that a prophet, along with mediums and diviners, are "religious specialists. . .concerned with proclaiming and interpreting divine messages and on occasion with speaking about the future," and that all three "provided means by which people could contact the gods."¹²¹ For simplicity, he combines the prophet, shaman, medium, and diviner together to form a set he refers to as "intermediaries," because they all "serve as intermediaries between the human and divine world." He deliberately omits priests because of their unique religious function in the maintenance and operation of the cult.¹²² "Prophets, shamans, witches, mediums, and diviners," he informs us, "can also be priests if they have regular cultic roles in their societies," and "priests can on occasion function as diviners, prophets, or mediums."¹²³ He likewise omits mystics, which he defines as someone who has a "temporary union with divine reality," because anthropologists rarely use the term and because mystics are "frequently unwilling or unable to verbalize their experience and often have no clearly defined religious role

115. Wilson, *Prophecy and Society*, 22-28.

116. *Ibid.*, 22.

117. *Ibid.*, 22-23.

118. Blenkinsopp, *A History of Prophecy*, 27. This ancient practice of utterance and interpretation is a cognate of the early Mormon practice of speaking in tongues and the interpretation of tongues, a practice that has vanished from Mormonism in spite of its inclusion in the 7th Article of Faith, but is still practiced in some Pentecostal religions.

119. Wilson, *Prophecy and Society*, 23. See also 23n4.

120. Blenkinsopp, *A History of Prophecy*, 27.

121. Wilson, *Prophecy and Society*, 22-23.

122. *Ibid.*, 26-27.

123. *Ibid.*, 27.

within their societies."¹²⁴ Based on these definitions, we see Joseph Smith as a diviner when he was guiding treasure quests. He was both diviner and mystic-medium when he translated the book of Mormon. After the church was founded, he became diviner, prophet-medium, and priest. He may have had ecstatic or mystical experiences during any of those periods, and he was an intermediary during all of them.

In his chapter "Prophecy in Modern Societies," Wilson summarizes the social prerequisites of intermediaries, the mechanisms of intermediation, and the making of an intermediary. Before I summarize his findings, I should point out that Joseph Smith and Mormonism are not mentioned in this book, nor does the book refer to any of Smith's contemporaries. The focus is on ancient Israel, but the author could just as easily have been referring to the Burned-over District of the 1830s.

The social prerequisites of intermediation are: 1) a belief in the reality of a supernatural power or powers; 2) a belief that those powers can influence earthly affairs and can in turn be directly influenced by human agents; 3) a positive view toward the intermediaries' actions (the activities of the intermediary need to be either encouraged or at a minimum tolerated); and 4) societal conditions require the services of an intermediary. All four social prerequisites are evident throughout Joseph Smith's career. His services as a diviner, for example, were in demand because his society believed in the reality of subterranean spirits that controlled slippery treasures. The society's acceptance of magic attests to its belief that those powers can be directly influenced by human agents; its acceptance of Joseph and others as diviners reveals a positive view toward intermediaries; and as everyone knew, a successful treasure hunt required the services of a seer. As Joseph transformed from diviner to prophet, the same prerequisites held true, but his target audience was seeking salvation instead of lost treasure.

Wilson further elaborates on the conditions that favor the development of intermediaries:

Intermediaries are often found in societies undergoing stress and rapid social change. Sudden economic reversals, wars, natural disasters, and cross-cultural contact can all lead to social instability. Under such conditions a society may seek to restore its equilibrium by renewing its contacts with the supernatural world. Intermediaries may have a role in this process, and if so, their numbers will increase as social conditions deteriorate. The converse is also true. As social conditions become more stable, the need for intermediaries lessens, and their numbers are likely to decrease."¹²⁵

¹²⁴. Ibid.

¹²⁵. Wilson, *Prophecy and Society*, 31.

Compare the quote above to the following description of Joseph Smith's environment:

The situation throughout the union was unsettled and things were extremely fluid in this period when all America seemed to be streaming westward after the Revolution. A new physical universe was there to contend with. A new and somewhat uncertain political system existed and Americans had to operate within it. The bases of social order were in a state of disarray, and as a result of the nation's having cut its ties with England and her history, a clear lack of grounding in the past was evident. . . [U]ncertainty placed in jeopardy the religious dynamic that for centuries. . . had passed from one generation to the next a body of unquestioned information about divinity, humanity, the system of right relationships that created the social order, and the nature of experience after death.¹²⁶

It is not by accident that upstate New York and the western frontier were the birthplaces to scores of new religions.

The section of Wilson's book dealing with the making of intermediaries should be of great interest to students of Joseph Smith. Wilson explains, "It is popularly believed that individuals become intermediaries by virtue of possessing certain religious, psychological, or social characteristics. People who have these characteristics are thought to develop naturally, even inevitably, into intermediaries."¹²⁷ But not all charismatics, mystics, etc., become intermediaries, so other developmental factors must be considered. In fact, intermediaries tend to share certain social characteristics: "For the most part, these people play peripheral roles within their societies prior to becoming intermediaries and sometimes belong to an oppressed or minority group. Although they may have social status, they have little actual social, political, or religious power."¹²⁸ Additionally, the transformation process is more likely to occur in individuals undergoing a personal crisis, severe stress, or uncertainty about their proper social role. People have been known to become intermediaries as a response to unbearable family tensions. In possession societies, the initial experience of the intermediary often occurs at puberty. Parallels to the life of Joseph Smith are obvious. According to Joseph's own story, he was a young boy, fourteen years old, and uncertain about which religion to join. His family was facing not only a religious crisis, but also a financial one, having just lost their family farm. Joseph was able to receive some social status for his abilities with his peepstone, but the family was clearly marginal, poor, and powerless.

In the same way that Mormons believe Joseph Smith was "called" to become a prophet by direct divine intervention, most societies that support intermediaries

126. Jan Shipps, *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 33-34.

127. Wilson, *Prophecy and Society*, 46.

128. *Ibid.*.

believe they are the result of supernatural action. "Spirits or deities choose their own intermediaries," writes Wilson, "either by granting them a mystical experience of some sort or by possessing them directly. In the former case the person's spirit leaves his body during a trance or during a dream and travels to the supernatural realm, where the spirits inform him of his future vocation."¹²⁹

When Joseph Smith first delivered the news that he'd had a vision of God, he received no support outside his own family. His community was unwilling to accept him as a religious intermediary, which left him to complain, "Why does the world think to make me deny what I have actually seen? For I had seen a vision; I knew it and I knew God knew it, and I could not deny it."¹³⁰ Only after he produced the Book of Mormon did his community have a means to evaluate his prophetic calling. There were plenty of "diviners" in the neighborhood—people claiming the ability to find water or lost items or even treasure. But a restored ancient scripture was something of a different magnitude. Joseph Smith's translation of the Book of Mormon helped him appear as someone with truly exceptional supernatural powers. In effect, it gave him the charisma necessary to become accepted by society in his new role.¹³¹ Of course, many still rejected him and his book, but others were accepting because its message was consistent with their internally held beliefs. The Book of Mormon struck a resonant cord, and followers eagerly responded to its message.

With the founding of the new religion, and with followers behind him, Joseph had completed the transition from diviner to mystic to prophet/priest. The end result was a vastly improved social status for him and his family, regardless of whether this had been his goal. He now had support within a small, devoted, and growing group. However, tensions quickly increased between the group and the larger community. An intermediary, explains Wilson, can survive within a small support group as long as he or she doesn't generate too much conflict within the larger society.¹³² The church's relocations to Ohio, Missouri, Illinois, and Utah, were a result of the tension caused by the larger society's unwillingness to accept Smith's message or his status as a prophet. Joseph's eventual martyrdom was the result of those continued conflicts. He was not by any means the first prophet to become a martyr, and his death may actually have helped the church survive. According to Wilson, "Once the leader has begun the process of group formation and has sketched a program for the group to follow, his actual physical presence within the group is no longer necessary for its successful growth. History is full of examples of charismatic leaders who were

129. *Ibid.*, 49.

130. Joseph Smith, Jr., et. al., *History of the Church*, 1:7-8.

131. Max Weber defines charisma as a "certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities" (*The Theory of Social and Economic Organization* [New York: Free Press, 1964], 358-59).

132. Wilson, *Prophecy and Society*, 68.

martyred or who simply disappeared early in the process of group formation. In many cases these leaders became more effective catalysts after their departure than they were before."¹³³

Today the Mormon church is no longer a marginal sect. It has wealth, power, prestige, and wants nothing more than to be considered a world religion. It's not by accident that the more mystical aspects of Mormonism have all but vanished. Prophets start new religions among marginalized, powerless peoples, and once those people gain control of their situation, the charismatic element is regularized or eliminated in favor of organization and control. Today's prophets, seers, and revelators—the ordained apostles who lead the church—do not speak in tongues or use divining rods, and Joseph's seerstone is safely tucked away in the First Presidency's vault. Only on rare occasions have LDS leaders added to the official canon. From an organizational viewpoint, that is as it should be. Joseph Smith lived in a time and place where magic and religion often co-existed harmoniously and where religious leaders and magical practitioners could be one and the same. But even then, as soon as Joseph Smith found himself in a position of power, he began the process of distancing himself from his magical roots. (Hence, the absence of these elements from his later official accounts.) Over the years, the Mormon church has attempted to increase that distance. Mysticism is almost non-existent in the modern church, and in fact, it is now the church that marginalizes its more mystical members. History shows that after the mystically inspired founders of new religions pass on, their followers begin to canonize. Commentaries are piled on top of commentaries on top of the original doctrines, each layer moving the brave new religion farther away from its mystical core. From the mystic's point of view, this is regrettable. To quote Steindl-Rast, "[L]ive doctrine fossilizes into dogmatism."¹³⁴

In truth, however, the Correlation Department of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is, from an anthropological perspective, the predictable result of the church's growth and success. A young, poor, and marginalized Joseph Smith would most likely be as uncomfortable today with the church he founded as he was with the established denominations of his time. Then, a confluence of societal conditions created an opportunity for a deprived but genial young man with a background in magic to reinterpret and recast the scriptures and change the history of American religion. To understand how that happened—how a boy became a prophet—one must surely take into account his treasure hunting, his knowledge and use of magic, the connection between magic and the creation of the Book of Mormon, and how these things led almost unavoidably to the establishment of a new religion. Magic opened a door for Joseph Smith into the world of religious mysticism and, as a tool for producing the Book of Mormon, may have set him on the path to becoming a prophet.

133. *Ibid.*, 79.

134. Steindl-Rast, "The Mystical Core of Organized Religion."