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Book of Mormon Translation Concerns

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Chapter 3

Book of Mormon Translation Concerns

15) *Joseph Smith used a rock in a hat to translate the Book of Mormon.*

Answer: The Lord speaks in the “language” and “understanding” of His children. To Joseph Smith, the Nephite Interpreters (see Ether 4:5) were like his seer stone (Joseph and other early members referred to the Interpreters as the “Urim and Thummim,” but this association is not made in the Book of Mormon—you can read more about it [here](#)). One (the Nephite Interpreters) is a rock *out of a hat*, the other (the seer stone) is a rock *in a hat*.

The Lord used the tools available to Joseph Smith to reveal the text of the Book of Mormon. Joseph, and some other religious people in his vicinity and time, believed that the ability to “see” in a seer stone was a gift from God. God used Joseph’s “language” as a tool whereby Joseph Smith could translate the ancient text. Is a translation from a rock in a hat any less miraculous than a translation from a rock outside of a hat? Does putting the rock in the hat automatically void revelation from God?

While it may seem strange to us in the 21st century that someone could look into a rock and see the translation of a text, it really only matters if Joseph Smith believed it—which he did. Technically there is nothing special about the seer stone—it’s a rock. Technically, there is nothing special about the water in a baptismal font—it’s still H₂O. There is nothing scientifically different about the water that can wash away the sin of the one being baptized.

Unlike Roman Catholics, Latter-day Saints do not believe that the bread and water of the sacrament undergoes a chemical change when it is blessed. It’s still bread and water. Scientifically, the emblems of the sacrament are no different than the left over bread in the plastic wrapper or the water droplets in the sink that remain after filling the sacrament cups.

When Richard Dawkins said that one of his prized possessions is a first edition of Darwin’s *Origin of the Species*, we can rest assured that chemically there is nothing different with this particular copy than a newer edition or facsimile copy of the first edition. What makes a house more special because Elvis once slept there? What makes a piece of gold, flattened and formed into a circle, more valuable to the owner if it happens to be a wedding ring? Why is the wedding veil worn by your grandmother more valuable to you than to someone else if it ended up at a Good Will store?

When the sun rises on any Sunday morning, do gravity and light magically change as soon as the day transitions from Saturday to Sunday? Nope, it’s often the same as the day before or the day after. It becomes a special day for Christians because of what the day symbolizes, not what it has become in any physical sense. What makes August 12 more important than August 11, or August 13? It’s my birthday (and don’t forget to send a Face Book birthday wish!). The day may not be important to you, but it’s important to me. The seer stone, the baptismal water, and the bridal veil don’t change on their own, they change according to their *owner*.

Joseph Smith believed in what today's "enlightened crowd" might call "magic" (and, as noted above, even the staunchest of today's atheists still, even if unconsciously, believe in some version of "magic" as well). In Joseph Smith's day/circle a seer stone was viewed as a manifestation of God's power (it still is in some circles). God knew what Joseph Smith believed and what would work for him, because God knew Joseph's "language." The seer stone was just the right tool—similar enough to the Nephite Interpreters—to provide the crutch needed for Joseph to receive revelation.

Remember the movie *Dumbo*? Remember the feather? Timothy the mouse convinced Dumbo that the magic feather gave Dumbo the power to fly. By the end of the movie, Dumbo realized that he could fly without the feather. For those of you in the younger generation who haven't seen the movie—shame on you. Go rent it (and you can see a clip about the feather [here](#)). Near the end of Joseph Smith's life, Joseph gave up the seer stone and told Orson Pratt that he didn't need it anymore—he could receive revelation without it.

I recognize that comparing Joseph's use of a seer stone to Dumbo's feather may sound sacrilegious. Critics will chuckle, and believers might feel a bit offended, but the truth is that Walt Disney didn't make up the concept of empowerment. It's a natural and unavoidable part of human (and apparently cartoon elephant) psychology. An inanimate object can act as a symbol of power and help a person achieve their goals. Psychologists often utilize this principle in behavioral therapy. While the Dumbo feather analogy may sound foolish, childish, naïve, magical, or even blasphemous, it shows, once again, how God works through humans by accommodating His directives to *our* language. He knows how humans think and process information, and He uses our deficiencies to bring forth eternal truths.

And if men come unto me I will show unto them their weakness. I give unto men weakness that they may be humble; and my grace is sufficient for all men that humble themselves before me; for if they humble themselves before me, and have faith in me, then will I make weak things become strong unto them (Ether 12:27).