

# Knowing Brother Joseph Again: The Book of Abraham and Joseph Smith as Translator

*Karl C. Sandberg*

No man knows my history.

Joseph Smith

Millions shall know Brother Joseph again.

Mormon hymn

THE ORIGINAL PROBLEM PROMPTING THIS ESSAY occurred improbably more than twenty years ago as I was sifting through the four *in folio* volumes of Pierre Bayle's 1697 *Dictionnaire historique et critique* in search of something else and came upon his articles on biblical personages. Bayle, a Huguenot refugee and Calvinist controversialist writing in Holland from 1680 to 1704, was one of the most erudite men of his time and had apparently encountered the Hebrew Cabala and the rabbinical tradition during his exile in Rotterdam. Here in his article on Abraham was information with a familiar ring: Sarah was Abraham's niece; Abraham was exceptionally well educated, was an astronomer, and opposed the idolatrous religions among which he was raised; he was therefore persecuted, and his life was threatened by idolaters; and a book about Abraham existed anciently that gave an account of the creation.

All of this information was familiar because it was also found in the Book of Abraham (Joseph Smith's rendition of ancient papyri, begun in 1835 and published in 1842), but it was not found in Genesis. What could account for Pierre Bayle's dictionary in the Book of Abraham, or vice versa?

The problem took another turn when Joseph Smith's papyri, which had been missing and presumed lost for eighty to ninety years, resurfaced in 1967 and were examined and translated by Egyptologists. One fragment of papyrus was identified as the ostensible source of the Book of Abraham, but it bore no relationship to the Book of Abraham either in content or subject matter (Heward and Tanner 1968, 93-98; Parker 1968, 98-99). This discovery

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raised more questions: What *is* the Book of Abraham, and what is to become of the concept of Joseph as translator?

The issue was complicated further by a more careful reading of the text of the Book of Abraham itself. It contains some information about Abraham found in Genesis and some information contained in extra-biblical sources but not in Genesis. The most significant parts of the book, however, the concepts that make it one of the prime source documents of Mormon theology, are original, with no apparent source in any previous document or tradition. Yet the text exists, and Joseph produced it. All this might lead us to ask: What went on in Joseph's mind when he produced the Book of Abraham? What kind of person was he? What kind of religion did he launch? And what *did* Joseph mean when he said, "No man knows my history"? The problem became that of "knowing Brother Joseph again."

Ezra Pound's verse might appropriately be applied:

Oh, they'll not get him in a book,  
Though they write it cunningly,  
No mouse of the scrolls was the goodly fere  
But a man o' men was he.  
*The Ballad of the Goodly Fere*

Before we can have any hope of getting Joseph Smith into a book or, more specifically, understanding the religion he channeled and informed, many more pieces must be put into place. One key piece is the concept of "translation" as he understood and practiced it. Understanding this process and, in particular, the role of stones, symbols, and documents in it, will enable us to see the turn of his mind, which cast the character of Mormonism with its paradoxes of the rational and the revelatory, of the intelligible and the numinous, and ultimately of the institutional and the individual.

This argument has several strands, which will have to be developed separately.

## I

A new look at Joseph might begin by trying to see him as he saw himself, from the inside out.

On 6 April 1830, at the inception of the Church, a revelation given through Joseph Smith instructed him that in the record to be kept in the new church, he, Joseph, should be called "a seer, a translator, a prophet, an apostle of Jesus Christ" (D&C 21:1). In 1835, in the description and definition of the offices of the two priesthoods, the presiding high priest of the Church is characterized as being "a seer, a revelator, a translator, and a prophet" (D&C 107:92). On 19 January 1841, three years before Joseph's death, his brother Hyrum was designated as "a prophet, and a seer, and a revelator unto my church, as well as my servant Joseph" (D&C 124:94), but to Joseph it was given "to be a presiding elder over all my church, to be a translator, a revelator, a seer, and a prophet" (D&C 124:125). It seems clear that Joseph consistently thought of himself as a translator and did not think of himself as a seer or a prophet separate and apart from his role as a translator. It is perhaps significant that

neither of the two major biographers of Joseph Smith (Fawn Brodie and Donna Hill) assign great importance to this unusual self-perception.

What is translation?

Translation as ordinarily practiced in our time and culture starts with a document in language A and ends with the creation of a document in language B. The language in document A will work on the levels of denotation, connotation, register, and discourse as determined by the culture in which it was produced. Translation, then, is a process of understanding the document in language A and finding the words and the structures in language B that express the document's denotations, connotations, register, and discourse in culture B. For a translation to be completely accurate, the reading of the document in language A must be so exact that it excludes all possible meanings but one, and the rendition into document B must be correspondingly exact. The ideal translation is the slave of the original, adding nothing and taking nothing away.<sup>1</sup>

The check on the accuracy and adequacy of the translation is always rational and consists of rereading document A to see how appropriately and adequately the entire content and range of expression of A is re-expressed in B. Translation does not require a special gift; it can be performed by anyone with a knowledge of two languages and can always be checked by anyone who knows both languages.

Joseph Smith did not think of translation in these terms. We can save ourselves much rumination if we accept at the outset that Joseph Smith never did document-to-document translation based on a knowledge of two languages, except as an exercise in his Hebrew class in the winter of 1835–36. Five major articles have appeared in the past nine years detailing the historical circumstances of Joseph Smith translations, and all solidly establish that many times during the translation of the Book of Mormon he was not even looking at the plates. Doctrine and Covenants 7 comes from a parchment hidden up by John the Revelator and “translated” by Joseph and Oliver through the Urim and Thummim without the parchment being physically present. When Joseph translated the Old and New Testaments, he made no claim to be consulting Greek or Hebrew manuscripts—he simply revised the substance (Van Wagoner and Walker 1982; Ostler 1987; Lancaster 1983; Ashment 1980; Ricks 1984). Only the Book of Abraham has an original document to compare with the translation, and the original and the translation show no relationship to each other.

The fact is that Joseph Smith and those of his time and milieu used the term “translation” in a way far different from any in use today. (The contrast between Joseph Smith's culture of the 1830s and our own can be seen in some measure by the immense disparity in the use of the term.) Michael

<sup>1</sup> A translation in this sense is seldom more than approximate. Matthew Arnold maintained that no one had ever adequately translated Homer—one translator may have captured his swiftness but not his nobility; another may have captured his nobility but not his plainness. On the other hand, Fitzgerald's translation of Omar Khayam into English is accounted by many who know both languages to exceed the quality of the poetry in the original, and Fitzgerald, not Omar Khayam, is credited as the poet of the *Rubiyat*.

Quinn points out, for example, that even in encyclopedias of the 1830s Egyptian “characters” and hieroglyphics (cf. the “reformed Egyptian” of the Book of Mormon) were thought to be occult symbols to be deciphered or interpreted by an arcane art now entirely lost (1987, 151–52). The word “translation” itself needs to be translated from one culture into another.

How then did Joseph Smith himself understand the term “translation”?

Here we are not in doubt, for the Book of Mormon speaks very directly about translation, and the process is not one familiar to the Translation Department in the Church Office Building today. When the brother of Jared is commanded to write the things that he has seen and heard and to seal up the record in a language that others, coming later, will not be able to “interpret,” he is also commanded to hide up two stones he has received, stones which “shall magnify to the eyes of men these things which ye shall write” (Ether 3:21–28, 4:5).

A more detailed account appears in Mosiah 8:5–19, where King Limhi asks Ammon if he can “interpret languages.” An exploring party has come across records kept on metallic plates by a people that has since disappeared, and the king wants to know the cause of their destruction. Ammon says that he cannot interpret but that he knows someone who can, a man who “can look, and translate all records that are of ancient date; and it is a gift from God.” The aids this man uses are “called interpreters, and no man can look in them except he be commanded, lest he should look for that which he ought not and he should perish. And whosoever is commanded to look in them, the same is called a seer” (v. 13).

When the king exclaims that a seer is greater than a prophet, Ammon explains that a seer is indeed a prophet and also a revelator, because “a seer can know of things which are past, and also of things which are to come, and by them shall all things be revealed, or rather, shall secret things be made manifest, and hidden things shall come to light, and things which are not known shall be made known by them, and also things shall be made known which otherwise could not be made known” (v. 17). The interpreters were, in fact, prepared for the specific purpose of “unfolding all such mysteries to the children of men” (v. 19). These interpreters are elsewhere identified as stones (Mosiah 28:13).

In a subsequent passage, Alma instructs his son Helaman to preserve the twenty-four plates because they contain the record of the secret works and abominations and wickedness of the people that had been destroyed and to preserve the interpreters along with them. The record will be read in effect by a stone, which “shall shine forth in darkness unto light” (Alma 37:23) and by which the Lord will “bring to light all their secrets and abominations, unto every nation that shall hereafter possess the land” (37:25). The one who has this high gift of God is called a “seer,” and by virtue of this gift, the greatest of all possible gifts of God, is also a “revelator” and a “prophet” (Mosiah 8:16).

*Translation, as understood in the Book of Mormon, is the gift of seeing hidden things, both good and evil, and making unknown things known. It is*

*carried out or made possible through the use of physical objects — stones which enable the user to see what is hidden and thus to describe it and bring it to light. Translator is synonymous with seer. The capacity of revelator and the status of prophet derive from seership.*

When the seer translates, he does not go from document to document, because part or all of the original document has been lost or is in an unknown language. He must go back to the original source of the document, to God, and get the reading from him. Translation thus derives from a keenly perceived connection with the numinous, and through this connection come statements that we call revelation.

Here the term “numinous” calls for some clarification.

The concepts of the empirical, the rational, and the intelligible, to which the numinous stands in contrast, are easily understood. We know a thing when we can measure it, or when our uncertainty about it is reduced to zero, or when we can see it in relation to other known things. When we speak of the numinous, however, we are talking about the stuff of religious or creative experiences, about forces that are experienced as real but that remain unseen. They engage, entice, attract, illuminate, or move us to act but cannot be measured or analyzed. We may be gripped by them, moved by them, lifted up or cast down by them, but however much we try to encompass them by thought, something always escapes. They are experienced as indefinitely large and ultimately mysterious. They cannot be delimited except to say that they are as large as the stove, the table, the cupboard, and quite a bit more besides. In the realm of religion they manifest themselves in the experiences of conversion or of mysticism, as William James, for example, so clearly and abundantly describes in his classic *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902). In modern psychiatry, these experiences are tapped by deep analysis. They might be referred to, as in Jungian psychology, in terms such as the “anima” or the “shadow” or the “unconscious” (Jung 1964, 72–73, 88). Nonetheless, no description of the forces of the numinous or unconscious is ever more than partial. Experience with them is real but subjective.

If, then, the experience of the numinous is subjective and cannot be observed directly, how much can we say about the translation process Joseph went through? How did he do it?

We can start by just looking. Had we been present in the room at the time as practicing empiricists, we would have said Joseph was translating with stones. William Smith, Joseph’s brother, in 1891 told of having seen the “interpreters” — two stones set in a bow — and having looked into them. For William they did not work, because translation was a gift, one he did not have (Ostler 1987, 103). It was these two stones that Joseph used to produce at least part of the first 116 manuscript pages of the Book of Mormon, the pages Martin Harris lost. When Joseph started to translate again, he did not use the interpreters, but a stone he had found while digging a well in 1822. When Joseph translated, he put the stone in his hat, put his face far enough into the hat to exclude light, and then dictated. This same stone was the medium through which he received a number of revelations through 1829,

some of which were published in the Book of Commandments in 1833. On a number of occasions, the plates were not physically present or, if they were, Joseph did not look at them as he translated. (Detailed descriptions of the translation process appear in Van Wagoner and Walker 1982, 50–55; Ostler 1987, 103–5; Lancaster 1983, 52–56; Ashment 1980, 11–13; Ricks 1984, 1–6.)

But we can recognize the shortfall in empirical observation when we want to add, “Yes, but how did he really do it?” For we have to say either that something else was going on inside Joseph that we do not get at by observation, that the stones possessed some causal quality (they were “magic spectacles”), or that the book (in the case of the Book of Mormon) does not exist.

We can take a step closer to understanding Joseph Smith’s mind and spirit by looking at his translation process from two different but complementary perspectives.

The first is that of Jungian psychology. It is fair to say that no figure of the twentieth century has done more than Jung (1875–1962) to describe the breadth and sound the depths of the human unconscious. How does that which is latent and formless within an individual emerge and take on a form? The way that the analyst or the individual makes contact with the deep well of the unconscious is often through the medium of a concrete object. Jung gives the example of one of his analysands who had taken a long train ride in Russia. “Though he did not know the language and could not even decipher Cyrillic script, he found himself musing over the strange letters in which the railway notices were written, and he fell into a reverie in which he imagined all sorts of meanings for them.”

The incident was revealing for Jung in that it showed him that one could reach the center of the psyche “from any point on the compass. One could begin with Cyrillic letters, from meditations upon a crystal ball, a prayer wheel, a modern painting, or even a casual conversation about some trivial event” (1964, 11). Or, we might add, a stone. And it is informative to learn that in Joseph’s milieu stones were often used as means of locating lost objects,<sup>2</sup> but it is even more informative to note that Jung and his associates, in describing psychic phenomena empirically in Africa, in North and South America, and

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<sup>2</sup> When the report went around the countryside that Joseph was on the trail of hidden plates of gold, many of the local citizenry believed in the plates’ existence as much as Joseph did and, according to the account of Lucy Mack Smith, sent some sixty miles for a conjuror to come and help them locate the plates. Joseph was nonetheless able to forestall them because he carried the Urim and Thummim around with him, and they warned him when the plates were in danger (L. M. Smith 1853, 102–4).

In another example, after Joseph had obtained the plates and had hidden them temporarily in a box in the cooper’s shed, “a young woman by the name of Chase, sister to Willard Chase, found a green glass, through which she could see many wonderful things, and among her great discoveries she said she saw the precise place where ‘Joe Smith kept his gold bible hid.’” Evidently the glass worked just fine, for the mob went to the exact place she indicated, tore up the floor, and found the box in which she had seen the plates. Fortunately, Joseph had had an intimation of danger and had removed the plates from the box, hidden them in another place, and had replaced the box as before (L. M. Smith 1853, 108–9).

For David Whitmer the stone even became the test of the authenticity of revelations — it was after Joseph stopped using the stone and started to give revelations by his own mouth that he began to trust in the arm of flesh and to drift into error (Whitmer 1887, 12).

in Asia, conclude that stones have been and are a universally recurrent means of contact with the divine power (von Franz 1964, 227). Joseph's translation process by a stone was strange but, from a more universal vantage point, not altogether unusual.

The second perspective comes from comparing the self-description that poets, musicians, mathematicians, inventors, and painters have given of the creative process they have experienced with the self-description that Joseph gives of his translation process. The two kinds of experiences turn out to be remarkably similar.

In an introductory essay to an anthology of accounts of artistic and scientific creation, Brewster Ghiselen describes the recurring patterns that can be observed in the creative process. It begins with an awareness that something has gone wrong which needs to be set right. The artist first experiences an extreme dissatisfaction with the existing order of his or her inner world. Some problem or experience has troubled the waters, perhaps bringing with it a sense of unrealized potential (1952, 12) or an initial "commerce with disorder" (p. 13). Time is out of joint. The creative power, an extension of the life force, overreaches and finishes breaking down the established order and then reorganizes it out of the "surging chaos of the unexpressed" (p. 14). The finished product often includes items not found originally.

The process also appears to be spontaneous and automatic, as a seemingly independent force guides the work. Mozart often found appearing in his mind whole musical ideas, which he then worked into their orchestrated form. When he wrote them down, he appeared to be taking dictation from the muse (Ghiselen 1952, 44-45). Picasso, walking through the forest of Fontainebleau, might have had an "indigestion of greenness" (p. 59), which he would have to resolve into a form and later translate into a painting that appeared to take shape spontaneously on the canvas. "At the beginning of each painting," says Picasso, "there is someone who works with me. Toward the end I have the impression of having worked without a collaborator" (p. 57). The mathematician Poincaré had the experience during a sleepless night of seeing all of his ideas about the solution of a particular problem "colliding" and working themselves out to a solution, which he had only to write down the next morning, he himself serving, as it were, as scribe to his ideas (p. 16). And Max Ernst describes his own creative experiences as resembling the poet who is "writing at the dictation of something that makes itself articulate within him." Just so, "the artist's role is to gather together and then give out that which makes itself visible within him" (p. 65). The artist no less than the prophet is a seer.

This same process was at work with Joseph Smith. After a long period of indeterminacy during his adolescence caused by the status of his family and the tensions and divisions in the family over religion, the contentions and uncertainties with regard to religion among the churches, and the anxiety over his personal follies and shortcomings (JS-H 2:5-10; Groesbeck 1988, 22-29), the elements of his experience came together in something greater than the sum of its parts. Certainly he experienced a gestation period of deep and earnest thought that he later associated with revelation: "The things of God

are of deep import; and time, and experience, and careful and ponderous and solemn thoughts can only find them out. Thy mind, O man! if thou wilt lead a soul to salvation, must stretch as high as the utmost heavens, and search into and contemplate the darkest abyss, and the broad expanse of eternity — thou must commune with God” (in J. F. Smith 1976, 137). For Joseph also, the experience of revelation, a gift that could be cultivated by anybody, was sudden and illuminating. It was the feeling of “pure intelligence flowing into you, it may give you sudden strokes of ideas . . . you may grow into the principle of revelation” (1976, 151).

What was the role of the stone in this process? We may surmise that for Joseph the stone was a catalyst — because of his belief in the stone and his attunement to the world of the numinous, or the unconscious, where unseen powers moved, collided, contended, danced, and held their revels, the stone became the means of concentrating his psychic energies and giving them form. When the translation of the Book of Mormon began, it appeared to be automatic, even given by dictation, as Oliver Cowdery describes it: “These were days never to be forgotten — to sit under the sound of a voice dictated by the inspiration of heaven, awakened the utmost gratitude of his bosom! Day after day I continued, uninterrupted to write from his mouth, as he translated with the Urim and Thummim, or, as the Nephites would have said, ‘Interpreters,’ the history or record called the ‘Book of Mormon’ ” (*Times and Seasons* 2 [1 Nov. 1840]: 201).

But let us recognize that having said this much we still have not said the essential. We cannot say precisely how we got the theory of relativity, or the Ninth Symphony, or the Koran, or such recent claimants of divine revelation as the Urantia Book or the Course in Miracles.<sup>3</sup> The stone, and indeed all experiences with the numinous and the creative, remain a scandal to the analytical mind. Even Oliver, who shared in the intensity and exultation of the translation process, said on another occasion, “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 the plates, though the ‘Urim and Thummim’ and the plates not be in sight at all” (Van Wagoner and Walker 1982, 51).

But as important as the stones are for understanding Joseph as seer, they are even more important for understanding Mormonism because of two unexpected results which derived from them, for we inevitably ask whether any check exists on this kind of subjective translation, which seemingly plucks the new book out of the air. What will keep the translator from simply making up what he wants? What will keep the reader or believer, in Jonathon Swift’s phrase in his *Tale of a Tub*, from “the possession of being well deceived, the calm and serene state of being a fool among knaves”? It was in natural response to this question that one of the paradoxes of Mormonism appeared. We

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<sup>3</sup> The Urantia Book, published by the Urantia Foundation (Chicago, 1955) is a history of the past and future of this planet (Urantia), with a life of Jesus, the whole being given by a corps of revelators appointed to this purpose. A Course in Miracles, published by The Foundation for Inner Peace in 1975, was dictated by an inner voice to its author, or recipient.



would be making a gross error in interpreting Joseph and Mormonism if we did not recognize that the stones, those seeming instruments of the magical world, brought with them the dichotomous elements of institutional authority and of rationalism.

The institutional test came early as egalitarian revelations threatened the cohesion of the community of saints in late 1830 and early 1831. Hiram Page, a brother-in-law to David Whitmer and one of the eight witnesses of the Book of Mormon, also had a seer stone and received revelations with it concerning the building up of Zion. Joseph had a revelation in September 1830 saying that "No one shall be appointed to receive commandments and revelations in this church, except my servant Joseph Smith, Jun., . . . For all things must be done in order, and by common consent in the church, and by the prayer of faith" (D&C 28:2, 13). In other words, revelation was to be subjected to an institutional test. The ideas of common consent and the prayer of faith provided for the participation of individual members in ratifying revelations, but the burden of the message was that any individual revelation was subject to established institutional authority.

The test by individual reason, however, had come even earlier. While on the one hand the process of translation appeared to be entirely subjective and automatic to some of those surrounding Joseph (all their lives David Whitmer and Martin Harris believed Joseph saw English words under the unknown characters when he looked into the stone), Oliver Cowdery had the opposite experience. Assisting Joseph as a scribe, Oliver believed so much in the marvelous process of translation that he wanted to translate, too, apparently assuming the process to be automatic. When he tried and failed, it was explained to him that translation is also a process of studying the subject out in one's own mind, getting an idea, and having an inward confirmation (D&C 9:7-9). Significantly, Lucy Mack Smith remembered Joseph as being the least bookish of her children but the one most inclined to "meditation and deep study" (1853, 84). The process of translation involves the intellect, and the end result is propositional and rational.

In May 1831, another revelation came to Joseph giving him the key for discerning which revelations came from God and which did not: "He that preacheth and he that receiveth, understand one another, and both are edified and rejoice together. And that which doth not edify is not of God, and is darkness. That which is of God is light; and he that receiveth light, and continueth in God, receiveth more light; and that light groweth brighter and brighter until the perfect day" (D&C 50:22-24). The same test is also implied within the Book of Mormon in Alma 32. The test of the goodness of the seed, the word, is whether it sprouts, grows, and brings forth increase.

The test of revelation and of translation is understanding and intelligibility, the congruence of "hidden things made known" with a growing body of understanding, coupled with a pragmatic confirmation of their goodness or futility in one's life. Revelation and translation depend upon the understanding and experience, and thus upon the reason, of the recipient for their verification.

This invitation to reason and learning quickly broadened. Whereas the Book of Mormon had been offered to the world almost as an act of defiance — the sealed book that the learned could not read (Whitmer 1887, 11–12) — in another eighteen months revelation would enjoin the Saints to seek out and read the best books that the learned could read (D&C 88:77–80, 118–19). Both divine and human enlightenment tasted good and were seen as being served from the same abundant table.

The spirit of this commandment was fulfilled in the *Messenger and Advocate* (published in Kirtland from 1834 to 1837), which included not only doctrinal discussions but articles on such topics as Roman history, and in the School of the Prophets, where some forty participants gathered to “teach each other diligently” and even engaged a learned Jew, a professor Joshua Seixas, to teach them Hebrew. This growing stream of Mormonism culminated in the Thirteenth Article of Faith, which states that all truth from whatever source is a part of the religion, to be sought out and possessed.

What can we conclude, then, about translation as Joseph knew it? The word “translation” comes to embody and express the central tension in Mormonism. In the Joseph Smith experience with translation, the primary contact was not with the contents of a document but with the mind of the seer, which determines what the document should say. The seer is the one who makes contact with the deep, mysterious, and powerfully moving parts of the soul or historical milieu and sees into them in such a way as to transform them, to give them form, and to bring them to light, so that they may be examined, analyzed, and tested experientially. The “seer” brings the numinous into the realm of the intelligible, where its content becomes authoritative but at the same time subject to analysis and examination, and may be — must be — tested by reason and experience (without the process of its production necessarily being understood). The tension between the rationalism of the Enlightenment and the supernaturalism of the frontier milieu, which Bushman describes (1984, 7–8, 71–72), appears to be only one aspect of the deeper paradox and tension within Joseph Smith himself, a condition that remained constant in him throughout his life and in the church he founded through the present time. Mormonism is a two-winged bird whose wings do not always flap in unison.

## II

We can move still closer to understanding Joseph by seeing another paradox of his personality, expressed by the respective roles of stones and symbols in his mental processes. As we come to see the role of symbols, we can begin to see the structure of Joseph’s individual works and the progressions in his work as a whole. In seeing the structure of his works, we can see the progressions of his mind, and we thus obtain an indispensable key for understanding him and his work.

To reiterate, the stone<sup>4</sup> represented and was a means of Joseph’s direct contact with the numinous. As a child of his times, he held to the efficacy of the

<sup>4</sup> The term “Urim and Thummim” apparently did not appear in any publication before 1833, when W. W. Phelps associated the stones or interpreters with the Old Testament prac-

stone in the process of translation: it made known what was hidden. In the early 1830s, while translating (revising) the New Testament, he came upon John 1:42, which in the King James version reads, "And when Jesus beheld him, he said, Thou art Simon the son of Jona: thou shalt be called Cephas, which is by interpretation, a stone." Joseph rendered the verse: "And when Jesus beheld him, he said, Thou art Simon, the son of Jona, thou shalt be called Cephas, which is, by interpretation, a seer, a stone" (Edwards 1970, 23).

In the Book of Abraham, produced between 1835 and 1842, we learn that it was through the Urim and Thummim that Abraham gained his ideas of the heavens, the planets, and the eternity of intelligences (Abr. 3:1, 4). In 1843 Joseph declared,

The place where God resides is a great Urim and Thummim. This earth, in its sanctified and immortal state, will be made like unto crystal and will be a Urim and Thummim to the inhabitants who dwell thereon, whereby all things pertaining to an inferior kingdom, and all kingdoms of a lower order, will be manifest to those who dwell on it; and the earth will be Christ's. Then the white stone mentioned in Revelation 2:17, will become a Urim and Thummim to each individual who receives one, whereby things pertaining to a higher order of kingdoms will be made known. (D&C 130:8-10)

Although Joseph stopped using the seer stone sometime early in 1830 and gave it to Oliver Cowdery, he apparently possessed several similar stones throughout his life (Van Wagoner and Walker 1982, 59-61; Quinn 1987, 195-204).<sup>5</sup>

Nonetheless, as Joseph came into contact with book learning, symbols (going from the visible to the intelligible) came to play an increasingly important role in his revelations and appear to have had an even more pervasive influence on the form, content, and production of his revelations than stones had.

Jung's notion of symbols is especially appropriate: "Man, as we realize if we reflect a moment, never perceives anything fully or comprehends anything completely . . . [therefore] we constantly use symbolic terms to represent concepts that we cannot define or fully comprehend." A word or anything immediate or visible is symbolic "when it implies something more than its obvious and immediate meaning. It has a wider 'unconscious' aspect that is never precisely defined or fully explained. Nor can one hope to define or explain it. As the mind explores the symbol, it is led to ideas that lie beyond

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tice of inquiring of the Lord through Urim and Thummim (Van Wagoner and Walker 1982, 61). The reference to translation by the Urim and Thummim in D&C 10:1 differs from the same revelation in the 1833 Book of Commandments. D&C 17, where the term is used, was not published until 1835.

<sup>5</sup> I must mention in passing that the notion of the seer and the use of physical objects as prompts to or media of inspiration were not restricted to the "magical world view" or the burned-over district of the American frontier. In the age of Romantic inspiration, when William Blake was having his mystical visions and Swedenborg in the manner of a seer was laying bare the correspondence of the natural and spiritual orders, characters in Balzac novels expatiated freely on phrenology, Goethe composed poetry while holding the skull of Schiller, and Victor Hugo, the poet-seer, consulted the spiritualistic mediums on the island of Jersey. The rationalism of the Enlightenment was momentarily awash.

the grasp of reason" (1964).<sup>6</sup> People are generators of symbols, and symbols are generators of ideas.

In a 1988 *DIALOGUE* article, Anthony Hutchinson associated the LDS creation narratives of the Book of Moses and the Book of Abraham with the literary form of midrash, interpreting an original text by translating, embellishing, or adding to it. The relationship of symbols to the creative process shows how a midrash might be produced.

If we examine the texts produced by Joseph Smith, a common pattern emerges. First, there is a symbol: a fact, an image, or an experience that expresses a sense of a mystery, or something that has been lost or hidden. At the same time, the symbol becomes a catalyst, pointing to something beyond itself with a hint, idea, or suggestion from which Joseph leaps to ideas and whole systems that emerge entire and new, bypassing a pedestrian plodding from premises to conclusions. The symbol thus sets loose a flood of information, ideas, and connections that go far beyond the initial question and end by establishing a new cosmic context. Joseph's translations are thus never slave to an original document; they always start with a symbol and add something that was not there before. The new revelation becomes another metaphor, the starting point for yet another revelation. In this process, we see another dimension of the idea of "continuing revelation" and another fundamental characteristic of Joseph's mind to be taken into account by any future biographer.

Michael Quinn describes in great detail the symbols of the magical or arcane in Joseph's milieu and with which Joseph was familiar (1987, 97-111). I find no evidence that they moved Joseph to produce much text. Symbols of a different order, on the other hand, did move his mind powerfully and resulted in the primary revelations shaping later Mormon theology. Two of several such symbols<sup>7</sup> can be cited from Joseph Smith's translation of Genesis, undertaken sometime in 1830 and finished by 1833 (Edwards 1970, 15).

The first was the figure of Enoch. Prior to December 1830, as Joseph said later, "much conjecture and conversation frequently occurred among the saints concerning the books mentioned, and referred to in various places of the Old and New Testament, which were nowhere to be found. The common remark was, they were *lost books*; but it seems the apostolic churches had some of these writings, as Jude mentions or quotes the prophecy of Enoch, the seventh from Adam. To the joy of the flock . . . did the Lord reveal the following doings of olden times from the prophecy of Enoch" (in Edwards 1970, 8).

It is not impossible that Joseph had heard of a translation of the lost Book of Enoch — one had been available since 1821 (Quinn 1987, 172) — but what is significant is the way in which he responded to the symbol. The one

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<sup>6</sup> The Jungian paradigm with its concepts of the unconscious, the animus and anima, the shadow, and individuation offers rich possibilities for understanding Joseph which are beyond the scope of this present essay.

<sup>7</sup> A more complete study of Joseph before 1830 would have to include the symbols of Israel, including the lost ten tribes, of Zion, and of the curse (which figures so prominently in the Book of Mormon and the Book of Moses). A study of Joseph in Nauvoo would have to include the symbols of Masonry.

verse in Jude becomes sixty-nine verses in Genesis 7 of the Inspired Revision or Moses 7 in *The Pearl of Great Price*, expressing new and large ideas about the nature of Zion and the character of God, as Enoch walks and talks with God and sees in panoramic vision the end of the world and God's judgments.

Enoch, having grown prominent as a symbol in Joseph's mind, in turn appears to have led to another symbol, Melchizedek, who in turn becomes the generator of new ideas about the priesthood. When Joseph began his revision of Genesis and came to the account of Abraham offering tithes to Melchizedek, Melchizedek and the priesthood he held were associated with Enoch and described in terms that do not occur in any of Joseph's previous revelations. We learn that Melchizedek was a man of faith who as a child feared God, stopped the mouths of lions, and quenched the violence of fire. "And thus, having been approved of God he was ordained an high priest after the order of the covenant which God made with Enoch. . . . For God having sworn unto Enoch and unto his seed with an oath by himself, that everyone being ordained after this order and calling should have power, by faith, to break mountains, to divide the seas, to dry up waters, to turn them out of their course; to put at defiance the armies of the nations, to divide the earth, to break every band, to stand in the presence of God" (JST, Gen. 14:26, 27, 30, 31).

We are already here far beyond any concept of priesthood elaborated in the Book of Mormon, where the role of priesthood is seen simply as the performance of rituals and ordinances. We are well on our way toward D&C 84 and D&C 132, where the priesthood is seen as the key to knowledge and the channel of power and increase. (Joseph Smith said several times that he had restored the fullness of the Church, the priesthood, or the gospel, but the character of revelation was such that the fulness never got full — there was always something else to be added [Beurger 1983, 22, 24]. Joseph's translation of Genesis was really part of the gathering theological flood that was sweeping through and changing everything, including the political and social order, in its course.)

To these two examples we can add D&C 76, dated 16 February 1832. Joseph and Sidney were working on translating the Gospel of John — again without recourse to Greek texts — and again Joseph sensed that "many important points touching the salvation of man had been taken from the Bible, or lost before it was compiled" (HC 1:245). Again, he appealed directly to God, the original source — "this caused us to marvel, for it was given to us of the Spirit" (D&C 76:18) — and the result, again, was a new cosmic context in which the recipients of celestial glory "are priests of the Most High, after the order of Melchizedek, which was after the order of Enoch, which was after the order of the Only Begotten Son" (v. 58). Those who come into the celestial kingdom are those who "have come to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of Enoch, and of the Firstborn" (v. 67). The symbols of Enoch and Melchizedek have become part of a larger cosmic order, much more elaborate than in the Book of Mormon but still considerably less elaborate and comprehensive than in D&C 132.

The next great symbol in Joseph's development was Abraham.

## III

The Book of Abraham, begun in 1835 and published in the *Times and Seasons* in 1842, stands at midpoint among the source documents for the elaboration of Mormon theology. There is, in fact, a clear progression in the expansion of the concepts of the nature of God, humans, priesthood, and salvation from the Book of Mormon (1829) through Joseph Smith's translation-revision of the Bible (1830–33), D&C 84 and 88 (1832), the Book of Abraham (mostly 1835–36), and D&C 121 (1839) to D&C 132, the temple ceremony, and the King Follet discourse (1842–44). Among Joseph Smith's revelations, the Book of Abraham serves as a prime source for the doctrines of the premortal existence of human spirits and the plurality of Gods, stands as a halfway house in the movement toward plural marriage, and marks a stage in the development of statements about priesthood as the key to knowledge of God.

In 1835 a Michael Chandler exhibited in Kirtland some Egyptian mummies and papyri, which members of the Church bought from him. Joseph Smith said, "I began the translation of some of the characters or hieroglyphics [of these papyri], and much to our joy found that one of the rolls contained the writings of Abraham, another the writings of Joseph of Egypt — a more full account of which will appear in its place, as I proceed to examine or unfold them" (HC II: 235–36). In the current LDS edition of the Book of Abraham, the book is presented as "a Translation of some ancient Records, that have fallen into our hands from the catacombs of Egypt. — The writings of Abraham while he was in Egypt, called the Book of Abraham, written by his own hand, upon papyrus."

Since resurfacing in 1967, having been missing and presumed lost for some eighty to ninety years, the papyri have been examined and translated by Egyptologists. As previously indicated, the fragment of papyrus identified by some as the ostensible source of the Book of Abraham bears no relationship to the Book of Abraham either in content or subject matter (Heward and Tanner 1968, 93–98; Parker 1968, 98–99). On the other hand, LDS Egyptologist Edward Ashment has suggested that it is not certain that Joseph Smith considered he had gotten the Book of Abraham from the papyri — he may have "received a revelation comprising the Book of Abraham [and] tried to match his revealed text with the *snsn* text in an effort to decipher Egyptian hieroglyphics" (1979, 44). In either case, there is a problem. Either Joseph's translation is in error, or there is no translation as we currently use the term.

Let us explore the latter possibility. The Book of Abraham does not fit with modern ideas about translation. It is not a document-to-document translation; Joseph got it wrong about the papyri having been written by the hand of Abraham. The English text nonetheless fits precisely with the pattern of translation as the restoring of things lost or the unfolding of things not known. The production of the book involves symbols that moved Joseph's mind to a vastly greater cosmic context.

The first stimulus seems to be the expanding ideas of Abraham and the priesthood, which derive from Joseph's previous revelations. The second stimu-

lus is his contact with Hebrew, which by powerful coincidence Joseph began studying during the winter of 1835–36, shortly after he became deeply engrossed in the Egyptian papyri. The third stimulus is extra-biblical lore about Abraham, which Joseph encountered at about this same time.

Joseph's encounter with Hebrew has been carefully studied by Louis Zucker (1968), who describes the circumstances of the class, the qualifications of Professor Seixas, and the effect that Hebrew had on Joseph's thinking and revelations, especially on his revelation of the Book of Abraham. The presence of Hebrew words in the text (for example, the names of the sun, moon, stars, and firmament) can easily be accounted for by referring to Professor Seixas's grammar book. (These Hebrew terms are not important for adding ideas to the book, but they are important for showing that Joseph's mind was occupied with Hebrew.)

Not so easily explained is something quite different and more significant: other Hebrew words are used and carried far beyond their bare meaning into the elaboration of a new concept. The word *gnolaum* for example, is a noun form that may also be used as an adverb; but it is used by Joseph as an adjective in elaborating a doctrine of the premortal existence of spirits: "Yet these two spirits . . . shall have no beginning . . . no end, for they are *gnolaum*, or eternal" (Abr. 3:18). The word *Elohim*, which is a plural form consistently interpreted as a singular by Jewish commentators, becomes the springboard for a polytheistic theology in chapters 4, 5, and 6, departing from the strict monotheism of the Book of Moses and of Abraham 1, 2, and 3. Zucker then gives a very insightful comment: "It has not been my intention to imply that Joseph Smith's free-handling of Hebrew grammar and the language of the Hebrew Bible shows ineptitude. . . . I simply do not think he wanted to appear before the world as a meticulous Hebraist. He used the Hebrew as he chose, as an artist, inside his frame of reference, in accordance with his taste, according to the effect he wanted to produce, as a foundation for theological innovations" (1968, 51–53). In a more recent essay, Michael Walton makes the same points and emphasizes the influence of Joseph's Hebrew studies on the syntax and key words of the Book of Abraham (1981, 41–43). Joseph worked as an artist, taking familiar material and transmuting it into something new and larger. Translation, then, is transmutation.

The third stimulus working in Joseph's mind was the extra-biblical information on Abraham. The problem initially prompting this essay, that of establishing a link between Joseph Smith and this material, was solved bit by bit but turned out to have only secondary significance. Joseph had access to information about Abraham through three identifiable sources: two learned Jews (Joshua Seixas and Alexander Neibaur) and Josephus, with whose writings, especially the *Antiquities of the Jews*, he was almost certainly familiar.

Joshua Seixas, the teacher engaged to teach a ten-week course of Hebrew at the School of the Prophets in Kirtland, was a learned and devout Jew, as evidenced by his authorship of a manual of Hebrew grammar to "promote the best of all studies, the study of the Bible" (Zucker 1968, 6). It has sometimes come as a surprise to Bible-bound Christians that all the extant information

about Abraham was not included in Genesis but has always been available to anyone learned in the rabbinical schools and traditions (as Joshua Seixas certainly was), since these traditions form an intrinsic part of the Jewish study of the scriptures.

We know from Professor Zucker's article that on at least one occasion (6 March 1836), Joseph went alone for instruction in Hebrew (1968, 46) and that on two other occasions (7 and 8 March), the "first class" translated chapters 17 and 22 of Genesis, both of which deal with Abraham (1968, 47). It is not unlikely that the Jewish professor had occasion before, during, or after these sessions to mention or describe other information about Abraham.

Another possible source of information about Hebrew traditions was Alexander Neibaur, the first Jewish convert to Mormonism. He had studied in a Jewish rabbinical seminary and was familiar with Jewish philosophers and commentators. He settled in Nauvoo in 1841, became friends with Joseph, and was close enough to him to become a sometime German tutor to him. The Book of Abraham appeared in *Times and Seasons* in the spring of 1842, after Neibaur's arrival.

A more immediate and demonstrable source is Flavius Josephus (A.D. 37–ca. 100) in whose writings the same lore appears. His *Antiquities* was translated into English in 1737, and a copy of the 1794 edition was in Joseph Smith's hometown library (Quinn 1987, 263); but we need not speculate about a direct link. As we skim over the pages of the *Messenger and Advocate* for December 1835, whom do we find quoted at length by Oliver Cowdery but . . . Josephus! (p. 234) And the reference is to the part of the *Antiquities* corresponding to Genesis. We cannot escape the conclusion that Josephus was read and talked about in Kirtland in 1835. And since Josephus lays out this extra-biblical lore in such matter-of-fact detail and abundance, it seems reasonable to assume that Joseph Smith's already keen sense that much in the scriptures had been lost and needed to be restored may have been quickened, even to restoring more than was in Josephus.

Having said that much and having established the strong likelihood that Joseph did encounter the learning of the rabbinical tradition, we still have not explained the Book of Abraham, for its most striking characteristics are not in what is familiar, but in what transforms and transcends the familiar to the point of becoming original. The Book of Abraham is, in fact, an elaboration of the idea of priesthood as the key to knowledge, passing through Joseph's new learning, and ending with a new picture of the cosmos.

Abraham 1:26–27 has most often been read as a statement of the relative status of the white and black races, but in the context of the whole chapter these verses seem to be more a statement about the superiority of Abraham's priesthood, with its knowledge and keys to knowledge, compared to the learning of the Egyptians. Abraham is first portrayed as a seeker after knowledge, and his attainment of great learning is connected in a novel way with his "appointment unto the Priesthood" (Abr. 1:2–4). The learning of the Egyptians, as recounted in the rabbinical tradition, is reflected in the Book of Abraham in Pharaoh's having received "the blessings of the earth, with the blessings



of wisdom.” But the superiority of Abraham and of the priesthood emerges as Pharaoh is cursed as to the priesthood (Abr. 1:26), which also accounts for the idolatrous imitation of the priesthood among the Egyptians (1:6–27). That this cursing was not merely a manifestation of nineteenth-century racism is shown by the fact that Pharaoh, who was cursed as to the priesthood, is depicted in facsimile 3 as being white.

Again, in Josephus, the study of astronomy causes Abraham to become the first monotheist. In the Book of Abraham, Abraham’s study of astronomy leads to the vision of the heavens (given through the Urim and Thummim!), and from there Joseph takes us to a discussion of the eternity and therefore the premortal existence of spirits or intelligences, the purpose of earthly existence, the appointment of a redeemer and the revolt in heaven, and the creation of the earth and its life forms by a multiplicity of gods under the direction of one supreme God.

The Book of Abraham, in sum, reflects Joseph’s first contact with substantive learning outside of the strictly biblical tradition in the study of Hebrew and the rabbinical tradition that attends it. This learning seems to have acted on his mind, along with his fascination with the papyri and mummies, in the same way that symbols and seer stones previously had. It served as a catalyst to “the gift of seeing” in the quantum leaps of revelation. The Book of Abraham is not the product of a document-to-document translation, but it fits exactly with the pattern of the seer-as-translator, unfolding what was hidden and expanding the symbol to the larger concept. For its authenticity the book depends not on a previous document but rather on its own internal merits.

We can feel the tug of the tide carrying us forward to 1842 and Joseph’s encounter with the symbols of Masonry, likewise transformed and carried to new meanings, and the further symbol of Abraham as the polygamous patriarch, ending with the transformation of humans into eternally increasing and creating gods. However, we must leave these latter themes undeveloped and must recognize as well that the themes we have examined are susceptible to deeper probing and analysis (for example, the process of Joseph’s translations, which might be clarified still more by Jungian views on the relationship between symbols and creativity). We must conclude with a statement of the premises and conclusions of this essay and their implications for Mormon belief and for new biographical light on Joseph Smith.

The first implication concerns the nature of revelation.

The tidying up of Mormonism over the past century or so has resulted in two views of revelation. One sees revelation as divine dictation to which a passive recipient makes no contribution, perhaps pausing even in mid-revelation to ask, “Would you mind spelling that word?” The recipient may be changed by the revelation, but the revelation is not limited by the culture nor changed by the life experiences of the recipient — it arrives pure and unsullied, as with a letter brought by a postman. David Whitmer had such an idea of the translation process of the Book of Mormon, believing Joseph saw letters and whole words through the seer stone and then simply dictated them to the scribe (1887, 12). According to this view, as revelations are collected, their parts

are interchangeable and their authority is equal: a verse from I Samuel 11 is just as valuable and binding as a verse from the Doctrine and Covenants or the Sermon on the Mount.

Such finalized revelation is a precondition to the construction of a dogmatic theology, one that can give definitive answers and cast the last stone. A dogmatic theology is a closed system. The first item on its agenda is authority, and the practical focus it yields for the religious life is obedience to this authority.

In the other view, the revelator is a prism shaped by his or her culture and life experiences. The light of the revelation is changed by the recipient, whose effort, study, and contribution are indispensable. The revelation reflects and in important ways is limited by the cultural context of the recipient, even while transcending it in others. The parts of the revelation are all valuable but not interchangeable. A later revelation may even contradict an earlier one, while each retains its parcel of truth. The revelation is always continuing and progressive, never fixed and final, and always partial.

In 1835, for example, had we asked for an absolute and final answer to the question of the number of personages in the godhead, the Lectures on Faith would have told us, "Two" (1963, 55). In 1843, we would have been told, "Three" (D&C 130: 22–23). In 1832, had we wanted to know what God was like, we would have been told that he was omnipotent and omniscient, and that he had always been that way ("Lectures" 1963, 37–38). In 1844, had we been present at the King Follet funeral discourse, we would have heard that God was once a man (J. F. Smith 1976, 345). We should therefore expect that a continuing revelation may well modify previous revelations and that one day we will see in a wider context everything that we now believe.

This kind of continuing and partial revelation, which includes all of Joseph's translations, does not allow the construction of a dogmatic theology. This kind of revelation can vitalize, but not finalize. The theology derived from it serves as point of reference, as something to think with, but the system remains open, and the first item on the religious agenda is the responsibility of the individual to choose what is important in the living of his or her life. The focus of the religious life is on individual initiative.

The second implication of the views in this essay derives from the first and relates directly to authority-based belief. The earliest anti-Mormon writers assumed that if they could link the Book of Mormon to a previous document (such as the Spalding manuscript) they could demolish the book's credibility. Pro-Mormon writers have assumed that if they could link the book with a previous document (such as the golden plates), the authority of the book would be established. Similarly, anti-Mormon writers have assumed that by severing the Book of Abraham from the papyri, they have settled the authority question, and some pro-Mormon writers have twisted every possible way to avoid those implications. In either case, the mind comes to rest on a document, yielding a binary mode of thought: either Joseph Smith was an infallible spokesman for God, or he was a fraud.

The mischief with this binary mode is twofold. First, it leaves unsettled the question of how the document, even if authentic, becomes an authority.

If the original manuscript of the Gospel of Mark, written in Mark's own handwriting, were discovered in a cave in upper Egypt, we would still have to resolve the question, for example, of whether Mark mistook epilepsy for demonic possession; we would still have to say why we believe that Mark got it right.

Second, the binary mode insulates us from, and in many cases causes us to miss, the contact with primary religious questions. To the extent that I base my life on an authority *out there*, the authority becomes responsible for me. As that authority diminishes, I must perforce take more responsibility myself.

With the more detailed descriptions we now have of the production of the Book of Mormon and the Book of Abraham, the immediate and primary link of the resulting texts is with the mind of the seer and not with a document, and the question changes complexion. Maintaining an authority-based faith becomes more and more difficult. Ultimately, I believe, both books must stand or fall on their own intrinsic worth, on the religious value of their content, as do the Koran, the Bagavahd-Gita, the Urantia Book, and the Course in Miracles. In William James's phrase, they must be judged by their fruits, not their roots (1902), and individual responsibility in judging them then becomes total. No book becomes an authority by its origins, and all books become authorities to the extent, and only to the extent, of their yeast.

Could it be different? The Book of Mormon itself claims that it will be authenticated experientially and pragmatically, or at least that is how I understand Alma 32 and Moroni 10:4–5. The same test must also be applied to the Book of Abraham, as should the test enjoined since the beginning of Mormonism with regard to any supposed revelation: that which is light continues to increase in light, in congruence with a growing body of understanding. In the very terms of Mormon revelation, then, the translation or revelation cannot become an authority until it is completed and ratified in the mind and experience of the recipient.

As for "knowing Brother Joseph again," any new biography of Joseph Smith ought to include an account of his mind, at least to the extent that it can be known through the texts he produced. Much of the current intellectual energy of Mormonism is being spent on establishing context, and, while context is indispensable and will require us to think in new ways, it will nonetheless miss the essential quality in Joseph until it is joined with text, which shows what he did with his context.

In addition, if we wish to understand Joseph Smith better, we should think of him as a complex man embodying a number of paradoxes. Richard Cummings has described the many facets of "literal mindedness" as the quintessential Mormon way, rooting life in a very narrow and particular spot (1982, 93–102); but the genius of Mormonism, as expressed in the belief in a continuing revelation and in the Thirteenth Article of Faith, has nonetheless been to go beyond the literal and to accept no limit as permanent. In this paradox, Mormonism continues to mirror its first prophet, for Joseph Smith manifested a curious literal mindedness throughout his life, all the while reacting powerfully to symbols, which always carried him beyond the immediate and the

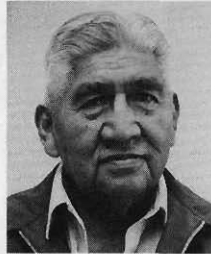
literal. A reductionist view, that he was "nothing but . . .," will miss this essential quality.

When we think of him as a translator, we should think of him as a seer, one who sees into the powerfully moving, unseen forces of the soul and the rest of the cosmos to give these forces form. The resulting translation becomes authoritative only as reason completes this retrieval from the unknown by finding light and coherence in it and by confirming it in practice. Thus, since its inception, Mormonism has embodied a dialectic and has been shaped by this tension between the revelatory and the rational and pragmatic. To be a Latter-day Saint aware of beginnings is to be left with the individual task of making sure that all of the foregoing gets translated correctly.

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Gauntleted gloves, rose design, Hazel and Wallace Zundel (Clearfield, Utah), 5½"×14", buckskin, glass beads, 1988; (Utah) State Art Collection.

