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KnoWhy #538 - Did a “Magic World View” Influence the Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon?

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Abstract: Did a "magic world view" influence Joseph Smith and the coming forth of the Book of Mormon? The Prophet never denied having once participated in folk practices during his youth, but, as this KnoWhy explores, claims that he was fundamentally influenced by "magical" beliefs is a misleadingly simplistic approach to a very complex topic.



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“Joseph with the Seer Stone” by Gary Ernest Smith via foursquareart.com

DID A “MAGIC WORLD VIEW” INFLUENCE THE COMING FORTH OF THE BOOK OF MORMON?

“Therefore, I will proceed to do a marvelous work among this people, yea, a marvelous work and a wonder.”

2 Nephi 27:26/Isaiah 29:14

THE KNOW

In an editorial published in July 1838, Joseph Smith responded to some common questions circulating about him and the beliefs of members of the restored

Church of Jesus Christ. One of the questions asked, “Was not Jo Smith a money digger,” meaning somebody who was hired to locate buried treasure. To this, the Prophet answered ironically, “Yes, but it was

never a very profitable job to him, as he only got fourteen dollars a month for it.”¹

This quip highlights one of the common questions many people have asked about Joseph Smith: how much did a “magic world view” influence the Prophet and his account of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon? Even in his own lifetime, Joseph faced accusations of being embroiled in superstition and “folk magic” from skeptical neighbors and adversaries.² Today historians debate the extent to which Joseph and his family participated in early nineteenth-century folk magic culture and what this participation may have meant for Joseph personally and as the leader of a new religious movement.³ Some have argued that the young Joseph was deeply influenced by this “magical” culture that saw legitimacy in the use of “magical” devices such as divining rods and seer stones. According to these scholars, the coming forth of the Book of Mormon can be seen, in part, as the direct result of Joseph participating in this “magic world view.”⁴

Others, however, have argued for a nuanced view that, for example, calls into question the common terminology (“magic,” “magical”) historians today use to describe the folk practices in which Joseph and the Smith family sometimes participated.⁵ The main problem with this language is that it is too easy to manipulate. As one scholar has written, “The plasticity of magic, its pliable and permeable nature, has made the concept readily adaptable as a polemical and ideological tool, especially when coupled with the long-standing stigma attached to the notion.”⁶

Still, others dispute that “folk magic,” as it is commonly defined, played any prominent a role in the foundational claims of Joseph Smith.⁷ Whatever the case, some practices, such as the use of crystals or other stones to channel miraculous visionary experiences, which some scholars call “magical,” were not necessarily seen by early nineteenth-century American Christians as incompatible with biblical faith or ordinary life.

“Seeing” and “seers” were part of the American and family culture in which Joseph Smith grew up. Steeped in the language of the Bible and a mixture of Anglo-European cultures brought over by immigrants to North

America, some people in the early 19th century believed it was possible for gifted individuals to “see,” or receive spiritual manifestations, through material objects such as seer stones.

The young Joseph Smith accepted such familiar folk ways of his day, including the idea of using seer stones to view lost or hidden objects. Since the biblical narrative showed God using physical objects to focus people’s faith or communicate spiritually in ancient times, Joseph and others assumed the same for their day. Joseph’s parents, Joseph Smith Sr. and Lucy Mack Smith, affirmed the family’s immersion in this culture and their use of physical objects in this way, and the villagers of Palmyra and Manchester, New York, where the Smiths lived, sought out Joseph to find lost objects before he moved to Pennsylvania in late 1827.⁸

According to this way of thinking, classifying certain practices as “magical” as opposed to “religious” runs the risk of imposing modern views on people of the pre-scientific past, when they may well not have conceptualized their behavior or activity in such a binary way.⁹ As Richard Bushman, one of Joseph Smith’s leading biographers, has recently observed, looking closely at historical folk practices, it is clear that for nineteenth-century Yankees, like the Smith family,

magic and Christianity did not seem at odds with one another. The combination was altogether too common in the nineteenth century for it to invalidate Joseph Smith’s more conventional religious claims. [For early Latter-day Saints] and for many Christians, folk traditions and religion blend. To call the two incongruous seems more like a matter of religious [or ideological] taste than a necessary conclusion.¹⁰

Or, as historian Wouter J. Hanegraaff has put it, there is no real meaningful distinction between “religion” and “magic” when writing about history. Any attempt to make this distinction “belongs to the domain of theological polemics . . . and cannot claim any scholarly foundation.”¹¹

Historians have also recently pointed out that the extent of Joseph Smith's involvement in folk magic during his youth, or at least the influence such had on the young seer, may have been exaggerated over the years due to authors uncritically repeating outdated or questionable arguments. As Bushman in 2016 has written,

At present, a question remains about how involved Joseph Smith was in folk magic. Was he enthusiastically pursuing treasure seeking as a business in the 1820s, or was he a somewhat reluctant participant, egged on by his father? Was his worldview fundamentally shaped by folk traditions? I think there is substantial evidence of his reluctance, and, in my opinion, the evidence for extensive involvement is tenuous. But this is a matter of degree. No one denies that magic was there, especially in the mid-1820s. Smith never repudiated folk traditions; he continued to use the seer stone until late in life and used it in the translation process. It certainly had an influence on his outlook, but it was peripheral—not central. Biblical Christianity was the overwhelming influence in the Book of Mormon and the Doctrine and Covenants. Folk magic was in the mix but was not the basic ingredient.¹²

This need for caution is illustrated in discussions of the use of seer stones in the translation of the Book of Mormon. It is evident from historical records that, in bringing forth and dictating the translation of the Book of Mormon, Joseph Smith used, at varying times in 1828 and 1829, either the Nephite Interpreters (later called the Urim and Thummim) or his personal seer stone that he had previously used in treasure seeking and other folk practices.¹³ The Prophet's use of seer stones in the translation of the Book of Mormon has been dismissed as “magical” and “superstitious” by some of his critics. Others have argued that the occasional mention or use of seer stones and other supernatural or miraculous devices in the Book of Mormon itself (e.g. the Liahona, Alma 37:38; Mosiah's seer stones, Mosiah 8:13–18; 21:28; Gazelem, Alma 37:23) indicates that the same “magic world view” which influenced Joseph Smith permeates throughout the text.¹⁴

However, in addition to the clear biblical (Judeo-Christian) precedent for the use of stones and other instruments as a means to channel divine power,¹⁵ the use of stones or crystals as instruments of revelation is a widely-documented practice. For example, such aids were used among the ancient and modern Maya of Mesoamerica in divination practices.¹⁶ Some Bible scholars believe that the biblical Urim and Thummim, which was worn by the high priest of ancient Israel, was a precious stone, and perhaps was used like the crystal balls and seer stones found in later European tradition.¹⁷ The argument that mentions of such stones or tools in the Book of Mormon *must* be a reflection of the supposed “magic world view” of Joseph Smith's early nineteenth-century American environment can therefore be reasonably questioned.

THE WHY

Repeatedly and insistently, Joseph Smith testified throughout his prophetic ministry that the Book of Mormon came forth and was translated by the gift and power of God. In his now-famous 1842 editorial titled “Church History,” for instance, the Prophet testified, “Through the medium of the Urim and Thummim I translated the [Book of Mormon] by the gift, and power of God.”¹⁸ Similar language appears in the preface to the 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon and in the appended “Testimony of Three Witnesses.”¹⁹ Whatever folk practices Joseph and his family may have participated in, especially in his younger years, the documentary record is crystal clear that the Prophet fundamentally saw his work in bringing forth the Book of Mormon and restoring the Church of Jesus Christ as a divine, sacred calling, not “magical” legerdemain,²⁰ even if it may have taken Joseph time and angelic tutelage to help him fully realize the significance of his prophetic calling.²¹

Of course, Book of Mormon prophets and authors themselves understood the coming forth of their words “from the dust” as a sign of God's miraculous power in the latter days (Moroni 10:27). Nephi, for instance, likened the words of Isaiah about the Lord doing “a marvelous work among this people, yea, a marvelous work and a wonder” to describe the coming forth and translation of the Book of Mormon in modern times (2 Nephi 27:26/Isaiah 29:14). This phrase from Isaiah (“marvelous work and a wonder”;

from the Hebrew root *pl'*; “extraordinary,” “wonderful,” “miraculous”) that Nephi drew upon acts as a parallelism that emphasizes how God would accomplish a work so remarkable and explanation-defying that it would confound the wisemen of Israel (“for the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the understanding of their prudent men shall be hid”). What better way to describe the inspired translation of the Book of Mormon by “an unlearned youth,”²² a feat which still today defies secular or naturalistic explanation.²³

Additional insight and more information on this topic may yet be forthcoming; for now, we indeed “know [only] in part” and still “see through a glass, darkly” (1 Corinthians 13:9, 12). As Bushman astutely observed, when encountering challenging information about the past, including the early life of Joseph Smith and the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, “we need to keep in mind that the wheels of history grind slowly, but they grind exceedingly fine. What seems central at one moment in time will lose force as the years go by.” Using specifically the example of Joseph Smith’s folk practices, Bushman recognized that with careful and more thorough scholarship “magic [has] moved to the sidelines over the years,” and thus wonders “will other issues be next? We should be careful about putting too much weight on the criticisms of the moment when it is uncertain how enduring they will be.”²⁴

FURTHER READING

Book of Mormon Central, “Were Joseph Smith’s Translation Instruments Like the Israelite Urim and Thummim?” *KnowWhy* #417 (March 20, 2018).

Book of Mormon Central, “Why Was a Stone Used as an Aid in Translating the Book of Mormon?” *KnowWhy* #145 (July 18, 2016).

Book of Mormon Central, “Why is a Seer Greater than a Prophet?” *KnowWhy* #86 (April 26, 2016).

Richard Lyman Bushman, “Joseph Smith and Money Digging,” in *A Reason for Faith: Navigating LDS Doctrine and Church History*, ed. Laura Harris Hales (Provo and Salt Lake City, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, and Deseret Book, 2016), 1–6.

Richard E. Turley Jr., Robin S. Jensen, and Mark Ashurst-McGee, “Joseph the Seer,” *Ensign*, October 2015, 49–54.

Kerry Muhlestein, “Seeking Divine Interaction: Joseph Smith’s Varying Searches for the Supernatural,” in *No Weapon Shall Prosper: New Light on Sensitive Issues*, ed. Robert L. Millet (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2011), 77–91.

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NOTES

1. *Elders’ Journal* 1, no. 3 (July 1838): 43. \$14 in the 1820s was the equivalent to between \$300–\$380 in 2019, depending on the year, as calculated at <https://www.officialdata.org/us/inflation>.
2. See the examples and discussion in J. Spencer Fluhman, “A Peculiar People”: *Anti-Mormonism and the Making of Religion in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 39–48.
3. For an important treatment on this subject, see Mark Ashurst-McGee, “A Pathway to Prophethood: Joseph Smith Junior as Rodsman, Village Seer, and Juedo-Christian Prophet” (Master’s Thesis, Utah State University, 2000).
4. D. Michael Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, 2nd edition (Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books, 1998); John L. Brooke, *The Refiner’s Fire: The Making of Mormon Cosmology, 1644–1844* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Richard S. Van Wagoner, *Natural Born Seer: Joseph Smith, American Prophet, 1805–1830* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Smith-Pettit Foundation, 2016).
5. Stephen D. Ricks and Daniel C. Peterson, “Joseph Smith and ‘Magic’: Methodological Reflections on the Use of a Term,” in “*To Be Learned is Good If...*,” ed. Robert L. Millet (Salt Lake City, UT: Bookcraft, 1987), 129–145; Ashurst-McGee, “A Pathway to Prophethood,” 40–44, 50–56; Brant A. Gardner, *The Gift and Power: Translating the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City, UT: Greg Kofford, 2011), 23–43.
6. Randall Styers, *Making Magic: Religion, Magic, and Science in the Modern World* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 9.
7. Stephen E. Robinson, review of *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View* by D. Michael Quinn, *BYU Studies* 27, no. 4 (1987): 88–95; William A. Wilson, review of *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View* by D. Michael Quinn, *BYU Studies* 27, no. 4 (1987): 96–104; Benson Whittle, review of *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View* by D. Michael Quinn, *BYU Studies* 27, no. 4 (1987): 105–121; John Gee, “‘An Obstacle to Deeper Understanding,’” *FARMS Review of Books* 12, no. 2 (2000): 185–224; William J. Hamblin, “That Old Black Magic,” *FARMS Review of Books* 12, no. 2 (2000): 225–393; William J. Hamblin, Daniel C. Peterson, and George L. Mitton, review of *The Refiner’s Fire: The Making of Mormon Cosmology, 1644–1844* by John L. Brooke, *BYU Studies* 34, no. 4 (1994): 167–181; Davis Bitton, review of *The Refiner’s Fire: The Making of Mormon Cosmology, 1644–1844* by John L. Brooke, *BYU Studies* 34, no. 4 (1994): 182–192;

- William J. Hamblin, Daniel C. Peterson, and George L. Mitton, "Mormon in the Fiery Furnace: Or, Loftes Tryk Goes to Cambridge," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 6, no. 2 (1994): 3–58.
8. Richard E. Turley Jr., Robin S. Jensen, and Mark Ashurst-McGee, "Joseph the Seer," *Ensign*, October 2015, 50.
 9. See the discussions in Kerry Muhlestein, "Seeking Divine Interaction: Joseph Smith's Varying Searches for the Supernatural," in *No Weapon Shall Prosper: New Light on Sensitive Issues*, ed. Robert L. Millet (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2011), 77–91; and Eric A. Eliason, "Seer Stones, Salamanders, and Early Mormon "Folk Magic" in the Light of Folklore Studies and Bible Scholarship," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 55, no. 1 (2016): 73–93. As Johannes Dillinger observes, "Treasure hunters invoked saints as well as demons who were supposed to help them find a treasure or simply bring them money. St Christopher became the patron saint of treasure hunters. Most treasures, it was believed, were watched over by ghosts. The idea of a wraith guarding a treasure belonged to a whole set of beliefs about the spirits of the dead doing penance or trying to fulfil certain tasks. Ghosts had to walk until a task that they had left unfulfilled in their lifetime was completed or until some guilt was expiated. The treasure's owner was guilty of the deadly sin of avarice. He might also have failed to give the treasure to a good cause or – in the case where it had been gained by unlawful means – to return it to its rightful owner. Thus, he had to come back as a ghost. The discovery of the treasure was in the ghost's own interest because this was a precondition for its redemption. *As treasure hunters helped the ghost to leave the visible world, treasure hunting could be presented as a godly deed and a Christian duty. The idea that the recovery of a treasure was an act of piety because it resulted in the redemption of a wandering soul was a genuine part of the motivation of many treasure hunters.* Even though learned Protestantism negated the existence of ghosts unconditionally, this attitude seems not to have had any effect at the popular level. . . . *The more emphasis was placed on the redemption of the ghost as a godly deed, the more important it became to prepare for this religious task through prayer and devotion.* At times, the treasure-hunting group acquired characteristics of a religious community, with the magician as its spiritual leader. In this role, he could wield considerable power over people who were his social superiors. Within such groups, the social and denominational differences between members lost some of their importance. *The treasure-hunting parties had characteristics of business enterprises as well as of religious congregations.*" Johannes Dillinger, *Magical Treasure Hunting in Europe and North America* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 205–207, emphasis added.
 10. Richard Lyman Bushman, "Joseph Smith and Money Digging," in *A Reason for Faith: Navigating LDS Doctrine and Church History*, ed. Laura Harris Hales (Provo and Salt Lake City, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, and Deseret Book, 2016), 4; cf. *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Urbana and Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 64–76; *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 46–52.
 11. Wouter J. Hanegraaff, "The Study of Western Esotericism: New Approaches to Christian and Secular Culture," in *New Approaches to the Study of Religion, Vol. 1: Regional, Critical, and Historical Approaches*, ed. Peter Antes, Armin W. Geertz, and Randi R. Warne (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2004), 513–14.
 12. Bushman, "Joseph Smith and Money Digging," 4.
 13. See Book of Mormon Central, "Why Was a Stone Used as an Aid in Translating the Book of Mormon?" *KnowWhy* #145 (July 18, 2016); "The Gift and Power of God," chapter 6 in *Saints: The Story of the Church of Jesus Christ in the Latter Days, Volume 1: The Standard of Truth, 1815–1846* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2018), 54–64; "Book of Mormon Translation," Gospel Topics, topics.lds.org; Michael Hubbard MacKay and Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, "Firsthand Witness Accounts of the Translation Process," in *The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon: A Marvelous Work and a Wonder*, ed. Dennis L. Largey et al. (Provo, UT and Salt Lake City, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, and Deseret Book, 2015), 61–79; John W. Welch, "The Miraculous Translation of the Book of Mormon," in *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations, 1820–1844*, ed. John W. Welch (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2005), 76–213; Michael Hubbard MacKay and Nicholas J. Frederick, *Joseph Smith's Seer Stones* (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and the Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2016).
 14. Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, 174; Dan Vogel, *Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet* (Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books, 2004), 136, 166–174, 347–348; Van Wagoner, *Natural Born Seer*, 134–135.
 15. See Book of Mormon Central, "Were Joseph Smith's Translation Instruments Like the Israelite Urim and Thummim?" *KnowWhy* #417 (March 20, 2018); cf. Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, 1–7; Eliason, "Seer Stones, Salamanders, and Early Mormon "Folk Magic" in the Light of Folklore Studies and Bible Scholarship," 86–92.
 16. James E. Brady and Keith M. Prufer, "Caves and Crystal-mancy: Evidence for the Use of Crystals in Ancient Maya Religion," *Journal of Anthropological Research* 55, no. 1 (1999): 129–144; Marc G. Blainey, "Techniques of Luminosity: Iron-Ore Mirrors and Entheogenic Shamanism among the Ancient Maya," in *Manufactured Light: Mirrors in the Mesoamerican Realm*, ed. Emiliano Gallaga M. and Marc G. Blainey (Boulder, CO: University Press of Colorado, 2016), 179–206; John J. McGraw, "Stones of Light: The Use of Crystals in Maya Divination," in *Manufactured Light*, 207–227; Olivia Kindl, "The Ritual Uses of Mirrors by Wixaritari (Huichol Indians)," in *Manufactured Light*, 255–283; Karl Taube, "Through a Glass, Brightly: Recent Investigations Concerning Mirrors and Scrying in Ancient and Contemporary Mesoamerica," in *Manufactured Light*, 285–314. On the significance of this for the Book of Mormon, see Mark Alan Wright, "Nephite Daykeepers: Ritual Specialists in Mesoamerica and the Book of Mormon," *Ancient Temple Worship: Proceedings of the Expound Symposium, 14 May 2011* (Orem and Salt Lake City, UT: The Interpreter Foundation and Eborn Books, 2014), 244–246.
 17. Cornelis Van Dam, *The Urim and Thummim: A Means of Revelation in Ancient Israel* (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1997), 221–226; C. Houtman, "The Urim and Thummim: A New Suggestion," *Vetus Testamentum* 40, no. 2 (1990): 229–232. See also John A. Tvedtnes, "Glowing Stones in Ancient and Medieval Lore," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 6, no. 2 (1997): 99–123.

18. "Church History," *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 9 (March 1, 1842): 707.
19. *The Book of Mormon: An Account Written by the Hand of Mormon, upon Plates Taken from the Plates of Nephi* (Palmyra, NY: E. B. Grandin, 1830).
20. See the discussion in Larry E. Morris, *A Documentary History of the Book of Mormon* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019), 6–16, 157–159. One example where skeptics have argued that Joseph's foundational claims were wrapped up in folk magic is with the personage of Moroni as guardian and custodian of the plates. Attempts to argue that Joseph's account of the visitation of Moroni originated as a money-digging tale, however, are not persuasive. See the in-depth explorations and rebuttals to this argument in Mark Ashurst-McGee, "Moroni: Angel or Treasure Guardian?" in *Mormon Historical Studies* 2, no. 2 (2001): 39–75; reprinted and revised in "Moroni as Angel and as Treasure Guardian," *FARMS Review* 18, no. 1 (2006): 35–100; Larry E. Morris, "I Should Have an Eye Single to the Glory of God?: Joseph Smith's Account of the Angel and the Plates," *FARMS Review* 17, no. 1 (2005): 11–81.
21. See the in-depth exploration in Ashurst–McGee, "A Pathway to Prophethood"; cf. Steven C. Harper, "The Probation of a Teenage Seer: Joseph Smith's Early Experiences with Moroni," in *The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon: A Marvelous Work and a Wonder*, edited by Dennis L. Largey, Andrew H. Hedges, John Hilton III, and Kerry Hull (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2015), 23–42.
22. Joseph Smith, Letter to James Arlington Bennet, 13 November 1843, [1a].
23. Brian C. Hales, "Naturalistic Explanations of the Origin of the Book of Mormon: A Longitudinal Study," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 88, no. 3 (Fall 2019): 105–148.
24. Bushman, "Joseph Smith and Money Digging," 4.