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it has done, but its value will expand as others utilize it in the future and build on the transparency it represents.

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THIS IMPORTANT NEW BOOK from Michael Hubbard MacKay and Nicholas J. Frederick is intended as a “friendly introduction” to Joseph Smith’s possession and use of seer stones (p. xiii). Aimed explicitly at a Latter-day Saint audience, the authors—both assistant professors of religious education at Brigham Young University—attempt “to locate and explore the role of seer stones in Joseph Smith’s Restoration theology” (p. 3). To that end, MacKay and Frederick not only provide the single best historical overview of the function and role of seer stones in early Mormon history, but also offer a provocative (if not necessarily wholly convincing) reading of the significance of seer stones to Mormon theology.

*Joseph Smith’s Seer Stones* serves as a sort of sequel to another volume coauthored by MacKay and Gerrit Dirkmaat, *From Darkness unto*

*Light: Joseph Smith's Translation and Publication of the Book of Mormon* (2015). Among that book's signal contributions was its frank discussion of Joseph Smith's use of seer stones while translating the Book of Mormon and its inclusion of several illustrations depicting that process by Anthony Sweat, MacKay and Dirkmaat's colleague in BYU's Department of Church History and Doctrine. A few months after the publication of *From Darkness unto Light*, the Joseph Smith Papers released several high-resolution photographs of one of Smith's seer stones; shortly thereafter, photographs of the stone appeared in the *Ensign*, the monthly magazine published by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and intended for the broadest Mormon readership possible.<sup>1</sup> *Joseph Smith's Seer Stones* represents an effort to capitalize on the interest generated by those developments, contributing to what MacKay and Frederick term "a process of renormalization" in which "the miracle" of the seer stones is "recaptur[ed] . . . in historical terms" (p. xix).

The authors' effort to renormalize seer stones begins with a historical overview. Following the book's introduction and an abbreviated opening chapter on Joseph Smith's melding of evangelical Christianity, "folk religion, medicine, and common folklore" (p. 2), the book's next three chapters cover, in successive order, the parallel cultures of money digging and religious revivals that defined the culture of upstate New York where Joseph Smith was raised, the origin of Joseph Smith's own seer stones, and the role the stones played in the translation of the Book of Mormon. The authors explain that whereas modern readers might see "a deep divide" between Christianity and the use of seer stones or divining rods to locate lost objects, Joseph Smith "saw an environment

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1. Royal Skousen and Robin Scott Jensen, eds., *Revelations and Translations, Volume 3, Part 1: Printer's Manuscript of the Book of Mormon, 1 Nephi 1–Alma 35* (Facsimile edition), vol. 3 of the Revelations and Translations series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, ed. Ronald K. Esplin and Matthew J. Grow (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2015), xx–xxi; Richard E. Turley Jr., Robin S. Jensen, and Mark Ashurst-McGee, "Joseph the Seer," *Ensign*, October 2015, 49–54. The Joseph Smith Papers has since made available several additional photographs of the brown seer stone, as well as the pouch and box in which it was stored, on its website at <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/topic/seer-stone>. Accessed February 15, 2017.

where the ecstatic religious experiences ever present in revivalism were exhibited in folk religion and the occult” (p. 2). Joseph Smith found his first seer stone at roughly the same time that he experienced his first vision. By 1826, he had in his possession at least three such stones, which he believed to be “ancient artifacts” designed to help him and others locate additional hidden objects, ranging from the commonplace (water) to the more exciting (buried treasure). This experience naturally shaped his understanding of events later in his life, including the “retrieval of the Nephite interpreters [and gold plates] and the coming forth of the Book of Mormon.” “The interpreters,” MacKay and Frederick explain, “were two seer stones bound together like spectacles,” and the visit of the angelic being Moroni in 1823 was not “the first time [Smith] envisioned himself finding ancient artifacts buried near his home” (p. 6). But the guidance of divine beings did alter Smith’s understanding of seer stones and the landscape of upstate New York. In time, “Joseph bound together the ideas of sacred land, ancient Native American artifacts, and digging for money with seer stones.” He came to believe “that he plucked his seer stones from a blessed landscape where they had been buried by ancient inhabitants and under the direction of God” (p. 16).

In describing this broadened understanding, however, the authors reject the term *transition*, preferring instead *transformation*, which they claim more accurately describes the “process of accumulation and selection” in which Smith “molded these tools to fit his Christian religion” (p. 19). The most obvious example of that transformation came in Smith’s translation of the Book of Mormon, a subject MacKay and Frederick examine in detail in chapter four. They argue that Joseph Smith’s use of the stones to translate an ancient record written in an unknown language is the factor that most clearly separated him from other practitioners of seer stones. “The process described by [Smith’s] scribes and witnesses, in which words appeared on seer stones,” they write, “was unique in the folklore of magic and removed from his money-digging experiences” (pp. 44–45).

In rejecting the notion that Joseph Smith transitioned away from seer stones as he grew into his roles as prophet and revelator, the authors note that he continued to possess and use seer stones until his death in

1844, as did other Latter-day Saints in the nineteenth century. Chapter five traces the provenance of Joseph Smith's brown and white seer stones, respectively. Following the publication of the Book of Mormon in 1830, Smith gave the brown stone to Oliver Cowdery, and from there it was passed down to various leading Latter-day Saint men and women in the nineteenth century before ending up in the possession of the Joseph F. Smith family and then the First Presidency during the twentieth century. Though there is no record of the stone being used in any way approximating its earlier usage to translate ancient records, the authors make clear that "Joseph Smith's seer stones represented authority" to Latter-day Saints. Its possession by Brigham Young, John Taylor, Wilford Woodruff, and Joseph F. Smith was understood as evidence of their possession of priesthood keys and authority.

Joseph Smith's white seer stone, by contrast, remained in his possession for the duration of his life. Though the record detailing its provenance is less clear, the surviving evidence suggests that Joseph Smith and other church presidents in the nineteenth century used it more regularly than the brown stone. In 1841, for example, Smith showed the stone to the Twelve Apostles and informed them that it was his personal stone and that each person "was entitled to a seer stone, and should have one." Brigham Young, who possessed the stone after Smith's death, made a similar point in the 1850s, and Wilford Woodruff in 1887 "consecrated [the white stone] on the altar" of the Manti Temple (pp. 79–80).

This "deliberate attempt to preserve and value" the seer stones leads into a decidedly different part of the book, in which MacKay and Frederick examine the place of seer stones in the Book of Mormon's own internal narrative and what that tells us about Smith's seer stones in the nineteenth century (p. 84). Here the authors move beyond summarizing historical evidence and venture into more original scholarly territory. In seeking to intervene in the debate among some scholars over Joseph Smith's active role in the production of the Book of Mormon's text, MacKay and Frederick "examine how the Book of Mormon responds to the questions raised through Joseph's use of seer stones" (p. 112). The authors argue, for instance, that Nephi's extensive appropriation and application of

Isaiah's prophecies to the Lehite people "[show] us a prophet unconcerned with the idea that he is 'borrowing' from someone else" (p. 115). So, too, with Mosiah's "seeric reading" of an ancient stone with engravings in an unknown language, in which a seer receives "a relic and translates the language on the relic . . . in a way that allows for additional, more important information to be relayed from a divine source" (p. 117). Even more intriguingly, the authors propose that the Liahona, or "directors" that guided Lehi and his family in the wilderness, functioned in some ways like a seer stone, or "that the Liahona was actually a seer stone that had been placed within a golden metallic ball" (p. 120).<sup>2</sup> Such readings are, of course, conjectural, but they do provide interesting possibilities about the ways in which the text of the Book of Mormon might have shaped Joseph Smith's own understanding of his seer stones and their origin and uses.

In some instances, the authors' conclusions (or conjectures) ignore relevant evidence. In chapter 7, for example, they propose that "the Book of Mormon [is] very specific about separating the concept of *translation of texts* from the notion of *reception of visions*" (p. 122). It is not clear that Joseph Smith learned such a lesson about the seer stones' purposes from the Book of Mormon, though. Indeed, the revelation now canonized as section 7 of the Doctrine and Covenants blurs the lines between vision and translation in interesting ways. In April 1829, "a difference of opinion" arose between Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery "about the account of John the Apostle . . . whether he died, or whether he continued." The debate was ultimately settled "by the Urim and Thummin," which evidently provided Smith and Cowdery a *vision* of a "parchment, written and hid up by [John] himself."<sup>3</sup> Moreover, if the Book of Mormon

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2. This reading of the Liahona was earlier made by MacKay and Gerrit Dirkmaat in *From Darkness unto Light*, though it receives an extended analysis here. See Michael Hubbard MacKay and Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, *From Darkness unto Light: Joseph Smith's Translation and Publication of the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center and Deseret Book, 2015), 67–68.

3. Joseph Smith, "History, 1838–1856, volume A-1 [23 December 1805–30 August 1834]," p. 15, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, accessed January 31, 2017, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-a-1-23-december-1805-30-august-1834/21>; "Book of Commandments, 1833," p. 18, *The*

identified seer stones as translation tools, the Book of Abraham offered a significant counterexample—one that MacKay and Frederick discuss without acknowledging the apparent conflict just one chapter later. In the third chapter of the Book of Abraham, the ancient prophet is shown, via the Urim and Thummim, a vision of the sun, stars, and planets, as well as a panoramic vision of the premortal world and the earth's creation.

Perhaps the most innovative and provocative contribution, though, is the book's concluding chapter, which attempts to outline a theology of seer stones. Pointing to Joseph Smith's lifelong possession and periodic use of at least one seer stone and his teachings late in life "that the Urim and Thummim would play a part in the celestial kingdom" (p. 136), MacKay and Frederick argue that Joseph Smith's life and actions as a prophet, seer, and revelator "uncovered an ancient and sacred past of seer stone use that transformed local folklore into a new kind of religious epistemology" (p. 136). That seems clear, at least inasmuch as it applies to Smith's use of seer stones. But the authors take it a step further, arguing that seer stones will facilitate the reception of future scripture. "If the brass plates or the sealed portion are to be revealed in the future," they claim, "it seems likely that those records will be brought forth through seer stones prepared for the specific seers called to translate" (p. 132). Perhaps this is a disciplinary difference, in which predicting the future makes me, a historian who is more comfortable in the past, somewhat uncomfortable, but this proposal would appear to put Latter-day Saint leaders in something of a bind, especially now that the church has acknowledged that it possesses at least one seer stone. Are Latter-day Saints merely awaiting the discovery of additional ancient records, at which point the current church president will then use existing seer stones to translate? Perhaps, but that is far from clear, especially given the paucity of both seer stone usage and translation of ancient records in the more recent Latter-day Saint past.

In spite of my own discomfort with some of the book's more provocative proposals, I highly recommend *Joseph Smith's Seer Stones* to interested

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*Joseph Smith Papers*, accessed January 31, 2017, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/book-of-commandments-1833/22>.

readers. It is, without a doubt, the single best accessible treatment of the subject to date. I have used it in teaching courses on the Doctrine and Covenants at BYU and have recommended it to students interested in reading more. MacKay and Frederick have succeeded in their effort to provide a “friendly introduction” to seer stones for Latter-day Saint readers, but the book deserves a much wider audience than that. Historians of early Mormonism and scholars of both the Bible and the Book of Mormon will appreciate not only the careful assessment of what we know about Joseph Smith’s seer stones but also the numerous tables and charts throughout. Especially useful are the book’s six appendices, which cover in detail seer stones and their owners in upstate New York during the 1820s, other seer stones connected with Joseph Smith during his lifetime, the possession and use of seer stones by other Latter-day Saints during the nineteenth century, and analyses of the Urim and Thummim in the Old Testament and the mention of a “white stone” in the book of Revelation. Perhaps most useful to historians is the “selected annotated bibliography for seer stone sources,” which includes citations and excerpts from the various nineteenth- and twentieth-century sources detailing Joseph Smith’s seer stones, arranged in alphabetical order by author. If a book’s value can be judged by the conversations it stimulates and its success in advancing the conversation in potentially productive new directions, *Joseph Smith’s Seer Stones* is an obvious success.

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