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History and the Claims of Revelation: Joseph Smith and the Materialization of the Golden Plates¹

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Abstract

The Mormon claim that Joseph Smith discovered ancient golden plates buried in a hillside in upstate New York is too often viewed in simple either/or terms, such that the plates either existed, making Smith the prophet he claimed to be, or did not, making him deceptive or delusional. If we assume that there were no ancient golden plates and at the same that Smith was not a fraud, then the task of historical explanation is more complex. Building on a review of the evidence for the materiality of the plates, the paper uses a series of comparisons — between the golden plates and sacred objects in other religious traditions, between Smith’s claims and claims that psychiatrists define as delusional, and between Smith’s role as a seer and the role of the artist and the physician as skilled perceivers — to generate a greater range of explanatory options. In light of these comparisons, we can view the materialization of the golden plates in naturalistic terms as resulting from an interaction between an individual with unusual abilities, intimate others who recognized and called forth those abilities, and objects that facilitated the creation of both the revelator and the revelation.

Keywords

revelation, Mormonism, Joseph Smith, golden plates, Book of Mormon

Introduction

Theologians and philosophers of religion have discussed the relationship between revelation and history at length in an effort to protect believers’ claims from the corrosive effects of historical scrutiny (see, e.g., Harvey 1996 and Ward 1994). Here I want to approach this relationship from the point of view of the secular historian in order to consider the questions that historians can bring to such claims, the kinds of data we can analyze, the sorts of explanations we might consider, and the responsibilities that we owe to our subjects *as historians* if we want to explain their claims in non-native terms. Using Mormonism, a relatively recent, well documented, and still highly contentious instance of an alleged new revelation as a case study, I will seek to illustrate two points: (1) historical methods are well positioned to bring well-documented “outliers” — unusual events, figures, and movements — into conversation

¹ Versions of this paper were given at the conference on Researching Religion at Aarhus University in Denmark, as the Mary Olive Woods Lecture at Western Illinois University in Macomb, the Alumna of the Year Lecture at the University of Chicago Divinity School, the Dickinson Distinguished Fellow Lecture at Dartmouth College, the Donald Benson Memorial Lecture at Iowa State University, and at the 2013 meeting of the Mormon History Association. I am grateful to conversation partners in all these contexts for helpful feedback and discussion. Thanks above all to Richard Bushman, Kathleen Flake, Stephen Fleming, Steven C. Harper, and Jan Shipps for reading drafts and providing feedback on my efforts to play fair with the Mormon sources.

with events, figures, and movements that are more amenable to study using ethnographic and/or experimental methods, and (2) Mormon claims regarding new revelation force non-Mormon scholars to struggle to make sense of seemingly implausible claims, a project that has long fascinated both anthropologists and historians of religion.

Neither of these aims requires us to draw upon unusual methods; we simply need to use familiar tools — historical critical, comparative, and explanatory — in an evenhanded and transparent way. First, we need to reconstruct the emergence of the newly claimed revelation in light of the full range of historical evidence offered by both believers and skeptics as the process unfolded. Second, if we seek to explain their claims, we need to articulate our presuppositions forthrightly in order to make the parameters within which we seek to explain explicit. Third, we need to use comparisons based on various stipulated points of analogy in order to illuminate aspects of the phenomenon and generate an explanation within the parameters specified.

The Mormon claim that Joseph Smith Jr. discovered ancient golden plates buried in a hillside in upstate New York provides an important test case since two leading Latter-day Saints (LDS) scholars of early Mormonism, Richard Bushman and Terryl Givens, argue that secular or non-Mormon historians have not taken the historical evidence for this claim seriously and that, as a consequence, historical scholarship on early Mormonism has remained highly polarized. Bushman has argued that at bottom it is the question of the plates that has led Mormon and non-Mormon historians to offer divergent characterizations of Smith. Non-Mormon historians, assuming there were no plates, presume there was something “fishy” going on, as Bushman (2004:269) puts it, and this then colors their entire assessment of Smith.

To dismiss LDS claims, Bushman says, “unbelieving historians ... repress material [evidence] coming from eyewitnesses close to Smith [who] consistently wrote and acted as if he had the Book of Mormon plates” (ibid.:93). The crux of the problem, according to Givens, is that this evidence grounds the Book of Mormon “in artifactual reality” (2002:12). If Smith only claimed to have spoken with an angel or seen the plates, Givens says, we could explain his new revelation as a subjective experience for which there would be little objective evidence. Smith and his followers, however, claimed that that they not only saw, but also held objectively real golden plates. “Dream-visions,” Givens rightly insists, “may be in the mind of the beholder, but gold plates are not subject to such facile psychologizing” (ibid.:42). From an LDS perspective, the materiality of the golden plates presents secular historians with a significant stumbling block. Givens was right, I think, to argue that we cannot just explain the golden plates in terms of “Joseph’s psyche or religious unconscious” (ibid.). For those of us interested in naturalistic explanations, this offers an intriguing challenge.

Explanations of the golden plates to date tend to presuppose an either/or choice: ancient golden plates either existed or they did not. If they existed, then Smith was who he claimed to be. If they did not and Smith knew it, then he must have consciously deceived his followers in order to convince them that they existed. Alternatively, if Smith believed there were plates when in fact there were not, then he was deluded. Although some non-believing historians have chosen to bracket the contentious issue of the golden plates, others — both non-Mormon and ex-Mormon — forthrightly acknowledge their belief that there were no

actual golden plates; indeed, this is so obvious to some historians that they are taken aback when they discover that many Mormon intellectuals believe there were.²

In keeping with these either/or choices, non-believing contemporaries of Smith and non-believing historians in the present typically explain Smith's claims regarding the plates in terms of deception, fantasy, or a prank that got out of hand. Within two years of the alleged removal of the plates from the hill in 1827, Smith's neighbor, Peter Ingersoll, claimed that the box that supposedly contained the plates really contained only sand (Early Mormon Documents [EMD] 2:44–45). Historian Fawn Brodie, relying on this source, suggests that: "Perhaps in the beginning Joseph never intended his stories of the golden plates to be taken so seriously, but once the masquerade had begun, there was no point at which he could call a halt. Since his own family believed him ... why should not the world?" (1995:41). Historian Dan Vogel views the materiality of the plates as "the most compelling evidence" for "conscious misdirection" on Smith's part (2004:xi). Speculating that Smith most likely made the plates himself out of tin, Vogel characterizes the recovery of the plates as a mix of deception and fantasy, the sort of "pious fraud" that he associates with shamans and magicians.³

Skeptics in my view have been too quick to jump from the assumption that there were no plates to the conclusion that Smith was either deluded or a fraud. In doing so, they sidestep the most interesting (and challenging) questions. For the sake of argument, I want to assume that there were no plates or at least no ancient golden plates and at the same time take seriously believers' claim that Smith was not a fraud. If we start with those premises, then we have to explain how the plates might have become *real* for Smith as well as his followers. The challenge, however, is not just to explain how they might have become real for Smith, but how they might have become real for him *in some non-delusory sense*.⁴ This shift in premises forces us to consider a greater range of explanatory possibilities and has the potential to expand our understanding of the way that new religious movements emerge.

To open up some new options, I want to turn to a letter written by Jesse Smith, Joseph Smith's staunchly Calvinist uncle, to Joseph's older brother Hyrum in June 1829, two years after Joseph claimed to have recovered the golden plates, but before the translation was published in 1830 (EMD 1:552; for context, see EMD 1:567). In a scathing attack, Jesse Smith denounced "the whole pretended discovery" and compared Joseph to the Israelites in the desert bowing down before the golden calf. Joseph, Jesse wrote, was like a "man [who] ... makes his own gods, [then] falls down and worships before it, and says this is my god which brought me out of the land of Vermont." In Joseph's case, though it was not a golden calf, but a "gold book discovered by the necromancy of infidelity, & dug from the mines of atheism." His Calvinist sensibilities outraged, Jesse summarized the letter he had received a year earlier, complaining, "he writes that the angel of the Lord has revealed to him the hidden treasures of wisdom & knowledge, even divine revelation, which has lain in the bowels of the earth for thousands of years [and] is

² Many believing historians, such as Bushman and Givens, in turn wonder how well-trained, non-believing historians can dismiss so much evidence, hence their critique.

³ Vogel 2004:xi–xx, 44–45, 98–99. Characterizing shamans as "pious frauds" begs the question, as the literature on shamans and shamanistic practices is at least as complicated and contentious as the literature on Joseph Smith (for an overview, see Znamenski 2004).

⁴ I am grateful to the philosophers at Western Illinois University for challenging me on this point.

at last made known to him.” To this very early account of the new revelation, Jesse then adds: “he has eyes to see things that are not, and then has the audacity to say they are” (EMD 1:552).

This is an extraordinarily rich passage that opens up several lines of inquiry, two of which I want to consider here: first, the allusion to the golden calf, idolatry, and Joseph as the “maker of his own gods” and, second, Jesse’s astute, albeit somewhat puzzling, observation that his nephew had “eyes to see things that are not, and then [had] the audacity to say they are.” The first takes us into the complex relationships between materiality and sacrality, on the one hand, and between human creativity and divine manifestation, on the other. The second takes us into the problematics of perception. What exactly does it mean to say someone has eyes to see things that are not? Does it mean that the things do not exist, that they are imagined or made up, as Jesse believed? Does it mean that there are things that do exist that are not visible to those who do not have the eyes to see them, as Joseph’s followers claimed? Or might it mean, as I will suggest, that he had eyes to see what *could be* and the audacity to give what he envisioned tangible form.

In making this argument, I am playing with the idea of discovery: turning away from discovery as a literal recovery of ancient golden plates buried in a hill in upstate New York to discovery as skillful seeing. If we view Smith as a skilled perceiver, we can view the appearance of the angel Moroni in 1823 as a dream-vision that opened up the possibilities present in a particular historical moment and the testimony to the materiality of the golden plates as evidence of Smith’s ability to bring forth his dream-vision. Viewing Smith in this way takes his claim to seership seriously and allows us to consider the seer alongside the artist as the creator of things that, in Martin Heidegger’s sense (1971:43–44), open up new worlds. Nonetheless, a seer, however perceptive, becomes a seer only with the support and collaboration of others who play a crucial role as co-creators of the new worlds their seers envision. In that sense, the seer is like the physician who cannot heal apart from his or her patients.

Building on a review of the evidence for the materiality of the plates, the paper uses a series of three comparisons — between the golden plates and sacred objects in other religious traditions, between Smith’s claims and claims that psychiatrists define as delusional, and between Smith’s role as a seer and the role of the artist and the physician as skilled perceivers — to generate a greater range of explanatory options. In light of these comparisons, I argue that the materialization of the golden plates might be better understood as an interactive process that involves a person with unusual abilities, intimate others who recognized and called forth those abilities, and objects that facilitated the creation of both the revelator and the revelation.

The Materiality of the Plates

Bushman is right to point out that those close to Smith did fairly consistently act as if he had ancient plates. Although Jesse Smith died a fervent Calvinist, all of Smith’s immediate family and many in his extended family were convinced that the gold book was real. Moreover, when it was published in 1830, the Book of Mormon contained the testimony of two sets of witnesses (“the three” and “the eight”), some of them family members and others closely involved with the translation process, who claimed they had seen or handled the plates. Stepping back, we can identify three types of evidence: first, accounts of feeling and “hefting” the plates while covered with a cloth or contained in a box; second, the accounts of the three and eight

witnesses, who claim to have seen the plates directly; and third, relatively detailed visual descriptions, which characterize the plates in terms of size and appearance and have been used to create models of them.

Although Smith, his parents, and others, such as David Whitmer, provide detailed descriptions that have been used by believers to create models of the plates (see EMD 1:171, 1:221, 1:462, 5:38), most of the sources agree that no one was allowed to look at the plates directly from the time they were recovered in September 1827 until they were shown to the witnesses in late June 1829, after which time they were no longer available. Most of the evidence offered by Smith's immediate family and those directly involved in the translation process is of something material, which, though obscured by a cloth or kept hidden in a box, nonetheless could be felt and "hefted." Smith's younger siblings, William (EMD 1:479, 1:497, 1:505, 1:508, 1:511) and Catherine (EMD 1:521, 1:524), both recount that they had hoped to see the plates when Smith brought them home, but that when he said they were not allowed to look at them directly, they obeyed. Smith's wife Emma provided a more detailed account that ran along similar lines (EMD 1:539–540). Martin Harris, who helped with the translation, reported that "[t]hese plates were usually kept in a cherry box made for that purpose, in the possession of Joseph and myself. The plates were kept from the sight of the world, and no one, save Oliver Cowdrey, myself, Joseph Smith, jr., and David Whitmer [i.e., Smith and the three witnesses], ever saw them" (EMD 2:306). The signed testimony of the three and the eight witnesses provides relatively little physical detail. The three — Cowdrey, Whitmer, and Harris — simply testified "we beheld & saw the plates & the engraving thereon" (EMD 5:347), while the eight testified that the plates, which "we did handle with our hands & we also saw the engraving thereon," had "the appearance of gold" (EMD 3:471).

The more detailed descriptions of the plates seem not to reflect what people saw first hand, but the way Smith described the plates to them. Joseph Knight, who was staying with the Smith's the night Smith ostensibly recovered the plates, recounts that Smith described the plates to him the next morning, indicating "the Length and width and thickness of the plates[,] and[,] said he[,] they appear to be Gold." But, according to Knight — and Smith's mother Lucy agrees on this point — Knight did not see the recovered plates, which were still not present in the house, but presumably hidden for safekeeping (EMD 4:15). The later descriptions offered by Smith's parents and others are similar to the one that Smith offered to Joseph Knight and suggest that the models of the plates are based not on what they actually saw, but on how Smith described them.⁵

If we look beyond this inner circle of believers, all of whom testified to the materiality of the plates, opinion as to their existence was sharply divided. There were many, mostly associates or former associates of Smith's in the local treasure-seeking network, who clearly believed the plates existed, viewed them as gold treasure rather than a gold bible, and went to great lengths to get them away from Smith, but without success. Then there were those who viewed Smith as a charlatan and a deceiver who fabricated plates in order to promote his

⁵ Smith described the plates in an interview in 1842 (EMD 1:171), his mother in an interview in 1842 (EMD 1:221), and his father in a similar fashion in an interview in 1829 or 1830, published four decades later (EMD 1:462, 1:456). In 1878, David Whitmer, who aided in the translation and was one of the three witnesses, provided a similar description of what he saw when "an angel laid the plates before his eyes" in June 1829 (EMD 5:38).

revelatory claims, including Harris' wife Lucy (EMD 1:353–355, 1:382–386), Emma Smith's family (EMD 4:284–288), and neighbors such as the Ingersolls (EMD 1:385–386, 2:39–45).

What I find most striking, though, is that the discussions of the materiality of the plates, whether by insiders or outsiders to the tradition, seem to presuppose that we are talking about materiality in the ordinary sense of the term.⁶ If we examine key events in the material history of the plates, however, it appears that their material presence remains under the control of supernatural entities that have the power to manifest or withdraw them as they see fit. "The Testimony of the Three Witnesses" published with the Book of Mormon provides the most obvious example. Smith did not simply show the plates to the three witnesses, instead, they testified that they were shown the plates "by the power of God & not of man," and specifically, that "an angel of God came down from Heaven & *he brought & laid before our eyes* that we beheld & saw the plates & the engraving thereon."⁷ In contrast, the published "Testimony of the Eight Witnesses" indicates that Smith showed them the plates, not an angel.⁸ Nonetheless, according to his mother Lucy, Smith did not bring the plates to the grove so that the eight could handle them. Rather, she indicates, the eight "repaired to a little grove where it was customary for the family to offer up their secret prayers[,] as Joseph had been instructed that *the plates would be carried there by one of the ancient Nephites.*" Moreover, she adds, "[a]fter the witnesses returned to the house the Angel again made his appearance to Joseph and *received the plates from his hands.*"⁹

Lucy Smith recounts other occasions in which an angel transported the plates from one place to another. Prior to traveling from Pennsylvania back to New York, the Lord told Smith to leave the plates in Pennsylvania and "he would receive the plates from the hand of an angel" after he arrived at the Whitmer's house in New York (EMD 1:391). Smith also monitored the plates from a distance using his "interpreters." Thus, according to his mother, "Joseph kept the urim and thumim constantly about his person as he could by this means ascertain at any moment <if> the plates were in danger" (EMD 1:334, 1:338). In addition, both Joseph's history (EMD 1:73) and Lucy's manuscript history (EMD 1:370–371) indicate that an angel took the plates back after Harris reported that the first part of the manuscript had disappeared.

In short, insider accounts do not depict the plates as an ordinary material object, but rather as an object that angels, "ancient Nephites," and, in particular, the angel Moroni, who was himself "an ancient Nephite," could display, deliver, and take away as appropriate. Even though the inner circle that saw and touched the plates generally acknowledged that they had either seen the plates in vision or obscured by a covering, believers and non-believers found the "magical realism" of the plates hard to grasp. In 1837–1838 a number of well-placed believers left the church when Harris allegedly testified, according to Warren Parish, that "he never saw

⁶ Palmer (2002) is the most notable exception.

⁷ EMD 5:347. Emphasis added.

⁸ EMD 3:464–472. While there is general agreement that the three witnesses saw the plates in a vision, skeptics and believers tend to disagree with respect to the testimony of the eight, with believers arguing that the eight saw and handled the plates directly (Givens 2002:39–40 and Anderson 2005) and skeptics arguing that they did not (Vogel 2002; Palmer 2002; Vogel 2012). Although Anderson (2005:21–22) quotes Lucy Smith's account, both he and his interlocutors focus on what the witnesses saw in the grove without commenting on how Lucy indicates the plates got there. Thanks to Mark Ashurst-McGee for bringing this discussion to my attention.

⁹ EMD 1:395–396. Emphasis added.

the plates except in vision, and ... that any man who says he has seen them in any other way is a liar, Joseph [Smith] not excepted” (EMD 2:289) and, according to Stephen Burnett, that neither the three nor the eight witnesses had seen “the plates with his natural eyes only in vision or imagination” (EMD 2:291). Although Harris’ testimony apparently caused considerable consternation, Parrish noted that it was supported by the revelation Smith received in June 1829, preserved in the canonized Doctrine and Covenants (D&C 17.5), which indicated that the three witnesses would see the plates, “as my servant Joseph Smith, Jun., has seen them; *for it is by my [God’s] power that he has seen them*, and it is because he had faith ...”¹⁰ In other words, God, or Smith in revelatory mode, depending on how you look at it, conceded that Smith himself only saw the plates through the power of God in faith.

The fact that insiders do not describe the golden plates as an ordinary material object, but rather as one that ancient Nephites display, deliver, and take away as appropriate; the fact that Lucy Smith says that ancient Nephites — not Joseph — brought the plates to the grove where some argue the eight saw them with their natural eyes; and the fact that most believers testified to seeing the ancient plates either directly in vision or indirectly while hidden in a box or covered by a cloth suggests to me that there was a material artifact, but that it was most likely neither ancient nor gold. I think Vogel (2004:98–99) is probably correct in speculating that Smith made the plates himself, but, and this is the crucial question, is there any way he could have done this and still viewed them — in some non-delusory sense — as ancient golden plates?¹¹

¹⁰ EMD 2:289, n. 2. Emphasis added. It is not clear what was so disturbing about Harris’ testimony, partly because we do not know exactly what Harris said (for text and commentary, see EMD 2:288–293). Although he may have said that the testimony of the eight was false, he most likely said, under some duress, that the eight — like the three — saw the plates in vision, which then as now is not how believers typically interpret the witness of the eight. Whether or not he said “Joseph Smith not excepted” is not clear either, as it appears in Parrish’s but not Burnett’s account. There is no indication that Harris considered his testimony as a repudiation of the Book of Mormon; indeed Burnett reports him as saying “he knew it was true.” Most likely, then, Harris simply reiterated his long-standing testimony to have seen the plates “with the eye of faith [although covered with a cloth] ... just as distinctly as I see any thing around me” (EMD 2:292, n. 11) and, when pressed on the matter in the heat of an emotional meeting, claimed that the same was true for the eight as well. Since he allegedly said that “he would have let it pass as it was ... if it had not been picked out of him” (EMD 2:292), I suspect that Harris typically allowed people to believe what they wished about the testimony of the eight because he knew some people had difficulty with the idea that all the witnesses had seen through the eyes of faith. Given the evidence already presented that people, including Smith, either saw ancient plates directly in vision or through the eyes of faith when covered or in a box, I take the consternation surrounding Harris’ testimony as evidence of believers’ difficulty grasping the “magical realism” of the plates.

¹¹ I think it is possible, as Vogel argues, that Smith made the plates himself out of tin or other metal as an act of “conscious misdirection,” but I also think it is possible, as Quinn and Bushman argue, that Smith really believed in the power of his seer stone and used it to develop his revelatory abilities over time. Vogel believes their argument is premised on Smith seeing “objectively real treasures in his stone,” an assumption precluded, he argues, by “the failure of present-day adepts to prove the efficacy of divination under scientific conditions” (2004:xvi). Assuming (as I would) that human psychological processes have not changed since Smith’s day, he asks: “in what way could Smith possibly train himself to be a prophet using such delusive methods?” Vogel, however, has not exhausted the range of psychological possibilities. Thus, for example, Gardner (2011:259–277) has drawn from the scientific literature to offer a plausible naturalistic account of how seers “see” and how Smith might have “translated” based on unusual abilities rather than deception. In a similar vein, treasure-seeking might have involved visualization practices that later enhanced his ability to visualize spiritual treasure and visualize text while staring at a stone in

Idol Anxiety and the Making of the Golden Plates

As Givens acknowledges, it is not that hard to explain how Smith might have seen the plates. As a highly imaginative individual, prone to visionary experiences (Roberts 1992:243–250), Smith may well have believed he saw the plates in his visits to the hill. While his ability to recover the plates is usually depicted in terms of having the right mindset and the right companion, I think there may have been another factor at work as well. Recovery of the plates may have depended on Smith realizing that he had to actively materialize the plates “in faith,” rather than passively waiting for them to be “given” to him ready made, as it were.

The historical evidence for this interpretation is speculative and derives primarily from Lucy Smith’s description of the way Joseph told his family that the time had come to recover the plates (EMD 1:325). Arriving home late one evening shortly before his last visit to the hill, Joseph reported to his anxious parents that he had just received “the severest chastisement that [he] had ever had in his life ... [from] the angel of the Lord.” The angel told him he had been “negligent [and] that the time has now come when the record should be brought forth.” But, he added confidently, “Father give yourself no uneasiness as to this reprimand <for> I know what course I am to pursue an[d] all will be well” (ibid.). I am hypothesizing that up until this time, in so far as Smith was thinking about recovering the plates, he knew that someone else had to be involved, but still was not clear how he was actually going to recover them. If, as I am assuming, he did in fact “materialize” the plates, the “chastisement from the angel” evidently convinced him that he needed to take a more active course.¹²

This more active course, I am hypothesizing, involved creating what was in effect a representation of the plates, perhaps using sand and later tin or lead, as detractors claimed, in the knowledge that they would become the sacred reality that the Smith family believed them to be only in so far as the angel made them so.¹³ As such his representation of the plates,

his hat.

¹² I am assuming that “chastisement from an angel” could be construed in naturalistic terms as a mental dialogue between two inner voices, one of which Smith attributed to an angel.

¹³ Disparate descriptions make it difficult to be more specific than this about how they might have been made. In an interview in 1859 (EMD 2:309), Martin Harris said: “I hefted the plates, and I knew from the heft that they were lead or gold, and I knew that Joseph had not credit enough to buy so much lead.” He says they were “usually kept in a cherry wood box ... [and] weighed forty or fifty pounds” (EMD 2:306). Harris’ estimate of the weight needs to be reconciled with his description of Smith running with this object through the woods, striking a man who tried to attack him, and then handing it to Lucy through a window, whereupon she hid it under the hearth (EMD 2:306–307). In contrast to Harris who hefts, but does not claim to see or touch the object, Emma Smith (EMD 1:539) recounts feeling the pages/leaves under a cloth. She gives no indication of weight or hefting in her account, but rather describes tracing the outline and feeling edges that move. In recently discovered minutes of a court case where Smith was tried for breaching the peace on 30 June 1830, Josiah Stowell said that he had seen “a corner of it [the golden Bible]; it resembled a stone of greenish caste; should judge it to have been about one foot square and six inches thick; he [Smith] would not let it be seen by any one; the Lord had commanded him not; it was unknown to Smith that witness saw a corner of the Bible, so called by Smith; [Smith] told the witness the leaves were of gold, there were written characters on the leaves” (“Mormonism,” 1832). A greenish cast would suggest copper rather than lead or gold and pages could be made out of copper more easily than lead. Although believers tend to conflate the various descriptions, I think it is more likely that Smith saw the plates in vision, described what he saw to those close to him, and then made one or more objects to represent what he saw: initially, perhaps, a box containing something heavy and then later, an object with leaves.

placed under the cloth or in the box, can be understood as representing or even co-creating the reality of the plates along a continuum of possibilities, ranging from the way a crucifix represents the crucifixion, an Eastern Orthodox icon is said to manifest the reality of the saint it depicts, the way Eucharistic wafers are thought to be transformed into the literal body of Christ, or the way that Mary “created” Jesus in her womb.¹⁴ As such, what I am construing as Smith’s actions in creating plates would have analogues in other Christian “materializations” of the sacred.

I am not arguing that Smith necessarily thought about what he was doing in these terms. The logic of the insider stories nonetheless points in this direction. A similar logic is evident in key chapters in the Book of Mormon, which suggests that such a process also would have been in keeping with the new revelation.¹⁵ Thus, in Ether 4, Moroni (the ancient Nephite who appeared to Smith as an “angel”) describes how the plates came to be in the first place. According to Moroni, the Lord instructed him to write on “these plates the very things which the brother of Jared saw” and to “seal up the interpretation thereof” along with “the interpreters,” hiding them in the earth until the day “that they shall exercise faith in me [the Lord] ... even as the brother of Jared did,” at which time, the Lord said, “will I manifest unto them the things which the brother of Jared saw, even to the unfolding upon them all my revelations” (Ether 4.3–4.7).¹⁶

What Jared’s brother saw, due to his “exceeding faith,” was the bodily form of the Lord Jesus Christ, initially just the Lord’s finger and then the whole “body of [his] spirit” (Ether 3.6–3.9, 3.15–3.16). Jared’s brother demonstrated his exceeding faith — and this is the key point — by *preparing sixteen small stones*, carrying them “to the top of the mount,” and *imploping the Lord*, who “hast all power,” *to make them shine* (Ether 3.1–3.4). In response to his plea, “the Lord stretched forth his hand and touched the stones [that Jared’s brother had made] one by one with his finger” (Ether 3.6) and “caused them to shine in darkness” (Ether 6.1). Jared’s brother “molten[ed]” the stones from a rock,¹⁷ because the Lord had commanded him to do

¹⁴ Ellenbogen and Tugendhaft (2011) offer a theoretically illuminating set of essays on the relationship between idols, icons, and divine presence.

¹⁵ I am grateful to Loyd Ericson at Kofford Books for bringing Jared’s brother to my attention.

¹⁶ For a discussion of the place of this passage in the Book of Mormon, see Bushman 1984:118. For general background on the Book of Ether, see Hardy 2010:227–240; on the story of Jared’s brother specifically, see Hardy 2010:241–247. The Book of Ether claims to be Moroni’s abridgment of the twenty-four golden plates that recorded the history of the Jaredites, one of several ancient peoples who, according to the Book of Mormon, came to the Americas from the ancient Near East.

¹⁷ The text reads: “And it came to pass that the brother of Jared ... did molten out of a rock sixteen small stones; and they were white and clear, even as transparent glass.” As John L. Brooke (1994:159–160) indicates, the verb “molten” appears in other contexts (1 Nephi 17.9, 17.16) where it suggests metalworking. The smelting of transparent stones from a rock suggests something more complex than ordinary metalworking, perhaps even some kind of transmutation of an esoteric variety in keeping with Brooke’s general reading of early Mormonism. In any case, this passage is redolent with symbolism that is elaborated later. Thus, D&C 130 explicitly links the white stone to the cosmic Urim and Thummim, the new name bestowed on each person who enters the celestial kingdom, and the white stone in Revelation 2.17. But as Brooke (1994:258–259) points out, the Masonic tradition associates the white stone of Revelation 2.17 with the alchemical philosopher’s stone and the alchemical work of transmutation, which suggests esoteric possibilities that Smith might have had in mind if, as I am suggesting, he made plates and asked the angel to transform them. Thanks to Sally Gordon for urging me to consider possible esoteric interpretations.

something (construct waterproof vessels to save his people from impending floods), but had not provided all that was needed to complete the task (a means of getting light into the sealed vessels). Smith, too, believed he had been commanded to do something (bring forth the golden plates from the hill), but after numerous attempts had not been able to complete the task. In the same way that the Book of Mormon depicts Jared's brother's solution to the lighting problem as a demonstration of his faith, so too Smith may have understood himself as demonstrating *his* faith by figuring out how to recover the ancient plates, that is, by taking home-made plates "to the top of the mount" (the Hill Cumorah) and imploring the Lord to transform them into the ancient golden plates he saw in his 1823 dream-vision.

Although we can only speculate on the course Smith pursued to recover the plates, there is a final parallel worth noting between Smith and the brother of Jared, this one explicit: both stories begin with severe chastisement and end in revelation. It turns out that after a period of four years, the Lord came to the brother of Jared and for three hours "chastened him because he remembered not to call upon the name of the Lord" (Ether 2.14). Jared's brother repents; the Lord forgives him and instructs him to build the vessels, which then leads to the events just described. In 1827, four years after the angel's first visit, Smith receives "the severest chastisement that [he] had ever had his life ... [from] the angel of the Lord" for his negligence in recovering the plates.¹⁸ Regardless of how we conceive the relationship between Smith and the text, "active materialization" does seem to be compatible with the Jaredite tradition.¹⁹

Jared's brother notwithstanding, it is the idea of "active materialization" that gives rise to charges of fraud and deception and, if not fraud and deception, then idolatry and delusion. As already noted, Vogel considers the materiality of the plates "the most compelling evidence" that Smith consciously misdirected his followers and compares the making of the plates with the practices of adepts who combine trickery and sincere belief. Smith's logic, however, may have been less like an adept deceiving his subjects and more like a Catholic priest making Christ present in the Eucharistic wafer. In the first case, the adept knowingly misleads his viewers, albeit for their own good. In the second, a priest calls upon the Holy Spirit to transform the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ.²⁰

¹⁸ According to Terry Givens (2002:220), the story of Jared's brother opens in Ether 2.14 with "what must surely be the longest dressing-down in sacred history" and ends with "the most spectacular epiphany in the Book of Mormon." In using this story to illustrate the Book of Mormon's dialogic understanding of revelation, Givens notes that "the brother of Jared asks the Lord to touch and illuminate 16 molten stones," but he does not reflect on the fact that Jared's brother crafted the stones or on the parallels between Smith and Jared's brother.

¹⁹ The plausibility of this reading is strengthened by the explicit reference to Jared's brother in the June 1829 revelation (D&C 17) given through Smith to Cowdery, Whitmer, and Harris, who had just learned from the "translating" of Ether 5.2–5.4 that "three [who had assisted in bringing forth the work] shall be shewn [the plates] by the power of God." The revelation indicates that Cowdery, Whitmer, and Harris will not only see the plates through the power of God and their faith, just as Smith had seen them, but also "the breastplate [*sic*], the sword of Laban, the Urim and Thumim which was given to the brother of Jared upon the mount, when he talked to the Lord face to face" (*Revelations and Translations, Volume 1* [RT1]:654–655).

²⁰ The Tibetan Treasure tradition also presents a suggestive opportunity for comparison, though beyond the scope of this paper. This tradition maintains that these Treasures (*gter-ma*) are special teachings, originally preached by a buddha and later hidden (in most cases) by the Indian master who introduced tantric Buddhism to Tibet. The master is "said to have concealed these teachings in such a way that they would be discovered at a later date by various predetermined Tibetan Treasure discoverers (*gter-ston*), who would then 'translate' their revelation into a

Comparison of the golden plates and the Eucharist allows us to consider the possibility that Smith viewed something that he made — metal plates — as a vehicle through which something sacred — the ancient golden plates — could be made (really) present. In both cases, the sacred character is visible only to those who believe. In both cases, the materialization unfolds in accord with a story: in the case of the Eucharist, the story of the last supper; in the case of the Mormon Prophet, the story of the angel and the buried plates. Moreover, in both cases, believers claim that this is not just an enactment. The priest does not just pretend that the wafer is the body of Christ. Standing in for Christ, he says, referring to the wafer, “this is my body.” Nor did Smith claim that the plates were a representation of ancient golden plates, he claimed that they really were. In much the way that Jesus is said to have held up human made bread and said to his disciples “this is my body,” Smith may have made plates, placed them in a box, and said to his family: these are the golden plates. While some in each tradition may view these statements as figurative, others — orthodox Catholics and orthodox Latter-day Saints — might view them as more literally true in light of their belief in the power of divinity to manifest itself in material bodies and objects.

Delusions and the Emergence of New Religious Movements

If, as I am suggesting, Smith might have made something through which he believed other worldly powers would manifest the ancient plates, then we would not have to view Smith as making something in order to convince others of something *he* did not believe. But if he believed this, was he deluded? Strictly speaking, from a psychiatric perspective, we cannot call Smith delusional. Technically, according to the DSM-4 (*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*), a delusion is

a false belief based on [an] incorrect inference about external reality that is firmly sustained despite what almost everyone else believes and despite what constitutes incontrovertible and obvious proof or evidence to the contrary. The belief is not one ordinarily accepted by other members of the person’s culture or subculture (e.g. it is not an article of religious faith). (American Psychiatric Association 1994:765)

Although philosophers find the religious exception unsatisfying in that it fails to distinguish between delusions and ordinary religious beliefs, they concede that their efforts to distinguish between them on intrinsic grounds have failed (Radden 2011 and Bortolotti 2010). In a recent effort, philosopher Jennifer Radden concludes, “to differentiate spiritual delusions from more ordinary spiritual convictions, it seems we must rely on aspects of context or accompanying symptoms rather than [features] of the delusions themselves” (2011:108).

In the absence of accompanying symptoms, the distinction between ordinary belief and delusion turns on context, that is, on whether the beliefs make sense within the context of a culture or subculture. From this perspective, the key issue with respect to Smith’s claims is what others thought of them. Notice, though, how the definition of delusions with its exception for articles of religious faith is premised on preexisting claims already accepted by people. There is little room in this definition for novelty, for the possibility of new revelation. At the same time, once new beliefs are accepted by others — once the individual is no longer alone in his or her beliefs — then he or she can no longer be considered deluded in the psychiatric

form comprehensible to their contemporaries” (Gyatso 1993:98). I am grateful to Jesper Oestergaard of Aarhus University for directing me to this literature.

sense. From this vantage point, whether or not an individual is deluded or the founder of a new religious movement rests on whether or not they can get others to share their novel beliefs.

This process of sharing novel beliefs took place initially within Smith's family, which, as historians such as Michael Quinn (1996) have demonstrated, embraced a range of folk beliefs and practices that they probably considered Christian, including recounting significant dreams, treasure-seeking by means of seer-stones, and divinatory practices. Smith's claim to have recovered actual ancient golden plates is premised on his belief that such things existed, a belief that we can trace back to the morning after the mysterious personage appeared to Smith three times during the night of 21 September 1823. I stress the morning after, because Smith went to work in the fields as scheduled the next morning. He did not go the hill until after the personage appeared again, instructed him to tell his father what had transpired during the night, and his father pronounced his dream-visions "of God." Without his father's firm belief that the appearances of the "personage" were real, that the knowledge being conveyed was authentic, and that its instructions were to be obeyed, the evidence suggests that Smith may not have acted on it on his own.²¹ Moreover, when he saw but was unable to remove the plates, his account of his failure, as recounted to his family, paralleled the stories he and others told of buried treasure spirited away by mysterious treasure guardians (Vogel 2004:47–50 and Ashurst-McGee 2006). Most crucially, his inability to recover the plates for four years did not preclude the ancient personage from telling him what was written on the plates nor prevent Smith from recounting what he learned about the ancient inhabitants of the continent to his enthralled family "as though," his mother recalled, "he had spent his life with them" (EMD 1:295–296). His family, in short, shared Smith's belief in ancient Nephites, the angel Moroni, and ancient buried plates long before Smith claimed to recover them.

It is because his family already believed in the reality of the golden plates that they did not challenge Smith's statement that God had commanded them not to look at them directly, a response that outsiders found rather puzzling.²² Insiders also protected the plates from those who doubted their existence. Suspicious that her husband Martin was being duped by Smith and putting their property at risk in the process, Lucy Harris went to extraordinary lengths to investigate believers' claims and Lucy Smith provides a detailed account of the family's efforts to thwart her (EMD 1:382–387). Ultimately convinced that there were no actual ancient plates,

²¹ I am basing this conclusion on a comparison of the various accounts of the events in September 1823 as recounted by Smith and members of his family. A detailed analysis is beyond the scope of this paper but will appear in a book manuscript in progress (Taves forthcoming).

²² When Smith's brother William told an interviewer that, while disappointed that they could not view the plates directly, they obeyed, the interviewer commented to the elderly William that "most people would ha[v]e examined them any way." At that, the interviewer recounted, "the old man suddenly straightened [straightened] up and looked intently at him and said. The Lord knew he could trust Joseph and as for the rest of the family we had no desire to transgress the commandment of the Lord but on the other hand was exceeding anxious to do al<l> we were commanded to do" (EMD 1:508). Smith's wife Emma made much the same point, though less emphatically, saying: "I did not attempt to handle the plates nor, uncover them to look at them. I was satisfied that it was the work of God, and therefore did not feel it to be necessary to do so." Smith's directive, understood by insiders as a divine injunction, functioned to set the plates apart in the Durkheimian sense. Although Smith could supply the directive, others had to observe it in order for it to have any effect, and, in so far as they did, they participated in the materialization of ancient plates.

Lucy Harris found three neighbors willing to testify to that effect in court; the judge, however, dismissed the case in response to her husband Martin's positive testimony (EMD 1:387).

If we consider Joseph's directive, the obedient response of insiders, and their willingness to protect the plates from skeptical outsiders, we can envision an alternative way to view the materialization of the plates that involved neither recovery and translation in any usual sense nor necessarily deception or fraud, but rather a process through which a small group — who believed in the power of revelatory dream-visions, in ancient inhabitants of the Americas, and in golden records buried in a hillside — came to believe that a material object covered by a cloth or hidden in a box were the ancient plates revealed to Smith by the ancient Nephite Moroni. Either/or views of the plates rest on a narrow conception of the materialization process, such that he either dug them up or he did not. Highlighting the crucial role played by those who believed in the reality of the ancient plates suggests a broader view that embeds the recovery of the plates in a process of materialization that stretched (at least) from Smith's dream vision in 1823 to the publication of the Book of Mormon in 1830.

Recognizing the importance of the small group interactions in the materialization of the plates, however, does not adequately account for Smith's role in the process. He was the one who had the dream visions in 1823; he was the one who returned to the hill each year, conversed with the ancient personage, learned more about what was contained in the golden plates, and recounted what he learned to his appreciative family; and he was the one who figured out what he had to do in order to "recover" the plates. Here we return to the problem of seeing things that are not and saying that they are. We enter into the realm of hallucination and hypnotism, but also of creative inspiration, skilled craftsmanship, and the arts. The concepts of hallucination and hypnosis, like delusion, are premised on a stable, shared understanding of reality. Like the idea of delusions, these concepts leave little room for the emergence of something new or for those with the ability to see what might emerge, what might manifest or be revealed — little room, in other words, for artists, designers, or seers.

Skilled Perception and the Discovery of the Plates

Although Smith is most commonly described today as a prophet, he is depicted in early accounts as a seer, translator, and prophet, as are key figures in the Book of Mormon itself (RT1:xix–xx). The Book of Mormon's copyright, recorded by Smith in 1829, encapsulates what Susan Staker (2002) has described as its central narrative thread, that is, an account of seers, who are also revelators and prophets, who hand down records from one generation to the next in order to ensure that through them — to quote the Book of Mormon — "shall all things be revealed — or rather shall secret things be made manifest — and hidden things come to light ... which otherwise could not be known" (Mosiah 8.17). According to the Book of Mormon, the role of the seer supersedes that of the revelator and prophet because the seer has additionally been commanded by God to translate ancient records using "interpreters" (Mosiah 8.13–8.16). A seer is thus one whom God has commanded to see things — secret things — that are not visible to those who do not have the gift of seeing and/or the means for doing so. There is a sense, then, in which the revelation reflexively depicts Smith as a skilled perceiver in a long line of skilled perceivers, who perceive at the command of God, using abilities and tools given to them by God.

The characterization of Smith as a seer in a long line of seers tends to be read — for good or ill — against the backdrop of his local renown as a seer of buried treasure called upon, as his mother put it, because people believed “he [Smith] possessed certain keys, by which he could discern things invisible to the natural eye” (EMD 4:130, n. 5). The keys in question were seer stones, which he not only used to seek buried treasure and most likely to locate the golden plates, but also to translate the plates and to obtain some of the early revelations recorded in the Doctrine and Covenants (Van Waggoner and Walker 1982 and RT1:xxi). When Smith was brought up on charges related to treasure seeking in 1826, the witnesses, like his extended family, disagreed sharply over whether Smith could actually see things that others could not. Those who brought the charges testified that they had investigated Smith’s abilities to “discern objects at a distance” by means of a stone and “came away disgusted, finding the deception so palpable” (EMD 4:253). The man who hired him, however, testified to his “faith in Prisoner[']s skill,” as did another treasure seeker who expressed his confidence in Smith’s abilities to “divine things by means of said Stone and Hat” (EMD 4:250–253, 255–256).

Although I doubt that his seer stones had powers apart from those that Smith imputed to them, I do not think that this requires us to conclude either that they were unnecessary (at least initially) or that he saw nothing when looking at the stone in the hat. I think it is possible that a stone perceived as special could afford “seeing” or “visualizing” in much the same way that a placebo perceived as a drug can afford healing. In both cases, I would argue that the believed-in powers of an object might enable some but not all to activate latent abilities (to visualize text or to heal themselves) that they cannot access consciously.²³ Here, however, I am concerned with seeing in a wider context, not just in relation to buried treasure or translating the plates but in relation to the entire process of materialization beginning with his dream visions through the publication of the Book of Mormon. Viewed in the context of this longer process, the focus on whether he could see and recover actual buried treasure, including golden plates, has obscured his patent ability to see and create a new reality for himself and others. In this process, we can consider the seer alongside the artist as a skilled perceiver of new possibilities and the skilled healer who knowingly prescribes a placebo.

Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Kelly (2011:207–208), drawing on Heidegger, highlight the role of ability and training in perceiving things that are not apparent to others. Quoting a nineteenth-century wheelwright, they highlight differences that a skilled craftsman can feel under the plane or the axe and teach to an apprentice learning the craft but cannot explain to outsiders in a way they can understand. With this example, Dreyfus and Kelly (ibid.:209) try to capture the extent to which meaning or possibility inheres in an object or situation as potential that can be discerned by a skilled perceiver and revealed through creative interaction. The ability could be innate, evoked by circumstances, or deliberately cultivated. However it is acquired, I think it allows some people to see possibilities that are not apparent to others not only in materials but also in situations. Highlighting the role of skillful perception allows us to recognize that possibilities may inhere in objects or situations without having to think of possibilities as essences and to acknowledge that some people may perceive these possibilities through insights or inspirations that seem to come from beyond the self without dismissing them as delusions or hallucinations.

²³ This possibility is in keeping with Gardner 2011.

The scholarly discussion of so-called “fetishes” — a dismissive term for human made objects to which people attribute supernatural qualities — can help us to see the additional complexities that surround the skilled perception of sacred possibilities. David Graeber, building on the work of William Pietz, lifts the discussion of fetishism outside the realm of so-called primitive superstition and relocates it in the realm of the creative process more generally, where, as he notes, the ascription of powers to things with unclear origins abound. Thus, he notes,

when artists, musicians, poets, or authors describe their own experience of creativity, they ... almost never ... see themselves as anything like an architect rationally calculating dimensions and imposing their will on the world. Instead one almost invariably hears how they feel they are vehicles for some kind of inspiration coming from outside, how they lose themselves, fragment themselves, leave portions of themselves in their products. (Graeber 2005:430)

Evoking a kind of double consciousness, he observes: “even when the [social] actors seem perfectly aware that they were constructing an illusion, they also seemed aware that the illusion was still required” (ibid.:432). I would suggest that Smith, like most purveyors of something new, enacted the role of seer on just this sort of cusp between fetish and deity, idol and icon, magic and religion, fabrication and manifestation.

Physicians who prescribe placebos position themselves on a similar sort of cusp. Researchers have typically defined placebos as inert treatments that nonetheless produce an effect, that is, as a “fake pill.” Fakes have long been used to prove that something people claim is real is actually imaginary, from demonic possessions in the sixteenth century to mesmerism in the eighteenth century to present-day drug trials (Kaptchuk, Kerr, and Zanger 2009). As a control used to debunk claims, the placebo has a negative connotation. Placebos are often referred to as “fake pills” and “sham procedures.” Conceived as fakes, they are conceptually similar to allegedly “fake deities,” i.e., fetishes and idols. Conceived in this way, physicians often hesitate to prescribe placebos even though they know they may have beneficial effects, because doing so typically involves deceiving the patient, suggesting to them that the placebo is a real drug, when the physician knows it is not. Viewed as fakes, a comparison between the plates and placebos is another way to say that the plates were fakes and that Smith deceived his followers.

But research on placebos, like Graeber’s work on fetishes, is starting to paint a more complex picture and doing so has meant letting go of the language of real and fake. Researchers have realized for some time that defining a placebo as an inert treatment that causes an effect makes little sense since a treatment that causes an effect is not technically inert. In an effort to be more precise, some researchers are focusing instead on the placebo as “a *simulation* of an active therapy within a psychosocial context” such that the “capacity of simulation empowers the influence of the placebo” (Price et al. 2008:567; see also Benedetti 2008:32–35). Placebo effects, thus, are effects that patients attribute to placebo itself, when in fact they are responses to the simulation as a whole. While clinical trials are designed to test the effects of pharmacologically active ingredients, the emerging interest in placebos (or simulated drugs) *as such* is allowing researchers to examine the measurable effect of “words and rituals, symbols, and meanings ... in shaping the patient’s brain” (Benedetti et al. 2011).

If we shift from viewing postulated created plates not as fake plates but as a simulation or enactment of ancient golden plates, we can compare Smith to a physician who prescribes a placebo knowing that it contains no pharmacologically active ingredients not to deceive his

patient but because the physician knows that placebos can have a healing effect. We can characterize the physician who prescribes a placebo — like Smith — as one who has “eyes to see things that are not, and the audacity to say they are.” As in the case of Smith, this can mean different things. In keeping with the older research, it could mean the physician sees a “fake drug” and has the audacity to say or imply that it is real. In keeping with the more recent research, it could mean that the physician has eyes to see what could be (a non-pharmacologically induced healing process) and the audacity to initiate it. In the first formulation, the focus is on what the physician believes about the drug; in the second, the focus is on what the physician believes about the role of simulations in the healing process.

For this comparison to make sense, we have to assume that Smith sincerely believed that he had access to new revelation. We need to further assume that in simulating plates and expressing his confidence in them, he was in effect expressing his confidence in the reality of a supernatural world populated with persons and powers that made their presence felt in this world. In this simulation, the created plates played a necessary, if not fully understood, role, just as the wafer does in the Eucharist and the pills do in simulated treatments. But like the wafer and the pills, *powers* had to act through the created plates to transform them into an ancient golden record. For Smith and his followers, I am assuming, those powers were supernatural ones. From a naturalistic perspective, the powers were those of the human mind.

Conclusion

We can view the materialization of the plates as a process that unfolded over a period of years beginning with the dream-visions of September 1823 and culminating in the publication of the Book of Mormon. Within that timespan, believers claim that the plates were materially present for approximately two years. In that two-year window, I am proposing that believers materialized the plates in two steps. The first step involved the creation of one (or more) representation(s) of the plates that could be hefted in a box, touched through a cloth, and translated by means of “interpreters,” but not viewed directly. The second step involved the direct seeing of the plates in vision by those already deeply invested in the translation process and strongly disposed to believe. While many Mormons take the witness of the three and the eight as testimony to the materiality of the plates, the plates in question — by believers’ own description — were not material in the usual sense of the term. Their testimony, thus, should not be taken as testimony to the ordinary materiality of the plates, but rather as testimony to the witnesses’ ability to see reality in the way Smith did, that is, as a supernaturally charged reality in which angels produced, transported, and ultimately withdrew a believed-in simulation. In naturalistic terms the witnesses testified to the powers of the human mind not only to see things others could not see, but also to the power of human minds to see things together in faith.

If we return to the historical data, I think that this line of interpretation has certain advantages. Not only does it provide a way to understand what Smith, his closest followers, and outsiders said about the materiality of the plates that has analogues in other Christian claims to have materialized the sacred, it also allows us to make sense of a series of events that have more to do with *seeing* than with materiality and takes us back to Jesse Smith’s observation that Joseph had “eyes to see things that are not, and the audacity to say they are.” Three events stand out in this regard: the way Smith translated the plates, his characterization of the

urim and thummim as the key the morning after he claimed to have recovered the plates, and his intense happiness when the three witnesses saw the angel and the plates.

Although modern LDS depictions of Smith translating the revelation often depict him looking at the plates, there is extensive insider testimony to the effect that he actually dictated his translation of the plates to scribes while looking at the “interpreters” — the urim and thummim or his seer stone — positioned in a hat to block out the light (Van Waggoner and Walker 1982 and RT1:xx–xxi). Just as he could use his seer stone to see if the plates were safe in their hiding place, so too he could see the characters inscribed on the plates (and understand what they meant) without having to look at them directly. The importance of seeing also makes sense of the fact that the morning after he claimed to have recovered the plates Smith described the “interpreters” to his mother as the “key” and, according to Joseph Knight, seemed more excited about recovering them than he was about recovering the plates (EMD 1:328–329; 1:338; 4:15). This suggests that the interpreters were not only the key to “translating” the plates, but also and more deeply the key to seeing what was written on the plates without anyone having to actually look at them. The unusual mode of translation, in other words, was part and parcel of the “magical realism” of the plates.

Above all, this line of interpretation makes sense of Smith’s intense happiness when the three witnesses saw what he claimed to see: an angel laying the plates before their eyes. As Lucy recounts, he exclaimed afterwards:

Father! — Mother! — ... you do not know how happy I am[.] The Lord has caused the plates to be shown to 3 more besides me who have also seen an angel and will have to testify to the truth of what I have said for they know for themselves that I do not go about to deceive the people ... I do feel as though I was relieved of a dreadful burden which was almost too much for me to endure but they will now have to bear a part and it does rejoice my soul that I am not any longer to be entirely alone in the world. (EMD 1:394)

Up until that point, he was alone in the world in “seeing things that are not” and having “the audacity to say that they are.” If we do not assume that Smith was being deceptive, *the burden he refers to here is that of being alone in his perceptions, i.e., alone in what he was able to see.* The burden was not one of deception but of being *accused* of deception.

If, as I have suggested, the plates were real for Smith and his family long before he claimed to have recovered them, then we need to view the process of materialization as extending from at least 1823 to 1830. If we view Smith as a skilled perceiver, we can view his dream-visions the night of 21 September 1823 as revealing a course of action — the recovery of an ancient book — with the potential to resolve tensions and longings not only in that particular historical moment but also, so his followers claim, down to the present day. In highlighting Smith’s ability to perceive this course of action, we need not ignore the way his abilities may have been honed within his family and through his practical work as a village seer. Nor should we ignore the way the tensions and dispositions within his family and community prepared some, but not all, to respond to what he perceived. Above, all, I am suggesting we cannot ignore the active role that Smith and those closest to him played in the process of materializing his visions. Viewing Smith in this way takes seriously his claim to have been a seer and allows us to consider the seer alongside the artist as the creator of things that, in Heidegger’s sense (1971:43–44), open up new worlds.

Abbreviations

- EMD Vogel, Dan, ed. 1996–2003. *Early Mormon Documents*, 5 vols. Salt Lake City: Signature Books.
- RT1 Jensen, Robin Scott, Robert J. Woodford, and Steven C. Harper, eds. 2011. *Revelations and Translations, Volume 1: Manuscript Revelation Books*, vol. 1 of Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman (eds.), *The Joseph Smith Papers* [Revelations and Translations], Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press.

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