

Seer Stones and the Urim and Thummim

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Joseph Smith's Seer Stone

When the church recently acknowledged that Joseph Smith had used a seer stone in translating part of the Book of Mormon, and that the stone was currently in their possession, it caused quite a stir among some people, both within the church and without.

Some were skeptical that such a thing as a “seer stone” actually existed and equated it with being some sort of magical crystal ball. Others have looked at the Urim and Thummim in much the same way.

Because of two things I experienced in my youth, I have no problem with either seer stones or the Urim and Thummim.

The first experience was the fact that my grandfather, Arta McLean Seely had a seer stone as a boy, and my father and mother had told me many stories about it. I knew that both my grandfather and my parents had the highest integrity and would always tell me the truth. Also, the stone was at one point examined by Apostle James E. Talmadge and is mentioned in his writings.

The second experience was one that I had on my mission to Germany.

I will address each of these experiences separately.

Grandfather Arta McLean Seely's Seer Stone



Arta McLean Seely

The story of Grandfather Arta McLean Seely's seer stone was related to me personally by both my father, F. Leland Seely and my mother, Grace Seely on several different occasions, and also by my Aunt Verna Seely Carter. The following is a combination of grandfather's autobiography; remembrances of my Aunt Verna Seely Carter; and my personal remembrances of what was related to me by my parents and Aunt Verna.

Arta found the seer stone in 1881 at the age of 7, and "lost" it five years later when he was 12 years of age.

The following is quoted from grandfather's personal autobiography:

I moved with my parents while still a child to East Mill Creek, Salt Lake County, Utah, where we lived on a farm. At the age of seven years, while gathering stones near the house to flip in an elastic flipper, I came across a very pretty and peculiar stone about an inch and one half thick at one end, and tapering for about two and one half inches to almost a point. It was of dark crystal, or glass on two sides with a sort of limestone formation on the other sides. This stone proved to be a seer stone with which I was permitted to see many things, including articles that had been lost or stolen. I saw relatives in other cities, strange things and places, located many lost or stolen articles for people from all over the nation.

For five years this wonderful gift was allowed me. I was taken out of school many times to my home to look into my stone for some lost article, or for information on various subjects and things. This was very detrimental to my school work, as I was taken out as many as three times a day by different anxious persons. My mother would never allow any charge to be made for my information, as she said my gift was not for the purpose of making money, and the Lord would withhold it if a charge were made. Many came back with gifts, after finding their lost property.

This stone was placed in the hands of Apostle James E. Talmage by Patriarch John Smith, for analysis. Brother Talmage's report showed that it was neither rock nor glass, but he could not determine exactly its composition.

My mother took charge of the stone at all times until her death, which occurred when I was eleven years of age. About one year after Mother's death, the stone was lost.

My Aunt Verna Seely Carter recorded the following account of her father's seer stone.



Verna Seely Carter

My father told us children about the loss of his seer stone. After his mother's death, Amos Neff, a suitor for his sister Lucy, and a man who enjoyed teasing sometimes without mercy, used his teasing on the young boy Arta. He would tell him that he made up the things he said he could see in the stone. He teased until the boy would cry and become rebellious. One day after such a session the boy, while sitting on the steps of his home, lifted his hand and threw the stone out into the raspberry patch. A short time later he felt he shouldn't have thrown it away and searched and searched the ground all around – not once but a number of times and never found it.

That old raspberry and later weed patch was still there when father told us, his children, about it and my brothers, Elwyn and F. Leland, and I searched and searched that piece of ground, but to my knowledge no one ever found it.

Father didn't speak to us often about his experience with the seer stone; it seemed too personal a thing with him. One time Elwyn asked him what may have happened if he had kept the stone until he had grown up and he said, "I don't know, it was a powerful tool – perhaps it's good the gift was taken from me, for without the loving and wise guidance of my mother during my growing up years, I may have used it unwisely."

The following are my own remembrances of stories told to me by my parents.



Jim Seely

Arta would place the seer stone in a hat and then put his face into the hat to look into the stone. When people had lost things, he would look into the stone and see the lost article. He would then describe what he was seeing until the person recognized where the lost article was.

An example of this was when ranchers would lose cattle. They would come to him and he would look into the stone, see the cattle, and then describe where they were. Such as: they are located in some trees; near a stream; in a canyon, etc. He would then continue to give more detail until the rancher recognized where they were and could go and find them.

One time a neighborhood woman lost her wedding ring. She searched everywhere, but couldn't find it and finally came to grandfather. He looked into the seer stone and saw the ring, but couldn't figure out where it was. He said it was in a dark place; with some white lines; and was lying in some dried leaves. After much thought, the woman finally remembered taking the ring off while she sat on her wooden front porch peeling potatoes. It had fallen through the cracks and was in the dry leaves below. The white lines were caused by light showing through the cracks.

Another time, someone stole the tithing money from the Bishop of a local Ward. The Bishop lived on a ranch, and the money went missing following the visit of one of his neighbors, who had a somewhat dubious reputation. Everyone was sure that he was the culprit and he was arrested. The man kept professing his innocence, and they couldn't find the money, so finally came to grandfather, hoping that he could see where it was.

Grandfather looked into his stone and saw that the money was in a coffee can in the bunkhouse on the Bishop's ranch. The sheriff went to the bunkhouse and found the money. One of the cowboys who worked for the Bishop confessed to stealing it, and the innocent man who had been arrested was released.



Amos Barr Neff



Lucy Seely Neff

Amos Barr Neff was courting grandfather's sister Lucy during the time that grandfather had his seer stone, and Amos loved to tease him about the stone, insisting that Arta couldn't see anything and that he was just making it all up.

One day, grandfather was looking into the hat at the seer stone, when Amos started teasing him unmercifully. Grandfather finally reached a breaking point and he handed Amos the hat. Amos took the hat and looked into it. As he did, his face went bright red and he hurriedly handed the hat back to Arta. He never said what he saw, but he never teased grandfather about the seer stone again.

Amos later became known as "Uncle Ame" after marrying Lucy. This was the same "Uncle Ame," who, some years later, was ambushed, shot, and killed on the front porch of his home in a dispute over a pony. At the time he was killed, he lived next door to my grandfather.



Arta's Mother – Jane Fisher Seely

Grandfather's mother wouldn't let him accept any money for the many services he provided with his seer stone, and while she was alive, she always took care of the stone, keeping it in her china cabinet. She also managed the constant stream of people who came seeking his help. After she died, it became more and more difficult for grandfather to deal with all the people seeking after him. As the notoriety of the seer stone spread, more and more people came, until he was being taken out of school three or four times a day.

Finally, one day after repeatedly being taken out of school, he could take it no more. He walked out onto the front porch and threw the seer stone out into the raspberry patch. Before it had even hit the ground, he realized he had made a mistake and went after it. But although he search and searched, he could never find it again.

Years later, in telling his children about the seer stone, he said that, "It was just as well that it was lost as it wouldn't have done for him as an adult to be able to see some of the things that he could see."

As children, my father F. Leland, his brother Elwyn, and his sister Verna searched the raspberry patch on their hands and knees many times trying to find the seer stone, but it was never seen again.

My Urim and Thummim Experience in Germany



Munich Germany

I served as a Missionary in the Bavarian Mission in Southern Germany in 1962-64, and while working in Munich, had an experience concerning the Urim and Thummim, which at first completely puzzled me.

My companion was giving a lesson on the Book of Mormon to a German man who was questioning everything that was being said.

The discussion drifted into how Joseph Smith translated the Book of Mormon by using the Urim and Thummim, and the man absolutely refused to believe that such a thing as a Urim and Thummim existed.

My companion then stated that the Urim and Thummim were mentioned in the Bible.

"Not in my bible," the man stated defiantly.

At this point, I entered the discussion. It just so happened that I had researched that very topic in my scripture study that morning and knew exactly the verse in which the Urim and Thummim are mentioned (Exodus 28:30). Knowing this reference, I asked the man to bring me his bible, which he did. At my instruction, he turned to Exodus 28:30 and read the verse. I kept expecting to hear the words “Urim and Thummim,” but never did.

Confused, he then handed me his bible and to my amazement, the man was right, the words “Urim and Thummim” were not in his bible.

I was embarrassed and thought that I must have mixed up the scriptural reference.

Our discussion ended on that sour note and we went home.

As soon as we got to our apartment, I went straight to my scriptures and found the verse and saw that the words “Urim and Thummim” were clearly there. It then dawned on me that I was reading my English bible and that was the same bible that I had studied that morning. I then checked again in my German bible, and as in the discussion with the man, the words were missing. I then realized that these words are translated into German in the German bible, but were not translated in my English one.

English: Exodus 28:30

30. And thou shalt put in the breastplate of judgment the **Urim and the Thummim**; and they shall be upon Aaron’s heart, when he goeth in before the LORD: and Aaron shall bear the judgment of the children of Israel upon his heart before the LORD continually.

German: 2 Mose 28:30

30. Und sollst in das Amtschild tun **Licht und Recht**, daß sie auf dem Herzen Aarons seien, wenn er eingeht vor den HERRN, daß er trage das Amt der Kinder Israel auf seinem Herzen vor dem HERRN allewege.

“**Urim**” in our King James Bible is “**Licht**” in the Lutheran German Bible and means “**Light**” in English.

“**Thummim**” in our King James Bible is “**Recht**” in the Lutheran German Bible and means “**Right**” or “**Truth**” in English.

This was a totally new concept to me that the words Urim and Thummim were not just names someone had come up with anciently to identify these objects. These words actually had meaning (**Light and Truth**).

A short time later, I was reading in the Doctrine and Covenants, when I came across one of the most misquoted scriptures in the church, Doctrine and Covenants 93:36.

36: The glory of God is intelligence, or, in other words, **light and truth.**

I say misquoted, because the first part of this verse is quoted frequently (The glory of God is intelligence), but the last part (or, in other words, light and truth) is seldom included.

Because I had just recently learned that the meaning of “Urim and Thummim” was “light and truth,” this portion of that scripture just jumped out at me, and I concluded that “Light and Truth” are the same thing as the “intelligence” of God.

Until this point in my young life, I had struggled with the concept of Joseph Smith using some strange ancient glass objects to translate the Book of Mormon. In my mind it was kind of like using a crystal ball. That changed when I read Doctrine and Covenants 93:36 in its entirety and the following concept occurred to me. Joseph Smith translated the Book of Mormon through use of the “Urim and Thummim”, or in other words, through the use of “Light and Truth”; or in other words through the “intelligence” of God.

The preface to the Book of Mormon states that Joseph Smith translated the plates, “by the gift and power of God,” which to my mind is pretty much the same thing.

I know that the “Urim and Thummim” are physical objects, but their power comes directly from God and they are in no way equivalent to a crystal ball.

As most anyone who speaks a second language can attest, reading scriptures in another language can often bring new understanding and meaning. I have certainly experienced that with German.

Note: The Bible Dictionary states that Urim and Thummim is a “Hebrew term that means: Lights and Perfections”, but this is not consistent with the German Bible. Also, there are several variations to the meaning of the German word “Recht,” depending on usage, and somewhat on what part of Germany you are in. However, “Right,” “Correct,” “True,” or “Truth” are the meanings I was most familiar with as a missionary in Southern Germany in 1964. Additionally, my German Doctrine and Covenants translates “Light and Truth” as “Licht und Wahrheit”. “Wahrheit” is the word I would normally use for “Truth,” but the word “Recht” also means “Truth” and seems to be a good fit in this instance.

For further information about Seer Stones and the Urim and Thummim, I would recommend reading an article in the October 2015 Ensign Magazine, titled “Joseph the Seer.” It is available at the following link

<https://www.lds.org/ensign/2015/10/joseph-the-seer?lang=eng>

There is an interesting quote from Elder Orson Pratt in this article that I think is pertinent to this discussion.

Joseph had other seer stones, but in the words of Elder Orson Pratt (1811–81), a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles and later Church Historian, Joseph had also matured by this time in his spiritual understanding. At a meeting on June 28, 1874, attended by President Brigham Young and many other General Authorities, Elder Pratt told his audience about being “present many times” when Joseph Smith “was translating the New Testament.” Seeing no interpretive instruments in use during the translation process, he wondered why Joseph “did not use the Urim and Thummim, as in translating the Book of Mormon.”

As Elder Pratt watched the Prophet translate, “Joseph, as if he read his thoughts, looked up and explained that **the Lord gave him the Urim and Thummim when he was inexperienced in the Spirit of inspiration. But now he had advanced so far that he understood the operations of that Spirit, and did not need the assistance of that instrument.**”

In Elder Quintin L Cook’s address in the April 2017 General Conference, he presented the idea that both the Urim and Thummim and the seer stones were possibly “**like the training wheels on a bicycle,**” and were used only “until Joseph could exercise the faith necessary to receive more direct revelations.” This position is supportive of Orson Pratt’s observation cited above.

Joseph Smith was only 23 years old when he completed translating the Book of Mormon. He was uneducated and had little grasp of English, let alone a foreign language. He totally lacked the ability to translate anything on his own.

In conclusion, let me say this. I know that my Grandfather Arta McLain Seely had a seer stone for five years as a youth and that its power was real. For me, that is beyond dispute. I also know that Joseph Smith was incapable of translating or writing the Book of Mormon on his own. That is also beyond dispute. Exactly how he translated The Book of Mormon is interesting, but not nearly as important as what is contained inside it.

Throughout my life, I have encountered many ideas or “discoveries” that have challenged the authenticity of the Book of Mormon and the Church and which have caused the faith of some to falter. In every case, when all the facts have eventually come out, the things that at first seemed to challenge one’s faith in the church, eventually are found to support it.

The only plausible explanation I have ever heard about the origin of the Book of Mormon is the one Joseph Smith gave. The more I read it, and the more life experiences that I have, the more convinced I am that it is true. And if the Book of Mormon is true, then the Bible is true. And if the scriptures are true, then there is a living God; He has a son, Jesus Christ; and there is a life after this one.

The following is part of an article by Steve Reed that is pertinent to this subject. The full article is found at this website:

<http://oneclimbs.com/2015/08/10/truths-that-joseph-smiths-seer-stone-continues-to-reveal/>

Aug 10, 2015 [Steve Reed](#)

Truths that Joseph Smith's Seer Stone Continues to Reveal



...The seer stone looks like a regular rock because that is probably exactly what it is. I think what makes it special is not any kind of 'power' it possesses, but that it is a witness of what God can do with simple things.

The stone is almost a metaphor for Joseph Smith. Though it is small, simple, and plain, one might overlook the fingerprint-like stripes that encompass it and punctuate its uniqueness.

God is constantly seeking to challenge the narrow, prejudiced, and shifting traditions of men with trials that require humility, time, study, and meditation.

Those who jump to conclusions without much thought tend to miss the message, stumble and drift into confusion, doubt, and cynicism.

The appearance of this seer stone on the scene surely raises a multitude of questions and possibilities which will inevitably result in a spectrum of conclusions.

To the critic, you will have another wonderful example of how the restoration is another fraud rooted in folk magic, rather than a divine work. To the faithful, you might find another example of God's consistency in using simple things to accomplish great purposes. Some will change their minds, but most will probably only find support for the views that they have already determined to maintain.