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## Money-Digging Folklore and the Beginnings of Mormonism: An Interpretive Suggestion

Marvin S. Hill

From the time that Obediah Dogberry sought to discredit the religious claims of Mormonism by charging that the movement began as a money-digging speculation without religious aspects, anti-Mormons have used this argument against Latter-day Saint claims of unique authority and Christian restoration.<sup>1</sup> LDS church historians have responded over the years with accounts which minimize or deny any money-digging connections.<sup>2</sup> Both sides have seemingly assumed, until very recently, that if Joseph Smith believed in and practiced magic to find buried treasure then his story of the inspired discovery of the plates of the Book of Mormon may be suspect.<sup>3</sup>

Needless to say, the recent appearance of two letters with gold-digging implications gave new life to the discussion of Mormon origins in these terms. (The texts of both letters are reproduced in full elsewhere in this issue of *BYU Studies*.) In the first letter, purportedly written by Joseph Smith in 1825 to Josiah Stowell, Joseph advises Stowell on the best way to go about recovering valuables from a mine, saying:

You cannot dig more untill you first discover if any valluables remain you know the treasure must be guarded by some clever spirit and if such is discovered so also is the treasure so do this take a hasel stick one yard long being new Cut and cleave it Just in the middle and lay it asunder on the mine so that both inner parts of the stick may look one right against the other one inch distant and if there is treasure after a while you shall see them draw and Join together again of themselves.

The second letter, attributed to Martin Harris, written in 1830 to W. W. Phelps, associates Joseph Smith with stone-gazing to discover treasure and links the discovery of the gold plates to the activities of an "old spirit" who "transfigured himself from a white salamander."

The Church released the text of both letters within a two-week period, beginning 29 April 1985. Commenting on the Harris letter, President Gordon B. Hinckley said, "There is no evidence the letter is forged." But he cautioned, "There is no certainty that Harris wrote the letter." He further said, however, that even if the letter was authentic it would not reflect upon the divine origin of the Church—a viewpoint with which I agree.<sup>4</sup>

Yet recent developments in the Salt Lake City bombings, and the subsequent preliminary hearing of Mark Hofmann as murderer and fraudulent documents dealer, have raised questions as to the authenticity of these letters which he located.<sup>5</sup> Handwriting expert Kenneth Rendell stated in a television interview that he thought several of the documents found by Hofmann in the last five years show signs of forgery, including the 1825 letter to Josiah Stowell. Rendell said he could still find no evidence that the so-called salamander letter attributed to Martin Harris is a forgery. An FBI laboratory report was also said to find no evidence of forgery. Despite this, Rendell was quoted as saying that since other Hofmann discoveries seem to be forgeries we cannot discount the possibility that the salamander letter is as well.<sup>6</sup> Rendell's affirmation has brought a reaction by other experts contending that some of Hofmann's earlier discoveries are not forgeries at all.<sup>7</sup> All of which has left the public, and some historians too, confused as to which, if either, of the money-digging letters can be considered authentic.

Nonetheless, it is the argument of this paper that in large part the question of the 1825 and 1830 letters' authenticity is not crucial since there is enough evidence from other sources that the issue of the relationship between Mormonism and magic is still with us. For one thing, the evidence that Joseph Smith was tried in court as a money digger in 1826 is considerable,<sup>8</sup> and, for another, there are several Mormon sources which establish an integral relationship between the folklore of magic and some traditional accounts of Mormon origins.

In recent years scholars have altered our understanding of popular religion in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and early eighteenth centuries to such an extent that our perception of what magic meant to the common man has taken on an entirely new cast. Keith Thomas, in a pioneering study he calls *Religion and the Decline of Magic*,<sup>9</sup> traces the widespread belief in the magical arts by aristocratic counts and common men in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in England. Thomas says that in the medieval church objects such as the sacramental wafer and church relics were thought to have divine

power. Although the Reformation involved a deliberate attempt to take such magical elements out of religion, thus abandoning the effort to endow physical objects with supernatural qualities through consecration and exorcism, many miraculous elements still endured in Protestantism. Protestants anointed the sick with oil and fasted and prayed, believing that these religious rituals would bring control over men and nature through divine intervention. Further, those problems for which the magical remedies were used were still there—the fluctuations of nature, the hazards of fire, famine and flood, the dangers of plague and other diseases. These were considered works of divine Providence and subject to divine supplication. Without Catholic priests to counsel and forewarn, and to invoke divine intercession, the average Englishman felt deprived and looked to those outside the church for safeguards against calamity. In the seventeenth century many consulted witches and wizards, wise men, and conjurers who could heal with a touch, summon heavenly personages, find lost articles, interpret dreams, and predict the uncertain future. Thus religion and magic drew upon the same human need for security and offered to help offset the misfortunes of life. Thomas maintains, however, that in time true religion triumphed over magic, that religion came to mean more than earthly health and wealth, that it encompassed a comprehensive world view and promise of future life which magic never entailed.

Jon Butler counters Thomas, however, in his "Magic, Astrology, and the Early American Religious Heritage, 1600–1760," first by arguing that magic was carried to America and flourished in the colonies at least until 1720, and also by maintaining that Thomas employs too narrow a definition of religion and is consequently wrong in distinguishing it from magic. Religion, Butler says, should be seen as a resort to supernatural powers or supernatural beings to determine the course of human events. In this light there can be no clear line drawn between it and magic. Both seek the well-being of the believer by invoking supernatural intervention. Butler finds much evidence of the occult in the popular almanacs published in the colonies but says magic was on the wane after 1700 as occult publications imported from England were curtailed and colonial governments tended to enforce laws against occult practices.<sup>10</sup> Just how magic could wane if it was indistinguishable from religion Butler does not explain.

In an article published in a recent anthology on the occult in America, Butler modifies his position on one point, contending that

he had ended his story of magic in America too soon, that while alchemy and Rosicrusianism subsided by 1760, magic among black slaves continued into the nineteenth century, as did rodsmanship and to some extent witchcraft among the general public. Butler says that "occult practices existed in all the major regions of the country, and in all social classes" into the 1850s.<sup>11</sup>

Ron Walker's essay in this journal supports Butler in this latter contention. Walker shows that magic flourished among the common man, especially in New England, western New York, and Ohio, where Mormonism had its inception. To those students of Mormonism familiar with E. D. Howe's testimonies and with Obediah Dogberry's accounts of widespread money digging, this is not surprising. But Walker documents what Dogberry had only asserted. Walker's descriptions match at several points certain details of the coming of Moroni as told by Joseph Smith, his family and friends, and raise questions which historians are already wrestling with as to what influence the money-digging lore may have had upon the Mormon Prophet.<sup>12</sup>

It may be helpful, to begin with, to gain some feeling for the actual money-digging stories as they were told by countless wise men in early nineteenth-century America. The following story relates of a certain "Commodore" who acquired a brand new divining rod in 1828 and set upon a number of excursions in Ohio above the outlet of Muskingum. His adventures began when he ran into some Indians who appeared with a deer skin filled with lead, which they had taken from under a flat stone. The Commodore journeyed up a creek, but when it forked he had to consult his rod to discern the proper route. Some followers were amazed at his powers. As the group moved on, they found a cluster of flat stones:

The largest, and one the next in size, had a number of curious characters, or "Harlogriffs," as "the Commodore" called them in relating the story, cut on their faces. The most of them were much weather-worn and indistinct. What they imported no one knew. The history of their origin was equally obscure, as they had been found there when this part of the country was first settled, about the year 1773. The surveyor then said he should like to know by what people they had been erected but did not suppose that would ever be discovered. Much elated with his success so far, the old man [the Commodore] replied, "If anybody can do it, I can, and will consult the rod in this matter." . . . It was thought he did it in sincerity, and a confident belief in the virtue of the rod; which he supposed must be indued wth [sic] some supernatural power. . . . Having uncovered

his bald head, he raised the talisman before him, and looking reverently upwards, administered in a solemn tone the usual form of an oath; directing it to tell him the truth to such questions as whether the French, the Spaniards, the English, the Dutch, the Romans, and several other nations, had erected them; to all which the rod remained immovable. Finally he asked if it was the Welsh. . . . To this it gave a gentle nod, which the rodsman knew from former trials meant yes. A few years after this curious adventure, the great mound near the mouth of Grove Creek, was opened and carefully explored. Amongst many other singular relics of that ancient people who erected it, was found in one of the vaults, a small flat stone, covered on one side with characters and letters of the old Saxon and Welsh languages.

The surveyor asked how long ago the mounds had been erected. The Commodore consulted his rod, which answered:

“fifteen hundred years before the discovery of America by Columbus;” which is probably about the actual time of the building of the earthworks in the valley of the Ohio.

Continuing with the story, the narrator said the Commodore heard of a pot of silver and gold buried in a mound under a flat stone along the river by miners who were harassed by Indians. On one of his voyages downriver at night he decided to try for the money, using his rod in the prescribed manner. Sometime later,

he returned, in a very ill humor, and reported that he found the mound very readily, and after digging a few feet he came to the flat stone over the pot, when Steel [an associate] involuntarily cried out, “By the Lord we have got it!” when instantly, with a low rumbling sound, it settled down out of sight. It is said such searches must always be conducted in silence, as the sound of the human voice irritates the evil spirit who has charge of hidden treasures, and they vanish away.<sup>13</sup>

This story was not published until 1850, and in no way influenced Joseph Smith, but it does reflect the tone and style of the money-digging lore, and also much of the content. One can see in the story certain common themes which appear in traditional Mormon accounts—Indians, gold, flat stones, magic instruments for discovery, deciphering of hieroglyphics, pre-Columbian Americans, and treasures that get away because the guardian spirit was displeased that the prescribed procedures were not followed.

When E. D. Howe published his collection of Mormon money-digging stories in 1834 he presented evidence that Joseph Smith believed in such a magical world. Howe published the testimony of

Willard Chase, a neighbor of the Smiths who said that Joseph Smith, Sr., related to him the following account:

Some years ago, a spirit had appeared to Joseph his son, in a vision, and informed him that in a certain place there was a record on plates of gold. . . . On the 22d of September, he must repair to the place where was deposited this manuscript, dressed in black clothes, and riding a black horse with a switch tail, and demand the book in a certain name, and after obtaining it, he must go directly away, and *neither lay it down nor look behind him*. . . . He repaired to the place of deposit and demanded the book, which was in a stone box . . . and raising it up, took out the book of gold; but fearing some one might discover where he got it, he *laid it down* to place back the top stone, as he found it; and *turning around*, to his surprise there was *no book in sight*. He again opened the box, and in it saw the book, and *attempted to take it out, but was hindered*. He saw in the box something like a toad, which soon assumed the appearance of a man, and *struck him* on the side of his head. . . . After recovering from his fright, he enquired why he could not obtain the plates; to which the spirit made reply, because you have not *obeyed your orders*. He then enquired when he *could* have them, and was answered thus: come one year from this day, and *bring with you your oldest brother*, and you shall have them. . . . Before the expiration of the year, his oldest brother died. . . . On the 22d of September, he arose early in the morning . . . and, *together with his wife*, repaired to the hill. . . . He then observed that if it had not been for that stone . . . he would not have obtained the book.<sup>14</sup>

Chase's account, and others collected by Howe, have been discredited by some Mormon writers because of Doctor Philastus Hurlbut's obvious attempt in collecting these stories for Howe to find testimony against the Mormons in Ohio, and also because they seem to include in each testimony common phrases which suggest a single person may have composed them.<sup>15</sup> Also it has been argued that the many stories of money digging by the Smiths seem contradictory in detail.<sup>16</sup> But the Howe evidence may be too easily disregarded, for Joseph Knight's "Manuscript History," written by the Prophet's early friend and convert in Harmony, Pennsylvania, relates the discovery of the plates in terms quite similar to Chase's. According to Knight, Joseph Smith

went and found the place and opened it and found a plane Box. He oncovered it and found the Book and *took it out and laid [it] Down By his side* and that he would Cover the place over again thinkinking [*sic*] there might be something else here. But he was *told to take the Book and go right away*. . . . He thot he would look in the place again and see if it had not got Back again. . . . And he opened the Box and *Behold the Book was there*. He took hold of it to take it out again and Behold *he*

*Could not stur the Book. . . . He exclaimed "why cant I stur this Book?" And he was answerd, "you have not Done rite; you should have took the Book and a gone right away. You cant have it now." Joseph says, "when can I have it?" The answer was the 22nt Day of September next if you Bring the right person with you. Joseph says, "who is the right Person?" The answer was "your oldest Brother."*

But before September Came his oldest Brother Died. Then he was Disapinted and did not [k]now what to do. But when the 22nt Day of September Came he went to the place and the personage appeard and told him he Could not have it now. But the 22nt Day of September nex he mite have the Book if he Brot with him the right person. Joseph says, "*who is the right Person?*" The answer was *you will know. Then he looked in his glass and found it was Emma Hale.*<sup>17</sup>

Chase's recollection of what Joseph Smith, Sr., told him and the history by Knight both have a folklore tone to them. They both relate that Joseph must secure the plates on a certain day, 22 September; that he must take the book and "go directly away"; that for disobeying the orders he was prevented from obtaining the book; that the book appeared, disappeared, and reappeared after he violated orders by laying it down; that he subsequently had to bring the right person with him to secure the record, first his brother and then his wife; and that a stone or glass was effective in helping him secure the record at last.

That the Chase account appears in a collection of testimonials published by an anti-Mormon while the Knight narrative comes from a faithful Latter-day Saint whose statement was not published until very recently suggests that the anti-Mormon material cannot be lightly dismissed because of its origin. The anti-Mormon statements have to be checked against what is admitted by the Mormons themselves. Willard Chase very likely heard his story from Joseph Smith, Sr., as he reported. This is further evidenced by an independent account published by Fayette Lapham in 1870 of an earlier interview with Joseph Smith, Sr., as to the origin of the golden plates. This report corresponds closely in some respects to what Knight and Chase recounted. It is lengthy but deserves full treatment.

He then told his father that, in his dream, a very large and tall man appeared to him, dressed in an ancient suit of clothes, and the clothes were bloody. And the man said to him that there was a valuable treasure, buried many years since, and not far from that place; and that he had now arrived for it to be brought to light, for the benefit of the world at large; and, if he would *strictly follow his directions*, he would direct him to the place where it was deposited, in such a manner that



he could obtain it. He then said to him, that he would have to get a certain coverlid, which he described, and an old-fashioned suit of clothes, of the same color, and a napkin to put the treasure in; and go to a certain tree, not far distant, and when there, he would see other objects that he would take or keep in range and follow, until he was directed to stop, and there he would find the treasure that he was in pursuit of; and when he had obtained it, *he must not lay it down* until he placed it in the napkin. "And," says Smith, "in the course of a year, I succeeded in finding all the articles, as directed; and one dark night, Joseph mounted his horse, and, aided by some 'supernatural' light, he succeeded in finding the starting point and the objects in range." Following these, . . . he proceeded on foot, keeping the range in view, until he arrived at a large boulder, of several tons weight, when he was immediately impressed with the idea that the object of his pursuit was under that rock. Feeling around the edge, he found that the under side was *flat*. Being a stout man, and aided by some super-natural power, he succeeded in turning the rock upon its edge, and under it he found a square block of masonry, in the centre of which were the articles referred to by the man seen in the dream. Taking up the first article, he saw others below: lying down the first, he endeavored to secure the others; but, before he could get hold of them, *the one he had taken up slid back to the place he had taken it from*, and to his great surprize and terror, the rock immediately fell back to its former place, nearly crushing him in its descent. His first thought was that he had not properly secured the rock when it was turned up, and *accordingly he again tried to lift it*, but now in vain: he next tried with the aid of levers, but still without success. While thus engaged, *he felt something strike him on the breast*, which was repeated the third time, always with increased force, the last such as it lay him upon his back. As he lay there, he looked up and *saw the same large man* that had appeared in his dream, dressed in the same clothes. He said to him that, when the treasure was deposited there, he was sworn to take charge of and protect that property, until the time should arrive for it to be exhibited to the world of mankind; and, in order to prevent his making an improper disclosure, he was murdered or slain on the spot, and the treasure had been under his charge ever since. He said to him that he had *not followed his directions*; and, in *consequence of laying the article down* before putting it in the napkin, he *could not have the article now*; but that if he would come again, one year from that time, he could then have them. The year passed . . . but he went to the place of deposit, where the same man appeared again, and said he had not been punctual in following his directions, and, in consequence, *he could not have the article yet*. Joseph asked when he could have them; and the answer was, "Come *in one year from this time, and bring your oldest brother with you*; then you may have them." During that year, it so happened *that his oldest brother died*; but, at the end of the year, Joseph repaired to the place again, and was told by the man who still guarded the treasure, that, inasmuch as he could not bring his oldest brother, he

could not have the treasure yet; but *there would be another person appointed to come with him* in one year from that time, when he could have it. Joseph asked, "*How shall I know the person?*" and was told that the person would be known to him at sight. During that year, Joseph went to the town of Harmony, in the State of Pennsylvania. . . . While there, he fell in company with a young woman; and, when he first saw her, he was satisfied that *she was the person appointed to go with him to get the treasure* he had so often failed to secure.<sup>18</sup>

The italicized sentences highlight those places where the Knight, Chase, and Lapham accounts correspond. They make it likely that a common source is involved, probably members of the Smith family. These sources raise questions similar to those that the salamander letter raised. Why is the story being told in a money-digging format? Apparently the language and concepts of magic were familiar and acceptable to the Smith family and their friends.

Lucy Mack Smith herself relates some of the Joseph Smith story in the same way her husband and Joseph Knight did. Lucy says that the angel told Joseph he might try to secure the plates on 22 September. When he visited the site where the plates were buried, he supposed that he would be able to take them home.

But said the divine messenger you must take them into your hands and *go straight to the house without delay* and put them immediately and lock them up accordingly when the time arrived he went to the place appointed and removed the moss and grass from the surface of the rock and then pryed up the *flat stone* . . . he then discovered the plates laying on 4 pillars in the inside of the box he put forth his hand and took them up but when he lifted them from their place the thought flashed across his mind that there might be something more in the box that would be a benefit to him in a pecuniary point of view in the excitement of the moment he *laid the record down in order to cover up the box* lest some one should come along and take away whatever else might be deposited there *When he turned again* to take up the record it was gone but where he knew not . . . . He kneeled down & asked the Lord why it was . . . The angel appeared to him and told him that *he had not done as he was commanded in that he laid the record down in order to secure some imaginary treasure* that remain[ed] after some further conversation Joseph was then permitted to raise the stone again and *there he beheld the plates* the same as before He reached forth his hand to take them but was *thrown on to the ground* when he recovered . . . the angel was gone and he arose and went to the house.<sup>19</sup>

In Lucy's version Joseph had to take the plates immediately and not delay; he removed the flat stone, found the plates in a box, laid the record down and found it had disappeared when he turned back to

get them; the angel told him this was because he had not done right; afterward he looked again and the plates had reappeared. When he tried to take them he was manhandled by the angel.

There are elements here very similar to the money-digging folklore outlined by Ron Walker in this journal. There is the use of the stone or glass; there is the jealous guardian of the treasure who will not allow the hunter to obtain the treasure without following explicit instructions and who uses physical force to impose his will. There is the disappearing and reappearing treasure, the necessity of bringing a suitable person before the treasure can be obtained, and the necessity of a pure motive devoid of greed.

In evaluating the significance of these parallels, we must not forget that the early Saints did not deny their involvement with money digging nor their faith in the powers behind the money-digging arts. Joseph Smith himself never denied his participation, although he did minimize its significance once he became founder of the Church.<sup>20</sup> He told the elders in 1841 that everyone should have a seer stone, so that he still believed in its special powers and that those who were faithful would have the ability to use it.<sup>21</sup> Joseph Smith, Sr., boasted of his knowledge of the magical arts to a small group in Kirtland,<sup>22</sup> while Lucy Mack Smith admitted the entire family's participation in treasure hunting by magical means in the unpublished manuscript of her history:

Let not my reader suppose that because I shall pursue another topic for a season that we stopt our labor and went at trying to win the faculty of Abrac drawing magic circles or sooth saying to the neglect of all kinds of business we never during our lives suffered one important interest to swallow up every other obligation but whilst we worked with our hands we endeavored to remmember the service of & the welfare of our souls.<sup>23</sup>

There exists a good deal of additional evidence that many early Mormons believed in magical practices and powers and that they found these to be a support of their religious faith. Joseph Smith told Oliver Cowdery in an early revelation in April 1829 that his gift of "working with the rod was of divine origin." Joseph said, "Behold it has told you things: behold there is no other power save God, that can cause this rod of nature, to work in your hands, for it is the work of God."<sup>24</sup> The early Saints, including Oliver Cowdery, seem to have had no difficulty believing this revelation because they believed in the medium of stones and hazel rods themselves. Different witnesses testify that the plates of the Book of Mormon were translated—and

perhaps discovered—by means of a stone.<sup>25</sup> David Whitmer said he began to doubt some of Joseph Smith's revelations when the Prophet stopped receiving them through his stone.<sup>26</sup> When Hiram Page received revelations through a similar medium, he threatened to draw away Oliver Cowdery and the Whitmers.<sup>27</sup> Brigham Young said in 1857 that "Baptist, Presbyterian, and Methodist priests and deacons" sent for a conjurer to find the plates after Joseph Smith brought them home and that the conjurer "*knew where those plates were hid.*"<sup>28</sup> Lucy Mack Smith claimed that Sally Chase could see "many wonderful things" in her glass, including where the plates were hidden. Lucy also wrote that while Joseph was trying to get a chest made he hid the plates and that Willard Chase and several others "sent for a conjurer to come 60 miles to divine the place where the record was deposited by magic art we were apprehensive that the plates were taken out and secreted somewhere and we were somewhat uneasy lest they might like Moses who was hid in the bulrushes be discovered by our enemies."<sup>29</sup> Martin Harris in an interview published in 1859 recalled how Joseph Smith had located with his stone a pin Martin had dropped in straw and repeated a tale told by Samuel Lawrence, whose name was linked with Joseph Smith's in the Joseph Knight narrative, that a man eight or nine feet tall harrassed the money diggers and forced them to give up their quest for treasure. Martin Harris still attested to the sincerity of the money-digging group, whom he said had worked with Joseph Smith and his father in Palmyra and other places.<sup>30</sup> Clearly these early Saints believed that magical powers existed and that others besides Joseph Smith possessed them. All of this is too much evidence to simply brush aside or ignore.

In the light of the accumulating evidence of a strong influence of magic upon the early Mormons, it is vitally important that serious historians should not overreact. There is always the danger of reverting to the enormous distortion of an Obediah Dogberry or a Fawn Brodie and concluding that Mormonism could not initially have been a legitimate religious movement. I would suggest that Mormonism was at the beginning a religious movement fundamentally rooted in a reaction against religious pluralism and that this explains how the money-digging activities fit. Belief in money digging in this context is not central but in part a by-product of anti-pluralism. This insight requires explanation.

Joseph Smith made it clear in his 1838 personal history that he was put off by the revivals because the many churches competed for

converts afterward. Joseph said he could not tell who was right and who was wrong.<sup>31</sup> Deciding who was right in the early nineteenth century had become more and more difficult because of the growing multiplicity of sects. Joseph Smith had a conversion experience at age fourteen but then had a lengthy period of indifference.<sup>32</sup> When his mother and other members of the family joined the Presbyterians at the revival in 1824, Joseph would not join as he could feel nothing.<sup>33</sup> If Oliver Cowdery is correct, one of Joseph's dilemmas was whether to believe at all, which could be a harrowing experience for a young man in a predominantly believing family and culture.<sup>34</sup>

Peter Berger argues persuasively in two of his major works, *The Sacred Canopy* and *The Heretical Perspective*, that secularism was a by-product of multiplicity, religious and otherwise. He maintains that the modern world of religious impotence emerged rapidly after the Reformation as the church undertook to control less and less of the affairs of everyday life. The modern world, says Berger, is fraught with choices: where to live, how and where to work, where to worship, what to believe, who to have as friends, and so on. He argues that such choices did not exist in the medieval world, that society was staid, and supported and sustained a unified world with accompanying religious world view. Berger suggests, however, that Protestantism facilitated the process of secularization by playing down miracles, magic, sacraments, and ceremonies, and by exerting less and less control over everyday life. Protestants stressed that man's access to God comes not through priestly intervention but by means of a personal encounter with God during a coveted conversion experience.<sup>35</sup> At this point, Berger and Thomas, cited earlier in this paper, agree that Protestantism left the believer bereft of the ceremonial supports of faith. If, as Berger says, the Protestant could depend only upon the conversion experience for support within the church, it would make it doubly hard for those Americans outside the churches who had no such faith-confirming experience. Conversion never came to many, and this left them devoid of contact with the divine. Others found themselves so confused by so many contradictory religious claims that they were not certain where or whether God was made manifest.

If conversion caused Joseph Smith difficulty, as has been shown, other early Mormons had similar difficulties. George A. Smith reported that after attending many revivals he was the only one of his group who was not converted, and he was sealed up to damnation by the Congregationalists.<sup>36</sup> Willard Richards had a similar experi-

ence.<sup>37</sup> Warren Foote went to Methodist camp meetings but only “to see them jump and hear them shout and sing and when they all got to praying, shouting and singing at once it was fun to me to hear them.”<sup>38</sup> For Foote, God was not in the revivals. Lewis Barney said that he had decided “Religion of every kind was a hoax And that none was right and that all preachers of religion were hypocrits, that they preached for money and popularity.”<sup>39</sup> Martin Harris reported that before he became a Mormon “the Spirit told me that I might Just as well Plunge myself into the water as to have Any of the Sects Baptize me.”<sup>40</sup> George Laub, about nineteen years of age, said he attended Methodist meetings and sat on the mourners’ bench “to pray to have my sines forgiven. I Saught with earnest but all in vein to me. I did this in three Evenings in Succesion but found noe delevence. The Third Evening the priest told me to beleave I had it and then I would have it. I told him I could not beleav that I had a thing when I knew that it was not So. I Said if this is relegeon there is none for me.”<sup>41</sup>

Such people as these had to find the power of God elsewhere than in the religious organizations they saw about them. John Sherer, a minister who lived at Colesville in 1830 and knew some of the Mormon converts there, said that “all professing Christians who do not adhere to their [the Mormon] system, they consider as formalists, having the form of godliness, but denying the power.”<sup>42</sup> Here was a fundamental issue to the Mormons who repudiated the existing institutions. If God’s power was not manifest by miracles and magic, many early Latter-day Saints feared that the churches were man-made and that a secular world view might be right.<sup>43</sup>

Priddy Meeks, writing in Parowan, Utah, in 1879, explained what money digging and magic stones meant to some early Latter-day Saints. He said, “A seer’s stone appears to me to be the connecting link between the visible and invisible worlds.”<sup>44</sup> For him it was a means whereby the miraculous power of God, which was missing among the sects, could be discerned. Thus it is evident that the powers of the stone bolstered the faith of Joseph Smith during his time of alienation toward the churches, for stones and hazel rods sometimes worked in marvelous fashion.<sup>45</sup> When they did not, there was a ready-made answer for failure. Priddy Meeks warned, “It is not safe to depend on peepstones in any case where evil spirits have the power to put false appearances before them while looking in a peepstone. If evil spirits will not interfere the verdict will be as true as preaching.” For Priddy Meeks these experiences were a source of the verification of the reality of an unseen world. Meeks cites Hyrum

Smith to this effect: "The Patriarch, Hiram Smith, the brother of the Prophet Joseph Smith, held the same idea, but stated that our faith was not strong enough to overcome the evil influences that might interfere, but seemed to think that time would come."<sup>46</sup> The peep-stone might become an instrument of divine favor if its user had sufficient faith. In the minds of those like Hyrum Smith and Priddy Meeks, revealed religion and magic served similar purposes. They were reassuring evidence of the power of God. We must be aware of this mind-set if we are to avoid misreading the significance of the money-digging sources.

## NOTES

Marvin S. Hill is a professor of history at Brigham Young University. He writes, "I am indebted to Ronald W. Walker for allowing me to read his paper prior to publication in this journal and for several helpful suggestions during the research and writing of this paper."

<sup>1</sup>See the *Palmyra Reflector*, 6 January 1831 through 19 March 1831, for Obediah Dogberry's six articles which develop the money-digging thesis. E. D. Howe, editor of the Painesville, Ohio, *Telegraph*, was an early advocate of the thesis and used it in his *Mormonism Unveiled* (Painesville, Ohio: E. D. Howe, 1834). A recent example of the use of the money-digging thesis by anti-Mormons is Jerald and Sandra Tanner's "Salamandergate," in the June 1985 issue of their *Salt Lake City Messenger*, no. 57.

<sup>2</sup>B. H. Roberts, the most widely read LDS historian of early Mormonism, skirted the money-digging issue, placing great emphasis on how hardworking the Smith family was and affirming that if they were hardworking they had little time for money digging (see his *Comprehensive History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 6 vols. [reprint; Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1965], 1:42-43). Richard L. Anderson, writing in 1970, also played down the money-digging issue, holding that those who made money-digging allegations were not well informed. He quotes William Smith, younger brother of the Prophet, that "my statement on the subject is that the charges are false" (see "Joseph Smith's New York Reputation Reappraised," *BYU Studies* 10 [Spring 1970]: 283-314). William, who was not always candid on other matters, may have been putting the family's best foot forward on this topic (*ibid.*, 15).

<sup>3</sup>For example, Hugh W. Nibley says that the "most damning charge against Joseph Smith is that he was a money digger." After reviewing contradictory testimony, Nibley concludes, "If Joseph Smith is to be condemned, I fear it must be on far better evidence than this" (*The Myth Makers* [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1961], 91-190, especially 91, 190).

<sup>4</sup>*Church News*, 28 April 1985, 6. President Hinckley said, "The letter has nothing to do with the authenticity of the Church." He argued that the "real test of the faith which both Martin Harris and W. W. Phelps had in Joseph Smith and his work is found in their lives."

<sup>5</sup>For an account of the charges of fraud against Hofmann, see "Records Allege Hofmann Sold Forged Documents," *Salt Lake Tribune*, 7 February 1986, A-1.

<sup>6</sup>Rendell's discrediting of the documents discovered by Hofmann first occurred on a Salt Lake City television station but was repeated to the *Salt Lake Tribune*, 7 February 1986, A-2.

<sup>7</sup>Among others, James Dibowski, former director of the U.S. Postal Crime Laboratory in Cincinnati, spoke for the authenticity of the blessing by Joseph Smith of his son, Joseph III, to succeed him (see *Provo Herald*, 12 February 1986, 14).

<sup>8</sup>See my "Joseph Smith and the 1826 Trial: New Evidence and New Difficulties," *BYU Studies* 12 (Winter 1972): 223-33. There can be little doubt that a trial took place, although we have conflicting reports as to the charges, who testified, and the verdict. In light of the forgery charges in connection with early Mormon sources, it would be well if the bills of cost discovered by Rev. Wesley Walters were submitted for testing as to authenticity, a point I urged in the above mentioned piece.

<sup>9</sup>Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (London: Weidenfield and Nicolson, 1971), 22-50, 70-93, 117-28, 151-73, 200-13, 224-45, 636, 643-66.

<sup>10</sup>Jon Butler, "Magic, Astrology, and the Early American Religious Heritage, 1600–1760," *American Historical Review* 84 (April 1979): 317–46.

<sup>11</sup>Jon Butler, "The Dark Ages of American Occultism, 1760–1848," in *The Occult in America: New Historical Perspectives*, ed. Howard Kerr and Charles Crow (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983), 58–78.

<sup>12</sup>Several papers dealt with this topic at the Sunstone Symposium in August 1985 in Salt Lake City.

<sup>13</sup>"A History of the Divining Rod: With the Adventures of an Old Rodsman," *U.S. Magazine and Democratic Review* 84 (April 1850): 317–21.

<sup>14</sup>Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled*, 240–48; emphasis added.

<sup>15</sup>Anderson, "Joseph Smith's New York Reputation Reappraised," 283–314.

<sup>16</sup>Nibley, *Myth Makers*, 91–190.

<sup>17</sup>Dean Jessee, "Joseph Knight's Recollection of Early Mormon History," *BYU Studies* 17 (Autumn 1976): 31; emphasis added.

<sup>18</sup>*Historical Magazine* (1870), 305–9; emphasis added.

<sup>19</sup>Lucy Mack Smith, History, MS, Library–Archives, Historical Division, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City (hereafter cited as LDS Church Archives); emphasis added.

<sup>20</sup>*Elder's Journal* (July 1838), 43. To the question "was not Jo Smith a money digger?" the editor, Joseph himself, said, "Yes, but it was never a very proffitable job to him, as he only got fourteen dollars a month for it."

<sup>21</sup>Quoted in Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 69.

<sup>22</sup>James Colin Brewster, *Very Important! To the Mormon Money Diggers* (Springfield, Ill., 1843), 2–4. Joseph Smith, Sr., is quoted as saying, "I know more about money digging than any man in this generation for I have been in the business more than thirty years."

<sup>23</sup>Lucy Mack Smith, History, MS.

<sup>24</sup>*The Book of Commandments* (Zion, Mo.: W. W. Phelps & Co., 1833), 19.

<sup>25</sup>Hosea Stout indicates that Brigham Young said the plates were found by means of a seer stone (Juanita Brooks, ed., *On the Mormon Frontier: The Diary of Hosea Stout* [Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1964], 2:593). David Whitmer said, "God gave to an unlearned boy, Joseph Smith, the gift to translate it by means of a STONE" (*Address to All Believers in Christ* [Richmond, Mo., 1887], 6). Emma Smith said the plates were translated with a seer stone in a hat, and Michael Morse, an eyewitness, reported similarly (see *Saints' Herald* 35 [19 May 1888]: 310, and 26 [15 June 1879]: 190–91).

<sup>26</sup>In his *Address to All Believers*, 31–32, David Whitmer lamented that Joseph Smith gave up use of the seer stone after finishing the translation of the plates. He made a large point of the fact that later revelations did not come through the stone and claimed that these revelations where Joseph was "mouthpiece" contradicted the scriptures.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, 32. David Whitmer notes that Hiram Page prophesied that the stars would fall a few days before it happened on 13 November 1833. Joseph Smith in his history indicates that Page received two revelations on church government and that the "Whitmer family and Oliver Cowdery were believing much in the things set forth by this stone" (see Joseph Smith, *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2d ed. rev., 7 vols. [reprint; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1971], 1:110). However, David Whitmer said, "None of them pretended to dictate for the church." Whitmer admitted that although "Oliver and I never thought much about them [Page's revelations]. We talked of them, and thought they might be from God, or might be from Satan" (see Whitmer's letter of 9 December 1886 in the *Saints' Herald* 34 [5 February 1887]: 90).

<sup>28</sup>Remarks by Brigham Young at the Salt Lake Bowery, 19 July 1857, *Journal of Discourses* 5 (Liverpool: Latter-day Saints' Book Depot, 1858), 55.

<sup>29</sup>Lucy Mack Smith, History, MS.

<sup>30</sup>*Tiffany's Monthly* (1859), 163–70.

<sup>31</sup>Joseph Smith, *History*, 1:9.

<sup>32</sup>In his earliest history, written in 1832, Joseph said, "I fell into transgression and sinned in many things which brought wound upon my soul" (see Milton Backman, *Joseph Smith's First Vision* [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1971], 157).

<sup>33</sup>Alexander Neibaur, Journal, n.d., LDS Church Archives.

<sup>34</sup>Oliver Cowdery said that on the eve of Joseph's first vision the all-important question was "if a Supreme Being did exist . . . that he was accepted of him" (*Latter-day Saints' Messenger and Advocate* 1 [February 1835]: 78).

<sup>35</sup>Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy* (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1969), 111–12.

<sup>36</sup>"Autobiography of George A. Smith," *Millennial Star* 27 (15 July 1865): 407–8.

<sup>37</sup>Claire Noall, *Intimate Disciple* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1957), 65, 69, 71.

<sup>38</sup>Autobiography of Warren Foote, 4, LDS Church Archives.

<sup>39</sup>Journal of Lewis Barney, 16, LDS Church Archives.



<sup>40</sup>Martin Harris's statement, dictated to a scribe and dated 4 September 1870, is in the LDS Church Archives.

<sup>41</sup>"George Laub's Nauvoo Journal," ed. Eugene England, *BYU Studies* 18 (Winter 1978): 155.

<sup>42</sup>John Sherer to Absolem Peters, correspondence secretary of the American Home Missionary Society, 18 November 1830, AHMS Collection, Amistead Research Center, New Orleans.

<sup>43</sup>On this point James Turner argues that Evangelical Protestants surrendered all belief in a God who intervenes in nature contrary to natural law. As he put it, "church leaders swallowed the Deist conception of a natural-law God." This was obviously devastating to many members of the lower class in America who wanted strong evidence that a personal God controlled the universe and acted to their personal benefit. (See Turner's *Without God, Without Creed: Origins of Unbelief in America* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1985], 73.)

<sup>44</sup>"Journal of Priddy Meeks," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 10 (1942): 180.

<sup>45</sup>For an insightful discussion of how water witching is sometimes effective and seems so even to educated farmers today, see Evon Vogt and Ray Hyman, *Water Witching USA* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 191–213.

<sup>46</sup>"Journal of Priddy Meeks," 180.