

CHAPTER III

The Problem of the History, Transmission and Use of the Urim and Thummim

Joseph Smith said, "Through the medium of the Urim and Thummim I translated the record, by the gift and power of God."¹ The "record" in question was the Book of Mormon. The Prophet tells us little about the manner in which he used the sacred instrument; in fact, he says that "it was not intended to tell the world all the particulars of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon."²

The assertion that a physical instrument of ancient origin was used as an aid in the translation of the Book of Mormon has created wide interest and, among scientific men, caustic comment. These gentlemen are prone to dismiss curtly, as having no basis in fact, the statement of Joseph Smith that he translated at all—with or without the Urim and Thummim. They point out that the Prophet had little or no formal training in English, not to mention a foreign language. His substitution of a physical instrument for knowledge of a foreign language seems, for the trained person at least, untenable.

When and under what circumstances did the Urim and Thummim originate? Scholars say, "Their origin is unknown." The Book of Mormon, on the other hand, tells us much of interest about them. In the Book of Ether we learn that the brother of Jared, great prophet-leader of a group of families dispersed from the region of the Tower of Babel, went upon a high mountain to commune with the Lord. Because of the exceedingly great faith of this man, the pre-existent Christ appeared to him and manifested to him many glorious and marvelous things of the past, present, and future. Moroni, abridger of the Book of Ether, continues the account as follows:

And it came to pass that the Lord said unto the brother of Jared: Behold, thou shalt not suffer these things which ye have seen and heard to go forth unto the world, until the time cometh that I shall glorify my name in the flesh; wherefore, ye shall treasure up the things which ye have seen and heard, and show it to no man. And behold, when ye shall come unto me, ye shall write them and shall seal them up, that no one can interpret them; for ye shall write them in a language that cannot be read. And behold, these two stones will I give unto thee, and ye shall seal them up also with the things which ye shall write. For behold, the language which ye shall write I have confounded; wherefore I will cause in my own due time that these stones shall magnify to the eyes of men these things which ye shall write. And when the Lord had said these words, he showed unto the brother of Jared all the inhabitants of the earth which had been, and also all that would be; and he withheld them not from his sight, even unto the ends of the earth. For he had said unto him in times before, that if he would believe in him that he could show unto him all things—it should be shown unto him; therefore the Lord could not withhold anything from him, for he knew that the Lord could show him all things. And the Lord said unto him: Write these things and seal them up; and I will show them in mine own due time unto the children of men. And it came to pass that the Lord commanded him that he should seal up the two stones which he had received, and show them not, until the Lord should show them unto the children of men. (Ether 3:21-28)

The two stones mentioned in this account were the active agents in the Urim and Thummim. The Doctrine and Covenants would seem to imply that they were the ones in the sacred instrument used by Joseph Smith:

Behold, I say unto you, that you must rely upon my word, which if you do with full purpose of heart, you shall have a view of the plates, and also of the

breastplate, the sword of Laban, the Urim and Thummim, which were given to the brother of Jared upon the mount, when he talked with the Lord face to face, and the miraculous directors which were given to Lehi while in the wilderness of the Red Sea. (17:1)

It will be noticed in the words of Moroni above that nothing is said about the two stones being set in the rims of a silver bow to give the appearance of a large pair of spectacles, as the Urim and Thummim are described by Joseph Smith. It is possible that the brother of Jared or some later Jaredite prophet mounted the stones, for convenience in use or to insure that they would not get lost, in the silver bows described by Joseph Smith.

What happened to the Urim and Thummim among the Jaredite people after the death of the brother of Jared is not known. Nothing is said either about their use or about the names of the prophets to whom they were handed down. All we know is that the Urim and Thummim or "interpreters," as they were called by the Nephites (Mosiah 8:13; 28:20), eventually found their way into the hands of Nephite prophets and were handed down from generation to generation until they come into the possession of Moroni. Moroni hid them in the hill, where about 1400 years later they were acquired by the Prophet Joseph Smith. (Ether 4:5)

Now the interesting question arises, How and when did the Urim and Thummim leave the hands of the Jaredite people and get into the hands of Nephite prophets? It would seem to us that these sacred "interpreters" were certainly in the possession of the Nephites as early as the days of the elder Mosiah, who must have used them in translating engravings on a large stone which had been brought to him. The Nephite record says:

And it came to pass in the days of Mosiah, there was a large stone brought unto him with engravings on it; and he did interpret the engravings by the gift and

power of God. And they gave an account of one Coriantumr, and the slain of his people. And Coriantumr was discovered by the people of Zarahemla; and he dwelt with them for the space of nine moons. (Omni 20-21)

Notice how closely the words "he did interpret the engravings by the gift and power of God" parallel the words of Joseph Smith at the beginning of this chapter. The elder Mosiah was king over the people of Zarahemla (united Nephites and Mulekites) possibly about the year 180 B. C. We shall assume that the Nephite prophets had the Urim and Thummim at least by that date.³ Now we ask again, How did the Nephite prophets get the sacred Jaredite instrument? The following possibilities seem open to us:

1. One of the last Jaredite prophets, possibly Ether himself, transmitted the Urim and Thummim at the Lord's behest to one of the Nephite prophets about the time of the last battles of the Jaredites. We remember that Ether hid the record that he had written about his people in such a manner that a branch of the Nephite people found them (Ether 15:33); the sacred "interpreters" might also have been hidden in such a manner that an inspired Nephite prophet would find them.

2. During a period of apostasy, early in Jaredite history, the Lord may have taken the Urim and Thummim from that people and delivered them to Abraham, who received them while still residing in Ur of the Chaldees. (Abr. 3:1) From Abraham the instruments were probably transmitted to his righteous posterity throughout the long history of Israel until about the time of the Babylonian Captivity. We know that Moses and Aaron had them (Exo. 28:30; Lev. 8:8) and that they were transmitted to others. (See Num. 3:1-4; 20:22-29; 27:21; see also 1 Sam. 28:6.) In post-exilic times the Old Testament plainly indicates that the Urim and Thummim had been lost to the tribe of Levi. (Ezra 2:63; cf. Neh. 7:65) There is a Jewish tradition found in the Babylonian Talmud, Sota, 48,a, to the effect that

the Urim and Thummim were lost at the time of the destruction of the Temple. Since this is about the time that the Nephites left Jerusalem, we suggest the possibility that Father Lehi took them with him or that Nephi secured them along with the Brass Plates. If one of them did secure the instruments, we see that the Nephites had the sacred "interpreters" during all the years of their long history.

Now which of these two possibilities seems more probable? Number one has the weakness of not having the Nephite record drop a single word in its behalf. Moreover, it does not account for the presence of the breastplate along with the Urim and Thummim. Joseph Smith said in his history:

Also, that there were two stones in silver bows—and these stones, fastened to a breastplate, constituted what is called the Urim and Thummim—deposited with the plates; . . .⁴

Possibility number two has this weakness: it requires the Lord to transfer the Urim and Thummim from this continent, where the Jaredites were located, to Abraham in the Near East at Ur of the Chaldees. It also assumes that there was but one Urim and Thummim. Otherwise it is very attractive and fits very nicely into Nephite history. It accounts also for the presence of the breastplate with the Urim and Thummim. (See Exo. 28:30; Lev. 8:8)

President Joseph Fielding Smith believes that the Urim and Thummim had by Abraham were "separate and distinct" from those had by the brother of Jared and brought by him to this continent.⁵ He would rule out possibility number two given above. If he is correct, we are left with possibility number one, namely, that one of the last of the Jaredite prophets managed to transmit the Urim and Thummim to an unnamed Nephite prophet. If it was Ether who transferred them, we may conclude that the Nephites received the sacred "interpreters" as early as 300 B. C.

Now let us direct our attention to the problem of how the Urim and Thummim were used. It may at first appear presumptuous on our part to discuss the question, in view of the fact that the Prophet Joseph Smith consistently refused to do so. However, let us make clear that any explanation offered here of the manner in which the Urim and Thummim operated is tentative in nature, but, we hope, in the general direction of the truth. It will be remembered that the Urim and Thummim used by Joseph Smith were given by the Savior to the brother of Jared on the mount (D. & C. 17:1; Ether 3:23). In all probability the active elements in the instrument, that is to say, the two stones, were composed of celestial material. That the stones of the Urim and Thummim were from the celestial world should be a fact of supreme importance—so it seems to us—in any attempted explanation of how they functioned. Somehow or other, celestial material seems to have helped both ancient and modern seers to bridge the chasm of the unknown. A hint of the role played by such material is presented to us in the Doctrine and Covenants (130:8-10):

The place where God resides is a great Urim and Thummim. This earth, in its sanctified and immortal state, will be made like unto crystal and will be a Urim and Thummim to the inhabitants who dwell thereon, whereby all things pertaining to an inferior kingdom, or all kingdoms of a lower order, will be manifest to those who dwell on it. And this earth will be Christ's. Then the white stone mentioned in Revelation 2:17, will become a Urim and Thummim to each individual who receives one, whereby things pertaining to a higher order of kingdoms will be made known.

May we not assume, therefore, that when a seer, in all humility, used the Urim and Thummim, he was for the time being in a mental or spiritual state somewhat analogous to that of the "inhabitants" mentioned in the above

revelation? That which was unknown to him would be manifested or mirrored to his mind. Stating the principle in another way: the celestial stones of the Urim and Thummim enabled the Seer, by concentrating all of his spiritual faculties, to pass into the realm of the unknown and have the truth made known to him. Using a technical term familiar to the chemist, the Urim and Thummim were in effect spiritual "catalyzers"—they promoted an action that otherwise could not readily go forward without their use. When, for example, Joseph Smith was translating the Nephite record, the Urim and Thummim enabled him to receive what the Germans would call the *Sprachgafuehl* or linguistic feeling for the unknown language. For the time being the prophet had an intuitive sense of, or natural feeling for, the Nephite language, which enabled him to understand the writing on the gold plates in his possession. He then proceeded to convey the thoughts expressed on the plates into the best English at his command. His command of English grammar was somewhat limited because of his lack of formal instruction. The Lord is not to be blamed for the imperfections of language found in the Book of Mormon.

It is quite evident that our explanation of how the Urim and Thummim functioned is not complete—indeed, could not be under the circumstances. Only a seer, the Lord permitting, could give a full explanation. We shall be well satisfied if our ideas contribute a little to the understanding of the problem connected with the translation of the Book of Mormon.

1 *Times and Seasons*, V, 21

2 *Far West Record*, p. 16.

3 If there is objection to this date, we point out that there can be no doubt the younger Mosiah had the instrument about 122 B.C. See Mosiah 8:13.

4 Joseph Smith, 2:35, in Triple Combination

5 See *The Improvement Era*, Vol. 57, p. 382.