THE PRODUCTION OF THE BOOK OF MORMON IN LIGHT OF A TIBETAN BUDDHIST PARALLEL

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> *The American history of Joseph Smith looks for causes: what led Joseph Smith to think as he did? Comparative, transnational histories explore the limits and capacities of the divine and human imagination: what is possible for humans to think and feel?*[1]

Drawing on observations and suggestions from scholars of Tibetan Buddhism and Mormonism, this article compares the production of the Book of Mormon with that of the class of Tibetan Buddhist scripture known as *gter ma* ("Treasure," pronounced "terma").[2] In

1. Special thanks to Dr. Dominic Sur for inspiring this article, and Drs. David Holland and Janet Gyatso for hosting independent studies in which I developed much of my ideas while pursuing a master of theological studies at the Harvard Divinity School. Thanks also to Drs. Frank Clooney and Kimberley Patton for allowing me to present an early draft to the Harvard Comparative Studies Doctoral Colloquium.

Richard L. Bushman, "Joseph Smith's Many Histories," *Brigham Young University Studies* 44, no. 4 (2005): 11.

2. I am not the first to notice similarities between these two traditions. However, only Donald Lopez has done more than merely note superficial similarities. In his *The Tibetan Book of the Dead: A Biography* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2011), Lopez observed that both Joseph Smith and the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*'s revealer, Karma Lingpa (*karma gling pa*; 1326–1386), legitimated their discoveries by posthumously attributing their text's authorship to an authoritative religious figure after purportedly uncovering them from their

brief, both are said to have been authored by ancient religious figures, buried with the anticipation of future discovery, discovered by visionaries with the help of supernatural beings, and "translated" from an

native lands and translating them from an obscure language by supernatural means. Creating this link to a sacred past, Lopez argues, bolstered the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*'s popularity while leading to widespread suspicion and persecution of Smith, "at least in part, because [he] lived in a chronologically recent and geographically proximate past" (137–39, 148–52). As for other Buddhist studies scholars who have noted the comparison, in chronological order: Janet Gyatso, *Apparitions of Self* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998), 147; Matthew Kapstein, *Tibetan Assimilation of Buddhism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 136; Gananath Obeyesekere, *The Awakened Ones* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 503–4; Robert Mayer, "Indian *niddhi*, Tibetan *gter ma*, Guru Chos dbang, and a *Kriyātantra* on Treasure Doors: Rethinking Treasure (part two)," *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines*, no. 64 (2022): 368–69. As for Mormon studies scholars: Grant Underwood, "Attempting to Situate Joseph Smith," *Brigham Young University Studies* 44, no. 4 (2005): 46; Elizabeth Quick, "Emma Smith as Shaman," Salt Lake City Symposium, January 1, 2008, Sunstone, https://sunstone.org/emma-smith-as-shaman/; Grant Hardy, introduction to *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text*, edited by Royal Skousen (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2009), xxv–xxvi; Ann Taves, "History and the Claims of Revelation," *Numen* 61 (2014): 195n20; Grant Hardy, "Ancient History and Modern Commandments," in *Producing Ancient Scripture: Joseph Smith's Translation Projects in the Development of Mormon Christianity*, edited by Michael Hubbard MacKay, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Brain M. Hauglid (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2020), 216n37. Also tangentially related are the comments of Douglas Osto ("Altered States and the Origins of the Mahāyāna" in *Setting Out on the Great Way*, edited by Paul Harrison [Bristol, CT: Equinox, 2018], 196n5) and Daniel Boucher (*Bodhisattvas of the Forest and the Formation of the Mahāyāna* [Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008], xii, xiv) that comparisons with Mormonism could aid in understanding the origins of Mahāyāna Buddhism. Both are drawing on comments from Jan Nattier, who has only briefly made the comparison once herself (*A Few Good Men* [Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2003], 170). Robert Mayer has also suggested that cross-cultural comparisons with anthropological accounts of treasure recovery could aid in understanding the origins of the Tibetan Treasure tradition ("Rethinking Treasure [part two], 368–69); "Rethinking Treasure [part one]," *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines*, no. 52

obscure language into the discoverers' native tongue by supernatural, revelatory means.[3]

More specifically, this article aims to use a new lens—a *gter ma* lens, if you will—to explore and extend existing theories of the relationship between the gold plates that Joseph Smith claimed to discover and his translation of those plates, the Book of Mormon. Before continuing, it will be important to briefly clarify and justify the use of comparison for the purpose of analyzing these two culturally, geographically, and temporally separate phenomena, and especially the idea that the analysis of one can be used to shed light on the other.

Whereas comparative methodologies were once common to the field of religious studies, they have become increasingly unpopular since the postmodern turn.[4] One of the persistent postmodern critiques

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[2019]: 144–46). Also worth mentioning are Edward Conze's comparison of the Tibetan Treasure tradition and Gnosticism ("Buddhism and Gnosis" in *Le Origini Dello* Gnosticismo, edited by Ugo Bianchi [Leiden: Brill, 1970], 651–67) and Lawrence Foster's claim that Mormon studies scholars "greatest single weakness" in theorizing Smith's translation "has been their failure to take into account comparative perspectives on revelatory and trance phenomena" (*Religion and Sexuality* [Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981], 295).

3. Although I have presented these actions in the past tense for grammatical symmetry, it is important to note that Tibetan Treasure discoveries continue in the present day. See David Germano, "Re-Membering the Dismembered Body" in *Buddhism in Contemporary Tibet*, edited by Melvyn C. Goldstein and Mathew T. Kapstein (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 53–94; Holly Gayley, "Ontology of the Past and Its Materialization in Tibetan Treasures," in *The Invention of Sacred Tradition*, edited by James R. Lewis and Olav Hammer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 213–40; and Hanna, "Vast as the Sky," in *Tantra and Popular Religion in Tibet*, edited by Geoffrey Samuel, Hamish Gregor, and Elisabeth Stutchbury (New Delhi: International Academy of Indian Culture and Aditya Prakashan, 1994), 1–14.

4. For a more thorough summary (and partial rebuttal) of postmodern critiques of comparative religion, see Kimberley C. Patton and Benjamin C. Ray, introduction to *A Magic Still Dwells*, ed Kimberley C. Patton and Benjamin C. Ray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 1–22.

has been that the logic of comparative religion rests on the unwarranted assumption that there is such a thing called "religion" that can be compared cross-culturally. Indeed, the concept of religion has been shown to be a modern concept birthed from the rise of, and hence modeled on, Protestant Christianity.[5] As such, when scholars compare "religious phenomena" they are often imposing anachronistic and provincial categories that distort that which they intend to illuminate.

In light of such critiques, I want to be clear that in using events and ideas located in Tibetan Buddhist history to shed light on Joseph Smith's translation of the gold plates, I am not arguing that *because* Tibetan Buddhists acted and thought in a certain way, Joseph Smith *must have* acted and thought in a similar way, based on some sort of preposterous organic connection.[6] Rather, I am arguing that as we attempt to trace associations between Smith's gold plates and the Book of Mormon, considering how other people in radically different times and places have described structurally similar events can serve to highlight and challenge assumptions previously taken for granted, and introduce new possibilities that would be otherwise indiscernible.[7]

Reading Smith's interactions with the gold plates alongside structurally comparable events in the Tibetan *gter ma* tradition—as well as alongside how scholars of Tibetan Buddhism have approached those events—highlights and challenges two prevailing paradigms in

5. See Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2013); Craig Martin, *A Critical Introduction to the Study of Religion* (London: Routledge, 2017), 4–10; and Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

6. This is a paraphrase of Underwood's comment about comparing these two traditions ("Attempting to Situate Joseph Smith," 46).

7. This approach takes after Barbara A. Holdrege's observation that comparison can serve to "test and critique prevailing paradigms, expose their inadequacies, and generate a range of possible models to account for the multiplicity of religious traditions" ("What's Beyond the Post," in Patton and Ray, *A Magic Still Dwells*, 85).

Mormon studies and serves to introduce a novel possibility on how Smith experienced his translation of the Book of Mormon. In brief, this comparison first draws attention to problematic assumptions about the nature of human subjectivity in relation to the material world that have fueled longstanding debates that posit the Book of Mormon must be either a translation of an authentic historical document or a fraud. Moreover, although I agree with much of the work of scholars such as Karl Sandberg, Ann Taves, and Sonia Hazard, whose work transcends this either/or binary by showing the gold plates could have functioned as something other than an inert object subject to linguistic translation, I will take issue with their persistent return to Smith's subjective imagination or creativity as one of the (if not the primary) driving source of his "translation."

In light of the *gter ma* tradition, where the discovered material scroll acts as an agent that draws forth the memory of a particular teaching given by the Buddhist master Padmasambhava in a previous life, and where the work of "translation" consists primarily of ritually orienting oneself in relation to its power as to be an effective intermediary for Padmasambhava's message,[8] I will argue that the gold plates can similarly be thought of as having their own "generative potencies" that acted on Smith in "unpredictable ways."[9] As such, I will suggest that Smith's "translation" be approached as a set of rituals in relation to an agentive material object that enabled him to act as a present intermediary for past voices crying out "from the dust."[10] I will also contend that

8. As I will make clear below, the Tibetan *gter ma* tradition is around 1,000 years old and very diverse. This is a particular reading of that tradition, the sources for which are discussed in part 2 of this article.

9. These are terms borrowed from Tibetan Buddhist studies scholar James Gentry in his discussion on treasure objects (*gter rdzas*) as agents in his book *Power Objects* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 8, 13, 36. They will be elaborated below.

10. 2 Nephi 3:19 (citations with chapter and verse references refer to the Book of Mormon).

this idea is plausible in light of recent work concerning Smith's use of the term "translation," some of Smith's later theological innovations, and postcolonialist and new materialist theories of subjectivity and agency.

The primary goal of this article is to use this idiosyncratic pairing of Tibetan Buddhist and Mormon modes of scriptural production to help us trace the associations between Smith, the gold plates, and the Book of Mormon in a way that better aligns with the primary sources. To do so, I will begin in part 1 by outlining a set of important functional similarities between the gold plates and *gter ma*s within their respective religious traditions. This portion of the article is meant to provide fuller context for introducing my own critiques and theories in part 2, as well as to make a broad case for the comparability of the two traditions that could be generative of future comparative work. Focusing the bulk of the article on their comparability and my own critiques and theories concerning Smith's translation will admittedly leave a number of relevant questions about the implications of this study for Smith's life and legacy unanswered. Nevertheless, I will conclude by briefly discussing two implications of this study, namely around questions of the Book of Mormon's historicity and Smith's later theological innovations on the theme of materiality, which will have to be fully developed elsewhere.

Part 1: Functional Similarities Between the Tibetan Treasure (*gter ma*) Tradition and the Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon

What is particularly interesting to note in this section of the article is how these apocryphal scriptures functioned within their respective traditions, which gives us an idea of the comparability of the activities of Joseph Smith and the Tibetan *gter ma* discoverers (*gter ston*) despite their highly distinctive temporal and geographical contexts. Specifically, Smith and the Tibetan *gter ston*s discovered and translated ancient material objects as a means of bridging the religiously

authoritative past with the present to address contested questions of religious authority and national identity amid religious and political paradigm shifts. In doing so, their scriptures posed similar challenges to the received authority of preexisting canonical texts and expanded traditional canonical boundaries beyond their previous geographical and temporal limitations, thereby sacralizing their native lands and contextualizing them within the larger arc of Christian/Buddhist history, as well as authenticating the otherworldly prowess of their discoverers and the contested authenticity of their own traditions.

The *gter ma* tradition can be seen as a mix of native Tibetan traditions of pragmatic treasure burial and Indian Buddhist revelatory traditions that coalesced into a unique response to contested questions of canonical, denominational, and personal religious authority, as well as religio-national identity, amid religious and political paradigm shifts. The *gter ma* tradition emerged within what is now called the Nyingma (*rnying ma*) tradition of Tibetan Buddhism around the twelfth century,[11] during a period denoted by Tibetan historiographers as the later spread of the Dharma in Tibet, juxtaposed to the earlier spread of the Dharma. These two periods of Buddhist transmission are divided by a hundred year "period of political fragmentation" or "dark period," brought about when the Tibetan central government, and thus imperially sponsored monastic Buddhism, dissolved following

11. Andreas Doctor claims that Nyangral Nyima Ōzer's writings in the twelfth century "are the first to show a self-conscious movement" (*Tibetan Treasure Literature: Revelation, Tradition, and Accomplishment in Visionary Buddhism* [Ithaca, N.Y.: Snow Lion, 2005], 20). However, Hirshberg traces the beginning of the *gter ma* tradition to the thirteenth century when Guru Chöwang wrote his *Great History of the Treasures* (*gter byung chen mo*), since this work marks the first attempt at "deliberate codification" (*Remembering the Lotus-Born: Padmasambhava in the History of Tibet's Golden Age* [Somerville, Mass.: Wisdom, 2016], 85–86).

the assassination of the putatively anti-Buddhist king Lang Darma by a Buddhist monk in the mid-ninth century.[12]

When political and economic conditions restabilized amid a cultural renaissance and religious revival in the latter half of the tenth century,[13] the authenticity of extant Buddhist scriptures and practices became a

12. Traditional sources depict Darma as a demon-possessed tyrant set on ridding Tibet of Buddhist influences, subsequently murdered at the request of the patron goddess of Tibet, *dPal ldan lha mo*, by the monk Lhalung Pelgyi Dorjé to save Darma from incurring further negative karmic retribution and to preserve Buddhism in Tibet. Jens Schlieter provides an overview of traditional depictions of Darma's assassination in "Compassionate Killing or Conflict Resolution?," in *Buddhism and Violence*, edited by Michael Zimmermann (Lumbini: Lumbini International Research Institute, 2006), 131–58. Scholars have questioned this Buddhist suppression narrative, describing him more as a victim of preexisting clan tensions, which he exacerbated by reducing imperial funding of Buddhist activities, *inter alia*, in response to his brother's—King Ralpacan (806–841)—unprecedented Buddhist patronization, military spending, and altering of linguistic and cultural customs, which had led to his own assassination a year earlier. See Ronald Davidson, *Tibetan Renaissance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 64–66; David Snellgrove and Hugh Richardson, *A Cultural History of Tibet* (Boston: Shambala, 1986), 93–94; and Kapstein, *Tibetan Assimilation*, 10–12, 52; Per K. Sørensen, *The Mirror Illuminating the Royal Genealogies* (Weisbaden: Harrassowitz, 1994), 423–424n1488. Some have even questioned whether this regicide actually occurred. See Tsultrim K. Khangkar, "The Assassinations of Tri Ralpachen and Lang Darma," *Tibet Journal* 18, no. 2 (1993): 19–22; and Zuiho Yamaguchi, "The Fiction of King Dar ma's Persecution of Buddhism" in *Du Dunhuang au Japon*, edited by Jean-Pierre Drège (Geneva: Droz, 1996), 231–58.

13. The religious revival was spearheaded by two forces: Central Tibetans affiliated with Tridhé—a purported descendant of Lang Darma who sent young men to receive ordination from monastic refugees on the eastern edge of the empire, who subsequently revived Central Tibetan monastic institutions (Davidson, *Tibetan Renaissance*, 87–102); and Rinchen Zangpo (958–1055) in the west, who initiated monastic revivals and translation efforts with the patronage of Lha Lama Yeshe Ö (947–1019?) (David Snellgrove, *Indo-Tibetan Buddhism* [Boston: Shambala, 2002] 471–72, 477–79; Samten Karmay, "The Ordinance of Lha Bla-ma Ye-shes-'od," in *Tibetan Studies in Honour of Hugh Richardson*, edited by Michael Aris and Aung San Suu Kyi [England: Biddles Ltd., 1979], 150–51).

topic of serious concern. Many of the new religious authorities suspected that many, if not all, of the *tantras*[14] said to have been transmitted to Tibet during the imperial age—denoted as Old or Nyingma (*rnying ma*) *tantra*s—were not authentic Buddhist teachings but Tibetan fabrications. In addition, individuals associated with the old dark-period religious traditions were charged with engaging in a variety of disreputable activities, implying that they had misinterpreted or deliberately abused these traditionally esoteric teachings and were thus operating within a lineage corrupted by heresy.[15] The only possible solution, it seemed, was to "send young men to India . . . to bring back to Tibet the pure esoteric dispensation," resulting in a baseline standard of scriptural authenticity defined as texts of Indic origin, transmitted to Tibet post-late-tenth century.[16]

14. The term *tantra* refers to texts associated with tantric or Vajrayāna Buddhism (*rdo rje theg pa*), a loose rubric under which an important part of Tibetan Buddhist practice and ritual is categorized. Traditionally, tantric practice and transmission occur within an intimate teacher-student relationship outlined in initiation ceremonies and sealed through a covenant or vow (*dam tshig*). This stringent mode of transmission ensures that the teachings—which often prescribe sexual and/or other transgressive actions—are conveyed accurately and only to those spiritually and intellectually qualified, and thus typically operates under an aura of secrecy—as opposed to the mainstream transmission of Mahāyāna and non-Mahāyāna *sūtra*s, which received little polemical attention in Tibet. During the earlier spread of Buddhism in Tibet, *tantra*s even faced heavy regulations by the imperial court, who relegated their distribution to a tight aristocratic circle and even altered or removed entire passages from certain tantric texts. See Jacob P. Dalton, *The Taming of the Demons* (London: Yale University Press, 2011), 56–57; Jose I. Cabezón, *The Buddha's Doctrine and the Nine Vehicles* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 1–2.

15. Davidson, *Tibetan Renaissance*, 73–80, 105–7.

16. Davidson, *Tibetan Renaissance*, 121. Although, Davidson notes that the standard was often selectively applied. Some of the texts and practices revered by the Nyingma but scorned as Tibetan fabrications by their detractors were actually of Indic origins. Similarly, some of the texts considered authentic by the new (*gsar ma*) Buddhist schools were Tibetan/Indian hybrids Davidson calls "gray texts." See Davidson, "Gsar Ma Apocrypha," in *The Many Canons of Tibetan Buddhism*, ed. Helmut Eimer and David Germano (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 203–24).

Amid this importation of new Indic scripture, new Tibetan Buddhist schools also emerged that articulated their ecclesial authority and authenticity by linking their teaching lineage to current Indic traditions "in the face of the supposed corruption and antiquity of previous Tibetan Lineages."[17] These previous lineages were subsequently dubbed Nyingma ("old") in contrast to the new schools. In response, the Nyingma began articulating their own lineal heritage through the Buddhist masters of the imperial period—the ancient Tibetan kings and Indian Buddhist ambassadors who had come to be remembered as great *bodhisattvas* (awakened beings) and who compassionately introduced Buddhism to Tibet between the seventh and eighth centuries CE.[18]

It is within these religious paradigm shifts around the turn of the eleventh century that individuals primarily associated with this fledging Nyingma tradition claimed to discover *gter ma*s: heretofore unknown sacred historical, ritual, and doctrinal texts attributed to a Buddhist master (typically Padmasambhava, who will be discussed below) from Tibet's imperial age.[19] Thus, the Nyingma tradition began to distinguish itself from other Tibetan Buddhist schools over the doctrine of "continuing revelation" against an ostensibly closed canon[20] by appealing to discoveries of ancient, buried treasure across a period of perceived religious corruption.

17. Germano, "Re-Membering the Dismembered Body," 73.

18. Kapstein, *Tibetan Assimilation*, 33–36, 144–47, 159; see also Gayley, "Ontology of the Past," 214; and David Germano, "The Seven Descents and the Early History of Rnying Ma Transmissions," in Eimer and Germano, *Many Canons of Tibetan Buddhism*, 225–64.

19. On the various contextual genres of *gter ma*, see Gyatso, "Drawn from the Tibetan Treasury," in *Tibetan Literature*, ed. José Ignacio Cabézon and Roger R. Jackson (Ithaca, N.Y.: Snow Lion, 1996), 155–60.

20. E. Gene Smith, *Among Tibetan Texts* (Boston: Wisdom, 2001), 15; Robert Mayer, *A Scripture of the Ancient Tantra Collection* (Oxford: Kiscadale, 1996).

Although Nyingma apologists attempted to legitimate their innovations by appealing to similar revelatory precedents in Mahāyāna *sūtra*s,[21] this movement posed a unique challenge to traditional modes of scriptural transmission—known as spoken transmission. By

21. As for *sūtra*s, the *Āryasarvapuṇyasamuccayasamādhi* mentions treasures in mountains, ravines, and woods and that the doctrine will emerge from the sky, walls and trees. The *Āryadharmasamgītisūtra* refers to concealing doctrines "as treasures." The *Nāgarājaparipṛcchāsūtra* describes "four great treasures." The *chu-klung rol-pa'i mdo* refers to doctrinal texts being concealed as mind and earth treasures. The *Bodhicharyavatara* refers to people spontaneously hearing the doctrine, as do a variety of others. See Dudjom Rinpoche, *The Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism*, trans. Gyurme Dorje and Matthew Kapstein (Boston: Wisdom, 1991), 743–44, 747–48, 928. The *Pratyutpannasamādhi* describes itself being stored in caves, stūpas, the earth, under rocks, in mountains, and into the hands of *devas* and *nāgas*. See Paul Harrison, *The Samadhi of Direct Encounter with the Buddhas of the Present* (Tokyo: International Institute for Buddhist Studies, 1990), 98, 103–4. Gyatso notes that this particular passage has not been noticed by the treasure apologists ("The Logic of Legitimation," *History of Religions* 33, no. 2 [1993], 105n17), although Mayer has argued that it may have served as the theoretical basis for the entire tradition ("Scriptural Revelation in India and Tibet," *Institute for Comparative Research in Human Culture* 2 [1994]: 533–45). There are also some events described in Mahāyāna history that allude to similar occurrences. It is said, for example, that the Mahāyāna *sūtra*s were held hidden in the Dragon World until the appropriate time and that Nāgārjuna retrieved the *Śatasāhasrikāprajñāpāramitā* from the nāgas at the bottom of the sea. Similarly, Dudjom notes that "all the tantrapiṭaka which were reportedly discovered in ancient India . . . were, in fact, treasure doctrines," for they were hidden until revealed to "accomplished individuals [who] were given prophetic declarations" (*Nyingma School*, 927). Guru Chos-dbang makes a similar point in his *gter 'byung chen mo* (see Gyatso, "An Early Survey of the Treasure Tradition and Its Strategies in Discussing Bon Treasure," in *Tibetan Studies* 1, edited by Per Kvaerne [Oslo: Institute for Comparative Research in Human Culture, 1994], 276–77), as does Tukwan Lobzang Chokyi Nyima (*thu'u bkwan blo bzang chos kyi nyi ma*; 1737–1802) (translated in Eva M. Dargay, *The Rise of Esoteric Buddhism* [Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1977], 67). There are also a number of sūtras held to be canonical by the *gsar ma* schools that came about by similarly revelatory means, listed by Kapstein in *Tibetan Assimilation*, 132–34.

establishing a direct link between the enlightened beings of Tibet's imperial age and the present, the *gter ma* discoverers created a timeless repository of ancient knowledge that turned "the original critique of decline among the 'old school' . . . on its head."[22] Whereas the Indian *tantra*s brought to Tibet following the close of the dark period in the late tenth century by new school representatives were transmitted from teacher to student for generations upon generations and thus—according to Nyingma apologists—subject to corruption, the *gter ma*s shortened the lineage, placing the *gter ma* discoverer in direct communication with an enlightened source.[23] Thus, the Nyingma were able to claim that the *gter ma*s were a direct revelatory corrective to gaps, errors, or misinterpretations of the current canon. Moreover, as such had been hidden by an enlightened being with the express purpose of discovery at a precise future date, they were said to be better designed to "suit the mental desires, needs and capacities of people born in those times."[24] Thus, the *gter ma*s existed in a dialectic relationship to the existing canon, which served as a source of legitimacy, yet in turn was made to appear somewhat obsolete as comparatively more distant and less personalized.

Here, it is worth noting that the Book of Mormon likewise positioned itself both as a corrective to erroneous biblical translations and interpretations across a period of spiritual darkness, and a source of fresh prophetic wisdom designed to uniquely address contemporary

22. Gayley, "Ontology of the Past," 224.

23. Dudjom, *Nyingma School*, 745; Tulku Thondup, *Hidden Teachings* (Boston: Wisdom, 1997), 49; Gyatso, "Genre, Authorship, and Transmission in Visionary Buddhism," in *Tibetan Buddhism: Reason and Revelation*, edited by Steven D. Goodman and Ronald M. Davidson (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 96–100; Gyatso, "Drawn from the Tibetan Treasury," 149–50.

24. Thondup, *Hidden Teachings*, 62–63, see also 150; see also Gayley, "Ontology of the Past," 223–24.

needs amid turbulent times. Moreover, it existed in a comparable dialectic relationship to its own canonical counterpart, the Bible.

Joseph Smith both propagated the idea that the early Christian church had apostatized soon after the death of Christ and his apostles,[25] as well as joined a number of marginal voices challenging the cessationist notion that the Christian canon had been sealed with the writing of the New Testament.[26] Yet Smith did not only couch his claim in his own words, or even the words of God revealed to him, but in the words of ancient Israelite prophets who—unbeknownst to the rest of the world—had anciently inhabited portions of the American continent. With prophetic foresight, these prophets maintained and ultimately buried an ancient record (the gold plates) that preserved the "plain and most precious parts of the gospel," which would be taken away from the Bible,[27] and which would uniquely speak to the needs of

25. Theodore D. Bozeman offers a robust summary of the varying Protestant and pre-Protestant "primitivist" claims, from the tenth century to the Puritan era (*To Live Ancient Lives* [Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988], 19–50). On similar strands in Joseph Smith's religious environment, see Leonard J. Arrington and Davis Bitton, *The Mormon Experience* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), 26–27.

26. David Holland, *Sacred Borders* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 50–53, 84, 97–98, 127, 137–53.

27. 1 Nephi 13:26–40. Smith claimed that the Bible was fully God's word "as it read when it came from the pen of the original writers." However, "ignorant translators, careless transcribers, or designing and corrupt priests have committed many errors" ("History, 1838–1856, vol. E-1 [July 1, 1843–April 30, 1844]," October 15, 1843, 1755, The Joseph Smith Papers, https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-e-1-1-july-1843-30-april-1844/126). Thus, Smith wrote: "We believe the Bible to be the word of God *as far as it is translated correctly*; we also believe the Book of Mormon to be the word of God" ("The Articles of Faith," in *The Pearl of Great Price*.)

the latter-day followers of Christ.[28] Thus, by discovering and translating the gold plates, Smith could likewise claim direct access to uncorrupted and personalized prophetic wisdom against the comparatively erroneous and provincial Bible.

Yet just as this new scripture challenged the Bible's inerrancy, universality, and soteriological sufficiency, the Book of Mormon's function within the early Mormon movement was most often to the signal the impending fulfillment of eschatological and restorationist biblical prophecies, and was itself defended through reference to biblical passages interpreted as prophesying its emergence.[29] Many saw in its emergence the fulfillment of a variety of Old and New Testament prophecies that signaled the impending restoration of the primitive Christian church after a period of apostasy, the literal restoration of Israel, and the establishing of God's kingdom in anticipation of Christ's millennial reign.[30] Thus, similar to the *gter ma*s, the Book of Mormon's meaning and legitimacy was both defined in relation to the rest of the Christian canon while simultaneously rivaling its previously unparalleled authority.

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28. On the claimed prophetic foresight of the Book of Mormon authors, see 1 Nephi 13; 2 Nephi 3:19, 27, 29; Enos 1:13–17; 3 Nephi 21:9–11, 23, 26:2, 26:8; and Mormon 5:9–14, 8:26–41. For an analysis of this topic as well as examples of this rhetoric among LDS leaders, see Richard D. Rust, "Annual FARMS Lecture: The Book of Mormon, Designed for Our Day," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1989–2011* 2, no. 1 (1990): 1–23.

29. See note 21 above.

30. Grant Underwood, "Book of Mormon Usage in Early LDS Theology," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 17, no. 3 (1984): 35–74; Phillip L. Barlow, *Mormons and the Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 48; Terryl Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 62–88; Steven C. Harper, "Infallible Proofs, Both Human and Divine," *Religion and American Culture* 10, no. 1 (2000): 99–118. As for the biblical references, see Ezekiel 37:15–22; Isaiah 11:10–12, 29:10–14; Daniel 2:34–35, 2:44–45; Joel 2:28–32; John 10:16; and Revelations 14:6–7.

In addition to their role as canonical innovations, the *gter ma*s and the Book of Mormon were also important means of legitimating the religious careers of their discoverers, the authority of their associated tradition, and a means of contextualizing those traditions within the larger arc of Buddhist and Christian history. As Gyatso has analyzed in depth,[31] the *gter ston*'s claiming part in the prophesied discovery and propagation of a *gter ma*—itself a complicated semiotic process consisting of locating oneself in canonical prophecies and interpreting external signs to be discussed below—is "powerfully self-legitimating." In doing so, the discoverer "accrue[s] to their own person the exalted qualities of that text and its holy origins,"[32] and his or her tradition becomes authenticated against its detractors through recourse to a "competing power structure located in the culturally powerful memories of the dynastic period."[33] Moreover, as this competing power structure consisted of ancient Tibetan voices in the face of a canonical tradition in which "Indian provenance [had become] the sine qua non of religious authority,"[34] the *gter ma* tradition not only expanded canonical boundaries past their traditional temporal and geographical constraints but made Tibet "an active partner in the Buddhist cosmos. Instead of being the disheveled stepchild of the great Indian civilization, by means of

31. Janet Gyatso, *Apparitions of the Self* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998); Janet Gyatso, "Signs, Memory and History," *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 9, no. 2 (1986): 7–35; Gytaso, "Logic of Legitimation."

32. Gyatso, *Apparitions of the Self*, 150.

33. Germano, "Re-Membering the Dismembered Body," 75; see also Mayer, "Rethinking Treasure (part one)," 137.

34. Dominic Sur, "Constituting Canon and Community in Eleventh Century Tibet," *Religions* 8, no. 40 (2017): 1.

[*gter ma*] the snowy land of Tibet became the authentic ground of the Buddha's enlightened activity."[35]

Likewise, the Book of Mormon's origin story—both its miraculous translation and what its claimed ancient authors prophesied about this event—served to route the fulfillment of restorationist and eschatological biblical prophecies through the inspired actions of a particular individual—Joseph Smith. As the seer who brought to light this ancient scripture, whose very existence signaled the incipience of the long-awaited "restitution of all things" as prophesied in the New Testament book of Acts,[36] Smith went from rural visionary to God's newly called prophet,[37] and his movement to the culmination of God's dealings with humankind. Moreover, by placing both the internment and discovery of this pivotal text—with its accompanying mythology of ancient Christian worship and even a visit from the resurrected Christ in the Americas—Smith brought his followers into a new (or restored) Christian teleology in which God's plan had always included, and would culminate with, the prophetic work of his chosen peoples on the American continent.

This is not meant to be an exhaustive list of the role these texts have played within their respective religious traditions, nor is it an exhaustive list of the commonalities between the two. Much could be written, for example, about how this revelatory mechanism enabled these traditions to give modern doctrinal, ritual, and theological innovations a historical guise, and how these texts validated canonical texts whose

35. Davidson, *Tibetan Renaissance*, 231; see also 243.

36. Acts 3:21.

37. To paraphrase Richard Bushman's apt phrasing of Smith's transformation (*Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* [New York: Vintage Books, 2007], 58).

authenticity was being called into question.[38] Nor is it to say that their functionality has not changed over time, as it surely has; although I would argue that the concerns mentioned here have been rather constant.[39] Yet, this brief comparison indicates that Joseph Smith and the Tibetan *gter ma* discoverers were—in some important ways—engaged in functionally comparable projects.

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38. Germano has written that *gter ma* functioned to "authorize and authenticate the Nyingmas' religious traditions," "appropriate and transform . . . new intellectual and religious materials stemming from India without acknowledging them as such," and to develop unique "theories, practices, and systems" in the form of the Great Perfection (*rdzogs chen*) ("Remembering the Dismembered Body," 75; see also Janet Gyatso and David Germano, "Longchenpa and the Possession of the Ḍākinīs," in *Tantra in Practice*, ed. David Gordon White [Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000], 232–39). Similarly, Davidson notes that *gter ma* made apocryphal *bka' ma* texts with Great Perfection teachings "into true tantric scriptures, for the authenticity of one secured the authenticity of its related works" (*Tibetan Renaissance*, 228). The Book of Mormon has likewise served to authenticate parallel biblical narratives under the same logic (Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon*, 177). Although some have noted that there is not much by way of doctrinal innovation in the Book of Mormon (Hardy, "The Book of Mormon," in *The Oxford Handbook of Mormonism*, ed. Terryl L. Givens and Phillip L. Barlow [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015], 134), Givens has written much on its status as a signifier of the validity of the innovations carried out by Joseph Smith (*By the Hand of Mormon*, 228–39). Further, Gerald Smith has recently argued that the Book of Mormon does in fact carry innovative teachings that contributed to in content, rather than mere sign, to LDS doctrine (*Schooling the Prophet* [Provo: Brigham Young University, 2015]).

39. Doctor, for example, notes that Jamgön Kongrtul issued many of the same defenses against twentieth-century polemics, as did Guru Chöwang in the thirteenth (*Tibetan Treasure Literature*, 38). Although, it is clear that *gter ma* responded to changing religious, social, cultural, and political concerns, as can be seen in the work of the *gter ston* Orgyen Lingpa (*o rgyan gling pa*; 1323-?) (see Giuseppe Tucci, *Religions of Tibet*, trans. Geoffrey Samuel [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970], 38) and Sera Khandro (*se ra mkha 'gro*; 1892–1940) (see Sarah Jacoby, *Love and Liberation* [New York: Columbia University Press, 2014], 100). For the evolution of Book of Mormon usage, see Underwood, "Book of Mormon Usage," and Reynolds, "The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon in the Twentieth Century," *BYU Studies* 38, no. 2 (1999): 6–47.

More specifically, this comparison highlights that the ancient artifacts discovered within these two traditions operate in functionally similar ways. In both traditions, a material artifact enables a discoverer to bring to light ancient voices across a temporal divide. This act has dramatic personal implications related to that individual's religious authority and that of their tradition, but those implications are defined by the relationships that the material artifact forges between the discoverer and a variety of other agents. And it is precisely by analyzing how the material artifact is said to do this in the *gter ma* tradition and applying the theoretical possibilities that this analysis opens up concerning what a material artifact can do—rather than merely what it could be or what Smith could be doing with it—to Smith's translation of the gold plates that we can begin to tug at the seams of the assumptions undergirding some of the current theories.

Part 2: The Gold Plates in Light of the Tibetan Treasure Tradition

A serious challenge to reading Joseph Smith's translation of the gold plates in light of the *gter ma* tradition is its sheer diversity. Whereas discoveries of ancient, buried texts as an institutionally recognized means of scripture production in Mormonism begins and ends with Joseph Smith,[40] the *gter ma* tradition has generated hundreds of dis-

40. There have been other non-canonized and generally uninfluential discoveries within Mormonism, such as James Jesse Strang's *Record of Rajah Machou of Vorito* (see Don Faber, *James Jesse Strang* [Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016], 58, 65–70) and W. W. Phelps's discovery and translation of some Native American petroglyphs in Utah (see Christopher J. Blythe, "By the Gift and Power of God," in MacKay, Ashurst-McGee, and Hauglid, *Producing Ancient Scripture*, 47). Christopher Smith has recently drawn attention to a heretofore neglected figure, Earl John Brewer (1933–2007), who claimed to have been led by an angle to find hundreds of inscribed plates in Utah, purportedly placed there by the Jaredites See "The Hidden Records of Central Utah and the Struggle for Religious Authority" in *Open Canon: Scriptures of the Latter Day Saint Tradition*, ed. Christine Elyse Blythe, Christopher J. Blythe, and Jay Burton (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2022). chap. 15.

coveries and discoverers since the late tenth century.[41] The origins of the tradition, and what holds it together as a tradition, are ongoing points of debate.[42] My reading of the *gter ma* tradition draws heavily on Do Drubchen III's (1865–1926) analysis of *gter ma* discovery and translation in his essay "Wonder Ocean, an Explanation of the Dharma Treasure Tradition," translated and elaborated by Tulku Thondup in his book *Hidden Teachings of Tibet*. I supplement this reading with accounts of *gter ma* discovery drawn primarily (but not exclusively) from the lives of the Tibetan *gter ston*s Jigme Lingpa (1730–1798) and Nyangrel Nyima Ozer (1124–1192), as well as broader theorizations about how treasure materials (*gter rdzas*) exert power in ritual contexts by the Tibetan ritual master Sokdokpa (1552–1624).

Thus, my reading is neither comprehensive nor governed by an emphasis on a particular time period or *gter ma* lineage within the Nyingma school. As such, the sources cited below are not to be taken as unilaterally congruent. In addition to spatial restraints, this focus has mostly to do with accessibility to what is still a rather understudied tradition. Yet, by focusing on the few individuals whose treasure discoveries and theories related thereto have been subjects of in-depth analyses by contemporary scholars of religion—Janet Gyatso, Daniel

41. Gyatso and Smith both place the first discovery in the tenth century (Gyatso, "Signs, Memory and History," 30n2; Smith, *Among Tibetan Texts*, 15). It is important to note, however, as observed by Doctor, that "although the Nyingma school traces the beginning of Treasure revelation in Tibet to the master Sangye Lama (eleventh century); Nyangral Nyima Ōzer's writings a century later are the first to show a self-conscious movement" (*Tibetan Treasure Literature*, 20). Although there is no definitive list, Thondup has compiled the names and dates (if available) of 278 known *gter ston*s (*Hidden Teachings of Tibet*, 189–201). Dudjom provides short biographies of twenty-four important discoverers (*Nyingma School*, 743–881).

42. See, for example, Doctor, *Tibetan Treasure Literature*; Davidson, *Tibetan Renaissance*, 210–42; Hirshberg, *Remembering the Lotus-Born*, 85–140; Robert Mayer, "gTer ston and Tradent," *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 36/37 (2013/2014): 227–42; and Mayer, "Rethinking Treasure (part one)" and "Rethinking Treasure (part two)."

Hirshberg, and James Gentry, respectively—this study will also provide an opportunity to reflect on how contemporary scholars of religion operating in a different field have delt with this peculiar revelatory mechanism in relation to scholars in the field of Mormon studies.

I will begin with an explanation of the relatively standard mythology undergirding the tradition. Around the twelfth century, *gter ma*s began to be traced primarily to the eighth-century tantric master Padmasambhava.[43] Recent scholarship on Padmasambhava suggests he came to Tibet from present-day Pakistan at the request of King Trisong Detsen to subdue the local deities who were obstructing efforts to build Tibet's first monastery, Samye monastery. Soon after arrival, the earliest sources claim he was expelled from Tibet because his exceptional powers made him a dangerous political rival; although, some scholars have suggested his removal had more to do with the controversial, transgressive tantric teachings he promoted.[44] Nevertheless, by the twelfth century, a counternarrative arose that has since become characteristic of his representation in the Nyingma tradition and foundational to *gter ma* discovery: after pacifying the opposing indigenous forces and enlisting them in the protection and propagation of Buddhism, Padmasambhava traveled throughout Tibet, teaching his many students and burying his inscribed teachings and other relics in the Tibetan soil for later recovery.[45]

43. Hirshberg has recently suggested that scholars differentiate between pre-tradition *gter ma*—the early *gter ma* that did not operate within a clear taxonomical schema and origins myth—and post-tradition *gter ma*, artificially divided by the first classificatory study on the topic, Guru Chöwang's *Great History of the Treasures* (*gter 'byung chen mo*) written in 1264–1265. (On the topic of earlier vs. later *gter ma*, see Doctor, *Tibetan Treasure Literature*, 15–53.) In relation to this schema, as my focus is on Do Drubchen III's (*rdo grub chen*, 1865–1926), my study focuses primarily (but not exclusively) on post-tradition *gter ma*.

44. Hirshberg, *Remembering the Lotus-Born*, 14; see also Jacob P. Dalton, "The Early Development of the Padmasambhava Legend in Tibet," in *About Padmasambhava*, ed. Geoffrey Samuel and Jamyang Oliphant (Shongau, Switzerland: Garuda Books, 2020), 29–64.

45. Hirshberg, *Remembering the Lotus-Born*, 1–18.

In conjunction with this narrative, Padmasambhava has taken on the status of "second Buddha" in the Nyingma tradition, remembered as the primary protagonist in Tibet's conversion to Buddhism, who graciously hid his teachings on account of his prophetic perception of the future challenges Tibetan Buddhist practitioners would face.[46]

The content of Padmasambhava's teachings that were inscribed as *gter ma*s are perceived as scripturally authoritative in part because he preached them, but he is more of a codifier than an author. Like the conventional, spoken transmissions of the Nyingma tradition, these teachings were said to have been first transmitted nonverbally by a buddha in a pure land ("transmission of the realized"), then semiotically by early Nyingma patriarchs ("transmission in symbols for the knowledge holders"), and lastly in conventional discourse ("transmission into the ears of people"), which is where Padmasambhava appears.[47] Within this last step, the *gter ma* tradition posits its own three-step transmission process. First, through a tantric ceremony known as a "benedictory initiation," Padmasambhava transmitted teachings and appointed specific students to reveal them in future lifetimes; second, he prophesied their future revelation; and third, he appointed dākinīs or Treasure protectors[48]

46. Germano, "The Seven Descents," esp. 232–37; Thondup, *Hidden Teachings*, 50, 62–63, 150; Dudjom, *Nyingma School*, 744–45; Gyatso, "Signs, Memory and History," 16.

47. Gyatso, "Logic of Legitimation," 112–15; Gyatso, "Signs, Memory and History," 8. On this process in the spoken transmissions (*bka' ma*), see Jacob P. Dalton, *The Gathering of Intentions* (New York: Colombia University Press, 2016), 3, 13–19.

48. Dākinīs—literally "sky-goers"—are described by Sarah Harding as "female deities who . . . clear away obstacles and help bring about wisdom" (*Machik's Complete Explanation* [Boston: Snow Lion, 2013], 374). Harding describes protectors as "beings or spirits who act to protect a given place or person. Dharma protectors are beings that have been tamed by a great teacher like Padmasambhava and actually serve the best interests of the Dharma" (378). In Tibetan Treasure literature, the terms are used interchangeably (Gyatso, *Apparitions of the Self*, 161). For a brief history of their role and development from Vedic religion to Tibetan Vajrayāna, see Jacoby, *Love and Liberation*, 135–37.

to protect the *gter ma* and help the *gter ma* discoverer find them. After, his consort, Yeshey Tsogyal, recorded the teachings on "yellow scrolls." Finally, the texts were concealed, often in a container with other material objects (*gter rdzas*).[49]

The historicity of this narrative, as well as the claims of discovery and translation by each individual *gter ma* discoverer, have been a popular topic of debate in Tibetan Buddhist inter- and intra-denominational polemics, as well as modern academic scholarship.[50] Yet, although some scholars have dubbed the entire *gter ma* enterprise a blatant fraud,[51] academic scholarship on the *gter ma* tradition as a whole has been considerably less polarized and more nuanced than studies of the Book of Mormon.[52] There are myriad potential reasons for this difference;[53] yet,

49. Gyatso, *Apparitions of Self*, 159–61; Gyatso, "Drawn from the Tibetan Treasury," 151; Gyatso, "Signs, Memory and History," 9; Germano, "Re-Membering the Dismembered Body," 61. Thondup follows a different order and different terminology: (1) "Aspirational Empowerment of the Mind-mandate Concealment" or "Mind-mandate Transmission" in the "expanse of the awareness state or the Buddha nature of the mind"; (2) transcription of the teachings and entrustment to the dākinīs; (3) "Prophetic Authorization" (61, 67–70, 84). Further, two additional orderings yet similar descriptions are given in Thondup's translation of *Wonder Ocean* (104–6).

50. On the pervasiveness of this historical question, see Doctor, *Tibetan Treasure Literature*, 32–44; and Gyatso, "Logic of Legitimation," 102–6, esp. 103n14.

51. See, for example, L. A. Waddell, *The Buddhism of Tibet* (1894; repr. Cambridge: W. Heffer & Sons, 1939), 166–67; and Michael Aris, *Hidden Treasures and Secret Lives* (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1988), 96–98.

52. Hirshberg offers an apt summary of the differing views on this topic, as well as his own nuanced position (*Remembering the Lotus Born*, 85–87, 134–139). See also Doctor, *Tibetan Treasure Literature*, 42–51; and Anne C. Klein and Geshe Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche, *Unbounded Wholeness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 206.

53. One is that the interplay between the Tibetan Buddhist belief in reincarnation and traditions of pragmatic treasure burial prior to the fall of the Tibetan empire create the social and psychological conditions within which scholars could see one actually finding a buried textual object and connecting it with

what is important to note for our purposes is that among scholars of the *gter ma* tradition there is a tendency to refrain from making comprehensive claims about the plausibility, and thereby historical authenticity, of

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a purported memory of a past live in conjunction with the aforementioned narrative (Germano, "Re-Membering the Dismembered Body," 54; Gyatso, "Drawn from the Tibetan Treasury," 151–52; and Gytaso, "Logic of Legitimation," 107–8). In fact, Hirshberg has made this very argument in sympathy with the claims of the first well-documented *gter ston*, Nyangrel Nyima Ozer (*nyang ral nyi ma 'od zer*, 1124–92) (*Remembering the Lotus-Born*, 136). See also Kapstein, *Tibetan Assimilation*, 137. Although, it has been noted that Smith lived in a social sphere in which interest in and discoveries of artifacts, even textual artifacts, from indigenous civilizations were common. See Samuel M. Brown, *In Heaven as it is On Earth* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 69–87; and Lester E. Bush, "The Spalding Theory Then and Now," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 10, no. 4 (1977): 40–69. It could also be said that this is because some scholars have actually found authentic ancient materials in some *gter ma*s (although, as we will see below, Book of Mormon scholars have made similar claims). This is particularly true regarding the *bka' thang sde lnga*, whose ancient materials are surveyed by Mayer, "Rethinking Treasure (part one)," 120–33. Donald Lopez, the only scholar to address the question directly, claims that this discrepancy has to do with the general public and academia's sliding scale for tolerance of and interest in supernatural claims in conjunction with their chronological and geographical context. In his recent comparison of the Western public reception of the Book of Mormon and the famed *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, Lopez notes that this *gter ma*'s unique origin story greatly contributed to its mystical allure and widespread popularity, whereas Smith's similar claims brought widespread suspicion, and even violent persecution, which persists (although generally nonviolently) to the present day. These discrepancies, Lopez argues, have to do not with their respective "intrinsic value, regardless of how that might be measured, but, at least in part, because [Smith] lived in a chronologically recent and geographically proximate past" (*The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, 148). Aris (*Hidden Treasures*, 96–98) and Terryl L. Givens (*Viper on the Hearth* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1997], 83, 90–94) make similar claims not on this comparison specifically but on the treatment of these texts in general. To this possibility, I would also add that the multiplicity of *gter ston*s has served to diffuse the perceived religious implications of the veracity of a single *gter ston*s claims, thus mitigating against the emic/etic divide obviously operative not only in Mormon polemics but religious studies as well, which seeks for clear either/or answers regarding the Book of Mormon's origins.

the *gter ma* discoverer's claims. Rather, scholars (especially Janet Gyatso and Thondup) have critically analyzed the phenomenology of *gter ma* discovery and revelation in conjunction with the traditional mythology and claimed material discoveries, shedding light on a complex revelatory interplay between agentive material, human, and superhuman forces, as well as Buddhist theories of reincarnation, no-self, prophecy, interdependent origination, and Tibetan semiotics.

In the field of Mormon studies, there has been a persistent idea that the Book of Mormon's claim to be rooted in "artifactual reality" rather than the "nebulous stuff of visions" automatically shifts the scholarly debate around Smith's claims "from the realm of interiority and subjectivity toward that of empiricism and objectivity."[54] As argued by Mormon studies scholar Terryl Givens:

> Dream visions may be in the mind of the beholder, but gold plates are not subject to such facile psychologizing. They were, in the angel's words, buried in a nearby hillside, not in Joseph's psyche or religious unconscious, and they chronicle a history of this hemisphere, not a heavenly city to come. As such, the claims and experiences of the prophet are thrust irretrievably into the public sphere, no longer subject to his private acts of interpretation alone. It is this fact, the intrusion of Joseph's message into the realm of the concrete, historical, and empirical, that dramatically alters the terms by which the public will engage this new religious phenomenon.[55]

In accordance with this logic, much of the scholarly debate on Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon has centered around using historical and inter/intratextual criticism to verify the book's internal, historical claims in what are often called the "Book of Mormon wars"—debates over perceived archaisms[56] vs. anachro-

54. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon*, 12

55. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon*, 42.

56. For two extremely influential works, see Hugh Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon* (1957; repr. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1988); and John Sorenson, *Mormon's Codex* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2013). Givens

nisms,[57] evidence of many ancient authorial voices consistent with its internal claims,[58] or evidence of nineteenth-century interpolations

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gives an excellent summary of the many others who have followed the work of these pioneering figures (*By the Hand of Mormon*, 117–54).

57. Alexander Campbell, *Delusions: An Analysis of the Book of Mormon* (Boston: Benjamin H. Greene, 1832) 13; Woodbridge Riley, *The Founder of Mormonism* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1903); Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History* (1945; repr. New York: Vintage Books, 1995); Whitney R. Cross, *The Burned-Over District* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1950); Marvin S. Hill, "Quest for Refuge," *Journal of Mormon History* 2 (1975): 3–20; Brent L. Metcalfe, *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1993); Michael D. Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic Worldview* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1998); Anderson, *Inside the Mind of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1999); Dan Vogel and Lee Metcalfe, eds., *American Apocrypha* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002); Dan Vogel, *The Making of a Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2004); Clyde Jr. Forsberg, *Equal Rites* (New York: Colombia University Press, 2004).

58. Through computational stylistics, scholars have found over 2,000 authorship shifts between twenty-four unique authorial styles, "consistent to [the Book of Mormon's] own internal claims." See John L. Hilton, "On Verifying Wordprint Studies," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 30, no. 3 (1990): 89–108. Skousen has also found evidence in favor of Smith's claim to have orally dictated the book to a scribe without prior knowledge of its contents or referencing external sources. These include errors reflective of "mishearing what Joseph had dictated" rather than "misreading while visually copying"—such as writing "&" as a mishearing of "an" or consistently misspelling a name that would be phonetically ambiguous—as well as "scribal anticipation errors," where phrases from later in a sentence would be written and crossed out before their proper place, due to hearing Smith dictate faster than they were able to write ("How Joseph Smith Translated," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 7, no. 1 [1997]: 23–31). Moreover, even in sections of the text that seem like obvious plagiarisms—such as when the text quotes verbatim from the book of Isaiah—Skousen has noted the same scribal errors consistent with the oral composition of the rest of the text, unorthodox divisions, and even readings that align not with the King James Bible of Smith's time but the Masoretic (traditional Hebrew) text and the Septuagint (Greek) ("Textual Variants in the Isaiah Quotations" in *Isaiah in the Book of Mormon*, edited by Donald W. Parry and John W. Welch [Provo: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1998], 369–90).

interwoven by a nineteenth-century editor.[59] This information, in turn, is used to make sense of what Smith was doing—whether he was restoring a long-lost scripture as part of his larger Christian restorationist project or deceptively trying to accrue personal power by playing on the religious sensibilities of his time.[60] In this way, rather than asking what the unique revelatory mechanism that facilitated the book's production reveals about its origins and significance, scholars have focused primarily on what its textual content reveals about its origins and significance. That is, they have conflated the gold plates with the Book of Mormon, creating the logic that the existence of the former can be verified by the antiquity of the latter. And although some have bracketed the question of the gold plates origins, focusing rather on how the idea of the plates influenced Smith's movement, most religious studies scholars and historical biographers make their opinion known on the basis of perceived metaphysical plausibility and/or historical evidence, and proceed to either depict Smith as a rural visionary turned prophet[61] or conscious

59. Two common theories have been that Smith plagiarized from Solomon Spalding's *"Manuscript Found"* and Ethan Smith's *View of the Hebrews*. On the original Spalding hypothesis as first explicated in 1834, see E. D. Howe, *Mormonism Unvailed* (Painesville, OH: By the author, 1834), 278–88. For a detailed account of the theory in all its expansions, redactions, and challenges, see Bush, "Spalding Theory Then and Now." Bushman also offers a quick synopsis (*Rough Stone Rolling*, 90–91). On that of the *View of the Hebrews*, see Charles D. Tate Jr.'s introduction to the 1996 reprint of *View of the Hebrews (1825 2nd Edition)* (Provo: Brigham Young University, 1996), ix–xxii. For a succinct summary, see Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon*, 161–62; and Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 96–97. See also William L. Davis, *Visions in a Seer Stone* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020); David P. Wright, "Isaiah in the Book of Mormon," in Vogel and Metcalfe, *American Apocrypha*, 157–234.

60. For two paradigmatic examples of these divergent approaches, see Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 58–83; and Vogel, *Making of a Prophet*, 129.

61. Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 58.

(or delusional) deceiver.[62] This, in turn, has generated a scholarly field sharply divided along emic/etic lines.[63]

Although we need not discard the possibility that Smith was actually linguistically translating an ancient text, or that he was making the whole thing up, comparison with the *gter ma* tradition demonstrates that this binary is not necessitated by the revelatory mechanism alone. Returning to the *gter ma* tradition, it is interesting to note that although *gter ma*s are said to be translated, the material scroll which is "translated" in practice serves more as an instigator and facilitator of revelation. In fact, the content of the core text of a transcribed *gter ma* cycle—the portion of the *gter ma* discoverer's oeuvre authorially attributed to Padmasambhava—is traced not to the inscriptions on the discovered scroll but to the memory of Padmasambhava's oral transmission (described above in the first unique step of *gter ma* transmission). At that moment of oral transmission, it is said that the teaching goes from the mind stream of Padmasambhava to the "luminous natural awareness . . . of the minds of his disciples," which makes the teachings impermeable to karmic forces across the protectors' various lifetimes.[64]

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62. This is a paraphrase of Vogel's statement that "existence of the Book of Mormon plates themselves as an objective artifact which Joseph allowed his family and friends and even critics to handle while it was covered with a cloth or concealed in a box . . . [is] compelling evidence of conscious misdirection" (*Making of a Prophet*, xi).

63. This is perhaps most evident in that one of the few etic scholars who has taken their existence seriously, Jan Shipps, has been since dubbed an "insider-outsider" (Shipps, "An 'Inside-Outsider' in Zion," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 15, no. 1 [1982]: 139–61; Bushman, "The Worlds of Joseph Smith" in *Believing History*, ed. Reid L. Neilson and Jed Woodworth [New York: Colombia University Press: 2004], 10). On the pervasiveness of this divide in the field, see Jan Shipps, "The Prophet Puzzle," *Journal of Mormon History* 1 (1974): 19; Bushman, "A Joseph Smith for the Twenty-first Century" in Neilson and Woodworth, *Believing History*, 262–78; Taves, "History and the Claims of Revelation," 183–87.

64. Thondup, *Hidden Teachings*, 106.

According to Thondup, this act of embedding a particular teaching in the recesses of a future revealer's mind, known as "Mind-mandate Transmission," is the defining feature of a Nyingma *gter ma*.[65]

In fact, the material scroll often contains no more than a couple of characters or a brief phrase which may or may not be thematically related to the teaching itself. Moreover, the scroll is encoded with a secret script and often written in a secret language,[66] hindering attempts at conventional translation. The scroll's function is not to preserve the teaching itself, but to awaken the memory of its being taught to the *gter ma* discoverer in a previous lifetime. The contents of this memory are subsequently transcribed by the *gter ma* discoverer (or a scribe), yet authorially attributed to Padmasambhava. Some who receive Mind-mandate Transmission even reveal *gter ma*s by accessing the memory without a material support, known as mind *gter ma*.[67] I will focus here on the revelatory mechanics of earth *gter ma*, as this revelatory mode best aligns with the Book of Mormon, but that such a genre exists serves to accentuate the unique mnemonic and revelatory character of *gter ma* production, and carries interesting parallels with some of Joseph Smith's other revelatory activities.[68]

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65. Thondup, *Hidden Teachings*, 61.

66. This is often a form of ḍākinī script (*mkha' 'gro brda yig*) and symbolic language of the ḍākinīs (*mkha' gro brda skad*), although Gyatso and Thondup mention myriad other protentional scripts and languages (Gyatso, "Signs, Memory and History," 12, 18; Thondup, *Hidden Teachings*, 69–70).

67. Thondup, *Hidden Teachings*, 61–62, 64–66, 85–90, 102–7, 125–35, 159.

68. For example, the seventh section of the Doctrine and Covenants claims to come from a "record made on parchment by John [the apostle of Jesus] and hidden up by himself," not physically discovered by Smith but revealed by him. The "Book of Moses" in the *Pearl of Great Price* claims to be a revelation of historical events in the lives of the Old Testament prophets Moses and Enoch, the latter of which Smith alluded to being from the prophecy of Enoch mentioned in the book of Jude in the New Testament (Jude 1:14; "History, 1838–1856, vol. A-1 [December 23, 1805–August 30, 1834]," December 1830, 81, The Joseph Smith Papers, https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history

Although there is much to elaborate here, allow me to briefly return to Joseph Smith and the gold plates to consider what is known about the gold plate's role in the production of the Book of Mormon. Smith was rather quiet on the specifics of the translation process. Most of what scholars now believe about the mechanics of translation come from his scribes and other eyewitnesses. From Smith's recorded statements about the translation between 1830 and 1843, it can be gathered that he felt "it was not intended to tell the world all the particulars of the coming forth of the book of Mormon,"[69] but that "by the gift and power of God"[70] he "translated the Book of Mormon from hieroglyphics"[71] with the "spectacles" that the "Lord had prepared."[72]

-1838-1856-volume-a-1-23-december-1805-30-august-1834/87). Again, Smith never claimed to recover a physical manuscript In a similar mode, verses 6 to 17 of the 97th section of the Doctrine and Covenants are cast as a revelation given to the apostle John. Smith described Doctrine and Covenants section 76 as a "transcript from the records of the eternal world" ("History, 1838–1856, vol. A-1 [December 23, 1805–August 30, 1834]," January 25–February 16, 1832, 192, The Joseph Smith Papers, https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-a-1-23-december-1805-30-august-1834/198). The "Book of Abraham," also contained in the *Pearl of Great Price*, claims to be a translation of a set of Egyptian papyri which Joseph purchased in 1835.

69. "Minute Book 2," October 25–26, 1831, 13, The Joseph Smith Papers, https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/minute-book-2/15.

70. Joseph Smith Jr., preface to *The Book of Mormon* (Palmyra, N.Y.: E. B. Grandin, 1830).

71. "History, 1838–1856, vol. E-1 [July 1, 1843–April 30, 1844]," November 13, 1843, 1775, The Joseph Smith Papers, https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-e-1–1-july-1843-30-april-1844/147.

72. "History, circa Summer 1832," The Joseph Smith Papers, 5. For all other accounts not cited above, see "History, 1838–1856, volume A-1," The Joseph Smith Papers, 9; "Elder's Journal, July 1838," The Joseph Smith Papers, 43; Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents* 1 (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996), 17; "Journal, 1835–1836," The Joseph Smith Papers, 26; "Letter to Noah C. Saxton, 4 January 1833," The Joseph Smith Papers; "Minute Book 1," The Joseph Smith Papers, 44; "History, 1838–1856, volume C-1," The Joseph Smith Papers, 1282; and "Times and Seasons, 2 May 1842," The Joseph Smith Papers, 772.

Smith worked on his translation of the gold plates periodically between October 1827 and late June 1829 with the help of eight different scribes.[73] Here, I will quote at length from the most detailed account, that of David Whitmer:

> Joseph Smith would put the seer stone into a hat, and put his face in the hat, drawing it closely around his face to exclude the light; and in the darkness the spiritual light would shine. A piece of something resembling parchment would appear, and on that appeared the writing. One character at a time would appear, and under it was the interpretation in English. Brother Joseph would read off the English to Oliver Cowdery, who was his principal scribe, and when it was written down and repeated by Brother Joseph to see if it was correct, then it would disappear, and another character with the interpretation would appear.[74]

Whitmer's comments about a "spiritual light," that "something resembling parchment would appear," and that the translation proceeded one character at a time may be his own suppositions as they are not mentioned by anyone else. However, all eyewitness accounts are remarkably consistent in stating that Joseph Smith would put either the spectacles he found buried with the plates or a "seer stone"—a circular, chocolate-colored stone that Smith had found in 1822, through which he could reportedly see hidden objects[75]—into a hat, and then dictate the words

73. These are Emma Smith, Reuben Hale, Martin Harris, Samuel Smith, Oliver Cowdery, John Whitmer, Christian Whitmer, and David Whitmer. See John W. Welch, "The Miraculous Translation of the Book of Mormon," in *Opening the Heavens*, ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005), 83–98.

74. Whitmer, *An Address to All Believers in Christ* (Missouri: By the author, 1887), 13.

75. On Smith's seer stone and its use before his translating the gold plates, see Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 48–52; and Richard V. Wagoner and Steve Walker, "Joseph Smith: 'The Gift of Seeing,'" *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 15, no. 2 (1982): 53–62. How much Joseph Smith used the spectacles buried with the plates, and how much he used the seer stone, is still debated; see James E. Lancaster, "The Method of Translation of the Book of Mormon," *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 3 (1983): 62–63; and Michael H.

of the Book of Mormon to his scribe a couple of sentences at a time, pausing to spell out peculiar proper names and large words,[76] and to check that it was transcribed correctly by having the scribe read the text back to him. Emma Smith, Joseph's wife, and others also make clear that during the process he did not consult the plates, as they "lay on the table . . . wrapped in a small linen tablecloth" while his face was buried in his hat.[77] Nor did he consult any other external source. In fact, Emma reports that he never even consulted the English translation as he went along: "and when returning from meals, or after interruptions, he would at once begin where he had left off, without either seeing the manuscript or having a portion of it read to him."[78]

Scholarship on how Smith experienced his translation of the gold plates has generally operated under the assumption that Smith was in fact translating an ancient document. The debate has centered around what this translation looked like as it passed through Smith's seer stone—did Smith see actual words in the seer stone as David Whitmer reported? Or did he receive images or ideas that he then explained in his own language?[79] Those who advocate the former position point out

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MacKay and Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, "Firsthand Witness Accounts of the Translation Process," in *The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon*, ed. Dennis L. Largey et al. (Provo: Brigham Young University, 2015), 68.

76. On spelling out proper names and large words, see Emma Smith's description from her 1856 interview with Edmund C. Briggs: Briggs, "A Visit to Nauvoo in 1856," *Journal of History*, October 1916, 454.

77. "Last Testimony of Sister Emma," *The Saints' Herald* 26, no. 19 (1879): 289–90. For what other scribes and eyewitnesses reported, see Wagoner, "Gift of Seeing"; Lancaster, "Method of Translation"; and MacKay and Dirkmaat, "Firsthand Witness Accounts."

78. "Last Testimony of Sister Emma," 289–90.

79. Skousen groups the possibilities into three categories: iron-clad control (the seer stones ensured that Smith nor the scribe could make any errors); tight control (Smith was revealed words and tasked with reading them to a scribe); and loose control (where Smith was impressed with ideas). See "How Joseph Smith Translated," 24.

certain archaisms and scribal errors that they take as evidence of a literal word-to-word translation.[80] Most, however, have opted for a form of translation in which imagery or ideas were presented by the stone that Smith then elaborated.[81] This theory is backed by an exuberant number of awkward "corrective conjunctive phrases"—phrases such as "or rather" that aim to clarify the meaning of a particular passage—that some claim signal Smith's grappling with the meaning of an idea or image in a way that the original authors presumably would not have, especially considering that they were inscribing hieroglyphs into gold plates.[82] This theory also accounts for anachronistic elements reflective of Smith's nineteenth-century environment, especially the obvious contextual and grammatical influence of the King James Bible on Smith's translation,[83] and the fact that, in addition to grammatical changes,

80. For just a few influential examples, see Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert and The World of the Jaredites* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft Publishing Co., 1952), 184–89; John W. Welch, "Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon," *Brigham Young University Studies* 10, no. 1 (1969): 69–84; and Skousen, "How Joseph Smith Translated," 28–31. Skousen has also made this argument based on certain scribal errors that he claims indicate Smith spelled out complicated proper names to his scribe and had access through the seer stone to about twenty words at a time (Skousen, "How Joseph Smith Translated," 27).

81. Brant A. Gardner, *The Gift and Power* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2011), 183–95; Samuel M. Brown, "Seeing the Voice of God," in MacKay, Ashurst-McGee, and Hauglid, *Producing Ancient Scripture*, 144–46; Blake T. Ostler, "The Book of Mormon as a Modern Expansion of an Ancient Source," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 20, no. 1 (1987): 104; Michael D. Quinn, L. Mayer, D. Young, "The First Months of Mormonism," *New York History* 54, no. 3 (1973): 321; Stephen D. Ricks, "Translation of the Book of Mormon," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2, no. 2 (1993): 201–6.

82. Gerald Smith, however, has recently studied the corrective conjunction phrases and noted that "over time and across editions the Prophet chose to retain the original translation of corrective conjunction phrases, including seemingly obvious errors and mistakes," meaning that perhaps they were in fact part of the original text (*Schooling the Prophet*, 38–39).

83. Barlow, *Mormons and the Bible*, 28–33.

Smith did make a few substantive contextual changes to the text of the Book of Mormon between the publications of the 1830, 1837, and 1840 editions.[84]

Yet the inescapable problem here is that Smith did not look at the gold plates while "translating" them. Although most note but then ignore this fact, two have suggested that perhaps their purpose was simply to reassure Smith and others that the words he dictated came from the plates.[85] However, this supposition relies on an excessively narrow plausibility structure, and seems to be a last-ditch effort to ground Smith's work in an empirically verifiable activity contra the eyewitness evidence. What is clear from the primary sources is that Smith discovered a set of gold plates and that he orally dictated a narrative about ancient Israelites in the Americas with his head in a hat looking at seer stones while the plates were nearby. That the role of the gold plates was to provide the content of Smith's dictation is only surmised by the term "translation" and reinforced by the dominant empiricist/historicist stance discussed above. How do we understand Smith's production of the Book of Mormon as a "translation" of gold plates if the plates seem irrelevant to the production process? Here is where notions of agentive material objects as gleaned from the *gter ma* tradition are quite useful to think with.

In Tibetan Buddhism, the transmission of tantric teachings from master to disciple coincides with an initiation ceremony known as an empowerment. The empowerment mediates the flow of power from master to disciple, which enables the disciple to both intellectually grasp the teaching and put it into practice. This empowerment is

84. On these substantive changes, see Royal Skousen, "Changes in the Book of Mormon," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 11 (2014): 169–72. For all textual variants in the various additions, see Skousen, *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2009), 739–89.

85. Wagoner, "The Gift of Seeing," 53; MacKay and Dirkmaat, "Firsthand Witness Accounts," 71–72.

also associated with a particular set of vows that bind the initiate to a strict set of ethical imperatives, as well as to the master in what is often compared to a father-son bond.[86] To qualify for initiation, the prospective student is required to demonstrate competency in maintaining preliminary vows, as well as undergo rigorous intellectual training accompanied by spiritual realizations, which demonstrate that he or she can comprehend the intricate tantric ceremonies and rituals, and possesses the emotional commitment necessary to maintain the vows.[87]

It is in this context that *gter ma* "translation" and the role of agentive material objects therein can be understood. As elaborated by Gentry in his study of the writings of the Tibetan Buddhist ritual master Sokdokpa (1552–1624), treasure objects (*gter rdzas*) are regarded as the material embodiment of Padmasambhava's ancient tantric vows with his now reincarnated students.[88] As such, they are treated as "receptacles of blessings and power, [whose] transformational potency poises them to variously act upon persons, places, and things."[89] According to Gentry, they have "the particular feature of binding those who encounter them via the senses to . . . all the masters, buddhas, bodhisattvas, and deities who were once in contact with [the objects],"[90] as well as the capacity to act "as mediators, which variously embody, channel, and direct the transition of power and authority between persons, things,

86. Tsele Natsok Rangdröl, *Empowerment and the Path of Liberation* (Hong Kong: Rangjung Yeshe, 1993), 17–23; Thondup, *Hidden Teachings*, 45; Tucci, *Religions of Tibet*, 44–45.

87. Patrul Rinpoche, *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, trans. Padmakara Translation Group (Boston: Shambala, 1998), 143–45; Jamgön Kongtrul, *The Teacher-Student Relationship*, trans. Ron Garry (Ithaca, N.Y.: Snow Lion, 1999), 139–43; Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, *Guru Yoga*, trans. Matthieu Ricard (Ithaca, N.Y.: Snow Lion, 1999), 57–61; Rangdröl, *Empowerment and the Path*, 33, 35–37.

88. Gentry, *Power Objects*, 10–11.

89. Gentry, *Power Objects*, 13.

90. Gentry, *Power Objects*, 11.

[and] communities."[91] The role of the *gter ma* revealer, then, is to "[give] presence to Padmasambhava's distributed being in ever-new contexts," by serving as an effective medium in cooperation with a force that acts on the revealer both sensually and mnemonically, rather than just as a linguistic medium.[92]

Here, it is important to note that a few scholars in the field of Mormon studies have also treated the gold plates as more than an inert linguistic medium. Ann Taves, for example, has analyzed Smith's translation of the gold plates through a comparative, phenomenological lens that depicts Smith as neither literal translator nor fraud, but creative agent who expressed his subjective vision of an angel and gold plates through a material object he created.[93] For example, Taves suggests that Smith's presentation of the gold plates may be comparable to a Catholic priest's consecration of the eucharist: just as the priest takes a mundane wafer and calls upon the Holy Spirit to transform it into the body of Christ, perhaps "Smith viewed something that he made—metal plates—as a vehicle through which something sacred—the ancient gold plates—could be made (really) present." She also suggests that it could be similar to a placebo: just as placebos mimic therapeutic treatment in a way that has demonstrable positive effects, perhaps Smith had "eyes to see what could be (a non-pharmacologically induced-healing process) and the audacity to initiate it."[94]

Karl Sandberg, drawing on both Jungian theories of how extreme focus on material objects can provide access to the unconscious as well

91. Gentry, *Power Objects*, 26.

92. Gentry, *Power Objects*, 52, see also 49.

93. Taves, "History and the Claims of Revelation"; see also Ann Taves, "Joseph Smith, Helen Schucman, and the Experience of Producing a Spiritual Text," in MacKay, Ashurst-McGee, and Hauglid, *Producing Ancient Scripture*, 169–86; and Ann Taves, *Revelatory Events* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2016).

94. Taves, "History and the Claims of Revelation," 195, 202.

as theories of performativity in which savants tap into a seemingly independent guiding force through a combination of action and material instruments, has suggested that Smith's seer stones acted as a "catalyst—because of his belief in the stone and his attunement to the world of the numinous, or the unconscious, where unseen powers moved, collided, contended, danced, and held their revels, the stone became the means of concentrating his psychic energies and giving them form."[95] Sandberg has also pointed out that a similar process seems to be operative in Book of Mormon accounts of translation, where "seers" do not "go from document to document" miraculously interpreting characters,[96] but use stones which "magnify to the eyes of men the things which [they] shall write."[97] And although I am not convinced that we should take statements about translation within the document that Smith translated to be speaking directly to the means by which he translated it, Sandberg's argument (most recently also made by Hickman)[98] does demonstrate that the Book of Mormon's internal narrators' focus on maintaining a linguistically accurate record for future generations does not imply that Smith was necessarily engaged in an act of literal linguistic translation.

Most recently, Sonia Hazard has argued that Smith's so-called gold plates were actually printing plates that he either found or encountered in a printing shop and then constructed himself. Hazard draws on an impressive body of research to argue that nineteenth-century printing plates align with the descriptions in the witness accounts in a variety of ways and offers three reasonable scenarios within which Smith

95. Sandberg, "Knowing Brother Joseph Again," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 22, no. 4 (1989): 22–24.

96. Sandberg, "Knowing Brother Joseph Again,"20–21.

97. Ether 3:24.

98. Jared Hickman, "'Bringing Forth' the Book of Mormon," in MacKay, Ashurst-McGee, and Hauglid, *Producing Ancient Scripture*, 78–80.

could have encountered them.[99] More important for the purposes of this paper, Hazard suggests that as a "starting point for understanding creativity and change" we should not assume that the gold plates were solely products of Smith's mind or cultural milieu, but "an assemblage of ideas and concrete material things."[100] As such, Hazard emphasizes that Smith's production of the Book of Mormon began as an encounter with what to him could have easily appeared to be an otherworldly object. Hazard explains:

> to encounter something or someone—whether an object, a space, a person, a mood, and so on—is to enter into the other's "field of force" (to borrow a phrase used by Charles Taylor) and, thus, to assemble with the other, be made vulnerable to change in oneself, and become different. Such encounters expand the field of what was before possible. They rescript future events. This is what I have in mind when I say that the materiality of the printing plates mattered, in the sense that Smith's encounter with them changed his course and continued to direct that course in particular ways.[101]

Thus, although Hazard makes clear that Smith's imagination, social relationships, and "surrounding cultural and religious imaginary" certainly played an important role in the Book of Mormon's production, these are merely one part of a broader assemblage that not only includes but was instigated by, "the powers of material things."[102]

Of the three scholars surveyed above, Hazard's notion of "encounter" draws the closest to Sokdokpa's ideas on materialist agency. Illustrating where Sokdokpa diverges will be helpful to further shed light on the questions and challenges the *gter ma* tradition poses to our analysis of Smith and the gold plates. This becomes most clear in

99. Sonia Hazard, "How Joseph Smith Encountered Printing Plates," *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 31, no. 2 (2021): 150–178.

100. Hazard, "How Joseph Smith Encountered," 140, 146.

101. Hazard, "How Joseph Smith Encountered," 148.

102. Hazard, "How Joseph Smith Encountered," 180–81.

Gentry's discussion of Sokdokpa's responses to critics who interpret sacred material objects as symbols, instruments, or mnemonic cues. According to Gentry, Sokdokpa makes clear that, through these objects, "the transformative powers of subjective qualities" of past Buddhist masters are materialized to the extent that, "by way of physical and existential connection," they "have the capacity to bring forth the presence of past masters and timeless buddhas and bodhisattvas."[103] This is not to render the agency of the humans who encounter such objects mute; Sokdokpa concedes that the ability of the object to affect people is "based on the individual's respective level of spiritual development" as well as the successful ritual treatment thereof.[104] Nevertheless, one's spiritual development does not just make one more vulnerable to personal transformation within the objects sphere of influence; it enables him or her to function as a medium for the presence of a past master.

This interplay between preparation and ritual action in relation to bringing forth past voices is especially operative in the *gter ma* discovery and translation process. The process of discovering a *gter ma* typically begins with the discovery or reception of a prophetic guide, often through a supernatural agent such as a manifestation of Padmasambhava or a *gter ma* protector. Although its contents vary, their most significant feature is a prophecy, couched in the words of Padmasambhava, which addresses the prospective *gter ma* discoverer by name, or clearly alludes to the circumstances of his or her own life. As such, the prophetic guide serves as proof of one's identity as a reincarnation of one of Padmasambhava's students, contextualizing them within a providential narrative that qualifies him or her for the task of *gter ma* revelation due to their having received a particular teaching and commission to reveal it in a past life.[105] This pivotal event, in turn,

103. Gentry, *Power Objects*, 299–303.

104. Gentry, *Power Objects*, 246, 310.

105. Janet Gyatso, "The Relic Text," (unpublished manuscript), 7–12; Thondup, *Hidden Teachings*,72–76; Jacoby, *Love and Liberation*, 142.

sets off a series of arduous tasks, ranging from mastering particular ritual practices prescribed in the prophetic guide, appeasing the *gter ma* protectors through propitiatory rites, and discerning external signs which reveal when, where, and with whom to uncover the *gter ma*.[106]

Once removed from its burial place,[107] the process of cracking the *gter ma*'s "code" begins. As mentioned above, the scroll serves as the signifier of the signified encoded teaching implanted in the mind stream of the future revealer, functioning both as a tool of secrecy by making the teaching legible only to the appointed revealer, and a type of revelatory mnemonic device. However, awakening the memory is no easy task. Often, the discoverer is required to enter that same deep level of consciousness within which the original teaching was implanted through meditative practice.[108] Moreover, the text is often subject to spontaneous change, and stabilizing it requires aligning oneself again with the right people, at the right place, at the right time, and often requires engaging in sexual yoga with a karmically aligned tantric consort.[109] After the text stabilizes, the *gter ma* discoverer may be able to perceive its decoded form spontaneously through exposure to an external stimulus, by repeatedly analyzing the scroll, by merely glancing

106. Gyatso describes the semiotic process by which one determines the necessary conditions for revelation in detail in her study of the *gter ston* Jigme Lingpa (Gyatso, *Apparitions of the Self*, 162–81) and elsewhere ("Signs, Memory and History," 22–27; see also Drubchen, *Hidden Teachings*, 130).

107. For detailed examples of *gter ma* discovery, see Hanna, "Vast as the Sky"; Germano, "Re-Membering the Dismembered Body"; Gyatso, *Apparitions of Self*, 161–74; and Hirshberg, *Remembering the Lotus-Born*, (96–139).

108. Germano and Gyatso, "Longchenpa and the Dakinis," 242.

109. Thondup describes the consort as one who "helps to produce and maintain the wisdom of the union of great bliss and emptiness, by which the adept attains the ultimate state" (*Hidden Teachings*, 82–83; see also Gyatso, *Apparitions of Self*, 173, 194–97). Elsewhere, Gyatso explains this as facilitating the "breaking of codes (*brda grol*), here a metaphor for the loosening of the psychic knots that bind the cakras, necessary for the mature rendering of the full Treasure scripture in determinant form" ("Signs, Memory and History," 22).

at the scroll, or even through an alphabetical key that accompanied the discovered *gter ma*.[110] Once decoded, the all-important memory comes forth. However, that memory may need to be translated out of a secret language (not to be confused with the secret script) and the *gter ma* discoverer must come to comprehend its contents and/or learn to effectuate its rituals before transmitting it to others. In all, this process, which must be kept secret from those not directly involved, can span years.[111]

Yet, despite such active engagement in decoding the scroll, claims of agency are consistently mitigated and ultimately authorial identity is shifted to Padmasambhava. As Hirshberg has observed in the case of the *gter ma* discoverer Nyangrel Nyima Ozer (1124–1192), "the consistent use of intransitive sentence constructions [is used to mitigate] his agency. He is literally omitted from the action and is merely the one present to directly receive the treasures when the time has come for them to emerge on their own."[112]

Of course, none of this need imply that Smith experienced his translation of the gold plates in a way directly comparable to the Tibetan *gter ston*s. But it should give us pause to rethink—taking after Bruno Latour—where in Smith's account we may have "invented believers" instead of tracing the agents (human and nonhuman) that make these so-called believers act.[113] I agree with Hazard's turn to take Smith's material encounter with the gold plates seriously rather than (*pace*

110. Although Gyatso is sighting Drubchen (*Hidden Teachings*, 124–135), her systematic outline of this process is quite helpful (see Gyatso, "Signs, Memory and History," 17–22).

111. Jigme Lingpa's revelation of the *Logchen Nyingtig* (*klong chen snying thig*) for example, took seven years (Gyatso, *Apparitions of the Self*, 168).

112. Hirshberg, *Remembering the Lotus-Born*, 133.

113. Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 234–37.

Taves) "as a materialization of an idea into a material thing."[114] This option both transcends the problematic dichotomized prophet/fraud options surveyed above, as well as aligns with the primary sources' clear emphasis on Smith's encounter with a material object he discovered.[115] Nevertheless, I am concerned by the bracketing of Smith's claim by all three of the aforementioned scholars to not have only been personally influenced by the plates, but to have translated myriad ancient voices.

The issue here is reminiscent of the postcolonial theorist Mary Keller's intellectual history of religious studies analyses of spirit possession. Keller observed that, despite individuals' claims to being overcome by the agency of ancestors and other invisible forces, their experiences were consistently reduced to symbolic actions reflective of cultural beliefs that served to address "real" social issues.[116] The effect of such an analysis is to trace the claims undergirding diverse religious expression insofar as they do not exceed modern metaphysical sensibilities, at which point the turn is to impose the pervasive modern Western assumption that "religiousness is a matter of belief" to account

114. Hazard, "How Joseph Smith Encountered," 146.

115. Emma Smith accompanied her husband on his discovery expedition, and many others provided transportation, lodging, protection from thieves, places to hide the plates, and witnessed him return from the hill with a set of plates (although under a cloth) (Bushman, *Believing History*, 93–105). Emma also describes "[moving] them from place to place on the table, as it was necessary in doing my [house]work" ("Last Testimony of Sister Emma"). A select eleven were even given permission by the angel Moroni to "handle" them and "[see] the engravings thereon" (see "The Testimony of the Three Witnesses" and the Testimony of the Eight Witnesses" in the Book of Mormon). For a discussion on the credibility of their accounts, see Dan Vogel, "The Validity of the Witnesses' Testimonies," in Vogel and Metcalfe, *American Apocrypha*, 79–122; and Steven C. Harper, "Evaluating the Book of Mormon Witnesses," *Religious Educator* 11, no. 2 (2010): 37–49.

116. Mary Keller, *The Hammer and the Flute* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 33, 35–37, 54–72.

for the remainder against something apparently more "real."[117] Not only does this misrepresent the diverse worlds inhabited by religious practitioners, but it ignores that in such cases, "it is receptivity" to an other agency, comparable to "a hammer, flute, or horse that is wielded, played, or mounted," that "makes the possessed body powerful."[118] To explore the implications of this shift in the role of the human subject in religious experience, Keller states:

> We need to create a discursive space in which the agency of religious forces can be recognized as such. This is not because religious forces are 'real' and thus should not be scrutinized critically. This is a methodological argument regarding our ability to recognize alternative modes of subjectivity and to subject ourselves to the agency of the others who attract our attention. Methodologically it allows the scholar to represent religious bodies at war as bodies that are negotiating with power that is not the same power that Western scholars have identified as hegemony and ideology.[119]

Likewise, I would suggest that we need to consider the possibility that Smith really experienced being spoken through by other voices.[120]

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117. Keller, *Hammer and the Flute*, 7, see also 41, 44–46.

118. Keller, *Hammer and the Flute*, 9, see also 48.

119. Keller, *Hammer and the Flute*, 159–60.

120. One other interesting alternative is Taves's and Dunn's theory that Smith's ability to dictate extensive narratives without external sources through reference to trance states that enable "automatic writing" (Taves, *Revelatory Events*, 250–69; Taves, "Joseph Smith, Helen Schucman"; Scott C. Dunn, "Automaticity and the Dictation of the Book of Mormon," in Vogel and Metcalfe, *American Apocrypha*, 17–46). This cross-cultural phenomenon refers to states of consciousness within which an individual can write or dictate words to a scribe for extensive periods of time without prior knowledge of, or control over, the words themselves, and thus attributes them to an external force. The primary problem with this theory, however, is its reliance on Smith's natural knack for storytelling and high degree of familiarity with the King James Bible to posit a robust set of mentally stored raw materials upon which Smith's mind drew while under hypnosis to produce the content of the Book of Mormon. There

Without doing so, I believe we are missing a crucial point from which to explore the world that Smith inhabited and the nature of religious experience therein. My suggestion then is that in light of the *gter ma* tradition, we can both move past claims of literal linguistic translation or fraudulent deception—which, as I have argued, stretch the primary source accounts of Smith's translation in unreasonable ways—while still taking seriously Smith's claim to be giving voice to other agents. In this view, Smith can be seen as one who encountered a material object that not only had personal effects on him but forged relational bonds between him, an angel, and a past civilization in seemingly unpredictable ways—most importantly, by enabling him to channel a type of revelatory mode through which he served as a medium for ancient

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is scant evidence for these innate qualities and/or cultivated knowledge base. In making this claim, Taves and others (Rodney Stark, "A Theory of Revelations," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 38, no. 2 [1999]: 294; Hickman, "'Bringing Forth' the Book of Mormon," 76–77) rely exclusively on Lucy Smith's (Joseph Smith's mother) comment that during their "evening conversations," Smith would give "amusing recitals" about "the ancient inhabitants of this continent" before discovering the plates (Scot F. Proctor and Maurine J. Proctor, eds., *The Revised and Enhanced History of Joseph Smith by His Mother* [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1996], 112). However, I think they are reading too deeply into this comment. This seems to be a reference to what Moroni told Smith during their first meeting. In Smith's own words: "I was also informed concerning the aboriginal inhabitants of this Country, and shown who they were, and from whence they came; a brief sketch of their origin, progress, civilization, laws, governments, of their righteousness and iniquity, and the blessings of God being finally withdrawn from them as a people was made known unto me" ("History, 1838–1856, vol. C-1 [November 2, 1838–July 31, 1842]," March 1, 1842, 1282, The Joseph Smith Papers, https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-c-1-2-november-1838-31-july-1842/456). For a critique of the automatic writing theory, see Brian C. Hales, "Automatic Writing and the Book of Mormon," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 52, no. 2 (2019): 1–35.

voices, yet only while in the object's presence.[121] In this way, Smith's four years of preparation to retrieve the plates from the angel Moroni, chastisement at the hands of that angel resulting in the plates being removed and his ability to translate muted,[122] as well as attempts to create and maintain amicable relationships with aids throughout the process,[123] can be seen as Smith ritually orienting himself in relation to the power of a sacred object over a prolonged period of time in order to become an effective medium for its message.

I also think this reading aligns well with compelling recent arguments regarding what Smith could have meant in using the term

121. The closest approximation to my theory thus far in Mormon studies are Josh E. Probert's brief comments that the seer stone "acted on Smith" and "acted as a mediator" ("The Materiality of Lived Mormonism," *Mormon Studies Review* 3 (2016): 26–27). My emphasis on the plates instead of the seer stones stems primarily from their being the claimed contextual source of the translation and the fact that, when the angel took the plates away, Smith could no longer translate despite having access to seer stones.

122. Smith's mother recorded in the late winter or early Spring of 1827 that Joseph had received "the severest chastisement" of his life at the hand of Moroni for being "negligent" with respect to "the things that God had commanded [him] to do" (Proctor and Proctor, *Revised and Enhanced History of Joseph Smith*, 135). After preparing the first 116 pages of the plates, Smith mistakenly allowed his scribe, then Martin Harris, to show the transcript to family members, after which they were lost and the plates subsequently taken from Smith from June 15 to September 22, 1828 (Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 66–69).

123. Two early sources written by friends of Smith record that the angel told him he must "bring the right person" to retrieve the plates, who Smith later learned was Emma Hale, a local woman who married a few months later. These accounts written by these friends, Joseph Knight and Willard Chase, are summarized in Quinn, *Early Mormonism*, 158, 163. Smith also had to retain an amicable relationship with Emma to be able to translate ("Letter from Elder W. H. Kelley," *Saints' Herald* 1 [1882]: 68) and was inspired to engage with different scribes throughout the process.

"translation" to describe his project,[124] particularly that made by Jared Hickman. Hickman has recently argued against "the paradigm of *linguistic* translation" in favor of what he calls "*metaphysical* translation."[125] Hickman notes that "the word 'translate' and its variants appear only five times in the King James Bible, and none of these refers to linguistic translation."[126] In fact, three are found in the fifth verse of the eleventh chapter of Hebrews—which happens to be one of the most cited chapters of scripture in the early Mormon movement[127]—which speaks of God translating Enoch "that he should not see death." Moreover, Webster's 1828 *American Dictionary* offers five definitions of the term *translate* before arriving at today's conventional usage of "[rendering] into another language," all of which convey the sense of transporting something from one place to another. With this notion of translation in mind, Hickman argues that Smith's "[bringing] forth" ancient voices "as if [they] had cried from the dust"[128] can plausibly be seen not as a conversion of the language of the gold plates into English, but as Smith's transferring ancient voices across time and space.

I diverge with Hickman slightly where he emphasizes Smith's role as an activist, claiming that the qualifier in the last line, "*as if*," arguably opens "a gap between the Book of Mormon text and indigenous voices, emphasizing Smith's role . . . as an activist; that is, someone acting on

124. Other comparable, interesting arguments for non-linguistic translation, which I do not have space to survey here as they extend to Smith's other translation projects, are Kathleen Flake, "Translating Time," *Journal of Religion* 87, no. 4 (2007): 497–527; and Samuel M. Brown, *Joseph Smith's Translation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

125. Hickman, "'Bringing Forth' the Book of Mormon," 54.

126. The other two appearances of the term are in 2 Samuel 3:10 and Colossians 1:13.

127. Grant Underwood, *The Millenarian World of Early Mormonism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 163–64n4.

128. 2 Nephi 3:15–19.

behalf of Native peoples as a 'spokesman' . . . rather than as an actual medium of Native peoples."[129] My reading, on the other hand, tries to take after Bushman's observation that the "signal feature" of Smith's life was "his sense of being guided by revelation"[130]—that is, that he was driven by real forces outside him rather than acting on behalf of forces he encountered in vision. Nevertheless, the general idea that Smith's metaphysical translation consisted of Smith "[translating] himself into the ancient American world through the virtual reality technology of the seer stone and then [translating] that world back into his own through the virtual reality technology of oral storytelling," thereby "altering the way Euro-Christian settlers inhabit the indigenous cosmos they find themselves in,"[131] I find to be compatible with my reading of Smith's translation.

I also believe that my reading could provide insights into Smith's own theological innovations around themes of materiality and historicity, which I will only have space to briefly mention here. Moving forward very tentatively, I would suggest that my theory resonates with Rosalynde Welch's use of the term "prime agency"—drawing implications from Smith's "King Follet Sermon," and his claim that "spirit is matter"[132]—to suggest that in Smith's radically re-envisioned Christian cosmos, agency resides "not in the human personality but in Mormonism's plural ontology of intelligent matter; prime agency, in other words, is hardwired into the basic structure of reality."[133] As my theory that the plates were agentive objects that facilitated Joseph Smith's channeling of ancient voices across time and space constitutes one of Smith's

129. Hickman, "'Bringing Forth' the Book of Mormon," 75.

130. Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, xxi.

131. Hickman, "'Bringing Forth' the Book of Mormon," 54, 60, 75, 77–78.

132. Doctrine and Covenants 131:7.

133. Rosalynde Welch, "The New Mormon Theology of Matter," *Mormon Studies Review* 4, no. 1 (2017): 70.

founding religious experiences, reorienting the dominant paradigm of interior, subjective belief as the foundation of religious experience to an interaction with an agentive material world,[134] I suggest that Smith's distinctive cosmic vision could stem from formative encounters with the material world that imbued in him a pervasive sense of materialist agency, seen in not only claims of material monism but further distinctive ritual actions around materials, in, for example, building temples and wearing sacred garments.

Finally, I would suggest that moving past claims of linguistic translation need not coincide with an outright rejection of the Book of Mormon's historical claims. Although it should be clear that the manner by which Joseph Smith produced history is not amenable to modern conceptions of historiography, this should not amount to a declaration that his means are ineffable and his claimed historical productions are impermeable to critical examination. Rather, it would be useful to take up Charles Stewart's usage of the term "historical consciousness," referring to "whatever basic assumptions a society makes about the shape of time and the relationships of events in the past, present and future," the form of which "in any given society is an open question, requiring empirical, ethnographic investigation."[135] That Smith had a unique conception of time that can be investigated to better understand his "historical productions" has been fruitfully explored by Kathleen Flake and Samuel Brown.[136] Stewart's application

134. On this pervasive, Protestant influenced paradigm of religious studies, see Peter J. Bräunlein, "Thinking Religion Through Things," *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 28, no. 4/5 (2016): 370–72; and Brigit Meyer, "How Pictures Matter," in *Objects and Imagination: Perspectives on Materialization and Meaning*, edited by Øivind Fuglerud and Leon Wainwright (New York: Berghahn, 2015), 165–66.

135. Charles Stewart, *Dreaming and Historical Consciousness in Island Greece* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 2.

136. Flake, "Translating Time"; Brown, *Joseph Smith's Translation*.

of the term includes an emphasis on how discoveries of buried objects "charged with human-like attributes," "performative icons" capable of mediating "visionary knowledge,"[137] in conjunction with dreams in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Island Greece (which he explicitly compares to Joseph Smith's discovery of the gold plates)[138] aid in influencing such unique conceptions of time. It is precisely such an approach, put into conversation with my theory of the gold plates as agents, which could be productive in forwarding theories of Mormon historical consciousness, thereby providing further glimpses into the unique world Smith inhabited.

137. Stewart, *Dreaming and Historical Consciousness*, 51, 64, 68.

138. Stewart, *Dreaming and Historical Consciousness*, xvii–xviii.

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