THE BOOK OF MORMON AND THE LIMITS OF NATURALISTIC CRITERIA: COMPARING JOSEPH SMITH AND ANDREW JACKSON DAVIS

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In an 1879 interview with her son, Emma Smith famously asserted: "My belief is that the Book of Mormon is of divine authenticity—I have not the slightest doubt of it. I am satisfied that no man could have dictated the writing of the manuscripts unless he was inspired." In support of her declaration, Emma turned from a confessional assertion to a naturalistic line of reasoning, arguing, "for, when [I was] acting as his scribe, your father would dictate to me hour after hour; and when returning after 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. This was a usual thing for him to do. It would have been improbable that a learned man could do this; and, for one so ignorant and unlearned as he was, it was simply impossible."[1] Emma's turn to naturalistic criteria offers an opportunity to explore the persistent relationships that often emerge in Mormon communities between personal testimonies and naturalistic arguments, which usually take the form of direct claims or indirect assumptions about Joseph's alleged ignorance

This essay is indebted to insights from Brent Metcalfe, David Rodes, Colby Townsend, and the editor and anonymous readers for *Dialogue*.

1. Dan Vogel, ed., *Early Mormon Documents* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996), 1:542. Hereafter *EMD*.

and illiteracy. Emma's statement offers a template for this pervasive dynamic: her testimony suggests that her *belief* in the Book of Mormon hinged, at least in part, on her *disbelief* in Joseph's ability to produce the work on his own accord.

Emma, of course, was not alone in this attitude. Early accounts of Joseph's intellectual abilities, from critics and followers alike, often emphasize his illiteracy and lack of education; whereas those hostile to him did so in order to assert that another person or persons composed the text (hence the Spalding–Rigdon theory), believers did it in an effort to provide supporting evidence for the divine authenticity of the Book of Mormon.[2] In time, such naturalistic arguments occasionally evolved into complex lists of criteria aimed at disqualifying Smith—or any other individual, for that matter—as the author of the work. In a 1955 devotional at Brigham Young University, the future LDS apostle Hugh B. Brown provided his audience with criteria that would influence subsequent lists of such naturalistic argumentation. "I submit to you that the Prophet Joseph Smith in translating the Book of Mormon did a superhuman task," Brown declared to his audience. "I ask you students to go out and write a Book of Mormon. . . . I ask you to write, if you can, any kind of a story of the ancient inhabitants of America, and I ask you to write it without any source material." Brown continued with a list of selective criteria, focusing on the ability to produce multiple chapters devoted to wars, history, visions, prophecies, and the ministry of Jesus Christ. In addition, any undertakers of such a task would need to incorporate "figures of speech, similes, metaphors, narration, exposition, description, oratory, epic, lyric, logic, and parables." Moreover, alluding to Joseph's age and lack of education, Brown singled

2. Joseph Smith Sr. may well have started the tradition. According to Fayette Lapham, a farmer from nearby Perinton (aka Perrinton), New York, who visited the Smith home in 1829 or 1830, Joseph Sr. referred to Joseph Jr. as "the illiterate." *EMD* 1:457.

out "those of you who are under twenty" to write the book (Joseph was twenty-three when he dictated the current text), while reminding them that "the man that translated the Book of Mormon was a young man, and he hadn't had the opportunity of schooling that you have had."[3] Like Emma's assertions regarding Joseph's lack of ability, Brown's declarations offered a buttress for faith based on naturalistic lines of reasoning.

Brown's list apparently inspired BYU professor Hugh Nibley to produce a similar but more detailed set of criteria. In addition to the general ideas proposed by Brown, Nibley specified that anyone attempting to replicate Joseph's feat must produce a work "five to six hundred pages in length," provide the names of hundreds of characters, and "be lavish with cultural and technical details—manners and customs, arts and industries, political and religious institutions, rites, and traditions, include long and complicated military and economic histories," among several additional requirements.[4] Brown's and Nibley's selective catalogues spurred numerous imitations, often referred to as the "Book of Mormon Challenge." They might also contain additional exclusionary points of comparison, such as, "You are twenty-three years of age," "You have had no more than three years of formal school education," and "Your history must be 531 pages and over 300,000 words in length [at approximately 269,510 words, the Book of Mormon actually falls

3. Hugh B. Brown, "The Profile of a Prophet" (devotional, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, Oct. 4, 1955). For a modified transcript, see https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/hugh-b-brown/profile-of-a-prophet/. For an audio recording, see BYU Speeches, "The Profile of a Prophet | Hugh B. Brown," YouTube video, 27:04, June 29, 2018, https://youtu.be/QnhPeGI__DY, 17:10–19:55. The quotations follow my own transcription of the original audio recording.

4. Hugh Nibley, *The Prophetic Book of Mormon*, The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley, edited by John W. Welch, vol. 8 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989), 221–22.

short of this criterion]."[5] The popularity of such lists has long saturated the cultural imagination of believers, reinforcing the idea that Joseph's translation of the Book of Mormon would require, to use Brown's words, a "superhuman task" to duplicate.

Such frameworks of evaluation, though unofficial and nondoctrinal, ostensibly gratify a need for tangible evidence of divine intervention, and variations of these lists make regular appearances in formal and informal settings. In a recent conference addressing the topic of Joseph Smith's translation, for example, Richard L. Bushman offered an informal set of criteria that revealed the presence of such framing: "Despite all the naturalist arguments, I still do not believe that no matter what his [Smith's] genius, he could have done it as himself." In support of his position, Bushman proposed a comparative framework of naturalistic criteria intended to demonstrate the improbability of Smith's possible authorship: "What I want is a text of similar complexity, produced under such primitive conditions, with so little background or training or precedence, to turn out his master work—not at the end of his career but at the beginning of his career, just as he's getting started. That seems to me really beyond anything you could call natural."[6] Bushman's response was, of course, improvised, rather than a formal statement on the matter. Even so, his observations offer a fitting example of the ways in which naturalistic checklists weave their way into informal discussions about the origins of the Book of Mormon,

5. For a common list of criteria, together with commentary, see Jerald and Sandra Tanner, "Book of Mormon Challenge," *Salt Lake City Messenger* 107, Oct. 2006, http://www.utlm.org/newsletters/no107.htm. For the 269,510-word count, see John W. Welch, "Timing the Translation of the Book of Mormon," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 57, no. 4 (2018): 22.

6. Richard L. Bushman (panel discussion, "New Perspectives on Joseph Smith and Translation" conference, Utah State University, Logan, Utah, sponsored by USU Religious Studies and Faith Matters Foundation, Mar. 16, 2017). See Faith Matters Foundation, "The Translation Team—with highlights," YouTube video, 18:53, Apr. 27, 2017, https://youtu.be/E-X5Hsv16BE?t=210, 3:30–4:06.

influencing opinions and oftentimes buttressing the very foundations of faith.

Within the broader spectrum of Mormon apologetic discourse, the regular appearance of such comparative "proofs" (either as individual issues or collective catalogues) reflects a strong and common tendency to move beyond confessional affirmations—such as testimonies of spiritual witnesses confirming the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon—to decidedly non-confessional appeals to naturalistic criteria.[7] Nevertheless, such proposals, which directly entangle naturalistic criteria with the effort to strengthen faith, carry inherent and unpredictable risks. Should the proffered checklists fail to distinguish the Book of Mormon in any substantive way from other notable contemporary examples, then such comparisons not only result in the weakening of popular supports to faith but potentially undermine faith itself. As Loyd Isao Ericson cautions, the possibility then exists that "instead of tearing down potential stumbling blocks to faith, Mormon apologetics actually and unknowingly engages in building and establishing those blocks."[8] Moreover, such comparisons are burdened with implications of unspoken (and unintended) commentaries on the very nature of faith and belief. The insistent turn to naturalistic criteria in the cultural imagination of believers strongly suggests the existence of an unacknowledged, paradoxical, and potentially incompatible component within the foundations of faith: *belief* in the Book of Mormon contains an embedded *disbelief* in Smith's capacity to create it, or even to participate actively in its creation.

7. As neither a doctrine nor principle of faith, the issue of plausibility falls technically outside the realm of theological apologetics.

8. Loyd Isao Ericson, "Conceptual Confusion and the Building of Stumbling Blocks of Faith," in *Perspectives on Mormon Theology: Apologetics*, edited by Blair G. Van Dyke and Loyd Isao Ericson (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2017), 209.

Within the community of faith, the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon finds its anchors exclusively in the personal spiritual witnesses and lived experiences of believers, independent of any additional appeals to naturalistic assumptions. Such, at least, is the idealistic and theological claim. The relentless invocations of naturalist arguments, however, trouble this idealism. Whether appearing as broad claims asserting Joseph's alleged ignorance and illiteracy or as detailed catalogues of idiosyncratic criteria, it becomes clear that naturalistic arguments do, in fact, participate in the actual framework of day-to-day belief and workaday faith concerning the origins and authenticity (and therefore the authority) of the Book of Mormon. The pragmatic nature of faith seems not only to reflect a belief in "things which are not seen, which are true" (Alma 32:21), but likewise involves a subjective *disbelief* in alternative possibilities. Thus, doubt comes to play a role in the composition of faith. The embedded reliance on naturalistic arguments, however tangential, therefore presents the uneasy and troubling possibility that a portion of one's faith rests upon a foundation of limited mortal assumptions, constrained within the narrow and finite compass of an individual's personal knowledge, hopes, needs, and experience. As such, the presumably solid rock foundation of faith turns out to contain a lot of destabilizing sand.

Comparing American Seers

With such thoughts on faith and belief serving as a meditative backdrop, we might treat these naturalistic arguments as a convenient analytic framework to compare—and contrast—Joseph Smith and his 1829 translation of the Book of Mormon with Andrew Jackson Davis (1826–1910), another early American "prophet and a seer," and his trance performance of *The Principles of Nature* (1847).[9] For within this

9. J. Stanley Grimes describes how Davis came to the realization that he "was a prophet and a seer." J. Stanley Grimes, *The Mysteries of Human Nature Explained* (Buffalo, N.Y.: R. M. Wanzer, 1857), 353.

comparison, we find another complex text produced by a speaker with limited formal education and training, created under similar conditions and circumstances, and a work that stands as its young creator's greatest masterpiece, even though the text was created at the dawn of the speaker's career. Davis, like Smith, was raised in a poor household and received little formal education—Davis, in fact, would claim to have received only "little more than five months" of schooling.[10] Davis also received visions and met with angelic messengers, who informed him that he was chosen to reveal important truths to the world. Through a mystical process of mesmeric trance and "conscious clairvoyance," Davis dictated—without the use of notes, manuscripts, or books—his first and most popular volume, *The Principles of Nature, Her Divine Revelations, and a Voice to Mankind*, which, at approximately 320,000 words, contains a collection of intricate revelations that many of his readers treated as new scripture.[11] Though Davis eventually composed more than thirty books, *The Principles of Nature* would remain "the most famous" and influential text of his career.[12]

These broad-stroke comparisons do not, however, do justice to the compelling and oftentimes uncanny similarities between Smith and Davis. A closer examination of the circumstances surrounding the oral production of their works—both their similarities and important

10. Andrew Jackson Davis, *The Magic Staff: An Autobiography of Andrew Jackson Davis* (New York: J. S. Brown, 1857), 173.

11. Catherine L. Albanese aptly describes Davis's work as "a new Bible of Nature." See Catherine L. Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2007), 212. See also Grimes, *Mysteries*, 354. Brian Hales estimates that *The Principles of Nature* contains approximately 340,000 words, though I can only account for approximately 320,000. See Brian C. Hales, "Automatic Writing and The Book of Mormon: An Update," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 52, no. 2 (Summer 2019): 5.

12. Anthony A. Walsh, "A Note on the Origin of 'Modern' Spiritualism," *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 28, no. 2 (Apr. 1973): 170. See also Albanese, *Republic of Mind*, 218.

differences—can thus provide crucial insights into the cultural context in which these two fledgling seers performed their respective texts into existence. Moreover, such a comparative exploration alerts us to the problems of invoking arbitrary criteria in a strategic effort to privilege the work of a favored candidate.

The Poughkeepsie Seer

In April of 1829, when Joseph Smith started dictating the Book of Mormon in Harmony, Pennsylvania, Andrew Jackson Davis, not yet three years old, lived just over one hundred miles away in Blooming Grove, New York, a small town in the Hudson River Valley.[13] Like Smith, Davis was born into an impoverished family: his father was a weaver and journeyman shoemaker, while his mother occasionally supplemented the family's meager income through domestic work in neighbors' homes.[14] Their indigent circumstances forced them into a peripatetic life, moving from town to town in a constant search for work, disrupting any sense of familial stability. Their arrival in Poughkeepsie in 1841, when young "Jackson" turned fourteen years old, would mark the seventh time the family had moved.[15]

13. For a sample of biographical sketches on Andrew Jackson Davis, see Albanese, *Republic of Mind*, 206–20, and Albanese, "On the Matter of Spirit: Andrew Jackson Davis and the Marriage of God and Nature," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 60, no. 1 (Spring 1992): 1–17. Robert W. Delp, "Andrew Jackson Davis: Prophet of American Spiritualism," *Journal of American History* 54, no. 1 (June 1967): 43–56; Delp, "A Spiritualist in Connecticut: Andrew Jackson Davis, the Hartford Years, 1850–1854," *New England Quarterly* 53, no. 3 (Sept. 1980): 345–62; and Delp, "Andrew Jackson Davis and Spiritualism," in *Pseudo-Science and Society in 19th-Century America*, edited by Arthur Wrobel (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1987), 100–21. See also Grimes, *Mysteries*, 350–62.

14. Davis, *Magic Staff*, 24–26, 68, 119.

15. Davis, *Magic Staff*, 40, 51, 87, 118, 123, 136, 169–70, 177, 185.

According to Davis, the constant moving from one town to another, coupled with the impoverished circumstances of the family, resulted in a poor education. Indeed, Davis's supporters and detractors alike would eagerly embrace his claim of having little more than five months of formal education, arguing that Davis's miraculous revelations could not possibly have come from the mind of such an untutored, ignorant boy. J. Stanley Grimes, a well-known contemporary mesmerist and phrenologist, argued that "*Davis* was notoriously ignorant and illiterate. . . . How, then, was he to write a superior book?"[16] The Reverend William Fishbough, Davis's scribe during the dictation of *The Principles of Nature*, described the young visionary's purported naïveté in more florid terms: "*He remained, then, up to the commencement of his lectures, the uneducated, unsophisticated child of Nature, entirely free from the creeds, theories, and philosophies of the world*."[17] Ira Armstrong, a Poughkeepsie merchant who once hired Davis as an apprentice, stated, "His education barely amounted to a knowledge of reading, writing, and the rudiments of arithmetic."[18] Armstrong's description (a common refrain in the period) might well be compared to Smith's claim that "I was merely instructed in reading, writing, and the ground rules of arithmetic."[19] The familiar trope of the illiterate mouthpiece of God's pure and undefiled word offered a convenient framework in which to cast the budding prophet's career, and Davis's self-reported

16. Grimes, *Mysteries*, 354, italics in the original.

17. Grimes, *Mysteries*, xiv, italics in the original.

18. Andrew Jackson Davis, *The Principles of Nature, Her Divine Revelations, and a Voice to Mankind* (New York: S. S. Lyon and Wm. Fishbough, 1847), ix.

19. *EMD*, 1:27, spelling and punctuation modernized. Davis, describing himself in the third person, would assert that prior to his revelations he had only read one book in his lifetime "on a very unimportant subject" (later identified as *The Three Spaniards* [1800], a Gothic melodrama by George Walker) and that he knew "nothing of grammar or the rules of language." *Magic Staff*, 304–05.

ignorance provided his supporters with compelling evidence of divine intervention.[20]

Like the Smiths, the transient life of the Davis household also reflected their restless search for a religious home—at least for some of the family members. Davis's father seems not to have held much interest in religion, yet his mother was deeply spiritual. Along with formal religious organizations, she was also a firm believer and practitioner in various forms of folk magic. "She had real clairvoyance," Davis would later recall, adding that she had a "mysterious faculty to foretell the future."[21] Davis also attended various churches with his mother, who joined at least two different denominations: the Dutch Reformed Church and the Presbyterians.[22] Working as both a farm laborer and an apprentice shoemaker, Davis would also frequently attend the churches to which his employers belonged, exposing him further to the Episcopalians, Methodists, and (indirectly) Universalists.[23]

Among these traditions, Methodism emerged as perhaps the most influential—another commonality with Smith. Davis's interest began in the spring of 1842, when he started working as an apprentice to Ira Armstrong, a devout Methodist. Davis participated in a variety of services, including probationary meetings, class meetings, Sunday services, and at least one revival.[24] In such gatherings, Davis would have observed ministers and lay members engaged in semi-extemporaneous speaking, praying, and exhorting. He also would have witnessed the audience responses, which, apart from members rising and "shouting"

20. In spite of Davis's claims, a careful reading of his autobiography suggests that he deliberately downplayed the actual amount of formal and informal education he received.

21. Davis, *Magic Staff*, 110, 119; see also 94–95.

22. Davis, *Magic Staff*, 160, 178.

23. Davis, *Magic Staff*, 158, 191, 200 ("Rev. A. R. Bartlett" was a Universalist preacher).

24. Davis, *Magic Staff*, 192.

out praises and calling for mercy, would have included members falling unconscious or into trance-like states of spiritual conviction.[25]

Davis's prophetic career began in December 1843, shortly after J. Stanley Grimes, an itinerant lecturer, arrived in Poughkeepsie to demonstrate the wonders of mesmerism (a form of hypnotism) and phrenology (inferring an individual's personality traits based on features of the cranium).[26] Davis volunteered as a subject, yet Grimes failed to hypnotize him. A few days later, however, William Levingston, a local tailor studying Chauncy Hare Townshend's *Facts in Mesmerism* (1840) and an amateur mesmerist in his own right, approached Davis and asked if he could try to succeed where Grimes had failed. In this next attempt, Davis slipped into a deep trance.[27] In time, among other clairvoyant skills, Davis claimed that he could see the internal organs of people placed before him, as if "the whole body was transparent as a sheet of glass."[28] This alleged ability prompted Davis and Levingston to set up a clairvoyant medical practice in March of 1844.[29] Levingston, acting as Davis's "operator," would induce the mesmeric trance, and then Davis, wrapped in a mystical vision, would look into the patient's body, diagnose the ailments, and then advise homeopathic remedies.

During this early period, Davis also received visions in which angelic messengers met with him and foretold his mission in life. In his best known vision, much like Moroni's visit to young Joseph, Davis would claim that the spirits of Galen, the ancient Greek physician and philosopher, and Emanuel Swedenborg, the eighteenth-century mystic and theologian, appeared to him and guided him in a quest to reveal

25. Davis, *Magic Staff*, 192–93, 199.

26. Davis, *Magic Staff*, 201.

27. Grimes, *Mysteries*, 350. Davis, *Magic Staff*, 201–02, 210.

28. Davis, *Magic Staff*, 215.

29. Davis, *Principles of Nature*, xii.

greater spiritual truths to humankind.[30] Such "prophetic admonitions," as Davis described them, revealed that he was destined for a higher calling as a prophet and seer.[31]

In the months that followed, a Universalist minister in Poughkeepsie, the Reverend Gibson Smith, took great interest in Davis and Levingston's medical practice and convinced the pair to travel with him on a healing/lecture tour throughout the region, stopping at Albany, New York, and Danbury, Connecticut.[32] During the tour, Davis not only diagnosed patients but spoke in trance about the natural and universal laws that governed all creation. The lectures fascinated Gibson Smith, and Davis "promised to give him three or four lectures on the subject."[33] Nonetheless, and apparently without Davis's permission or editorial input, Gibson Smith revised and published the lectures in a thirty-two-page pamphlet, *Lectures on Clairmativeness: Or, Human Magnetism* (1845). But Davis was not happy with Gibson Smith's alterations or the resulting publication, describing the pamphlet as "a fugitive and mongrel production—containing a strong infusion of the editor's own mind."[34] As Catherine L. Albanese notes, "Davis would later disown the pamphlet."[35]

As he continued his clairvoyant medical practice, Davis began to focus more attention on the revelation of eternal truths. His patients, in fact, often prompted this transition. "From the very beginning of my

30. Albanese, *Republic of Mind*, 207–08; Delp, "Andrew Jackson Davis: Prophet," 44; Davis, *Magic Staff*, 238–45; for Davis's identification of these visitors, see *Magic Staff*, 248.

31. Davis, *Magic Staff*, 244.

32. Davis, *Magic Staff*, 277.

33. Davis, *Magic Staff*, 275; see also 276, 279.

34. Davis, *Magic Staff*, 279. Likewise, Joseph Smith produced three recorded revelations (Doctrine and Covenants sections 3, 4, and 5) before the publication of the Book of Mormon.

35. Albanese, *Republic of Mind*, 207.

mystical experience," Davis recalled, "convalescing patients and investigating minds" had peppered him with theological questions: "'Can you tell me what constitutes the soul?' or 'Is man's spirit immortal?' or 'Is man a free agent?' 'Is God a person, or an essence?' 'What is life?' . . . 'What is the main purpose of man's creation?' 'Is the Bible all true, or in part only?'"[36] In time, the barrage of questions and Davis's responsive revelations led to the incremental formation of a complete and systematic cosmology. Later, when patients continued to ask such questions, Davis replied that he would "dictate a Book, which will contain my answers to your interrogatories."[37] This ambitious book, according to Davis, would contain "a series of extraordinary revelations" that would outline a new system of scientific theology encompassing the natural and spiritual laws that governed all creation.[38]

Later, in the fall of 1845, Davis ended his partnership with Gibson Smith and Levingston.[39] In their place, Davis enlisted the help of a homeopathic physician in Bridgeport, Connecticut, one Dr. Silas S. Lyon, who would act as Davis's new mesmeric operator.[40] Davis and Lyon then moved to Manhattan, where they set up a clairvoyant medical practice in a local boarding house.[41] In preparation for recording Davis's revelations, they also recruited the help of the Reverend William Fishbough, a Universalist minister living in New Haven, Connecticut, to act as the scribe for the project.[42] Davis and Lyon then arranged to

36. Davis, *Magic Staff*, 286.

37. Davis, *Magic Staff*, 286.

38. Davis, *Magic Staff*, 286.

39. Davis, *Magic Staff*, 296–98. Albanese, *Republic of Mind*, 208.

40. Albanese, *Republic of Mind*, 208; Delp, "Andrew Jackson Davis: Prophet," 44; Davis, *Magic Staff*, 298; Davis, *Principles of Nature*, viii, xiii.

41. Davis, *Magic Staff*, 299.

42. Albanese, *Republic of Mind*, 208; Delp, "Andrew Jackson Davis: Prophet," 44; Davis, *Magic Staff*, 300.

have three formal witnesses regularly attend the trance lectures in order to provide eyewitness testimony concerning the process of dictation. Along with these witnesses, no less than twenty-three additional observers attended some of the proceedings, "ranging from one to six" guests per session.[43] "Among the more noteworthy visitors," Robert W. Delp notes, "were Edgar Allan Poe and the organizer of communitarian experiments, Albert Brisbane."[44] After approximately three months of preparation, in which Davis supported himself and Lyon by seeing patients in their clairvoyant medical practice, Davis finally started delivering the "lectures" on November 28, 1845.[45] The ambitious prophet and precocious seer had only recently turned nineteen years old.[46]

If presented as a tableau, Davis's revelatory sessions would look similar to Smith's translations with the seer stone. Both Smith and Davis would sit center stage in a room, their scribes near at hand writing furiously to keep pace, with a small but select audience of eyewitnesses to observe the proceedings.[47] There were, of course, differences. Smith used a seer stone in an upturned hat to block out light, while Davis was blindfolded and induced into a mesmeric trance by his operator, Lyon. Nevertheless, some of the parallel mechanics of the sessions prove intriguing. For example, Davis, like Smith, dictated the majority of his work one phrase at a time, pausing after each phrase and waiting for the operator or scribe to repeat each line back to him. According to Davis, the purpose was "to make sure that each word was correctly heard and written."[48] Fishbough also described the dynamic: "A few words only

43. Davis, *Principles of Nature*, xv; see also 2.

44. Delp, "Andrew Jackson Davis: Prophet," 44.

45. Davis, *Principles of Nature*, xviii.

46. Davis was born on August 11, 1826.

47. For David Whitmer's description of Smith's dictation sessions, see *EMD*, 5:153–54.

48. Davis, *Magic Staff*, 307.

are uttered at a time, which the clairvoyant requires to be repeated by Dr. Lyon, in order that he may know that he is understood. A pause then ensues until what he has said has been written, when he again proceeds."[49] In this phrase-by-phrase process, Davis appeared to slip in and out of his trance state: "the passage into and out of the spiritual state occurs at an average of about once every sentence."[50] Thus, Davis, like Smith, retained some form of conscious awareness of the development of the transcribed text.

In addition, Davis also spelled out unfamiliar words. When transcribing the term "Univercoelum," a word that Davis coined to describe the original state of all the physical and spiritual components of the universe, Fishbough interrupted and asked, "What was that word?" Davis then "carefully spelled it, letter by letter, to make the scribe's writing a matter of certainty."[51] Moreover, Davis never referred to notes, manuscripts, or books during his trance state—he was, after all, blindfolded.[52] Neither did he review the physical manuscripts of his prior revelations before launching into new revelations. He did, however, claim to review visionary manifestations of the manuscripts in his clairvoyant state. Fishbough recalled, "At each entrance into the abnormal state for the purpose of lecturing, he [Davis] was capable, by an effort of a few moments' duration, of reviewing all the manuscripts of his previous lectures."[53] From the very beginning of the project, Davis also claimed that in his trance state he had the ability to view and scan the entire outline of his work.[54] Thus, through this clairvoyant process, Davis was able to start each new dictation session where the last one

49. Davis, *Principles of Nature*, xviii.

50. Davis, *Principles of Nature*, xviii.

51. Davis, *Magic Staff*, 318.

52. Davis, *Principles of Nature*, xvii.

53. Davis, *Principles of Nature*, xx.

54. Davis, *Magic Staff*, 299.

left off, without referring to material notes or texts—a feat that Smith had also performed during the translation of the Book of Mormon.[55]

In another noteworthy comparison, Davis also explicitly equated his mesmeric trance visions with the same visionary perceptions that allegedly occurred with the use of seer stones. When Davis was still in Poughkeepsie and developing his newfound skills in clairvoyance, an "old English gentleman" by the name of Dr. Maryatt came for a visit and "brought an egg-shaped white crystal, into which he requested me [Davis] to look, and tell him what I saw." Initially confused about how to make the seer stone operate, Davis eventually succeeded in invoking its power. Within the "glass" he saw visions that revealed Maryatt's house, environs, and family circumstances in England.[56] Later, when reflecting on the experience and how the seer stone worked, Davis observed that the object merely facilitated the same form of clairvoyance that he experienced with mesmerism: "it occurred to me that my gazing into it [the seer stone], with so much characteristic earnestness, had induced, temporarily, the state of conscious clairvoyance, which had enabled me first to see the landscape, house, paper, &c., and then, by simple concentration of thought, produced a miniature reflection of them in the glass before me." This "conscious clairvoyance," as Davis continued to describe it, allowed crystal-gazers to slip into a conscious trance-like state, "without going into sleep."[57]

Davis's level of consciousness during the dictation of his revelations alerts us to another important similarity between Smith and Davis. Even though Smith's translation of the Book of Mormon and Davis's trance lectures have both been analyzed in terms of automatic writing, neither of these two young seers was actually operating within that particular

55. See e.g., *EMD*, 1:542.

56. Davis, *Magic Staff*, 266–68.

57. Davis, *Magic Staff*, 268. Davis borrowed the term "conscious clairvoyance" (and plagiarized portions of text) from William Gregory's observations on the use of seer stones. See William Gregory, *Letters to a Candid Inquirer, on Animal Magnetism* (London: Taylor, Walton, and Maberly, 1851), 367–76.

process.[58] With automatic writing, the person receiving the revelations is the same person writing them, acting as a passive medium through whom some other disembodied spirit physically communicates a message. Though Scott C. Dunn has proposed that trance dictation and automatic writing "are only different techniques or expressions of the same underlying process," the conflation of these modalities obliterates significant and crucial distinctions.[59] Apart from the challenge that neither Smith nor Davis claimed to channel the voice of another spirit or supernatural being, for example, the argument contains an embedded and faulty assumption that a text arising from an oral performance would express the same content, language, and characteristics as a written effort (conscious or otherwise). But these two modes of composition inevitably express significant and crucial differences.[60]

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58. See e.g., Scott C. Dunn, "Automaticity and the Dictation of the Book of Mormon," in *American Apocrypha: Essays on the Book of Mormon*, edited by Dan Vogel and Brent Lee Metcalfe (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002), 17–46; Hales, "Automatic Writing," 1–35; Robert A. Rees, "The Book of Mormon and Automatic Writing," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 15, no. 1 (2006): 4–17, 68–70.

59. Dunn, "Automaticity," 23.

60. Anita M. Mühl conducted experiments with subjects narrating memories by dictation via crystal gazing and also automatic writing. Though the subjects described the same stories in both modes, the expression of events were inevitably different (e.g., alterations in phraseology, vocabulary, and narrative omissions and additions from one mode to the next); see Anita M. Mühl, "Automatic Writing Combined with Crystal Gazing as a Means of Recalling Forgotten Incidents," *Journal of Abnormal Psychology and Social Psychology* 19, no. 3 (Oct. 1924): 264–73. More recently, Alexandra A. Cleland and Martin J. Pickering observe that "language is clearly used differently in written and spoken production," identifying differences in the use of passives, complex phrasal constructions, and size of vocabulary; see "Do Writing and Speaking Employ the Same Syntactic Representations?," *Journal of Memory and Language* 54, no. 1 (2006): 185–98, esp. 185–86. In an oft reprinted article, David Crystal offers a concise list of distinctions between written and spoken language; see "Speaking of Writing and Writing of Speaking," *Longman Language Review* 1 (repr. 2005): 1–5. For a more comprehensive analysis, see Douglas Biber, *Variation Across Speech and Writing* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

Moreover, Davis vehemently argued that his process of revelatory dictation did not equate to that of writing and speaking mediums: "how glaring becomes the misapprehension of those who advertise my lectures as 'given through the *mediumship* of A. J. Davis'—as if my mind . . . were an insensible, unintelligent, and passive substance, or *spout*, through which disembodied personages express or promulgate their own specific opinions! This is an egregious error—a most unwholesome misrepresentation."[61] Davis did not passively channel other spirits but rather spoke actively *as himself*, communicating the enlightened knowledge and divine revelations that flooded into his mind during his transcendent state.[62] When analyzing this process of performance, we find that neither the spontaneous utterances of automatic writing nor the free associations of extemporaneous trance speaking provides an adequate framework for the revelations and oral performances of either Davis or Smith.[63]

Another point of comparison involves the time it took to produce Smith's and Davis's revelations, and their resulting lengths. Smith produced the Book of Mormon within a three-month span, while Davis's revelations occurred over a period of fifteen months.[64] In terms

61. Davis, *Magic Staff*, 311–12, italics in the original.

62. Davis referred to several different trance states, with different levels of consciousness, ranging from being oblivious to his surroundings to being acutely aware of his environment. For Davis's sketch outline of four trance ("magnetic") states, see *Principles of Nature*, 35–37. For his scribe Fishbough's observations of different trance states, see Davis, *Principles of Nature*, xvii-xviii.

63. For the historical context regarding the development of conscious and unconscious trance states, see Ann Taves, *Fits, Trances and Visions: Experiencing Religion and Explaining Experience from Wesley to James* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999), 207–27.

64. Fishbough states that the first lecture began on November 28, 1845, and the last ended on January 25, 1847; see Davis, *Principles of Nature*, xviii. In other words, Davis spent fourteen months of actual work time spanning a fifteen-month calendar period.

of actual working days, however, the disparity is not so great as these inclusive times might suggest. Scholars believe that Smith produced the Book of Mormon within a period ranging from fifty-seven to seventy-five working days, during which time he often worked at a full-time pace.[65] And, as David Whitmer observed, "the days were long, and they [Smith and Cowdery] worked from morning till night."[66] Davis, on the other hand, supported himself and Lyon with the proceeds from their shared clairvoyant medical practice when he was not performing his revelations.[67] Financial exigencies forced Davis to produce the lectures intermittently and on a part-time basis, while devoting the majority of his time to treating enough patients to cover the living expenses for himself and his partner. In all, Davis intermittently delivered 157 lectures, each varying in length "from forty minutes to about four hours."[68] If he could have worked "from morning till night," as Smith had done, Davis theoretically could have produced at least two lectures per working day, spending a total amount of time that would have ranged from a low of one hour and twenty minutes per day to a high of eight hours. Thus, Davis's total amount of dictation time, when converted to "full-time" days, equates to a rough estimate of 78.5 working days, and his series of revelatory lectures resulted in a work containing approximately 320,000 words.

When preparing the scribal manuscript for publication, Davis supervised the process but made few editorial corrections to the original outpouring of inspired words. Fishbough, who handled the preparations, stated, "With the exception of striking out a few sentences and supplying others, according to [Davis's] direction, I have only found

65. For John Welch's most recent estimate "of only 57 to 63 available full-time working days," see Welch, "Timing the Translation," 34.

66. *EMD*, 5:104.

67. Davis, *Principles of Nature*, xiv.

68. Davis, *Principles of Nature*, xviii.

it necessary to correct the grammar, to prune out verbal redundancies, and to clarify such sentences as would to the general reader appear obscure." Occasionally, the original manuscript was apparently illegible, requiring Fishbough to "reconstruct sentences" using "only the verbal materials found in the sentence as it first stood, preserving the peculiarities of style and mode of expression." In perhaps the most invasive change, Fishbough indicated, "The *arrangement* of the work is the same as when delivered, except that in three instances contiguous paragraphs have been transposed for the sake of a closer connexion." Finally, Fishbough asserted, "With these unimportant qualifications, the work may be considered as paragraph for paragraph, sentence for sentence, and word for word, as it was delivered by the author."[69] In this regard (apart from Fishbough's transpositions), the final published text of *The Principles of Nature* parallels similar editorial modifications that appeared in the 1837 and 1840 editions of the Book of Mormon, in which Smith revised the grammar and made selective changes in both editions.[70]

In terms of textual complexity, a comparison between Smith and Davis falls prey to subjective measurement, given that their texts are two fundamentally different products of oral performance. Smith produced an epic narrative containing a relatively complex collection of story episodes that included, as Grant Hardy has detailed, "flashbacks," "embedded documents," "year-by-year chronological markers through a century of judges," "multiple wars," "scriptural quotations and exegesis," and "successions of rulers," among several other standard narrative typologies.[71] Hardy has further argued (curiously) that the

69. Davis, *Principles of Nature*, xviii–xix.

70. For a concise description of Smith's changes, see Paul C. Gutjahr, *The Book of Mormon: A Biography* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2012), 63–65.

71. Grant Hardy, ed., *The Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ, Maxwell Institute Study Edition* (Provo: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious

stories are "original."[72] By comparison, Davis produced a series of lectures that outlined his vision of a scientific theology that would guide the world to a state of harmonious perfection. Such lectures, however, lacked the compelling drive of narrative structures filled with interesting, exotically named characters and dynamic storylines. Yet, as a systematic course of instruction that developed a new way of understanding the world, Davis's lectures were never meant to be an epic narrative—a difference that hinders any direct comparison with the Book of Mormon. Evaluating the complexity of Davis's thought therefore requires another perspective.

In terms of overall structure, *The Principles of Nature* contains three major divisions: "Part I.—The Key," which establishes the fundamental framework of Davis's ideas; "Part II.—The Revelation," which Catherine L. Albanese describes as a "Swedenborgian-plus-'popular-science' section"; and "Part III.—The Application," which ultimately provides a utopian vision of a harmonious society, or "The New Heaven and the New Earth."[73] Albanese also observes that "*The Principles of Nature* was a complexly combinative work" that moved "in emphatically metaphysical directions." And, in spite of its "trance dictation and sententious prose,"

Scholarship and Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2018), 621.

72. Hardy recently claimed that one of the features of the Book of Mormon is its "originality," specifically stating that, "the content [of the Book of Mormon] is original." See Grant Hardy, "Textual Criticism and the Book of Mormon," in *Foundational Texts of Mormonism: Examining Major Early Sources*, edited by Mark Ashurst-McGee, Robin Scott Jensen, and Sharalyn D. Howcroft (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 39. In the absence of clarification, Hardy's claim is debatable, given the large body of research in literary criticism that hotly contests the meaning of "originality" in the way that Hardy appears to use the term. The stories of the Book of Mormon, though often "original" with regard to surface features, nevertheless rely heavily on preexisting core narrative templates for their shape and structure.

73. Davis, *Principles of Nature*, xxiii; Albanese, *Republic of Mind*, 210.

the work "possessed a logic and coherence that were, in structural terms, clear."[74] This three-part division offers a simple yet effective organization for the entire work, though, from a structural viewpoint, it does not approach the complexity of the narrative twists and turns found in the Book of Mormon.

Moving beyond structure to evaluate the content, however, the reader discovers a sophisticated syncretism of contemporary scientific, theological, and philosophical thought. Though most of his ideas are now long outdated, especially with regard to scientific theories, Davis nevertheless stakes out positions and provides commentary on cutting-edge scientific theories of his day. And his philosophical forays reveal unexpected adaptations and developments of complex ideas. In the opening "Key," for example, Davis sets about the task of reshaping the readers' fundamental epistemologies, moving them away from standard theological narratives and traditional histories to novel views and assumptions informed by Enlightenment ideas, biblical criticism, scientific advances, and new philosophical perspectives. Davis alerts readers that their understanding of the world—how it operates, the nature of universal and divine laws, conceptions of God, and the spiritual nature of all things—is fundamentally distorted. For instance, as David Mihalyfy indicates, Davis addresses the issue of a historical Jesus, insisting rationally that Christ "was no apocalyptic prophet," but a gifted (mortal) healer and, as Davis describes him, "the great Moral Reformer."[75] In a quasi-primitivist turn, Davis also reveals that in order to understand how the universe truly operates, we need to

74. Albanese, *Republic of Mind*, 209.

75. David Mihalyfy, "What They Don't Want You to Know About Jesus Christ and the Seer of Poughkeepsie," *Contingent Magazine*, June 21, 2019, https://contingentmagazine.org/2019/06/21/jesus-poughkeepsie/; Davis, *Principles of Nature*, 434. For a detailed analysis of Davis's views on a historical Jesus and biblical criticism, see David Francis Mihalyfy, "Heterodoxies and the Historical Jesus: Biblical Criticism of the Gospels in the U.S., 1794–1860" (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2017), esp. 7, 180–84, 193–217.

sweep away false traditions and conceptions (with an emphasis on traditional religious opinions) and go back to the beginning of creation to understand how the world came to be, how it developed into its current state, and the principles that will structure further development.

In doing so, Davis invokes an overt Neoplatonic concept of material reality, where tangible matter and material forms exist in concert with perfected ideals (their "ultimate" state): "forms and appearances are effects of matter in approximating to its future state of perfection; while its perfected state, or ultimate, is in return controlling and refining these substances and forms."[76] In this modification of Plato's theory of forms, Davis extrapolates multiple "spheres" of existence, in which earthly matter interacts with its perfected ideal on higher planes of existence—planes that also offer error-free concepts, greater truths, and complete knowledge. But these relationships do not remain static. With this philosophical foundation, Davis incorporates contemporary scientific advancements into his philosophy to postulate a process of biological evolution.

Drawing on adapted concepts of Newtonian physics and laws of motion to theorize a mechanism for evolution (revising Newton's concept of *vis inertia* and commenting on the relationships among rectilinear, curvilinear, and spiral motion) and incorporating contemporary studies in geology and paleobiology (the evolution of lower life forms observed in "the remains of the mollusca, radiata, articulata, and vertebrata" found in successive geological strata), Davis traces the origin, development, and transmutation of plants and animals in the natural world.[77] Not one to avoid controversy, Davis further includes the evolution of "Man" (the human body, though not the spirit) as the

76. Davis, *Principles of Nature*, 47.

77. For Davis's references to Newton's laws, see *Principles of Nature*, 57, 69. For his discussion on lower life forms, see 78–79. For evolution, see e.g., 57–85.

pinnacle form of that evolutionary process.[78] Thus, in his 1846 and 1847 trance lectures, Davis rejected a literal interpretation of the traditional story of Adam and Eve and the instantaneous six-day creation of all things and substituted a controversial model of biological evolution that contemporary scholars were fiercely debating in the years leading up to the publication of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* in 1859.[79]

Moreover, in a point critical to note, Davis did not simply regurgitate information from a wide range of contemporary source materials and fields of knowledge. Rather, he saw their interrelated connections (or presumed relationships) and used those links to construct the scaffolding of a new belief system. For instance, this modified conception of the universe provided Davis with a philosophical and scientific explanation for how his own trance states operated: while in trance, his spirit transcended this earthly state to the higher planes of existence, where he received pure and unadulterated knowledge, which, in turn, he would share with the world through his revelatory trance utterances. Through a series of adaptations and calculated borrowings, especially from Swedenborg, Davis amalgamated the disparate fields of his knowledge and beliefs into a cohesive and multifaceted cosmology that served his ultimate project of social reform. He was, in essence, a magpie prophet-scientist, drawing on diverse sources of knowledge in order to weave his own innovative patchwork quilt explaining the laws that governed all creation. When we further consider that Davis

78. Davis situated his theory in what we describe today as intelligent design. See *Principles of Nature*, 70–76, 92. For an unambiguous statement on the evolutionary process resulting in humankind, see 328.

79. Darwin was not, of course, the first to propose a theory of biological evolution. Rather, he proposed new theories regarding the mechanisms driving the transmutation of species (e.g., natural selection). For a contemporary study that acknowledges the controversies of biological evolution and includes the categories of Radiata, Mollusca, Articulata, and Vertebrata, see Charles Girard, "Life in its Physical Aspects," *Proceedings of the National Institute for the Promotion of Science* (annual meeting, National Institute for the Promotion of Science, Washington, DC, Jan. 15, 1855), 2–22, esp. 20–22.

performed these lectures while blindfolded, at the ages of nineteen and twenty, without the aid of notes or manuscripts for easy reference, and all the while supporting himself and an associate, we might begin to understand why many of his observers believed that this barely educated, substantially illiterate, poverty-stricken son of a poor journeyman shoemaker must have been truly inspired.

Turning from content to form, Davis also displays a wide range of rhetorical devices on par with those found in the Book of Mormon.[80] Because Fishbough kept his editorial changes to a minimum, *The Principles of Nature* preserves a number of interesting characteristics of Davis's oral performance techniques, specifically regarding the use of rhetorical figures. Throughout the text, Davis makes use of such devices as anaphora (successive phrases beginning with the same word or words); antithesis (ideas set in opposition); epistrophe (successive phrases ending with the same word or words); various forms of parallelism; symploce (a combination of anaphora and epistrophe); zeugma (multiple phrases, often in a series or catalogue, controlled by a single verb); and, among many other devices, various types of "ring composition" or "envelope patterns" (also called simple and complex "chiasmus," "inclusio," and "inverted parallelism," among other terms).[81]

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80. For a detailed and helpful overview of several species of parallelism and a selection of rhetorical devices in the Book of Mormon, see Donald W. Parry, *Poetic Parallelisms in the Book of Mormon: The Complete Text Reformatted*, 2nd ed. (Provo: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, Brigham Young University, 2007), xi–xlvi.

81. The final paragraph on page 6 of *The Principles of Nature* (1847) offers several common examples: "This ignorance still exists; this bigotry and superstition still exist" (parallelism, symploce); "It has in its long career," "It has obstructed," "It has obscured," "It has covered," "It has sapped," "It has produced" (anaphora, parallelism); "Wisdom/folly," "Knowledge/ignorance," "Happiness/misery" (antithesis). Such devices are ubiquitous in oral traditions as storytelling techniques, as well as in written texts. Thus, any assertion that such devices provide evidence of the Book of Mormon's *literary* (written) origins faces the added burden of proving how such devices were exclusively literary constructions and not orally derived features.

Indeed, Davis's pervasive use of chiastic structures suggests that the various patterns of ring composition—patterns of repetition and expansion quite common in oral traditions—reflect a habit of mind in the organization of his thoughts. Scholarship has not yet examined Davis's use of complex chiastic structures, though it is highly unlikely that Davis knew about or intentionally formed them, particularly when they often lack the precision and clarity of consciously constructed (and revised) literary texts. Davis's style of dense repetition, however, allows for the ready imposition of chiastic patterns onto his thoughts. A cursory reading can locate numerous examples, which, though certainly produced unconsciously, rival similar complex patterns found in the Book of Mormon (see figures 1 and 2).

Given the prominence of complex chiastic structures and the techniques of ring composition (conscious or otherwise) in oral performances, it would appear that the scholarship on chiasmus in the Book of Mormon needs to address further critical questions regarding the differences between literary and orally derived chiastic structures, as well as revisiting the purported intentionality behind them. Attributing such structures exclusively to the presence of underlying Hebraic

A: So men should not **criticise each other's thoughts**
  B: with a **superficial judgment**; but instead of this,
    C: they should **present truth** in all its native simplicity,
      D: and **leave error** and all the depressing influences
        E: existing in the **physical**
        E: and **mental** world to themselves: [antithesis]
      D: for the best **antidote for error**
    C: is the **presentation of truth.**
  B: Marvel not, then, concerning the **superficials things**
    of which I have spoken,
A: nor falsely **accuse each other's sentiments**.

Andrew Jackson Davis
The Principles of Nature (1847), p. 392.

Figure 1

A: The next in the class of ideas the origin of which is to be traced,
is the traditional opinion **concerning *Cain* and *Abel***.

[Parenthetical 39-word interjection: "It will be recollected that I have spoken..."]

B: **The history of this was transferred,** with other and **similar expressions**,
through successive generations and centuries, until we find it first
expressed by **a writer among the early Egyptians**.
[B levels: corresponding characters/concepts in generations of histories/traditions]

B: A **correspondence** was connected with **this tradition**, which was of the
following import (for the early inhabitants knew things by their obvious
correspondences and representatives):
C: The **younger**
D: **and weaker** tribe (which was Abel)
E: corresponded to **light**, purity, and innocence.
F: Cain (which was **the stronger and grosser** nation)
G: corresponded to **darkness**, wickedness, and abomination.
H: For, according to **the early theology**,
G: **darkness** was the first principle in being,
F: and therefore the **oldest and most powerful**;
E: while **light** was subsequently created,
D: and was consequently **weak**
C: and **immature**.
B: And thus the **comparison** was **written among the Egyptians** as follows:---
C: "And from the forefathers sprang **two children** [both children]
whose names were **Osiris and Typhon** [C levels: Osiris:Typh::Typh:Osiris]
D: **Osiris** was a **good and gentle** brother, and **was loved by Brahama**.
E: **Typhon** was a **strong** brother, and cultivated the things of the earth.
E: For **Typhon** is the child of **darkness** which was over all and for ever:
D: but **Osiris** was a child of **light**, because light **was permitted by Vishnu**
the good spirit."
C: But **Typhon**, which is darkness, was represented as attacking and
overpowering Osiris, which is light and innocence.
B: This is the first **written correspondential account** of this **primitive tradition**.
B1: I find that this was admitted into other manuscripts,
B1: and appeared among the Chaldeanic writings.
B1: Afterward it was transcribed into Greek,
B1: and ultimately into the Hebrew oracles and manuscripts;
B: and through this medium **it was conveyed to subsequent generations**
who admitted it into the "**primitive history**:"

A: and in this the characters are named ***Cain* and *Abel***.

Andrew Jackson Davis
The Principles of Nature (1847), pp. 404-405.

Figure 2

literary devices ignores the global pervasiveness of such structures in both spoken and literary contexts, creating yet another illusory buttress to faith that crumbles upon closer examination.

Fixations on Idiosyncratic Criteria

In discussions concerning the origins and nature of the Book of Mormon, the fixation on naturalistic comparisons continues to thrive as a prominent and insistent need. The persistent creation of arbitrary taxonomies that divide and subdivide lists of selective criteria in an effort to privilege a predetermined chosen text suggests that such naturalistic comparisons play a far more important role in the cultural performance of faith and belief in the Book of Mormon than is usually acknowledged (or theologically desirable). Such lists attempt to manufacture miracles with an impressive array of contested categories, such as natural versus supernatural composition; conscious versus unconscious production; the purported significance of lengthy texts; the fixation on (often irrelevant) stylistic differences; dubious lists of information that the speaker allegedly could not possibly have known; and, above all, the purported ignorance and illiteracy of the person producing the work.[82] Given that such non-theological issues ideally do not participate in the confirmation of faith, the inordinate obsession with such naturalistic comparisons would seem to offer a troubling distraction, sending the tacit signal to the audience of believers that such comparisons and criteria must indeed be a crucial if unofficial component of faith.

The introduction of selective criteria, however, presents a double-edged sword that cuts both ways. We might, for example, create a new framework of naturalistic criteria, one calculated to dismiss Smith and the Book of Mormon in favor of Davis and *The Principles of Nature*: 1)

82. See e.g., Hales, "Automatic Writing," 1–35. Rees, "The Book of Mormon and Automatic Writing," 4–17; 68–70.

The author or translator must be only twenty years of age or younger when he or she produces the work; 2) The author or translator cannot receive financial support from outside sources during the course of the project but must financially support himself or herself and an associate for the duration of the work; 3) The inspired text must consist of no less than 300,000 words, without being artificially expanded by the incorporation of extensive passages from other texts, especially the Bible; 4) When describing historical events and circumstances, the subject must frequently refer to *known* historical events and traditions that witnesses can independently verify for accuracy, using sources outside the text; 5) As evidence of truly divine revelation, the author must predict the existence of a planet in the solar system before the scientific community has discovered that same celestial body; and, finally, 6) When in a visionary state, the revelator must have the ability to utter phrases in Greek, Hebrew, Latin, and Sanskrit, even though the subject has never studied such languages, and then have a reputable university professor of Hebrew witness and verify such a feat.[83] If we were to accept this arbitrary list of criteria, we might hail Andrew Jackson Davis as a true prophet and seer, while Joseph Smith would be disqualified at every point along the way.

While naturalistic catalogues prove popular as rhetorical tools of persuasion, and while the mobilization of exclusionary rhetoric and

83. Albanese notes how Davis "predicted an eighth [planet]—in a lecture delivered six months before the discovery of Neptune." Albanese, *Republic of Mind*, 211. George Bush, a New York University professor of Hebrew and a devoted Swedenborgian, stated, "I can most solemnly affirm, that I have heard him correctly quote the Hebrew language in his Lectures." Bush also claimed that Davis dictated phrases "from the ancient languages," including "long extracts from the Sanscrit [*sic*]." See George Bush, *Mesmer and Swedenborg*, 2nd ed. (New York: John Allen, 1847), 161, 203. The "ancient languages" would be later identified as "Hebrew, Greek, and Latin." See Theophilus Parsons, "Review," *New Jerusalem Magazine* 20, no. 5 (Boston: Otis Clapp, Jan. 1847), 190.

claims of textual exceptionalism might appear to buttress belief, such dependence on arbitrary naturalistic criteria runs the risk of making faith more vulnerable. Indeed, the damage might already be done: the common day-to-day expressions of belief in the Book of Mormon strongly suggest that the persistent turn to naturalist comparisons reveals an entanglement of personal opinion, belief, theory, and faith. Belief in the Book of Mormon becomes inextricably bound to disbelief in Smith's ability to create it—a position that reveals the uncomfortable prospect that the foundation of faith contains limited mortal perceptions, impressionability, and finite experience.

With such potential hazards, we might pause for a moment to ask what cultural work these comparative lists of selective criteria are actually performing and inadvertently revealing—not just about the texts but about ourselves. Such projects, after all, cannot prove or disprove the divine origins of the Book of Mormon. They never will. Such lists merely consist of tailored, calculated requirements that artificially isolate a preferred outcome, even as they showcase the preconceptions and assumptions of those who create and/or employ them. Such special pleading thus puts our own biases into sharp relief. Even if a text involves unusual characteristics beyond anything that we might personally describe as "natural," the conclusion that the text must therefore be "divine" reveals a fatal leap in logic. We thereby display a faulty line of syllogistic reasoning that equates things purportedly unique and allegedly inexplicable with things miraculous and divine, as if these concepts were all somehow synonymous.

The persistent valorization of such projects, which ultimately compete with the development of authentic faith and potentially threaten whatever faith may already exist, should therefore make us pause and question their real value. Though such catalogues of criteria aim to impress (and entertain) an audience of believers, and though they might initially appear to strengthen faith, their effects prove ultimately unreliable and illusory. Moreover, they obfuscate

historical complexities, transforming the young Joseph Smith into a two-dimensional, illiterate, know-nothing boy, when a close reading of historical sources rather reveals a young man with a gifted intellect and ambitious desires for self-education and self-improvement. Perhaps most importantly, however, naturalistic sets of criteria reveal more about ourselves than they reveal about Joseph Smith or the origins of the Book of Mormon: instead of discovering eternal markers that signal the presence of the divine, we merely discover the limitations of our individual experience, the borders of our imagination, and the measure of our credulity.

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