

DIALOGUE

a journal of mormon thought

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AUTOMATIC WRITING AND THE BOOK OF MORMON: AN UPDATE

Brian C. Hales

At a Church conference in 1831, Hyrum Smith invited his brother to explain how the Book of Mormon originated. Joseph declined, saying: “It was not intended to tell the world all the particulars of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon.”¹ His pat answer—which he repeated on several occasions—was simply that it came “by the gift and power of God.”²

Attributing the Book of Mormon’s origin to supernatural forces has worked well for Joseph Smith’s believers, then as well as now, but not so well for critics who seem certain natural abilities were responsible. For over 180 years, several secular theories have been advanced as explanations.³ The more popular hypotheses include plagiarism (of the Solomon Spaulding manuscript),⁴ collaboration (with Oliver Cowdery, Sidney Rigdon, etc.),⁵

1. Donald Q. Cannon and Lyndon W. Cook, eds., *Far West Record: Minutes of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1830–1844* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1983), 23.

2. “Journal, 1835–1836,” in *Journals, Volume 1: 1832–1839*, edited by Dean C. Jessee, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Richard L. Jensen, vol. 1 of the Journals series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, edited by Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2008), 89; “History of Joseph Smith,” *Times and Seasons* 5, Mar. 1, 1842, 707.

3. See Brian C. Hales, “Naturalistic Explanations of the Origin of the Book of Mormon: A Longitudinal Study,” *BYU Studies* 58, no. 3 (Spring 2019): forthcoming.

4. See Eber D. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled* (Painsville, Ohio: 1834), 290; Walter Martin, *The Maze of Mormonism* (Ventura, Calif.: Regal Books, 1978), 59; and Wayne L. Cowdrey, Howard A. Davis, and Arthur Vanick, “References,” *Spalding Research Associates*, Aug. 10, 2018, <http://www.solomonspalding.info>.

5. See William Owen, “Mormon Bible,” *Free Enquirer* [New York], Sept. 3, 1831, 364; Meredith Ray Sheets and Kendal Sheets, *The Book of Mormon: Book of Lies* (McLean, Va.: 1811 Press, 2012), 13–16.

mental illness (bipolar, dissociative, or narcissistic personality disorders),⁶ and Joseph's intellect (with help from the Bible, *View of the Hebrews*, parallelism, or his environment).⁷ Even today the topic remains controversial without general consensus.⁸

A fifth explanation attributes the Book of Mormon text to "automatic writing," also called "spirit writing," "trance writing," "channeling," "psychography," "abnormal writing," "direct writing," and "independent writing."⁹ In psychological terms, automatic writing is described as "ideomotor effect," "motor automatism," and automaticity.¹⁰

Understanding "Automatic Writing"

Psychiatrist Ian P. Stevenson, who served as the chair of the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Virginia School of Medicine, explains: "The term 'automatic writing' is used to designate writing that is done without the writer being conscious of what he is writing. . . . Usually the writing proceeds rapidly, sometimes far more so than the subject's normal writing does."¹¹

Independent researcher Irving Litvag further writes: "One type of psychic activity, known as 'automatic writing,' began to attract attention through the activities of a group of mediums, mostly English, in the late nineteenth and

6. See I. Woodbridge Riley, *The Founder of Mormonism: A Psychological Study of Joseph Smith, Jr.* (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Company, 1902), 70; William D. Morain, *The Sword of Laban: Joseph Smith Jr. and the Dissociated Mind* (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Press, 1998), 25, 72, 95–96, 105, 109, 113, 172.

7. Alexander Campbell, "Delusions," *Millennial Harbinger*, Feb. 7, 1831, 93; Wesley Walters and Michael Marquardt, *Inventing Mormonism: Tradition and the Historical Record* (Salt Lake City: Smith Research Associates, 1994), 126.

8. See Anonymous, "Could Joseph Smith have written the Book of Mormon?," *MormonThink*, Aug. 27, 2017, <http://www.mormonthink.com/josephweb.htm>.

9. See Robert A. Rees, "The Book of Mormon and Automatic Writing," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 15, no.1 (2006): 5.

10. Daniel M. Wegner, Betsy Sparrow, and Valerie A. Fuller, "Clever Hands: Uncontrolled Intelligence in Facilitated Communication," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 85, no. 1 (2003): 6.

11. Ian Stevenson, "Some Comments on Automatic Writing," *Journal of the American Society for Psychological Research* 72 (Oct. 1978): 316–17.

early twentieth centuries. Automatic writing involves the reception and transcription of various types of communications in written form. The medium claims to have no control over the writing that is produced.”¹²

While the process is called automatic writing, it can produce words through speech or through other modes of communication: “The subject may speak what is in his mind, as occurs in ordinary cases of mental mediumship with oral utterances; or he may rest two or three fingers lightly on a pointer that moves around a board with letters printed on it,” commonly called a Ouija board.¹³ “Planchettes” may also be used, which are described as “a miniature table, usually shaped like a heart, less than eight inches long [with] two easy rolling wheels supported at one end, and a pencil fastened in a hole at the top.”¹⁴

In summary, through automatic writing, subjects can produce words using several different methodologies, but in every case the author is believed to be unconscious of the letters and sentences being created. Historically, multiple texts have been attributed to automatic writing (see Table 1).

Comparing the Book of Mormon with *The Sorry Tale*

Pearl Curran’s *The Sorry Tale* is most often compared to the Book of Mormon to support an automatic writing theory. A number of similarities can be identified.

The Book of Mormon Dictation

A brief review of the details of the Book of Mormon dictation show that Joseph spoke virtually all of the 269,320 words to scribes who recorded them with quill pens.¹⁵ He and the scribe worked with dictations of twenty

12. Irving Litvag, *Singer in the Shadows: The Strange Story of Patience Worth* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), 8.

13. Stevenson, “Some Comments on Automatic Writing,” 316–17.

14. Milbourne Christopher, *ESP, Seers and Psychics* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1970), 124.

15. On February 18, 2019, Book of Mormon scholar Stanford Carmack wrote: “The 1830 first edition has 6,852 full stops in 269,318 words . . . if we count the first instance of ‘me thought’ as two words (18, 41; the second is spelled as one word) and the

Publication	Year	Author	Birth Year	Education
<i>Great Gospel of John</i>	1851–1864	Jakob Lorber	1800	Trained to be the village teacher. Gifted in music.
<i>The Principles of Nature, Her Divine Revelations, and a Voice to Mankind</i>	1847	Andrew Jackson Davis	1826	Basic writing and arithmetic.
<i>Oahspe: A New Bible</i>	1880–1882	John Ballou Newbrough	1828	Fluent in several languages. Worked as a physician and dentist.
<i>Spirit-Identity</i>	1879	William Stainton Moses	1839	Educated at Exeter College, Oxford.
<i>The Aquarian Gospel of Jesus the Christ</i>	1908	Levi H. Dowling	1844	Graduated from medical school and worked as a physician.
<i>Clothed with the Sun</i>	1889	Anna Kingsford	1846	University of Paris. Medical Degree.
<i>From India to the Planet Mars</i>	1900	Catherine-Elise Müller	1861	Local schools to age 15.
<i>A Dweller on Two Planets</i>	1905	Frederick Spencer Oliver	1866	“Without any solid education.”
<i>The Impersonal Life</i>	1914	Joseph Sieber Benner	1872	Attended public schools.
[Multiple]	1911–1945	Edgar Cayce	1877	Cayce’s education stopped in the ninth grade because his family could not afford the costs involved.
<i>The Sorry Tale: A Story of the Time of Christ</i>	1915–1917	Pearl Curran	1883	Schooling ended at age 13. Admitted to be a “mediocre student.”
<i>The Urantia Book</i>	1924	[Unidentified]		Unknown.
<i>The Scripts of Cleophas</i>	1928	Geraldine Cummins	1890	Trained in journalism and creative writing.
<i>The Seth Material</i>	1963–1984	Jane Roberts	1929	Attended public schools and Skidmore College.
<i>A Course in Miracles</i>	1965–1972	Helen Schucman	1909	Helen Schucman received a PhD in psychology.
<i>Conversations with God Book 1</i>	1995–2017	Neale Donald Walsch	1943	Informally studied comparative theology for many years.
<i>The Book of Mormon</i>	1830	Joseph Smith	1805	Frontier schooling.

Table 1

# Words	Source of Words	Comments	Pub.
5,500 pages	God through an “inner voice”	Jakob, who started writing at age 40, referred to himself as “God’s scribe.” Works were published posthumously.	<i>GGOJ</i>
340,000	Trance state	Prior to dictating, a “magnetizer” would magnetize him, cover his eyes, and await his entrance into a trance.	<i>TPON</i>
298,840	“Jehovih” “The Great Spirit”	Oahspe is made up of a series of related books discussing earth and heaven.	<i>O:ANB</i>
37,532	Channeling from the dead	Psychologist Théodore Flournoy wrote Moses was capable of creating the words of his books subconsciously.	<i>S-I</i>
84,940	Transcribed from the Akashic records	The Akashic records are reportedly encoded in a non-physical plane of existence.	<i>TAG</i>
89,670	Trance state	Anna claimed association with fairies as a child and had many channeled visions.	<i>CWTS</i>
122,000	Martians via trances while sleeping	“Hélène Smith” adopted name as a medium.	<i>FITTPM</i>
161,463	Phylos The Thibetan	Prophecies of airplanes in the future.	<i>ADOTP</i>
79,670	Directly from God	Author reported having his mind subsumed by a larger Being, acting co-creatively with God.	<i>TIL</i>
[multiple-short]	Trance state	Called “The Sleeping Prophet,” Cayce gave answers while in a trance.	<i>[Multiple]</i>
264,000	Deceased Patience Worth	Pearl Curran communicated via Ouija Board with a spirit named “Patience Worth” in a unique English dialect producing over 4,000,000 words.	<i>TST</i>
650,070	Celestial beings	Medium portrayed as not being in an ordinary trance, but unconscious of surroundings and communications. Described as a “clearing house for the coming and going of reported extra-planetary personalities.”	<i>TUB</i>
128,986	Spirit-guide “Astor”	Cummins described as a spiritualist medium, novelist and playwright, who produced many channeled writings.	<i>TSOC</i>
95,480	An energy personality who called himself “Seth”	Contact with spirit personality Seth produced messages in Roberts’ head.	<i>TSM</i>
413,230	Inner voice she identified as Jesus	“Scribed” by Schucman between 1965 and 1972 through a process of inner dictation.	<i>ACIM</i>
69,130	Panentheistic God	Walsch says his books are not channeled but affirms he can hear God talking to him, just as if God stood next to him.	<i>CWGI</i>
269,528	“Gift and power of God”	Some critics allege a direct parallel between the Book of Mormon dictation and automatic writing.	<i>TBOM</i>

Table 1, continued

to thirty words at a time.¹⁶ The scribe immediately read back the text to assure accuracy. The dictations proceeded linearly without stops to review previous pages or paragraphs. Joseph Smith often spelled out proper names when first encountered in the text. No books, manuscripts, or other documents were consulted during the dictation.¹⁷ After breaks, Joseph would start where he left off without reading back the previous portion.¹⁸ Of the nearly seven thousand sentences in the 1830 Book of Mormon, Joseph did not rearrange the sequence of a single one after dictation.¹⁹ No rewriting or content editing occurred; emendations were made, but the core messages and storylines were published without any significant changes.²⁰

Pearl Curran's The Sorry Tale

In 1913, thirty-year-old Pearl Curran visited a friend and after initially resisting, participated in a Ouija board experience. Within a year, Pearl's Ouija board sessions became common, and among the messages spelled out were communications from an entity identifying herself as a deceased

second instance of 'for/asmuch' as two words (111, 32; no hyphen; the first is spelled as one word), then we get 269,320 words." Comment following Brian C. Hales, "Curiously Unique: Joseph Smith as Author of the Book of Mormon," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 31 (2019): 151–90, <https://www.mormoninterpreter.com/curiously-unique-joseph-smith-as-author-of-the-book-of-mormon>.

16. Royal Skousen, "Translating the Book of Mormon: Evidence from the Original Manuscript," in *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited: The Evidence for Ancient Origins*, edited by Noel B. Reynolds (Provo: FARMS, 1997), 67–83.

17. David Whitmer quoted in *Chicago Times*, Oct. 14, 1881; Emma Hale Smith quoted in Joseph Smith III to James T. Cobb, Feb. 14, 1879, Community of Christ Library-Archives; Joseph Smith III, "Last Testimony of Sister Emma," *Saints' Herald* 26, Oct. 1, 1879, 289–90.

18. See Emma Smith's comments in Edmund C. Briggs, "A Visit to Nauvoo in 1856," *Journal of History* 9 (Oct. 1916): 454.

19. Brian C. Hales, "Why Joseph Smith's Dictation of the Book of Mormon Is Simply Jaw-Dropping," *LDS Living*, Nov. 10, 2018, <http://www.ldsliving.com/Why-Joseph-Smiths-Dictation-of-the-Book-of-Mormon-Is-Simply-Jaw-Dropping/s/89568>.

20. Royal Skousen, "Changes in the Book of Mormon," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 11 (2014): 161–62. See also Royal Skousen, *The History of the Text of the Book of Mormon: Part One Grammatical Variation* (Provo: FARMS and BYU Studies, 2016), 11. See also Brian C. Hales, "Changing Critics' Criticisms of Book of Mormon Changes," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 28 (2018): 49–64.

spirit named Patience Worth: “Many moons ago I lived. Again I come. Patience Worth my name.”²¹

During the next twenty-four years, Patience Worth communicated over four million words of dictation to Pearl Curran through her Ouija board and later without it. Included were “seven full-length books, thousands of poems ranging from a few lines in length to hundreds, uncounted numbers of epigrams and aphorisms, short stories, a few plays, and thousands of pages of witty trenchant conversations.”²²

In July 1915, Patience began communicating the text of a new book entitled *The Sorry Tale* (with Pearl Curran as medium), finishing it in February less than two years later. Set at the time of Christ, some have referred to it as a “fifth Gospel.”²³ Casper S. Yost described the process through which Curran dictated the text:

[Pearl Curran] sits down with the Ouija board as she might sit down to a typewriter, and the receipt of the communications begins with no more ceremony than a typist would observe. Mrs. Curran has had no experience in literary composition and has made no study of literature, ancient or modern. Nor, it may be added, has she made any study of the history, the religions, or the social customs of the period of this story, nor of the geography or topography of the regions in which it is laid. . . .

Some time was given to its transmission on two or three evenings of every week until its completion. In the early months she proceeded leisurely with the task, usually writing 300 to 1,000 words of the story in an evening, and, in addition, poems, parables, or didactic or humorous conversation, as the mood or the circumstances prompted. . . .

As *The Sorry Tale* progressed she gave more and more time to it, producing on many evenings from 2,500 to 3,500 words of the tale in a sitting of an hour and a half or two hours. In one evening 5,000 words were dictated, covering the account of the Crucifixion. At all times, however, it came with great rapidity, taxing the chirographic speed of Mr. Curran to the utmost to put it down in abbreviated longhand. . . .

21. Litvag, *Singer in the Shadows*, 15.

22. *Ibid.*, 2, 240.

23. Scott C. Dunn, “Spirit Writing: Another Look at the Book of Mormon,” *Sunstone* 10 (June 1985): 22.

From start to finish some 260 persons contributed in this way to the composition. . . . Each time the story was picked up at the point where work was stopped at the previous sitting, without a break in the continuity of the narrative, without the slightest hesitation, and without the necessity of a reference to the closing words of the last preceding instalment.²⁴

The book was published later that year, apparently with little or no editing. Concerning *A Sorry Tale*, a *New York Times* reviewer wrote: “The long and intricate tale is constructed with the precision and accuracy of a master hand. It is a wonderful, a beautiful, and a noble book, but it is not easy to read. . . . Its archaic language and its frequently indirect modes of expression make necessary constantly the closest attention.”²⁵ More recently BYU professor Richard L. Anderson wrote less favorably: “*The Sorry Tale* spins overdone human tragedy but fades out the divine tragedy of Christ’s atonement for sin. Its Jesus teaches an unstructured ‘kingdom of love’ but drops out the realities of sin and salvation, church and ordinances. Such oversimplified humanism does not match the Christ of the Gospels.”²⁶

Similarities Between the Book of Mormon and The Sorry Tale

Several parallels between the creation of *The Sorry Tale* and the Book of Mormon can be recognized. The books are of similar length and involve Christian themes. Each process was facilitated by a mystical instrument, a Ouija board for Pearl Curran and a seer stone for Joseph Smith.

The dictation speeds are also similar. While Curran spaced out her sessions, the number of words generated in her most productive day may have been equal to or greater than the average dictation given through Joseph Smith and recorded by Oliver Cowdery. A curious detail, common to both, is that after taking a break from dictating, scribes were never required to read back the previous portion before moving on. The lack of editing is another match.

24. Patience Worth, communicated through medium Mrs. John H. [Pearl] Curran, *The Sorry Tale: A Story of the Time of Christ*, edited by Casper S. Yost (New York: Henry Holt, 1917), iii–iv.

25. “The Sorry Tale,” editorial, *New York Times*, July 8, 1917, 255.

26. Richard Lloyd Anderson, “Imitation Gospels and Christ’s Book of Mormon Ministry,” in *Apocryphal Writings and the Latter-day Saints*, edited by C. Wilfred Griggs (Provo: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1986), 62–63.

The Book of Mormon Dictation and Automatic Writing: Similarities

Table 1 and the origin of *The Sorry Tale* demonstrate several general parallels between books produced by automatic writing and the Book of Mormon dictation.

Automatic writing can produce texts as long as the Book of Mormon

Automatic writing can produce short prose in a single sitting, or as seen in Table 1 even book-length manuscripts compiled over multiple sessions that are much longer than the Book of Mormon.

Automatic writing can create complex books with complicated storylines

Among the books in Table 1 are several that parallel the Book of Mormon in apparent complexity.

Automatic writing texts do not employ standard composition methodology

Neither the Book of Mormon nor the other automatic writing books were composed through standard writing techniques that involve author researching, outlining, drafting, and/or revising. In some cases the precise methodology may be less clear, but sending a manuscript directly to the printer with little or no modification is most common.

None of the automatic writing authors were considered to have a genius level IQ

Table 1 lists the educational achievements for each author. Some are impressive, but most are ordinary and unremarkable. None of the authors otherwise distinguished themselves as intellectuals or demonstrated a genius-level IQ.

The Book of Mormon Dictation and Automatic Writing: Dissimilarities

Besides these similarities, a couple of dissimilarities can also be identified.

Joseph Smith's Alleged "Trance State"

Historically, authors describing the Book of Mormon translation are split on whether they believe Joseph Smith entered a trance state as he recited the words. Lawrence Foster, Harold Bloom, T. B. H. Stenhouse, I. Woodbridge Riley, and G. St. John Stott assume Joseph went into a trance when dictating. On the other hand, authors like Richard Van Wagoner and Richard Abanes stress that he did not.

Historically, multiple eyewitnesses describe Joseph Smith as looking in the hat and simply dictating.²⁷ None imply an altered state of consciousness to describe his appearance or behavior while looking into the hat.²⁸ One might argue that burying his face would obscure signs of a trance state, but any change in Joseph's voice quality or demeanor would probably have been mentioned by his sometimes skeptical observers.²⁹ In addition, the process of dictating involved the scribe reading back the previous sentences to ensure the accuracy of the manuscript before moving on.³⁰ Such interruptions seem inconsistent with trance state.

Use of a Seer Stone

A second dissimilarity involves the physical objects that are connected with the creation of the Book of Mormon.³¹ Seer stones or their near equivalent are not associated with any of the other automatic writing books listed in Table 1.

27. Martin Harris, quoted in "The Three Witnesses to the Book of Mormon," *Millennial Star* 48, June 21, 1886, 389–90; David Whitmer, in *Kansas City Daily Journal*, June 5, 1881; Isaac Hale, quoted in Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled*, 264–65; Joseph Knight, "Reminiscences," 2–6, MS 3470, Church History Library.

28. See accounts in "Documenting the Translation Chronology," in *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations 1820–1844*, edited by John W. Welch (Provo: BYU Press, 2005), 118–213.

29. Besides followers Martin Harris, Emma Smith, Oliver Cowdery, Samuel Smith, John Whitmer, Christian Whitmer, and David Whitmer, unbelievers Reuben Hale and Michael Morse are listed as witnessing the translation process.

30. Skousen, "Translating the Book of Mormon," 83.

31. See Jenny Champoux, "Sacred Stones and Fleshy Tablets: Litholatry and Mormonism," unpublished manuscript, 2018.

Supernatural Answers to: “Where Do All the Words Come From?”

Whether dealing with the Book of Mormon or the other automatic writing texts, it is helpful to ask, “Where do all the words come from?” The answers can be divided into supernatural and natural explanations. Table 1 identifies authors who universally attributed their words to supernatural origins. Several general categories of sources can be identified.

Deity

Communication with deity is commonly reported. It may be Jesus or a universal God, but the highest source of truth is often invoked directly or indirectly. Some automatic writing philosophies attempt to unify all theologies into one whole. Sometimes Christ may be mentioned or listed as the source of words, but his Christian roles as messiah and redeemer are usually diminished or ignored.

Deceased Persons

Reports of automatic writings coming “from deceased persons, or from unknown discarnate entities” are common.³² Professor C. D. Broad of Trinity College, Cambridge, wrote in 1965 that some “automatic scripts” suggest “rather strongly that certain human beings have survived the death of their physical bodies and have been able to communicate with certain others who are still in the flesh.”³³ Information from dead relatives is the most sought after, although random deceased spirits may show up like Patience Worth in Pearl Curran’s writings.

Ancient Records

Besides the Book of Mormon, *The Aquarian Gospel of Jesus the Christ* is reported to be derived from an ancient source, the Akashic records, which

32. James Randi, *An Encyclopedia of Claims, Frauds, and Hoaxes of the Occult and Supernatural: Decidedly Skeptical Definitions of Alternate Realities* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 1995), 21.

33. Charles D. Broad, foreword to *Swan on a Black Sea: A Study in Automatic Writing: The Cummins-Willett Scripts*, by Geraldine Cummins (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965), vii–viii.

“are supposed to contain data on everything that has ever happened, is happening, or ever will happen in the entire universe.”³⁴

Spirit Guides

Spirit guides or personalities serve as “a go-between with the ‘other world’” and communicate the messages recorded.³⁵

Trance States

Several of the reports simply list a “trance state” without professing a provenance of the words they speak beyond the implication that they originate outside of and ostensibly superior to the author.

Joseph Smith’s Explanation for the Sources of Automatic Writing

It is likely that Joseph Smith would have agreed with many of the claims of supernatural assistance affirmed by the automatic writing authors. In the arithmetic of his cosmology, such were not unexpected. Joseph taught that spiritual manifestations were real, but that “every Spirit or vision . . . is not of God.”³⁶

Besides originating from deity, Joseph identified another potential source as he cautioned that “there are many spirits which are false spirits, which have gone forth in the earth, deceiving the world. And also Satan hath sought to deceive you, that he might overthrow you” (D&C 50:2–3). In 1839, Joseph cautioned: “Lying Spirits are going forth in the Earth.”³⁷

In 1829, Joseph Smith encountered Hiram Page, brother-in-law to David Whitmer, who was receiving revelations through his own seer stone and had influenced many of the Whitmers.³⁸ Early dissenter Ezra Booth wrote that Page “had written over considerable paper” of his revelations.³⁹ In response, Joseph

34. Randi, *An Encyclopedia of Claims*, 8.

35. *Ibid.*, 222.

36. Joseph Smith, sermon, Aug. 8, 1839, Willard Richards Pocket Companion, in *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, edited by Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook (Provo: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1980), 12.

37. *Ibid.*

38. Newel Knight, autobiography and journal, 1846, Church History Library.

39. Ezra Booth quoted in Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled*, 215–16.

prayed and dictated the following revelation: “And again, thou shalt take thy brother, Hiram Page, between him and thee alone, and tell him that those things which he hath written from that stone are not of me and that Satan deceiveth him” (D&C 28:11). Hiram put away his seer stone at that moment, and though one of the Eight Witnesses, he eventually left the Church.⁴⁰

Within the context of Joseph Smith’s teachings, a fairly straightforward spiritual dichotomy is detected. God facilitated the dictation of the Book of Mormon. In contrast, automatic writings that contradict these things are from false spirits. This attitude represents a sort of revelatory elitism for Joseph Smith as he later warned: “A man must have the discerning of spirits, before he can drag into daylight this hellish influence and unfold it unto the world in all its soul destroying, diabolical, and horrid colors: for nothing is a greater injury to the children of men than to be under the influence of a false spirit, when they think they have the spirit of God.”⁴¹

Skeptics often group Joseph Smith’s dictations with those of other automatic writers as they discount all reports of extra-worldly connections. Clustering these authors together might seem to provide an explanation, but in reality, clustering is not explaining. To successfully refute the supernatural claims of automatic writings and the Book of Mormon, a plausible natural explanation is needed. Otherwise, the argument just reframes Joseph’s reports of the “gift and power of God” into a different, but still suprahuman, construct.

Where Do All the Words Come From? Natural Explanations

Numerous skeptics have approached automatic writers and mediums attempting to debunk their reports of mystical communications.⁴² Since automatic writing became popular in the early 1900s, most of the psychological studies were performed at that time.

40. See also the account of James Colin Brewster in Dan Vogel, “James Colin Brewster: The Boy Prophet Who Challenged Mormon Authority,” in *Differing Visions: Dissenters in Mormon History*, edited by Roger D. Launius and Linda Thatcher (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 120–39.

41. Joseph Smith, ed., “Try the Spirit,” *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 11, Apr. 1, 1842, 744.

42. Christopher, *ESP, Seers and Psychics*; Randi, *An Encyclopedia of Claims*; Walter Franklin Prince, *The Case of Patience Worth* (New Hyde Park, N.Y.: University Books, 1964).

The most popular natural explanation is that the words emerge from a portion of the automatic writer's unconscious. That is, a mechanism is employed to transfer control of the writing from the author's consciousness to nonconscious mental forces, and from there the words flow. An article in the March 1930 *Popular Science Monthly* explains, "The source of such composition is the spontaneous expression of a submerged fraction of a person's personality."⁴³

To summarize, explanations that the Book of Mormon was produced through automatic writing necessarily credit all of the words to Joseph Smith's unconscious mind. This leads to additional important inquiries.

How Does the Unconscious Take Control?

If the words emerge from an automatic writer's unconscious mind, what happens to mentally transfer supervision of speaking from conscious to unconscious control? Normally humans are very much aware of their surroundings and cannot switch to an unconscious mode voluntarily. Several descriptions of triggers exist, with significant overlap between them, explaining how mental control switches from conscious to unconscious during automatic writing.

Psychological Techniques Expose the Unconscious

Psychologists may deliberately attempt to probe the unconscious through therapeutic techniques. Psychotherapist J. H. van der Hoop explains that in addition to analyzing "dreams [and] visions," and inducing "hypnosis [and] trance states," another useful "means of enquiring into the contents of the unconscious mind was afforded by automatic writing."⁴⁴ Anita M. Muhl, author of *Automatic Writing*, further explicates: "The use of automatic writing in conjunction with psychoanalysis is invaluable in getting at unconscious processes quickly."⁴⁵ Researcher Ian Stevenson explains: "The altered state

43. Wesley R. Wells, "The Truth about Hypnotism," *Popular Science Monthly* (Mar. 1930): 163.

44. Johannes Hermanus van der Hoop, *Character and the Unconscious: A Critical Exposition of the Psychology of Freud and of Jung* (New York: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1923), 6, 59.

45. Anita M. Muhl, *Automatic Writing* (Dresden: Theodor Steinkopff, 1930), 96.

of consciousness that usually occurs before and during the act of automatic writing facilitates the emergence into consciousness of material that is ordinarily kept outside awareness [unconscious]. The condition is thus somewhat like that of dreaming and also like that of a hypnotic trance. . . . We should remember that our minds are stored—one could say stuffed—with much more information than we ordinarily need or ever become consciously aware of.”⁴⁶

While advocated by some health care providers, automatic writing has never enjoyed wide acceptance in medical settings and is seldom practiced today.

Dissociation Taps the Unconscious

A second way to transition out of consciousness to write automatically is described as entering a dissociated state, which is like a person with multiple personalities leaving the conscious self to enter into another identity.⁴⁷ In his 1998 book *The Sword of Laban: Joseph Smith Jr. and the Dissociated Mind*, plastic surgeon William D. Morain theorizes that Joseph Smith’s childhood knee operation was his “maiden voyage into ‘dissociation’” and that “there would be many more” during his lifetime.⁴⁸ Explaining that it “cannot be known how successful Joseph’s dissociation was in blotting out the pain,” Morain insists that “the fantasies arising through his dissociations” tormented Joseph for the rest of his life.⁴⁹ Ostensibly, the repressed pain also influenced his dictation of some of the storylines in the Book of Mormon.⁵⁰

According to the 2013 edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*: “Dissociative disorders are characterized by a disruption of and/or discontinuity in the normal integration of consciousness, memory, identity, emotion, perception, body representation, motor control,

46. Stevenson, “Some Comments on Automatic Writing,” 317–18. See also Theodore Flournoy, *Spiritism and Psychology*, translated by Hereward Carrington (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1911), viii.

47. See Morain, *The Sword of Laban*, 95–96, 105, 109, 113, 172.

48. Morain, *The Sword of Laban*, 25.

49. *Ibid.*, 25, 72. See also 95–96, 105, 109, 113, 172.

50. *Ibid.*, 95–96, 105, 109, 113, 172.

and behavior.”⁵¹ The resulting pathologies include multiple personalities, amnesia, depersonalization, and fugue (forgetting one’s own identity).⁵² Morain and others postulate that less severe manifestations of dissociation might have permitted Joseph Smith to access previously unconscious functionality and creative abilities.

Ann Taves, Automatic Writing, Hypnosis, and Dissociation

In her 2016 book *Revelatory Events: Three Case Studies of the Emergence of New Spiritual Paths*, Ann Taves, professor of religious studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara, examines Joseph Smith and the origin of the Book of Mormon. In a very complex discussion involving repeated references to consciousness, hypnosis and hypnotic states, automatic writing, and dissociation,⁵³ she acknowledges that Joseph’s dictation came as a “flow of words that seems to arise outside consciousness.”⁵⁴

Taves describes how the seer stone “triggered” or “cued” the equivalence of a “formal hypnotic induction” of Joseph Smith. From there he entered “an imaginative storytelling mode,” a “subjective experience of an altered state,” a “visual modality,” a “highly focused awareness,” or a “translating mode” that caused him to “dissociate” in some ways.⁵⁵

According to Taves, the resulting state enhanced Joseph’s “imaginative skills,” improved his ability to focus “on a target goal,” and “cued the suspension of [his] normal self-referential processing.”⁵⁶ Thereafter, he was able to

51. American Psychiatric Association, “Dissociative Disorders,” *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 5th ed. (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association, 2013), available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1176/appi.books.9780890425596.dsm08>. See also Jerrold S. Maxmen and Nicholas G. Ward, *Essential Psychopathology and Its Treatment*, 2nd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1995), 311.

52. Dianne Hales and Robert E. Hales, *Caring for the Mind: The Comprehensive Guide to Mental Health* (New York: Bantam, 1995), 443–63.

53. Ann Taves, *Revelatory Events: Three Case Studies of the Emergence of New Spiritual Paths* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2016). See “conscious” (252, 254, 256), “dissociate” (252, 254, 256, 261), “automatic writing” (256, 262), and hypnosis or hypnotic state (251, 253, 254, 256, 259, 264).

54. *Ibid.*, 256; see also 249–50.

55. *Ibid.*, 250, 252, 253, 255, 259.

56. *Ibid.*, 264, 258.

“dissociate control over the flow of words and automate the process so that it flowed quickly and smoothly. Indeed, dissociating the flow of words so that they did not seem to be [his] own meant that [he was] nonconsciously reflecting on them as [he] dictated.”⁵⁷ For Taves, the mental condition—triggered by the seer stone and controlled by nonconscious forces—enabled Joseph to “effortlessly” produce the Book of Mormon text.⁵⁸

Confidence in the Unconscious

Generally speaking, psychologists confidently attribute the origin of words arising from automatic writing to the unconscious of the author, sometimes even without evidence showing how the words originally got in there. Since almost all research on lengthy automatic writings occurred in the early twentieth century, psychological theories embraced generally today are traced to that era. For example, writing in 1906 after discussing an automatic writing narrative that contained specific details that were seemingly impossible for the writer to have known, Columbia University professor James H. Hyslop explained a psychological theory of automatic writing that is advocated by several authors who classify the Book of Mormon as a product of automatic writing:

We are, therefore, left to pure conjecture for the source of the subconscious ideas. We may suppose that it is the resurrection of some forgotten knowledge, or a dream fabrication associating disconnected names and incidents in a consistent whole. As for proof of this, there is none. . . .

The resourcefulness of subconscious mental actions is thus shown to be very great, and that little material knowledge is necessary for more or less perfect dramatization, and the believer in “spirits” will have to learn that he has first to exhaust the field of abnormal psychology before he can trust his judgement to accept any explanation of such phenomena but that of secondary personality [dissociation].⁵⁹

57. *Ibid.*, 257–58.

58. *Ibid.*, 258.

59. James H. Hyslop, “Apparent Subconscious Fabrication,” *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 1, no. 5 (1906): 208, 213.

Hyslop emphasizes, “The claims for the supernatural are summarily thrown out of court, and we are left with subconscious mental action of the subject as the one general source which cannot be doubted.”⁶⁰

The Book of Mormon as the Product of Joseph Smith’s Unconscious

To further investigate the possibility that the Book of Mormon emerged from Joseph Smith’s unconscious, I will examine four characteristics of the Book of Mormon production:

- The complexity of the dictated text (the Book of Mormon)
- The challenges associated with creative dictation
- Joseph Smith’s conscious abilities, which correlate to his unconscious abilities
- The documented capabilities of the unconscious mind (from scientific studies)

Quadrangulating these four data points provides a clearer assessment of the cognitive challenges associated with the Book of Mormon creation and the ability of automatic writing theories to explain them.

The Complexity of the Book of Mormon Text

The Book of Mormon storyline dictated by Joseph Smith is complex, mentioning 337 proper names with 188 being unique to the Book of Mormon.⁶¹ It references the activities of over 175 individuals and groups who existed in at least 125 different topographical locations.⁶² It describes more than 425 specific geographical movements among these characters.⁶³ The Book of Mormon also includes literary devices that would be memory-intensive

60. Ibid., 213.

61. Paul Y. Hoskisson, “Book of Mormon Names,” *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, edited by Daniel H. Ludlow, 4 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 1:186.

62. See John L. Sorenson, *The Geography of Book of Mormon Events: A Source Book* (Provo: FARMS), 217–326.

63. Ibid.

to construct and recite in real time, including 430 distinct chiasms, with over thirty being six-level or greater,⁶⁴ and over one thousand Hebrew literary elements.⁶⁵

How does the Book of Mormon's complexity compare to other books?⁶⁶ Modern literary experts can estimate the reading difficulty of a book using a device called the Lexile Framework for Reading, which "involves a scale for measuring both reading ability of an individual and the text complexity of materials he or she encounters."⁶⁷ The Lexile scale applies to grades 1–12.

For example, books used in the eleventh grade curriculum in the United State public schools in 2004 carried an average Lexile score of 1120, and for twelfth 1130.⁶⁸ The Book of Mormon Lexile score is 1150,⁶⁹ which correlates to the reading level of some sixth graders and most in the eleventh grade.⁷⁰ Other popular books with an 1150 Lexile score include

64. Modified from Donald W. Parry, *The Book of Mormon Text Reformatted According to Parallelistic Patterns* (Provo: FARMS, 1992); James T. Duke, *The Literary Masterpiece Called The Book of Mormon* (Springville, Utah: CFI, 2004), 116.

65. Donald W. Parry, "Hebraisms and Other Ancient Peculiarities in the Book of Mormon," in *Echoes and Evidences of the Book of Mormon*, edited by Donald W. Parry, Daniel C. Peterson, and John W. Welch (Provo: FARMS, 2002), 156–89.

66. See Brian C. Hales, "Curiously Unique: Joseph Smith as Author of the Book of Mormon," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 31 (2019): 151–90, available at <https://www.mormoninterpreter.com/curiously-unique-joseph-smith-as-author-of-the-book-of-mormon>.

67. "Understanding Lexile® Measures," <https://lexile.com/educators/understanding-lexile-measures/>.

68. See Gary L. Williamson, Heather Koons, Todd Sandvik, and Eleanor Sanford-Moore, "The Text Complexity Continuum in Grades 1–12," *Metametrics Research Brief*, Oct. 1, 2012.

69. The Lexile Framework for Reading, Publisher Report, containing the certified Lexile score for the text of the 1830 Book of Mormon was issued August 17, 2017, commissioned by Brian C. Hales for LDS Answers, Inc. Due to the lack of an ISBN number for the 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon, the Lexile score is not included in the Lexile score database at <https://fab.lexile.com>.

70. See "Typical Lexile Reader Measures by Grade" chart, <https://lexile.com/educators/measuring-growth-with-lexile/lexile-measures-grade-equivalents/>.

Dostoyevsky's *Brothers Karamazov* (364,153 words), Melville's *Moby Dick* (206,052 words), and Dickens's *Great Expectations* (162,690 words).⁷¹

At nearly 270,000 words, the Book of Mormon is much longer than other religious texts, including the New Testament (138,020), the English translation of the Qur'an (77,701), and the Torah (just under 80,000). Yale University chair of history Daniel Walker Howe summarizes: "True or not, the Book of Mormon is a powerful epic written on a grand scale with a host of characters, a narrative of human struggle and conflict, of divine intervention, heroic good and atrocious evil, of prophecy, morality, and law. Its narrative structure is complex."⁷²

Challenges of Creative Dictation

The second data point involves creative dictation. This describes texts that are dictated and sent straight to the printer, like most automatic writings. It bears both similarities and differences to creative writing.

Modeling Creative Dictation

While it is possible that Joseph Smith's dictations came by reading a preexisting manuscript concealed in the hat, such a ruse would probably have been detected through the weeks of translation, and multiple documents affirm he used no outside resources.⁷³ Alternatively, Joseph might have memorized the roughly four to five thousand words each day from a concealed transcript, but no such transcript has come to light. Time for secret memorization sessions also seems to have been unavailable. David Whitmer recalled how the translation sessions proceeded: "It was

71. See <https://fab.lexile.com>.

72. Daniel Walker Howe, "What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815–1848," *Oxford History of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 314.

73. See David Whitmer interviews, *Chicago Times*, Oct. 17, 1881; cited in Lyndon W. Cook, ed., *David Whitmer Interviews: A Restoration Witness* (Orem, Utah: Grandin Book, 1991), 74–76; "St. Louis Republican (16 July 1884)," in Cook, ed., *David Whitmer Interviews*, 139–40. See also Emma Smith quoted in Joseph Smith III to James T. Cobb, Feb. 14, 1879, Community of Christ Library-Archives; Joseph Smith III, "Last Testimony of Sister Emma," *Saints' Herald* 26, Oct. 1, 1879, 289–90.

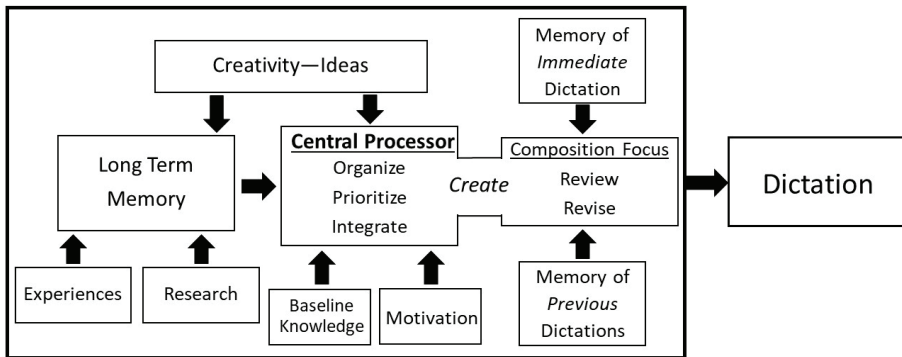


Figure 1. Creative Dictation Model

a laborious work for the weather was very warm, and the days were long and they worked from morning till night.”⁷⁴

Most observers assume Joseph Smith created all the words in real time. Historian Dan Vogel acknowledges: “Smith’s method of dictation did not allow for rewriting. It was a more-or-less stream-of-consciousness composition.”⁷⁵

It appears that a stream-of-consciousness form of dictation would require the mental convergence of several important elements: proper motivation, sufficient knowledge of the English language, an understanding of the rules of composition, a rich reservoir of personal experiences to draw from, research data regarding the topic, potent creativity, proficient memory, and above-normal intellectual processing power. Modeling these demonstrates possible individual interactions and importance (see Figure 1).

One of the heaviest burdens in creative dictation is carried by memory (long- and short-term). In creative writing, the author can consult printed matter in the forms of research materials and previous drafts in order to supplement natural memory. In creative dictation, the author’s memory is responsible for all recall and data storage. Long-term memory supplies facts, details, ideas, and outlines, as the text is generated on the fly. Short-term memory

74. James H. Hart, “About the Book of Mormon,” *Deseret Evening News*, Mar. 25, 1884.

75. Dan Vogel, *Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2004), xix.

provides constant vigilance over the spoken sentences to assure coherency with words recently dictated as well as text recited hours and days previously.

Psychologists Linda Flower and John R. Hayes explain how longer texts are more difficult to produce: “Each word in the growing text determines and limits the choices of what can come next.”⁷⁶ That is, the word choice of the 200,000th word cannot ignore the 20,000th word, the 2,000th word, or any that had been spoken up to that point, if accuracy and sentence integrity is to be maintained. Without the short-term memory’s perpetual attentiveness, inconsistencies will crop up in the manuscript and will expand as the text is enlarged.

Comparing Creative Dictation to Creative Writing

Creative writing has been investigated for many decades and shares many parallels with creative dictation.⁷⁷ Maxine Hairston and John J. Ruszkiewicz, authors of *The Scott, Foresman Handbook for Writers*, explain, “Researchers who have studied how writers work do agree that there are discernible patterns among writers, and that, generally speaking, they seem to work through” specific stages, which can be distilled as follows: pre-writing, choosing a topic, creating an outline, researching pertinent documents; writing, putting words on the paper in the form of a completed first draft; and rewriting revisions, rewriting, content and copy editing, as well as typesetting.⁷⁸ Automatic writing theories explaining manuscripts mentioned above, including the Book of Mormon, assume that these steps were not needed unless they were performed within the confines of the nonconscious brain. According to this model, Joseph Smith was involuntarily writing and rewriting the text simultaneously.⁷⁹

76. Linda Flower and John R. Hayes, “A Cognitive Process Theory of Writing,” *College Composition and Communication* 32, no. 4 (Dec. 1981): 371.

77. See Falk S. Johnson, *How to Organize What You Write: A New Look at an Old Problem* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company), 1; Lynn Quitman Troyka, *Simon and Schuster Handbook for Writers* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1987), 13; Jean Wyrick, *Steps to Writing Well*, 12th ed. (Boston: Wadsworth, 2014), 91–92.

78. Maxine Hairston and John J. Ruszkiewicz, *The Scott, Foresman Handbook for Writers*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), 5–6.

79. In a private communication, Dan Vogel explained that Joseph “worked it out in his mind and therefore had done the editing before dictating rather than after” (Dan Vogel to Brian Hales, Facebook message, Dec. 22, 2015, used with permission).

Part of the reason creative dictation is poorly understood both by researchers and by lay people today is because it is so rare. Practically speaking, virtually no scholars have elected to dictate long manuscripts off the top of their heads and then send them directly to the printer. Even the most intellectual geniuses today pre-write, write, and rewrite their manuscripts prior to completion.⁸⁰

Joseph Smith's Conscious Intellectual Skill Set

The third component involves Joseph Smith's conscious composition abilities because they were closely tied to his unconscious capabilities (see below). Ann Taves writes that at times he engaged in "imaginative storytelling" and could recount "narratives of great vividness."⁸¹ She also quotes a questionable source that says Joseph "acquired knowledge very rapidly and learned with special facility all the tricks of the scoundrels who worked in his company. He soon outgrew his teachers."⁸²

The historical record describes activities showing Joseph Smith was intelligent and inquisitive.

- Orasmus Turner recalled that as a youth Joseph helped "solve some portentous questions of moral or political ethics, in our juvenile debating club."⁸³
- Lucy Mack Smith recalled that in 1823 "Joseph would occasionally give us some of the most amusing recitals that could be imagined."⁸⁴

80. See Stephen Hawking, *My Brief History* (New York: Bantam Books, 2013), 93–94; Bertrand Russell, *Portraits from Memory and other Essays* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1956), 195.

81. Taves, *Revelatory Events*, 252–53.

82. Taves, *Revelatory Events*, 253. Instead of quoting the original source, Taves lists "quote in Persuette, 2000, 15," which is David Persuette, *Joseph Smith and the Origins of The Book of Mormon*, 2nd ed. (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2000), 15. There Persuette documents the source as Wilhelm Wyl (von Wymetal), *Mormon Portraits* (Salt Lake City: [Tribune Printing and Publishing Co.], 1886), 25. Wyl's book is highly biased and includes some claims that are over-the-top unbelievable (e.g., 65, 68, 70, 90, 91, etc.), which undermines its credibility to some degree.

83. Orasmus Turner, *History of the Pioneer Settlement* (Rochester, N.Y.: William Alling, 1851), 214.

84. Lucy Mack Smith, *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith the Prophet and His Progenitors for Many Generations* (Liverpool: S. W. Richards, 1853), 85. Lucy reports these activities occurred after September 22, 1823.

- Pomeroy Tucker portrayed Joseph as an active reader of “dime novels.”⁸⁵
- Joseph reportedly said, “I can take my Bible, and go into the woods, and learn more in two hours, than you can learn at meetings in two years, if you should go all the time.”⁸⁶
- When learning Hebrew in 1835, Joseph was second only to Orson Pratt in the ability to memorize and learn the language.⁸⁷

It is probable that Joseph Smith’s competency in reading and writing, even as a twenty-three-year-old farmer, was above average. However, no available recollections describe him as exhibiting extraordinary intellectual capabilities by 1829. It seems a majority of the printed recollections described him as ignorant or illiterate.⁸⁸

Isaac Hale recounted in 1834 that “I first became acquainted with Joseph Smith Jr. in November, 1825. . . . His appearance at this time was that of a careless young man—not very well educated.”⁸⁹ Similarly, John H. Gilbert, who typeset the Book of Mormon in 1830, remembered: “We had a great deal of trouble with it [the Book of Mormon manuscript]. It was not punctuated at all. They [Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery] did not know anything about punctuation.” When asked: “Was he [Joseph Smith] educated?” he responded: “Oh, not at all then.”⁹⁰

85. Pomeroy Tucker, *Origin, Rise, and Progress of Mormonism* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1867), 13–14.

86. Smith, *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith*, 90.

87. Matthew J. Grey, “‘The Word of the Lord in the Original’: Joseph Smith’s Study of Hebrew in Kirtland,” in *Approaching Antiquity: Joseph Smith and the Ancient World*, edited by Lincoln H. Blumell, Matthew J. Grey, and Andrew H. Hedges (Provo: Religious Study Center, 2015), 266.

88. See George Peck, ed., “Mormonism and the Mormons,” *Methodist Quarterly Review* 25 (1843): 112; Orlando Saunders, William Van Camp, and John H. Gilbert, quoted in “The Early Days of Mormonism,” *Lippincott’s Magazine* 26 (Aug. 1880): 198–206, 211; John W. Barber and Henry Howe, *Historical Collection of the State of New York* (New York: S. Tuttle, 1841), 580–81. Jonathan Hadley, “Golden Bible,” *Palmyra Freeman*, Aug. 11, 1829; Reuben P. Harmon, statement, in *Naked Truths about Mormonism* 1 (Apr. 1888): 1.

89. Isaac Hale quoted in Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled*, 262–63.

90. John H. Gilbert, quoted in “The Hill Cumorah and the Book of Mormon,” *Saints’ Herald* 28, June 1, 1881, 165–66.

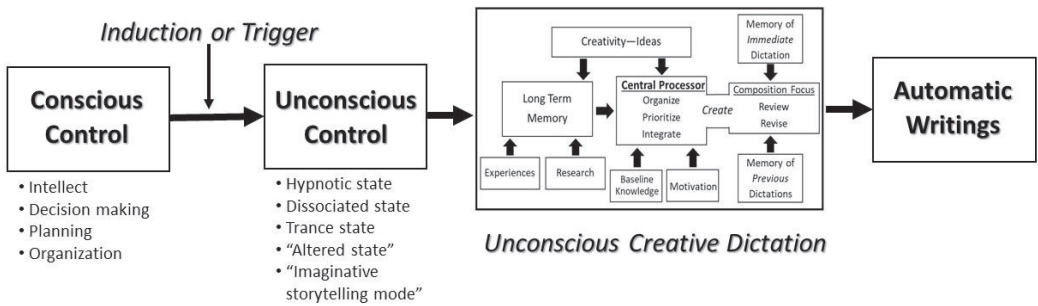


Figure 2. Model of Triggered Unconscious Creative Dictation

Cognitive Abilities of the Unconscious

After reviewing the first three components—the Book of Mormon complexity, the challenges of creative dictation, and Joseph’s qualifications while conscious—the fourth element asks and tries to answer the question: “What capabilities would have been enhanced by switching from an awake Joseph Smith to an unconscious or hypnotized version?”⁹¹

Hypnosis and Unconscious Changes

As discussed above, hypnosis may be used to transfer mental control to the unconscious. Graham F. Wagstaff, professor of cognitive social psychology at the University of Liverpool, recognizes that “[t]he traditional view of the hypnotized person as someone in a state of automatism, possessed of transcendent powers, is still popular among the general public.” But is this “traditional view” accurate? Wagstaff continues: “However, it is now the opinion of most researchers that hypnosis does not induce a state of automatism, and caution should be exercised when employing hypnotic procedures to facilitate memory.”⁹²

91. It is assumed that the unconscious can be accessed through both hypnosis and dissociation although their relationship is controversial and largely dependent on the specific definitions of the terms employed by the authors. See Irving Kirsch and Steven Jay Lynn, “Dissociation Theories of Hypnosis,” *Psychological Bulletin* 123, no. 1 (1998): 112; Jonathan M. Cleveland, Brandon M. Korman, and Steven N. Gold, “Are Hypnosis and Dissociation Related? New Evidence for a Connection,” *International Journal of Clinical and Experimental Hypnosis* 63, no. 2 (2015): 207.

92. Graham F. Wagstaff, “Hypnosis and the Law: Examining the Stereotypes,” *Criminal Justice and Behavior* 35, no. 10 (Oct. 2008): 1277.

Also, in a clinical setting, hypnosis has been touted as providing important health benefits. “The effectiveness of incorporating hypnosis in clinical interventions has gained positive empirical support in pain control, anxiety, depression, trauma, weight loss, and eating disorders among other areas.”⁹³

So while the traditional view of the hypnotic state may describe superior abilities as compared to a conscious state, are such assumptions supported by scientific studies? Does hypnosis or an unconscious state improve a person’s cognitive capabilities, as touted by some proponents? Could hypnosis (or a similar mental state) have endowed Joseph Smith with the capacity to create the Book of Mormon through creative dictation?

General Studies

As the field of psychology embraced the concept of hypnosis in the early twentieth century, researchers quickly explored the capacities of individuals in a hypnotic state. The earliest studies by Paul C. Young in the 1920s concluded, “There is no noticeable difference between the normal and hypnotic states in the ability of normal persons in the fields of sensation, perception, finer discriminations, present memory (learning and retention), or physical work which does not involve fatigue.”⁹⁴ Over a decade later, Hans. J. Eysenck reported up to 77 percent improvement in some tasks under hypnosis as compared to the conscious state, but he cautioned, “There is roughly an inverse relation between the difficulty of a test, and improvement in it under hypnosis; the easier and more mechanical the test, the greater the improvement.”⁹⁵ These results are still accepted today.⁹⁶

93. Tobias Egner, Graham Jamieson, and John Gruzelier, “Hypnosis Decouples Cognitive Control from Conflict Monitoring Processes of the Frontal Lobe,” *NeuroImage* 27 (2005): 969.

94. Paul Campbell Young, “An Experimental Study of Mental and Physical Functions in the Normal and Hypnotic States,” *American Journal of Psychology* 36, no. 2 (Apr. 1925): 231. See also Paul Campbell Young, “An Experimental Study of Mental and Physical Functions in the Normal and Hypnotic States: Additional Results,” *American Journal of Psychology* 37, no. 3 (July 1926): 345–56.

95. Hans J. Eysenck, “An Experimental Study of the Improvement of Mental and Physical Functions of the Hypnotic State,” *British Journal of Medical Psychology* 18, nos. 3–4 (Feb. 1941): 308, 315.

96. See for example, John F. Kihlstrom, “The Domain of Hypnosis, Revisited,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Hypnosis: Theory, Research, and Practice* (New York: Oxford

Unconscious Memory

As discussed above, one of the greatest mental burdens of creative dictation involves both long- and short-term memory. Scott C. Dunn notes: “Automatic writers [have] produced detailed information from books that they have read but in some cases cannot remember reading.” He then explains that Joseph’s memory, when in the automatic writing mode, was sufficient: “It should not be surprising, therefore, to find Smith’s scriptural productions repeating things he may have heard or overheard in conversation, camp meetings, or other settings without any concerted study of the issues.”⁹⁷ Ann Taves too posits that Joseph rapidly “absorbed information” and “acquired knowledge” that was stored in his memory to be later regurgitated when he entered his “imaginative storytelling mode.”⁹⁸

Despite these opinions, multiple psychological studies demonstrate that entering a hypnotic state does not enhance overall memory recall.⁹⁹ Cognitive social psychologist and prolific author John F. Kihlstrom explains, “Hypnosis appears to be incapable of enhancing memory [but] hypnotic procedures can impair memory.”¹⁰⁰ “Enhanced memory, or hypermnesia, has also been claimed

University Press, 2008), 22, 52; Daniel Druckman and Robert A. Bjork, *Learning, Remembering, Believing: Enhancing Human Performance* (Washington, DC: National Academies Press, 1994), 223, 354.

97. 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 Metcalfe (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002), 34–35.

98. Taves, *Revelatory Events*, 252–53.

99. Joseph Barber, “Hypnosis and Memory: A Hazardous Connection,” *Journal of Mental Health Counseling* 19, no. 4 (Oct. 1997): 311, 313; John F. Kihlstrom, “Hypnosis, Memory and Amnesia,” *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London* 352, no. 1362 (Dec. 1997): 1727–32; Steven Jay Lynn and Irving I. Kirsch, “Alleged Alien Abductions: False Memories, Hypnosis, and Fantasy Proneness,” *Psychological Inquiry* 7, no. 2 (1996): 151–55; Peter W. Sheehan, “Memory and Hypnosis—General Considerations,” in *International Handbook of Clinical Hypnosis*, edited by Graham D. Burrows, Robb O. Stanely, and Peter B. Bloom (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2001), 52; Graham F. Wagstaff, et al., “Facilitating Memory With Hypnosis, Focused Meditation, and Eye Closure,” *International Journal of Clinical and Experimental Hypnosis* 52, no. 4 (2004): 434.

100. John F. Kihlstrom, “Hypnosis, Memory, and Amnesia,” *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London* 352, no. 1362 (Dec. 1997): 1731.

for hypnosis . . . ; however, empirical evidence for hypnotic hypermnesia has never been particularly convincing.”¹⁰¹ Jean Holroyd, of UCLA’s Department of Psychiatry, explains: “There is some evidence that being hypnotized may actually interfere with reasoning and memory.”¹⁰² Former president of the Society of Psychological Hypnosis Marty Sapp agrees: “There is no experimental evidence to support the use of hypnosis to refresh memory.”¹⁰³ While anecdotal reports exist of individuals recalling obscure details from the past, virtually all studies show that the process is not reliable or consistent.

Kevin M. McConkey and Sachiko Kinoshita examined “The Influence of Hypnosis on Memory After One Day and One Week” and concluded, “The number of incorrect items increased across the test periods . . . for all subjects. The use of hypnotic procedures, however, did not influence the number of total incorrect items” either positively or negatively.¹⁰⁴ This supports the idea that, as Joseph Smith was dictating his 200,000th word, his unconscious memory would have been no more accurate than his conscious memory recalling the 150,000th word or 100,000th word dictated weeks earlier.

Many other researchers could be cited to show that hypnosis or dissociation does not reliably enhance the recall of previously learned information, whether actively or passively absorbed.

Unconscious Cognitive Function

A second substantial mental responsibility of creative dictation involves cognitive function—the act of creating coherent sentences one right after the other in real time. Ann Taves postulates that in his “altered state,” Joseph Smith’s “level of organization of the nonvolitional [nonconscious] story . . .

101. John F. Kihlstrom, “Hypnosis and Cognition,” *Psychology of Consciousness: Theory, Research, and Practice* 1, no. 2 (2014): 142.

102. Jean Holroyd, “Hypnosis as a Methodology in Psychological Research,” in *Contemporary Hypnosis Research*, edited by Erika Fromm and Michael R. Nash (New York: Guilford Press, 1992), 219.

103. Marty Sapp, *Hypnosis, Dissociation, and Absorption: Theories, Assessment, and Treatment* (Springfield, Ill.: Charles C. Thomas, 2015), 135.

104. Kevin M. McConkey and Sachiko Kinoshita, “The Influence of Hypnosis on Memory After One Day and One Week,” *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 97, no. 1 (1988): 50, 52.

exceeds what [he] would have been able to do volitionally [consciously].”¹⁰⁵ Dunn writes that the human mind has the “ability to think and plan without conscious awareness of these processes” and that “the presence of one’s own language or memories in a text by no means indicates that it was produced through extensive mental effort or conscious planning.”¹⁰⁶ In other words, by shifting to unconscious control, Joseph recruited nascent creative talents enabling the recitation.

However, psychological studies do not appear to support these theories. John A. Bargh and Ezequiel Morsella of Yale University conclude that, “Although concept activation and primitive associative learning could occur unconsciously, anything complex requiring flexible responding, integration of stimuli, or higher mental processes could not.”¹⁰⁷ Harvard professor Anthony G. Greenwald concurs: “Unconscious cognition has been found to be severely limited in its analytic capability.”¹⁰⁸ And a 2005 study demonstrates that hypnotized individuals are not in “a state of highly focused attention.”¹⁰⁹

Peter Farvolden and Erik Z. Woody observe that, “Asking hypnotized participants to complete a fairly extensive battery of demanding cognitive tasks, such as the memory tasks [word recall] . . . is simply incompatible with maintaining a ‘state’ of hypnosis.”¹¹⁰ Peter W. Sheehan in his article “Memory and Hypnosis” explicates: “Hypnotized people do not in general critically analyze incoming detailed information.”¹¹¹ In fact, as Stanford

105. Taves, *Revelatory Events*, 258.

106. Dunn, “Automaticity,” 31–32.

107. John A. Bargh and Ezequiel Morsella, “The Unconscious Mind,” *Perspectives on Psychological Science: A Journal of the Association for Psychological Science* 3, no. 1 (2008): 73–79.

108. Anthony G. Greenwald, “New Look 3: Unconscious Cognition Reclaimed,” *American Psychologist* 47, no. 6 (June 1992): 775.

109. Tobias Egner, Graham Jamieson, and John Gruzelier, “Hypnosis Decouples Cognitive Control from Conflict Monitoring Processes of the Frontal Lobe,” *NeuroImage* 27 (2005): 975.

110. Peter Farvolden and Erik Z. Woody, “Hypnosis, Memory and Frontal Executive Functioning,” *International Journal of Clinical and Experimental Hypnosis* 52, no. 1 (2004): 19.

111. Sheehan, “Memory and Hypnosis,” 58.

professor Ernest R. Hilgard explains, the mental reasoning under hypnosis may “distort” reality: “Reality distortions of all kinds, including acceptance of falsified memories, changes in one’s own personality, modification of the rate at which time seems to pass, doubling of persons in the room, absence of heads or feet of people observed to be walking around the room, inappropriate naming, presence of hallucinated animals that talk, and all manner of other unrealistic distortions can be accepted without criticism within the hypnotic state.”¹¹² As another study concludes, “Hypnotized persons tend to mix perception and imagination in a way that is logically incongruous and that they tolerate the incongruity without seeming to resolve it.” It may be defined as “trance logic.”¹¹³

It appears that no available scientific studies support the idea that a person in an unconscious state is able to consistently perform complex cognitive tasks effectively. Creative dictation would probably fall into that category.

Creativity and Other Abilities

A common belief is that hypnosis enhances creativity by diminishing anxiety. Julie Regan summarizes this popular belief: “Hypnosis and hypnotic induced states provide an individual with the opportunity to relax the conscious, ego-controlling mind thus suspending the logical observing and thinking processes and enabling amongst other things fantasy, imagination, and unconscious material to arise and be accessed.”¹¹⁴ The question is whether this perception is accurate—can hypnosis actually increase creativity? Regan concludes, however, that “There is a lack of clear evidence that hypnosis can enhance creativity.”¹¹⁵ Another study concluded that “Hypnosis does not appear to bolster creativity, relative to non-hypnotic conditions.”¹¹⁶

112. Ernest R. Hilgard, *Hypnotic Susceptibility* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1965), 9. Both Taves and Dunn quote Hilgard as authoritative.

113. Kevin M. McConkey, Richard A. Bryant, Bernadette C. Bibb, and John F. Kihlstrom, “Trance Logic in Hypnosis and Imagination,” *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 100, no. 4 (1991): 464.

114. Julie Regan, “Painting Like Picasso: Can Hypnosis Enhance Creativity?,” *Australian Journal of Clinical Hypnotherapy and Hypnosis* 37, no. 2 (Spring 2015): 5.

115. *Ibid.*, 7.

116. Steven Jay Lynn and Harry Sivec, “The Hypnotizable Subject as Creative Problem-Solving Agent,” in *Contemporary Hypnosis Research*, edited by Erika Fromm

Specifically regarding Joseph Smith and dissociation, psychiatrist Robert D. Anderson, author of *Inside the Mind of Joseph Smith*, offers this evaluation: “If Smith experienced dissociative states while creating the Book of Mormon, they were, in my opinion, limited in degree. Dissociative states require amnesia, significant distress, impairment in functioning, and/or a disruption of the integrative functions of consciousness, memory, and identity. But the Book of Mormon contains integrated careful calculations of fact and date, creating a complex history instead of a disorganized mess. This result suggests either full or nearly full personality [conscious] function at the time of dictation.”¹¹⁷

A practical example of the unconscious mind’s limitations is the process of dreaming because “dreams are the clearest expression of the unconscious mind.”¹¹⁸ While dreams may include elaborate ephemeral plotlines and sweeping imaginings, they cannot be flipped on and off at will. Neither do they deliver the type of minute organization and sustained complexity found in many automatic writings including the Book of Mormon.¹¹⁹

Ernest Hilgard’s Hypnotized Storyteller

A key piece of evidence cited by both Dunn and Taves to support their positions involves a young storyteller introduced by Ernest Hilgard in his book *Divided Consciousness*.¹²⁰ He described a “highly hypnotizable student” who, while hypnotized, could tell stories with such “clarity and verisimilitude”

and Michael R. Nash (New York: Guilford Press, 1992), 332.

117. Robert D. Anderson, *Inside the Mind of Joseph Smith: Psychobiography and the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1999), xiii–xiv.

118. Calvin S. Hall and Vernon J. Nordby, *A Primer of Jungian Psychology* (New York: Mentor Books, 1973), 118.

119. An additional concern of automatic writing is that it does not address the statements of the Three and Eight Witnesses who declared they viewed tangible artifacts like the gold plates. Perhaps they might be dismissed as a conscious ruse to supplement the otherwise unconscious production of the words. For an innovative treatise of this topic, see Ann Taves, “History and the Claims of Revelation: Joseph Smith and the Materialization of the Golden Plates,” in *The Expanded Canon: Perspectives on Mormonism and Sacred Texts*, edited by Blair G. Van Dyke, Brian D. Birch, and Boyd J. Petersen (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2018), 93–119.

120. Dunn, “Automaticity,” 25–26, 37, 41, 42, and 44. Taves, *Revelatory Events*, 250–51, 261–62.

that they seemed real to listeners.¹²¹ In one experiment, Hilgard challenged the student under hypnosis to fabricate a story about being in a cave with friends. From there, he recited a seventeen-minute narrative with impressive details regarding geography and the group's activities. The student later related how "In hypnosis, once I create the pattern, I don't have to take any more initiative; the story just unfolds."¹²²

Dunn refers to this student's state as "dissociation," which allows a person access to the "latent abilities of the human mind" so they can "rapidly produce writing of a quality superior to their natural powers."¹²³ Taves agrees that the student demonstrates how, through hypnosis, a person "could tap into levels of mental activity that were not available to the consciousness of the hypnotized person."¹²⁴ Focusing on the student's described ease of dictation, Taves writes, "Both dream narratives and 'confabulations'—defined as 'fictive narrative[s] produced effortlessly, without insight as to . . . veracity'—provide evidence that most people can produce stories effortlessly."¹²⁵ While this may be true, Taves does not address the length, quality, and complexity of the narratives produced "effortlessly."

As a parallel to Joseph Smith, Hilgard's hypnotized student has limitations. The seventeen minutes of recited text would equate to roughly 2,500 words, so memory requirements would not parallel the creation of a text over one hundred times as long during a three-month span. Additionally, Hilgard does not provide a transcript, so it is impossible to know whether the sentences flowed with sufficient polish to allow them to go straight to press with minimal editing. Other dissimilarities can be identified suggesting that a hypnotized storyteller's short yarn would require only a small fraction of the cognitive functionality (whether conscious or unconscious) needed to create lengthy automatic writings or the Book of Mormon.¹²⁶

121. Ernest R. Hilgard, *Divided Consciousness: Multiple Controls in Human Thought and Action*, 2nd ed. (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1986), 196; see also 51.

122. *Ibid.*, 198.

123. Dunn, "Automaticity," 26.

124. Taves, *Revelatory Events*, 252.

125. Taves, *Revelatory Events*, 258.

126. While Hilgard speaks of a hidden part of the unconscious that assisted the hypnotized storyteller (called the "hidden observer"), he does not consider that

Nonconscious Control Diminishes Intellectual Capabilities

It seems that descriptions of a person entering a nonconscious state where they perform complex cognitive functions that are well beyond their conscious abilities are simply describing a psychological unicorn—a mental condition that scientific experiments have not yet shown to exist. John F. Kihlstrom and Eric Eich write that “Hypnosis does not appear to enhance the performance of people whose sensory and perceptual abilities are intact.”¹²⁷ While Taves acknowledges that Joseph Smith “stands out,” she does not attempt to close the gap between psychological descriptions of documented unconscious capabilities and those required in creative dictation.¹²⁸ A possible analogy might be identifying a person skillfully drawing stick figures and then assuming their skills would allow them to paint the Mona Lisa. The available data does not seem to support the leap of logic required by the theory. Additional supportive documentation is needed.

Perhaps some recalcitrant clinicians, like James H. Hyslop mentioned above, would look at the historical data and still maintain that the unconscious is responsible for lengthy automatic writings. This position could be greatly strengthened by performing a prospective study where a subject is examined while creating a continuous text through multiple sessions of automatic writing in a way that generally duplicates the origins of *The Sorry Tale* or the Book of Mormon. If the process occurs naturally, scientific experimentation ought to be able to replicate it.

To date, texts attributed to automatic writing attain that classification well after they have been written—through retrospective observations. That is, authors like Pearl Curran, Helen Shucman, and Joseph Smith have been studied by academics only after producing their epic works that have been labeled automatic writings.

hidden part of the mind to represent “unrealized human potential” (Hilgard, *Divided Consciousness*, 209). Hilgard’s research supports that neither the unconscious, nor this hidden part, possess the cognitive potential assumed by Taves and Dunn (Ibid., 196–215).

127. John F. Kihlstrom and Eric Eich, “Altering States of Consciousness,” in *Learning, Remembering, Believing: Enhanced Human Performance*, edited by Daniel Druckman and Robert A. Bjork (Washington, DC: National Academies Press, 1994), 222.

128. Taves, *Revelatory Events*, 258.

To summarize, in their 1992 article “Is the Unconscious Smart or Dumb?” psychologists Elizabeth F. Loftus and Mark R. Klinger review the literature on the topic and ultimately conclude: “There seems to be a general consensus that the unconscious may not be as smart as previously believed.”¹²⁹ Theories that task the nonconscious mind with the ability to complete complicated intellectual projects remain unproven.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the similarities between the creation of the Book of Mormon and other automatic writings are undeniable. While automatic writing has been promoted as “the best model for understanding the translation of the Book of Mormon,” the apparent connection does not constitute an actual explanation of how these compositions were generated.¹³⁰ Grouping the Book of Mormon with automatic writing provides no answer to the question, “Where did all the words come from?”

Secularists will understandably reject Joseph Smith’s revelations describing different types of supernatural forces influencing both the creation of the Book of Mormon and automatic writings. Even as psychological explanations attribute the words to the subconscious minds of the authors, prospective experiments demonstrating this to be a possibility have yet to be performed. Neither have assumptions that entering a trance state could enhance the natural compositional abilities of the authors been proven. Indeed, available scientific studies appear to demonstrate the opposite.

These observations might explain the reason why, historically, automatic writing has never gained wide acceptance among naturalistic theories explicating the origin of the Book of Mormon. It appears that Joseph Smith’s intellectual qualifications in 1829, the complexity of the Book of Mormon, the difficulties of creative dictation, and the inherent cognitive limitations

129. Elizabeth F. Loftus and Mark R. Klinger, “Is the Unconscious Smart or Dumb?” *American Psychologist* 47, no. 6 (June 1992): 762.

130. Dunn, “Automaticity,” 33. See also Taves, *Revelatory Events*, 256; Riley, *The Founder of Mormonism*, 84.

of an unconscious state fail to coalesce into a plausible explanation of how he generated all the words. Nevertheless, the findings presented in this article should not be considered the final word; additional research is warranted to explain Joseph Smith's loquaciousness even if automatic writing is insufficient to do so.

		Standard Writing	Automatic Writing	Book of Mormon Dictation
Produce long books		Yes	Yes	Yes
Produce complex books		Yes	Yes	Yes
Writing methodology	Pre-write	Yes	No	No
	Write	Yes	Yes	Yes
	Rewrite	Yes	No	No
Use of objects in forming text		No	Sometimes	Yes
Trance state		No	Frequently	No
Author claims of supernatural assistance		No	Yes	Yes
Author's intelligence matches book's complexity (generally)		Yes	No	No
Naturalist explanations		Human intellect	Subconscious origin of words, human intellect, and/or deception	Human intellect, deception, and/or subconscious origin of words
Joseph Smith's explanation		Human intellect	False spirits or human influence	Gift and power of God

Table 2



Royden Card
Below the Mesa

THE GOLD PLATES AND ANCIENT METAL EPIGRAPHY

Ryan Thomas

Richard Bushman has called the gold plates story “the single most troublesome item in Joseph Smith’s history.”¹ Smith famously claimed to have discovered, with the help of an angel, anciently engraved gold plates buried in a hill near his home in New York from which he translated the sacred text of the Book of Mormon. Not only a source of new scripture comparable to the Bible, the plates were also a tangible artifact, which he allowed a small circle of believers to touch and handle before they were taken back into the custody of the angel. The story is fantastical and otherworldly and has sparked both devotion and skepticism as well as widely varying assessments among historians. Critical and non-believing historians have tended to assume that the presentation of material plates shows that Smith was actively engaged in religious deceit of one form or another,² while Latter-day Saint historians have been inclined to take Smith and the traditional narrative at face value. For example, Bushman writes, “Since the people who knew Joseph best treat the plates as fact, a skeptical analysis lacks evidence. A series of surmises replaces a documented narrative.”³ Recently, Anne Taves has articulated a middle way between these positions by suggesting that

1. Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 58.

2. E.g., Fawn Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1945); Dan Vogel, *Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2004).

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

while Smith most likely fabricated the plates, he may nevertheless have been sincere in his belief in their spiritual authenticity and antiquity.⁴

For now, I would like to set aside the question of Smith's motivations and innermost understanding of himself and the gold plates and inquire into the more basic issue of the historical plausibility of the plates themselves. After all, whatever Smith may have said about the plates and however strong the evidence that his family and friends accepted their existence and authenticity, the gold plates and its narrative congeners (brass plates, plates of Nephi, plates of Ether, etc.) represents a historical datum capable of investigation and substantiation by itself. For not only are they claimed to be a product of remote antiquity, but are said to stem from writing cultures with roots in the ancient Near East and Israel-Judah in particular. Assuming historicity and that the peoples of the Book of Mormon were constrained and inflected by human culture and technology, we should expect to find circumstantial corroboration within the available historical record for this general picture of preserving lengthy sacred narrative on metal.

As is well known, the topic has already received extensive treatment in Latter-day Saint apologetic scholarship. In the face of general skepticism regarding the plates, Latter-day Saint scholars and scripture enthusiasts have documented archaeological evidence for writing on metal in antiquity in an effort to authenticate the Book of Mormon and buttress claims of the gold plates' ancient origin, which has typically involved constructing lists of comparative parallels.⁵ However, the weaknesses of this general approach have become

4. Ann Taves, "History and the Claims of Revelation: Joseph Smith and the Materialization of the Golden Plates," *Numen* 61, nos. 2–3 (2014): 182–207.

5. E.g., Ariel L. Crowley, *Metal Record Plates in Ancient Times* (United States: The author, 1947); Franklin S. Harris, Jr., "Others Kept Records on Metal Plates, Too," *Instructor* 92 (1957): 318–21; H. Curtis Wright, "Metallic Documents of Antiquity," *BYU Studies* 10 (1970): 457–77; Mark E. Petersen, *Those Gold Plates!* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1979); C. Wilfred Griggs, "The Book of Mormon as an Ancient Book," in *Book of Mormon Authorship: New Light on Ancient Origins*, edited by Noel B. Reynolds (Provo: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1982), 75–101; Paul R. Cheesman, *Ancient Writing on Metal Plates: Archaeological Findings Support Mormon Claims* (Bountiful, Utah: Horizon, 1985); Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert, The World of the Jaredites, There Were Jaredites* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988); Hugh Nibley, *Since Cumorah*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS,

increasingly apparent. Not all writing on metal is equally relevant to the Book of Mormon plates, considering that inscriptions in the ancient Near East were engraved on all types of objects, were of diverse length, and featured a wide range of content and literary genres. The tendency has been to treat any and all metal inscriptions as having probative value, highlighting vague material and content parallels at the expense of a careful consideration of how their individual contexts differ from the Book of Mormon and what that may suggest about the latter's origin. In addition, there is no attempt to explain how these disparate metal epigraphic traditions gave rise to the Book of Mormon metal plates or even how the Book of Mormon's presentation of metal document record-keeping fits into the larger sweep of human writing history.

The following study aims to evaluate the Book of Mormon claims of gold and other metal documents and to determine to what degree they have credible antecedents or parallels in the broader ancient Near East. The purpose is not to defend or attack the Book of Mormon as a religious document but to gather and weigh evidence in the spirit of Bushman's recent call to bridge the conversation between believers and nonbelievers on difficult topics such as the gold plates.⁶

To that end, I will first present a comprehensive review of inscriptions on metal from the ancient Near East/eastern Mediterranean by region along with a brief analysis of their typologically significant features, for example, major literary genres, length, social background, and ideological and religious functions. Because I am interested in finding texts closely comparable to the Book of Mormon plates, a tradition that is alleged to have originated in

1988); John A. Tvedtnes, *The Book of Mormon and Other Hidden Books: "Out of Darkness unto Light"* (Provo: FARMS, 2000); Aaron P. Schade, "The Kingdom of Judah: Politics, Prophets, and Scribes in the Late Preexilic Period," in *Glimpses of Lehi's Jerusalem: The Kingdom of Judah: Politics, Prophets, and Scribes in the Late Preexilic Period*, edited by John W. Welch, David Rolph Seely, and Jo Ann H. Seely (Provo: FARMS, 2004), 319–23; William J. Hamblin, "Sacred Writing on Metal Plates in the Ancient Mediterranean," *FARMS Review* 19, no. 1 (2007): 37–54.

6. "Will believers and unbelievers learn to talk about the miraculous elements at the foundation of Mormonism with the same even-handedness as we discuss the Utah War? Can we bridge the belief gap on such subjects as the gold plates?" (Richard Lyman Bushman, "Reading the Gold Plates," *Journal of Mormon History* 41, no. 1 [2015]: 69).

Israel-Judah before the sixth century BCE and perhaps much earlier with the Jaredites, I will limit my investigation to inscriptions that a) date from the third millennium to fifth century BCE; b) include continuous text of more than one line, excluding mere dedications or the listing of private names; and c) were written on a flat surface, such as a plate or sheet, that mimics material used for archival writing (e.g., papyrus, leather, clay tablet, etc.), excluding arrowheads, knives, armor, statues, bowls, cups, vases, jewelry, etc. Such a broad analysis will lead to the identification of a number of common patterns in the use of metal as epigraphic support across the ancient Near East/eastern Mediterranean as a whole. Next, I will describe metal record-keeping as recounted in the Book of Mormon and consider how the practice fits into the above context of ancient metal epigraphy. Finally, I will critically examine the hypothesis that Israel-Judah once had a metal writing tradition that gave rise to the Book of Mormon.

Metal Epigraphy from Ancient Near East/ Eastern Mediterranean⁷

Mesopotamia

Almost all known inscriptions of continuous text recorded on metal in Mesopotamia were foundation deposits or similar building-dedicatory inscriptions, which have been catalogued and discussed by Ellis.⁸ As explained by Pearce, “Stone and metal were generally reserved for inscriptions commissioned by members of royalty, although not all royal inscriptions were written on these materials. Since Mesopotamia was poor in mineral resources, gold, silver, and basalt were imported. Metals were attested only infrequently as a writing material and were reserved for texts of importance to the crown.”⁹ The use of metal as a writing medium was

7. See the appendix for a catalogue of inscriptions from individual regions.

8. Richard S. Ellis, *Foundation Deposits in Ancient Mesopotamia*, Yale Near Eastern Researches 2 (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1968), 104, 188–94.

9. Laurie Pearce, “The Scribes and Scholars of Ancient Mesopotamia,” in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, edited by Jack Sasson (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1995), 4:2269.

intended to convey prestige as well as permanence, in addition to aiming to please the deity to whom the inscription was directed.¹⁰

Iran/Persia

Metal inscriptions are exclusively associated with royal authority in Iran/Persia, their function ranging from royal decree, foundation deposit, to display inscription. Valuable metal was apparently used to mark the prestige of the document owners as well as their devotion to deity.¹¹

Anatolia

Anatolia had a long and rich tradition of writing on metal, including the Hittite practice of publishing important political documents on metal tablets. As explained by Van den Hout, “Metal tablets are said to have been made in gold, silver, bronze, and iron, and such copies were probably made only of very important texts, serving as engrossed copies. Signs must have been ‘punched’ in with an instrument that imitated the impression left by a normal stylus in a clay tablet. Such metal tablets are attested for treaties, loyalty oaths and, possibly, a land grant, but also for historical texts. Only one bronze example has survived so far, containing the treaty of the Great King Tuthaliya IV (ca. 1240–ca. 1210 BCE) with Kuruntiya, viceroy in the southern province of Tarhuntassa. Treaties are known to have been deposited ‘before the deity’ and we may assume that all such engrossed copies in metal were kept there.”¹² The bronze, iron, gold, and silver documents are uniformly of royal background

10. Ellis, *Foundation Deposits*, 107, 140; Laurie E. Pearce, “Materials of Writing and Materiality of Knowledge,” in *Gazing on the Deep: Ancient Near Eastern and Other Studies in Honor of Tzvi Abusch*, edited by Jeffrey Stackert, Barbara N. Porter, and David P. Wright (Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 2010), 167–80.

11. C. L. Nimchuk, “Empire Encapsulated: The Persepolis Apadana Foundation Deposits,” in *The World of Achaemenid Persia: History, Art and Society in Iran and the Ancient Near East*, edited by John Curtis and St. John Simpson (London: I. B. Tauris, 2010), 224; Douglas Fear, “*utā pavastāyā utā carmā grftam āha*—Written on Clay and Parchment: Old Persian Writing and Allography in Iranian,” in *Communication and Materiality: Written and Unwritten Communication in Pre-Modern Societies*, edited by Susanne Enderwitz and Rebecca Sauer (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015), 76.

12. Theo van den Hout, “The Written Legacy of the Hittites,” in *Insights into Hittite History and Archaeology*, edited by Hermann Genz and Dirk Paul Mielke (Leuven, Belgium: Peeters, 2011), 52–53.

and seem to have been intended to perform a symbolic display function, communicating power, wealth, and piety to both local and external audiences.

Phoenicia and Phoenician Colonies

Aside from some early inscriptions on bronze dedicatory spatula, in Phoenicia and its colonies the use of metal as a medium for writing continuous text occurs only in relation to the production of amulets.¹³ The metal sheets were typically inscribed with short incantations and apotropaic imagery, rolled up, and stored in capsules. The choice of precious metal in this case was likely a factor of the amulet owner's wealth and status; in addition, such metal had a numinous or sacred quality and therefore may have been seen to possess enhanced apotropaic properties.¹⁴

Israel-Judah

The only examples of continuous text on metal from ancient Israel-Judah are the Ketef Hinnom inscriptions, which are short incantations that functioned as amulets against demonic forces.¹⁵ As with the Phoenician inscriptions

13. Christopher Rollston, "Phoenicia and the Phoenicians," in *The World around the Old Testament: The People and Places of the Ancient*, edited by Bill T. Arnold and Brent A. Strawn (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2016), 284–94; Philip C. Schmitz, "Reconsidering a Phoenician Amulet," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 122 (2002): 817–23; Jeremy D. Smoak, *The Priestly Blessing in Inscription and Scripture: The Early History of Numbers 6:24–26* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 44–49.

14. Amir Golani, *Jewelry from the Iron Age II Levant* (Göttingen, Germany: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), 15–16; Irene J. Winter, "Radiance as an Aesthetic Value in the Art of Mesopotamia (With some Indian Parallels)," in *Art, the Integral Vision: A Volume of Essays in Felicitation of Kapila Vatsyayan*, edited by Baidyanath N. Saraswati, Subhash C. Malik, and Madhu Khanna (New Delhi: D.K. Printworld, 1994), 123–32; Susan Limmer, "The Social Functions and Ritual Significance of Jewelry in the Iron Age II Southern Levant" (PhD diss., University of Arizona, 2007), 393–99; Christopher A. Faraone, *The Transformation of Greek Amulets in Roman Imperial Times* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), 80.

15. Gabriel Barkay, Marilyn J. Lundberg, Andrew G. Vaughn, and Bruce Zuckerman, "The Amulets from Ketef Hinnom: A New Edition and Evaluation," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 334 (2004): 41–71; Smoak, *The Priestly Blessing*, 12–42; Angelika Berlejung, "Der gesegnete Mensch. Text und Kontext von Num 6,22–27 und den Silber-amuletten von Ketef Hinnom," in *Mensch und König:*

discussed above, the choice of precious metal as material support was likely a factor of the amulet owner's wealth and status, in addition to that such metal facilitated an apotropaic function.¹⁶

South Arabia

Numerous bronze plaques have been recovered from the lands of ancient South Arabia.¹⁷ However, only a small number date from the early Sabaic period. Generally short in length, the inscriptions are dedicatory or votive in function, representing a gift to deity to commemorate a certain pious act and/or engender divine favor, and to put on display in temple structures.

Egypt

In Egypt no document on metal is presently extant before the Greco-Roman period, though the Harris Papyrus shows that metal was used much earlier in the case of royal votives intended for display in the cult. As noted by Eyre, "inscriptions [on metal] may have been commoner than the evidence suggests—metal objects were the first target for recycling—but always special in purpose."¹⁸

Ancient Greece and Greek Settlements

Writing on metal is abundantly attested in the Greek world. In fact, more inscriptions of continuous text are extant from Greece and Greek colonies than from anywhere else in the ancient Near East/eastern Mediterranean. The texts on bronze and lead are generally short, the longest ranging between

Studien zur Anthropologie des Alten Testaments. Rüdiger Lux zum 60. Geburtstag, edited by Angelika Berlejung and Raik Heckl (Freiburg: Herder, 2008), 37–62.

16. Gabriel Barkay, "The Priestly Benediction on Silver Plaques from Ketef Hinnom in Jerusalem," *Tel Aviv* 19 (1992): 174; Smoak, *The Priestly Blessing*, 42.

17. Christian Robin, "Saba' and the Sabaeans," in *Queen of Sheba: Treasures from Ancient Yemen*, edited by St. John Simpson (London: British Museum, 2002), 63–64; William D. Glanzman, "Arts, Crafts and Industries," in *Queen of Sheba: Treasures from Ancient Yemen*, edited by St. John Simpson (London: British Museum, 2002), 114; Barbara Jändl, *Altsüdarabische Inschriften auf Metall*, Epigraphische Forschungen auf der Arabischen Halbinsel 4 (Berlin: Wasmuth, 2009).

18. Christopher Eyre, *The Use of Documents in Pharaonic Egypt* (Corby: Oxford University Press, 2013), 32.

twenty and forty lines. No lengthy literary text has been preserved, though Pausanias reports he had seen a copy of Hesiod's *Works and Days* recorded on a lead tablet at the sanctuary of Mount Helicon in the second century CE.

With the increased development of mining in the Archaic period,¹⁹ bronze and lead suddenly come into use as an inscriptional medium from the sixth century BCE, with bronze employed “especially in regions where it is more abundant than stone or marble or where the stone is of poor quality, such as around Olympia, where the stone is a shelly limestone, difficult to engrave.”²⁰ Bronze was ordinarily used for documents of an official, normative, or public character, such as treaties, laws, contracts, wills, or dedications, and were put on display at sanctuaries. Cole explains, “Greek sanctuaries were used for the display of inscribed legal documents, in part for publicity, but also to make clear the involvement of the gods in the legal process at the human level. The inscription itself, whether on bronze plaque, stone stele, or the wall of the temple had the status of votive object, declared sacred to the god. . . . Both the inscription itself and the legal acts it contained were protected by the gods from tampering and destruction.”²¹ With regard to the use of bronze at Olympia, Sophie Minon states,

The bronze plaques once inscribed were displayed on the walls of the temples at Olympia (small fixing holes in some), though it is assured that these displayed texts were not readable since they were too small to be read from afar. They were thus sacred records by being engraved

19. Thilo Rehren, “Metallurgy, Greece and Rome,” in *The Encyclopedia of Ancient History*, edited by Roger S. Bagnall, et al. (Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 4466–69.

20. Sophie Minon, email message to author, June 9, 2017. See also L. H. Jeffery, *The Local Scripts of Archaic Greece*, rev. ed. with supplement by A. W. Johnston (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990), 55; Bradley H. McLean, *An Introduction to Greek Epigraphy of the Hellenistic and Roman Periods: From Alexander the Great to the Reign of Constantine (323 BC–AD 337)* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 206; Anne Kolb, “Bronze in Epigraphy,” in *New Research on Ancient Bronzes: Acta of the XVIIIth International Congress on Ancient Bronzes*, edited by Philippe Della Casa and Eckhard Deschler-Erb (Zürich: Chronos, 2015), 344.

21. Susan Guettel Cole, “Civic Cult and Civic Identity,” in *Sources for the Ancient Greek City-State: Symposium, August, 24–27 1994*, edited by Mogens Herman Hansen (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1995), 306.

on a non-perishable material and entrusted to the god (the plaque is in general called “property of Zeus”). Clearly, only a part of the archives, probably only texts of the law, was engraved. The rest was to appear on more perishable supports, such as wooden tablets. . . . [Bronze writing] serves to display, that is to say to give a form of publicity, to communicate. It is used for this purpose for its perennial character. And probably because the material is sufficiently noble to give a form of authority to the decisions and acts of public life that they carry.²²

Lead was used for private documents, such as letters, curses, and oracular questions and responses, because it was relatively inexpensive and easy to engrave.²³

Italy

Outside of Greek-populated areas in Magna Graecia, continuous text on metal is rarely attested in ancient Italy before the Roman period, limited to a few short Etruscan inscriptions on gold and lead.²⁴ The gold Pyrgi inscriptions were votive and intended for public display in the sanctuary, while the lead inscriptions appear to be of a cultic nature. As is well known, bronze was widely used by the Romans for the publication of important political and legal documents.²⁵

22. Sophie Minon, email message to author, June 9, 2017.

23. Antonia Sarri, *Material Aspects of Letter Writing in the Graeco-Roman World: 500 BC–AD 300* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018), 72–73; D. R. Jordan, “Early Greek Letters on Lead,” in *A History of Ancient Greek: From the Beginnings to Late Antiquity*, edited by Anastasios-Phoibos Christidēs and Kentro Hellēnikēs Glōssas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 1355–66; Esther Eidinow and Claire Taylor, “Lead-Letter Days: Writing, Communication and Crisis in the Ancient Greek World,” *Classical Quarterly* 60 (2010): 30–62; Esther Eidinow, *Oracles, Curses, and Risk Among the Ancient Greeks* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Fritz Graf, *Magic in the Ancient World*, translated by Franklin Philip (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), 133; McLean, *Introduction to Greek Epigraphy*, 207.

24. Luciano Agostiniani, “The Etruscan Language,” in *The Etruscan World*, edited by Jean MacIntosh Turfa (New York: Routledge, 2013), 460–64.

25. Callie Williamson, “Monuments of Bronze: Roman Legal Documents on Bronze Tablets,” *Classical Antiquity* 6 (1987): 160–83; Kolb, “Bronze in Epigraphy”; Werner Eck, “Documents on Bronze: A Phenomenon of the Roman West?,” in *Ancient Documents and their Contexts: First North American Congress of Greek and Latin Epigraphy (2011)*, edited by John Bodet and Nora Dimitrova (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 127–51.

Analysis of Comparative Data

From this review of inscriptions on metal from the ancient Near East/eastern Mediterranean, we are now in a position to identify a few common patterns in the material:

First, the inscriptions are generally short, with the majority averaging around ten lines and the longer examples representing the equivalent of several modern printed pages.

Second, the range of genres employed in writing on metal was limited, both within cultures and across the ancient Near East/eastern Mediterranean as a whole. The most prominent types include dedication, memorial, foundation deposit, building inscription, legal decree, treaty, incantation, and curse. The language is generally formulaic, lacking literary complexity.

Third, inscriptions on metal had a prominent symbolic function.²⁶ They were typically meant to be seen, whether by deity, other elites, or the community, and so were put on display, the most common venue being the sanctuary.

Fourth, the use of metal as epigraphic support is most commonly associated with royal sponsorship or wealthy individuals who could bear the significant expense.²⁷

Fifth, because of its high value and solidity, requiring laborious engraving, metal was not generally used as an archival material for the storing of large-scale information or a log to which content could be added incrementally. Writing on metal belonged to the sphere of skilled craftsmanship, and inscriptions tended to be produced all in one go, i.e., as complete text.

The most notable exceptions to the above patterns with regard to length and genre are *The Deeds of Šuppiluliuma* written on bronze tablets and Hesiod's *Works and Days* written on lead. The texts are not only unusually long, approaching one thousand and eight hundred lines respectively, but relatively

26. John Bodel, "Epigraphy and the Ancient Historian," in *Epigraphic Evidence: Ancient History from Inscriptions*, edited by John Bodel (New York: Routledge, 2001), 19–24.

27. See Christopher A. Rollston, *Writing and Literacy in the World of Ancient Israel: Epigraphic Evidence from the Iron Age*, *Archaeology and Biblical Studies* 11 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2010), 64–66.

unique in their high literary character. *Deeds* is a historiographic account of the reign of Šuppiluliuma I composed by his son Muršili II that served as prologue to an annalistic account of the latter's reign, while *Works and Days* is an epic poem combining myth and practical teaching. However, these exceptions only prove the rule with regard to the non-use of metal as archival support, since the bronze version of *Deeds* was most likely a display inscription celebrating the royal Hittite dynasty and the lead copy of *Works and Days*, if the report of Pausanias is reliable, was a votive at the sanctuary near Mount Helicon.

Metal Epigraphy in the Book of Mormon

The character of the metal plates tradition in the Book of Mormon can be gathered from evidence mostly internal to the narrative itself.

First, the use of metal documents is extensive. We have mention of at least six metal plate collections representing lengthy independent documents, including the brass plates (1 Ne. 5:11–13), small plates of Nephi (1 Ne. 9:2–4; 2 Ne. 5:30–32), large plates of Nephi (1 Ne. 9:2, 4; 19:4), plates of Zeniff (Mosiah 8:5; 22:14), plates of Mormon (W of M 1:3; 3 Ne. 5:10–11; Morm. 6:6), and plates of Ether (Mosiah 8:9; Ether 1:2). These are the primary examples of formal writing in the narrative, and indeed other epigraphic support materials such as leather skins, wood tablets, wax, or stone are never directly referenced, only a single cryptic allusion to non-plate substances (Jacob 4:1–2).

Second, the tradition is ancient and proximately of Judean-Israelite background. The plates of brass are labeled the “record of the Jews,” implied to be a national history and document tradition tracing back to the time of Joseph in Egypt (1 Ne. 5:16). Nephi, a native of Jerusalem, is responsible for constructing and initiating the large and small plate collections, which remained in use throughout Nephite history and presumably along with the plates of brass were the models upon which later plate traditions were fashioned. In addition, the Jaredites apparently had a metal epigraphic tradition independent of the Nephites, since the prophet Ether is said to have composed a history of the Jaredites on gold plates containing a continuous account from the time of Adam (Ether 1:2–4).

Third, the metal plates functioned as regular archival material, that is, they were intended primarily for informational storage (1 Ne. 5:11–13; 6:3–6;

9:2–4; 19:3–5; 2 Ne. 5:30–33; Jacob 1:2–4; 4:3; etc.). The independent metal documents contained complex historiographical and biographical narrative, interweaving multiple literary genres, and were generally of a lengthy character, representing the equivalent of hundreds of modern printed pages. They also tended to be composed incrementally, with a single author adding to a document on multiple occasions or multiple authors contributing to the same document. For example, the brass plates were updated with prophecies from Jeremiah in the time of Lehi (1 Ne. 5:13); Nephi writes his personal ministry on the small plates after the separation from the Lamanites and subsequently expands with additional teaching material (2 Ne. 5:30–32; 10:2; 31:1–2; 33:3); Jacob and his descendants fill out the small plates of Nephi (Jacob 1:1–2; Jarom 1:1, 15; Omni 1:30); and Moroni fills out the plates of Mormon with chapter 8 of Mormon through Moroni (Morm. 8:1, 5).

Fourth, metal documents were created, maintained, and handed down by the spiritual leaders of Book of Mormon peoples. Nephi kept the large plates before being made king by the Nephites (1 Ne. 19:1) and passed on the small plates to the prophet Jacob (Jacob 1:1–2), ordering that they be handed down “from one prophet to another” (1 Ne. 19:4). Although the large plates tradition was kept by the kings of the Nephites from Nephi to Mosiah₁ (W of M 1:10), beginning with prophet-king Benjamin the small and large plates were handed down together. After Mosiah₂ and Alma the Younger (Mosiah 28:20), they became solely the preserve of prophets again (Alma 37:1–2; 3 Ne. 1:2; 4 Ne. 1:19, 47–48; Morm. 1:2–4; 6:6; 8:5). Ether, the author of the Jaredite history, was also a prophet (Ether 1:2; 12:2). The major authors of the Book of Mormon were not only prophet-scribes but skilled craftsmen responsible for having fashioned the metal plates (1 Ne. 1:17; 19:1; 3 Ne. 5:11; cf. Morm. 8:5) and engraved them (1 Ne. 19:1; Jacob 4:1, 3; Morm. 1:4).

Finally, the metal plates were apparently in the form of a codex. According to Joseph Smith’s description of the gold plates, “each plate was six inches wide and eight inches long, and not quite so thick as common tin. They were . . . bound together in a volume, as the leaves of a book, with three rings running through the whole” (1842). This means that at least the plates of Mormon were constructed in codex form, with multiple leaves bound on one side. However, there can be little doubt that this form applied to other plate collections as well. Not only are the documents referred to

variously with plural and singular forms (“plates” *and* “record”), but the collections are ordered sequentially such that they have beginnings and ends. For example, Lehi is said to have searched the plates of brass “from the beginning,” which contained “the five books of Moses . . . and also a record of the Jews from the beginning, even down to the commencement of the reign of Zedekiah” (1 Ne. 5:10–12). In abridging the plates of Ether, Moroni omits “the first part of the record, which speaks concerning the creation of the world, and also of Adam, and an account from that time even to the great tower” and treats only the part of the narrative “from the tower down until [the Jaredites] were destroyed” (Ether 1:3, 5). The small plates of Nephi are obviously sequential, and the same can be assumed for the large plates, which is the source behind the plates of Mormon. Such lengthy sequential narrative seems to presuppose codex-like organization, since without a binding the metal sheets would be prone to disarrangement and confusion, and the employment of simple catchphrases or colophons to link so many together would have been impracticable.²⁸

Accepting the accuracy of this description, the Book of Mormon metal writing tradition clearly stands outside of documented practices of ancient metal epigraphy. Salient factors include the following:

- consistent use of metal to the exclusion of other epigraphic support materials
- extensive use of gold in particular
- exceptional length
- complex melding of literary genres
- archival informational storage function of the plates
- incremental addition to plate documents
- non-mention of a display role for plates in sanctuary
- provenance of metal epigraphy outside of royal power and politics

28. For ancient strategies of linking large amounts of text together, see Alan Millard, “Books in the Late Bronze Age in the Levant,” in *Past Links: Studies in the Languages and Cultures of the Ancient Near East*, edited by Shlomo Izre’el, Itamar Singer, and Ran Zadok (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1998), 171–81.

- combination of scribal art and metal craftsmanship into single author
- codex form

As is well known, the codex form developed in the Roman period and gradually replaced the scroll over the first millennium CE.²⁹

Taken altogether, the presentation of metal epigraphy in the Book of Mormon is deeply implausible on historical grounds. It is not simply a matter that the Book of Mormon lacks any credible parallel or antecedent writing on metal from the ancient Near East, since ultimately this is an argument from silence and it is always possible that further metal documents may eventually be found, but the fact that the social, political, economic, technological, and literary features of Book of Mormon metal writing so strongly contradict what we would expect for the time and culture. Multiple lines of evidence all contribute to the case for disconfirmation.

Metal Epigraphy in Israel-Judah

We saw above that the Book of Mormon implies that the proximate background of the plates tradition was ancient Israel-Judah, from which derived the plates of brass and Nephi, who was responsible for initiating the large and small plates in Nephite record-keeping. So Latter-day Saint scholars have been keen to establish potential examples of metal epigraphy in archaeological and biblical sources, both from Israel-Judah as well as later Second Temple Judaic culture.³⁰ Aside from the Ketef Hinnom inscriptions, which we have already discussed do not provide a viable parallel to the Book of

29. J. van Haelst, "Les origines du codex," in *Les Débuts du codex*, edited by Alain Blanchard, *Bibliologia* 9 (Brepols, Belgium: Turnhout, 1989), 12–35; Lionel Casson, *Libraries in the Ancient World* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2002), 124–35; June Ashton, *Scribal Habits in the Ancient Near East: C.3000 BCE to the Emergence of the Codex* (Sydney: Mandelbaum, 2008), 177–79; Adam Bülow-Jacobsen, "Writing Materials in the Ancient World," in *The Oxford Handbook of Papyrology*, edited by Roger S. Bagnall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 3–29.

30. See Crowley, *Metal Record Plates*; Nibley, *Since Cumorah*; William J. Adams, Jr., "Lehi's Jerusalem and Writing on Metal Plates," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 3, no. 1 (1994): 204–06; Tvedtnes, *The Book of Mormon and Other Hidden Books*; Kevin L. Barney, "A More Responsible Critique," *FARMS Review* 15, no. 1 (2003): 97–146; Hamblin, "Sacred Writing on Metal Plates."

Mormon because of their short length and genre as magical incantations, other proposed examples of writing on metal include Exodus 28:36; Job 19:23–24; Isaiah 8:1; Isaiah 30:8; 1 Maccabees 8:22; 14:48–49; and the Copper Scroll from Qumran. I will briefly look at each of these texts and consider whether as secondary and/or late evidence they point to the existence of an earlier metal writing tradition that by chance has not yet been revealed through archaeological excavation.

Exodus 28:36: "You shall make a crown/rosette [šyš] of pure gold, and engrave on it the seal inscription, 'Holy to YHWH.'"

Hamblin writes, "The oldest example of Hebrew writing on metal is the engraved gold plate attached to the front of the turban of the high priest (at least 10C). According to Exodus 28:36, Moses was ordered to 'make a plate (*tzitz*) of pure gold and engrave upon it as an engraved seal (*khotem*), 'Holy to Yahweh.'"³¹ However, there are various problems with this characterization. Aside from the fact that the dating of the passage is uncertain, we have many more reliable examples of early Hebrew writing on metal objects, and the translation of *šyš* with "plate" is undoubtedly incorrect.³² The inscription is brief and therefore unremarkable.

Job 19:23–24: "O, would that then my words be written! Oh, would that they be engraved [wyḥqw] in an inscription [spr]! With an iron stylus and lead, they be hewn upon a rock forever."

Noting that the verb *ḥqq* properly means "to engrave," Barney supposes that *spr* in this context may refer to a bronze or copper tablet, based on a proposal advanced by earlier biblical scholars that the Hebrew word is related to Akkadian *siparru* bronze.³³ On this understanding, the bronze and rock material are two examples of writing intended to be permanent. However, this explanation of *spr* is speculative and unnecessary. In the context of the

31. Hamblin, "Sacred Writing on Metal Plates," 40.

32. William H. Propp, *Exodus 19–40: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible 2A (New York: Doubleday, 2006), 446–47.

33. "Responsible Critique," 107–08.

passage, which is about Job's words being written, the consonants *s-p-r* are more easily related to the sphere of writing.³⁴ Not only that, Hebrew already had a common word for "bronze." Others have observed that *spr* can mean "inscription," which provides a nice parallel to the following line in verse 24 about having words cut into rock with an engraving tool. Suriano has recently argued that the passage describes a "single location of writing that is consistent with a tomb inscription."³⁵

Isaiah 8:1: "And YHWH said to me, 'Take a large stele [glywn gdwl] and write on it with a human engraving tool [hrt], 'Belonging to Maher-shalal-hash-baz.'"

Although *glywn* is a hapax whose precise meaning is unknown, Latter-day Saint scholars have identified it as another possible example of a metal table because *hrt* elsewhere denotes a graving tool used on hard surfaces and a similarly spelled *glynym* appears in Isaiah 3:23, which has been interpreted as "polished metal, i.e., mirrors."³⁶ However, this view meets with several difficulties. First, it is not clear that *glynym* in Isaiah 3:23 means "mirrors," since the references that precede and follow it in the catalogue appear to be articles of clothing. The same term has been linked to Akkadian *gulēnu/gulīnu/gulānu* "overgarment" and Hebrew *glwm* "coat, wrap."³⁷ Second, the story of the *glywn gdwl* presumes that it was publicly visible and therefore legible to observers. A relatively small bronze mirror would serve poorly

34. Marvin H. Pope, *Job: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, Anchor Bible 15 (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1973), 143–44; Robert Gordis, *The Book of Job: Commentary, New Translation, and Special Studies* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1978), 204; Norman C. Habel, *The Book of Job, A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985), 292; Matthew J. Suriano, "Death, Disinheritance, and Job's Kinsman-Redeemer," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 129, no. 1 (2010): 51–52; C. L. Seow, *Job 1–21: Interpretation and Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2013), 802–03.

35. Suriano, "Death, Disinheritance," 51.

36. Crowley, *Metal Record Plates*, 16; Tvedtnes, *The Book of Mormon and Other Hidden Books*, 149; Barney, "Responsible Critique," 106–07.

37. Hugh G. M. Williamson, *Isaiah 1–5: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, International Critical Commentary (New York: T&T Clark, 2006), 282–83; Hans Wildberger, *Isaiah 1–12: A Commentary*, translated by Thomas H. Trapp (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 155.

for this purpose. Third, Hebrew already had a straightforward terminology for mirror, *mr'h* or *r'y*, and tablet, *lwḥ*. Fourth, the command to “take” a large *glywn* and write on it implies that whatever the object was it was relatively accessible and common, that there were large *glywns* as well as small *glywns*. This would have not been the case for a luxury object such as a bronze mirror or tablet. Fifth, the *glywn* is unlikely to be metal considering that the term derives from a simple root (*gly* “to uncover” or *gll* “to roll”) and lacks any specification for the material of the object. Lastly, the recent analysis by Williamson plausibly relates *glywn* to Aramaic *gll* and Akkadian *galālu* and identifies the object as a stone slab or stele.³⁸

*Isaiah 30:8: “Now come, write it [ktbh] on a tablet [lwḥ]!
Come [?], inscribe [ḥqh] it on a scroll [spr]! That it may be a
for a future day as a witness forever.”*

Some Latter-day Saint exegetes have related one or both parts of this passage to metal epigraphy.³⁹ For example, Barney writes, “The same verb and noun combination as in the second line appears in Job 19:23 in a similar context of a writing intended to last a long time (KJV ‘for ever and ever’). Therefore the allusion in Isaiah 30:8 may also be to a writing on a bronze tablet, with the first writing (on wood) containing the headings or a summary, and with the second writing (on metal) containing the full message in permanent form.”⁴⁰ However, a basic problem with such a reading is that the material of the “tablet” and “scroll” are left unspecified, suggesting that neither has in view rare metal. In the Hebrew Bible *lwḥ* generally refers to flat pieces of stone or wood, and *spr* means simply, “writing, document, scroll.” As stand-alone terms they do not point in the direction of metal epigraphy. Similar to Job 19:23–24, *spr* is unlikely to mean “bronze” reflecting Akkadian *sipparu* since the immediate context relates to the writing down of words.⁴¹

38. Hugh G. M. Williamson, “The Practicalities of Prophetic Writing in Isaiah 8:1,” in *On Stone and Scroll: Essays in Honour of Graham Ivor Davies*, edited by James K. Aitken, Katharine J. Dell, and Brian A. Mastin (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011), 357–69.

39. Crowley, *Metal Record Plates*, 28; Barney, “Responsible Critique,” 109.

40. “Responsible Critique,” 109.

41. Hans Wildberger, *Isaiah 28–39: A Continental Commentary*, translated by Thomas H. Trapp (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 139–40.

The passage is nonetheless enigmatic and has engendered diverse interpretations among biblical scholars, including wax writing board, clay tablet, and papyrus scroll.⁴² None of these are particularly satisfactory, since a wax inscription would be a poor material to last very long, clay tablets were not customarily used in Israel-Judah and neither are they known to have been designated *lwh* or *spr* in Hebrew, and papyrus scrolls were never inscribed or cut into. My own preference is to take *lwh* and *spr* with their standard meanings as “a hard tablet-like surface” and “scroll document” and note that the expected verbs have been reversed in each case, *ktb-lwh* and *hqq-spr* rather than *ktb-spr* and *hqq-lwh*.⁴³ The immediate and broader context seems to play with the notion of written revelation as authoritative (see Isa. 28:9–13; 29:11–13, 18), so the author has alluded to stone tablets and papyrus scrolls upon which to record YHWH’s condemnation of his people, suggesting that the prophetic *torah* of Isaiah 28:9 functions to counter an alternative written *torah*. In this context, *lwh* and *spr* can only evoke authoritative documents such as the famous stone tablets of the law and other Deuteronomistic affiliated writings from the Pentateuch. The language is thus rhetorical and ideologically constructed, going so far as to reverse the verb and noun combinations of *ktb-spr* and *hqq-lwh*.

42. K. Galling, “Tafel, Buch und Blatt,” in *Near Eastern Studies in Honor of William Foxwell Albright*, edited by H. Goedicke (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971), 207–23; A. Baumann, “הורל *lûah*,” in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, edited by G. J. Botterweck, H. Ringgren, H. J. Fabry (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1975–2015), 7:480–83; J. D. Moore, “Writing Religion: A Comparative Study of Ancient Israelite Scribes, their Writing Materials and their Methods Used in the Writing of the Hebrew Prophecies” (master’s thesis, Brandeis University, 2011); A.L.H.M. van Wieringen, “הורל board, tablet,” *KLY Database: Utensils in the Hebrew Bible*, 2011, available at <http://www.otw-site.eu/KLY/lwj.pdf>; William Henry Irwin, *Isaiah 28–33: Translation with Philological Notes* (Rome: Biblical Institute, 1977), 79; J. C. de Moor, *The Rise of Yahwism: The Roots of Israelite Monotheism* (Leuven, Belgium: Leuven University Press, 1997), 158; Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2000), 415; J. J. M. Roberts, *First Isaiah: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 388.

43. Hugh G. M. Williamson, *The Book Called Isaiah: Deutero-Isaiah’s Role in the Composition and Redaction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 104.

1 Maccabees 8:22; 14:48–49

1 Maccabees 8:22–32 and 14:27–49 report two separate inscriptions on metal from the second century BCE, bronze tablets containing a treaty between Judas Maccabeus and Rome and a decree affirming the election of Simon as high priest, military commander, and ruler in Judea. As rare examples of continuous text on metal from the Second Temple period, they have often been thought to support the existence of an earlier Jewish metal epigraphic tradition.⁴⁴ However, these inscriptions fit well within the standard use of bronze during the Greco-Roman period, when treaties and legal decrees were created for display in public spaces and sanctuaries.⁴⁵ The texts are basically short, functional, and monothematic, their political importance underlining the exceptional nature of bronze as epigraphic support.

Copper Scroll from Qumran (3Q15)

For Latter-day Saints, the Copper Scroll is significant not only because it demonstrates the use of metal as a writing material among Jews but because it was hidden in the ground for safekeeping.⁴⁶ For example, Hamblin writes, “The most well-known example of Hebrew writing on metal plates is the famous Copper Scroll (3Q15) from Qumran (1C AD), containing a list of hidden temple treasures. Although the origin and purpose of the Copper Scroll is widely debated, it is a clear example of an attempt to preserve an important sacred record by writing on copper/bronze (Heb. *nechushah*) plates and then hiding the document.”⁴⁷ However, the use of the Copper Scroll as a parallel to the Book of Mormon breaks down on closer analysis. First, the text is formally that of an inventory or list, describing the locations of various hidden treasures in a dry, enumerative style, lacking a narrative framework of any kind. Second, the use of metal as epigraphic support is

44. Crowley, *Metal Record Plates*, 13–14; Tvedtnes, *The Book of Mormon and Other Hidden Books*, 149; Hamblin, “Sacred Writing on Metal Plates,” 40–41; Barney, “Responsible Critique,” 106.

45. Miriam Pucci Ben Zeev, “Josephus, Bronze Tablets and Greek Inscriptions,” *L’Antiquité Classique* 64 (1995): 211–15; Linda Zollschan, *Rome and Judaea: International Law Relations, 162–100 BCE* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2016), 18–21.

46. Nibley, *Since Cumorah*.

47. Hamblin, “Sacred Writing on Metal Plates,” 41.

unique to this one text. No examples of biblical or para-biblical literature written on metal were found in the archive at Qumran.⁴⁸ Although the reason why copper was used in this case is unknown, and theories range from durability intended for the preservation of valuable information, ritual purity, or dependence on biblical analogs,⁴⁹ the fact that expensive metal was used to record a list of buried treasure seems unlikely to be mere coincidence. Third, the genre and historicity of the text is uncertain, and some scholars have argued that it is a literary fiction.⁵⁰ Fourth, the document was constructed to resemble the form of a regular parchment scroll, highlighting its unusual material character as well as distinguishing it from the codex-like plates of the Book of Mormon. Fifth, the provenance of the Copper Scroll in an underground cave is a feature shared in common with the other Dead Sea Scrolls, so its deposition there should be explained in relation to these other documents, not apart from them.

In sum, none of the arguments for finding parallels to the Book of Mormon plates in the Bible or Second Temple Judaic culture are convincing. Either the biblical passages admit of more plausible readings or the examples of authentic writing on metal bear little in common to the Book

48. Emanuel Tov, *Scribal Practices and Approaches Reflected in the Texts Found in the Judean Desert* (Leiden: Brill, 2004).

49. Cf. George J. Brooke, "Introduction," in *Copper Scroll Studies*, edited by George J. Brooke and Philip R. Davies, *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha Supplement Series 40* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2002), 7; Émile Puech, *The Copper Scroll (3Q15): A Reevaluation. A New reading, Translation, and Commentary* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 463; Jesper Hogenhaven, "Geography and Ideology in the Copper Scroll (3Q15) from Qumran," in *Northern Lights on the Dead Sea Scrolls: Proceedings of the Nordic Qumran Network 2003–2006*, edited by Anders Klostergaard Petersen, et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 87–88.

50. Jozef T. Milik, "Le Rouleau de Cuivre provenant de la Grotte 3Q (3Q15)," in *Le rouleau de cuivre*, edited by Maurice Baillet, Jozef T. Milik, and Roland de Vaux, *DJD 3* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1962), 201–302; Hogenhaven, "Geography and Ideology"; cf. Al Wolters, "Apocalyptic and the Copper Scroll," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 49, no. 2 (1990): 145–54; Piotr Muchowski, "The Origin of 3Q15: Forty Years of Discussion," in *Copper Scroll Studies*, edited by George J. Brooke and Philip R. Davies, *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha Supplement Series 40* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2002), 257–70.

of Mormon narrative. Although metal was undoubtedly used as an epigraphic medium in Israel-Judah from early times, there is no evidence to support the assumption that it figured in an established scribal tradition of lengthy literary composition or archival storage.

Concluding Thoughts

The Book of Mormon is an impressive literary and cultural artifact. It reflects significant religious creativity and imagination and as such is deserving of careful study and appreciation. Whatever the book's origins, the text stands on its own merits. But while the narrative's world-making ability is real enough, its status as a translation of an ancient document is most unlikely, which is perhaps nowhere better seen than in its claims regarding gold and other metal plates as the original sources from which the document was produced. Comparison of documented practices of metal epigraphy from throughout the ancient Near East/eastern Mediterranean show that the Book of Mormon tradition of writing extensive literary compositions on metal for archival purposes was conspicuously outside the norm, without historical precedent or parallel. In addition, biblical and archaeological evidence do not support the notion that Israel-Judah was exceptional or distinctive with regard to its use of metal as epigraphic support. Metal was not employed for the writing of continuous literary text, which was reserved for papyrus, leather, wax tablet, and wood, all perishable materials.⁵¹

It is worth noting as well that the problem of metal plates cannot be resolved by resorting to the explanation of culturally mediated (mis)translation, since the nature of the plates and plate writing are so thoroughly described in the narrative. For Joseph Smith to have gotten this aspect of the "translation" so wrong and inserted his own ideas into the story world, we may as well no longer call the Book of Mormon a translation.

On the other hand, in contrast with the Book of Mormon's divergence from almost all aspects of ancient metal epigraphy, the notion of ancient

51. André Lemaire, "Writing and Writing Materials," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, edited by David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 6:999–1008; Ashton, *Scribal Habits*, 20–42; Moore, "Writing Religion."

peoples having composed lengthy documents on metal in codex-like form was current in the world of Joseph Smith.⁵²

Appendix

The appendix to this article has been made available exclusively on the Dialogue website. To see Ryan Thomas's exhaustive catalog of known examples of metal writing in antiquity, please visit Dialogue online at <https://www.dialoguejournal.com/articles/the-gold-plates-appendix>.

52. Michael G. Reed, "The Notion of Metal Records in Joseph Smith's Day" (paper presented at the Summer Seminar on Mormon Culture, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, Aug. 18, 2011, available at <https://publications.mi.byu.edu/fullscreen/?pub=3468&index=9>); Brent Lee Metcalfe, "Apologetic and Critical Assumptions about Book of Mormon Historicity," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 26, no. 3 (1993): 157.

EMPIRICAL WITNESSES OF THE GOLD PLATES

Larry E. Morris

“The question of the ultimate origin of a purported revelation,” writes Grant Underwood, “is ultimately beyond the scope of academic analysis.”¹ Professor of religious studies James D. Tabor concurs: “We can evaluate what people claimed, what they believed, what they reported, and that all becomes part of the data, but to then say, ‘A miracle happened,’ . . . goes beyond our accessible methods [as historians of religion].”²

A prime example of such a report is the Three Witnesses’ account of hearing the voice of God and seeing an angel with plates. Although this is a confirmation of what Joseph Smith had already been saying, the veracity of the claim is a religious, not historical, issue. A historical argument relies on documented experiences empirically accessible, at least in theory, to any competent observer, and because hearing God’s voice and seeing angels are not part of normal human experience, the origin of these purported miracles goes beyond the scope of academic investigation.³ (Historians should report

1. Grant Underwood, “The Dictation, Compilation, and Canonization of Joseph Smith’s Revelations,” in *Foundational Texts of Mormonism: Examining Major Sources*, edited by Mark Ashurst-McGee, Robin Scott Jensen, and Sharalyn D. Howcroft (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 107.

2. James D. Tabor, “Do Historians of Religion Exclude the Supernatural?,” *HuffPost*, Sept. 5, 2016, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/do-historians-of-religion-exclude-the-supernatural_b_57cda5cde4b06c750ddb3815.

3. Lyman E. Johnson and Mary Whitmer also offered “religious” accounts of the plates. Johnson left no firsthand account of his experience, but others heard him discuss it. Benjamin Stokely wrote: “An angel brought the Mormon Bible and laid it before him (the speaker); he therefore *knows* these things to be true” (cited in William Shepard and H. Michael Marquardt, *Lost Apostles: Forgotten Members of Mormonism’s Original Quorum of Twelve* [Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2014], 43—see *Lost Apostles*, 46

evidence of fraud, collusion, mental illness, and the like, however, for these fall squarely within the realm of scholarly analysis.)

It follows, of course, that accounts of the plates involving normal sensory experience fall within the scope of scholarly inquiry. Seventeen people reportedly saw or handled the plates (or both) under such conditions, and this paper examines the documentary evidence surrounding these empirical events to discover what information they offer about what Terryl Givens calls the “pure physicality of the plates.”⁴

Witnesses Among Joseph’s Family, Friends, and Acquaintances

Emma Smith

Joseph Smith III interviewed his mother, seventy-four-year-old Emma Hale Smith Bidamon, in February of 1879, two months before her death. “These questions, and the answers she had given to them, were read to my mother by me, the day before my leaving Nauvoo for home, and were affirmed by her,” wrote Joseph III. An excerpt from that interview follows:

and 91, for similar examples). In interviews given in 1878, 1887, and 1889, David Whitmer told how he, Joseph Smith, and Oliver Cowdery met a “messenger with the plates,” as they traveled from Pennsylvania to the Whitmer home in Fayette, New York, in June 1829. Various descriptions as “an old man,” “one of the three Nephites” and “the angel Moroni,” this personage showed the plates to Whitmer’s mother, Mary Musselman Whitmer, who told her family of the experience but left no first-hand account. (See Lyndon W. Cook, ed., *David Whitmer Interviews: A Restoration Witness* [Orem, Utah: Grandin Book, 1991], 27, 215–16, 217–18.)

Lucy Harris, Martin’s wife, is also sometimes mentioned as a religious witness of the plates because Lucy Mack Smith’s memoir includes a description of Lucy Harris reporting a dream in which a personage appeared to her and showed her the plates. See Lucy Smith, *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith the Prophet and His Progenitors for Many Generations* (Liverpool: S. W. Richard, 1853), 112. In an 1833 affidavit, however, Lucy Harris indicated that she never believed Joseph’s story about the angel and the plates.

4. Terryl L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture That Launched a New World Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 4. Accounts from those who claimed to have simply lifted the plates inside a container are not included in this discussion.

Question. Had [Joseph Smith] not a book or manuscript from which he read, or dictated to you?

Answer. He had neither manuscript nor book to read from.

Question. Could he not have had, and you not know it?

Answer. If he had had anything of the kind he could not have concealed it from me.

Question. Are you sure that he had the plates at the time you were writing for him?

Answer. The plates often lay on the table without any attempt at concealment, wrapped in a small linen tablecloth, which I had given him to fold them in. I once felt of the plates, as they thus lay on the table, tracing their outline and shape. They seemed to be pliable like thick paper, and would rustle with a metallic sound when the edges were moved by the thumb, as one does sometimes thumb the edges of a book.⁵

Emma did not specify when she handled the plates.

William Smith (younger brother of Joseph)

In 1884, seventy-three-year-old William said:

When Joseph received [the plates], he came in and said: "Father, I have got the plates." All believed it was true, father, mother, brothers and sisters. You can tell what a child is. Parents know whether their children are truthful or not. The proof of the pudding is not in chewing the string, but in eating the pudding. Father knew his child was telling the truth. When the plates were brought in they were wrapped up in a tow frock. My father put them into a pillow case. Father said, "What, Joseph, can we not see them?" "No. I was forbidden to show them until they are translated, but you can feel them." We handled them and could tell what they were. They were not quite as large as this Bible. Could tell whether they were round or square. Could raise the leaves this way (raising a few leaves of the Bible before him). One could easily tell that they were not a stone, hewn out to deceive, or even a block of wood. Being a mixture of gold and copper, they were much heavier than stone, and very much heavier than wood.⁶

5. "Last Testimony of Sister Emma," *Saints' Herald* 26, no. 19, Oct. 1, 1879, 289–90.

6. "The Old Soldier's Testimony. Sermon preached by Bro. William B. Smith, in the Saints' Chapel, Deloit, Iowa, June 8th, 1884. Reported by C. E. Butterworth," *Saints' Herald* 31, no. 40, Oct. 4, 1884, 643–44.

Lucy Mack Smith

Although Lucy Smith's memoir tells of her handling the spectacles and breastplate of the Urim and Thummim through a covering, it is silent on whether she saw or handled the plates. A secondhand account has survived, however. Sally Bradford Parker and her husband converted to the Church in Maine around 1834. In June of 1837 they migrated to Kirtland, Ohio, where they lived until March of 1838. In August 1838, Sally wrote:

[Lucy Smith] told me the whole story. The plates were in the house and sometimes in the woods for eight months on account of people trying to get them. They had to hide them once. They hid them under the hearth. They took up the brick and put them in and put the brick back. The old lady told me this herself with tears in her eyes and they run down her cheeks too. She put her hand upon her stomach and said she, "O the peace of God that rested upon us all that time." She said it was a heaven below. I asked her if she saw the plates. She said no, it was not for her to see them, but she hefted and handled them.⁷

This is consistent with William Smith's assertion that the Smith family handled the plates but was not allowed to see them.

In 1842, British clergyman Henry Caswall visited Nauvoo and reported Lucy's saying, "I have myself seen and handled the golden plates; they are about eight inches long, and six wide; some of them are sealed together and are not to be opened, and some of them are loose. They are all connected by a ring which passes through a hole at the end of each plate, and are covered with letters beautifully engraved."⁸ Because Parker knew Lucy well

7. Janiece L. Johnson, "'The Scriptures Is a Fulfilling': Sally Parker's Weave," *BYU Studies* 44, no. 2 (2005): 115–16. The original text reads as follows: "she told me the hole story the plates wass in the house and some times in the woods for eight monts and on account of peopel trying to git them they had to hide them wonce they hide them under the hearth they took up the brick and put them in and put the brick back the old lady told me this hur self wih tears in hur eyes and they run down hur cheeks too she put hur hand upon her stomack and said she o the peace of god that rested upon us all that time she said it wass a heaven below I axter if she saw th pates she said no it wass not for hur to see them but she hefted and handled them."

8. Henry Caswall, *The City of the Mormons: or, Three Days at Nauvoo, in 1842* (London: J. G. F. & J. Rivington, 1842), 26–27.

and asked her specific details about her experience—and because Parker’s account of Lucy’s handling but not seeing the plates is corroborated by other sources and Caswall’s claim that she saw them is not—Parker’s is the more reliable source.⁹

Katharine Smith (younger sister of Joseph Smith)

Katharine’s grandson Herbert S. Salisbury related two instances of Katharine’s handling the plates:

She told me [when Joseph first brought the plates home in 1827] Joseph allowed her to “heft” the package [of plates wrapped in a frock or a pillow case] but not to see the gold plates, as the angel had forbidden him to show them at that period. She said they were very heavy.¹⁰

Catherine Smith Salisbury told me that while dusting up the room where the Prophet had his study she saw a package on the table containing the gold plates. . . . She said she hefted those plates and found them very heavy like gold and also rippled her fingers up the edge of the plates and felt that they were separate metal plates and heard the tinkle of sound that they made.¹¹

9. In his interview with Joel Tiffany, Martin Harris said, “When he [Joseph] arrived at home, he handed the plates in at the window, and they were received from him by his mother” (“MORMONISM—No. 2,” Tiffany’s Monthly, May–July 1859, 167).

10. H. S. Salisbury, “Things the Prophet’s Sister Told me,” Church History Library, MS 4122, folder 2. Salisbury typed this statement in 1945.

11. “The Prophet’s Sister Testifies She Lifted the B. of M Plates,” *The Messenger* (Berkeley, Calif.), Oct. 1954, Church History Library, MS 4134. The narrative that Katharine “rippled her fingers up the edge of the plates” is problematic because the residence Katharine presumably would have been cleaning was the Smith frame home in Manchester. However, it is quite unlikely—given the efforts of hostile neighbors to steal the plates—that Joseph would have left the plates on a table. Also, this account is remarkably similar to one (reprinted above) related by Emma. Both accounts mention dusting the room, feeling the edge of the plates, perceiving separate leaves, and hearing the metallic sound created when the leaves were thumbed. See Joseph Smith III to Mrs. E. Horton, letter, Mar. 7, 1900, in *Early Mormon Documents*, edited by Dan Vogel, 5 vols. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996–2003), 1:546. Such similarity in detail raises the distinct possibility that Katharine initially told of Emma’s experience but that over the interim of several decades, Herbert Salisbury mistakenly attributed it to his grandmother rather than his great-aunt.

Joseph Smith Sr.

As noted, William Smith said that when Joseph carried the frock-covered plates into the house in 1827, Joseph Sr. put them in a pillowcase, which would have involved handling and lifting them. Although Joseph Sr. testified in 1829 of seeing and handling the plates as one of the Eight Witnesses, he is not known to have offered any details on receiving the plates from Joseph Jr. in 1827.

Martin Harris

William S. Sayre, who apparently talked to Harris in 1829, wrote that Joseph Smith “would not let him [Harris] see the bible but let him *feel* of it when it was covered up.”¹² In 1853, Harris told David B. Dille he had once held the plates on his knee “an hour and a half, whilst in conversation with Joseph, when we went to bury them in the woods. . . . And as many of the plates as Joseph Smith translated, I handled with my hands, plate after plate.”¹³ In addition, Tiffany reported Harris’s saying, “I hefted the plates many times, and should think they weighed forty or fifty pounds,” adding that the plates were held together by three silver rings and were about four inches thick, with each plate about as thick as a plate of tin.¹⁴

Oliver Cowdery

When Cowdery spoke to a group of Saints at Council Bluffs, Iowa, on October 21, 1848, Reuben Miller recorded those remarks: “Friends and brethren my name is Cowdery, oliver Cowdery. . . . I wrote with my own pen the entire book of Mormon (save a few pages) as it fell from the lips of the prophet, As he translated <it> by the gift and power of god, By means of the urim and thummim, or as it is called by that book [‘]holy Interpreters.’ I beheld

12. William S. Sayre to James T. Cobb, letter, Aug. 31, 1878, Theodore A. Schroeder Papers, Archives, Wisconsin State Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin, in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents* 4:144–45.

13. “Additional Testimony of Martin Harris (One of the Three Witnesses) to the Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon,” *Millennial Star* 21, Aug. 20, 1859, 545.

14. “MORMONISM—No. 2,” 166, 165.

with my eyes. And handled with my hands the gold plates from which it was translated.”¹⁵

Josiah Stowell

Stowell and Joseph Knight were visiting the Smith family in September 1827 when Joseph obtained the plates and were present when he brought them to the Smith home a few days later. Although Stowell left no firsthand account of Joseph’s bringing the plates to the house, two individuals who talked to Stowell produced reports. “If I understood him [Stowell] wright,” Martha Campbell wrote to Joseph Smith in 1843, “he was the first person that took the Plates out of your hands, the morning you brough[t] them in & he observed blessed is he that seeeth & believeeth & more blessed is he that believeeth without seeing & says he has seen & believeed he seems anxious to get there [Nauvoo] to renew his covenant with the Lord.”¹⁶ If accurate, this means Stowell was the first person other than Joseph to handle the plates.¹⁷

A Colesville, New York court record sheds further light on Stowell’s experience with the plates. On June 30, 1830, Stowell testified in a case in which Joseph was accused of “a breach of the peace . . . by looking through a certain stone to find hid[den] treasures.” After being sworn before Justice of the Peace Joel K. Noble, Stowell said “that about two years since, witness was at Palmyra, and saw prisoner; that prisoner told witness that the *Lord had told prisoner that a golden Bible* was in a certain hill; that Smith, the prisoner, went in the night, and brought the Bible, (as Smith said;) witness [Stowell] saw a corner of it; it resembled a stone of a greenish caste; should judge it

15. “Reuben Miller journals, 1848–1849,” Church History Library, MS 1392. David Whitmer stressed that he, Cowdery, and Joseph saw but did not handle the plates. See Lyndon W. Cook, ed., *David Whitmer Interviews: A Restoration Witness* (Orem, Utah: Grandin, 1991), 152, 188.

16. “Letter from Martha Campbell, 19 December 1843,” The Joseph Smith Papers, Church History Library.

17. Stowell’s being the first other than Joseph to handle the plates is not consistent with William Smith’s claim that Joseph Sr. received them or with Harris’s claim that Lucy Mack Smith did.

to have been about one foot square and six inches thick; he would not let it be seen by any one; the Lord had commanded him not; it was unknown to Smith, that the witness saw a corner of the Bible, so called by Smith.”¹⁸

These two statements indicate that when Joseph reached the house, he handed the frock-covered plates to Stowell, who apparently caught a glimpse of them as he set them down, making Stowell the only witness to see the plates “by accident.” As for the color of the plates, Ann Taves writes, “A greenish cast would suggest copper rather than lead or gold and pages could be made out of copper more easily than lead.”¹⁹

Alvah Beman (also spelled Beaman or Beeman)

“As soon as it was noised around that there was a golden Bible found (for that was what it was called at the time),” wrote Alvah’s daughter, Mary Adeline Noble, “the minds of the people became so excited and it arose at such a pitch that a mob collected together to search the house of Father Joseph Smith to find the records[. M]y father was there at the time and assisted in concealing the plates in a box in a secluded place where no one could find them although he did not see them.”²⁰

Martin Harris added that “when they [the plates] were taken from there [the cooper’s shop], they were put into an old Ontario glass-box. Old Mr. Beman sawed off the ends, making the box the right length to put them in, and when they went in he said he heard them jink, but he was not permitted to see them. He told me so.”²¹

18. “Mormonism,” *Morning Star* (Limerick, Maine), Nov. 16, 1832, available at <http://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/BOMP/id/1369/rec/16>.

19. Ann Taves, “History and the Claims of Revelation: Joseph Smith and the Materialization of the Golden Plates,” *Numen* 61, nos. 1–2 (2014): 192n13. Copper turns green when exposed to the elements, also true of bronze (an alloy of copper and zinc), brass (an alloy of copper and tin), and some types of tumbaga (an unspecified alloy of gold and copper).

20. Mary Adeline Noble reminiscence, circa 1836, in Joseph B. Noble reminiscences, 1836–1866, autograph document, p. 3, Church History Library.

21. “MORMONISM—No. 2,” 167.

Joseph McKune Sr.

McKune was a neighbor (and relative through marriage) of Isaac Hale's. Joseph Smith had several interactions with the McKune family, most of them negative. Mehitabel Smith Many Doolittle (1802–1894) was a granddaughter of Joseph McKune Sr.²² and grew up knowing Emma. An 1887 newspaper interview with Mrs. Doolittle reported: "While Joe was upon his farm he had the Mormon Bible. Whether he professed to find it before or after marriage Mrs. Doolittle does not remember. Her grandfather was once privileged to take in his hands a pillow-case in which the supposed saintly treasure was wrapped, and to feel through the cloth that it had leaves. From the size and the weight of the book, Mr. McKune supposed that in dimensions it closely resembled an ordinary Bible in the print of those days."²³ This uncorroborated account makes McKune the only outsider to handle the plates.

"What emerges as alone indisputable," writes Givens, "is the fact that Joseph Smith does possess a set of metal plates. . . . Dream-visions may be in the mind of the beholder, but gold plates are not subject to such facile psychologizing."²⁴

The Eight Witnesses

The testimony of the Eight Witnesses, states the Joseph Smith Papers, "reads like a legal document" and "describes a sensory experience that involved both sight and touch as the witnesses handled and lifted the plates."²⁵ Given such apparently straightforward facts, one would expect a consensus about

22. Background information from *Middletown Daily Argus*, Dec. 10, 1894 and from McKune family genealogical records at Ancestry.com.

23. "Early Days of Mormonism," *Chenango Union*, Apr. 12, 1877.

24. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon*, 40, 42.

25. Michael Hubbard MacKay, Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, Grant Underwood, Robert J. Woodford, and William G. Hartley, eds., *Documents, Volume 1: July 1828–June 1831*, vol. 1 of the Documents series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, edited by Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, Richard Lyman Bushman, and Matthew J. Grow (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2013), 387.

the nature of the Eight's experience, but several historians argue that the five members of the Whitmer family²⁶ and three members of the Smith family saw and handled the plates "in vision," thus disqualifying their testimony as empirical evidence.

The key question is this: What did the Eight themselves say about the event? Certainly, they are the authorities on their own experience and should be allowed to speak for themselves. Their statement reads as follows:

Be it known unto all nations, kindreds, tongues, and people, unto whom this work shall come, that Joseph Smith, Jr. the Author and Proprietor of this work, has shewn unto us the plates of which hath been spoken, which have the appearance of gold; and as many of the leaves as the said Smith has translated, we did handle with our hands; and we also saw the engravings thereon, all of which has the appearance of ancient work, and of curious workmanship. And this we bear record, with words of soberness, that the said Smith has shewn unto us, for we have seen and hefted, and know of a surety, that the said Smith has got the plates of which we have spoken. And we give our names unto the world, to witness unto the world that which we have seen: and we lie not, God bearing witness of it.

CHRISTIAN WHITMER, JACOB WHITMER, PETER WHITMER, JR., JOHN WHITMER, HIRAM PAGE, JOSEPH SMITH, SEN., HYRUM SMITH, SAMUEL H. SMITH.²⁷

"As a historical document, the Testimony of Eight Witnesses is disappointing," writes Vogel. "It fails to give historical details such as time, place, and date. Neither does it describe the historical event or events, but simply states that the eight signatories, collectively, have seen and handled the plates." In addition, "Joseph Smith's History is vague about events behind the Testimony of Eight Witnesses" and fails to "describe the historical setting in which the eight men saw the plates." Finally, "subsequent statements by the eight witnesses shed very little light on the historical event behind their Testimony."²⁸

26. Hiram Page married Catherine Whitmer on November 10, 1825.

27. 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon, 590. David Whitmer said each witness "signed his own name" to the testimonies (Cook, *David Whitmer Interviews*, 44).

28. Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 3:464. One important question is whether the Eight saw the plates together or in smaller groups. P. Wilhelm Poulson, who inter-

These points are well taken—no one provided the kind of details students and scholars of early Mormon history yearn for. The lack of specifics about the historical setting, however, hardly means the testimony is not empirical. Indeed, the testimony is emphatically empirical because it mentions both sight and touch, identifies Joseph Smith as the one who displayed the plates, and neither claims nor even hints that the occurrence included a miracle.

Moreover, the testimony of the Eight meets three crucial standards of source criticism by being (1) a firsthand document (2) produced near the time of the event in question and (3) signed by multiple witnesses. Except for the nonempirical statement of the Three Witnesses, none of the hundreds of other Book of Mormon documents comes close to having such bona fides. And while Lucy Mack Smith, John Corrill, and Luke Johnson said they heard testimonies from all eight men but recorded no specific details,²⁹ three of the Eight left firsthand confirmations of the original testimony: John Whitmer, Hyrum Smith, and Hiram Page.

A close look at these recitals shows that although these men clearly felt a divine commission to testify of the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon and sometimes spoke of their religious and empirical experience in the same breath, they made no claims of examining the plates in a supernatural setting.

John Whitmer

In his official history of the Church, Whitmer wrote: “And also other witnesses even eight Viz. Christian Whitmer, Jacob Whitmer, John Whitmer, Peter Whitmer Jr. Hiram [Hiram] Page, Joseph Smith [Sr.], Hiram [Hyrum] Smith, and Samuel H. Smith. are *the men to whom Joseph Smith Jr showed the*

viewed John Whitmer in April 1878, reported in a July 31, 1878 letter that Whitmer said the Eight examined the plates in a room at the Smith home, four at one time and four at another (*Deseret News*, Aug. 14, 1878). This report is uncorroborated, however; nor was it approved by Whitmer before his death on July 11, 1878.

29. See Smith, *Biographical Sketches*, 140–41; John Corrill, *Brief History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, (Commonly Called Mormons;) Including an Account of Their Doctrine and Discipline; with the Reasons of the Author for Leaving the Church* (St. Louis: For the Author, 1839), 11–12; and “History of Luke Johnson [By Himself],” *History of Brigham Young, Latter-day Saints’ Millennium Star* 26, no. 53, Dec. 31, 1864, 835.

plates, these witnesses [including the three witnesses] names go forth also of the truth of this work in the last days. To the convincing or condemning of this generation in the last days.”³⁰

In an 1836 editorial, Whitmer added:

To say that the book of Mormon is a revelation from God, I have no hesitancy; but with all confidence have signed my name to it as such; and I hope, that my patrons will indulge me in speaking freely on this subject, as I am about leaving the editorial department [of the *Latter Day Saints’ Messenger and Advocate*]³¹—Therefore I desire to testify to all that will come to the knowledge of this address; that I have most assuredly seen the plates from whence the book of Mormon is translated, and that I have handled these plates, and know of a surety that Joseph Smith, jr., has translated the book of Mormon by the gift and power of God.³¹

Whitmer intertwined his role as a witness with his religious testimony while at the same time affirming the sensory nature of his examination of the plates. (His statement that he signed his name as confirmation that the Book of Mormon was a revelation from God was technically incorrect, of course, because his signature simply confirmed the reality of the plates.)

In one of his last letters, Whitmer stated, “I conclude you have read the Book of Mormon, together with the testimonies that are thereto attached; in which testimonies you read my name subscribed as one of the Eight witnesses to said Book. That testimony was, is, and will be true henceforth and forever.”³²

Hyrum Smith

In August 1838, Sally Parker, then in Sunbury, Ohio, wrote that she had heard Hyrum Smith preach. (He had passed through the area a few months

30. “The Book of John, Whitmer kept by Comma[n]d,” ca. 1838–ca. 1847, handwriting of John Whitmer, ninety-six pages, in *Histories, Volume 2: Assigned Historical Writings, 1831–1847*, edited by Karen Lynn Davidson, Richard L. Jensen, and David J. Whittaker, vol. 2 of the *Histories* series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, edited by Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2012), 37, emphasis added.

31. John Whitmer, “Address,” *Latter Day Saints’ Messenger and Advocate* 2, no. 6, Mar. 1836, 286–87.

32. John Whitmer to H. C. Smith Esq., letter, Dec. 11, 1876, in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 5:244.

earlier as he migrated from Kirtland to Far West, Missouri.) “We were talking about the Book of Mormon,” she wrote, “[of] which he is one of the witnesses. He said he had but two hands and two eyes. He said he had seen the plates with his eyes and handled them with his hands and he saw a breast plate and he told how it was made. . . . Why I write this is because they dispute the Book so much.”³³

In an 1839 letter, Hyrum wrote, “I had been abused and thrust into a dungeon, and confined for months on account of my *faith*, and the ‘testimony of Jesus Christ.’ However I thank God that I felt a determination to die, rather than deny the things which my eyes had seen, which my hands had handled, and which I had borne testimony to, wherever my lot had been cast; and I can assure my beloved brethren that I was enabled to bear as strong a testimony, when nothing but death presented itself, as ever I did in my life.”³⁴

Hiram Page

Page, who left the Church in 1838, wrote to William E. McLellin in 1847:

As to the book of Mormon, it would be doing injustice to myself, and to the work of God of the last days, to say that I could know a thing to be true in 1830, and know the same thing to be false in 1847. To say my mind was so treacherous that I had forgotten what I saw. To say that a man of Joseph’s ability, who at that time did not know how to pronounce the word Nephi, could write a book of six hundred pages, as correct as the book of Mormon, without supernatural power. And to say that those holy Angels who came and showed themselves to me as I was walking through the field, to confirm me in the work of the Lord of the last days—three of whom came to me afterwards and sang an hymn in their own pure

33. Johnson, “Sally Parker’s Weave,” 115. The original document reads as follows: “wee wass talking about th Book of mormon which he is ons of the witnesses he said he had but too hands and too eyes he said he had seene the plates with his eyes and handeled them with his hands and he saw a brest plate and he told how it wass maid . . . why I write this is because they dispute the Book so much.”

34. Hyrum Smith “to the Saints scattered abroad,” letter, *Times and Seasons* 1, no. 2, Dec. 1839, 20, 23.

language; yea, it would be treating the God of heaven with contempt, to deny these testimonies, with too many others to mention here.³⁵

True, the Eight Witnesses “knew” that Joseph had learned of the plates from an angel and considered themselves honor bound to “bear witness unto the world” of what they knew. They made no distinction between religious and empirical truth and believed their experience with the plates to be tightly bound up with Joseph’s authentic calling and the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon. Still, they insisted throughout their lives that they “did handle [the plates] with [their] hands” and that they had “seen and hefted,” with no reference to a miraculous setting.

Empirical or Religious?

As to why the testimony of the Eight is sometimes claimed to be religious rather than empirical, consider the following:

Thomas Ford’s Speculation

In *No Man Knows My History*, Fawn Brodie reprints the statement of the Eight Witnesses and adds, “One of the most plausible descriptions of the manner in which Joseph Smith obtained these eight signatures was written by Thomas Ford, Governor of Illinois, who knew intimately several of Joseph’s key men after they became disaffected and left the church”³⁶—and follows up with a long paraphrase of Ford’s description.

“I have been informed by men who were once in the confidence of the prophet,” wrote Ford, “that he privately gave a different account of the matter. . . . The prophet had always given out that [the plates] could not be seen by the carnal eye, but must be spiritually discerned; that the power to see them depended upon faith, and was the gift of God, to be obtained by fasting, prayer, mortification of the flesh, and exercises of the spirit.” Therefore, when Joseph saw “the evidences of a strong and lively faith in any of his followers . . . he set them to continual prayer, and other spiritual

35. Hiram Page to “Bro. William” [William E. McLellin], letter, May 30, 1847, *Ensign of Liberty* 1, Jan. 1848, 63.

36. Fawn Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 79.

exercises, to acquire this lively faith by means of which the hidden things of God could be spiritually discerned.” Then, “when he could delay them no longer, he assembled them in a room, and produced a box, which he said contained the precious treasure. The lid was opened; the witnesses peeped into it, but making no discovery, for the box was empty, they said, ‘Brother Joseph, we do not see the plates.’” Joseph responded, “‘O ye of little faith! how long will God bear with this wicked and perverse generation? Down on your knees, brethren, every one of you, and pray God for the forgiveness of your sins, and for a holy and living faith which cometh down from heaven.’” Lumping the Three and Eight Witnesses together, Ford claimed they “dropped to their knees, and began to pray in the fervency of their spirit, supplicating God for more than two hours with fanatical earnestness; at the end of which time, looking again into the box, they were now persuaded that they saw the plates.”³⁷

We don’t know who Ford’s informants were, whether they were trustworthy, or whether they were really “in the confidence of the prophet.” With no names, dates, or locations given, attempting to corroborate this account is virtually impossible. Nor did any of the witnesses report any experience that resembles the one depicted by Ford. And while nineteenth-century “historians” frequently relied on the kind of hearsay and rumormongering employed by Ford, a modern reader expects more careful source criticism from Brodie, writing in the mid-twentieth century and trained at the University of Chicago.

Because it is a thirdhand, anonymous account not corroborated by any first- or secondhand sources, Ford’s story offers little in the way of evidence—except as proof, perhaps, of the kind of rumors making the rounds twenty years after the fact. Nevertheless, it was also cited by a historian as prominent as Dale L. Morgan. The section of Morgan’s manuscript dealing with the Eight Witnesses, chapter 4, added nothing significant to Brodie’s analysis (although it was still in draft form when Morgan died). Like Brodie, he included a lengthy quote from Ford and used Ford as his sole nineteenth-century source (other than the testimony of the Eight itself).³⁸

37. Thomas Ford, *A History of Illinois, From Its Commencement as a State in 1818 to 1847* (Chicago: S. C. Griggs & Co., 1854), 256–58.

38. John Phillip Walker, ed., *Dale Morgan on Early Mormonism: Correspondence and a New History* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1986), 304.

The influence of Brodie and Morgan has hardly waned. In the posthumously published *Natural Born Seer* (2016), Richard S. Van Wagoner quotes the testimony of the Eight and then moves immediately to the same excerpt from Ford cited by Morgan.³⁹

Stephen Burnett's Letter to Lyman E. Johnson

Burnett began losing his faith as he talked with Luke S. Johnson, John Boynton (original apostles with Lyman Johnson), Martin Harris, and others who had been excommunicated late in 1837 after the collapse of the Kirtland Safety Society Anti-Banking Company triggered widespread disillusionment with Joseph Smith.⁴⁰ Burnett wrote: "When I came to hear Martin Harris state in a public congregation that he never saw the plates with his natural eyes only in vision or imagination, neither Oliver [Cowdery] nor David [Whitmer] & also that the eight witnesses never saw them & hesitated to sign that instrument for that reason, but were persuaded to do it, the last pedestal gave way, in my view our foundations was sapped & the entire superstructure fell a heap of ruins."⁴¹

39. Richard S. Van Wagoner, *Natural Born Seer: Joseph Smith, American Prophet, 1805–1830* (Salt Lake City: Smith-Pettit Foundation, 2016), 359–61.

40. John Smith, president of the Kirtland High Council, wrote: "The spiritual condition at this time is gloomy also. I called the High Council together last week and laid Before <them> the case of a compan<y> of Decenters 28 persons[,] where upon mature Discussion [we] proceeded to cut them off from the ch[urc]h; the Leaders were Cyrus Smalling Joseph Coe Martin Harris Luke Johnson John Boyton and W[arren] Parrish" (John and Clarissa Smith to George A. Smith, letter, Jan. 1, 1838, cited in Shepard and Marquardt, *Lost Apostles*, 158).

41. If Harris indeed used the phrase "in vision," what he meant by that is open to debate. Speaking of his experience with Oliver and Joseph, for example, David Whitmer wrote: "Of course we were in the spirit when we had the view, for no man can behold the face of an angel, except in a spiritual view, but we were in the body also, and everything was as natural to us, as it is at any time." (David Whitmer to Anthony Metcalf, letter, April 1887, in Cook, *David Whitmer Interviews*, 247.) Stephen Burnett to Lyman E. Johnson, letter, Apr. 15, 1838, Joseph Smith Papers, Letterbook 2, 65, Church History Library.

Burnett's claim of what Harris said was partially confirmed by a letter from Warren Parrish, formerly a trusted secretary of Joseph but by mid-1837 his most hostile critic: "Martin Harris, one of the subscribing witnesses, has come out at last, and says he never saw the plates, from which the book purports to have been translated, except in vision, and he further says that any man who says he has seen them in any other way is a liar, Joseph not excepted."⁴²

This report is a portent of Harris's future oblique references to the Eight. As the only Book of Mormon witness communicating with the dissenters, Harris had become the *de facto* spokesman for the others. The irony, of course, is that of the eleven men in question, Harris is the only one known to have been alone with Joseph when he saw the plates, making him the one least qualified to speak for the others.

Adding one complication to another, Burnett's letter subsequently reports that three weeks after Harris's controversial statement about the witnesses, "Harris arose & said . . . he never should have told that the testimony of the eight was false, it if had not been picked out of air but should have let it passed as it was." Rather than confirming that the Eight saw the plates in vision, Harris's calling their testimony false only muddies the water. Two decades later, Harris further confused the picture when he said, "The plates were kept from the sight of the world, and *no one*, save Oliver Cowdrey, myself, Joseph Smith, jr., and David Whitmer, *ever saw them*."⁴³

Amazingly, all of this is preamble to the most important question involving Harris's purported disclosure: Where did he get his information? Neither Burnett's nor Parrish's letter says anything about Harris claiming to have talked to the Eight. It is therefore entirely possible, especially given Harris's temperament and his bent toward "religious enthusiasm," that he made presumptions about the experience of the Eight without ever consulting them.

The deeper we delve into Harris's connection—or lack thereof—with the Eight Witnesses, the more mysterious things get. Between 1829 and 1939, close to fifty individuals recorded accounts of Harris's experience with the

42. Warren Parrish to E. Holmes, letter, Aug. 11, 1838, *The Evangelist* 6, Oct. 1, 1838, 226, available at <https://user.xmission.com/~research/central/parrishletters.pdf>.

43. "MORMONISM—No. 2," 166, emphasis added.

founding of Mormonism, but of all the folks who heard Harris recall his incredible journey, only one said he specifically mentioned the Eight: Stephen Burnett.⁴⁴ And while Harris enthusiastically rejoiced after seeing the angel and the plates with Joseph near the Whitmer farm, there is no indication that Harris was even present at the Smith farm in Manchester a few days later when the Eight saw and hefted the plates. Nor do Harris's biographers note any conversations he had with the Eight about their experience.⁴⁵

Given Martin Harris's standing as a Book of Mormon witness, Burnett, Parrish, and others naturally put a good deal of stock in his comments. We can especially sympathize with Burnett, who was still clinging to his conviction that the plates were real when Harris's declaration that the Eight saw the plates only in vision brought his once-strong faith crashing down into "a heap of ruins." But what Burnett quite understandably failed to realize was that Harris's apparently ironclad pronouncement was fragile and that the 1829 empirical statement of the Eight was still the best evidence of what they claimed to have experienced.

Notes Made by Thomas Bullock, circa 1845

Early in 1839, Church member Theodore Turley was appointed to a committee helping the Saints evacuate from Missouri. On April 4 of that year, Turley and Heber C. Kimball visited Joseph Smith and others in Liberty Jail. The next day, Kimball and Turley were in Far West, at the committee's office, when John Whitmer and seven other men entered the room. A passage in the *History of the Church* describes the encounter that followed, and that passage is based on notes taken by Thomas Bullock in Nauvoo around February 1845 when he interviewed Turley. The complete published account reads as follows:

Friday, April 5.—Brothers Kimball and Turley arrived at Far West.

This day a company of about fifty men in Daviess county swore that they would never eat or drink, until they had murdered "Joe Smith."

44. See Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:253–393.

45. Susan Easton Black and Larry C. Porter, *Martin Harris: Uncompromising Witness of the Book of Mormon* (Provo: BYU Studies, 2018).

Their captain, William Bowman, swore, in the presence of Theodore Turley, that he would “never eat or drink, after he had seen Joe Smith, until he had murdered him.”

Also eight men—Captain Bogart, who was the county judge, Dr. Lafity, John Whitmer, and five others—came into the committee’s room [i.e., the room or office of the committee on removal] and presented to Theodore Turley the paper containing the revelation of July 8, 1838,⁴⁶ to Joseph Smith, directing the Twelve to take their leave of the Saints in Far West on the building site of the Lords House on the 26th of April, to go to the isles of the sea, and then asked him to read it. Turley said, “Gentlemen, I am well acquainted with it.” They said, “Then you, as a rational man, will give up Joseph Smith’s being a prophet and an inspired man? He and the Twelve are now scattered all over creation; let them come here if they dare; if they do, they will be murdered. As that revelation cannot be fulfilled, you will now give up your faith.”

Turley jumped up and said, “In the name of God that revelation will be fulfilled.” They laughed him to scorn. John Whitmer hung down his head. They said, “If they (the Twelve) come, they will get murdered; they dare not come to take their leave here; that is like all the rest of Joe Smith’s d—n prophecies.” They commenced on Turley and said, he had better do as John Corrill had done; “he is going to publish a book called ‘Mormonism Fairly Delineated;’ he is a sensible man, and you had better assist him.”

Turley said, “Gentlemen, I presume there are men here who have heard Corrill say, that ‘Mormonism’ was true, that Joseph Smith was a prophet, and inspired of God. I now call upon you, John Whitmer: you say Corrill is a moral and a good man; do you believe him when he says the Book of Mormon is true, or when he says it is not true? There are many things published that they say are true, and again turn around and say they are false?” Whitmer asked, “Do you hint at me?” Turley replied, “If the cap fits you, wear it; all I know is that you have published to the world that an angel did present those plates to Joseph Smith.” Whitmer replied: “I now say, I handled those plates; there were fine engravings on both sides.

46. A footnote in the original reads as follows: “See Doctrine and Covenants, sec. cxviii.”

I handled them;” and he described how they were hung, and “they were shown to me by a supernatural power;” he acknowledged all.

Turley asked him, “Why is not the translation now true?” He said, “I could not read it [in the original] and I do not know whether it [i.e., the translation] is true or not.” Whitmer testified all this in the presence of eight men.⁴⁷

The late Grant Palmer covers the Eight Witnesses more extensively than Brodie, Morgan, Van Wagoner, or Taves, relying heavily on Burnett’s letter and on this *History of the Church* excerpt, especially Whitmer’s purported statement that “I handled those plates; there were fine engravings on both sides . . . they were shown to me by a supernatural power.” Palmer and others conclude that “this added detail of how [Whitmer] saw indicates that the eight probably did not observe or feel the actual artifact.”⁴⁸

The “added detail,” of course, concerns the phrase *supernatural power*. The published version, which includes Willard Richards’s edits, is straightforward, but Bullock’s original manuscript is not as clear: “I now say I handled those plates. there was fine engravings on both sides. I handled them.” and he described how they were hung and they were shown to me by a supernatural power. he acknowledged all.”⁴⁹ Not only does the narration make an unnatural shift from the second-person *he* to the first-person *me*, the critical phrase *they were shown to me by a supernatural power* is not in quotation marks, leaving doubt as to whether Turley intended to be directly quoting Whitmer.

47. Joseph Smith Jr., *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, edited by B. H. Roberts, 7 vols., 2nd ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1980 printing), 3:306–08. The original document, entitled “Theodore Turley’s Memorandums,” is in Bullock’s hand, making this a thirdhand source—with the account going from Whitmer to Turley to Bullock. Furthermore, the document offers no information about possible interaction between Turley and Bullock and does not contain Turley’s signature or any other indication that he approved it.

48. Grant H. Palmer, *An Insider’s View of Mormon Origins* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002), 206.

49. “Theodore Turley’s Memorandums,” Church History Library, transcription by Larry E. Morris.

Another source, however, tends to support the *History of the Church* version by citing another instance of Whitmer using the same phrase. In August 1878, one month after Whitmer's death, Myron H. Bond wrote of "that record [the Book of Mormon] which old Father John Whitmer told me last winter, with tears in his eyes, that he knew as well as he knew he had an existence that Joseph translated the ancient writing which was upon the plates which he 'saw and handled,' and which, as one of the scribes, he helped to copy, as the words fell from Joseph's lips, by *supernatural or almighty power*."⁵⁰ While confirming Whitmer's inclination to use the phrase, Bond's account also demonstrates an instance of Whitmer using it while describing a purely empirical event, namely his acting as scribe in the Whitmer home in June of 1829 while Joseph dictated the text of the Book of Mormon as he was looking at the seer stone in his hat. Despite the *belief* of Whitmer and others that Joseph was inspired as he dictated, the process of translation was neutral in terms of whether a miracle was involved.

Certainly, the Three Witnesses, who reported seeing an angel with the plates, could have said, "The plates were shown to us by a supernatural power." The Eight, however, took pains to avoid such language, stating at the beginning of their testimony that "Joseph Smith Jr. . . . has shewn unto us the plates" and at the end that "the said Smith has shewn unto us" and "the said Smith has got the plates." Whitmer reiterated this point in his official history of the Church: "[the Eight Witnesses] are the men to whom Joseph Smith Jr showed the plates."⁵¹

At the same time, Whitmer's empirical experience with the plates was irrevocably linked to his religious convictions—he was intent on testifying that the Book of Mormon was a revelation from God and proclaimed to the inhabitants of the earth that he had freed his garments of their blood. Isn't it therefore possible or even probable that when he said the plates had been shown to him by a supernatural power, he was reaffirming his convic-

50. Myron H. Bond to Editors, letter, Aug. 2, 1878, *Saints' Herald*, Aug. 15, 1878, 253, emphasis added.

51. "The Book of John, Whitmer kept by Comma[n] d," ca. 1838–ca. 1847, handwriting of John Whitmer, ninety-six pages, CCLA, in *Joseph Smith Papers*, H2:37.

tion that God had directed the ancient creation of the plates and Joseph's obtaining them through instructions by an angel?

After all, Turley himself had challenged Whitmer with a statement that (inaccurately) conflated Whitmer's empirical and religious testimonies: "All I know is that you have published to the world that an angel did present those plates to Joseph Smith." (The testimony of the Eight, of course, said nothing of an angel or any other miraculous occurrence.) Then, in the presence of eight witnesses of a different stripe—including the virulent anti-Mormon Samuel Bogart, later to flee Missouri after committing murder⁵²—Whitmer responded with a detailed empirical description of the plates followed by his assurance that a supernatural power played a crucial role in the translation of the Book of Mormon.

We can't be certain of Whitmer's meaning, but that uncertainly itself shows that concluding "the eight probably did not observe or feel the actual artifact" goes beyond the evidence. Bullock's thirdhand notes lack the historiographical authority to overrule both the testimonies of the witnesses themselves and the secondhand accounts of those who talked directly to them.

The Materialization of the Golden Plates

Already well respected in religious studies, UC Santa Barbara professor Ann Taves turned her attention to the Book of Mormon with "History and the Claims of Revelation: Joseph Smith and the Materialization of the Golden Plates" (2014) and *Revelatory Events: Three Case Studies of the Emergence of New Spiritual Paths* (2016). "For the sake of argument," writes Taves, "I want to assume that there were no plates or at least no ancient golden plates and at the same time take seriously believers' claim that Smith was not a fraud. If we start with these premises, then we have to explain how the plates might have become real for Smith as well as his followers." She subsequently argues that the "materialization" of the plates can be "understood as an interactive

52. Samuel Bogart biography, available at <https://josephsmithpapers.org/person/samuel-bogart>.

process that involves a person with unusual abilities, intimate others who recognized and called forth those abilities, and objects that facilitated the creation of both the revelator and the revelation.”⁵³

Taves successfully opens “new options” by turning to a “letter written by Jesse Smith, Joseph Smith’s staunchly Calvinist uncle, to Joseph’s older brother Hyrum in June 1829” and gets good mileage from Jesse’s stinging rejection of the “gold book,” especially his charge that his nephew Joseph “has eyes to see things that are not, and then has the audacity to say they are.” Building on this point, Taves turns “away from discovery as a literal recovery of ancient golden plates buried in a hill in upstate New York to discovery as skillful seeing.”⁵⁴ A close look at her arguments, however, reveals that Taves’s effort to employ “historical critical” tools and build “on a review of the evidence for the materiality of the plates”⁵⁵ falls short largely because she fails to deal adequately with the testimony of the Eight Witnesses.

Take these examples: Taves writes that “the Book of Mormon contained the testimony of two sets of witnesses (‘the three’ and ‘the eight’) . . . who claimed they had seen or handled the plates. . . . the three and eight witnesses [claimed] to have seen the plates directly.” This summary is problematic because it obscures crucial differences between the accounts of the Three and the Eight: the Three offered a religious testimony—repeatedly using the words *grace*, *heaven*, and *Christ*—in which they claimed to see, but not handle, the plates in a miraculous setting, and the Eight a matter-of-fact empirical testimony—using none of those words—in which they claimed to see, handle, and heft the plates, with no mention of an angel or the voice of God. Although Taves could have printed both statements in their entirety—which seems mandatory in a major scholarly paper about the plates—she opts instead to cite brief excerpts or paraphrase parts of those testimonies, sometimes conflating the two, leaving these questions unanswered: How can both the Eight and the Three have facilitated Joseph’s “skillful seeing” when

53. Taves, “History and the Claims of Revelation,” 185, 186–87.

54. *Ibid.*, 185–86.

55. *Ibid.*, 183, 182.

their declarations are so radically different? If Joseph and the Three “only saw the plates through the power of God in faith,” what is the significance of faith not being mentioned in relation to the Eight—or, for that matter, the Eight never being specifically mentioned in either the Book of Mormon or in Joseph’s revelations? Taves, however, shows such little interest in the Eight that she does not even identify any of them by name.⁵⁶

Taves’s claim that “the inner circle that saw and touched the plates generally acknowledged that they had either seen the plates in vision or obscured by a covering”⁵⁷ is blatantly inaccurate. As discussed above, the only individuals who both “saw and touched the plates” were Martin Harris, Oliver Cowdery, Josiah Stowell, and the Eight Witnesses, and of those eleven, only Harris and Cowdery saw them in vision, and only Harris (allegedly) said he saw them through a covering.⁵⁸ Taves’s presumption that the Eight saw the plates in vision is apparently based on Burnett’s and Parrish’s reports of Harris’s 1838 statement, but, again, as shown, Harris is not a reliable source on the matter. Taves has thus failed to let the Eight speak for themselves.

Taves’s hypothesis that the materialization of the plates was “a process that unfolded over a period of years beginning with the dream-visions of September 1823 and culminating in the publication of the Book of Mormon [in 1830]” is similarly problematic. For Joseph’s family, the coming forth of the Book of Mormon certainly unfolded over the period mentioned by Taves. It is also true that Joseph’s family “shared Smith’s belief in ancient Nephites, the angel Moroni, and ancient buried plates long before Smith claimed to recover them” and that family members were “deeply invested

56. *Ibid.*, 190. Taves mentions Joseph Sr. and Hyrum Smith but not in the context of their role as witnesses.

57. *Ibid.*, 189.

58. John A. Clark, an acquaintance of Martin Harris, wrote that a “gentleman in Palmyra” told Clark that in answer to the question of whether Harris saw the plates with his “bodily eyes,” Harris replied that he saw the plates “just as distinctly as I see any thing around me,—though at the time they were covered over with a cloth.” (John A. Clark, *Gleanings by the Way* [Philadelphia: W. J. & J. K. Simon; New York: Robert Carter, 1842], 257.) Of course, this is a weak source because it is third hand and includes an anonymous witness.

in the translation process and strongly disposed to believe.”⁵⁹ What Taves fails to explain, however, is how this notion of the plates materializing over several years could possibly apply to the Whitmer family, who had known Joseph for less than a month when John, Jacob, Christian, and Peter Whitmer Jr. and their brother-in-law Hiram Page became the majority of the Eight (and David became one of the Three). The sole evidence offered by Taves that these men participated in the materialization of the plates is their testimony itself—essentially the argument that anyone who believed and assisted Joseph must have played a role in the materialization—but such a contention is clearly tautological and therefore evidence of nothing.

Although Seth Perry argues that the “scholarly heft” Taves brings to her work “makes it important reading” and that “her notion of materialization” is “essential reading for the ever-growing set of scholars interested in material religion,”⁶⁰ a painstaking discussion of the testimony of the Eight Witnesses would have added considerable weight to that “heft.”

Conclusion

What, then, is the upshot of the statements of the seventeen empirical witnesses of the plates? By their very nature, of course, those statements cannot prove that an angel delivered an ancient record to Joseph. What those accounts do demonstrate is, in the words of the Eight, that “the said Smith has got the plates” and that those plates had “engravings thereon, all of which [had] the appearance of ancient work, and of curious workmanship.”⁶¹ In

59. *Ibid.*, 203, 297, 203.

60. Seth Perry, review of *Revelatory Events: Three Case Studies of the Emergence of New Spiritual Paths*, by Ann Taves, *Mormon Studies Review* 5 (2018): 99.

61. The forgery of the so-called Kinderhook plates, “discovered” in 1843 and considered ancient by many until 1980, shows that it was possible in the nineteenth century for a group of men, including a blacksmith working in his shop, to use plates of brass and acid to create an artifact having the “appearance of ancient work, and of curious workmanship,” with “engravings thereon.” See Brian M. Hauglid, “Did Joseph Smith Translate the Kinderhook Plates?” in *No Weapon Shall Prosper: New Light on Sensitive Issues*, edited by Robert L. Millet (Provo: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2011), 93–103, available at <https://rsc.byu.edu/archived/no-weapon-shall-prosper/did-joseph-smith-translate-kinderhook-plates>.

addition, those accounts are consistent: William Smith, in the autumn of 1827, and the Eight Witnesses, in the summer of 1829, as well as Emma Smith, Martin Harris, and Joseph McKune Sr. sometime in between, all described an object with leaves, or pages. Some of the pages were sealed and some were not. There is no evidence that Joseph used sand or anything else to “represent” the plates.

Individual accounts add that the pages were pliable, about as thick as plates of tin, about four to six inches thick, clearly not fashioned from stone or wood, and connected by rings. The plates were heavy, much heavier than stone, with estimates of their weight ranging from forty to sixty pounds. They measured about six or seven inches by eight inches and had a greenish color.⁶² The documentary evidence indicates there was one set and one set only. Dan Vogel aptly describes the inevitable conclusion: “The plates were either ancient or modern.”⁶³

62. Although Josiah Stowell judged the plates to be “about one foot square,” that estimate is suspect because he only claimed to see “a corner” of the plates.

63. Vogel, *Making of a Prophet*, xi.

PLAIN AND PRECIOUS THINGS LOST: THE SMALL PLATES OF NEPHI

Rebecca A. Roesler

“And upon *these*,” Nephi writes, differentiating his smaller set of plates from the original historically focused record begun over thirty years prior, “I write the things of my soul” (2 Ne. 4:15). As he opens his intimate psalm, he establishes how much he personally values this second record and intends the writings thereon “for the learning and the profit of [his] children.” That Nephi designates this parallel diary for the paramount preaching of his and successive generations is evident in his explications of the text’s existence (1 Ne. 9:3–5; 19:1–3; 2 Ne. 5:29–32), as well as his directions to those who would subsequently keep and add to this sacred portion of his corpus (1 Ne. 6:6; 19:3; Jacob 1:2). He prioritizes this “small account” as the vessel for retaining the choicest Nephite teachings: “I, Nephi, received a commandment that the ministry and the prophecies, the more *plain and precious* parts of them, should be written upon *these* plates” (W of M 1:3; 1 Nephi 19:3, emphasis added).¹ Nephi clearly desires that his posterity treasure the writings on the “small plates” (Jacob 1:1), that they study and teach them (Jacob 1:1–4).

1. The phrase “plain and precious” appears seven times in 1 Nephi 13, during Nephi’s recorded vision (1 Ne. 11–14). Four times, these words specifically refer to “plain and precious things taken away from the book, which is the book of the Lamb of God” (1 Ne. 13:28, 29, 34). However, three more instances of “plain and precious” things appear in this chapter, and refer to “much of my gospel” (v. 34), which “thy seed . . . shall write” (v. 35), and that “shall make known the plain and precious things which have been taken away” (v. 40). In only one other instance does the phrase “plain and precious” appear in the Book of Mormon, wherein Nephi refers to the writings on the small plates. When Latter-day Saints refer to “plain and precious things,” they often speak of those writings eventually lost from the biblical record. For example, the Joseph Smith Translation entry in the Guide to the Scriptures relates that “The Joseph Smith Translation has restored some of the

Thus, having been assigned the highest value, the small plates would warrant the most conscientious treatment by authors throughout the Book of Mormon text. Presumably the doctrines, prophecies, and language on the small plates would be woven through subsequent writings, as those of Hebrew prophets in Jesus' day, the King James Bible in nineteenth-century America,² and Isaiah within portions of the Book of Mormon. Unexpectedly, however, this does not occur with Nephi's "plain and precious" record (1 Ne. 19:3).³ As Joseph Spencer muses, "That the small plates are never specifically mentioned again and are seldom quoted is somewhat confusing and one wonders how the small plates had become so marginalized over the course of the centuries."⁴ Despite Nephi's several exhortations to his posterity to "preserve these plates and hand them down" (Jacob 1:3) and "that the things which were written should be kept for the instruction of my people" (1 Ne. 19:3), his posterity seem unaware of their existence. Questions posed by Alma₂ in particular suggest that he does not possess the same understanding that is expressed in the books of Nephi and Jacob. The Book of Mormon prophets, therefore, do not exhibit consistent degrees of doctrinal and prophetic understanding.

Such inconsistencies may cause some readers to question the credibility of the text. Upon observing doctrinal and prophetic variation within the Book of Mormon, some dismiss the book's divinity. Conversely, others deny

plain and precious things that have been lost from the Bible (1 Ne. 13)" ("Joseph Smith Translation (JST)," Guide to the Scriptures, <https://www.lds.org/scriptures/gs/joseph-smith-translation-jst?lang=eng>). Bible Dictionary entries on the Joseph Smith Translation and Sermon on the Mount offer similar treatments of the phrase. The Topical Guide and index to the triple combination entries on the word "plain" offer verses from 1 Nephi 13 and 14, but not 1 Nephi 19:3. General conference addresses utilizing the phrase "plain and precious" also refer to 1 Nephi 13–14, but 1 Nephi 19:3 is likewise not mentioned.

2. See John S. Tanner, "The King James Bible in America: Pilgrim, Prophet, President, Preacher," *BYU Studies* 50, no. 3 (2011): 4–24.

3. Several authors have observed some parallels between the small plates and the books of Mosiah and Alma, such as John Hilton, "Jacob's Textual Legacy," *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 22, no. 2 (2013): 52–65, and Joseph M. Spencer, *An Other Testament: On Typology*, 2nd ed. (Provo: Neal A. Maxwell Institute, 2016). These will be addressed later in this article.

4. Spencer, *An Other Testament*, 125.

inconsistencies exist at all and attempt to interpret passages to support the book's unchanging truth, defending its authenticity.

Among others, Brent Metcalfe and Matthew Roper represent these two viewpoints.⁵ Metcalfe explains variation in Book of Mormon prophets' understanding by considering the dictation sequence.⁶ As Joseph's own language or ideas change over time, the language of the text parallels that variation when considered in dictation order. He presents as evidence the dictation's historical context, stylistic and textual development that appear parallel to the dictation sequence, and early prophecies unknown to subsequent prophets in the middle period. The text's ideological/prophetic development coincides with a Mosian priority dictation order. He therefore concludes that Joseph Smith is the primary creator of the text: "The composite of those elements . . . point to Smith as the narrative's chief designer."⁷

Responding directly to Metcalfe, Matthew Roper argues for unchanging prophetic understanding throughout the Book of Mormon.⁸ He reframes certain passages that Metcalfe cites and bypasses others, asserting that Benjamin and Alma exhibit the same prophetic understanding as Nephi and Lehi. While his argument against Metcalfe's differentiation between "Christocentric" and "penitent" baptism, among others, is persuasive, he overlooks key differences in spiritual knowledge clearly exhibited among various prophets.⁹ Further, his fundamental anxiety is more troubling: that variation in the spiritual knowledge exhibited by prophets somehow threatens the book's historicity and, therefore, validity.

5. Brent Lee Metcalfe, "The Priority of Mosiah: A Prelude to Book of Mormon Exegesis," in *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon: Explorations in Critical Methodology*, edited by Brent Lee Metcalfe (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1993), 395–444, and Matthew Roper, "A More Perfect Priority?," review of "The Priority of Mosiah: A Prelude to Book of Mormon Exegesis," by Brent Lee Metcalfe, *FARMS Review of Books* 6, no. 1 (1994): 363.

6. Metcalfe, "The Priority of Mosiah."

7. *Ibid.*, 433.

8. Roper, "A More Perfect Priority?"

9. *Ibid.*, 367. Roper considerably reframes Alma 13:25 and overlooks Alma 7:8 and Alma 16:20 (*ibid.*, 363–65). These will be addressed later in this article.

Though the original discussion between Roper and Metcalfe ensued nearly three decades ago, many of the concerns they express perpetuate in scriptural discussions today. Both authors are tied up in an assumption: that if variation exists in the text, the book as a divine source of knowledge must be invalid. Readers may consider another approach to canonized texts: embracing changeableness, rather than unchangeableness, as a characteristic of scriptural texts. Variation need not invalidate sacred books. Rather, recognizing and exploring such variation can augment our understanding as we allow the text to be what it is.

Through examining the text of the Book of Mormon, I intend first to establish that scriptural texts can indeed exhibit variation in spiritual understanding and second, that such variation does not devalue sacred texts but can rather be insightful and, in the case of the Book of Mormon, align with and enrich the narrative. Before doing so, I first wish to preempt the possibility that readers may presume I subscribe to a particular theory that explains the text's dictation. I am not commenting on the historicity of the text nor the degree of divine involvement in the dictation process.¹⁰ Frankly, I keep rather aloof from such discussions, but prefer instead to focus on the document we all have before us. However, I will often refer to the Book of Mormon, in part or whole, as "record" or "history" because it refers to itself in this way through its characters/authors. Ultimately, the book remains a rich and mysterious complexity. Assumptions have perpetuated that are not only illogical but do a disservice to the text. Here I seek to expose the problematic nature of some of these assumptions, hopefully lending the text its due respect and wonder. I therefore offer an alternate reading to those presented by Metcalfe and Roper and others they may represent: that a careful examination of the Book of Mormon text presents a literary case

10. I do not deny the possibilities that Joseph Smith may have been influenced by his environment, that he uses the language of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century texts, or that the dictation sequence aligns with and explains some of the language and understanding exhibited within the text. However, I believe that attempting to explain the text solely through this lens is an incomplete approach.

that, sometime in the generations before Alma, the small plates of Nephi and the teachings thereon are lost or obscured from view.¹¹

Sources of Evidence

Many textual indications in the Book of Mormon suggest that the Nephites were unaware of the spiritual knowledge present on the small plates during the middle period. Evidence for this possibility is subsumed under a few categories. The strongest case is provided by direct evidence: certain doctrines and prophecies—clearly written on the small plates—are longed for and overtly acknowledged as absent or unknown. At times this sought-for understanding develops throughout the middle period (the second century BC, according to the text) as it is obtained through diligent searching, revelation, and at times angelic visitation, but previous teachings are not referenced. Another type of textual clue is more circumstantial and includes prophecies, concepts, or phrases that are simply absent during the middle period but present in the writing of Mormon and (mostly) Moroni. This evidence is abundant but only correlational and does not in itself demonstrate the Nephites' lack of access to the small plates. Considered in addition to direct evidence, however, and taken into account as an entire body, it corroborates the case for the Nephites' unawareness of the small plates during the middle period. In addition to these specific textual clues, the broader contextual narrative demonstrates a principle that spiritual knowledge increases or decreases based on people's attentiveness to it. This offers a possible rationale for the small plates' absence, as well as the depreciation and eventual reacquisition of spiritual knowledge and teachings thereon.

"Now as to this thing I do not know. . ." (Alma 7:8)

Alma₂ provides especially substantive evidence suggesting that the Nephites lack knowledge contained on the small plates. He seeks to understand or

11. Metcalfe makes some observations similar to those that follow, as will be noted, and he observes that concepts and language appear to develop parallel to a widely accepted Mosian priority dictation sequence (Metcalfe, "The Priority of Mosiah"). The present analysis acknowledges and confirms those observations, while offering an alternative reading that considers the narrative context, to be discussed later.

expound multiple doctrines and prophecies that are found on the small plates of Nephi, but he must toil to acquire them by revelation and uses restraint in expressing anything uncertain. Alma deliberately states what he does not know, what he gives “as [his] opinion” (Alma 40:20), and what he knows with certainty by revelation (e.g., Alma 5:46). He does not know when Christ would come (Alma 13:25), how the event would happen (Alma 7:8), or details as to the timing of the Resurrection (Alma 40:4–5). As the high priest, and because he is so cautious about speculating beyond certainty, Alma qualifies as a valid measure of general doctrinal knowledge. If he does not know a point of doctrine, it is plausible that no one else in the church would during that time.

Doctrines

In the period that opens as Mosiah₁ leads Nephite followers to Zarahemla, recorded doctrinal expositions and prophecies do not at first reflect the same understanding as Lehi, Nephi, and Jacob. Alma₂ and those preceding him diligently seek understanding of these doctrines, which return little by little, “line upon line” (2 Ne. 28:30), during something of a renaissance that begins in the second century BC.

Resurrection

“I have inquired diligently of God that I might know . . . concerning the resurrection,” Alma confides to his son Corianton (Alma 40:3). Alma describes this doctrine as a “mystery” that must be “unfold[ed],” which demonstrates that he does not have access to a satisfactory explication of resurrection doctrines. However, the small plates contain thorough expositions on the Resurrection: Lehi teaches this doctrine to his son Jacob (2 Ne. 2:8), who later speaks in great detail concerning the resurrection of the dead (2 Ne. 9:4–22). He clearly teaches that “the spirit and the body is restored to itself again” in resurrection and that the Resurrection brings to pass the judgment (2 Ne. 9:13). However,

this doctrine is not taught again with such detail until Amulek and Alma₂ teach the doctrine (Alma 11:42–45).¹²

King Benjamin does not speak much about the nature of the afterlife. He does not teach about a universal resurrection, though he does mention that Christ “shall rise the third day from the dead” (Mosiah 3:10). He only speaks of possibly being “received into heaven” or “brought to heaven” (Mosiah 2:41; 5:15).¹³ Most notably, he does not mention the spirit and body’s restoration to each other, as does Jacob, according to Nephi’s record of his teaching on the small plates. The word “resurrection” is only used by Abinadi (Mosiah 15:20–26), then Alma₁, both teaching that the righteous will be “numbered with those of the first resurrection, that ye may have eternal life” (Mosiah 18:9). Although they use the term “resurrection,” they offer little more detail concerning the afterlife than Benjamin offers his people. They make no mention of the reuniting of spirit and body.¹⁴

On the other hand, Amulek, likely having been taught by Alma₂ (the high priest), gives unprecedented doctrinal insights that “the spirit and the body shall be reunited again in its perfect form; both limb and joint shall be restored to its proper frame” (Alma 11:42–45). Doctrines he teaches, previously unrecorded in his century, include the reuniting of spirit and body in

12. For a more thorough review of doctrinal teachings on the resurrection, see Robert J. Matthews, “Doctrine of the Resurrection as Taught in the Book of Mormon,” *BYU Studies* 30, no. 3 (1990): 41–56. Matthews notes differences in the teaching of the resurrection by various Book of Mormon doctrine teachers, but he does not go so far as to say that understanding varies from person to person.

13. Mosiah 26:2 may indicate more had been taught, but it is not clear who taught it; this verse is referring to a time after Alma₁ enters Zarahemla.

14. Simply because the record does not provide these details does not in itself mean they were not known, of course. Roper contests that such is an “argument from silence” (Roper, “A More Perfect Priority?”). As demonstrated here, however, the text is not only doctrinally reduced for a large period but includes concurrent or eventual instances in which authors seek understanding of that which is not known, as especially demonstrated in the queries of Alma. The possibility that the Nephites may not have completely understood the doctrine of resurrection is also supported in the apparent confusion on the subject as later reported and clarified by Alma₂ to his son Corianton (Alma 40:15–18). There appears to be disagreement over terminology, perhaps originating in the way the doctrine is originally taught in this period, before it is more fully understood.

an incorruptible state and a universal resurrection for all, which then brings about divine judgment in the presence of God for both the guilty and the righteous. Nephi records all these doctrines on the small plates as Jacob had taught them: “the bodies and spirits of men shall be restored to one another . . . and all men become incorruptible, and immortal, and they are living souls, having a perfect knowledge like unto us in the flesh . . . and then must they be judged according to the holy judgment of God” (2 Ne. 9:12–13, 15; see 2 Ne. 9:4–22).

Spirit World

Alma 40 offers a particularly poignant window into Alma’s inquisitive mind and thirst for further spiritual understanding, in which he relates to his son Corianton that he has “inquired diligently of God that I might know . . . what becometh of the souls of men from the time of death to the time appointed for the resurrection” (Alma 40:3, 7). He relates that it must be “made known unto [him] by an angel” concerning this state of happiness or misery of the soul before the resurrection (Alma 40:11). Why must he “inquire diligently of God” and why must he receive angelic manifestations? Doctrines he learns after such toil concerning the “state of the souls of the wicked . . . as well as the righteous in paradise until the time of their resurrection” (Alma 40:14) are the first of their kind recorded in his century; yet they do not expand beyond Nephi’s record of Jacob’s public address teaching of states of “hell” and “paradise” before “the spirit and body is restored unto itself again” (2 Ne. 9:12–13).

Alma states that he must come to an understanding of the spirit world and the resurrection by seeking answers from God and then by receiving angelic declaration and other revelation (Alma 40:11) (see table 1). His awareness of the material on the small plates appears to be cursory at best. Yet, he is a diligent gospel scholar. It seems unlikely that Alma would have only a perfunctory understanding of a record so replete with the answers he seeks. More viably, Alma has no such writings before him to search, or is unaware of their existence.

Prophecies

“In six hundred years . . . ”

Nephi records three separate statements from three different sources that Christ would come to earth six hundred years after Lehi’s departure from Jerusalem (1 Ne. 10:4; 19:8; 2 Ne. 25:19). These prophecies appear to be unknown to the Nephites in the middle period, and nothing indicates that people observed their fulfillment at the time of their occurrence. By contrast, the biblical Gospel writers, for example, frequently quote earlier prophecies, testifying of their fulfillment (e.g., Matt. 2:17–18, 23; 3:3).

Alma’s brooding contemplations indicate that these prophecies are unknown to him. Although he knows of Christ’s coming, he is unaware of the timing of his coming: “And now we only wait to hear the joyful news declared unto us by the mouth of angels, of his coming; for the time cometh, *we know not how soon*. Would to God that it might be in my day; but let it be sooner or later, in it I will rejoice” (Alma 13:25, emphasis added).¹⁵ If Alma searched the records available to him, he makes no indication of it.

Christ’s Life

After an angelic visitation, King Benjamin prophesies of Christ’s life (Mosiah 3). Benjamin relates little that was not already recorded on the small plates.¹⁶ The account the angel gives Benjamin of the Savior’s life (Mosiah 3:5–10) is similar to that given by Lehi (1 Ne. 10:4–11) and Nephi (1 Ne. 11), except

15. Metcalfe observes the Nephites’ lack of awareness of this prophecy (Metcalfe, “The Priority of Mosiah”). Roper responds that the Nephites did indeed know of the prophecy and maintains that Alma 13:25 refers specifically to Christ’s coming to the people in their own land (Roper, “A More Perfect Priority?”). I agree that the specific verse alone is ambiguous, but little evidence supports the certain interpretation he asserts. To the contrary, Alma 7:8 indicates uncertainty that they would be visited at all, and whether it would be during Christ’s mortal life. It is not until Alma 16:20 that the Nephites receive a clearer understanding of his visit among them after his resurrection. A holistic approach to Nephite understanding during this period confirms their lack of awareness of the original six-hundred-year prophecy.

16. The angel does teach two new pieces of knowledge not recorded on the small plates, however: Mary’s name and the description of Christ’s bleeding from every pore (Mosiah 3:7–8).

Benjamin's address omits Christ's baptism and the exact time of his coming. Why would he need an angel to declare this account to him when it had already been recorded? Benjamin never cites earlier records as he speaks to the people, only the words of the angel.

Additionally, the angel's words to the people through Benjamin appear to be an *increase* of knowledge based on their righteousness. The angel says to Benjamin, "The Lord hath heard thy prayers, and hath judged of thy righteousness, and hath sent me to declare unto thee that thou mayest rejoice; and that thou mayest declare unto thy people, that they may also be filled with joy" (Mosiah 3:4). Because of their righteousness, Benjamin and his people receive the knowledge to follow, after much faith and prayer. The knowledge is new to them and could only be given by revelation. It appears the knowledge was not available to them by any other known means.

Christ's Coming Among the Nephites

Nephi receives a vision outlining the future destiny of his people, including the pinnacle event: Christ's coming among them. Nephi relates that he "saw the heavens open, and the Lamb of God descending out of heaven; and he came down and showed himself unto them" (1 Ne. 12:6). Nephi later relates these events in greater detail:

And after Christ shall have risen from the dead he shall show himself unto you, my children, and my beloved brethren; and the words which he shall speak unto you shall be the law which ye shall do. . . .

The Son of Righteousness shall appear unto them; and he shall heal them, and they shall have peace with him, until three generations shall have passed away, and many of the fourth generation shall have passed away in righteousness. (2 Ne. 26:1, 9)

Alma, however, is not clear as to any of these details. He writes, "I do not say that he will come among us at the time of his dwelling in his mortal tabernacle; for behold, the Spirit hath not said unto me that this should be the case. Now as to this thing I do not know" (Alma 7:8). Later, however, "they were taught that he would appear unto them after his resurrection" (Alma 16:20;

see also Alma 45:10). Alma's newfound understanding of this prophecy demonstrates that he is unaware of the small plates.¹⁷

Purpose and Destiny of the Nephite Record

Nephi also prophesies extensively concerning the purpose and destiny of the records he keeps. He relates details about the coming forth of the Book of Mormon to a gentile nation that would then bring the record to the Nephites and the Jews. The records would establish the Bible's truthfulness and restore the plain and precious things that are absent from the biblical record. These prophecies abound throughout the small plates (1 Ne. 13; 2 Ne. 3; 27–30).

Alma's musings, however, consistent with his carefully responsible yet enthusiastically inquisitive character, indicate that he does not know of these prophecies:

And who knoweth but what they will be the means of bringing many thousands of them [the Lamanites], yea, and also many thousands of our stiffnecked brethren, the Nephites, who are now hardening their hearts in sin and iniquities, to the knowledge of their Redeemer?

Now these mysteries are not yet fully made known unto me; therefore I shall forbear.

And it may suffice if I only say they are preserved for a wise purpose, which purpose is known unto God. (Alma 37:10–12, emphasis added)

Alma knows and senses that these records are important and will bring to pass "great things" (Alma 37:6–7). He surmises the possibility of greater conversions

17. Unbelievers' later complaints also provide evidence of the lack of universality of the knowledge of Christ's coming among the Nephites. Unbelievers reportedly "began to reason and to contend among themselves, saying that it is not reasonable that such a being as a Christ shall come; if so, and he be the Son of God, the Father of heaven and of earth, as it has been spoken, why will he not show himself unto us as well as unto them who shall be at Jerusalem? Yea, why will he not show himself in this land as well as in the land of Jerusalem?" (Hel. 16:17–19). It may be that the teaching of Christ's appearance to the Nephites after his resurrection (Alma 16:20) is not widely understood beyond those who are believers. Because it is a relatively new teaching for their time, unbelievers are perhaps complaining about something that had already been addressed but was not universally known. They would have understood, perhaps, had they listened to recent prophets and prophecies.

occurring due to the writings contained thereon. However, he is careful not to speculate when he cannot speak authoritatively on the subject. Again, it appears that Alma did not have access to the small plates, because he would have been able to cite Nephi's prophecies foretelling the coming forth of the Book of Mormon unto the Gentiles, then the Jews, and "the remnant of our seed" (2 Ne. 30:3–4; see also 1 Ne. 13:35–39; 2 Ne. 27) as well as Enos, who further prophesies in particular concerning the Book of Mormon coming unto the Lamanites (Enos 1:13, 16–17). He also ignores other prophets like Jarom, who expresses his understanding that the record he keeps is "for the intent of the benefit of our brethren the Lamanites" (Jarom 1:2).

Mormon and Moroni

Perhaps the most obvious evidence for the Nephites' ignorance of the small plates is Mormon's surprise upon discovering them. He must "search among the records" to find "these plates" (W of M 1:3) only after he has abridged the large plates through the account of Benjamin. Typically, Mormon incorporates various authors' accounts within the sequence of the larger narrative, but the small plates stand alone without his editorial hand. We do not know at what point during his abridgment of the large plates he reads the small plates, but the record suggests that by the time he had finished the abridgment, he knew the material on the small plates, and that influences his later writing, as well as and especially that of his son Moroni.¹⁸

Several more of Nephi's prophecies on the small plates are never mentioned during the centuries before Christ comes among the people. Then, after they are absent from the record for nearly a millennium, these prophecies vigorously reappear in the writing of Mormon and Moroni, who have the small plates before them. For example, while Alma appears to have no

18. Although Mormon states that he discovers the small plates while abridging the large plates (W of M 1:3), we do not know when he studies them in detail. He reads them enough to note the "prophecies of the coming of Christ," which are "pleasing to me" (W of M 1:4), though these words are written when he is "about to deliver up the record which I have been making into the hands of . . . Moroni" (W of M 1:1).

knowledge of earlier prophecies pertaining to the destiny of Nephite records (as previously noted), Mormon and Moroni express a more comprehensive vision for the records they keep. They repeat and confirm prophecies regarding the records' purpose (3 Ne. 29:1; Morm. 5:12–15; 8:26). Moroni's prophetic writings pertaining to a latter day (Morm. 8) all exist within the context of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon record: "And no one need say they shall not come, for they surely shall" (Morm. 8:26).

Many other prophecies, concepts, and phrases contained on the small plates remain absent throughout the middle of the Book of Mormon until they return in the writing of Mormon and Moroni, including:

- Seeing and speaking to a latter-day universal audience (2 Ne. 33:10, 13; Morm. 3:17–18; 7:1; 8:35; Ether 5; title page)
- Twelve Jerusalem judges and twelve Nephite judges (1 Ne. 12:9–10; Morm. 3:17, 19)
- The latter-day state of affairs: Book of Mormon to come forth in a time of unbelief (2 Ne. 26–29; Morm. 8:26–39; 9:7, 15; Moro. 10:24)
- Three witnesses (2 Ne. 27:12–13; Ether 5:2–4)
- "God who can do no miracles" (2 Ne. 28:6; Morm. 9:15; Ether 12:12)
- "He that shall" "bring forth" "this thing to light" "by the power of God" (2 Ne. 3:11–15; Morm. 8:14, 16, 25)
- "Voice" "crying from the dust," "speaking out of the dust" (2 Ne. 3:19–20; 26:16; 27:13; 33:11, 13; Morm. 5:12; 8:23, 26; Moro. 10:27)
- "Meet[ing] . . . before the pleasing bar of God" (2 Ne. 33:11; Jacob 6:13; Moro. 10:34)

In these examples, Mormon's and Moroni's language is at times so similar to Nephi's it is difficult to ignore a connection between them. Table 2 provides a list of the prophecies absent during the middle period that are reiterated by Mormon and Moroni. That these prophecies and lexical groupings are absent in the generations before Mormon provides further evidence that the Nephites are unaware of the small plates from the time (or before) Amaleki finishes them until Mormon finds them.

Observed Parallels Between the Small Plates and Mosiah, Alma

Of course, Mormon's collection and abridgment of the large plates are not without passages that appear to originate from the small plates. Despite variation in spiritual understanding as noted above, much common knowledge exists from one Nephite period to the next, such as the commandment to keep the law of Moses until it is fulfilled (2 Ne. 25:24; Mosiah 13:27–28; Alma 25:15–16; 30:3; 34:13–14).¹⁹ Joseph Spencer has observed parallels between the writing of Nephi and Zeniff.²⁰ John Hilton has observed textual similarities between Jacob and King Benjamin.²¹ Furthermore, Alma 36:22 appears to be a direct quote from the small plates (1 Ne. 1:8).

All of these anomalies suggest the existence of (at least) two parallel records, the large plates and small plates, from which later text may have been derived. Moreover, it is feasible that Nephi copied some of his original record onto the small plates, as he began the latter account after first recording thirty years of history and prophecy on the large plates (1 Ne. 19:1–2; 2 Ne. 5:28–30).²² The exact text of Alma 36:22, for instance, also appears very early in Nephi's second account—the eighth verse (1 Ne. 1:8)—which may have been copied from the large plates.

Though traces of Jacob exist within Mormon's abridgment of the large plates, they are relatively few. John Hilton points out several textual similarities

19. See Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader's Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 193.

20. See Spencer, *An Other Testament*.

21. See John Hilton, "Jacob's Textual Legacy," *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 22, no. 2 (2013): 52–65.

22. See John W. Welch, "When Did Nephi Write the Small Plates," in *Pressing Forward with the Book of Mormon: The FARMS Updates of the 1990s*, edited by John W. Welch and Melvin J. Thorne (Provo: FARMS, 1999), 75–77. S. Kent Brown also addresses Nephi's copying from previous sources such as the book of Lehi and the brass plates in "Nephi's Use of Lehi's Record," in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon*, edited by John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1991). See also David E. Sloan, "The Book of Lehi and the Plates of Lehi," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 6, no. 2 (1997): 269–72.

between King Benjamin's address (Mosiah 2–4) and Jacob's address as recorded by Nephi in 2 Nephi 9, specifically within a span of only twenty-nine verses (2 Ne. 9:16–44).²³ Contrastingly, Jacob's influences on Moroni draw from a much broader range of Jacob's writings, including 2 Nephi 9 and Jacob 2, 3, 4, and 6. It is possible that Nephi recorded portions of Jacob's address on his large plates, perhaps before he made the small plates; Nephi recounts forging the small plates (2 Ne. 5:28–30) just prior to his account of Jacob's sermon (2 Ne. 6–10). Jacob's language is otherwise absent from most other writings until Moroni, thus more fully supporting the premise that subsequent Book of Mormon authors do not have most of his words.

Joseph Spencer notes several correlations between the record of Zeniff and Nephi's opening to the small plates, as well as connections between Jacob and Abinadi.²⁴ Although Spencer highlights striking similarities between Nephi and Zeniff's record, the use of the small plates as a template for Zeniff's record is problematic in at least one way: Amaleki still has the plates in his possession while he records on them the group's first and second trips to the land of Nephi.²⁵ As in the cases addressed above, it is possible that Nephi's parallel set of large plates may account for the noted correlations between portions of the small plates and the record of Zeniff and Abinadi's doctrinal teaching. At any rate, these exceptions demonstrate the book's complexity and defy the parallels with the dictation sequence that Metcalfe observes.²⁶

23. Hilton, "Jacob's Textual Legacy."

24. Spencer, *An Other Testament*.

25. It is intriguing, however, that Amaleki is personally connected with the group: his brother goes with them. The mysterious origins inherent in the characters of Zeniff and especially Abinadi and their temporal proximity to the small plates' intended deliverance into the royal depository do invite some amount of conjecture as to these persons' possible contact with Nephi's second smaller account. Even so, Zeniff's people fall into apostasy and Abinadi is martyred, and any knowledge of the small plates that they may have had does not appear to endure through subsequent generations.

26. Metcalfe, "The Priority of Mosiah."

Narrative Context

That Nephi's small plates are unknown to the Book of Mormon's most diligent gospel scholars of the second century BC is baffling and especially contradictory to Mormon's assertion that King Benjamin "took them and put them with the other plates" (W of M 1:10). Indeed, Amaleki states his intent to give them to Benjamin (Omni 1:25). How can these statements be reconciled with Alma's apparent lack of awareness of the small plates?

As mentioned above, Brent Metcalfe aligns the variation he sees in the text with the dictation order, which is an informative yet incomplete consideration.²⁷ In an effort to defend the book's historicity, Matthew Roper responds to the "purported anomalies" Metcalfe presents largely by making the case for unchanging prophetic understanding throughout the Book of Mormon.²⁸ The data presented in this analysis demonstrates that the latter static approach to the Book of Mormon text (not unique to himself) must be reconsidered.²⁹ Additionally, while acknowledging (and expanding upon) Metcalfe's observations of prophetic variation, the forgoing offers a reading that takes into account the literary context and maintains the literary integrity of the Book of Mormon. A broader view of the Book of Mormon narrative, considered through the lens of a principle laid out by its own prophets, provides a rationale as to the plates' absence during the second century BC.

"According to the heed and diligence which they give. . ."

The Book of Mormon itself characterizes individuals' and societies' spiritual knowledge acquisition as a dynamic endeavor rather than a static state of being. Alma₂ describes a positive relationship between people's earnestness toward the word of God and God's imparting of it:

27. Ibid.

28. Roper, "A More Perfect Priority?," 362.

29. E.g., Matthews, "Doctrine of the Resurrection," and Daniel C. Peterson, "Authority in the Book of Mosiah," *FARMS Review* 18, no. 1 (2006): 149–85 also offer a treatment of the text that asserts unvarying spiritual knowledge throughout its history.

It is given unto many to know the mysteries of God; nevertheless they are laid under a strict command that they shall not impart only according to the portion of his word which he doth grant unto the children of men, according to the heed and diligence which they give unto him.

And therefore, he that will harden his heart, the same receiveth the lesser portion of the word; and he that will not harden his heart, to him is given the greater portion of the word, until it is given unto him to know the mysteries of God until he know them in full.

And they that will harden their hearts, to them is given the lesser portion of the word until they know nothing concerning his mysteries.
(Alma 12:9–11)

A similar relationship between righteousness and prosperity is expressed numerous times as the Book of Mormon opens (1 Ne. 2:20; 4:14; 2 Ne. 1:9, 20), and as the text progresses, prosperity is understood not only to mean wealth but also security and protection (2 Ne. 1:9; Jarom 1:9; Omni 1:5–6). Throughout the Book of Mormon, the text draws a correlation between righteousness, collective security, and spiritual knowledge. These variables do not remain constant throughout the book, but all, including recorded prophetic understanding, ebb and flow. This is certainly the case in the generations following Nephi.³⁰

After Nephi bestows the small plates on his brother Jacob, they are passed from generation to generation, father to son and brother to brother, each keeping the record with varying degrees of conscientiousness. Also, in the generations following Nephi, prophets report a decline in righteousness, revelatory reception, and safety and peace. The people spiral downward from “prosper[ing] exceedingly” (2 Ne. 5:13) to “indulg[ing] themselves somewhat in wicked practices . . . under the reign of the second king” (Jacob 1:15) until eventually “the more wicked part of the Nephites were destroyed” in a few generations (Omni 1:5), which Amaron attributes to the people’s failure to keep God’s commandments (Omni 1:6). Five generations of small plates

30. For a thorough examination of these patterns, see Rebecca A. Roesler, “Heed and Diligence: Correlations of Righteousness and Truth in the Book of Mormon,” unpublished manuscript in author’s possession.

record-keepers (Jarom, Omni, Amaron, Chemish, Abinadom) become increasingly casual and lose sight of the record's original purpose, forgetting their father Nephi's original instructions to them (Jacob 1:1–2).³¹ Dissemination of spiritual knowledge ceases; Abinadom states “I know of no revelation . . . neither prophecies” (Omni 1:11).

Meanwhile, unlike Nephi and Jacob, a weak relationship appears to exist between the keepers of the small (originally more spiritually oriented) plates and the kings who have stewardship over the historical records. Beyond Jacob's subtle criticism of the people's hardening behavior “under the second king” (Jacob 1:15) and Jarom's mentioning that their “kings and their rulers were mighty men in the faith of the Lord” (Jarom 1:7), there seems to be little connection, personally at least, between Jacob's posterity and the kingly line. Not until Amaleki celebrates Mosiah, who, in contrast to the immediately

31. Jacob expresses understanding of the record's special purpose: “Nephi gave me, Jacob, a commandment . . . that I should write upon these plates a few of the things which I considered to be most precious; that I should not touch, save it were lightly, concerning the history of this people” (Jacob 1:1–2). Furthermore, he states, “For, for this intent have we written these things, that they may know that we knew of Christ” (Jacob 4:4). Jarom's writing does not reflect the same priorities. He states that he writes so that “our genealogy may be kept” and that it is “written for the intent of the benefit of our brethren the Lamanites” (Jarom 1:1–2). Although Jarom communicates the importance of obedience as his main message and includes the witness of the Christ to come as taught by others, he leaves nothing of his own witness for future readers. Omni, introducing himself as “a wicked man” (Omni 1:2), acknowledges the importance of obedience (“as I ought to have done”) but leaves no witness of Christ in his actions or words and states that the plates' only purpose is “to preserve our genealogy” (Omni 1:1). Amaron indicates that he understands the purpose of obedience and acknowledges that the judgments of God are the consequence of disobedience (Omni 1:4–7). He leaves no testimony of Christ, however. Testimony and doctrine in the writing of Chemish is nonexistent, and yet he declares, “And after this manner we keep the records, for it is according to the commandments of our fathers” (Omni 1:9). Abinadom, six generations after Nephi's mandate to Jacob, demonstrates some degree of understanding of the expectation regarding the keeping of the record. He states he knows of no revelation, but that “that which is sufficient is written” (Omni 1:11). It would seem he is saying, “I know I'm supposed to write the revelations we're receiving, but I don't know of any, so I guess what's there will do.”

previous generations, leads them “by many preachings and prophesyings” (Omni 1:12, 13), does an author mention a direct association with a king?³²

By the time King Benjamin receives stewardship over the main corpus of records (what we understand as the large plates), how aware is he of the small plates’ existence? Amaleki, upon observing that “these plates are full” (v. 30) and that he has no posterity to bestow them upon, determines it would be best to deliver them to Benjamin, “knowing [him] to be a just man before the Lord” (Omni 1:25). According to Mormon, Amaleki does just that, and King Benjamin then “took them and put them with the other plates” (W of M 1:10). What happens next? Do the people receive the records with rejoicing, public readings, or deliberate study, as with other acquired records, such as those of Zeniff, Alma, and the Jaredites (Mosiah 25:5–6; 28:11–19)? The text makes no mention of such a reception of the small plates.

Given the generations and centuries that have, by this time, passed through darkness, destruction, and casual record keeping by those who appear largely disconnected from the kings who keep the other records,³³ it is possible that, upon delivery, the value of the “plain and precious” record is not recognized (1 Ne. 19:3). Perhaps “this small account” (W of M 1:3) does not even make it directly into the hands of Benjamin before being filed away, perhaps in an unknown location. Or perhaps Benjamin is commanded to “keep them, that they should not come unto the world,” as Mosiah does the sealed portion of the Jaredite plates (Ether 4:1–2). Despite several conjectural possibilities, we cannot be certain of the plates’ location and accessibility in the Nephite library at this point. However, the Book of Mormon record itself provides evidence that, whatever the reason, the Nephites hereafter appear to be unaware of the small plates of Nephi, perhaps even as the account exists in their possession all along. With few exceptions (noted above) these middle-period prophets and kings do not

32. Interestingly, Mosiah is not reported as having been king in the land of Nephi. His familial connection to the original Nephite line of kings is not stated, but he does, of course, somehow acquire the records on the large plates; they are passed down to his son Benjamin.

33. Over the course of twelve verses (Omni 1:1–12), from Jarom to Amaleki, approximately two centuries and four generations pass.

reference or quote the material on the small plates. Several doctrines and prophecies contained therein are evidently unknown or eventually learned independently during the centuries leading to the coming of Christ.

Conclusion

The evidence herein supports the premise that the Nephites living after Amaleki (and perhaps before) are unaware of the small plates of Nephi until the day that Mormon finds them among the records. Alma₂ is a particularly helpful source regarding the Nephites' doctrinal and prophetic knowledge; he reports having no certain knowledge of a large body of doctrine and prophecies clearly written on the small plates. Additionally, many prophecies contained on the small plates are never referred to in subsequent books, missing from the record until they return prominently in the writing of Mormon and Moroni, after Mormon discovers the small plates.

The present analysis offers an alternative reading of the text that both acknowledges and expands upon Metcalfe's observations of the "less well developed" concepts of the "middle section of the book (Mosiah and Alma)"³⁴ while offering a literary rationale for such textual variation, thus maintaining the integrity of the entire Book of Mormon narrative as a whole—a narrative that aligns with principles laid out by the book's own prophets. Further, I offer a response to Metcalfe's hypothetical: "Why would Mormon or Moroni have inserted later, more developed elements into the narrative in some cases but neglected to do so in the homilies of Benjamin, Mosiah, Abinadi, and both Almas?"³⁵ Meanwhile, Roper's argument attempting to defend the Book of Mormon's historicity by asserting that its peoples' doctrinal and prophetic knowledge remains static and unchanging over a period of a millennium is indefensible—and ahistorical. Prophetic knowledge exhibited throughout scriptural texts does not remain constant. Acquisition of spiritual knowledge is instead represented as a dynamic process of development and, at times, decay.

I suggest that there is a viable reading of the Book of Mormon narrative that accounts for differences in language, prophecies, and doctrines

34. Metcalfe, "The Priority of Mosiah," 415.

35. *Ibid.*, 427.

taught during various periods of the book, a book that follows its own rules as to the spiritual knowledge acquired by its people. Despite Nephi's writing on the small plates "for the learning and profit of [his] children" (2 Ne. 4:15) and his directions to his posterity to "write upon these plates . . . things which [they] considered to be most precious . . . for the sake of our people" (Jacob 1:2–4), it appears that in only a few generations these "plain and precious things" are "taken away" from them until just prior to their final destruction (1 Ne. 13:26).

Doctrine	Small Plates	Benjamin	Abinadi/ Alma₁	Alma₂/ Amulek
Resurrection	"bring to pass the resurrection of the dead" (2 Ne. 2:8) "the spirit and the body is restored to itself again" (2 Ne. 9:13)	"received into heaven" (Mosiah 2:41) "brought to heaven" (Mosiah 5:15)	The righteous will be "numbered with those of the first resurrection, that ye may have eternal life" (Mosiah 18:9)	"The spirit and the body shall be reunited again in its perfect form; both limb and joint shall be restored to its proper frame" (Alma 11:42–45)
Soul between death and resurrection	States of "hell" and "paradise" before "the bodies and spirits of men will be restored one to another" (2 Ne. 9:12–13)	No mention	No mention	"state of the souls of the wicked . . . as well as the righteous in paradise until the time of their resurrection" (Alma 40:14)

Table 1. Recorded doctrinal teachings as taught by Lehi and Jacob on the small plates, Benjamin, Abinadi/Alma₁, and Alma₂/Amulek.

Prophecy	Small Plates	Large Plates	Mormon/ Moroni
Christ in 600 years	1 Ne. 10:4 1 Ne. 19:8 2 Ne. 25:19	Alma unaware: Alma 13:25 Samuel, “5 years more”: Hel. 14:2	Already fulfilled Mormon observes: W of M 1:4
Christ’s life	1 Ne. 10:4–11	Mosiah 3:5–10, by revelation, angelic manifestation	Already fulfilled
Christ among Nephites	1 Ne. 12:6 2 Ne. 26:1, 9	Unaware: Alma 7:8 Learned later: Alma 16:20	Already fulfilled W of M 1:4
Purpose of records	1 Ne. 13 2 Ne. 3 2 Ne. 27–30 Enos 1:13, 16–17 Jarom 1:2	Unaware: Alma 37:7–12	3 Ne. 29:1 Morm. 5:12–15 Morm. 8
Latter-day univer- sal audience	2 Ne. 33:10, 13	No mention	Morm. 3:17–18 Morm. 7:1 Morm. 8:35 Ether 5 Title page
The Twelve: Judges	1 Ne. 12:9–10	No mention	Morm. 3:17–19
Latter-day state of affairs: unbelief	2 Ne. 26–29	No mention	Morm. 8:26–39 Morm. 9:7, 15 Moro. 10:24
“God who can do no miracles”	2 Ne. 28:5–6	No mention	Morm. 9:15 Ether 12:12
“He that shall bring this thing to light”	2 Ne. 3:11–15	No mention	Morm. 8:14, 16, 25
Three witnesses	2 Ne. 27:12–13	No mention	Ether 5:2–4
Voice “from the dust”	2 Ne. 3:19–20 2 Ne. 26:16 2 Ne. 27:13 2 Ne. 33:11, 13	No mention	Morm. 5:12 Morm. 8:23, 26 Moro. 10:27
“Pleasing bar of God”	2 Ne. 33:11 Jacob 6:13	No mention	Moro. 10:34

Table 2. Prophecies as contained in the small plates, Mormon’s abridgement of the large plates, and the writing of Mormon and Moroni.

TIMO'S BLESSING

Peter de Schweinitz

I remember that the sun shone warm but the air felt cool. A robin would have chirped in the branches that shaded my father, who was immersed in the savory smoke rising from the built-in grill. My four younger siblings spread about the enclosed patio, munching on snacks because the hamburgers were still pink inside. Across from me at the plastic table sat Maudi, a wiry woman with a deep tan, and a cigarette in her mouth, and Rod, a portly man with a slightly raspy voice, greying mustache, topsiders, and Vuarnet sunglasses tucked away in a front pocket. Maudi was Dad's mom. Rod was Maudi's third husband, the one that she kept.

It seemed strange that they had flown out to see us. In less than a month we would be making our annual spring-break trip to visit them in Tucson. As usual, we would spend a night or two at their middle-class ranch house across from a corral of horses before driving south across the border to Puerto Peñasco, known in Arizona as "Rocky Point," to spend a few days in their immobilized trailer home. We'd eat enchiladas to the sound of mariachi bands, sail the catamaran, and bake our skin while lying on our bellies in the sand. I looked forward to that trip.

I don't remember any deep conversations with Rod, or Maudi. It wasn't that they were shallow people; it was mostly that we were strangers. My maternal grandmother, the one we called "Grandmother," lived in a small home in Mountain View, just fifteen-minutes south on 101. She kept a playhouse in the backyard and poured us orange juice in small Archie cartoon glasses her own kids had used. Every spring, she took one or two of us down the coast to Carlsbad to boogie board at the beach with our aunts. I suppose I didn't have any deep conversations with Grandmother, either. But neither did I feel uncomfortable, as I did with Maudi, who wore a red bikini even after her breasts went south.

“How’s school, Peter?” Rod asked.

“Pretty good,” I said.

“You playing any sports right now?”

“No, the basketball season’s over. I decided not to play anything this spring. I’m working at the YMCA, teaching little kids sports. I’m trying to save up for college.” When I spoke to Maudi and Rod, I used complete sentences. This wasn’t because they were formal, but rather because I felt just a bit nervous.

“Oh, that’s good,” Rod said.

“I’m going to try out for the BYU soccer team in August.”

Maudi turned away and blew out a stream of smoke.

“I hope you make it,” Rod said.

I heard the sliding glass door to the family room open and close and then felt my mother’s breath in my ear and saw her square face at my side. From a distance, I looked more like Mom than Dad. Mom and I had blond, curly hair and blue eyes. Dad’s hair was black, like his two brothers, who would also be coming for lunch. “We just found out that Timo and Dave are homosexual,” Mom said. “They’ll be arriving soon.”



I’d seen a pair of homosexuals before.

One day, Dad had piled us into the car and drove north through San Francisco and across the Golden Gate Bridge before turning west through the eucalyptus trees of Marin County. We didn’t stop at Stinson Beach. We jogged north and then west around a cove to Bolinas, a sleepy village in the fog. Dad hadn’t been there in almost forty years, so it took a bit of searching before he found the right place.

“How long did you live here?” we asked him when he’d stopped the car.

“Oh, maybe six months, maybe a year. I went to kindergarten here.”

The cottage must not have been more than six or seven hundred square feet, a lonely structure on the round of a steep hill overlooking the wide expanse of the Pacific Ocean. We saw no one on the streets. There were no other houses nearby.

We watched as Dad cautiously approached the cottage. He stopped. “Maybe someone lives here,” he called back. He took a few more steps, never

looked inside, and headed back to the car. Dad had been only five-years old when Maudi had fled my grandfather Lewis, a ski instructor who owned a lodge in southern Vermont. Dave had been three. Timo would not be born until they'd settled into Nevada with Maudi's second husband.

"Might as well see the beach," he said. "We've come all this way."

We hadn't brought our bathing suits, but I took my shoes off and walked at the edge of the tide. The shore bubbled with sand crabs as the water ebbed and flowed.

"You can catch clams here," Dad said. "My grandfather came out from Vermont and taught me how to eat them raw, right here on the beach."

Santa Cruz had wooden-railed roller coasters and girls in bikinis smoking cloves. Here, there were no roller coasters, no girls in bikinis, no cloves. There was nothing to distract from the dreary immensity of the sea and the misty sky.

The two men appeared twenty yards inland, on the dry, flat sand the water didn't touch. One man stood and another lay on a towel on his back. Both were fit.

The man standing up had his shorts on.

The one lying on the ground had a massive boner.

"How come that man is naked?" one of the younger kids asked.

The one on his back must have known that we could see him, but he didn't even blink. He didn't turn pale or change his expression, although we passed by at no less than thirty yards.

Dad didn't say anything.

Mom giggled—"They're homosexuals."

It was big, the mast of a ship, maybe a telephone pole for a seagull to perch. We saw a lot of seagulls that day, hovering, and rising over the sea. We saw pelicans too.



Although both Timo and Dave lived off and on in San Francisco, "The City," I had never visited Dad's brothers. In fact, we rarely drove further north than Menlo Park. San Francisco was a world away, a cluster of row houses and skyscrapers hidden in the clouds. We drove through occasionally. There

were the touristed areas like Pier 39 and Golden Gate Park, but there were other places too. Ugly places like the Tenderloin, with ragged men carrying paper bags and women with hips and high heels.

Mostly, I knew San Francisco from TV. There were things I would never see in person—bathhouses, where men did things I didn't want to think about, skin heads who bashed them on the head in places called the Haight or the Castro District. A gay man had gotten himself elected to the City Council and then ended up dead by gunshot. Wherever gays went, calamity followed.

Having been raised in the Palo Alto School District, son of Stanford graduates, I wasn't dense enough to tell myself that AIDS was a curse, and I quickly gave up using the word "fag" as slang for "idiot." Still, I knew there was something unnatural about the activities of such men. When I judged the world from inside myself, homosexuality seemed fraudulent. Men didn't want other men; they wanted women. They knew they did. In Palo Alto, we had regular people. Professors, engineers, lawyers, and businessmen.



Timo and Dave entered through the black gate beneath the magnolia tree and paused by the small, fenced off, Japanese-style garden, as if allowing me to size them up, or, possibly, to size us up. Biology had shaped both similarities and differences in the three brothers. Each had a full head of black hair and a thick mustache. But Dave and Dad had lithe bodies like their father, Lewis, and enjoyed finely chiseled cheek-bones and prominent, German noses. Timo, on the other hand, was built like his father, Warren, a ranch hand and miner with fleshy cheeks and a barrel chest. But although Timo was built like his father who could do a pull-up with one arm, Granddad Warren would never have worn a hoop in his right earlobe.

Not on your life.

What would the ranchers of the Independence Valley have said?

How hadn't I seen it before?

Probably, this was the first time he'd worn it, at least in our presence.

Dad's full-brother, Dave, had worn an earring for years. I'd figured it had meant he was tough—he wore it in his left earlobe, not his right.

Now, he wore a hoop in each ear. What did that mean? Unlike Timo, who kept his hair short, Dave let his hair grow long and wavy to his shoulders, much longer than Dad's, which was short enough for a business meeting.

Their clothing choices set them apart as well. The dutiful firstborn, Dad wore hush puppies and polyester slacks. The youngest, Timo, also dressed conservatively, but with the style of a younger generation. He wore jeans with an Oxford shirt and shoes I can't remember. Dave also wore jeans but with light brown work boots. This seemed to set him apart, to be, almost, some kind of statement against the professional world of which he had no part.

The work boots and earrings might have made Dave a kind of macho man but for the fact that he kept his shirt open nearly to his belly, far deeper than Burt Reynolds or Julio Iglesias. I had never noticed this before, either. One more button up the shirt, and he might have appeared to be a typical, heterosexual stud at a night club. With as many buttons open as closed, he suddenly appeared to me less like Burt Reynolds, and more like one of the men who sang about macho men on stage, maybe one of the Village People. A tarnished metal medallion on a thin leather cord nestled into his tan, hairy chest. (Mom later told me that he had previously worked as a model in Italy.) Images of bathhouses and man-sandwiches flooded my mind.

Act natural.

For a moment, everything was quiet. My uncles stood by the Japanese-style garden. My father remained behind me at the grill. Then, out of the corner of my right eye, I saw Dad pass by my shoulder. If Mom knew they were gay, Dad must have known it too. Emerging from the shadow of the awning of our middle-class Eichler home, he crossed the patio and extended his hand. Timo took a step forward and shook it.

"Nice to see you," Dad said.

"Nice to see you, too, Alan."

Dave looked a bit more circumspect. He stood back on his hind foot and kind of smiled. "Good to see you, Alan," he said, looking slightly upward at his older brother. Dave was only a year or two younger than Dad, but he too seemed almost of a separate generation. Dad was a father of five children, an elder in the Melchizedek Priesthood, and a Vice President of Engineering, albeit at a small company. Dave was a single man.

Dad smiled, although he didn't show his teeth.

“There’s salad,” Mom offered, “and Alan’s got hamburgers on the barbecue.”

Maudi and Rod gave my uncles hugs.

Timo sat down across from me at the small, plastic table.

The hamburgers smelled ready.

“Hi Peter,” he said.

“Hi,” I said, holding up my palm. Dad had always insisted that I look a man in the eyes, and so I did. Shows respect. Confidence, too.

“Good to see you,” Timo said.

“Yeah, nice to see you too,” I said, smiling.

I grabbed a carrot stick and dipped it in ranch.

I took a bite and chewed on it, just like I didn’t know a thing.



Our family generally didn’t fly commercial. Usually, Mom and Dad drove us to Tucson, or Dad flew us out in a single engine plane he rented down at the Palo Alto Airport. I suppose those options were cheaper. Dad could rent a plane for eight dollars per hour, gas included, with his membership in the Mach Tenths Flying Club.

I’m not sure why we didn’t rent that year. Probably, it had something to do with the composite weight of our growing family. It may also have been the lightning storm that we’d weathered over the Mojave on a previous trip. As we had been thrown about, Dad had assured us that even a direct strike wouldn’t take us down. Maybe Mom wasn’t so sure.

Tucson doesn’t have lawns. It is a city of taco stands, stray saguaros, wide roads, flash flood canals, and dust. There is an inhospitable authenticity to Tucson. If Phoenix has golf courses and retirement homes, Tucson has hardware stores and funky shops selling Panama hats, psychedelic scarves, and horned-rim sunglasses. There is a certain parched severity found in Tucson, something that keeps a cheerful Mormon at bay—to the north a couple hours, in places called “Mesa” and “Tempe,” the eastern suburbs of Phoenix, where the lawns grow green and square and a white temple stands in the hills. In Tucson, there was no Mormon temple. I’m sure that Maudi preferred it that way.

I was surprised, over the next few days, when relatives from the East Coast showed up. Uncle Joe, Maudi's older and only sibling, was a lawyer in Brooklyn but kept a house on the coast of southern Maine. A man who wore bowties. His children were like him—preppy and accomplished. One of his sons had been the editor of the *New York University Law Review*. I have little idea what the others had accomplished, but they smelled like the Ivy League. Although they were a bit more formal and dressed differently than Palo Altans, they didn't fall far outside my norm for human beings. I didn't imagine any of them as gay.

I was standing alone in the middle of Maudi and Rod's living room, when Mom approached me from the side. "There are going to be a lot of people this year. You and Marc are going to have to camp outside." I thought about the desert.

"Is that OK?" she asked.

"Are there a lot of scorpions around here?"

"You'll have a tent."

"OK."

"Timo has AIDS," she said.

I felt almost as if I'd left my body. "He does?"

"He's looking everywhere for a cure."

I nodded my head.

"He's willing to try anything," Mom said.

"What's he trying?"

"Oh, alternative medicine—herbs and vitamins. . . ."

Some people said AIDS was a curse, but that wasn't scientific. The scientists knew how it was transmitted. Only superstitious people like Televangelists and Baptists believed it was a curse. Still, it seemed to make sense that they were the ones who were afflicted. After all, God was just. Even Darwin didn't agree with gays, and it wasn't often you found God and Darwin on the same side of the table. How could a man make a baby with a man? The species would fail

"Dave plays the role of the man," Mom said.

I pictured that.

"Timo plays the woman." I pictured that too.

She didn't mean that they were together. But everyone knew in those days that gay men were one or the other, man or woman, and what she said made sense. Despite keeping his shirt open too low, Dave looked tough. Timo seemed gentle, like Mom. Deep down even homosexuals understood the reality of the cosmos. I understood the attraction of playing at being something I was not. Once, in the third grade, I had worn my sister's green dress to school. I loved the tiny printed flowers from my shoulders to my knee. I loved feeling open to the elements, even after a kid tried to take a peak from below. But that was on Halloween, the one day of the year free to experience something you were not. Male and female, God had created them. Only male plus female could fulfill the purposes of creation.

"Dad is ashamed of him," Mom said, "but I think he's really nice." I didn't know if it was right to want it, but I still wanted it. I wanted God to cure my uncle, even in sin. Mom must have wanted that too.



That night, after I'd checked the tent for black widows and scorpions, Marc and I slipped into our sleeping bags. We didn't have pads, if I recall, but the pebbles beneath the canvas of the tent molded to our bodies.

"I feel sick," Marc said.

"What's the matter?"

"My stomach hurts."

When I had been a little boy, my father had done everything with me. We'd shot tin cans at Mt. Diablo, repelled into Matadero Creek to collect pollywogs, and flown kites in the coastal hills among the oak trees. But he hadn't spared so much time for my siblings. With five children, there wasn't enough of him to go around. Plus, he'd risen in the hierarchy, from a junior engineer working on circuit boards to a manager of people. He spent several days at a time on business trips, in Washington, DC and, later, New York City. Dad had taught me what he knew—how to fish, how to do math, how to burn leaves with a microscope, how do more math, how a plane elevates, and how electricity works. I taught Marc what I knew best—how to pitch and bat a baseball, how to drop-kick a soccer ball, and how to attend a party without drinking alcohol.

Dad had baptized me. I had baptized Marc.

"You want to say a prayer?" I asked.

"OK." Marc had Dad's long nose and Mom's light blue eyes.

"Do you want me to say it?"

"OK."

Our sleeping bags slipped down our backs as we knelt up in prayer. "Dear Heavenly Father," I prayed, "Thank you for all that you've given to us. Thank you for our tent and sleeping bags, and thank you for getting us here to Tucson safely. Please forgive us for our sins. Marc is feeling sick to his stomach. Please bless him to feel better. Help us to get a good sleep tonight. In the Name of Jesus Christ, Amen."

When I opened my eyes, Marc stuck his head outside the tent and puked.

"God answered our prayer." I said.

"He did?"

"Yeah."

Marc looked at me blankly.

"I said a prayer and then you threw up."

"Uh huh."

"You feel better, right?"

"Yeah. . . ."

It bothered me that Marc didn't get it. What good is a miracle if it doesn't build faith?



Usually, we visited Old Tucson, the western movie set where they taught you how to fake a punch; Tombstone; or the Desert Museum, where we walked a trail among the cacti, before heading south. This year was different. Because of the East Coast relatives, I guess, we didn't have any fun plans. Instead, we hung out at the house and ate cheese and crackers.

Although Maudi had raised her four children in a ghost town, she had grown up as the daughter of San Francisco socialites, and she liked cheese. This disgusted me. It was the way she liked cheese, saying things like "Mm, this is good," and, "This one's delicious." Stuff like that. It wasn't just the narration of experience; it was the nature of the commentary.

People who liked food kind of grossed me out. Food was supposed to be fuel and nutrition. Remember that fat kid in Willie Wonka who went up the chocolate tube? I had wanted to erase the image of the fat kid almost as much as I had wanted to erase Brooke Shields in *The Blue Lagoon* from my mind when I passed the sacrament.

There weren't any balls or Frisbees at Maudi's house, so there weren't any distractions from the cheese and crackers and the standing around the house except the pain in my back. Maybe sleeping in the tent had done it. I don't know if I complained about it, or if the problem in my back was obvious, but each of the three brothers had some piece of wisdom.

Dad's wisdom was not unexpected. Having served in the Army three years, a hiatus from college, he knew about posture. "We de Schweinitz's have long backs," he said. "You have to put your chest out and pull your shoulders back." He demonstrated, and I copied.

Dave had another explanation: "Have you ever heard of chakras?" he started. He and I were sitting alone outside on the low, garden wall by the hot tub. I remember that our knees were almost touching. Which didn't bother me.

"Chakras?" I said. I hated to admit ignorance, but I also hated to lie.

"We have seven, from the base of the spine, to the crown of the head."

I nodded.

"Each chakra is connected to an emotional or spiritual aspect of your life. Each has a spin. You want them to flow openly. The chakra at your base is related to survival." I cocked my head. "Things like security. Safety. Having your basic needs met."

"Oh, OK."

"The next chakra is your sexual center." He didn't touch my belly, but he pointed a loose finger at it. I wondered what it would mean to have an open sexual chakra. How could that be good?

Up he went: My solar plexus was about my power and authority in the world. That didn't seem so good either. Knowledge was good, but Jesus said the first would be last, and the last, first. The upper chakras seemed better than the lower ones.

The one in the center of my chest related to love. That was good.

The one in my throat related to expression. OK.

The one between my eyes had a strange name—the “third eye.” The third eye was the center of intuition.

The final chakra made perfect sense. Dave said it was a kind of gateway. I had never thought of the crown of the head as a vortex of energy, but I'd often received spiritual power at church through this chakra. When I was eight, Dad and some other men in the ward had laid their hands on my head and given me the Gift of the Holy Ghost, by which I would know the truth of all things. Whenever I rose to a new office in the Priesthood, a man laid his hands on my head and ordained me. Just three months before, I'd gone to the Stake Patriarch's house. He'd laid his trembling hands on my first chakra and told my future. I would marry a lovely sister in the temple and attend the Lord's University. I would need to watch out, because I was prone to mediocrity. On the plus side, I had a gift to nurture—that of redemptive love.

I wondered if our prophet, Ezra Taft Benson, knew about chakras. On the one hand, if he didn't know about them, wouldn't that make him ignorant? I'd learned that the Lord would not do anything without first informing the Prophet. Sure, there was more to be revealed, but further revelation would come through President Benson, not through some Indian swami. Either chakras weren't real, or they weren't from God. If they were real but not from God, what might be the source? The devil? I liked them, though. Chakra. It was kind of a cool name. I guess what Dave was trying to say was that my back pain had spiritual origins, and that those origins had something to do with either sex or survival.

Back inside the house, Timo's approach was a little more like Dad's:

“I teach actors in New York,” he said.

“You do?” I remembered Mom once saying he worked on sets.

“Imagine a string attach to your head, right here.”

“Right here?” I said.

“Yeah, that part of your head is called the ‘vertex.’”

He touched my head lightly.

“The string is connected to the ceiling.”

“OK.”

“It's called the Alexander technique.”

After he'd taught me his version of posture, he told me to lie down on my back.

When I pulled my knee up to my chest, he put a hand on my knee.

"You feel the stretch in your hamstring?" He said.

I did.

"Now, without letting go of your knee, extend your foot toward the ceiling."

"Ok."

"Now point your toe toward the ceiling as well."

My leg began to shake uncontrollably.

"That's weird," I said. "Why does it do that?"

"It's a reflex," he said.

I liked it. I liked lying on my back, my leg out of control. I liked it when Timo touched my knee too. I knew I couldn't get HIV that way. There was something very relaxing about feeling my body move without my intention.

Timo exuded an easy confidence that morning, passing down his wisdom, but later that day, when he approached my dad, he seemed different. A little nervous. In the afternoon, Dad and I were playing chess at a tiny table in the dining room when he pulled up a chair.

"I have something to ask you, Alan."

Dad looked up from the board, but hardly adjusted his posture.

"OK."

"I've heard that Mormons have a special kind of healing blessing." Timo didn't whisper these words, but neither did he broadcast them. "Is that true?"

"Yeah," Dad said. "That's true."

When you're a boy, even an eighteen-year old, you can look at adults having conversations and sometimes they don't mind at all. You're just there, watching from two feet away, and they hardly notice. I looked at my father looking at his little brother. It struck me how much younger Timo was. Dad was old, like forty-three or something. Timo was just past thirty.

"Are you able to give blessings?"

"Yeah," Dad said. "I can."

"Are people who aren't part of your church allowed to get one?"

I didn't know the answer to that one.

Dad looked down at his bishop and leaned back a bit. He stroked his mustache. Dad has a really good poker face, even though he can't play poker, because Mormons don't gamble. Could Dad use the Holy Melchizedek Priesthood to bless a non-member?

That had to be possible. I'd heard of it before. But could Dad bless a homosexual? I wouldn't have faulted Dad for blessing his mother, if she'd been dying then of lung cancer, even though she smoked. But sex and cigarettes are different, even though both sins could stop you from getting a Temple Recommend. Sex could stain a man's soul.

"I don't see how there's a problem with that," Dad said.



In the photographs taken right after Timo's blessing, Dave is wearing the thin leather cord around his neck, and another cord, a black one, with a rustic metal shape dangling in his chest hair. He turns away from the camera, looking back over his shoulder, as if he's a female model, showing off his butt. So much for Dave playing the role of a man.

Timo is wearing a pink shirt and tie. His top button is loose, his smile warm.

My great-grandmother, Dougan, a woman who grew up on yachts and clapped for the waiter, is wearing a green and orange blouse and a necklace of thick beads.

Aunt Lisl, Dad's born-again sister, is wearing a floral skirt and blouse.

Maudi has on thin white linen pants and matching blouse.

Dad is wearing a plain, blue oxford shirt with grey, polyester pants. Same as work. Same as church.

The East Coast relatives wear their more thickly woven oxfords, maybe a bowtie.

Everyone looks happy, even a conservatively dressed man and baby that I've never seen nor heard of again. Perhaps he is the husband of one of the East Coast relatives. I've not seen any of those relatives in more than three decades. When the matriarchs of the family died, not many years after the photo, the connections were lost.

Timo must have made an announcement, because an hour or so after Dad accepted his request, everyone gathered in the front room. The sofas had been cleared from the center of the floor, leaving a solitary, wooden chair that Dad set near the head of the room, away from the front door. For some reason, everyone stood about in a circle. Maybe Timo had requested that. Probably it was the natural thing to do.

“You can just sit down right here,” Dad said, putting his hand on the back of the chair.

I’d never seen Dad say a prayer in Tucson, let alone lay his hands on someone’s head. At least with Mom’s side we sang the Thanksgiving Song, “We gather together to ask the Lord’s blessing.” Maudi not only didn’t believe in Mormonism, she didn’t believe in God, as far as I could tell.

I wouldn’t know how much Maudi disliked Mormons until I arrived home from my mission and Mom told me that she thought I was corrupting Japanese culture and until Maudi herself asked me how I could waste one seventh of my life on church. But even at the time, I recognized that the Restored Gospel wasn’t her thing.

I suppose for Dad, the blessing was a kind of coming out.

“So, I just go ahead and give the blessing,” Dad said.

Dave interrupted. “Can the rest of us join in?”

“Well . . .” Dad said.

I knew the answer to that one. I had the Aaronic Priesthood, and even I wasn’t allowed. Dave wasn’t even a member. My grandmother Maudi wasn’t even a man. Lisl didn’t even consider Mormons Christian.

“That’s not what we usually do,” Dad said.

I felt relief. That would have been going too far.

But Dave didn’t let up. He asked whether it would do harm.

Here’s where my memory fails. I can’t remember if Dad gave in or not. I have two memories. In one, we’re standing back, and Dad and Timo are alone in the middle of the room. In the other, we’re all there, laying on hands. That’s the way my littlest sister, Julie, remembers it. She was eleven at the time. What I remember clearly is my discomfort with the idea of breaking the rules. When blessing the sacrament, even a single word like “it” or “the” added or subtracted invalidates the whole thing. You say, “that they may eat in remembrance of the body of Thy Son,” and the bishop smiles with

approval. You say, “that they may eat *it* in remembrance of the body of Thy Son” and you’re back to square one. You have to start the whole thing over from “Oh God, the Eternal Father.” I never had to say the sacrament prayer more than once. Adam did, because he tried to recite it from memory. Never that bold, I read the sacrament prayer from the laminated card.

I don’t remember that Dad had any oil on hand. Our household mostly relied on Doctors Zlotnik and Zamvil.

“Timothy Butters, By the power of the Melchizedek Priesthood which I hold, I lay my hands on your head and give you a blessing.” I don’t recall what Dad blessed Timo with. Probably, my mind was too riled up to listen. I don’t even remember if he blessed Timo to heal.

What I remember are my thoughts: Could God really heal a man from a fatal disease, just like in New Testament times? In 1987 there was no chance for Timo without God. But would God be willing to heal a man who had not only sinned, but shaped his very identity around sin? Wouldn’t it be confusing if God blessed the sinner as easily as he blessed the righteous? What were miracles for, if not to draw a man back to the path?

“I would like to offer something,” Dave said, when Dad was done.

Dave placed his hands on Timo’s crown, not unlike Dad.

“I’m going to channel energy,” he said.

When he finished, Dave looked at me. I took it that each of us were supposed to contribute something. Given the fact that I only held the “lesser” Priesthood, I didn’t see what I could add to Dad’s blessing, but I bowed my head and prayed.

Mom deferred, if I recall, as did Maudi and Rod.

I don’t remember my siblings there at all, although they must have been, but maybe not in the circle. They are in the photographs, and Julie has her memories.

Aunt Lisl stepped forward and spoke in what she called the “Adamic language.” The Doctrine and Covenants speaks of the Gift of Tongues, but I took that to mean something like French or German. Lisl’s words didn’t sound like any languages I’d ever heard. I remember a lot of bubbling “B” sounds. Nothing glottal or stopped. As she spoke, her arms and torso swayed, as if moved by the rhythm of her own song.

At the close of the circle stood Uncle Joe, Maudi's older brother, the New York City lawyer who would, after Maudi and Dougan died, rework the inheritance to channel the bulk of the wealth in the direction of his children. Joe, in yellow shirt and bowtie, said a good, Protestant prayer, hardly different than my own. He even addressed it to "Heavenly Father" and closed "in the name of Jesus Christ, Amen."



Later that afternoon, Dave drove Anne and me to his apartment. It was a small, tidy place. He showed us a painting on his kitchen wall. I hadn't known he was an artist. Mom told me he painted houses for a living. The painting portrayed him standing on a ladder, painting the inside of a room.

I noticed a strange drawing taped to another wall. While Dave was otherwise occupied, I examined it more closely. I noted that it was an advertisement for a party, depicting a naked man chained to a pole, and giving a date and time. When Dave looked over, I looked away.



By the next day, the East Coast relatives were gone and we headed south, the Sonora Desert stretching out dry and abundant as far as the eye could see. We had been going to Puerto Peñasco as long as I could remember. Even thinking of the place opened something in me.

Sitting in the back of the SUV with Dave, I tried to name the plants, but got no further than saguaro. Dave gave me a few of the names; there were agave, barrel cactus, lyceum, desert marigolds, and buckhorn cholla.

"What do you call those ones again?" I asked.

"Which ones?" Dave asked.

"Those ones with the yellow flowers."

"Ocotillo," he said.

Dave and I sat close together. I noted that Dave and Dad had the same smiles around the edges of the eyes and the same refined cheeks. Dad's skin was milky white, like Grandfather Lewis. Dave had inherited Maudi's bronze skin, courtesy of a Portuguese ancestor who had tried to pass as Anglo.

As the desert rolled by, we drew with a pencil on a sketch pad.

It had been a long time since I'd thought I was any good at art—since kindergarten, when Mom had set up an easel out back by the lemon bush and I'd painted apple trees with watercolors. At Gunn High, I had taken art as a freshman, but never put much stock either in it or my abilities to do it. I worried about every line I drew. Frozen, almost, I wanted everything to be perfect. "Don't worry," Dave said, as I erased the bad lines.

Dave held out his hands to receive the sketch pad.

"You don't have to worry about mistakes," he said, scratching his pencil across the paper in what seemed a haphazard fashion. "If you don't like the line, just keep scribbling until what you want appears. See? Darken the lines that you like."

From the several dozen lines he'd lightly laid down, a man began to appear, and as the man appeared, Dave pressed harder with his pencil.



Mexico was to the United States as Tucson was to Phoenix. I felt freedom just knowing that we were approaching the border. Sometimes we visited Nogales to haggle over the price of a sombrero or eat turtle soup, but this year, if I have it right, we didn't. At a border stop well west of Nogales, we pulled off the road under a roof with a Mexican official in a baseball cap. Dad and Rod, the drivers of the two cars, entered a tarnished, cement building. When they returned, we continued southwest toward the Sea of Cortez.

There was much to love in Mexico: There were the animal crackers (so cheap!) and the wooden carvings in the blankets laid out for sale on the beach. There were the patches of housing, seemingly placed willy-nilly, and the pedestrians crossing the roads wherever they liked. I had a sense, almost, that life in Mexico mimicked my uncle's style of drawing. A line here, a line there: darker lines must have emerged over time, as make-shift housing grew into *de facto* communities. In Palo Alto and in Phoenix, everything had its place. Planned out. To my young eyes, Mexico was organic.

Hubcaps.

Food wrappers.

Orange peels.

Kids without shoes.

I don't think my sense of freedom came only from the fact that I was on vacation, or that I wasn't learned in the cultural mores of another society, although that's also true. On the beach, there were often blue-clad soldiers with black guns strapped to their shoulders, but this didn't seem restrictive. It was exciting. The locals waded right into the sea wearing t-shirts and shorts. What I saw was spontaneity. Not only spontaneity: nonconformity. Mexicans didn't need to have the proper attire. As a teen, I scoffed at people who wore matching ski suits in Tahoe, or fancy tennis outfits on the courts. Mexicans seemed to think like me.

In Half Moon Bay, I didn't meet kids at the beach. In Puerto Peñasco, I made friends with local boys, who seemed to be there without parents. We taught each other through pantomime.

I made a fin with my hands.

"Tiburón," they said.

"Shark," I said back.

I put my palms together and moved them around.

"Pescado," they said.

"Fish," I replied.

One boy handed me his sunglasses and they rowed me out to sea. That was part of it, I must admit. As a gringo, I was almost royalty. Mostly, though, it was the freedom I felt. Even the weather was unpredictable.

One day, while Dad was sailing the catamaran with Anne and me, the wind suddenly increased and one of our pontoons lifted off the water. Anne cried as we sped back toward shore. I felt as if I were a hero, braving great adversity.

Puerto Peñasco seemed to change the rules, too. In the fifth grade, I was walking past the card table in Maudi and Rod's trailer when I came across Mom, sitting an arm's length from a can of beer.

"What's beer taste like?" I asked.

"You can try it," she replied. "It's Maudi's."

I took a sip and put the can down.

"What do you think?"

"Beer tastes bad," I said.

In high school, Anne drank on occasion. I didn't see the appeal. Why drink something bitter that makes you lose control?



Mom and Dad got a room in a cheap motel. I don't know where Timo and Dave spent the night. We five kids stayed with Maudi and Rod in their trailer in bunk beds and on the floor. There was a trailer park with Gringos north of the beach, but that's not where we stayed. Maudi and Rod's trailer was permanently parked in a lot just off the fairgrounds among old shacks and fishing equipment. I say permanently because it had a room added on, and I never saw the trailer move. I rarely saw anyone except a vendor or two pass through. They'd come to the solitary domicile, open a blanket of wooden figurines for our review, and then depart, back to the beach, I suppose.

After we'd dropped off our bags, Rod hitched up the Hobie Cat and drove off toward the beach. The rest of us put on our bathing suits and walked along the chest-high, cinder-block wall that separated the lot from the fairgrounds. My little sisters, all gymnasts, took turns balancing on the wall. As we walked, the occasional Mexican man in white t-shirt or tank top, wearing polyester pants and cheap dress shoes, whistled at them. Like all of the men in my family, Mexican men had mustaches.

"Eh, Muchacha!"

"Chica bonita!"

Back at home, when I saw a cute girl, I might look again, maybe even try eye contact. If a girl looked interested, I might smile. If she smiled back, I might say, "hello." In Mexico, a boy didn't need to hide his desire. There was nothing ironic about the attention they administered to my sisters. They didn't smirk.

That afternoon, Rod stepped on a crab and then kicked the pontoon. He didn't kick it on purpose. His foot just flew off the crab and smashed his big toe on the boat. He sailed anyway. I liked watching him, with his pot belly and tan skin. I liked his Vuarnets and sailor's cap, his throaty voice. I liked the authority in his hands, as he cinched up the sail or let it out.

I rode Maudi's windsurfer and then dried off. Lying in the sand, the water evaporating from my body, I imagined what I must look like from the

outside. The blond hair. The athletic body. Not too shabby. After a while, I felt itchy, so I dove back in to rinse the salt off my baking skin.

Maudi didn't have any sports equipment. No balls. No bats. Growing up in a ghost town in rural Nevada, Dad and his brothers hadn't learned to play football or baseball. When the population is twenty-seven, it's hard to form an athletic league. They knew how to fish, hunt, and milk cows.



In previous years, we often went to the old part of Puerto Peñasco to dine in a dim restaurant with a mariachi band. This year, however, we drove in the other direction—north past the beach and several, large white houses such as I'd never before seen in Mexico. Apparently, there were upper middle-class people here too. I must have been impressed that such houses existed in Mexico, because I remember asking who owned them. I don't remember the answer.

We pulled into a large, rectangular building.

We entered to find several long tables set end to end. No one else was there.

We ate enchiladas.

After dinner, we danced solo, but all together, a disco ball scattering light across our bodies. I don't remember Mom, Dad, or Rod dancing. Maybe Maudi did. I have a vague, possibly invented memory of Dougan, eighty-nine years old, stepping to the music. Dave had rhythm in his step. His hips moved side to side, as if sliding on a finely greased rail.

Dad was light on his feet and had excellent rhythm, just like Dave, but he wasn't comfortable with rock. Having graduated from Elko High in 1960, the Rolling Stones and Doors had not yet formed, and the Beatles had not yet crossed the Atlantic to do work on the sixth chakra. But at their formation in 1960, the Beatles' sound wasn't yet potent enough to split a generation. Timo had rhythm; he looked comfortable dancing to rock and roll. But he wasn't as light on his feet as his older brothers. It was the late 1980s, so we danced to the likes of Madonna. I seem to remember the Doobie Brothers too.

Over the next few years, Dad watched as his family fell like dominoes—Timo died during the fall semester of my freshman year at BYU, Dave, while I was on my mission; Maudi, the one who'd rejected aristocracy to make a home with a ranch hand in Nevada, went a couple years after that of lung cancer; the next year was her mother, Dougan, who forbade Maudi to mingle with the help. For some reason, despite her cigarettes, Dougan survived ninety-four years. The four deaths were upside down, the youngest going first, the oldest, coming last. By then, Dad had abandoned his old life. He had found a new church and new wife. I wouldn't understand the connection between Timo's death and my father's departure for over a decade.

Rod married one of Maudi's friends, Francesca, who hung crystals from the ceiling and kept a Buddha and a prayer rug in the corner of her living room. Rod lived with Francesca almost twenty-years. He wintered in Tucson and summered in the mountains of northern Arizona. I don't know what he did with the trailer and Hobie Cat.



Our last night in Mexico, Timo showed up at the door. My younger siblings were probably all in their pajamas. Maybe they were still up, playing "war" in their beds. Mom was there, but he directed his question at me. "Do you want to go for a walk?"

Even though I didn't have a curfew, I hesitated. "Can I go?"

"Whatever you want to do," Mom said, as if I didn't need to ask.

We hopped the low, cinder block wall to the fairgrounds and walked west toward the port. I don't remember our conversation. It's hard even for me to recall Timo's syntax and vocabulary. It's not hard to remember the smell of oil, burnt sugar, dust, and fish guts; the way we walked—easy, as if our bodies had substance; the quality of Timo's voice—soft and resonant, like the glassy flow of water spilling over the edge of a tub.

I remember most how I felt: As if suddenly, we were no longer uncle and nephew, or perhaps that we finally were. Friends, maybe. I felt it not only in the tenor of his voice, but in his neglect to pause and consider how his words might impact me, a young man. I don't remember any man ever

having treated me that way before—as if they didn’t need to consider my age. This, despite the fact that I didn’t yet have a mustache. I felt as if I were walking with an old friend from Gunn High, even though I’d spent less than four or five hours total, I’ll bet, talking to Timo in my entire life. Much less than that, talking one on one.

We didn’t seem to be headed anywhere in particular, but he slowed to a stop not far from a lonely churro stand on the outskirts of the carnival and pointed across empty space toward a ride. Usually, the fairgrounds were empty, but this year our spring break coincided with Easter.

“That’s Dave’s boyfriend.”

I’d stood beneath that ride the night prior, but I hadn’t bought a ticket. It was one of those great axels with metal arms. From the arms, twenty or thirty seats hung from chains. It reminds me now of a spider spinning on a stake. When you board, the seats are barely above the ground. As the axel turns, they rise.

“He’s the one who operates the ride,” Timo said.

Beneath the orbiting children was a lanky man with a white tank top, dark skin, and a thin mustache. Although I wasn’t close enough to see the details, I imagined his dress shoes were scuffed, like the men at the wall.

As I thought about Dave and this Mexican man, a trace of anxiety rose like a reflex in my shoulders. Dave wasn’t just gay in principle. Here was the evidence. But as I stood there, observing him, an ordinary looking, Mexican man with children flying over his head, something let go. I wondered about them—the Mexican with scuffed shoes who operated a carnival ride; and Dave, who had fled Nevada at his first opportunity, enrolling in a prep school in New England.

“How do they communicate?” I said.

“Dave speaks some Spanish,” Timo said.

I wondered what they talked about, but I didn’t ask.

Timo didn’t seem to expect me to say anything.

I nodded and we continued on, the smell of churros fading as we continued in the direction of trumpets and violins. For a few minutes we stood at the edge of a giant tarp, watching men and women in traditional

red, green, and white costumes stomp on a wooden stage. Then, we headed back to the trailer.

Whether we shook hands or hugged, I don't recall. Probably neither. I imagine we said goodbye, just like any other pair of male friends do, after hanging out for a bit. *Goodnight. Thanks.* That kind of thing. Timo looked well when we parted. His cheeks were pink and his chest was thick.



Royden Card
Down Zion Valley

Judas

Marilyn Bushman-Carlton

Everybody, well or ill . . . imagines a boundary of suffering . . . beyond which, she or he is certain, life will no longer be worth living. . . [A]t various times, I could not possibly do without long walks on the beach or rambles through the woods; use a cane, a brace, a wheelchair; stop teaching; give up driving; let someone else put on and take off my underwear. [But o]ne at a time, with the encouragement of others, I have taken each of these . . . steps. . . . When I reach the wall, I think I'll know.

—Nancy Mairs, *Waist High in the World*

Surviving my mother by twelve years, my father
became my perfect friend,
having evolved from the anxious and overly-protective
father I'd known as a teenager.

I stopped by regularly, alone, both going and coming,
during monthly drives to southern Utah
where I escaped for quiet to write.
I developed a need to sit beside him.

Mostly, he listened
as I handed him my heart, giving it wholly to him.
He handled it carefully like a secret.
He could see inside the singular heart of his second child,
the one most like him—headstrong, quietly confident—
even as I poured out questions, even disagreements,
about the faith that was his life
and second nature.

Occasionally, about a certain grievance, he asked why
I felt the way I did and listened to my explanation,
nodding, yes, he could see that.
He stayed deliberately on my side.

His mind was sound, his body agile, his heart
not only good, but strong. Then at 97
he swallowed Tums until they found the cancer.

Some of my siblings and I were with him
when the specialist told him what to expect, giving him
a few to several months.
He sat quietly
while everyone cheered him on—
he'd be reunited with his wife, our mother. His parents.

He lived alone, stubbornly took care of himself,
sometimes saying he was not ready yet. Life
was still enjoyable.

Very near the end as the two of us sat close—
his vision and hearing nearly gone—
and the distance between us was a whisper,
he confessed he wished he'd been given a choice
for treatment. That day in the specialist's office.

I felt like Judas.

Sunday School

Marilyn Bushman-Carlton

Each week the teacher gave us
something to be grateful for,
for we saw
with perfect pity,
even smugness,
certainly relief,
the conspicuous thing about him,
his missing right arm—
the urgent implication of a lesson.
We saw the cross he had to bear,
the visual aid of it,
the shrunken, shriveling stump
we imagined,
a weight beneath his pinned-up sleeve.
The loss was punctuated
by his whole and useful left arm,
its hand deftly,
proudly even,
holding notes or hanging loosely
from his shoulder.
One Sunday he used the phantom arm
as a metaphor, telling how,
as a foolish teen, he'd lost it waterskiing,
how he'd cast aside the rules
allowing the rope
to twist itself around his upper arm
like a string tied taut
around a baby tooth to rip it

permanently away.
After his story—
he must have wanted this—
we rose above our ferocious pity,
rose, if just a little, into empathy.
But as resolve so often goes,
some of us began to envy
his rise along the learning curve
and the distraction
his missing arm offered.
We were young, you see,
and anxious,
our crosses yet unknown.

The Mormon Peace Gathering

Las Vegas, Nevada : March, 1992

Dennis Clark

Fresh from Mountain Meadows, headed home
from the Nevada Test Site, we were high
from crawling under barbed wire, and trespassing,
when I flipped the doe into the suicide lane.
She hardly registered before she rode
the hood & bloodied the windshield like a Cretan
facing a hornless breed of rampant bull.

We'd tried to bypass Vegas on back roads.
No way! Each one the map showed ended at
gates and a guard. Our gamble failed. We took
the byways west of St. George, compensating.
Until the doe cashed in her chips we'd thought
the Mountain Meadows Massacre was over.
I walked back praying she'd leap up and run,
a player in another combat sport.
Hand on her ribs I learned she was warm and dead.

My mother kissing my father across the fence
made the news that Sunday night in Salt Lake
(while we were driving home with a dancing hood),
his white hair, her dark brown, blown in the wind.
Our ritual booking and release did not—
protesting our exclusion from the war rooms
where men we couldn't reach would make our choices.
By Cedar City we were talking over
a re-finance I hoped would free me in seven

years from the dead hand of mortgage. I saw her turn,
turning and running to safety into the cedars,
when she jinked into my fender and flew off over
the roof before I heard her forelegs snap.
A passing driver offered to call the cops
as I knelt in the grit of the two-way left-turn lane.

“I used to lecture the driver” the trooper said
“automatically. This winter I hit one, too.
Jumped out in front of me. Been a bad year
for deer. . .” The night before, on Shabbat, we’d
shared a stew and poems and biscuits in
the community hall of a Catholic church in Vegas.
In the morning I went running towards the temple,
turned back before I got there so we could convoy
to the Test Site. My father, riding shotgun,
saw her as I did — my mother, not at all,
divvying grapes from Safeway’s in the back seat
of their Accord. “Which one was driving now?”

Her tail no longer a flag, the trooper drug
her off to the shoulder to wait for the Roadkill Squad.
Cock-eyed and all we drove up-state to Provo,
keeping an eye out for phantom herds in the hills,
headlights crossed like someone with lazy eye,
tufts of her hair snagged in the windshield gasket,
blood on the glass that neither wiper could reach.

The Moldau in a Utah Living Room

Simon Peter Eggertsen

I most recall the river music. Smetana's *Moldau*

meandered often into the air at our house,
European classical sounding in the high Utah parroquia.

da da
da di da da
da da di
da di
da da di
da da
da da
di

On hearing,

I still see glacial snow dissolve to droplets and fall, one at a time,
as happens high on Timpanogos, near Emerald Lake.

I still see rivulets trickle over limestone, weep down the face,
as happens in the bouldered terrain above Stewart's Falls.

I still see a mountain stream's rambunctious bounce,
scattering water gems in the canyon air,
as happens on the North Fork, as the stream bends,
eats the road above Wildwood.

I feel the splash as water trips over itself, stumbling
into the Provo River, swift enough to let us tube,
rough enough to scare us,
 as happened among us on the living room floor,
 hands to feet, rolling and laughing,
 no fear of falling from our father's grasp.

I see the cascading water mass, giving weight to gravity,
irreverently slide its way down steep, limed canyon sides
 at Upper Falls, and again near Bridal Veil, adding
 mass to the stream.

I see it all pause, take a breath, straighten itself into
the protocol of a proper river, first near Edgemont,
 last at Lakeview after the diversions tame it.

I see it calmly wandering in its bed, an older river now,
 wider now and fatter, tilting into Provo Harbor
 and the fresh lake.

At the end I still see the joined force of all this,
a Sagan "billion" droplets absorbed with others into
the widest and roundest of Utah water majesties—
the salt sea,
 as happens as the water restricts itself
 in the Jordan Narrows, lifts its freshness
 northward into the brine-laden Great Salt Lake.

I was baptized by the symphony of *The Moldau*,
it was my first confirmation that on hearing I could also see.

do re me fa so la ti.

Sweater

Theric Jepson

Horizontal stripes
black and white
on the priest
as he blesses the bread—

What prison
dear son
need you escape from?

New & Everlasting

Theric Jepson

The former widow
seem happy
now
can I forgive them
may be replaceable
and the former widower
together,
but
for suggesting
I
to you?

BODE AND IRIS

Levi S. Peterson

It may seem odd that an experienced fornicator like Bode Carpenter would get the girl pregnant in the first place—particularly because he carried a condom in the watch pocket of his jeans on that fateful evening. Be it said here, Bode had knock-out good looks—five eleven, neatly trimmed blond hair, a just-right nose, a square jaw, muscular arms, and a taut belly. He lived in Richfield, a town in central Utah. He was a Mormon, and he had an eight-hour-a-day job at the AgriCo-op, a feed and farm supply store, with a half day's work on Saturdays at overtime rate. As for room and board, his parents let him live at home for free because they hoped to nudge him back into the paths of righteousness.

The girl was Iris Denning. She worked in a café in Salina, a town about twenty miles north of Richfield. Another waitress at the café, Sibyl Holinshed, dated a backsliding buddy of Bode's, Abe Larkin. On a Saturday evening in June, Abe brought Bode along and, after the two girls had come out of the café at quitting time, he introduced Bode to Iris.

She wasn't pretty. She had a hawk nose and a prominent overbite—a true Plain Jane, according to Bode's judgment. That didn't matter, of course, Bode being chiefly interested in her nether parts. Abe drove his old Cadillac up to a reservoir, and while he and Sibyl got busy doing unwholesome things in the front seat, Bode and Iris got out of the back seat and walked up a nearby hill.

For an eighteen-year-old just out of high school, Iris had a lot of savvy about religion. Also, she was aggressive about putting down Mormonism. Maybe it was just the natural result of belonging to a religious minority in a predominantly Mormon town. She was a Baptist, as she let Bode know immediately, and she wanted to know why Mormons believed in three heavens.

"We don't believe in three heavens," he said. "We just think heaven is divided into three degrees of glory."

“That sounds like three heavens to me,” she said. “But this is a free country. If you like believing in three heavens, nobody is going to stop you.”

Bode was thinking this Plain Jane was somehow running circles around him. Time to fight back.

“So what do Baptists believe?”

“They believe in salvation by faith, not by works. They believe in the Bible. It’s all you need to find out how to be saved. They believe in baptism by immersion—after you are old enough to make decisions for yourself. They believe in just one heaven. They don’t think you need three of them.”

She said this crisply—no sign of hesitation. Nonetheless, Bode decided to take another swing.

“Baptists believe in fire and brimstone,” he said. “They believe the devil tortures people in hell.”

“Fire and brimstone! That’s just silly. The torment of hell comes just from knowing you’ll never be with God or Jesus forever and ever.”

Bode could see he wasn’t going to be running any circles around this chick. Time to back off and leave well enough alone.

They stopped walking and faced each other. Moonlight didn’t help her features much. She edged toward Bode and on an impulse, he kissed her. It was kind of a duty, he was thinking. Homely girls needed to make out once in a while just like anybody else. The important question was, would she be interested in something a little more substantial than mere making out? She put her arms around him, and they went on kissing. “You’re so good looking,” she murmured. Shortly, the sensuous flexing of her lips got to him, and he tried to slide his hand down through the open collar of her blouse. She grasped his hand and placed it on her waist. They continued to kiss, but the spirit had gone out of it for Bode.

Later, after Abe and Bode had dropped off the girls at their homes and were heading back to Richfield, Abe said, “Well, how was it, ol’ buddy?”

“Not so good,” Bode said. “She isn’t exactly a Marilyn Monroe, and she doesn’t want anybody messing around below the neckline.”

“That’s tough,” Abe said apologetically. “You run into girls like that once in a while.”

For various reasons, Bode kept dating Iris. For one thing, a couple of his former steadies—girls he could count on for a quick session in the back seat of his car after a movie or a dance—became unavailable, one of them getting married and the other moving to Oregon. For another thing, he had become obsessed by the abruptness with which Iris had pulled his hand from her blouse and placed it on her waist. He couldn't quit thinking about her. On a Saturday night when he had nothing else to do, he drove up to Salina and went into the café at quitting time.

There were no customers present. Iris tidied up behind the counter. Through a serving window Bode could see Sibyl and Larry Forbes, the fellow who owned the café, working in the kitchen.

Iris didn't seem surprised to see Bode. When he said he had come up just to take her home, she said okay, but he needed to understand some things.

"First of all, just remember, I'm a Baptist and you're a Mormon."

He understood they weren't to form an attachment. There was no danger of that, of course, at least not on his part. He was actually feeling pretty good—somewhat generous and benevolent. Plain Janes have feelings just like anybody else, and it didn't hurt a fellow to accommodate those feelings once in a while.

"Also, I don't drink," she added, "and I don't like to go with guys who do."

"No problem," Bode said. "I'm not into booze. Also I don't use tobacco or pot." He meant of course that he wasn't into them as a matter of habit. No need for her to know he wouldn't turn liquor or pot down if they were offered at a party.

They left the café a half-hour later. Bode asked whether they should drive back up to the reservoir. She said she knew a place closer to town. She had him pull onto a dead-end road scarcely a quarter mile from the café. It led to an abandoned prisoner of war camp from World War II—more than sixty years in the past. It was an eerie, unhallowed place, and people rarely went there, especially at night. One night shortly after the war, a guard, an angry American soldier, had sprayed the tents of the sleeping German prisoners with a machine gun, killing ten and wounding twice that many.

"If you want to be undisturbed, this is the place to come," Iris said.

After they had kissed a couple of times across the consol that separated their seats, she said, "I like to snuggle. Shall we get in the back seat?"

For a few moments, Bode got his hopes up. Back seats were meant for more serious business than just making out. However, making out was all Iris intended by snuggling. They sat hugging each other while they alternately kissed and fell into snatches of conversation. Eventually their conversation died, and their kissing became intense and prolonged, Iris putting a surprising energy into the process. Quite abruptly, about forty-five minutes after they had arrived, she said, "Please take me home."

That's the way weekend nights went for a couple of months. It was an unsatisfactory arrangement for Bode. About five minutes of kissing—with Iris's lips working on his with an uncanny sensuousness—roused him to the point of wanting to finish the job in the way Nature intended, leaving him in a state of frustration. Of course, he'd lope his mule when he got home, but that was tame stuff compared to having carnal knowledge of a girl when he and she were both heated up and wanting it.

Moreover, Iris teased him about Mormonism enough to keep him on the defensive. She had read parts of the Book of Mormon when her family first moved to Salina—her pastor having said they had just as well deal with it up front since the vast majority of their neighbors were Mormon. She said there were good things in the Book of Mormon, but according to her pastor it was like the Apocrypha in the Catholic Bible. It was a book-length sermon. It explained scripture, but it wasn't scripture. The Protestant Bible—that's all the scripture anybody needed, she said.

Bode didn't know how to respond to that, so he phoned his brother Avery, who had been on a mission and was currently a senior at BYU. Bode doctored the truth a little, telling Avery he had met a nice Baptist girl who looked like she might be open to the truths of Mormonism if he could correct some false notions somebody had fed her. Avery latched onto the project in a flash. As a first step, he advised Bode to emphasize the fact that whereas Mormons had the bona-fide, genuine trade-mark church of God, Baptists were a generic brand of Christianity. Like most other Christian denominations, the Baptists had bought into the Nicene Creed, which held that God is one in substance

but three in person. Only the Mormons, Avery explained, had the straight dope on the doctrine of the Trinity. God the Father had a resurrected body of flesh and bone, as did God the Son, whereas the Holy Ghost had a spirit body, which was why the Holy Ghost could inspire righteous people at any time and place.

However, the long and the short of it was that Iris was unimpressed. She just scoffed at the mention of God the Father having a resurrected body of flesh and bone. She finally did agree to back off on talking about religion altogether since it obviously tainted their moments together with acrimony. Naturally, Bode brooded on his dissatisfactions, and he made up his mind multiple times to stop seeing Iris. But he kept going back. He was hooked, he was an addict. As far as his sex life was concerned, he knew he would have to write the summer off as a loss. He just hoped when it was over and Iris had gone off to the University of Utah, he could build himself up a fresh inventory of local girls willing to go all the way.

Then one night near the first of August, disaster struck. Bode carried a condom in his watch pocket, but by the time he realized he needed it, he and Iris had already got beyond being influenced by a sense of the consequences. He of course had relied on her. It was she, after all, who had set the boundaries on their intimate behavior that summer. He could at least console himself on that fateful evening with the fact that she took the first step by whispering, "Shall we do it?" Taking that as permission, Bode proceeded as an experienced practitioner of backseat intercourse.

Within seconds of their having completed the act, Iris whispered hoarsely, "Bode, what have we done?" During the brief duration of the act, Bode had congratulated himself on his good fortune. Now he realized how stupid he had been to proceed without a condom. Moreover, he realized he shouldn't have gone all the way for a reason beyond the danger of getting her pregnant. Even though she had given him permission, he shouldn't have taken advantage of her in a moment of weakness. She was too good a girl for that.

Neither of them spoke after that until they arrived at her house. As she opened the car door, she said, "We're not good for each other, Bode, so don't come back."

“I’ll behave,” Bode said. “I’ll keep my hands to myself. I promise.”

“Don’t come back, Bode. Just don’t come back—ever.”

For a while on his drive home, Bode grieved. That was the only word for it. Iris had dug into him deeper than he had realized. But pretty soon he began to fret over the chances of her becoming pregnant. He wasn’t ready to be a daddy, especially not with a girl as homely as Iris. So she was absolutely right to put her foot down. They weren’t good for each other.

Arriving at home, he immediately got onto the Internet and researched the likelihood of a single instance of unprotected intercourse resulting in pregnancy—a two-and-a-half percent chance, one site claimed. That meant a ninety-seven-and-a-half percent chance that he had got away free.

With that reassurance, he decided to forget his little episode with Iris Denning and get back to his former habits. He could start taking in dances in little towns like Venice or Glenwood or Monroe and scout out some willing girls. Then there was a bar in Marysvale, where he had had luck with an older woman. Maybe she was a regular there. And he sure as hell wouldn’t get carried away and have sex without putting on a condom.

The next day was a Sunday. As usual, Bode slept in. He was having a belated bowl of cereal and milk when his parents and his younger siblings, Alan and Janet, returned from church in the early afternoon. Listening to their chatter, he realized he was anxious. For a long time he had believed it unnecessary to be in a hurry to repent. He had figured on changing his ways at the age of twenty-five at the earliest and maybe as late as thirty. But now he was feeling strangely vulnerable, as if something drastic would happen to him soon. By evening, Bode had it figured out. His increased anxiety was a result of hanging out with Iris. By poking fun at Mormonism, she had put him on the defensive. Forced to assert his Mormonism, he had begun to realize the Commandments were for real and they were for right now. A guy couldn’t choose to validate them just any old time.

Bode’s life changed drastically. He stopped going out at night, even on weekends. He went on with his back-breaking work at the AgriCo-op, ate meals with his family, and otherwise hung out in his basement room reading the Book of Mormon for the first time in his life. The more he read, the

worse he felt about himself. He was in a special stew on Sundays. He started going to church with his family, which pleased his parents greatly. The bishop welcomed him back, as did family friends. Naturally, Bode didn't have the guts to forego partaking of the sacrament because everybody would know he had serious sins on his conscience. So he went along partaking of the sacred bread and water unworthily even though he knew he was digging himself deeper and deeper into the pit of damnation. Any way he looked at it, his life had become downright hellish. It was the life of a spiritual galley slave.

Bode was grateful when Avery and their sister Anna came home from their summer term at BYU. Their good cheer diverted his parents' attention from his silent, moody presence. They were there for three weeks, filling the house with banter and chatter. By the time they went back to Provo for fall semester, Bode had started to cheer up a little. His improved mood lasted through September, when the weather turned cool, and the storage sheds where he worked weren't nearly as hot as in the summer. Sometimes he felt like maybe the Lord had decided to forgive him for fornicating with Iris and all the others and it was time for him to figure out how to make something of himself. However, he was shortly disabused of the notion things were starting to go well for him. On a sunny Saturday morning in early October, Abe Larkin showed up at the loading dock where Bode was taking in a new shipment of chicken mash.

"Got something to impart to you, ol' buddy," Abe said. "Iris is pregnant. Last night I was at the café up in Salina and Sibyl and Larry told me I've got to let you know."

Bode chewed on his words for a long moment before their meaning sank in. Then it hit him hard. He could feel a blush coming up his neck onto his cheeks. "Well, damn," he said, seating himself on the edge of the dock.

"You know you could just up and marry her."

"Marry her!"

"That's Sibyl's idea, not mine."

"I don't see her and me getting married," Bode said. "She's a Baptist and I'm a Mormon even if I haven't been a very good one up till now." Also, he

hadn't planned on marrying a homely girl. That counted against her more than being a Baptist although he didn't mention that to Abe.

"Maybe I better tell you something else," Abe said. "According to Larry, you'll have to pay child support till the baby turns eighteen even if you don't marry her. The law makes you do it."

Bode was stunned. Ten seconds of ecstasy in the back seat of a car cost eighteen years of child support!

"Larry says you and Iris will have to fill out a legal document that spells out what you're going to do with the kid."

Bode pulled off his gloves and scratched his neck.

"He and Sibyl think you ought to come on up to the café and start thrashing things out with Iris."

"Does she want to see me?"

"I can't say she's real enthusiastic about the idea. But Sibyl says for you just to show up at quitting time tomorrow night. She will make sure Iris doesn't take off early."

"All right, I'll be there," Bode said grimly.

"Don't take it too hard, ol' buddy," Abe said as he prepared to leave. "You ain't the only feller in the county that has got a kid he didn't plan on."

When Bode walked into the café the next evening, the dining area was empty except for Iris, who sat on a stool at the counter. Larry and Sibyl were in the kitchen, as Bode could see through the serving window. A document composed of maybe two dozen sheets of paper lay on the counter before Iris.

Bode slid onto the stool next to hers. He could see his face and hers, side by side, in a round mirror that hung above the coffee urn.

"You've heard the bad news," Iris said.

"Yes. Abe brought me word yesterday."

They watched each other in the mirror. Funny thing—in Bode's judgment, she was pretty in the mirror

"I'm not blaming you any more than I'm blaming myself," she said. "We weren't smart, Bode, neither one of us."

"That's true."

“My mother told me, don’t be dumb, Iris. Don’t get pregnant. Then I went and did it.”

“I’m sorry,” Bode said. “I really am.”

Her gaze dropped from the mirror to the document on the counter. She patted it with a hand. “Larry gave me this. It comes from the website of the Utah court system. It tells us how to make a parenting plan. We’ve got to work out custody and visitation rights—other things, too. It isn’t going to be easy. You’ll want our baby to grow up a Mormon. I’ll want it to grow up a Baptist.”

She uttered a short, bitter laugh. “So what do we do—flip a coin?”

He picked up the document and scanned through it. He could see she was right. They were in for some long talks.

Shortly, she asked him to drive her home. As they passed the road into the abandoned prisoner of war camp, she asked him to stop for a moment. “There’s something else I just as well tell you. When I first knew for sure I was pregnant, I decided to have an abortion. It’s legal in Utah if you do it early. But the doctor has to explain the procedure and show you a movie about it, and then you have to wait three days to have the abortion. All the clinics are in Salt Lake City. Sibyl said she’d drive up with me both times if that’s what I really wanted. But I couldn’t make up my mind—neither one way nor the other. I knew if I was going to have an abortion, I should do it soon. One night I drove out here. It’s a murderous place, and I hoped it would help me harden my heart. It didn’t, Bode. It did just the opposite. I gave up on getting an abortion.”

Disappointment rippled through Bode. Too bad she hadn’t gone through with it. An abortion would have saved them both a lot of trouble. Then guilt took over. He knew he shouldn’t feel so disappointed about her not having the abortion. He had an inclination toward wickedness. That’s all there was to it.

When they arrived at her house, she asked him to come inside while she confronted her parents with the fact she was pregnant. He was too startled to say no. A lamp was lit in the Denning living room when they went in. “Wait here,” she said to Bode, then disappeared down a hall.

He heard a door opening, then a woman’s voice. “Is that you, Iris?”

“Yes, Mom.”

"I'm glad you are home. Have a good sleep, dear."

"Mama, Daddy, I need to talk to you," Iris said. "I'm pregnant."

"What's that?" a deep masculine voice said.

"I let a Mormon guy make love to me and I'm pregnant."

"For God's sake," the deep masculine voice bellowed, "don't make jokes about something like that!"

"It's not a joke," Iris said. "He's out in the living room. His name is Bode Carpenter. We've got to work out a parenting plan for our baby."

"I'll kill the son of a bitch!" the deep voice said.

"Woodrow!" Iris's mother cried.

"Well, let's go out and take a look at him."

Iris's parents were Woodrow and Merle Denning. As Bode already knew, Woodrow was a petroleum engineer, transferred from an oil field near Greeley, Colorado, to a drilling site in Salina Canyon.

Hearing the tread of his slippers in the hall, the quaking Bode prepared for the worst.

Woodrow paused in the doorway from the hall. A muscular, heavy-set man, he wore a belted robe over his pajamas. A moment later, Merle pushed past him. She wore a robe over her nightgown, which hung nearly to her ankles.

"Let's take a little time to talk things over," she said. "Iris, you and your young man sit on the sofa. Woodrow, let's take the easy chairs."

When they were all seated, she turned to Iris. "First of all, are you sure you are pregnant?"

"I missed my period. It should have happened over a month ago. So I bought a kit and I tested positive."

"Well, then, you probably are pregnant."

Sighing, she turned to Bode. "Tell us about yourself. And, please, I didn't catch your name."

"I'm Bode Carpenter," he said. "I'm from Richfield. My folks are Martin and Esther Carpenter."

"Presumably, you have a job."

"Yes, ma'am. I work for the AgriCo-op feed and farm supply store out on the south side of Richfield."

“What’s your pay there?” Iris’s father asked in a gruff voice.

“Ten dollars an hour, eight hours every week day, and time-and-a-half for another four hours on Saturday.”

“Let’s see—that’s going to be a little over twenty thousand a year. How much do you spend on car payments?”

“Nothing. My dad gave me an old car. I have to maintain it, of course.”

“How much do you spend on room and board?”

“Nothing. I live at home with my parents.”

“How long are you going to go on living with them?” Woodrow’s voice had turned sarcastic.

“I’m not sure. Not forever, of course.” Bode could see he didn’t count heavier than a piss-ant with Iris’s father.

At this point, Merle intervened. “I hope you two aren’t planning on getting married.”

“No way,” Iris said. “We are going to work out a parenting plan on how we are going to raise the baby. Larry Forbes says the law requires us to do that.”

“Have you considered putting it up for adoption? You could stay with Aunt Dorothy in Denver till it’s born.”

“I’m keeping the baby,” Iris said stubbornly.

“At our cost,” Woodrow grumbled.

“We can handle it,” Merle said. “By all means, you two, go ahead with your parenting plan. If you want a place to hang out while you work up the agreement, you can use our den. Nights are too cold for sitting in your car.”

“Is that all right, then?” Iris said to Bode.

Bode nodded. He wasn’t the negotiator here and his mind was a scramble.

“Hold on just a minute,” Woodrow said. “Let me take a look at that document.”

He strode to Iris and took it, glancing through its pages as he returned to his seat. “Mr. Carpenter,” he said, “what if Mrs. Denning and I make you a deal? We’ll get my lawyer to make up a contract that relieves you of all financial obligations toward this child in return for just clearing out of the picture altogether. Merle and I will guarantee the finances of the situation.”

Bode's jaw dropped with astonishment. He glanced at Iris. She shrugged her shoulders.

"Is it a deal?" Woodrow said insistently.

"Okay," Bode replied.

"Is this okay with you?" Merle asked her daughter.

"It makes things less complicated," Iris said.

"We'll try hard to keep things uncomplicated," Merle went on. "With me as a backup nanny, maybe you can get on with your education."

Bode could see it was time to leave. He stood and looked around. Abruptly walking out like this left a raw edge. He sighed, scratched behind an ear, and headed for the door.

Woodrow followed him onto the porch. Having closed the door, he said, "I'll make sure that contract is ready as soon as possible. I'll have my lawyer bring it by where you work. Now, there's a little something else I want to mention. If you stick with this deal and sign that contract, there'll be ten thousand dollars cash for you under the table. That's close to half a year's income for you. That'll be yours free and clear."

Bode was thunderstruck. Ten thousand dollars cash! What a guy couldn't do with that kind of money!

"No need to mention this little cash deal to anybody," Woodrow added. "That's strictly between you and me, just a little something to sweeten the pot."

Bode drove home on cloud nine. When it looked certain that the entire population of Sevier County would know what he and Iris had done, the nightmare had suddenly evaporated—with a promise of eighteen years of salvaged income and some instant big bucks on the side! He hoped he could smarten up now. He should get on with making something of himself. He would put the ten thousand toward college. He'd pursue a degree in wildlife resource management. That's what he really wanted, a life in the outdoors—and marriage to a beautiful Latter-day Saint woman with whom he'd raise a righteous family.

Bode had a troubled sleep that night. Somewhere toward morning, he awoke from a strange dream. In the dream, he saw a kangaroo grazing on the strip of grass next to the parking lot at the AgriCo-op store. The kangaroo

paused, balanced on its tail, and chewed a while. Then a beautiful human child, maybe six months old, pushed its head and upper torso out of the kangaroo's pouch. Bode knew it was his baby though he didn't know how it had got into the pouch.

He mulled the dream for a few minutes before getting out of his bunk. The baby in the kangaroo pouch reminded him of his sister Janet, whom his mother had briefly placed in his arms on the day of her birth. He realized suddenly he had come down off cloud nine. He was grieving. He had agreed to walk out on his child before it was born.

He swung out of his bunk and sat with his feet on the cold concrete floor. A stark idea came to him. He wouldn't sign a contract. He wouldn't walk out on the kid. Anxiety stirred in his belly. He knew he was in for eighteen years of child support payments, to say nothing of losing an under-the-table instant bonus of ten thousand dollars. Likely he would bring shame to himself and his family. Maybe he would be excommunicated from the Church. Well, that was the way it had to be.

Just before breakfast, he took his cell phone outside to call Woodrow so that his parents wouldn't overhear the conversation. "I'm sorry, sir," he said, "to put you and Mrs. Denning to a lot of trouble, but I've changed my mind. I'm not going to sign any contract. I respect you and Mrs. Denning a whole lot and I hope we can get along okay."

Woodrow began to splutter something about giving Bode twenty thousand dollars under the table. Shutting off his phone, Bode went back into the house to have breakfast. What with his anxiety ratcheted up, he didn't have a good day at work. That night around bedtime, the house phone rang and Bode's mother told him that a girl wanted to talk to him. It was Iris. "Daddy threw a fit this morning. He says you backed out on signing a contract."

Bode didn't know what to say. His anxiety went up another notch.

"From what I could gather, he offered you some money on the side."

Bode remained silent.

"Are you still there?" she said.

“I’m sorry to upset your daddy,” Bode blurted, “but I’m like you. You can’t go through with an abortion. Well, I can’t go through with signing away my right to spend some time with our kid.”

“I can respect that—although,” Iris added wearily, “it does make things more complicated for both of us.”

“I’m ready to tackle the parenting plan. How do you want to work it out?”

Iris suggested they accept her mother’s offer to let them meet in the den of the Denning house. She told him she had arranged to work a mid-day shift at the café Monday through Friday. Accordingly, she proposed now that he and she meet in the den on Saturday and Sunday evenings. The den had both an inside and outside door. Bode was to use the outside door, which would allow him to avoid meeting her father

Bode felt hollow after he had hung up. It was time now to come clean with his parents. He knew a rancher who had chopped off a gangrenous finger with a hatchet. He was wishing he could trade places with the rancher. Chopping off a finger would be nothing compared to telling his parents he was a fornicator.

Bode’s parents, Martin and Esther, were preparing for bed as he entered their room. A single lamp burned on the night stand beside his mother. She was already in bed, wearing glasses and sitting up propped against a pillow with the Book of Mormon in her hands. His father sat on the opposite side of the bed, bare footed but still clad in his suit pants and his unbuttoned white shirt.

“I’ve got some bad news,” Bode said. “A while back when I was still helling around, I broke the law of chastity with a Baptist girl and now she’s pregnant.”

“Oh, my word!” Esther gasped.

A long silence followed. Then, from Martin: “We knew you were dating a Baptist girl. Avery gave us to understand she was interested in the Church.”

“As it turns out, she isn’t interested. She has read parts of the Book of Mormon and doesn’t believe it. She’s a dyed-in-the-wool Baptist. She just believes in the Bible.”

“And you say she’s pregnant?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Oh, Bodie,” Esther wailed, using his childhood nickname, “where did we go wrong? How did we fail you?”

“You never did anything wrong. I just turned rebellious on my own.”

“What’s the girl’s name?” Martin said.

“Her name is Iris Denning and she lives in Salina.”

“Are you thinking of getting married?”

“No, sir, we aren’t. Do you think we ought to?”

“If she’s not interested in the Church, you are likely just as well off not getting married.”

“This is just terrible,” Esther said. “An illegitimate child in our family! Who would have thought it?”

“We might have expected it, given how things are nowadays,” Martin said. “But what counts now, I guess, is making the best of it. For starters, you’ve got some tall repenting to do, Bode. You’d better go talk this over with the bishop.”

“Yes, sir, I guess I’d better.”

A little later, lying in his bunk, Bode pondered the fact that he hadn’t told his parents about the six other girls and the middle-aged woman at the bar in Marysvale with whom he had also fornicated. Shortly he decided it was okay not to have told them. But the bishop—that was another matter. He’d rather chop off two fingers than tell him. But it couldn’t be avoided. Bode would have to come completely clean with him.

On his way home from work the next day, Bode called by the bishop’s house. The bishop was having supper when Bode rang the doorbell. The bishop stood in the doorway chewing food while Bode came straight to his point. “Bishop,” he said, “I am in a real pickle. I did what I shouldn’t have done with a Baptist girl and now she’s pregnant.”

“You better come inside,” the bishop said, peering out into the street as if there might be eavesdroppers. He had Bode sit in an easy chair while he closed the door between the living room and the dining room where his wife was still at supper. He listened gravely, shaking his head from time to time, while Bode explained his situation in further detail.

“I’m sorry to hear all that,” the bishop said when Bode had finished. “Lately, it has looked like you had cleaned up your act, and I’ve been thinking

about suggesting to the stake president that it was time to advance you to the Melchizedek priesthood. But now you tell me all your hell-raising has got you in big trouble with an outside girl.”

The bishop’s fingers drummed on the wooden arm of his chair. He was a large, bald man—a farmer whose kids had grown up and moved away from home.

“Do you think I ought to marry her?” Bode said.

“Do you want to marry her?”

“No, sir.”

“Does she want you to marry her?”

“No, sir. But I guess I could try to talk her into it if you think I ought to.”

“Has she shown any interest in the Church?”

“No, sir. She makes fun of it.”

“Well, I will say I’ve known some very righteous Latter-day Saints who were married to outsiders. The important thing is to keep the Commandments. But if she makes fun of Mormonism, I wouldn’t waste time trying to talk her into getting married if I were you.”

“There’s something else I’d better tell you. Before I met this girl, I broke the law of chastity with some other girls, plus a lady down in Piute County. None of them got pregnant. I made sure of that.”

“How many girls?”

“Six.”

The bishop shook his head. “Any thing else I ought to know?”

“I did some drinking. I tampered with tobacco. I smoked a little pot. But not lately. I quit all that.”

The bishop scrutinized one of his knuckles. “You are a tough case. I’m not sure what ought to be done here. I maybe ought to cut you off the Church. Might serve you right.”

He paused to rub the knuckle. “On the other hand, you’ve done the right thing to come talk to me. I respect you for that.”

He began to drum his fingers again on the arm of his chair. “Guess I won’t cut you off. You’d never come back. So where do we go from here? I want you to keep on going to church but hold off on partaking of the

sacrament. Do that for a year. In case people ask questions, just tell them you'd rather not talk about it. No need to advertise your predicament any more than we have to. Hold steady and come next summer, you can start partaking of the sacrament again and I'll recommend your advancement to the Melchizedek priesthood."

The sun was setting over the western mountains when Bode emerged from the bishop's house. He could see that getting on the right side of the Lord was going to be tough. The fact he couldn't participate in the sacrament would hit his family hard. Other people would know he'd somehow got in trouble with a girl. Likely as not, word of who the girl happened to be would leak out.

On his drive to Salina to see Iris on the following Saturday evening, Bode considered the dubious prospects of taking care of their child if he had custody of it. He obviously couldn't turn the child over to his mother during his working hours—at least not until she had got over being horrified by the scandal. The long and the short of it was that Bode was in no position during his negotiation with Iris to insist on anything close to equal custodial time for the foreseeable future. Maybe he would never want equal custodial time—just regular weekends and some holidays and, every other year, the kid's birthday. Maybe that would be contact enough.

He arrived in Salina a little after seven. Iris welcomed him into the den and disappeared for a plate of cookies. At that point, her little brother and sister entered the den. The brother was maybe eight, the sister maybe four.

"We're Rodney and Ellen," the boy said.

"Glad to meet you," Bode said.

Rodney stationed himself near an arm of the sofa on which Bode was seated. "Are you Iris's boyfriend?"

"In a way you could say I am."

"Dad says you are poor white trash," Rodney went on.

"I expect he's right. I don't have a whole lot going for me."

"You don't look like trash to me," Ellen said.

"Thank you," Bode said.

Shortly, Iris returned. "You've had a chat with the kids, I take it."

"Yes. They have more or less welcomed me into the family."

After the children left, Iris sat beside Bode on the sofa and handed him a copy of the parenting plan, keeping another for herself.

The template for the plan was over twenty pages long. She and Bode were each required to complete a plan, being named respectively petitioner in one and respondent in the other. There were boxes to tick off and blanks to fill in by the dozens, presenting them at this juncture, long before the birth of their child, with issues loaded with imponderables. They were to provide the name, sex, date of birth, and social security number of the child. They could opt for joint custody, in which case they would have to agree on important decisions about the child's education, health and dental care, and religious training, or they could opt for one of them having custody—with sole responsibility for making important decisions—and the other having the right to periods of visitation.

"Custody is the big question, isn't it?" Iris said. "When does our child stay with me, when does it stay with you?"

"For sure it has to stay with you till it's weaned," Bode responded. "Later on—well, I don't know. I likely won't have anybody to take care of the kid on long term. So maybe the arrangement ought to be all along that you have custody and I have visitation rights."

Iris looked relieved. In a moment, a worried look returned to her face. "You'll likely want to take our child to church with you."

"Well, yes, I suppose I will want to do that."

"I don't fault you for it. But it does pose a problem, doesn't it—a Mormon service one Sunday, a Baptist service the next? What's more, according to these instructions, we can't badmouth each other's religion. No matter what, our child is going to grow up in a two-church environment."

She turned to look him in the eyes. "Who knows? Maybe someday I'll have Mormon grandkids. So I wish you'd explain Mormonism to me. I promise not to say anything sarcastic."

That began a series of respectful discussions about the doctrines and practices of their two faiths—discussions that went on for more than a month. For the time being, they put the parenting plan on hold and concentrated on their religious differences. However, without truly taking it into account,

they often managed to squander a good portion of an evening together by chatting about personal matters or even, on several occasions, by watching a movie from the ample Denning collection of DVDs.

On an impulse one evening, Bode confessed to having had carnal relations with seven women before meeting Iris. At first he wasn't sure why he told her. He could see his confession shocked and disappointed her, just as if he had owed her the fidelity of being, like herself, a virgin on the occasion of their passionate misdeed at the prisoner of war camp. Eventually, Bode realized he had, in fact, told her because he did owe her that sort of fidelity. Their relationship was turning strange and unpredictable.

"I'm through with that sort of thing," Bode explained. "I've told my bishop. He more or less disfellowshipped me. It's a sort of probation. He told me if I live righteously for a year he'll put me back in good standing. In the meantime, I have to go to church on Sunday but I can't partake of the sacrament."

"The sacrament?"

"The bread and the water for the Lord's Last Supper."

"We call that communion," Iris said. "We don't use water. We use grape juice."

"Did you talk to your pastor about what we did?"

"No, but he knows. Mother told him I'm pregnant."

"Do you partake of the communion?"

"Yes, I accept it. I accept it to show I accept Jesus."

"Do you feel forgiven?"

"Jesus knows what I've done. He knows I'm not going to do it again. My pastor isn't like your bishop. He doesn't get between me and the Lord."

"I hope I feel forgiven when my year is up. But even if I do, I've pretty well messed up my life. I can't hide what I've done. What decent Mormon girl is going to want me now?"

Iris stared at him. "You're dumb to think that way. You're good looking, Bode. There'll be a lot of Mormon girls eager to catch you. I just hope you get one who'll treat our child right when it's at your house."

That's when once again things went south, so to speak. Bode grasped that her words implicitly acknowledged her own attraction to him—and

forced him to acknowledge the strength of his attraction to her. He warmed to the idea of coming home to her every evening for a lifetime, then, worried, struggled to put it out of his mind.

A couple of weeks later Iris made her attraction to him even more explicit. It was a Sunday evening in early November. They were on the sofa in the den. “I keep wishing we could get married,” she said. “It would be so much better for our baby. Besides, I’ve got used to you, Bode. I like to be with you. You are very kind, very gentle.”

Immediately afterward, she frowned, obviously annoyed with herself. She stood and moved toward the outside door, her customary signal that it was time for Bode to go home. He followed her to the door. She opened it and stood with her hand on the knob. “I’ve said more than I should have said. Don’t attach any importance to it. Let’s just get the parenting plan finished and be done with it. We’ve been neglecting it for weeks.”

Driving home, Bode’s mind was a swirl. Iris had intentionally put marriage on the table as a topic of discussion, then pulled it off. Did he want to put it back on?

He granted he looked forward to their evenings in the den. He granted that he lusted on her. But marriage? His bishop had said it was okay to marry an outsider. But if he married Iris, there would probably be other children, who like the child who was presently on its way would be intimately exposed to Iris’s erroneous faith. Then there was the Plain Jane factor. Wouldn’t the first question to come to mind among his friends and relatives be something like this—*Couldn’t you do better than that? How did you get tangled up with a girl that homely in the first place? Don’t you have any pride?*

Finally, there was the question of finances—a question that made the following week a period of uncomfortable self-interrogation while Bode heaved sacks in the storage sheds or, inside the store, inventoried new shipments. At twenty-one, he was still living the life of a sixteen-year-old, engaged in brute grunt labor for a subsistence wage and mooching off his parents for room and board. If he and Iris married—he could see the handwriting on the wall. They’d be dirt poor and dependent on hand-outs from relatives and the Richfield food bank.

While returning to Salina on the following Saturday evening, Bode decided to leave the topic of marriage off the table. He planned to agree that they get on with the parenting plan without further delay. However, his resolve evaporated when Iris met him at the door of the den. She looked so good to him—so desirable. He was wondering if he hadn't been half in love with her all along. He didn't really care, did he, if she was a Plain Jane? Who had invented that demeaning term in the first place?

"Shall we sit?" she said, leading him to the sofa. Stapled copies of the parenting plan template lay on the side table. Next to them was a pitcher of lemonade. She poured him a glass.

Handing him a document, she said, "Are you are still okay with letting me have custody with visitation rights for you?"

Ignoring the question, he set down his glass. "When you thought about us getting married, how did you think it could work?"

She seemed surprised, then thoughtful—then maybe even eager. "I had in mind taking turns at doing things your way for a while and then doing things my way for a while. We could go to the Mormon service one Sunday and to the Baptist service the next. Or maybe we could go to both services every Sunday. We would *have* to be a real two-church family. That would be a way of showing our respect for each other's faith."

He lifted his glass and took sip. He was dubious. Her idea seemed too simple.

"There are a lot of different ways we could work it out," she went on. "But however we arrange it, it will only work if we really want it to."

His resistance softened. Say their family, he and Iris and three or four kids, did things full tilt the Mormon way for a couple of weeks and then did things full tilt the Baptist way for couple of weeks—the idea was appealing. Maybe they'd end up with a bunch of screwed-up kids, but maybe they wouldn't.

"For starters," Iris said, "we could attend each other's church. Maybe you could come with me to my Baptist service tomorrow."

He pondered a moment. "I'm afraid of your dad."

"Then take me to your sacrament meeting. I'll drive down and meet you there."

“Not in my ward,” he said hastily.

“Well, then, somewhere else.”

A tremor went up his backbone. They were behaving as if a two-church family was a cut-and-dried matter. “Okay,” he said, “but it’s just an experiment.”

“Yes,” she agreed, “it’s just an experiment. So where shall we go?”

“Get your laptop and let’s see what we can find in San Pete County.”

Returning with the laptop, she said, “Maybe we can squeeze in a Baptist service somewhere too.”

The most promising venues were churches in a couple of small towns in upper San Pete County—an LDS ward in the village of Bristol and, scarcely five miles from Bristol, a Baptist congregation in the even smaller village of St. Albans. As it turned out, the schedules and proximity of the churches were such that Bode and Iris could take in both meetings on a single day.

He picked Iris up at eight-thirty the next morning. They were both in their Sunday best, he in a dark blue suit with a white shirt and tie, she in a tan skirt suit with high-heeled pumps.

The November sun was bright, and the fields along the highway glistened with frost. Passing through Manti, they saw the Mormon temple, capped at either end by a cupola-fitted tower. Its walls, built of a cream-colored limestone from a local quarry, gleamed in the sun.

“I hear Mormons don’t use a temple on Sunday,” Iris said.

“That’s right. They go to a church for Sunday services.”

“So what’s a temple for?”

“So people can get married for time and eternity,” Bode said. “Also, so they can get baptized for their dead ancestors who died without the Gospel.”

“I guess I can’t enter a temple.”

“That’s right,” Bode said. “I can’t either. Not right now. Maybe next year after the bishop takes me off probation.”

“Say some of my grandchildren turn out to be Mormon. Could they get baptized for me after I’m dead?”

“Likely so.”

He decided not to tell her it might not do her any good even if somebody was baptized in her behalf after her death. From what he understood,

people who had a chance to become a Mormon in mortality but didn't take advantage of it, didn't get another chance in the Hereafter.

"So remind me which of the three glories will I be in while I wait for my grandkids to get around to being baptized for me?"

"You'll be in the middle one, the Terrestrial Kingdom. That one is for good, decent people who have been blinded by the craftiness of men."

"So I have been blinded by the craftiness of men?"

"Well, yes, more or less, that's the way it is." He paused. "Sorry to have to put it that way. Things are even worse for me, of course—at least right now. If I have the bad luck to get killed before my year of probation is over, I'll end up in the Telestial Kingdom, which is the bottom one. That's where wicked people go. It's like the Baptist hell. People aren't tortured and tormented there. They are just separated from God and Christ for all eternity."

"I think you are already forgiven, Bode," she said. "You just don't know it. I think there's just one degree of glory in heaven and its glory can't be measured. You and me, we'll both be there—and our child too, no matter whether it turns out to be a Mormon or a Baptist."

They attended the Mormon meeting in Bristol first. They took a seat near the rear entrance so that they could depart quickly at the end of the service. On the platform at the front, a woman played prelude music on an organ. A bishop and two counselors sat to the left of a lectern while a teen-aged girl and an elderly couple sat to the right. One of the counselors conducted the meeting. There was an opening hymn, accompanied by the organist and led by a female chorister, and then an invocation. A second hymn followed, during which older teen boys broke bread into bits on trays and blessed the bread.

"Those are priests," Bode whispered. "About seventeen years old, I'd judge. Priest is the office I'm stuck in right now, being a backslider."

Younger teen boys distributed the trays. "Those are deacons—twelve or thirteen years old," Bode whispered.

When a tray filled with small pieces of broken bread reached Iris, she looked at Bode a moment, then took a piece and put it in her mouth. She offered the tray to Bode. He attempted to grasp the handle in order to pass it on without partaking—this from respect for his probation. Frowning, Iris

refused to release the tray until Bode, to keep from creating a scene, took a piece. She was, he saw, insistent that they act out the charade of a conventional Mormon couple one hundred percent. As he expected, the procedure repeated itself when a tray of water cups, duly blessed, reached them. Bode judged this to be a violation of his probation. He wondered whether another aspect of the charade was also blameworthy—his satisfaction at the possibility of being taken for the husband of the slender, dark-haired young woman at his side.

Following the distribution of the sacrament, the teen-aged girl who sat on the stand spoke briefly on a theme drawn from a general conference sermon. She was followed by the elderly couple, who reported on a mission to Montana from which they had just returned. Both emphasized the joys of service in their talks, citing passages from the Bible, the Book of Mormon, and the Doctrine and Covenants. Among several anecdotes, the husband mentioned having recently given a name and a blessing to the new baby of a young woman whose soldier husband was on active duty elsewhere.

This anecdote figured in Bode's and Iris's conversation while they drove on to St. Albans after the sacrament meeting had ended.

"Do Mormon men get to choose a baby's name off the cuff just like that?" Iris said.

"Not off the cuff," Bode replied. "They give the name the parents have chosen. They also give a blessing so the baby will grow up healthy and righteous. It's usually the baby's father that's giving the blessing."

"So could you do that for our baby?"

"Yes. That is, after I have cleaned up my act and have been made an elder. If we were willing to wait for a few months after our baby is born, I could likely do it."

"I would like that," she said.

As they pulled into the parking lot at the Baptist church, Bode brought up another matter. "I expect you'll want me to take part in the communion, as you call it."

"Would you rather not?"

“When the time comes around and our kid is old enough to see how things are, won’t it be harder to teach it which church is yours and which is mine if we partake of each other’s sacrament—or communion, as you call it?”

“I hadn’t thought of that. But yes, I agree, we shouldn’t participate in each other’s communion.”

Again for Bode, that tremor along the spine—he could see they were behaving more and more as if marriage were indeed a cut-and-dried proposition.

The service had already begun when they entered. The pastor—a short, robust man attired in a rumpled double-breasted suit—was leading a hymn a cappella, there being no piano or organ present. The small hall featured a double row of benches, scarcely enough for fifty persons. Close to thirty persons were currently present, mostly men and women accompanied by a few children.

Bode and Iris seated themselves on the last row of benches. At the front was a low stand with a tall lectern, behind which the pastor stood. Two other equally robust men sat in chairs on either side of the pastor. In front of the men, just off the stand, stood a low table covered with a satiny cloth. Trays with handles and shiny stainless-steel plates rested on the table.

At the conclusion of the hymn, the pastor broke directly into a sermon. Stepping off the low stage, he began to pace back and forth like a lion in a cage, his voice assuming a rhythm coordinated with his stride, dropping and rising in force as he strode back and forth. He said he wished to emphasize that it was faith rather than works that took a person to heaven. However, as he went on to make clear, good works inevitably followed a genuine faith in Jesus. They were the necessary product of real faith. Soon he shifted to a new topic. He said Jesus was his best friend. Sweeping an arm toward his listeners, he told them he knew Jesus as well in his inward life as he knew these, the cherished members of this congregation, in his outward life. He said he spoke personally with Jesus many times every day. He said he hoped his listeners had such a relationship.

Despite himself, Bode was transfixed. He listened intently, his mouth slightly agape. The pastor, for all his rumpled, dowdy appearance, could

preach. There was no doubting his intense sincerity. If he misled his followers, it wasn't because of craftiness. He honored Jesus to the core.

Eventually, the pastor declared it time to celebrate the Lord's Last Supper. He said if there was anything amiss in the hearts of his listeners, they should repent of it now. With that, he closed his eyes and called upon Jesus to sanctify the unleavened bread on the plates. He then handed the plates to the two men beside him. Each of them went down an outside aisle, handing a plate to the first person on each bench and waiting until the plate had been handed back before moving on.

When a plate came along the bench on which Bode and Iris sat, he saw it contained small wafers. Iris took a wafer and offered the plate to Bode, who—with unexpected regret—passed it on without taking one. A few minutes later a tray of tiny cups of grape juice came along their row. Again, Bode abstained.

Shortly, the deacons returned to the front and the pastor said, “That’s all for now, folks. Don’t forget Bible study tomorrow night at six o’clock. Sister Hoskins will be running a nursery, so bring the little fellows along. God bless you. Drive careful.”

Bode and Iris retreated quickly from the church and started for home. Passing through Ephraim, they stopped at a sandwich shop. He ordered a ham sandwich, she a chicken salad. They seated themselves across from each other in a booth by a window looking out onto Main Street and for a period ate in silence, casting fleeting glances into each other’s eyes and turning their heads frequently to gaze out the window.

Bode ruminated on the pastor’s theme of establishing a personal relationship with Jesus. Bode had never felt that Jesus was close at hand. He wasn’t sure he wanted to. Wouldn’t that put enormous demands on a fellow? He’d have to take his sandals off, so to speak, like Moses in the presence of the burning bush.

He spoke of the sermon to Iris. “What about you? Have you felt the presence of Jesus?”

“I have. The night I drove into the massacre site to help me make up my mind to have an abortion—the moment I turned off the car lights, I had a

panic attack, and I said, 'Sweet Jesus, help me,' and you know, the calmest feeling came over me and I knew he was close, just as if I was in a room and he was in the hallway just outside, and I knew I must keep the baby but my sin was forgiven and I could bear whatever disgrace and humiliation came my way." Bode's scalp prickled. For a moment he supposed an uncanny energy surrounded Iris. And then it dissipated, and things were ordinary again.

Inertia bound them to the booth. Bode acknowledged the pleasure of simply being there with Iris, gazing out the window at passing automobiles and college students strolling on the sidewalks.

By and by, a boy and a girl passed along the street on a bicycle, the boy pedaling, the girl seated on a rack behind, arms around him and legs spread to keep her feet from interfering with the pedals.

"College students?" Bode queried with a nod toward the scene on the street.

"Probably," Iris said. After a pause, she added, "Do you wish it was us, starting over with enough sense not to get pregnant?"

"Do you?" he said evasively.

"Of course I do. That is, at least a part of me wishes it was us. It would be nice if we were just a Mormon guy and a Baptist girl who knew each other at Snow College once upon a time. As it is—well, our mistake was to hang out in the back seat of a car, wasn't it? But I'm not going to hold our sin against our baby. I'm glad the baby is alive, and I'm glad you are its father."

She picked up the plastic fork with which she had eaten her salad and looked at it abstractly, as if it focused a thought for her.

"I didn't want to fall in love with you, Bode, but I have. Like I said before, I've got used to you. You are kind and gentle, and I like to be with you. So I'm okay with marrying a Mormon. I'm okay with our child becoming a Mormon if it chooses to. So I'd be glad to be part of a two-church family. But if you aren't in love with me, I don't think we should do it."

She was still making it easy for him to back out. He considered doing so for only a moment. Under the terms of any parenting plan they were likely to make, he would see Iris only momentarily at the beginning and end of periods of visitation—with a high possibility that some other caretaker than

Iris would supervise the exchange of their child. She would essentially disappear from his existence.

Across the table, she watched intently. The irrelevance of her plainness sank in on him with finality. Her overbite, her nose, they were part and parcel of a cherished being. A lifetime with Iris Denning—the prospect filled him with a luminous joy. As for the Hereafter with its consequences, it was abstract and remote.

“You’ve got used to being with me,” he said. “Well, I’ve got used to being with you.”

She reached a hand across the table. His hand met hers at the half-way point.

They went on talking for a while, scoping the prospects and problems of a two-church family. Iris accepted that, if Bode blessed and baptized their child, it would be entered upon the records of his church as a member. Bode accepted that Iris would make sure it was also entered on the records of whatever Baptist congregation she attended.

Before they left the sandwich shop, they decided to inform both sets of parents of their intentions that evening. Accordingly, Bode phoned his parents and alerted them that he and Iris would arrive within an hour.

“Will they think I’m a Delilah?” Iris asked while they drove.

“They’ll just be glad we’ve decided to get married,” Bode said.

It was after dark when they arrived in Richfield. Bode’s parents met them at the front door. They were both in their usual Sunday attire. Taking Iris by both hands, Bode’s mother said, “You are welcome in this home.” After she had introduced Iris to Alan and Janet, they all took seats in the spacious living room, Bode and Iris on the sofa, the others in chairs. “We’ve decided to attend one another’s church,” Bode said.

Alarm showed in his mother’s eyes. His father’s brow furrowed deeply.

“We’ve also decided to wait to bless our baby till the bishop has taken me off probation and I’ve been made an elder, and then I’ll bless it in our Mormon ward. Also, later on, when it’s eight, I’ll baptize it.”

Bode saw his parents relax, and he relaxed a little as well. No need to tell them their child would also be on the Baptist records, also no need to bring

up the vexing probability that all these arrangements would repeat themselves when they had other children.

Shortly Bode's mother and Iris began a discussion of family connections. Was there a possibility that Iris could be related to a Denning family Esther knew over at Capitol Reef? Not likely, Iris informed her. As far as she knew, her father's family derived from roots in Missouri, where an ancestor had moved immediately after the Civil War.

"Your family is nice," Iris said to Bode as they drove on toward Salina.

"They like you," Bode said, neglecting to add that they would never surrender a hope that Iris would convert. That would remain a given till their dying day.

Bode and Iris found her parents watching television in their living room. "Sorry to interrupt," Iris said, "but we've made up our minds. We want to get married."

Turning off the TV set with a remote control, Merle motioned the young couple toward the sofa. Once they were seated, Merle turned a querying look toward Bode.

"I'll try hard to earn a decent living," Bode said. "I'll do my best."

"We'll have my wages from the café for a while," Iris said. "After that, we'll make do on whatever he earns. We'll live in a shack if we have to."

"We can't have you living in a shack," Merle said. "If you are determined to get married, we'll help."

Woodrow scowled, needing no words to express his disgust with this new turn of events.

"We *will* help," Merle repeated insistently.

The next morning, Merle drove to the Carpenter home and introduced herself to Esther. Over the next two weeks, the two mothers helped their engaged offspring lay out a plausible future. The wedding would take place on the Saturday of the Thanksgiving weekend in a reception room of a new Richfield motel. The officiator would be neither a Mormon bishop nor a Baptist pastor but the Sevier County clerk. Other arrangements included a small one-bedroom apartment for the newlyweds near the truck-stop on the I-70. Bode would continue to work at the AgriCo-op. He planned to

enroll in night school when winter semester began at the Richfield branch of Snow College and pursue a major in natural resources management. As for Iris, she planned on filling her time after she had quit working at the café by pursuing a degree in elementary education through the online Western Governors University. Woodrow, having accepted the inevitability of the marriage, made the couple the gift of a car with a lot of miles left in it, giving the young couple the mobility of a second serviceable, if aging, automobile.

On the evening before Thanksgiving Day, Avery and Anna arrived from BYU. They were extraordinarily positive and cheerful, as if they were determined to ignore the Carpenter family's shipwrecked honor. Bode was doubly grateful for their presence, which distracted their parents from the ignominious necessity of the pending marriage.

The wedding party gathered as scheduled at three o'clock on the Saturday afternoon following Thanksgiving. Folding chairs were arranged in rows in a meeting room of the motel. At the front stood a small table, laden with a bouquet of white, pink, and yellow flowers. The county clerk, standing in front of the table, called the gathering to order. Bode and Iris stood before him, Iris wearing a light blue suit and half-high heels and Bode wearing his dark suit with a new blue-grey tie—a gift from Iris.

Referring to a few scribbled notes in his hand, the county clerk spoke briefly on the weighty implications of marriage, urging Bode and Iris to regard their civil wedding as a solemn contract with Heaven to love and cherish one another. He then proceeded with the official ceremony, securing from each the required assent to taking the other as a life-long spouse. Bode found himself saying yes with a cracking voice, seized suddenly by the finality of it all.

The wedding party then migrated to a private dining room for a catered supper. After the meal, the party broke up slowly, the goodbyes generating brief sallies into new topics of conversation. At a private moment, Avery asked Bode about the prospects of Iris becoming a Mormon.

Bode shook his head dolefully. "It'll never happen."

"You are sure of that, are you?"

Bode nodded grimly.

“Well, by golly,” Avery said, “at least you would call her a good person—a *righteous* person—wouldn’t you?”

“Absolutely.”

“It’s certainly not a sin to be married to a righteous non-Mormon,” Avery reminded him. “The thing is, don’t let her drag you off course. You can still qualify for the Celestial Kingdom. You can still qualify for spending eternity in the presence of Heavenly Father and Jesus. Just be a good Mormon, Bode, and you’ll be okay.”

Just be a good Mormon—Bode was glad that Avery had backed up the bishop’s assurance that a two-church marriage wasn’t inherently sinful. Maybe he would see the interior of the Manti temple again after all. He needed to keep his sights locked on the Celestial Kingdom.

The newlyweds spent the night in the Richfield motel, intending to depart in the morning for Bryce National Monument on a brief honeymoon. After they had checked into their room, Iris raised a question. Were they to lounge on the king-size bed for a while and watch wide-screen cable TV, or were they to get down immediately to the business of giving a legitimate consummation to their union?

“I wouldn’t mind if we made love first,” Bode said, having had the legitimate consummation of their marriage on his mind all day long.

He showered first and put on new pajamas. Iris undressed and put on a robe while he was in the shower. Bode emerged from the shower and sat on the side of the bed. Iris stood beside him, displaying the delicate lingerie she intended to wear when she returned from the bathroom. He untied her robe and pulled it open. She was nude beneath the robe—small breasts, trim thighs, a slim waist showing a slight bulge.

“You are beautiful,” he said.

He stood and they embraced. Shortly, one thing having led to another, they got onto the bed and made love.

“Well,” she said, “we’ve taken care of that little business.”

“I wouldn’t mind if we did it again after you’ve had your shower,” Bode said. She looked at him askance. “If you’ve got the energy. . .,” she said.

As it turned out, he did.

Much later, after they had gone to bed for the night, he failed to fall asleep quickly. He couldn't get his mind off Avery's earnest reminder that, despite being married to Iris for a mortal lifetime, he could still qualify for spending eternity in the presence of Heavenly Father and Jesus in the Celestial Kingdom. He had heard that righteous persons who were not married for time and eternity but who dwelled in the presence of the Father and the Son were considered ministering angels. He had heard that these ministering angels from the Celestial Kingdom could visit the lesser kingdoms. A ministering angel—that was exactly what Bode would be. As such he would request leave of absence to visit Iris in the Terrestrial Kingdom. He would request that it be an extended leave of absence. He would be there to comfort and sustain Iris and also to comfort and sustain any of their children who had chosen to go the Baptist way. It was a happy thought.

After about half an hour, Bode began to relax, soothed by the soft sounds of Iris's sleep. He slowly slid a hand toward her till it barely touched her arm. He left it there, comforted by her tactile presence.

Reasonably Good Tidings of Greater-than-Average Joy

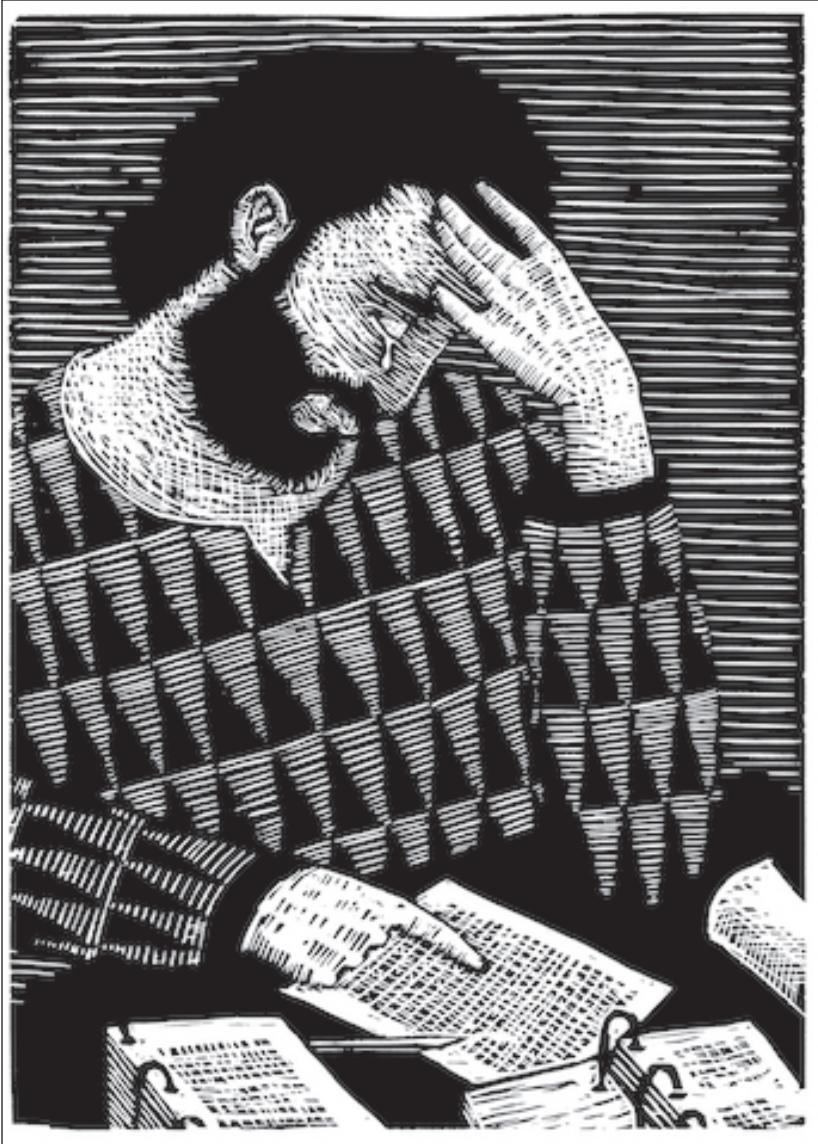
Grant Hardy, ed. *The Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ, Maxwell Institute Study Edition*. Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2018. Illustrated by Brian Kershnik. 600 pp. Paperback: \$32.18. Kindle: \$27.99. ISBN: 978-1944394653.

Reviewed by Michael Austin

For serious readers of scripture, the publication of a major study edition is cause for great rejoicing. The *HarperCollins Study Bible* and the major Oxford Study Bibles (the *Jewish Study Bible*, the *Catholic Study Bible*, and the REB-based *Oxford Study Bible*) are classics of scholarly editing with dozens of contributors and hundreds of features that facilitate deep engagement with the text. And Harper's recent *Study Qur'an* manages to squeeze 1300 years of Islamic commentary into 2000 pages at a ratio of about four inches of footnotes to every inch of text.

The Maxwell Institute's Study Edition of the Book of Mormon—edited by Grant Hardy and jointly published by Deseret Books and the BYU Religious Studies Center—is not quite as extensive or groundbreaking as these other volumes. It contains only a modest scholarly apparatus, and it borrows much of its textual organization from Hardy's earlier *Reader's Edition of the Book of Mormon* published by the University of Illinois Press in 2005. But it is still a cause for moderate-to-pretty-good rejoicing. It is an excellent resource for serious gospel study and a surprisingly reader-friendly presentation of the text of the Book of Mormon.

The Maxwell Study Edition is a well-designed and attractive book, beginning with the artwork on the cover and placed throughout the text. Latter-day Saint artist Brian Kershnik created nineteen original woodcut



Sad scholar © Brian Kershnik, 2018. Used with permission.

images to accompany the *Study Edition*. These images are both serious and beautiful, and they bring a dignity to the work that immediately sets it apart from other editions. For those of us raised on the Arnold Friberg's illustrations—with their Arnold Schwarzenegger Nephites and Jay Silverheels Lamanites—Kershisnik's woodcuts do the work of redemption. They allow us to associate our sacred text with images as graceful and thoughtful as the words that they illustrate.

But design considerations for a book like this go well beyond the aesthetic pleasures of good artwork. Layout and typeface convey information, and the goal of a study edition is to present as much information as possible without overwhelming or confusing the reader. A badly designed study edition will footnote everything and direct readers to the bottom of the page—or, worse, to the end of the book—for commentary and additional explanation. A well-designed book finds ways to incorporate this information seamlessly into the text with different layouts, typefaces, and inline images—which is precisely what Hardy and the Maxwell Institute designers have done with this book.

Here are the major ways that the text has been designed to enhance the reading experience and maximize the information conveyed on each page. Design elements marked with an asterisk represent features also available in Hardy's 2005 *Readers Edition*:

* The text is printed in logical paragraphs with verse numbers in superscript. This allows readers to encounter the text as a coherent narrative, much as the readers of the first editions of the Book of Mormon encountered it. Unlike the pre-1879 editions, though, the paragraphs are not 2–3-page monstrosities with only an occasional punctuation mark to let the reader catch a breath. Hardy has done the significant editorial work of crafting logical paragraphs that divide the text into manageable chunks, making the reading experience more coherent than the standard edition with 1–2 sentence verses throughout, and much less frustrating than the various first-edition facsimiles with the paragraphs that E.B. Grandin created in 1830.

- * The text is broken into several levels of headings independent of the standard chapter-and-verse organization. Chapter numbers are included in the left margin, but each book is further organized and divided using three heading levels, each with its own distinct typeface. So, for example, the text from Alma 9–14 is grouped under the large heading: “Alma and Amulek’s Preaching at Ammonihah” (265). This section is further divided into sections such as “Alma’s Sermon at Ammonihah” (265) “Amulek’s Sermon at Ammonihah” (268), and “Alma’s Answer to Antionah” (276). And these sub-sections are further divided into 3–4 paragraph scenes with helpful, interpretive titles like “Amulek’s words are misconstrued” (270), “A Digression on the Nephite Legal and Monetary System (271), and “Zeezrom Questions Amulek” (272). These heading levels are enormously helpful, as they provide a series of constant reference points for understanding the way that the text is organized and for keeping the larger story in mind while reading the specific details and doctrinal arguments.
- Each page is oriented to both the standard chapters and verses and to the original chapter numbers in the 1830 edition. Before Orson Pratt created the now-standard chapters and verses of the Book of Mormon in 1879, the text had no verses and far fewer chapters than it has today. In a feature not available in the 2005 *Reader’s Edition*, the *Study Edition* marks the beginning of the original chapters with brackets and Roman numerals and the beginning of modern chapters with much larger bold text. Both kinds of chapter information are included on the top of each page, allowing readers to orient themselves quickly and easily to any edition of the text.
- * Characters with the same name are identified in section headings by subscript numbers. Hardy identifies characters with the same name with subscript number indicating which character he is referring to. Thus, all headings involving Moroni₁ refer to the military leader, while headings with Moroni₂ are talking about the guy who hid the plates and wrote the final book.
- Lengthy passages based on the King James Version of the Bible include boldface text to indicate significant departures from the source. In every substantial quotation from the KJV—the Isaiah passages in 2 Nephi

and the Sermon on the Mount chapters in 3 Nephi, but also in shorter quotations and paraphrases of biblical passages—Hardy highlights what is different in the Book of Mormon, allowing readers to easily compare the different versions. In other places, the *Study Edition* uses boldface to show where brief passages of the King James Bible are incorporated into the text of the Book of Mormon. This may be the design element with the most potential to confuse readers, as a boldface passage of text may, depending on the context, mean that the words in bold either are exactly the same, or are substantially different, than the words of the King James Bible.

- Textual variants are given in the footnotes. Another unique feature of the *Study Edition* is the inclusion of textual variations from the surviving original manuscript (O) and the Printer’s Manuscript (P). Hardy has based these notes on Royal Skousen’s detailed textual analyses of both versions, and he also includes a number of the textual emendations that Skousen proposes in the six-volume *Analysis of Textual Variations* (2017), each of which “almost certainly corrects a mistake in the earliest manuscripts” (xix). Textual variants combine with occasional cross references and explanatory glosses to create a healthy, but by no means overwhelming body of footnotes to the main text.

- * Poetic passages are rendered as poetry. As he does in the *Reader’s Edition*, Hardy renders some passages of the Book of Mormon as poetry. While this is a standard feature of most modern translations of the Bible, it is much more difficult to do with the Book of Mormon, as we do not have access to the original text, nor do we understand what might have constituted poetry in Reformed Egyptian. As Hardy explains in the back matter, though, he has made editorial decisions based on an understanding of the way that Hebrew poetry works. “When I encountered passages that exhibited heightened emotion, repetition, and parallel phrases that were both grammatically uncomplicated and relatively short,” he writes, “I set them into poetic lines” (629). Though there is no way to know if these editorial decisions reflect the intention of the original authors, they do change the way that we read the text—and they usually change it for the better.



Witness © Brian Kershnik, 2018. Used with permission.

All told, I can find little fault with the way that the *Study Edition* has been shaped to provide a satisfying reading experience with as much information as possible on every page. This is one of the primary functions of any study edition, and this one does it well, perhaps even perfectly.

I cannot give quite the same endorsement for the second standard feature of study editions, which is to provide a rich selection of contextualizing essays and ancillary materials to enhance serious study. The most useful editions employ multiple contributors to synthesize large bodies of scholarship on the origins and composition of different parts of the text, the history of its reception, the way that it interacts with important social issues, its role in contemporary worship, and things like that.

In a Book of Mormon study edition, one might reasonably expect to see contextualizing essays on such topics as the historical connections between Lamanites and American Indians, connections between The Book of Mormon and the Bible, the literary aspects of different parts of the text, the role that it played in American history, the way that it is used in the Community of Christ, the FLDS, and other branches of Mormonism other than The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and the various arguments for both an ancient and a nineteenth-century understanding of its origins.

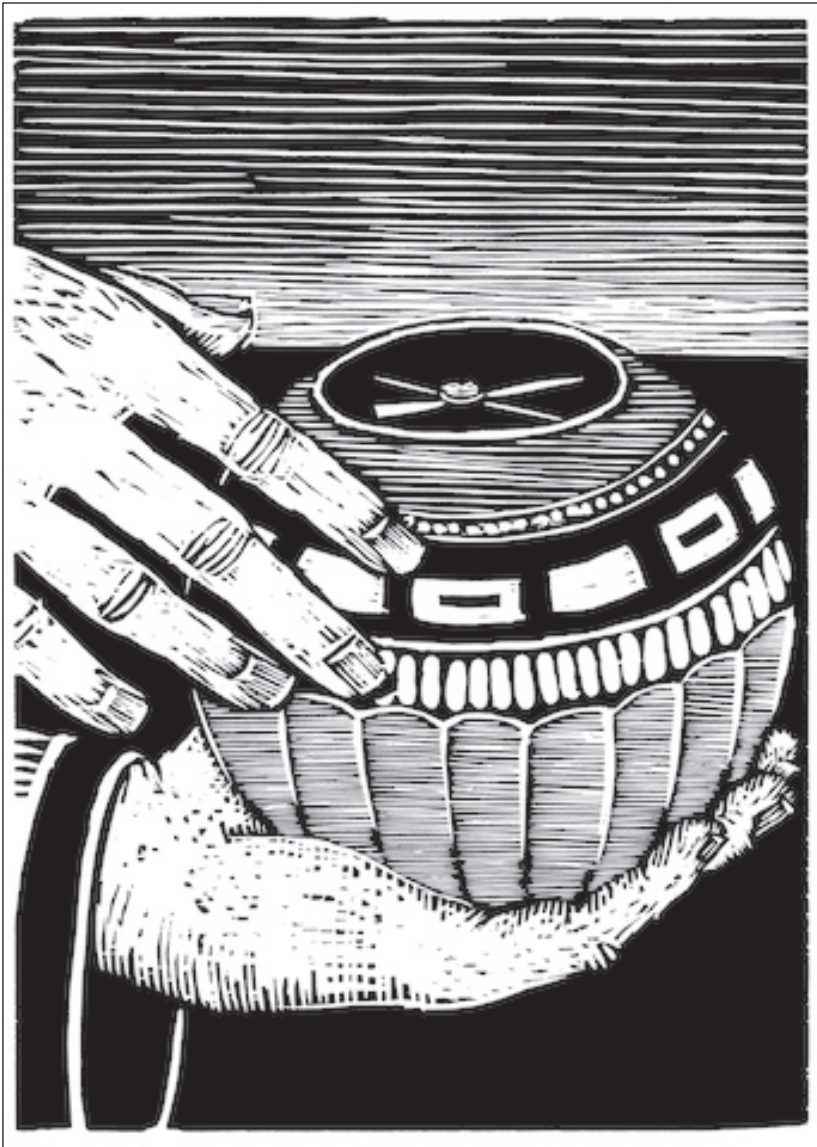
Almost none of this appears in the Maxwell Institute edition. The front matter is limited to official statements by Joseph Smith and his contemporaries about the divine origins of the Book of Mormon, and the back matter includes the sorts of maps, charts, and timelines found in seminary and institute manuals—along with more statements by Joseph Smith’s contemporaries, an essay on chiasmus and parallel structure, and one four-page essay addressing (and conclusively resolving) possible historical anachronisms, DNA evidence, nineteenth-century language, and other potential difficulties with the Book of Mormon’s text. Even the bibliographies and suggestions for further reading have been carefully curated to include only official Church sources and scholarship that supports the Church’s conclusions.

Nothing about this should surprise anyone. The *Study Edition* comes with the triple imprimatur of The Neil A. Maxwell Institute, Deseret Book, and the Religious Studies Center at Brigham Young University. It is an official publication of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and this officialness is at once its greatest strength and its greatest weakness.

We cannot ignore the importance of having an official edition that is this good. One always felt a bit naughty bringing something like the 2005 *Reader's Edition* to church. It was published by a secular university press. It used the 1920 public domain version of the text rather than the official 1981 version copyrighted by the Church. And it generally fell into the category of “unapproved materials” for gospel study by orthodox Latter-day Saints. By combining with a serious and thoughtful scholar like Grant Hardy, the Church has produced and authorized a version of its signature scripture that is orders of magnitude more helpful, and more scholarly, than anything it has produced before.

But officialness comes at a cost. Official books must tell official stories, which means that honest discussions of controversies and pressure points—no matter how important they may be to the study and interpretation of the text—cannot become part of the apparatus. But one must be fair: nothing in this book or its marketing pretends otherwise. The Maxwell Institute’s *Study Edition of the Book of Mormon* presents itself—and has been presented by its makers—as a resource that faithful members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints can use to enhance their testimony of Book of Mormon. And it performs this task admirably, gracefully, and with scholarly and religious integrity. And this is more than enough reason to celebrate its publication.





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Understudies for Angels

Megan Sanborn Jones. *Contemporary Mormon Pageantry: Seeking After the Dead*. Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan Press, 2018. 336 pp. Hardcover: \$77.74. Kindle: \$64.95. ISBN: 978-0472130979.

Reviewed by Michael Hicks

The cover photo startles us into the book's theme: two tribes, ghosts and mortals, staring off in the same direction. Beyond that cover we take a trek through Mormonism's pageantry—not the pageantry of temple rituals or General Conferences or Tabernacle Choir spectaculars, but the outdoor reenactment of events both real and mythic in the faith's ancient history or old-timey past. A pageant, Jones shows us, is a surrogate reincarnation. It is neither fiction nor fantasy, however contrived or stagey, but is a eulogy, headstone, and resurrection all at once.

Among the book's several roles, it acts as a compendium of four recent long-running pageants: the Hill Cumorah, Manti, Nauvoo, and Mesa. The locales are all Church-related sites, though suitably removed from Salt Lake City. Their real estate shapes the analysis, since the locale of a pageant *is* the stage. And that stage is inviolate. The pageant can't go on tour. For Jones, the reenactment of events in their primal environs links present to the past in profound ways, even allowing the ghosts of original characters to mingle with their proxy casts. This sociology suits Mormonism well: dead men delivered its founding book, transmitted its priesthood from beyond the grave, and then assigned tasks—including the dead men's own redemption—from the other side of the supernatural "veil." Mormonism is not just a religion, but also an elaborate ghost story.

The title has two taxonomic grey areas for me. First: "contemporary"—contemporary with what? How old makes the cut? More important, what do we mean by "pageant"? Jones limits her observations

to most outdoor church-sponsored events called “pageants” functioning annually at the time she wrote. Indoor pageants (like *It Came to Pass*, which operated for decades near the Oakland Temple), non-continuous commemorative pageants (like *Message of the Ages*, mounted for the successive centennials of the church’s founding and of its entry into the Salt Lake Valley), shorter-lived ones (like *People of the Book* in Southern California and Utah, 1967–1969), and even the portable, multiple-site pageants *Zion* (created and published by the Church for its 1980 sesqui-centennial) and *Savior of the World* (currently promoted on the Church’s website), all fail to make it even into the back story of this book. That keeps Jones’s focus tidy and clean. Which is good. But the omissions feel a bit like a flat earth taking the place of a round one.

Jones provides fairly lush detail about her four works’ scripting, casting, music, lighting, choreography, and such, not in the form of lists but as ripples in the ably flowing prose. The construction of that prose, mind you, is cinematic. Although the book has five chapters and an epilogue, it often crosscuts among topics, from the naming of the Hill Cumorah itself, to the pursuit of virtue in religious media, to temples as death-redemption, and so forth. Meanwhile, if her topics roam confidently through Mormonism’s intellectual landscape, so do her sources, from theoretical to anecdotal. The range of scholarship reveals a mind at once single-minded yet vividly curious. The verbiage floats easily from theoretical to practical and from jargon to vernacular with little shift in tone.

One of the duties of a reviewer, of course, is to utter his or her obligatory disappointments. Other than the one about putative pageants that fly under Jones’s radar, I have two slight misgivings. First, the bibliography lacks some classic works and authors in the realm of Mormon theater. The strangest omission is that of George Pyper, who virtually ran the cultural life of the Church in the early twentieth century, and whose *Romance of an Old Playhouse* might have lent some savory ingredients to Jones’s recipe. Second, I dislike those telegraphing moments that typify

academic prose: “In what follows, I will do [x] and then [y]”—followed, of course, by x and y. That construction suits dissertations, I suppose, but feels stale in books. At least ones that make my mind salivate.

With those reservations out of the way, let me make clear: Jones is sharp-minded, dogged, and fair. Those three traits make hers the standard treatment that will be paralleled and troped but never superseded. Its ruminations on death-theology-via-pageantry make it complete a trilogy on my shelves alongside Douglas Davies’s *The Mormon Culture of Salvation* and Samuel Brown’s *In Heaven As It Is on Earth*.

In the architecture of Mormon scholarship, irony is often the capstone. Here, that irony is the Church’s wholesale cancellation of pageants on the heels of this book’s publication. Of Jones’s four pageants, only Nauvoo escaped the axe. Since her book barely preceded the edict, she will have to wait for another edition to analyze its cause and effect. Till then, this book survives as an elegant relic of a now even ghostlier art.



The Maidservant’s Witness

Mette Harrison. *The Book of Abish*. Salt Lake City: By Common Consent Press, 2019. 190 pp. Paperback: \$9.95. ISBN: 978-1948218085.

Reviewed by Luisa Perkins

Every writer, whether prophetic or not, questions some things and assumes others. One of the attractions of a retelling is the way it highlights subjectivity—something we tend to ignore as readers of history, myth, or scripture. In Mette Harrison’s *The Book of Abish*, as with any retelling, we encounter subjectivity not only of character, but of author.

In Alma 19, we get Abish's experience at least third hand. Ammon presumably told the story to Alma the Younger, who then recorded it. Mormon's relative silence in this section of Alma possibly indicates a lighter editorial hand, though certainty in that regard is difficult—for this non-scholar, at least. But did Ammon speak to Abish directly after the miraculous fact, or did he get his information about her from her employer, the queen? We likely won't know anytime soon.

In any case, the details of the "original" account are sparse, but intriguing. The Lamanite King Lamoni, after arising from a three-day coma in which "the dark veil of unbelief was being cast away from his mind" (verse 6), testifies of his Redeemer and is again "overpowered by the Spirit" (verse 13) to the point of unconsciousness. Lamoni's wife along with Ammon and all the servants in the vicinity soon follow suit—except for Abish, who has been a secret convert for many years. She runs from house to house to tell people what has happened, hoping "it would cause them to believe in the power of God (verse 17)."

However, once everyone arrives on the scene, they don't react the way Abish initially had planned. Desperately trying to curb the Lamanites' rising anger, she takes the queen's hand "that perhaps she might raise her" (verse 29). After praising Jesus, the queen raises up her husband (Ammon apparently arises on his own), who then preaches the gospel to his people. Exit Abish, like Samuel, never again to be encountered by Nephite or Latter-day audiences.

In *The Book of Abish*, Harrison plunges into Alma's significant narrative gaps with energy and imagination, inventing a cast refreshingly rich in female characters. Abish is the youngest of seven sisters, and her mother's enthralling postpartum experiences begin the narrative.

Abish's young life is a riches-to-rags story (and indeed, Harrison cites Frances Hodgson Burnett's *A Little Princess* as a significant influence). Abish's wealthy father dies and the family business is stolen by a greedy partner. Once the family is evicted from their house, the sisters scramble to survive. Some marry with varying degrees of success; one

disappears entirely; and another becomes a prostitute and then commits suicide out of shame and despair. Abish is left to care for and support her grieving and increasingly addled mother as best she can. She eventually gets married and takes a job at the king's house, where she later encounters Ammon, the enigmatic Nephite.

In building Abish's world, Harrison sketches a host of Lamanite gods, with her characters generally selecting one or another as a favorite. In the book's prologue, Abish's mother Timah invokes "the Great One," the absentee father of all other gods, to protect her newborn baby from her husband's wrath at having yet another girl. Curiously, Harrison chooses not to connect "the Great One" to the Nephite "One True God," with whom Abish's father Haman and Abish herself later converse, and no other Lamanite seems to patronize the Great One once the main story begins.

Though Harrison pleasingly rounds out the Lamanite social structure, the book is devoid of much physical setting. I imagine this is due to Harrison's reluctance to side with any of the various Book of Mormon geography factions. Guatemala or Great Lakes? Reticence sidesteps the controversy, but some vividness and clarity is lost as a result. Fabrics, on the other hand, are described in great detail, perhaps alluding to the "fine-twined linen" mentioned throughout the Book of Mormon.

Harrison's focus on Abish as a woman of destiny has clear echoes of Queen Esther. However, though Abish has intimate contact with deity through thoughts and impressions, the visionary experiences remain with men—her father and much later, her husband. A traditional reading of Alma 19:16—"she having been converted unto the Lord for many years, on account of a remarkable vision of her father"—assigns the converting vision to Abish's father. Though "of her father" *can* indicate possession, the verse doesn't have to be read that way. As first pointed out to me in an essay by Kevin and Shauna Christensen, it's just as valid to read the verse as Abish herself having had a vision of her father.

In Alma's account, Abish deliberately takes the queen by the hand to raise her. The queen, in turn, similarly raises her husband. Though

the story takes place more than a hundred years before Christ's ministry, Mormon as editor may have highlighted Abish's physical actions to prefigure the healing and restoring miracles of the resurrected Lord and his Nephite Twelve and hint at intriguing priesthood/temple connections. Harrison's choice to have Abish merely shake the queen awake detracted from the miraculous nature of the story and the "woman of destiny" theme.

Harrison's first book published by BCC Press, *The Book of Laman*, sports a clever cover, its design linking it to the ubiquitous paperback version of the Book of Mormon and hinting at its alternate history plot. BCC's designers, evidently wanting to connect *The Book of Abish* to its earlier companion, use the same iconic typeface and employ the genius tagline "Another Book by Mette Harrison." But instead of navy faux leather, the background is what looks like shocking pink stucco with a few palm fronds waving in front, reminiscent of the kind of loud Hawaiian shirt worn by white men of a certain age. Seeing the pink cover, my ten-year-old asked, "Is that a girl book?" Though gender neutrality shouldn't have to default to more subdued, masculine aesthetics, I did wonder about BCC's intended audience.

These quibbles aside, Harrison should be heartily applauded. *The Book of Abish* is worth reading for more than entertainment value or the thought and conversation Harrison's choices provoke. More than fifty years ago, Hélène Cixous exhorted women to write stories about women, "seizing the occasion to speak, hence her shattering entry into history, which has always been based on her suppression." In her afterword, Harrison explains she has done just that, "to prioritize a female story and not just a male story because I believe that even if the scriptures don't tell that part of the story, it is there." I hope Harrison and BCC have plans for *The Book of Sariah* and *The Book of Isabel*. I, for one, would read them just as happily as I read Harrison's *Abish*.



Royden Card
Hartnet Wilderness

ON MY ART

Royden Card

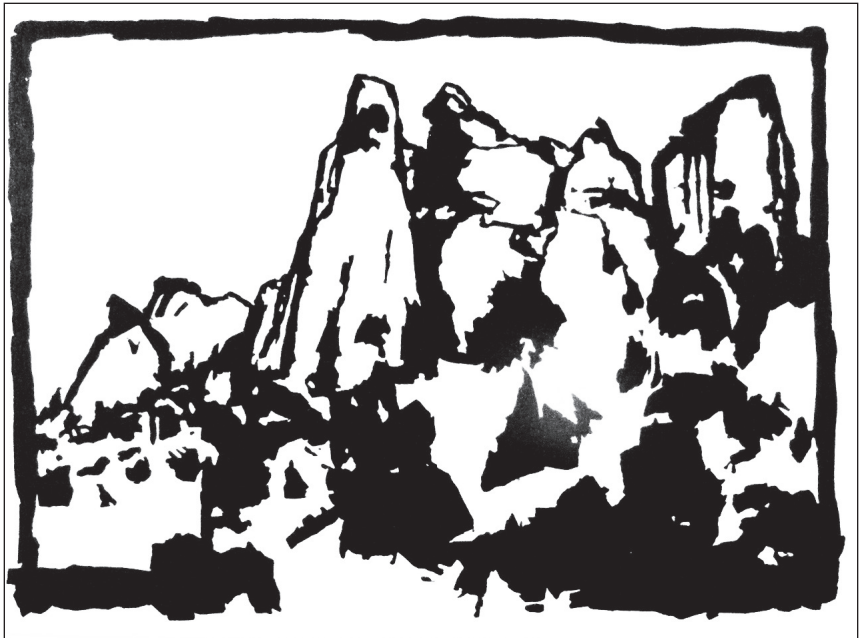
1952. I was born in Canada and raised in Utah. Received a BFA and MFA from BYU and taught printmaking there for sixteen years.

Drawing and then painting desert landscape has been my primary focus for over fifty years. You do the work, learn, teach, keep painting, maybe win and award or two (or not), but you keep on painting. Lately, I seek out those views which are overlooked; not the usual scenic turn-out icons. Though I love the slick-rock and towering red cliffs, I think I love the multiplicity of greys, siennas, pale ochres, the blue greens of Morrison hills, purples and faded umbers of the badlands even more. They seem to be what I tend to paint these past years. Love of the desert, refuge and contemplation . . . and painting. It is an ongoing search for beauty and the desire to paint something “worthy” . . .

The scent of sage of cliff rose blooms.
Canyon wren's song—coyote's call.
An amber sunset setting rice grass plumes ablaze
and sandstone walls aglow.
The flow of cottonwoods, golden
along the stream—leaves shimmering, a gleam.
All these for refuge—for sanctuary.
All that is holy does compass these also
into that great whole.



Royden Card
Zion Walls



Royden Card
Stone Towers

WHAT SHALL WE SEE?

Samuel Morris Brown

I'm still haunted by a woman who died in our intensive care unit a decade ago. She was eighteen weeks pregnant and had a kidney infection serious enough that her lungs failed. She quickly ended up on maximal life support, barely surviving from day to day. We diagnosed the Acute Respiratory Distress Syndrome. That's by far the most common and expected scenario for someone whose lungs stop working during a serious infection, and pregnant women's lungs are notoriously susceptible to this problem. We treated her with everything we could, but she would not improve. In desperation, we decided to pretend that we didn't know what we thought we knew. What if, we asked, we had made ourselves blind to the truth about her condition?

Allowing ourselves new eyes, we realized that a subtle shadow on a heart ultrasound was not what it seemed to be. Her problem was that bacteria had migrated from her kidney to a slightly damaged heart valve. By interfering with the valve, the infection caused fluid to build up in the lungs. As cruel fate had it in this case, her heart couldn't be fixed: she died three days later. Even though our early blindness didn't determine her terrible outcome, I've never forgotten the moment I realized that we'd been looking intently but not seeing.

This lesson I learned at her bedside has had a strong influence on my religious life. It's not just the sacred sadness I experience when a person dies, although her death has stayed with me too. It's this fact that we had failed to see what mattered most. I've realized since then that we do this all the time—we think we see everything, but we're in fact profoundly blind.

Often what we *can't* see is more important than what we can. Today I want to consider with you two kinds of blindness, one new and one very old.

The new strain of blindness is something we've inherited from many generations of reformers in the West. They were trying to repair problems

This sermon was delivered at the Bonneville Stake Conference on Dec. 8, 2018.

they saw in government, religion, science, and medicine, and they ended up exercising the nuclear option. Intending to limit the power of the Catholic Church, they created a world that struggled to understand religion itself. In the battle against human tyrannies, God and the possibility of life beyond the earthly became collateral damage, casualties in a bloody culture war.

But, of course, God is not dead and earth life is not all there is. It's just that many in the world now think so.

This blindness has become remarkably common. I received a playful postcard from a friend recently. It said, "Dear Religion, Pics or it didn't happen. Love, Science." I enjoyed the snarky card for two reasons. First, it's creative and at least a little funny. Second, it perfectly exemplifies this new blindness. It says that if we cannot hold something in our hands, then it doesn't exist. If we can't take a photograph of something, it's not real. This is the key assumption of a philosophy that masquerades as science and dominates much of our modern culture. This core belief—that what we can't hold in our hands doesn't exist—is both scientifically unmotivated and ultimately meaningless. Think for a moment about love, loyalty, courage, hope, or joy and you will know in an instant how much that we cannot hold in our hands in fact defines the very length and breadth of the world that really matters.

The modern world wants us to believe that there are only neutrons and electrons, molecules and states of matter, skin and bones. We are told to accept the naïve claim that the world is simply a random conglomeration of atoms and humans are just talking stardust. It's as if we are sailors in the merchant marine told that nothing exists beneath the surface of the sea. The ocean is just a wet road. We risk believing that the tip is the entire iceberg. But we people of faith know better than that. We allow ourselves to see. We know that we live and breathe and have our beings within a realm of divine power. The world positively crackles with that power. We just have to be willing to open our eyes.

I know from experience what it's like to open my eyes. By the time I was 18 years old, I'd spent about a decade viewing myself as a clear-sighted, atheist intellectual. When I abandoned atheism three decades ago, I realized that I could choose to see God in and through the world. I just had to stop closing my eyes. And once I allowed that possibility, it was as if I could

suddenly see the life under the ocean's surface—the fish and whales and plants and mountains and trenches. What had once been the shadowy and indistinct undulations of the sea surface now disclosed an overwhelming glory. The fact that our bodies are in fact made of star dust doesn't mean there's no more to us than those ancient physical particles.

I realize now that I'd received the great revelation of the majesty of God that courses through the entire world. The world is vaster and more beautiful than we moderns let on. It's one of the great delusions of our age, this idea that everything is precisely as it seems. That the world is only skin deep. Faith, under the tutoring of scripture, prayer, and church service, opens up the rich, voluptuous, spiritual world to our view. It is a stunning and humbling vision.

I'm aware that what I'm saying is the opposite of received wisdom in the world today. Critics like to say that we religious folk are like horses with blinders on, seeing only a fraction of our natural field of vision. We should admit that there are things we believers don't do well, some sins to which we are more prone. That's true enough, and we must repent of those sins, but it's not the central point. We can see the world in its God-drenched glory.

Allowing this revelation to change our minds can bring both healing respite and new challenges. We're not trying to see clearly just so that we can feel happier or smarter or more fulfilled. We're trying to see clearly because God calls us into actual communion. We are called to see God and, having seen God, to witness with our heavenly parents a world full of divine glory.

Enoch's sacred vision in Moses 6 points to the next blindness that worries me. This one's as old as humanity. Standing with God, Enoch sees a vision of all human history. Much as I think Christ must have done at Gethsemane, Enoch becomes aware of the divine glory of every single human being. His vision is sacred in part because it is unusual. Blindness to the divine in others is perhaps the oldest blindness of all.

It's easier to see ourselves and our needs than to witness the vast grandeur of the people who surround us. Our mortal selfishness makes it simpler for cultural assumptions about the nature of the world to confuse us.

In my personal and professional lives, much changed when a health crisis struck our family six years ago. In tearfully prolonged moments of soul-deep pain, I realized that I had been blind to my wife and children. I'd been blinded

by my work, my love of excellence and accomplishment. I'd seen them as characters in my life story rather than divine beings in their own right. As the work of repentance reshaped my soul, I realized that I'd also been blind to my patients and their families. I'd seen them as types, shadows, surfaces, problems to be solved rather than beings to encounter. I'd been satisfied with the surface of people, afraid, in retrospect, of their divinity.

There's a quote from C.S. Lewis that's so popular it's become a bit cliché. But it's popular because it is true and beautiful and speaks to the essence of things. He said, "It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship. . . . There are no ordinary people; you have never talked to a mere mortal."

As Latter-day Saints, we believe that doctrine even more than Lewis did. We are perhaps uniquely called to see the divine in others. In that spirit, I often ask myself now "What would Jesus See?" I confess that I don't always know what Jesus would do in a given situation, but I've got an increasingly clear sense of what he would see. He sees the divine grace scintillating inside us; he sees the incomprehensible beauty that flows from every human being. I do well to see with Christ that beauty.

My sisters and brothers, we and the world we inhabit throb with divine power. The world beams and hums. If we will open our eyes, we will realize that the scintillating majesty of the Northern lights is always flickering in the souls of the people we encounter and in the very soul of the world. But we must agree to look. We must be willing to see. As we retrain our vision, the solutions to the problems of heaven and earth will be various and wide-ranging. We will all have roles to play in the grand drama. But first we must see.

God beckons us to dance, with our whole bodies and souls. Our heavenly parents call us to participate with them in the eternal rhythms that transfigure our eternal souls through the continuous mortal work of faith. Let us see our heavenly parents; let us see each other with the eyes of faith. May we heed their call to the dance of life with eyes wide open is my prayer, in the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.

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