> rather than the emptiness of the world? What preaching ought we today to pursue—if, that is, we still have the courage to hope to scandalize our contemporaries by insisting that the messianic remains relevant? And then, what wilderness should we be prepared to flee to? (Vol. 2, p. 70)

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William L. Davis. *Visions in a Seer Stone: Joseph Smith and the Making of the Book of Mormon*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020.

Reviewed by Grant Shreve

How did the Book of Mormon happen?

This is a question no reader of the book with even a modicum of appreciation for its monumentality can help but ask. Its sheer length (over five hundred dense manuscript pages), plus the velocity of its composition (the bulk of it was transcribed in about three months), plus its unconventional compositional method (dictated by Joseph Smith to a small cadre of rotating scribes), plus its staggering narrative complexity (centuries of history of an ancient people relayed by multiple narrators in both first and third person through a vast array of embedded texts) distinguish the Book of Mormon from virtually every other major narrative work of the nineteenth century.

Answers, of course, abound.

Orthodox accounts have cleaved to Smith's own claim that the book is an authentic collection of ancient texts he translated with the aid of divine instruments, perhaps with some measure of stylistic freedom. Skeptical explanations, meanwhile, have often relied on dubious

conspiracy theories contending that Smith purloined a fiction written by someone else (the aspiring early American novelist Solomon Spalding being the favored candidate), which he subsequently bowdlerized and appropriated as his new scripture.

Then there are what we might call the naturalistic accounts, which broadly accept the orthodox sequence of events of composition but credit Smith with full creative authority. In these, the Book of Mormon stands as the product of Smith's mind and his alone. Some, like the Restoration minister Alexander Campbell, had no doubts about the work's origins but little sympathy or appreciation for it. One of the book's first reviewers, Campbell wrote: "There never was a book more evidently written by one set of fingers, nor more certainly conceived in one cranium since the first book appeared in human language, than this book."[1]

Campbell took a dim view of the Book of Mormon's quality, as have many others over the past 193 years. Recently, careful readers have found far more to appreciate in the book. Beginning with Grant Hardy's *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader's Guide* in 2010, there has been a renaissance in Book of Mormon studies. Thanks to the work of scholars like Jared Hickman, Elizabeth Fenton, and many others, books, articles, conferences, and courses on the Book of Mormon have begun proliferating at universities and in fields—like English—where the book has, historically, been dutifully ignored. It is now harder than ever to deny that the Book of Mormon stands as a work of narratological significance regardless of whether a reader accepts it as scripture.

Much of this work has succeeded, however, by erecting a boundary between the book itself and the context of its creation. This has been enabling insofar as it has allowed scholars to study the Book of Mormon without having to re-litigate debates over its origins. Yet, as R. John Williams writes, one of the defining characteristics of the Book of Mormon

1. Alexander Campbell, "Delusions: An Analysis of the Book of Mormon," *Millennial Harbinger* 2 (February 1831): 13.

is its "intransigent refusal to let us stay 'inside' the text."[2] One can only cordon off the *how* and the *who* of the book for so long.

Enter William L. Davis's recent book, *Visions in a Seer Stone: Joseph Smith and the Making of the Book of Mormon*. Davis holds a PhD in Theater and Performance Studies and approaches the endemic problem of the Book of Mormon's creation through this novel disciplinary lens. Indeed, the first stake he puts in the ground is that the book's compositional process ought not to be thought of, first and foremost, as a scene of *writing* but of *performance*. The Book of Mormon, he writes, is "a script, or a transcript, of Smith's performative process—the artifact of a grander multifaceted oratorical effort" (p. 3). No telling of the Book of Mormon origin story is complete without mention of the seer stone, the hat, the barrier between orator and scribe, and the rhythms of the dictation. What Davis does, however, is make the performance itself integral to the style and shape of the book. In his hands, this foundational scene of creation comes thrillingly alive as a vital factor in the making of the Book of Mormon.

As Davis takes care to explain, this approach to understanding the Book of Mormon is not intended to foreclose orthodox accounts of the book's creation. Rather, it offers "a framework for both believers and nonbelievers to account for the production of the Book of Mormon, while also accommodating and carefully reflecting on the textual and historical evidence" (p. 160). Davis clearly hopes for a broad spectrum of readers to profit from the case that *Visions in a Seer Stone* makes.

Through seven meticulously argued chapters (along with a brief introduction and epilogue), Davis outlines a case for how Smith could have feasibly dictated the entirety of the Book of Mormon. The heart of the claim is this: Smith's exposure to techniques of extemporaneous and semi-extemporaneous oratory common in the Connecticut River Valley and Burned-Over District in the early decades of the nineteenth-century equipped him with the performative and rhetorical tools

2. R. John Williams, "Plates and Paratext," in *Americanist Approaches to* The Book of Mormon, ed. Elizabeth Fenton and Jared Hickman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 71.

that—when paired with his imagination and his receptivity to revelatory experiences—enabled a process of extended narrative dictation capable of producing the Book of Mormon. The first four chapters of Davis' book methodically build this contextual scaffolding, setting the stage for the discussion of the Book of Mormon and its production in the latter half of the book.

Chapter 1, "Seer Stones and Western Esotericism," considers Smith's use of seer stones to activate his prophetic voice, and why that practice would have been legible to his family and neighbors. Davis details the esoteric traditions, rituals, and beliefs that circulated alongside mainstream Protestantism in nineteenth-century western New York. For families like the Smiths, the "complex entanglement of religious and mystical ideologies became . . . [a] way of life, constructing a cultural and perceptual lens through which they would view and interpret the world" (p. 12). The narrative here is a familiar one, but Davis rehearses it ably and efficiently.

The next two chapters veer away from esotericism toward specific elements of composition and oratory characteristic of Protestant sermonizing in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Both center on "laying down heads," or the practice of announcing key topics at the outset of a discourse that form a skeletal outline. Laying down heads is the cornerstone of Davis's argument, informing practically every other claim. In these chapters, he demonstrates just how ubiquitous laying down heads was during the period, in everything from composition guides to personal narratives to sermons. The sheer volume of sources that Davis cites is impressive, as well as the careful work he does to connect these sources to Smith's family and upbringing. To illustrate Smith's direct familiarity with this practice, Davis introduces two texts that Smith dictated—his unfinished 1832 history of the Church and notes taken on his 1843 sermon on the Prodigal Son—both of which incorporate explicit announcements of key topics.

In chapter 4, Davis adds another dimension to his discussion of laying down heads by differentiating between explicit and concealed heads. Framing the argument is Smith's 1844 King Follett Sermon, one

of the final public addresses Smith delivered before he was assassinated. Although the sermon is remembered today for its theological radicalism, Davis's interest is in its form. Long and digressive, the sermon stands apart from other texts Davis cites because Smith does not "lay down heads" at the beginning of the performance. Yet, Davis contends, Smith almost certainly had a structure in mind that he could depart from and return to as his imagination desired. The topics included in this structure were concealed heads.

In these early chapters, Davis demonstrates the pervasiveness of "laying down heads" as a pillar of semi-extemporaneous preaching in Smith's youth. Although he has assembled an impressive array of sources, Davis takes care throughout to keep the argument centered on Smith by frequently returning to the formal and informal avenues through which Smith could have absorbed and honed these techniques, from composition books that detailed the practice to extensive exposure to revival preachers to his participation in debate societies to the Methodist exhortation classes he likely attended to his well-documented fondness for telling stories in all settings.

All that said, Davis perhaps overstates his case when he contends that skeletal outlines constitute Smith's "central and most fundamental approach to composition" (p. 87). Given the limited number of examples from Smith's own *oeuvre* and the intense focus on this single technique, there is not enough extant textual evidence to generalize to this degree or to account for the other ways that Smith may have translated other works for which he was responsible, as well as how these methods may have changed across his prophetic career. Admirable and exhaustive as these early chapters are, this reader would have appreciated more discussion of Smith as a writer and an orator.

In chapters 5 and 6, Davis pivots to the Book of Mormon itself. He approaches the book through two of its favored genres: sermons and historical narrative. As Davis notes at the beginning of chapter 5, sermons make up a staggering 40 percent of the entire book. Interweaving discussions of Methodist sermon culture with readings of a slew of Book of Mormon passages, Davis underscores the fact that

sermons in the Book of Mormon consistently adhere to conventional nineteenth-century sermonic forms and rehearse standard lists of doctrinal points, theological controversies, and even conventional phrases from revivalist—and specifically, Methodist—preaching.

The most tantalizing moments of this chapter come, however, when we begin to see how the scene of the dictation parallels or reflects the work being dictated. One of these moments occurs in the book of Jacob when Jacob relays Nephi's instruction that "if there were preaching which was sacred, or revelation which was great, or prophesying, that I should engraven the heads of them upon these plates, and touch upon them as much as it were possible."[3] Davis makes it possible to see the call to "engraven the heads" (p. 91) as potentially referencing a commonplace technique of semi-extemporaneous speaking in nineteenth-century sermonic culture.

Chapter 6 turns toward the Book of Mormon's historical narratives. Specifically, Davis tracks how chapter headings in the book come to function as skeletal outlines. Although italicized and offset in the text, Davis treats these as being potentially part of the stream of language that poured out of Smith during dictation sessions. Here, a paratextual apparatus independent of the narrative comes to be understood as a vital piece of an evolving, performative script. One key example is the head, "an account of the death of Lehi," at the beginning of 2 Nephi 1, which Smith then expands into "a 4,655-word narrative" (p. 138). The mnemonic cue alone, Davis speculates, could have triggered for Smith the basic elements of the event, and Smith's own imagination would have been able to supply as much content as he felt he needed to elaborate upon it.

Over the course of the chapter, Davis provides numerous other examples of brief summaries that precede the narration of events, suggesting that Smith used these as anchors to inform his semi-extemporaneous storytelling. This evidence also leads Davis to contend that the foreknowledge necessary to generate such heads and ensure narrative

3. Jacob 1:4.

coherence "militate[s] against the theory that Smith produced the work in spontaneous, unpremeditated outbursts of creativity" (p. 157). Smith, in other words, would have had to engage in an extensive process of preparation.

Davis's final body chapter delivers on the promise of the preceding chapters to advance a theory of translation. Davis makes the claim that the Book of Mormon is replete with mnemonic cues and markers of techniques like the "laying down of heads" that could have served as prompts for Joseph Smith to unfurl a story that had been developing in his mind for the better part of a decade. Because this process was performative and included an audience, Davis moreover suggests that the narrative was not solely a recitation of ideas already worked out but a dialectical process that was both responsive to the reactions of his scribes and to Smith's own desire to seek divine confirmation of the veracity of his account. For Smith, the production was, in Davis's words, a "divine collaboration," a process that is "interactive and divinely engaged" (p. 192). For believers and nonbelievers alike, this makes available a more nuanced and dynamic vision of authorship. The techniques for semi-extemporaneous speech that Smith had acquired in the preceding years could have facilitated this extended collaboration that Smith and those around him recognized as a divine event.

The thesis of *Visions in a Seer Stone* is deceptively simple but no less revelatory for its simplicity. Davis provides a framework that deepens available naturalistic accounts of the process by which the Book of Mormon was created, enabling those who read the book as a nineteenth-century text composed through natural means to connect its content to the conditions of its creation. For readers who may want to consider the Book of Mormon within canons of American literature—as many believers and nonbelievers alike have sought to do for decades—Davis also makes it possible to locate the book alongside other long narrative works from the nineteenth century like *Moby Dick* or *Uncle Tom's Cabin* that were composed in concentrated bursts of literary creativity. Just as a whaling ship could be Melville's Yale and Harvard, so, too, could the religious and cultural milieu of the Connecticut River

Valley and Burned-Over District have been Joseph Smith's. Moreover, Davis complicates received portraits of Joseph Smith by affording him some measure of agency within the Book of Mormon's creation. As Davis puts it in the epilogue, the story he tells "undermines the hagiographical accounts of Smith as an ignorant farm boy" (p. 194). Davis not only grants Smith his intelligence, creativity, and curiosity, but gives us a version of the story of the Book of Mormon's origins that charts the many possible sources through which Smith could have learned the skills to harness and channel a supernova of creative flourishing.

In her epochal 1949 biography of Joseph Smith *No Man Knows My History*, Fawn M. Brodie celebrated the Book of Mormon as an American literary achievement. But, she cautioned, "any theory of the Book of Mormon that spotlights the prophet and blacks out the stage on which he performed is certain to be a distortion."[4] *Visions in a Seer Stone* raises the house lights and illuminates the stage in a way that will hopefully inspire further work into the conditions under which the Book of Mormon came into existence.

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4. Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History*, 2nd ed. (New York: Vintage, 1995), 69.