Another Look at the Book of Mormon

This is a course in miracles. Please take notes.” With these words, a Columbia University medical psychologist and self-proclaimed atheist was introduced to an inner voice which identified itself as Jesus Christ. Acting against her skepticism, the psychologist, known simply as Helen, obediently began dictating the words of the voice to a colleague. The result after ten years was a fifteen-hundred-page manuscript that was published in 1976 as a three-volume work, A Course in Miracles. Today, thousands of people in forty-seven states and fifteen countries study, individually or in groups, the words of this massive work which promises to bring the miracles of love and inner harmony into their lives.

Two years before this voice made itself known to Helen, another woman, Jane Roberts, began to experience psychic forces in her life. A novelist with no particular interest in the occult, Roberts conducted experiments in this new domain which soon led her into contact with “Seth,” a discarnate personality which spoke through the medium of Roberts’s mind and voice. In these sessions Roberts lapsed into a trance while Seth lectured on complex philosophical and metaphysical subjects quite beyond the educational experience of Jane Roberts herself. By recording Seth’s dictation, Roberts and her husband produced well over a dozen books which have acquired considerable popularity with the religiously and mystically minded segment of the American reading public.

Equally curious is the case of Levi H. Dowling, a man born just a month before the martyrdom of Joseph Smith. Dowling, who pursued careers as a pastor, medical doctor, and writer, experienced visions from childhood and was eventually commissioned by “Visel the Goddess of Wisdom” to record The Aquarian Gospel of Jesus the Christ. This scripture-
like production purports to be a “transcription from the Akashic Records,” recounting a heretofore unknown ministry of the Savior. This work, which is still available in bookstores today, comments on the natures of God and man, prophesies its own coming forth, and contains many other teachings familiar to Bible-reading Christians.

In spite of their disparate backgrounds, Helen, Jane Roberts, and Levi Dowling all appear to be part of a phenomenon known as “spirit writing” or “automatic writing.” This term refers to the ability to dictate or write material in a relatively rapid, seemingly effortless and fluent manner. Moreover, the practitioner of automatic writing does not consciously compose the material. Indeed, except for sometimes knowing a word or two moments in advance of writing or speaking, the individual is typically unaware of what the content of the writing will be. (See Ian Stevenson in the Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research, October 1978, p. 316.)

Interestingly, there are a number of significant parallels between such instances of automatic writing and events in the life of the prophet Joseph Smith. Indeed, historian Lawrence Foster and other non-Mormon authors have suggested that automatic writing was the very method through which Joseph Smith produced the Book of Mormon. Such a claim, if correct, can have many important implications for the way we approach our latter-day scriptures. Before exploring the validity of this contention, however, it will be helpful to acquire a greater understanding of the various forms, techniques, and causes of automatic writing.

Many people who produce automatic writing attribute its composition to an outside intelligence. Indeed, except for sometimes knowing a word or two moments in advance of writing or speaking, the individual is typically unaware of what the content of the writing will be. (See Ian Stevenson in the Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research, October 1978, p. 316.)

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Many people who produce automatic writing attribute its composition to an outside intelligence. In some instances, such as those cited above, this external consciousness may have a name and personality all its own. These so-called “channeled texts” frequently revolve around some sort of religious theme. For example, the Oahspe, a work belonging to this genre, claims to be a “New Bible in the words of Jehovah [sic] and his Angel Ambassadors.” Like the conventional Bible, this volume consists of various “books,” and includes an account of the creation and early history of the earth as well as doctrinal and prophetic discourses. Interestingly, this 1882 production, created automatically through the typing of dentist John Newbrough, also contains several lines of unusual characters or “hieroglyphics,” which are translated in the book’s glossary.

Probably better known is the Urantia Book, a “2100-page ‘library’ of cosmology, philosophy, and religion,” published in 1955. Disciples of this work consider it to be a “divine revelation,” a work that “will change you.” It is said to answer “the Three Most Vital Questions being asked . . . on earth today,” namely “Who Am I? What Am I Doing Here? [and] Where Am I Going?” (Clyde Bedell’s Concordex of the Urantia Book, pp. 19, 16, 12, 11.)

Such familiar promises notwithstanding, the average reader is likely to find this massive volume a bit bizarre. The first fourth of the book, for example, claims to have been “Sponsored by a Uversa Corps of Superuniverse Personalities acting by authority of the Orvonton Ancient of Days.” Among the authors listed for the separate papers are “Perfector of Wisdom,” “Mighty Messenger,” “One High in Authority,” “Melchizedek,” “Brilliant Evening Star,” “Chief of Seraphim,” “Chief of Midwayers,” and other unusual characters. Other sections of this book include “The Local Universe,” “The History of Urantia [Earth],” and “The Life and Teachings of Jesus.”

Of course, channeled texts are not the only form of automatic writing. Indeed, a number of well-known works of literature came into being through this method. Charlotte Bronte, for example, is said to have written her masterpieces Villette and Jane Eyre in a steady stream with her eyes shut. Calling her a “trance-writer,” critics Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar quote entries from Bronte’s journals that describe visionary experiences and moments of “divine leisure” in which “the stream of thought . . . came flowing free & calm along its channel” (The Madwoman in the Attic, pp. 311-13). Perhaps alluding to a similar process, the visionary William Blake wrote that his lengthy poem Jerusalem was “dictated” to him. Similarly, the English poet A. E. Houseman once noted that entire stanzas of poetry would come into his mind all at once.

Still another well-known poet to compose material in this fashion is Robert Graves, who once related that while working on a historical novel, “a sudden overwhelming obsession interrupted me. It took the form of an unsolicited enlightenment on a subject I knew almost nothing of . . . my mind worked at such a furious rate all night, as well as all the next day, that my pen found it difficult to keep pace with the flow of thought . . . within three weeks, I had written a 70,000-word book about [an] ancient Mediterranean Moon-Goddess,” later published as The White Goddess. Though Graves denied any involvement with spiritualism, the method described here exactly fits the definition of automatic writing. (Five Pens in Hand, pp. 54-55, 58.) No doubt the reason such literary works are seldom connected with spiritual phenomena is that unlike channeled texts the authors rarely claim that the works were composed by anyone other than themselves.

Automatic writing may be obtained in a variety of ways. Some individuals experience words or thoughts forming in their minds, which they then write down or dictate. This is what happened to Lilian D. Johnson, who believed she was...
in psychic contact with a group of departed spirits. She would sit at a typewriter and ask questions about such subjects as life after death and receive the answers in her mind. The discourses prompted by this method have been published in a book entitled *Spray from an Inland Sea*. Similarly, Jane Roberts records that when in mental contact with the spirit personality Seth, "the words tumbled through my head and out my mouth" (*The Seth Material*, p. 31).

Many individuals are able to produce automatic writing with no mental involvement whatever. In these instances, the person usually holds a pen or pencil and writes freely without knowing what he is writing. Such an individual may carry on a conversation with someone in the room while his hand is writing on an entirely unrelated subject. Indeed, some people must be distracted before their hand can produce involuntary script. Others require complete silence.

Some people generate works of automatic writing through the medium of the ouija board, whose pointer spells out the individual letters of each word. A number of purveyors of automatic texts, including the prolific Jane Roberts, began with this technique.

Others use different implements to produce automatic writing. Stone- or crystal-gazing (scrying), for example, is a well-documented method of stimulating this kind of writing. In most of these instances, the individual gazes into the stone or crystal and experiences some sort of vision while the hand writes automatically. This writing typically reports information seen in the vision. In some cases, the stone-gazer’s vision reveals written words rather than events. For instance, one woman relates, "I had been trying to obtain automatic writing while looking in the crystal. I was also wondering who had put a pair of lost scissors in a very conspicuous place, where I had just found them. I saw a name written, and found that my right hand had written the same name." (*Theodore Besterman, Crystal-Gazing*, pp. 126-27.) Other individuals’ dictations describe what is seen in the crystal. As an example, one psychologist reports the case of a young boy who, though considered stolid and unimaginative, dictated a fantastic adventure story which he saw enacted in a crystal while his hand wrote automatically at the same time. (*Anita K. Muehl, Automatic Writing*, pp. 111-26.)

A number of people, including Jane Roberts, create involuntary script while in a trance. Nevertheless, many automatic writers produce their works while fully awake and alert. This is the case with Helen, the woman through whom *A Course in Miracles* was composed. One writer reports that if the “telephone rang during a dictation session, she could interrupt to answer it; the voice [which dictated the work] waited patiently for her return and then resumed, in mid-sentence if necessary, exactly where she had broken off” (*Psychology Today*, September 1980, p. 84).

As with method, the quality of material obtained through automatic writing varies widely. Much of it is, as one author observes, “taken up with platitudinous moralising, or verbosely expressed spiritual philosophy, most of it inferior to what the writer could produce in a normal fashion” (*D. J. West, Psychical Research Today*, p. 58). However, this is not always the case. Some works seem to exhibit writing skills and awareness of facts far beyond those which the individual normally possesses. For example, in speaking through Jane Roberts, the personality of Seth once carried on a conversation with a professor of psychology using appropriate terminology and making references to esoteric philosophical theories of which Jane herself had no apparent knowledge. The psychologist later wrote that he chose topics of conversation which were clearly of tolerable interest to Seth and considerable interest to me, and which by...
that time I had every reason to believe were largely foreign territory to Jane. Also . . . I chose to pursue these topics at a level of sophistication which I felt, at least, made it exceedingly improbable that Jane could fool me on.

So impressed was he by the results that he affirmed, "I do not believe that Jane Roberts and Seth are the same person, or the same personality, or different facets of the same personality." (As cited in The Seth Material, pp. 107-8.)

Some have suggested that the varying quality and different methods employed in obtaining automatic writing—e.g., ouija boards, dictation, crystal-gazing, and others—indicate that this is not one but an entire collection of qualitatively different phenomena. This view allows followers of a particular channeled text to label one such work "inspired" while dismissing others as mere psychological phenomena. Such a claim might be plausible if it could be shown, for example, that ouija boards always produce drivel, while crystal-gazing produces impressive literature. However, this is simply not the case. Individuals who produce high-quality writing often use the same methods as those who produce clearly inferior works. Too, some individuals use a variety of methods to generate automatic writing, with no apparent difference in the fluency or quality of the writing. At least one automatic writer received various channeled texts through a ouija board, through handwriting, through dictation, sometimes with visions and sometimes without, always maintaining the same apparent style and level of quality throughout her work. It would appear then that the use of crystals or ouija boards, dictation or manual writing, are only different techniques or expressions of the same underlying process which produces material in a relatively rapid, unplanned manner.

Of course, one could attempt to make a case for multiple phenomena based on varying quality alone. Unfortunately, our inability to objectively measure depth of thought and quality of expression renders this a difficult claim to substantiate. Moreover, the fact that the quality of some individuals' writing improves over time casts doubt on the validity of using varying quality as a criterion to identify different phenomena.

There is much to suggest a connection between automatic writing and what is often called "creative inspiration." For instance, a number of novelists who have outlined their plots and planned their characters and settings nevertheless find themselves typing hurriedly away, anxiously waiting to see what twist their story will take next. In some instances, authors find the effortless flow of ideas so pronounced that they speak of its source as their own personal "muse." Seen this way, automatic writing becomes a fairly ordinary occurrence which emerges in varying degrees depending on the talent and training of the practitioner.

But such an observation, while helpful, still leaves questions about the most extreme forms of the phenomenon. This is especially so in the case of channeled texts, which appear to be authored by totally independent and invisible beings. Where do these unusual works come from?

The most immediate explanation would be to accept the claims of their purveyors as entirely correct. In other words, it may indeed be the case that a frequently reincarnated spirit named Seth spoke through Jane Roberts or that Jesus Christ communicated A Course in Miracles to a psychologist named Helen. Not surprisingly, followers of these works have occasionally produced evidence to support this literalistic hypothesis.

Yet while there are intriguing and even miraculous circumstances surrounding some of this material, there is also good reason not to accept it all at face value. This is especially true in the case of channeled texts which purport to be the new works of long-dead authors dictating material from the spirit world. For example, a few years ago a woman published a book which she claimed was authored by the ghost of the noted American psychologist William James. Unfortunately, the rapid writing style of this work bears no resemblance to James's own inimitable literary style. If we are to accept these claims as correct, we can only wonder at the devastating effect which death has on personal capacities.

Partly for this reason, many students of automatic writing have sought other explanations for this phenomenon. Although research in this area has been relatively scant, a number of the available studies suggest that both the content of automatic writing and the spirit personalities purported to produce it are creations of unconscious levels of the human brain. Indeed, information found in automatic writing can very often be traced to events, facts, or ideas to which the automatic writer was exposed during his or her lifetime.

Consider the case of a woman who claimed that the automatic writing she produced was dictated by her deceased mother, a spirit who referred to herself in the writing as "My Dearest." Under the questioning of a psychologist, "My Dearest" (i.e., the mind or entity which composed the writing) revealed that she was not the woman's mother at all but was merely a personality which emerged to comfort the woman when her mother died. Further questioning revealed details apparently from the woman's memories. For example, "My Dearest" expressed a fondness for "yellow steps" and, when asked why, explained that the steps to her house had been painted yellow when she was young. The woman through whom the writing was "transmitted" did not remember this at all. Later on, however, the psychologist was able to verify that the steps to the woman's childhood home had been painted yellow when she was three years old. (Muehl, Automatic Writing, pp. 43-47.)
Similar results were obtained by Dr. P. L. Harriman, who employed a group of students to experiment with automatic writing:

Under hypnosis they were made to live through in imagination some difficult situation. They were told they would forget all about it on waking. The subjects had previously been trained in automatic writing, and after being brought out of their hypnotic state they were given paper and pencil and encouraged to write while at the same time engaging in desultory conversation. The automatic writings so obtained were frequently concerned with the anxieties and conflicts set up by the imaginary difficult situations. One student, who had been told by the hypnotist that he was summoned to the dean's office, produced a screed containing a list of minor offences and neglected duties. He had in fact been guilty of them all. (West, Psychical Research Today, p. 58.)

Experiments of this sort have also been performed with crystal-gazing. One psychologist reported working with an individual who, when performing automatic writing during crystal-gazing, was able to recall forgotten events that occurred as far back as the age of fifteen months. The accuracy of this remarkable recall was confirmed by the subject's mother. (Muehl, Automatic Writing, pp. 112-19.)

None of this is to suggest deliberate deception on the part of the automatic writer. On the contrary, the best-known practitioners appear to be very sincere individuals who are unfamiliar with the latent abilities of the human mind. When they discover that they can rapidly produce writing of a quality superior to their natural powers, they very understandably suppose that such works must come from an outside source. In some such cases, automatic writing may occur in connection with an alternate personality expressed through religious beliefs or a desire to communicate with a departed loved one. Although the language and disposition of these secondary personalities make them appear to be distinct, external beings, their origin is no further away than the writer's own mind.

On the other hand, the fact that automatic writing contains material from the writer's memory does not mean that it cannot also contain paranormally derived information. In other words, it is entirely possible that an automatic text may contain a mixture of the writer's own ideas and the ideas of some external, possibly divine, intelligence. Because the possibility for such a combination exists, it is often very difficult to rule out entirely supernatural explanations for automatic writing. Ultimately, of course, there is simply no way either to prove or disprove such claims. To a great extent, belief in the influence of other-worldly minds and powers on automatic writing remains a matter of faith.

But what, if anything, does this have to do with the Book of Mormon? In spite of the association of this phenomenon with hypnotism and ouija boards, a number of parallels exist between Joseph Smith's production of scriptures and instances of automatic writing. These parallels can best be illustrated by a detailed recounting of one of the most extensively documented examples of automatic writing: the case of Patience Worth. This unusual story began one hot summer evening when Pearl Curran, a St. Louis housewife, was persuaded by some friends to experiment with a ouija board. After some false starts, the pointer began spelling out words. Pearl's mother dutifully took down the letters as they were called out. Through the ouija board came the curious declaration: "Many moons ago I lived. Again I come—Patience Worth my name." (Irving Litvag, Singer in the Shadows, pp. 1-2, 27-28.)

The group began carrying on conversations with "Patience," who, though reticent to talk about herself, indicated that she was an Englishwoman who had lived in the seventeenth century. Using what appeared to be an archaic form of English, Patience carried on saucy discussions filled with pungent metaphors and sarcastic
Unlike many instances of automatic writing, the works of Patience Worth exhibited impressive literary quality. A preeminent literary critic of the day, William Marion Reedy, though not believing Patience Worth to be a genuine spirit, referred to her poems as "extraordinary" and "near great." A professor of English from Virginia found some of them superior to the verse of Chaucer, Spenser, and even Shakespeare. While most readers of Patience's work were not this enthusiastic, even the most unbelieving of critics admitted that there were occasional passages of "undeniable simplicity and beauty" or that it was "all good literature and deserves reading on that account alone." In 1916 and again in 1918, Patience Worth was listed in a highly respected and authoritative anthology of poetry; the same volume which included ten poems by Amy Lowell and five by Edna St. Vincent Millay listed some eighty-eight poems by Patience Worth, several of them marked as "poems of distinction."

In time the entity who identified herself simply as "a wench" dictated a number of novels and plays. These, too received substantial critical acclaim. The most popular was The Sorry Tale, a massive historical novel relating to the life of Jesus Christ. The work generally received favorable reviews and earned Patience Worth a place among the outstanding authors of 1918 as judged by the Joint Committee of Literary Arts of New York. A reviewer for the New York Times called The Sorry Tale "a wonderful, a beautiful, and a noble book," one "constructed with the precision and accuracy of a master hand." One scholar and critic wrote that the segment "describing the crucifixion—a chapter of five thousand words . . . dictated in a single evening—is a composition of appalling force and vividness, and an interpretation on a high and sincere plane." Still another critic, also noting the book's spiritual and emotional impact, referred to it as a "fifth gospel," a term Mormons sometimes apply to 3 Nephi. (As cited in Litvag, Singer in the Shadows, pp. 62, 161, 124, 180-81, 152, 160, 155-56.)

Like believers in the Book of Mormon, followers of Patience Worth adduced linguistic evidence to show that the writing dictated through Pearl Curran did indeed belong to antiquity. While some of the language used by Patience was more ungrammatical than archaic, there appear to be occasional uses of genuinely obsolete English words which Mrs. Curran simply would not have known. More striking still is the extraordinarily high incidence of Anglo-Saxon words in Patience Worth's vocabulary. While modern English descends from Anglo-Saxon, it currently uses a rather high percentage of words borrowed from other languages. The Declaration of Independence, for example, uses only forty-two percent Anglo-Saxon words, the King James Bible seventy-seven percent, and Chaucer sixty-four percent. However, Patience Worth's language, as measured in one of her novels, consists of an amazing ninety percent Anglo-Saxon words. In light of the fact that one must go back to writings of the thirteenth century to find a comparable percentage, it becomes apparent that Patience Worth's productions are, as one scholar put it, nothing less than a "philological miracle." (West, Psychical Research Today, p. 62.)

Another startling thing about the works attributed to Pearl Curran is their accuracy on factual details which Mrs. Curran apparently could not have known, a defense often applied to writings given through Joseph Smith. Regarding The Sorry Tale, one author notes that "scholars and literary critics agreed that even a lifetime of reading all available knowledge of the Holy Land (reading that apparently never took place, but even if it had) still would not have given [Mrs. Curran] the information to produce a book with such veri-
similitude.” Similarly, after the publication of *Hope Trueblood*, Patience’s novel of English life, the *London Times* asserted that the book “reveals a familiarity with nature as it is found in England, and with the manners of English life of the older time.” Another British paper commented that sections of the work appeared “to show an uncanny knowledge of English social life in the 17th century and before.” (Litvag, *Singer in the Shadows*, pp. 160, 189-90.)

Like Joseph Smith, Pearl Curran appears to have lacked the education necessary to produce such works. Individuals close to her were quick to point out that while she was an intelligent woman, Mrs. Curran was clearly unacquainted with early English literature and “never had read anything archaic.” This curious situation prompted one observer to note that “if Patience Worth be an invention, the inventor is a genius of no mean order.” (Litvag, *Singer in the Shadows*, pp. 76-77, 81.)

While for many years Mrs. Curran received communications from Patience through a ouija board, this method was not always employed. Just as Joseph Smith eventually began to dictate revelations without the aid of a seer stone, so Pearl Curran began to dictate the words of Patience Worth without a ouija board or any other physical object. Mrs. Curran “simply saw the pictures and the words in her head and called them out, as coming from the hand of Patience Worth” (Litvag, *Singer in the Shadows*, pp. 212-13).

As with other producers of automatic writing, Mrs. Curran was not in a state of trance but was fully alert while dictating Patience’s words. She would look over at a friend, wave, or even write a letter while dictating. Her dictation was effortless and fluent and could be performed for hours without stopping. She was known to have dictated nearly 6,000 words in a single sitting and was once timed at producing 110 words per minute. In sharp contrast, when Mrs. Curran composed her own writing, the process was much slower, sometimes requiring most of an afternoon to write a single letter.

One respected journalist made an intriguing observation about the composition process: “Each time the story was picked up at the point where work stopped at the previous sitting, without a break in the continuity of narrative, with the slightest hesitation, and without the necessity of a reference to the closing words of the last preceding instalment” (Casper Yost in the *preface to The Sorry Tale*, p. iv). Compare this observation to that made by Emma Smith regarding the production of the Book of Mormon: “[Joseph] would dictate to me hour after hour; and when returning after meals, or after interruptions, he would at once begin where he had left off, without either seeing the manuscript or having any portion of it read to him. This was a usual thing for him to do.” (*Saints’ Herald*, 1 October 1879, p. 290.)

Pearl Curran is like Joseph Smith in still another way: for both, virtually all available historical evidence militates against the possibility of calculated fraud. In the case of Mrs. Curran, there appears to have been little motive for such deception, since the publication of Patience Worth’s writings ended up costing the Currans and their friends a great deal of money. And if Pearl had been interested in fame, it would have been much more to her advantage to put her own name to the material she dictated, since the association of her works with the occult actually hurt their acceptance in the literary world. Furthermore, Mrs. Curran and her immediate associates were known by all as individuals of unimpeachable honesty.

Perhaps the most compelling evidence in favor of Mrs. Curran’s sincerity is the fact that much of the writing was produced in settings which seem to exclude the possibility of deliberate deception. For example, Walter Franklin Prince, a professional researcher of psychic phenomena who carefully and skeptically analyzed the case of Patience Worth, reported the following:

A poem of 25 lines was demanded, the lines beginning with the letters of the alphabet, except X, in due order. It was instantly dictated. I asked for a conversation between a lout and a maid at a county fair to be couched in archaic prose, and a poem in modern English on ‘The Folly of Atheism’—first a passage of one and then a passage of the other, thus alternating to the end. This seemed to me an impossible mental feat. But it was done so rapidly as to tax the recorder—four passages of humorous prose abounding in archaic locutions, alternating with four parts of a poem in modern English of lofty and spiritual tenor; and when assembled each factor made a perfectly articulated little piece of literature. (*Scientific American*, July 1926, p. 22.)

In such a situation, there was clearly no opportunity for Mrs. Curran to work out the poetry and memorize it in advance.

Prince also compared Patience Worth’s writings with known works of literature but discovered no indications of plagiarism. He did, however, find some linguistic similarities between the writings dictated by Mrs. Curran and some poems from Dorset, a community in that part of England said to be the home of Patience Worth. (*The Case of Patience Worth*, pp. 80ff, 271.)

Interestingly, this same Walter F. Prince also conducted an extensive study of the Book of Mormon. In an article entitled “Psychological Tests for the Authorship of the Book of Mormon,” he concluded that the Book of Mormon reflected events and ideas common to nineteenth-century New England. It is not surprising, then, to discover that Prince was far more impressed with the supernatural aspects of the Patience Worth case than he was with the Book of Mormon, which he considered to be the product of Joseph Smith’s unconscious mind. (*American Journal of Psychology*, 1917, pp. 373-95.)

But beyond these general parallels to the expe-
The use of a crystal or stone to dictate information is a well-known method of producing automatic writing.
Book of Mormon contents did not result from conscious planning but was acquired from the spirit Moroni, one of the book's principal authors. Such a preparatory or incubation period is also evident in instances of sudden insight and other unconscious mental processes.

Another seeming contrast between the Book of Mormon and automatic writing is the assertion in some documents that Joseph had portions of the manuscript read back to him before continuing. However, these sources do not indicate that Joseph did this in order to keep track of the story line or maintain his place in the narrative. Indeed, remarks by Emma Smith and Parley P. Pratt indicate that in dictating the Book of Mormon and revelations respectively, this was in fact not necessary. Furthermore, an examination of the Book of Mormon manuscripts suggests that comparatively little editing or revising of work was made as it was recorded. This is precisely what we would expect from a text produced through automatic writing.

In spite of such differences, then, it does not seem unreasonable to assert that the same automatic processes operating in the production of various channeled books were at work in Joseph Smith as he translated the Book of Mormon and perhaps also as he dictated various revelations.

In addition to clarifying the translation process, an automatic writing model of the Book of Mormon helps illuminate certain aspects of this volume which have never adequately been explained. Such, for example, is the case with the extensive use of the Bible in the Book of Mormon. In addition to the lengthy passages from Isaiah, the Book of Mormon is replete with allusions, expressions, and quotations from the King James translation of the Old and New Testaments. Since many of these quotations occur in settings hundreds of years before the biblical manuscripts were composed, it seems highly unlikely that these verbatim extractions were engraved on the Nephite plates. Some Mormons have attempted to resolve this problem by speculating that when Joseph Smith came to a passage in the ancient record which paralleled biblical ideas, he would use the King James Bible to assist him in the translation. Unfortunately, this explanation is not supported by the known accounts of the translation process, none of which mention Joseph using a Bible or, for that matter, even having one present.

Automatic writing, on the other hand, provides a very simple explanation of these circumstances. Just as individuals under hypnosis have been able to quote lengthy passages in foreign languages which they heard at the age of three, so have automatic writers produced detailed information from books which they have read but in some cases cannot remember reading. Thus, if Joseph Smith’s scriptural productions borrow material from the Bible he was known to study, this is entirely consistent with other cases of automatic writing. This phenomenon of memory, known as cryptomnesia, may also explain the presence of writing styles and literary patterns which are found both in the Book of Mormon and the Bible.

Because such feats of recall often occur in automatic writing, this phenomenon also helps us understand the inclusion in the Book of Mormon of so many concepts which seem to belong to nineteenth-century New England. A number of Mormon writers, for example, have pointed out that the Book of Mormon incorporates theological concepts and addresses religious debates common in Joseph Smith’s environment. In addition, the book capitalizes and expands on theories of the origin of the American Indian which were circulating in that part of the country in the 1820s but which have been rejected by anthropologists and ethnologists today. The existence of these parallels have caused both Mormons and anti-Mormons mis-

"Perform a mission for Jehovah."

An automatic writing model of the Book of Mormon helps illuminate certain aspects of this volume.

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takenly to assign an inordinate degree of significance to the question of whether Joseph Smith had direct access to and studied books whose ideas are echoed in the Mormon scriptures.

But automatic writing renders such a question irrelevant. Automatic texts often contain information available to the writer in the most obscure manner imaginable. For example, one researcher has described the case of a woman who, with a ouija board, produced automatic writing which recounted "almost exactly" the death notices in an available newspaper. Although the woman apparently had not read these obituaries, she had done the crossword puzzle found on the same page in the newspaper. It seems that her mind had picked up and stored material which was in her field of vision as she worked the crossword puzzle; she had unconsciously read and unconsciously written information of which her conscious mind was entirely unaware. It should not be surprising, then, to find Joseph Smith's scriptural productions repeating things he may only have heard or overheard in conversation, camp meetings, or other settings without any concerted study of the issues.

An understanding of automatic writing also reveals a number of problems with certain traditional Mormon apologetics regarding this standard work. An oft-repeated defense of the Book of Mormon, for example, asserts that Joseph Smith was too ignorant and uneducated to create a book of such complex construction and profound teachings. But this is exactly what other producers of channeled texts have accomplished, most notably the unlettered Pearl Curran, whose moving religious novel won the praises of historians and literary critics alike. If the Book of Mormon is to be defended as a uniquely inspired ancient text, it must be done on stronger ground than this.

Similarly, some Mormon apologists have claimed that evidence for the Book of Mormon's antiquity somehow "proves" or validates its doctrinal teachings and even the existence of God. Such claims are clearly made in ignorance of channeled texts, many of which evidence historical and philosophical knowledge beyond that of the person through whom the writing was transmitted. Since the theologies of these writings clash with the Book of Mormon and with each other, it seems specious to suggest a connection between the doctrinal claims of a book and the miraculous aspects of its content.

This last point in particular raises a much larger question: On what basis do we designate a book as scripture? We say the Book of Mormon is a holy book, but why? Because its language or content are miraculously beyond the knowledge of the writer? This is also true of other books. Because it was brought forth by supernatural means? This is also true of other books. Because it teaches Christian principles? This is true of other books. Because it changes lives for the better? This too is true of other books. Because people feel they have received a spiritual witness of its divinity? Even this is true of other books. In fact, there does not appear to be anything of a historical, theological, philosophical, or literary quality in the scriptural writings of Joseph Smith that has not been matched by those well outside the Mormon tradition. While Latter-day Saints who take issue with this statement may point to masses of evidence which support the claims of their scriptures, these evidences appear to differ only in quality—not quality—to those that undergird non-Mormon writings, and that only because there are simply more people examining the Book of Mormon than have scrutinized other channeled texts.

Of course, there are many ways of understanding these similarities. It may be, for example, that automatic writing is God's true means of giving revelations and translations (in the case of Joseph Smith) which has been counterfeited by Satan (in the cases of Jane Roberts, Pearl Curran, and others). Of course, this raises the difficult question of why Satan would assist in the production of such fine literary works as Jane Eyre, such moving religious novels as The Sorry Tale, or such uplifting instructional works as A Course in Miracles.

An alternative view which circumvents this difficulty might be that not only did God use automatic writing to help his prophets produce latter-day scripture but he also used it to inspire great literature as with Pearl Curran and Charlotte Bronte. In this view, Mormons might consider Patience Worth to be a real seventeenth-century woman whom God permitted to pierce the veil and communicate with a twentieth-century American housewife. This explanation, however, may bother more doctrinally minded Latter-day Saints, especially since the teachings of so many channeled texts run counter to LDS theology.

Still another possibility is that some or all of these books are totally or partially the result of psychological processes. Unfortunately, this view does not resolve the central problem: How does one distinguish inspired books from psychological phenomena? It is easy enough to say that the Book of Mormon is inspired while other books are not. But without more evidence of clear differences, such an assertion will probably not be too convincing to outsiders who are acquainted with automatic writing. If Mormons are to interpret the evidence consistently, we must either revise our understanding of the role of the standard works or adopt a more pluralistic attitude about the validity of other forms of spiritual phenomena such as automatic writing.

SCOTT C. DUNN is managing editor of Sunstone. For much of the information and many of the sources regarding the translation method of the Book of Mormon, the author is indebted to Brent Lee Metcalfe.