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FORKED TONGUE?

Linda King Newell's personal assessment of herself and her unbiased motivation in co-authoring the book *Mormon Enigma* (Speeches & Comments, SUNSTONE, 10:7, p. 40) makes me sick to my stomach. My intestinal fortitude is certainly up to anything that an open and avowed apostate can dish out; maybe at times I can even relate a bit to them, but shame to anyone who knowingly assures her listeners that she is an active and faithful Latter-day Saint, when her forked tongue and written works prove otherwise. With faithful Saints like her our prophets, including Joseph, certainly have no need for real enemies.

It is true her "nonjudgmental book" (her words, and I have to laugh) received raves from a "booted-out" church historian, a non-Mormon writer, (albeit one whom I admire) and a few other unauthoritative people. So what? It is also true that their text was carefully annotated, but from what sources? A vast majority of them from vicious apostates (Hurlbut et al). Many texts from the RLDS Church, whose mission is to destroy the true church, and many from the history of a sweet, dear sister, whose book was banned by a prophet of God because it contained numerous errors, incident to the old age and memory of the writer. Can a stream rise any higher than its source?

Newell's challenges to our so-called myths are as asinine as her book. For instance, as any good deacon should know, the restitution of all things pertains to the Everlasting Covenant and Priesthood Keys and not to the Law of Moses. As for her numbers, I recall a visit in 1947 from my mission president. From a show of hands, he informed us that 75% of the missionaries were descended from the polygamous 3% of the pioneers.

I would also ask Ms. Newell if the scriptural admonition, "by their fruits they shall be known" be true, where then are the descendants of those who rejected the principles of yesteryear? Where are the Emma Smiths? Where are the William Laws and others today? Who fulfilled

prophecy? Who built up the Kingdom? Did Mary Fielding Smith practice an unhallowed lifestyle? Does a bitter fountain bring forth sweet water? Is the church that Newell so faithfully pledges her soul to today the true church of God on earth? Could it be that the myth of the origin of plural marriage is true, that it really did come as a commandment of God? If so, her own words, "I find very little in the system of polygamy that would come from a just and loving God," will one day make her as nauseous as they make me today.

P.S. If I didn't like your heretical magazine so much I would cancel-ha!

Max H. Rammell
 Rexburg, ID

LITERARY INFLUENCES

Someone once summarized Aristotle's view on happiness (apparently based on his *Ethica Nicomachea*, Books 1 and 10) thus: "Happiness is the meaning and purpose of life, the whole aim and end of human existence." (Quoted in Lillian Eichler Watson, *Light From Many Lamps*, New York, 1951, pp. 1-2.)

In relation to this we find something attributed to Joseph Smith in the (so-called) *[Documentary] History of the Church*, 5: 134-35. It is contained in an essay simply tossed into the 1842 record with no explanation. It reads, "Happiness is the object and design of our existence and will be the end thereof, if we pursue the path that leads to it."

I wonder how instructive, putting revelation aside momentarily, it might be to thoroughly examine the literary influences on and sources of the Prophet's thoughts?

Stanley B. Kimball
 Edwardsville, IL

BY THEIR FRUITS

I can't decide whether Scott Dunn's "Spirit Writing" was written with tongue-in-cheek or whether it is a serious attempt to discredit Joseph Smith. Since I can't believe that any loyal member of the Mormon Church would try to downgrade the Book of Mormon to the status of *Jane Eyre*, I have had to come up with another theory about Dunn's moti-

vation. Perhaps he was carried away with the cleverness of his analysis of the seeming similarities between the Book of Mormon and other books written speedily by persons who were not supposed to know much about what they wrote about. At any rate, as a long-time student of the occult "sciences" I was intrigued (but also disturbed) by Dunn's attempt to understand Joseph Smith's achievement in the light of other seemingly miraculous literary achievements. Even if there are similarities in writing methodology and content, that does not prove (as Dunn seems to imply) that Joseph Smith was just another "spirit writer" and the Book of Mormon just another "spirit written book."

As defined in Dunn's article, "spirit writing" or "automatic writing" is rapid writing or dictation which seems almost effortless—yet is coherent and imaginative. Dunn cites works by Helen, Jane Roberts, Levi Dowling, John Newbrough, Charlotte Bronte, Robert Graves, Lilian Johnstone and Pearl Curran to establish some "parallels" with Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon. Whether these seem like damaging or spurious "parallels" will depend on each reader's assessment of the criteria Dunn utilizes to postulate them. His main criteria seem to be writing methodology and originality.

Let me explain what I find both unconvincing and dangerous about Dunn's insinuation that Joseph Smith was just another "spirit writer" and the Book of Mormon just another "spirit-written book." I realize that Dunn did not come right out and say either of these things, but he certainly insinuated them. For, on the last page of his article, he pleads for a reconsideration of "the role of the standard works." Evidently, he feels that he has desecralized the Book of Mormon by "proving" that the method by which Joseph Smith brought it forth (as well as much of its content) is similar to some other literary productions. What is new about this claim? Nothing as far as content is concerned. Critics from **Hurlbut to the Tanners** have been harping on seeming similarities for years.

However, the use of the new and somewhat sinister term "spirit writing" does *seem* to be a new claim and therefore a new explanation. Is it really? No, but it was probably inevitable that "parallels" would be drawn because some of the "common-sense" explanations of why Joseph Smith couldn't have written the Book of Mormon himself (too ignorant, etc.) fairly cry out for comparison with other persons who have written marvelous things they weren't supposed to know much about. Even the claim that Joseph Smith picked up his dictation where he left off without having to have anything read back to him, while it sounds uncanny, has been shown to be typical of "spirit writers." So what? Superficial similarities between the writing methodologies employed by Helen, Roberts, Dowling, Newbrough, Bronte, Graves, Johnstone, Curran, and Joseph Smith, and, for that matter, countless others, don't prove anything about the source and value of their output. How about Nostradamus, Mary Baker Eddy, Edgar Cayce, Jeanne Dixon, etc.? Didn't they all claim supernatural assistance or inspiration in the production of their writings? If a claim of supernatural assistance, coupled with rapid writing or dictation, is what constitutes a "spirit writer," then, obviously, Joseph Smith was one. But, again, that proves nothing about the source of the inspiration or the worth of the message. Emphasis on the methodology of literary production (and, for that matter, on literary quality) simply diverts attention from the main issue—which I say is the content of the message and, of course, the source.

If the Book of Mormon can't be declared guilty by association with other seemingly "spirit written books," then what about the matter of originality? Total originality has never been a major claim to fame of the Book of Mormon. Not only are whole chapters of Isaiah quoted (as noted above), but the Sermon on the Mount is quoted from the New Testament. Obviously, Joseph Smith wasn't overly worried about being accused of plagiarizing the Bible. He translated whatever was

on the gold plates—regardless of what men would think about it. But why is the Book of Mormon phrased in King James' English? Undoubtedly because that was the only literary language Joseph Smith knew. He could hardly have done otherwise—unless, as some suppose, he was given by the Holy Ghost exact English equivalents of each word and phrase he came across on the Gold Plates. I realize that there is room for honest disagreement about the precise process used by Joseph Smith in his translation of the Gold Plates. Dunn questions whether he followed the procedure recommended to Oliver Cowdery in D&C 9—or whether he was given exact English equivalents. I assume that he was given the exact words and phrases to pass on to his scribe when he started out, i.e., when he was fully dependent on the Urim and Thummim. Later, after he had gained more understanding of Reformed Egyptian, I suspect that he was able to translate directly from the Gold Plates.

But, regardless of how it was done, it was done "by the gift and power of God." What does that mean? Simply that he did it with divine assistance. 2 Peter 1:20-21 tells us how scripture must come and how it must be interpreted: "Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the Scripture is of any private interpretation. For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost." Because every reader can test for himself or herself Joseph Smith's claim that he was divinely inspired to bring forth the Book of Mormon, the Book of Mormon makes a bid for our attention and belief that goes well beyond anything put forth in any book not claiming to contain God's word. Only the Bible, Doctrine and Covenants and Pearl of Great Price can be tested in the same way. I suspect that most people who believe the Bible to be the word of God have never tested it; they simply accept it by tradition.

In other words, the Book of Mormon is not really comparable with *Jane Eyre*, *The White Goddess*, *A Course of Miracles*, *The Seth Material*, *The Aquarian Gospel of Jesus Christ*, *The Urantia Book*, *Spray From an Island*

Sea, or the case of Patience Worth. Nor is it really comparable with the case of Bridey Murphy, the trance readings of Edgar Cayce, the “prophecies” of Jeanne Dixon, or the prophetic quatrains of Nostradamus. Taking the latter example, Nostradamus had great style (and made many lucky guesses) but his “prophecies” were about worldly kingdoms—not the Kingdom of God. Hence, his achievement, though impressive, is irrelevant to our salvation. The existence and message of the Book of Mormon, on the other hand, is absolutely essential to our salvation. That’s the difference! It is a difference in kind—not merely one of degree.

Here again, content and source are what counts, not writing speed and style. The Book of Mormon never claimed to be great literature. But, it can bring us a lot closer to Jesus Christ than *Jane Eyre* can! Dunn suggests towards the end of his article that we may need to demote the Book of Mormon to the level of other “spirit written books” or else elevate them to the level of the Book of Mormon. Hogwash! This is about as logical as insisting that all books bound in Morocco leather with gilt-edged pages and a cloth bookmark are scripture. A book is not scripture because of the way it was written or the way it is bound. It is scripture because of its content and its source (along with formal acceptance as scripture by a general conference vote.) Either Joseph Smith was or was not inspired by the Holy Ghost to translate the Book of Mormon from ancient records. Since he made that audacious claim, it’s up to each reader to test the claim by reading the book and praying about it. If they are not willing to do both of these things, they have no promise. All too many people are “sure” that the Book of Mormon is about the Lost Ten Tribes of Israel. If they never get past that misconception, they will never learn what it really is about.

To my way of thinking, the real issue is the source of Joseph Smith’s inspiration. Early detractors recognized this as the real issue when they went to such trouble to defame his character and impugn his worthiness to receive inspiration from God. They didn’t use operational terms like “spirit writing” to try to show that Joseph Smith didn’t have

anything over other people claiming supernatural inspiration. They simply declared that he got his inspiration from the Devil, the Father of Lies. This is probably still the main issue (or explanation) for fundamentalist Christians. Sophisticated Christians, who no longer believe in the Devil, have had to come up with other explanations—most of them based even on psychological or occult suppositions. “Spirit writing” is one of these. In other words, it is assumed that Joseph Smith spun the Book of Mormon out of his own fevered imagination—with a little help from the “collective unconscious.” That isn’t a new claim either!

I, for one, am convinced (as Dunn apparently is not) that Joseph Smith didn’t have access (without divine inspiration and an ancient record) to the cultural knowledge that would permit him to write a 500-plus page book about more than 2000 years of ancient history pertaining to largely unknown civilizations. (How, for instance, could he have made up 200 or so unfamiliar proper names that have turned out to be genuinely Near Eastern?) The other writers that Dunn has compared to Joseph Smith came up with seemingly unknowable cultural data, but that data was at least available in books in their day. Ancient Mesoamerican high civilizations (those having cities as described in the Book of Mormon) were essentially unknown to citizens of the United States before John Lloyd Stephens and Frederick Catherwood published their monumental *Incidents of Travel in Mexico, Chiapas and Yucatan* (1841). In other words, it is easier to believe that Pearl Curran (or even Bridey Murphy) could come up with valid descriptions of life in England (or Ireland) hundreds of years before their time than it is to believe that Joseph Smith could have come up with minute descriptions of ancient high civilizations in Mesoamerica before they were known to exist. True, not all cultural details mentioned in the Book of Mormon have been validated thus far. However, enough have been validated to establish the cultural context of the Book of Mormon through empirical investigation. [See John Sorenson’s new book entitled *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (1985)]. I say

this in all seriousness in spite of the spate of unscientific and sometimes ridiculous claims put forth by writers and map-makers less responsible and careful than John Sorenson. No one ever said it would be easy to find the truth. However, the gift and power of discernment, one of the more useful of the gifts of the Holy Ghost, can help honest investigators cut through the thickets of seeming similarity and discover for themselves the Tree of Life; they can sift through the gravels of the Stream of Life and come up with pure gold; they can wade through piles of seemingly identical oysters and come up with the Pearl of Great Price. Just as there are “distinctions without a difference,” there are similitudes without much similarity. This, to my way of thinking, is what Dunn has done with his “parallels.” By emphasizing methodology of literary production (and, to some extent, content) he has discounted the transcendent message of the Book of Mormon—which makes it unique in spite of Isaiah passages and superficial similarities with Ethan Smith’s *Views of the Hebrews* and Solomon Spaulding’s famous manuscript. Again, what is so new about the claim that Joseph Smith could have gotten some ideas for the Book of Mormon from his environment? Post hoc reasoning is easy. Any number can play. It all boils down to a matter of opinion—and faith.

To say that Pearl Curran or some other automatic writer came up with comparably unknowable information is to prove nothing about Joseph Smith. Remember the craze that Bridey Murphy caused? Some people are gifted with a vivid imagination, others with insight into the future (or the past), others are surely inspired by the Devil, and others are inspired by the Spirit of Christ. In other words, there are lots of ways whereby people can come up with seemingly miraculous scenarios. Even scientists have hunches that lead them to great breakthroughs in thought. Walter B. Cannon devotes a whole chapter (chapter V) of his book *The Way of the Investigator*, to the “Role of Hunches” in scientific discovery. Automatic writing is a kind of non-stop series of hunches and insights, isn’t it? The point is that labeling is not explaining: calling Joseph Smith a “spirit writer” does

not explain (or explain away) his achievement.

Because it is so difficult to say with any finality who was gifted or inspired in what way or by what external force, the best that we can do is to test the content of a purported book in the scientific way recommended by Alma 32. Mormons do not pretend or claim that they have a corner on all spiritual knowledge and inspiration. Indeed, 2 Nephi 29:7 says quite the opposite: "Know ye not that there are more nations than one? Know ye not that I, the Lord your God, have created all men, and that I remember those who are upon the isles of the sea; and that I rule in the heavens above and in the earth beneath; and I bring forth my word unto the children of men, yea, even upon all the nations of the earth." If God has given His word to his children in various nations, it must mean that His word was given through holy men—if not fully-endowed prophets. I have read enough of the Koran to feel that God could have inspired it, but *not* in the same way as the Standard Works of the Mormon Church. Nevertheless, this scripture (2 Nephi 29:7) does give us some insight into the attitude we, as Latter-day Saints, should take towards the "sacred books" that are not a part of our Standard Works. It is pretty obvious to us that there is a hierarchy of "sacred books"—or, should we say, degrees of dependability. The Bible, Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, and Pearl of Great Price are the pinnacle of the pyramid as far as we are concerned. And why not? We have tested them as directed in Alma 32. We have tasted them and found them delicious. We have found that they enlarge our souls. (One way that they enlarge our souls is to make us love and respect all mankind.)

But don't all so-called "sacred books" (as well as many secular books) enlarge one's soul and make one better to cope with life? Yes, of course. But, just as a beginning arithmetic book does not take one through differential calculus, a good but limited "sacred book" in the Hindu, Jain, Zoroastrian, Buddhist, Confucian, Taoist, Shinto, Islamic, Jewish, Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Protestant, or Post-Christian tradition can't take one as far and bring one into a

covenant relationship with the True and Living God and His Son Jesus Christ as the Mormon scriptures and the Mormon Church can. If a Mormon doesn't believe that he has something extra, something extremely important to add to whatever a person of another religion (or no religion) has, then he doesn't really understand the mission of the Restored Gospel.

To compare *A Course in Miracles*, *The Seth Material*, *The Aquarian Gospel of Jesus Christ*, *Oahspe*, *The Urantia Book*, *Jane Eyre*, *The White Goddess*, *Spray From an Inland Sea*, *The Sorry Tale*, and *The Case of Patience Worth* with the Book of Mormon—just because they *may* have been written by superficially similar techniques is to miss the whole point. The point is that the Book of Mormon has been offered to the world as a new witness for Jesus Christ. One can find out for oneself if this claim is true. I know for myself that it is true because of the witness I received while reading 3 Nephi, chapter 17-19.

Charles L. Sellers
Knoxville, TN

AND SPEAKING OF AUTHORITY . . .

I read with some interest David John Buerger's article on Elder Bruce R. McConkie's citations from commentaries on the Scriptures ("Speaking with Authority," *SUNSTONE* vol. 10, no. 3). I was somewhat dismayed at Mr. Buerger's side-stepping of probably the most important sources that Elder McConkie depends on to establish his doctrinal views. These two scriptural commentaries are cited at a ratio of at least 20 to 1 to all others that he cites, including himself.

I have spent the last 12 years indexing Elder McConkie's works and now have a 400 page document which demonstrates that in his published texts he cites over 16,000 different scriptural passages a minimum of 25,000 times. To my understanding, there is only one commentary more authoritative than the Standard Works themselves and that is, as the Prophet Joseph Smith was wont to say, "the oldest book in the world; . . . even the Holy Ghost" (TPJS, p. 349). How often Elder McConkie quotes from this

"oldest of books" Mr. Buerger will have to determine for himself, as we all must.

On the other issue of self-citing, most prolific LDS and non-LDS writers do this. The motive for the practice is generally nothing more than convenience for the reader.

In light of the preponderance of numbered scriptural citations and insights prompted by the Spirit (which are "unnumberable," perhaps), Elder McConkie's quotes from himself seem proportionately quite modest.

Paul Nolan Hyde
Simi Valley, CA

JOHNNY LINGO

Since Johnny Lingo's cows did not give Mahana any more innate worth than she already had, neither would I expect the kiss of a royal-born daughter of Heavenly Father to make Kent any more princely than Frogley.

Connie Susa
Warwick, Rhode Island

NOT SO WORD PERFECT

Wonderful as Word Perfect 4.1 is, it is no substitute for proof-reading. I was dismayed as I read my review "A Personal Response to Dialogue" (10:8, p44) to find several errors which altered the meaning of what I had actually written. Probably anyone can correct *uspet* to *upset* (WP Speller where were you?), but your rendering of "For *him* [my father] the most impressive feature of the Stanford Ward was its elders' quorum" to "For *me* the most . . ." obscures the very reason that I was allowed to go to Stanford in the first place. Further on, it was my "naive arrogance" not my *native* arrogance that was challenged. Finally, I should have been identified at the end as Susan Taber, not Susan Buhler.

Since the review was in your possession for nine months before publication, I find it difficult to understand why I was not given the opportunity to proofread it prior to publication.

Susan B. Taber
Newark, DE