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ORAL CREATION AND THE DICTATION OF THE BOOK OF MORMON

Brant A. Gardner

Review of 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). 250 pages with index. \$90.00 (hardback), \$29.95 (paperback).

Abstract: *Visions in a Seer Stone: Joseph Smith and the Making of the Book of Mormon introduces a new perspective in the examination of the construction of the Book of Mormon. With an important introduction to the elements of early American extemporaneous speaking, Davis applies some of those concepts to the Book of Mormon and suggests that there are elements of the organizational principles of extemporaneous preaching that can be seen in the Book of Mormon. This, therefore, suggests that the Book of Mormon was the result of extensive background work that was presented to the scribe as an extended oral performance.*

William L. Davis has provided a new view of the way in which the Book of Mormon may have been created. He focuses on the well-known fact that the text was dictated to suggest that mechanisms behind oral performance should be used to understand the text. It is a completely logical premise.

Davis intends to place his examination in the neutral territory of an academic study. While his hypothesis does not require the divine intervention that anchors explanations from believers, he does not place his work as opposed to the text. In his introduction, he notes: “Readers hoping for a study that debunks Joseph Smith and attacks the Book of Mormon will be disappointed with this work. This is not to say, however, that I will not be challenging some of the *unofficial*, nondoctrinal traditions and theories surrounding the text” (ix).

Davis is equally clear that: “I would encourage believing scholars and readers to recognize that this study addresses a readership that extends beyond the religious boundaries of the various denominations within the Latter Day Saint movement to include those who do not embrace the Book of Mormon as an inspired or authentic ancient text”(xi). As a reviewer who declares himself a believer, it is perhaps inevitable that I would disagree with some of what Davis proposes. Nevertheless, I must respect his purposes and look at his work in the context in which it was intended.

The overall theme of the book is clearly stated in the very first sentence of the first chapter: “In 1829 Joseph Smith Jr., the future prophet and founder of the Latter Day Saint movement, produced the Book of Mormon in an extended oral performance” (7). The second sentence introduces a perhaps unfamiliar reader to the reason that such “an extended oral performance” should have generated enough controversy to require a book-length treatment: “His process of spoken composition, however, was anything but usual: taking a mystical ‘seer stones,’ an object in Western esotericism that functioned like a crystal ball (also described as ‘peep stones,’ ‘spectacles,’ ‘crystals,’ ‘glasses,’ and ‘show-stones,’ among other terms), Smith placed the stone into the bottom of his upturned hat, held the hat to his face to block out all light, and then proceeded to dictate the entire narrative to his attentive scribes” (7).

Extended oral performances are not entirely unexpected, but such performances being associated with the surprising use of a seer stone requires some explanation. Davis therefore begins with a historical summary that a reader should know to understand the seer stone aspect of the oral performance process.

The overview of the place of seer stones in Western culture provides the basic understanding that the use of such implements followed a long tradition, reaching back to England. However, Davis broadens his subject far beyond the contemporary use of seer stones and connects them to a broader search for the mystical: “The impulse to resist or embellish the dogmas and power structures of established religions encouraged eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Seekers to look outside the boundaries of traditional Christianity, where a panoply of philosophies and practices awaited the curiosity of those who sought alternative systems of belief among the various traditions of Western esotericism” (9).

That tenuous tie between folk magic and the Seeker movement is crucial to his thesis that the seer stones were involved in the process of the generation of a text that attempted to answer those questions. What is missing is any indication of how the concepts surrounding the use of

a seer stone would lead to such connections. Seer stones in Joseph Smith's time were instruments to discover hidden things, but those hidden things were objects, not philosophies. It is also certain that the use of a seer stone resulted in an oral performance, but the context was more perfunctory, and the oral presentation of information was not considered to be the important aspect of the consultation. It was the discovery of the location of that which was lost or hidden which was important, not the story that described the loss.¹ Thus, there is a disconnect between the method and the extended oral performance that is not addressed.

With the historical background on seer stones set, Davis moves to the historical background that forms the backbone of his argument for the way in which Joseph produced the extended oral performance. Davis provides an important look at the way early preachers prepared and delivered their sermons. Quite apart from the application of the information to the Book of Mormon, this is a solid contribution. For the Book of Mormon connection, the important aspect of that examination is that there were, during Joseph Smith's lifetime, a number of preachers who took pride in their ability to provide a sermon without a written text. There was not only a culture of extemporaneous performance, but one of instruction in how to prepare for the extemporaneous oral performance.

There are two general types of oral performance that do not involve reading a text or reciting one that was memorized. One is impromptu speech, and the second is extemporaneous speech. The distinction is important. Impromptu speech is given with little prior preparation, while extemporaneous speech allows for extensive preparation and planning, but the presentation itself is mostly created during the event. Davis is very clear that he is using the second model, and the understanding that the oral speech act is reliant upon preparation is crucial to his thesis of how the elements of an extemporaneous performance could undergird the oral creation of the Book of Mormon.

Davis argues convincingly that Joseph would have easily learned — perhaps by instruction, perhaps by absorption — the techniques used in

1. Several sources discuss the way in which seer stones were used. See Samuel D. Green, "Joseph Smith, the Mormon," *The Christian Cynosure* 10, no. 12, December 20, 1877, <http://www.sidneyrigdon.com/dbroadhu/IL/mischig.htm#122077>; D. Michael Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1987), 39; William H. Kelley, "Benjamin Saunders Interview, Circa September 1884," in Dan Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:139; "Lorenzo Saunders Interview, 12 November 1884," in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:154–55; Caroline Rockwell Smith Statement, 25 March 1885," in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:199.

extemporaneous speaking. “Any attempt to situate Smith’s style of oral composition within the context of his life and the religious traditions that he avidly explored in his youth results in multiple potential avenues of influence” (25).

The heart of Davis’s argument is laid out in Chapter 2. Davis opens the chapter by looking at the opening of Joseph Smith’s 1832 history. At the beginning of that text is a large section that lays out the topics that will be presented in the history. This outline is used to open the discussion of the technique of “laying down heads.” He notes: “The explicit use of the skeletal sketch in the opening of the history, marking each stage in the sequence of the narrative with a summarizing phrase, provides one of the several expressions of the method commonly known as ‘laying down heads.’ Both speakers and writers used this popular, widespread technique to designate and arrange the main topics of such compositions, sermons, public speeches, essays, narrations, and school lessons” (16).

The use of preview outlines was used not only in extemporaneous speech but was also a common feature of contemporary print culture. Davis places Joseph Smith’s use in the realm of extemporaneous because he suggests that Joseph’s usage was too verbose for an imitation of the print culture: “While juxtaposing Smith’s 1832 history with contemporary print conventions might help to explain what Smith was trying to achieve in terms of his textual apparatus, the comparison falls short of explaining the origin of Smith’s style. For example, several of Smith’s prefatory heads in his 1832 history are far too long and excessively wordy for the concise phraseology modeled and usually required by print conventions” (19).

That distinction is important because it allows Davis to situate this feature as an element of extemporaneous speech rather than an imitation of print culture. Given that Joseph Smith also imitated the King James Version style from print culture, it isn’t a conclusive separation, but it does provide an appropriate reason for examining the text of the Book of Mormon to see if such techniques are seen in the text.

Readers familiar with the Book of Mormon do not need more than this suggestion to see the parallels between the several chapter headings and the concept of laying down heads. As Davis points out, they often provide an outline of the major events to be discussed in the book which follows. That is precisely what laying down heads should do.

Additionally, understanding that Joseph would have been familiar with laying down heads provides the best explanation for an otherwise ambiguous sentence in the book of Jacob: “And 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, for Christ's sake, and for the sake of our people" (Jacob 1:4). Davis understandably underscores this verse when examining the process of laying down heads in the Book of Mormon (91).

The process of laying down heads took two forms. The first is the explicit method, which produces outlines such as seen in the book headers in the Book of Mormon. The second is the concealed method, where the outline would have been created beforehand, but not explicitly provided during the oral performance (68).

Davis applies this understanding of how extemporaneous sermons might be created to Joseph Smith's famous King Follett Sermon. He finds:

Smith's introduction for the King Follett sermon suggests that he had some form of an outline in mind prior to delivery. "Before I enter fully into the investigation of the subject that is lying before us," Smith announced, "I wish to pave the way, make a few preliminaries, and bring up the subject from the beginning in order that you may understand the subject when I come to it." Thus, Smith did not approach the pulpit unprepared, trusting exclusively in the promptings of the Spirit to guide him. Rather, Smith followed a common strategy for "explanatory" sermons by providing a simple introduction before moving into more advanced issues. (66)

Thus, the thrust of Davis's argument is that examining sermons outside of the Book of Mormon confirms the probability that Joseph Smith used the techniques of preparing an outline before speaking. Davis thus posits that it becomes a reasonable assumption that those techniques were employed in the creation of the Book of Mormon.

There is historical interest in showing that Joseph Smith's preaching reflected techniques of the time, but that study would stir little controversy and would be unlikely to be an innovative examination of an aspect of early Mormonism. The most important part of the investigation is the work Davis does to show that such techniques can be seen in the text of the Book of Mormon and therefore they can tell a story about how the extended oral performance that became the Book of Mormon was created.

The hypothesis is important and provides a new and interesting way to approach the question of the creation of the Book of Mormon. Some of my own work leads me to agree that there are aspects of oral creation that can be discerned in the text. I see the application of the understanding of oral presentations and performances to be an important avenue in the study of the text of the Book of Mormon. However, Davis is not studying

the text of the Book of Mormon as much as he is suggesting a method by which the content of the text was created. That is a different question. The question for Davis's proposal is how well it works to explain the overall text of the Book of Mormon rather than specifics of the language.

Davis begins with the strongest evidence that the book header is an example of laying down heads: the header for 1 Nephi. That header very clearly describes what is going to happen in the chapter. The header clearly lays out the historical bones of the story to be told. While Davis makes that point clear (and is correct in that reading), Davis does not spend any time on the contents of 1 Nephi that are not predicted by the outline. There are multiple places where there are some asides, and the ending to 1 Nephi is not only not predicted in the heading outline, but the contents of the last chapters appear to be an unintentional deviation from the outline.²

The difference between the historical outline and the actual text of 1 Nephi does not necessarily contradict Davis's understanding of laying down heads. The variations away from the outline could be ascribed to the extemporaneous process, where the speech act itself can lead to elements that were not in the outline.

The problem with this difference between laying down heads and the actual content is that it becomes more divergent after 1 Nephi. The book outline for 2 Nephi repeats the same kind of historical backbone that we see in the header for 1 Nephi. However, the 2 Nephi outline stops with the events of the current LDS version's chapter 5. The remainder of the content of the book, comprising the modern chapters 6 through 33, are not represented in the book header. If the purpose of the explicit outline were to help Joseph Smith remember what he was to develop orally, the vast majority of 2 Nephi is set adrift from that possibility.

Davis examines concealed outlines, and it is possible to see a concealed outline in 2 Nephi 11:8: "And now I write some of the words of Isaiah, that whoso of my people shall see these words may lift up their hearts and rejoice for all men. Now these are the words, and ye may liken them unto you and unto all men." That could be seen as a concealed head, but it is not a very important one, since it leads, not to an extemporaneous performance of new material, but to the inclusion of multiple chapters of Isaiah. It also highlights the lack of any kind of head that explains the rough transition between 2 Nephi chapters 5 and 6, a division that is sufficiently stark that some LDS scholars have suggested that it really

2. This is an extended argument. See Brant A. Gardner, *Labor Diligently to Write: The Ancient Making of a Modern Scripture*, *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 35 (2020): 221–32.

ought to have been the division point between the two books of Nephi rather than the one that was dictated and printed.³

This should give us pause if the second book on the Book of Mormon raises issues for the usability of the explicit heads as an explanation. The complication is that the entire concept of the extemporaneous production was prior planning and mnemonic devices to help understand the text. So much of the book of 2 Nephi is not represented in the book outline, or head, that the hypothesis must come up with a different explanation for that content. Davis does not address the issue.

The disjunction between explicit heads and the text of the book continues in the outline for the book of Alma. That outline reads: “The account of Alma, who was the son of Alma, the first and chief judge over the people of Nephi, and also the high priest over the Church. An account of the reign of the judges, and the wars and contentions among the people. And also an account of a war between the Nephites and the Lamanites, according to the record of Alma, the first and chief judge.”

The historical backbone is certainly there. The book does speak of Alma and the chief judge and the high priest. It spends a lot of time on the wars and contentions. The explicit head can account for Alma chapters 1–4 and 43–64. However, the book of Alma also spends a lot of time with an Alma who renounces his position as chief judge and embarks on a series of visits to cities which occasion long sermons. There are important chapters where Alma address his sons. Thirty-nine chapters of important content cannot have been recalled by having memorized the explicit head.

If the book outlines were to have been mnemonic devices to generate the content of the book, they fail to do so. This conflict between prediction and actual use of the technique in the text is highlighted by the sermons.

Davis has a chapter on sermon culture in the Book of Mormon. He suggests:

Significantly, as the text repeatedly demonstrates, Smith avoided the explicit announcement of comprehensive sermon outlines in the introductions to his orations, opting to limit any preliminary notifications to brief and often generalized heads. This approach, however, should not be confused with purely extempore performances. Smith’s overt references to impending subjects and changes in topic, particularly when he lays down explicit and progressive heads to do so,

3. Frederick W. Axelgard, “1 and 2 Nephi: An Inspiring Whole,” *BYU Studies* 26, no. 4 (1986): 53–65; Joseph M. Spencer, *An Other Testament: On Typology*, (Salem, OR: Salt Press, 2012), 34–35.

demonstrate his use of the common “concealed” method of preaching ...

By removing the constraints imposed by explicitly stated preliminary sermon outlines, Smith allowed himself the freedom to address any subject that sprang to mind, in any order and for any duration, without unsettling his reader by diverging too far from any explicitly stated heads in the opening of orations. (115)

Davis is suggesting two different types of preparation, one that created the history and a second concealed method that generated the sermons. That is consistent with contemporary sermon practice. It is, however, difficult to place into the framework of an extemporaneous creation of the text of the Book of Mormon.

The Book of Mormon has explicit outlines which outline history, but they never mention sermons. Thus, right at the point where we would expect the greatest crossover in techniques from preaching culture, we find a major disconnect. The explicit heads completely ignore the sermons, and therefore do not provide the mnemonic structure that would allow Joseph Smith to create them in an appropriate context. Just as the majority of 2 Nephi cannot be explained by laying down heads, the presence of the sermons cannot be explained by laying down heads.

Furthermore, Davis suggests that Joseph allowed himself great latitude in his sermons without explicit heads, which was not “unsettling his reader by diverging too far from any explicitly stated heads” (115). I stopped that quotation intentionally, because while Davis applied it only to sermons, it must be applied to any use of the laid down heads. If it was unsettling to have a sermon that did not follow the explicit head, how can we explain the explicit heads that don’t describe major content? That is a contradiction in his hypothesis that Davis does not see, and therefore does not address.

Davis develops the concept of organization into smaller units that would help an oral performer create a larger description from a small outline hint. He explains that concept with the seven words in the book header of 2 Nephi: “An account of the death of Lehi.”

One of the reasons Smith could encapsulate an entire scene with a seven-word phrase pertains to the nature of the narrative circumstances. Rather than encompassing a complex sequence of actions, the scene contains a single trope: a variant of the deathbed scene, in which relatives and friends gather to hear

the last words of a prominent dying family member. Given the ubiquity of this conventional trope and the array of narrative elements associated with it, Smith could have easily expanded the phrase “an account of the death of Lehi” into an extended passage by simply envisioning the circle of friends and relatives round Lehi, and then offering semi-extemporaneous exhortations and blessings to each of the recipients. As such, the amplification of the seven-word phrase into a lengthy text would not be remarkable, nor would the dictation of such a moment require elaborate premeditation. (139)

The obvious counter to “Smith could have easily expanded the phrase ...” would be that Smith could easily have “translated the text.” Both statements over-simplify the problem. Extracting the bones of the outline does not explain the text but leaves us with only an unevidenced possibility.

Unquestionably, while Lehi’s scene could be easily imagined, the nature of the complexity of that scene suggests much more planning, forethought, and preparation than Davis appears to suggest. The weakness of Davis’s suggestions is precisely in the nature of the content. The process of organizing information prior to presentation is the same for extemporaneous presentations as it is for written texts.⁴ The difference is that a written text can be corrected before it sees the light of day, and the extemporaneous text is generated live, with all of the humanity of its production on full display. That difference covers over the important and critical similarity. Both written and extemporaneous productions require preparation.

Davis absolutely understands the problem of preparation. He notes:

The brevity of many mnemonic cues in the Book of Mormon indicates that Smith was familiar with the stories that his cues evoked. That such bare-minimum phrases could cue Smith’s memory suggests that he spent a long time with his stories — meditating on them, generating and developing ideas, choosing topics to address, establishing sequences of events, choosing names and places, and making any possible revisions along the way — until he became sufficiently familiar with them for the stories to become entrenched in his mind. In doing so, such preparations and mental rehearsals would enhance his memory of the narratives. A single summarizing phrase for

4. Denis Alamargot and Lucile Chanquoy, *Through the Models of Writing* (Berlin: Springer-Science+Business Media, B.V., 2001): 3–5.

such premeditated and familiar tales would be all that Smith needed to evoke the content and structure of his creations. (141)

Note the similarity between what Davis suggests and the process of creating a written text: “Writing a text is a complex task that needs a coordinated implementation of a large set of mental activities. Writers have to clearly delimitate the nature, the goal and the communicative function of the text. They also have to establish a precise representation about readers’ characteristics and expectations, in order to anticipate systematically what must, or can, be written.”⁵ In other words, Joseph Smith had to do what any author would do. He “wrote” his text, but perhaps to memory. Davis allows that he may have written down at least notes, if not the precise words.

With respect to the content, it is clear there was a planned text. Only at this point is there any significant difference between a proposal for a translated text and an extensive outline. Both require a text that clearly shows it was planned. Davis uses times when the Book of Mormon speaks of events in the future as demonstrations of laying down heads. That is a reasonable definition in his context, but both the use of laying down heads and the presence of foreshadowing in a written text are precisely the same. Davis understands and makes that prerequisite explicit: “When reviewing the entire text of the Book of Mormon, we find repeated evidence of Smith’s forethought and preparations, which militate against the theory that Smith produced the work in spontaneous, unpremeditated outbursts of creativity” (158). Those who support a translated text would agree with Davis. There is a text behind the orally dictated text.

Davis presents evidence for his hypothesis of construction within the text, but his evidence for the prior creation is based on the assumption that it must have happened, since if it had not, the extended oral performance could not have occurred. The concept of an oral presentation is useful to explain aspects of the text, but it cannot explain the elements of the text that were neither a spontaneous nor extemporaneous production. The locus of the explanation is on the performance, and the nature of the preparation is only assumed.

The laying down of explicit heads cannot provide sufficient mnemonic help to generate the contents of each of the books of the Book of Mormon, although it could be argued sufficient for 1 Nephi. Any hypothesis that covers only one case of many is not that strong. The

5. Alamargot, and Chanquoy, *Models of Writing*, 1.

concealed heads are suggested as reasons why Joseph could ignore some of those heads, and not need them in the creation of sermons. Davis's strongest recommendation for concealed heads is that Joseph Smith did not need to use them. That is not a strong indication that they formed much of a mnemonic clue to create the text.

There is nothing in the mnemonic use of any type of extemporaneous methodology that explains the nature of the Isaiah texts in the Book of Mormon. It might be used to suggest their presence but not the specifics. In particular, David Wright looked at many of those changes and found a concentration of changes around italicized words in the King James Version of the Bible, the obvious source for the majority of the Isaiah texts.⁶ That evidence cannot be explained by extemporaneous theory. Even assuming an excellent memory, the changes that were made and specifically those triggered by the presence of an italicized word preclude extemporaneous production.

The book of Ether resists much of the use of extemporaneous methods. There is no book outline, so that is of no assistance. There is an explicit case of laying down heads in the text, if we read the long genealogy in Ether 1:6–32 as laying down heads. That genealogy is used, in reverse, to structure the historical narrative.

That certainly seems like the use of heads, but it requires a prodigious amount of memorization, particularly since the list itself has duplicated names that have to appear correctly in the reversed narrative. Complicating that further is that the list in Ether 1 is a genealogy, and not a list of rulers. The historical narrative that develops from the genealogy presents numerous shifts in the rulers, including multiple names that are not included in the genealogy. The divergence in political succession between Nephite and Jaredite cultures needs some explanation, since the Jaredite practice of ultimogeniture can be discerned from the text, and is unexpected and implicit. The primogeniture among the Nephites, on the other hand, is both expected and explicit.

The book of Ether follows an entirely different logic from the rest of the Book of Mormon. Its stories are told tersely and with little sermonizing. Significantly, the textual reason of the inclusion of that book (its discussion of secret combinations), is not mentioned in any of the localized heads. The textual emphasis on secret combinations was foreshadowed in “heads” from much earlier in the text. While that does

6. David P. Wright, “Isaiah in the Book of Mormon: Or Joseph Smith in Isaiah,” in *American Apocrypha: Essays on the Book of Mormon*, ed. Brent Lee Metcalfe and Dan Vogel (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002), 157–234.

suggest pre-planning, the time distance between laying down the textual concealed head and the time that it is made explicit covers months of time and significant intervening text.

The book of Ether provides another interesting example that complicates the question of Joseph as author. In the original edition, Ether 4:1, speaking of the translation of the book of Ether, read: “and for this cause did king Benjamin keep them.” Later editions understood that this is a difficult reading, and it was Benjamin’s son Mosiah who translated the records.” The story is clear that it should have been Mosiah. However, this very error of speaking of Benjamin rather than his son occurs at the first introduction of the story of the plates in Mosiah 21:28. The correct story occurs after Mosiah 21:28, yet this “mistake” in Ether echoes a similar issue at the beginning of the story of the record of Ether. There have been a few explanations for this interesting issue in the text, but Davis’s hypothesis would suggest that the exacting preparation for an extemporaneous production would have avoided that mistake in every other case save for this one that has an interesting textual connection that, in the process of the oral presentation, would have been months apart. Positing Joseph as an author makes the mention of Benjamin doubly anomalous, since Joseph would also have been the author of the texts that Mosiah translated, which refer to Mosiah as translator, and which are more recent in memory than this interesting mention of Benjamin. Regardless of how one interprets that name in Ether, its presence argues against Davis’s theory that meticulous preparation would have led to the oral presentation.

Another indication of the need for an existing text is a particular type of repetitive resumption in the Book of Mormon. I find I am the source for misleading Davis’s use of that concept in his discussion of extemporaneous performances.⁷ I continue to believe it is a technique that may have begun in an oral culture, but I have discovered occasions where the Book of Mormon use of the technique appears to require a written text, or at least a heavily memorized pre-existing text.

Repetitive resumption is a technique in which a set of words or sometimes only the concept which marks the last part of the planned text is

7. Davis quotes Brant A. Gardner, “Literacy and Orality in the Book of Mormon,” *Interpreter* 9 (2014): 29–85, and notes that I suggested that it was a technique that developed in an oral culture, and which can be used in oral presentations to return to a theme after an interruption. He quotes me correctly, but I have learned a lot about larger examples which, while the technique may have originated as an oral technique, appear to require a written text as an explanation.

repeated after an intervening intrusive text. Thus, the repetition allows the author to pick up where they had departed, or to resume to narrative flow.

Repetitive resumption can be used to describe returning to a sentence that has become overly complex. Royal Skousen uses it in that way.⁸ In the examination of the creation of texts, it can be used to describe a technique that brackets an intrusive, inserted text.⁹ That function also appears in the Book of Mormon. At times, it allows the author to return after a short aside. Those cases would easily fit into an extemporaneous performance. However, the longer the intrusive insertion, the greater mental distance from the phrases of the departure and the return, the less likely that memory provides the ability to recapture the point of departure.

To present the basic idea, the following is a short example that could rely upon memory:

So that when he had finished his work at Melek he departed thence, and traveled three days' journey on the north of the land of Melek; **and he came to a city which was called Ammonihah.**

Now it was the custom of the people of Nephi to call their lands, and their cities, and their villages, yea, even all their small villages, after the name of him who first possessed them; and thus it was with the land of Ammonihah.

And it came to pass that **when Alma had come to the city of Ammonihah** he began to preach the word of God unto them.
(Alma 8:6–8)

There is another case where an intrusive text was inserted in Mosiah 28:11–20 where the number of intervening verses is not only longer, but they are also interrupted by a chapter break in the original 1830 edition. The complexity of remembering the specific sentences over that number of verses as well as the conceptual chapter boundary make this less amenable to an extemporaneous insertion. It could be explained as a written text or a memorized text but not an extemporaneous text.

My final issue with the extemporaneous hypothesis is personal. I spent time in high school and college in competitive speech tournaments where I was directly involved with events that were explicitly extemporaneous, or which employed those techniques. I can

8. Royal Skousen, *The History of the Text of the Book of Mormon: Grammatical Variation*, (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2016): 2:808–53.

9. I. Tzvi Abusch, “Maqlû III 1–30: Internal Analysis and Manuscript Evidence for the Revision of an Incantation,” *Studia Orientalia*, 106. (2009): 307.

appreciate the need for information to draw upon in the extemporaneous presentation. I can appreciate drawing upon extensive study. However, I cannot easily reconcile my experience with extemporaneous speaking with the descriptions of the Joseph Smith's oral performance.

When speaking extemporaneously, the flow of the words and ideas is important. Combinations occur which are new and relevant but come as part of the performance. I contrast that with my experience helping my wife prepare talks early in our marriage. I would suggest something to her, and she would say that she really liked what I said, and that I should therefore repeat it. That was difficult to do. Invariably, I could not recall what I had said and had to reconceive it. Break that process down to the dictation of the entire text of the Book of Mormon at a rate of about twenty words per minute. That constant interruption of thought would make it difficult to produce anything close to what I might do in a strictly oral performance. When that problem is combined with the statements from witnesses that Joseph Smith always picked up where he left off, without any hint of where he was, then that production process would be beyond anything I have experienced.

The greater the need for memorization, the less presence of extemporaneous production we find. The best use of Davis's hypothesis is to suggest that there was a pre-existing text (perhaps unwritten, but therefore requiring massive memorization), and that the actual sentences themselves, and perhaps a few of the asides, were extemporaneous. There is evidence for extemporaneity at that level in the text. Nevertheless, Davis suggests that the presence of any of these outline devices must point to a more modern creation of the text:

When Nephi commanded his brother Jacob to “engraven the heads” of sermons, revelations, and prophecies onto the gold plates and to “touch upon them as much as it were possible” (Jacob 2:4), both Nephi and Jacob and many of the author-prophets who followed did not limit the technique of laying down heads to oratorical performances. They also used the technique to organize their historical narratives, providing the structural architectonics for the entire Book of Mormon. Crucial to understanding Smith's process of narrative product however, is the recognition that these methods and techniques emerged in a different place and time than the period in which the stories of the Book of Mormon occurred, signaling the authoritative presence of a modern hand — whether as a translator or author — in the construction of the work. (159)

Note the contradiction Davis provides that significantly weakens this hypothesis: “While the technique of laying down heads was common in the eighteenth century (and much earlier), pedagogical approaches guiding students in a stop-wise fashion from beginning compositional skills to advanced techniques were not yet prevalent” (17, emphasis added). The obvious conclusion is that the concept of organizing a text is quite ancient. The question about organization using concealed heads cannot be placed into any dating scheme, as most texts exhibit some form of organization, even if they don’t use the vocabulary of the nineteenth century texts to explain them.

The “laying down of heads” is a time-specific vocabulary that describes organizational elements. It is difficult to find a way to discern the use of concealed heads as a nineteenth century element because they do not reflect any kind of internal organization, which could easily be extracted from most documents. The strongest evidence for the laying down of heads are the explicit heads, but they don’t actually help explain the majority of the text of the Book of Mormon.

Davis’s hypothesis continues to be based on an assumed pre-existing text that is only hypothesized:

Whether one chooses to believe that the Book of Mormon emerged exclusively from Smith’s mind and creative powers or as the translation of an authentic historical record, an examination of the textual and historical evidence suggests that Smith engaged in advance preparation for the work. The text reveals a process of careful and thoughtful planning, and the specific structuring that underpins the composition of the entire work centers on the introductory technique of laying down heads to create sketch outlines and mnemonic cues. (190)

Davis is correct that there must have been a pre-existing text, whether written or simply mentally conceived and stored. The data go further to require extensive memorization of massive details that are foreshadowed in the text, but which are not present in the “sketch outlines and other mnemonic cues.” The support for Davis’s thesis is the careful selection of only the evidence that supports the hypothesis, while ignoring the vast majority of the Book of Mormon that cannot be explained by those “sketch outlines.”

I do believe that initiating an interest in the oral aspects of the text will be very productive for understanding the text itself. I am not convinced that it can tell us anything useful about the creation of the text.

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