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Abstract The claim that the Gadianton robbers in the Book of Mormon are merely a reflection of nineteenth-century Masons, who were referred to in the late 1820s as "secret combinations," is false since an 1826 use of the phrase establishes that those words were not used exclusively to describe Masons.

"Secret Combinations" Revisited

Daniel C. Peterson

It has long been contended by critics of the Book of Mormon that its "Gadianton robbers" are merely nineteenth-century Freemasons, transparently disguised.[1] As one of their chief arguments for that notion, such writers as David Persuitte and Robert Hullinger have pointed out that the Book of Mormon refers to the Gadianton robbers using the same phrase, "secret combination," with which contemporary newspapers referred to the Masons during the great anti-Masonic agitation of the late 1820s.[2]

One can easily demonstrate, though, that the word "combination" was commonly used, in the nineteenth century and earlier, in the sense of "conspiracy." Thus, its use for the robbers of Gadianton seems to bear little real significance for the question of Book of Mormon authorship, proving at best that the text's English vocabulary is most likely that of a nineteenth-century American. But this was never in doubt.[3]

However, in a 1989 article, Dan Vogel took the argument even further. "At the time of the Book of Mormon's publication," he claimed, "the term 'secret combinations' was used almost exclusively to refer to Freemasonry."[4] According to this

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1 For a survey and preliminary evaluation of the arguments advanced for this proposition, see Daniel C. Peterson, "Notes on 'Gadianton Masonry'," in Stephen D. Ricks and William J. Hamblin, eds., *Warfare in the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1990), 174–224.

2 Robert N. Hullinger, *Mormon Answer to Skepticism: Why Joseph Smith Wrote the Book of Mormon* (St. Louis: Clayton, 1980), 114, nn. 30 and 31.

3 See Peterson, "Notes on 'Gadianton Masonry'," 189–90.

4 Dan Vogel, "Mormonism's 'Anti-Masonick Bible'," *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 9 (1989): 18.

view—which soon tends to lose its modest "almost"—it is the phrase as a whole that uniquely denotes Freemasonry and, so, points to a nineteenth-century origin for the Book of Mormon as well as to the real identity of the (presumably fictional) Gadianton robbers.[5]

The obvious problem with such a view is that it is difficult to see why the joining of a common adjective like "secret" to a common term of the day like "combination" should be regarded as a technical piece of esoteric jargon so distinctive as to constitute a definitive test of authorship or a conclusive refutation of the Book of Mormon's historical authenticity. The evidence supporting Vogel's claim, furthermore, seems to have been drawn from an overly narrow sampling of documents, and to be, simply, too sparse to sustain him. I noted this in 1990:

> Vogel's own evidence—which consists of seven anti-Masonic newspaper quotations—merely demonstrates what has been known for many years, that the phrase was indeed sometimes employed in reference to Masons. But this is a far cry from demonstrating that such was its *exclusive* use. . . .What is needed, before one can confidently declare that the phrase "secret combination" was never used in non-Masonic contexts in the 1820s and 1830s, is a careful search of documents from that period of American history *that have nothing to do with the controversy surrounding the Masons*. This has not yet been done.[6]

I made a small effort in that direction for my 1990 article, but the results, while they were interesting and suggested that Vogel was probably wrong, remained inconclusive. A computerized search of available nineteenth-century federal and state court opinions revealed ten occurrences of the phrase "secret combination(s)," not one of which referred to the Masons. Unfortunately, though, the earliest of these dated only to 1850,

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5 On 26 August 1989, Vogel and his sometime coauthor Brent Metcalfe, in a Salt Lake City conversation with me and my colleague, Prof. Stephen D. Ricks, declared flatly that the phrase "secret combination" was never used at the time of the translation and publication of the Book of Mormon, except to refer to Freemasonry.

6 Peterson, "Notes on 'Gadianton Masonry'," 191. Italics in the original.

fully two decades after the publication of the Book of Mormon. This lack of pre-1850 references was, I believe, a merely accidental effect of the fact that court decisions of the first half of the nineteenth century remain largely uncomputerized, and so could not be easily searched. Following a somewhat different research direction, I located a passionate 1831 attack on bar associations, by a Massachusetts journalist named Frederick Robinson, in which such phrases as "secret bar association," "secret brotherhood of the bar," "combination," "conspiracy," "secret society," and "secret fraternity" all appeared in close proximity. It seemed mere bad luck that the precise phrase "secret combination" did not actually occur.[7]

However, the fact remained that a non-Masonic occurrence of the precise phrase "secret combination" had not been located prior to 1850. At this point, though, I elected to retire from the issue. I am a medieval Islamicist, not an American historian. I could only say in parting that the conservative character of legal language, coupled with the fact that the phrase "secret combination(s)" occurred at least ten times in court decisions issued between 1850 and 1898, certainly suggested that exploration of older court materials would likely find earlier occurrences of the phrase.[8] And there remained the tens of thousands of pages of non-legal writing from Jacksonian America, which I had neither the time nor the patience to comb. "Can anyone doubt," I wrote rather resignedly, "that a more extensive search in period writings will locate precisely that phrase?"[9]

Indeed, I have now quite unintentionally located precisely that phrase, "secret combination," used in a plainly non-Masonic context, in a letter from late 1826. This establishes that the phrase was being used to refer to things other than Freemasonry before Joseph Smith obtained the plates from which he translated the Book of Mormon, as well as after.

The 1828 presidential campaign sank to depths that make today's "dirty campaigning" seem like a church choir rehearsal. For example, Charles Hammond, the editor of the *Cincinnati Gazette* and a fervent partisan of Henry Clay, advanced the claim that Clay's rival, Andrew Jackson, had never actually been legally married to his wife. Hammond was strident and shrill in

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7 Ibid., 195–97.

8 Ibid., 191–93.

9 Ibid., 197.

his accusations. "Ought a convicted adulteress and her paramour husband to be placed in the highest offices of this free and Christian land?" he demanded. This was just one of many brutal charges and countercharges traded during the election campaign—a leading Clay newspaper was the Washington *National Journal*—but it was particularly resented by General Jackson. And when his wife died at the end of the campaign, Jackson held Clay personally responsible. "A being so gentle and so virtuous," he said, "slander might wound but could not dishonor." Indeed, Jackson had long felt that Clay was behind such attacks. Even "the aged and virtuous female," he had written to Sam Houston on 15 December 1826, could not escape "his secrete [sic] combinations of base slander."[10]

The importance of this passage should be obvious. Here, as I have said, we have a non-Masonic occurrence of the term "secret combination" from the period immediately prior to the translation of the Book of Mormon. Indeed, the individual using the phrase, Gen. Andrew Jackson, was himself a very prominent Mason.[11] Had he known the phrase as referring uniquely to Freemasonry, or even as predominantly associated with Freemasonry, it seems highly unlikely that he would have used it in this pejorative way against a despised opponent. Yet by the date of Jackson's letter to Houston, 15 December 1826, the hysteria surrounding the murder or disappearance of William Morgan—which Brodie and others have imagined to be reflected in the Book of Mormon, and during which, we are told, the phrase "secret combination" referred exclusively to Freemasonry—was already approximately three months old.[12]

Thus we can now say without fear of contradiction that non-Masons could be accused of involvement in "secret combinations" both before and after the publication of the Book of Mormon, and even, most particularly, during the anti-Masonic hysteria of the late 1820s.

It is not often that so neat a refutation of a historical claim presents itself. Yet, since my own desultory readings on American history and politics have supplied this counterexample, one can confidently predict that a true search of period writings

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10 Robert V. Remini, *Henry Clay: Statesman for the Union* (New York and London: Norton, 1991), 340.

11 As was Henry Clay, although by this time he was not particularly active in the organization. See Remini, *Henry Clay*, 333–34.

12 Remini, *Henry Clay*, 333; Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith*, 2d ed. (New York: Knopf, 1975), 63.

would furnish many more. The claim that the Book of Mormon's "secret combinations"—simply because they are called "secret combinations"—necessarily betray their origins in nineteenth-century anti-Masonic paranoia can now be definitively laid to rest.