

"Secret Combinations"

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Helaman 3:23 "There was continual peace established in the land, all save it were the secret combinations which Gadianton the robber had established in the more settled parts of the land, which at that time were not known unto those who were at the head of government."

Critics of the Book of Mormon have long argued that, since the book uses the term *secret combination* and since that term was indeed used in New York in the 1820s to refer to a supposed conspiracy among the Freemasons, the Gadianton robbers must simply represent a memory of the Masons (presumably worked into the Book of Mormon by an anti-Masonic Joseph Smith). Such an argument is illogical and flawed in many ways, and it was eventually dropped by Alexander Campbell, its original proponent.¹

Indeed, use of the term *combination* to mean "conspiracy" or "monopoly" was not unusual at the time of Joseph, as Noah Webster's 1828 American dictionary makes clear. The word also occurs in George Washington's "Proclamation on the Whiskey Rebellion" (1794) and in his "Farewell Address" (1796). It appears numerous times in the Federalist Papers, in Blackstone's *Commentaries on the Laws of England*,² and can easily be found elsewhere.

What of the phrase "*secret combination*"? A search of federal and state court opinions available on computer readily yields at least ten occurrences of this phrase, one being in an 1850 decision of the United States Supreme Court. These opinions show that the term *secret combination* was widely used in the second half of the nineteenth century to describe secret agreements, coalitions for exercising undue influence on the legislature, agreements in restraint of trade, secret business transactions, secret societies, and many other such things.

As early as 1548, the laws of Edward VI prohibited merchants and workers from swearing "mutual oaths" in any conspiracy, "society, brotherhood, or company of any craft, mystery, or occupation" to fix prices. The term "combination in restraint of trade" continues today to be used in antitrust regulation as a synonym for "monopoly" and "conspiracy." What better English term, then, could possibly have been used to describe a group who had banded together among the ancient inhabitants of the Americas "that they might get gain"? (see Helaman 6:17).

The laborious task of combing legal and numerous other records from the first half of the nineteenth century—which remain largely unindexed and noncomputerized—is yet to be done. But the widespread use of the phrase *secret combination* in later nineteenth-century litigation, coupled with the highly conservative nature of legal language, gives reason to expect that the phrase will be found in the earlier period as well. For example, in his Proclamation to the Citizens of Nauvoo in 1843, Joseph Smith denounced the thieves and desperadoes on the Mississippi River as a "secret combination for stealing."³ His usage seems to reflect a general usage without any Masonic overtones.

One other interesting contemporaneous occurrence of a similar phrase has been located. On June 25, 1831, Frederick Robinson, a journalist and Massachusetts legislator, wrote to Rufus Choate attacking the bar association as a "secret brotherhood." This "secret society," he says, is attempting to seize control of the American

judicial system and to establish itself as a kind of aristocracy. This, he declares, “is an encroachment on the natural rights of man,” and the situation is already far gone. “Most of the offices of government are in your hands,” he says to attorney Choate. “You say that the bar is a ‘necessary evil,’ ” Robinson concludes. “I know that it is an evil; that it is necessary I deny. I know of no good resulting to the community from the existence of your *secret bar association*. Public good was not the object of your *combination*. It is a conspiracy against the rights and liberties of the people.”⁴

Evidently, the terms *combination* and *secret combination* were not special code words in Joseph Smith’s day referring solely to the Masons. They were normal words for conspiracies of all kinds in Joseph’s day. More extensive searching in period writings will undoubtedly locate a range of meanings for the phrase *secret combination*.

Based on research by David R. Benard, John W. Welch, and Daniel C. Peterson, October 1989. For further recent studies about the Gadianton Robbers, placing them outside the realms of early nineteenth-century America, see Daniel C. Peterson, “The Gadianton Robbers as Guerilla Warriors” and “Notes on ‘Gadianton Masonry,’” and Bruce W. Warren, “Secret Combinations, Warfare, and Captive Sacrifice in Mesoamerica and the Book of Mormon,” in Stephen Ricks and William Hamblin, eds., Warfare in the Book of Mormon (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1990), 146-229.

Footnotes

1. Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1984), 131.
2. William Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1765-69), 4:159.
3. Joseph Fielding Smith, ed. and comp., *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1979), 285.
4. Cited in Mortimer J. Adler, ed., *The Annals of America*, 21 vols. (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1968-1974), 5:441-47.