Secret Combinations and Flaxen Cords: Anti-Masonic Rhetoric and the Book of Mormon

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Some critics of the Book of Mormon claim that Joseph Smith drew certain terminology from his nineteenth-century environment. In particular, they suggest that terms such as secret society and secret combination may reflect anti-Masonic rhetoric from the period or even that the term flaxen cord has Masonic overtones. This article traces many varied uses of secret combination in nineteenth-century writings that have nothing to do with the Masons. The appearance of these terms in the Book of Mormon does not weaken the historical claims of the Book of Mormon.
SECRET COMBINATIONS

AND FLAXEN CORDS

Anti-Masonic Rhetoric & the Book of Mormon
The appearance of terms such as *secret combinations* and *flaxen cord* in the Book of Mormon has led critics to claim that the book reflects a 19th-century-American cultural milieu. Those two particular terms tie especially to the world of Freemasonry, they assume, and reveal that Joseph Smith simply borrowed them and wove them into what they believe is a fabricated narrative. What are we to make of such claims? For one thing, a search of literature shows that those terms were by no means peculiar to Joseph’s environment but appear in a wide range of early American and British publications. Moreover, the Book of Mormon applies the terms to situations that were foreign to Joseph’s world.
SECRET COMBINATIONS AND THE MASONs

In 1826 a bricklayer named William Morgan mysteriously disappeared from Batavia, New York. Because Morgan was in the process of publishing a book on Freemasonry that disclosed the ceremonies and practices of the order, suspicion fell on the Masons. Politicians seized upon the issue, an anti-Masonic party fielded candidates in several elections, Freemasonry was attacked in state legislatures, and anti-Masonic agitation played a part in the presidential election of 1828.

Historians and critics have often claimed that the Book of Mormon reflects the anti-Masonic rhetoric that was rife in upstate New York during the years preceding its publication. For example, Fawn Brodie stated that “Joseph Smith was writing the Book of Mormon in the thick of a political crusade. . . . And he quickly introduced into the book the theme of the Gadianton band.” Another author likewise claims that “Book of Mormon accounts of robbers resemble reports of early nineteenth-century political insurgencies because the scriptural narrative was imbued with the anti-Masonic rhetoric permeating Joseph Smith’s culture.” A third writer asserts that

secret societies which promise their initiates power and wealth—complete with elaborate ritual, secret signs and tokens, and special clothing—are not distinctive cultural traits and do not require cultural transmission to have their existence. However, there is a noticeable linguistic dependency on anti-Masonic rhetoric in the Book of Mormon’s description of ancient secret societies.

At first glance this claim of rhetorical or linguistic influence on Joseph Smith and thereby the Book of Mormon may seem unlikely. Most anti-Masonic writing was florid even by the standards of the time and formed an odd contrast to the lean vocabulary and spare narrative style of the Book of Mormon. But what critics mean when they speak of the presence of anti-Masonic rhetoric in the Book of Mormon is that the book adopted certain words and phrases that the anti-Masons also used. For example, one author asserts that “secret oaths, secret plans, secret words, secret combinations, secret signs, secret abominations, secret band, secret work, secrets—all [such expressions] were anti-Masonic terms of the time.” But there is no reason to believe that the anti-Masons held the copyright on the word secret. Its presence in the Book of Mormon only shows that Joseph Smith and his contemporaries spoke a common language.

Most writers focus their attention on just two of these terms: secret society and secret combination. The anti-Masons frequently referred to the Masonic fraternity as a secret society. The term does occur three times in the Book of Mormon (3 Nephi 3:9; Ether 9:6; Ether 11:22), but it also appears in many writings of the time that have no connection to Freemasonry. It was widely used in reference to temperance societies; college fraternities; criminal organizations; medieval Moslem sects; covert Protestant groups in Catholic countries; revolutionary movements in France, Germany, Ireland, Poland, and Italy; and a variety of other movements. When anti-Masonic writers spoke of secret societies, their use of the term clearly referred to more than just the Masonic fraternity. For example, a speaker to an anti-Masonic
The term secret combinations is more distinctive and deserves closer scrutiny. Critics of the Book of Mormon have long argued that its presence in the Book of Mormon betrays the book’s 19th-century origins and that in upstate New York in the 1820s it could only have been a reference to Freemasonry. Even Mark D. Thomas, a sympathetic commentator, suggests that the term was a “code name for Masonry.” Another author states that “at the time of the Book of Mormon’s publication the term ‘secret combinations’ was used almost exclusively to refer to Freemasonry.”

In support of these claims, such authors point to seven occurrences of the term found in four upstate New York newspapers between 1827 and 1829. At first this list may look impressive, but aspects of timing and location do not match up with what we know of Joseph Smith’s whereabouts during the same period. Indeed, on closer examination, it is most unlikely that any occurrences of the term could have directly influenced the Book of Mormon. The first instance of the term secret combination occurred in March 1827 in a newspaper published in Batavia, New York, about 60 miles from Palmyra. Three more instances appeared in Palmyra newspapers in July, November, and December of 1828. At that time Joseph Smith was living not in Palmyra but in Harmony, Pennsylvania, a distance of two or three days’ travel. The remaining three occurrences were published in Palmyra newspapers in September, October, and November of 1829, several months after the translation was completed and the copyright secured and while the printing was under way. Therefore, the argument that Joseph Smith adopted the term from anti-Masonic writings cannot be sustained by these sources. It will stand only if it can be shown that these newspaper articles are representative of a wider range of anti-Masonic writings, yet to be identified, that Joseph Smith might reasonably be expected to have read.

But even that idea is a matter of some uncertainty. In 1830 James Creighton Odiorne published a collection of popular anti-Masonic writings entitled Opinions on Speculative Masonry. This 280-page anthology included 29 speeches, sermons, editorials, and letters by various anti-Masonic writers from New York and Massachusetts, most of which had previously circulated in pamphlet form. Yet in this entire collection the term secret combination occurs only once. If the term were a generally understood code name for Freemasonry, it is difficult to explain why it is almost absent from a book of this kind. Perhaps the cluster of occurrences cited in newspapers of the time does not accurately represent the wider circle of anti-Masonic writings.

In any case, as Daniel C. Peterson has noted, “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.” Peterson has also noted that the identification of the term as exclusive to Freemasonry rests entirely on a reading of a very narrow sample of documents. Naturally a researcher who looks only at anti-Masonic writings will find the term only there.

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.

Peterson has reported one such non-Masonic use of the term by President Andrew Jackson in a letter written to Sam Houston in 1826 at the height of excitement over William Morgan’s disappearance. This occurrence alone demonstrates that the term secret combinations was not universally considered to refer to Masonry, particularly because Jackson himself was an active Mason. One critic of the Book of Mormon cites another non-Masonic case, a letter published in January 1829 in an anti-Masonic newspaper that applies the term to a college fraternity, Phi Beta Kappa.

Thomas takes note of Peterson’s work and correctly observes that to support the claim that secret combinations referred to something broader than Masonry, it is necessary to find more ample evidence that the term was used in non-Masonic contexts.

If the discussion of conspiratorial organizations contains roughly the same frequency of usage of the term “secret combinations,” then we may be justified in saying that this phrase was a non-specific symbol that did not contain any subtle
allusion to Masonry. However, if this phrase is largely absent from general conspiratorial language in the early nineteenth century, then it would be reasonable to conclude that “secret combination” was generally understood as referring to Masonry.  

In their efforts to discover how the term was used during the 19th century, both Peterson and Thomas turned to legal records. In 1990 Peterson found a number of court cases in which the term secret combinations described illegal conspiracies of various kinds, none of which had any connection to Freemasonry. Unfortunately, the earliest case found by Peterson dated to 1850.  

Thomas took a different approach: he found six cases involving illegal labor combinations from the period between 1806 and 1829, but he failed to find the term in those reports.  

Collections of computerized legal documents are now more extensive, and a search for the term secret combination(s) turns up 50 cases from the 19th century, including 6 dated before 1850. These cases make it possible to trace the courts’ use of the term to around the time of the publication of the Book of Mormon.  

In 1819, for example, the Court of Appeals in Kentucky used the term to describe a scheme to obtain control of a valuable horse. In 1825 the Supreme Court of New York decided a case in which a number of people had participated in a scheme involving a series of sham conveyances of property. The court described this arrangement as “a fraudulent and secret combination.” The Supreme Court of Tennessee in 1833 used the term in a case involving the duties of surety for a constable. In 1840 the Kentucky Court of Appeals contrasted the duties of a toll bridge operator with those of a common carrier of freight and noted that property carried over a toll bridge “is not exposed to the same hazard from secret combinations.” The South Carolina Court of Appeals and Errors ruled in 1841 that a bank might sometimes be justified in suspending species payments for a time when it is the victim of “secret combinations of foreign and hostile institutions.” Finally, the Illinois Supreme Court in 1849 employed the term in connection with irregularities in the sale of a hotel in Quincy. Significantly, none of these cases had any relation to Freemasonry.  

Occurrences of the term are not confined to reports of court cases. Recently other historical documents from 18th- and 19th-century America have become available in a form that facilitates word searches. For example, the Library of Congress now makes some documents from the founding period available on the Internet, and the Making of America Collection at the University of Michigan and Cornell University contains many books and articles from the latter part of the 19th century and a few items from as early as 1815. Although these sources are just a small sample of the historical materials in archives and libraries around the country, they show that the term secret combinations was in use soon after the beginning of the 18th century and continued to be used throughout the 19th century, usually in contexts unrelated to Freemasonry. Table 1 shows occurrences of the term up to 1850, and table 2 tabulates the term’s various appearances in items published between 1851 and 1900.  

What did secret combinations mean to the contemporaries of Joseph Smith and to other 19th-century readers? Even Thomas, who does not believe that the term applied exclusively to the Freemasons, thinks that it had a rather narrow meaning: “The Book of Mormon and early nineteenth-century usage understand ‘secret combinations’ as oath-taking, murderous societies that destroy nations.” But an examination of the passages from the 18th and 19th centuries shows that the term had a wide range of usage and was, in fact, hardly more than a general synonym for a conspiracy. The following list of meanings, though not exhaustive, illustrates some of the ways in which the term secret combination(s) appeared in American discourse during that time period.
1. A covert alliance of princes or states. English historian John Strype states in *Annals of the Reformation*, published in 1709, that "the chiefest Popish potentates entered into a secret combination to destroy the reformed religion utterly." This meaning of the term continued throughout the 18th and 19th centuries. In 1846 a writer spoke of "a secret combination of Catholic princes" arrayed against Luther, and another historian employed the term to describe a secret alliance between Austria and Russia in the 18th century.

2. A conspiracy against a monarch by members of the nobility. David Hume, in his monumental *History of England*, published in the middle of the 18th century, twice refers to a conspiracy among the barons of King John as a "secret combination." In an American short story published in 1837, the term describes a court conspiracy against the Emperor Constantine. In another case it points to the plot to assassinate Julius Caesar.

3. A criminal conspiracy to get gain. Writers frequently referred to predatory criminal organizations as secret combinations. For example, in 1788, during the trial of Warren Hastings for conspiring with native rulers to plunder the provinces of India, English writer and statesman Richard Brinsley Sheridan described the scheme as a "secret combination." Frank Soulé, an early historian of the state of California, describes the criminal syndicates that sprang up there during the gold rush:

While this constant immigration favored the freedom of criminals from arrest, it also helped to extend their acquaintance among kindred rogues. Wherever they went, they knew there were one, two, or half a dozen noted haunts for fellows like themselves, upon whose aid they could always rely, to execute new outrages, to swear an *alibi*, or give any kind of false testimony that might be wished; to fee counsel or offer straw-bail, or to plan an escape from pursuit or prison of themselves, or some hotly pressed associate in crime. Thus there was gradually formed a secret combination among the chief thieves, burglars and murderers of the country, minute ramifications of which extended down to the pettiest pilferers.

On occasion, these criminal organizations, like the Gadianton robbers, may have adopted the paraphernalia of a secret society. A piece of serial fiction written in the mid-19th century describes a "secret and well-organized combination" of horse thieves who operated throughout the eastern states: "Their business was to steal horses, which were transferred by agents and runners from hand to hand, and thus passed from North to South and vice versa." The writer goes on to say that the gang "had secret signs, grips, and watch-words. They had also, their landmarks; and a perfect stranger, belonging to this band, could travel through the State as over familiar ground."

4. Economic conspiracies in restraint of trade. Schemes to rig the bids at an auction or to raise prices or wages or to resist the introduction of new technology were frequently characterized as "secret combinations."

5. A conspiracy by the politically elite to manipulate the government for their own purposes. The existence of secret combinations of this kind was a matter of great concern in the early republic. For example, in 1788, during the debates of New York’s state convention to ratify the federal constitution, Alexander Hamilton, who was a delegate from the city and county of New York, argued in favor of electing members of the Senate for fixed terms in order to make them independent, to some degree, of the state legislatures:

In this, the few must yield to the many; or, in other words, the particular must be sacrificed to...
the general interest. If the members of Congress are too dependent on the state legislatures, they will be eternally forming secret combinations from local views.  

Hamilton wrote the term again the following year in a letter to George Washington. Washington had solicited Hamilton’s advice regarding his conduct as president and how he could best support the dignity of the office. Hamilton was of the opinion that the president should keep the people at a respectful distance but that senators and foreign ambassadors should have unrestricted access to the president to avoid the creation of a clique of presidential advisers who might manipulate and deceive him. Although the term secret combination never occurs in The Federalist, the word combination appears frequently in those portions written by Hamilton. In fact, Hamilton was greatly concerned about preventing the formation of corrupt political oligarchies, or combinations, and saw the checks and balances of the Constitution as a remedy. The anti-Federalists expressed similar concerns about “combinations, secret or open.”

During the early 1820s, controversy arose over congressional nominating caucuses that selected candidates for president. These caucuses were criticized as elitist and undemocratic. During the election of 1824, the congressional caucus, with only a quarter of the members attending, gave its support to William Crawford. Andrew Jackson, John Quincy Adams, Henry Clay, and John C. Calhoun refused to accept the decision of the caucus. A spirited debate ensued in the United States Senate during which Senator John Holmes stated:

When the Representatives act with open doors, and expose their views and motives to the world, the people’s rights are safe, the danger lies in secret combinations, in compacts to divide and distract—in private meetings to prevent public meetings. It is here that bargains may be made, and management and intrigue be practiced with success.

Later in the century a historian rehearsed a plot by a number of prominent men in Kentucky, called the Spanish associates, to take the settlements into an alliance with Spain, which at that time controlled New Orleans and navigation on the Mississippi, in direct opposition to the wishes of the majority of the citizens. This cabal was called “a secret combination of influence and management.” Cliques of corrupt politicians in the New York legislature were also referred to in this way. Writers spoke of “a secret combination of bankrupt brokers and political financiers” that deprived the city of New York of its independence and wrote of “the Canal Ring,” a “secret combination” of corrupt contractors and politicians that siphoned off most of the revenues of the Erie Canal.

6. A conspiracy to ruin the reputation of an individual by spreading false information. From 1808 to 1828 Quaker congregations in New York and Pennsylvania were racked with doctrinal controversy. These contentions eventually led to a schism that divided the Quakers for more than a century. On one side was the liberal Hicksite party, who gathered around the popular preacher and abolitionist Elias Hicks. On the other side was the orthodox party, led by several ministers, including the English Quaker Anna Braithwaite.

In 1824 the Hicksites, who were prominent in rural Pennsylvania and upstate New York, issued a pamphlet entitled The Errors of Anna Braithwaite in Relation to the Doctrines Held and Preached by Elias Hicks and the Revilers Exposed: Being an Examination of a Pamphlet Issued by the Secret Combination, Associated for the Purpose of Destroying the Religious Character of Elias Hicks, Termed “Calumny Refuted.”
<table>
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<th>Date</th>
<th>Author</th>
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<tr>
<td>1788</td>
<td>Richard Brinsley Sheridan</td>
<td>A conspiracy between British officers and local rulers to plunder the provinces of India</td>
<td>Chauncey A. Goodrich, Selected British Eloquence: Embracing the Best Speeches Entire of the Most Eminent Orators of Great Britain for the Last Two Centuries (1856), 429</td>
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<td>1788</td>
<td>Alexander Hamilton</td>
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<td>Jonathan Elliot, <em>The Debates in the Several State Conventions on the Adoption of the Federal Constitution</em> (1861), 318</td>
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<td>1824</td>
<td>Hickite Quakers</td>
<td>A group of orthodox Quaker ministers</td>
<td><em>The Errors of Anna Braithwaite in Relation to the Doctrines Held and Preached by Elias Hicks and the Revelers Exposed . . .</em> (1824)</td>
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<td>1825</td>
<td>New York Supreme Court</td>
<td>A fraudulent attempt to conceal assets through sham conveyances of property</td>
<td>Esek Cowen (reporter), <em>Fellows v. Fellows</em>, in <em>Reports of Cases Argued and Determined in the Supreme Court and in the Court for Trial of Impeachments and Correction of Errors of the State of New York</em> (1852), 4:685</td>
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<td>1830</td>
<td>no author listed</td>
<td>Freemasons</td>
<td>“Address of the Massachusetts Anti-Masonic Convention to the People of the Commonwealth,” cited in <em>James Creighton Odiorne, Opinions on Speculative Masonry Relative to its Origin, Nature, and Tendency</em> (1830), 239</td>
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<td>1833</td>
<td>Tennessee court</td>
<td>Responsibility for the malfeasance of a constable</td>
<td>George S. Yerger (reporter), <em>Wells v. Gant</em>, in <em>Reports of Cases Argued and Determined in the Supreme Court of Tennessee During the Year 1833</em> (1843), 494</td>
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<tr>
<td>1835</td>
<td>no author listed</td>
<td>May refer to Freemasons (reference is unclear)</td>
<td>“The Press and the Convent Question,” <em>New England Magazine</em>, June 1835, 454</td>
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<td>1837</td>
<td>Mrs. Harrison Smith</td>
<td>From a piece of serial fiction about the Byzantine court</td>
<td>Mrs. Harrison Smith, “Constantine: or, The Rejected Throne, Concluded,” <em>Southern Literary Messenger</em>, December 1837, 725</td>
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<td>1840</td>
<td>Kentucky court</td>
<td>Duties of the toll bridge operator and a common carrier of property</td>
<td>James G. Dana (reporter), <em>Frankfort Bridge Co. v. Williams</em>, in <em>Reports of Select Cases Decided in the Court of Appeals of the Commonwealth of Kentucky</em> (1851), 405</td>
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<td>1843</td>
<td>church council</td>
<td>Congregants who circulated false charges of delinquency about their pastor</td>
<td>“Exparte Council at Reading, Massachusetts,” <em>New Englander and Yale Review</em> 5 (October 1847): 560</td>
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<td>1843</td>
<td>South Carolina court</td>
<td>A run on a bank by other financial institutions</td>
<td>R. H. Spears, <em>State v. Bank of South Carolina</em>, in <em>Reports of Cases Argued and Determined in the Court of Appeals and Court of Errors of South Carolina from November 1842 to May 1843</em> (1843), 455</td>
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<td>1844</td>
<td>no author listed</td>
<td>The conspiracy to assassinate Caesar</td>
<td>“Cicero’s Letters with Remarks by William Melmoth,” <em>The Southern Quarterly Review</em> 6 (October 1844): 358</td>
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<td>1846</td>
<td>no author listed</td>
<td>An alliance of Catholic princes opposed to Luther</td>
<td>“Michelet’s Life of Luther,” <em>North American Review</em> 63 (October 1846): 457</td>
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<td>1849</td>
<td>Illinois court</td>
<td>Collusion among bidders</td>
<td>E. Peck, <em>Webster v. French</em>, in <em>Reports of Cases Determined in the Supreme Court of the State of Illinois from November Term 1849 to June Term 1850</em> (1850), 267</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1850</td>
<td>no author listed</td>
<td>The Spanish Associates, a group that attempted to ally Kentucky with Spain prior to statehood</td>
<td>“Early Spirit of the West, No. 1,” <em>Debow’s Review</em> 8 (April 1850): 327</td>
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It is entirely possible that Joseph Smith, a young man with a keen interest in religious controversy, might have been familiar with this pamphlet. But we cannot be certain.

As Peterson has pointed out, Andrew Jackson used the term *secret combination* in that same way in 1826. Another instance of this usage is found in an article published in 1847 reporting on a church council that censured members of a New England Protestant congregation for “organizing of a secret combination, and circulating a document containing charges of delinquency” against their minister.

7. An insurrectionary movement. In many parts of the world, the 19th century was a period of political ferment as authoritarian governments tried to maintain control in the face of strong opposition. Often liberal and national movements adopted secretive methods to avoid the inquisitive eyes of the police. They administered oaths and punished informers. They used secret passwords and signs for recognition and frequently resorted to terrorism and assassination to achieve their ends. American and English writers often referred to these movements as secret combinations. The term is, for example, applied to the secret societies opposing the Manchus in China, covert opposition to the Bourbons and Louis Philippe in France,
student societies in the German schools and universities, and radical movements in England and Portugal. Most commonly the term points to revolutionary movements in Italy and Ireland.

Even in the United States, insurrectionary movements were sometimes called “secret combinations.” The following passage refers to an abortive slave revolt reported in the 5 September 1856 edition of a Texas newspaper called the True Issue:

It is ascertained that a secret combination had been formed embracing most of the Negroes in the county, for the purpose of not fleeing to Mexico, but of murdering the inhabitants—men, women and children promiscuously. To carry out their hellish purposes, they had organized into companies of various sizes, had adopted secret signs and passwords, sworn never to divulge the plot under penalty of death, and elected captains and subordinate officers to command the respective companies.

8. A movement that seeks to prevent the application of laws. At times the term was applied to groups that, for reasons of conscience or ideology, resisted the legal authority of the government. For example, John C. Calhoun characterized the Underground Railroad, which helped slaves escape into Canada, as a “secret combination.” During the 1850s the term frequently referred to the American Party, or the Know-Nothings as its members came to be called, who opposed immigration and endeavored, by legal or illegal means, to prevent immigrants and Catholics from voting or holding public office. After the Civil War, the Ku Klux Klan, which resisted federal authority in the former states of the Confederacy, was often called a “secret combination.”

Secret Combinations and the Book of Mormon

The expression secret combinations appears in the Book of Mormon in one, perhaps two, of these senses—conspiracy against a reigning king and an insurrection movement (which, under a monarchy, is tantamount to a conspiracy against a reigning king). What is striking at first glance is the very narrow range of meaning that the term exhibits therein. Furthermore, as we have seen, owing to the widespread occurrence of the term in Joseph Smith’s environment, the claim that the expression secret combination derives from 19th-century anti-Masonic writings is flawed and cannot be sustained. The matter should be considered closed. Besides, to argue that Joseph Smith borrowed anti-Masonic language requires explaining how it was that Joseph adopted such language and yet turned out to be a supporter of Freemasonry.

But that still leaves us with this question: Could not Joseph Smith have adopted this term from his environment? Possibly, but not very likely. In the first place, the narrow range of meaning for the term in the Book of Mormon erodes any position that claims that Joseph Smith borrowed it from his environment. Second, many of the publications cited in categories two and seven (the two usages of secret combination that best approximate Book of Mormon usage of the term) appeared long after the translation and publication of the Book of Mormon. Third, those works dealt chiefly with matters of European history and culture at a time when monarchs and monarchies were still the norm. Such features, of course, were not a part of the contemporary American world of Joseph Smith. Yet the Book of Mormon employs the expression secret combination within the setting of court intrigue and political insurrection. Fourth, unlike any contemporary
American and British source that repeats the term, the Book of Mormon plainly states that the devil is the author and founder of such plots, not people. For example, “it is he [the devil] who is the author of all sin. And behold, he doth carry on his works of darkness and secret murder, and doth hand down their plots, and their oaths, and their covenants, and their plans of awful wickedness, from generation to generation” (Helaman 6:30). Further, “there are also secret combinations, even as in times of old, according to the combinations of the devil, for he is the founder of all these things; yea, the founder of murder, and works of darkness” (2 Nephi 26:22). This sort of declaration mirrors nothing in Joseph Smith’s world.

Concerning plots against a reigning king, the earliest record in the Book of Mormon, the book of Ether, preserves an account of a certain Akish who, after marrying the granddaughter of the king, gathered his family members and put them under oath to support him in whatever he might do (see Ether 8:11–18). Then, “because of the secret combinations of Akish and his friends, behold, they did overthrow the kingdom of Omer,” the reigning monarch (Ether 9:1). Such deadly intrigues at court, it is plain, were not part of the fabric of Joseph Smith’s world. Yet it is this very context in which the oldest mention of “secret combinations” appears in the Book of Mormon record. A slight variation on this theme occurs in the early chapters of 3 Nephi. There we read of a secret combination that had grown in such strength that it posed a serious threat to both the Nephite and Lamanite hegemonies. In effect, it had become as a nation. It was curtailed only by an extraordinary show of unity and force (see 3 Nephi 1:27–5:6). But this secret combination renewed itself and overthrew the government eight years later, ushering in an era of a corrupt monarchy and tribal rule (see 3 Nephi 6:19–7:14). All of these situations, which the Book of Mormon describes in some detail, were foreign to Joseph Smith’s world. The secret combinations described in the Book of Mormon simply do not fit into early-19th-century America.

**The Flaxen Cord**

Another term that has attracted the attention of critics of the Book of Mormon is flaxen cord. During the Masonic initiation ceremony, the candidate is led forward by a rope fastened twice around his neck. This rope, called a cable tow, is symbolic of a mason’s obligation to respond to the call of a brother mason who is in need of assistance. One author sees a veiled reference to this ceremony in 2 Nephi 26:22:

> And there are also secret combinations, even as in times of old, according to the combinations of the devil, for he is the founder of all these things; yea, the founder of murder, and works of darkness; yea and he leadeth them by the neck with a flaxen cord, until he bindeth them with his strong cords forever.

But because the Book of Mormon identifies the devil as the originator of secret combinations, the above passage stands against the notion of Masonic influence on Joseph Smith. Interestingly, one author contends that “the nineteenth century Book of Mormon reader would almost certainly have seen this passage as an allusion to and prophecy of masonry.” If that were the case, one would expect to find widespread references to this interpretation in contemporary sermons, journals, and letters. No writer, however, cites any examples of 19th-century authors who actually understood the verse in this way; and, in fact, any connection between the flaxen cord and the Masonic initiation ceremony seems to have gone largely unnoticed until the late 20th century.

Most readers of Joseph Smith’s era, steeped as they were in the language of the Bible, would probably have recognized the flaxen cord as a reference to the binding of Samson. When that hero was first bound by the men of Judah and then assailed by the Philistines, “the cords that were upon his arms became as flax that was burnt with fire” (Judges 15:14).
The legate, therefore, as soon as he arrived in the north of France, sent over two knights templars to desire an interview with John at Dover, which was readily granted: he there represented to him in such strong, and probably in such true colors, his lost condition, the disaffection of his subjects, the secret combination of his vassals against him, the mighty armament of France, that John yielded at discretion, and subscribed to all the conditions which Pandolph was pleased to impose upon him.


I have thought that the members of the Senate should also have this right of individual access on matters relative to the public administration. In England & France Peers of the realm have this right. We have none such in this Country, but I believe that it will be satisfactory to the people to know that there is some body of men in the state who have a right of continual communication with the President. It will be considered as a safeguard against secret combinations to deceive him.

—Alexander Hamilton, letter to George Washington, 1789

Napoleon, a man capable of sincere friendship, had relied too much and too long on the existence of a like feeling in the Russian Emperor. And, misled perhaps by the sentiment of his own energy, did not sufficiently allow for the daring intrigues of a court where secret combinations of nobles formed the real government.

—William Napier, *History of the Penninsular War*, 1831

An indirect, but no less clear and palpable violation of this Constitution is committed by the secret combinations which are believed to exist in many of the Northern States, having for their object the enticing, decoying, and seducing of slaves to escape from their owners, and the passing of them secretly and rapidly, by means organized for that purpose, into Canada, beyond the reach of the provision.

—John C. Calhoun, from the address of the southern delegates in Congress to their constituents, 1849

Kien-Lung was succeeded, in 1799, by his 15th son, Kia-King. His reign was frequently disturbed by internal commotions; for in China there exist secret combinations of malcontents of all classes. In their nightly meetings, they curse the emperor, celebrate Priapian mysteries, and prepare everything for the arrival of a new Fo, who is to restore the golden age.

—*Encyclopedia Americana*, 1851

Some of the provinces were infested with banditti, and the stringent measures adopted to suppress them gave more offence than the previous insecurity of property and life. Then the policy was changed, and the robber bands were broken up through agreements made with their captains, and by granting pensions for life to the chief offenders. Political assassinations, always the opprobrium of Roman politics, had become frequent, and secret combinations were more powerful than the government.

—“Pius the Ninth and the Revolutions at Rome,” *North American Review*, January 1852

"Secret Combination(s)”: A Term Not Peculiar to Anti-Masonic Rhetoric
Flax

Flax is the common name for a group of plants of the Linaceae family and for the fiber produced from those plants. The stems are used to produce the fiber from which linen is made, while the seeds are made into food or medicine or are pressed for oil. The oldest known piece of woven fabric is a 9,000-year-old fragment of linen found at the archaeological site of Cayonu in southeastern Turkey. The same site yielded flax seeds that show signs of domestication, making flax one of mankind’s oldest cultivated crops. By 6,000 B.C., flax was widely grown throughout the Middle East. Egypt, in particular, produced a valuable linen whose strength and fineness of weave have not been surpassed even today.

Although domesticated flax (*Linum usitatissimum*) was cultivated throughout the Old World, it was unknown in the Americas until introduced by European settlers in the 17th century. However, a number of varieties of wild flax, some of which resemble the cultivated plant, are native to the Western Hemisphere and were sometimes gathered by Indians to create fishnets and twine.

Until recent times, flax was a common material for cords and ropes because it is soft, strong, and resistant to moisture. Cords of flax do not stretch and are therefore useful for measuring. When a flaxen cord is burned, the ash retains its outward form but crumbles at the touch, making it a symbol for fragility.

Flax is mentioned 11 times in the Bible. In the Book of Mormon, only Nephi, who would have been familiar with the fiber from the Old World, refers to it. The Book of Mormon does, however, refer to “linen” several times. John L. Sorenson has suggested that this fabric may have been woven from henequen, a fiber that resembles flax but is made from the leaves of the maguey plant.
He later submits to stronger and stronger bonds until at last he gives away his secret and is inescapably bound “with fetters of brass” (Judges 16:21).  

Although phrases such as *flaxen cords, cords of flax,* and *threads of flax* are found frequently in 19th-century novels, sermons, and political writings, they do not seem to have been applied to the Masonic cable tow. Instead, they were conscious allusions to the story of Samson and proverbial metaphors for fragile moral or social ties that the subject could break if he or she wished. Thus in 1821 the American poet William Cullen Bryant described the Protestant Reformation in these words:

>The web, that for a thousand years had grown  
O’er prostrate Europe, in that day of dread  
Crumbled and fell, as fire dissolves the flaxen thread.64

The New England mystic Jones Very stated in 1839 that “the common bonds of humanity,—they are weak as flaxen cords in the giant hands of our selfishness.”65 In some cases preachers used the flaxen cord to represent the bonds of sin. A celebrated Scottish preacher, in a collection of sermons first published in 1855 and widely read in the United States, says, “It is as easy for God to break thy tyrant’s strongest as his lightest chain. A chain of iron and a thread of flax are all one to God.”66

The flaxen cord was also used in a political sense as a symbol of the bonds of the Constitution. A delegate to the Indiana State Constitutional Convention stated that “written Constitutions are only made to be violated, and in the hands of a triumphant majority are but as flaxen cords in the hands of a giant.”67 Even William Seward, who had been prominent in the anti-Masonic movement, could use the term, without any consciousness of a Masonic connection, to describe the federal union as “a Confederacy of discordant States bound by a flaxen cord.”68 Because the metaphor was so widely used, there seems to be no reason why its appearance in the Book of Mormon should be seen as a subtle reference to Masonry. Joseph Smith may have used a common figure of speech to express a similar idea in the original record, or perhaps Nephi himself recognized the homiletic potential of the story of Samson found on the plates of brass. Another possibility is that the Masonic ceremony merely gave concrete form to an ancient and widely understood metaphor.

**Conclusion**

Those who reject the historicity of the Book of Mormon generally seek for clues to its content in the events and ideas that were current in Joseph Smith’s environment. The centerpiece of these environmental explanations is the supposed presence of anti-Masonic rhetoric in the Book of Mormon. But the mere occurrence of metaphors such as the flaxen cord or terms such as *secret society* or *secret combinations* is not enough to show that the book is a product of the 19th century. These expressions were a part of Joseph Smith’s language and culture and occur widely in other 19th-century writings. Naturally, he could draw upon them in translating the history and ideas of the ancient record into a book that his contemporaries would understand.  

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Illustration on facing page: Turning flax into linen involved many complicated steps. Starting from the left, the plant stems rot underwater in vats. The inner fibers are then beaten with wooden mallets, polished by striking on a wet stone, and made supple by being twisted into a rope. The fibers are made into thread and woven into linen by women (not shown), and finally the men display the finished cloth to a supervisor.  

(From the tomb of Amenemhet, Beni Hasan, Egypt, 19th century B.C.)
Secret Combinations and Flaxen Cords: Anti-Masonic Rhetoric and the Book of Mormon
Paul Mouritsen

1. Interestingly, William Morgan’s widow, Lucinda, joined the church in 1834. Some historians claim she later became a plural wife to Joseph Smith. Regardless, there is no evidence that Joseph Smith knew William Morgan.


6. My brief electronic search of the Making of America Archives at the University of Michigan (http://moa.umdl.umich.edu) and Cornell University (http://moa.cit.cornell.edu/moa) turned up over 3,000 occurrences of secret society or secret societies in 19th-century documents. Only a relative few refer to Free-masonry. (These sources were available online as of April 2003.)

7. “Remarks on Secret Societies,


58. This matter has been reviewed recently by Terryl L. Givens, By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture That Launched a New World Religion (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2002), 163-64.

59. See also 2 Nephi 9:9; Helaman 6:26-30; 3 Nephi 6:26-29; Ether 8:15-16, 28.

60. William Morgan, Illustrations of Masonry (Cincinnati: M. Gardner, 1851), 39.


62. Thomas, Digging in Cumorah, 203.


66. Thomas Guthrie, The Gospel in Ezekiel, Illustrated in a Series of Discourses (New York: R. Carter & Bros., 1857), 368. For examples of other sermons in which this metaphor is used, see Joel Moody, The Science of Evil, or, First Principals [sic] of Human Action . . . (Topeka, Kansas: Crane & Byron, 1871), 258; W.