

KnoWhy #377
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Why Does the Book of Mormon Use the Phrase “Secret Combinations?”

“And the regulations of the government were destroyed, because of the secret combination of the friends and kindreds of those who murdered the prophets.” 3 Nephi 7:6

The Know

Throughout the Book of Mormon, the phrase “secret combinations” is used to describe the evil activities of secret, oath-bound societies like the Gadianton robbers. As Ray Hillam described, “secret combinations have existed since the days of Cain (Moses 5:51). Satan is their author (2 Nephi 26:22), power and gain are their motives (Ether 8:15, 25), and conspiracy is their method of operation (Helaman 6:22–24).”¹ In Helaman 2:13, Mormon indicated that the rise of secret combinations “did prove the overthrow, yea, almost the entire destruction of the people of Nephi.”

Some have argued, though, that the secret societies in the Book of Mormon are merely fictional and were inspired by a well-known fraternity called Freemasons (or Masons).² As Daniel Peterson explained, “It has long been contended by critics of the Book of Mormon that its ‘Gadianton robbers’ are merely nineteenth-century Freemasons, transparently disguised.”³ As evidence of this claim, its supporters have pointed to a number of similarities between both groups, one of which being that “secret combinations” was used almost exclusively as a negative term for Freemasons around 1829.⁴

At least, this *seemed* like a potentially valid assumption, until online databases made it possible to search through a much larger number of 19th century documents. In 2014, Gregory Smith found conclusive evidence from a variety of sources that “before, during, and after Joseph Smith’s translation of the Book of Mormon, secret combinations was a general term in the United States for any clandestine group or plot, especially one in the political realm.”⁵ It wasn’t at all the exclusive code name for Freemasons that some critics of the Book of Mormon had long maintained.

Adding to this argument for broader meaning, Webster’s 1828 dictionary defines a “combination” in general terms as an “intimate union, or association of two or more persons or things.”⁶ It also notes that it can be used in both a positive and a negative sense.⁷ Thus when the word “secret” is added before “combination,” it apparently helps clarify that this general term is being used in a negative, secretive sense.⁸ As Peterson concluded, “We are not dealing here with an esoteric [specialized] piece of technical terminology.”⁹

Yet even if “secret combinations” had exclusively referred to Freemasons around the time of the Book of Mormon’s translation, it wouldn’t mean that Joseph Smith had merely fabricated this aspect of its content. Many ancient societies had secret groups that were involved in oath-related conspiracies to get rich or influence the government.¹⁰

For instance, in Judea and elsewhere in the ancient Near East, robbers bound themselves with oaths to keep their hideouts and plans secret.¹¹ There is even good evidence that such societies existed in ancient Mesoamerica, and that they may have formed in the Early Preclassic Period (Olmec/Jaredite times).¹² Importantly, scholars who have studied secret societies have been struck by their similarities, even when they are from different locations and time periods in the world’s history.¹³

It is therefore not surprising that the Gadianton robbers in the Book of Mormon share some similar features with the Freemasons of the 19th century.¹⁴ Nor is it surprising that the Book of Mormon’s 1829 English translation used “secret combinations” to describe them. It was a general term, often used to label Freemasons, but also used to describe a host of other secretive 19th century groups, and a term which would apply equally well to secret societies all over the ancient world, including ancient America.

The Why

This situation demonstrates the need for patience and thorough investigation into issues that could otherwise trouble one’s testimony or be the grounds for disbelief. Elder Neil L. Andersen has taught, “Addressing honest questions is an important part of building faith, and we use both our intellect and our feelings. Not all answers will come immediately, but most questions can be resolved through sincere study and seeking answers from God.”¹⁵ On another occasion, Elder Andersen wisely counseled, “Will we understand everything? Of course not. We will put some issues on the shelf to be understood at a later time.”¹⁶

This is precisely the approach that some LDS scholars took when confronted with this issue. Daniel Peterson, one of the first to research this topic, suspected from the beginning that “secret combinations” wasn’t an exclusive label for Freemasons in 1829. However, he couldn’t initially locate the sources to prove it.¹⁷

Over the course of time, however, he and others uncovered document after document which supported his initial reservations.¹⁸ And then, after decades of patiently waiting, modern search engines finally provided enough evidence to thoroughly and conclusively discredit the critical theory which Peterson had rejected all along. As Gregory Smith explained, “Now that a broader look at the literary culture of the early 1800s is more practical via digital search, Peterson’s skepticism has been vindicated.”¹⁹

In the case of “secret combinations,” the information needed to fully dismiss this concern took a matter of decades from the time the issue was first raised.²⁰ Other causes for doubt may take much longer to resolve. And for some issues, the needed information may not be forthcoming until, as Elder Holland expressed, “Jesus descends as the ultimate infallible truth of all.”²¹

The beauty of God’s plan is that we don’t have to wait for technological advancements and improved research methods in order to find answers to the questions that matter most. Through the power of the Holy Ghost, one can know the Book of Mormon is true without having to prove wrong every criticism that could possibly be raised against it.²² As President Dieter F. Uchtdorf insightfully explained, “I wish I could help everyone to understand this one simple fact: we *believe* in God because of things we *know* with our heart and mind, not because of things we do *not know*.”²³ This holds true for belief in the Book of Mormon as well.

Further Reading

Gregory L. Smith, “Cracking the Book of Mormon’s ‘Secret Combinations?’” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 13 (2014): 63–109.

Nathan Oman, “‘Secret Combinations’: A Legal Analysis,” *FARMS Review* 16 no. 1 (2004): 49–73.

Daniel C. Peterson, “Notes on ‘Gadianton Masonry,’” in *Warfare in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks and William J. Hamblin (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1990), 176–224.

Bruce W. Warren, “Secret Combinations, Warfare, and Captive Sacrifice in Mesoamerica and the Book of Mormon,” in *Warfare in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks and William J. Hamblin (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1990), 225–236.

Notes

1. Ray C. Hillam, "Secret Combinations," *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 4 vols., ed. Daniel H. Ludlow (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1992), 3:1290–1291.
2. See Daniel C. Peterson, "Notes on 'Gadianton Masonry,'" in *Warfare in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks and William J. Hamblin (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1990), 176–181.
3. Daniel C. Peterson, "Notes and Communications: 'Secret Combinations' Revisited," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 1, no. 1 (1992): 184.
4. For an overview of these claims, see Peterson, "Notes on 'Gadianton Masonry,'" 180–181.
5. Gregory L. Smith, "Cracking the Book of Mormon's 'Secret Combinations?'" *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 13 (2014): 93. It should be noted that Smith wasn't the first to identify 19th century documents which used "secret combinations" in a non-Masonic context. For prior successes in this effort, see Peterson, "Notes on 'Gadianton Masonry,'" 174–224; Peterson, "'Secret Combinations' Revisited," 184–188; Paul Mouritsen, "Secret Combinations and Flaxen Cords: Anti-Masonic Rhetoric and the Book of Mormon," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 12, no. 1 (2003): 64–77, 116–18; Nathan Oman, "'Secret Combinations': A Legal Analysis," *FARMS Review* 16 no. 1 (2004): 49–73.
6. Noah Webster, *American Dictionary of the English Language* (1828), s.v., "combination."
7. Webster's 1828 dictionary also explains that the term is used "in a good sense, when the object is laudable" and "in an ill sense, when it is illegal or iniquitous." Webster, *American Dictionary of the English Language* (1828), s.v., "combination."
8. It should be noted, though, that the term "combination" seemed to be predominantly negative in tone, even without "secret" as a qualifier. See Peterson, "Notes on 'Gadianton Masonry,'" 189–190.
9. Peterson, "Notes on 'Gadianton Masonry,'" 191.
10. See John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1985), 300–301.
11. See Kent P. Jackson, "Revolutionaries in the First Century," in *Masada and the World of the New Testament*, ed. John F. Hall and John W. Welch (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 1997), 129–140; John W. Welch, "Legal and Social Perspectives on Robbers in First Century Judea," in *Masada and the World of the New Testament*, 141–153; John W. Welch and John F. Hall, *Charting the New Testament* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2002), chart 3–12.
12. See Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting*, 300–310; Bruce W. Warren, "Secret Combinations, Warfare, and Captive Sacrifice in Mesoamerica and the Book of Mormon," in *Warfare in the Book of Mormon*, 225–236.
13. See Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting*, 304–305. Likewise, Bonnie Erickson found that *risk*—a key feature of many, though not all, secret societies—is "so important a consideration that it sets similar processes in motion even for societies differing in time, place, goals, and so on." Bonnie H. Erickson, "Secret Societies and Social Structure," *Social Forces* 60, no. 1 (1981): 190. Although the 19th century Freemasons may not have actually been a truly dangerous group, the label of "secret combinations" given to them by their opponents implies they were involved in something illegal or unwholesome. In other words, they were being characterized as a group whose secrecy was made necessary because of *risky* behavior.
14. Although some similarities do exist, there are also key differences between the Gadianton robbers and 19th century freemasons. See Peterson, "Notes on 'Gadianton Masonry,'" 209–213.
15. Neil L. Andersen, "Faith Is Not by Chance, but by Choice," *Ensign*, November 2015, 66, online at lds.org.
16. Neil L. Andersen, "Never Leave Him," *Ensign*, November 2010, 41, online at lds.org.
17. See Peterson, "'Secret Combinations' Revisited," 185–188; David R. Benard, John W. Welch, and Daniel C. Peterson, "'Secret Combinations,'" in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon: A Decade of New Research* (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1992), 227–229.
18. See Peterson, "'Secret Combinations' Revisited," 184–188; Mouritsen, "Secret Combinations and Flaxen Cords," 64–77, 116–18; Oman, "'Secret Combinations,'" 49–73.
19. Smith, "Cracking the Book of Mormon's 'Secret Combinations?'" 93.
20. Although Alexander Campbell was the first to connect the Book of Mormon's Gadianton robbers with the Freemasons, the argument that "secret combinations" was an exclusive term for Freemasons wasn't developed until the 20th century. See Peterson, "Notes on 'Gadianton Masonry,'" 176–181.
21. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland, "The Greatness of the Evidence," Chiasmus Jubilee, August 16, 2017, online at bookofmormoncentral.org.
22. See Book of Mormon Central, "How Will God Manifest the Truth of the Book of Mormon?" (Moroni 10:4), *KnoWhy* 254 (December 16, 2016).
23. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, "Be Not Afraid, Only Believe," *Ensign*, November 2015, 78, online at lds.org.