

common features and characters in the final destruction of both peoples communicate a sensitive melancholy, and on this tone the narratives of the Book of Mormon end.

The destruction of a society was, for the original nineteenth-century Book of Mormon reader, and is for the current reader, a fundamental human issue. Today most of us work in religious, educational, and business institutions, even successful institutions, that necessarily and constantly struggle for survival. We have witnessed the destruction of Native American cultures, the elimination of much of pre-Nazi Judaism, and the truncated but devastating battle of Joseph McCarthy against Communism, just to name a few. We may not consciously analyze the subject of cultural destruction, but many of our actions eloquently bespeak our awareness of it as a primary source of our motivation. Fear of social destruction motivates many of the protective measures employed by corporate cultures, various schools of thought and practice, race, and religion.

What, if anything, is universal about this formulaic narrative of destruction of society in the Book of Mormon? It is to our unspoken yearning for social survival that the Book of Mormon speaks. The narrative form in which it is embodied is *not* the triumph of a powerful social climber or the glories of victory in battle. It speaks with the countercultural accent of the dispossessed. It is the solitary voice of a survivor who has witnessed utter destruction. The Book of Mormon is about victims of social evil who prevent it, if they can, or endure the inevitable and complete destruction surrounding them. The message is even more powerful for those of us who stand at Mormonism's current crossroads. Even though the book was written from a white, male perspective, for all of those who possess any imagination, it can provide the countercultural models of diligence, martyrdom, miracle, and hope for the future as we stand on our own last Cumorahs.

Excursus 10.1

A Test for the Presence of the Phrase "Secret Combination" in Early Nineteenth-century Court Cases

I have argued in this chapter that the term "secret combinations" appealed to a general conspiracy theory of history and that it alluded to both the destruction of Jerusalem by assassin/bandits and to Masonry. Daniel Peterson takes the position that "secret combinations" in the Book of Mormon is a general symbol that does not allude to

Masonry as the latter-day referent. As his evidentiary base, he uses court cases and Mormon occurrences of the phrase that refer to something other than Masonry. However, all but one of his examples post-date the coming forth of the Book of Mormon. The court cases date from the 1890s. (He claims that these late examples are representative of nineteenth-century legal vocabulary because of the conservative nature of legal language.) The single example of "secret combinations" that he cites as being used before the publication of the Book of Mormon is in an 1827 political setting.¹⁶ He is convinced that a search of early nineteenth-century legal documents will reveal "secret combinations" referring to something broader than Masonry, therefore negating the claim that this is what the Book of Mormon means.

To support his position, he must find ample evidence that the term was used in non-Masonic contexts. In other words, 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 nonspecific 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, the thesis I advance and for which there is already substantial historical precedence.

Peterson has already hypothetically established the best location to find such language in early nineteenth-century legal documents. He is certain that an examination of precedent-setting cases of labor unions ("combinations") will support his broad interpretation that excludes Masonry. To test his hypothesis, I examined six of eleven known court cases involving "combinations" in labor disputes between 1806 and 1829. All involve strikes, are precedent-setting test cases in the history of American labor and law, and are widely known. They continued to be quoted in magazines and books well into the 1820s and, despite their urban location, generated rural concern as well. For example, farmers in Pennsylvania's Susquehanna Valley held town meetings in 1813 to express concern that labor groups were "joining in combination" to raise wages.¹⁷ Each of these cases discusses what they call "combinations," their alleged violence and extortion, and

their potential detriment to the larger society. Some cases refer to "oaths" taken by members of the labor groups. The 1806 case specifically discusses secrecy in price- and wage-setting mechanisms. The six cases are:

1. *The Trial of the Boot and Shoemakers of Philadelphia, on an Indictment for a Combination and Conspiracy to Raise their Wages* (Philadelphia, 1806). This publication calls the trial the most important event to occur since the American revolution.

2. *Trial of the Journeymen Cordwainers, of the City of New York for a Conspiracy to Raise their Wages* (New York, 1810).

3. *Report of the Trial of the Journeymen Cordwainers, of the Burrough of Pittsburgh* (Pittsburgh, 1816).

4. *Trial of Twenty-Four Journeymen Taylors charged with a Conspiracy: Before the Mayor's Court of the City of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1827).

5. The 1829 trial for "combinations and conspiracies" of the Philadelphia Cotton Spinners contained in Hazard's *Register of Philadelphia* (17 Jan. 1829).

6. Report of a trial for the Baltimore Weavers contained in *Banner of the Constitution* (5 Dec. 1829).

All six cases analyze, discuss, and define the concept of combinations as derived from British common law. In the 1806 trial, the prosecution explicitly compared the journeymen's strikes to Masonry, calling them "pernicious combinations, of misguided man, to effect purposes not only injurious to themselves, but mischievous to society."¹⁸ Yet these six cases do not once use the phrase "secret combinations," which, as I have already shown, appears in anti-Masonic literature of the same period to mean Masonry. Furthermore, defense attorneys frequently claimed that masters (management) had themselves formed price- or wage-fixing combinations and discuss the broader concepts of combinations in social groups and political conspiracies. Peterson correctly states that "combinations" referred to a wide variety of bands, conspiracies, and confederacies.

The 1827 trial quotes a definition of a combination, then comments: "A combination is a conspiracy in law, whenever the act to be done, has a necessary tendency to prejudice the public or oppress individuals, by unjustly subjecting them to the power of confederates, and giving effect to the purposes of the latter, whether by extortion or of mischief." These

are principles well settled; because plainly deducible from acknowledged authorities and approved decisions upon the subject."¹⁹

In this commonly held definition, a combination is related to conspiracy. In fact, the phrase "conspire and combine" appears in all six cases. Yet even in the context of combinations plus secrecy, the phrase "secret combinations" is never used. Why is this phrase, then, so commonly used in the Book of Mormon and in discussions of Masonry? I suggest that "combination" was *not* equivalent to "secret combination" in the nineteenth century. The Book of Mormon makes the same distinction in Ether 8:18: "And it came to pass that they formed a secret combination, even as they of old; which combination is a most abominable and wicked above all, in the sight of God." Consequently, secret combinations are a special and wickedest subset of "combinations," evoking a conspiracy theory of history. The Book of Mormon and early nineteenth-century usage understand "secret combinations" as oath-taking, murderous societies that destroy nations. Hence, I conclude that it would be both inappropriate and uncommon in the 1820s to describe labor unions or similar movements as "secret combinations." Peterson's hypothesis that "secret combinations" is a vague, generalized symbol with no specific referent cannot be substantiated by the very legal documents where he suggests that evidence will be found. If the evidence presented here is representative of pre-1830 vocabularies, Peterson's post-1850 legal examples of "secret combinations" are not typical of the 1830 language surrounding Joseph Smith.

We must remember that the Book of Mormon itself warns of *a* secret combination that will exist when the book first comes forth. This single secret combination must be understood as Masonry. The evidence presented here supports the thesis that the Book of Mormon identifies Masonry as one example of a symbol of the destructive nature of social evil in every age.

In our age Masonry is no longer a threatening group nor the incarnation of evil. Because we cannot understand a text until we can read ourselves into it, contemporary Mormon authors have interpreted "secret combinations" as communism, the Mafia, guerrilla warfare, and so forth. These interpretive attempts are certainly justified as part of the original intent of the text. But it is equally clear that Masonry cannot be automatically excluded from that list.