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JONATHAN EDWARDS'S UNIQUE ROLE IN AN IMAGINED CHURCH HISTORY

Spencer Kraus

Review of Jonathan Neville, *Infinite Goodness: Joseph Smith, Jonathan Edwards, and the Book of Mormon*. Salt Lake City: Digital Legends Press, 2021. 339 pages. \$22.99 (paperback).

Abstract: *This is the second of two papers reviewing Jonathan Neville's latest books on the translation of the Book of Mormon. In Infinite Goodness, Neville claims that Joseph Smith's vocabulary and translation of the Book of Mormon were deeply influenced by the famous Protestant minister Jonathan Edwards. Neville cites various words or ideas that he believes originate with Edwards as the original source for the Book of Mormon's language. However, most of Neville's findings regarding Edwards and other non-biblical sources are superficial and weak, and many of his findings have a more plausible common source: the language used by the King James Bible. Neville attempts to make Joseph a literary prodigy, able to read and reformulate eight volumes of Edwards's sermons — with enough genius to do so, but not enough genius to learn the words without Edwards's help. This scenario contradicts the historical record, and Neville uses sources disingenuously to impose his idiosyncratic and wholly modern worldview onto Joseph Smith and his contemporaries.*

As I have demonstrated in my recent review of *A Man That Can Translate*,¹ Jonathan Neville consistently misuses and misquotes historical sources. He resorts to multiple double standards to force the historical narrative into the shape required by his theories. My previous review responded to his claims that (1) Joseph Smith memorized and recited Isaiah from memory rather than translate it from the Book of Mormon record; (2) Joseph Smith tricked his close friends and family, making them believe that he was translating the

aforementioned sections of the Book of Mormon; (3) many witnesses to the Book of Mormon are not to be believed; and (4) we should instead rely on sources hostile to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to properly understand Joseph's translation effort.

I will now respond to Neville's new hypothesis that Joseph Smith read and studied the teachings of Jonathan Edwards from an early age, ultimately incorporating Edwardsian language into his translation of the Book of Mormon.²

Neville's portrayal of Edwards and Joseph Smith, however, has much in common with the dubious claim that Joseph was influenced by Emanuel Swedenborg's ideas about heaven.³ In both cases, the purported similarities are superficial, any connection was unremarked upon by contemporaries (even those who were well acquainted with both works), and more easily explained by a common source shared by both.

As with Swedenborg, Joseph's supposed reliance on Edwards was unnoticed until the modern era. Indeed, the lack of any early claim that Joseph was influenced by Edwards is significant for a couple of reasons. Edwards's works were, after all, available in the bookstore of Joseph's hometown, and they were widely published in the early American republic. The people who would have known Joseph certainly could have talked to those around him — and yet we don't have anyone claiming such influence, nor do any claim that he was well-versed in Edwards's writings. By Neville's own admission there is no "conclusive direct evidence" that he can provide to support any of the claims in his book.⁴

Instead, says Neville, there are just "probabilities" based on his own (mis)readings of historical sources and his own presuppositions.⁵ In this review, I will demonstrate how this discussion is another modern manufacture, yet another specimen of the long line of pseudo-historical claims made by Jonathan Neville.⁶

Joseph's Literary Capabilities and Perusal of Theology

Central to Neville's thesis is the assumption that, despite all historical evidence to the contrary, Joseph Smith was well-versed and well-studied in early American Christian theology. However, the sources that Neville uses to substantiate this claim are misused and misunderstood.

Neville argues from a basis of presupposition, making his entire premise flawed when his presupposition is examined with even scant attention to accuracy. Neville repeatedly insists that Joseph *had* to be aware of and actively study early American theologians, because "it's difficult to believe" otherwise, and there is "no reason for him to *ignore*

such readily available resources.”⁷ This is an example of “the argument from personal incredulity” fallacy — the author cannot see how something could not be the case, and so it must have been the case.⁸ The study of history is partly the process of using sources to expand our understanding of what could or could not be the case to avoid imposing our preconceptions on the past.

Neville often claims that Joseph’s “intimate acquaintance” with Christian denominations in his day must have included a familiarity with Christian writings, claiming that evidence of theologians’ works can be found in Joseph’s writings, translations, and revelations.⁹ However, such a “common sense” proposition could only make sense if it were to align with the historical record — which Neville fails to demonstrate.¹⁰

Neville’s faulty premise begins with the assertion that “in [Joseph’s] early years, due to the leg infection, he did have an unusual amount of free time to read about and contemplate religious topics.”¹¹ This comment is centered around an offhand remark — provoked by Erasmus Holmes’s desire to learn more about the Church and its doctrine — from Joseph Smith. Joseph offered “a brief relation of my experience while in my juvenile years, say from 6, years old up to the time I received the first visitation of Angels which was when I was about 14, years old.”¹² Neville believes that this statement is key to understanding a great deal about Joseph’s life and upbringing by linking the leg surgery to his immersion in the writings of Edwards. However, an account of one’s youth would be a natural place for anyone to begin a personal history — it is not necessary that this be a prelude to an immersion in Christian theology, or a sign that these events of youth are a key to all that came after.¹³ (And if Edwards’s works *were* so important to Joseph’s history, this would be an excellent place to mention them — but he doesn’t.)

Neville argues that in the aftermath of Joseph’s leg surgery and during his stay with his uncle Jesse in Salem, Massachusetts, Joseph Smith was introduced to theological sermons by Samuel Deane geared toward young men. He concludes this based upon common terminology used by Latter-day Saint scripture and Deane. Although Neville notes that “this non-biblical terminology is not exclusive to Deane,” he believes that a few solitary words taken out of context from at least fourteen verses throughout the Book of Mormon and Doctrine and Covenants are evidence that Joseph read Deane’s work. However, just because a single word or phrase appears in multiple sources does not mean that one must have been influenced by the other. Take, for example, the words “enjoyment” or “preface” that appear in 2 Nephi 9:16

and D&C 1:6, respectively.¹⁴ Neville links these two words to Deane's writings, but is it a safe assumption that these words were brought to Joseph's attention because of Deane's work? Any rational historian would argue not — using such a low bar for evidence, after all, would mean that virtually any book written in the English language could be considered a smoking gun for outside influence on the text of the Book of Mormon. Such a methodology is fundamentally flawed.

Neville continues to double down on this presupposition by incorporating additional hypotheticals likewise impossible to support. According to Neville, as Joseph Sr. and Lucy Mack Smith taught their children about God, “presumably they would provide reading material,” leading to Joseph's “intimate acquaintance” with other denominations' teachings and writings.¹⁵ He is unable to provide a single source to explain how Joseph Sr. and Lucy Smith (the latter of which had to pay in scraps of cloth to arrive in Palmyra when they moved) were able to afford such an expansive library of theological treatises, especially given Joseph Sr.'s distrust of organized religion and its ministers.¹⁶

Neville also erroneously believes that Joseph's lengthy recovery from his surgery “compromised [his] usefulness for farm work, leaving him more time to read” after returning to his family and moving to Palmyra.¹⁷ Given the Smith's dire financial situation, however, it is hard to imagine in historical context that this would be a plausible hypothesis. There was plenty of work on a nineteenth-century farm for a young Joseph to engage in despite his disability around the house. Joseph was far more likely to be engaged in helping his family survive than read theological treatises in his supposedly endless spare time. His work in treasure digging and athletic nature, especially his affinity for wrestling, is also evidence that he was not as handicapped as Neville proposes and was accustomed to hard and physical toil.¹⁸ This picture of Joseph matches what a twentieth-century child might have experienced, but not the son of poor nineteenth-century farmers — it is classic presentism.

Whatever Joseph's conditions in New York may have been, he was able to leave the house and perform some errands on his own. Neville cites Orasmus Turner, who recounted one memory of the young Joseph Smith on such an errand:

He was lounging, idle; (not to say vicious,) and possessed of less than ordinary intellect. The author's own recollections of him are distinct ones. He used to come into the village of Palmyra with little jags of wood, from his backwoods home; sometimes patronizing a village grocery too freely; sometimes

find an odd job to do about the store of Seymour Scovell; and once a week he would stroll into the office of the old Palmyra Register, for his father's paper. How impious, in us young "dare *Devils*" to once and a while blacken the face of the then meddling inquisitive lounge-but afterwards Prophet, with the old fashioned balls, when he used to put himself in the way of the working of the old fashioned Ramage press! The editor of the Cultivator, at Albany-esteemed as he may justly consider himself, for his subsequent enterprize and usefulness, may think of it, with contrition and repentance; that he once helped, thus to disfigure the face of a Prophet, and remotely, the founder of a State.¹⁹

Neville only cites a small portion of the above text dealing with Joseph's trips to the printing press and having his face blackened.²⁰ Neville attempts to link this incident to an eight-volume set of Jonathan Edwards's writings on sale in Palmyra at that time, allowing Neville to assert a "plausible" connection between Joseph Smith and the writings of Jonathan Edwards. However, when the statement is read in its full context, it is clear that the author was vehemently opposed to Joseph and the restoration and even believed Joseph to be of less than ordinary intellect. Joseph is similarly reported as "patronizing" a grocer, and he is specifically said to have gotten in the way of the staff running the Ramage press. It appears clear from the context that Orasmus Turner was not referring to Joseph lingering to read from the eight volumes of Jonathan Edwards.

To further cement Neville's poor analysis and historiography, one need only look at his treatment of Lucy Mack Smith's history. In Lucy's 1844 history, she remarks how Joseph "had never read the Bible through by course in his life for Joseph was less inclined to the study of books than any child we had but much more given to reflection and deep study."²¹ This was changed slightly in her 1845 history to say Joseph "was much less inclined to the perusals of books" than any other Smith children.²² Neville attempts to take advantage of this slight shift in wording by an appeal to the *modern* definition of "perusal." While Neville correctly asserts that perusal is defined in Webster's 1828 dictionary as "the act of reading," Neville also fails to mention how the 1828 dictionary also defines it as a "careful view or examination," acting as a synonym for the word "study."²³ Rather, Neville cites the modern *Merriam-Webster* dictionary to define perusal as a contranym, a word with a dual meaning. In the modern dictionary, perusal can mean either an intense study or

a light reading, which Neville uses to claim that Lucy Mack Smith never challenged the idea that Joseph was well-read as a young boy:

This suggests she meant that the other children's perusals were more relaxed and informal than Joseph's "deep study." This connotation is consistent with her observation that Joseph hadn't "read the Bible through," because "meditation and deep study" requires more detailed examination of cross-references and commentaries than merely reading it through.²⁴

The error in using a modern definition in a historical text should be obvious to any reader. This is another form of presentism that Neville incorporates to make his argument more credible, but presentism weakens any argument, no matter how well-crafted. If we want a clue as to Lucy's meaning, we have only to look at what her original 1844 text said — and it is obvious from that text that Joseph "was less inclined to the study of books." It is implausible that she meant to completely invert her meaning in 1845 by saying Joseph was really into studying books, but not into casually flipping through them.

Neville's argument is further weakened when he quotes Lucy saying she "perused the Bible and prayed incessantly" in her 1844 history, clearly meaning she studied the Bible intently.²⁵ Neville's arguments are weak, and his use of presentism and incompetent use of sources are fatal to his argument.

What, then, should be concluded regarding Joseph Smith's literacy? According to Emma Smith, Joseph was unable to write or even dictate a well-worded letter²⁶ — a claim Neville tries to dismiss by challenging Emma's literacy, as though that would make her analysis any less true: "Emma's own literacy was not exemplary" based on a letter she wrote in 1839 "that is mostly one long continuous sentence."²⁷ In contrast to Emma, Neville cites George A. Smith, the prophet's cousin, who recounted how a letter his family received from Joseph circa 1828 that recounted how Christendom was in a state of apostasy led his father to exclaim how Joseph "writes like a prophet."²⁸ However, one must ask what George A.'s father likely meant — did he believe a prophet should write fluently, precisely, and clearly, or was he more concerned with the theological message contained within the letter, no matter how flawed the spelling and grammar? Given that we have examples of Joseph's writing from earlier and later in his career — and none of his early work can be said to display great literate sophistication — George A.'s account is unlikely to mean what Neville needs it to say.

The best example close in time to the Book of Mormon is Joseph Smith's 1832 history (which Neville cites extensively in an appendix).²⁹ Whatever we think of the older Joseph's literary gifts, young Joseph's handwritten portion of the 1832 essay is certainly no better than Emma Smith's 1839 letter that is "mostly one long continuous sentence." Joseph even admits at the outset of his handwritten portion that he lacked many literary capabilities when he wrote that "as it required their exertions of all that were able to render any assistance for the support of the Family therefore we were deprived of the bennifit of an education suffice it to say I was nearly instructtid in reading and writing and the ground <rules> of Arithmatic which const[it]uted my whole literary acquirements."³⁰ (Neville conveniently ignores this admission.) Joseph was not well-written in the early days of his ministry, nor was he an academic scholar.³¹

Edwards as a Proposed Elias Figure

A unique claim Neville makes is that Edwards was an Elias-like figure for the restoration,³² preparing the way for Joseph to perform his work: "Edwards frequently encouraged his listeners and readers to look forward to, and even pray for, the coming prosperity of the Christian church. Again, when seen through young Joseph's eyes, Edwards suggested, if not foreshadowed, if not *predicted*, the Restoration."³³

Edwards did indeed discuss how the Church would become great in the latter days, but he does not foreshadow or predict the restoration itself. Statements such as Edwards's, prophetic as they may seem, are not alone in the voices of his contemporaries who, upon breaking from the Church of England, often looked forward to a time when the Church would again have apostles and prophets. Others had often discussed and hoped for a return to New Testament Christianity and expressed this hope in more detail than Edwards. Neville also spends an entire chapter discussing how Edwards has been, in his view, misrepresented by Latter-day Saint scholars despite Edwards playing such an "essential role" in the restoration.³⁴ However, when analyzed critically, none of the citations that Neville uses demonstrate that Edwards played such an important role.

Neville repeatedly quotes Jonathan Edwards's use of the word "restoration" to show a "qualitative connection between Jonathan Edwards and Joseph Smith." Neville notes: "Some people have a different understanding of what Edwards had in mind when he used terms such as 'restoration.' In my view, it's less important what Edwards

thought or intended than what his readers have learned from his writing and how they have acted in response.”³⁵

We might first ask what is meant by a “qualitative connection” — is there some quality or characteristic that Edwards and Joseph share? But if so, why need Joseph depend upon Edwards for it? It would hardly be surprising if Joseph and Edwards — both interested in religious issues in the early United States — had some topics or concerns in common. They doubtless shared the quality of being concerned about grace, God, prayer, baptism, and salvation. But this only demonstrates that they were nineteenth century Christians. (And, arguably, such matters have been the preoccupation of most Christians for two millennia.)

When we read our own preoccupations or ideas into a text, scholars term it *eisegesis*. Neville, who prefers to read Edwards via *eisegesis*, sees only the broad similarities, not the differences. He fails to note, for example, that nowhere does Edwards hint or imply that he believed in a universal apostasy. The restoration he spoke of was not a restoration of the gospel. Neville points out the obvious when he notes how “Joseph Smith ... definitely focused on the latter-day restoration” of lost doctrines and authority,³⁶ but he cannot provide us any connection to Edwards’s teachings of “restoration” which match Joseph’s ideas.

This degree of *eisegesis* is dangerous — there is certainly merit to the idea that readers have some freedom to respond to and interpret art or writing in ways the creator did not intend, and the resulting so-called reader-response criticism can take on a life of its own and be a subject worthy of study. But if the creator of a work cannot convey any kind of intended meaning, then they would have essentially worked in vain. The author’s intent and content *as they understood it* is just as important, if not more so, than how we react to it. This is doubly so when doing history.

Neville also argues that Joseph’s 1832 account of the First Vision was influenced by Jonathan Edwards’s teachings regarding the glorious state of the Church.³⁷ However, Joseph Smith never taught about his experience in terms of Edwards’s teachings, and instead recorded how, while he was more open towards Methodism, he generally found no church he could confidently join due to the apparent apostasy that was made evident around him.³⁸

Placing Edwards as an Elias for Joseph Smith is also challenged by Joseph Smith’s lack of direct referral to Edwards throughout his life.³⁹ Jesus Christ often spoke about John the Baptist, pointing out how John was sent to prepare the way, but no such mention appears from

Joseph regarding *any* early American theologian. In fact, the Lord *did* identify a forerunner to Joseph Smith and the Restoration of the Gospel in D&C 35:4 — Sidney Rigdon. Unlike Jonathan Edwards, Rigdon (a prominent Campbellite minister before his conversion) did believe there had been some apostasy and sought to reclaim New Testament Christianity. The Lord even compares Rigdon to John the Baptist and Elijah, and it is clear, based on the work Rigdon performed in Kirtland as a Campbellite preacher, that the people of the area were prepared to receive the Gospel, causing the Church to flourish once it was introduced to them.⁴⁰ While the Lord was preparing the world for His gospel before Sidney Rigdon, this fact does not necessitate Edwards as an Elias for Joseph Smith, and Neville is unable to offer any convincing evidence to support his point of view.

Proposed Theological Influences From Jonathan Edwards

Believing that Joseph was well versed in Edwards, Neville believes “there is even evidence Edwards may have influenced Joseph on topics ranging from Book of Mormon geography to the Urim and Thummim and the introduction of plural marriage.”⁴¹ This is not unlike other claims made since the publication of the Book of Mormon that attempt — either in good faith or bad — to place certain themes or phrases in a nineteenth century context. Like these other claims, Neville’s hypothesis quickly manifests itself as implausible.⁴² While I have shown in general terms that Joseph lacked the literary capabilities, means, and opportunity to read and reappropriate Edwards (or any direct evidence of his having done so), this is a lengthy argument and a substantial part of Neville’s theory regarding Jonathan Edwards. Most of what he has to offer, however, is weak and inconclusive — indeed, after a close examination, it can be determined that *if* Joseph was affected by Jonathan Edwards’s writings, he reacted in the complete opposite to what Neville proposes, countering many of the doctrines proposed by Edwards.

An example of the weak links that Neville draws to Edwards can be seen when Neville attempts to link the 1985 Church hymnbook with a hymnbook used by Edwards because nine of the modern Church’s hymns also appeared in a hymnal compiled by Isaac Watts. Such a strained connection is a weak and untenable strand on which to hang a large role for Jonathan Edwards in the Restoration.⁴³ (Edwards and Joseph might even have sung the same Christmas carols, but that doesn’t mean Joseph got the idea of Christmas from Edwards.) Here, I will focus

on various items of doctrinal importance that Neville attempts to link to Jonathan Edwards.

Prayer

Neville compares 2 Nephi 32:8 with Edwards's teachings that the natural man wants to avoid prayer, in an apparent attempt to link the doctrine of prayer to Edwards.⁴⁴ Jonathan Edwards, however, need not be the source for such a claim — a search on Google Books regarding the “natural man” and “prayer” will show that this same idea was discussed fairly often in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The Book of Mormon here is reflecting a common theological belief of Joseph Smith's time.

The First Vision

Jonathan Neville quotes five separate sermons by Jonathan Edwards that he believes Joseph studied. Each of these sermons quotes from James 1:5, and Neville implies that reading these sermons led Joseph to pray in the sacred grove.⁴⁵ A much more likely scenario is the one described by William Smith: after hearing a preacher at a revival camp quote James 1:5, Joseph was so deeply moved that he studied it in his Bible as well. Joseph never mentioned Jonathan Edwards's work throughout his multiple retellings of his sacred theophany.⁴⁶ Neville also tries to link Joseph's accounts of the First Vision to Jonathan Edwards's conversion to Christ, although many of the details that Neville emphasizes constitute an amalgamation of separate accounts from Joseph (such as going to tell his father).⁴⁷ There are stronger analogies with many who sought salvation in Joseph's historical setting, and many scholars have discussed various aspects of these. If Neville must have parallels that instigated Joseph's spiritual quest, these are far more plausible than the one he offers.⁴⁸

The Temple Endowment

Neville asserts that “The biblical ‘god of this world’ (2 Corinthians 4:4) is not explicitly connected with Satan in the Bible, but Edwards links the two [in a previously cited sermon]. Many Latter-day Saints are familiar with this connection as well.”⁴⁹ Neville is referring to Latter-day Saints who have been through the temple and there made sacred covenants with God. Biblical language is used when making these covenants, including biblical titles, and Neville goes beyond the evidence in concluding that Edwards is the source for Latter-day Saints linking Satan with the “god of this world.”

As we read further in the scriptural reference cited by Neville, Paul *does* expand on the role of the “god of this world” by stating that this figure deceives others into rejecting the Gospel. It is not a leap in logic to assume this can only be referring to Satan, and it is not a title Edwards was the first to connect with Satan — anyone who reads the verse would immediately recognize who Paul was describing. For example, Martin Luther said:

The devil knows the thoughts of the ungodly, for he inspires them therewith. ... And St Paul says: “*The god of this world* blindeth the minds of them that believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them,” etc. And Christ gives a reason how it comes to pass, ... where he says: “*The devil* cometh, and taketh the Word out of their hearts, lest they should believe, and be saved.” Therefore it is no marvel that the *devil*, through his prophets, declares what shall happen and come to pass.⁵⁰

Again, Edwards is in theory a *possible* source for the idea, but the idea itself can hardly be evidence that Edwards *was* the source. Why not Luther? Or why not the most obvious person of all — Paul himself?

Christ Clothed in Glory

Neville states that the description of Christ clothed in glory in D&C 99 is a direct connection to Jonathan Edwards’s description of Christ that combined multiple scriptures to create a single statement.⁵¹ However, the idea of Christ being “clothed in glory” would be easily found in the Bible itself, and the phrase predates Joseph Smith’s birth when applied to Christ.⁵² D&C 99 does not necessitate that a single scripture or source — if any — be responsible for that exact description. This is another weak connection easily dismissed.

The Age of the Earth

Neville appears to take a literalist approach to D&C 77:6, stating that Bishop Usher’s chronology (cited by Jonathan Edwards) that places the creation at 4000 BC is in agreement with the revelations of Joseph Smith.⁵³ However, it is possible that even Joseph Smith did not take a literalist approach. John S. Lewis points out how William W. Phelps believed the seven thousand years mentioned in D&C 77 to be referring to God’s time, where a thousand earth years are a day to the Lord, as discussed in 1 Peter and the Book of Abraham.⁵⁴ The point is moot for our purposes

— as Neville demonstrates, the conception of a seven-thousand-year earth goes back to at least Bishop Usher (who died in 1656) and was a commonplace Christian notion by Joseph’s era. Even if D&C 77 is to be interpreted literally, Joseph does not need Edwards for the idea.

Book of Mormon Geography

Neville quotes one instance of Edwards referring to a convergence of streams as the *head* of a river, believing this can be compared to Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon. Neville asserts that the Mississippi River is the river Sidon, and so the head of the river Sidon cannot be the source of the river to fit it into his geography.⁵⁵ However, it is also important to consider how the Book of Mormon defines the head of a river: 1 Nephi 8:14 clearly describes the head of a river as its *source*. While it is not out of the question for other uses to intend *head* to mean a convergence of rivers, it is a stretch to say Edwards had any influence on Joseph’s view of Book of Mormon geography.⁵⁶ Neville also erroneously links Oliver’s mission to the Lamanites with a mission that Edwards took to the Native Americans, believing there to be a connection between the two without providing any substantial support for the idea.⁵⁷ Some European colonists had been preaching to the Native Americans since their arrival. Joseph did not need Edwards to come up with the notion.

The Urim and Thummim

Neville writes, “Perhaps Joseph was influenced by comments Jonathan Edwards made [regarding the biblical Urim and Thummim] of his ideas and insights that he drew upon for his sermons and treatises,” but Edwards had nothing new to contribute to the discussion that could be found outside the Bible, simply pointing out that the Urim and Thummim were used by the High Priest to commune with God before it was lost.⁵⁸ Neville also tries to link this description to D&C 130 regarding a white stone and the earth becoming a Urim and Thummim — but there are no clear connections that can reasonably be drawn from Edwards in this regard.⁵⁹

Plural Marriage

Neville attempts to connect the institution of plural marriage by Joseph Smith to some writings of Edwards. In addition to Joseph Smith’s study and inspired revision of the Old Testament, Neville says,

Another possible factor [that led to the revelation on plural marriage] could be the publication of a 10-volume collection

of Edwards' works by his grandson, Sereno Edwards Dwight, in 1830. That collection included Edwards' thoughts about the polygamy as a type of the Church in the latter days. Whether that played a role or not is unknown at this point, but it's interesting to consider.⁶⁰

We note Neville's method. He presents a possible link, admits there is no evidence and then declares it "interesting to consider." There are many things that are interesting to consider — including Middle Earth and the land of Oz. But our interest or consideration do not create evidence from thin air.

Neville then summarized Edwards's thoughts on the matter as follows, before citing selected writings:

Jonathan Edwards saw Solomon's many wives as a type of Christ's church in the latter days, which would have a "multitude" of souls and nations "espoused" to Christ. He also suggested that Solomon was exempt from the law of Moses because the Lord sought to make him unlike other kings of his day.⁶¹

However, latter-day revelations received by Joseph contradicts what Edwards had proposed. Jacob 2 and D&C 132 make it clear that Solomon was *not* exempt from the Law of Moses and *broke* the law of the king recorded in Deuteronomy 17. Of the patriarchs and prophets spoken of in D&C 132, only David and Solomon are spoken of in a negative light for having multiplied wives to themselves (see Deuteronomy 17:17). Due to the significant contradictions between Edwards's writings and prophetic revelations, Edwards is an unlikely source for the institution of plural marriage in this dispensation. If mentioning an idea is enough to be credited as Joseph's source — even if Joseph concludes precisely the opposite of what the source says — then anyone and everyone could be a source.

The Fires of Hell

Neville argues that Joseph's ideas of hell being mental anguish are similar to Edwards's views, but Joseph's revelations and theology go in completely different directions. Just as with plural marriage, Joseph discusses a concept common to most Christians, and draws a conclusion diametrically opposed to Edwards — and yet we are told Edwards is the "likely source."⁶² Joseph revealed a finite hell and a grand view of heaven

for all of God's children save the sons of perdition, something decidedly lacking in Edwards's sermons.

Neville even accuses Brigham Young of painting a caricature of many Christians for believing in an infinite hell, claiming, "no one claims everyone is going to hell forever," while he misreads Brigham Young's context of the *sinful* persons — for whom an eternal hell is a widely held belief in many Christian sects.⁶³ Neville continues by saying Brigham's "caricature" "clearly doesn't reflect the teachings of Jonathan Edwards, who emphasized repentance and faith in Christ as the deliverance from hell."⁶⁴

In fact, not only did many teach an eternal hell⁶⁵ (which Neville denies, stating instead that Edwards saw the fires of hell as a sort of mental anguish) but Edwards himself did so in no uncertain terms. He was at pains to foreclose any suggestion that eternal punishment meant anything except an infinite suffering that continued forever with no relief. He also certainly does not confine the torments to the mental realm:

The misery of the wicked in hell will be absolutely eternal. ... The other opinion which I mean to oppose is that though the punishment of the wicked shall consist in *sensible misery*, yet it shall not be absolutely eternal, but only of a very long continuance. ... As the future punishment of the wicked consists in *sensible misery*, so it shall not only continue for a very long time, *but shall be absolutely without end.* ...

Do but consider what it is to suffer extreme torment forever and ever: to suffer it day and night from one year to another, from one age to another, and from one thousand ages to another (and so adding age to age, and thousands to thousands), in pain, in wailing and lamenting, groaning and shrieking, and gnashing your teeth — with your souls full of dreadful grief and amazement, [and] *with your bodies and every member full of racking torture*; without any possibility of getting ease; without any possibility of moving God to pity by your cries; without any possibility of hiding yourselves from him; without any possibility of diverting your thoughts from your pain; without any possibility of obtaining any manner of mitigation, or help, or change for the better.⁶⁶

Edwards's teachings regarding hell clearly have but a tangential connection to Joseph's revelations of hell and heaven.⁶⁷ Neville does not

cite any instance of Edwards teaching that this faith and repentance could be exercised after death, whereas latter-day revelation clarifies and expands upon the principles of salvation for the dead mentioned briefly in the New Testament (making Joseph's revelations, in my mind, much more significant than anything Edwards had to say on the matter). In life, there is no question among most Christians that faith and repentance *do* save us from hell, but most believe that this must be done *before* one is sent to hell. There is little to convince the reader that Edwards maintained the near universalist view of salvation found in the Doctrine and Covenants.

Proposed Intertextuality Between Jonathan Edwards and the Book of Mormon

Neville proposes a heavy intertextuality between the Book of Mormon and the writings of Edwards, and includes a lengthy list of proposed non-biblical words and phrases in Appendices 2 and 3 that Neville traces back to Edwards.⁶⁸ Having looked through these lists, I have found numerous errors. I found over sixty words that have a biblical root in the first two pages alone, whether it is through a spelling variation (aught/ought) or a change in the tense of the verb. Neville previously listed various scriptures that he argues may have been influenced by Jonathan Edwards or James Hervey as well, although all of the connections he draws are superficial and do not necessitate any outside influence (for example, the use of the word "farewell" is unlikely to reflect any theologian's writings).⁶⁹

Some words and phrases constitute a significant portion of Neville's argument, and so I will respond to some of these in more depth below. It becomes clear to the careful reader, however, that Neville fails to deliver any convincing argument for the intertextuality he proposes, while even misrepresenting his sources to create more "evidence." Since these are his strongest cases on which he spends the most effort, the reader is right to conclude the others are even worse.

Infinite Goodness

Neville derives the name of his book from King Benjamin's sermon in Mosiah 5, as well as from some remarks by Edwards. However, his approach is fatally flawed insofar as he will either allow this phrase to be either from an outside source *or* the Bible. Even if Joseph *had* taken this phrase from an outside source, Neville admits that Edwards "was not the only, and was not even the first, Christian author to use the phrase."⁷⁰ If

this is so, then the argument is useless — it cannot be anything but weak proof for his claim.⁷¹

Neville shows that even Edwards used it only 55 times in his writings.⁷² It would be a stretch, even if Joseph *did* read the entire eight-volume set of Edwards’s teachings, for the prophet to find and internalize these uses in the limited time he had to read (once a week at the Palmyra print shop while trying to dodge the face-blackening printers).

A far more likely outside influence, assuming such an influence exists, is instead the Christian ministers who preached at the revival meetings Joseph attended during his youth. Edwards was, after all, an influential American theologian, and his writings were widely published. Joseph, however, was not the one who would have read extensively from Edwards.

The Sin of the World

Here Neville has misused his sources to impose his own personal worldview on the scriptures. Citing a paper by Nicholas J. Frederick in the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*, Neville claims that Frederick misquotes scripture to fit his needs.

The citation Neville takes issue with is as follows:

Wherefore I would that ye should remember that I have spoken unto you concerning that prophet which the Lord showed unto me that should baptize *the Lamb of God*, which should *take away the sin of the world*. (2 Nephi 31:4)
The next day John seeth Jesus coming unto him, and saith, Behold *the Lamb of God*, which *taketh away the sin of the world*. (John 1:29)⁷³

As Frederick noted earlier in his paper,⁷⁴ he was citing Royal Skousen’s *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text*. It tells us that 2 Nephi 31:4 differs from other printed editions of the Book of Mormon by pluralizing “sin” to “sins.” Skousen notes in his analysis of textual variants:

Here in 2 Nephi 31:4, the 1830 typesetter changed the singular *sin* to *sins*. Yet this passage is virtually identical to the language in John 1:29...The singular *sin* is appropriate here. The text underwent the same change from *sin* to *sins* earlier in 1 Nephi [10:10] ... Oliver Cowdery is responsible for the change to *sins* in 1 Nephi 10:10; in the printer’s manuscript, he added the *s* later with heavier ink flow. The original manuscript is extant for 1 Nephi 10:10 and it reads *sin*.⁷⁵

However, despite Frederick's faithful representation of what the Book of Mormon's earliest text says, Neville ignores all this and naively claims that Frederick has misquoted the Book of Mormon:

Frederick misquotes 2 Nephi 31:4. The verse actually reads "which should take away the **sins** of the world..."

The distinction is significant. If we assume Joseph Smith was redacting the New Testament, we are left to speculate why Joseph would have essentially misquoted John throughout the Book of Mormon and Doctrine and Covenants...

If we expand our study to non-biblical sources, we find possible sources for Joseph Smith's usage...

Edwards also referred to "the **sins** of the world" several times.⁷⁶

If Neville had read Frederick's references, he would have known that Frederick was not citing from the 1830, or even 2013, edition of the Book of Mormon, and he could have accessed Skousen's widely accessible work to confirm Frederick's reading. Even if the scripture had originally read "sins of the world," it would be strange to say that Joseph Smith could not make the phrase plural of his own accord without the use of Edwards as inspiration.

We here see Neville's method in full flower — he misunderstands the argument being made, does not engage with well-known scholarly tools and literature, becomes aggressive and dismissive to those who disagree with him, and ends by drawing an utterly unwarranted conclusion. This is the entire book, in miniature.

Redemption Cometh in and Through the Holy Messiah

Neville argues that Edwards talked about redemption being connected with the Messiah over 100 times, so the Book of Mormon must be reflecting this idea from Edwards.⁷⁷ However, *Messiah* is simply a title that means *Anointed One* and is the equivalent of *Christ* in Greek — so it is hardly novel that Joseph believed redemption came through Jesus the Messiah, nor would it be a stretch to believe that the Nephites believed the same thing. (Given that the Nephites predated Greek, the use of Messiah may more literally reflect their language.)

Moreover, the Old Testament clearly connects the Messiah with redemption and deliverance throughout the Psalms, even if the King James Version translates it as "anointed one." This is clearly

a biblical idea that in no way requires Edwards to be an influence on the text.

Wrestle Before God

Neville states that any idea of “wrestling with God” is a phrase that most likely originated with Edwards and David Brainerd, rather than the well-known use in Genesis 32. Neville claims biblical intertextuality is “not a good fit because Jacob was not wrestling with God.”⁷⁸ Neville only cites Genesis 32:24’s description of “a man” who wrestled with Jacob and ignores the rest of the chapter that *does* teach that this man was either the Lord or the angel of the Lord. Jacob goes so far as to name the place “Peniel” — “face of God” (Genesis 32:31). Genesis 32 thus *does* ultimately claim that the wrestle is with God, making it an appropriate scriptural story for Nephite prophets.

Neville also only mentions Alma 8:10, avoiding the well-known story in Enos who clearly did connect his wrestle before God with Jacob at Peniel before he received a remission of his sins.⁷⁹ Alma, then, would have had Jacob’s *and* Enos’s experiences to draw from in his own description of wrestling before God.

Endure to the End

Neville claims that “endure to the end” is a non-biblical phrase adopted from Edwards, contrasted with the biblical “endure unto the end” in Mark 13:13.⁸⁰ However, “endure to the end” is also a phrase employed in the New Testament, such as in Matthew 10:22, and is entirely synonymous with “endure unto the end” which makes this a poor argument for Neville to make from any standpoint. It is also a phrase that occurs extensively in Early Modern English texts, showing this phrase does not require Edwards’s insertion to the text.⁸¹

The Natural Man Is an Enemy to God

Neville says that 1 Corinthians’s 2:14’s use of the “natural man” who “receives not the things of the Spirit” offers “little or no insight” to the phrase’s use in the Book of Mormon. Because of this, Neville claims that “non-biblical textuality takes us to Jonathan Edwards and deeply enriches the text. By invoking Edwards, Joseph Smith provided us a key to a more profound and meaningful experience not just with the text, but with God.”⁸² However, while Neville simplistically links 1 Corinthians 2:14 strictly with knowledge, he fails to take the whole passage into context — knowledge of things of the Spirit. Paul’s description fits perfectly

with King Benjamin's description of the natural man, making Edwards a forced and unnecessary addition to the text. Neville attempts to strengthen his connection to Edward in Mosiah 3:19 by citing Edwards's list of various traits the spiritual man should have, but most of the traits listed do not appear in the Book of Mormon, making the connection weak and superficial.⁸³ Here we should ask, "If Joseph is cribbing from Edwards, why does he ignore such a useful list?" In assessing an author's influence on another, we must look at "unparallels" as well as supposed "parallels."⁸⁴

Neville also claims that James 4:4's use of "enemy of God" is completely different from the phrase "enemy to God" found in the Book of Mormon.⁸⁵ However, the context suggests that it is an objective genitive, which means that "enemy to God" is an appropriate translation of the Greek. The ideas are identical. James and Benjamin were discussing the same idea, being an enemy *to* God, and Edwards is a forced addition to the text. A brief look through Google Books will also show that Edwards was not the only person to connect the natural man with an enemy to God, further demonstrating Neville's forced insertion of Edwards into the text.

Forever and Ever

Neville claims that the phrase "forever and ever" is a phrase distinct from the Bible's "for ever and ever." Edwards, however, used both, so he may have influenced the text of the Book of Mormon.⁸⁶ However, the phrases are identical in meaning and would simply reflect scribal/translator preference. There is no reason to suppose any outside source was needed for the Book of Mormon.

Preparatory State

Neville argues that the theology of a preparatory state comes from Edwards, but Edwards's "preparatory state" is his description of the period from the Fall of Adam and Eve to the birth of Christ.⁸⁷ The Book of Mormon, however, speaks of a *mortal* probation for us to prepare ourselves to meet God. The two have a superficial connection, but the theology of Edwards and the Book of Mormon diverge drastically upon closer examination.

Broken Heart and Contrite Spirit

Neville argues that the phrase "a broken heart and contrite spirit" comes from Edwards, but both the Bible and latter-day revelations refer to both

the heart and the spirit with both adjectives.⁸⁸ A broken heart is a contrite heart, and a contrite spirit is a broken spirit. Those who know the bible as well as Neville claims that young Joseph did know that Psalms 34:18 includes both in clear parallel: “The Lord is nigh unto them that are of *a broken heart*; and saveth such as be of *a contrite spirit*.” The phrase “a broken heart and a contrite spirit” was used before 1620,⁸⁹ including twice by John Bunyan in 1691 under a revealing title: *The Acceptable Sacrifice: or the Excellency of a Broken Heart: Shewing the Nature, Signs, and Proper Effects of a Contrite Spirit*.⁹⁰ The Book of Mormon’s “broken heart and contrite spirit” dates to at least 1615.⁹¹ It was likely a common expression in Joseph’s time, which is why Edwards and Joseph used it.⁹²

Come Unto Christ

Jesus says “come unto me” (Matthew 11:28), but when Moroni talks about it in the third person as a command “come unto Christ,” Neville argues Joseph must have received the phrase from Edwards.⁹³ This is a poor argument since both verses offer the same doctrine, just told in different voices. The phrase is also used in dozens of works found in a quick Google Books search between the dates of 1800–1820. The University of Michigan’s free EEBO database for Early Modern English likewise shows hundreds of occurrences of this phrase being used, showing it was not unique to Edwards or Joseph.⁹⁴ In fact, one such usage has “invite them, together with us, to come unto Christ.”⁹⁵

Clear as the Moon

Neville argues that Joseph Smith did not quote the Song of Solomon in the Doctrine and Covenants — he quoted Edwards quoting the Song of Solomon.⁹⁶ Joseph Smith, however, was likely aware of the contents of the Song of Solomon by 1836 as he learned Hebrew — he would later quote from the Song of Solomon in the 1840s,⁹⁷ and the name Nauvoo is based on a rare word in the Hebrew Bible that appears only once in Isaiah and the Song of Solomon. It is doubtful that Joseph truly was dependent on Edwards for these inclusions. Once again, the story changes to support Neville’s claims — Joseph must know the Bible extremely well, except when it would be better for the theory if Jonathan Edwards knew it.

Son of Righteousness

Neville believes that “Son of Righteousness” in 3 Nephi 25:2 is the correct spelling (rather than “sun,” as it appears in Malachi 4:2) and that Joseph Smith saw this as an error in the Bible and was referring to

sermons by Edwards.⁹⁸ However, there is no indication that Joseph ever attempted to alter this verse in his inspired revision, and a scribal error is more likely. It would be easy to hear “sun” but write “son.” Joseph likely saw no need to correct this in later editions of the Book of Mormon because “Son of Righteousness” and “Sun of Righteousness” are each adequate titles for Jesus Christ, the only begotten son of God and the light of the world. In any case, Joseph hardly needs Edwards to point out that “sun” and “son” sound identical.⁹⁹

Arise from the Dust

Neville argues that the phrase “arise from the dust,” a quotation from Isaiah, is more likely from Edwards.¹⁰⁰ However, it is clear for serious readers of the Book of Mormon that the Nephite prophets clearly adopt this language from Isaiah, and all use it in the same way, reflecting a thorough knowledge of the ancient Old World understanding of rising from the dust as a symbol of enthronement/empowerment and covenant keeping. The Book of Mormon uses this language in profound ways when modern biblical scholarship is considered, showing a level of depth and sophistication far beyond what one could have gained from consulting Jonathan Edwards.¹⁰¹ Once more, Joseph’s biblical knowledge flags just when Neville needs it to.

Gathered Together in One

Neville argues that “gathered together in one” is a non-biblical phrase, even though “gather together in one” is biblical (Ephesians 1:10).¹⁰² Neville is apparently willing to allow Edwards to use a verb in multiple tenses but unwilling to allow Joseph Smith or the Book of Mormon prophets the same freedom.

Father of Lies

Neville argues that the title “father of lies” is Edwardsian, although it is an entirely biblical concept that does not require Edwards.¹⁰³ John 8:44 states that Satan is a “liar, and the father of it [i.e., lies].” It is not a leap in logic to believe a prophet could adopt that title and clarify the meaning. This is evident by Martin Luther, who called the devil the father of all lies long before Jonathan Edwards:

When that envious, poisoned spirit, *the devil*, plagues and torments us, as is his custom, by reason of our sins, intending to lead us into despair, we must meet him in this manner: “thou deceitful and wicked spirit! How darest thou

to presume to persuade me to such things? Knowest thou not that Christ Jesus, my Lord and Savior, who crushed thy head, has forbidden me to believe thee, yea, even when thou speakest the truth, in that he names thee a murderer, a liar, and the father of lies.”¹⁰⁴

Zion

Neville claims the New Testament never mentions Zion, but the Greek form “Sion” is used repeatedly. He attempts to link this to Edwards’s teachings that “mount Zion is a type (or symbol) of the Church of Christ.”¹⁰⁵ However, this concept is not necessarily drawn from Edwards, as Hebrews 12:22–23 speaks of Zion as entering the company of angels and the “church of the firstborn.” Christians in the Early Modern English era likewise used Mount Zion as a symbol much like Edwards did, basing their arguments out of the Bible.¹⁰⁶ *Zion* and its Greek form *Sion* are easily connected.

Hebraism, or Edwards?

Neville writes,

Another well-known feature of the Book of Mormon is parallelism, including chiasmus and other forms of repetition. Edwards effectively used such parallel structures to convey his messages because much of his work was written for public speaking. ...

While interesting and relevant, an in-depth comparison between Edwards’ literary techniques and the Book of Mormon is beyond the scope of this book.¹⁰⁷

Neville appears to believe that Hebraisms in the Book of Mormon, including some of the most common Hebraic forms of poetry, are not in the Book of Mormon because it is a text from a Hebrew people who fled Jerusalem, but because Edwards purportedly used similar methods while preaching. (Neville offers no evidence to support this claim, however.) This is a dangerously incorrect assumption that shoehorns Edwards into the text and risks clouding the nature of an inherently Hebraic text.

Other Wrongly Attributed Phrases

A few other phrases or words Neville wrongly attributes to Edwards’s influence stand out as worthy of mention.

For example, Neville attempts to draw a distinction between “towards” in place of “toward,” even though they are synonymous. Neville even demonstrates through his citations of Edwards that Edwards used both words synonymously, and there is little reason to believe Joseph’s choice was influenced by Edwards.¹⁰⁸

Neville similarly includes “having had” as a verb form found in Edwards and minimally in the Bible, assuming that Joseph Smith could only learn this conjugation of the verb from him.¹⁰⁹ He also argues that verbs such as “grasped” come from Edwards’s reading of a Hebrew phrase, unaware that the *hiphil* form of *hzk* in Hebrew is translated as “grasp” and would not require Edwards’s reading to appear in the Book of Mormon.¹¹⁰ (It also seems a stretch to insist that Joseph — who knew English at least as well as he knew the Bible — was incapable of using a common English verb in a variety of tenses.)

Neville similarly argues that phrases such as “strait and narrow” or “straight and narrow” originate from Edwards’s writings, even though it is a biblical phrase that may have been misspelled by Joseph’s scribes.¹¹¹ Neville also claims the phrase “sandy foundation” originated with Edwards, even though it reflects a biblical idea (e.g., Matthew 7:26) and Edwards was not the first to use this paraphrase.¹¹² One prominent example is from William Penn, a Quaker and the namesake of the Quaker colony of Pennsylvania, who was confined to the tower of London in 1668 for writing a religious pamphlet called *The Sandy Foundation Shaken*. This work was repeatedly republished in nineteenth-century America.¹¹³

The Proposed Use of Additional Outside Sources in the Translation

In addition to Edwards, Neville proposes that Joseph relied on other books for his translation of the Book of Mormon. Many critics of the Church have appealed to these books as putative sources for the Book of Mormon, in an attempt to discredit the Book of Mormon and the restored gospel. Incredibly, Neville even asserts that “faithful scholars rejected the very evidence developed by the skeptics that supports Joseph’s claim that he translated the plates. Instead, they have adopted a theory that Joseph was merely reading words that appeared on the [Urim and Thummim] or seer stone.”¹¹⁴ As with his supposed connections to Edwards, however, Neville offers only superficial evidence that cannot be taken seriously.

For example, he argues that among the sources Joseph had read and drew upon, he was intimately familiar with *The Late War*, *The First Book of Napoleon*, *The American Revolution*, and *The First Book*

of the *American Chronicles of the Times*. Neville claims these sources were used for military terms found in the Book of Mormon, but most are single common words such as “surrounded” or “rehearsed.”¹¹⁵ Single words such as these cannot be seriously linked to any outside source, as it would presume Joseph was incapable of hearing or learning them in any other way.

Perhaps the weakest argument Neville could make regarding *The Late War* and the Book of Mormon is that “In both cases, we have a Title Page, a Copyright Page, and a Preface.”¹¹⁶ Because both books have these features, including the eleven witnesses, which he compares to scholarly endorsements for *The Late War*, Neville sees a connection between the two that is entirely imagined. If he is so desperate for parallels that these will do, it says much about even the author’s assessment of how convincing his case really is.¹¹⁷

Neville similarly argues that Lucy Mack Smith’s late retelling of Joseph Sr.’s dream influenced Joseph’s language, but the reverse may also be true — that is, she adapted language from the Book of Mormon in her retelling of Joseph Sr.’s dream years after it had occurred.¹¹⁸ This scenario is much more likely.¹¹⁹ Although Joseph’s family doubtless influenced his language, this example cannot bear the load that Neville places upon it.

Conclusion

While Joseph Smith surely was influenced by the language of his time — after all, “the Lord God giveth light unto the understanding; for he speaketh unto men according to their language, unto their understanding” (2 Nephi 31:3) — Neville makes far too many unsubstantiated claims and bases his arguments on far too many implausible suppositions to be taken seriously. Even his best suggestions are weak — they consist of phrases common in the religious literature and discourses of three centuries.¹²⁰ There is no clear evidence linking distinctive language in the Book of Mormon to books written or published around Joseph Smith’s time, nor can Neville demonstrate a clear connection to Edwards’s writings. And, lest we forget, this entire shaky edifice is constructed on a sandy foundation — Neville has provided only a just-so story to convince us that Joseph even had contact with Edwards’s in-depth theological treatises to begin with.

Infinite Goodness is a poor book to add to any Latter-day Saint’s library because of its many historical inaccuracies. It is further weakened by its continued insistence on his Demonstration Hypothesis, which claims that Joseph Smith merely feigned translation by reciting Isaiah from

memory, despite the textual and historical evidence to the contrary.¹²¹ It also serves as a poor model of how to do history, how to argue honestly, and even the use of logic. It is a pseudo-historical work that gives undue credence to many attacks originally formulated by critics of the Church regarding the origins of the Book of Mormon, and its arguments can be devastating to faith for unprepared members of the Church who do not know beforehand the claims made within. We can only debate whether its effect on the reader will be worse because of the false ideas it teaches, or because of the dreadful example that it sets.

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Endnotes

- 1 Spencer Kraus, "An Unfortunate Approach to Joseph Smith's Translation of Ancient Scripture," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 52 (2022): 1–62, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/an-unfortunate-approach-to-joseph-smiths-translation-of-ancient-scripture/>.
- 2 I have previously responded to some of Neville's claims regarding Jonathan Edwards made in an interview on YouTube. This review deals with his more complete claims made in print, although some of his claims made in his interview can also clarify his book's claims. For my earlier response, see Spencer Kraus, "Jonathan Edwards's Purported Influence on Joseph Smith: A Response to Jonathan Neville's Latest Interview (Part Two)," *Latter-day Light*

and Truth (blog), 18 October 2021, <https://latterdaylightandtruth.blogspot.com/2021/05/a-response-to-strange-theories.html>.

- 3 The argument that Swedenborg influenced Joseph’s view of heaven can be found in Mary Ann Meyers, “Death in Swedenborgian and Mormon Eschatology,” *Dialogue* 14, no. 1 (Spring 1981): 58–64 and D. Michael Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, rev. ed. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1998), 217–19. A rebuttal to this claim, arguing that Joseph Smith and Swedenborg drew from the Bible in different ways, can be found in J. B. Haws, “Joseph Smith, Emanuel Swedenborg, and Section 76: Importance of the Bible in Latter-day Revelation,” in *The Doctrine and Covenants, Revelations in Context*, ed. Andrew H. Hedges, J. Spencer Fluhman, and Alonzo L. Gaskill (Provo: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2008), 142–67.
- 4 Jonathan Neville, *Infinite Goodness: Joseph Smith, Jonathan Edwards, and the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Digital Legends Press, 2021), 79.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 See Kraus, “An Unfortunate Approach,” which deals extensively with pseudo-historical claims made by Neville regarding the translation of the Book of Mormon, including the claims that Joseph Smith memorized and recited Isaiah and lied to the Whitmers regarding his use of a seer stone during the translation.
- 7 Neville, *Infinite Goodness*, 79.
- 8 Thomas W. Manninen, “Appeal to Personal Incredulity,” *Bad Arguments: 100 of the Most Important Fallacies in Western Philosophy* (Wiley Online Library, 9 May 2018), <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/9781119165811.ch17>.
- 9 See Jonathan Neville, *A Man That Can Translate: Joseph Smith and the Nephite Interpreters* (Salt Lake City: Digital Legends Press, 2020), 215–16.
- 10 Lucy Mack Smith and Emma Smith (two family members with no inclination to lie about their beloved Joseph) each testified that Joseph Smith was not well-read, as will be discussed below. See also Book of Mormon Central, “Why Would God Choose an Uneducated Man to Translate the Book of Mormon? (2 Nephi 27:19),” *KnoWhy* 397 (January 9, 2018), <https://knowhy>.

- bookofmormoncentral.org/knowwhy/why-would-god-choose-an-
uneducated-man-to-translate-the-book-of-mormon.
- 11 Neville, *Infinite Goodness*, 3. Cf. Neville, *A Man That Can Translate*, 212–13.
 - 12 “Journal, 1835–1836,” p. 36–37, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/journal-1835-1836/37>.
 - 13 It is quite telling that Joseph rarely went into detail regarding his youth and his leg surgery in most of his other histories, and in one of his histories the leg surgery incident is included without any mention of leading Joseph to read and ponder on the teachings of any prominent Christian theologian. Neville’s claim is purely imaginative and out of place in the historical record. See “History, 1838–1856, volume A-1 [23 December 1805–30, August 1834],” p. 131, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-a-1-23-december-1805-30-august-1834/137>.
 - 14 Neville, *Infinite Goodness*, 164–67.
 - 15 *Ibid.*, 177–78.
 - 16 Lucy Mack Smith once recorded that her husband “would not subscribe to any particular system of faith, but contended for the ancient order, as established by our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, and his Apostles.” After spiritual dreams he “seemed more confirmed than ever in the opinion: that there were no order or class of religionists who knew any more concerning the Kingdom of God, than those of the world; or such as made no profession of religion whatever.” See “Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1845,” pp. 52–53, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/lucy-mack-smith-history-1845/59>. Given Joseph Smith Sr.’s ties to Universalism, it would especially be doubtful that he gave his children Jonathan Edwards’s sermons, one of which I will cite below that is antithetical to the Universalist model.
 - 17 Neville, *Infinite Goodness*, 167. Neville specifically mentions how Christian theological works were widely published in New York, so I conclude that Neville believes this would have continued into their stay in Palmyra.

- 18 For Joseph Smith's athletic capabilities, see Alexander L. Baugh, "Joseph Smith's Athletic Nature," in *Joseph Smith: The Prophet, The Man*, ed. Susan Easton Black and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1993), 137–50.
- 19 Orsamus Turner, *History of the Pioneer Settlement of Phelps and Gorham's Purchase and Morris' Reserve* (Rochester, NY: William Alling, 1852), 213–14, https://www.google.com/books/edition/History_of_the_Pioneer_Settlement_of_Phe/VIIWAAAAYAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1.
- 20 Neville, *Infinite Goodness*, xiii. Cf., 79.
- 21 "Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1844–1845, Page [1], bk. 4," p. [1], bk. 4, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/lucy-mack-smith-history-1844-1845/43>. It should be noted that the context of this account makes it clear that Lucy Mack Smith was explaining how her son's achievements were remarkable given that he was not a heavily educated bookworm.
- 22 "Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1845," p. 86, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/lucy-mack-smith-history-1845/93>.
- 23 *Webster's Dictionary 1828* (online), s.v. "perusal," <https://webstersdictionary1828.com/Dictionary/Perusal>.
- 24 Neville, *A Man That Can Translate*, 214. Cf. Neville, *Infinite Goodness*, 178–79.
- 25 "Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1844–1845, Page [2], bk. 2," p. [2], bk. 2, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/lucy-mack-smith-history-1844-1845/20>.
- 26 See "Last Testimony of Sister Emma," *Saint's Herald* 26 (1 October 1879).
- 27 Neville, *Infinite Goodness*, 175. For further discussion, see Kraus, "An Unfortunate Approach," 43.
- 28 George A. Smith, "Joseph Smith's Family – Details of George A. Smith's Own Experience, etc.," in *Journal of Discourses* (2 August 1857), 5:102–103, <https://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/digital/collection/JournalOfDiscourses3/id/2275/rec/5>.
- 29 See Neville, *Infinite Goodness*, 283–300.

- 30 “History, circa Summer 1832,” p. 1, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-circa-summer-1832/1>, spelling in context.
- 31 Neville also discusses Joseph’s early interactions with the angel Moroni, who quoted from several biblical passages in 1824 during his initial visits. Neville claims that the content of Moroni’s speech — which included biblical citations — reveals Joseph’s biblical sophistication. I discuss Joseph’s purported biblical knowledge in Kraus, “An Unfortunate Approach,” 19–20.
- 32 Neville, *Infinite Goodness*, 210.
- 33 *Ibid.*, 7.
- 34 See *ibid.*, 26.
- 35 *Ibid.*, 92.
- 36 *Ibid.*
- 37 *Ibid.*, 82–88.
- 38 For example, “my intimate acquaintance with those of different denominations led me to marvel exceedingly for I discovered that they did not adorn their profession by a holy walk and Godly conversation agreeable to what I found contained in that sacred depository this was a grief to my Soul ... I found that mankind did not come unto the Lord but that they had apostatised from the true and living faith and there was no society or denomination that built upon the gospel of Jesus Christ as recorded in the new testament” (“History, circa Summer 1832,” p. 2, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-circa-summer-1832/2>).
- 39 For example, in his 1832 account Joseph discussed “searching the **scriptures** believing as I was taught, that they contained the **word of God** thus applying myself to **them** ... there was no society or denomination that built upon the gospel of Jesus Christ as recorded in the **new testament** ... I learned in the **scriptures** that God was the same yesterday to day and forever that he was no respecter to persons.” He repeatedly mentions the scriptures, but says nothing about reading anything else. One is struck by Joseph’s isolation — he has only scripture, himself, and his thoughts (“History, circa Summer 1832,” 2, emphasis added).

- 40 See Matthias F. Cowley, *Cowley's Talks on Doctrine* (Chattanooga, TN: Ben E. Rich, 1902), 160–61, <https://archive.org/details/cowleystalksondo00cowl/page/n3/mode/2up>.
- 41 Neville, *Infinite Goodness*, 6.
- 42 A recent example of this can be seen in Kent P. Jackson, “Some Notes on Joseph Smith and Adam Clarke,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 40 (2020): 15–60, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/some-notes-on-joseph-smith-and-adam-clarke/>. While Thomas Wayment’s hypothesis of Adam Clarke’s influence on the Joseph Smith Translation originally showed promise, and even showed more promise than Neville’s hypothesis presented in *Infinite Goodness*, it, too, failed to deliver any substantial evidence for outside influence on one of Joseph Smith’s translations. Other failed “smoking guns” will be discussed below, as Neville reuses many critics’ arguments regarding books such as *The Late War*.
- 43 Neville, *Infinite Goodness*, 147.
- 44 *Ibid.*, 102.
- 45 *Ibid.*, 39–40.
- 46 The detail regarding the preacher is found in “Wm. B. Smith’s Last Statement,” *Zion’s Ensign*, Jan. 13, 1894, 6. All of the extant accounts of the First Vision can be read online at the Joseph Smith Papers project.
- 47 See Neville, *Infinite Goodness*, 203–205.
- 48 See Alexander L. Baugh, et al, eds., *Joseph Smith and his First Vision: Context, Place, and Meaning* (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 2021) for excellent studies regarding the historical context of the First Vision.
- 49 Neville, *Infinite Goodness*, 86.
- 50 “The Devil and His Works,” in *The Table Talk of Martin Luther*, trans. William Hazlitt (London: HG Bohn, 1857), entry DXCIV, 255, <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.92926/page/n361/mode/2up?>.
- 51 Neville, *Infinite Goodness*, 56–61.
- 52 For one example among many: “Him hath God the Father highly exalted, and set him down at his Right-Hand, clothed in Glory,

- and exalted Majesty” [Thomas Bouston, *The Mystery of Christ in the Form of a Servant* (Glasgow: William Gray, 1742), v].
- 53 Ibid., 36.
- 54 See John S. Lewis, “The Scale of Creation in Space and Time,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 8 (2014): 71–80, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/the-scale-of-creation-in-space-and-time/>.
- 55 Neville maintains that Zarahemla must be in Iowa based on a misreading of D&C 125:3, forcing the Mississippi to be the Sidon River. Because the Book of Mormon describes the head of the river Sidon being south of Zarahemla, Neville must argue that the head of the river is different than the source of the river. He offers a brief summary of his argument in Jonathan Neville, “The name of Zarahemla,” *Moroni’s America* (blog), 9 December 2021, <http://www.moronisamerica.com/the-name-of-zarahemla/>.
- 56 Neville, *Infinite Goodness*, 148–50.
- 57 Ibid.
- 58 Ibid., 157–58.
- 59 Ibid., 158–59.
- 60 Ibid., 160, spelling in context.
- 61 Ibid., 161.
- 62 Ibid., 113–28.
- 63 Ibid., 114–15.
- 64 Ibid., 115.
- 65 For an accessible quick review of various Christian attitudes toward hell, see Edwin Woodruff Tait et al, *A History of Hell: A brief survey and resource guide* (Worcester, PA: Christian History, 2011), <https://www.yumpu.com/en/document/read/6836552/the-history-of-hell-christian-history-magazine>. Those who taught an eternal, unending hell for some included Tertullian, John Chrysostom, Jerome, Augustine, Anselm of Canterbury, Thomas Aquinas, Isaac Watts, John Wesley, and EB Pusey. Even a consideration of Dante’s *Inferno* makes it clear that many Christians taught an eternal, never-ending hell. For example, from the year of Joseph’s First Vision, see John Reed, letter to Rev. Hosea Ballou, “Correspondence,” *Universalist*

Magazine (5 February 1820): 126, https://archive.org/details/sim_universalist_1820-02-05_1_32/page/n1/mode/2up. (“If these, and many similar expressions in the sacred volume, will not prove the eternity of hell’s torments then language ... means any thing or nothing.”)

- 66 Jonathan Edwards, “Sermon XI: The Eternity of Hell’s Torments,” in *Sermons on the Following Subjects ... By the Late Reverend Mr. Jonathan Edwards* (Hartford: Husdon and Goodwin, 1780), 172, 183, 197, <https://archive.org/details/sermonsonfollowi00edwa/page/170/mode/2up?>, emphasis added. Neville argues (*Infinite Goodness*, 21–34) that Latter-day Saint scholars such as Steven C. Harper and Terryl Givens are wrong to focus on Edwards’s teachings on hell as found in his infamous “Sinners in the Hands of An Angry God,” yet a wider examination of what Edwards had to say on the matter shows that Steven C. Harper and Terryl Givens do portray what Edwards believed about the fires and torments of hell accurately. While Edwards may have had room for a slightly more compassionate God than as described in that sermon, it pales in comparison to the loving and merciful God revealed to Joseph Smith who had prepared an infinite *escape from* hell rather than an infinite *prosecution into* hell.
- 67 A more potent argument for Neville would have been that the Book of Mormon’s view of “hell” is closer to Edwards’s view than Joseph’s later theology. However, Neville focuses almost entirely on the Doctrine and Covenants conception of hell while only tangentially using language from the Book of Mormon, making this argument easily dismissible.
- 68 See Neville, *Infinite Goodness*, 217–79.
- 69 *Ibid.*, 63–70. The word “farewell” is listed as Edwardsian on page 70.
- 70 *Ibid.*, 15.
- 71 A search through Google Books will show that the term “infinite goodness” is far from exclusive to Jonathan Edwards, and the EEBO database for Early Modern English, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu>, similarly includes countless examples of this phrase being used. A viable explanation for its inclusion in the Book of Mormon is simply that it was a part of the theological vocabulary of the day. While some scholars believe they have found evidence of

Early Modern English in the Book of Mormon, such a discussion is beyond the scope of this paper. The purpose in referencing this time period is not to argue for or against Early Modern English in the Book of Mormon, but rather to show that these phrases identified by Neville predate Jonathan Edwards and had become common theological phrases in the centuries leading up to the Restoration.

- 72 Neville, *Infinite Goodness*, 14.
- 73 Nicholas J. Frederick, “The Book of Mormon and Its Redaction of the King James New Testament: A Further Evaluation of the Interaction between the New Testament and the Book of Mormon,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 27 (2018): 51.
- 74 Ibid., 48n8.
- 75 Royal Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon, Part Two: 2 Nephi 11 – Mosiah 16* (Provo, UT: The Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2014): 907–908.
- 76 Neville, *Infinite Goodness*, 48–49.
- 77 Ibid., 51.
- 78 Ibid., 74.
- 79 See Matthew L. Bowen, “And There Wrestled a Man with Him’ (Genesis 32:24): Enos’s Adaptations of the Onomastic Wordplay of Genesis,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 10 (2014): 151–60, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/and-there-wrestled-a-man-with-him-genesis-3224-enoss-adaptations-of-the-onomastic-wordplay-of-genesis/>.
- 80 Neville, *A Man That Can Translate*, 230–31.
- 81 The EEBO database for Early Modern English, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu>, similarly includes countless examples of this phrase being used. Google Ngram similarly shows that the phrase “endure to the end” was used from the Early Modern English era through Joseph Smith’s day more frequently than the more archaic “endure unto the end.”
- 82 Neville, *Infinite Goodness*, 93. Cf. Neville, *A Man That Can Translate*, 379–81.
- 83 Neville, *Infinite Goodness*, 99.

- 84 Benjamin McGuire has offered many insights into this topic. See Benjamin L. McGuire, “The Late War Against the Book of Mormon,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 7 (2013): 323–55, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/the-late-war-against-the-book-of-mormon/>; Benjamin L. McGuire, “Finding Parallels: Some Cautions and Criticisms, Part One,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 5 (2013): 1–59, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/finding-parallels-some-cautions-and-criticisms-part-one/>; and Benjamin L. McGuire, “Finding Parallels: Some Cautions and Criticisms, Part Two,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 5 (2013): 61–104, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/finding-parallels-some-cautions-and-criticisms-part-two/>.
- 85 See Neville, *Infinite Goodness*, 96.
- 86 See *ibid.*, 98.
- 87 See *ibid.*, 129–34.
- 88 See *ibid.*, 77.
- 89 *The Workes of Mr. Sam. Hieron late Pastor of Modbury in Deuon*, Vol. 2 (London: Wi Stansby, 1620), 58, 368, https://books.google.ca/books?id=MgQ8v_FYrGwC&pg=PA368; George Willington, “*Cor concuffum & Contritum*: or, A Present for Jehova,” (London: Thomas Milbourn, 1670), 8, 12, https://books.google.ca/books?id=_0dnAAAaAAJ&pg=PA8.
- 90 Bunyan is better known as the author of *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. See John Bunyan, *The Acceptable Sacrifice: or the Excellency of a Broken Heart: Shewing the Nature, Signs, and Proper Effects of a Contrite Spirit* (London: Elizabeth Smith, 1691), 19, 168, <https://books.google.ca/books?id=WYRnAAAaAAJ&pg=PA168>, emphasis added.
- 91 Thomas Howes, *A Christian Enchiridion* (C.L., 1615), 182, https://books.google.ca/books?id=alrL_2x3DGIC&pg=PA182.
- 92 A quick search of Google Books between the years 1800–1820 finds more than twenty examples of the Book of Mormon’s version alone. The EEBO database for Early Modern English, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu>, similarly includes countless examples of this phrase being used. For more information regarding this phrase in the Book of Mormon text, see Book of Mormon Central, “Why Did Jesus Tell All People to Sacrifice a Broken Heart and a Contrite

- Spirit? (3 Nephi 9:19–20),” *KnoWhy* 198 (September 29, 2016), <https://knowhy.bookofmormoncentral.org/knowhy/why-did-jesus-tell-all-people-to-sacrifice-a-broken-heart-and-a-contrite-spirit>.
- 93 See Neville, *Infinite Goodness*, 77.
- 94 The EEBO database for Early Modern English, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu>.
- 95 Iacopo Aconcio, *Satan's Stratagems* (London: John Maddock, 1648), author's preface.
- 96 See Neville, *Infinite Goodness*, 135–40. Neville bases this argument off of the remark that appears in the Joseph Smith Translation that the Song of Solomon is “not inspired writings,” but Neville approaches the matter simplistically, as if Joseph would never read the Song of Solomon under any other circumstances than provided by Jonathan Edwards. See the Church's Bible Dictionary, c.v. “Song of Solomon,” <http://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/scriptures/bd/song-of-solomon>.
- 97 References to the Song of Solomon, including those made by Joseph Smith and other early Church leaders, can be found at <https://scriptures.byu.edu>.
- 98 See Neville, *Infinite Goodness*, 84–85.
- 99 Royal Skousen has considered this case and provides good reasons for favoring “sun” here. See Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants in the Book of Mormon*, 830–33.
- 100 See Neville, *Infinite Goodness*, 89.
- 101 See Jeff Lindsay, “‘Arise from the Dust’: Insights from Dust-Related Themes in the Book of Mormon (Part 1: Tracks from the Book of Moses),” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 22 (2016): 179–232, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/arise-from-the-dust-insights-from-dust-related-themes-in-the-book-of-mormon-part-1-tracks-from-the-book-of-moses/> and especially Lindsay, “‘Arise from the Dust’: Insights from Dust-Related Themes in the Book of Mormon (Part 2: Enthronement, Resurrection, and Other Ancient Motifs from the ‘Voice from the Dust’),” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 22 (2016): 233–77, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/arise-from-the-dust-insights-from-dust-related-themes-in-the-book-of-mormon->

part-2-enthronement-resurrection-and-other-ancient-motifs-from-the-voice-from-the-dust/.

- 102 See Neville, *Infinite Goodness*, 89.
- 103 Ibid., 78.
- 104 “The Devil and His Works,” entry DC, 258, emphasis added.
- 105 Neville, *Infinite Goodness*, 43–44.
- 106 The EEBO database for Early Modern English, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu>, where many of these examples are readily available.
- 107 Neville, *Infinite Goodness*, 19.
- 108 Neville, *A Man That Can Translate*, 222–25.
- 109 Ibid., 384–85.
- 110 Neville, *Infinite Goodness*, 75–76.
- 111 Neville, *A Man That Can Translate*, 225–28.
- 112 Neville, *Infinite Goodness*, 78.
- 113 Rosemary Moore, *George Whitehead and the Establishment of Quakerism* (Leiden, NL: Koninklijke Brill, 2022), 32.
- 114 Neville, *A Man That Can Translate*, 190. I have respectfully inserted the term Urim and Thummim into the quotation where Neville used his acronym “U&T.” For a response to the claim that scholars have “adopted” the “theory” that Joseph read words off of his translation instruments, see Kraus, “An Unfortunate Approach,” 13, to see why this is historically accurate and likely the method originally described by Joseph Smith himself.
- 115 See Neville, *A Man That Can Translate*, 234–35. Cf. Neville, *Infinite Goodness*, 193–98.
- 116 Neville, *Infinite Goodness*, 190. See also 191–93.
- 117 Neville also fails to recognize the scholarship detailing whether or not Joseph Smith was influenced by these works that show that not only was it highly unlikely that Joseph actually had access to these sources, but there are no meaningful connections that can be drawn from them. See, for example, Stanford Carmack, “Is the Book of Mormon a Pseudo-Archaic Text?” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 28 (2018): 177–232, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/is-the-book-of-mormon-a-pseudo-archaic-text/>; Stanford Carmack, “Personal Relative Pronoun

- Usage in the Book of Mormon: An Important Authorship Diagnostic,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 49 (2021): 5–36, <https://interpreterfoundation.org/personal-relative-pronoun-usage-in-the-book-of-mormon-an-important-authorship-diagnostic/>; and McGuire, “The Late War Against the Book of Mormon.”
- 118 See Neville, *A Man That Can Translate*, 235–36.
- 119 For a more thorough analysis, see Book of Mormon Central, “Why Are There So Many Similarities between the Dreams of Lehi and Joseph Smith, Sr.? (1 Nephi 8:4),” *KnowWhy* 474 (October 9 2018), <https://knowwhy.bookofmormoncentral.org/knowhy/why-are-there-so-many-similarities-between-the-dreams-of-lehi-and-joseph-smith-sr.>
- 120 Brant Gardner also mentions how revivalist language was used in the book of Mormon precisely because it was so common in Joseph Smith’s day (and as such it would not be required that Joseph Smith was well versed in any theological treatise). See Brant Gardner, *Translating the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2011), 308.
- 121 Neville offers a brief review of his Demonstration Hypothesis in Neville, *Infinite Goodness*, 315–17. For my review of this hypothesis, see Kraus, “An Unfortunate Approach,” 1–62.

