

mainstream environmental groups, and the struggles of a new religion's second generation to maintain continuity with a founder's vision.

Those interested in further development of methodologies specific to studies of new religions will likely be disappointed, with explication of methodology being little more than an aside: "a hybrid of textual, historical, and ethnographic approaches" (xv). Those approaches are quite evident throughout the book, with the ethnographic elements being very well done.

Eco-Alchemy adds to the underdeveloped category of New Religions Studies and environmentalism. There are too few studies of this relationship and fewer still that engage the relationship of specific traditions to environmentalism. There are none as detailed and well-researched as *Eco-Alchemy*; but, then, there are few new religious movements (or old religious movements for that matter) that are as intimately involved with the environmental movement as Anthroposophy. Besides being one of the two classic examples of the reemergence of the western esoteric tradition (the other being Theosophy), and unlike its more well-known precursor, Anthroposophy is rightly classified as an environmental religion. McKanan's excellent study removes any doubt of this fact.

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Visions in a Seer Stone: Joseph Smith and the Making of the Book of Mormon. By William L. Davis. University of North Carolina Press, 2020. xi + 250 pages. \$90.00 cloth; \$29.95, paper; ebook available.

Midway through *Visions in a Seer Stone*, William L. Davis cites the noted historian Larry Morris' description of one of the great frustrations of historians of Joseph Smith and the Mormon tradition he founded: scholars have discovered no extant, contemporary documentation of the production of the Book of Mormon. There are reminiscences, like that of Joseph Smith's mother Lucy and his scribe Oliver Cowdery; there are decades-later interviews of Joseph Smith's wife Emma and close friend David Whitmer; there is Joseph Smith's own enigmatic insistence that the book was produced "by the gift and power of God" from a set of plates an angel guided him to, which was all he seemed to care to say on the subject. But there are no documents mentioning the book from the years in the mid-1820s, when Joseph Smith was by his own account learning about the book from an angel and then, in a blitz of productivity and after a false start that produced material now lost, dictating roughly 175,000 words to a scribe in sixty days or so.

This lack of source material continues to fuel a debate that began almost as soon as the book was published. It is clear that Smith produced the book with the use of various esoteric objects. In addition to

the famous golden plates upon which the record was written, various collaborators recall a breastplate-and-spectacle device Smith called the “Urim and Thummim,” which he claimed to have recovered with the plates. More famously, Smith utilized a seer stone—a common divination device in the early American frontier—placed in a hat to shield extraneous light while he gazed into it. Similarly, against Smith’s assertion of divine inspiration, scholars and skeptics have proposed theories ranging from plagiarism to autohypnosis, finding sources for the book everywhere—from a mysterious fiction manuscript smuggled secretly from Pennsylvania, to a symbolic recounting of Smith’s traumatized unconscious.

Until very recently, however, such arguments nearly all orbited around the content of the book. Scholars sought parallels between the Book of Mormon’s long and complex plot describing Christianity in ancient American civilizations and the Bible, the ancient Near East, Joseph Smith’s family dynamics, and antebellum American revivalism. It is only recently that critical appraisal of the Book of Mormon has followed scholars of the Bible away from the content and toward the text, focusing increasingly on form criticism, literary style, and close reading. Davis’ book falls into this movement and has come at a critical juncture in Book of Mormon studies. It offers exciting potential for future study of the text.

The title of the book is ironic. Despite the volume’s allusions to visions and seer stones, Davis cares little for the physical and visual aspects of the Book of Mormon translation. There is scant discussion here about the golden plates and Davis’ introductory material about the Smith family’s involvement in frontier occult culture feels perfunctory. Rather, the core of Davis’ argument is that the Book of Mormon is best understood as an oral production rather than written text. As he puts it, “The Book of Mormon might best be described as a script, or transcript, of Smith’s performative process—the artifact of a grander, multifaceted oratorical effort” (2). One of the great strengths of the book is Davis’ grounding in a nineteenth-century oral culture far distinct from our own; a world of audiences entranced by three-hour sermons delivered by gesticulating preachers holding no notes; a world in which divinity students drilled tirelessly on mnemonic devices to help them capture vast reams of scripture in their minds.

Davis spends much time—several chapters—on the preaching culture of antebellum America, delving into an understudied realm central to Americans’ religious lives but often neglected by historians more interested, perhaps, in doctrine than in lived religion. While occasionally Davis’ grasp of current scholarship on antebellum religion seems a bit shaky (as when he draws perhaps a too-wide gap between esoteric culture and mainstream antebellum Protestantism) overall he gives us a fascinating look into the lived religion of Protestant preachers and

parishioners alike. The book uncovers a wide array of tools preachers used to compose and memorize sermons, exploring trade lingo like “heads” (quick, bullet-point like summaries of what was to come listed at the opening of a sermon and returned to as mnemonic devices throughout) or “memoriter” (a form of delivery in which a preacher would memorize an entire sermon). For the most part, an antebellum preacher would work from “chief heads,” a short list of key points that could be expanded as an audience seemed to need—particularly if, as many preachers did, one had command of a wide array of Bible verses, anecdotes, and short discourses on Christian topics, like baptism or repentance, developed over the course of a long ministry that could be marshalled on the fly.

The meat of the book comes as Davis applies these models to Joseph Smith, and particularly to the Book of Mormon. Exploring the scanty record of relatively intact Joseph Smith sermons, Davis finds that Smith seemed to be aware of these techniques and used them. He posits that it makes sense, then, that the Book of Mormon might have been produced in the same way. He delves into the text of the book, finding evidence of the use of “heads” in the sermons various characters deliver (and indeed, at one point finds the actual word “heads” used in this way). He also finds evidence of the mechanic used in the book’s narrative, as several times in the narrative brief outlines of what is to come are given, followed by expanded discussions of each event and another citation of the outline. In the years preceding the actual dictation of the Book of Mormon, Joseph Smith may well have composed the text in his mind as a minister might compose a sermon, hanging a series of “heads” throughout to guide him as he preached to his scribes.

Through much of the introduction Davis seeks to thread a needle between “critics” and “defenders” of the Book of Mormon, an argument that is becoming increasingly irrelevant as students of Joseph Smith and the religious tradition he founded grow less interested in debunking or validating the faith than understanding it as a key part of the landscape of American religion. Despite the context he presents in the introduction, in his exploration of antebellum preaching culture Davis has gone a long way toward uncovering some of its terrain.

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God on the Big Screen: A History of Hollywood Prayer from the Silent Era to Today. By Terry Lindvall. New York University Press, 2019. 384 pages. \$99.00 cloth; \$35.00 paper; ebook available.

In the opening pages of John Updike’s *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, two key events happen: Mary Pickford faints while filming her next