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Abstract Review of *Written by the Finger of God* (1993), by Joe Sampson.

Joe Sampson, *Written by the Finger of God*. Salt Lake City: Wellspring Publishing and Distributing, 1993. 350 pp., with appendix and glossary. \$15.95.

Reviewed by Frederick M. Huchel

Virtually no one would disagree that Joe Sampson's *Written by the Finger of God* is an unusual book. However, that may be the end of consensus on this treatise concerning Joseph Smith's translation of ancient documents.

This book does not make for light reading. It is, at best, a difficult book; but then, it treats a difficult subject, and one which has been a topic of debate since the very beginning of the latter-day Restoration. Questions concerning Joseph Smith's unorthodox methods of translating, and indeed, questions regarding Joseph Smith as a translator, have sparked lively debate in both scholarly and nonacademic circles for over 160 years.

Enter Joe Sampson, a man as unorthodox as his subject. Part of his unorthodoxy is his paucity of formal linguistic or scholarly training. His background does not bode well for serious consideration of his book by academics. And that's a pity. Latter-day Saint scholars should be the last to ask, "Have you been to college and received training?"

Joe Sampson has waded in where none has dared tread until now. He has taken on a daunting task. The result—while not without serious flaws—not only shows the earmarks of considerable study and labor, it also makes some significant points which should be triggers for much study by those with the skills to continue where Mr. Sampson has begun. He has poked holes in the veil concealing the structure underlying the ancient languages translated by the Prophet Joseph and the system of knowledge contained in those languages, and in so doing he has illuminated the intricate fabric which resulted from Joseph Smith's translation labors.

In taking Joseph Smith seriously as a translator, Joe Sampson seems to be moving against a swelling current of antagonism. One

of the main contributions of this book is to point out once again that Joseph Smith was not a country bumpkin making up wild tales; Sampson dismisses the theories of those who reject Joseph Smith as an authentic translator with condescending remarks about his translations being productions of his own mind and products of “the times in which he lived.” Here the untrained Joe Sampson takes the role of teacher and provides evidence that many of those *with* formal training are *really* the “so-called” scholars.

Joe Sampson takes Joseph Smith not only seriously, but at his word. He starts with the “given” that Joseph Smith was honest, and was what he claimed to be. Some of the resulting insights, perspectives, and nuggets of information scattered through the pages of *Written by the Finger of God* are enlightening and even downright impressive.

Unfortunately, the book falls far short of what it might be. The pity is that many who might otherwise learn what Joe Sampson has to offer will quickly lose interest because of the book’s shortcomings. Perhaps part of the problem is inherent in the subject. It is said that ancient Hebrew and Egyptian are largely intuitive. The principles of both language and religion of those cultures far removed from our own are alien to our language and religion in both context and logic. Nephi himself lamented the difficulty of understanding the “manner of prophesying among the Jews,” saying that it was “hard . . . to understand” (2 Nephi 25:1). That being the case, Joe Sampson is doubly disadvantaged in his efforts to explain the intuitive nature and labyrinthine perplexities of an ancient language and logic system.

In important ways, Joe Sampson has not succeeded in explaining to the reader a system which he seems to have well defined in his own mind: the *Kabbalah*. It seems clear that, like the parables, the scriptures contain encrypted information, available to those with “ears to hear.” They are, by that encryption, kept from the unprepared mind. One of the developments from that corpus of secret knowledge is what has come to be called *Kabbalah*. That “mysteries” are part and parcel of the Hebrew language itself—and therefore of scripture—is hardly arguable. Even so, Sampson makes some enormous extrapolations. He seems to imply that Joseph Smith spent a great

deal of time studying the Kabbalah. While one may agree that Joseph Smith understood the patterns placed in the Hebrew scriptures through revelation, there is no credible evidence that Joseph Smith was a student of the Jewish Kabbalah. The Kabbalah is a degenerate production of later Judaism. It is a tattered and debased version of the original. The Kabbalah is doctrinal debris. Much like Gnosticism, it is a tattered relic of the original, but it is *not* the original.

One problem with Sampson's references to the Kabbalah is that he never defines exactly what he means by "Kabbalah." He asks the reader to take his word that the scripture is filled with a system of Kabbalistic encryption, but he never outlines for the reader how the system works. On page 15, he tells the reader, "I will now start to play the Kabbalah game in earnest." Nowhere, however, does he list the rules for the game. Even if he does have in mind some set of Kabbalistic rules, he does not lay them out in his book, leaving the reader to wonder if he is making them up as he goes along.

The second problem in his references to the Kabbalah is that he implies that all scripture is "Kabbalistic." It is like the erroneous notion that *all* of the Book of Mormon is chiastic. Portions of the scripture are undoubtedly Kabbalahistic; but it is a mistake to try to force the entire text into that structure.

Along with not adequately defining rules or terms, Sampson makes colossal jumps, such as expecting readers to accept without question that "although this chart [the Sephiroth] is called the Tree of Life, it really functions better as the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil" (p. 37). He expects readers to accept something he "knows" is true, but never explains.

Perhaps the greatest fault of this book is its lack of form and structure. It presents the appearance of a hodgepodge of bits and pieces of knowledge, without pattern and shape. It is almost as if the author is playing peekaboo with the reader, daring the reader to make sense of it all.

Written by the Finger of God could have been a much better book—even in simple ways. The footnoting is grossly inadequate. Some passages beg for references (for example the information on page 29 and the quotation from Joseph Smith on page 38). In other places, vague references are given without page numbers

(page 26, note 3; and no date or page number given for the graphic from the *Deseret News* on page 5); or incorrect references are given (footnote 2 on page 118 should be *Ibid.*, p. 348).

That said, there is much of value in *Written by the Finger of God*. For one thing, Sampson takes Joseph Smith seriously, and brings into focus a number of heretofore unnoticed elements which point to Joseph Smith as an authentic translator, factors which cannot be explained by theories about Joseph being a “product of his times.” He also reinforces what Hugh Nibley has been stressing for years, that one of the chief secrets to understanding both scripture and ordinance lies in the intricacies of language itself. Understanding the original languages in their own context is invaluable in making sense of the corpus of knowledge originally encrypted in those languages. Perhaps more important, Sampson has directed attention to that most-neglected product of Joseph Smith’s translating efforts: the Egyptian Alphabet and Grammar. For years, Nibley has pointed out how ludicrous it is for scholars to condescendingly wave aside Joseph Smith’s translations while proudly (here read *arrogantly*) trumpeting the fact that they have never read the works themselves. Not only, however, has the Egyptian Alphabet and Grammar received that treatment by secular academics, it has received exactly the same treatment from *Latter-day Saint* scholars! Honest students can no longer deny that the Alphabet and Grammar was Joseph Smith’s work. The Prophet himself claims ownership in the document.¹ Latter-day Saint scholars should be ashamed of being ashamed of Joseph Smith’s Alphabet and Grammar. Joseph Smith *was* onto something. The Alphabet and Grammar is a key. Latter-day Saint scholars will someday find the evidence which vindicates the Prophet and his work on the Alphabet and Grammar. Sampson has provided some tools for that effort. He notes that we are indebted to Robert Fillerup for the prodigious labor of transcribing the Alphabet and Grammar into computer format. Through the marvels of computer wizardry, for

¹See Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1978), 2:238, 286; Joseph Smith Sketch book, October 1, 1835, November 17, 1835; Joseph Smith Journal, November 15, 1843 (originals in LDS Church Historical Department Archives).

the first time, the Alphabet and Grammar is now available in printed form, standardized in spelling, and indexed.

Even with all his own work studying and synthesizing the meaning of the Hebrew characters as he understands them, perhaps Sampson's greatest contribution is showing the connection between Hebrew and Egyptian noted by Nephi, and providing the reader with Joseph Smith's own study-document on the subject in a form which can be utilized by future students (printed *in extenso* in an appendix). This connection has been staring Latter-day Saints in the face since 1830, when Nephi's words were printed: "Yea, I make a record in the language of my father, which consists of the learning of the Jews and the language of the Egyptians" (1 Nephi 1:2). What Sampson seems to be trying to convey to the reader (not altogether clearly) is that there is a consistent pattern in all scriptural writings. He posits that the key to the structure of written scripture is to be found in the elemental definitions inherent in the root words, and consequently in the very characters of the Semitic languages. The story being told in the Hebrew Old Testament text is inherent in the root definitions of the words and characters of which the text is constructed. The validity of this heretofore unnoticed pattern can easily be tested by recourse to a good concordance.

With that in mind, Sampson extends his study to the oldest of all written languages, Hieroglyphic Egyptian. He proposes that Joseph Smith approached the Egyptian Alphabet and Grammar from a different standpoint than linguists would, and that what was going on with the Alphabet and Grammar followed the same pattern he finds in the Hebrew scriptures. That being the case, what Joseph was doing in the Alphabet and Grammar can be uncovered by simply comparing the characters of the language with the root definitions of the words themselves. Sampson takes Nephi's statement in 1 Nephi 1:2 as indication that the Egyptian and Hebrew languages were related, and therefore tries to prove his thesis first in the Hebrew scriptures, and then in the Egyptian characters in the Alphabet and Grammar. Not content, he finds parallels in ancient New World languages as well.

Written by the Finger of God takes the position that there is a consistent, underlying pattern in all scriptural writings. Instead of finding it in chiasmus, as others have done, he finds the structure

of that pattern in what has come down to us as the “Sacred Tree of the Sephiroth.”

Some of Sampson’s assertions are difficult to prove. Others, however, hold great promise and provide fruitful areas of study for Latter-day Saint scholars. Many readers will tire of wading through the poorly organized text and trying to follow the frayed thread of narrative in search of the nuggets of significance. The book will likely be of greatest interest to those with a penchant for linguistic study.

Whatever the faults and failings of *Written by the Finger of God*, Joe Sampson has made a valuable contribution to the study of Joseph Smith, the Book of Mormon, the Kirtland Egyptian papyri, and prophetic translation. It can only be hoped that those with formal linguistic training will not turn up their noses at his efforts.