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## Authorship of "Try the Spirits"

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## Authorship of “Try the Spirits”

[Adapted from Chapter 3 of *Brought to Light* by Jonathan Neville]



The scope of Joseph Smith’s activity as Editor of the *Times and Seasons* in 1842 has never been clear. Was he a “hands-on” editor who wrote unattributed editorials (signed “Ed.” or left anonymous)? Or, if he didn’t write these editorials, did he explicitly or implicitly approve of them? Could he have been merely a nominal editor who left the operations and content of the *Times and Seasons* to others?

One approach to clarifying Joseph’s role as editor is to determine who actually wrote the unattributed editorials. This article focuses on the authorship of “Try the Spirits” as an example.

Unattributed articles exist throughout the *Times and Seasons*, but in 1842 these became more significant because with Joseph Smith listed as editor in the boilerplate at the end of each issue, some people assume he either wrote or approved of any unsigned articles in the paper. Consequently, many of the unattributed 1842 articles have been cited in *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, in the Church lesson manual *Teachings of the Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith*, and in numerous other publications including General Conference talks.<sup>1</sup>

The issue is relevant to Book of Mormon studies because of the three unsigned editorials published in the *Times and Seasons* in September and October 1842 that link the Book of Mormon to specific sites in Central America. Proponents of Central American or Mesoamerican geography theories cite these anonymous articles as evidence that Joseph Smith believed in—or at least entertained the possibility of—a Mesoamerican setting.<sup>2</sup>

One argument offered by those who claim Joseph Smith wrote the Mesoamerican editorials is that there is proof he wrote at least one article signed “Ed.”<sup>3</sup> The article is titled “Try the Spirits.” It appeared in the *Times and Seasons* on April 1, 1842 (Vol 3:11, p. 743) and *History of the Church* 4:580. At 5,398 words, it is one of the longer editorials in the *Times and Seasons*.

Because FairMormon cited “Try the Spirits” specifically to support the theory that Joseph Smith wrote the Mesoamerican articles, this article takes a close look at the editorial. “Try the Spirits” is a good choice because it illustrates how an unexamined assumption about authorship may have led to a cascading series of errors.

In most cases, it probably doesn’t matter who wrote the unattributed editorials in the *Times and Seasons*. So long as the doctrine is sound, does it make a difference whether the original author was Joseph Smith, Wilford Woodruff, John Taylor, William Smith, W.W. Phelps, Benjamin Winchester, or someone else?

Probably not.

But in other cases—such as the Mesoamerican articles—it makes a big difference.



“Try the Spirits” is quoted in lesson 33 of the manual, *Teachings of the Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith*.<sup>4</sup> The footnotes to the quotations read:

*History of the Church*, 4:580; punctuation modernized; from “Try the Spirits,” an editorial published in *Times and Seasons*, Apr. 1, 1842, p. 743; Joseph Smith was the editor of the periodical.

This is a legitimate, factual statement. However, the introduction to the quotations from the editorial is more assertive:

In the early days of the restored Church, members of the Church, as well as members of other religious groups, sometimes acted upon influences from evil or false spirits, believing they were under the influence of the Holy Ghost. **The Prophet Joseph Smith taught:** (last emphasis mine).

In other words, the introduction to the lesson claims Joseph *taught* the material, while the footnote clarifies that he *edited the periodical* in which it appeared. This is a significant difference (even without raising the question whether he *actually* edited the paper, or was merely the *nominal* editor). While the footnote simply states a fact, the introduction reflects the prevailing theory that if Joseph was listed as Editor, he must have written or approved of everything in the paper, whether it was signed by him (Joseph Smith), it was signed by “Ed,” or it was published with no signature (i.e., authorship was anonymous).

Any examination of Church history should distinguish between facts and inferences. Both can lead to subjective interpretations, but we should be clear about which is which. In the lesson manual, the footnotes are factual, but the introduction is an undisclosed inference.

I think the theory that Joseph wrote or approved of everything in the *Times and Seasons* while he was the nominal editor is not supported by the evidence and puts an unwarranted stamp of prophetic approval where it was never intended.

In this case, the content of “Try the Spirits” (or at least the sentences quoted in the lesson manual), presumably reflect sound doctrine so it doesn’t matter who wrote it. The doctrine itself is not the point of this analysis; instead, I’m looking at evidence of authorship.

Recall that FairMormon cites this article as proof of Joseph’s authorship of articles signed “Ed.” Anyone reading the lesson manual might think it supports the FairMormon theory, but the analysis I just went through shows that, so far, there is no evidence Joseph wrote the article—and even the lesson manual doesn’t claim there is. The manual simply perpetuates a tradition based on an assumption of authorship.



FairMormon’s video claims there is historical evidence that “Try the Spirits” was written by Joseph Smith. Therefore, because the editorial is signed “Ed,” Joseph must have written the other articles as Ed. Setting aside the logical fallacies of such a claim, I want to focus on the alleged historical evidence. The video itself doesn’t explain what the historical evidence is, but an unsigned article on BMAF.org does.<sup>5</sup> Here is the claim:

1 April 1842

*Times and Seasons* contains an extensive editorial on "Try the spirits." *History of the Church* denominates this as "The Prophet's Editorial in the Times and Seasons." [18] It is not signed in Joseph's name, but as "Ed." [19]

Footnote 18 is “History of the Church 4:571.” Footnote 19 is “Times and Seasons 3/11 (1 April 1842); 748.”

*History of the Church* (“HC”) Volume 4, page 571, reads:

Friday, April 1, 1843. —I was engaged in the general business office.  
“Try the Spirits” —The Prophet’s Editorial in the *Times and Seasons*

Recent occurrences that have transpired... [the editorial continues to the end].

The full article is printed in HC as it is found in the *Times and Seasons*, except the signature at the end is deleted; i.e., there is no “Ed.” signature in HC.

Does this entry in HC constitute historical evidence that Joseph Smith wrote the editorial? I think not.

The entry labels the article as “the Prophet’s Editorial.” Certainly Joseph himself didn’t designate it that way; the designation had to be inserted by someone else.

Notice how one assumption about history leads to another. We start with an article in the *Times and Seasons* signed only by “Ed,” which leads to whoever compiled HC inserting the editorial under the date of April 1, 1842, and labeling it as the “Prophet’s Editorial,” which leads to BMAF and FairMormon citing this as historical evidence of Joseph’s authorship, and before we know it, they have Joseph Smith writing not only every editorial signed “Ed.” but even *unsigned* editorials.



For many years, HC was the main reference for Church history. It was written and compiled between 1839 and 1856. Although it is written in the first person, little of it was written by Joseph Smith. Twenty men contributed to the work. Many of the entries came from Wilford Woodruff’s journal; others were newspaper clippings and other material copied into the book.

With the advent of the Joseph Smith Papers, HC became obsolete; it is useful now mainly to find references in older material such as the article on BMAF.org. I would never use HC for actual research about what happened in the early days of the Church. The Joseph Smith Papers are far more accurate and comprehensive.

That doesn’t mean I’m criticizing those who cited HC in the past. It only means that those who did should update their work and adjust conclusions accordingly. BMAF.org and FairMormon have not done so—yet.

The Joseph Smith Papers lets everyone see the original source for the HC, including the “Try the Spirits” article. It is found in what is now designated as *History, 1838-1856*, vol. C-1. Go to [josephsmithpapers.org](http://josephsmithpapers.org) and search for “try the spirits” using the quotation marks. It will take you to the exact page. Or use this link: <http://josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/history-1838-1856-volume-c-1-2-november-1838-31-july-1842>.

This source for the HC entry is on page 1303. It reads:

April 1 Friday, April 1, 1843. —I was engaged in the general business office.  
“Try the Spirits” Recent occurrences that have transpired... [the text continues to the end of the editorial].

Notice the difference? The comment “The Prophet’s Editorial in the *Times and Seasons*” was not in the original manuscript. It was apparently added during the process of publishing HC.

Another interesting aspect of this is that the article as written in *History, 1838-1856*, vol. C-1, is not an exact copy of the *Times and Seasons*. Some punctuation is different. The word *collected* in the original

was added to the *History* version, apparently as a correction.

Just to clarify, the version in *History* was not the original source for the *Times and Seasons*. That source is not extant. Volume C-1 of *History* was created beginning on or just after February 24, 1845. Thomas Bullock wrote the entry about “Try the Spirits.” Because Joseph Smith died in June 1844, he never reviewed this part of the history.

An argument could be made that Bullock, as one of Joseph’s scribes, would have a good idea of what Joseph wrote and what he didn’t. However, Bullock became Joseph’s scribe in 1843; he didn’t arrive in Nauvoo from England until May 31, 1843. He had no first-hand knowledge of Joseph’s activities during 1842. There is no indication of his being directed to include “Try the Spirits” under the date of April 1, 1842, and the entry in *History* notes only that Joseph was working in the general business office, not that he wrote, took credit for, or even approved the article.

In fact, Bullock himself appears to have elaborated on his source. Joseph Smith’s journal, designated as *Journal, December 1841-December 1842*, has a contemporaneous entry for 1 April 1842.<sup>6</sup>

It reads, “April Friday 1 at the General Business office.”

In 1843, Bullock wrote “Friday, April 1. 1842. I was engaged in the general business office.”

These are small changes but they are a good example of how Bullock and other contributors to the *History* incorporated a first person perspective as if Joseph had written the material. With the help of the Joseph Smith papers, we have all the steps in the process.

1. Instead of “at the General Business office” from Joseph’s journal, Bullock expands it to “I was engaged in the general business office.”
2. Bullock simply copies the article “Try the Spirits” into the history.
3. The person preparing HC further expands the entry, adding the comment “The Prophet’s Editorial in the Times and Seasons.”
4. People quote the editorial and attribute it to Joseph Smith, including in *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* and General Conference.
5. The Church lesson manual introduces quotations from the editorial by writing “The Prophet Joseph Smith taught...”
5. BMAF.org and others cite the editorial as proof that Joseph signed his own work as “Ed.” and therefore also wrote unsigned material published in the *Times and Seasons*.
6. BMAF.org and others claim that Joseph wrote the *unsigned* articles that link the Book of Mormon to Central America.
7. The unsigned articles form the foundation of the Mesoamerican theory of geography that is widely accepted by Church scholars, presented to the world at the 2005 symposium at the Library of Congress titled “The Worlds of Joseph Smith,” and incorporated into Church media.

Unpacking the history of “Try the Spirits” to determine authorship may not change long-held beliefs based on the traditions that developed on the assumption that Joseph Smith wrote other unattributed editorials, but hopefully it will lead to a critical re-assessment of those traditions.



There is additional historical information that provides context for the editorial. According to the note in the Joseph Smith Papers, the “general business office” was Joseph’s private office in the upper floor of his brick store. The day before, March 31, 1842, his journal records this:

In council at his office with. Elders [Brigham] Young. [John] Taylor &c. & wrote an Epistle to the Female Relief Society and spake to the Society in the afternoon. [original spelling]

This is one of the few recorded instances when Joseph wrote something himself. (In my book, *Joseph Smith: Nominal Editor of the Times and Seasons*, I show each of these instances.) There is nothing in his journal that states or implies he wrote “Try the Spirits,” although there are blank pages for a few days in March.

The *Journal* entry for March 8, 1842, reads:

Tuesday 8 Commenced Translating from the Book of Abraham, for the 10 No of the Times and seasons—and was engaged at his office day & evening—

Like the entry for March 31<sup>st</sup>, this entry shows Joseph himself preparing material for the *Times and Seasons*. Of course, he could have written anything at any time, but here we have two journal entries that line up with two known items Joseph wrote. Any assertion that Joseph wrote unattributed material that *wasn't* mentioned in his Journal must confront the disparate treatment; i.e., we can account for everything mentioned in his Journal, and those things he actually signed are mentioned in the Journal.

Those claiming Joseph wrote unattributed material must also factor in the well-documented activities of March 1842, including Joseph's commanding of the parade of the Nauvoo Legion, his presiding at church, civic and military functions, his organizing the Relief Society and participating in Nauvoo Lodge Masonic activities, his baptizing of nearly 200 people for the dead, and various councils and other business.

None of the historical evidence supports a theory that Joseph Smith wrote “Try the Spirits.” At most, the evidence leaves a few gaps in Joseph's busy schedule during which he *could have* written it. Of course, he could have been engaged in any number of activities during these unaccounted for gaps in time.

In the absence of evidence that Joseph wrote the articles, the question becomes whether there is evidence of who did write the article.



I am not attaching the entirety of a 5,400-word article because I suppose most readers won't read the whole thing and it takes up a lot of space, but think about that a minute. A piece 5,400 words long represents a lot of work. This is about the length of the entire Book of Abraham (5,480 words, not counting facsimiles and explanations). The article you are reading is about 3,000 words to this point.

“Try the Spirits” is a significant editorial in terms of length and doctrine, but it also represents considerable research about, or at least broad familiarity with, a variety of events. There are several scriptural references, as well as comments on the French Prophets, the Irvingites, Joanna Southcot [sic], Jemimah [sic] Wilkinson, and others. There is a citation to *Buck's Theological Dictionary*.

The unknown author didn't dash it off in an afternoon.

I was curious about the title, so I did a search<sup>7</sup> and found the phrase “try the spirits” was used nine times in the *Times and Seasons*. Four uses were in the April editorial itself (including the title):

Who shall solve the mystery? "**Try the spirits,**" says John, but who is to do it?... "**Try the spirits**" but what by? are we to try them by the creeds of men?... Some will say '**try the spirits**' by the word.

Four uses were subsequent references back to the April editorial.

T&S 3:16 (June 15, 1842): We would refer our readers to an article written upon this subject in the 11th No. of

this vol. headed "**Try the Spirits.**" As we have so lately written upon this subject, it will be unnecessary for us to enter into particulars at the present; but we would say, "**try the spirits,**" "prove all things, and hold fast that which is good."

T&S 4:5 (Jan. 16, 1843): Elder Pratt then proceeded to read from the "Times and Seasons," an article, entitled, "**Try the Spirits,**" which we expect to publish as soon as possible in the "Star."

T&S 4:6 (Feb. 1, 1843): It will be recollected that in the 11 no. vol. 3, there was a long article written upon the nature and effects of false spirits, which was headed, "**Try the Spirits.**"

I don't consider these four references relevant to the authorship question because they merely refer back to the article, except for two important points. First, notice that none of these references link Joseph Smith to the article. Instead, we see "an article written," "we have so lately written," and "there was a long article written." The editor is taking pains to avoid identifying the author (or authors), and yet is recommending it to readers. If Joseph had written the editorial, wouldn't that information be *emphasized* instead of obscured?

Second, the June 15 comment states "we have so lately written," which at first glance may appear to imply multiple authorship. While that is a possible interpretation, it was common for editors of the day to use the editorial *we* even when there was only one editor at work. In the same way that a court refers to "we" when describing a decision issued decades earlier, an editor may use "we" to mean the editorial position, regardless of the actual author at any particular time. The statement "we have so lately written," could therefore mean that the same person or persons who wrote "Try the Spirits" wrote the comment on June 15, or it could mean that a completely different person, acting as editor in June, wrote "we" in the sense of speaking on behalf of the unnamed person(s) who wrote the April editorial above the signature "Ed."



The ninth usage of the phrase "try the spirits" in the *Times and Seasons* was actually published *prior* to the April editorial, in T&S 3:1 (Nov. 15, 1841). That article was titled "AN ADDRESS TO THE CITIZENS OF SALEM (MASS) AND VICINITY, BY E. SNOW<sup>8</sup> AND B. WINCHESTER." The phrase is found in the closing:

Therefore, examine the matter for yourselves, and "**try the spirits** whether they are of God, or whether they be of man."

At first I thought seeing Benjamin Winchester pop up here was merely a coincidence, but I checked my database and discovered this was not the first time Winchester used the phrase at the close of a piece he wrote.

In 1840, Winchester published a 9,300-word pamphlet titled *The Origin of the Spaulding Story, Concerning the Manuscript Found*. The last lines are:

Therefore, examine the matter for yourselves, and "**try the spirits** whether they are of God, or whether they be of men."  
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Was this a coincidence also?

I checked further. The phrase "try the spirits" does not show up in my database of John Taylor, Wilford Woodruff, or Parley P. Pratt. It is not in the *Wasp* or the *Nauvoo Neighbor* or the *Messenger and Advocate* or the *Elders Journal*.

However, in the May 1833 *Evening and Morning Star*, the phrase was used twice in an unsigned article presumably written by W.W. Phelps (who was running the paper himself) titled “Preach the Word.” Here is the paragraph:

This being the last generation of the wicked, before the Lord comes to his temple, satan will exert himself, and use all his power to overthrow, or hinder the progress of Christ's kingdom. Every deception, therefore, that he is master of, will be practiced, as far as he has power, that he may deceive some, and lead them to destruction. John said in one of his epistles, supposed to have been written ninety eight years after the birth of our Lord: Believe not every spirit, but **try the spirits** whether they are of God; because many false prophets are gone out into the world. If false prophets, and evil spirits were then in the world, what less is to be expected now, since the world has been engrossed in wickedness, and lain in darkness for ages; the sacred scriptures been robbed of their plainness, and man set himself up as a guide, to direct his fellow beings to happiness by his own wisdom? Is it not important, that the disciples **try the spirits**, and be reminded continually of the word of the Lord to his ancient disciples when he said: Watch, therefore, for ye know neither the day nor the hour wherein the Son of Man cometh? For it is the pure in heart that shall see God.

This 7,800-word article includes 3,000 words of direct quotations of scripture, mostly, like in this paragraph, without citations. The article deals primarily with the fulfillment of Biblical prophecies in the last days and, apart from the quoted scripture from John, has little in common with “Try the Spirits.”

The phrase was also used in three discourses published in the *Journal of Discourses* (Brigham Young, 1862, and Orson Pratt, 1873 and 1876). I don't consider these relevant; if anything, I'm surprised this well-known verse from John was not cited more often.

Another usage in *Journal of Discourses*, though, was reported in an “Address by President Joseph Smith” dated June 2, 1839.<sup>9</sup> This address was taken from a notebook kept by Willard Richards, labeled in the Joseph Smith Papers as *JS, Report of Instructions, Commerce IL, July 1839*. Richards recorded:

we may look for Angel & receive their ministretiring [sic] but we are to **try the Spirits** & prove them for it is often the case that men make a mistake in regard to these things.

So now we have one unknown and two known authors who published material containing this phrase:

- (i) the author of the “Try the Spirits” article (1842),
- (ii) W.W. Phelps (1833), and
- (iii) Benjamin Winchester (1840 and 1841).

We also have a reported usage of the phrase by Joseph Smith in 1839.

Of course, prior usage of the phrase is not determinative; anyone could quote from this well-known scripture. But prior usage does show at least familiarity with the verse and an application of it in a written context.

It's a good place to start.

How do we determine which of these men wrote the article? What if someone else wrote it? What if all three contributed, or some combination of them and others? What if someone else edited the piece?

One solution might be to turn to statistical stylometry. A chunk of 5,400 words should be sufficient for a reliable analysis, assuming the material was written by one author and there is a reliable corpus for comparison. It may be possible to separate portions of the article written by different authors, as well as to detect editorial input, but a legitimate stylometric study requires someone without a bias to confirm and a willingness to publish assumptions, data and software used. [I have done an analysis of lexical density, readability indices, and other stylistic measures and found that there are three distinct parts of the editorial, as discussed below.]



Here, though, I'm focusing on the historical context and some features of the material that I think give us an idea of who the author was.



As mentioned above, the author of the “Try the Spirits” refers to Joannah Southcot [sic], Jemimah [sic] Wilkinson, the “French Prophets,” and the Irvingites. These people were cited in anti-Mormon literature as early as 1831 to compare Mormonism to “similar fanaticisms.”<sup>10</sup> One author, Henry Caswall, visited Nauvoo in April 1842, after the article was published. Comments in his book—“I further remarked, that the same class of people who believed in Joanna Southcote, might easily be persuaded to credit the divine mission of Joseph Smith”—show that comparisons to Southcott and the others were still lively at the time the article was written and published. Certainly any possible author of “Try the Spirits” would be familiar with these individuals and groups.

Two subsequent articles in the *Times and Seasons* refer to Southcott. [Strangely, her name is spelled differently each time: Joannah Southcot, Joanna Southcott (the correct spelling), and Joanna Southcote.]

In T&S 5:1 (Jan. 1, 1844), p. 395, a letter to John C. Calhoun, signed Joseph Smith, includes this passage:

Would it not be well for the great men of the nation to read the fable of the partial judge, and when part of the free citizens of a state had been expelled contrary to the constitution, mobbed, robbed, plundered and many murdered, instead of searching into the course taken with **Joanna Southcott**, Ann Lee, the French prophets, the Quakers of New England, and rebellions [sic] niggers, in the slave states, to hear both sides then judge, rather than have the mortification to say, 'oh it is my bull that has killed your ox, that alters the case! I must inquire into it, and if, and if?

The 1844 letter, like most of Joseph's political material, was likely written by Phelps. It differs significantly from “Try the Spirits” in tone and content. It also mentions Ann Lee and the Quakers, but doesn't mention the Irvingites.

In T&S 6:5 (Mar. 15, 1845), p. 833, an installment of “History of Joseph Smith” reports on activities in 1833 Missouri. A passage quoted from a Missouri newspaper includes this sentence:

True, it may be said, and truly no doubt, that the fate that has marked the rise and fall of **Joanna Southcote** and Ann Lee, will also attend the progress of Joe Smith; but this is no opiate to our fears, for when the fabric falls, the rubbish will remain.

These two passages confirm that the issue of Southcote was on the minds of the Saints from at least 1833 through 1844. Any Mormon candidate for authorship of “Try the Spirits” would be familiar with these people and the associated issues.

Another feature of the editorial is the extended discussion of the Irvingites, a group that began in London in the 1830s. This is only time the Irvingites are mentioned in the *Times and Seasons* (apart from a brief mention in an extract from the *Millennial Star*). The author spends over 1,000 words—20% of the content—on this group. There are quotations from the group's leaders, detailed descriptions of their practices, etc. No source is cited, but in the 1830s there were numerous publications that discussed the Irvingites. A representative, the Rev. John Hewitt, had visited Kirtland in June 1835, apparently to explore the possibility of joining with the Mormons.<sup>11</sup> Bruce Van Orden is writing a biography of W. W. Phelps. In his proposed Chapter 14, he discusses Phelps' interaction with Hewitt and suggests Phelps contributed to “Try the Spirits.” Whoever wrote “Try the Spirits” had more than a casual knowledge of

the group, suggesting he spent some time on research or perhaps had become acquainted with the group during Rev. Hewitt’s visit to Kirtland. Additional support for this possibility is present in one of the closing paragraphs, which relates experiences in Kirtland:

Soon after the gospel was established in Kirtland, and during the absence of the authorities of the church, many strange visions were seen, and wild enthusiastic notions were entertained; men run out of doors under the influence of this spirit, and some of them got upon the stumps of trees and shouted, and all kinds of extravagances were entered into by them: one man pursued a ball that he said he saw flying in the air, until he came to a precipice when he jumped into the top of a tree which saved his life, and many ridiculous things were entered into, calculated to bring disgrace upon the church of God; to cause the spirit of God to be withdrawn; and to uproot and destroy those glorious principles which had been developed for the salvation of the human family.

A third feature is the only scholarly citation in the article, a reference to *Buck’s Theological Dictionary*.<sup>12</sup> Charles Buck (1771-1815) was a minister in London. His *Theological Dictionary* became popular in England and the United States. “Try the Spirits” cites *Buck’s Dictionary* after the paragraph on the “French Prophets,” and that passage does quote and paraphrase Buck (albeit without quotation marks). The material on Wilkinson also quotes and paraphrases Buck. Buck has an entry on “Southcotters” as well—and it spells the name *Joanna Southcot*, which suggests the *Times and Seasons* author used Buck’s spelling for her last name, which is actually Southcott. “Try the Spirits” adds an h to both Joanna and Jemima, which could be a typo from the text (if the editor in Nauvoo had a copy of Buck’s) or from a handwritten article mailed in.

Buck’s entry does not include the comment in “Try the Spirits” that Southcott “was to bring forth in a place appointed a son that was to be the Messiah.” The author may have added that detail from common knowledge or another source. Southcott claimed she was going to deliver the new Messiah on 19 October 1814, but it didn’t happen and she died in December 1814. Buck died in 1815, the year when his 4<sup>th</sup> American edition was published in Philadelphia, and it appears he did not update the entry on the Southcotters.

This table compares the material in “Try the Spirits” with *Buck’s Theological Dictionary*.

“Try the Spirits”	Buck’s Theological Dictionary (4 <sup>th</sup> Ed. 1815)
<p>The “French Prophets,” were possessed of a spirit that deceived; they existed in Vivaris, and Dauphiny in great numbers in the year 1688, there were many boys, and girls from seven to twenty five; they had strange fits as in tremblings, and faintings, which made them stretch out their legs and arms as in a swoon; they remained awhile in trances and coming out of them uttered all that came into their mouths. [See Buck’s Theological Dictionary.]</p>	<p><b>FRENCH PROPHETS</b>  They first appeared in <b>Dauphiny and Vivarais. In the year 1688, five or six hundred</b> Protestants of both sexes gave themselves out to be prophets, and inspired of the Holy Ghost. They soon became so numerous, that there were <b>many thousands of them</b> inspired. They were people of all ages and sexes without distinction, though the greatest part of them were <b>boys and girls from six or seven to twenty-five years of age. They had strange fits, which came upon them with tremblings and faintings as in a swoon, which made them stretch out their arms and legs,</b> and stagger several times before they dropped down. They struck themselves with their hands, they fell on their backs, shut their eyes, and heaved with their breasts. <b>They remained a while in trances, and, coming out of them with twitchings, uttered all which came in their mouths.</b></p>
<p>Joannah Southcot professed to be a prophetess and wrote a book of prophesies in 1804: she became the founder of a people that are now extant; she was to bring forth in a place appointed a son that was to be the Messiah, which thing has failed.</p>	<p><b>SOUTHCOTTERS</b>  The followers of <b>Joanna Southcot</b>, well known at this time in the south of England as a <b>prophetess</b>.  The book in which Joanna <b>published her prophecies, is dated London, April 25, 1804</b></p>
<p>Jemimah Wilkinson, was another prophetess that figured</p>	<p><b>WILKINSONIANS</b></p>

<p>largely in America in the last century. She stated that she was taken sick and died, and that her soul went to heaven where it still continues. Soon after her body was reanimated with the spirit and power of Christ, upon which she set up as a public teacher and declared she had an immediate revelation.</p>	<p>The followers of <b>Jemima Wilkinson</b>, who was born in Cumberland in America. In October 1776, <b>she asserted that she was taken sick, and actually died, and that her soul went to heaven, where it still continues. Soon after, her body was reanimated with the spirit and power of Christ, upon which she set up as a public teacher; and declared she had an immediate revelation</b> for all she delivered, and was arrived to a state of absolute perfection.</p>
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A fourth feature to consider is unusual or unique spelling, grammar, and word choice. Again, these are not determinative, but they are relevant, along with other distinctive elements are as shown below.

Although the editorial was published on April 1, 1842, it is not separately dated; it could have been written days, weeks, or months before publication. It could have been written specifically for the *Times and Seasons* or could have been adapted from another source. It could have been written in Nauvoo or mailed to the city like most of the material published in the *Times and Seasons*.

Finally, the signature—“Ed.”—seems designed to obscure the identity of the author(s). The subsequent references back to the editorial affirm this intention. It is possible that this was merely a protocol, but it is also possible that the editors had a reason to avoid disclosing the author’s identity or wanted to avoid listing multiple names as contributors.

There are many editorials and editorial comments on extracts in the *Times and Seasons* signed by “Ed.”, but this is an unusually long one. Two others during 1842 are around 2,500 words long; others are much shorter.

The concluding paragraphs of “Try the Spirits” share several anecdotes of Church members afflicted with various “false spirits,” including the Kirtland experiences previously quoted and others from Upper Canada, New York, Far West, and Nauvoo. These could have been written from the author’s personal knowledge or from other accounts shared orally or in writing.

*Arguments on Phelps as author.* Although Phelps’ publication of the phrase “try the spirits” was 9 years earlier, he had been estranged from the Church and returned only in 1840. We wouldn’t expect any writing from him while he was away from the Church. After he arrived in Nauvoo in December 1841, he

took up residence near Joseph Smith’s store where the President’s Office was located... He aided Joseph Smith and then John Taylor with the editing of the church’s Nauvoo newspaper, the *Times and Seasons* [and] ghostwrote dozens of essays in behalf of both editors.<sup>13</sup>

Phelps had written extensively on doctrinal topics for his Missouri paper, the *Evening and Morning Star*, so an article on spirits would not have been an unusual or foreign topic for him to tackle. He could be trusted with such a project. (In fact, I think it was Phelps’ return to the Church—and later to Nauvoo—that led to the completion of the translation of the Book of Abraham and its publication in March 1842.)

I have not found any prior publication by Phelps that mentions Southcot or the others, but in September 1834, the *Messenger and Advocate* published an article signed by Oliver Cowdery that mentioned Anna Lee and Jemima Wilkinson. It would be surprising if Phelps was not familiar with these individuals. He was present in Kirtland in June 1835 and would likely have known of the visit of Rev. Hewitt and therefore the history of the Irvingites.

Because of Phelps’ history in Missouri, if he wrote or edited “Try the Spirits” it is understandable why he would do so anonymously (a point discussed in *The Lost City of Zarahemla*).

There are also some contrary factors. First, there is no explicit record of Phelps working at the *Times*

*and Seasons* in the April 1842 time frame. Second, “Try the Spirits” refers to the *Saviour* four times, all with the British spelling. I have not found an instance of Phelps spelling the term this way. The term is used 263 times in Phelps’ *Evening and Morning Star*, but only 4 times is it spelled *Saviour*, and all 4 are in letters written by other people, published after the paper moved to Kirtland and Phelps was no longer editor. Third, much of “Try the Spirits” addresses the issue of women and their role in the Church. So far as I can find, Phelps never wrote about this topic publicly.

*Arguments on Joseph Smith as author.* As previously mentioned, Willard Richards reported that Joseph used the phrase “try the spirits” in an instructional context 1839, but the phrase is not found in any of Joseph’s formal or published material. On 30 January 1842, Joseph’s journal shows this entry:

Sunday 30. preached in the morning after. father coles [Austin Cowles].— & in the evening, at his house, concerning [sic] Spirits their operation & designs.<sup>14</sup>

That’s not specifically on point, but maybe Joseph taught about how to “try the spirits” on that occasion. Certainly Joseph would be interested in the topic and capable of writing about it. (It’s also possible that the author of “Try the Spirits” was present at either or both the 1839 and 1842 events.)

As previously discussed, Joseph’s daily journal mentions other things he wrote but not this article. It is difficult to conceive how he could have fit the extensive research and writing effort required to produce “Try the Spirits” into his busy schedule, particularly when it is never mentioned.

Joseph would have been familiar with the Irvingites due to the visit of Rev. Hewitt, but there is no indication he ever studied or referred to Buck’s Dictionary.

There is a substantive factor to consider as well. The day before “Try the Spirits” was published, Joseph wrote an Epistle to the Female Relief Society and spoke to them.<sup>15</sup> In fact, “Try the Spirits” is preceded in the April 1 issue by a short editorial about the Relief Society. He had organized the Relief Society two weeks previously on March 17, 1842 “under the priesthood after the pattern of the priesthood.” On that day, he told them “If any Officers are wanted to carry out the designs of the institution, let them be appointed and set apart, as deacons, Teachers &C. are among us.”

When we compare Joseph’s Epistle and address to the Relief Society with “Try the Spirits,” there is a clear distinction in tone and content. Joseph told the Relief Society that Emma was an “elect lady.” They were organized after the pattern of the Priesthood and had authority to conduct their affairs. In “Try the Spirits,” the author singles out three women identified as “prophetess” and condemns their teachings. The article quotes Paul’s directive to women “to keep silence in the church” and asserts that Paul “would not suffer a woman ‘to rule, or to usurp authority in the church.’”

Even assuming these teachings can be reconciled, the focus of “Try the Spirits” is a stark contrast with what Joseph told the Relief Society.

On March 31<sup>st</sup>, Joseph publicly signed the Epistle to the Relief Society. He recognized the importance of attaching his name to the document. If Joseph wrote “Try the Spirits,” published the very next day, it seems incongruous that he did *not* want his name associated with it (unless he recognized the stark contrast in content, in which case we would have to wonder why he intended to send mixed messages.)

These factors lead me to conclude that Joseph probably did not write “Try the Spirits.” If he contributed to it, the contrast to his Relief Society instruction remains somewhat puzzling.

*Arguments on John Taylor as author.* There are some indications of John Taylor’s input. For example, although Rev. Hewitt visited Kirtland before Taylor joined the Church, Taylor did mention the Irvingites

in a May 1837 letter he wrote from Toronto, Upper Canada, to a clergyman in England. The *Messenger and Advocate* published the letter in June 1837. Taylor's letter refers to "their absurdities in doctrine and practice" and recommends that his friend "push it from you as far as you can."

However, in that same letter, Taylor writes "It is the privilege of all the saints to enjoy it if they are faithful-male and female-all are allowed to pray, speak, &c. as they may be led by the spirit." This contrasts with the quotation in "Try the Spirits" that "Paul told the women in his day "to keep silence in the church."

"Try the Spirits" mentions Upper Canada twice, including this anecdote:

A circumstance of this kind took place in Upper Canada, but was rebuked by the presiding elder-another, a woman near the same place professed to have the discerning of spirits, and begun to accuse another sister of things that she was not guilty of, which she said she knew was so by the spirit,-but was afterwards proven to be false-she placed herself in the capacity of the 'accuser of the brethren'-and no person through the discerning of spirits can bring a charge against another, they must be proven guilty by positive evidence, or they stand clear.

It is possible that the author was relating this from personal experience, which would strongly point to Taylor as author of at least this portion of the editorial, but it is also possible that the author heard the account from Taylor or someone else who had visited the area or heard it second hand.

There are rare phrases in the editorial that are used by Taylor elsewhere, such as "it needed," "medium of the Priesthood," "leave to differ," and "eternal being."

Although there is no evidence that Taylor ever referred to *Buck's Theological Dictionary*, the misspellings of Joannah and Jemimah suggests that the printing shop in Nauvoo didn't have the actual book for proofing, but instead relied on a handwritten submission.

*Arguments on Winchester as author.* As I documented in *The Lost City of Zarahemla*, the *Times and Seasons* published many items written by Winchester, both over his signature and as anonymous extracts from the *Gospel Reflector*.

Only Benjamin Winchester and the unknown author published the phrase "try the spirits" in the *Times and Seasons*, and the two instances were only a few months apart. Only those two authors used the phrase in quotation marks (as a direct quotation).

Before I continue assessing Winchester as a possible author of "Try the Spirits," though, I need to explain more background.

There are critics who claim that I exaggerated Winchester's influence when I proposed in *Lost City* that he also wrote under a pseudonym. They especially object to my proposal that Winchester wrote the three unsigned articles that directly link the Book of Mormon to specific sites in Central America, published in the September 15 and October 1 1842 issues of the *Times and Seasons*.

As I've explained, I had never heard of Benjamin Winchester before I started this research. When I evaluate historical events, I try to understand what people of the time thought. This takes effort; it's too easy to impose current ideas and traditions on the past. Just because Winchester is not well known among modern Latter-day Saints, and is not even mentioned in Church manuals and books on Church history, doesn't mean he was insignificant to his contemporaries.

On one occasion, the *Times and Seasons* specifically embraced the articles in Winchester's *Gospel Reflector*, suggesting that "all saints ought to be acquainted with" its contents. Here is the unsigned editorial endorsement, published when Don Carlos Smith was editing the *Times and Seasons* (T&S 2:17, p. 463, July 1, 1841).

We have received twelve numbers of the Gospel Reflector, published in Philadelphia, by Elder B. Winchester, pastor of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, in that city.—They contain **many excellent articles** in reference to the faith and doctrines of said church, and will when bound, be a volume of interesting matter, which **all the saints ought to be acquainted with**. We may, occasionally, make some extracts; in the mean time **we recommend them to all those who are enquiring after the truth as it is in Jesus, and who wish to become acquainted with the gospel**. (emphasis added)

Some modern LDS scholars seem to believe that “*no saints ought to be acquainted with*” Winchester’s writings. This anachronistic thinking has obscured the truth and deterred others from exploring these issues further.

I’m not going to ignore links to Winchester to placate these critics.

As previously mentioned, “Try the Spirits” cites *Buck’s Theological Dictionary*. I searched my database for other citations of Buck. So far as I could determine, Buck was never cited by John Taylor, Wilford Woodruff, Parley P. Pratt, W.W. Phelps, Joseph Smith, or by anyone writing in the *Journal of Discourses*, the *Evening and Morning Star*, or the *Messenger and Advocate*. He was cited one additional time in the *Times and Seasons*, which I’ll explain below.

There was only one identified author in the early days of the Church who cited Buck—Benjamin Winchester. He did so in his two major books.

Winchester started work on his *Concordance* around January 1842, about the time he left Nauvoo to return to Philadelphia. The 15 January 1842 *Times and Seasons* contains Winchester’s “Prospectus for the *Concordance*,” while the 15 September 1842 announces its completion and availability for purchase. Two people who gave him endorsements read the manuscript in July 1842. (I discuss the *Concordance* in more detail in Chapter 7.) This means Winchester was working on the *Concordance* between January and July 1842, including during March 1842 when “Try the Spirits” was presumably written for its April 1 publication date (unless it was written even earlier).

In the *Concordance*, Winchester cites Buck three times: Twice in his entry on Baptism for the Dead, and once in his discussion of the Fifth Century, where his footnote reads: “See Buck on the ‘Nestorians.’” Winchester also cites Buck in his *History of the Priesthood*, published in 1843.

Buck is cited one additional time in the *Times and Seasons*, 4:22 (Oct. 1, 1843), p. 345. The article is titled “Massacre of the Nestorian Christians” and contains this passage:

For the information of our readers, relative to this people, we publish the following from Buck’s Theological Dictionary.

#### NESTORIANS,

“The followers of Nestorius, the bishop of Constantinople, who lived in the fifth century. They believed...”

So not only is Winchester the only Mormon author to cite Buck, in his *Concordance* he cited Buck specifically on the Nestorians—the identical topic for which Buck was cited in the *Times and Seasons* on Oct. 1, 1843.

Of course, this could all be coincidental. Maybe lots of people had a copy of Buck’s book, and maybe they all read about the Nestorians.

In fact, two people donated a copy of *Buck’s Theological Dictionary* to the Nauvoo library in 1844: J. Browning and Oliver B. Huntington.<sup>16</sup> I don’t consider either of them candidates for writing “Try the Spirits” or “Massacre of the Nestorian Christians,” however. Neither published anything in the *Times and*

*Seasons*, except for minutes of a conference in Erie, N.Y., reported by Huntington. Their donations to the library were made nearly two years after “Try the Spirits” was written. The only Mormon author we know of who had a copy of Buck in 1842 was Winchester.

Given the facts so far, it is difficult to come up with a reason to reject Winchester as at least one of the authors of “Try the Spirits.”

One objection could be that he was not present in Nauvoo, but as I’ve mentioned, most of the material published in the *Times and Seasons* was mailed to Nauvoo. Another objection could be that he was in disfavor with Church leadership, a topic I discussed in *Lost City*. However, as a teenager on Zion’s Camp, Winchester became close with most early Church leaders, including Joseph Smith, William Smith, Parley P. Pratt, and Wilford Woodruff. When Zion’s Camp was disbanded, seven men stayed at the Arthur farm to earn money by making bricks and build the Arthur home. Benjamin Winchester and Wilford Woodruff were two of those seven. Winchester was an occasional missionary companion to William Smith and when William became editor of the *Prophet* newspaper in New York, he solicited Winchester to write articles.

Winchester’s history includes sharp rebukes from Church leaders but also strong approval, as in the case of the *Gospel Reflector* and the *Concordance*. When the Nauvoo library was organized in January 1844, Winchester was the largest stockholder in the Library and its President and Chairman. He was one of seven men selected to deliver Lectures. The others were Sidney Rigdon, Erastus Snow, John Taylor, Orson Pratt, Orson Spencer, and Orson Hyde, which suggests the esteem in which Winchester was held in 1844.

With this background in mind, it should not be surprising or strange that Wilford Woodruff, John Taylor, William Smith or even Joseph Smith would accept Winchester’s work. Combined with the long practice at the *Times and Seasons* of approving and publishing Winchester’s content—the very first issue in 1839 published a long letter from Winchester about his missionary labor, and the paper published over a dozen of his other articles—Winchester is a strong candidate to be the author of “Try the Spirits.”

And there is more evidence.

There are several similarities between “Try the Spirits” and Winchester’s writing. I realize that unique terms and phrases are not proof of authorship; theoretically, anyone can write anything. However, there is a cumulative effect that becomes evident the closer one looks.

For example consider these two lines in the respective opening paragraphs:

From “Try the Spirits”

Recent occurrences that have transpired amongst us render it an imperative **duty devolving upon me to say something** in relation to the spirits by which men are actuated.

From Winchester’s *Origin of the Spaulding Story* (1840)

The writer has therefore esteemed it a **duty devolving on him, to make a statement of facts** coming under his own inspection; as well as those with which he has had ample opportunity of becoming cognizant.

Obviously the latter is written in third person, while the former is in first person. But Winchester also wrote in first person, as in the article “Charity,” published in the *Times and Seasons* in Nov. 1841: “Therefore I think it necessary to insert a few remarks upon this subject.”

The phrase “duty devolving” was used only twice in the *Times and Seasons*, the first one being in the text of an ordinance of the Nauvoo Legion, published on March 15, 1842, and the second being “Try the

Spirits.”

Others used variations of devolve and duty, as well, albeit infrequently. For example, a March 1, 1844, political statement promoting Joseph’s candidacy says, “it now devolves upon us, as an imperative duty, to...” We can assume that W.W. Phelps wrote the political statement (for reasons I won’t take the time to explain here). In 1844, John Taylor wrote in his journal, “I felt that it was a duty devolving upon me to make some remarks.”

This example illustrates the challenges of tracing authorship by key or unique words. At the same time, unusual or unique features can be relevant.

One of the unusual features of the editorial is spelling and particular phrases. British spelling appears, for example. I mentioned the term *Saviour* above as a factor that contradicts Phelps’ authorship. Winchester spelled the term both ways, but *Saviour* (33 times) is more common in his work than *Savior* (7 times). In the *Times and Seasons* as a whole, it is spelled *Saviour* 55 times (often in material sent from England), but it is spelled *Savior* 215 times. These statistics are not determinative, and spelling can be chosen by an editor instead of a writer, but the use of the British spelling in “Try the Spirits” tends to suggest authorship.

In the Wentworth letter, the term is spelled *Saviour*, but that letter was adapted from Orson Pratt’s pamphlet *An Interesting Account of Several Remarkable Visions* which was published in Edinburgh in 1840 and uses the British spelling throughout. John Taylor’s British publications always spell the term *Saviour* while his American publications spell it *Savior*.

*Neighbour* appears in “Try the Spirits” and is another indication of a preference for British spelling. Parley P. Pratt’s British publications spell it *neighbour*, while his American publications spell it *neighbor*. John Taylor’s do the same. Wilford Woodruff spelled it both ways in his journal. Taylor and Woodruff, of course, became editors of the *Nauvoo Neighbor* in 1843.

The *Times and Seasons* spells *neighbor* 140 times but only spells the term *neighbour* 5 times: once in “Try the Spirits,” twice in reports from England, once in a letter from a steamboat passenger who used British spelling throughout, and once in the history of the Missouri persecutions (Feb. 1840). This means “Try the Spirits” is one of only 2 out of 145 instances in the *Times and Seasons* when the term is spelled *neighbour* by American authors.

Winchester uses *neighbour* 6 times in the *Gospel Reflector* and never spells it *neighbor*. The spelling in his articles “Charity” and “The Millennium” is changed from *neighbours* and *neighbour* to *neighbors* and *neighbor*, respectively, when the articles are reprinted in the *Times and Seasons*.

“Try the Spirits” includes the term *criterian*, a misspelling that is found only one other time in the *Times and Seasons*—in Winchester’s “Address to the Citizens of Salem.”

Twice, the author writes “I contend.” Winchester uses this phrase five times in his *History of the Priesthood*. I can’t find a single use by John Taylor, Phelps, or Woodruff, although Woodruff does use it in one account of a sermon by Joseph Smith. Of course, we don’t know if that’s verbatim.

The phrase “probationary state” appears just twice in the *Times and Seasons*; in “Try the Spirits” and in a submission titled “Baptism for the Dead” signed by G.H. that was published in 2:13 (May 1, 1841), p. 399. (I argue in another article that Winchester wrote that and other phony letters to the editor.) Winchester uses the phrase twice in his *Concordance*. I don’t find the phrase in John Taylor, Wilford Woodruff, or W.W. Phelps except in quotations from the Book of Mormon.

Winchester’s writings include words such as *impostor* and *vagabond* which are in “Try the Spirits” but not in John Taylor, Wilford Woodruff, or W.W. Phelps (although Taylor once attributed *vagabond* to Joseph Smith).



In terms of content, “Try the Spirits” refers to the priesthood 9 times, which is a lot. In the entire *Times and Seasons*, over 6 volumes (over 100 numbers) *priesthood* is used only 244 times. Winchester uses *priesthood* over 500 times in his writing (35 times in the Appendix of his *Concordance*). Between January and July 1842, the priesthood was a focus of Winchester’s research as he worked on the *Concordance*.

The editorial makes a couple of statements about the eternal nature of spirit:

Without attempting to describe this mysterious connexion and the laws that govern **the body and spirit of man**; their relationship to each other, and the design of God in relation to the human body and spirit, I would just remark that **the spirits of men are eternal**... Try the motions and actions of **an eternal being**, (for I contend that all spirits are such)...

About the time “Try the Spirits” was published in April 1842, Winchester was writing about this topic in his *Concordance* that would be published in September:

The Peripatetics, who held to the doctrine to which Aristotle probably gave birth, acknowledged the existence of a God ; yet, they believed that his nature resembled the moving principle in a piece of machinery, and that he was unconscious or regardless of human affairs. They admitted the obligations of morality; **but whether or not they acknowledged the immortality of the soul is uncertain**.

The Stoics assigned to the Deity somewhat greater majesty and influence than the disciples of Aristotle, **yet they denied the eternal existence of the soul**.

He also wrote along a similar vein in the *Gospel Reflector*, May 1, 1841, in an article titled “The Resurrection:”

**Spirit is eternal**; therefore, it preserves, and is not subject to pain. It will invigorate the human system with power and cause it to act without weariness **to all eternity**.

Another possible connection between Winchester and “Try the Spirits” is the reference to the “witch of Endor.” The only other reference in the *Times and Seasons* to the witch of Endor was published in the May 16, 1842, issue in a letter to the editor titled “Evangelical Religion” signed by “I.T.” Two references to the witch of Endor six weeks apart—when no other references ever appear in the *Times and Seasons*—seem significant. The proximity could be coincidental, but it could also flag identical authorship. I argue elsewhere that Winchester wrote letters to the editor using pseudonyms, including this one.

One aspect of the editorial that doesn’t link to Winchester is the phrase “medium of the priesthood,” which appears three times. The phrase is found only two other places in the *Times and Seasons*, once in a letter from Lorenzo Snow and once in an unsigned editorial titled “The Elias” (4:8 (Mar. 1, 1843) p. 121): “The earth has to be redeemed by the power of God, through the medium of the priesthood.”

The term “medium” is common; it was used 64 times in the *Times and Seasons*, often in connection with the paper; i.e., “through the medium of the Times and Seasons” or another newspaper. It was also used this way in the *Evening and Morning Star*, the *Messenger and Advocate*, and the *Wasp*. However, I don’t find the term used a single time in Winchester’s writing.

In January 1837, Joseph Smith wrote this in the *Messenger and Advocate*:

TO ALL CONCERNED.

Owing to the multiplicity of Letters with which I am crowded, I am again under the necessity of saying, through the **medium** of the Messenger, that I will not, hereafter, take any letters from the Post office, unless they are postpaid.

He also wrote to the editors of the *Times and Seasons* on May 6, 1841, that “I wish, through the **medium** of your paper...” In the *Wasp*, William Smith wrote “Through the **medium** of the ballot-box...” on April 30, 1842. Phelps, John Taylor, and several other authors used the term medium in their work. In 1882, John Taylor wrote “through the medium of the Holy Priesthood...” in his *Mediation and Atonement* (although that book was apparently ghost written for Taylor).

There is one instance of editing that may be significant. Joseph Smith used the phrase “through the **medium** of the Urim and Thummim” in the Wentworth letter, a change from “through the **means** of the Urim and Thummim” as Orson Pratt wrote it in his *Interesting Account of Several Remarkable Visions*. The Source Note to the Wentworth Letter in the Joseph Smith Papers makes this comment:

Because William W. Phelps revised and expanded the text of “Church History” a year later in answer to a request from editor Israel Daniel Rupp, it is possible that Phelps helped compose the original essay. However, Phelps’s active role as scribe and composer for JS apparently did not commence until late 1842.<sup>17</sup>

The presence of “medium of the Priesthood” is a contraindication of Winchester’s authorship, or possibly reflects an editorial insertion or addition.



Much of “Try the Spirits” addresses the question of women in the Church, including a quotation of Paul’s view that they should not speak in church. In his *Origin of the Spaulding Story*, Winchester makes this observation:

A woman preacher appointed a meeting there and in the meeting read and repeated copious extracts from the Book of Mormon.” As I lived close by New Salem at this time, I knew all the Elders of this church who visited New Salem. I have reason to know that no such meeting as that herein described ever took place; especially as we never had a female teacher in the church! We do not allow any such impropriety.

Winchester’s exclamation point matches the tone of “Try the Spirits.” The passage from Paul objecting to women speaking in Church is also quoted in the article “Baptism—the Mode of its Administration” in T&S 4:20 () p. 308. I argue in Chapter 6 that Winchester wrote, or at least contributed to, that article as well.

In his *Concordance*, Winchester writes,

Many of the most approved historians are of opinion, that the regular succession of popes was broken in this century by a **woman**, by the name of Joan, who found her way to the papal chair and reigned two years, under the title of Benedict III. It is said, that **the first female convent** was built in this century. **More heathen ceremonies** were introduced into the church... the Christian system, (or what is now called Catholicism,) was a curious compound of what we have above mentioned: hence, the addition of the **ridiculous** pagan ceremonies, such as image-worship, use of incense, exorcism, and creation of new functionaries, such as sub-deacons, &c. &c. All these are said to have been introduced during this century. It is said that baptism was administered with much **ridiculous** ceremony, and menacing shouts of the exorcists, in order to drive away the **evil spirits** from the candidate... when we trace the church, we find ourselves in the mist of spiritual darkness, in which there is a **heterogeneous mass of paranism**, vain philosophy, political rites, and fragments of Christianity, compounded or thrown together

Winchester doesn't mention the Irvingites, Southcot or Wilkinson—his *Concordance* treats more ancient Christian history—but he freely criticizes other religious practices in a tone similar to that found in “Try the Spirits.” Here are passages in “Try the Spirits.”

Let each man or society make a creed and try **evil spirits** by it and the devil would shake his sides... surely such a **heterogenous mass of confusion** never can enter into the kingdom of Heaven... many **ridiculous** things were entered into, calculated to bring disgrace upon the church of God.

Overall, Winchester had the means, motive and opportunity to write “Try the Spirits.” His motive would be the same one that prompted him to write all the other articles published in the *Gospel Reflector* and the *Times and Seasons*; i.e., he was zealous and wanted to make a difference, while also sharing (or displaying) the research he was doing for the Concordance. In the introduction to the Concordance, he emphasizes—twice—how much effort the book required.

The citation to *Buck's Theological Dictionary*, the spelling, the similar phrases, and the similar content all make Winchester the most likely candidate as the main author of “Try the Spirits.” However, I also think others probably contributed and/or edited the material, including someone in Nauvoo who knew the details of the people mentioned in the final paragraph of the editorial.

You might ask, how did an article by Winchester get published in April 1842 when he was in Philadelphia and Joseph Smith had just taken over the *Times and Seasons*?

Winchester was one of the most prolific early LDS authors; my database of his work is over 270,000 words. This is about equivalent to an entire year's worth of the *Times and Seasons*. He produced twelve volumes of the *Gospel Reflector* in six months. He asked Joseph for a job in printing in Nauvoo and moved there in October 1841 to work at the paper; it seems likely he would have prepared articles for the paper while he was still in Nauvoo. If so, it makes sense that he would leave them at the printing office with Woodruff or William Smith, both men he knew well. Alternatively, he could have mailed material from Philadelphia, as he had before he moved to Nauvoo.

Either way, someone in Nauvoo would have edited Winchester's material, whether Joseph Smith, John Taylor, W.W. Phelps, Wilford Woodruff, or William Smith.



Conclusion. The title “Try the Spirits,” the subject matter, and the quotations from Buck's Theological Dictionary all persuade me that this editorial originated as an article by Benjamin Winchester. I also think that people in Nauvoo—primarily Phelps and Taylor—edited Winchester's original article by adding the anecdotes from Upper Canada and the Nauvoo area. The material on the Irvingites could have been written by Winchester or Phelps, who were in Kirtland during Rev. Hewitt's visit, or by Taylor, who clearly had some knowledge about the group based on the letter he wrote in 1837.

There seem to be shifts in style throughout the piece. The first line uses first person singular, but otherwise the author uses first person plural. Throughout the editorial, scriptures are quoted without citations, but in one paragraph, three specific citations are given.

I have not listed all the lexical analysis I've done on the editorial, but as an example, Winchester uses the word “certainly” once every 2700 words. Taylor uses it once every 6300 words, and Phelps uses it every 4,700 words. “Try the Spirits” uses it three times, or once every 1800 words—closest to

Winchester. The rare phrase “heterogeneous mass” appears once in Taylor’s writing (Response to Heys 1, 1840) and once in Winchester’s writing (Appendix to his Concordance, 1842). (The phrase also appears in a report from England by Willard Richards and a piece by Winchester’s friend John Eaton in the Sept. 15, 1844, *Times and Seasons* as a reprint from the *Prophet* newspaper.) To the extent such a phrase is probative, I would deem it most likely Winchester wrote it in “Try the Spirits” because his use in the *Concordance* is contemporaneous with the editorial.

There is a distinction in style and content between the first 3,250 words (which I attribute to Winchester), the next 1,000 words on the Irvingites (which I attributed to Phelps) and the final 824 words about anecdotes (which I attribute to Taylor). There is some overlap which I attribute to the editing process. Further study may be able to identify these different authors with more precision.

The main point, of course, is that there is no historical evidence that Joseph Smith wrote the editorial, and there is little stylistic or semantic evidence that he participated in editing it.



It probably seems like I spent a lot of time to go through this editorial in such detail, but remember, this is the editorial cited as proof that Joseph wrote the articles signed by “Ed.” For me, the historical evidence shows, at a minimum, that others were involved. I think it goes further to show that Joseph had little if any involvement with “Try the Spirits,” and certainly was not the main author.

Does it make a difference whether Joseph Smith wrote “Try the Spirits?” It is a widely quoted article that informs current debates about the role of women in the Church. Juxtaposed to Joseph’s simultaneous work with the Relief Society, the article seems incongruous. I’m not focusing on the merits of that argument in this article, but I propose that Joseph’s non-authorship of “Try the Spirits” could make a difference in the discussion about the role of women in the Church today. The same can be said about many of the other 1842 articles long attributed—incorrectly in my view—to Joseph Smith.

Of course, the authorship of the unattributed editorials in the 1842 *Times and Seasons* has a bearing on the articles the address Book of Mormon geography. For many people, it makes an enormous difference whether Joseph wrote *those* words.

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<sup>1</sup> For an example of a General Conference talk, see Marion G. Romney, “Gifts of the Spirit,” *Conference Report*, April 1956, pp. 68-73, in which he said, “You can get the message I would like to give you in more detail than I will have time to give it here if you will read [D&C 46:1-33] and an editorial written by the Prophet Joseph Smith in 1842, titled “Try the Spirits,” which you will find in Volume IV, History of the Church, page 571. It is also printed in the Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith, compiled by our beloved President of the Council of the Twelve, beginning on page 202.

<sup>2</sup> Most publications that promote a Mesoamerican geography cite or implicitly incorporate the Mesoamerican articles. E.g., John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (FARMS and Deseret Book, 1985, 1996): 2-3; Sorenson, *Mormon’s Codex* (Maxwell Institute and Deseret Book, 2013): 694; David A. Palmer, *In Search of Cumorah* (Horizon Publishers, 1982): 22; Brant A. Gardner, *Traditions of the Fathers* (Greg Kofford Books 2015): 121. Gardner in turn cites Matthew Roper’s claim that stylometry analysis proves Joseph wrote the articles, but Roper has published only his conclusions and has never disclosed details to allow analysis and replication of his work, including his database, his assumptions and methodology, or the software he used.

<sup>3</sup> See “Truth about Joseph Smith’s Beliefs on Geography of The Book of Mormon,” produced by FairMormon, available on youtube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6rsyAExrNNc&feature=youtu.be>. Other authors have also assumed Joseph wrote the editorial. E.g., Grant Underwood, “Joseph Smith and the King James Bible,” in *The King James Bible and the Restoration* (Religious Studies Center), online at <https://rsc.byu.edu/es/archived/king-james-bible-and-restoration/13-joseph-smith-and-king->

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[james-bible](#) (“As editor of the Times and Seasons in 1842, he [Joseph] issued two major essays to educate Church members on the topic—‘Try the Spirits’ (a title that used King James wording from 1 John 4:1) and ‘The Gift of the Holy Ghost.’”); Terry Givens, *Wrestling the Angel* (Oxford University Press): 329 (Givens cites “Try the Spirits” with this comment: “Unsigned, but generally attributed to Joseph Smith.”); Truman Madsen, “Joseph Smith and the Ways of Knowing,” note 34, <http://chaunceyriddle.com/courses/philosophy-110-byu/joseph-smith-and-the-ways-of-knowing/> (“The Prophet teaches that one may “test” revelation by further revelation, as well as relating it to the other sources of knowledge as far as they are relevant. See, for example, his editorial, Try the Spirits,” TPJS 202-215”); Rhett S. James, “Writing History Must Not Be an Act of ‘Magic,’” *FARMS Review of Books* 12/2 (2000): 397 online at <http://publications.mi.byu.edu/publications/review/12/2/S00017-51b9ed26eef9c17James.pdf> (“Joseph Smith's 1842 editorial in the *Times and Seasons*, entitled "Try the Spirits," is an important Mormon denunciation of magic, the occult, false traditions, and corrupted religion); and Samuel M. Brown, “The Reluctant Metaphysicians,” *Mormon Studies Review* 1 (2014): 128 (“Smith’s important 1842 editorial titled “Try the Spirits” was all about constraining supernatural power for the purpose of establishing a stable society,” citing “[Joseph Smith and coauthors]”), online at [http://publications.mi.byu.edu/publications/msr/1/brown-reviewessay\\_metaphysicians.pdf](http://publications.mi.byu.edu/publications/msr/1/brown-reviewessay_metaphysicians.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Online at <https://www.lds.org/manual/teachings-joseph-smith/chapter-33?lang=eng>

<sup>5</sup> “Joseph Smith as Editor of the Times and Seasons,” <http://www.bmaf.org/node/361>. BMAF.org is a group of Mesoamerican proponents. BMAF is a member of the citation cartel with FairMormon, the Interpreter, FARMS, and the Maxwell Institute. Although this article doesn’t name the author (because BMAF is emulating the Times and Seasons?), the actual author is Gregory L. Smith, who blogs at <https://seesangelsinthearchitecture.wordpress.com/2013/07/28/ed-in-the-1842-times-and-seasons/>

<sup>6</sup> Joseph Smith Papers, *Journals*, Volume 2: December 1841—April 1843, (The Church Historian’s Press, 2011) p. 48.

<sup>7</sup> I use centerplace.org to search the *Times and Seasons* because of its utility, but there are other ways to search periodicals. I check results against a printed facsimile because there are errors in the centerplace digital files.

<sup>8</sup> I don’t include Erastus Snow, the co-author of the 1841 “Address to the Citizens of Salem,” as a potential author of “Try the Spirits” because Winchester was the sole author of the earlier 1840 pamphlet and because Winchester was the main author of the Address.

<sup>9</sup> See <http://jod.mrm.org/6/237>.

<sup>10</sup> The quotation is from J.B. Turner, *Mormonism in all Ages* (New York 1842), but anti-Mormon authors mentioned Southcote as early as 1831. See Abner Cole, “Gold Bible [Nos. 1 and 4],” *The Reflector* (Palmyra, NY 1831); E.D. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled* (Painesville, Ohio 1834); LaRoy Sunderland, “Mormonism,” *Zion’s Watchman* (New York 1838); and Henry Caswall, *The City of the Mormons, or, Three Days at Nauvoo, in 1842* (London 1843).

<sup>11</sup> Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (Knopf 2007): 270-274.

<sup>12</sup> An online version is available here: <http://www.takeacopy.com/files/index.htm>.

<sup>13</sup> Bruce A. Van Orden, “‘We’ll Sing and We’ll Shout!’ Who Is the Real W.W. Phelps?,” *Mormon Historical Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Spring 2015), pp. 69-70.

<sup>14</sup> The entry is at <http://josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/journal-december-1841-december-1842?p=15>.

<sup>15</sup> The Epistle is found in the Joseph Smith Papers at <http://josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/?target=X3F62F64E-3BA0-46CB-B8D4-76AF5F153A04#/paperSummary/nauvoo-relief-society-minute-book&p=83>.

<sup>16</sup> Christopher C. Jones, “The Complete Record of the Nauvoo Library,” *Mormon Historical Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (2009), pp. 195 and 202, available at <http://mormonhistoricsites.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/The-Complete-Record-of-the-Nauvoo-Library-and-Literary-Institute.pdf>.

<sup>17</sup> See Source Note at <http://josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/church-history-1-march-1842?p=1>.