

Abstract: *Some have seen evidence of anti-Masonic rhetoric in the Book of Mormon and cite 2 Nephi 26:22 in support of this theory, since Satan leads sinners "by the neck with a flaxen cord." It is claimed that this is a reference to Masonic initiation rituals, which feature a thick noose called a cable-tow or tow-rope. Examining the broader rhetorical context of 2 Nephi demonstrates that the "flaxen cord" more likely refers to something slight and almost undetectable. To test this hypothesis, I undertake a survey of the use of the phrase flaxen cord in 19th century publications. I also examine analogous phrases from the Bible. I examine fifty examples, seven of which are excluded because they do not contain enough information to support either claim. Of the remaining 43 examples, a full two-thirds (67%) describe a cord that is trivial or easily snapped. Only 7% denote a thick, strong rope, and 17% describe a thin rope that is strong. Given (1) the rhetorical context of 2 Nephi, (2) an expression that usually refers to a cord of trivial thickness and strength, and (3) virtually all poetic, scriptural, or allegorical uses imply fragility, the evidence overwhelmingly contradicts the anti-Masonic thesis.*

Joseph Smith's production of the Book of Mormon in roughly 63 working days is a literary accomplishment virtually without parallel.¹ Even before the book's publication, allies and critics were lining up for a battle over its origins, a battle that shows little sign of abating.

[Page 332] Many 20th century critics have returned to the one theory that most of Joseph's friends, family, and critics regarded as untenable: Joseph wrote it himself, drawing heavily on his own life and experiences to do so.² It is not clear why their assessment of Joseph's capacities ought to outweigh that of those who knew him best.³ This stance has many strands: one such filament is the claim that Joseph was gripped by the anti-Masonic fervor swirling around New York and the United States in the late 1820s. And thus, some readers have found evidence of anti-Masonic language in Joseph's frontier scripture.

One lynch pin of this theory was the claim that *secret combination* was a phrase that applied only to Freemasonry during the period of the Book of Mormon's composition. Were this true, it would add more weight to the suggestion that other potential parallels to Masonry are real, not imagined.

Given that the claim that secret combinations must always refer to Freemasonry has been shown to be definitively false for Joseph's time and place,⁴ we might well ask whether other supposed Masonic parallels are equally dubious.

[Page 333] The *Flaxen Cord* in the Anti-Masonic Thesis

One of the advocates of the anti-Masonic thesis (AMT) argues that the Book of Mormon contains a criticism of Masonic ritual:

Despite the assertion that the "elaborate initiation rituals" [of Freemasonry] are absent from the Book of Mormon, researchers have long believed that 2 Nephi 26:22 alludes to the Masonic initiatory cable-tow ritual. In describing the corrupt churches and priestcrafts of the last days, Nephi adds: "And there are also secret combinations, even as in times of old, according to the combinations of the devil, ... and he leadeth them by the neck with a flaxen cord, until he bindeth them with his strong cords forever" (2 Nephi 26:22). In the Masonic ritual, the initiate is blindfolded and led into the lodge by a rope around his neck, the cable-tow.⁵

This Book of Mormon passage (2 Nephi 26:22) claims to be the work of Nephi, a Hebrew from Jerusalem circa 600 bce. The first question we must ask is whether the presence of a *flaxen cord* is anachronistic. If Nephi were unfamiliar with ropes made of flax, the phrase must come from Joseph Smith (as either translator or author). An anachronistic flax rope makes a better case for the AMT.

Archaeological evidence of flax cultivation goes back 34,000 years, including twisted fibers "used to make ropes or strings."⁶ The Gezer calendar — a 3.5 x 6 inch limestone fragment, dated to the "late tenth century or the very early ninth century bce," and written in either early Canaanite or Phoenician — "describes seasonal agricultural activities — sowing, harvesting, and processing of flax and barley."⁷ Samson's bands are compared to ropes of flax (Judges 15:14). Clearly, flax and ropes made from it are not anachronistic to the ancient Near East.

It is thus possible for Nephi to write about "flaxen cords." But what does this have to do with Freemasonry?

[Page 334]The *Cable-tow* in Masonry

To understand the thrust of the AMT's claim, we must briefly review the *cable-tow* or *tow-rope* used in Masonic initiations. One 1828 anonymous exposé of Masonry, nearly contemporaneous with the translation of the Book of Mormon, provides a useful reference for how Joseph Smith's contemporaries would have thought of the cable-tow in the hotbox of anti-Masonic fervor. In it the author details the use of the tow-rope in Masonic ceremonies.⁸ He enumerates two instances of its use and their intended symbolism.

The first:

Every Mason who wishes to be admitted into the Scotch degrees, and even into all other degrees of Masonry, is first taught that, until that period, he has lived in slavery, and it is on that account only, that he is admitted into the presence of the other brethren with a rope about his neck, praying that he may be delivered from his bonds.

The intent of *rope* (not a *cord*) is to symbolize the initiate's pre Masonic enslavement; thus, the rope is presumably of sufficient size and weight to convey this message. A small thread or string would not suffice; it would, in fact, convey precisely the opposite idea.

The second use of the rope occurs later:

When he [the initiate] aspires at the third Scotch degree ... he must appear in a far more humiliating costume. The candidate is shut up in a dark cell, a rope with four slip knots is twisted round his neck, he is stretched out upon the floor; there, by the dull light of a twinkling lamp, he is abandoned to himself to meditate on the wretched state of slavery in which he exists. ... At length one of the brethren comes and introduces him to the lodge, leading him by the rope, holding a drawn sword in his right hand, as if meant to run him through the heart, in case he made any resistance.

[Page 335]As before, the rope symbolism is not subtle.⁹ The initiate has a hangman's noose around his neck in a "dark cell." He is then led by the rope and threatened with a sword if he resists — this imagery requires a robust cord.

This anti-Masonic work contains no images or engravings, but a later work, the classic *Duncan's Masonic Ritual*, illustrates how during a first degree ("Entered Apprentice") initiation, "The Deacon now ties a handkerchief or hoodwink over his eyes, places a slipper on his right foot, and after-wards puts a rope, called a cable-tow, once round his neck, letting it drag behind," and then provides an illustration (Figure 1).¹⁰ The use of the rope continues for second degree ("Fellow Craft") masonic initiation¹¹ and third degree ("Master Mason").¹²

The intent of the ritual is not to hide these bonds but instead to make them unmistakable. Any man so bound cannot be ignorant of his situation. That is the entire point of their ritual use.

The Book of Mormon's Rhetorical Intent

Does this, then, match the Book of Mormon imagery? It may appear convincing to read of a rope in Masonry leading someone by the neck, and find borrowing in a cord likewise used to lead someone in the Book of Mormon. A closer look, however, demonstrates that the Book of Mormon's use of this symbolism is almost the inverse of the [Page 336]Masonic scenario offered by the AMT. (It makes scant difference whether we believe that Nephi or Joseph Smith wrote the text or chose the precise wording. We simply ask how the Book of Mormon text uses the phrase.)



Figure 1. First-degree masonic candidate prepared for initiation with the "cable-tow" or rope.

The imagery occurs in the context of the prophet Nephi's polemic against apostasy and evil in the last days. The verses that immediately precede the "flaxen cord" declare:

of their stumbling block, that they have built up many churches; nevertheless, they put down the power and miracles of God, and preach up unto themselves their own wisdom and their own learning, that they may get gain and grind upon the face of the poor.

And there are many churches built up which cause envyings, and strifes, and malice. (2 Nephi 26:20-21)

After predicting the Book of Mormon’s appearance (2 Nephi 27), Nephi returns to these themes:

For it shall come to pass in that day [the latter days] that the churches which are built up, and not unto the Lord, when the one shall say unto the other: Behold, I, I am the Lord’s; and the others shall say: I, I am the Lord’s; and thus shall every one say that hath built up churches, and not unto the Lord. (2 Nephi 28:3)

This is, then, the same polemic against the same targets: that the corrupt churches built up by men which precede the Nephite record’s [Page 337]translation (and which necessitate its coming forth) are still in business after its production and are guilty of precisely the same sins.

Nephi condemns these sins, which are identical to those he has already mentioned in 2 Nephi 26:

Table 1. Condemnation parallels between 2 Nephi 26 and 28.

Sins in 2 Nephi 26:20-21	2 Nephi 28
Pride	“puffed up in their hearts” (v. 9); “because of pride, and because of false teachers ... their churches have become corrupted, and their churches are lifted up; because of pride they are puffed up” (v. 12); “because in their pride they are puffed up” (v. 13); “they wear stiff necks and high heads; yea and because of pride” (v. 14)
The buildup of many churches	“the churches which are built up, and not unto the Lord. ... thus shall every one say that hath built up churches, and not unto the Lord” (v. 3)
Putting down the power of God	“deny the power of the holy One of Israel...there is no God today, for the Lord and the Redeemer hath done his work, and he hath given his power unto men” (v. 5)
The denial of miracles	“if they shall say there is a miracle wrought by the hand of the Lord, believe it not; for this day he is not a God of miracles; he hath done his work” (v. 6)
The preaching of one’s own wisdom, learning	“teach with their learning” (v. 4)
Persecution of the poor	“they persecute the meek and the poor in heart”; “rob the poor” (v. 13)
Getting gain	“rob the poor because their fine sanctuaries ... [and] because of their fine clothing” (v. 13)

Gossamer Thin: 2 Nephi's "Flaxen Cord" and the Anti-Ma	Gregory L. Smith
Envy, strife, and malice	"contend one with another; and their priests shall contend one with another" (v. 4)

Having seen the close parallels (and at times almost wholesale duplication) between the two halves of the polemic, we can now address the verse of interest to us:

And there are also secret combinations, even as in times of old, according to the combinations of the devil, for he is the founder [Page 338]of all these things; yea, the founder of murder, and works of darkness; yea, and he leadeth them by the neck with a flaxen cord, until he bindeth them with his strong cords forever. (26:22)

These ideas from the first half of the polemic are also found, unsurprisingly, in the second half. There, Nephi returns to the idea of secret combinations, whose oath-bound societies spread murder and evil: "they shall seek deep to hide their counsels from the Lord; and their works shall be in the dark. And the blood of the saints shall cry from the ground against them" (28:9–10).

The second half of the polemic then turns — as it does in the first half — to a description of Satan's tactics: "for he is the founder of all these things" (26:22). Satan will "rage in the hearts of" humanity, seeking to bind them "with his everlasting chains, and they be stirred up to anger, and perish" (28:19–20).

The "everlasting chains" or "awful chains from whence there is no deliverance" of the second half of the polemic (v. 19, 22) are clear parallels to Satan "bind[ing] them with his strong cords forever" in the first half (v. 22).

But what, then, is the analogue to being led "by the neck with a flaxen cord"? The AMT assumes (tacitly, if not explicitly) that the tow-rope is a stand-in for the demonic chains. And this *is* a possible reading. The second half of the polemic, however, offers another option:

And others will he pacify, and lull them away into carnal security, that they will say: All is well in Zion; yea, Zion prospereth, all is well — and thus the devil cheateth their souls, and leadeth them away carefully down to hell. (2 Nephi 28:21)

In this imagery, Satan is far less overtly aggressive. He does not chain his victims up right away, nor does he stir them to violent anger, as he does some. Instead, he soothes them and pacifies them. He "lulls" them, and "leadeth them away *carefully* down to hell." The control or bonds he has on his dupes are hardly perceptible.

The second half of the polemic clearly offers an image quite different from the AMT's tow-rope with its hangman's noose. It rather pictures Satan exerting a slow, gradual, almost imperceptible control that his targets neither feel nor see. (And how "careful" can one be when hauling the victim by a rope?)

An Alternative to the Anti-Masonic Thesis

As we have seen, a close reading of the Book of Mormon text offers an interpretation that is completely different from the Masonic tow-rope.

[Page 339]I propose that the "flaxen cord" is in fact a symbol that is the *inverse* of the tow-rope. The Book of Mormon's "flaxen cord" is not heavy or easily detected at all. It is, one might say, spider-web thin — its use requires great care on Satan's part, for it could easily snap, were his target to become aware of it. The soft, smooth, ~~supple flax neither chafes nor weighs heavily. Only when he has accomplished his long, drawn-out, ever-downward~~

seduction do the "everlasting" and "strong" chains then bind. (There is also an ironic counterpoint between the heavy, inviolable chains with which they will one day be bound, and the thin line with which Satan "carefully" leads them unawares toward that end.)

On textual grounds alone, I judge my reading the stronger. I offer it as a competing hypothesis to the one inherent in the AMT. The question now before us is *Can an examination of the language choices made by Joseph Smith's contemporaries incline us toward one hypothesis or the other?*

For example, does nineteenth century usage often use a "flaxen cord" to portray the Masonic cable-tow? If the AMT was correct, we might expect so. To our twenty-first century ears, "cord" might sound like a sizeable attachment, even a rope, and not a thread or small string. If, on the other hand, my thesis is correct, we might expect the phrase *flaxen cord* to mean "fragile," "weak," or "of little consequence."

An Example

A particularly striking visual example is available from 1872¹³ and shown in Figure 2. In it, a Christian parent's natural love for a child is compared to a "cord that binds you to a mother's heart":

Hold fast ... [an] old cord that touches your mother; it reaches out from her up to the skies. ... Yes, hold fast the cord of mother-love, little one.

However, the mother is then exhorted to use "example," with which she communicates "more emphatically *than the flaxen cord from the distaff*. ... Remember, stronger than a silken cord drawing heavenward is a good life."¹⁴

Here the "flaxen cord" is a symbol of being small or slight; the better, stronger cord of righteous example outstrips the flaxen cord of mere positive feelings for the child.

The symbolism is driven home by the accompanying illustration (Figure 2) — it includes the "distaff" (the spindle upon which flax is wound to spin thread) carried by the mother, which the article argues is weaker [Page 340] than the mother's "example ... [of] a good life." The mass of thin, threadlike cord ("from the distaff," as the ornate prose puts it) thus produced is clearly visible, bunched at her right hand and trailing barely perceived to her left. Clearly, in this case, by "flaxen cord" we should understand thread or fine yarn, not rope. The illustration precludes any other interpretation.¹⁵



Figure 2. A mother with distaff and its "flaxen cord."

We thus have at least one case that sustains my thesis over that of the AMT, albeit from a later date. But is this an outlier?

[Page 341]King James Bible: Samson

In considering whether this approach to flaxen cords is an outlier, the AMT analysis cited above ignores one biblical passage that bears scrutiny, in which Samson's binding cords are compared to flax that has been burned with fire:

And when he came unto Lehi, the Philistines shouted against him: and the Spirit of the LORD came mightily upon him, and the *cords that were upon his arms became as flax that was burnt with fire*, and his bands loosed from off his hands. (Judges 15:14, emphasis added)

Here we certainly have ropes or bands of considerable size and strength, but they are described *as if* of flax weakened by fire to convey their fragility before Samson's strength. An 1835 piece encouraging non Latter-day Saint mission efforts asks, have reader's

hearts sighed at the thought that your years are stealing away so rapidly, and leaving behind them so little accomplished for the Lord? ... It need not be: you may be more useful. The church is not bound down by so fatal a chain that her activity shall be for ever fettered. No, she will arise and *burst the*

This passage directly invokes the Samson material, for he later tells Delilah that if he is bound with “seven green withes [withes]” (seven fresh bowstrings) his strength will leave him. This misdirection is embarrassing for the Philistines, when they find that Samson easily “brake the withs, as a *thread of tow [flax]* is broken when it toucheth the fire” (Judges 16:7–9, emphasis added). The imagery is one of effortless rupture of a weak strand.

An 1849 work published in Philadelphia turns the “cords ... as flax that was burnt” explicitly into “flaxen cords”:

Some have slumbered long under the power of the grave, but Jesus will shortly descend from heaven with the voice of the archangel. ... The grave — you can hold your victims no longer [Page 342]— your iron folds and bars become like the *flaxen cords* on Sampson’s arms that were as though burnt with fire.¹⁷

A second 1849 effort reads:

The Bible must be put within reach of all; ... the Sabbath school must be sustained; ... and no effort may be spared to furnish every family with the productions of the religious press. But, in instrumentality high above all this, and to which all else is subsidiary is the holy ministry [sic], ordained of heaven to command all men everywhere to repent. ... Aside of this, every other instrumentality is as powerless to subdue and bind the man of sin, as the green withes and flaxen cords of the Philistines to conquer the son of Manoah.¹⁸

And a third:

Our educational, moral, and religious appliances must be long and perseveringly employed. ... But above all, is the influence of the holy ministry. Aside from this, every other instrumentality becomes as feeble as the green withes and *flaxen cords* in which it was attempted to bind the son of Manoah.¹⁹

The biblical model then — and later 19th century use of its imagery — sees a “flaxen cord” as a symbol of something broken easily and effortlessly. This simply does not fit the anti-Masonic picture of the Book of Mormon’s description of a tow-rope.

Methodology

I searched digital databases of 18th and 19th century texts for the phrase *flaxen cord*. Though I make no claim to the search being complete or exhaustive, I report all examples found except duplicates.

I began first by reviewing the use of this imagery in the King James Version of the Bible, a text with obvious affinities to Book of Mormon language. Having already examined the KJV and four nineteenth-century examples that appeal to it, I now report 45 additional examples of *flaxen cord* from 1771–1902.

[Page 343]We will ask: *Does this flaxen cord sound like the sort required for the AMT’s Masons?* Or is it more like the nigh-undetected strand suggested by my reading of the second half of Nephi’s polemic and the Christian newspaper examined earlier? Is it weak — and therefore not suitable for leading forcibly — as implied in the Samson story?

We will find that usage in the late 18th century and throughout the 19th century overwhelming favors this view. To Joseph Smith's audience, a *flaxen cord* would have likely been the furthest thing from a cable-tow.

Results

I have identified a total of 50 examples in publications from the United States and Great Britain between 1712 and 1902. I do not, however, include all 50 examples in my analysis; I have made a total of eight exclusions. Five examples are from dictionaries or concern word etymologies.²⁰ I have excluded these from the rest of the analysis, since their intent is, by their nature, to cover a wide variety of usages, even though I think that on balance they incline towards portraying a *flaxen cord* as relatively thin. Under the most pessimistic reading of the data for my thesis, they do not *exclude* a thin string or cord from being intended.

Three additional examples do not include enough information to classify the cords by either their strength or size. These three describe

- Chinese rope making, which says that flaxen rope or cord will not be as strong as hemp (1832b);
- Polynesian cloak with a cord that ties it on at the neck (1857b); and
- the fact that Samson was bound with flaxen cords as a literary prelude to a technical treatise on flax husbandry (1863b).

The first and third seem to me of little evidentiary value one way or the other. The Polynesian *cloak tie* is likely a smaller, possibly not strong line, but in the interest of conservatism, I have excluded it as well (see Appendix II, Table 6).

This leaves us with 42 references. Appendix I contains the text of each of these examples with brief commentary. I have categorized each reference by (1) genre; (2) whether the cord is said to be thick, thin, or undetermined in diameter; and (3) whether the cord is portrayed as weak, strong, or unstated. Readers who disagree with this or that [Page 344]categorization can thus easily adjust the scoring as they think best. Percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number.

Drawing on the raw examples in Appendix I, I have tabulated them in Appendix II, Table 2, Table 3, and Table 4, respectively. A master table with classification of all examples is found in Table 5.

Arguments for the Anti-Masonic Thesis

A few of the examples support the AMT. The ropes that bind priests' belts in two examples (1712a, 1897a) would probably match the tow rope. Most importantly, one melodramatic mention of a hangman's noose uses the precise term *flaxen cord* (1848a). Thus, only $\frac{3}{42}$ (7%) fit the tow rope in size and presumed strength, and none of these date to within Joseph Smith's lifetime, much less the Book of Mormon's translation window. The literal noose is, however, the example that fits best with the anti Masonic model.

Seven additional examples are strong while their thickness is either "thin" or "undetermined": two bowstrings, a ligature used to bind an animal testis, a garrote, a rope to draw water from a well, and two references to the fine mesh that supports a hot-air balloon.²¹

Thus, ten of the examples describe cords that are either said to be (or may reasonably be concluded to be) strong and resistant to breakage — but of these, only three agree with the cable-tow in size.

We conclude that an anti-Masonic reading might seem a *possible* one, granted a broad date range, though the complete lack of matching metaphorical or poetical usage should give us pause.

~~Arguments Against the Anti-Masonic Thesis~~

It must be noted that metaphoric/poetic use or biblical allusions do not match the AMT at all: all but one ($\frac{21}{22} = 95\%$) have weakness as a central aspect of their symbolism. (The lone exception seems to describe a garroting — it is thus likely thin, unlike the tow-rope, but strong enough to permit the murder — see 1832b.) Thus, in the genres most applicable to the Book of Mormon passage, no examples support the AMT.

Twenty-two examples [$\frac{(19+3)}{42} = 50\%$] have cords that are obviously weak, and count against the Masonic hypothesis. Can we narrow down the remaining ten "thin cord" cases that do not describe the strength?

Of these ten entries which are thin and do not mention the strength of the cord, six are in a context which strongly suggests that breaking them would be easy if desired:

- [Page 345]Hygrometer holding a small bob (1771a, republished repeatedly, e.g., in 1797, 1819)
- Tied paper message (1838a)
- Medical thread (1838b)
- Drawing or describing lines in geometry (1844b, 1878a)
- Tying a bundle of herbs (1847a)

Including these with the other weak entries gives 67% [$(22+6) \div 42 = \frac{28}{42}$] of the examples contradicting the anti-Masonic model.

By contrast, of these ten thin cords of unstated strength, we might expect more strength in the remaining four:

- the surgical line which holds a two-pound weight (1829a);
- stitching to repair a saddle (1834a);
- a surgical ligature (1841a); and
- the line used to bind a row of chickens about the neck (1891a).

Considering the first three, though such surgical ties or thread are strong enough to avoid tearing when in place — and thus might be classed as "strong" — they are nevertheless easily torn or snapped by the surgeon or tailor if tied around someone to lead them. Anyone bound with a surgical ligature or stout thread could break it easily. By contrast, the fourth cord keeping a mass of chickens attached to each other is likely stronger.

If we grant this, then the AMT gains an additional point (the row of chickens), and my proposal another three. In the interests of simplicity and conservatism, I have simply not credited these last four examples to either theory.

Limitations

No study is perfect, and the present case is no exception. Thirty-three of the works were published in America; the British examples may have less relevance to American usage, though the intellectual cross-fertilization and frequent publication of the same work on both side of the Atlantic leads me to suspect that this is a relatively minor issue.

More importantly, published works may not capture the vernacular of a non-elite such as Joseph Smith. We must, however, work with what we have, for non-elites were much less likely to write or be published at all.

Searches of scanned databases are limited by what has been preserved and scanned. I believe I have cast the net reasonably widely, however, and we have a good cross-section of time, place, and subject matter.

Scoring such citations is necessarily a subjective exercise in some cases. As demonstrated above, I have tried to err on the side of [Page 346]conservatism. The full data are provided in Appendix I for any who wish to decide for themselves.

The most serious defect, I believe, is the relative lack of early material from the United States. Some examples do exist, but they are not as numerous as we might wish. (There are, however, *no* examples of a thick, strong cord as the AMT would require, so my hypothesis is not disadvantaged compared to the alternative.)

There does not seem to be any sign of semantic drift from the early to late 19th centuries (or, for that matter, from Britain to the United States), and I would predict that if further sampling from the first decades of the century is undertaken, we will likely find no great surprises.

Conclusion

Even in a conservative reading of the data, fully two-thirds of the examples ($\frac{28}{42} = 67\%$) portray a cord that is trivial or easily snapped. By contrast, the stronger, thicker ropes are found in only $\frac{3}{42}$ (7%). A further $\frac{7}{42}$ (17%) are strong but too thin to be clear matches to a Masonic cable-tow.

Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, when we consider rhetorical and poetical uses or biblical allusions — arguably the genres that match the Book of Mormon most closely — we find the data virtually unanimous: $\frac{21}{22}$ (95%) of the examples used in a poetic, metaphoric, or biblically allusive sense do so in order to convey fragility or tenuousness, nor does the lone exception match the AMT.

When we combine this lopsided data set with the internal evidence provided by the two halves of Nephi's polemic, the anti-Masonic explanation of the flaxen cord becomes difficult to sustain. The search for Masonic parallels has resulted in a reading most probably a genuine inversion of the Book of Mormon's meaning *and* at variance with contemporary 19th century usage.

Nephi is not talking about a large, visible rope or hangman's noose — he is describing a subtle and fragile connection that could be easily snapped if mortals "awake to the awful situation of those that have fallen into transgression" (Mosiah 2:40).

Given the failure of other predictions made by the AMT, one can only hope that it will soon enter a long-overdue retirement. On the issue of the cable-tow, that thesis — like Nephi's flaxen cord itself — is now gossamer-thin.

[Page 347]Appendix I: Citations and Commentary

In each entry in this appendix, all italics in quotes represent emphasis in the original and all bold type represents my added emphasis. Five additional examples are discussed in the main text (one in "an example," and four in "King James Bible: Samson.") These five have been included in the statistics and analysis of the main paper.

1712a London: Description of Franciscan Monks' Dress

We begin with a point for the AMT. A text from 1712 (also reprinted in 1812) describes members of the Franciscan order:

Friars of the order of St. Francis. ... [wear a] habit of ... a coarse brown cloth, hanging down to their heels. ... Their feet and legs always bare; about their middle they are girded with **a flaxen cord with knots**, and there hang their beads, with the image of our Saviour upon the cross.²²

In this case, the cord seems more in keeping with a stout rope, acting as a sort of belt on a monk's habit. This is one of the few examples in which a more robust line is intended.

Size: Thick

Strength: Strong

Genre: Priest Garb

1762a England: Describing Turkish Bows

The Turks are very expert in the use of their bows and arrows, the former being made of an ox horn, and a **tough flaxen cord**, fattened with glew.²³

[Page 348]A bow-string is thin but tough; it is not a thick rope.

Size: Thin

Strength: Strong

Genre: Description

1771a England: Technical Drawing of Hygrometer by Royal Society

A hygrometer model first published in the *Proceedings of the Royal Society* was frequently reprinted throughout the 19th century.²⁴ A technical drawing with the label "FG" is described:

FG, in both figures, represents **a flaxen cord**, about 35 inches long, suspended by the tuning peg. ... This cord is that which is called by net makers in London *flaxen three-threads laid*, and is between one-20th and one-30th of an inch in diameter.²⁵

Clearly, this is a very fine string or thread (0.8–1.2 mm in diameter), and nothing like the cable-tow of Masonry.

Size: Thin Strength: Unstated

Genre: Scientific/Medical

1795a London and Edinburgh: Bow-string in poetry

William Wilkie's *Epigoniad* includes the lines

The only boon I claim ...
Is, that my hands that weapon may embrace,
And on the **flaxen cord an arrow place**.²⁶

This second reference to a bowstring is hardly a rope — it is, as the name implies, a "string," though a strong one.

Size: Thin Strength: Strong

Genre: Poetry/Metaphor

[Page 349]1795b New York: Homeric Vocabulary

Charles Anthon, a well-known figure connected with Martin Harris's Book of Mormon authentication efforts, defines the Homeric word $\lambda\iota\nu\upsilon\nu$ (linon) as: "**a flaxen cord**," "a fishing line," "a fishing net."²⁷

Fishing nets and lines can hardly be compared to a hangman's noose. They are thin and fragile in isolation. Indeed,

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fishermen's nets rely on the strength of the whole — a small tear can quickly destroy an entire net if the individual strands are not mutually supporting.

Gregory L. Smith

Size: Either

Strength: Unstated

Genre: Dictionary

1805a Salem, New York: Clothesline in Poetry

Across the yard at three the line was strung,
On which the treasures of the tubs were hung:
Loud blew the winds; **the flaxen cord** was rent,
And in the mud the cleansed garments went!²⁸

A clothesline is certainly more than a string — but here, that line has snapped, and the “flaxen cord” imagery seems intended to convey its fragility and the inevitable (if relative) tragedy of the remuddied clothes.

Size: Either

Strength: Weak

Genre: Poetry/Metaphor

Philadelphia and Elsewhere: Poetry on Haiti's Slave Rebellion

Behold! oh, horror! Hayti's [Haiti's] bloody strand!
Mark! how the lesson erst by white-men giv'n,
Not vainly taught the barb'rous sable band,
To claim the *birth-right* held alone from Heav'n.
Dark rose the negroes: 'twas the dread resolve,
That *right* to rescue, or with *it* expire,
[Page 350] **Bade the strong bolts** that bound their flesh dissolve,
Like flaxen cords before devouring fire.²⁹

The parallels with Samson are instructive — here we have “strong bolts” that bind slaves, but these bands have become like the fragile “flaxen cord” in a fire. The imagery is intended to invoke flimsiness and fragility.

Size: Either **Strength:** Weak

Genre: Poetry/Metaphor

1809a London and Edinburgh: Cattle Husbandry

This account describes a classical author's approach to sex selection in cattle breeding:

Democritus affirms, that it depends upon our own pleasure whether a male or a female be conceived; and directs, that when we desire a male, we ought to bind the left testicle of the stallion, or other male, with **a small flaxen cord**; and when a female, the right testicle.³⁰

A thick rope or cord will not remain long around a bull's testis — only a relatively thin thread or small string can be bound in this way.³¹

Size: Thin

Strength: Strong

Genre: Scientific/Medical

1826a England: Greek Lexicon

Of the Greek term Απολινωω (apolinow) this lexicon translates "to bind with a **flaxen cord**; to make a **ligature**."³²

[Page 351]"In surgery," a ligature is "a cord or string for tying the blood vessels, particularly the arteries, to prevent hemorrhage."³³ Ropes do not work well for such a purpose; strong thread or small string is required. (A further example of a flaxen cord being used as a medical ligature is discussed below.)

Size: Either

Strength: Unstated

Genre: Dictionary

1828a New York: Webster's Dictionary

Noah Webster's dictionary defined a cord as "a string, or small rope, composed of several strands twisted together."³⁴ Something on the smaller side is envisioned.

Size: Either

Strength: Unstated

Genre: Dictionary

1829a Boston: Medical Journal Case Report

A physician's report of his method of immobilization and traction applied to a fractured thigh-bone includes the use of a flaxen cord:

A silk handkerchief was then passed around the ankle, and tied at the bottom of the foot. To this projecting portion of the handkerchief was fastened a **small flaxen cord** ... [which] supported a small weight.³⁵

This article was republished in multiple venues; one 1830 summary reported of the small weight, "Dr. Daniell thinks that in general, a weight of two pounds will be sufficient."³⁶

The emphasis is on a *small* cord suspending a small weight — this is not a cable-tow.³⁷

Size: Thin Strength: Unstated

Genre: Scientific/Medical

[Page 352]1832a London: Advice to Unitarian Ministers

May our ministers universally be convinced that it is their duty to attach their flocks by the enduring bond of principle, and that **all ties** of a nature merely personal, are **at best but flaxen cords!**³⁸

Here the imagery is meant to convey fragility and flimsiness.

Size: Either

Strength: Weak

Genre: Poetry/Metaphor

1832b London: Poetic Reference to a Garotte

An allegorical poem that reports several "visions," places the villain of the piece in a filthy prison:

It was a gloomy cell,
 Where, through cross'd bars, the feeble glimpses fell
 Against the wall, where hung a broken chain,
 Whose rusted links gave back no light again....
 There, in a corner, where a rotting bed
 Of straw was flung, a naked corpse was spread;
 'Tis he, the ruthless wretch! whose envious feet
 Trampled on virtue in her holiest seat;
 Who brought the storm of war to cloud the sky,
 Whose very brightness pain'd his jealousy.
A flaxen cord was twisted round his neck;
 Upon his blue lips lay a crimson speck³⁹

This does not seem to be a hanging: the poet addresses the instrument of the villain's death:

O thou most stern avenger! ...
 But *thou* — no other heart save thine can know
 What made thee strike so merciful a blow;
 It were no sin, if justice only sped
 Her hallow'd vengeance at the felon's head. ...
 [Page 353]Tis a strange law, or else we greatly err,
 For murderer to slay a murderer.⁴⁰

This is not, then, a judicial execution by hanging. It is technically a felony — a murder, but one the poet sees as justified because the victim was a murderer beyond the reach of normal justice. His death is likely one accomplished by guile and stealth — probably by a thin "linen cord" that acts as a garotte, not a noose.

Size: Thin **Strength:** Strong

Genre: Poetry/Metaphor

1834a Philadelphia: Novel

After a hotly-contested race, one character returns "with the saddle torn to fitters between his hands, and his person exhibiting tokens of severe ill-usage." The saddle is said to be "mutilated," and later "Phil began to repair the pony's saddle, while [his wife] Poll twisted the **flaxen cords** according as her husband required them."⁴¹

A saddle cannot be repaired with rope, it requires thread or string. Poll is clearly making the thread/string by twisting flax (perhaps with a distaff?)

Size: Thin

Strength: Unstated

Genre: Description

1834b Boston: Chinese Rope Making

A general discussion of ropes "of all sorts and sizes":

In this country, the greater part of our ropes, of all sorts and sizes, are made of help: it is the same in Europe. For the ship's cable, nothing would probably be so strong or durable. For some of the common purpose of life, **the flaxen rope or cord** would last longer; but then it costs more.⁴²

The use of "rope and cord" may suggest that cord is seen in a class different from that of rope, likely somewhat smaller.

Size: Either **Strength:** Unstated

Genre: Description

1835b New York: Historical Novel

An intrepid hero attempts to breach a door in this historical novel:

[Page 354]The door evidently felt the force of the shock — one of the bars having been heard to give way. "Again!" shouted Luttrell, assisting in an effort which the hope of success rendered irresistible. **As if but a flaxen cord**, the whole paraphernalia of fastenings was broken, and the entrance lay open to the invaders."⁴³

Flaxen cord here denotes a bond easily broken or ruptured.

Size: Either

Strength: Weak

Genre: Poetry/Metaphor

1838a London: Fiction

A fictional adventure story describes the arrival of a message: "Ireton produced the packet; it was a small despatch [sic], and fastened with a **plain flaxen cord** and ordinary seal. ... Within this was a small letter ... bound with a skein of white floss silk."⁴⁴

A rope would hardly be used to seal a message or envelope.

Size: Thin

Strength: Unstated

Genre: Description

1838b Louisville, Kentucky: Surgical Thread

An operation on nasal polyps:

The metallic curve and eyed probe, five inches long, **threaded** with a **flaxen cord**, was introduced into the nose, and carried, the eye foremost, beyond the posterior nares; from which point, with a long and delicate pair of forceps, and end of the **thread** was taken from the probe, and brought out of the mouth; the probe being withdrawn, the ends of the **thread** were so tied together, as to cause that part

Here the identity of the "flaxen cord" is clearly "thread" — the word is used twice in the same paragraph to refer to it. This explicit medical [Page 355]usage of *thread* in the same context likely illuminates other uses of *flaxen cord* in medical or veterinary procedures.⁴⁶

Size: Thin

Strength: Unstated

Genre: Scientific/Medical

1839a Boston: Metaphor of Weak Bonds

Of affection or inclination, this author argues:

They are, it is true, natural, but they are no more than nature. However amiable our feelings, — the common bonds of humanity, — they **are weak as flaxen cords** in the giant hands of our selfishness, unless strengthened by duty.⁴⁷

Such bonds' transience or weakness is the dominant image.

Size: Either

Strength: Weak

Genre: Poetry/Metaphor

1841a Louisville: Medical Treatment of Anal Fistula

One fairly graphic account of a surgeon's treatment of an anal fistula — a tract which runs from the large bowel to an opening on the skin, allowing the seepage of feces — describes the use of a flaxen cord as an alternative to the use of a scalpel. The physician's somewhat condescending attitude toward those who dislike the use of the knife in the preanaesthetic era permeates the account:

the horror which most persons have of cutting instruments, has very naturally led to the search out and substituting of various other methods [for treating *fistula in ano*], amongst which is that by the ligature. ...

[In this case] I introduced through the external orifice of the fistulous canal, by means of a slippery elm bougie [a flexible probe or guide inserted along the tract], one end of a **common flaxen cord**, which I brought out at the end of the anus. The part to be cut through was thus included in the ligature, which I tied in a manner that I cannot very easily describe. No matter. The twisting of the two ends of the ligature [i.e., [Page 356]suture], which should be well waxed, or tying them in what is called the single bow knot, answers as well as any other *can*.⁴⁸

Such a procedure would be impossible with a large rope — such a ligature is much more like string than a tow-rope. And, significantly, this is a "common" thing for the author — so common that he need not give further details to his surgical audience as to either its precise identity, or how to tie it.⁴⁹

Size: Thin

Strength: Unstated

Genre: Scientific/Medical

1843a Philadelphia: Jesus' Power over Death

An account of the Resurrection uses "linen cord" to convey fragility:

Jesus, the conqueror of hell, broke asunder, as though they had been **flaxen cords**, the bands of death, rose up in renewed vitality, and walked forth from the tomb.⁵⁰

Size: Either **Strength:** Weak

Genre: Poetry/Metaphor

1844a Boston: A Near-drowning Victim

A paper dedicated to seamen published an account:

He had just shaken hands and bid farewell to a brother officer who was floating near him, both of them expecting that beneath the next rolling wave they would sink to rise no more. His companion, with eight others, was lost, while he, when seized by a friendly hand, was senseless; and when drawn into our boat, and laid upon me for support, he was **limber as a flaxen cord**, and near half an hour elapsed before his stupor passed away.⁵¹

The intent is to convey how lacking in resistance or muscular tone this near-drowning victim was — a thick rope conveys this far less than a small string or thread.

Size: Either

Strength: Weak

Genre: Poetry/Metaphor

[Page 357]1844b New York and London: Geometry

In a practical guide for carpenters, a technique for inscribing an ellipse is described:

At f and f place two pins, and another at c; tie a string about the three pins, so as to form the triangle, ffc; remove the pin from c, and place a pencil in its stead; keeping the string taut, move the pencil...it will then describe the required ellipsis. ... In making an ellipse **by string or twine**, that kind should be used which has the least tendency to elasticity. For this reason, a cotton cord, such as chalk lines are commonly made of, is not proper for the purpose: **a linen, or flaxen cord is much better.**⁵²

A geometrical figure made with pins and a pencil could hardly be done with a rope — this flaxen cord is better thought of as "string" or "twine."

Size: Thin

Strength: Unstated

Genre: Geometry

1846a New York: Doggerel in Adventure Story

A potboiler from the mid-nineteenth century contains the lines:

The Rope which no man can break, is of flaxen cords twisted together.

In union there is strength.⁵³

This example is particularly striking, in that *flaxen cords* can be snapped with a finger, while many such cords are required to make a rope — including, one presumes, a hangman's noose or cable-tow.

Size: Either

Strength: Weak

Genre: Poetry/Metaphor

1846b New York: On the Coalition to Defeat Napoleon

Early Book of Mormon critic Alexander Campbell writes of the alliance formed against Napoleon I:

[Page 358]The Belgian, French, English, Scotch, and Prussian phalanxes stood side by side, ... but all such alliances weaken and wane as the occasions pass away which called them into being. Their own respective and antagonistic interests ultimately rise in importance, and **consume the flaxen cords of ephemeral interest** which, during a short lived truce, produce a feeble and transient union.⁵⁴

The emphasis is on the fragile and ephemeral.

Size: Either

Strength: Weak

Genre: Poetry/Metaphor

1846c Boston: Attachments of the World before the Power of Religion

Samson's flaxen cords (without mention of fire) are invoked by an author to convey the fragility of worldly attachments before the power of God:

The reason, then, why we have no more revivals lies with ministers and the church; ... Let the church stand up in her full strength, full of faith and prayer, and the Holy Ghost, rebuking sin in high places, and theatres, with places of amusement, together with infidelity, in their varied forms, doubled and twisted around the moral world, would be **like the flaxen cords** that bound Sampson.⁵⁵

Size: Either

Strength: Weak

Genre: Biblical Allusion

1847a London: Veterinary Medicine of the Pig

A discussion of management of diseases in swine describes a method advised by a classical author:

[To treat] swine as have swellings of the glands under the throat. ... [Columella writes that] Some think it a more present and effectual remedy when they pour into each of them, through a horn, three cupfuls of ... salt-fish pickle; then they bind cloven tallies, or **cuttings of fennel-giant with a flaxen [Page 359]cord**, and hang them about their necks so that the swellings shall be touched with the fennel giant cuttings.⁵⁶

Size: Thin

Strength: Unstated

Genre: Scientific/Medical

1848a Boston: A Hangman's Rope in Fiction

Here we find a lone example which matches the anti-Masonic thesis' noose:

Ere a word could be uttered or a hand interposed, she seized the **dread, flaxen cord**, whose viper-like folds clung so significantly to the throat of Wilmot, and coiled the slack around her own dazzling neck. ... "Now **you may hang Wilmot**, if you will, but know that the cord which presses too closely his neck, shall be my death!"⁵⁷ [_](#)

Size: Thick

Strength: Strong

Genre: Hangman's Noose

1849d New York: Weak Bonds as Contrasted with the Strong Bonds of Alcoholism

A temperance newspaper recounts the story of a dissipated man (shown in an image dancing and playing court with many women on his wedding night) who was also given to drink. As he began to have children, his problems with drink worsened:

Henry Greenfield had become so much enslaved, that even he took the alarm, and made some ineffectual efforts to break away from the bondage in which he was held. But he was not as a strong man tied with **light flaxen cords**; but as a child bound with ropes. He felt, for a time, the struggle to be in vain.⁵⁸ [_](#)

[Page 360]The flaxen cords binding a man are held to be light and insignificant, as opposed to the ropes of alcoholism which bind him tightly.

Size: Either

Strength: Weak

Genre: Poetry/Metaphor

1850a South Carolina: Weak Ties between Different Christian Denominations

Clergy object to misleading claims of rapprochement between denominations:

There is a modern Catholicism [ecumenical spirit] whose praises are often "said and sung" in anniversary speeches, which seeks to bring into the most intimate relations those having only the most remote affinities. But if the bonds of such a union are too weak to withstand the breadth of prayer, let it not be baptized by the name of Christian Unity; and if its object is the advancement of the Redeemer's Kingdom, the sooner the **flaxen cords** are consumed by the flame of devotion, the better it will be.⁵⁹ [_](#)

Size: Either**Strength:** Weak**Genre:** Poetry/Metaphor

1850b Indiana: Constitutional Convention

On democracy's risk of tyranny of the majority, one speaker declares:

They are fulfilling the unhappy truth, that written Constitutions are only made to be violated, and in the hands of a triumphant majority are but as **the flaxen cord in the hands of a giant**.⁶⁰

The author doubles down on the simile — as weak as flaxen cords (already a common symbol for fragility) when confronted with a giant of even greater strength than a normal man. One wonders if this is intended to invoke Jonathan Swift's Gulliver, who found himself bound by "several slender ligatures," but "had the fortune to break the strings" [Page 361] with which the diminutive Lilliputians had bound him.⁶¹ A gallant effort on the part of the wee folk, we might think, but surely not one whose outcome was in doubt.

Size: Either**Strength:** Weak**Genre:** Poetry/Metaphor

1856a New York: Translation of Aeschylus

For thus thou art not dead; not even though thou didst die, for children are to the deceased reputation preserving; and like corks they buoy up the net, upholding the twist of the **flaxen cord** from the deep.⁶²

We again encounter the Greek for "flaxen cord" or "fishing line."⁶³

Size: Either**Strength:** Unstated**Genre:** Dictionary

1857a: Habits of Body Weak Compared to Habits of the Soul

A religious author compares the physical binding of hemp ropes against the skin by the mad with false mental ideas:

And the man who sets forth his false dogmas, only makes a parade of a soul blotched all over. ... There have been those who put humps upon their shoulders ... because disease had put them on others' shoulders. ... And there have been those who put wooden shoes upon their feet, and hempen cords about their chests, because others did the same; and by turns we have laughed at their folly and raved at their madness. But these in the comparison are innocent follies. They affect the body; but he who fastens about his mind, not **a flaxen cord, but an iron chain** ... must blush with shame.⁶⁴

[Page 362]Even a thick hemp rope is a small matter compared to sins of the mind: such sins are not the weak, apparently insignificant "flaxen cord," but instead "an iron chain."

Size: Either**Strength:** Weak**Genre:** Poetry/Metaphor

1857b New York: Polynesian Dress

A report of Polynesian dress:

Their dress was very simple. ... The most valued dress was formed of dog-skins. It was in shape somewhat like a cloak, and was fastened about the neck of the wearer by means of a **flaxen cord**.⁶⁵

This does not sound like a thick rope; it is more probably like what we would term a "string."

Size: Either**Strength:** Unstated**Genre:** Description

1859a Ireland and 1863a New York: Netting Surrounding an Airship or Balloon

A newspaper account of a lighter-than air craft, the balloon being surrounded by a net of rope:

The circumference of ... the balloon proper, measured around the long diameter is 387 feet; ... The netting is kit of a **flaxen cord**, about ½ of an inch in diameter, which was made expressly for this purpose. ... At the top of the globe, this netting is fastened to a hempen rope, 1¼ inches in diameter, and which will resist a strain of 50 tons. ... [The netting] weighs 325 pounds — the length of cord used in the construction being more than 15 miles. The cord will resist a strain of 400 pounds, so that the strength of the net is ample.⁶⁶

Strong as this rope is, it remains fairly thin — only ½ of an inch.

Size: Thin**Strength:** Strong**Genre:** Description

Another balloon description also emphasizes the strength of the netting, but we must remember this is in the aggregate, not necessarily true of any one cord. The cords are presumably larger, however, than thread or thin string:

[Page 363]Round the balloon circles a net-work of **flaxen cord**, manufactured expressly for the purpose, and calculated to resist a strain of 160 tons.

From this cord depends [hangs] a basket, and below the basket a boat.⁶⁷

Size: Either**Strength:** Strong**Genre:** Description

1859b Massachusetts: Allegory of Weak Restraints

Again, this unrivaled moral power of the pulpit is in no small measure the effect of those higher motives which the preacher employs. . . . But all these motives are not better than **a flaxen cord** to bind a man when exposed to the flames of excited passions. Then he needs the restraints imposed by the fear of God.⁶⁸

Clearly, the "flaxen cord" is meant to imply great fragility; it cannot be counted on.

Size: Either

Strength: Weak

Genre: Poetry/Metaphor

1862a Washington, D.C.: Abraham Lincoln Correspondence

Lincoln's Secretary of State wrote of how, after receiving a dispatch from France: "President [Lincoln] . . . wrote to Mr. Dayton a long harangue . . . about 'the popular mass surged by the voice of demagogues,' and 'a Confederacy of discordant States bound by **a flaxen cord**.'"⁶⁹

Lincoln hopes to portray the rebellious states as bound by interests or ties that will soon fragment — and thus discourage France from supporting them due to their lack of staying power.

Size: Either

Strength: Weak

Genre: Poetry/Metaphor

[Page 364]1863b Albany, NY: Treatise on Preparing Flax

Samson is invoked as an introduction to the topic of flax: "The manufacture of flax was among the first known to civilized man. . . . Samson was delivered into the hands of the Philistines bound with **flaxen cords**."⁷⁰

This tells us little about how the cords were seen outside of the scripture — but it demonstrates that the scriptural image was very well known: well enough that it could serve to introduce a slightly less familiar topic such as flax husbandry. Given that the Samson story has the flaxen cords being easily burst, this reinforces the impression that *flaxen cords* was strongly associated in readers' minds with the weakness of bonds.

Size: Either

Strength: Unstated

Genre: Scientific/Medical

1878a Bath, England: Something Thin and Ephemeral, Like a Line in Geometry

What is a line? Thin air. Look it out in the dictionary — **flaxen cord**. What is straight? The past participle of the old word *streccan*, to stretch. We have kept up the etymology of stretched cord.⁷¹

Here the "linen cord" is said to inspire the one-dimensional line of geometry — potentially of infinite length, but of infinite thinness too.

Size: Thin

Strength: Unstated

Genre: Geometry

1885a London: Greek Vocabulary

A work on the comparative linguistics of Polynesian languages and Indo-European tongues defines the Greek *λίνον* (*linon*) as: "anything made of flax, flax itself, a **flaxen cord**, fish-line, linen cloth."⁷²

A fish-line would be thin, but the definition does not rule out a thicker "flaxen cord."

Size: Either

Strength: Unstated

Genre: Dictionary

[Page 365]1891a Rope Holding a String of Chickens

She had been eating eggs in Lent! She must be punished. Here she came. All her sinful hens which had ventured to lay eggs in Lenten season were tied together with the same **great flaxen cord**; and they were cackling their protest against being thus wrapped about her neck, like a living rope of flesh and feathers which also covered her shoulders and fell upon the ground.⁷³

Here the flaxen cord is said to be "great" — yet it can hardly be too thick to be tied tightly around the neck of a row of chickens. Thus even this relatively thin cord is labeled "great" — which could indicate either thickness *or* length. Contrast this entry with the entry for 1902 below.

Size: Thin

Strength: Unstated

Genre: Description

1897a New York: Priest's Belt

There is a second example of a priest's garb:

Then Father Lucas rises, robed to administer the sacrament. ... Over his long white *alb* girt round his waist by **flaxen cord**, floats a *stole* of simplest make.⁷⁴

Here as before a more substantial rope is envisaged if it is to act as a sort of belt.

Size: Thick

Strength: Strong

Genre: Priest Garb

1899a New York: Kite String

As a substitute for the ordinary kite string or cord, the Weather Bureau ... uses fine piano wire, which is smaller and much stronger in proportion than any hempen or **flaxen cord**.⁷⁵

[Page 366]The emphasis is on both the thinness and relative fragility of flax versus wire. No kite string can be more than a strong thread, easily snapped by a man being led by it.

Size: Thin

Strength: Weak

Genre: Scientific/Medical

1902a: Small Rope to Draw Water

... already quite near at hand, was a Samaritan woman.

She was still young [and] ... carried a large earthen water-pitcher upon her head and a **slender flaxen cord** wrapped about her arm, for Jacob's well is more than fifty cubits deep.⁷⁶

Here the cord is said to be "slender," which suggests that thicker cord was not unusual. Contrast this entry with that in 1891a. Clearly, at least in the late 1800s, "flaxen cord" does not unerringly refer to either a slender or thicker line. That said, despite the weight of water to be hauled, as the airship entry of 1859a demonstrates, a thin flaxen cord could bear a surprising amount of weight if one was not seeking to break it.

Size: Either

Strength: Strong

Genre: Description

Appendix II: Raw Data Scoring

Table 2. Examples by genre.

Genre	Examples
description	8
hangman's noose	1
priestly garb	2
geometry	2
scientific/medical	7
poetry/metaphor	17
biblical allusion	5

Table 3. Cord size.

Size of Rope	Examples
Thick	3
[Page 367]Thin	18
Either	21

Table 4. Cord strength.

Strength (stated or implied)	Examples
Strong	10
Weak	22
Unstated	10

Table 5. Scoring of examples included in analysis (see section "Results > Inclusions).

No.	Date	Genre	Note	Size	Strength
1	1712a	priest garb	belt	Thick	Strong
2	1762a	description	bowstring	Thin	Strong
3	1771a	scientific/medical	hygrometer	Thin	Unstated
4	1795a	description	bowstring	Thin	Strong
5	1805a	poetry/metaphor	cord rent	Either	Weak
6	1805b	poetry/metaphor	cords dissolve	Either	Weak
7	1809a	scientific/medical	bind testis	Thin	Strong
8	1829a	scientific/medical	small 2 lb weight	Thin	Unstated
9	1832a	poetry/metaphor	fragile ties	Either	Weak
10	1832b	poetry/metaphor	garrote	Thin	Strong
11	1834a	description	repair saddle	Thin	Unstated
12	1835a	biblical allusion	Samson (main text)	Thin	Weak
13	1835b	poetry/metaphor	door fastenings burst	Either	Weak
14	1838a	description	tied paper message	Thin	Unstated
15	1838b	scientific/medical	medical thread	Thin	Unstated
16	1839a	poetry/metaphor	weak cords	Either	Weak

Gossamer Thin: 2 Nephi's "Flaxen Cord" and the Anti-Ma				Gregory L. Smith	
17	1841a	scientific/medical	surgical ligature	Thin	Unstated
[Page 368]18	1843a	poetry/metaphor	Jesus's power over death	Either	Weak
19	1844a	poetry/metaphor	drowning victim	Either	Weak
20	1844b	geometry	drawing shapes	Thin	Unstated
21	1846a	poetry/metaphor	easily snapped	Either	Weak
22	1846b	poetry/metaphor	ephemeral cords	Either	Weak
23	1846c	biblical allusion	world's bond vs. God's	Either	Weak
24	1847a	scientific/medical	tie herb bundle	Thin	Unstated
25	1848a	hangman's noose	hangman's noose	Thick	Strong
26	1849a	biblical allusion	Samson (main text)	Either	Weak
27	1849b	biblical allusion	Samson (main text)	Either	Weak
28	1849c	biblical allusion	Samson (main text)	Either	Weak
29	1849d	poetry/metaphor	alcoholism	Either	Weak
30	1850a	poetry/metaphor	weak ecumenicalism	Either	Weak
31	1850b	poetry/metaphor	giant breaks cords	Either	Weak
32	1857a	poetry/metaphor	body vs. mind errors	Either	Weak
33	1859a	description	balloon mesh	Thin	Strong
34	1859b	poetry/metaphor	motives vs. passions	Either	Weak
35	1862a	poetry/metaphor	Confederate states	Either	Weak
36	1863a	description	balloon mesh	Either	Strong
37	1872a	poetry/metaphor	see main text example	Thin	Weak
38	1878a	geometry	thin like a line	Thin	Unstated
[Page 369]39	1891a	description	chicken necks tied	Thin	Unstated
40	1897a	priestly garb	belt	Thick	Strong
41	1899a	scientific/medical	kite string	Thin	Weak

Gossamer Thin: 2 Nephi's "Flaxen Cord" and the Anti-Ma				Gregory L. Smith	
42	1902a	description	rope for well	Either	Strong

Table 6. Examples excluded from analysis
(see section "Results > Exclusions")

No.	Date	Genre	Note	Size	Strength
43	1795b	dictionary	Greek	Either	Unstated
44	1826a	dictionary	Greek	Either	Unstated
45	1828a	dictionary	Webster	Either	Unstated
46	1834b	description	types of line	Either	Unstated
47	1856a	dictionary	Greek	Either	Unstated
48	1857b	description	Polynesian dress	Either	Unstated
49	1863b	scientific/medical	Preparing flax	Either	Unstated
50	1885a	dictionary	Greek	Either	Unstated

1. John W. Welch, "The Miraculous Translation of the Book of Mormon," in *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations, 1820–1844*, ed. John W. Welch (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Studies, 2005), 102, <https://byustudies.byu.edu/content/opening-heavens-coming-forth-book-mormon-chapter-only>.

2. The apotheosis of this approach is Dan Vogel, *Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2004). Critiques of this approach are available in Alan Goff, "Dan Vogel's Family Romance and the Book of Mormon as Smith Family Allegory," *FARMS Review* 17, no. 2 (2005): 321–400, <https://publications.mi.byu.edu/fullscreen/?pub=1449&index=9> and "How Should We Then Read? Reading Mormon Scripture After the Fall," *FARMS Review* 21, no. 1 (2009): 137–78, <https://publications.mi.byu.edu/fullscreen/?pub=1464&index=12>; Andrew H. Hedges and Dawson W. Hedges, "No, Dan, That's Still Not History," *FARMS Review* 17, no. 1 (2005): 205–22, <https://publications.mi.byu.edu/fullscreen/?pub=1430&index=8>; Larry E. Morris, "Joseph Smith and 'Interpretive Biography'," *FARMS Review* 18, no. 1 (2006): 321–74, <https://publications.mi.byu.edu/fullscreen/?pub=1446&index=16>.

3. Eber D. Howe, moving force behind the first anti-Mormon book, was at least honest when he said he accepted the Spalding theory "because I could better believe that Spalding wrote it than that Joe Smith saw an angel." [Interview with E.D. Howe, in E.L. Kelley, *Public Discussion of the Issues between the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints and the Church of Christ (Disciples), Held in Kirtland, Ohio, Beginning February 12, and Closing March 8, 1884, between E. L. Kelley, of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, and Clark Braden, of the Church of Christ* (St. Louis: Christian Publishing and Smart, 1884), 83, <https://archive.org/details/publicdiscussion00kell/page/82>.]

4. See Gregory L. Smith, "Cracking the Book of Mormon's 'Secret Combinations'?" *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 13 (2014): 63–109,

<https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/cracking-the-book-of-mormons-secret-combinations>.

5. Dan Vogel, "Echoes of Anti-Masonry: A Rejoinder to the Critics of the Anti-Masonic Thesis," in *American Apocrypha: Essays on the Book of Mormon*, ed. Dan Vogel and Brent Lee Metcalfe (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002), 283.
6. Amy Lavoie, "Oldest-known fibers to be used by humans discovered," *The Harvard Gazette* (10 September 2009), <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2009/09/oldest-known-fibers-discovered/>.
7. Christopher A. Rollston, "What's the Oldest Hebrew Inscription?" *Biblical Archaeology Review* 38, no. 3 (May/June 2012): 39–40.
8. Henry Dana Ward, *Free Masonry: Its Pretensions Exposed in Faithful Extracts of Its Standard Authors; with A Review of Town's Speculative Masonry: Its Liability to Pervert the Doctrines of Revealed Religion, Discovered in the Spirit of Its Doctrines, and in the Application of its Emblems: Its Dangerous Tendency Exhibited in Extracts from the Abbe Barruel and Professor Robinson; and Further Illustrated in Its Base Service to the Illuminati* (New York, 1828), 295, <https://books.google.ca/books?id=FAAAAAAYAAJ&pg=295>.
9. "Every initiated person, whether prince, peer, or peasant, is bound, at least once during his Masonic career, to pass through this emblematical feature of his profession, as an unmistakable pledge of fidelity. He may not like it. He may object to it. He may think it degrading. But he has no option. He cannot avoid it." [Malcolm C. Duncan, *Duncan's Masonic Ritual and Monitor or Guide to the Three Symbolic Degrees of the Ancient York Rite and to the Degrees of Mark Master, Past Master, Most Excellent Master, and the Royal Arch, Explained and Interpreted by Copious Notes and Numerous Engravings*, rev. ed. (New York: Dick & Fitzgerald, 1866), 28n1, <http://www.sacred-texts.com/mas/dun/>.]
10. Duncan, *Duncan's Masonic Ritual and Monitor*, 28–29.
11. *Ibid.*, 59.
12. *Ibid.*, 89. In Illinois, where Joseph Smith encountered Freemasonry, only the first through third degrees of Masonry were implemented. Other auxiliary degrees were not introduced there until 1857 (See "Question: Was Brigham Young a '33rd degree' Mason?" *FairMormon Answers Wiki*, accessed 25 February 2018, https://www.fairmormon.org/answers/Mormonism_and_Freemasonry/Brigham_Young%27s_involvement#Question:Was_Brigham_Young_a_.2233rd_degree.22_Mason.3F). See also Greg Kearney's discussion, "The Message and the Messenger: Latter day Saints and Freemasonry" (Presentation, FAIRMormon Conference, Sandy, UT, August 5th 2005), <https://www.fairmormon.org/conference/august-2005/the-message-and-the-messenger-latter-day-saints-and-freemasonry>.
13. "Come Along!," *Illustrated Christian Weekly* 2, no. 31 (3 August 1872): 372.
14. *Ibid.*, emphasis added.
15. Note, too, how this thin thread binds and draws the soul to heaven, while Satan's in the Book of Mormon draws souls carefully to hell. The imagery is remarkably similar — some might even claim Joseph Smith stole it, did it not postdate the Book of Mormon by more than 40 years. The symbolic parallels are much closer than are those of the cable-tow.
16. Absalom Peters, ed., *The Home Missionary, and American Pastor's Journal* 7, no. 10 (1 February 1835): 166 <http://books.google.ca/books?id=IKYPAAAAIAAJ&pg=RA3-PA166>, emphasis added.
17. George Storrs, *An Inquiry: Are the Wicked Immortal? Also Have the Dead Knowledge?* (Philadelphia: George Storrs, 1849), 84, <http://books.google.ca/books?id=hcE3AQAAMAAJ&pg=PA84-IA22>.
18. "God has a Work to be Done by Man," *Home Missionary* 22, no. 6 (October 1849): 136.
19. "Jubilee of the Massachusetts Home Missionary Society," *Independent* 1, no. 28 (14 May 1849): 110.
20. 1795b, 1826, 1828, 1856, 1885.
21. These strands are strong in the aggregate, but likely weak in isolation, given their relatively low weight and caliber.
22. William Oldys and John Malham, *The Harleian Miscellany; or, A Collection Of Scarce, Curious, and Entertaining Pamphlets and Tracts, As Well In Manuscript as In Print, Found in the Late Earl of Oxford's Library, Interspersed with Historical, Political, and Critical Notes*, Vol. 11 (London: Robert Dutton 1810), 180, <http://books.google.ca/books?id=60sNAAAAIAAJ&pg=PA180>. See similar usage at footnote 73.
23. Samuel Derrick, *A Collection of Travels, Thro' various Parts of the World; But More particularly thro' Tartary, China, Turkey, Persia and the East-Indies; An accurate and entertaining Account of the Religion, Laws, Manners, Commerce, and Constitution of many different Nations* (London: John Wilkie, 1762), 1:173.

24. For example, see *Cyclopaedia; Or, Universal Dictionary of Arts, Sciences, and Literature*, s.v.

"Hygrometry," (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, & Brown, 1819),

<http://books.google.ca/books?id=OM4MJMyvBxIC&pg=PT458>.

25. John Smeaton, "XXIV. Description of a new hygrometer," *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society* 61 (1771): 201, doi:10.1098/rstl.1771.00242053?9215.

26. William Wilkie, *The Works of the British Poets with Prefaces, Biographical and Critical*, ed. Robert Anderson (London/Edinburgh: John and Arthur Arch; Bell & Bradiutz; J Mundell & Co., 1795), 11:44.

27. Charles Anthon, s.v. "Ατινον (linon)," in *The First Six Books of Homer's Iliad with English Notes, critical and Explanatory, A Metrical Index, and Homeric Glossary* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1848), 788,

<http://books.google.ca/books?id=6itJAAAAYAAJ&pg=PA788>. (One hopes that the shade of Anthon will be grateful to be cited in Latter-day Saint historiography about a matter other than his encounter with Harris.) See similar examples at footnotes 32, 63, and 72.

28. William C. Foster, *Poetry on Different Subjects, Written Under the Signature of Timothy Spectacles* (Salem, NY: John M. Looker, 1805), 23, <http://books.google.ca/books?id=z2dWAAAAYAAJ&pg=PA23>.

29. "Elegiac Stanzas, Extracted from an Address to the Cincinnati of Connecticut," *Literary Magazine and American Register* 3, no. 20 (May 1805): 398, <https://books.google.ca/books?id=5BwAAAAAYAAJ&pg=PA398>.

30. John Lawrence, "Neat Cattle — Various Opinions, &c.," in *A General Treatise on Cattle, the Ox, the Sheep, and the Swine: Comprehending Their Breeding, Management, Improvement, and Diseases*, 2nd ed. (London & Edinburgh: Sherwood, Neely, and Jones; J Harding; Archibald Constable and Co., 1809), 199,

<http://books.google.ca/books?id=TOM8AAAAYAAJ&pg=PA199>.

31. See footnotes 34, 45, and 47.

32. James Donnegan, *A New Greek and English Lexicon; Principally on the Plan of the Greek and German Lexicon of Schneider: The Words Alphabetically Arranged; Distinguishing Such as are Poetical, of Dialectic Variety, or Peculiar to Certain Writers and Classes of Writers; with Examples, Literally Translated, Selected from the Classical Writers* (London/Glasgow/Oxford/ Cambridge/York/Derby/Edinburgh/Dublin: Cowie, Low, and Co.; Deighton and Sons; Wilson and Sons; H Mozley; Waugh and Innes; Currie, Jr. and Co., 1826), 117,

<http://books.google.ca/books?id=mZkCAAAAQAAJ&pg=PA117>. (We note the presence of the prefix "Απο" = "away, off, apart" and the verb form "ατινωω" from "ατινον" = linen cord or fishing line.) See similar examples at footnotes 27, 62, and 73.

33. Noah Webster, s.v. "ligature," in *An American-Dictionary of the English Language ...* (New York: S. Converse, 1828), <https://archive.org/details/americaandictiona01websrich>.

34. Webster, s.v. "cord."

35. William C. Daniell, "IV. Method of treating Fracture of the Thigh Bone," *The Boston Medical and Surgical Journal* 2, no. 27 (18 August 1829): 423, <http://books.google.ca/books?id=7co9AQAAMAAJ&pg=PA423>.

36. Daniel Drake, ed., *The Western Journal of the Medical and Physical Science* 3, no. 3 (October, November, & December 1829): 446, <http://books.google.ca/books?id=teUJAQAAMAAJ&pg=PA446>.

37. Compare footnote 45.

38. Charles Fox, ed., *The Unitarian Chronicle and Companion to the Monthly Repository* 5 (June 1832): 73, <http://books.google.ca/books?id=07UnAAAAYAAJ&pg=PA73>.

39. William Edmondstoune Aytoun, *Poland, Homer, and Other Poems* (London/Edinburgh: Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown, Green & Longman/Adam Black, 1832), 28,

<https://archive.org/details/polandhomerando00netwgoog>.

40. *Ibid.*, 30.

41. "The Collegians," *Novelists' Magazine* 1, no. 1 (January 1834): 37, 100.

42. "Chinese method of rope making," *Parley's Magazine: With Fifty Engravings* 2, no. 7 (July 1834): 36.

43. Herbert Wendall: *A Tale of the Revolution in Two Volumes* (New York, Harper and Brothers, 1835), 2:17, <http://books.google.ca/books?id=wGOh-rQBHmAC&pg=RA1-PA17>.

44. Henry William Herbert, *Cromwell: An Historical Novel: By the Author of "The Brothers" ...* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1838), 2:117.

45. John C. Brent, "Extraction of a Nasal Polypus, on the 14th of August, 1837," *The Louisville Journal of medicine and Surgery* 1, no. 1 (1838): 45.

46. See footnotes 30, 35, and 48.

47. Jones Very, *Essays and Poems* (Boston: Charles C. Little and James Brown, 1839), 77,

<http://books.google.ca/books?id=pki0pawynJgC&pg=PA77>. Compare to reference 61 for similar imagery.

48. M. L. Linton, "Fistula in Ano," *The Western Journal* 4, no. 4 (October 1, 1841): 318, <http://books.google.ca/books?id=LAUDAAAAYAAJ&pg=PA318>. See footnotes 30, 35, and 46.
49. Compare footnote 45.
50. "The Easter Season," *Episcopal Recorder* 20, no. 5 (22 April 1843): 18.
51. Charles Rockwell, "My Shipmates," *Street Anchor* 2, no. 1 (6 January 1844): 1–2.
52. R.G. Hatfield, *The American House-Carpenter: A Treatise Upon Architecture, Cornices and Mouldings, Framing, Doors, Windows, and Stairs. Together with the Most Important Principles of Practical Geometry* (New York & London: Wiley and Putnam, 1844), 42, <http://books.google.ca/books?id=2vNYAAAAYAAJ&pg=PA42>.
53. E. Winchester, ed., "Wilfred Montessor; or The Secret Order of the Seven. A Romance of Mystery and Crime," *The Golden Rule Odd-Fellows' Family Companion* 5, no. 3 (18 July 1846): 34, <http://books.google.ca/books?id=oXhIAAAAYAAJ&pg=RA1-PA34>.
54. Alexander Campbell, "Our Colleges," *The Millennial Harbinger: Series III* 3, no. 7 (July 1846): 386, <http://books.google.ca/books?id=1ZEoAAAAYAAJ&pg=PA386>.
55. Bryan Morse, "Present State of the Church," *Zion's Herald & Wesleyan Journal* 17, no. 6 (11 February 1846): 21.
56. William Youatt, *The Pig: A Treatise on the Breeds, Management, Feeding, and Medical Treatment, of Swine; With Directions for Salting Pork, and Curing Bacon and Hams* (Cradok and Co: London, 1847), 81?82, <http://books.google.ca/books?id=t90DAAAQAQAJ&pg=PA81>.
57. Calvin Porter, *Leslie Wilmot: Or, Witchcraft: Calvin Porter* (Boston: F. Gleason, 1848), 38.
58. "Henry Greenfield on His Wedding Night," *New York Organ & Temperance Safeguard* 8, no. 40 (31 March 1849): 290.
59. "Article III: Report of Committee. Adopted by the Board of Managers of the American Bible Society," *Southern Presbyterian Review* 2, no. 1 (July 1850): 74.
60. H. Fowler, *Report of the Debates and Proceedings of the Convention for the Revision of the Constitution of the State of Indiana* (Indianapolis, Indiana: AH Brown, 1850), 581, <http://books.google.ca/books?id=Gd8WAAAAYAAJ&pg=PA581>. Compare to reference 48 for similar imagery.
61. Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels Into Several Remote Nations of the World* (London: W. Baynes and Son, 1824), 29–30, <https://books.google.ca/books?id=ulJMAAAACAAJ&pg=PA29>.
62. George Burges, trans., *The Tragedies of Aeschylus. Literally Translated. With Critical and Illustrative Notes, and an Introduction by Theodore Alois Buckley, B.A., of Christ Church, Oxford. To Which is Added An Appendix, Containing the New Readings of Hermann's Posthumous Edition* (New York: Harper & Bros, 1856), 162, https://books.google.ca/books?id=7so_AQAAMAAJ&pg=162.
63. See similar examples at footnotes 27, 32, and 72.
64. "Art. I. Radicalism versus Conservatism," *Freewill Baptist Quarterly* 5, no. 3 (1857): 245.
65. Charles Nordhoff, *Stories of the Island World* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1857), 260.
66. "The New Air-ship," *The Cork Examiner* 3394 (7 October 1859): 4.
67. "Transatlantic Ballooning," *Harper's Weekly* 3, no. 143 (24 September 1859): 143.
68. Henry A. Sykes and First Congregational Church, *Proceedings at Suffield, September 16, 1858: on the occasion of the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the decease of the Rev. Benjamin Ruggles, first pastor of the First Congregational Church* (Springfield: Samuel Bowles and Co., printers, 1859), 20.
69. William Bradford Reed, Charles Ingersoll, and Joseph Reed Ingersoll, *The Diplomatic Year: Being a Review of Mr. Seward's Foreign Correspondence of 1862* (Philadelphia: J. Campbell, 1863), 7.
70. "Preparation of Flax Fiber," *Country Gentleman* 22, no. 7 (13 August 1863): 106.
71. "The Beginnings of Exact Knowledge," *The Bath Chronicle* 6251 (November 21, 1878): 7, DOI: ID3230808116.
72. Abraham Fornander, *An Account of The Polynesian Race and the Ancient History of the Hawaiian People to the Times of Kamehameha I. Vol 3: Comparative Vocabulary of the Polynesian and Indo-European Languages* (London: Trübner & Co., 1885), 199, <https://books.google.ca/books?id=K4alXc-7IicC&pg=PA199>. See similar examples at footnotes 27, 32, and 63.
73. Frank Wakeley Gunsaulus, *Monk and Knight: An Historical Study in Fiction*, 2 Vols. (Chicago: A.C. McClurg and Company, 1891), 1:118, <https://books.google.ca/books?id=nvY0AAAAMAAJ&pg=PA118>.
74. Archibald Clavering Gunter, *Pt. 2 Ballyho Bey: The Sequel to Susan Turnbull* (New York: The Home

Publishing Co., 1897), 40. See similar usage at footnote 22.

[75.](#) Ray Stannard Baker, *The Boy's Book of Inventions: Stories of the Wonders of Modern Science* (New York: J. J. Little & Co and Doubleday, McClure & Company, 1899), 231.

[76.](#) Aaron Dwight Baldwin, *The Gospel of Judas Iscariot* (Chicago: Jamieson-Higgins Co., 1902), 250, <http://tinyurl.galegroup.com/tinyurl/6jSUN0>.