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David F. Holland, *Sacred Borders: Continuing Revelation and Canonical Restraint in Early America*

Reviewed by W. Clark Gilpin

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## Book Reviews

Review of David F. Holland. *Sacred Borders: Continuing Revelation and Canonical Restraint in Early America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. 304 pp. \$70.00 hardcover.

*Reviewed by W. Clark Gilpin*

In *Sacred Borders: Continuing Revelation and Canonical Restraint in Early America*, David F. Holland raises fresh and significant questions about one of the most vibrant epochs of American religious history, the three quarters of a century from the 1790s to the Civil War. As Protestant denominations proliferated and individuals exercised the freedom to change their affiliation from one to another, centrifugal religious energies not only generated diverse theological perspectives but also raised questions about the stable authority of any particular one of them. As Holland summarizes the situation, “only a fresh word from God, some claimed, could cut through the growing denominational chaos” (136–37). Thus, the religious environment of antebellum America challenged the adequacy of the inherited scriptural canon to meet the needs of a new age. The era witnessed, Holland argues, “the most lasting efforts by major American religious figures to open the canon” and make way for continuing revelation (12). Shakers, Hicksite Quakers, Transcendentalists, Mormons, Adventists, and prominent public figures ranging from the Unitarian minister Theodore Parker to the African-American prophetess Rebecca Jackson in their various ways pushed beyond the canonical borders, attentively listening for fresh communications of the divine. Parker was by no means alone in declaring “the canon of revelation not yet closed, nor God exhausted” (185).

When Holland identifies persons and movements who challenged the canon, he means those who *explicitly* “anticipated the future disclosure of divine truths that would add to the canon of holy writ” and “who placed so much emphasis on a new spiritual experience, a new church policy, a new natural law, a new dictate of reason, or a new principle of common sense that it became a new rule for their religious or ethical life, a continuing revelation of God’s mind, assuming a functional equivalency to a new passage of scripture.” Holland’s historical narrative places these challengers of canonical boundaries in dramatic tension with those who reacted to the challenge by viewing “the rise of new moral or religious imperatives as a sinister threat to the sanctity and unity of the closed canon” (9). Holland makes a significant contribution to scholarship by locating these nineteenth-century arguments about the “sacred borders” of the canon in a much longer historical process that goes back to the seventeenth century, especially Puritanism, and to eighteenth-century critics of Christianity, especially the deists.

As his subtitle indicates, Holland situates the concept of *the open canon* in relation to two other key terms, *continuing revelation* and *canonical restraint*. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the idea of scriptural canonicity assumed that there must exist a definitive textual repository of divine truth. The word *canon* primarily referred, therefore, to a criterion or standard of judgment, although it secondarily meant an authoritative list of books (9–10, 36). Especially in the Reformed tradition that so strongly marked early American culture, the biblical canon was the recognized rule against which other media of divine counsel—spirit, providence, ecclesial tradition, reason, and conscience—were to be tested. The canon as criterion of truth restrained the impulse toward immediate revelation that was a characteristic aspect of Puritanism and, later, of evangelicalism. The canon as definitive repository of truth countered those Enlightenment skeptics who pointed to insufficiencies in the traditional canon that had resulted from errors of transmission, internal contradictions, and an inadequate understanding of the world as it was now being described by modern science. Holland expertly narrates how, over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, this “closed

canon” elicited objections from deists who thought it denied God’s capacity to communicate “through the common gift of reason and the limitless book of nature” (54); from Unitarians who thought it diminished understanding of God’s “parental” care for “his human family” (181); and from Mormons who sought a prophet through whom they heard “the voice of God revealing to man as in former dispensations” (143). Indeed, Holland considers the most surprising feature of his historical study to be “the overwhelming presence of God in this discourse” about canon and continuing revelation (216).

In response to Holland’s stimulating study, I want to spell out some tacit implications of his argument and expand some important points he makes but does not adequately develop. First, as Holland’s phrase “canonical restraint” implies, he tends to stress that the canon’s principal function is to act as the guarantor of traditional order. It was not always so. Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Puritans initially elevated the authority of scripture as a strategy of resistance against the hierarchy of the established church, justifying change by appealing to the scriptural canon’s countervailing authority. Even in the nineteenth century, Alexander Campbell and the Disciples of Christ testified to the authority of “the Bible alone” and began to refer to themselves as “the Reformation of the nineteenth century,” in order to justify their distinctive teaching and practice around baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Hence, the idea of “canonical restraint” needs to be seen as a functional category. In some social contexts the canon restrained; at other times it sanctioned resistance and innovation.

Second, when one speaks of an “open canon,” toward what does it open? Holland emphasizes that the canon is open toward “continuing revelation” from God. But his narrative clearly implies that the scriptural canon, as an authoritative collection of texts, “opens” in other directions as well. An answer commonly given in the nineteenth century was that the Christian Bible was open toward the other great masterworks of Western civilization: classical philosophical texts, the essays of Montaigne, the drama of Shakespeare, or the poetry of John Donne. As Benjamin Jowett summarized this form of openness in 1860, “Interpret the

Scriptures like any other book.” A second nineteenth-century answer was that the Bible opened toward the other sacred texts of world religions, demonstrating, so it was thought, that the religious sentiment was a universal human trait. Indeed, this was one way in which the very category *religion* became codified during the century. A tacit purpose of all such openings of the canon was that, by including the Bible in larger literary groupings, the interpreter created—in Benedict Anderson’s phrase—“imagined communities.” By linking the Bible to literature, scientific works, and political orations, Americans incorporated the scriptural canon into a national identity. The opening of the canon was certainly a theological and spiritual enterprise, but it was nested in a larger matrix of canonical openings.

Third, although the concepts of “continuing revelation” and “open canon” doubtless overlap, some discrimination seems necessary. The adaptive application of Christian practices, texts, and ideas to new social conditions has proceeded throughout the long and diverse history of Christianity without necessary recourse to enlargement of the canon, whether the canon is considered as a criterion of judgment or as a collection of texts. Such adaptive application occurs whenever a sermon is preached, a prayer is murmured, a dream is interpreted, or an exegetical commentary is written. The Puritans, for instance, laid down the three-fold formal structure of a sermon with precisely such new application in mind. The preacher first exegeted a specific text; he then abstracted a doctrine from the text and expounded its meaning; and he concluded by exhorting the congregation on “uses” or application to daily life: text, doctrine, uses.

Several features of the Christian Bible and its classical interpretation encouraged this sense that “continuing revelation” proceeded through the adaptive application of canonical writing. One important feature was the arrangement of the Christian canon, beginning with Genesis and ending with Revelation, and therefore apparently encompassing the entire moral history of the cosmos. In some sense, the present moment of history was within the biblical narrative. Holland expertly illustrates this phenomenon in his account of the nineteenth-century Baptist William

Miller, who assiduously delved into biblical chronology in order to calculate that the latter-day glories were about to become manifest in the early 1840s. To alter the point of Holland's definition of an open canon, William Miller anticipated "the future disclosure of divine truths" on the basis of a closed canon. Another important feature of the canonical Bible was its presentation of paradigmatic lives (Moses, David, or Paul) and archetypal narratives (the journey toward a promised land), which provided perennial models for self and society. Seventeenth-century writers in the broad Puritan tradition, preeminently John Milton and John Bunyan, imaginatively recast these canonical archetypes in masterpieces of imaginative literature, *Samson Agonistes* and *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Such features of the canonical text complicate the binary opposition of a closed or an open canon, and they are not adequately captured by a definition of the canon overly focused on its articulation of an authoritative rule.

What, then, caused certain applications of Christian thought and practice to challenge the canon, to announce new prophets superseding the old, to disclose revelatory texts? What factors convinced certain groups that the canonical Bible was insufficient to address the contemporary situation and that an opening of the canon was therefore required? In nineteenth-century America, at least, decisions about the "sacred borders" of a canon seem to have been thoroughly intertwined with the process of establishing the "sacred borders" of a religious community. These two sets of sacred borders interactively defined how religious authority would function within a given community, who was eligible for membership and who was not, and which rules would regulate the conduct of communal life. Some advocates of an "open canon" such as Horace Bushnell or Theodore Parker opened the scriptural canon toward contemporary literature, poetry, and philosophy because the boundaries they imagined between church and society were also quite open. Others advocates of an "open canon," such as the Shakers or the Latter-day Saints, opened the scriptural canon toward new representations of transcendence because these reinforced the boundaries of distinction around their newly gathering communities.

Down these three avenues of scholarly reflection and numerous others, David Holland's erudite and intriguing study of debates about canon and continuing revelation invites further research and writing on an important but frequently overlooked topic.

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Review of Paul C. Gutjahr. *The "Book of Mormon": A Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012). 280 pp., with appendixes and index. \$24.95 hardcover.

*Reviewed by Kathryn Lofton*

The Book of Mormon is a book I have begun many times only to put it aside before I even reach the book of Jacob. The edition I possess was given to me by Chicago missionaries in 1997, and my incomplete reading of it haunts me. When I picked up Paul Gutjahr's *The "Book of Mormon": A Biography*, I thought perhaps this would be the commentary that would inspire my return to the Book of Mormon, a return that would give me another chance to see what it is about this text that makes it a scripture for so many. And also another chance for me to see if the missionaries were right: that it could be scripture for me.

Gutjahr presents a history of the Book of Mormon in which the reader is unspecified: she could be someone for whom this is a sacred text, and she could also be someone for whom it is a farce. Gutjahr chooses as his epigraph a statement from that most repossessed Mormon, Orson Pratt: "This book must be either true or false. If true, it is one of