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Reviewed by Greg Wilkinson

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Donald S. Lopez Jr. *The Tibetan Book of the Dead: A Biography*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011.

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THE *TIBETAN BOOK OF THE DEAD* IS A *TERMA*, a Tibetan treasure text. Starting in the eighth century CE, texts were buried in the ground and, according to Buddhist predestinarian teachings, buried in the minds of future Tibetan lamas as well. Several hundred years later, the lamas who were prepared to understand and interpret the texts discovered them. (Tibetan Buddhist teachings suggest that those who found *terma* knew of their locations because they were the ones that buried them in a past life.) These texts were often represented as a restoration of original, authentic Buddhist teachings and were significant in developing perceptions of Tibetan Buddhism as a distinct tradition. Those with background in Mormonism and Tibetan Buddhism may not be surprised to find comparative analyses between *terma* and the Book of Mormon. These texts share some similarities in their narratives of provenance and discourse of legitimation. Donald Lopez, in his “biography” of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, notes these but goes well beyond identifying similarities in the textual traditions of Mormonism and Tibetan

Buddhism. Rather, he puts forth a bold and creative thesis related to how, in his view, the Book of Mormon and the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* share a cultural relationship with what he terms “American spiritualism.” For Lopez, these works represent important modern case studies about how texts become scripture (p. 129).

Mormon studies scholars may be distracted by some errors in Lopez’s historical narrative, for instance with his mixing up of William Hale and Martin Harris (p. 16). Lopez lacks expertise in LDS history, it is true, but to be fair, his objectives are theoretical and focused more broadly on interpretations of metaphysical religion in America. His intended audience ranges well beyond specialists in Mormon history, to be sure. Still, scholars of Mormonism might justifiably object to the fact that Lopez fails to provide normative analysis that might distinguish types of ecstatic experiences within a broadly defined American spiritualism. Smith and the Book of Mormon are lumped, without qualification or distinction, with other instances of nineteenth-century religious expressions ranging from Mormon schismatic leader James Strang’s translation attempts and Kate and Margaret Fox’s séances with the devil and the recently departed (some of which the girls later recanted) to Madame Blavatsky’s auto-writing during the formation of the Theosophical Society.

That experiential reductionism notwithstanding, it seems clear that Lopez’s goal is not to disparage Joseph Smith (or any other purveyor of American spiritualism)—far from it. Rather, he strives to check overly romanticized views of an exotic Tibet, some even touted by academics. Lopez essentially forces a question on scholars: Why are Tibetan *terma* strangely exotic and yet the Book of Mormon simply strange? He answers the question with a gesture toward historical proximity, a point familiar to Mormon studies specialists: “The fate of the text rests not on its content, but on the degree to which the circumstances of its composition remain shrouded from the light of history. How much do we know about the time when the newly composed text was backdated? In the case of the Mahāyāna (Buddhist) sutras, we know very little. In the case of the Tibetan treasures, we know something. In the case of

Joseph Smith, perhaps we know too much” (pp. 138–39). Lopez then argues that the works brought to light by Smith, Blavatsky, or *Tibetan Book of the Dead* translator and propagator Walter Evans-Wentz are discredited not through any measure of intrinsic value but simply because they were born in a time too soon and in a place too close (p. 148). New canonical texts, especially in modern America, invite disparagement and even death (p. 147). Evans-Wentz’s new scripture avoided harsh criticism or violence, Lopez notes, through his “donning the Urim and Thummim of the scholar” in order to fabricate an ancient Asian provenance. This in effect created necessary separation from other texts brought forth during the nineteenth century’s spiritual efflorescence (pp. 149–50). Still, for Lopez, there is no objective difference between the texts brought forth by Smith and Evans-Wentz; to claim one, for Lopez, is to perpetrate a type of academic colonialism (p. 149). His invocation of the Book of Mormon, in other words, attempts to protect Buddhism from a kind of cultural “othering” he discerns in popular and academic discourse alike. He then argues for a view of “world religions” that is more self-aware; he envisions classrooms that still include the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* with English translations of the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Tao Te Ching* along with Blavatsky’s *Secret Doctrine* and the Book of Mormon within a discussion of how these texts are interpreted from the context of American spiritualism (pp. 119, 146–48).

His historical missteps notwithstanding, Lopez’s perspective provides benefits to scholars of American religion, regardless of specialization. For scholars of Mormonism, Lopez’s could be an intriguing theory because it provides an argument for the Book of Mormon’s significance in modern religious history through greater contextualization within American metaphysical religious traditions. This volume represents Lopez’s third publication on the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* (or *Bardo Thodol*, as it is known outside the West), and all three works share much in both content and argument.¹ The most significant addition made by this “biography” is Lopez’s attempt to contextualize Walter

1. See Donald S. Lopez Jr., *Prisoners of Shangri-La: Tibetan Buddhism and the West* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 46–87; and W. Y. Evans-Wentz, *The*

Evans-Wentz's translation of the *Bardo Thodol* with a direct connection to the Theosophical Society and an indirect connection to Joseph Smith (1805–1844) and early Mormonism. His first chapter provides a brief summary of the Smith family's move to New York from Vermont, Joseph Smith's visions of the angel Moroni, and Smith's translation of the Book of Mormon. These narratives are presented dispassionately, and while footnotes are few, it seems that Lopez is heavily (or perhaps exclusively?) relying on Richard Bushman's *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (Knopf, 2005) for his understanding of early Mormon history. The subsequent chapters provide a brief and yet effective summary of Buddhist teachings, history, and texts. A description of Walter Y. Evans-Wentz's (1878–1965) journey in finding, translating, and introducing the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* to the world follows thereafter, and the book's conclusion and codex bring together American spiritualism and Tibetan Buddhism through an analysis of Joseph Smith's translation projects, which included the Book of Mormon and an Egyptian funerary text that Smith presented as the "Book of Abraham."

For Lopez, understanding the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* must begin with understanding Walter Y. Evans-Wentz, who was influenced by the works of Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891). A Russian émigré and spiritual medium, Blavatsky founded the American Theosophical Society and gained a wide reputation for her esoteric teachings and psychic abilities. Through auto-writing and letters that would materialize in a cabinet, Blavatsky was a conduit for a group of ancient masters she called *mahatmas* ("great souls"), whom she first encountered in Tibet. In 1919 Evans-Wentz, a devoted member of the Theosophical Society, located the *Bar do thos grol* (literally, "liberation in the intermediate state [through] hearing") in the Sikkim province of India. Despite never having been to Tibet or having any ability to read Tibetan, Evans-Wentz translated the text into English with the help of Kazi Dawa Samdup (1868–1923). Evans-Wentz's translation has sold over half a million copies and has been more central to subsequent translations

Tibetan Book of the Dead (London: Oxford University Press, 2000). Lopez provides a new foreword and afterword for the new edition published in 2000.

and incarnations than even the original Tibetan text. Lopez argues that Evans-Wentz's ability to make the text relevant for an American audience derives from many factors, but probably none more significant than his knack for speaking to popular curiosity about both death and Tibet, which in turn tended to romanticize Tibet and widen the text's relevance beyond its liturgical roots (p. 11).

As a liturgical funerary text, Lopez's subject has limited application and significance within Tibetan Buddhism. Accordingly, Lopez's biography is not of the original *Bardo Thodol* per se, but of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*—as created through English translation and American contextualization. Lopez argues that the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* in English is not really about Tibet and not really about the dead. Indeed, the text that Evans-Wentz translated into the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* is not a text that many Tibetans own or have read, and a great many of them have probably never heard of the text (p. 1). In the West the book has gained wide relevance as *Bardo* has been reinterpreted to mean states of consciousness, ecstatic experiences, and even hallucinogenic episodes. Lopez, then, parses the *Bardo Thodol* from the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, arguing that the latter is more the result of a process of invention and creation than translation and interpretation (pp. 115–27).

Lopez is thus drawn to the Book of Mormon as a nineteenth-century analogue for “scripture making.” The Book of Mormon is distinct in content from the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, clearly, and yet Lopez argues for similarities in ecstatic provenance and reception history. First, he sees that both texts provide a specific definition of spirituality, which he defines as direct contact and communication with the spirits of the dead. For Smith, this occurs through the translation process and through angelic tutelage. Smith testified that the Book of Mormon provides a conduit for contemporary understanding of a people long dead and forgotten. For Evans-Wentz, the *Bardo Thodol* provides esoteric knowledge and ritual processes for communicating with the recently departed (pp. 4–7). Evans-Wentz also believed that his text provides a rare opportunity to read the teachings of ancient Tibetan masters who died over a millennium ago. Both Evans-Wentz and Smith provided textual evidence for

tangible communication with spiritual entities, creating a more literal definition of mysticism. While the process of bringing forth these texts can be seen as miraculous, Smith and Evans-Wentz offer an exact record from ancient prophets in their respective traditions rather than relating what was heard or felt through the ecstatic experiences. Both texts, at least, argue that religious leaders long ago carefully and laboriously wrote texts with the specific intent of instruction and edification for subsequent generations.

Second, Lopez argues that texts are sacred signs, providing religious instruction through their content while also alluding to greater esoteric knowledge in the context of a foundational urtext. For both Smith and Evans-Wentz, their translated texts argue for an open canon within Buddhism and Christianity. Both believed that these new scriptures supported and verified the core texts of their canons. Lopez argues that for Smith the urtext was the Bible (especially its nineteenth-century interpretations), with the Book of Mormon providing another testament for Christianity and opening the Christian canon to new possibilities. The Book of Mormon established Smith's authority but was certainly not the last word on Mormon theology. For Evans-Wentz, the urtext was Blavatsky's *Secret Doctrine* (p. 118).² His enthusiasm for the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* related to its forming an essential link, in his view, between Blavatsky's esoteric doctrines and the religions of Tibet. Far beyond the book's content, its provenance provided evidence for Blavatsky's ecstatic experiences, which she claimed were gained through relationships with ancient religious gurus in Tibet.

Third, both texts are simultaneously timeless and timely, prepared and buried for a time and yet seen as a universal message with relevance for all religious believers. For Smith, the timely and timeless aspect was wrapped within the religious idea of a restoration of gospel "fulness" that established continuity between his new movement and a pure, original religion established with Adam. For Evans-Wentz, Tibet represented a mystical ideal that could convey ancient truths taught, in

2. H. P. Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine: The Synthesis of Science, Religion, and Philosophy* (London: Theosophical Publishing Co., 1888).

one form or another, by all of history's religious adepts (pp. 80, 102–3). Blavatsky claimed her *mahatmas* were scattered throughout the world but had eventually congregated in Tibet. For her, the mahatmas did not convey the sectarian teachings of a single Buddhist tradition but the broad esoteric teachings that underpin all Buddhist rituals and ecclesiastical structures. (This claim for an esoteric foundation of exoteric expression and sectarian division is a common idea in Buddhist studies communicated effectively by Kuroda Toshio.)³

Probably the most important lesson from Lopez's work for scholars of Mormon studies relates, albeit indirectly, to Lopez's claim that Evans-Wentz's influence contextualized scripture that eventually became much more American than Tibetan. The original text certainly is ancient, liturgical, Buddhist, and Tibetan—yet malleable enough for American readers to project their own interpretations onto it (a process of likening the scripture unto themselves), thus expanding the text's significance and relevance. It is true that Lopez is dealing with a text with more transparent and observable origins than is the case with the Book of Mormon. Scholarship on the Book of Mormon has long been torn over LDS claims of the work's original antiquity and religious and secular attention to its nineteenth-century appearance. Lopez's analysis, in the end, can spur scholars of Mormonism to delve deeper into what made the text relevant in its modern setting. LDS scholars need not leave behind questions of historicity to appreciate the significance of such a question. Whatever one takes as the mechanics or religious significance of Joseph Smith's translations, in other words, Lopez's work underscores the point that his translations certainly entailed a kind of purposeful connection of the text to his world, as all translations do. On this, both the Book of Mormon's LDS apologists and its more secular appraisers might agree.

Put another way, one can wrestle with the magical and mystical narratives surrounding the provenance of the *Tibetan Book of Dead*,

3. Kuroda's theory on Buddhism's exoteric-esoteric system is commonly called *kenmitsu taisei*. For a good explanation of the theory in English, see Taira Masayuki, "Kuroda Toshio and the Kenmitsu Taisei Theory," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 23/3–4 (1996): 427–48.

but Evans-Wentz's work is not rendered insignificant by the fact the source material remains available and has been the object of subsequent translations and interpretations; for Lopez, Evans-Wentz's unique contribution of contextualization is not rendered irrelevant by source-text verification. While not a perfect analogue, this kind of attention toward a text's contemporary reframing represents another avenue of research apart from the ancient-versus-nineteenth-century gridlock over the Book of Mormon. The lack of source material or original records (gold plates and reformed Egyptian) can spur arguments that the Book of Mormon can only be studied as a nineteenth-century work and not as an ancient record. LDS scholars can reject that zero-sum proposal and yet still be enriched by its implications for comprehending their scripture's modern significance. Has Lopez, in other words, in his attention to American esotericism, offered clues to the Mormon scripture's limited but durable resonance in the nineteenth century? At very least, Lopez has demonstrated, again, that a text's claims to antiquity, and the concomitant debates surrounding such a claim, need not be the sole or primary way to explain its power in the modern world in which it emerges. Source problems and questions of historicity do not diminish the cultural significance of such religious texts—one might include the Bible itself alongside Lopez's discussion of texts whose originating narratives have come under scrutiny in the context of modernity's legitimizing acids. Lopez certainly shows this to be the case with Smith's translation of the Book of Mormon and the Book of Abraham, as well as Evans-Wentz's treasure texts (pp. 153–55).

On the book's dust jacket, Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp writes, "Lopez argues that persistent threads in American religious life—the tradition of the 'found' text as a repository for ancient wisdom, and a philosophical interest in life after death—help explain the overwhelming success of the book and its endurance as a cultural artifact." Maffly-Kipp accurately observes that these "persistent threads" can be maintained through the expectations of the audience rather than the academic evidence that underpins the text's provenance or content, and also that endurance as a "cultural artifact" will persist along the evidence continuum for

source texts from the Book of Mormon and the Book of Abraham to the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*.

Donald Lopez's biography of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* is potentially an intriguing and enjoyably provocative read for those interested in Mormon studies. It is at very least creative and unexpected: one of the most prolific scholars of Asian religions and an eminent specialist in Tibetan Buddhism explaining one of the most prominent Tibetan texts in the West through a connection to Mormon history. I suggest that Lopez's use of the Book of Mormon illustrates one facet of the advance of Mormon studies from a minor academic interest—historically characterized by apologetics, devotionism, or debunking—to a viable specialization within religious studies. Mormon studies scholars could profitably follow Lopez's example and thus propel this advance by welcoming conversations with specialists from other fields and by enthusiastically engaging their forays into Mormon topics.

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Jedediah S. Rogers, ed. *The Council of Fifty: A Documentary History*. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2014.

Reviewed by Adam Jortner

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MORMON SCHOLARS AND CONSPIRACY THEORISTS have been salivating over the publication of *The Council of Fifty: A Documentary History*—a formidable collection of primary sources edited by Jedediah S. Rogers.