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Title

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Abstract *Review of Mormons and the Bible: The Place of the Latter-day Saints in American Religion* (1991), by Philip L. Barlow.

Philip L. Barlow, *Mormons and the Bible: The Place of the Latter-day Saints in American Religion*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991. xxii + 251 pp., with index. \$32.50.

Reviewed by Marvin Folsom

Even though this volume focuses mainly on the Bible, it can justifiably be included in a volume of reviews of books about the Book of Mormon because its discussion of Mormon attitudes toward scripture deals not only with the Bible but with the Book of Mormon as well.

As part of the Religion in America series (which includes volumes on Dutch religion, the Presbyterian controversy, Muslims in America, Colonial New England, and the Social Order in Albany), this straightforward treatment by an insider ("I am a practicing Mormon" with "a greater personal sympathy for liberal rather than for conservative religious expressions [on many issues]," p. xviii) gives information and insight both to outsiders and insiders on Mormon uses of the Bible and how they fit into the landscape of views of other American religionists.

Barlow (currently Assistant Professor of Theological Studies at Hanover College, Indiana, and associate editor of the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*) selected pivotal figures (Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, Orson Pratt, B. H. Roberts, Joseph Fielding Smith, William Henry Chamberlin, J. Reuben Clark, Jr., Bruce R. McConkie, and Lowell L. Bennion) to provide a skeletal interpretation of Mormon biblical usage. He thereby shows that the ambiguity of Mormonism vis-à-vis American culture goes far deeper than the fictions of nineteenth-century rhetoric and that Mormons have remained Bible-believing Christians but with a basic, uneven, and evolving difference (p. 220).

Joseph Smith differed from evangelical Protestants in rejecting the Bible as a sufficient religious guide. He differed from Catholics and Episcopalians and Unitarians in rejecting churchly tradition or human scholarship as adequate substitutes or supplements for that insufficiency. He differed from contemporaneous visionaries in his notions of revelation and scripture and by producing the

remarkable, biblically conditioned Book of Mormon. And he differed from *everyone* by instigating distinctive social and religious practices, justified and fundamentally inspired by his biblical views. (pp. 220-21)

Some later leaders (especially Orson Pratt and Brigham Young) increasingly insisted not only on the primacy of living prophets but also on the importance of common sense and the truths revealed by science and human experience, but most Mormons have not been forced to think very deeply about theological diversity in the Bible because of their "private safety net" (*as far as it is translated correctly*) (p. 221). Barlow concludes that higher criticism changed the nature and tone of scriptural allegiance for some, but the Mormon relationship with the Bible remained on its distinctive foundation and millions of Latter-day Saints, like millions of other Christians, remain unfazed by historical biblical criticism (p. 223). According to Barlow, the most basic continuity is the perpetuation of the underlying tension between the fundamental Mormon acceptance of the Bible as the Word of God and the restrictions placed on biblical authority by the existence of living prophets, additional scriptures, and modern scholarship (p. 223). Many contemporary Saints are unaware of this tension; others attribute discrepancies to corruption in the biblical texts, and still others give broad leeway to the human element in both ancient and modern scripture (p. 223). Barlow feels that the specifics are not as important as the fact that God lives and is acting in human history to lift humankind to a better existence (p. 226).

Concerning the language of scripture, Barlow notes the change in status of the King James Bible from "common" to "official."

And, ironically, the King James Version has evolved from the common translation, inherited from antebellum Protestantism, into the official Mormon Bible—precisely as Jacobean language has grown increasingly obscure and as other Americans have gradually adopted more current versions. (p. 224)

He also assesses the influence of the current Latter-day Saint edition of the scriptures:

For the foreseeable future, that is, as long as English-speaking Mormonism relies on its present official edition, the biblical supplements will reflect the voices of Bruce McConkie and J. Reuben Clark more than those of Lowell Bennion and David O. McKay. From among the many expressions of Mormon faith . . . one particular expression will have the unofficial—perhaps even the inadvertent—but nevertheless the implied support of the Church. (p. 214)

At the end of the chapter on “Why the King James Version?” Barlow refers to the dilemma laid bare by the work of J. Reuben Clark and asks:

If the Saints forsake the King James Bible in favor of more accurate and more readable translations, will not the language of their Book of Mormon and Doctrine and Covenants, patterned after the KJV, appear increasingly anachronistic? Will any modern prophet feel called to adapt the work of Joseph Smith to the needs of an English-speaking populace in the twenty-first century, or is Smith’s English, like Mohammad’s Arabic, permanently sacrosanct? (p. 180)

In response, we can note that there are at least a few people who want to adapt the Book of Mormon. There are two versions currently in progress, both outside of the administrative structure of the Church. The first is a condensed and modernized version by Max Skousen. The second is *Mormon’s Book*, a complete verse-by-verse rendition by Lynn Matthews Anderson.

In his summary, Barlow reviews the various strands of attitudes:

Since the time of Joseph Smith, the Mormon use of scripture has combined a traditional faith in the Bible with more “conservative” elements (like a more than occasional extra dose of literalism), some liberal components (such as Joseph Smith’s Bushnell-like insistence on the limitations of human language), and, at least in an American context, some radical ingredients (an open canon, an oral scripture, the

subjugation of biblical assertions to experimental truth or the pronouncements of living authorities). (p. 228)

This unique recipe links Mormons at different points sometimes with Catholics, sometimes with Jews, sometimes with more exotic groups, and sometimes with others of the world religions, yet it constitutes the difference in the Mormon use of the Bible.

Barlow's historical sketch is very readable, even handed, and, as far as I can tell, reasonably accurate.