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## Patrick Henry, Gideon, and the Book of Mormon

Historian Richard L. Bushman, responding to accusations that the Book of Mormon contains “evidence of nineteenth-century American political culture,” concluded that in fact “most of the principles traditionally associated with the American Constitution are slighted or disregarded altogether” in the book. “So many of the powerful intellectual influences operating on Joseph Smith failed to touch the Book of Mormon.”<sup>1</sup>

For example, Bushman noted that patriotic orations and writings in Joseph’s time depicted the American Revolution as “a struggle of heroes against oppressors, a brave people versus a tyrant king.” The Book of Mormon, on the other hand, consistently describes groups of people being delivered from bondage not through heroic resistance or confrontation but by flight into the wilderness facilitated by the power of God.<sup>2</sup> Whereas 1820s patriotic rhetoric portrayed an enlightened people overthrowing wicked monarchs, Book of Mormon peoples generally clamor for a king;<sup>3</sup> and when the monarchy is abandoned, it is a king (Mosiah<sub>2</sub>) who instigates the change.<sup>4</sup> Bushman also argued that a careful reading of the Book of Mormon reveals that its seemingly democratic elements bear little resemblance


to American ideals: elections are rare, the separation of powers does not exist, there is no written constitution, the concept of “no taxation without representation” is absent, and hereditary succession prevails, even among the “judges.”<sup>5</sup>

One of the heroes of the American Revolution is Patrick Henry, revered for the stirring declaration “Give me liberty, or give me death!” The Book of Mormon, however, turns this sentiment on its ear. When the people of King Limhi are threatened by a much stronger Lamanite army, Gideon, the king’s captain, counsels, “Let us pacify the king [of the Lamanites] . . . ; for it is better that we should be in bondage than that we should lose our lives” (Mosiah 20:22). King Limhi apparently agrees that there are worse things than bondage, for later he tells Ammon that “it is better that we be slaves to the Nephites than to pay tribute to the king of the Lamanites” (Mosiah 7:15).

Joseph Smith, an impressionable child during the War of 1812 whose ancestors had fought in the Revolutionary War, would have imbibed the democratic and libertarian sentiments of his age. Indeed, in 1843 he told a congregation, “It is a love of liberty which inspires my soul.

Civil and religious liberty were diffused into my soul by my grandfathers while they dandled me on their knees.”<sup>6</sup>

His actions as well as his words indicate that his personal philosophy was more in tune with Patrick Henry’s than with Gideon’s or King Limhi’s. For example, he sent Zion’s Camp, an armed force of 200 men, to restore the exiled Saints to their homes in Jackson County, Missouri; he supported resistance to the Missouri militia during the hostilities of 1838; he organized and led a well-drilled military body, the Nauvoo Legion, to protect the rights of his followers; and with apparent foresight of his ultimate fate, he tried to escape to the West rather than submit to imprisonment among hostile foes.

If Joseph Smith fabricated the Book of Mormon, as some critics contend, it is hard to believe that he would have written with approval the words attributed to Gideon in Mosiah 20:22, or even those of King Limhi in Mosiah 7:15. It is far easier to believe that he was simply translating the words of other men, whose political sentiments were much different from his own. 

By Ross Geddes

### Notes

1. Richard L. Bushman, “The Book of Mormon and the American Revolution,” *BYU Studies* 17/1 (Autumn 1976): 3, 16, 20.

2. *Ibid.*, 6–10.
3. Bushman gives as examples Nephi<sub>1</sub> (2 Nephi 5:18; 6:2), Mosiah<sub>1</sub> (Omni 1:12, 19), Zeniff (Mosiah 7:9; cf. 19:26), and Alma<sub>1</sub> (Mosiah 23:6).
4. Bushman, “American Revolution,” 10–14. For earlier studies of the institution of Nephite judgeship, see John W. Welch, “Democratizing Forces in King Benjamin’s Speech,” in John W. Welch and Melvin J. Thorne, eds., *Pressing Forward with the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1999), 110–26; and John A. Tvedtnes, “King Mosiah and the Judgeship,” *Insights*, November 2000.
5. Bushman, “American Revolution,” 14–17.
6. Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, eds., *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1980), 229; punctuation normalized.

## Lectures on Christianity in the Middle East

In March the Institute cosponsored a lecture series at Brigham Young University titled “Christianity in the Middle East.” The series provided a historical overview of the eastward spread of Christianity into the pagan Near East, a subject largely neglected in religious and socio-cultural studies. Over many centuries, Christian groups maintained a presence in the region, leaving behind a notable literary, monumental, and artistic legacy that is increasingly being recognized as an important part of the world’s cultural heritage.

### Early Syriac Christianity

Dr. Lucas Van Rompay, professor of Eastern Christianity and director of Duke University’s Center for Late Ancient Studies, kicked off the series on 10 March with a lecture titled “Early Syriac Christianity.” Focusing on the pre-Islamic period (200–600 AD), when Syriac Christianity absorbed aspects of Greek culture, Van Rompay showed slides of mosaics and wall paintings that blend Syriac and Greek elements, such as script in both languages. Notably, one wall painting features Abgar Ukkama and the Roman emperor Constantine, supposedly the first two rulers to convert to Christianity. Tradition holds that King Abgar of Edessa, a Mesopotamian city that became a center of Christianity in the fourth century AD, exchanged letters with Jesus, resulting in the conversion of Abgar and his entire city. This tradition, along with Greek language and philosophy, was the primary shaping influence of Syriac Christianity, Van Rompay said.

### Christianity under Islam

On 17 March, Dr. Sidney H. Griffith, professor of Semitic languages at The Catholic University of America, spoke on the topic “Christianity under Islam in the Pre-Modern World.” Griffith is a specialist in Syriac and Arabic Christianity, and he chairs the advisory board for BYU’s Eastern Christian Texts series. He began by noting that the Qur’an, which presumes familiarity with the Old Testament and related lore, offers a critique of Christianity, referring to Christians vaguely as “people of the book” and viewing Jesus Christ as one of God’s messengers but not as his Son. He then spoke of the challenges that Christianity posed to Islam in the pre-Modern period (from the time of Mohammed to the Crusades). For example, after the Abassid revolt in AD 750, Christians in the Middle East gradually became enculturated into the Islamic community. Muslim scholars took notice of the three primary Eastern Christian groups (Melchites, Jacobites, Nestorians) and set about trying to refute their beliefs.

After describing the culture of Arabic-speaking Christians and the development of Christian theology at the hands of Christian-Arab theologians, Griffith focused on the plight of Christians living under Islamic rule: deprivation, subservience, and requirements to pay a tax for protection, to wear distinctive clothing, and to refrain from expressing their faith publicly and seeking converts among Muslims. Their lives of hardship led them to see the Islamic conquest in terms of “the apocalyptic mode” of the book of Daniel, he said—as evidence of God’s punishment of Christians who must await their deliverance. Griffith characterized Christian influence in the pre-Modern Islamic world as one of “diminution” until the irruption of Christian missionaries during the Crusades.

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