



1-1-2014

The Book of Mormon and Early America's Political and Intellectual Tradition

Benjamin E. Park

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms>

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Park, Benjamin E. (2014) "The Book of Mormon and Early America's Political and Intellectual Tradition," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*: Vol. 23 : No. 1 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms/vol23/iss1/9>

This Feature Article is brought to you for free and open access by the All Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Book of Mormon Studies by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

Review Essays

The Book of Mormon and Early America's Political and Intellectual Tradition

Benjamin E. Park

Review of David F. Holland. *Sacred Borders: Continuing Revelation and Canonical Restraint in Early America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011; Eran Shalev. *American Zion: The Old Testament as a Political Text from the Revolution to the Civil War*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013.

FOR A BOOK THAT CLAIMS AN EPIC SCOPE and cosmological depth, the Book of Mormon has mostly received a rather parochial academic framework. What does the text tell us about Mormon conceptions of scripture? What does it reveal concerning Joseph Smith's religious genius? How did Mormons use the book during the church's first few decades? These are certainly important questions, and they have received—and will receive—the responses they deserve. But what if scholars took a page from Mormon and Moroni's own approach and placed the narrative's importance on a much broader scale—demographically, geographically, and chronologically?¹

1. Terryl Givens talks about how Mormon and Moroni had a much broader vision of audience—that the Nephite record was more than just a familial and tribal record—than

Two books have recently and profitably embarked on such a cause by using the Book of Mormon as a crucial text in their broader narrative of American intellectual and social history during the early republic. David Holland, in his *Sacred Borders: Continuing Revelation and Canonical Restraint in Early America*, places the text within his sweeping overview of America's canonical experimentations between the early Puritans and the antebellum Transcendentalists. Similarly, Eran Shalev, in his *American Zion: The Old Testament as a Political Text from the Revolution to the Civil War*, posits the Book of Mormon as a prime example for what he calls pseudobiblical writings that shaped antebellum political culture. Together, these two books demonstrate the potential of examining Mormonism's keystone document in light of larger historiographical concerns, as well as the future for Book of Mormon studies within the early Americanist field.

In *Sacred Borders*, Holland, an associate professor of North American religious history at Harvard Divinity School, argues that the tension between an established scriptural canon—which he identifies as “a basic mental structure of the early modern era” (p. 8)—and the desire for new and expanded definitions for scriptural authority shaped much of intellectual life in America between colonization and the Civil War. On the one hand, a closed canon served many cultural purposes: in periods where cultural, social, and religious change was constant, a consistent notion of authorized boundaries brought stability and validated authority. Whenever orthodoxy was challenged, the closed limits of a scriptural canon provided the most strident defense. Yet at the same time, there was an acute yearning for a more culturally relevant deity—a God who could speak in modern times and was not just found in the records of an ancient world. This anxiety was especially acute in early America, where notions of antiquated authority were being overthrown from many angles.

The ambivalence caused by an ancient law and an active Lawgiver could be found throughout American history. Indeed, Holland makes a point to examine the tension within the mainstream of the nation's

had Nephi, the previous author of the Book of Mormon. Givens, *The Book of Mormon: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 85–89.

religious tradition (including the Puritans and the Founding Fathers) as well as those on the fringes (including the Shakers and, of course, the Mormons). In an important sense, Holland traces the intellectual genealogy for Mormonism's vision of the open canon; rather than Joseph Smith appearing as a revelatory oasis in the midst of a spiritual desert that was opposed to new scriptural texts, as has often been depicted, the Mormon prophet is instead seen as the climax of a profound cultural tradition found at the heart of America's quest for a new prophetic voice. While this might chop away at Mormonism's distinctive message, it adds significance to the particulars of Mormonism's revelatory claims. The Book of Mormon was not the only medium decrying America's tendency to bemoan, "A Bible! A Bible! We have got a Bible, and there cannot be any more Bible" (2 Nephi 29:3) but rather just another voice in a rancorous chorus that had been filling the American religious amphitheater since the nation's founding.

Holland's treatment of the Book of Mormon is brief, with only a portion of his limited section dedicated to Mormonism, but he includes several important points that challenge superficial readings of the text. First, he emphasizes the populist message of the text by claiming that Mormon's book and Methodist Lorenzo Dow's message were "two American manifestations of the same outraged populism" (p. 142). Second, the Book of Mormon was a rejoinder to the Deist argument against particular providence—an oppositional message that not only incited much debate throughout America but even animated discussion in Joseph Smith's own home. The text did not challenge, or even correct, the Bible (as most rationalist arguments sought) but rather reaffirmed its importance and validated its significance for modern readers. "Repeatedly," Holland explains, "the *Book of Mormon* declared itself as material evidence of a good and global God" (p. 147). Though many critics feared it undermined the Bible's authority, Mormons believed it reinforced the Bible's chief claims. In an age where skepticism seemed to shake the very foundations of religious authority, the Book of Mormon invoked that very ambivalence in order to restore Christianity's core message.

But the third, and most important, theme Holland found within the Book of Mormon was the importance of God's voice: not only does the text itself emphasize the significance of continual revelation, but its very presence underscores the perpetual significance of modern scriptural pronouncements. While the revealed text is important, it is not as important as the revelation process. Thus while the Shakers' *Sacred Roll* appeared long after the movement's inception and served as the climax of its revelatory development, the Book of Mormon predated the official institution and announced its initiation.

Yet the divine sovereignty reaffirmed in the Book of Mormon did not always echo the progressive God of most other modern scriptural texts. While other extracanonical works, like the Shakers' *Sacred Roll*, "promised that new revelation would never sanction bigamy or violence or other violations of accepted morality, the Mormon God offered no such safeguards" (p. 148). This was the God of the Old Testament unwilling to bend his commands for the people of the New World. Polygamy was not out of the realm of possibility, murder and war were not denounced as ancient, and civilizations declined just as often as they progressed. Indeed, within the first few chapters of the text, readers encounter the protagonist beheading a drunk and defenseless ruler in order to preserve a family record. While other contemporary scriptural books removed "the most challenging aspect of a continuously revealed religion," Holland explains, "the *Book of Mormon* unapologetically opens with it" (p. 149).

In one way, *Sacred Borders* merely offers intellectual context for the Book of Mormon's message and environment. In another, equally important way, the book also embodies the benefits of using a single text as a sign for deeper cultural anxieties. The Nephite people's insistence for a prophetic voice to adapt God's commandments to new circumstances coexisted with their persistent desire to keep the law of Moses—a paradoxical tension that mirrored early America's simultaneous quest for progressive reform and authoritative originalism, both in religious and political contexts. "This intense convergence of two countervailing ideas gave Mormonism a distinctive shape, and even Mormons themselves

had difficulty wrapping their minds and hearts around the resulting stresses” (pp. 156–57). Mormons were not unique in their attempt to solve this cultural riddle. Indeed, approaching the Book of Mormon as a way to examine an *American* problem, rather than merely a *Mormon* problem, makes the text much more relevant to students of American religious and intellectual history.

In *American Zion*, Eran Shalev, a senior lecturer at the University of Haifa, uses the same methodological approach to answer a different question: what does the Book of Mormon tell us about why Americans were so attached to the Old Testament during the century preceding the Civil War? During the decades between America’s founding and the Union’s near dissolution, the Hebrew scriptures played a vital role in the nation’s political tradition. Americans identified their country as a new Israel, which gave them religious and political legitimacy in an age of democratic tumult. But how could such an ancient and seemingly archaic text be so relevant to modern times? How could a record detailing a people led by a king hold lessons for a society that had torn down monarchy? The answers were complex and multifaceted but demonstrate the tensions and anxieties that plagued a culture striving to reaffirm authority while at the same time providing the social opportunities that republicanism promised.

The book’s third chapter attempts to, as announced in its title, chart the “cultural origins of the Book of Mormon.” More particularly, the chapter examines the growth of what Shalev calls “pseudobiblical literature,” which used Elizabethan English and a biblical message in order to add a divine grounding to the nation’s message. During the early republic, Shalev explains, a preponderance of texts sought to imitate the Bible’s language and message while validating America’s destiny and purpose. “By imposing the Bible and its intellectual and cultural landscapes on America,” *American Zion* explains, “those texts placed the United States in a biblical time and frame, describing the new nation and its history as occurring in a distant, revered, and mythic dimension” (p. 100). These texts sought to collapse the distance between past and present—making both the Israelite story relevant as well as the ancient

language accessible. This republicanization of the Bible possessed significant implications for American political culture. Beyond merely expanding their historical consciousness and placing America within an epic narrative of divine progress, the Old Testament added a pretext for such actions as those supposedly provoked by manifest destiny.

Ironically, the Book of Mormon appeared after the apex of this literary tradition. By the time Joseph Smith's scriptural record was published, texts written in the Elizabethan style were on the decline, and most works were presented in a more modern, democratic style. On the one hand, this made the Book of Mormon the climax of the pseudobiblical tradition; on the other hand, the book acts as something of a puzzle. Shalev writes that the text "has been able to survive and flourish for almost two centuries not because, but in spite of, the literary ecology of the mid-nineteenth century and after" (p. 104). While this may be true—and Shalev is persuasive in showing how the Book of Mormon appeared at the most opportune time to take advantage of its linguistic flair—his framework overlooks the continued potential for creating a sacred time and message through the use of archaic language. Not only did other religious texts replicate King James verbiage throughout the nineteenth century, but so did varied authors like the antislavery writer James Branagan, who used antiquated language in order to provoke careful readings of his political pamphlets. Yet despite this potential oversight, Shalev's use of the linguistic environment in order to contextualize the Book of Mormon is an underexplored angle that adds much to our understanding of the text.

Shalev is at his best when comparing the Book of Mormon to other pseudobiblical texts from the period, such as "The First Book of Chronicles, Chapter the 5th," which was published in South Carolina's *Investigator* only a few years before the Book of Mormon, as well as "A Fragment of the Prophecy of Tobias," published serially in the *American Mercury*. The latter text is especially fascinating for Book of Mormon scholars, as the editor claims to have found this work that was hidden away in past centuries and that required a designated translator to reveal its important meaning for an American audience. These contemporary

accounts are not meant to serve as potential sources for the Book of Mormon's narrative—indeed, Shalev admits such an endeavor would be impossible—but they reaffirm the important lesson that the Book of Mormon is best seen as one of many examples that embody the same cultural strains and that its importance for American intellectual historians is best seen as part of a tapestry of scriptural voices that speak to a culture's anxieties, hopes, and fears.

But Shalev's examination of pseudobiblical texts is meant to engage early America's political culture. "The pseudobiblical language was, after all, essentially political (and often ironic and polemic), making secular use of a sacred language," he explains (p. 114). In this regard, though, Shalev holds back on the Book of Mormon's political message, perhaps because its insistence on the importance of kings appears quixotic to the populist message found in the rest of the literary tradition. The Old Testament, from many pseudobiblical texts, needed to be democratized in order to be useful for the new context. The sovereignty of God was to remain—the text was, after all, primarily used to reaffirm religious orthodoxy—but the ecclesiastical organization was to be disregarded for republican government. Yet in the Book of Mormon, the two elements, God's sovereignty and kingly rule, seemed intimately intertwined. And as seen in Holland's book, the God of the Book of Mormon was no less frightening than the God of the Old Testament—how does that square with the democratic God of other pseudobiblical literature? Regardless, Shalev's book offers a new context and asks new questions concerning the Book of Mormon's linguistic and political context—issues that will certainly be taken up by future scholars.

To a certain extent, Holland's and Shalev's arguments are convincing, and their push to contextualize the Book of Mormon within America's revelatory heritage is to be lauded. But their conclusions concerning the scriptural text may not be definitive. (Nor should they be, given that the Book of Mormon was not the central focus of either book.) Yes, many elements found within the Book of Mormon are consonant with cultural trends, but there are other, equally important facets that dissent from those same strains. Nearly every other example found within *Sacred*

Borders and *American Zion* that challenged American notions of scriptural and political authority did so through blurring the boundaries and tinkering with the fringes of the scriptural canon. The Book of Mormon, on the other hand, was an outright assault on the limits of scriptural literature and political orthodoxy. It was not merely a supplement for, or a commentary on, the accepted holy texts, but an open challenge to their relevancy, coherence, adaptability, and comprehensiveness. While many movements in Holland's and Shalev's narratives yearned for new "scripture" in the generic sense of novel inspiration and immediate revelation, the Mormons produced scripture in the much more literal and limited sense of adding an actual text to the Christian canon.

And further, what does it mean that the Book of Mormon appeared decades later than the contemporary examples these authors think provide the most powerful comparisons—in Holland's case, the Shakers; in Shalev's case, the pseudobiblical works? Similar to Susan Juster's *Doomsayers: Anglo-American Prophecy in the Age of Revolution* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), Joseph Smith's scriptural text appears as a book out of time, better fit for a century before than in the Age of Jackson. Does this merely reinforce the importance of primitivism to the Mormon movement or perhaps add credibility to the proposed superficiality of Mormonism's earliest converts? The answer is probably much more nuanced and complex. Most importantly, it likely calls into question the chronological narratives and cultural compartmentalization invoked by historians of American religion. The Book of Mormon should serve as a reminder that religious innovation ebbs and flows in the way that it relates to cultural evolution and reaffirms the paradoxical nature of America's intellectual tradition. That lesson, in itself, makes Mormonism's unique scriptural text all the more important.

That said, this does not mean that scholars of the Book of Mormon should return to the parochial and exceptionalist framework that has so plagued Mormon studies in the past—far from it. Holland's and Shalev's arguments provide context for new, novel, and noteworthy insights concerning the book that previous studies could hardly fathom; they introduce new vistas that previous critics could hardly have envisioned. But

what this impressive cultural backdrop does is to provide the starting point for understanding what, exactly, *does* make the Book of Mormon unique. Now that the shackles of Mormon historiography's exclusive nature have been shed, the real work of contextualization and interpretation can begin. The broad narratives and sophisticated analysis of *Sacred Borders* and *American Zion* are not only indicative of this change, but they also lay the groundwork and pose important questions for the scholarship to follow.

Benjamin E. Park teaches history at the University of Missouri, where he is also a fellow at the Forum on Constitutional Democracy. He has an MPhil in political thought and intellectual history and a PhD in history from the University of Cambridge. He is currently an associate editor for *Mormon Studies Review*.