"Lifted up in the pride of their eyes": Pride and Cultural Distinction in the Book of Mormon

Kirk Weeden

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

“Lifted up in the pride of their eyes”: Pride and Cultural Distinction in the Book of Mormon

Kirk Weeden

Introduction

Latter-day Saints affirm that “the Book of Mormon was . . . written for our day.”¹ For the believer, it is no wonder that the book contains numerous accounts of inequality. Without exception, the dynamic force in these accounts is pride, which in most cases is manifest in cultural pretentiousness and exhibitionism. While the various faces and consequences of pride and its relationship to culture in the Book of Mormon

have been the subject of Latter-day Saint literature, there has, to date, been no reading of the Book of Mormon that attempts to provide a structural account of pride and its relationship to culture—that is to say, no analysis of the systematic relationship between the two. To do so would require reading the Book of Mormon with a sociological lens, an approach that, at least for the purposes of this paper, might be regarded as complementary to a theological interpretation.

In this regard, the work of the prominent French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu is worthy of special consideration. Bourdieu’s work has been identified with what he termed “constructivist structuralism,” focusing on practice as the outcome of “a dialectical relationship between structure and agency,” not being “objectively determined, nor . . . the product of free will.” Working within a Weberian strand of class analysis, Bourdieu formulated a theory according to which class is shaped by resources other than economic capital—such as cultural resources (cultural capital) and social connections (social capital). These types of capital are fought over in fields, which can be thought of as distinct areas of practice. Bourdieu’s greatest legacy is perhaps his exposition of the contestation of cultural capital within the field of culture. One of his major works, *Distinction*, brings to the fore often-ignored correlations between aesthetic taste and social position, demonstrating how class can be structured and experienced along cultural lines. More specifically, the work reveals the strategies deployed by the dominant in society to assert cultural distinction and thereby maintain their position of power.

---


3. Bourdieu’s work has prominence in sociological circles today, and his work has sparked a renewed interest in and reconceptualization of class in recent years in the United Kingdom and Australia.


A reading of the Book of Mormon in light of Bourdieu’s work provides the contours for a revealing structural account of the relationship between pride and culture. I argue here that pride can be read as striving for cultural distinction in Bourdieu’s sense. Conceptually, both pride and cultural distinction share the central feature of enmity, that is, a competitive self-interest. The benefit of using Bourdieu to shine light on examples of pride in the Book of Mormon is to offer an explanation of the factors that underpin such behavior, that is to say, a struggle for cultural capital through a mobilization of economic capital and a system of classifications of taste. All of these elements are reflected in the Book of Mormon, as I hope to show.

Being “lifted up”: Distinction and Enmity

Bourdieu invites the modern reader to think carefully about the social intention behind the consumption or display of cultural objects. This is because Bourdieu’s view of the world is of a competitive one, in which all individuals are treated as “capital holders and investors seeking profits.” In this market-like vision of social life, culture is a form of capital—embodied in manner, speech, and judgments of aesthetic taste; objectified in various forms (clothing, art, antiques, etc.); and institutionalized in academic titles. Consumption and expression of culture and taste thus serve a particular social purpose in a wider struggle for position and power. This posturing through culture is particularly important to the dominant group in society, the exchange of financial capital for cultural capital being “inscribed as an objective demand, in the membership of the bourgeoisie.” In this way, Bourdieu notes that “objectively and subjectively aesthetic stances adopted in matters like cosmetics, clothing or home decoration are opportunities to experience

7. Swartz, Culture and Power, 82.
or assert one's position in social space.” Indeed, many aesthetic choices are made with competitive interests in mind, “clearly marked by the intention . . . of marking distinction vis-à-vis lower groups.”

Like Bourdieu, the Book of Mormon demonstrates that cultural distinction serves as an early sign of pride and social fragmentation. Indeed, at its extreme, flaunting culture is bound up in the formation of social classes, as in Fourth Nephi (see 4 Nephi 1:23–26). In an attempt to avert just such extremities, it seems, Jacob condemns a group of increasingly wealthy Nephites, who, upon discovering precious materials, begin to “suppose that [they are] better than” others “because of the costliness of [their] apparel” (Jacob 2:13). He implores his audience to “think of your brethren like unto yourselves, and be familiar with all and free with your substance, that they may be rich like unto you” (Jacob 2:17). He further mandates that they seek wealth for the express purpose of administering “relief to the sick and the afflicted” (Jacob 2:19). In emphasizing the redirection of wealth away from the pure consumption of cultural products, Jacob appears to concur with Bourdieu’s view that the exchange of economic capital for cultural capital is integral to social differentiation and fragmentation, at least when the exchange is for the promotion of one’s own interests to the detriment of others. In this sense, one might say that Jacob hopes to dismantle early in Nephite history the emerging marketization of social life.

Jacob’s call for an egalitarian outlook is later echoed by King Benjamin, who uses the indelible image of the beggar to teach empathy for one’s neighbor, born of an acknowledgment of one’s own dependence on God (see Mosiah 4:16–20). This religious call to compassion is further complemented by Alma’s political wisdom. Having himself been on the receiving end of title and position under King Noah, Alma commands those who follow him (and desire him to be king) not to “esteem one flesh above another” (Mosiah 23:7). In these examples, the Book of Mormon reflects Bourdieu’s own view that cultural distinction is at some level motivated by an active struggle against others. Of

11. Bourdieu, Distinction, 60.
course, Bourdieu regards this struggle as an inherent feature of social life, whereas the Book of Mormon treats such enmity as both a precursor to, and a symptom of, political and religious degeneration.

Distinction through Education

Bourdieu emphasizes the role the education system plays in cultural distinction, with education itself constituting a major cultural resource. Bourdieu describes those with academic qualifications (“holders of cultural nobility”)\(^\text{12}\) as aristocratic, defined by a belonging to a “lineage, an estate, . . . a past, . . . or a tradition.”\(^\text{13}\) In contrast, there are those with “uncertified” cultural capital who demonstrate what they are by what they can do. Academics are thus “defined by the titles which predispose and legitimate them in being what they are”\(^\text{14}\) and thereby act to separate them “by a difference in kind from the commons of culture.”\(^\text{15}\) Not only does the system allow for those with a significant amount of economic capital to convert that into cultural capital, but schooling itself involves a hidden syllabus of bourgeois qualities, such as ease in approaching cultural objects or comprehension and the use of sophisticated language.\(^\text{16}\) According to Bourdieu, the school system is rigged to favor those with pre-existing cultural capital.

Bourdieu’s criticism of the education system can help explain the particularly poignant example of cultural distinction and stratification in 3 Nephi 6. The context for the passage could not be more ironic: the Nephites find themselves in a time of postwar era reconstruction, characterized by the introduction of laws to ensure “equity and justice” (3 Nephi 6:4). It is in this era of apparent equitable outcomes that some of

\begin{footnotes}
\item[12.] Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 24.
\item[13.] Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 24.
\item[14.] Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 24.
\item[15.] Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 24.
\end{footnotes}
the people again allow themselves to be “lifted up unto pride and boastings because of their exceedingly great riches” (3 Nephi 6:10), in turn becoming “distinguished by ranks” in accordance with “their riches and chances for learning” (3 Nephi 6:12). In this passage, wealth guarantees “great learning” whereas poverty leads to “ignorance” (3 Nephi 6:12). Hence, 3 Nephi 6 indicates that wealth is often insufficient by itself to generate the symbolic distinctions that underpin hierarchical social boundaries such as ranks or classes. Rather, as Bourdieu would argue, it is important to consider the role of other forms of capital, in particular institutionalized cultural capital, achieved through education, as the scriptural text demonstrates. In particular, academic titles and “great learning” function as marks of distinction, a claim to possess qualities that might extend beyond the titles, separating holders of such learning from the population at large.

“Pride of their eyes”: Symbolic Classifications and Symbolic Capital

The system of aesthetic classifications that mediates cultural distinction saturates social life. A student of the French intellectual tradition of structuralism, Bourdieu maintains that people make cognitive binary distinctions of aesthetic taste such as rare or common, low or high, good or bad. Bourdieu, however, argues that taste is arbitrary, there being no substantial a priori reason why a particular accent or artistic judgment should be indicative of high culture, or vice versa. Instead of reflecting an objective social reality, symbolic binary distinctions obtain their meaning in use, in oppositional relation to each other. For instance, Bourdieu maintains that the aesthetic preference of the elite for form over function represents an intention to distance themselves from real life, an expression of a domination of necessity, enabled by a favorable economic position. Far from

a simple artistic choice, the disdain for the everyday represents a “social break”\(^\text{19}\) and “a claim to legitimate superiority over those who, because they cannot assert the same contempt for contingencies in gratuitous luxury and conspicuous consumption, remain dominated by ordinary interests and urgencies.”\(^\text{20}\) Hence, distinctions of taste can be paired with social position, with the political effect of transforming mere classifications into articulations of social position and power.\(^\text{21}\)

Symbolic distinctions along such lines are mobilized by the proud in the Book of Mormon. Almost always, cultural goods are ascribed a particular value. The proud are identified as those with “exceeding riches, . . . fine silks, . . . fine-twined linen, . . . precious things” (Alma 4:6); “fine pearls, . . . fine things of the world” (4 Nephi 1:24); and, most especially, “very costly apparel” (Alma 4:6; emphasis added). Juxtaposed to this quest for luxury are those who dress in a “neat and comely” style or who wear “homely cloth” (Alma 1:27). The recurrence of terms to express value in the Book of Mormon (“fine,” “costly,” and “precious”) emphasizes the distinctiveness of the objects in question in terms of their value and thereby de-emphasizes their utility. As Bourdieu would say, the focus is firmly on their value in society. This is particularly the case for the term “costly,” which distinguishes the proud in every instance. Furthermore, the Book of Mormon texts seem to concur with Bourdieu that taste is arbitrary, especially when used for purposes of social differentiation. This is evident through the constant undermining of the claims of the upwardly mobile. For example, Jacob bemoans those who “suppose” they are better than others (Jacob 2:13), while others are “lifted up in the pride of their eyes” (Alma 4:6) and set their hearts upon “vain” things (Jacob 4:8) or grow “rich in their own eyes” (Alma 45:24). In these examples, there would appear to be an attempt to depict the proud as ungrounded and their claims as nothing more than self-serving supposition.\(^\text{22}\)

---

22. This is not always the case. As Alma 1 demonstrates, the Book of Mormon envisions the possibility of having an “abundance of . . . gold, and of silver, and of
Symbolic Capital and Discontents

The prize of those striving for distinction is symbolic capital. Broadly speaking, symbolic capital involves the recognition and legitimacy afforded to a form of capital. As such, it relies on the approbation of others and serves ideological purposes. Presupposed in such recognition is a preceding act of what Bourdieu terms “symbolic violence,” the “cement of class relations.” Symbolic violence occurs when dominant symbolic frameworks or activities are imposed on others and inconspicuously integrated into daily life as “taken-for-granted, disinterested or apolitical.” It stands to reason that symbolic impositions can often be contested, given that what is at stake, in Bourdieu’s eyes, is identity, culture being the ultimate expression of the self and group and the main way that one classifies self and others.

There are several passages in the Book of Mormon that can be read as depicting the contestation of symbolic capital. To begin, the division in the church under Alma’s leadership is accompanied by “envyings and strife, and malice and persecutions” (Alma 4:9), with those striving for distinction being “scornful” (Alma 4:8) and “despising others” (Alma 4:12). Thus, Alma inquires of the Church if its members have been “sufficiently humble,” “stripped of pride,” “stripped of envy,” or whether any has made a “mock of his brother” (Alma 5:28–30). Likewise, the account in 3 Nephi 6 of social stratification by ranks involves a significant degree of railing, reviling, and “all manner of afflictions” (3 Nephi 6:13). From Bourdieu’s perspective, what might be said to be happening in these passages is either a contest over legitimate culture or, more

precious things, and abundance of silk and fine-twined linen,” if such possession is tempered with a material concern for the welfare of others. While this would appear to undermine the analysis of taste as a function of social differentiation, the frequency of use of such terms in other instances suggests that deliberately mobilizing symbolic distinctions is more important to the proud, who, as Bourdieu argues, set themselves apart to legitimize their position.

24. Swartz, Culture and Power, 89.
25. Swartz, Culture and Power, 89.
likely, resistance to symbolic subordination. While the sociologist might regard such events as part of class warfare, the development into ranks is described in terms of yielding to the sinful temptations of power, authority, riches, and vanity (see 3 Nephi 6:15).

Conclusion

Reading the Book of Mormon through the prism of Bourdieu's account of cultural distinction illuminates the behavior of the proud. For one, Bourdieu's structural emphasis on cultural capital as a symbolically rich competitive resource for those striving for social status and prestige helps explain why cultural showiness is the hallmark of the proud in the Book of Mormon. Culture is mobilized by the proud precisely because it enables them to establish or legitimize their position. As both Bourdieu and the Book of Mormon reveal, this mobilization occurs through the exchange of financial capital for gratuitous high-end cultural consumption. Through a system of arbitrary distinctions of taste ("fine," "precious," and "costly"), this consumption becomes code for distance from necessity, and thereby a manifestation of power. Moreover, the acquisition of access to elite education helps to create a cultural aristocracy that cements emerging social hierarchies. Further, as Bourdieu observes, what really matters to the proud is the pursuit of symbolic recognition or symbolic capital by an act of symbolic violence, whereby their dominant worldview is legitimized and becomes accepted by all. It is no wonder, as Bourdieu and the Book of Mormon observe, that the claims of the proud are highly contested, often accompanied by "envyings," "persecutions," and "railings."

However, there are limitations to this reading. For one, in line with his structuralist leanings, Bourdieu regards striving for cultural distinction as part of social life. In contrast, the Book of Mormon teaches that, while cultural appropriation is not in itself morally reprehensible, flaunting, boasting, and powermongering are not of God. In fact, where Bourdieu is somewhat silent on class formation, the Book of Mormon uniquely identifies such behavior as sinful and as the driving force behind social fragmentation. In this way, the Book of Mormon stresses the role of individual agency. As a result, unlike Bourdieu, in
its ambition to bring readers to Christ, the Book of Mormon suggests that pride is avoidable. Jacob, King Benjamin, and Alma promote the value of neighborly love manifest both in charity and in politics (in the form of egalitarian respect for others). Devoted readers, of course, also aim to have their “hearts . . . knit together in love” (Mosiah 18:21) and see themselves as “no more strangers” (Ephesians 2:19), aiming to neutralize or minimize cultural distinctiveness in sacred spaces by emphasizing kinship and community.27

There is a final preliminary interpretative conclusion to be drawn from reading Bourdieu and the Book of Mormon side by side. The findings point to the potential value of using contemporary social theories to shed light on passages of scripture. In turn, the Book of Mormon demonstrates its prophetic import in understanding and addressing contemporary issues. This is especially the case when the text is read using familiar secular language and conceptual tools, which can allow non-believers to appreciate the text’s prophetic insights. Some might argue that such an interpretative enterprise is anachronistic, but this objection ignores the point that the Book of Mormon is intended for a modern readership. In fact, a dialectic between modern and ancient is something the Book of Mormon itself endorses. This article has been a modest attempt to model one way of being sensitive to that dialectic.

Kirk Weeden is an early career researcher with an interest in education and French studies. In 2014, he graduated from the University of Melbourne with first-class honors, winning the Professor A. R. Chisholm Memorial Prize for excellence in an honors thesis in French studies. In 2017, he published his first academic article in the Australian Journal of French Studies. He is a secondary school English and French teacher in Melbourne, Australia.

27. Two practical examples, whether directly or indirectly intended to emphasize community or not, are the universal wearing of white clothing in temples and calling each other “brother” and “sister” at church, instead of any other professional title.