Mormons and the Bible: The Place of the Latter-day Saints in American Religion by Philip L. Barlow

Roger R. Keller

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Reviewed by Roger R. Keller, Associate Professor of Comparative World Religions at Brigham Young University.

Latter-day Saints are Bible-believing Christians—but with a difference (xx). Such is Philip Barlow’s central thesis. According to him, that difference lies in part in the unique relationship which existed within Mormondom between the Bible, the American religious climate of the early nineteenth century, and the prophetic and creative spirit of the Mormon founder, Joseph Smith. In addition, Barlow indicates that over time an ecclesiastically sanctioned, doctrinal conservatism diminished the impact of some of the more creative luminaries within The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, thereby leaving Mormons with “no developed theory or doctrine of scripture adequate for a modern world” (226). In essence, the book attempts to examine the sociological context in which LDS biblical interpretation arose, along with how the Bible was interpreted by select representatives of the Latter-day Saint faith. In the later portions of his book particularly, Barlow contrasts the principles he perceives to be at work among Mormons with the interpretive practices at work in other Christian traditions. Chief among the practices used for comparison is the historical/critical methodology currently employed by numerous Protestant and Catholic biblical scholars.

This book contains an extended preface, an introduction entitled “The Bible in Antebellum America,” and six chapters on various aspects of Latter-day Saint biblical interpretation: (1) “Before Mormonism: Joseph Smith and the Bible, 1820–1830”; (2) “From the Birth of the Church to the Death of the Prophet”; (3) “Diversity and Development: The Bible Moves West”; (4) “The Mormon Response to Higher Criticism”; (5) “Why the King James Version?”; and (6) “The Bible in Contemporary Mormonism.” The content of each chapter is sketched below. My main interest is to make clear Barlow’s methodologies and main presuppositions.
The preface lays the groundwork for the book. Barlow notes that "until we can ascertain whether Mormons have tended to use the Bible in ways that are more like or more unlike those of other American religionists, assertions about Mormon similarity or dissimilarity to American religion more generally remain on insecure ground; the scholarly discussion to date simply lacks a dimension too central to ignore" (ix). Clearly, cultural factors and not merely exegetical principles must be examined, and this volume has a strong sociological base—in my opinion, too strong.

Barlow states briefly his personal allegiances indicating that I am a practicing Mormon, and second, that I have on many issues a greater personal sympathy for liberal than for conservative religious expressions. Of course, labels can be dangerous. . . . Guided in part by advice from the Book of Mormon, my kind of Latter-day Saint is likely to have as much in common with liberals and moderates of other faiths as with staunch conservatives of his or her own church. (xviii)

He also states his presuppositions. For example, he defines objectivity:

I use it broadly here as a shorthand to connote a method that embraces such values as balance, fairness, openness, integrity, the willingness to be self-critical, honesty in the attempt to present and follow even difficult or painful evidence, a modesty which respects opposing competent views, an absence of dogmatism, and the ability to produce history which seems responsible to diverse but intelligent and informed people of good will. (xvi)

He notes, however, that there are certain areas of life which transcend the methodologies of historical study and which are therefore closed to the historian. Historians can deal only with the visible:

I am convinced that reality has dimensions far transcending human capacities to ascertain. . . . If those forces are discernible at all, though, the discernment must come through private intuitions, or the vision of prophets, or the inspiration of poets, or the speculations of metaphysicians. They are not discernible through the tools of historians, strictly speaking, whose more modest task is to deal with things visible. (xvi)

Having said this, however, Barlow sets a lofty goal: "The historical task can and should be essentially a constructive work for humanity, possibly having as one of its positive goals the distinguishing of moral, spiritual, and intellectual wheat from chaff" (xvii).
The introduction and chapter 1 then examine Joseph Smith in his cultural and religious context before 1830. Chapter 2 traces the development of the Prophet’s understanding of scripture and his relationship to it. There is some interesting and very helpful material in these chapters, especially for those who seek to gain an understanding of the milieu in which the restoration of the gospel occurred. Barlow rightly stresses the powerful biblical climate which affected all aspects of early nineteenth-century life. There was a reverence for “unmediated scripture” (7), and scripture—interpreted by the individual—was the great equalizer which enabled men and women to confront the highest secular authorities (8). Such was the environment into which Joseph Smith was born—an environment without any central magisterium to define how one should interpret scripture.

The author also examines Joseph Smith’s language against and within this biblically laced society. According to Barlow, Smith’s mind was so steeped in biblical thought and phraseology, chiefly that of the King James Version, that such language colored accounts of his visions, the content of the Doctrine and Covenants, and even his memory of reported events. While these assertions have a prima facie ring of plausibility, ultimately they cannot be proved, nor can their implications. Barlow’s point that the King James Version influenced Joseph Smith’s “memory” of history and other matters would seem to imply that Barlow believes that some of the recorded events may not be fully historical or possibly not technically literal simply because Joseph expressed himself in biblical idioms (14, 19–21).

Barlow couples the above reflections with the argument that the text of the Bible was more fluid for Joseph Smith than it was for his contemporaries. While other people, like the Campbells, believed in the all-sufficiency of scripture, Joseph Smith came to believe that the Bible was open to correction and to additions, either in the text itself or by the addition of other volumes of scripture (57). While asserting this point, Barlow also points out that Joseph held a highly literalistic view of biblical events: “When the Bible reported that God spoke with Moses face to face and that angels appeared to human beings, that was the way it was. Smith knew it to be so because he too had been visited by God and angels. Indeed, his literal
mind set may have helped make such divine appearances possible for him” (65).

In chapters 1 and 2, the author also explores the major influences of the King James Version on Joseph Smith. Barlow talks about the imperfections in the KJV as represented in the corrections to the existing text of Malachi as quoted by Moroni (16–17), which Barlow suggests led to Joseph’s willingness to revise the text of the KJV; “while others set out to correct these imperfections by scholarly means, Smith mended the Bible by revelation” (47). Barlow catalogs six types of revisions that were made in the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible, i.e., long passages which claim to restore texts with no biblical parallel; common sense changes; interpretive additions; harmonization; miscellaneous, many of which reflect a propensity to remove italicized words; and, the most common, grammatical improvements, technical clarifications, and modernization of terms (51–53).

The reason Joseph Smith could treat the Old and New Testament texts as he did, according to Barlow, lies, first, in the nineteenth century’s understanding of authorship in which a writer could put words in an historical figure’s mouth (58–60) and, second, in Smith’s prophetic consciousness in which he felt he had received enlightenment from God for the entire world (60–61).

Chapter 2 ends by noting the revelations received during the process of producing the Joseph Smith Translation, the concept of typology which enabled Joseph Smith to see the Church as a new Israel, and the inherent biblicism which was part of his life:

Like many who wrote the Bible, and unlike his nineteenth-century antagonists, he felt his access to Deity was more direct than the written word itself; his authority was therefore at least as great as the text’s. If Sydney Ahlstrom’s and Fawn Brodie’s label of “megalomania” serves any useful purpose in describing such attitudes and practices, we must also remember it is equally applicable to many biblical writers and prophets, with whom Smith himself identified.

... The Bible fundamentally shaped Joseph Smith’s developing thought, and he in turn reshaped biblical theology for himself and for those who followed him. As distinct from his evangelical rivals, he did not seek to enthrone the Bible as final authority; he sought rather to restore the authority, truth, and prophetic gifts recorded in the Bible. (72)
Chapter 3 contrasts the views of Brigham Young and Orson Pratt concerning the place of the Bible in early Mormon thought. Pratt was the leading LDS intellectual of his time and tried to reconcile all Mormon doctrine with the biblical texts. Thus, the Bible spoke prophetically of the restoration. Brigham Young, on the other hand, clearly saw the Bible as one source among many. Biblical truth was reverenced, but modern truths could supersede it. Living revelation and the Spirit made the Bible understandable, not intellectualization. Barlow sees a contrast between these two men, especially when he notes that Pratt was far more tied to the Bible than was either Joseph Smith or Brigham Young (92–94).²

At the same time, Barlow highlights further the LDS doctrine that God speaks to his people through living prophets with the following observation on Brigham Young:

Brigham Young, fundamentally a Bible-believer, inherited this distinctive tradition from Smith. His sermons, often self-consciously "secular," were fully as authoritative as the Bible. For him, Mormon doctrine was Bible doctrine. The catch was that scripture, which had been written "by the spirit," had to be interpreted "by the spirit." Unless one understood Mormon theological insights, one did not really understand and believe the Bible. From one angle of vision, this is merely a case of blatant scriptural eisegesis. But as Young read the Bible, only "he who hath eyes to see" could see. (96, italics in original)³

Thus, the Bible was limited by living prophets, and therefore the canon was inevitably open (102).

Chapter 4 explores the Latter-day Saint response to higher biblical criticism using the works of B. H. Roberts, Joseph Fielding Smith, and William H. Chamberlin to represent the spectrum of Mormon thought. As noted earlier, Barlow’s sympathies clearly lie with persons open to historical-critical biblical interpretation. Thus, he appears to feel a kinship with the little-known Chamberlin. Chamberlin was trained at the University of Utah, the University of California, and at the University of Chicago. In the latter two universities, he studied philosophy, ancient languages, and biblical criticism (129–34).

According to Barlow, the antithesis to Chamberlin was Joseph Fielding Smith. "He had no use for human knowledge that did not conform to ‘the revealed word of God’ as interpreted by a severe
though selective literalism” (122). Similarly, Barlow reflects on Smith’s interpretative assumptions:

Elder Smith’s most fundamental hermeneutical assumption was that the Bible and other Mormon scriptures were essentially God’s speech in print. . . . Scripture to him represented “actual facts”; history and science were “theory.” . . .

He was simply an ordinary man with extraordinary influence, a man whose loyalty to God, as he understood God, was virtually boundless. . . . What he lacked—or rejected—was a modern historical consciousness: the conviction that “knowledge of divine things, like knowledge of ordinary things, must be found squarely within the historical process or not at all.” He believed that revelation, ancient and modern, completely transcended history. (126-27)

The author views B. H. Roberts as a midpoint between Chamberlin and Joseph Fielding Smith. Roberts engaged to some degree the biblical scholars who used the historical-critical methodologies in dialogue, but inadequately in Barlow’s mind, since Roberts continued to return to his dominant criticism that the academic methodologies failed to take seriously the possibility that prophetic scripture could foresee the future (116).

Chapter 5 contains the author’s summary of J. Reuben Clark’s arguments for the use of the King James Version of the Bible. Compared with other translations of the Bible, the King James Version, according to President Clark, was

(1) doctrinally more acceptable, (2) verified by the work of Joseph Smith, (3) based on a better Greek text, (4) literally superior, (5) the version of LDS tradition, and (6) produced by faithful, prayerful churchmen who were amenable to the Holy Spirit rather than by a mixture of believing and unbelieving, or orthodox and heterodox, scholars. (161)

Barlow notes that wording changes in the Revised Standard Version of the Bible which appeared in 1952 concerned Clark and thus led to his writings in defense of the KJV. Of particular concern was what Clark perceived to be a diminution of the divinity of the Savior (162). Interestingly, Barlow appends a chart showing the eight New Testament passages in which Christ’s divinity is potentially affirmed. Of those eight, the New International Version affirms the divinity clearly in seven, the Revised Version in six, the Revised
Standard Version in four, and the King James Version in four (181). He also notes that not all within the Church agreed entirely with Clark’s view of other translations, the most notable being President David O. McKay (169–70). Barlow argues further that Clark subverted his own position when he admitted that he could not understand much of Paul (170).

Above all, Barlow feels that the stance the Church has currently taken with regard to the normative nature of the KJV runs counter to what the Church originally held about the fallible nature of the entire biblical text. It contained error, the very reality that led to the Joseph Smith Translation and the openness of the Church to latter-day scripture (156, 172). Barlow’s position, however, overstates this tension and, at the same time, underemphasizes the several factors that have contributed to the standard use of King James English in Church publications.⁴ The real issue for Barlow, then, becomes the Church’s full acceptance of the King James Version in the 1979 LDS edition of the scriptures:

Despite this diversity of opinion in Mormon ranks, Church authorities in 1979 published an “official” LDS edition of the KJV, heavily cross-referenced with other Mormon scriptures. . . .

As they approach the twenty-first century, they have settled on an early-seventeenth-century translation as their official Bible. Unlike many other Christians, any controversy over the issue has been decidedly muted. At least on this matter—though partly for their own distinctive reasons—the Saints have traveled a well-worn path, showing themselves to be more conservative even than most of their evangelical peers. (177–78)

Chapter 6 contrasts the views of Elder Bruce McConkie and those of Lowell Bennion on the Bible. McConkie is viewed as the conservative dogmatist and Bennion as the enlightened humanitarian. In discussing Bruce McConkie’s perspectives on biblical interpretation, Barlow observes:

One can quickly grasp McConkie’s essential perspective on the Bible by attending to five dimensions of his approach: his disdain for higher criticism, his criteria for proper interpretation, his concern for “correct doctrine,” his selective commitment to literalism and inerrancy, and the limitations he put on biblical authority without imposing them on revelation generally. (187)
He sees Lowell Bennion as a distinct contrast to McConkie, especially in his attitude toward the interpretation of scripture. He feels that by the 1960s Bennion was recognized by some LDS scholars as being "among the seven most eminent intellectuals in Mormon history," having published numerous books and articles on a wide range of topics (195). In Barlow’s view, Bennion by his own admission was a "liberal." This meant that the overriding concern for Bennion was not theology, but rather justice and mercy (199). Bennion’s assessment of valid interpretation of scripture hinged on whether “it (1) is consistent with gospel fundamentals as defined above, (2) is confirmed by the prompting of the Holy Spirit, (3) appeals to thoughtful ethical judgment, (4) has won wide agreement among informed and rational persons of good will, (5) allows for the human as well as the divine in revelation, and (6) is primarily concerned with scripture’s religious intent” (203–4).

On the basis of this analysis, the dominant difference between McConkie and Bennion is that McConkie stresses revelation to the limiting of reason, while Bennion, too, believes in revelation, but does not believe that it is contrary to natural human reason. Using his discussion of the differences between the conservative McConkie and the liberal Bennion, Barlow once again returns, at the end of the chapter, to his assessment of the 1979 scriptures released by the Church. He feels that they represent a distinct conservatism that does not reflect the whole of the Mormon community.

However, as I have argued, Mormon scriptural understandings are not monolithic. Hence what is most interesting for present purposes is not the mere fact that Mormon theology is proffered in the new biblical supplements but, rather, the kind of Mormon theology expressed. The interpretations adopted in these supplements are far closer to Bruce McConkie’s view—in many cases they are McConkie’s views—than to Lowell Bennion’s. (209)

Thus, according to Barlow, the conservative influence in the Church, particularly represented by McConkie, has been so all-encompassing that there exists no modern, informed scholarship on biblical issues among Mormons and more than occasional doses of literalism (227).

Mormons have no developed theory or doctrine of scripture adequate for a modern world. Lowell Bennion’s efforts are a thoughtful begin-
ning by a nonspecialist but, naturally, they do not enjoy official stature. . . .

Yet the Church’s constant urging to “study the scriptures”—without any serious discussion of scripture’s nature, and coupled with what are implied to be the normative views of the 1979 biblical supplements and the recent generation of religious educational publications based not on informed scholarship but on dogmatic concerns—insures a minimum of competent thought about a quintessential aspect of Mormonism. (226)

The consequences of this are that “the majority of Mormons remain in a hermeneutical Eden, innocent of a conscious philosophy of interpretation” (227).

In summary, Barlow’s efforts in this book are provocative. He raises questions which many will feel need to be addressed and which many others will feel have already been answered. He certainly shows streams of thought that have been present to a greater or lesser extent in the Church, but his presentation tends to accentuate and imply the existence of a greater gulf between the various persons examined than actually in fact may have existed. In this sense, his work does not yield an entirely balanced representation of the typical LDS experience with the Bible.

One final issue needs attention. While the book is predominantly concerned with a historical and sociological analysis, there is another dimension obvious to those versed in the hermeneutical discussions (discussions about how one interprets the Bible) carried on in the twentieth century. In the final analysis, Barlow’s book revives, in a Mormon context, the hermeneutical debate that began in the 1930s between Karl Barth, Rudolf Bultmann, and Bultmann’s successors. In 1927, Barth published his first attempt at a systematic theology under the title Die christliche Dogmatik im Entwurf (Christian Dogmatics in Outline). He then stopped his work to write a commentary on St. Anselm’s Fides Quaerens Intellectum (Faith Seeking Understanding). When he returned to his theological project, he returned with a new vision, realizing that what he wanted to say could not be cast in the language of nonfaith, but could be said only in categories that had meaning within the community of the faith, i.e., within the Church. To the world of nonfaith, the categories of revelation, inspiration of the Spirit, and the divine sonship of Jesus
Christ were meaningless. Thus, Barth started the theological process over, this time writing *Church Dogmatics*. Because of Barth's move away from interpreting the Christian faith in philosophical terms and categories, Rudolf Bultmann accused Barth of ceasing to interpret scripture and of returning to a naïve biblical literalism and dogmatism that should not be tolerated in the modern world. Bultmann believed that the language of the Bible was time bound and needed to be “demythologized” or more accurately “existentialized.” Existent philosophy, coupled with historical/critical analysis, could remove the chaff from the grain.

Bultmann's successors suggested other hermeneutical keys for getting at the true meaning of the text. For Gerhard Ebeling, man is a linguistic being, subject to words, thus the “word event” finds a correspondence in man. For Wolfhart Pannenberg, the historical event, in its historical context, is the revelatory event.

These efforts, apart from Karl Barth's, had one thing in common—a basic optimism about human reason and a reticence about revelation. The situation appears to be similar with Barlow's book. Because he, with his chosen tools, cannot or does not access continuing revelation, prophets, and an active Holy Spirit who inspires understanding in readers of the Bible, he seeks to find Mormon interpretive principles in places different from where Mormon leaders have always claimed them to be found, i.e., in the Spirit of revelation. Thus, Barlow, by sympathizing with modern historical-critical methodologies, abandons the historical Mormon hermeneutic and in effect significantly limits the scope and value of his enterprise, which is to ascertain how Mormons have interpreted the Bible. To comprehend adequately the principles upon which Mormon hermeneutics are based, the categories of the theologian are essential. The tools of the historian are not wholly adequate to the task.

NOTES

1 If, as Barlow suggests, the historian's task is to deal with the visible, one must wonder how historians can identify moral and spiritual truths, both of which have their roots in a plane beyond the visible realm.
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For most Latter-day Saints this is not surprising, for the prophets (like Joseph and Brigham) are the conduit for new truths that have not yet been made known to others (like Pratt).

Both Luther and Calvin held positions on the Spirit much like that of Brigham Young. Reason alone, the tools of the scholar, or the authority of the Church were insufficient for an adequate interpretation of scripture. Apart from the Spirit, there was no true interpretation. John Dillengerger states: “Luther’s use of the term ‘right reason’ . . . was a demand for sensible interpretation of Scripture against the presumptuous claims of the Church. . . . Such interpretation involved being grasped by the Biblical Word and the Spirit conjoined in such a way that one was laid hold of by more than what the text said. It was being grasped in one’s depth, being redirected in one’s total being, including heart and mind, by the living Word.” John Dillengerger, ed., *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1961), xxxi. Similarly, Calvin’s heading to book 1, chapter 7, in the *Institutes* leaves little doubt where he stood on the role of the Spirit: “Scripture Must Be Confirmed by the Witness of the Spirit. Thus May Its Authority Be Established as Certain; and It Is a Wicked Falsehood that Its Credibility Depends on the Judgment of the Church.” John T. McNeill, ed., *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols., The Library of Christian Classics series, vol. 20 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1967), 1:74.

Fundamental to Mormonism is the belief that it is not a particular translation which makes the Bible understandable, but rather the Spirit of God which takes any imperfect translation and makes the text clear to the reader. Secondly, Latter-day Saints see themselves as a people under the authority of a living prophet. It was the prophet of God, in this case Harold B. Lee, who made the decision to use the King James text in the 1979 edition of the scriptures for official Church purposes in English-speaking areas. See the article “Bible: King James Version,” in Daniel H. Ludlow, ed., *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* (New York: Macmillan, 1991). Since Latter-day Saints believe the prophet to be inspired, they need not question that institutional decision. Having said this, however, any Latter-day Saint is free to consult other translations to assist in the interpretative process as directed by the Spirit.

Barlow’s footnote 44 on page 198 states: “Bennion’s definition of a religious (Mormon) liberal denotes a person with an ethical emphasis, who is concerned with people more than with doctrine, who is prepared to adapt the theology and structure of a church to serve human values, and who is open-minded and free to think rather than feeling obligated a priori to accept the pronouncements of either scripture or human authority figures.” Barlow cites “A Saint for All Seasons: An Interview with Lowell L. Bennion,” *Sunstone* 10 (February 1985): 7–17; and Lowell L. Bennion, “Being a ‘Liberal,’” in *Do Justly and Love Mercy: Moral Issues for Mormons* (Centerville, Utah: Canon Press, 1988), 85–94.

It seems to the reviewer that Barlow makes a sharper dichotomy between Bennion and McConkie than is necessary. Neither position is absolutely exclusive of the other. The dominant difference is in emphasis, even though the two individuals in question may have felt that they were quite removed from one another.
