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The Bible, Mormon Scripture, and the Rhetoric of Allusivity

Jeffrey D. Tucker
Brigham Young University

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Nicholas J. Frederick. *The Bible, Mormon Scripture, and the Rhetoric of Allusivity*.

Madison, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2016.

Reviewed by Jeffrey D. Tucker

Nicholas J. Frederick's new book, *The Bible, Mormon Scripture, and the Rhetoric of Allusivity*, is a highly detailed analysis in which Frederick compares the Book of Mormon and the Doctrine and Covenants with the Gospel of John, especially the first eighteen verses of John's Gospel—the Johannine Prologue. In so doing, Frederick argues that Joseph Smith purposefully incorporated biblical allusions into Mormon canonical works to imbue Mormon scripture, the nascent church, and Joseph Smith himself with authority and gravitas—a technique prophets have traditionally used throughout the ages (xiv). According to Frederick, one mark of a prophet, anciently speaking, *was* allusivity: “By adopting the rhetoric of allusivity, authors intentionally link themselves to earlier text . . . to gain entry into a canon” (xiv). Such, Frederick argues, was Joseph Smith's intention. Quoting Grant Hardy, Frederick suggests that Joseph Smith was simply following the lead of Moroni, who knew “his core audience intimately; [that is,] latter-day Gentiles” (7). To reach such an audience, Frederick avers, Joseph Smith used passages from the King James Bible.

Frederick divides Smith's use of biblical allusivity into four categories: (1) an “echo” of John's prologue, wherein the Johannine language appearing in the Book of Mormon is just that—an echo, meant to cause Book of Mormon readers to recall familiar pieces of the Bible and not, necessarily, to suggest any subtext, aside from establishing Smith's authority as a prophet; (2) an “allusion” to John's prologue, where both the language *and* context of John's words are carried over from the Bible into the Book of Mormon, allowing readers to apply the meaning or subtext of John's words to LDS scripture (and vice versa); (3) a Johannine “expansion,” in which a concept, originally expressed in John's Gospel, is amplified or given additional meaning through its inclusion

in Mormon scripture; and (4) “inversion,” which Frederick describes as something of an opposite use of “expansion”—that is, a concept or quote is taken from the Gospel of John, but its meaning, through inclusion in Mormon scripture, is recast and reconstructed to fit Mormon ideology. (Frederick points out that, with regard to the Johannine Prologue, only section 93 in the Doctrine and Covenants falls into this latter category.)

Here is an example of an “echo”: Frederick, in analyzing 3 Nephi 9, notes that Jesus repeats a statement found in John 1:1–2, that “I am in the Father and the Father in me,” a phrase also found in John 14. Why, Frederick asks, is this statement found in 3 Nephi, removed from the context that originally produced it—that is, Jesus’s reply to a question from Philip? While Frederick admits that the statement does have intrinsic doctrinal value, Frederick asserts that Joseph Smith wrote Jesus’s statement as it appears in 3 Nephi 9 to win over Smith’s nineteenth-century audience, showing Smith’s contemporaries that “the Book of Mormon speaks in a language that . . . carries . . . the authority of the Bible” (5).

Why use the Gospel of John? “Perhaps,” Frederick posits, “Joseph Smith wanted a distinct voice in which Jesus would speak in the modern days, and John’s text, with its unique language and imagery, provided that voice. . . . Perhaps Joseph Smith, like the epic poets of ancient Greece, relied upon certain stock phrases . . . around which to construct his revelations” (47), and the Gospel of John was the best source for such “stock phrases.”

When employing the term *rhetoric*, the art of persuasion, Frederick means exactly that—Joseph Smith deliberately employed persuasive techniques while writing the Book of Mormon to make it more palatable to a hostile nineteenth-century readership. According to Frederick, Joseph Smith “borrows” language from the Johannine Prologue “as part of a well-developed argument” (24); Joseph Smith uses the Gospel of John for “rhetorical” purposes “rather than theological” ones (15); in the Doctrine and Covenants, the Johannine echoes serve “a rhetorical function,” not an “interpretive” role (10). It is over this point that some of Frederick’s audience—assuming an audience composed, at least partially, of believing Latter-day Saints—may balk. For those Latter-day Saints who believe, as many do, that Smith merely wrote the words dictated to him by God, such people may ask why any *choice* about the Book of Mormon’s—or the Doctrine and Covenants’—verbiage was necessary. They may feel that Frederick’s thesis hews too closely to the claims of anti-LDS writings, which, for years, have claimed that Joseph Smith, rather than ancient prophets, is the actual author of the Book of Mormon.

In his introduction, Frederick quotes such familiar names as Emma Smith and Joseph Knight Sr., with each giving their personal testimony to how, exactly, they saw Smith translate the Book of Mormon; Frederick even includes a brief summary of the “stone in a hat” translation method. Ultimately, though, Frederick says that no historical account “satisfactorily explicates the *source* of [Joseph Smith’s] revelations” (xxvi), and it is telling that Frederick quotes Robert J. Woodford, who, speaking in shades of Derrida, says that “the great majority of [Joseph Smith’s] revelations were given to him through inspiration to his mind, and it was left to him to write them so others could also obtain the same message” (xxvii).

In an email exchange with me, Frederick expressed hope that people can “get past the questions of translation” and simply focus on the text itself. Yet, given the claimed supernatural origin of LDS scripture, some may find that separating the text from Joseph Smith’s translation process is, at best, impossible, and, at worst, deleterious to the exegetical process. For example, in his first chapter, Frederick cites three passages from John quoted by Jesus in 3 Nephi—“And as many have received me, to them have I given to become the sons of God,” “And even so will I to as many as shall believe on my name,” and “I am the light and the life of the world”—and then states:

All three phrases can function within the Book of Mormon narrative, but no meaning is carried over from the Bible to the Book of Mormon from a hermeneutical perspective because *the Nephites could not have understood the source material and its significance*. In the time frame laid out by the Book of Mormon, the Gospel of John did not yet exist. For this reason we must seek out an audience for whom the language of John would have been meaningful, an audience for whom the “echo” would actually have signified something, in this case the nineteenth century readers of the Book of Mormon. (6, emphasis added)

While acknowledging that the three phrases spoken by Jesus “can function in the Book of Mormon narrative,” Frederick fails to see that these phrases would have certainly “signified something” to Jesus’ Nephite audience and cannot be so easily dismissed.

Frederick’s stance that caters to an audience of non-LDS academics is understandable, given the situation in which Frederick finds himself: he is writing to an academically rigorous audience, most of whom are not LDS. (Fairleigh Dickinson University Press has made strides recently to publish more material in the field of Mormon studies.) The tone of his book, unsurprisingly, reflects this. And, truly, Frederick writes a

thorough, probing example of scriptural close reading that would be valuable for any student of LDS scripture, believer or nonbeliever alike. When Frederick rolls up his sleeves and dives into scriptural analysis, identifying the Gospel of John in places previously unnoticed, the book fascinates and instructs.

In saying that Joseph Smith used rhetorical technique when translating, we can postulate that Frederick favors the hypothesis that the Lord placed ideas into Joseph Smith's mind, who then had to figure out the best way to present those ideas. Thus, perhaps the greatest value of Frederick's book lies not in its thesis or in its conclusions, but in the questions it raises about the nature of Joseph Smith's revelatory process. For those not affiliated with the LDS faith, the book inspires contemplation of Joseph Smith, his era, and the struggle he faced to establish a new faith. For the believer, *The Bible, Mormon Scripture, and the Rhetoric of Allusivity* demonstrates how intricate the process of revelation can be. Can the Lord dictate, word by word, a revelation, as many—such as Royal Skousen—believe happened with the Book of Mormon? Can he also give impressions into the mind, thus prompting study, meditation, and prayer to fully understand a revelation, which is then put to paper under the influence of rhetorical technique? This is a book that asks us to put ourselves in Joseph Smith's place and, in turn, ponder how we can commune with a higher power.

Jeffrey D. Tucker received degrees in English from Brigham Young University (BA, 2003; MA, 2006) and a doctorate in English from the University of Southern Mississippi, where he studied creative writing. Tucker recently published his first full-length collection of poetry, *Kill February* (Sage Hill, 2015), which was chosen as the winner of the Powder Horn Prize for Poetry, a national literary contest. He currently teaches in the Department of English at Brigham Young University; he has also taught in the Church Educational System, serving as an Institute of Religion teacher in Virginia.