1997

Ethan Smith. *View of the Hebrews*.

Andrew H. Hedges

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

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/msr/vol9/iss1/13
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Title</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Author(s)</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Andrew H. Hedges</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Reference</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>ISSN</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1099-9450 (print), 2168-3123 (online)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Reviewed by Andrew H. Hedges

At first glance, the scene seems strangely incongruous: Brigham Young University’s Religious Studies Center publishing a book that several generations of church critics have fingered as the true source of inspiration—rather than gold plates and the Urim and Thummim—for the Book of Mormon. The incongruity appears even more pronounced in light of the fact that, as the present edition’s preface informs us, the book has not been republished since 1825, and copies are hard to come by. Why, one might legitimately ask, put what has been such a fruitful source of attack against the church back on the shelves now, just when it is on the verge of crumbling to dust? Is there a real need for a new printing of *View of the Hebrews*?

Indeed there is. One need only spend an afternoon reading through the most recent crop of books and essays dedicated to explaining away Joseph Smith and the church he restored as mere products of the nineteenth century to realize that the need for accessible copies of Ethan Smith’s *View of the Hebrews* has perhaps never been greater than at present. An afternoon thus spent would reveal the unfortunate fact that the increasing unavailability of this book has not been matched by an increasing scarcity of authors claiming that Joseph Smith borrowed, to one degree or another, from Ethan Smith’s work when he “wrote” the Book of Mormon. Indeed, it is apparent from Charles D. Tate Jr.’s introduction to this new edition that the number of authors making this claim has been steadily increasing since I. Woodbridge Riley first propounded it in 1903 (p. ix). Given the 1825 edition’s relative rarity, however, very few scholars—let alone laymen—who have wanted to compare the two books for themselves have had the opportunity to sit down with a complete, readable copy of Ethan
Smith's work. Hence the present edition: the chance for anyone who is interested to decide for him- or herself "whether the claim that [View of the Hebrews] is a source of the Book of Mormon can be substantiated" (p. viii).

This effort on the part of the Religious Studies Center to bring its readers face to face with one of the "opposition's" chief sources represents a significant departure from the accustomed practice of some presses devoted to defending the rise and progress of the Latter-day Saint Church. This is not to suggest, however, that the end product is any less valuable for the student of the restoration than a more traditional type of book—indeed, those who take the time to read Ethan Smith's oft-cited but rarely seen opus and compare it with the Book of Mormon will find the experience to be wonderfully faith promoting. This is because the further one reads in View of the Hebrews, the clearer it becomes that the Book of Mormon did not—indeed, could not—have its origin in it.

Allow me to explain. The tradition in which Ethan Smith was writing was a long and venerable one—as Richard Bushman has reminded us, English scholars were identifying the American aborigines with Jews as early as the sixteenth century.1 The idea reached American shores in the mid-1640s when John Eliot, the famous Puritan "Apostle to the Indians"; Daniel Gookin, the Massachusetts Bay Colony's Indian Superintendent; and other Puritan divines found the similarities between the Algonquin culture and ancient Israelite practices so compelling that they modified the then popular view—which held that the Indians were gentile "Tartars" from Asia—to suggest that, at the very least, the Indians were descendants of Hebrews who had made their way to America via a land bridge from Asia and were quite likely descendants of the lost tribes who had come the same route.2

Subsequent generations discussed and promoted the idea until 1775, when James Adair fully developed it in his *History of the American Indians*.\(^3\) Ethan Smith’s *View of the Hebrews* was just one of several books and pamphlets written on the topic in both England and America following the publication of Adair’s book, all of which echoed the earlier Puritan contention that the Indians were unchurched descendants of the lost tribes who had come to America from Asia via a land bridge or, at most, “by canoes, or other craft” (p. 84) across the Bering Straits.\(^4\)

A close reading of *View of the Hebrews* suggests that, while some aspects of this reconstruction could be debated, it is generally so complex as to be quite inflexible, based as it is on a relatively conservative reading of the biblical text and a number of suppositions so interdependent that if one should prove false, the whole model would collapse. Any modifications would have to be relatively small and insignificant, which explains why the basic outlines of the model remained virtually unchanged over the course of two centuries’ worth of discussion. For example, churchmen over the centuries could (and did) debate how much of the Mosaic law the Indians as the lost tribes had retained after arriving in America. They could do this because such debates did not alter in the least the basic structure of the paradigm, which posited a pre-Christian migration of Israelites who had some knowledge of Old Testament practices. The churchmen did not, however, at any time debate the possibility that the Indians’ ancestors knew of Christ’s birth before the event, had engaged in such New Testament practices as baptism in Old Testament times, and had been visited by Christ after his resurrection. This was because the mere suggestion of these things would have done violence to their understanding of the Bible, contemporary evidence from Indian cultures themselves, and other parts of the model. For such a suggestion to be true in the context of early America’s understanding of the Bible, for example, the Indians’ ancestors would have to have been believing Christians who left the Old

---

\(^3\) Bushman, *Joseph Smith*, 134.

\(^4\) For a discussion about the identification of the Native Americans with the Jews, see Bushman, *Joseph Smith*, 136–8.
World after the time of Christ, since early American scholarship emphatically held that the ancient Israelites completely misunderstood their own messianic prophecies and that ordinances like baptism had not been practiced in Old Testament times. This reconstruction would have flown in the face of all existing anthropological evidence, however—none of the practices in the native cultures studied resembled New Testament practices—and, unlike the lost tribes thesis, had no basis in scripture. Given the parameters in which they had to work, the suggestion that the Indians’ ancestors engaged in New Testament practices would have created rather than solved problems and would have required an entirely new reconstruction of events—based on a new reading of the text and other evidence—to be taken seriously. In short, keeping with our example, either the suggestion that the Indians’ ancestors practiced baptism or the model proposed by Adair, Smith, and others would have to be false; they could not both be true, nor—and this is important—could the former be considered an unimportant, inconsequential, and perfectly logical modification of the latter.

The Book of Mormon, of course, makes precisely this claim about baptism, along with several others that likewise cannot be reconciled with the nineteenth-century model explaining Indian origins. Thus it was that the further I read in View of the Hebrews, the greater the distance between it and the Book of Mormon appeared. Superficially, of course, the two resemble each other, and it was easy to see how someone with an ax to grind against the LDS Church could, with a little creative negligence, make a case against the Book of Mormon. But as I came to understand the complexity and inflexibility of Smith’s model, it became increasingly clear to me that the Book of Mormon’s teachings concerning Indian origins and destinies were something entirely new on the American scene and represented far more than mere

---

5 Thus it was that Alexander Campbell, Joseph Smith’s famous contemporary, ridiculed the Book of Mormon for suggesting that “the Nephites . . . for many generations were good christians . . . preaching baptism and other christian usages hundreds of years before Jesus Christ was born!” See Alexander Campbell, Delusions: An Analysis of the Book of Mormon; with an Examination of Its Internal and External Evidences, and a Refutation of Its Pretences to Divine Authority (Boston: Greene, 1832), 7.
modifications of the existing explanation. They were, to borrow a phrase, a “strange thing in the land” in every respect.

In republishing View of the Hebrews, the Religious Studies Center has provided valuable aids for anyone wishing to pursue this question further. Charles D. Tate Jr.’s introduction, wherein he traces the development of the debate surrounding Joseph Smith’s alleged borrowing from View of the Hebrews, is a masterpiece in historiography and deftly introduces the reader to all that Joseph’s critics and defenders have written on this topic over the years. The scripture index is equally valuable; not only does it facilitate an understanding of the scriptural basis for Ethan Smith’s arguments, it also makes it much easier to compare scriptures used in the Book of Mormon with those employed by Ethan Smith. For those wishing to learn more about Ethan Smith himself and his ideas, the Religious Studies Center has also included a complete list of his publications in this edition. And finally, the center’s willingness to publish his work in toto, including the contemporary “testimonials in favour of this work” that Smith appended to his book, renders us a great service. While some of what Ethan Smith included in his 1825 edition—such as these “testimonials”—may not seem immediately pertinent to Latter-day Saint Church history, all of it forms a part of the cultural context into which Mormonism was introduced. This context, for which sources can be difficult to obtain, is not well understood generally, and anything that can shed further light on it will help us better appreciate the challenges faced by the early church, its distinctiveness, and the importance of its doctrines.

I hope that the Religious Studies Center and other presses will publish more books of this nature. If they do, I have only two suggestions they might consider, based on my reading of View of the Hebrews. First, I found the absence of a subject index in this book rather frustrating. The problem was not as bad as it might have been; Ethan Smith’s table of contents is very well organized and thorough and identifies the various topics he addresses in enough detail that I could generally find at least one reference to what I was looking for. It is, nevertheless, no substitute for a good index, one which can quickly direct the reader to all the references a book may contain on any given topic or related topics. This is especially true of a book like this, in which the arguments are
sophisticated and involved and a variety of related issues are discussed; more likely than not the book will be used by specialists seeking insights into very specific questions.

Second, I was somewhat frustrated by the fact that this edition is paginated differently from Smith’s original 1825 edition, and that no attempt was made to key the original pagination into this volume. This presented no small problem when I tried to look up references cited by various authors who were using Smith’s original 1825 edition as their source, for the topics addressed on the pages to which they referred me are different in the Religious Studies Center’s edition than in the 1825 edition. This made it virtually impossible for me in a reasonable amount of time to verify the accuracy and context of the quotes these authors used and hindered my efforts to evaluate the validity of their claims. This problem is easily avoided; even if printing constraints require the pagination of a new edition to be different from that of the old, one can indicate the original pagination by placing the appropriate page numbers in brackets in the text of the new edition. Should the Religious Studies Center publish more such historical sources, a little extra effort on its part in this regard would pay great dividends for the researcher.

These two suggestions aside, I can only applaud the Religious Studies Center’s willingness to publish View of the Hebrews. Not only has it made available an important primary source for those studying early Mormonism and its detractors, the center has, by publishing this book, demonstrated confidence in Joseph Smith’s calling and mission as the prophet of the restoration, as well as in the divine origin of the Book of Mormon.