

## The Triumph of Conservative Biblical Criticism

*Mormons and the Bible: The Place of the Latter-day Saints in American Religion.* By Philip L. Barlow (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

Reviewed by Scott Kenney, editor,  
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THE GOAL OF *MORMONS AND THE Bible*, according to author Phil Barlow, is "to sketch, through pivotal figures, the main developing lines of LDS biblical usage." The figures discussed are important thinkers and writers, and Barlow's insights into their diverse interpretations of the Bible are fascinating. Whether, as far as most Latter-day Saints are concerned, the liberals were "pivotal," and whether their approaches to the Bible have much of a mainstream following, is, it seems to me, questionable. But there can be no question that as a work of Mormon intellectual history this is a seminal—and eminently readable—work.

Barlow begins with a brief overview of biblical usage from the Puritans, through the First Great Awakening and Revolution, to the early nineteenth century. He keeps the reader abreast of trends in Protestant and Catholic thought throughout the volume, providing fascinating comparative insights to Mormonism. For instance, whereas Joseph Smith's contemporaries applied the Bible to their lives, Joseph viewed his life as a continuation of the Bible story. Biblical figures returned to instruct, bless, and ordain him. In his life, "endings were

put on stories that had their beginnings in scriptural text."

Significantly, Joseph did not write his new endings in stone. He routinely revised revelations to reflect subsequent circumstances and understandings. He made changes for the biblical text as well—posthumously published as the Inspired Version—but he believed he was correcting translation and transmission errors, not revising or amplifying the original "word of God." Like most of his contemporaries, Joseph assumed plenary inspiration for the Bible, an assumption he did not extend to the Book of Mormon or his own revelations. The Book of Mormon and "the holy scriptures" were separate. In contemporary accounts of his Nauvoo discourses Joseph cites the Book of Mormon twenty-three times and the Bible 600 times. Mormon periodicals of the 1830s cited the Bible nineteen times more frequently than the Book of Mormon. The significance of the Book of Mormon for early Mormons, Barlow concludes, lay not in its content but in the mere fact of existence. It was proof the biblical saga had been revived and was continuing in the person of Joseph Smith and the experience of latter-day Israel.

The engaging chapter comparing Brigham Young, who tended to disregard the Bible theologically, and Orson Pratt, who worked to synthesize Mormonism and traditional Bible in-

terpretation, is followed by an overview of higher criticism. This sets the stage for B. H. Roberts, Joseph Fielding Smith, and William H. Chamberlin.

Organic evolution threatened the Bible only by implication and primarily impacted only the account of creation. But higher criticism "challenged the Bible directly and entirely. . . . Equally sophisticated but not so easily popularized as Darwinism, the new approach to the Bible invited a much deeper and broader redefining of the nature . . . than an acceptance of evolution did of itself."

B. H. Roberts was receptive to higher criticism in principle but hostile to its most challenging implications. He allowed that the methods of biblical criticism were legitimate and made real contributions, but he never enumerated what those contributions were. On the other hand, he "lamented . . . the tendency of the critics to undermine the faith of traditional believers," particularly in the divinity of Jesus Christ, miracles, and prophetic prediction of future events. With regard to higher criticism, Barlow concludes, Roberts was "profoundly ambivalent."

No one ever accused Joseph Fielding Smith of ambivalence ("Why is it that thousands of intelligent-looking human beings are willing to accept these stupid teachings? Frankly it is because Satan has deceived them and they love darkness rather than light"). He was highly regarded as a scriptorian by his colleagues and lay members. Barlow contrasts Smith's veneration of scripture with Brigham Young's statement, "I would not give the ashes of a rye straw for all [scriptural] books . . . without the living oracles." Smith lacked—or rejected—a

modern historical consciousness, but he "raised entirely plausible objections against the Bible's critics. Ironically, several of his contentions were more specific and substantive than those of the better equipped B. H. Roberts."

On a continuum of Mormon attitudes, Barlow places Smith on the far right, Roberts and William H. Chamberlin, "the first Mormon teacher to make extended use of modern methods of Bible study," on the left. Chamberlin believed in a personal God, prophets and revelation, and a physical resurrection. Barlow's conclusion that Chamberlin remained "well within the tradition of Joseph Smith and Brigham Young" might be challenged, but his point is that Smith, Young, and Chamberlin all "stressed the limitations of human language, the provisional nature of revelation, and the need of a living prophet."

The perspectives of James Talmage, John Widtsoe, Russell Swensen, Heber Snell, Franklin West, and Sidney Sperry are briefly discussed before Barlow launches into what is, for me, the most interesting third of the book, J. Reuben Clark's wedding of Mormonism to the King James Version and the sealing of that union in the 1979 Mormon edition of the KJV.

Nineteenth-century Mormonism accepted the Bible as the word of God "insofar as it is translated correctly," emphasizing the existence of scribal errors and intentional corruptions. But when twentieth-century scholars offered a revised translation based on careful analysis of manuscripts not available to the KJV translators, Mormons became champions of the KJV. Echoing the conspiratorial suspicions of the McCarthy committee on Un-American Activities (which formally

charged Revised Standard Version members of introducing Communist influences into the Bible), J. Reuben Clark wondered "if there be not behind this movement . . . a deliberate . . . intent to destroy the Christian faith." He objected to the substitution of "signs" and "wonders" for "miracles," and "epileptic" for "lunatic." Where differences were observed, Joseph's Inspired Version more closely followed the KJV than the RSV. And since God's revelation to Joseph was verbal, not merely conceptual, the Inspired Version, and hence the KJV, is clearly superior. Though there were leaders like David O. McKay, who seemed to favor revisionist principles, no one spoke more forcefully or authoritatively in the 1950s than Clark, and succeeding generations of Mormon scholastics followed his lead.

Barlow presents a convincing case that with Clark Mormonism veered dramatically to the right. That vector continued through Joseph Fielding Smith and his son-in-law Bruce R. McConkie. Barlow points out that on doctrinal and scriptural matters McConkie is the most frequently cited Mormon leader of the twentieth century. His published works total nearly 7,000 pages, and he modestly observed, "It just may be that I have preached more sermons, taught more doctrine, and written more words about the Lord Jesus Christ than any man now living."

McConkie's anti-intellectual bias pervades the 1979 official LDS edition of the King James Version of the Bible, which was compiled by his long-time associate Robert J. Matthews. That influence can be seen in the 813-page harmonizing appendix. The "dictionary" is adapted from the Cambridge Bible Dictionary with emendations

such as, "Latter-day revelation teaches that there was no death on this earth for any forms of life before the fall of Adam" ("Death") and the omission of "The book [of Job] should not be regarded as literal history" ("Job"). McConkie wrote the interpretive chapter summaries, including, "Man is justified by faith, righteous works, and grace"—which, Barlow points out, may be doctrinally correct but is hardly the point of Romans 4.

To contrast Bruce R. McConkie, Barlow selected Lowell L. Bennion, the founding director of the Institute of Religion at the University of Utah. Bennion has published thirty books and a hundred essays on philosophy, ethics, sociology, politics, and religion. Considering his forty years of teaching and his publications, "it is doubtful that more than a handful of modern figures have wielded greater enduring influence on major sectors of Mormonism."

Bennion's concern for moral behavior, emphasizing people over doctrine, is well known. "Theology is abstract and intellectual, an organized statement of beliefs, of definitions about God and his relationship to man. Religion is living, actual worship of and service to God," he wrote. Scripture is "the most authentic record we have of religion," but it is a record written by human beings.

Barlow concludes that the tensions in modern Mormon biblical usage were inherent in Joseph Smith, who "in some ways . . . 'out-Bibled' the traditional biblicalists who surrounded him," but also put "substantial, singular, and progressive" limitations on biblical authority. In the twentieth century "Mormons remained essentially unfazed by historical biblical criticism," and their leaders became increasingly conserva-

tive.

If anything, it seems to me that Barlow understates the conservative victory. The number of Latter-day Saints affected by higher criticism is surely insignificant, and liberal voices among leaders have utterly vanished. I must, therefore, quibble with Barlow's objective, "to sketch, through pivotal figures, the main developing lines of LDS biblical usage." Only the McConkie school of biblical usage persists in the LDS church. There are no other "developing lines" in the institution. Brigham Young, B. H. Roberts, William Chamberlin, David O. McKay, and Lowell Bennion are really not "pivotal figures," they are foils, a backdrop for the triumph of conservative Mormonism.

Barlow points out that in 1980 the church adopted the Uniform Translation for use in Germany—a translation that incorporates modern biblical scholarship in the vernacular. And as modern versions gain the ascendancy throughout the world, Mormonism may be forced to accept modern English versions as well. Then, Barlow asks, "will not the language of their Book of Mormon and the Doctrine and Covenants, patterned after the KJV, appear increasingly anachronistic? Will any modern prophet feel called to adapt the work of Joseph to the needs of an English-speaking populace in the twenty-first century, or is Smith's English, like Mohammad's Arabic, permanently sacrosanct?" An interesting question, given the heavy Mormon emphasis on missionary success. But my money is on anachronism and continued devotion to verbal revelation for the prophet—at least through the next generation.

A final word. Of the reviews of

Barlow's book I have seen, five raved about *Mormons and the Bible*: "Lucid and erudite" (*The Journal of American History*); "one of the most interesting books I have read on Mormonism in recent years" (*American Historical Review*); "achieves remarkable results, . . . establishing a norm for others in researching the scriptural practices of other religious bodies" (*Modern Theology*); "among the five or six most significant works [on Mormonism] . . . to appear over the course of the past twenty years" (*Journal of the West*); "profound in its insights, scholarly to the core . . . effortlessly readable" (*Sunstone*).

I note two exceptions to the high marks, both from ultra-conservative journals. According to the *Southwestern Journal of Theology*, the book "gives the Mormon church a sense of legitimacy and credibility it does not deserve. It is written with a pro-Mormon bias and is anything but objective." Interestingly, *Brigham Young University Studies* faults the book for its non-Mormon bias: "Because [Barlow], with his chosen tools, cannot or does not access continuing revelation, prophets and an active Holy Spirit . . . he seeks to find Mormon interpretive principles in places different from where Mormon leaders have always claimed them to be found. . . . It was the prophet of God, in this case Harold B. Lee, who made the decision to use the King James text . . . Since Latter-day Saints believe the prophet to be inspired, they need not question that institutional decision."

*Mormons and the Bible* has all the markings of a Mormon classic.