

# Retelling the Greatest Story Ever Told: Popular Literature as Scripture in Antebellum America

*Clyde R. Forsberg, Jr.*

TO EXPRESS A BELIEF IN MORE OR LESS than what Christians consider to be scripture has rarely evoked a tolerant or sympathetic response.<sup>1</sup> "Of the Holy Scriptures," the Westminster Confession of Faith says, "nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men."<sup>2</sup> The Confession does not deny that the Spirit testifies to the truth of holy writ, "bearing witness by and with the word in our hearts," and while not "all things in Scripture" are "alike clear to all," it freely admits, what is necessary to salvation is "so clearly propounded . . . that not only the learned, but the unlearned . . . can obtain a sufficient understanding."<sup>3</sup> "The authority of the holy scriptures," it further stipulates, "dependeth not upon the testimony of any man or church, but wholly on God."<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, the Book of Mormon is precisely the type of "revelation from the Spirit" the Confession and orthodox Christianity anathematizes. However, as New Testament scholar Krister Stendahl has argued, this new revelation freely modifies biblical revelations:

---

1. Harold O. J. Brown, *Heresies: The Images of Christ in the Mirror of Heresy and Orthodoxy from the Apostles to the Present* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1984), 47, 63, 67-74, 87, 106, 110, 350.

2. *The Confession of Faith; the Larger and Shorter Catechisms* (Inverness: John G. Eccles Printers, Ltd., reissued by the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland, 1976), 22.

3. *Ibid.*, 23.

4. *Ibid.*, 21.

the Book of Mormon belongs to and shows many of the typical signs of the Targums and the pseudepigraphic recasting of biblical material. The targumic tendencies are those of clarifying and actualizing translations, usually by expansion and more specific application to the need and situation of the community. The pseudepigraphic, both apocalyptic and didactic, tend to fill out the gaps in our knowledge about sacred events, truths and predictions. They may be overtly revelatory or under the authority of the ancient greats: Enoch, the patriarchs, the apostles, or, in the case of the Essenes, under the authority of the Teacher of Righteousness in a community which referred to its members as latter-day saints. Such are in the style and thematic vocabulary of the biblical writings.<sup>5</sup>

Stendahl locates the Book of Mormon at the end of the Judaeo-Christian extracanonical tradition: the small "p" pseudepigraphical tradition, originating in the intertestamental period.

The Book of Mormon as nineteenth-century targum, or pseudepigraphical work, is an intriguing idea. It is nonetheless misleading and, if not inaccurate, then certainly incomplete. While it may be true that "the laws of creative interpretation by which we analyze material from the first and second Christian centuries operate and are significantly elucidated by works like the Book of Mormon,"<sup>6</sup> scholars have not been as resourceful when it comes to identifying possible nineteenth-century literary antecedents.

The Book of Mormon makes a case for the Hebraic origin of the American Indians, a thesis that has suffered a number of scientific and anthropological setbacks. Nevertheless, and importantly, when the Book of Mormon appeared in 1830 it was very believable—the notion that native peoples had descended from one of the Ten Lost Tribes was in anthropological vogue.<sup>7</sup> Sanford Porter, for example, an early convert to Mormonism, thought the Book of Mormon was both plausible *and* "quite entertaining," a sacred work to be sure, but a good story all the same.<sup>8</sup> Long before he read the Book of Mormon, and like many of his "gentile" neighbors, Porter believed that America "had been settled, by some peo-

---

5. Krister Stendahl, "The Sermon on the Mount and Third Nephi," in *Reflections on Mormonism: Judaeo-Christian Parallels*, ed. Truman G. Madsen (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1978), 152.

6. Krister Stendahl, *Meanings: The Bible as Document and as Guide* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 33-34.

7. See Dan Vogel, *Indian Origins and the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1986), and Richard H. Popkin, "The Rise and Fall of the Jewish Indian Theory," in *Hebrew and the Bible in America*, ed. Shalom Goldman (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1993), 70-90. Cf. Cyrus Gordon, "The Ten Lost Tribes," in *Hebrew and the Bible in America*, 61-69. In fact, Gordon argues in favor of a transoceanic migration of Hebrews (and even Romans).

8. Sanford Porter, "Reminiscences," 171ff, archives, Historical Department, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.

ple, at some time, that [sic] was [sic] a sivilised [sic] people . . . long before it was; [sic] Discovered, by, Columbus."<sup>9</sup>

Most of the Evangelical attacks against the Book of Mormon emphasized the alleged unrepublican character of the book's author. Smith was accused of plagiarism, of master-minding a confidence scheme, and even of adding to the Word of God,<sup>10</sup> behavior unbecoming a Christian and an American, and out of step with the Reform impulse. Evangelicals refused to take Smith at his word and continually questioned his honesty. His claims of discovering and translating an ancient history by supernatural means strained their credulity. When America's moral reformers questioned the Mormon prophet's sincerity, they saw all the signs of a man on the make.

Nonetheless, a more important question is what caused Porter and others like him to respond so positively to the book. And if the Mormon prophet was a born story-teller, what kind of story-teller was he? What was his literary agenda? Who was his intended audience? Whom did he wish to assail or attack? Only by rephrasing the question in this way can we begin to fathom why some readers responded so heartily to the narrative and others, especially America's elites, did not.

In the following essay I will argue that the Book of Mormon is a nineteenth-century manifestation of the revelatory freedom found in the Radical Reformation. From this tradition, the Book of Mormon inherited a belief in a corrupted biblical text and adherence to the inner Word of God. While targumic in the broadest sense of the word, the Book of Mormon is both a commentary *and* a translation of the King James Version of the Bible (possibly for America's native population). Interestingly, characterizations of the book as an antebellum novel and fictional apology for republicanism do not contradict this interpretation. Written with the edification of the common person and the condemnation of the religious status quo in mind, the Book of Mormon illustrates a new genre in American literature—retellings of the greatest story ever told. In short, the Book of Mormon is an American novel that addresses biblical issues from the twin perspectives of the Radical Reformation and nineteenth-century American popular literature.

The Book of Mormon provides an amended biblical text. But its text was inspired by and advocates direct revelation from God. In this respect, it is a nineteenth-century descendant of the Radical Reformation. Radical Reformers were a diverse group of Protestants who believed that mainstream reformers had not gone far enough. Many preached polygamy,

---

9. *Ibid.*, 172.

10. See Robert Heys, *A third address to the members of the Wesleyan societies . . . on the romantic character of the Book of Mormon . . . on the profaneness and wickedness of adding to the Book of God* (Douglas: W. Walls and Co., 1840).

revelation, new books of scripture, a political kingdom of God, etc. The early South German-Austrian Anabaptists are one notable example of the Radical Reformation to believe in private revelation, or the “transhistorical inner Word.” They were mystics in the tradition of Meister Eckhardt, John Tauler, and the *Theologia Deutsch*. Thomas Muntzer, Hans Denck, and Hans Hut played an important role in the revitalization and dissemination of medieval mysticism. “True” knowledge of God, they believed, was communicated by the Spirit which resided in the heart of every human. Yet they did not rule out scripture altogether as a wellspring of divine knowledge. Those of “living faith” could certainly strengthen their faith by comparing it with the experiences of others as recorded in God’s Word.

Hans Denck hypothesized that, albeit sinful by nature, humans had a divine spark which helped them to resist evil, thus enabling them to know God without the aid of externals—medieval sacraments, scripture, even the substitutory atonement of Jesus. Denck also held views that lessened the importance of the Bible.

According to his opponents, such as Johann Bader, Denck was not simply interested in guarding against equating the Word of God with biblical texts, but “gives people to understand that the man who has the Spirit no longer has need of the Scriptures.”<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, Bader’s criticism of Denck was a distortion. Denck contrasted scripture with the pre-incarnate Word, the Word of God written upon the soul, which one could read and understand by means of the Spirit—what he called the “key of David.”<sup>12</sup> He rejected the Lutheran correlation of hearing the Word and faith, not scripture per se. For Denck, scripture without faith, or rather the Spirit, was dead; and although faith might stand alone without the Bible, it need not do so since the testimony of the written Word functioned as a second witness. Objective authority, therefore, dwelled in the heart of the believer illuminated by the Spirit.

Hans Hut was a strong believer in private revelations from God communicated to the faithful by means of the Spirit in fulfilment of Old Testament prophecies. Hut even claimed a private revelation which confirmed that he was the infallible interpreter of prophecy. His Salzburg followers believed that he possessed an ancient book reserved for the last days—though Hut denied any knowledge of the mysterious volume.

Like Denck, Hut distinguished between the outer and the inner witness. However, he assigned the outer witness, the hearing of the Word, an interim role. Like Luther, Hut gave a higher priority to the written Word in the divine order of grace and salvation. Yet, like Denck, he emphasized

---

11. Warner O. Packull, *Mysticism and the Early South German-Austrian Anabaptist Movement* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1977), 46.

12. *Ibid.*, 56.

the whisperings of the Spirit, the necessity of suffering, and a conception of the inner Word in the human soul which precipitated "tried faith." Scripture was a dead letter and salvation null or void without the Spirit. "Prevenient faith," a direct result of hearing the Word, came first, followed by "tried faith," which was rooted in the mystical experience of the cross. Book of Mormon prophet Alma's "dormant faith" and "perfect knowledge" are roughly equivalent to Hut's "prevenient faith" and "tried faith."

Hut's was an argument for spiritualism that did not exclude biblicalism. He was thus both spiritualist and literalist. As Warner O. Packull, a leading scholar of mystical Anabaptism, explains: "Hut could, therefore, accentuate the letter-spirit dichotomy when confronted by an appeal to Scripture. He could also insist on a literal interpretation, if it was the meaning the Spirit intended."<sup>13</sup>

The same logic is employed in the Book of Mormon, which compares the written Word to a "seed" the heart judges to be good or not. However, in numerous places in the Book of Mormon the spirit, not scripture, is the final arbiter of truth, though the two work hand-in-hand. The challenge at the end of the book, in which readers are assured that "by the Holy Ghost," or by means of the inner, it is possible to "know the truth of all things," or the outer, is another example. Throughout the Book of Mormon the righteous are those who follow the dictates of their hearts, not necessarily their heads, who are of a "broken heart and a contrite spirit."

This is consistent with the Book of Mormon's criticisms not of God's Word but of the corrupt written or outer Word. Moreover, in certain cases even the correct rendering may lack clarity and thus mislead the most diligent reader, such as the words of Isaiah which Nephi says are "of great worth" but nonetheless difficult to understand. In such cases, the Spirit is essential if one is to understand what Isaiah and others are saying and to whom their words are addressed.

When Jesus appears to the Nephites, it is noteworthy that they are convinced of his divinity first by means of the inner witness of "a still small voice," and yet they do not hesitate to do as Thomas did, and feel the prints of the nails in his hands and feet. This is another dramatic illustration of the symbiotic nature of the inner and outer Word—the spoken Word which Jesus communicates to the faithful via the Spirit and the physical Word, in this case the resurrected body of Jesus himself, a dual testament to his atonement and the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy.

Muntzer and Hut have been associated with revolutions—though I think one should distinguish between an unavoidable and unfortunate

---

13. *Ibid.*, 73.

series of events, which found them in the proverbial wrong place at the wrong time, and their original intentions. And whether a synthetic understanding of “the inner and the outer” gave impetus to the revolution among early South German-Austrian Anabaptists is debatable. This is not the case, however, in the Book of Mormon, which clearly associates revolution with “the inner and the outer,” referring to the righteousness of the individual and the world respectively. Captain Moroni, a Nephite commander of the same stripe as Gideon in the Old Testament, reminds his reluctant conscripts that “God hath said that the inward vessel shall be cleansed first, and then shall the outer vessel be cleansed also.”<sup>14</sup>

The mystical and possibly revolutionary vision of sixteenth-century Spiritualists like Hut was rekindled during the First and Second Great Awakenings, especially among Mennonite dissenters in Pennsylvania. Beulah Stauffer Hostetler’s *American Mennonites and Protestant Movements* chronicles several competing Anabaptist visions in America contemporaneous with early Mormonism.<sup>15</sup> Pennsylvania, she points out, was home to religious separatists of many origins: Mennonites, Quakers, German Lutherans, German Reformed, German Schwenkfelders, Amish, and Radical Pietist Separatists (the Contented of the God Loving Soul, the Dunkers or the German Baptist Brethren, Inspirationalists, and the Moravians).

Mormon scholars have long been aware that early Mormonism was of the same mystical and radical bent.<sup>16</sup> D. Michael Quinn’s *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View* identifies many theological parallels between early Mormon folk religion and the mysticism of Jacob Boehme and others.<sup>17</sup> Likewise, John L. Brooke’s award-winning *Refiner’s Fire: The Making of Mormon Cosmology, 1644-1844*, traces the Radical Reformation to Joseph Smith’s door step.<sup>18</sup> It is less well-known that American Mennonitica gave impetus to many like movements which dotted the frontier. Dunkers flocked to Alexander Campbell’s movement in droves—some of whom left with Sidney Rigdon and later converted to Mormonism.<sup>19</sup>

14. Wilford C. Wood, *Joseph Smith Begins His Work: The Book of Mormon 1830 First Edition* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1963), 397.

15. Beulah Stauffer Hostetler, *American Mennonites and Protestant Movements* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1987).

16. See Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1945), 1-15.

17. D. Michael Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1987), for Jacob Boehme, 75, 176; for Johannes Kelpius, 14.

18. John L. Brooke, *The Refiner’s Fire: The Making of Mormon Cosmology, 1644-1844* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

19. See David Barry Eller, “The Brethren in the Western Ohio Valley, 1790-1850: German Baptist Settlement and Frontier Accommodation,” Ph.D. diss., Miami (Ohio) University, 1976, 199-201. Fifteen Dunker churches joined Campbell’s restoration movement. Cf. Bill J. Humble, “The Restoration Ideal in the Churches of Christ,” in *The American Quest for the Primitive Church*, ed. Richard T. Hughes (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 226.

The Book of Mormon is thus a revelation not unlike those of the mystical branch of the Radical Reformation. While critical of the outer word, it does not abandon it entirely. Rather, it employs mystical or spiritualist means to literalist ends.

The Book of Mormon also satisfied a widespread longing for an American Bible translation. Ernest S. Frerichs, editor of a collection of essays entitled *The Bible and Bibles in America*, sheds much light and criticism on Joseph Smith's reliance on the English of the KJV in the Book of Mormon. He suggests why it makes sense to see the latter as an American Bible translation—albeit veiled in the myth of the Hebraic origin of the American Indians—or at least a work inspired by antebellum America's craving for a Bible translation of its own. Frerichs explains that a "persistent American appetite for the Bible . . . abetted by American zeal and ingenuity that matches particular translations to every American taste" combined to proliferate translations.<sup>20</sup> The premise of American Bible translations at that time, he notes, was that the reader does not know the original languages and, therefore, the focus "is more frequently on the reader audience and less on the intention of the original language, author, or authors."<sup>21</sup> Even more striking is what Frerichs calls "the reflection of doctrinal and sectarian emphases . . . conveyed in the language of translation."<sup>22</sup> America, he argues, was a "fertile ground for the growth of movements that have their own sacred literature."<sup>23</sup> Harold P. Scanlin, in "Bible Translation by American Individuals," also emphasizes the eccentric and duplicitous temperament of American translators, who were not averse to translating the Bible to suit their own theological fancies.<sup>24</sup> Thus Smith's use of the KJV as his primary source and his approach were typical of other American translators.

As early as 1818 revisions of the KJV appeared. Abner Kneeland, the Universalist minister, published his two-volume Greek-English edition of the New Testament. Notably, his Greek text was that of J. J. Griesbach, the German biblical scholar and text critic, who enclosed various passages in brackets and relegated others to footnotes. Although Kneeland was not the first to publish Griesbach's Greek New Testament in America, his diglot played an important role in disseminating the discoveries of textual

---

20. Ernest S. Frerichs, "Introduction," *The Bible and Bibles in America* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 2.

21. *Ibid.*, 2.

22. *Ibid.*, 4.

23. *Ibid.*, 6.

24. Harold P. Scanlin, "Bible Translation by American Individuals," in *The Bible and Bibles in America*, 43-82.

scholars to a wide audience.<sup>25</sup> In 1833 Rodolphus Dickinson, an Episcopal minister, published his revision of the New Testament. Although Dickinson used Griesbach's Greek text, he was more interested in correcting the English text. In the preface, he writes: "The lapse of centuries has produced a revolution in the English language, requiring a correspondent change in the version of the scriptures; and I may add, that the errors in grammar and rhetoric, the harsh and indelicate expressions, dispersed through the generally adopted text, demand amendment."<sup>26</sup> Similarly, Noah Webster, the famous American lexicographer, published his own revision of the Bible that same year to correct and update the English.<sup>27</sup> Even Alexander Campbell produced a revision of the Bible because of his belief that "the common version was an exact representation of the meaning of the original [but] at the time in which it was made."<sup>28</sup> Indeed, Bible translation was not the strict purview of males. Julia Evelina Smith-Parker, American suffragist and Millerite, composed her own translation of the Bible.<sup>29</sup>

"Nineteenth-century America was marked by a diversity of religious interests that created a variety of religious writings," Scanlin explains. "Part of this creative, pluralistic concern," he continues, "was demonstrated in the production of special translation projects whose primary concern had a different thrust from most versions of the period, which aimed at producing a more readable and more accurate translation with the King James Version tradition."<sup>30</sup> Joseph Smith's Inspired Version of the Bible was one such special project, he argues—in the same class as a spiritualist edition of the New Testament, probably prepared by Leonard Thorn, entitled *Introductory Remarks and Explanations by the Spirit of Jesus Christ as Revised and Corrected by the Spirits*, published in 1861.<sup>31</sup> However, Scanlin seems unaware of the fact that the Book of Mormon can also be seen as translation or revision of the Bible. Moreover, it was the Book of Mormon that inspired Smith to undertake a revision of the Bible in the

---

25. *Ibid.*, 46-47. See Abner Kneeland, *The New Testament; Being the English Only of the Greek and English Testament; Translated from the Original Greek According to Griesbach* (Philadelphia: William Frye, 1823).

26. Scanlin, "Bible Translation by American Individuals," 47. See Rodolphus Dickinson, *A New and Corrected Version of the New Testament* (Boston: Lilly, Wait, Coleman, & Holden, 1833), vii.

27. See Noah Webster, *The Holy Bible . . . In the Common Version: With Amendments of the Language* (New Haven, CT: Durrie & Peck, 1833).

28. George Campbell et al., *The Sacred Writings of the Apostles and Evangelists of Jesus Christ* (Buffalo, VA: Alexander Campbell, 1826).

29. See Julia E. Smith[-Parker], *The Holy Bible . . . Translated Literally from the Original Tongues* (Hartford: American Publishing, 1876).

30. Scanlin, "Bible Translation in America," 56.

31. *Ibid.*, 57.

first place.<sup>32</sup> Thus Smith's Inspired Version of the Bible and the Book of Mormon are similar in many respects. The difference is that one purports to be a revision of the Bible, the other an Indian Bible and thus a synthesis of two complementary antebellum crusades: the redemption of a text *and* a people.

John Alden, in "The Bible as Printed Word," notes that the "first American Bible" was John Eliot's 1663 Cambridge Bible, a translation for Massachusetts Indians.<sup>33</sup> In 1816 Elias Boudinot, president of the New Jersey Bible Society, called for a general meeting and the American Bible Society was born. The prime directive of the A.B.S., as stated in its constitution, was "to encourage a wider circulation of the Holy Scriptures, without note or comment."<sup>34</sup> Not the least of the society's undertakings was its mission to the American Indians. As Alden explains:

With independence Americans had taken up, in the revivalist fervor that gave rise to the American Bible Society, a zeal for spreading the Gospel in their own terms. Of the numerous such organizations that were founded as a consequence of this movement, perhaps the most significant and enterprising was the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, whose origins closely parallel those of the society.<sup>35</sup>

The first missionaries were sent to the Hawaiian Islands in 1820.<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, the American board did not neglect opportunities at home. It established a mission to the Cherokees at Brainerd, the Choctaws in Mississippi and Arkansas, and, in later years, missions to the Ojibwas, the Crees, the Pawnees, the Nez Perces, the Dakotas—Sioux—and many others.<sup>37</sup>

Evangelicals were not the only ones interested in both the purity of the Bible and the salvation of America's native peoples. Thomas Jefferson's Bible, penned with Indians in mind, suggests that American Bible translation allowed for a great deal of latitude. F. Forrester Church, in "Thomas Jefferson's Bible," explains that Jefferson was critical of the Bible, which he considered to be incomplete. Influenced by Benjamin Rush, the Universalist whose principal contribution was in chemistry and medicine, and Joseph Priestly, the famous Unitarian minister and scientist, Jefferson was convinced of the moral superiority of Christianity but be-

---

32. See Robert J. Matthews, *A Plainer Translation: Joseph Smith's Translation of the Bible* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University, 1975). Cf. Kent P. Jackson, "The Sacred Literature of the Latter-day Saints," in *The Bible and Bibles in America*, 163-91.

33. John Alden, "The Bible as Printed Word," in *The Bible and Bibles in America*, 15.

34. *Ibid.*, 19.

35. *Ibid.*, 22.

36. *Ibid.*, 23.

37. *Ibid.*, 23-25.

lieved, as did Priestly, that "the Gospel not only was obscured, but distanced from the lives of many persons who neither had the time nor the means to investigate it properly."<sup>38</sup> With Priestly's blessing, Jefferson set out to itemize the moral attributes and doctrines of Jesus by "extracting in his own words from the Evangelists, and leaving out everything relative to his personal history and character."<sup>39</sup>

On the cover page of his *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*, Jefferson characterizes the work as "an abridgment of the New Testament for the use of the Indians, unembarrassed with matters of fact or faith beyond the level of their comprehensions."<sup>40</sup> Jefferson also boasts of restoring the scriptures to their original purity.<sup>41</sup> Jefferson was possibly more excited by the prospect of a rationalist reconstruction of the life of Jesus in accordance with his deistic beliefs than in facilitating the conversion of his native brothers and sisters. As Church explains, "Jefferson's search was not so much for the historical Jesus as for the intelligible Jesus."<sup>42</sup> The Book of Mormon, an American Bible translation, likewise endeavours to win converts to Christ by rendering the Jesus of history more intelligible, along deistic-rationalist lines.

The Book of Mormon can also be seen as an antebellum novel. Its historical claims, interesting, are in line with those of other popular works of fiction at the time. Not unlike Bible translation, fiction also had a religious agenda. The objective was the same in either case: to make the message of Jesus more accessible. However, fictional representations of the life of Jesus were certain to be criticized, indeed black-listed, if they did not purport to be "historical" in some sense.

Allene Stuart Phy, in "Retelling the Greatest Story Ever Told: Jesus in Popular Fiction," explains:

the majority of the first American novelists, despite formidable opposition, valiantly defended their vocation by insisting that their stories were based on fact, which they then pretended to take pains to authenticate. . . . The novel was still suspect and only succeeded in gaining admittance into the more upright homes when it started assuming the masks of history, biography, and New Testament Christianity.<sup>43</sup>

---

38. F. Forrester Church, "Thomas Jefferson's Bible," in *The Bible and Bibles in America*, 145-61, 151.

39. *Ibid.*, 151-52. See Thomas Jefferson, *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Paul Leicester Ford (Boston: Beacon, 1905), 10:70.

40. Church, "Thomas Jefferson's Bible," 154. See Henry S. Randall, *The Life and Times of Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Darby and Jackson), 3:654.

41. Thomas Jefferson, *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Andrew A. Lipscomb and Albert Ellery Bergh (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office), 15:244-45.

42. Church, "Thomas Jefferson's Bible," 160.

43. Allene Stuart Phy, "Retelling the Greatest Story Ever Told," in *The Bible and Popular Culture in America*, ed. Allene Stuart Phy (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 43-44.

Antebellum novelists, who used fiction to render Jesus and Christianity more palatable, attempted to avoid criticism by a number of means. For example, they prefaced their works with a disclaimer of fictional distortions, identified their purpose as moralistic in nature, and employed such literary devices as an epistolary form of narrative—the use of letters or epistles—which simulated reality. The Jesus of these dramatic and creative “retellings,” Phy goes on to explain, was thus

a Jesus of American culture, stripped of “theological accretions”—trimmings that have, the authors often believe, made him distasteful and incomprehensible, that have obscured the vitality of his personality and the force of his message. In this manner traditional Christianity has been sacrificed to a bland and colourless American religious pluralism.<sup>44</sup>

The Mormon prophet was one of the first writers of a new genre in American literature: the popular novel, specifically, retellings of the Jesus story which were drafted with the moral edification of the common people in mind. And he was not the only antebellum author to compel readers’ assumption of historicity. Solomon Spaulding, the Congregational minister and author of *Manuscript Found*, also suggested that his story of a Roman ship blown off course onto the shores of America was historical. Fabius, Spaulding’s protagonist, was a literal descendant of the illustrious Roman general of the same name.<sup>45</sup> However, even more remarkable is Spaulding’s contention that he stumbled upon a “flat Stone” and “with the assistance of a leaver . . . raised the Stone . . . [and discovered] that it was designed as a cover to an artificial cave.” Once in the cave he discovered an earthen box and, inside the box, “eight sheets of parchment . . . in the Latin Language,” which he translated. Spaulding did not claim to be an author, but a translator.

Smith employed the same tropes to lend credence to his narrative. Nephi, a protagonist in the Book of Mormon, was a literal descendant of the biblical Joseph who was sold into Egypt. Like Spaulding, Smith recounted that he discovered an ancient document: a set of metal plates, sequestered in a stone box in a hill near his home, numbering in excess of eight and bearing inscriptions in an unknown language—which he also translated. Whereas Spaulding could, in fact, read Latin, his English manuscript is entirely of his own making. So is Smith’s—which, incidentally, is true whether he possessed an ancient document or not. The Book of Mormon was one of many nineteenth-century American novels which, because of the mood of the public at the time, was veiled in history to fa-

44. *Ibid.*, 76.

45. See Solomon Spaulding, *The Manuscript Found*, also *Manuscript Story* (Liverpool: Millennial Star Office, 1910).

cilitate the realization of a religious agenda.

Phy credits two Unitarians, William Ware and Samuel Richardson, as co-founding a "flourishing genre in American popular literature."<sup>46</sup> The Reverend Joseph Holt Ingraham, the Mississippi Episcopalian and author of *Captain Kyd; Or the Wizard of the Sea* and *Lafayette, the Pirate of the Gulf*, who employed the same adventure formula in his dramatic portrayal of the life of Jesus, *The Prince of the House of David: Or, Three Years in the Holy City*, was another propagator of this new literary school. Indeed, Ingraham understood his role to be that of "editor" rather than "author." He also wrote *The Prince of The House of David* in the hopes of "convincing one son or daughter of Abraham to accept Jesus as the Messiah, or convince the infidel Gentile that He is the very Son of God and Creator of the world."<sup>47</sup> Apparently, Smith was particularly fond of Ingraham's *Captain Kid*.<sup>48</sup>

Of course, eighteenth-century travelogues were also notorious for purporting to be historical, when in fact they were not. Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* is a case in point. Jonathan Swift's protagonist, Gulliver, is certainly fictional, and the name itself a play on words, a criticism of the gullibility of his unsuspecting readers.<sup>49</sup>

The Book of Mormon uses epistolary discourse, identifies its purpose as didactic and historical—an account of "real" persons and events. Presumably, Smith was only editor and translator of the divine will. The Book of Mormon also purports to be a witness to Jews and gentiles of the divinity of Jesus.

Smith credited divinity with both the idea and content of the Book of Mormon. In fact, such accrediting was common practice. Elizabeth Stuart Phelps Ward, the famous post-bellum author, averred that her book, *The Gates Ajar*, was an angelic revelation. Harriet Beecher Stowe, the famous ante-bellum author, went to her grave steadfast in the belief that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was the fruit of divine inspiration.<sup>50</sup>

Critics have made much of the fact that the title page of the 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon identifies Smith as "author and proprietor."<sup>51</sup>

46. Phy, "Retelling the Greatest Story Ever Told," 45.

47. *Ibid.*, 47.

48. Orsamus Turner, "Origin of the Mormon Imposture," in *Living Age*, ed. E. Littel (Boston: Littell & Co., 1867).

49. See the preface to *Gulliver's Travels*, entitled "The Publisher to the Reader," in George K. Anderson, William E. Buckler, and Mary Harris Veeder, *The Literature of England* (Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman and Co., 1979), 475.

50. See Edwin Cady, "As Through a Glass Eye, Darkly: The Bible in the Nineteenth-Century American Novel," in *The Bible and American Arts and Letters*, ed. Giles Gunn (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 54.

51. The testimony of the eight witnesses (at the end of the 1830 edition) also identifies Smith as the "Author and Proprietor of this work."

Alexander Campbell was the first to do so.<sup>52</sup> However, the real significance of this has proven to be elusive. For one thing, Smith's identification of himself as "author and proprietor" must be read in connection with the rest of the title page which also contains the words—near the top of the page and in bold print—"AN ACCOUNT WRITTEN BY THE HAND OF MORMON, UPON PLATES TAKEN FROM THE PLATES OF NEPHI." Under this appear two more paragraphs which make unequivocal claims about the book's ancient origins and religious mandate.<sup>53</sup>

Ironically, the use of biblical language in the text is consistent with an interpretation of the Book of Mormon as both a biblical commentary *and* an antebellum novel. However, it is important to keep in mind that, as a novel, it should not be lumped together with American novels of high culture, but rather with those of popular or "low" culture.

Edwin Cady notes that in the tradition of the "high" American novel, biblical language and imagery was the exception rather than the rule. Except for Harriet Beecher Stowe and George Washington Cable, "even from the scenes of believing novelists, biblical speech sounds surprisingly seldom."<sup>54</sup> What Cady calls the "serious novel" of nineteenth-century America tended to avoid explicit references to biblical narrative. On the other hand, "the homelier the author, the likelier and more various the fiction's biblicisms."<sup>55</sup> Americans from all walks of life read novels. Yet the novels which appealed to middle- and upper-class Americans, Cady maintains, were not as ostensibly biblical as the novels which commoners read. While there are bound to be exceptions, the Book of Mor-

---

52. Alexander Campbell, *Delusions* (Boston: Joshua V. Himes, 1832), 19-20. Campbell says, "And as Joseph Smith is a very ignorant man and is called the author on the title page, I cannot doubt for a single moment that he is the sole author and proprietor of it."

53. There are any number of plausible explanations for this apparent contradiction. It has been argued, for example, that Smith claimed right of authorship rather than authorship per se to obtain a copyright which was required by law. Esquire Cole (pseud. O. Dogberry) obtained access to the E. B. Grandin press, which was being used to print the Book of Mormon, and printed several sections of the book. When asked to stop, Cole refused. The matter went to arbitration and it was decided that Cole was in violation of the copyright. See Russell R. Rich, "The Dogberry Papers and the Book of Mormon," *Brigham Young University Studies* 10 (Spring 1970): 314-20. Without such a copyright, Smith would have had no legal recourse and thus been at the mercy of such unscrupulous publishers.

While there is some truth to this, it is important to remember that Smith's choice of titles was consistent with, and limited by, legal *and* literary conventions and requirements, which suggests that he neither lied nor contradicted himself. Author and translator were perhaps mutually inclusive roles in his mind.

In later editions Smith is identified as the book's translator. This is perhaps as Mormons have traditionally understood it, a clarification of his role rather than a shift in his understanding of the book and himself. Note that the testimony of the eight witnesses has also been emended to read, "the translator of this work."

54. Cady, "As Through a Glass Eye, Darkly," 35.

55. *Ibid.*, 54.

mon supports Cady's argument in the main.

Perhaps no single writer of the antebellum era employed a "homelier" writing style than Joseph Smith. The Book of Mormon, his first literary production, is saturated with biblical language and allusions to the KJV. Indeed, what Albert Gelpi said of Emily Dickinson's writing, that she "sought to speak the uniqueness of her experience in a personal tongue by reconstituting and revitalizing—at the risk of eccentricity—the basic verbal unit," might also be said of Smith's.<sup>56</sup> And while it makes sense that Smith wrote in the style of the "low" American novel, it is unfair to assume that by "low" is meant inferior. Rather, the Book of Mormon betrays the hand of an antebellum commoner, written in the language of the common people—akin to Martin Luther's translation of the Bible into German—a veritable lexicon of the *volk*. Prosaic repetition of familiar biblicisms is not a weakness but a strength in the Book of Mormon and quite probably one of the reasons for its wide acceptance among a certain class of readers.

Interestingly, the Book of Mormon describes itself as "low" or of lowly origins, the fulfillment of a biblical prophecy which equates truth and simplicity with "lowness." Nephi, in his last great sermon before he passes the record on to his brother, Jacob, alludes to Isaiah 29 when he says that "they which shall be destroyed [his people] shall speak unto them [modern-day gentiles] out of the ground, and their speech shall be low out of the dust."<sup>57</sup> The prevalence of biblical language and imagery is a corollary to this. In Mormon thought, the Book of Mormon and the Bible complement each other. Ezekiel 37, which speaks of the coming together of the sticks of Judah and of Joseph, is the scriptural support to which Mormon exegetes turn: the Old Testament prophecy that Mormons believe is a cryptic reference to the Bible and the Book of Mormon and, more importantly, an affirmation of the complementary nature of the two. The context suggests a tribal reunification rather than a literary or textual rapprochement.<sup>58</sup> However, the important point is not whether Mormon exegesis is sound, but rather that the Book of Mormon has traditionally been defined in terms of two complementary ideas in the antebellum "low novel" tradition: low or common speech and an inordinate reliance on and reference to the biblical narrative.

However, it is possible to locate the Book of Mormon on the periphery of another fledgling antebellum American literary tradition, that of antinomian poets (who also relied on the Bible). A certain amount of

---

56. Albert Gelpi, *Emily Dickinson: The Mind of the Poet* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965), 147.

57. Wood, *The Book of Mormon*, 107-108.

58. See J. Kenneth Kuntz, *The People of Ancient Israel* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1974), 371-76.

overlapping occurs when one considers that American poetry has traditionally been at odds with the demands and constraints of the dominant culture. In fact, Roy Harvey Pearce characterizes American poetry as animated by what he calls "the antinomian impulse." The power of American poetry, he argues, "has derived from the poet's ability, or refusal, at some depth of consciousness wholly to accept his culture's system of values."<sup>59</sup> Lionel Trilling has expanded this to include all modern literature. "The particular concern of the literature of the last two centuries," he avers, "has been with the self in its standing quarrel with culture."<sup>60</sup> Herbert Schneidau also emphasizes the employment of biblical symbolism and archetypes in much of the literature of protest.<sup>61</sup>

Who were the antinomian poets, harbingers of what Pearce called the "Adamic impulse"? Walt Whitman was one, and according to Pearce, his *Leaves of Grass* should be read as "a set of holy scriptures."<sup>62</sup> Whitman, as Schneidau explains, "regularly and recurrently thought of the poet as a prophet, and thought this concept included that of the classical *vates* or seer."<sup>63</sup> Whitman's heroes were Old Testament prophets. Like him, they are critical of the rich and mighty. As Schneidau explains, whereas the motto of the Old Testament is surely, "How are the mighty fallen!" in the New Testament its equivalent is "The last shall be first," both of which were underscored in Whitman's writings.<sup>64</sup> These same themes are frequently repeated in the Book of Mormon.

Emily Dickinson's Bible was her sole source of linguistic inspiration, as mentioned, and "she presents the extreme case of the familiar paradox." Schneidau comments: "the more antinomian the American poet, the more he or she falls back on the traditional guidebook."<sup>65</sup> Thomas H. Johnson, her editor, explained it this way:

It [the Bible] was the primary source, and no other is of comparable importance. Even when she draws her figures of speech from the language of the sea, of trade, of law, or of science, they usually suggest that they have passed through the alembic of the King James version of biblical utterance. . . . It is not too much to say that in almost every poem she wrote, there are echoes of

---

59. Roy Harvey Pearce, *The Continuity of American Poetry* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961), 5.

60. Lionel Trilling, *Beyond Culture: Essays on Literature and Learning* (New York: Viking Press, 1968), 118.

61. Herbert Schneidau, *Sacred Discontent: The Bible and Western Tradition* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1976).

62. Pearce, *The Continuity of American Poetry*, 72n.

63. Herbert Schneidau, "The Antinomian Strain: The Bible and American Poetry," in *The Bible and American Arts and Letters*, 19.

64. *Ibid.*, 22-23.

65. *Ibid.*, 25.

her sensitivity to the idiom of the Bible, and of her dependence upon its imagery for her own striking figures of speech. The great reservoir of classical myth she rarely drew on. . . . She found the Bible her key to meaning.<sup>66</sup>

Indeed, this is perhaps as fair a characterization of the Book of Mormon and Smith's other scriptures and writings as one could write. It suggests that if evaluated according to a literary standard of measurement that is germane to the text, a more favorable judgment of the Book of Mormon is possible.

For a variety of reasons, then, it makes sense to characterize the Book of Mormon as a novel of the "low" American type and a poem of the "antinomian" type and to emphasize that its employment of biblical language and imagery was consistent with both. Its intended audience was America's lower classes and other outsiders who had a bone to pick with the emerging middle-class, Evangelical consensus.

Finally, there is certainly a sense in which the Book of Mormon can be viewed as a republican history, or rather a political apology which is no less fictional. The Book of Mormon defense of the Republican ideal, like other apologies at the time, is "more of a caricature than a portrait."<sup>67</sup> Lester H. Cohen argues that the first histories of the Revolution were really "secular jeremiads," or didactic narratives. Historical writing following the war was thus "a process of inventing and fictionalizing."<sup>68</sup> By means of narrative presentation, historians tended to "improve the truth, or make of history a grotesque deceit."<sup>69</sup> Gordon Wood's assessment of the first histories of the new republic concurs with that of Cohen. "Their histories," Wood argues, "were rhetorical efforts in which the criterion of truth lay in the moral effect of the work on its readers. Such a criterion of truth . . . justified the historians' avoidance of a sometimes sordid reality and their omission of unpleasant facts about the Revolutionary heroes."<sup>70</sup> The justification for such historical license, Cohen argues, was the widely held view that the post-Declaration generation had fumbled the ball, that Federalist concessions had deformed the original Republican vision of their patriotic elders.

Mercy Otis Warren, the most vituperative of the anti-federalist historians, describes the constitutional aftermath in terms of a series of contradictions. "We have a Republican form of government," she defiantly

---

66. In *ibid.*, 25-26.

67. Lester H. Cohen, "Creating a Usable Future: The Revolutionary Historians and the National Past," in *The American Revolution*, ed. Jack P. Greene (New York: New York University, 1987), 323.

68. *Ibid.*, 326.

69. *Ibid.*

70. Gordon S. Wood, "Illusions and Disillusions in the American Revolution," in *The American Revolution*, 356.

writes, "with the principles of monarchy, the freedom of democracy with the servility of despotism, the extravagance of nobility with the poverty of peasantry."<sup>71</sup> The solution to the problem, Warren and others believed, was to invent a Republican consensus, a glorious past, in the hopes of reuniting Americans under the banner of a revitalized classical Republicanism. They emphasize three themes in their histories: dedication to ordered liberty within the context of law and balanced, representative government; an ethical commitment to the rational obligations of conscience and public virtue so that social intercourse is simple and felicitous and demarcated by industry and prudence; and a philosophical conviction which held that people are free, efficacious, and responsible.

The problem of national defense plagued the early republic. E. Wayne Carp, a leading American military historian, notes that Americans were reluctant advocates of a standing army. The debate about the need for a standing army was directly related to the debate about the powers of the central government. Federalists and Whigs favoured both; Republicans and Democrats demurred. The notion that the Revolutionary War had been fought and won by an army of virtuous agrarians was more fiction than fact—as the War of 1812 had proven when Americans were reluctant to take up the cause of liberty once more. Fiction was more compelling than fact.<sup>72</sup> History telling *and* story telling were blurred in the antebellum era.

The Book of Mormon discussion of colonial America is similarly more mythical than factual. To evaluate it in terms of the "reality" of Revolutionary rhetoric, as Richard Bushman does,<sup>73</sup> or to juxtapose Mormon communitarianism with Jacksonian individualism, as Marvin Hill does,<sup>74</sup> ignores the fact that the Book of Mormon is a romance and a jeremiad. Nathan Hatch documents the explosion in popular literature at the turn of the century and the belief that "the common people had the right, even the responsibility, to break into print."<sup>75</sup> Many such tomes, Hatch explains,

combined the logic of an Ethan Allen, Tom Paine, or Elihu Palmer with radical strains of evangelical piety. The result was a powerful discrediting of the old order that nourished religious experience at the same time it allowed

---

71. In *ibid.*, 315.

72. E. Wayne Carp, "The Problem of National Defense in the Early American Republic," in *The American Revolution*, 14-50.

73. Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984).

74. Marvin S. Hill, *Quest for Refuge: The Mormon Flight from American Pluralism* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989).

75. Nathan O. Hatch, "In Pursuit of Religious Freedom: Church, State and People in the New Republic," in *The American Revolution*, 392.

people to see themselves carrying out the finest traditions of the American Revolution and exalting the American republic as the means to deliver the people from what Alexander Campbell called "the melancholy thralldom of relentless power."<sup>76</sup>

Joseph Smith's first testament to the world does not stand alone as a work of American literature or as a book of scripture. It does stand apart, however. Other antebellum re-tellers of the greatest story ever told could only dream of the successes of the Mormon prophet. By mystical and spiritualist means, in a manner reminiscent of the Radical Reformation, Smith claimed to have restored biblical texts, thus satisfying a craving for an American Bible translation. Not unlike sixteenth-century Anabaptist mystics, Smith employed spiritualist means to biblicist or literalist ends. Not unlike nineteenth-century antinomian novelists and anticlerical moralists, he used fiction to convince wayward Americans of the divinity of the historical Jesus. His book was also a defense of a mythical republic. To characterize the Book of Mormon as fictional is not to diminish the book. Fiction is a larger medium than history, encompassing larger truths. Joseph Smith exercised good judgment in the end when he chose the medium he did to communicate divine truth to a confused world.

---

76. *Ibid.*, 401.