

REVIEWS

Canon: Open, Closed, Evolving

David F. Holland. *Sacred Borders: Continuing Revelation and Canonical Restraint in Early America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010. 275 pp. notes, index. Hardcover: \$65. ISBN-13: 978-01-9975-361-1

Reviewed by Samuel M. Brown

Sacred Borders represents a rigorous and compelling consideration of various traditions about the state of the biblical canon in American religion. For bookish Latter-day Saints, this volume will provide much-needed context for early Mormon beliefs about their open canon as well as a subtle and sympathetic view of both sides of the debate over the closed canon. While the style is highly accessible, given the complexity of the subject matter, a reader may benefit from having digested a book like Brooks Holifield's *Theology in America* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2005) or perhaps the survey by Jon Butler, Grant Wacker, and Randall Balmer, *Religion in American Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003). Many of Holland's arguments will make more sense when the reader recognizes some of the actors, concepts, and traditions involved. Even so, I believe that *Sacred Borders* will be useful to non-specialist audiences. Holland, a recent Stanford graduate and assistant professor of history at the University of Nevada Las Vegas, is an important new voice in American religious history and Mormon studies. For expository clarity, I have divided the review into three sections.

The Canon Problem in the American Traditions

The notion that the Bible is a single book directly relevant to modern readers is a conceit, albeit a useful one, often invoked in shorthand as the biblical "canon." Holland makes quite clear that canon has occasioned considerable controversy over many centuries of American religious history. As scholars commonly remind us, "Bible" is an Anglicization of a Greek word (*[ta] biblia*) probably better, if idiomatically, translated "library" or "anthology." The canonized Bible was written, rewritten, and edited by a mixed assortment of "sacred penmen" over many centuries.

Canon in American Protestantism is not just a question of spurious versus actual authorship of sacred texts; it is also a belief about a book that is binding on modern Protestants. Beyond their diversity, the books of the Bible contain accounts of myriad strange, supernatural happenings, events that may have little direct resonance in the lives of modern Christians.

Despite certain logical obstacles, many Christians have embraced a closed canon for a variety of persuasive reasons. American Protestants used the closed canon to reject enthusiasm, to denounce Anglican and Catholic ecclesiology, to imagine that God's mind could be comprehended, and to battle Deists, among other applications. Where enthusiasts threatened ecclesial anarchy with outpourings of God's spirit, the canon offered protection and stability. Where Catholics and Anglicans saw the Church as wielding great power, American Protestants saw the Bible "alone" as a counter to ecclesial dictatorship. In Holland's phrase, they were thereby attempting "to keep religious tyrants at bay" (24). A closed canon also gave hope for believers that they might master the tasks presented to them in their religious tradition: Within a closed canon, "Christian discipleship was no moving target" (24).

I agree with Holland's argument that a closed canon favors the educated because exegetical aptitude is valued, even as he emphasizes that it would be wrong to collapse the question of canon to a question of elite hegemony (29). Thinkers like Jonathan Edwards revered the canon, not just because it favored their particular cognitive and expository skills, but because it made sense of their world and struck them as fundamentally consistent with the nature of God. Holland also reminds readers that, misconceptions notwithstanding, believers in the closed canon thought that God continued to speak. They believed that He did so through Providential expressions of His sovereign will. In elaborating this point, Holland provides a highly useful treatment of the intersections of Providence and revelation in American Protestantism, including an arresting, summary turn of phrase to describe Ann Hutchinson's stillbirth (a personal tragedy by which critics of her prophethood found divine sanction for their criticism): "An active God spoke through a mangled fetus to declare that he had not spoken through a living witness" (40-44).

On the other hand, Holland reminds us, an open canon—“a Bible with the back cover torn off” (209)—has intuitive, even logical appeal. The God of the biblical anthology is manifestly a God who speaks, and it is only natural to expect that God will continue to speak today. In the terms of an ancient Latin truism that Holland employs to good effect, *si Dii sint, divinatio est*: “If Gods exist, revelation exists.” (Latter-day Saints may recall Hugh B. Brown’s famous 1955 “Profile of a Prophet” speech on this point.¹)

In believers’ hands, an open canon was a claim at once rational and irrational, though. Nothing could be simpler than an extension of the biblical pattern into the modern day, but the wide chasm between the supernatural lives of the “sacred penmen” and modern readers strained credulity. What seemed reasonable when represented in sacred history seemed absurd or even fanatical in early modern America. Various Protestants admitted as much in their profoundly circular logic that there would be no new revelation unless, of course, there were new revelation (21–22). In the phrase of famed liberal Congregationalist Horace Bushnell, “arguments for the possibility [of an open canon] are good, but evidences for the fact do not correspond” (134).

Holland makes the compelling argument that canon is a story about the character of God (216). I applaud the return of this theological question to a theological arena. I strongly agree with his rejection of merely sociological accounts of the canon (94); I also concur with his argument that one need not invoke esoteric traditions to understand the attraction of an open canon or active prophecy (169). The closed canon was an organic, reasonable attempt to make sense of God in the world, just as the open canon was a logical response to the particular claims and compromises of the closed canon.

I have only two minor complaints about Holland’s treatment of the canon question in American Protestantism. I wish he had explored the co-identity of Christ as The Word and the Bible as word, a theme to which Matthew Bowman reminds us to return in his excellent dissertation, “The Urban Pulpit: Evangelicals and the City in New York, 1880–1930” (Georgetown University, 2011). Images of the Divine Word in both these senses have been important to Protestants for centuries and surely played a part in their unitary identification of the biblical canon. I also wish, given my

on-going fascination with the topic, that Holland had spent more time pondering oral versus written culture and the meaning of the infidelity of human language. Though he appropriately mentions this problem, I found that I wanted just a little bit more detail.

The Mormon Question

Mormon readers will likely be most interested in Holland's treatment of Mormons per se (141–57), but I have waited to consider this section until now to emphasize the point Holland is making implicitly: that Mormonism cannot be understood without first comprehending its context within American religion. Holland pushes back gently against Nathan Hatch's well-known social argument in *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1989), wanting to emphasize that Methodists and Mormons were not just fighting against social hierarchy; they were also criticizing America's epistemology (142). Mormonism is an important chapter in America's canon history, and American canon traditions are crucial to understanding Mormonism.

Mormons, like many others, highlighted important facts about the Bible: The process of canonization itself was external to the biblical texts; translation and scribal transmission may have muddied the original text; different groups advocated different canons. Many Protestants agreed with these specific claims and accommodated them within either closed or open canon models. More important to Mormons, though, was the anti-cessationist argument that God's mode of revelation did not vary by geography or time. Believers should expect that every nation and every generation would have access to records as valid as scripture as the Bible itself (with the logically complex exception of times of "apostasy"). Their Book of Mormon, ancient America's Bible, was a powerful proof of concept, one they followed with another lost Egyptian-Hebrew scripture (the Book of Abraham), recovery of a lost Book of Moses and Prophecy of Enoch, and several truly modern scriptures by which early Mormons inscribed their own life stories into holy writ.

Holland makes a very important point that bears repeating: The opening of the Mormon canon was distinct from most other

approaches to opening the canon, of which there were many. The new revelation of early nineteenth-century Shakers, for instance, purified the Bible of some of its dangerous remnants, but the Book of Mormon provided no such protection. Any of the horrifying elements of the biblical narrative, including even patriarchal polygamy, could return under the right circumstances, according to the Mormon lost scripture (148). Mormonism's canon was not a way to secure a worldview by detoxifying the Bible; it augured instead the possibility that the strangely miraculous world of the Bible would return.

The first Mormon scripture knew well that it addressed the problem of canon. The Book of Mormon seemed to taunt the Bible's canonical failings. In place of faceless committees and councils, the Book of Mormon was ultimately canonized by one man, its eponymous prophet. The Book of Mormon ruptured the biblical canon in more ways than one.

Holland also draws attention to some of the limitations of an open canon; *Sacred Borders* is not an apologia for Joseph Smith and his heirs in any traditional sense. A truly open canon, however endorsed in early Mormon scripture, was not entirely possible, as Protestant critics were quick to point out. When prophetic competitors arose within the movement, their new scriptures and revelations were rejected, and they were often excommunicated. The openness of the Mormon canon within a few decades had evolved as well. Mormonism now seems to have adopted a more Catholic model, in which the Church can direct its course through revelation while the canon (the "standard works" in Mormon parlance) remains largely closed. These shifts and complexities speak to the point that the notion of open canon is in some respects oxymoronic. Canon by its very nature is restrictive, closed, exclusive. Even when additions are tolerated, they are additions to a canon, which excludes other texts. What many people mean by an "open" canon may be better understood as an "evolving" canon, a complex hybrid of restriction and inclusion.

I have a few quibbles with Holland over the material in his treatment of Mormonism, but these are minor and probably self-serving. First, Smith's relationship to Hebrew and pure language is rather more complex than suggested in Holland's brief comparison (188) to Transcendentalist Theodore Parker (who, as

Holland notes, also studied with Joshua Seixas, teacher for the Mormon's Kirtland Hebrew School). Second is the relative absence of the *Book of Commandments* and Doctrine and Covenants, beyond a discussion of Smith's polygamy revelation, which entered the Mormon canon three decades after his death. This deficit may be driven by the exigencies of physical space and word count; if so, I understand completely. Nevertheless, the revelations issuing directly from Joseph Smith are strikingly different from the American Bible he translated as the Book of Mormon. And the differences are relevant to the meaning of "open" and "canon" in early Mormonism.

Oliver Cowdery's public and notorious quarrel with Smith over the editing and updating of revelations for the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants speaks to the heart of the problem of the open canon. It is one thing to say that the Bible canon failed to include other ancient scripture, as many Protestant readers allowed in their attempts to come to terms with "lost" texts like the book of Enoch mentioned in Jude 14–15. It is quite another to say that new scripture can be written in antebellum America. Smith, as few—if any—others, combined those two modes. Was it a natural transition for Smith, from discovering and translating "lost books" to promulgating revelation directly as the American namesake of the Egyptian patriarch Joseph? Understanding the dynamics of Smith's transition from ancient to modern scripture might illuminate substantially the operation of the open canon in a new religious movement.

Third, Holland argues that Mormons embraced personal revelation as a way to avoid the tyranny threatened by an open canon. This threat is one American Protestants associated with "prelatic" or "papist" religion or ecclesial structure. Where the canon is open, a leader may exercise disproportionate or even tyrannical power over followers. Early Mormons lived the tension between "prophetic hierarchy" and "revelatory democracy" (154–55). Holland, employing a statement from Brigham Young (153), argues that the open canon favored balance in early Mormonism, but I am not entirely persuaded. Mormons drew on anti-cessantionist traditions about spiritual gifts in general, and early Mormons often embraced the irony well-observed by Nathan Hatch that populist religion frequently accommodated dominating lead-

ership styles. Holland does not explicitly consider, for instance, that the revelation announcing that all Mormons could prophesy was radically constrained early on because its applications proved too schismatic.

Holland's treatment of the broad arc of canon within American religion generates many questions for students of Mormonism that fall well beyond his historical period. How does canon play into the plausible deniability of modern Latter-day Saints confronted by beliefs widely held by the first generations of Mormons? Even in a movement that strongly emphasizes the openness of canon, there are reasons to require that canon persist. Such persistence is a reminder that canon is a way for a community to agree together what its standard beliefs will be. Does the image of Kolob as God's throne belong to the modern Church? Widely held in the early Church, this belief is not univocally confirmed in the canon. What about polygamy? The Manifesto ending the practice has been canonized, but the 1843 revelation authorizing its performance (to which fundamentalists turn to justify on-going practice of polygamy) has not been decanonized. More generally, what does one make of modern LDS biblical literalists? Their philosophical stance seems far from that of early Mormonism, and there is no (LDS) canonical support for strict biblical literalism, but such literalists appear to constitute a vibrant and persistent subculture within modern Mormonism.

Metatextual Problems and Illuminations

I hope that this book and others like it will represent a face of Mormon studies in our intellectual era. In recent decades, Mormon history has transitioned from denominational to bibliographic to interpretive and contextual; and although I am as much a child of my generation as any child of any prior generation, I favor what is happening now in Mormon history. Scholars are attempting to situate Mormonism within relevant contextual traditions and to ask broad interpretive questions.

Such a model is more plural than it may appear at first blush. There is wide latitude even within this general emphasis on context and interpretation. Where Terryl Givens's illuminating *When Souls Had Wings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010) speaks to the traditions of intellectual history/history of ideas in his con-

sideration of human preexistence, *Sacred Borders* declares its allegiance primarily to historians of American religion. Feminists and demographers and sociologists and literary theoreticians and many others may approach Mormonism contextually and interpretively, writing from their own core intellectual tradition. Each school or tradition will and should be represented in our explorations of the contexts and meanings of Mormon belief and experience.

Holland's implicit and my explicit claims for the importance of contextual, interpretive Mormon history should elicit objections from many consumers of Mormon-themed publications. Mormon history has benefited greatly from the assiduous work of non-Ph.D. historians sometimes termed (with intermittent and sometimes defensive derision) "amateur" or "hobbyist" or "devotional." But contextual and interpretive history requires the kinds of painstakingly obtained primary data that only graduate students and non-Ph.D. historians seem willing to unearth. The identification and collation of primary data are crucial, and Mormon history is richer for the on-going participation of non-Ph.D. historians.

Of course, questions about who should be writing Mormon history are themselves questions of canon. Whose voice will be heard? What standards will regulate access to the accepted corpus of Mormon history? What is a credential? What do we make of chemists and mathematicians and linguists and attorneys who seek to contribute both in the more traditional and in the more current methods of Mormon history? On the other hand, contextual, interpretive history requires a substantial burden of review of material that may be intrinsically uninteresting to the historian whose inquiry is driven by a love for and fascination with the Mormon traditions. Presbyterialist politics and sectarian controversies over liturgy may command little direct interest for many Mormon readers. I hope that a useful model will develop wherein Ph.D. historians do their laborious work on context/interpretation and non-Ph.D. historians continue their laborious work in Mormonism's complex and abundant primary sources. This seems to me a dynamic symbiosis in which the boundaries between the two sets of participants can remain fruitfully porous.

Well beyond Mormonism proper, Holland's work speaks to a

generational transition within academic history. The older model of professional history required extensive use of relatively inaccessible archives. A professional life's work might culminate in an accurate synthesis of materials discovered and collated over decades. The recent explosion of information access is shifting that landscape. Sources once available only on a funded research sabbatical are now a few keystrokes away from anyone with a live internet connection. Holland confesses, in an appendix (219–20), his use of electronic scans of primary texts in his research. To a younger audience, this appendix will seem quite strange, if not utterly idiosyncratic. Why would he not have used scans from Google or other sources in his research? But the canons of professional history are themselves undergoing dramatic change, and Holland's book stands self-consciously in the midst of this change.

The former canonical approach of reviewing physical copies of old texts has helped to define how historians practice their craft. There may be no change in the actual content when a document is viewed electronically, but it is approaching the "text" in a different, more convenient way, one that might threaten the traditional power of the scholar. Almost any reader can now check obscure primary sources within moments. There is a risk that the work of history will suffer through the acontextualization that such ready access to texts provides. Texts may come to represent "hits" in a contextless "query." Having found a text in an archive or historical society used to mean an inevitable conversation with the archivist, the occasional serendipitous discovery of a related document. The advantage of the older system is that the professional scholar has spent a decade in the sources and can quickly and appropriately contextualize documents in a way that a less contextual scholar may not appreciate. On the other hand, patterns in word usage may appear through electronic searches, contexts unconstrained by the vagaries of physical archiving. What were originally considered to be unique textual phenomena may prove to reflect much broader currents. Here again, I believe that a mixed model will be required, and Holland's book proves an excellent example of the hybridity characteristic of the modern practice of history.

By way of brief summary, David F. Holland's *Sacred Borders* is a balanced, engaging exploration of the state of the biblical canon

in American history. It is an important advance in our understanding of Mormonism and a key entry in the expanding world of the interpretive, contextual school of Mormon studies. More broadly, the book calls us to consider questions of canon well beyond just the sacred anthology we call Bible.

Note

1. Hugh B. Brown, *Profile of a Prophet* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1955).

Mormons, Southerners, and American Assimilation

Patrick Q. Mason, *The Mormon Menace: Violence and Anti-Mormonism in the Postbellum South*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. 264 pp. Notes, index. Hardcover: \$29.95. ISBN 13: 978-0-19-974002-4

Reviewed by Mark Brown

Patrick Mason has recently been named to the Howard W. Hunter Chair of Mormon Studies at Claremont University. He was granted a Ph.D. from the University of Notre Dame; and his dissertation, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry Mob," examined violence against religious minorities and outsiders in the post-bellum American South. This book builds upon that research, and it also expands the narrative to include the legal, theological, and cultural objections to Mormonism in the Old Confederacy in the generation following the Civil War and Reconstruction. The book focuses primarily on the causes and patterns of violence against Mormons but also includes a chapter that treats problems encountered by other religious minorities.

While Mormonism is often thought to be a uniquely American faith, *The Mormon Menace* demonstrates conclusively, repeatedly, and in great detail just how offensive the Latter-day Saint faith was to Americans in the late nineteenth century, especially to southern Americans. A Southern Baptist official said: "It [Mormonism] incarnates every unclean beast of lust, guile, falsehood,