

LETTERS

A Postapocalyptic Perspective?

Jacob Bender's recent poststructural approach to the Book of Mormon (volume 45, no. 3) is a refreshing addition to Book of Mormon interpretation. Its first five pages provide us with a fine discussion of how the text of the Book of Mormon points beyond itself to a participatory religion that cannot be adequately captured in words. It summarizes the essence of Mormonism, not as a religion of the Book or abstract thought, but as a religion of experience to which the text points. But unfortunately, once Bender gets beyond this initial idea, his interpretation loses its way.

Bender seeks to reread the Book of Mormon in light of the current reader; he emphasizes that his interpretation represents something authentic about the "literary moves" and true authentic voice of the narrators within the Book of Mormon. But it seems to me that the second half of Bender's interpretation of the Book of Mormon is a kind of ventriloquism—using the book to speak his theological mind—that has nothing to do with the puppet text. Every generation, like the early Christian Church and current Mormon readers, must find their own meanings. But if those meanings contradict the words, meaning and spirit of the text, they amount to a tyranny of the reader over the text. But I do not believe that the tyranny of the reader, like the customer, is always right. Here are two of the main points in Bender's article erroneously claiming to be derived from the "literary moves" of the Book of Mormon:

1—All Things Fail

Bender argues that meanings in texts constantly shift based on new contexts. In this constant shifting of meaning, the center of any text is constantly shifting. Here Bender quotes Mormon "For all things must fail." Civilizations fail, words fail, texts fail, the center of meaning fails. But then Bender makes an exception—"the great mediation remains, standing alone." For Bender, only charity as a relationship of atonement is "endless" (Mormon 8:17). It is an eloquent poststructural theology. But Bender's lips are moving. It is an arbitrary distinction. Either all things fail in a poststructural interpretive world, or we are not in a poststructural world. Bender can't have it both ways.

The Book of Mormon proclaims many things to be fundamentally eternal, and eternally dualistic alongside the meaning of charity and the atonement. Hell is as eternal as charity in the Book of Mormon (2 Nephi 28:7–9, 22, Alma 3:26, 42:16, Helaman 6:28, 7:26, Mormon 8:38), as are decrees of God (Ether 2:10), as is priesthood (Alma 13:7–9), as is the plan of happiness and punishment (Alma 42:16), as is the universal presence of the miraculous in every age as the Nephites constantly remind us. If Bender wants to create a personal theology that all meaning shifts and fails, except charity, I think that is a wonderful sentiment. But it is his sentiment and quite foreign to the Book of Mormon.

Why does Mormon say that all things must fail except charity (Mormoni 7:46)? It is hyperbole, even for

Mormon. Mormon's comment is certainly patterned after 1 Corinthians 13 in which charity is a spiritual gift which never ends, though other spiritual gifts do. But Mormon's notion is much more modest than Bender's universal shifting of meaning. In Bender's understanding of meaning, we are now in the realm of personal theology, not interpretation of texts.

2—The Book of Mormon as Restoration Apocalypse

Bender claims that Mormon has a "postapocalyptic perspective." His primary evidence is the Nephite notion of the inadequacy of words to replace religious experience. But, apparently, Bender is not familiar with the well-established scholarship (Perrin, Wilder, etc.) that maintains that the inadequacy of words is in fact a hallmark of Jewish and Christian apocalyptic writing. That is one of the reasons that apocalyptic presents its message in such bizarre, dreamlike, and mythical images—to express the unutterable.

Contrary to Bender, I would characterize the Book of Mormon as a Restoration Apocalypse. Bender claims that the Book of Mormon is not dualist. But the Book of Mormon, like much of traditional apocalyptic, is fundamentally dualist—a cosmic battle between good and evil. 2 Nephi 2 tells us that if we eliminate that dualism or opposition in all things, we destroy the earth and God ceases to be God. Yet Bender denies that fundamental opposition.

Traditional apocalyptic often portrays a narrative vision or dream that is interpreted by an angel to represent in

allegorical form the history from the beginning of the world or from the time of the visionary to the end of the world, the time when the audience and author live. Since prophecy was believed to have ceased, apocalyptic is often but not always pseudonymous, drawing upon the name and authority of some ancient seer. In the end times, evil is in control, but God will send a Messianic figure that will defeat evil. Then begins a new age ruled by God. But the dualism remains. Satan is not destroyed, only bound. So goes the outline of many apocalyptic works. The most famous are Daniel and the book of Revelation. But there are many outside of the canon as well, down into the time of Joseph Smith. The audience is the current reader who stands at the end of time, in the great battle between good and evil.

Mormon is consistent with Book of Mormon apocalyptic perspectives. He presents narratives as warnings for the latter day and explicitly addresses the reader "when this work shall commence" (Mormon 3:17) at the end time, not postapocalyptic in time or outlook. The Book of Mormon as a whole follows apocalyptic literary forms, its theological outlook and tenor, the typical dualism of apocalyptic in the whiteness of fruit of the tree versus dark wilderness and mists of darkness, etc., interpretive angels in Lehi's dream, the typical allegorical interpretation of a vision, Mormon's reading of the Nephite collapse as a type of the readers' apocalypse, and widespread allusions and quotations from biblical apocalyptic—"the whore upon

many waters,” “I looked and behold,” etc. The Book of Mormon represents itself as the latter-day messianic figure before the millennium, along with the gathering and final battle—all this points to the Book of Mormon as thoroughly apocalyptic. To go with Bender and call the Book of Mormon postapocalyptic is the equivalent of asserting that the poetry of Emily Dickinson is actually opera rather than poetry.

Bender may be postapocalyptic. Mormon definitely is not. Again the Book of Mormon is a Restoration Apocalypse.

The temptation is ever present for all of us to look upon the sacred text as a mirror, a mirror on the wall, telling us that our personal theology is the fairest of them all. It is more difficult to read scripture well than any other sort of text. It takes courage to read a scriptural text that contradicts one’s cherished values and surprises one’s expectations. Misreadings of scriptural texts have a long and illustrious history. Dozens of systems of Gematria (assigning numerical value to a word or phrase and matching verses that have the same numerical value), spiritualizings, typologies, metaphorical meanings, elaborate chiasmic structures encompassing entire books, multiple literal senses, allegories, moral and hidden secret meanings, code, and yes, poststructural approaches to scripture like Bender’s all fill the stage of scriptural ventriloquism. If Bender has entered with a wooden text in his arms, who among us has not?

*Mark Thomas
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Jacob Bender Responds

I’m flattered that Mr. Mark Thomas felt my essay worth his response. I hope he accepts it as equal flattery that I respond in kind. I would like to address his second objection first, namely, that the Book of Mormon is a “Restoration Apocalypse,” not mere postapocalyptic. I’m actually in complete agreement with him; I wrote that the Book of Mormon’s “effect is not one of final dissolution a la Marquez—quite the opposite, in fact.” The Book of Mormon looks forward to the end of the world not as an ending doom but as a joyous rejuvenation. If my essay did not make that distinction explicit, then I apologize for the confusion.

He is also right to point out how “according to well-established scholarship . . . the inadequacy of words is in fact a hallmark of Jewish and Christian apocalyptic writing.” The inadequacy of words is also a hallmark of poststructural apocalyptic writing. In fact, a compare/contrast between the two literary traditions—one super-ancient, the other super-modern—sounds like it would make a fascinating study.

I’m more confused by his accusation that I argue “all meanings shift and collapse”—on the contrary, I don’t argue that meaning collapses, only the signifiers. There is in fact a God in heaven, hell beneath, an Atonement of Christ, and an eternity beyond comprehension. These are what remain after the signifiers collapse. I also agree with Mr. Thomas’s assertion that there is a fundamental dualism outlined in 2 Nephi 2; Satan is also