

Mormons, Films, Scriptures

Joseph M. Spencer

I asserted without argument a few years ago at the annual meeting of the Association of Mormon Scholars in the Humanities that the Mormon film movement of 2000–2005 witnessed the production of only one truly Mormon film, namely, *Napoleon Dynamite* (2004).¹ The claim for which I did provide an argument was that the bulk of the movement launched by Richard Dutcher's *God's Army* (2000) and brought to its culmination with Dutcher's (thankfully-later-re-titled) *God's Army 2* (2005) was principally a study in the possibility of introducing into Mormonism, for ostensibly pastoral reasons but with theologically fraught consequences, an arguably non-Mormon sense of religious transcendence. What I did not note then, but would like to reflect on now, is the curious role scripture played—and did not play—in this short-lived movement.²

I want to consider both what I believe all would consider the movement's most impressive production, as well as what I believe all would consider the movement's least impressive production—respectively, Richard Dutcher's *States of Grace* (née *God's Army 2*) and Gary Rogers' *The Book of Mormon Movie: Volume 1, The Journey* (2003). By way of conclusion, I then want to say a word about *Napoleon Dynamite*—that most Mormon of films that, nonetheless, had not a word to say about scripture. If, as I suggested a few years ago, the Mormon film movement was as much a theological venture as a filmic one, what can be said about it in terms of specifically *scriptural* theology?

It is relatively easy to set up as polar opposites *The Book of Mormon Movie* and *States of Grace*, and not only in terms of aesthetic merit. Where the one is ostensibly conservative, the other is ostensibly liberal; where the one, not unproblematically, reproduces and reinforces Mormon culture, the other, also not unproblematically, contests and ultimately parts ways with Mormon cul-

ture. But despite such clear differences in both talent and approach, Rogers and Dutcher wrestle, in many ways, with the very same problem: What is the relevance of Mormon scripture to contemporary life?

Rogers poses this question in *The Book of Mormon Movie* in three different ways.

First, through the liberties automatically taken in any dramatization of a scriptural text, he introduces into the scriptural narrative distinctly modern concerns that arise in the setting of contemporary Mormon culture. The most poignant—and, frankly, painful—example comes in the portrayal of 1 Nephi 18:9–10, that less-than-memorable moment in Nephi’s narrative when some of his party began, during the ocean voyage to the New World, “to make themselves merry, insomuch that they began to dance, and to sing, and to speak with much rudeness.” In Rogers’ adaptation, this scene becomes less a worry about “forget[ting] by what power” the group had been brought out of Jerusalem and more a study in young women’s modesty—with two of Ishmael’s daughters dancing in quasi-ancient-looking denim skirts that do not reach their knees and not-at-all-ancient-looking tops that leave not only their arms and shoulders but also their midriff bare. Significantly, in Rogers’ version, before Nephi chastises his brothers, Ishmael’s wife, the rightly-concerned Mormon mother, intervenes, instigating a dialogue too precious not to quote: “What are you doing down here?” “We’re just having some fun, mother.” “Fun? Look at you! You’re half-naked! You know better than this!” “Oh, mother. We’re going to a new world. You’re so old-fashioned.” “The Lord would not be pleased with this.” “We’re out here in the middle of the ocean. Do you really think anyone cares how we dress?” “Yes. I do. And the Lord does.” With this most-awkward scene and others like it, Rogers addresses the relevance of the Book of Mormon to contemporary life simply by projecting onto the scriptural text, in good Sunday-School-discussion fashion, distinctly contemporary and ultimately non-scriptural concerns.

The second way Rogers poses the question of the relevance of scripture to contemporary life is more subtle. Though reviewers of the film have often said that “much of the film’s dialogue is taken directly from the *Book of Mormon*’s actual wording,”³ that is

not, strictly speaking, true. The words of the Book of Mormon are more often adapted, abridged, or replaced, both in voice-over narration and in dialogue. Thus “As the Lord liveth, and as we live, we will not go down unto our father in the wilderness until we have accomplished the thing which the Lord hath commanded us” (1 Nephi 3:15) becomes “No. We can’t leave. Not like this. Just because we didn’t succeed the first time doesn’t mean the Lord won’t provide a way.” With so much adaptation, abridgment, and replacement, those instances where the wording of the scriptural text actually does make its way into the film are particularly interesting. Such instances are, almost universally, of two kinds. First, the most familiar or most-often quoted texts from Nephi’s writings find their way more or less unedited into the film. Viewers are not alienated by a reworded “I, Nephi, having been born of goodly parents” or “I will go and do the things which the Lord hath commanded.” Second, whenever a divine figure speaks—God, the Spirit, an angel—the words are generally taken unaltered from the scriptural text. The double implication of Rogers’ use of the actual words of the Book of Mormon is that there is a kind of immediate relevance at all times of both what is spoken by actually divine persons and what has come, by dint of constant quotation and repetition, to be recognized as always and immediately relevant.

The third way Rogers poses the question of the relevance of scripture to contemporary life weaves the first two ways together. On rare occasions in the film, well-known and culturally-affirmed scriptural passages are introduced into foreign contexts. A simple example of this is found in the slaying-of-Laban scene. In response to the Spirit’s injunction to kill Laban, Nephi responds by asking, “Is not the word of God written, ‘Thou shalt not kill?’” while the Book of Mormon text has Nephi say in his heart only “Never at any time have I shed the blood of man” (1 Nephi 4:10). A more interesting example comes when Rogers has Nephi quote himself in response to Lehi’s announcement that his sons would have to return to Jerusalem a second time, this time in order to bring Ishmael’s family—in particular his daughters—into the wilderness with them. After stating that Lehi’s announcement followed “the best vision [he] ever had,” Nephi quotes his own words at 1 Nephi 3:7 as a quasi-humorous response: “I will go and do the things the

Lord hath commanded,” etc. To have Nephi parody himself is cute, but it makes little sense of the actual story, of course. It is only *we* who have privileged Nephi’s words in such a way that the parody makes any sense. The most fascinating example, however, is to be found in the prefatory scene of the film, the introduction of sorts that explains how Joseph Smith became aware of and received the task to translate the Book of Mormon. In response to the angel’s explanation of the record, Joseph asks: “But, who would believe that? A record such as this, delivered from an uneducated farm boy?” To this, Moroni answers: “There is a promise, Joseph, a marvelous promise found at the end of the record. Anyone—*anyone*—who reads this book and asks of God with real intent whether or not it be true will receive an answer to their prayer.” Moroni thus, like any good missionary, turns directly to Moroni 10:4–5, to what Latter-day Saints generally regard as the *only* immediately relevant passage in the whole of the Book of Mormon because it provides the outline of a mechanical operation through which anyone can receive a testimony of Mormonism’s truth.

What is the theological significance of Rogers’ three ways of addressing the relevance of scripture to contemporary life? Despite the film’s apparent conservatism, the obvious sense in which it was meant to bring the Book of Mormon narrative to life, there are important ways in which it effectively undercuts the Book of Mormon’s relevance. In order to address contemporary concerns, it has, rather violently, to insert scenes and sequences into narratives where they fit uncomfortably at best. Moreover, the bulk of the narrative, as well as of the actual dialogue recorded in the text, is taken to be largely dispensable or made better through summary or rewording; only those passages that Latter-day Saints have collectively affirmed or that record the actual words of divine beings are sacred enough not to be altered. Finally, it makes clear that there is a sense in which the whole text of the Book of Mormon—as Terryl Givens taught us a decade ago⁴—can be set aside so long as one is familiar with Moroni 10:4–5. To the question of how relevant Mormon scripture is to contemporary life, Rogers’ film, despite being a staging of precisely Mormon scripture, responds with the answer: “Not that relevant.” The perfunctory production of the film thus mirrors the perfunctory relation-

ship Mormons too often have to the Book of Mormon—the book has to be read, the narrative has to be filmed, but nothing here is really supposed to change us or the world we live in. Indeed, I find it beautifully ironic that Rogers’ plan to film the whole of the Book of Mormon petered out somewhere around the Isaiah chapters, just like most efforts to re-read the Book of Mormon do in January or February every year.

Much more critical—and in more than one sense of that word—is Dutcher’s film *States of Grace*. The film is, on my interpretation, a double critique of the missionary program as an emblem for Mormon culture. First, Dutcher provides a critical study of what leads up to the moment of baptism—a critical study, that is, of how Mormonism, in the form of its missionaries, understands scripture. Second, he provides a critical study of baptism and its aftermath—a critical study, that is, of how Mormonism understands ritual.

States of Grace opens with a series of suggestions that scripture is completely irrelevant to contemporary life. The first word of or about scripture in the film comes from a homeless street preacher: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth”—the book of Genesis, chapter 1, verse 1. Verse 2? I can tell you all about it, brothers and sisters, I can tell you all about it: one bible, two testaments, fifty-eight books, eleven epistles—and then the glorious book of Revelation, the glorious book of Revelation.” The response is a chorus of different voices, all off-screen, saying “Shut up” in English and Spanish and culminating in someone saying: “No one is listening.” Shortly afterward, the two Mormon missionaries who are the film’s main characters are shown teaching discussions. In the first, in the middle of Elder Ferrell’s reading James 1:5, the investigator falls asleep, snoring loudly; in the second, the same elder’s reading of John 10:16 is interrupted by the beer-drinking beach bum that is their investigator with a too-hopeful question about Mormon polygamy.

This negative assessment is, however, complicated shortly afterward when Elder Lozano tells his companion his conversion story: he was converted when, while he lay in the hospital for six weeks, a Mormon missionary convalescing in the bed next to him made him memorize scriptures with him. The possible promise of scripture is then explained when the elders, a few days later, meet

with a new investigator—a gang member named Carl who had only just survived a drive-by shooting thanks to the elders. Carl begins their first real discussion with the following words: “I read some of this book that you gave me. It wasn’t that easy to read—all that ‘thee’ and ‘thou’ stuff. But my grandma—she’s religious and all, so she just changed it for me.” “She translated it for you?” Elder Lozano asks. “Yeah. Just takes some getting used to. That’s all.” Given the first dismissive and then more subtly affirmative attitude toward scripture in the film, this exchange is crucial. Dutcher here proposes, finally, that scripture can and should be relevant, but it is necessary for it to be “translated” for it to have any real force. Only then, it seems, can one “get used to it.”

This crucial moment gives way to a still more crucial one. Elder Lozano asks, “You have any questions about what she read?” But before Carl can answer, Elder Ferrell intervenes with “How did it make you *feel*?” to which both Elder Lozano and Carl respond by turning to look at him as if he were completely clueless. Here, in an almost passing moment, Dutcher distinguishes two apparently radically opposed understandings of scripture—on the one hand, scripture as signified; on the other, scripture as signifier, to put the point in Terryl Givens’ terms. Elder Ferrell sees the Book of Mormon as a sacred sign whose truth, learned by attending to one’s feelings, serves principally to identify for its readers which institutional church one should join. For him, translation of the book into contemporary life is not terribly important. Elder Lozano sees the Book of Mormon as a collection of sacred teachings whose truths, severally studied, can and should have a real effect in life. For him, clearly, translation is exactly what needs to be done with the book.

It is not difficult to guess which of these expresses Dutcher’s own convictions. This is indicated powerfully when, not much later, Carl is shown reading James 1:5 and then kneeling beside his bed to pray. Whereas an earlier investigator had fallen asleep sitting up when this verse was read to her, the same passage brings Carl to his knees. But this is just an introduction of sorts to two subsequent “translations” of the Book of Mormon into a contemporary context Dutcher goes on to present.

The first happens when the street preacher from before is reading in the Book of Mormon while alone in the elders’ apart-

ment. Borrowing, but of course without asking, a white shirt, a tie, and a name badge, he goes out into the street to beg for money while preaching from Mosiah 4:16–19: “But I say unto you, ye will not suffer that the beggar putteth up his petition to you in vain, and turn him out to perish. Therefore I will stay my hand, and will not give unto him of my food. I say unto you, O man, whosoever doeth this the same hath great cause to repent. Do we not all depend upon God?” The scene is, largely, presented as a bit of humor: a homeless Pentecostal preacher using the Book of Mormon to guilt passersby into giving him money. Its poignancy, though, should be noted. Unsurprisingly, but in an ominous echo of the first part of the film, the preacher is still without listeners, and there is no suggestion that anyone passing by gives him a cent in response to King Benjamin’s words.

More touching is the second “translation” of sorts. When Carl goes to have his baptismal interview, he has to confront the seriousness of his gang activity. In response to his worries, Elder Banks tells him the story of the Anti-Nephi-Lehies burying their weapons of war. To Carl’s question about what happened after that, Elder Banks responds: “Somewhere out there, deep in the earth, those weapons are still buried. They all kept their promise, every single of them, even though it cost some of them their lives. But their children—their children grew up strong and happy and good.” Later that night, Carl buries his own weapons—guns, magazines, knives—in his backyard, preparatory to his baptism the next day. Here, so literally it borders on cheesiness while remaining moving, Dutcher translates the ancient into the modern, the scriptural into the mundane. What makes this last scene all the more poignant is the fact that it follows on a brief confrontation between Carl and his little brother: “What is wrong with you?” his brother asks. Referring to the drive-by shooting that injured Carl but left others dead, he offers the sort of criticism that appears early in the film but by this point has lost its real force: “They killed Abe, and all you want to do is sit around and read the Bible.” While his brother pushes Carl to *do* something, he has no idea that Carl is about to *do* the most difficult thing of all: *stop*. This is a literalism and a kind of translation that one could well “get used to.”

But then all of this beauty is called into question. When, just

after being confirmed and given the Holy Ghost, Carl finds out his brother has been murdered by a rival gang, he digs up his weapons anew in order to exact revenge. When, with his gun pressed against the forehead of his brother's murderer, he hears his would-be victim both explaining that he has an eight-year-old sister and praying to God, he finds he cannot kill him, but his refusal to do so only leads to his friend's doing the deed. Tormented by what has thus taken place, he goes to the beach where he was baptized and throws his weapons irretrievably into the ocean. The Anti-Nephi-Lehies' act of burying their weapons in the ground was not enough—nor was, incidentally, the ritual of baptism. Bodies buried in the sea and weapons buried in the earth tragically give way to bodies buried in the earth and weapons buried in the sea. Only then can Carl see, as he puts it, how “messed up” everything is. Neither scripture nor ritual can face up to the violent reality of contemporary life, of life in a fallen world.

Dutcher's film thus ends more or less where it begins, in terms of its take on scripture. Though the first half of the film would seem to suggest that scripture can serve a redemptive purpose as far as it is translated into contemporary life, both of Dutcher's “translations” ultimately suggest that there is little reason to have hope in scripture. Right as Benjamin's words may be, they ultimately do little to turn people to the overwhelming need of the poor surrounding us. And beautiful as it might be to think of a gang member burying his weapons of war in a contemporary reenactment of an ancient covenant, it is more sentiment than solution in Dutcher's eyes. It thus appears that the first half of the film is aimed less at showing how scripture might be used rightly than at showing that most Mormon interpretation of scripture is shallower than shallow, so distantly removed from the real problems of life that it is more symptomatic of unthinking arrogance than of misguided or immature charity. The film is thus characterized by anything but the subtly despairing perfunctory element of Rogers' *The Book of Mormon Movie*, but it is not clear that explicit, outright despair is an improvement.

But I do not want to end on a note of despair, so let me conclude with just a word or two about *Napoleon Dynamite*. I lack the space to argue for its Mormonness or for its rightful place in the Mormon film movement—and others have already made that ar-

gument anyway. But what relationship does it bear to scripture? On the surface, none. It is arguably more *culturally* Mormon than anything else. And yet the hope that pervades the film is most crucial. It cannot be said to be culturally Mormon in anything like the sense that *The Book of Mormon Movie* is culturally Mormon. There is something more at work there. It outstrips the perfunctory while nonetheless refusing to assume a merely critical position.

What does *Napoleon Dynamite* present, then? Though I lack the space to spell out the details, I think it is a most beautiful filmic presentation of the so-called psalm of Nephi, a study—not anything like as powerful as Malick’s *Tree of Life* (2011) but not for that reason unworthy—of Paul’s theological self-interpretation in Romans 7. It traces the pathway every Latter-day Saint travels when she finally hears King Benjamin and all his talk about nothingness in the way Benjamin intended. Our worries that we are not good enough are all more than justified. But the problem is not that we are not good enough. The problem is that we think we are supposed to be good enough. And thus *Napoleon Dynamite* demonstrates, without ever stating what it is up to, the way in which scripture is the most relevant thing of all. It shows us grace.

Notes

1. See Joseph M. Spencer, “Alfred Hitchcock in the Legacy Theater: Mormonism, Film, and ‘Religious’ Criticism,” unpublished paper presented at the annual conference of the Association of Mormon Scholars in the Humanities, “Religions and the Practices of Criticism,” Brigham Young University, May 8–9, 2009. See also Michael De Groote, “Dynamite, Dutcher, Hitchcock and the Failure of LDS Movies,” *Mormon Times*, May 14, 2009.

2. This paper was delivered as part of a panel on Mormon film at the 2012 annual conference of the Association of Mormon Scholars in the Humanities, “Economies and Humanities,” Southern Virginia University, May 18–19, 2012. The panel, which included Matthew Bowman and Rachael Givens in addition to myself, was titled “Film and Community.”

3. Paul C. Gutjahr, *The Book of Mormon: A Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 186.

4. See Terryl L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture that Launched a New World Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).