

An Excellent Historiography into the Complexities of Mexican Mormondom

Elisa Eastwood Pulido. *The Spiritual Evolution of Margarito Bautista: Mexican Mormon Evangelizer, Polygamist Dissident, and Utopian Founder, 1878–1961*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020. 356 pp. Hardcover: \$99.00. ISBN: 9780190942106.

Reviewed by Brittany Romanello

The Spiritual Evolution of Margarito Bautista: Mexican Mormon Evangelizer, Polygamist Dissident, and Utopian Founder, 1878–1961 by Elisa Eastwood Pulido is a commitment worth making. This volume, written as an extension of Eastwood Pulido's doctoral dissertation, withholds no detail as it weaves a nuanced and important history that typically goes unmentioned in most US Mormon spaces. Given that I, too, work at the intersections of race, migration, and Mormonism, I praise Elisa for identifying her own positionality while noting the kinds of historical negotiations nonwhite Church members have had to make. She recognizes the ongoing dualities of those who identify as Indigenous, Mexican, and Mormon without making one person's experience a monolith of representation. She also is truthful about Bautista's moral shortcomings, including his sexism and racism. The book maintains a balance by elucidating his dualistic experiences—of both radical acceptance and mobilization to do good and the marginalization, assimilation pressures, and ultimate rejection by both Anglo and Mexican Church leadership. Indeed, Eastwood Pulido succeeds in giving us a historical portrait of Margarito Bautista that accounts for “his achievements and his failures, his gifts as well as his flaws” (4).

Chapter 1 builds a foundation for the reader by introducing them to religious authority in Mexico. This backdrop, which highlights historical

Indigenous sovereignties, knowledge systems, and caretaking of the land throughout Mexico before European contact, is essential if readers are to better understand the colonial contexts of Mexico before and during Bautista's lifetime and how they intersect with Anglo Mormon colonization of the area. The author gives detailed accounts of how the social and spiritual exclusion of Indigenous Mexicans, beginning in 1519, continues even today throughout the region. In chapter 2, we see how this history shapes the motivations and interactions of Anglo Mormons as they utilized the US–Mexico border to their advantage. Early leadership, including prophet Joseph Smith, saw the Church as a pathway for salvation and assimilation of Indigenous peoples, whom LDS scripture calls “Lamanites.” Early missionaries sent to the borderlands using Spanish Book of Mormon excerpts taught Mexicans about their “true” heritage, encouraging them to embrace being a “chosen” people. Eastwood Pulido describes how this missionary work also led to increased Mormon migration into Mexican colonies, serving two pragmatic purposes: increasing Church membership and allowing white Mormons to escape scrutiny from the US government for practicing polygamy.

Chapters 3 and 4 offer an account of Margarito Bautista's conversion to Mormonism, describing how his worldview and lived experiences were shaped by the legacies of subjugation and violence associated with the Catholic Church. The Bautista family was well known for defending and protecting locals' farms from *hacendados*, who stole or intimidated locals into donating land to make way for Spanish-style *haciendas*, similar to the European feudal system. Bautista expressed admiration for Indigenous rebels who sought land reclamation, and for the Liberation Army of the South, or *Ejército Libertador del Sur*. Bautista found a testimony of the Church, and he also believed that Mormonism could provide an avenue by which Indigenous Mexicans could advocate for reparations from the socioeconomic marginalization they experienced on both sides of the border.

Bautista believed that if Mexicans would assimilate with Anglo ideals just enough, they could mobilize and assert their true supremacy as the chosen people described in the Book of Mormon. Bautista merged his own background as an Indigenous Mexican with the ideas of US Mormonism, positioning himself as an important mediator between cultures. Eastwood Pulido is careful to thoroughly convey the dichotomy Bautista often experienced as an Indigenous Mexican within the Church. On one hand, Bautista was a powerful force in shaping the direction of Mexican missionary work and inclusion among first-generation Church members, and on the other, he was still subjected to the xenophobia, racism, and discrimination of white Anglos while working as a gardener and landscaper in both Mesa, Arizona and Salt Lake City, Utah, which boasted heavy Mormon populations. The author includes many instances in which Bautista is fetishized, exoticized, and held up as a type of model minority Lamanite in Church spaces, while at the same time, whenever debating Anglo leaders about the scriptures, stirring activism within LDS communities, or discussing polygamy, he was minimized, underestimated, or dismissed for that same “Lamanite” background. It is a raw disjunction many Church members or readers from marginalized backgrounds may find themselves all too familiar with.

Much of chapters 5 through 7 continues to describe the complexities that molded Bautista’s experience as an Indigenous Mexican Mormon. Again, Eastwood Pulido is painstakingly careful in her narrative, pulling from not only Bautista’s personal writings (including the development of his five-hundred-plus-page magnum opus) but other accounts of that time period that document Bautista’s rise and fall from within US LDS Church society. Only a decade or so after his influence began attracting many Mexican nationals to Mormonism, Bautista found himself being rejected and criticized for his “controversial” teachings while in Mexico (93). During his mission throughout Mexico, he found that many Anglo missionaries from the US had not bothered to

teach alternate accounts of Joseph Smith's history, polygamy, or other doctrine that he considered the "meat" of the gospel. He was frustrated that the Mexican Mormons were not being entrusted with or given the same access to enrichment, knowledge, and leadership positions considering their divine and chosen heritage as described in the Book of Mormon.

This open criticism and declaration of the supremacy of Mexican members, specifically those who oversaw Indigenous lands and traditions, led to Bautista's increased popularity within the Mexican Church but a fall from favor back at Salt Lake City headquarters. Bautista found himself increasingly frustrated with being used by white leadership as a model minority while simultaneously spoken down to when implementing any type of ideology that would bolster Mexicans' ability to self-govern and establish independence from the US Church. Eastwood Pulido describes Bautista's journey as a spiritual evolution many times throughout these chapters, with Bautista ultimately realizing that Anglo American authorities of the Church would continue to do "little to foster the empowerment that would allow Mexicans to take their place as spiritual authorities in their own right" (107). These chapters show the reader all the happenings and circumstances that would eventually lead to Bautista's personal spiritual revolution, which to outsiders like white US Mormon leadership would look like a rebellion and even apostasy.

The final chapters, 8 and 9, outline Bautista's role in the Third Convention, which would end with a large schism as Mexican Church members left mainstream LDS practice. The US leadership's response to dissidents, who were asking for equal representation and self-governance that would better promote cultural sensitivity and social egalitarianism, perpetuated the same cycle of discipline and excommunication that we have seen occur throughout LDS historical practice. Bautista and many other male Mexican leaders expressed resentment of white Mormon paternalistic treatment of their communities, US ethnocentrism, and

the US Church's interference with Mexican members' political participation in Campesino and Zapatista social movements. Eastwood Pulido illustrates how Bautista's disenfranchisement both from the US LDS Church and, later, the Third Convention, led him to spend the rest of his life in his own version of a polygamous "utopia" called New Jerusalem, isolated from many with whom he used to associate. Despite his shortcomings, it is unfortunate that Bautista's contributions to the growth and well-being of the early Church in Mexico have long been overlooked, if not in many cases completely erased from mainstream LDS historical or social discourse. Most Latinx members I have interviewed in my own research have never heard of Margarito Bautista or the Third Convention, which I find troubling. Additionally, I have seen many times in my life already this same pattern of social activists who were once highly valued in Church communities being rejected and then disfellowshipped or excommunicated when their passionate efforts are seen as a threat to the status quo. It seems that the institutional approach toward those considered Mormon dissidents often results in community erasure unless the caretakers of history ensure that changemakers are remembered.

Overall, I think *The Spiritual Evolution of Margarito Bautista* is an excellent historiography that offers a view into the complexities of Mexican Mormondom. In my own academic research, I have found that although almost a century has passed, many Latinx Mormons are still encountering the same dichotomies, exotifications, and exclusions that Bautista (and many others) documented in their lifetimes. Many non-white members have expressed the same feeling of needing to be model Mormons while being excluded from their right to autonomy, sovereignty, and equity within US Church spaces. With Latinx membership being one of the only areas of consistent growth in the US Church, and numbers throughout Latin America staying strong, Eastwood Pulido has provided Church members and leadership with an important historical record that is as relevant today as it was a hundred years ago. I

hope as we enjoy the complicated story of Margarito Bautista, we will do more than read. I hope we consider the lessons of history by turning inward as individuals to address our own biases, while also reflecting on the ways US Mormonism has historically benefited from and perpetuated practices of racial oppression and erasure. I hope we will commit to listen to those who have been minoritized or marginalized within LDS spaces. I hope we will commit to act as agents for equitable inclusion and change. I hope we, too, will *evolve*.

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Heavy Lifting on Broken Ground

Elizabeth Fenton and Jared Hickman, eds. *Americanist Approaches to The Book of Mormon*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2019. 443 pp. Paperback: \$36.95. ISBN: 9780190221935.

Reviewed by Michael Austin

Americanist Approaches to The Book of Mormon cannot quite be described as “groundbreaking.” It covers ground, the editors acknowledge right up front, that has been broken many times before. In their introductory essay, Elizabeth Fenton and Jared Hickman describe the “the clockwork reiteration, at least once a generation, of a specific