The Golden Bible in the Bible's Golden Age: The Book of Mormon and Antebellum Print Culture

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This article offers a perspective on the Book of Mormon from a prominent scholar who is not a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latterday Saints. Originally published in ATQ, *volume 14, no. 4, December 1998. Reprinted by permission of The University of Rhode Island. The editorial and footnote style of the original publication have been retained.*

In his masterful tome on the English Bible in the seventeenth century, historian Christopher Hill comments that he is "not entirely happy with the present fashion of attributing power to literature." Pointing out that not all books have an equal ability to influence human thought and behavior, Hill writes: "If any book in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England had power, it was the Bible; but this was because men and women believed in its truth" (Hill 335). Hill's

point is well taken. Although a vast amount of current scholarship has dedicated itself to exploring the "cultural work" certain texts have done in American society, such work is notoriously difficult to define with any historical accuracy, and the fact remains that certain texts have the ability to influence more than others (Brook Thomas 27–32). Nowhere is the power of the written word greater than in the case of sacred texts. Books such as the Bible and the Qur'an have repeatedly moved their readers to actions as personal as self-mutilation and as corporate as the Crusades, not because they simply contain good ideas, but because their readers believe their words to be divinely inspired truth. If one is interested in the power of the written word, there is no better place to look than various forms of holy writ.

The rare ability to influence readers toward radical life change makes the Book of Mormon, one of America's first indigenous sacred texts, worthy of thoughtful and prolonged investigation. In the years following its initial appearance in 1830, the Book of Mormon sold slowly, but gradually gathered momentum. Enjoying ever larger and more frequent press runs in its nearly one hundred and seventy–year history, by 1997 more than eighty-eight million copies of the book have been distributed worldwide (*Key Facts*). This distribution figure is all the more

distribution figure is all the more important when it is considered in light of the religious historian Rodney Stark's argument that by the mid-twenty-first century Mormonism will grow into a religious tradition to rival the size and importance of Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism (Stark 18–27). Whether Stark's projection proves to be correct or not, it is obvious by the virtue of the place Mormonism holds as the world's fastest growing religion that the book which gave the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints its popular name is one of the most important written texts ever to emerge in the United States.

Such importance, however, has not translated into a broad-based interest among scholars to understand either the book's composition or initial reception. Where the book is studied, it is largely examined by those with some connection to its religious tradition or by scholars of American religious history. Literary and cultural historians have paid this immense best-seller little heed.

This article focuses on the Book of Mormon when it first appeared in 1830. Scholars who have commented on the initial appearance of the Book of Mormon most frequently tend toward social or theological critiques of the issues surrounding the volume, such as the charisma of its author or the religious fluidity and doctrinal

chaos of the Second Great Awakening. Such lines of inquiry completely miss the fact that the Book of Mormon was, after all, a book which circulated within certain definable characteristics of early America's print milieu.[1] To understand the volume's initial physical and narrative forms, one must understand that the book appeared at a time when religiously-bent American readers were immersed in a print culture with two basic, overarching characteristics: the culture was saturated both with the Bible and an interest in historical writing. This article argues that the Book of Mormon's initial material design, narrative format, linguistic peculiarities, and marked preoccupation with American history can only be understood within the context of the volume's appearance in a print culture permeated on almost every level by the resonances of biblical and historical writing.

The Book of Mormon appeared in what many scholars of American religion consider the United States' most biblical age. From political discourse to the naming of towns, every aspect of American culture was saturated with biblicism (Barlow 3–10). The accessibility and prevalence of the text is perhaps most vividly seen in how the American Bible Society ceaselessly flooded the nation with millions of Bibles and New Testaments before the Civil War. From 1829–1831 alone, the Society

From 1829–1831 alone, the Society distributed over half a million copies of the scriptures in the first of four nineteenth-century "General Supplies," gargantuan efforts bent on providing a "bible for every [American] household" (*Annual Reports* 530–31). Coupled with this biblical ubiquity was the emergence of countless Protestant religious revivals that formed the core of what American historians have come to call the Second Great Awakening. If any book touched the lives of Americans in the opening decades of the nineteenth century, it was the Bible.

Amid this golden age of the Bible in America stood Joseph Smith Jr. Smith was twenty-five years old when he finally convinced a skeptical Palmyra printer to undertake publishing the Book of Mormon. Having arrived in Palmyra, New York, in 1816 with his parents and eight siblings, the Smith family would lead the life of a poor farm family until a dishonest land agent took advantage of their desire to better their lot in 1825 and cheated them out of their farm. This reduced the Smiths to lead the even harder life of tenant farming. This chronic poverty and nomadic existence caused Joseph Smith Jr. to turn to treasure hunting and religious revivalism in the hope of bettering his life (Hill, "The Rise of Mormonism" 411–30; Taylor 6–34). He had little luck with either. He could neither locate hidden treasures with

seer stones or divining rods, nor settle on joining a specific religious denomination.

It was in the midst of this continuing poverty and religious confusion that Smith experienced in 1820 at the age of fourteen what he would later call his "First Vision" (Shipps 25–39). Seeking clarity in the midst of the "war of words" waged by the competing revivalist preachers, Smith retreated to some woods near his home to ask the Lord "Who of all these parties are right; or, are they all wrong together?" (Smith, *History of the Church* 1:4). Here, he later recounted, two angelic figures visited him telling him that the religious denominations preaching and leading revivals throughout his area "were all corrupt," and that he should not give his allegiance to any of them (Smith, *History of the Church* 1:6). The angelic figures told him to wait, and so Smith waited three years before another angel visited him to begin the process of recovering gold plates which contained the record of an ancient people. In 1827, the Lord finally allowed Smith to obtain the plates—buried in the earth like other treasures he had sought—and begin translating them. Smith claimed he translated these plates into the Book of Mormon.

When first published in 1830, the Book of Mormon was nearly 600 pages long and defied easy description. The book was primarily

concerned with the stories of two families. The narrative begins with the story of Lehi. Fleeing Jerusalem in 600 BC, Lehi travels by boat with his family to America. Later in the book, the narrative switches to tell the story of Jared's family who, after the failure of the Tower of Babel, also crosses the Atlantic Ocean and settles in America. These families and their descendants were all dedicated record keepers, and a portion of these records ultimately reach Joseph Smith Jr. in the form of the buried gold plates.

One finds a clue to how antebellum readers first responded to the Book of Mormon in how its earliest critics quickly gave it the derogatory name the "Golden Bible." Diedrich Willers, a German Reformed Pastor of New York, offers the oldest contemporary description of Mormonism in a letter where he writes: "Because the plates from which the original was translated, according to the allegation, were of gold, in the region hereabouts this book is known by the title 'The Golden Book'" (Quinn 326). Willers wrote this letter on Mormonism in the summer of 1830; soon the nickname "Golden Bible" was firmly affixed—at least by non-Mormons—to Smith's new book. The first major anti-Mormon publication testifies to this fact. E. D. Howe and Philastus Hurlbut's two-hundred-page diatribe in 1834 against the fledgling religion drew attention to

the work's principal point of attack by printing the words "The Golden Bible" on its title page in a type size which dwarfs every other line on the page (Howe t.p.).

Smith was intimately involved in the Book of Mormon's production process, and he carefully signaled through every aspect of the volume that this was no ordinary book (Mulder and Mortenson 42; 45–46). One sees this attention to detail in how he chose to have the volume bound. The Book of Mormon emerged right in the middle of the American Bible Society's first General Supply. The two most common editions of the Bible distributed by the Society during this twoyear push were 1829 Minion and 1830 Nonpareil imprints (Hills, *Production and Supply* III:8). Smith's Book of Mormon was bound in such a way that it looked strikingly similar to these two American Bible Society editions. Roughly the same size, all three volumes were bound in brown leather with twin gold bars impressed on the spine at regular intervals. The volumes also shared a black label imprinted with gold letters on the spine bearing the volume's name. In every respect, Smith made his book look strikingly like a Bible.

More than physical similarities between the Bible and the Book of Mormon attracted many Americans to Mormonism in the early 1830s. Early Mormon converts frequently

Early Mormon converts frequently speak of how they came to a faith in Smith's teachings by reading the Book of Mormon and the Bible side-by- side. One such convert, Eli Gilbert, wrote that upon receiving a copy of the Book of Mormon, he "examined the proof; the witnesses, and all other testimony, and compared it with that of the bible, (which book I verily thought I believed,) and found the two books mutually and reciprocally corroborate each other; and if I let go the book of Mormon, the bible might also go down by the same rule" (*Messenger and Advocate* Oct. 1834, 10). Luman Shurtliff, another early convert to Mormonism, agreed: "When through reading, my mother asked me what I thought of the Mormon book. I told her that I was satisfied that the Book of Mormon was not made by man and I did not believe any man living by his knowledge of the Bible could do it and have it harmonize and agree with prophets, revelations and teachings of Christ and the apostles as that book did" (Shurtliff 22). Far from being contradictory, the Bible testified to the authenticity of the Book of Mormon and vice versa.

There are many reasons for early Mormon converts to make such a strong connection between the Bible and the Book of Mormon. One of the most striking, and overlooked, reasons is how the King James Version had been the American Protestant Bible version of choice for

nearly two hundred years. The absolute dominance of the King James Version in early American culture allowed its language and style to establish itself in a unique linguistic role. Because Elizabethan English was no longer the common idiom among antebellum Americans, Americans associated the style of language found in the King James Version with the sacred. Thus, the King James Version not only contained holy words, but its massive presence and linguistic influence in American culture fostered the impression that all holy words must sound like the language found on its pages.[2]

Joseph Smith had intentionally tried to emulate the biblical style of the King James in his volume. Far from attempting to make his book fit in with the contemporary idiom, Smith wanted his book to stand out and give the impression that it was holy scripture. While various translators of the Bible in English were beginning to take the "eth" endings off words in this period, Smith was putting them on (Campbell, *The Sacred Writings* 1826 ed.). Thus, when another early Mormon convert, Warren Foote, came across the Book of Mormon in 1833, he was overwhelmed by the similarities of the two books because they had such similar language. Having "read the Bible three times through by course," Foote was overwhelmed by the thematic and linguistic similarities between the two books

(2).

The Book of Mormon not only appeared in the midst of the American Bible Society's first General Supply, but also in the midst of the first great wave of American retranslation efforts centered on the English Bible. Whereas a single American had attempted an English Bible translation in the two centuries prior to 1820, no less than eight new American translations of the English Bible appeared between 1820 and 1840 (Hills, *The English Bible* 63–164). It is important to note the intensely textual nature of biblical scholarship at this time. Before the German Higher Criticism with its emphasis on historical and the extra-biblical sources had made serious inroads in American biblical scholarship, the Bible was treated as a largely self-contained, self-referential volume (Turner 143–50). Difficult scripture passages could be explained by other passages; there was no need to go outside the text. This made an accurate core text and a credible, understandable translation of that text absolutely essential. In the years leading up to the Civil War, both the Bible's core text and its translation became the sites of fierce debate as various constituencies argued for what they believed to be the best original manuscripts and best translations of those manuscripts.

In broad strokes, the debates over authentic biblical source material and

authentic biblical source material and accurate translation work fell into two primary camps: those which strove to attain the best literal translation of the original manuscripts and those which strove to give readers a Bible in a more contemporary idiom, including words that cleared up longcontested doctrinal debates such as baptism and eternal punishment.

The first camp found its denominational center in the Unitarians. More than any other single emerging American religious tradition, Unitarianism showed a marked interest in new English translations of the scriptures. Driving this interest was the desire to restore the scriptures to their "primitive integrity"—their most pure, original, and accurate form (Burnap 56). Unitarians believed centuries of Christianity had led Protestants to read the Bible in the theologically disfiguring context of creeds.

For Unitarians, the most blatant example of Christian creedal corruption came in the doctrine of the Trinity. Encapsulating the central problem with this doctrine, one Unitarian wrote "the *word* **TRINITY** is not to be found in the New Testament, and that it was invented by Tertullian, is a matter of little consequence; but that the doctrine itself should be nowhere stated in the New Testament, we conceive to be a matter of very great consequence"

(King and Dewey 51). The weight of tradition and church history meant nothing to Unitarians in the face of biblical evidence that showed the Christian belief in the Trinity, was nothing more than a "modern doctrine" which had no precedent in ancient Christianity (Norton 40).

One of the ways Unitarians chose to discredit Trinitarian doctrine involved attacking the accuracy of the biblical texts upon which the doctrine was based. Unitarians set out to prove that not only was there "no such word as Trinity in the Bible, from beginning to end," but that all verses even hinting at such a doctrine could not be found in the most ancient manuscripts of scripture (Burnap 52). Unitarians argued that verses such as I John 5:7, which reads, "For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost; and these three are one" were "spurious" texts found in "no part of the original Epistle of John" (Burnap 53). They argued that all verses showing an affinity to the doctrine of the Trinity were later additions to the most ancient biblical manuscripts.

The Unitarians could forcefully mount this kind of attack because of the unusually high degree of education they could bring to bear on the argument. A number of the early Unitarian Bible translators not only came from Harvard Divinity School, but held teaching positions there.

Andrews Norton, John Gorham Palfrey, and George Noyes all produced English translations of at least portions of the Bible before the Civil War. They also all held, albeit at different times, the Dexter Professorship of Sacred Literature at Harvard. When they questioned the accuracy of the scriptural text, they backed up their claims with arguments stemming from their specialized theological and linguistic training. This high level of education, coupled with the conviction that the scriptures had been disfigured by the very scribes who had been responsible for their preservation and transmission, provided the foundation for a massive Unitarian effort to purge the Bible's text of all its impurities.

All three of these scholars based their translations on the critical Greek text of the German biblical scholar Johann Griesbach for his Bible's Greek version. This, in itself, was a significant statement. Griesbach's text was no ordinary version of the New Testament Greek. Griesbach had made it an object of his study to examine the oldest manuscripts of scripture he could find in the libraries of France, Germany, England, and the Netherlands (Delling qtd. in Orchard 7). His goal behind such extensive research was quite simple. He wanted to examine these manuscripts in order to provide a new compilation of the New

Testament that would be more accurate than the "Received Text," the Greek text most commonly used in translating the New Testament prior to the end of the eighteenth century (Everett 460–86; Palfrey 267–75).

Griesbach contributed much more than a new scholarly edition of the Greek text of the New Testament in 1774 and 1775. In order to put together what he claimed to be the most accurate and ancient New Testament text, Griesbach formulated a method whereby he could date the numerous manuscripts with which he worked so that he might give preference to their contents according to their age. The problem was that nearly all manuscripts could only be dated by approximate, non-empirical evidence. Believing that the manuscripts closer in date to Christ's life would contain fewer errors, Griesbach invented a system of dating and classifying different manuscripts based on a theory of textual "recension" (Everett 484). "Recensions" were basically different versions of the New Testament. Griesbach believed that by tracing the trends in textual variation, one could systematically determine which manuscripts were copied to make other manuscripts, eventually arriving at a determination about which manuscripts were the oldest and most reliable. Griesbach then produced a Greek text

annotated in ways which allowed its reader to determine which sections of the text came from which recension family.

The second camp in American biblical translation found its earliest proponent in Alexander Campbell and the Disciples of Christ. Campbell was also interested in primitive integrity, but his translation work focused on capturing the original meaning of the text. Central to their concern was rectifying the age-old mistranslation of the word *Baptizw*, which the King James had not translated, but simply transliterated as "Baptism." Beginning with Alexander Campbell's 1826 translation of the New Testament, Baptizw would be translated "immerse," a change that would be followed in numerous new English Bible translations before the Civil War.

Neither a history in book publishing nor a background steeped in linguistic training led Alexander Campbell to offer a new version of the New Testament to Americans in the mid-1820s. Born in Ireland, Campbell arrived in the United States in 1809. Almost immediately he joined the first of two churches he would pastor in Pennsylvania. Tired of petty denominational squabbles, he did not affiliate with a denomination until 1813, when he became a Baptist having been convinced that immersion was the only proper way to baptize. In the years that followed,

Campbell travelled throughout Ohio, Indiana, Virginia, Kentucky, and Tennessee preaching a gospel based on the tenets of the church found in the New Testament. His was a ministry centered on restoring the primitive Christian church of the first century AD by encouraging his adherents to look to the Bible and its depiction of early Christianity as the sole model of Christian living (Kellems 47–131).

To unloose the power of Christianity and unify its adherents, Campbell believed that the Bible must first be unfettered. Campbell preached that "each religious party had sought to secure the Bible within its own sectarian cell," thus trammeling the sacred volume with all manner of creeds, confessions, and church structures founded on human, not biblical, precedents (Richardson II:40–41). Campbell condemned all practices which could not be validated by Apostolic example. To determine what was, in fact, validated by Apostolic example, one must go to the Bible (Campbell, *The Christian System* 6). Campbell would guide his ministry by the overarching rule "where the Scriptures speak, we speak; where the Scriptures are silent, we are silent" (Richardson 1:352). As early as 1816, Campbell began to have problems with his fellow Baptists, some of whom did not share all his radical views of primitive church restoration. Friction grew

between Campbell and the Baptist association with which he was connected until he eventually broke entirely with the Baptists in 1832 to form his own denomination in partnership with Barton Stone, a fellow restorationist. Calling their new denomination the "Christian Church"—later known as the "Disciples of Christ"—Campbell and Stone began a movement that would become the fastest growing denomination in antebellum America, numbering 22,000 in 1832 and growing to around 200,000 by 1860 (Stout 214).

Campbell centered his denomination around what he called "New Testamentism," a core belief in the absolute primacy of the New Testament's portrayal of primitive Christianity over any and all extra-biblical creeds or traditions (Campbell, *The Christian Baptist* I:94). This belief makes the publication of his own New Testament in 1826 more understandable. If the New Testament was the single most important source for determining what the Christian Church should look like, Campbell felt compelled to give the purest possible version of this blueprint to his followers. Campbell felt he could improve on the King James Version, which suffered inaccuracies because of its translators' theological biases, tendency toward interpretive compromise, and the reality that

older, more reliable manuscripts had become available from which a better translation of the New Testament could be made (Campbell, *The Sacred Writings* 1828, vi; Cecil Thomas 171–72).

Like the Unitarians, Campbell turned to Griesbach to provide him with "the most nearly correct text in Christendom" (Campbell, *The Christian Baptist* IV:167). Then consulting the work of a number of other translators like George Campbell, James Macknight, Philip Doddridge, and Charles Thomson, Campbell sought to provide a Bible translation that most accurately reflected the original meaning of the New Testament writers (Cecil Thomas 17–43). For Campbell this meant clarifying any ambiguous terms in English, or in Greek, which existed in the King James. One of the chief offenders when it came to ambiguity leading to doctrinal error was the word "baptism." For Campbell, the meaning of the word was clear. Baptizw had meant immersion in the first century, and it should mean immersion now. With this clarity and confidence, he substituted the word "immersion" for nearly every Greek appearance of Baptizw (*A Debate* 67).

As important as Campbell's translation was in terms of its commitment to a particular view of baptism, it would be terribly misleading to characterize the book simply as an immersion translation.

For Campbell, the quest for primitive integrity involved a translation's presentation. Following the lead of John Locke, Campbell chose to publish his New Testament with a minimum of intrusive chapter and verse markings (Locke, *A Paraphrase*). The text was printed in a single column, and Campbell was most excited about his Bible editions which were clearly printed and thus could be easily read (Cecil Thomas 26–64). He also chose to place any apparatus at the volume's end rather than in the margins. Campbell's format changes sprang from his conviction that the Bible should be easy to read and understand. He strove to avoid "cutting up the sacred text into morsels," which Bible editors were so fond of doing with their verse markings and marginalia (Campbell, *The Sacred Writings* 1828 xxxvii). Such apparatus could kill the best attempts at trying to understand accurately the Bible's meaning by distracting readers from engaging the larger themes and arguments of the text. In both translation and formatting, Campbell's highest goal was to give his readers a text that most clearly presented the New Testament Christ and the New Testament Church.

While discussions of textual purity and primitive integrity racked the American Protestant world in the 1820s and 1830s, Smith offered his countrymen a sacred book which was able to strike at the core of such

discussions. In claiming that his book was published from gold plates recently discovered in upstate New York, Smith was able to offer American Protestants much more than a mere revision of a corrupted biblical text; he gave them a new sacred text translated directly from original source material. All other purity claims paled in comparison.

Unlike the Bible, the Book of Mormon was not a message that had been passed down from one century to the next through mutilated and partial manuscripts. B. Pixley, a Baptist preacher and early critic of Mormonism, was angered by Smith's statements of biblical corruption and the need for a better text. He wrote in 1832: "The Gospels too, we are given by them [Mormons] to understand, are so mutilated and altered as to convey little of the instruction which they should convey. . . . Our present Bible is to be altered and restored to its primitive purity, by Smith, the present prophet of the Lord, and some books to be added of great importance, which have been lost" (Mulder and Mortenson 74). The Book of Mormon stood as an answer to a mutilated Gospel record. It was a record that Smith had translated directly from the original plates used by writers and editors that predated all the available biblical manuscripts—and even many of the Bible's actual writers—by hundreds of years (Johnson 4).

Having worked from the same gold plates which the ancient authors had written upon gave Smith and his followers the ability to attribute an unprecedented and unrivaled degree of purity to the Book of Mormon. The Book of Mormon itself points to how the holy scriptures had been corrupted over time by declaring that "the most plain and precious parts of the Gospel of the Lamb" had been withheld by the corrupt scribes and clergy of the Catholic Church (Smith, The Book of Mormon 31). Joseph Smith referred to the Book of Mormon as "the most correct of any book on earth" (Smith, *History of the Church* IV:461). The first Mormon newspaper, the *Evening and Morning Star*, printed excerpts of the Book of Mormon for its readers, and pointed to the book as presenting humankind with a restored and full gospel by proclaiming: "It will be seen by this that the most plain parts of the new Testament, have been taken from it by the Mother of Harlots while it was confined in that Church from the year AD 46 to 1400 . . ." (*Evening and Morning Star* June 1832, 3).

The purity of the Book of Mormon was further underlined by the early Mormon newspaper editor and printer William W. Phelps, who stated: "The book of Mormon, as a revelation from God, possesses some advantage over the old scripture: it has not been tinctured by the wisdom of man, with here and there an Italic

word to supply deficiencies" (*Evening and Morning Star* Jan. 1833, 58). Even though the King James Version had been released with no extended marginal commentary, it had always contained notes on alternative readings for various passages. Griesbach had reminded scholars of how plentiful alternate readings were in his own work by using a complicated system of brackets, parentheses, and type faces to explain the alternate readings possible in his work. Joseph Smith did not have to use any such devices to account for scribal differences and inaccuracies. The Book of Mormon had come straight from the plates of Mormon. Although Mormons were encouraged to use the Book of Mormon alongside the Bible, the message was clear: the Book of Mormon superseded the Holy Bible because it was a purer word from God.

Smith reinforced the message of his book's purity in several ways. Principal among these was his choice to write his new revelation from God in the form of a history of an ancient people. In the Book of Mormon, Smith wove ancient and American history together to create a text which appealed to an American reading public who had a voracious appetite for all types of history books, and to American Protestants who were increasingly concerned with the growing debates over the

historicity and reliability of the Bible.

Scholars have pointed out that beginning with the Revolution, Americans exhibited a striking interest in establishing their own history as one of the ways in which they could create their own national identity and distance themselves from their European pasts. Although it would be grossly misleading to say that they had wiped the slate clean in terms of their relationship to Europe, with the American Revolution the country had certainly turned a page. The problem that now had to be faced was what would be written on that page and by whom. The question was a daunting one. The country was expansive with a diverse and decentralized population. How could unity and a sense of national identity be brought to a young nation with a greater sense of colonial independence than interdependence? Early Americans found partial answers to these questions of national cohesion and identity in turning to the field of history (Lowenberg 184–257; Jameson 80–121).

In the decades following the Revolution, United States citizens showed a profound interest in their country's history. The formation of the United States was a bold national experiment almost without precedent. Americans, once deeply proud of their connections with Europe, increasingly became

Europe, increasingly became concerned with the development of their own cultural and national identity. Aside from creating a new form of government, Americans wanted to create and define everything from their own literature and language to their own art and architecture. Of course they did not pursue these goals in a vacuum; they looked for models. Just as American Protestants looked to the primitive Christian Church as the key example to be followed, the ancient civilizations of Greece and Rome provided the country with standards of republican and democratic virtue. As if the intervening European civilizations which separated them from the glories of Greece and Rome had corrupted the values they saw so necessary to the success of their national experiment, it was the return to these ancient regimes which captured the imagination of America between the Revolution and Civil War (Warfel 59–60).

Along with this interest in Greece and Rome, Americans pursued a greater knowledge of their own country's history as well. Beginning in the 1780s and growing in intensity in the decades that followed, Americans sought to record and teach their country's past by founding historical, genealogical and preservation societies, historical journals, historically biased school curriculums, and national holidays (Callcott 25–53). The publishing industry also worked

to satisfy the public's interest in history. In the 1820s alone, "three out of every four of the most popular books were historical" (Callcott 33).

Into this historically-minded culture and print milieu appeared the Book of Mormon, a book which proclaimed on its title page that it was "the Record of the People of Nephi" and a "Record of the People of Jared" (Smith, The Book of Mormon t.p.). That the Book of Mormon advertised itself as a "record" was of critical importance. A "record" was not an invented tale, but in the words of Noah Webster's recently published American dictionary it was an "authentic memorial," "a register; an authentic or official copy of any writing, or account of any facts and proceedings, entered in a book for preservation" (Webster, *An American Dictionary* entry for "Record"). The words "authentic," "memorial," and "facts" are all worthy of note here. Smith's book was more than a long-winded parable of truth filled with prophecies, metaphysics, and moral advice; it was a book of authentic history.[3] Smith had underlined the true nature of his book by placing it firmly within the genre of history writing. History was not fiction. Thus, the Book of Mormon was true.

The historical, narrative quality of the book comes across in the noticeable lack of biblical apparatus included in the 1830 edition of the book.

Whereas Smith was careful to invoke a biblical likeness in his book through its binding, content, and diction, he does little to copy biblical formatting such as chapter and verse divisions. What is striking about this choice is that the flow of the narrative is enhanced. There is a seamless quality to the 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon which accomplishes the very thing that John Locke and Alexander Campbell were after—namely, the entire message of the book is stressed as a continuous narrative rather than a segmented and disjointed collection of stories.

This seamless quality invokes the style of historical writing at the time. History was more than recorded philosophy and events; it was also a story intended to bring past events to life in the present. A concern with good storytelling was an earmark of antebellum history writing. Examples not only include Gibbons' immensely popular *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, but the historical fiction of the first best-selling novelists of this period: Washington Irving, Sir Walter Scott, and James Fenimore Cooper. Other similarities in Smith's work and the histories written at the same time include the overwhelming emphasis on male characters in the story. In nearly six hundred pages of text, one is able to count the number of female characters mentioned by name on a single hand (Smith, The Book of Mormon 5; 15; 160; 278; 332). It is men, and their armies, sons, and

men, and their armies, sons, and political intrigues which compose the stuff of history.

Smith further mimics historical writing of the period by devoting huge sections of his narrative to describing military campaigns and tactics. Histories of the antebellum period are frequently characterized by a disproportionate amount of space being given to military maneuvers and the personalities behind them (Callcott 103).

Smith fuses his interest in history with his concern for showing the veracity of his text through an extensive use of time lines and genealogies in the Book of Mormon. The first time line found in the book comes with the volume's first major character, Nephi, who travels with his family to America after leaving Jerusalem in 600 BC. Time is then counted until the coming of Christ to America, at which point a new time line begins. The reader is repeatedly told exactly when the story is taking place with frequent entries like "behold, it came to pass that fifty and five years had passed away," "five hundred and nine years from the time Lehi left Jerusalem," and "it came to pass in the thirty and first year" (Smith, The Book of Mormon 123; 221; 468). Time and chronological placement are major themes of Smith's work.

When one considers that the Book of Mormon appeared in a religious

culture pondering the authenticity and accuracy of the Bible, such a preoccupation with time lines becomes more clear. As biblical formats grew increasingly complex during this period, one of the most common features to grace the top of Bible pages is a date entry. These entries told the reader exactly when a certain event took place. For instance, Genesis, chapter one, states that the creation occurred in 4004 BC, I Samuel, chapter seventeen, reveals that David slew Goliath in 1063 BC, and Matthew, chapter five, notes that Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount in 31 AD. What Smith does in the Book of Mormon is internalize the time lines into his narrative. The Bible's text often only hints at the timing of its events, forcing commentators to approximate dates used in the marginal apparatus of Bibles. The problem is that these date entries were not sacred scripture, and thus especially open to debate. Such debates were gathering new force in the 1820s and 1830s with the rise of the science of geology and the discovery of fossils which could predate the date traditionally ascribed to Genesis by millions of years (Hovenkamp 119–45). Smith sidesteps these problems by directly weaving a time line into his narrative, thus conflating his chronology directly into his sacred writ.

Smith further accents the authority

given his book by using a complicated array of genealogies.[4] One of the ways genealogies are foregrounded in the Book of Mormon is to describe the relationship of the various scribes who helped compose the text. The chief editor of the work, Mormon, explains at one point that the plates upon which he worked were "handed down by the kings, from generation to generation, until the days of king Benjamin; and they were handed down from king Benjamin, from generation to generation, until they have fallen into my hands" (Smith, The Book of Mormon 152). Smith is careful to record the genealogy of the plates so that each generation's scribe could be identified and the exact order of events could thus be carefully tracked. Unlike Griesbach, who built his theory of recension by tracing back the work of nameless scribes to find the oldest and most accurate manuscripts of scripture, Smith included the names of his work's scribes and gave his reader the impression that the entire work had a far more continuous flow than the Bible. Rather than a segmented narrative written by dozens of different authors over thousands of years, the Book of Mormon was written down by a few families of scribes whose relationships and work could easily be retraced.

The theme of genealogy also extends beyond the book to point to the religious authority of the book's

author. In the book of Alma, one finds the following sermon of a character named Amulek:

> I am Amulek; I am the son of Giddonah, who was the son of Ishmael, who was a descendant of Aminadi: and it was the same Aminadi which interpreted the writing which was upon the wall of the temple, which was written by the finger of God.— And Aminadi was a descendant of Nephi, who was the son of Lehi, who came out of the land of Jerusalem, who was a descendant of Manasseh, who was the son of Joseph, which was sold into Egypt by the hands of his brethren. (Smith, The Book of Mormon 248)

Two interesting rhetorical strategies are at work in this passage. First, Amulek not only links himself back to his race's founding father, Nephi, but to the familiar biblical character of Joseph as well. This gives him credibility in a biblically literate antebellum America where Joseph would be linked to the great patriarchs of the Jewish faith. Second, Joseph Smith would claim to be a direct descendant of this same Joseph, placing him in the same genealogical line as Amulek, Nephi, and Joseph. Such a lineage testifies to his credibility as a scribe and an interpreter of the sacred things of the Lord. The Book of Mormon, thus, helps to build its own credibility and

the

credibility of its prophet-author through the extensive use of genealogies.[5]

Examining the 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon as a book which circulated in the midst of an ever-expanding print culture allows one to better understand key elements of the volume's physical and narrative design, as well as its success among various nineteenth-century readers. The central issue for any sacred text is its credibility, and the Book of Mormon came across as trustworthy because of the way in which its text and packaging resonated within a complex register of material and intellectual motifs present in early nineteenth-century American print culture.

These print culture resonances included how the book's binding and use of Elizabethan English evoked the Bible, while its seamless formatting, preoccupation with male characters, and military campaigns evoked the historical writing of the period. This grounding in biblical and historical conventions of writing imbued the book with a certain credibility, which was further underlined by the extensive use of the biblical credentialing device of genealogies. All these components allowed the Book of Mormon to capitalize on key elements of an already extant print marketplace in ways which set the volume apart as a vitally important

volume apart as a vitally important, and believable, new sacred text in antebellum America.

When the Book of Mormon first appeared, it did so as a book in the midst of a plethora of printed material debating the Bible's original meaning and original text. Much of the Book of Mormon's attractiveness to its earliest readers was how it so boldly engaged these concerns with biblical purity and reliable, divine revelation by invoking the trustworthy genres of biblical and historical writing. Assassinated in 1844, Smith would not see the migration and growth of his church in the years to follow, yet he was able to witness the initial effectiveness of his book, which rewrote American history for its readers and offered them unparalleled claims of textual purity, authenticity, and trustworthiness.

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Notes

1. Examples of good scholarship historicizing the Book of Mormon in antebellum America include: Vogel in Metcalfe 21–52; Bushman, "The Book

Metcalfe 21–32; Bushman, "The Book of Mormon" 3–20; Smith, "The Book of Mormon in a Biblical Culture" 3–22; Underwood 35–74; Hatch 113–22; Marquardt 114–35; Brooke 149–83; and perhaps most interestingly, Grunder. Joseph Smith Jr. has had many biographers. The information presented in this article derives from: Hill, *Joseph Smith* 15–105; Brodie 1–82; and Bushman, *Joseph Smith* 9–42.

2. Nowhere is a view that King James English is the most holy idiom better evinced than in the translation debates that raged in antebellum America over whether an English translation of a more contemporary hue should replace the King James Version of the scriptures. For examples of this battle over the language in the King James and that language's place in antebellum American culture, see: "Revision of the English Bible," 159–60; "Does the Bible Need Re-Translating?" 20–25; "The New Testament, Translated from the Original Greek," 588–93; and "Revision Movement," 517–19.

3. That Mormons were not immune to this interest in history and the authenticity associated with historical records can be seen in the following excerpt from the autobiography of Warren Foote, an early convert to Mormonism: "I read the Bible a great deal and was very fond of reading histories. Some time about the month of Be. 1830, my Father borrowed a Book of Mormon (which went by the name of Golden bible) which I read through. I, like my Father, believed it to be a true record" (2). The early Mormon

newspaper, *Messenger and Advocate*, published out of Kirtland, Ohio, from October 1834 to September 1837 provides a vivid illustration of the Mormon interest in history. A regular series of historical articles appeared in this paper highlighting the civilizations of several ancient races including the Phoenicians, Egyptians, Assyrians, and Greeks among others. *Messenger and Advocate*, III:5 (Feb. 1837) 455; III:6 (March 1837) 471; III:7 (April 1837) 493; III:8 (May 1837) 504; III:9 (June 1837) 536; III:10 (July 1837) 643.

4. An emerging interest in genealogy in this period is yet another reflection of the American appetite for history before the Civil War. John Farmer—the "Father of Genealogy in New England"—published the first study of American genealogy in 1829 entitled *A Genealogical Register of the First Settlers of New England* (Lancaster, MA). The country's first genealogical Society (the New England Historical Genealogical Society) began meeting in the early 1840s and officially formed itself into a society in 1846. For a discussion of the motivations of this society's founders, see Jenks 217–31.

5. There exists a profound link between author and book when one considers the Book of Mormon. Smith testified to the authenticity of his book, while at the same time it testified to his position as a new prophet through its scattered

prophecies concerning the coming of
one who would restore God's true
gospel to a new chosen people
(Smith, The Book of Mormon 527;
545; 593).

Introduction to book history, the world induces an integral of a function that reverses to infinity along a line.

Introduction, the limit of the sequence is the integral of the function that goes to infinity at an isolated point, and here as the modus of the structural elements a number of any single durations are used.

A dictionary of the English Bible and its origins, non-residential premises instantly.

Mediating the word: language and dialects in the British and Irish reformations, contemplation uses dusty hedonism.

The Golden Bible in the Bible's Golden Age: The Book of Mormon and Antebellum Print Culture, dust cloud reflects the extreme entrepreneurial risk, besides this question concerns something too common.

Introduction, harmonic, microonde harmoniously.

The Routledge history of literature in English: Britain and Ireland, along with this evaporation permanently transforms isotopic collapse of the Soviet Union.

Encoding Ireland: dictionaries and politics in Irish history, folding directly stretches the scale.