
The Many Bibles of Joseph Smith: Textual, Prophetic, and Scholarly Authority in Early-National Bible Culture

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This article examines Joseph Smith's early Bible usage, pursuing three interconnected arguments. First, I argue that Smith's texts "signify on" the Bible as a means of establishing their own scriptural authority, and that early-national print-Bible culture made this possible. Smith's ability to synthesize, compile, rearrange, reference, and play with biblical texts was the product of his access to the formats, paratextual apparatus, and translational variety of early-national bibles. Second, I argue that a central preoccupation of early-national Bible culture—the materiality of scripture—is also a central concern of the Book of Mormon. Like contemporary bibles, Smith's texts display concern for their own material reliability and address that concern through a multiplicity of authorial and editorial voices. Last, acknowledging the questions implied by a focus on Smith's Bible usage, I argue that scholars must take seriously the fact that he spoke and acted in the interest of his prophetic reputation.

Therefore he caused that the words which he spake should be written and sent forth among those that were not under the sound of his voice, that they might also receive his words.

—Mosiah 2:8¹

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¹All quotations from the Book of Mormon are from Skousen (2009). Chapter and verse references are from the contemporary LDS editions.

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And have I not an equal privilege with the ancient saints?

—Joseph Smith, Jr., Letter to Silas Smith, September 26, 1833

JOSEPH SMITH HAD BEEN DICTATING the Book of Mormon for about two months in June 1828 when everything fell apart. He had been reading, he said, from golden plates revealed to him by an angel while Martin Harris, a moderately wealthy landowner who was bankrolling the project, served as scribe. In June, Harris managed to lose everything that had been written to that point. During the same month, Smith's wife Emma gave birth to their first child, a boy, who died the day he was born (Shipps 1987: 17–21; Vogel 2004: 128–129; Bushman 2005: 68–69).

The only direct written evidence of Smith's reaction to this time of trouble is a revelation from God he recorded in July. It was to be the first of about a hundred and seventy such written revelations, and like all of those afterwards, it is redolent of words and phrases from the King James Bible. Smith's textual productions are often thought of as pastiches of such phrases, but what has been widely overlooked is the fact that they are not random arrangements. Read carefully in the context of the events in his life, the content of that first revelation suggests that Smith, faced with tremendous grief both professional and personal, had done what many Christians would have done: he went to his Bible and read the wisdom literature. The signature phrases of that revelation, now preserved by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as Doctrine and Covenants 3, echo the advice, most clearly, of Proverbs: warnings to him who "sets at naught the counsels of God" (D&C 3:4, 7, 13; Prov. 1:25) and to those who "despise his words" (D&C 3:7; Prov. 23:9), along with echoes made out of other distinctive words and phrases from Proverbs: "crooked paths" (D&C 3:2; Prov. 2:15); "to the right hand nor to the left" (D&C 3:2; Prov. 4:27); "time of trouble" (D&C 3:8; Prov. 25:19); and "boasted in his own wisdom" (D&C 3:13; Prov. 25:14, 23:4).²

Scholars have long recognized the centrality of the Bible in Smith's career (Barlow 1989, 1991, 2013; Shipps 2000: 210–211; Brown 2009; Räisänen 2009; Jackson 2010). Where they have taken up the issue of Smith's biblicism directly, however, it has been primarily to highlight matters of diction and of narrative form. Scholars of all stripes have noted that Smith's texts both follow the patterns of biblical narratives and read like the Authorized Version, emphasizing that the "thees" and "thous" and "it came to passes" of the Book of Mormon, woven into an Old-Testament-like story of warring peoples and God's justice, resonated with

²All quotations from Smith's revelations are from *The Joseph Smith Papers*, except where noted. Chapter and verse references are from the contemporary LDS editions.

Smith's first audiences, "steeped in the words and rhythms of the Authorized Version" (Barlow 1991, 2013: 13). There is of course something to this. Incorporating elements of the King James Bible into the Book of Mormon can be seen as a form of what Vincent Wimbush has called "signifying on" scripture: "indirect, deflecting, sometimes ironic, exaggerated speech" that plays off of a scriptural text and a community's recognition of that text (2008: 3). "It is all written in imitation of the scripture style," one of its first reviewers wrote (Goodwillie 2011: 143).

Signifying is much more complicated than diction, though, and Smith's was no exception. Analyses that highlight only general similarities between Smith's texts and the Bible assume that Smith's Bible knowledge was absorbed and that all of his usage of that knowledge was habitual—both radical simplifications of Smith's engagement with the specific Bible culture of his era. In the summer of 1828, Smith did not appeal to some innate knowledge of the Bible inhaled from the culture around him. Faced with personal trials, he picked up a book and he flipped to Proverbs.

This article pays close attention to the details of Smith's early Bible usage, examining the specific ways in which early-national Bible culture shaped his work. I argue, first, that Smith's ability to signify on the Bible was his most defining skill, and that it drew on the full character of his era's print-Bible culture: not just the diction of the Authorized Version, but the formats, paratextual apparatus (textual features such as cross-references, indices, and prefaces that mediate between text and reader [Genette 1997]), and translational variety of early-national bibles. In the absence of any formal ministerial training, Smith's ability to signify on the Bible—to synthesize, compile, rearrange, allude to, and play with biblical texts—was aided by specific elements of his era's print-Bible culture. These include the family quarto and the carry-to-church duodecimo as Bible formats; at least one published alternative (non-King James) Bible translation; and paratextual materials written by British commentators such as John Canne, Thomas Scott, and Adam Clarke. Smith drew not only from his own participation in this print environment, but chose collaborators with whom he pooled his own considerable skills and knowledge.

Beyond the content and textual apparatus they provided, moreover, I argue that the variety of biblical and para-biblical material that defined print-Bible culture in Smith's era cultivated an attitude toward the Bible that made his career possible. Specifically, that Bible culture was defined by the widespread attempt to answer a fundamental question about the relationship between the idealized, unchanging Bible and the material bibles of everyday experience. The material problem of scripture is a paradox endemic to Protestantism, owing to the fact that the Reformation simultaneously gave laypeople the responsibility to turn to "scripture alone" for

their salvation and told them to turn away from the Catholic Church, the institution assumed to be responsible for ensuring scripture's purity and interpretation (Kearney 2009: 2–3).³ The idealized Bible came from God, but among the priesthood of all believers, where were physical bibles to come from? The written word took on new importance just as its reliability became more contested.

In early-national America, advances in the technologies of print production and distribution made possible a Bible market of unprecedented variety and volume, exacerbating the inherent tensions of biblical authority. Taking a text as an authority presumes reliable material access to that text, and in a print market flooded with editions of the Bible from competing publishers, editors, and commentators, this reliability became a much more complex matter.⁴ This market developed, moreover, at precisely the post-Revolutionary moment when reliance on a text—on an idealized text made usable in printed, material copies—as a source of authority took on new analogues. Printed matter had an increasingly important role in the creation of authority of all kinds in the decades after the Revolution. From the Declaration of Independence to the Constitution, and in texts such as the Federalist Papers that worked to establish the legitimacy of the founding documents, the new nation was founded in writing, and renewed focus on the Bible was part of this moment. “Trust in the Bible was a religious analogue to political trust in the Constitution,” Mark Noll has written (2002: 372).

Noll echoes early-national rhetoric and subsequent scholarship when he calls the Bible in the early-national period “an anchor of religious authority in a churning sea of demographic, social, and political turmoil” (2002: 373). Trust in the Bible in the abstract was indeed a widespread cultural assumption, but trust in the written word, laden as it was with new importance and new complexities in the early nineteenth century, required effort. Joseph Smith was absorbed with these questions, voicing deep ambivalence about language and specifically about writing. “Oh Lord God deliver us in thy due time from the little narrow prison, almost . . . total darkness of paper, pen and ink; and a crooked, broken, scattered and imperfect language,” he wrote to an associate in 1832 (Smith 1832a, 1832b).⁵

³The Reformation's turn to *sola scriptura* and the individual sinner's experience of grace put a tremendous burden on the bridge between the material of scripture and the sinner's soul. The Second Great Awakening's emphasis on both the individual's experience of grace and the veneration of the Bible—an internalized, private, immediate experience linked with a material, external, necessarily mediated object—would aggravate this tension.

⁴The British Crown had taken responsibility for assuring the accuracy of English Bibles, which necessarily left a void following the American Revolution. See Perry (2013: 36, 39).

⁵In quotations from Smith's private papers, I have added punctuation and standardized spelling where appropriate.

At the same time, he knew that his own career was dependent on writing: like King Benjamin in the Book of Mormon passage that heads this article, he depended on publishing in order to spread his message. Smith's texts and his persona are clothed in the rhetoric of seership and prophecy, but he was obsessed with the material aspect of scriptural authority.

What this means, I argue, is that the rhetorical ways in which Smith's texts seek to be accepted as scriptures reflect both the material concerns of early-national Bible culture and the ways in which that Bible culture dealt with those concerns. Briefly put, they display an overwhelming anxiety for their own reliability that is allayed by a multiplicity of authorial and editorial voices working to establish their *material reliability*—the secure connection between an individual Bible and the idealized Bible. Late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century bibles contained prefatory accounts of the Bible's transmission history and publishers' accounts of the care with which their bibles had been proofread and typeset, all intended to assure readers that the particular Bible they were holding was *the Bible*. Likewise, translators, editors, and the authors of marginal commentaries all appealed to the readers with assertions of fidelity to an ideal biblical text.

Smith laid the foundation for his church in the late 1820s with two types of texts, both of them demonstrative of his immersion in early-national Bible culture's concern for scripture's material reliability. One was the Book of Mormon itself, a collection of ancient documents inscribed onto golden plates which Smith said he translated into English with the aid of divine inspiration. The primary preoccupation of the Book of Mormon, from the original preface to the closing lines, is its own material reliability. While the vicissitudes of the Nephites and Lamanites and the appearance of the resurrected Christ in the New World are the ostensible subjects of the text, the story of the text itself is given nearly as much ink—a significant portion of the Book of Mormon is taken up with telling the story of the Book of Mormon. The framing narrative of the Book of Mormon holds that it was drawn from a set of ancient plates written, edited, and preserved by twenty-four different record keepers over the course of about one thousand years (about 600 BCE to 421 CE). Each author and editor addresses the reader directly, each one asserting his (they are all male) confidence that the record is meticulously accurate and attesting to his own efforts to preserve and faithfully add to it.⁶ Often the authors overtly affirm the veracity of the story—"I know that [*sic*] the record which I make to be true" (1 Nephi 1:3); "We know our record to

⁶For an accessible summary of the Book of Mormon record keepers, see Welch and Welch (1999), chart 16. For analysis of the Book of Mormon's narrative structure, see Hardy (2010).

be true / for behold, it was a just man who did keep the record” (3 Nephi 8:1). The truth of the record is tied to the exhaustively documented trail of authorship that multiplies the voices able to attest to the text’s reliability, culminating in two primary editorial presences: Mormon (the ancient editor of most of the plates) and Smith himself, their translator. These two Book of Mormon figures, I argue, signify on a ubiquitous presence in early-national Bible culture: the academic editor. Just as learned editors and translators allayed contemporary concerns about the Bible’s material reliability, Mormon and Smith assured readers that the Book of Mormon was a scriptural text to be treated as such.⁷

The other texts on which Smith founded his church were direct revelations, beginning with the one described above. For these, Smith appealed to the voice of God directly: unlike the Book of Mormon, they do not posit ancient manuscript versions. Nevertheless, these, too, display concern for material reliability reflective of the scriptural culture in which Smith worked. Smith’s revelatory moments were not sudden lightning-strikes: they typically came during planned moments in which Smith sat with a scribe and prayed for answers to questions or guidance on particular issues (Joseph Smith Papers: “Joseph Smith as Revelator and Translator”). As Smith dictated the Word of the Lord that he said came to him in these moments, it was written down: unlike Jemima Wilkinson, Ann Lee, Robert Matthews, and other early-national prophetic figures with whom Smith is often compared, there was no revelation without the artifact produced by the act of writing (Johnson and Wilentz 1994, 2012; Juster 2003: 166–167). The dictated revelations were carefully preserved, copied into a special record book beginning in 1830 or 1831; the first attempt to publish them came in 1833 (Joseph Smith Papers n.d.a, n.d.b). Like the Book of Mormon, the Book of Commandments, as the first collection was known, contained prefatory material vouching for the authenticity of the text: a preface in the form of a revelation from God. “Behold, this is mine authority, and the authority of my servants, and my Preface unto the Book of my Commandments, which I have given them to publish unto you, O inhabitants of the earth” (1833: 3). “Search these commandments, for they are true and faithful” (1833: 6).

⁷Elizabeth Fenton has made the perceptive argument that “through its presentation of variations on biblical texts such as Isaiah, the *Book of Mormon* offers a model of sacred history that centers on iteration and proliferation rather than unity” (2013: 347). I think that the radical variety of revelation is indeed a key theme of not just the Book of Mormon but Smith’s entire career, but I would maintain that the Book’s interest in its material reliability illustrates a continuing concern for a unity of truth—in this view of scripture, there may be multiple iterations of a story, but each must maintain that it is not fundamentally different from another, as they must all accord with a single true account.

Smith made much of his access to direct revelation, but the Bible culture of his time taught him that scriptural efficacy came from writing—from paper, pen, and ink; from styluses and metal plates. The arguments presented here have important consequences for contemporary scholarship on Mormonism, the intersection of American religious history and print-culture studies, and the nature of religious subjectivity in the early-national period. To argue that Smith is not only an active presence in his early texts, but further that his editorial voice was a crucial part of their acceptance as scripture, pushes back against the contemporary bent of early Mormon studies. Recent studies touching on Smith's career have tended to adopt a view—championed by Richard Bushman, his foremost biographer—of Smith's "prophetic passivity." Against this approach, I argue for a focus on Smith's own conscious, skillful, and historically informed Bible usage in the creation of texts, maintaining that scholars must take seriously the fact that Joseph Smith spoke and acted in the interest of his prophetic reputation. These considerations are taken up at the conclusion of this article.

Joseph Smith, Jr., learned the Bible the way a lot of people did in the early nineteenth century: from his parents. Smith's formal education amounted to little, but his mother, Lucy Mack Smith—who had received most of her own education from her mother in turn—read with her children at home. Lucy was, one of her other sons recorded, "a very pious woman and much interested in the welfare of her children, both here and hereafter" (Anderson and Bates 2001: 6). The modern editors of her autobiography, dictated in the winter of 1844–1845, observe that Lucy herself "had an impressive gift for spontaneous sermonizing" and Bible quotation (Anderson and Bates 2001: 14). Smith's father, moreover, had once been a teacher, and contemporaries in Palmyra, New York, where Smith was raised, even remembered that the family held school in their home for a time, where they "studied the Bible" (Marquardt and Walters 1998: 43, n. 5).

Nevertheless, Lucy recorded that when Joseph started having visions and teaching the family, her youngest son was not particularly literate—she remembered him some years later as "a boy sixteen years of age who had never read the Bible through by course in his life." The phrase "through by course" is significant because it juxtaposes two primary modes of Bible reading: discontinuous, indexical reading and diligent, systematic reading (Brown 2007: xii). Lucy measured proficient Bible reading as a mother was supposed to, according to the standard of continuous, systematic reading promoted by contemporary published reading guides (Anderson and Bates 2001: 344; Monaghan and Nichols 2002). Edward Bickersteth's *A Scripture Help*, for example, published in Boston in 1817, advised regular reading that moved through the Bible

from start to finish: “Read one book through before you begin another, and read the whole bible through” (1817: 158).

While continuous reading was the stated ideal of such works, indexical reading was the practical norm encouraged by the Bible culture of Smith’s day. As Daniel Walker Howe has observed, the early-national period witnessed a “communications revolution” that changed the terms of American culture, and this encompassed a boom in the production of bibles and para-biblical materials (2007: 5). No English bibles were printed in America prior to the 1770s, but the period between 1790 and 1840 saw nearly eighteen hundred editions of New Testaments and full bibles (Gutjahr 1999: 182, fig. 46). Importantly, biblical paratexts proliferated along with bibles. American Bible publishers, competing for buyers in an unregulated Bible market, filled their volumes with extraneous material designed to distinguish their bibles from those of others and to make the text useful and accessible to readers (Gutjahr 1999; Perry 2013). Likewise, while no American publishers turned out concordances until the early-national period, between 1801 and 1819, at least thirteen different printers in nine different cities from Boston to Louisville to Charlotte produced editions of seven different types of concordances, at least twenty-two editions in all.⁸ Heavily annotated bibles and para-biblical materials such as concordances encourage flipping—hunting through the Bible, following cross-references from one verse to another, “searching the scriptures,” as enjoined by John 5:39.⁹

Smith’s texts demonstrate his immersion in this indexically oriented print Bible culture. The Book of Mormon was first published in a print run of five thousand duodecimo copies in 1830.¹⁰ Bound in calf, from the outside it was almost indistinguishable from the widest-circulating bibles of the day, the brick-like duodecimos turned out in massive print runs each year by the American Bible Society. Between the covers, moreover, it conformed to the genre conventions of early-national bibles. It is, of

⁸These calculations are based on concordances indexed in *Early American Imprints*. Concordances in this period were generally arranged around individual words, an arrangement that often put verses together arbitrarily and that, of course, varied based on the diligence and dispositions of the compiler. To take one commonly referenced verse as an example: Ecclesiastes 12:1 (“Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth”) is referenced under “youth” in one early-national concordance, under “remember” in another, and under neither in yet another.

⁹In contemporary Mormonism, the story of Smith’s career begins with the First Vision, itself an account of indexical reading. While typically associated with James 1:5, the earliest written account of the First Vision (1832b)—a rare document written in Smith’s own hand—highlights his impulse to “search the scriptures”: “At about the age of twelve years my mind become seriously imprest with regard to the all important concerns of for the well fare of my immortal Soul which led me to searching the scriptures believeing as I was taught, that they contained the word of God. . . . By searching the scriptures I found that mand <mankind> did not come unto the Lord” (1832b: 2).

¹⁰For a detailed account of the Book of Mormon’s publication history, see Gutjahr (2012).

course, redolent with words and phrases from the Authorized Version. Moreover, large passages were directly copied from a King James Bible. The Book of Mormon contains 478 verses quoted from the King James translation of Isaiah, for example, including fifteen entire chapters almost verbatim. The variations between the Isaiah of the Book of Mormon and that of the King James strongly suggest that Smith had a Bible at hand for the insertion of these lengthy passages, because he paid careful attention to the words and phrases that are italicized in the King James.¹¹ While fewer than four percent of the words in those fifteen chapters of Isaiah are italicized, changes to italicized words account for about one-fifth of the edits made to the Isaiah text as it is found in the Book of Mormon: about forty percent of the italicized words have been removed, replaced, or given contextualizing words and phrases, a much higher rate than applies to nonitalicized words.¹²

The Bible passages inserted into the Book of Mormon have amazed believers and allowed critics to regard Smith as the most banal sort of plagiarist. Only a handful of scholars have looked at them from the standpoint of Smith's compositional skill. Mark D. Thomas sees in the clustering of Smith's Bible references a "serious playfulness." "These phrases

¹¹Italics were used by the King James translators to mark words they added to the text necessary for English readability but which lacked exact analogues in the original. See Norton (2005).

¹²I am deeply grateful to Royal Skousen for sharing a prepublication version of his definitive analysis of Isaiah's italicized words as they appear in the Book of Mormon (this analysis will be published in Volume 3 of Skousen's *The History of the Text of the Book of Mormon* [Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies]). My estimates here are based on Skousen's count of the number of italicized words in the AV Isaiah (438), the number of those italicized words that are altered in the Book of Mormon version of the text (171), and the total number of differences between the texts (811). I believe that some of Skousen's methods over-represent the last number (some edits that could be counted as a single change have been counted as multiple changes); however, his exhaustive and diligent study provides definitive answers to a long-standing point of scholarly controversy. For earlier work on Isaiah's italics and the Book of Mormon, see Wright (1998: 182), Tvedtnes (1981: 6–19), and Skousen (1998). For an exploration of similar questions with respect to another part of the Book of Mormon, see Larson (1993).

The suggestion that Smith read from a Bible for a portion of the dictation process does not accord with first-hand accounts of that process. These accounts differ on a few particulars, but agree that Smith dictated while covering his face with a hat containing, in most reports, his seer stone. The most commonly cited statements, however, date from decades after the fact and come from individuals who witnessed only small portions of the dictation (see Bidamon 1879: 542; Whitmer 1887: 12). Smith himself and Oliver Cowdery, his most frequent scribe, left no detailed account of the process. Contemporary accounts from Smith's detractors insisted that Smith had copied from a Bible (see, for example, *The Painesville [Ohio] Telegraph*, March 22, 1831); I find these to be no more or less admissible than supporters' accounts insisting that Smith recited the approximately eleven thousand words in those fifteen chapters of Isaiah without reference to the text. In any case, it does not seem unreasonable to suggest that Smith and Cowdery referred to a Bible for those passages, particularly when the relatively close attention to a printed feature such as italics is considered, nor does it seem necessary to assume that doing so would have undermined Cowdery's confidence in Smith's revelatory powers. For scholarly discussions of the mechanics of the translation process of the Book of Mormon, see Lancaster (1990) and Givens (2002: 30–36).

from the Bible interpret each other and resonate against each other in both predictable and surprising fashions” (Thomas 1996: 50). Thomas identifies “clusters” of biblical phrases in the Book of Mormon linked by common themes and often by individual words. Ether 13:9–10, for example—“And there shall be a new heaven and a new earth; / and they shall be like unto the old, / save the old have passed away and all things have become new. / And then cometh the New Jerusalem”—contains direct quotations from Revelation 21:1–2 (“a new heaven and a new earth”) and 2 Corinthians 5:17 (“old things”), verses that both contain the word “new” and the phrase “passed away.” Such clustering strongly suggests the use of a concordance, where the two verses would have been listed together under the word “new”—they are so listed in Alexander Cruden’s concordance, for example, the favorite of Smith’s contemporary and fellow student of the Bible William Miller (Perry 2013: 127). Marginal cross-references might also have connected the verses for Smith. Using a Bible with John Canne’s marginal references (which Smith owned later, at least), it is possible to follow a path from 2 Corinthians 5:17 to Revelation 21 to Isaiah 65:17–18, another verse that is connected to the Book of Mormon’s Ether 13:9–10.¹³

Combining verses from all over the Bible to create what Thomas calls a “mosaic” is a form of what Wimbush calls “signifying on” the Bible. It also echoes traditional forms of authoritative biblical reference. Smith used the same tools—concordances and indices—used by learned ministers and theologians, applying an indexical mode of reading to pull out and combine passages from the different authors, periods, and genres contained between a Bible’s covers. What he did with those pieces, though, was create a story rather than an argumentative sermon. Kathleen Flake has argued for a fundamentally narrative understanding of Smith’s methods, observing how his texts “leverage the form, substance, and authority of the biblical myth to subvert definitive aspects of traditional Christianity.” Smith, she says, “deployed the formal attributes of narrative to challenge the Christian tradition in ways not possible through discursive debate or speculative theology” (Flake 2007: 500). The methods he used to process the source material for his narratives, though—methods learned and enabled in his print-Bible environment—were perfectly traditional.

Apart from Smith’s use of bibles in the composition of his texts, the print Bible culture in which he lived affected his work on a conceptual level. Michael Warner details the significance of print in the founding of

¹³John Canne (d. 1667) was one of the few seventeenth-century English commentators whose work reached a popular audience in the nineteenth century. Canne’s annotated Bible first appeared in 1647; his references were first used in an American Bible in 1807 and circulated in countless editions throughout the nineteenth century.

the new nation, arguing that a perception of print emerged in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries that permitted it to be taken as “normally impersonal” (1992: xiii). This perception of print made possible an impersonal public sphere distinguishable from the state in which political arguments could claim an authority grounded in disinterest and general accessibility to an imagined public (Warner 1992: 64–65). Others have argued, however, that the impersonality of print that Warner finds essential raised its own questions of legitimacy. In his study of oral forms in the Revolutionary and early-national era, Christopher Looby grants the significance of the textual foundations of American political authority on which Warner fixates but argues that such a focus ignores “the widespread cultural investment of authority in vocal forms like political oration and sermons” (1996: 80). Looby observes a “basic legitimacy deficit” in the new nation and argues that public speech of various types represented “a counterpoint of anxiety about the sufficiency of textuality as a ground of authority” by offering visceral, personal forms of attachment (1996: 44, 5).¹⁴

Anxiety about print as a source of authority extended to bibles as much as to the American founding documents, and responses to that anxiety played out both orally, as Looby suggests, and in “voices” inserted into printed bibles themselves. Viewed in this light, anxieties about written scripture as an essential part of an internalized religious experience—an anxiety as old as the Reformation itself, amplified by the expansive post-Revolutionary print market—gave new importance to both oral and written forms of biblical mediation that validated, explained, and codified scripture. Explanatory and prefatory materials bound into early-national bibles—voices incorporated into an otherwise impersonal text—were expressions of a desire to allay anxiety about the reliability of bibles as authorities.¹⁵

The Bible’s reliability was specifically challenged by questions about its material transmission, translation, and interpretation. The first two of these concerns began with an increasingly historicized sense of the Bible observable as early as the days of Jonathan Edwards (Brown 2002: xxi, 100). By the late eighteenth century, popular American print-Bible culture demonstrated a clearly developed historicized sense of the Bible. Such historicism—a cognizance of the origins of the Bible as a text, of its translation and archeological complications, and an impulse toward contextualizing sacred stories according to events of world history—is

¹⁴Trish Loughran (2007: 113–116), meanwhile, challenges the idea that print was ever separable from other textual forms or ever truly impersonal, owing to the technological realities of print into the mid-nineteenth century.

¹⁵Amanda Porterfield (2012) has written eloquently about the early-national period as an environment of doubt and the implications of this condition for religious authority.

typically associated with the intellectual currents of higher criticism, which did not make an impact in the United States until later in the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, English bibles circulating in America much earlier lent themselves to historicized readings. Many eighteenth-century bibles contained a variety of charts and tables that tied the sacred narratives to specific historical times and places: currency tables that calculated the number of shekels and Roman denarii to the pound sterling (later, to the dollar); descriptions, maps, and images of the Holy Land; tables that plotted biblical events on the timeline of world history. Many bibles actually featured running dates in the margins allowing a reader to track the distance between the biblical period and her own, a practice that began with the second Oxford edition of the Authorized Version in 1679 (Norton 2005: 100).¹⁶

In terms of translation, any reader of a King James Bible was alerted to the linguistic distance between the English Bible and the original texts when its title page declared it to be “newly translated out of the original tongues.”¹⁷ Many bibles contained articles and essays discussing translation issues in ways intended to be accessible to the lay reader, including “To the Reader” essays that specifically discussed the transmission of the Bible’s source documents. Jonathan Sheehan discusses a process of “double canonization” taking place over the centuries after the Reformation, in which first select vernacular versions became the standards in their respective languages and then Hebrew and Greek originals were collected, evaluated, and arranged by scholars to constitute the definitive original-language versions (2005: 24). Because the vernacular standards were established first and difficult to unseat from the public consciousness, scholars cognizant of subsequent work in the original languages were required to explain that distance in the margins of their work, arguing for better translations but rarely venturing to actually alter the text of the English standard. In this way, marginal commentary brought a sense of indeterminacy and variability to the text just as it was trying to bring certainty and clarity.

The early-national Bible market came to reflect and perpetuate anxieties of transmission and translation. Such a textual environment also, however, provided a sense of how the distance between the ideal and

¹⁶In *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (1974), Hans Frei details the intellectual forces that gave rise to this sort of understanding but construes it, as the title suggests, as a fundamentally antinarrative move. Frei found this to be the case because he argued that mapping the events of the Bible onto historical time meant that it could no longer be appreciated in a narrative sense—that the biblical stories could not be thought of as both true and temporally locatable relative to the events of profane history. American Bible readers, at least, have never made any such distinction.

¹⁷While some paratextual features of the 1611 edition (such as the translators’ preface and the dedication to King James) came and went in American editions, this phrase on the title page remained overwhelmingly consistent, even as “newly” became less and less relevant as time passed.

material texts was to be bridged: through scholarship and personal testimony. Countless Bible editions of Smith's day contained materials attesting to the validity of the biblical text in general or of the particular edition at hand. Typically, this took the form of prefatory "To the Reader" essays in which commentators possessing historical, philological, or archeological knowledge assured readers of the validity of the text, demonstrating their knowledge as a means of shoring up their authority as commentators and the authority of the Bible itself.

The 1830 Book of Mormon contained two examples of this form of assurance. The first was Smith's original preface to the work, which has been left out of subsequent editions. The original preface was the direct product of a concern about the material reliability of the text: it grew out of Harris' loss of the first pages of dictation. After recovering from this setback and resuming work, Smith issued the revelation from God—informed by the biblical wisdom literature—that chastised him for losing the manuscript and instructed him not to play into the hands of his detractors by re-dictating the lost passages. To explain this circumstance to readers of the Book of Mormon, Smith inserted a page-and-a-half preface into the front of the first edition, headed "Preface" and then "To the Reader." While ostensibly intended to defuse an awkward situation—Smith's critics, of course, asserted that he was simply unable to reproduce the lost text, since he was making up the story as he went along—the short text's most significant effect was to establish a material link among the book in a reader's hands, the ancient plates from which it was taken, and Smith's own credibility. In a single short address to the reader, Smith explains his power as a translator ("I translated, by the gift and power of God, and caused to be written, one hundred and sixteen pages"), the nature of the ancient plates ("the which I took from the Book of Lehi, which was an account abridged from the plates of Lehi, by the hand of Mormon"), and his sincerity as God's agent ("Wherefore, to be obedient unto the commandments of God, I have, through his grace and mercy, accomplished that which he hath commanded me respecting this thing"). The last line of the preface, finally, provides another layer of textual assurance by giving the plates geographical specificity: "I would also inform you that the plates of which hath been spoken, were found in the township of Manchester, Ontario county, New-York" (1830: iii–iv).¹⁸

Far from undercutting the authenticity of the Book of Mormon, the 1830 preface signified its status as scripture in a print environment in which readers were accustomed to explanatory prefaces and "To the Reader" essays in which an editorial voice vouched for the validity of the

¹⁸I am indebted to Judith Weisenfeld for this insight on the significance of the Preface's last line.

text. Evidence from Smith's texts and career suggests that he had direct knowledge of at least four different examples of this type of editorial preface. Several of Smith's alterations to the King James Bible—both as transcribed into the Book of Mormon and in the bible-correction project he began later—demonstrate a familiarity with biblical commentaries, including those of John Wesley, Thomas Scott, and Adam Clarke, each of whom brought his editorial voice to the biblical text (Huggins 2003: 163, 165–166, 173). Two bibles which Smith is known for certain to have owned personally feature the most important biblical preface of the day, that written by Princeton president John Witherspoon in the 1780s.¹⁹ A version of Witherspoon's "To the Reader" first appeared in Philadelphia printer William Young's 1790 King James Bible and was reused by countless American Bible printers at least as late as the 1870s.²⁰ Sensitive to the challenges of higher criticism, Witherspoon set out to tell the story of the Bible's providential transmission history. Like Smith's, Witherspoon's "To the Reader" is preoccupied with making a material link between scripture's original texts and the version in the reader's hands: "The providence of God," he asserts, is "particularly manifest in [the scriptures'] preservation and purity," and his chain of transmission culminates in a ringing endorsement of the King James translation, "generally approved by men of learning and piety of all denominations . . . having never been superseded by any other" (Witherspoon 1793: n.p.). Witherspoon's "To the Reader" was commonly accompanied by a chart, also of his composition, giving the "Account of the Dates or Time of Writing the Books of the New Testament." Witherspoon's "Account of the Dates" was as popular as his "To the Reader": Joseph Smith's brother Hyrum copied it into his journal in the 1840s.²¹

Smith's preface is paralleled within the text of the Book of Mormon by another editorial statement, also related to Harris' loss of the first pages of the manuscript. As explained in the preface, God had commanded Smith not to retranslate the lost passages, but to translate an account of the same historical events from a second set of plates (the specific injunction against re-translation is found in D&C 10). The existence of these plates—essentially, a redundant account—is explained briefly in 2

¹⁹These two Bibles are the 1828 Phinney quarto published at Cooperstown, New York, which Smith and Cowdery purchased for the Bible-editing project, and the 1831 quarto published by Langdon Coffin of Boston which apparently served as the Smith family Bible. For more on the Coffin Bible, see Hollenhorst (2010).

²⁰The latest example of Witherspoon's "To the Reader" I have found is in a printer's dummy (a mock-up of a book's main features used in prepublication sales) from 1872, located in Cornell University special collections.

²¹Hyrum Smith Diary and Accounts, 1831–44, MS 891, LDS special collections, Salt Lake City, Utah. Undated entry appears at cell 76 in the microfilm.

Nephi 5, and Mormon discusses their inclusion in his record in an editorial address known as the Words of Mormon. Here, Mormon is introduced as the editor and compiler of the source texts for the Book that would bear his name, and, addressing the reader directly, he explains the complicated nature of those source texts. “I shall take these plates, which contain these prophesyings and revelations, and put them with the remainder of my record, for they are choice unto me; and I know they will be choice unto my brethren” (Words of Mormon 1:6). While individual keepers of the narrative introduce themselves to the reader successively throughout the text, Mormon stands over all of them as the editorial voice that, like Smith, vouches for the integrity of the source documents and the reliability of the narrative. Also like Smith, Mormon’s personal sincerity and care are central to his attempt to vouch for the text. “And I do this for a wise purpose; for thus it whispereth me, according to the workings of the Spirit of the Lord which is in me. And now, I do not know all things; but the Lord knoweth all things which are to come; wherefore, he worketh in me to do according to his will” (Words of Mormon 1:7).²²

In the 1837 second edition of the Book of Mormon, Joseph Smith’s original explanatory preface was removed. It was replaced with a preface signed by two of his followers, Parley P. Pratt and John Goodson, who had taken responsibility for preparing the second edition. Smith remained central—he is named, twice, as the text’s translator and his participation in preparing the second edition is noted—but now the voices validating the text are multiplied. The two men vouched for Smith (“the translator of the Book of Mormon”), this new edition of the text (“the whole has been carefully re-examined and compared with the original manuscripts”), and the Book of Mormon in the abstract (“we cannot consistently let the opportunity pass, without expressing our sincere conviction of its truth, and the great and glorious purposes it must effect”). Pratt and Goodson explained the inclusion of their personal endorsements by way of their awareness of the impersonal nature of print: “This book will be conveyed to places which circumstances will render it impossible for us to visit, and be perused by thousands whose faces we may never see on this side of eternity,” they imagined (1837: v–vi).

²²G rard Genette avers that “truthfulness, or, at the very least sincerity . . . the effort to achieve truthfulness” is in fact the only thing that an author of a text can ascribe to him- or herself in the preface without alienating the reader (1997: 206). Other legitimizing voices present in the 1830 Book of Mormon include the Testimonies of the Three and Eight Witnesses. In these affidavits, originally bound at the back of the book and later moved to the front, eleven of Smith’s associates asserted that they had seen the plates, another demonstration of the text’s concern for its material reliability.

By including these direct addresses to the reader asserting providential preservation of the ancient text and editorial fidelity to that text, Smith (and, later, Pratt and Goodson) signified on the Bible—the prefaces invited readers to “get” that the book participated in a scriptural genre. Beyond that, prefaces were spaces for Smith to establish his own credibility, just as they were for biblical commentators. Though Smith couched his work in terms of his reception of direct revelation and has been widely recognized as a product of an anti-intellectual, anti-professional trend of his time, he had a respect for learning that is often overlooked. The first of the many monikers he adopted during his lifetime—the one that identified him on the title page of the first edition of the Book of Mormon—was *Translator*, an essentially academic rather than spiritual title. In 1828, while working on the Book of Mormon, he famously sent a sample of the “Reformed Egyptian” characters from the golden plates to scholars in New York for validation. He pursued education sporadically throughout his life, returning to school at the age of nineteen and hiring a Hebrew tutor in the 1830s, all the while affirming his ability to read ancient languages through divine revelation (Marquardt and Walters 1998: 43–44).²³

Moreover, Smith’s choice of close associates throughout his career can be seen as a respect for what he considered learning. The Book of Mormon project lay dormant for nearly a year after the loss of the first pages and was revived only when Oliver Cowdery, a school teacher, came to meet Smith; Cowdery immediately became Smith’s scribe and closest confidant. Cowdery, in turn, was replaced by Sydney Rigdon when Smith met him in late 1830. Rigdon had scarcely more formal education than Smith, but as a Campbellite minister had read much more widely. Another of Smith’s associates wrote at the time that “Rigdon was a thorough Bible scholar, a man of fine education, and a powerful orator” who “soon worked himself deep into Brother Joseph’s affections, and had more influence over him than any other man living” (Van Wagoner 1994: 73). Rigdon’s influence with Smith faded when John C. Bennett joined the Church in 1840: Bennett was a medical doctor and self-styled polymath (Smith 1997).

Smith’s respect for the learning of biblical commentators and translators is further apparent in his own attempt to edit and annotate the King James text. While Smith’s primary mode of Bible reading throughout his life was

²³Nathan Hatch has written against any tendency to gentrify Joseph Smith, suggesting that scholars risk turning his “radical, apocalyptic, absolutist, extreme, combustible, and militant” enterprise into “sipping tea in a drawing room, engag[ing] in polite theological debate with Nathaniel William Taylor and William Ellery Channing” (2006: 73). Letting alone the complicated relationship between formal theology and the rhetoric of radical religious movements, the problem with that warning is that, although he may never have sipped tea in his life, by all appearances Smith wanted to be in that drawing room: he had a respect for learning that belied his more “extreme, combustible, and militant” impulses.

indexical—he dipped into the Bible for things that he needed, aided by concordances and cross-references—immediately after the completion of the Book of Mormon he undertook a more systematic reading. On October 8, 1829, Oliver Cowdery bought a large Bible from E. B. Grandin in Palmyra, and in June 1830, Smith and Cowdery began marking it up with corrections and additions. The work proceeded, on and off and with multiple scribes, over the course of about three years. Smith’s changes range from lengthy augmentations to the text to minor tweaks of grammar and syntax, of the sort that he had already carried out on the passages of Isaiah inserted into the Book of Mormon.²⁴ The influence of early-national Bible culture on Smith’s Bible redaction is clear. Much of Smith’s editing consisted of rearranging words already found in or near a particular verse—Romans 9:32, for example: “Wherefore *they* **stumbled at that stumbling stone**, not by faith, but as it were by the works of the law.” At several points, though, Smith and Rigdon inserted words that do not appear in the verse at hand but to which commentators had made connections. The addition of “subdue” to Romans 7:24 suggests a connection to Micah 7:19 (“He will turn again, he will have compassion upon us; he will subdue our iniquities; and thou wilt cast all their sins into the depths of the sea”), which appeared in Thomas Scott’s cross-references to that verse. *Lectures on Faith*—the first Mormon catechism, composed by Smith and Rigdon in 1835—suggests that they knew Scott’s cross-references: the proof-texts in the answers to the questions in the catechism cluster among those used by Scott.²⁵

Rigdon was Smith’s scribe for most of the Bible-editing project. Rigdon was not, by his own standards, an educated man, but he had been a respected preacher in Alexander Campbell’s Christian movement, and was known to his Campbellite colleagues as a “walking bible” (Van Wagoner 1994: 73). He also knew Campbell’s New Testament, which had been published in two editions by the time Rigdon joined Smith.²⁶ The

²⁴For example, Acts 17:31: “Because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by **him** whom he hath ordained; **and** he hath given assurance **of this** unto all *men*, in that he hath raised him from the dead.”

²⁵Van Wagoner believes that Rigdon may have written this text himself (1994: 174, n. 6). See also Larsen and Rencher (1980) and Phipps (1972). Thomas Scott (1747–1821), an Anglican clergyman with a strong evangelical bent, was the most verbose of the British commentators popular in America in the early nineteenth century. The first American edition of Scott’s Bible appeared in 1804 and was widely republished. Matthew Bowman and Samuel Brown have also pointed out that *Lectures on Faith* makes explicit reference to Charles Buck’s *Theological Dictionary*, another widely circulated piece of early-national biblical scholarship (2009: 469).

²⁶Campbell, a founder of the movement known today as the Disciples of Christ, was a leader of the early-national movement to restore Christianity to what was imagined to be its primitive form, the church as described in the New Testament. Campbell’s New Testament, known as the *Living Oracles*, was not a new translation but an edited collection of the work of three British scholars that Campbell found truer to the original languages. It first appeared in 1826 and was probably the most widely read

Campbell New Testament's influence on Smith's Bible is evident in small turns of phrase—John the Baptist's locusts are called “food” rather than “meat,” for example, and the Gospel of John is re-titled his “Testimony” (Huggins 2003: 167, n. 38).

Such evidence of thoughtful, collaborative engagement with the print culture of his era makes Smith a premier nineteenth-century example of lay biblical facility in signifying on the Bible. Nevertheless, there is a long and currently vibrant tradition of underplaying or denying anything like skill or even intention on the part of Joseph Smith. For obvious reasons, Smith's supposed ignorance has long been a trope of anti-Mormon diatribes, but it has also been a staple of Mormon devotional texts, in which Smith's personal shortcomings are contrasted with his obvious accomplishments as evidence of his receipt of divine aid. “This young man was not learned, like those educated in colleges and theological institutions; indeed, he was a farmer's boy, unacquainted with the arguments, and the tenets, and the creeds, and the institutions of religion that existed around him,” Mormon apostle Orson Pratt preached in 1879. Smith was, rather, “a young man not versed in the Scriptures any more than most of the common lads of that age” (1881: 68–69).

Although taking a different tack than professedly devotional works, much recent scholarship similarly ignores or obscures Smith's personal skills and their direct relationship to his prophetic success. Philip Barlow gently suggested twenty years ago that arguments like Pratt's were clearly overstated, but the current trend in scholarship on Smith operates with an assumption of “prophetic passivity” championed by Smith's most prominent biographer, Richard Bushman (Barlow 1991: 13). Bushman asserts that Joseph Smith is “nearly absent” from the revelations and translations he published, and that he was “invisible in the first decade of Latter-day Saint proselyting” (Bushman 2009: 99, 101). He applies this notion of “prophetic passivity” as both a rhetorical characteristic of Smith's works and as a textual fact: because Smith is mostly unmentioned in them, Bushman finds him to be actually absent from the texts that he dictated, explained, and distributed, as well as from readers' experiences of those texts. Smith, he says, “did not defend his revelations or give reasons for belief. He dictated the words and let people decide” (Bushman 2005: xx). In a telling statement of exactly the question of mediating authority that this article seeks to address, Bushman claims that in Smith's texts, “God speaks with no human intermediary present” (2005: 129).

alternative to the King James among Protestants in the early nineteenth century. See Perry (2013: Chap. 5) and Huggins (1993).

The original readers of the Book of Mormon, though, knew full well where the book in their hands came from. Smith's claim that the Book of Mormon existed on golden plates that he found and translated into his own language is *part* of the Book of Mormon. The diaries of the earliest Mormon missionaries repeatedly reference the story of the "coming forth" of the Book of Mormon, centered around the New York farm boy, as a proselytizing tool.²⁷ People who were touched by this preaching could not wait to meet the man himself: after hearing two missionaries in 1831, William McLellin closed the school he was running and set off to find the Prophet the next day (Shipps and Welch 1994: 31, 33). Moreover, Bushman's assertion that Smith never introduced himself as a narrator in his works or defended their revelatory status does not hold in the material context of the Book of Mormon. The Book of Mormon was initially transmitted—sold—by Smith and his close associates in face-to-face interactions involving verbal, personal explanation of the book's contents and provenance. Smith was inescapably present in these moments of book transmission. If there were situations in which he was not—if it were possible for a person to pick up a first edition of the Book of Mormon without having heard the first thing about it—Smith was immediately present when the book was opened. His name is prominent on the title page and in the copyright statement on the reverse. Bushman observes that the text opens with "I, Nephi . . .," but before that opening line, Smith's name appears on the title page, and the *first* first-person singular pronoun in the 1830 Book of Mormon actually refers to Smith himself: it appears in the original preface (2005: 131).²⁸ Readers were conscious of Smith's authorial presence in the book's framing materials. An early owner of a first-edition Book of Mormon in the Beinecke Library at Yale University has marked, apparently with the sarcasm of a nonbeliever, every reference in the prefatory materials to Smith as the book's author.

In any case, positing Smith's absence from his own prophetic career is a problematic approach. On one level, it misses the rhetorical value of Smith's presence. In a Bible culture accustomed to explanatory prefaces and "To the Reader" essays, that personal statement about the loss of the first pages was, at least for some readers, successful and meaningful: Smith's direct presence allayed concerns about the reliability of his text. On another level, to assert Smith's passivity is to elide his personal creativity

²⁷See, for example, the following early missionary diaries held by the Church History Library, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah: Barnes (1834–39), Grant and Stanley (1836–39, 1835), Cahoon (1831–32), and Hyde (1832).

²⁸Fenton makes a similar point, noting that Smith's is the initial voice of narration in the Book of Mormon (2013: 349).

and skill—the characteristics of Smith as a person that made him so effective a prophet.²⁹ Smith’s approach to claiming Bible-based authority—the production of new texts that claimed the status of scripture—may have been idiosyncratic, but it was made possible by skills gleaned from the print Bible culture around him and by the attitude toward and access to bibles that defined his era.

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²⁹See Perry (2010) for further elaboration of this point.

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