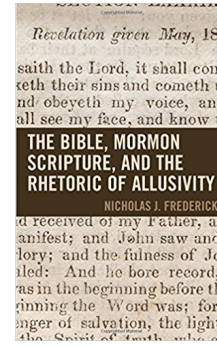
The Bible, Mormon Scripture, and the Rhetoric of Allusivity, by Nicholas J. Frederick



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Mark Twain, who actually seems to have read the book, humorously described the Book of Mormon as a "tedious plagiarism" of the Christian Bible.[1] Most of the Book of Mormon's critical readers since then

[1] Mark Twain, *Roughing It*, ed. Hamlin Hill (New York: Penguin Books, 1981), 146.

seem to have been inclined to agree, both that the volume is basically artless and that it is derivative. Occasional exceptions to this interpretive rule, however, have shown that the book deserves a closer look because, despite a certain aesthetic clumsiness, there is something genuinely sophisticated and compelling about the way the Book of Mormon handles the biblical texts it borrows. Thus in the late 1970s, Krister Stendahl tracked in a preliminary study how the climactic sermons of Christ in the book impose a Johannine frame on certain Matthean texts (primarily the Sermon on the Mount).[2] But not until the publication of Nicholas Frederick's *The Bible, Mormon Scripture, and the Rhetoric of Allusivity* has anyone developed in print a full study along the lines of Stendahl's relatively brief analysis. It is to be hoped that Frederick's book heralds a whole series of close investigations of how the Book of Mormon and other Mormon scripture interact with the Christian Bible.

Frederick's book assumes responsibility for demonstrating two things. First, he argues that Mormon scripture—texts presented to the world by Mormonism's founder, Joseph Smith—employs a "rhetoric of allusivity" that was meant, for its original nineteenth-century audience, to give it the weight of biblical authority. Second, he argues that this general reliance on biblical authority, accomplished through echoes and allusions, eventually launched Smith into a sustained critical interaction with biblical scripture, and specifically with the eighteen-verse prologue to the Gospel of John. In effect, what began for Smith as a source from which to borrow cultural and religious authority became eventually an interlocutor in an intensely speculative theological dialogue. Thus Frederick's study moves from chapters focused on mere echoes of and allusions to John's prologue in the earliest of Mormonism's scriptural texts to chapters focused on expansions and eventually inversions of the prologue as Smith's still-young prophetic career began to evolve.

What ultimately motivates the book is the existence of an 1833 revelation to Smith which presents itself as the *Urtext* (albeit in English) of John's prologue. It is a fascinating text, one that works out in preliminary form many of Mormonism's most theologically audacious claims, and it sets these forth through a direct and explicit engagement with the first part of the Gospel of John. Although Frederick never frames his study in these terms, the point of his investigation is arguably to ask how Smith made his way

[2] See Krister Stendahl, "The Sermon on the Mount and Third Nephi," in *Reflections on Mormonism: Judaeo-Christian Parallels*, ed. Truman G. Madsen (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1978), 139–54.

from relatively conservative interactions with Johannine texts in the Book of Mormon—where interaction is largely limited to authority-borrowing echoes and allusions—to more heterodox interaction and outright contestation of the Johannine text. That this development happened between 1829 (during the summer of which Smith dictated the entirety of the text of the Book of Mormon) and 1833 (late in the spring of which Smith produced the revelation that recasts the origins of John's prologue) is quite remarkable. In four years, Smith apparently shifted from regarding the biblical text as largely authoritative as it stands to malleable and open to contestation and radical reinterpretation.

Every stage in the story Frederick tells is compelling. In his first chapter, focused primarily on the Book of Mormon, but also on a relatively early (1831) revelation to Smith, he tracks the use of relatively vague echoes of John's prologue. Cutting across traditional debates about what such echoes mean about the Book of Mormon's claims regarding its historical provenance, he emphasizes the ways the text deliberately addresses itself to a nineteenth-century audience and presents itself in the garb of quasi-Johannine language in order to command a certain position of authority with a still-thoroughly-Christian readership. He finds the same rhetorical gesture in Smith's earliest revelations. Then, in a second chapter, Frederick looks at more obviously deliberate allusions to John's prologue, places where the earliest of Mormon scriptural texts borrow not only the language but also the basic contextual meaning of Johannine texts. Here again Frederick focuses just on the Book of Mormon and on the earliest of Smith's revelations (from 1828, 1830, and 1831). And as with vaguer echoes of John, more obviously deliberate allusions to John are, he argues, "rhetorical rather than theological" (15). They serve to underscore the close relationship between new and ancient scripture, such that the former can borrow the authority and cultural force of the latter.

The story grows more complex in Frederick's third chapter. There he traces moments already in Smith's earliest scriptural texts where there are "significant new dimensions" added to the Gospel of John's prologue (57). The earliest of these, though, are relatively humble developments of Johannine texts. But then, beginning with a recorded vision experienced by Smith and a companion in February 1832, the first relatively drastic developments of John's prologue start to appear, initially by a refocusing of the Johannine theme of fullness, shifting it away from the *logos* of John's prologue to outline a theology of "the fullness of the Father" (79). Frederick follows Richard Bushman in calling this the first of a series of "exaltation revelations"

(77). It is the well-known vision canonized as Section 76 of the *Doctrine and Covenants*, the scriptural collection of Smith's revelations. In another revelation from December 1832, Frederick finds further theological developments of the Johannine notion of fullness, as well as a remarkable reconceptualization of the Johannine prologue's talk of light as material and cosmic rather than merely metaphorical. Further, according to Frederick, Smith reworks John's well-known idea that many witnesses were necessary for Christian faith, to "reduce the importance of these witnesses" because "all one needed to do was look around and, in an Emersonian fashion, recognize the divine" (85). In these developments, one recognizes the beginnings of a theologically audacious handling of the biblical text.

Only in Frederick's fourth and final chapter does this story reach its climax. In the already-mentioned 1833 revelation, Smith produces the supposed original from which the Gospel of John's prologue was eventually derived. The production of this text amounts, according to Frederick, to one of Smith's "deepest engagements with any text of the Bible and results in what is arguably his greatest theological construction" (96). Frederick analyzes in startling detail the close but complex relationship between Smith's text and the biblical prologue of John. He shows that Smith's production borrows "the spirit and intent of the Prologue" (99) by reproducing its basically supersessionist gesture (albeit in order to allow Mormonism to supersede Christianity, rather than to confirm Christianity's supposed supersession of Judaism). The deconstruction and then reconstruction of John's prologue in Smith's revelation further replaces the Johannine high Christology (clearly embraced in the Book of Mormon) with an emphatically low Christology (central to much of subsequent Mormon theology)—a low Christology that, moreover, makes of Christ an example of progression "from grace to grace" toward the Father's fullness (110). What reveals early Mormonism's remarkable interaction with the Christian Bible is the fact that Smith presents this not as a straightforward *rejection* of John's prologue in favor of an alternative theology, but as a *restoration* of the prologue to its supposedly original form. This Smith accomplishes by retaining much of John's language, skillfully tracking points of tension and possibility in the biblical text, and then manipulating the text to bring out its latent potential meanings.

In the end, what Frederick makes perfectly clear with this study is that early Mormonism deserves closer study for its inventive interaction with the Christian Bible. Far from providing tedious plagiarisms, Mormon scripture provides a sophisticated and theologically interesting engagement with the

material text of the Bible. Not only might much be learned about Mormonism from closer study of its scriptures with biblical texts, but also much might be learned about the tensions and potentialities of the biblical texts themselves. Frederick has provided a remarkably strong example of methodological care in this book. The book serves to outline a methodology for tracking biblical interactions in texts clearly dependent on the Christian Bible but introduced to the world only long after the closure of the biblical canon—Mormon or otherwise. The book unquestionably succeeds in what it presents as its chief aim, even though this is arguably not really its chief aim or its most important contribution. It might be noted that Frederick has elsewhere published a sustained study of methodology for considering biblical interaction in the Book of Mormon (see Nicholas J. Frederick, "Evaluating the Interaction between the New Testament and the Book of Mormon: A Proposed Methodology," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 24 [2015]: 1–30).

At the same time, however, Frederick's study is not without its flaws. Chief among them, from my point of view, is its overt insistence on being primarily a study in methodology. In the book's introductory material, Frederick presents his work as an attempt at refining the methods used to find and categorize interactions in non- and pseudo-biblical literature with biblical texts. He defends the limitation of his attention to Mormon scripture's use of John's prologue, for instance, not by pointing out that it receives especially illustrative attention in an 1833 revelation, but simply on the grounds that it is a peculiarly unique and theologically robust part of the Christian Bible (see pp. xx–xxi) and so might be useful in a methodological study. This ultimately obscures the teleological flow of Frederick's study and distracts attention from the fact that there lurks, in the course of the book, a remarkably strong thesis about Joseph Smith's peculiar interest in the Fourth Gospel. Strengthening this misdirection of sorts, Frederick neglects in the book to engage as directly as he might with the explicit interest Mormon scriptural texts exhibit in *specifically* Johannine texts. Frederick seems to me to have missed an opportunity to make a direct and forceful case that there is a kind of systematic (if nonetheless changing) program of interpretation of Johannine texts in Mormon scripture. Although he does cite Stendahl's study of the Johanninization of Matthean texts in the Book of Mormon, he never engages in any sustained way with Stendahl's conclusions. Further, as noted, he avoids addressing, even in synoptic fashion, important explicit statements regarding the Johannine corpus in Mormon scripture—the direct survey of correct and misguided interpretations of John 10:16 in the Book of Mormon,

for example, or repeated references to John and the Apocalypse throughout the Book of Mormon. Frederick's book would have been strengthened by at least some direct discussion of these overt interactions with John, at least by way of contextualizing the more subtle use of John's prologue at strategic points in Mormon scripture.

This, though, should be heard as a mild critique—a suggestion that Frederick might profitably be less modest about what he attempts to track in Mormon scripture. A stronger thesis, which I believe *is* supported by Frederick's findings, would more forcibly reveal how closer study of Mormon scripture would reward those who give it attention. Yet Frederick *has* nonetheless done much to reveal just this. For that he is unquestionably to be commended.

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