

### Unreadability is the Reader's Problem: *The Book of Mormon's* Critique of the Antebellum US Public Sphere

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# Unreadability is the Reader's Problem: *The Book of Mormon's* Critique of the Antebellum US Public Sphere

Jonathan Sudholt\*

## Abstract

This article reads *The Book of Mormon* as an attack on the incoherence of American nationalism – as, specifically, a book about the inevitability of its own irrelevance. That is, its primary objection is that in order for Joseph Smith to get any attention at all within the unruly public sphere of Jacksonian America, he had to write a book that would get him the wrong kind of attention – attention as a religious fanatic rather than as a critic of the culture that creates religious fanatics. Joseph Smith believed there was something rotten at the heart of America, but, being an uneducated farm boy from western New York, he had no way to express his anger in a manner that would allow him to be taken seriously. He could only be an ‘authority’ with regard to religion, and religious authority, being ubiquitous, was no authority at all. Smith tracks the way the American public sphere forced its marginalized persons to criticize it from a disadvantageous position, and the way those critiques were turned to the establishment’s advantage. For Joseph Smith, freedom of speech in America has always been a tool of the political elites to keep the poor from speaking effectively.

*The Book of Mormon* (1830) is notorious for being a book that people do not read. This is especially true for scholars of literature. Although the critical ground is shifting, most notably with the recent publication of important articles by Elizabeth Fenton and Jared Hickman, and Grant Hardy’s apologetic but still useful book, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader’s Guide*, the general tendency in scholars’ treatments

of *The Book of Mormon* is to say, with Harold Bloom, that although Joseph Smith, Jr. and the religion he created might be fascinating, the text at its centre is not worth the bother. Bloom writes, 'It has bravura, but beyond question it is wholly tendentious and frequently tedious,' and declares, 'I cannot recommend that the book be read either fully or closely, because it scarcely sustains such reading'.<sup>1</sup> Because of its claim to authenticity, any critical investigation can expect to be attacked by the book's champions and ignored by everyone else. And because of the glaring stylistic clumsiness, drawn out over almost 600 pages, there seems to be no way to engage with it as a work of art. The style is ponderous, the characterizations dull, and the morality puerile. It is, as Mark Twain called it, 'chloroform in print'.<sup>2</sup> Admitting all of this, I will argue nonetheless that *The Book of Mormon's* value as a literary document has been sorely underestimated. Indeed, by thinking only of its conspicuous indecorousness, scholars have failed to see that *The Book of Mormon* is no less concerned about these problems. Attending to this concern allows us to better understand the text's cultural critique, a critique that is so intense that *The Book of Mormon* stages the annihilation of America not once, but twice, before its fury is used up.

## ***The Book of Mormon* and the stakes of participation in the public sphere**

Nathan O. Hatch has called *The Book of Mormon* 'a document of profound social protest, an impassioned manifesto by a hostile outsider against the smug complacency of those in power and the reality of social distinctions based on wealth, class, and education'.<sup>3</sup> In this article I will examine *The Book of Mormon's* treatment of its outsider status, to work through the means by which the text justifies its hostility. I will argue that *The Book of Mormon* can prophesy the complete destruction of the American nation with such confidence because it can anticipate its own rejection by the American public. And it was, I should point out, correct about the hearing it would receive: it was mocked, ignored, and on occasion enthusiastically embraced, but it has very rarely been read. This is a book that predicts that you will not read it, and that you will not read it because there is no way for you to know how to read it. When we do read it, we will find that its anger derives from the fact that the only means by which to express the frustrations and resentments building up under the regime of American liberal democracy is an inarticulate, confused, incoherent howl of rage, which, in the marketplace of ideas in

which subjects of the American system were forced to argue their case, could be casually dismissed as the inarticulate, confused, incoherent howl of a crank.<sup>4</sup> That is, by holding someone like Joseph Smith, a by-now famously uneducated farm boy, to the same standard to which the comfortable, educated people whose comfort and education Smith envied were held, the American marketplace of ideas invalidated his criticism by invalidating the only vehicle by which he could present it, offering only the illusion of participation, rather than a real opportunity to make his voice heard.

This duplicity is, I will argue, the target of *The Book of Mormon's* resentment. Jürgen Habermas describes it in terms of the incoherence of the bourgeois public sphere. Even his idealized version of this was by 1830 crumbling under pressure from people like Smith: "The same economic situation that pressured the masses into participating in the public sphere in the political realm denied them the level of education that would have enabled them to participate in the mode and on the level of bourgeois readers of journals."<sup>5</sup> Those individuals who could not play by the rules were, as Nancy Fraser and others have studied in more detail, expelled from the dominant public sphere, finding refuge, if any could be found, in what have been called counterpublics. Michael Warner describes counterpublics as publics 'defined by their tension with a larger public', and in which 'Discussion ... is understood to contravene the rules obtaining in the world at large, being structured by alternative dispositions or protocols, making different assumptions about what can be said or what goes without saying'.<sup>6</sup> Since Fraser's seminal essay, much has been made of the emancipatory power of counterpublics, built on her insight into the permeability of publics and the way that every counterpublic 'help[s] expand public space. In principle, assumptions that were previously exempt from contestation will now have to be publicly argued out.'<sup>7</sup>

While that is an important factor in any discussion of publics, it is also important to remember, as Craig Calhoun has made clear, that many radicals 'resigned themselves only reluctantly to a politics of counterpublics'. '[I]f they helped make a counterpublic, it was a response to circumstances they decried and a second best to the open discourse of an inclusive public that they favored.'<sup>8</sup> And this is because there is a very key way in which inclusion in a counterpublic may not provide adequate recompense for exclusion from the dominant public. Keeping issues alive, and keeping oneself alive by being able to sell one's product, is only part of what is at stake in participation in the dominant public sphere. Because the public sphere was explicitly constructed

as the realm into which one graduated after having been prepared by activity in the other spheres (the domestic, the literary, etc.) to contribute to the community's governance of itself, it was also the realm in which one could be recognized as a full member of human society. To be expelled from this domain introduced the very real danger of being caught in a negative feedback loop. Being outside, one not only has no claim to the rights and privileges enjoyed by those inside. Far worse, one is not entitled to have one's humanity acknowledged by those inside. Denied the necessary recognition, one cannot but reinforce one's exclusion by failing to abide by the rules of rational-critical debate. From this perspective, the person aspiring to enter the dominant public sphere could justifiably feel himself or herself situated on an existential precipice. The discovery that one is being forcibly expelled from the dominant public sphere, to establish a counterpublic if and as best one can, is likely to be a traumatic experience.<sup>9</sup>

Such concerns were of particular importance in the public sphere of Jacksonian America, with the bad blood that came out of the Compromise of 1820 and the election of 1828, unusually divisive even by early US standards, among the chief factors in what Sean Wilentz has called 'the Era of Bad Feelings'.<sup>10</sup> And western New York had certain idiosyncrasies that made its public discourse especially fraught. The state's Constitutional Convention of 1821 had extended the franchise, but not quite to universal white manhood suffrage. It retained the requirement of the payment of a tax, which, although modest, still put those in precarious economic circumstances at risk of being unable to participate in the political system they were repeatedly assured was one of the great achievements of humankind. At a more intimate level, Paul E. Johnson's study of Rochester, NY has shown how, with the rise of the regime of bourgeois privacy, master craftsmen-cum-businessmen were changing the nature of relationships between employer and employee, ejecting journeymen from their households and initiating a wage labour economy, while attempting to retain the social authority they had enjoyed under the previous system.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, the region was populated by those who had lost out in New England, and who had moved to western New York in the hope of material improvement but who were, largely, losing out again. The Smith family, like so many others, had emigrated to western New York after the 'Year without a Summer' of 1816 had finally sealed their failure in Vermont, where their last experience as they left was to be harassed and scammed by people presenting unjust but unavoidable claims of the family's debts. They might also have felt scammed in New York, since with the promise

of the Erie Canal then under construction, Palmyra was billed as a town on the rise, only to be eclipsed by Rochester as the local hub. So the Smiths bought their land dear, and in just a few years discovered that the land they could not afford was also worthless. They were bailed out by a neighbour, Lemuel Durfee, who bought their land and allowed them to live on it, and whom Joseph Jr. repaid in *The Book of Mormon* by giving the name Lemuel to his scripture's second greatest villain.<sup>12</sup>

On top of all this, the Masonic crisis was in full flower in Smith's neighbourhood at the very time that *The Book of Mormon* was being worked toward publication. The well-publicized disappearance and presumed murder of the Masonic turncoat William Morgan in 1826 occurred only a few dozen miles from Smith's home and enflamed passions throughout the region, especially because the criminal investigation was obstructed, frequently and effectively, by influential Masons.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, the demographics of Masonry drew attention to social, economic and political inequality. Lodge membership was overwhelmingly tilted toward the professional class, leaving out the area's farmers, who were by far the area's largest demographic.<sup>14</sup> This imbalance, along with the Masons' influence, and the widely held and not unfounded fear that they valued their Masonic commitments above their national ones, meant that although the Masons might have thought of themselves as 'among a bevy of voluntary organizations in civil society that shaped and were shaped by the public-spirited republican virtue of the postrevolutionary era', their activities could be differentiated from those other organizations on the grounds of the Masons' secrecy and power. 'Seen from the perspective of Anti-Masonry ... the brotherhood was a secret cabal of politically connected, secularizing, affluent men deeply threatening to the common man and evangelical Christianity.'<sup>15</sup> This is to say that the environment out of which *The Book of Mormon* emerged was saturated not just with the religious enthusiasm that is so often the focus of conversations about the Burned-over District in which Smith lived. It was also fertile ground for political anxieties, born of the privation and exploitation, bad luck and bad decisions that had afflicted the Smiths and many of their fellow Yankee transplants in the area for generations. The combination of religious enthusiasm and political frustration into a *mélange* in which distinctions between religion and politics were difficult to draw (indeed, to attempt to draw them was potentially a sign of religious waywardness and political irrationality), laid the foundations for what I will demonstrate to be a bold, if unstable, attempt to promote not just a new religious imaginary, but a new political one, as well.

My attention to the political element in *The Book of Mormon* is also intended to reshape scholarly discussion of the man behind it. Mormon hagiography has, quite naturally, focused on Smith as a religious leader. And Fawn Brodie's groundbreaking biography, *No Man Knows My History*, which stands as one of the first serious scholarly efforts to get to grips with the mercurial prophet, developed a more rounded picture of the young Smith as a mischievous, good-natured charlatan, someone whose charm, improvisational ability and straightforward chutzpah allowed him to bring enough sheep into his fold that he could work his way out of the destitution into which he was born. And although a number of very talented historians, both from within and without Mormonism, such as Richard Lyman Bushman and Jan Shipps, have added colour to this interpretation, our understanding of Smith remains largely focused on the religious element. My reading of his earliest major text is, among other things, an attempt to present a picture of this young man as engaged not only with his own religious perplexity, but also the broader question of class injustice in the antebellum USA. By attending to *The Book of Mormon* as a book born out of indigence and aware of, but unable to do much about, its significant limitations, I hope to open the conversation about Smith to an appreciation of his intervention as a political thinker – or, perhaps more accurately, a politically motivated religious tactician whose religious text so clumsily and effectively expresses Smith's awareness of his political limitations. That is, *The Book of Mormon* offers insight into the devices employed by a young man determined to engage in the public sphere, but burdened with a vivid sense of the obstacles that lay, or, as would have seemed more likely, had been laid in his path.<sup>16</sup>

Chief among those obstacles was the Burned-over District's contradictory obsession with discovering an absolute spiritual authority within a context of rapidly expanding democratic sensibilities. The only realm of experience in which a poor, unschooled farm boy like Joseph Smith could be granted equality of authority with the most significant men of his day was the spiritual realm. But that, as the confusion that tormented the region proved, was no authority at all. Gordon Wood writes, 'The Scriptures were to be to democratic religion what the Constitution was to democratic politics – the fundamental document that would bind all American Christians together in one national community'. But, 'as Smith himself came to perceive ... "the different sects understood the same passages of scripture so differently as to destroy all confidence in settling the question by an appeal to the Bible." Only some final interpreter, some supreme court of Christianity, could end the confusion'.<sup>17</sup> And

yet, given the incredible diversity of opinion and the extreme sensitivity to encroachments on liberty, any attempt to present the required 'final interpreter' was more likely to be received as a threat than as a solution. Democratic politics produced, according to the elites who feared it, pandemonium. Democratic religion was no less chaotic. And Smith, presenting what he might hope could serve as a supreme arbiter, anticipates that, instead of answering what seemed to be the problem of a lack of authority, he will only reveal himself to be an authoritarian demon, the ultimate threat to American millennial promise.<sup>18</sup>

The ordeal of one eventual convert to Mormonism, Solomon Chamberlin, is typical. A year before *The Book of Mormon* appeared in print, he published a pamphlet that described his own attempt to deliver 'a message from the eternal world' that, he assures his readers, 'came not by my own imagination neither is it a phantom of the brain'.<sup>19</sup> In that pamphlet he describes receiving the message from the 'departed spirit' of a neighbour, 'the wife of Daniel Arnold', who tells him that he must reform his life, 'to live more obedient to God, and not live so light and trifling'.<sup>20</sup> He must also pass on the same message to her widower, who for unstated reasons could not receive the message from his dearly departed himself. As Chamberlin attempts to transmit this message during the next church meeting, he has to shout over the ruckus his words cause. While he speaks to the class, 'some wept, others mocked, and I spake to an aged professor in the tenderest love', who nonetheless 'sprang up into a great rage and said, Solomon, stop, I want none of that – you are going [too] fast. Said I stop dear man, wait patiently and hear me through, and then mock on.'<sup>21</sup> Chamberlin is speaking to a group of like-minded churchgoers, and he still cannot get the attention he believes his words deserve. *The Book of Mormon*, I argue, is a book about being cheated by a contradictory system. The crisis of authority that afflicted antebellum US culture turns out only to be a ruse by which the wealthy maintain their place at the top of the social hierarchy. Every time someone like Joseph Smith, or Solomon Chamberlin, presents an authoritative statement – in, as I have said, the only realm in which they are granted authority – they overstep acceptable bounds, and instead of solving the problem they have been told is the major problem of their lives, they only compound it, and at the same time make themselves enemies of the very people who are suffering with them under the so-called crisis of authority. American democracy in *The Book of Mormon* operates according to the divide-and-conquer principle. By making obeisance to the rule of 'liberty' and 'democracy', conveniently defined by people totally unlike Joseph Smith, the fundamental rule of participation



in the public sphere, and by whipping up a crisis of authority that cannot be resolved without usurping people's rights and destroying liberty and democracy, the elites ensure that they can maintain power indefinitely. Still worse, because their power can always be defended by the simple means of accusing any dissent to it of disloyalty and 'anti-Americanism', they can become lazy, enfeebling the society they have comfortably under control. Smith, as will be seen, argues that their primary means of maintaining authority is to evacuate the term 'authority' of all meaning. Their victims, deprived of a legitimate image of authority, then do the elite's work for them. Being unfamiliar with real authority, they mistake it, when they see it, for tyranny, and drive away what could liberate them from their thralldom to American freedom.

I want to suggest that by failing to engage with Smith's inelegant work, we have not only missed an opportunity to attend to the genuine grievances it expresses; we have reinforced the grounds for those grievances. *The Book of Mormon* is a pointedly unreasonable reply to the public sphere's demand for reasoned debate, debate supported by evidence and arguments that are, taken on their own terms, valid and reasonable. Being unable to produce a work that suits the demands of the marketplace, a work that would earn him the attention of those who wield power, Joseph Smith produced a text that knows it will only get him the attention of the powerless, and precious little of that. After all, he could provide no statistics that would help him make his case, and he had no credentials from institutions of higher learning that would support his claim to make authoritative statements about the state of society, and on the evidence of *The Book of Mormon* he was far from an elegant writer. And this may be of particular interest to us now, when similarly angry people in many countries in Europe and America feel that they have to fight against a system no more inclined to attend to their clumsy and pugnacious complaints than was the system against which Smith fought. In this way, *The Book of Mormon* can be a tool for learning how to listen to those whose lack of sophistication and rhetorical blundering makes them easy targets for demagogues and, therefore, allows them to be easily dismissed as, to cite one recent example, the 'deplorables' of society.

## Stylistic infelicities

An anxiety about reception and the preemptive reply to the reader's suspicion directs the entire narrative, but it is most immediately visible

in *The Book of Mormon*'s acute awareness of its defects and deficiencies. This appears even before one reaches the main body of text. In the preface, Joseph Smith explains that his book is missing 116 pages, the first part that he translated, on account of a stratagem by 'evil designing persons', who 'have stolen and kept [it] from me, notwithstanding my utmost exertions to recover it again'.<sup>22</sup> Despite Smith's divine power to translate, he is not allowed to translate the same pages again because,

Satan had put it into [the thieves'] hearts to tempt the Lord their God, by altering the words, that they did read contrary from that which I translated and caused to be written; and if I should bring forth the same words again, or, in other words, if I should translate the same over again, they would publish that which they had stolen, and Satan would stir up their hearts of this generation, that they might not receive this work. (p.3)

The first thing one learns about *The Book of Mormon*, after its claim on the copyright page that it is 'an abridgement of the Record of the People of Nephi ... sealed by the hand of Moroni, and hid up unto the Lord, to come forth in due time by the way of Gentile', is that it is incomplete. To perhaps only the thieves' surprise, however, God has anticipated this unfortunate turn of events. During the Nephite civilization, God told the early prophets – those whose tenure the lost pages covered – to keep a separate record, a sort of greatest hits of their reign, that was then appended to the end of the main record for Smith to find and subsequently translate. Even this, however, does not allow for a comprehensive text. The plates on which this other record is kept are quite small, and the writers in this part of the book repeatedly explain that they cannot keep a full record of the history of their people. They are so small, in fact, that the last prophets in the sequence are left only enough room to document their genealogy and the plates' provenance.

The knowledge of these and similar shortcomings elicits from Moroni, *The Book of Mormon*'s last narrator, repeated warnings that the reader should not conclude that the text's mistakes invalidate his and his fellow prophets' claims to speak with divine authority.

Condemn me not because of mine imperfection; neither my father [Mormon, the editor and primary narrator for whom *The Book of Mormon* is named], because of his imperfection; neither them which have written before him, but rather give thanks unto God

that he hath made manifest unto you our imperfections, that ye may learn to be more wise than that which we have been. (p.538)

Later, he is even more explicit about his sense of inadequacy as a participant in the public sphere:

I said unto him, Lord, the Gentiles will mock at these things, because of our weakness in writing: for Lord, thou hast made us mighty in word by faith, whereunto thou hast not made us mighty in writing: for thou hast made all this people that they could speak much, because of the Holy Ghost which thou hast given them; and thou hast made us that we could write but little, because of the awkwardness of our hands. (p.564)

For a partisan of rational-critical debate, sceptical of the text's claims to divine inspiration and historical veracity, the first quotation has that clear indicator of intellectual tyranny against which the rules of rational debate are supposed to protect society: it promotes blind obedience over socially responsible engagement, insisting that inquiring into the inconsistencies and contradictions of the text and its doctrine must not be allowed. Thus it earns the suspicion of the bourgeois public sphere, the priorities of which are, according to its own mythology, diametrically opposed to *The Book of Mormon's* promotion of censorship, and all the repression and oppression that is said to follow from restrictions on the freedom of speech.

There is, however, an element of Moroni's nascent tyranny that complicates this apparently straightforward and all-too-familiar drive to silence all voices but its own. This has to do with the strange way that the Nephites, blessed as they are with effectiveness in speaking, are not similarly blessed with effectiveness in writing. That the Holy Ghost's influence should be so strictly delimited to the realm of the spoken word situates the opposition between oral culture and written culture as central to *The Book of Mormon's* concerns. This reflects, I suggest, the anxiety of a less literate person entering the lists of public discourse, someone who, like many other 'populist religious leaders' of Smith's time, was 'intoxicated with the potential of print', but whose intoxication did not prevent him from recognizing that print's potential did not guarantee a printed book's success.<sup>23</sup> In this way I relate the anxiety Smith expresses in his preface, that his contemporaries 'might not receive this work', with the anxiety his characters express. What makes the anxiety even more striking, and my

suggestion more secure, is that the Nephites are a prodigiously literate culture. Nephite prophets and leaders produce a tremendous number of records documenting their heroism and their nation's oscillation between backsliding and repentance. *The Book of Mormon* itself is the compilation and abridgement of the work of dozens of prophets, who carefully guard the record and track its provenance from one record keeper to another over the course of 1,000 years. Moreover, their literate civilization is repeatedly contrasted with that of their enemies, the Lamanites, who are characterized as having a predominantly oral culture, and who, as Armand Mauss has noted, thereby give the Nephites the rhetorical advantage of having the only written evidence supporting their side.<sup>24</sup>

Textual documentation is even the source of the narrative's first great event: the murder of a Jerusalem archivist named Laban by the book's first hero, Nephi. This occurs after Nephi and his brothers, having followed their father, Lehi, out of Jerusalem shortly before the Babylonian invasion, are sent back to the city by Lehi on instructions from God, to collect the 'brass plates', which have inscribed on them the Pentateuch and a history of the Israelites that includes a genealogy by which Lehi traces his ancestry to Manasseh. The plates are valuable enough to justify a murder because they are vital to the family's ability to maintain its heritage in the new Promised Land to which God has promised to lead them, America. In one of the most famous passages from *The Book of Mormon*, the Holy Ghost tells Nephi (who as a character shares a number of attributes with Robert Wringhim, of James Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* from 1824), that he must kill Laban, who refuses to give the brothers the plates, rather than go away empty handed, on the grounds that, 'the Lord slayeth the wicked to bring forth his righteous purposes: It is better that one man should perish than that a nation should dwindle in unbelief' (p.12). Possession of the record is a matter of national survival, and the entire story of *The Book of Mormon* depends on this clear understanding that cultural and political dominance requires a grand narrative that can conquer competing grand narratives. Indeed, one of the Lamanites' primary grievances against the Nephites, whom they characterize as usurpers on the grounds that Nephi was Lehi's fourth son and their ancestor, Laman, was Lehi's first, and by rights the leader of the people and the inheritor of the record, is that they have suffered as a nation for the loss of the plates and the consequent loss of cultural memory.<sup>25</sup> Given the Nephites' massive production of and reliance on texts, Moroni's anxiety, if it is anything other than false

modesty, makes little sense coming from a scion of the greatest family on the continent, a direct descendent of the original Nephi, and such a skilled formalist that he receives praise from Grant Hardy for his ‘allusive virtuosity’.<sup>26</sup> It therefore seems more like the expression of his creator’s anxiety, one that is so strong the creator cannot help but let it peek through, rather than an anxiety that a sophisticated narrator like Moroni would feel.

## Protesting too much

Two recent articles have demonstrated how *The Book of Mormon’s* anxiety about itself renders the text susceptible to deconstruction. First, Elizabeth Fenton’s work on the Nephites’ extravagant textual production leads her to diagnose them with a case of ‘Documania’, or, ‘the impulse to compile and preserve records’.<sup>27</sup> For her, *The Book of Mormon’s* attention to documentation amounts to an obsession, rendering the claims it bases on its internal evidence (to historical validity, and so on) not just historically unfounded but rhetorically unstable. This instability she then identifies as a critique of the progressive version of history on which antebellum American millennial optimism rests. She writes,

*The Book of Mormon* offers a radical revision of American history that presents both documania and the Puritan errand as dead ends. Through its frequent and fraught depictions of record keeping, the book highlights the impossibility of compiling an accurate account of the past even as it offers an alternative history of the Americas.<sup>28</sup>

Jared Hickman is also interested in the way *The Book of Mormon* foregrounds the limitations of the historical enterprise. He reads the text’s expressions of anxiety about itself as a subversion of ‘the very authority of the narrative that elaborates the framework in the first place’.<sup>29</sup> His argument focuses on the parochial quality of *The Book of Mormon* narrative, a text that, in ‘present[ing] multiple first-person narrators and editors who assiduously trace the provenance of their work’, ‘provides a conspicuous and self-conscious antithesis – or antidote – to ... biblical timelessness’.<sup>30</sup> This he presents, in a brilliant paradox, as *The Book of Mormon’s* antiracist racism. The Nephite narrators, who work very hard to construct the Nephites as white and virtuous and their enemies the Lamanites as dark and savage,<sup>31</sup> undo

all their racist reasoning by failing to keep the Lamanites from erupting in inconvenient ways into the text, most notably through their eventual annihilation of the Nephites and, in the 'latter days' of nineteenth-century America, their redemption as heirs to the promise given to their forefather, Lehi. Their presence, and the Nephite narrators' failed attempts to invalidate their claims to presence, Hickman reads as a rebuttal to the way the "commonsense reading of the Bible" and commonsense racism [reinforced] each other'.<sup>32</sup> He writes,

Insofar as *The Book of Mormon* purports to be scripture, its self-deconstruction draws attention to that which the literalist hermeneutics of biblicist America were keen to ignore – the contingent human conditions of scripture writing and scripture reading, in other words, precisely the conditions from which might conceivably arise spurious notions of theological racism.<sup>33</sup>

Fenton and Hickman have provided something more than the convincing deconstruction of the Nephites' pretensions. They have both attended to the metafictional qualities of the text. For Hickman, this is in regard to its racism: the more the Nephites proclaim Nephite (and therefore white) superiority, the more the Lamanite exceptions undercut their rhetoric. For Fenton, it is with regard to the very anxieties about the record that I have already discussed in a slightly different fashion. They both seem to follow Richard Bushman in seeing in it distinct similarities to postmodernist metafiction, and they are especially productive in drawing attention to *The Book of Mormon's* demolition of the strident optimism that characterized mainstream antebellum US nationalism.<sup>34</sup> By developing this line of analysis I will relate these deconstructive qualities to the full participation as citizens that the dominant public sphere denied to people like Joseph Smith. For there is much still to be drawn from trying to piece together the logic behind the ranting that Hickman deconstructs, not least the fixation on provenance.

In other words, even as Fenton and Hickman have provided such convincing readings of the deconstructive qualities of the text, there remains the project of constructing just what it is the Nephites' overly defensive rhetoric of hyperbolic racism and documania might be designed to achieve. Because, as pervasive as the narrators' racism is, the matter that clinches the point for Hickman – the triumph of the Lamanites over the Nephites and the prophesied triumph of the Lamanites over the Gentiles in the Last Days – is a rather minor point when compared to what the narrators prefer talking about: the moral

backsliding through which the Nephites earn their destruction. That is, the destruction that the Lamanites are said to be ready to perform is not determined by the Lamanites' ferocity but by the Nephites' fall from grace. The white people are in control of their own destiny, because they are in control of their obedience to God. This is why the phrase 'secret combinations' takes such a prominent place in the history of the Nephites. These cabals of wealthy, power-hungry men are the fifth column that sufficiently weakens the Nephite nation from within that they can be overrun from without.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, the Lamanites' conquest is in no way dependent on their own righteousness. During the final war, Nephite prophets lament that their people have become even worse than the Lamanites, but this is not to say that the Lamanites have become gentle and humane. It is just that the Nephites have finally run out of enough virtue, and God has run out of enough patience, that God gives up on them, and allows the depravity for which they lost their chosen status to run its course. The Lamanites are simply functionaries in God's economy of justice. Indeed, they are divinely ordained to kill off the Nephites only because there is no one else around to do it, the Americas having been emptied for Lehi's descendants when the clan first arrived.<sup>36</sup> Thus, the emphasis is not on what the Lamanites will do, which is presented in the vaguely titillating way that characterizes bogeymen, but on why the Nephites will deserve destruction. And this has significant implications for our understanding of the text, not least by opening up a way to understand it as a member of the genre Sacvan Bercovitch has discussed as central to US national consciousness, the 'American jeremiad'. Smith's version, however, can be distinguished on a crucial point from those of his contemporaries that Bercovitch describes. Whereas, during the antebellum era, 'American Jeremiahs considered it their chief duty to make continuing revolution an appeal for national consensus', Smith, in attacking the rules of the public sphere as a means by which national consensus could be enforced against the will of a significant percentage of marginalized Americans, aimed at the bigger game of the consensus itself.<sup>37</sup>

## What the Prophets Do

The Nephite prophets' *raison d'être* is to call the people to repentance. They do sometimes explicate texts and predict the future, but the vast majority of their time is taken up in browbeating the people, keeping them forever on their guard against backsliding. Two quotations

will serve to set the terms. First, Enos, a nephew of the first Nephi, declares,

And there was nothing save it was exceeding harshness, preaching, and prophesying of wars, and contentions, and destructions, and continually reminding them of death, and the duration of eternity, and the judgments and the power of God; and all these things stirring them up continually, to keep them in the fear of the Lord. (p.145)

Two pages later, his son, Jarom, writes,

And it came to pass that the prophets of the Lord did threaten the people of Nephi, according to the word of God, that if they did not keep the commandments, but should fall into transgression, they should be destroyed from off the face of the land; wherefore, the prophets, and the priests, and the teachers, did labor diligently, exhorting, with all long suffering, the people to diligence; teaching the law of Moses, and the intent for which it was given; persuading them to look forward unto the Messiah, and believe in him to come, as though he already was. And after this manner did they teach them. And it came to pass that by so doing, they kept them from being destroyed upon the face of the land: for they did prick their hearts with the word, continually stirring them up unto repentance. (p.147)

The similarity to what Whitney R. Cross called the Burned-over District's 'tools for rousing a community-wide anxiety over the 'inhabitants' spiritual state' will be obvious.<sup>38</sup> But it is worth mentioning that while Cross tends to separate the religious and the political, Smith's Nephites never do. The 'inhabitants' spiritual state' has a direct connection to the community's political health, and as the spirituality declines the community comes ever closer to earning annihilation. To take just one example, the righteous King Benjamin, 'had somewhat contentions among his own people' (p.152). Their 'contentions' are punished by an incursion by Lamanite warriors, who take advantage of the internal discord to see what war can achieve. The Nephites are saved by a combination of military and religious valour. While Benjamin goes to war, the prophets go to work:

And there were many holy men in the land; and they did speak the word of God, with power and with authority; and they did



use much sharpness, because of the stiffneckedness of the people; wherefore, with the help of these, king Benjamin, by laboring with all the might of his body and the faculty of his whole soul, and also the prophets, wherefore, they did once more establish peace in the land. (p.153)

In this and many similar passages, *The Book of Mormon* expresses the United States' national anxiety about its righteousness that Peter Onuf describes this way: 'Americans knew they were a special people, the only people on earth who had shown that they were capable of governing themselves', and yet, they were haunted by 'the awful possibility that Americans as a whole were insufficiently virtuous ... to preserve their independence'.<sup>39</sup> But the heroizing of the prophets, priests and teachers, who speak with divine authority, shows that the determining factor in national virtue is authority. Virtue comes not through some miraculous diffusion of right principles but by the hard work of the mouthpieces of God. That is, these diligent labourers, for whom the sentimentalist may shed the odd tear in recognition of all that they have suffered, are only contributing to the cause of national preservation because they speak with authority.

But authority, Smith recognizes, has an odd way of seeming clumsy and hostile. The 'self-deconstructive' qualities of *The Book of Mormon* by which Hickman redeems the text from its own extravagant racism were evident in the 1830s, too, but then they were called contradictions and absurdities. The exemplary response of this kind comes from the Disciples of Christ leader Alexander Campbell, to whom Mormonism was enough of a threat that he did what few other major religious leaders deigned to do at the time: take it seriously enough to rebut it rather than dismiss it. And he shows quite clearly that the story does not hold together and the theology, such as it is, is a hodgepodge of the positions taken by the religiously inclined in western New York over the previous decade. Among the more effective lines are: 'The Nephites, like their father, for many generations were good christians, believers in the doctrines of the Calvinists and Methodists, and preaching baptism and other christian usages hundreds of years before Jesus Christ was born!'; '[Smith] laments the prevalency of free masonry in the times when his book should be dug up out of the earth, and proves that miracles will never cease; because God is the same yesterday, today, and forever – consequently must always create suns, moons, and stars, every day!!'; and, 'Smith makes Nephi express every truth found in the writings of the Apostles concerning the calling and blessing of the

Gentiles, and even quotes the 11<sup>th</sup> chapter of Romans, and many other passages ... Paul says these things were secrets and unknown until his time; but Smith makes Nephi say the same things 600 years before Paul was converted!<sup>40</sup> And the most famous passage in Campbell's essay is:

This prophet Smith, through his stone spectacles, wrote on the plates of Nephi, in his book of Mormon, every error and almost every truth discussed in N. York for the last ten years. He decides all the great controversies – infant baptism, ordination, the trinity, regeneration, repentance, justification, the fall of man, the atonement, transubstantiation, fasting, penance, church government, religious experience, the call to the ministry, the general resurrection, eternal punishment, who may baptize, and even the question of freemasonry, republican government, and the rights of man. All these topics are repeatedly alluded to. How much more benevolent and intelligent this American Apostle, than were the holy twelve, and Paul to assist them!!! He prophesied of all these topics, and of the apostacy, and infallibly decides, by his authority, every question. How easy to prophecy of the past or of the present time!!<sup>41</sup>

These are all good points, but because Campbell's analysis relies on the self-evidence of *The Book of Mormon's* absurdity, it is not so effective as he might have wished. Indeed, Whitney Cross shows that there was at least one other way to read what Fawn Brodie called Smith's theological 'potpourri',<sup>42</sup> highlighting the value of authoritativeness for the people of the region by writing that Mormonism 'presented a definitive answer indeed to every issue of orthodox evangelical religion', and 'offer[ed] concrete instead of vague conceptions of, the very doctrines which thirty years of revivalism had made most intensely interesting to the folk of western New York'.<sup>43</sup> More recently, David F. Holland, attending to Smith's family's close ties to deism, presents *The Book of Mormon* as answering objections to Christianity from that direction, as well. *The Book of Mormon's* contents, he writes,

echo those of the Christian Bible, with one crucial twist: the assertion that Jesus Christ had revealed himself to *all nations* ... If the charge of revelatory particularity was indeed the one argument of deism which – according to John Leland – could 'be consistently supported', the *Book of Mormon* aimed to knock the legs out from under it.<sup>44</sup>

So there are ways to see *The Book of Mormon's* intervention into regional and national religious debate as, at least to some degree, rather shrewd. There was certainly some hard work put into making it that 'supreme court of Christianity' of which Gordon Wood writes. It was not just another evangelical power grab; it was a thoughtful, unconventional, and even, on its own terms, well-designed evangelical power grab. And, having recognized its shrewdness in that regard, I want to extend that recognition to the way *The Book of Mormon* anticipates the very criticisms that people like Campbell presented as unanswerable. In the best postmodern style, it expresses an awareness of how it will be read, so as to say how it should be read. And this is not restricted to Moroni's misgivings about his writing style. There is also the matter of the repeated warnings to antebellum Americans that they should pay attention. In a passage that particularly stoked Campbell's ire, Moroni writes,

Behold, I would exhort you that when ye shall read these things, if it be wisdom in God that ye should read them, that ye would remember how merciful the Lord hath been unto the children of men, from the creation of Adam, even down until the time that ye shall receive these things, and ponder it in your hearts. And when ye shall receive these things, I would exhort you that ye would ask God, the Eternal Father, in the name of Christ, if these things are not true; and if ye shall ask with a sincere heart, with real intent, having faith in Christ, and he will manifest the truth of it unto you, by the power of the Holy Ghost; and by the power of the Holy Ghost, ye may know the truth of all things. (pp.585–6)

But this effort to manage its reception appears most prominently in the fantastic performances of the prophets who speak with authority to audiences who are, frequently, actively trying to deny them a voice.

Prophecy in *The Book of Mormon* always happens on the prophet's terms, despite the fact that they frequently face the seemingly insurmountable problem of being alone amidst a hostile throng. Abinadi, whom I will discuss in greater detail further on, fulminates for pages at a time, on more than one occasion. The prophet and High Priest Alma's retort to the 'anti-Christ' Korihor is almost twice as long as the total of Korihor's words, and Alma, in answering the questions he asks Korihor, monopolizes the debate such that it ceases to be a debate and becomes, instead, a sermon. And the original Nephi propounds his doctrine – which for all its length has little in the way of substance

beyond obey, obey, obey – to the reader, to his jealous brothers, and to anyone else who will read or listen (however unwillingly) for the first hundred pages of the book, justifying his spiel by beginning his narrative with the line, ‘I, Nephi, having been born of goodly parents, therefore I was taught somewhat in all the learning of my father’, which among other things suggests that we, in turn, have something to learn from him (p.1).<sup>45</sup> Even Samuel – a unique figure, a Lamanite who is also a prophet – gets to complete his message, which fills eight pages, before the Nephites, who are in one of their wicked phases, chase him away. This is especially remarkable because what he says is so inflammatory that,

they cast stones at him upon the wall, and also many shot arrows at him, as he stood upon the wall; but the spirit of the Lord was with him, insomuch that they could not hit him with their stones, neither with their arrows ... therefore when they saw that they could not hit him with their stones and their arrows, they cried out unto their captains, saying, Take this fellow and bind him, for behold, he hath a Devil ... And as they went forth to lay their hands on him, behold, he did cast himself down from the wall, and did flee out of their lands, yea, even unto his own country, and began to preach and to prophesy among his own people. And behold, he was never heard of more among the Nephites. (p.449)

*The Book of Mormon* can expect to be received the way its prophets are received: with violence and fury, declared mad, even subversive. But it stands as a glorious dream come true for someone like Solomon Chamberlin. Whereas that visionary American barely begins passing on his message to people with whom he has enough in common to attend the same church service before the commotion caused by his his message drowns him out, these heroic figures, who face far more hostile audiences than he ever could, get to declaim and harangue to the very end, with the added thrill of having their statements confirmed by the very highest authority. Abinadi even gets to see his enemies confirm that authority themselves. When he is being persecuted for his preaching, the king says, ‘Away with this fellow, and slay him: for what have we to do with him, for he is mad’. But Abinadi stops his oppressors in their tracks with the power of God.

They stood forth and attempted to lay their hands on him; but he withstood them, and said unto them, Touch me not, for God shall

smite you if ye lay your hands upon me, for I have not delivered the message which the Lord sent me to deliver; neither have I told you that which ye requested that I should tell; therefore, God will not suffer that I shall be destroyed at this time ... Now it came to pass after Abinadi had spoken these words, that the people of king Noah durst not lay their hands on him; for the Spirit of the Lord was upon him; and his face shone with exceeding lustre, even as Moses did while in the mount of Sinai, while speaking with the Lord. (p.183)<sup>46</sup>

Were he not shining with the Spirit of the Lord, or were his persecutors unaware of what that shining means, they might still try to capture him. But because they ‘durst not lay their hands on him’, Abinadi, and by extension the believing reader, get to revel in the knowledge that Noah’s people have earned their condemnation. By moving from the prophet’s own assertion to an experience shared by a group of people, most of whom are Abinadi’s enemies, *The Book of Mormon* leaves no room for the reader to doubt the truth of Abinadi’s claims. This anticipation of the criticism, repeated time and again over the course of the narrative, I read as one of *The Book of Mormon*’s central claims: it insists that the reader is unlikely to pay attention, and that, if he or she does, his or her response will likely be to take offence, feel threatened and lash out at its transgressive assertions.

*The Book of Mormon* makes clear that it knows how it will be received, and that the central point of its reception will be that it does not belong. To make sense of it, therefore, one cannot rely only on the fact that it contradicts itself, and otherwise refuses to play by the established rules of public discourse. It is criticizing those rules.<sup>47</sup> In other words, it is criticizing the ease with which the flagrant infringements on good taste and rational debate by people like Solomon Chamberlin can be vilified as despotic, or laughed away as anachronistic. Those infringements should be taken seriously enough that the grievances – which they can only express using the ham-handed language of backcountry religion – can be translated into the language of rational debate and addressed. If the elites are going to palm off on the nation’s poor a set of priorities that can be expressed only in religious terms, *The Book of Mormon* seems to say, then the elites must also make an effort to understand the disappointment and resentment that the marginalized cannot express without the religious language that has been foisted onto them. But of course, it was initially foisted onto them to ensure they always presented their arguments in illegitimate and counterproductive

ways, and so, they have no recourse but to shout even louder, and seem even more irresponsible until, perhaps, they manage to overwhelm the system of rational debate and replace it with a system better suited to their rhetorical apparatus.

### Abinadi and National Chauvinism

What, then, does *The Book of Mormon* have to say that it suggests will elicit such a violent response? It says that the millennial optimism of the antebellum US is unearned, and that the rampant chauvinism that Tocqueville called the nation's 'perpetual self-adoration',<sup>48</sup> by proscribing this charge, was, far from being a solid base of strength and unity, of national virtue,<sup>49</sup> only a way to keep the national head in the sand, to avoid having to face up to the cruelties it inflicted on the people it congratulated itself for having liberated.<sup>50</sup> Here again, Abinadi can help us understand the argument that *The Book of Mormon* tells us we will not easily be able to see. He is a typical *Book of Mormon* prophet: his goal is to bring his audience to repentance and thereby to ward off the people's destruction. He does this by trying to 'prick their hearts', or in other words, by denouncing their evildoings. Abinadi appears in a Nephite colony that a few generations earlier had been established in lands that were once possessed by the Nephites, but that for centuries have been ruled by the Lamanites. Keeping to the standard prophetic script of scolding and threatening, Abinadi arrives to set the second- and third-generation colonists back on the path of righteousness and virtue after they had been led astray by their wicked king, Noah, and his prophets. The colonists do not take kindly to this, so they arrest him and charge him with blasphemy. This charge, and the trial at which it is prosecuted, capture *The Book of Mormon's* critique of the self-congratulatory rhetoric of US nationalism. For what is especially curious in Abinadi's story is that the charge of blasphemy, for which he is declared 'worthy of death', is almost immediately discarded by his accuser. The king says,

Abinadi, we have found an accusation against thee, and thou art worthy of death. For thou hast said that God himself should come down among the children of men; and now for this cause thou shalt be put to death, unless thou wilt recall all the words which thou hast spoken evil concerning me and my people. (p.190)

This offer of leniency shows that punishing him for blasphemy is a sham. What they are in fact punishing him for is speaking evil of the

king and the people. Abinadi's crime is to imply that God will become a man; he blasphemes by denying God's true divinity. But the way Abinadi can save his life has nothing to do with the crime. It is all about placating the people, about soothing their wounded pride. The king does not even require that Abinadi recant on the capital offence, as if he is so focused on getting Abinadi to apologize that he loses sight of what he was pretending to find criminal.

King Noah, like any good politician in a democracy, knows that he must ostentatiously display his concern for the people's dignity. For, although he is called a king, he is always subject to the demands of his people.<sup>51</sup> When they first bring Abinadi to him, they leave no question about who rules whom: 'Behold, here is the man, we deliver him into thy hands; thou mayest do with him as seemeth thee good' (p.181). The 'thou mayest' tells Noah all he needs to know. His privileges are granted to him by the people, and he must make sure that what seems good to him is what seems good to them. Moreover, when Abinadi refuses to recant, and takes his presence before the court as another opportunity to prophesy against the king and his people,

king Noah was about to release him, for he feared his word; for he feared that the judgments of God would come upon him. But the priests lifted up their voices against him, and began to accuse him, saying: He hath reviled the king. Therefore the king was stirred up in anger against him, and he delivered him up, that he might be slain. (p.190)

The priests' accusation is that Abinadi had 'reviled the king'. The priests demand that the king show that he respects his own dignity, or the dignity of his office, which is in effect the dignity of the people. They could have accused Abinadi of blasphemy, as they had before. But their patience has run out, and they do not bother with such pretexts. They make the king defend himself, rather than God. Many things are allowed in this community, but the one thing that is not allowed is puncturing its inflated sense of identity.

And the king seems to be responsible for this state of affairs. He is guilty of being a 'flatterer', *The Book of Mormon's* most trenchant term of opprobrium. The colonists' 'pride' and 'stiffneckedness' are the product of the impressive public works projects that Noah, whose kingship amounts to little more than being the colony's chief cheerleader, has built as testaments to his people's greatness.

Noah built many elegant and spacious buildings; and he ornamented them with fine work of wood, and of all manner of precious things, of gold, and of silver, and of iron, and of brass, and of ziff, and of copper; and he also built him a spacious palace, and a throne in the midst thereof, all of which was of fine wood, and was ornamented with gold, and silver, and with precious things. And he also caused that his workmen should work all manner of fine work within the walls of the temple, of fine wood, and of copper, and of brass; and the seats which were set apart for the high priests, which were above all the other seats, he did ornament with pure gold; and he caused a breastwork to be built before them, that they might rest their bodies and their arms upon, while they should speak lying and vain words to his people.

And it came to pass that he built a tower near the temple; yea, a very high tower, even so high that he could stand upon the top thereof and overlook the land of Shilom, and also the land of Shemlon, which was possessed by the Lamanites; and he could even look over all the land round about.

And it came to pass that he caused many buildings to be built in the land Shilom; and he caused a great tower to be built on the hill north of the land Shilom, which had been a resort for the children of Nephi, at the time they fled out of the land; and thus he did do with the riches which he obtained by the taxation of his people. (pp.178–9)

This passage is striking for its detailed catalogue and strong criticism of what could so easily be presented as wise decisions and good policy. The ornamentation of the temple will no doubt seem excessive, but the towers provide a view into Lamanite lands, and could serve (indeed, the first one later does serve) as lookouts from which the colonists can get advance warning of the movements of the Lamanite armies. But in this description, there is no room for wisdom. The tower, like the temple, is nothing more than a vanity project, something from which Noah and his people can flatter themselves that they rule over all the land they can see, which, since the Lamanites have a massive military advantage, is both inaccurate and stupid. This is especially apparent in their response to a few Lamanite marauders who come to test the defences of the colony. After the army drives away the skirmishers, the colonists catastrophically misinterpret their victory as a crushing blow to their enemies, and begin gloating: ‘They did boast in their own



strength, saying, That their fifty could stand against thousands of the Lamanites' (p.179).

It is in the middle of this frenzy of jingoism that Abinadi takes up the prophetic mantle. His warning is both religious and political because the community's great vulnerability, the end product of the king's and the priests' programme of flattery, is that the people might come to believe that they can fulfil their dreams on their own, that their individual and communal strength will be enough to see them through any challenge, even though they attribute their strength to their divine election, and hypocritically defend the majesty of God by condemning Abinadi to death for blasphemy. *The Book of Mormon* is not so blind to contradictions that it can fail to recognize that one. And it is this contradiction that I see *The Book of Mormon* identifying in antebellum US society. The anxiety that Peter S. Onuf describes of a nation 'insufficiently virtuous' to maintain its freedom in this light takes on the more specific content of an anxiety about a nation whose nationalism is itself what obstructs the development of the necessary virtue. At a time when, according to Gordon Wood, 'Every advance in America's material progress – even new inventions and canal-building – was ... interpreted in millennial terms', Smith, whose religion was saturated with millennial expectation, repeatedly warns that not all millennial thinking is equal, and the prevailing mode in his day is downright dangerous.<sup>52</sup>

Nationalist puffery leads the people into a state of arrogance from which they cannot listen to criticism. And yet they do not simply reject criticism, ignoring it to go placidly on their way. They attack it, suggesting that they are not so confident about their dignity and virtue as they claim to be (which might explain why Abinadi and the other prophets rarely bother to spell out the sins of which the members of their audience must repent). Variations on this theme run throughout *The Book of Mormon*. Of one Amulek, 'the people' shout, 'this man doth revile against our laws', to which the prophet responds, 'I have spoken in favor of your law, to your condemnation' (pp.250–1). Some seventy years later, shortly before the birth of Christ, one of the text's many Nephis finds himself similarly accused. When he scolds a group for the 'corruptness of their law' (by then the people were so wicked that even their laws were to be reviled), the judges in the audience

were angry with him because he spake plain unto them concerning their secret works of darkness; nevertheless they durst not lay their own hands upon him; for they feared the people, lest they should

cry out against them; therefore they did cry unto the people, saying, Why do ye suffer this man to revile against us? For behold, he doth condemn all this people, even unto destruction; yea, and also that these our great cities shall be taken from us, that we shall have no place in them. And now we know that this is impossible; for behold we are powerful, and our cities great; therefore our enemies can have no power over us. (p.429)

The first defense of the scoundrels who lead the people to wrack and ruin is to wrap themselves in the flag, and whip up the people to anger. Under their government, designed around democratic elections, the people are no less responsible for the laws than are their representatives. So to condemn the laws is to condemn the people. But to condemn the people is the one thing that cannot be tolerated. And yet, their overconfidence leads, as it always does in *The Book of Mormon*, to their destruction. Finally, the reason that Lehi has to decamp with his family from Jerusalem in the first place is that he has prophesied the imminent destruction of the city, for which he is rewarded with the citizen's threats to destroy him. Nephi writes, 'when the Jews heard these things, they were angry with [Lehi], yea, even as with the prophets of old, whom they had cast out and stoned and slain; and they also sought his life, that they might take it away' (p.7). Thus the critique of a nation unable to listen to criticism is embedded even in what might be *The Book of Mormon's* most crucial episode, by which it attempts to legitimize itself as a sacred record. The nation that so proudly saw in its genealogy the Chosen People of Israel, which, as Eran Shalev has discussed, early and antebellum Americans frequently appropriated as the Hebrew Republic, should look, Smith suggests, to its model's destruction rather than its Golden Age.<sup>53</sup>

Again and again the people are duped into believing more of themselves than they should, and again and again they are punished. The Nephites are, like the people of Joseph Smith's Burned-over District, and more broadly, Joseph Smith's America, forced to choose whom to believe. They are the authority over who will get to be the authority over them. But the insidious work of the flatterer has already reduced the choice to a simple binary: do we believe the speaker who tells us that we are great, or do we believe the speaker who condemns us? Flattery is so dangerous because it renders the people unable to receive criticism, however constructive, as anything other than an existential assault. The prophets may be there to put them back in line, but because the sin is this particular one of having fallen

victim to flattery, they respond to the prophets' exhortations with murderous indignation, further justifying God's wrath and, perhaps more importantly, ensuring that any attempt to address real religious and political problems will be overwhelmed in a frenzy of self-righteous anger at having the nation's virtue impugned.

## Conclusion

In this construction, America's virtue was at risk not from uneducated masses being given control of a government they could not understand; it was at risk from uneducated masses being charmed away by wealthy men who wanted nothing more than to maintain their privileges. It stands as a mirror image of the elitist handwringing over the boisterousness of American democracy that dominates our understanding of antebellum US culture.<sup>54</sup> The public sphere grants authority to people that engage in reasoned debate. What *The Book of Mormon* shows so clearly is that this insistence on reasoned debate obscured from view the misery and disaffection that could only be expressed in howls of rage, howls that are of course derided as inarticulate by the partisans of reasoned debate. *The Book of Mormon*, published in a nation that prided itself on a guarantee of free speech that would allow dissent, presents a nation that absolutely refuses to entertain the slightest dissent. It gives the impression that what this allowance for dissent is all about is to deny people any grounds on which they might dissent, for what country could be less deserving of criticism than that in which one is allowed to point out its failures, its hypocrisies, and its contradictions? Thus, it is designed not so much to be the land of freedom and equality it says it is, as to preempt the very criticism it claims to embrace. So, at least, Smith suggests. But spread out over the massive tome that is his *Book of Mormon*, this appears in exactly the kind of clumsy staging of an argument that is always going to blow up in his face. Kathleen Flake has rightly pointed out that Joseph Smith found his voice in narrative rather than argument, writing, 'Smith's religion-making success is related to his having deployed the formal attributes of narrative to challenge the Christian tradition in ways not possible through discursive debate or speculative theology'.<sup>55</sup> But with this challenge comes the risk that one will be excluded from the arena in which the conversations one hopes to influence are held. *The Book of Mormon* thematizes the potential liability in the way Smith found his voice, bludgeoning its reader with its inability to present a more nuanced view.

To return to Bercovitch's jeremiad, we might say that Smith points out that the one thing even this genre cannot do, since it is committed to American exceptionalism no less than those it condemns,<sup>56</sup> is the one thing the nation most needs to have done: to shake it out of this ridiculous and monstrous notion of its own election. *The Book of Mormon* takes up the challenge, but it can do that only because all hope of effective public engagement is already lost. Were Smith able to participate according to the rules of the bourgeois public sphere, he would have to begin by acknowledging the benevolence of the bourgeois public sphere. By writing from beyond the pale, illustrated most vividly by the repeated staging of prophets failing to break through a community's complacency, Smith can draw attention to the gaps in the public sphere's coverage, and the gaps in its benevolence. So, what he loses in legitimacy he gains in candour. But of course the very best effort he could make, *The Book of Mormon*, was only ever going to reinforce the contempt that those whose humanity had already been accepted in the public sphere held for people like him. And this leads to the text's prioritizing having one's say over a more equitable distribution of wealth and power, which is, in turn, the seed of the 'aestheticization of politics' that Walter Benjamin identifies as integral to fascist rule.

Fascism attempts to organize the newly created proletarian masses without affecting the property structure which the masses strive to eliminate. Fascism sees its salvation in giving these masses not their right, but instead a chance to express themselves. The masses have a right to change property relations; Fascism seeks to give them an expression while preserving property.<sup>57</sup>

By the end of *The Book of Mormon*, after the last prophet has said the last word, it is apparent that, for this text, the inability to make oneself heard in public – that is, the inability to earn recognition of one's humanity – is the obstacle that must be overcome before one can begin working toward material improvements in the lives of the marginalized. But in aiming so single-mindedly at recognition, the text confuses having one's say for realizing one's material goals. In other words, it would rather make demands than realize them. And thus it proves itself correct, falling into the trap it predicted it could not escape. It presents the authoritarian impulse the bourgeois public sphere is on guard against, invalidating itself in the very move that demonstrates its relevance to the public it knows cannot listen.

This no-win situation is the source of the text's frustration, and the object of its most incisive analysis. It is also how I would present its relevance to the current rise of popular nationalism in Europe and the USA. If what is understood to be at stake in political debates is not simply the various solutions offered but the matter of recognition, the right to participate, then condemning those who try to participate – but in so doing break certain principles thought to be fundamental to the exchange of ideas – only reinforces their sense of exclusion, and, therefore, their sense of injustice. If the marketplace of ideas in which these debates play out is seen as designed to exclude those whose circumstances have denied them the opportunity to develop the tools required to participate, then those people are not wrong to see in that exclusion an existential threat. Indeed, that assessment could stand as evidence of a capacity for clear-eyed analysis that is frequently denied them, which in turn could inspire changes to the public sphere to bring it closer to the diverse, inclusive space it claims to be. For it does not take an especially creative thinker to see that what is now largely dismissed as the outrageous misogyny, racism and xenophobia of Hillary Clinton's deplorables, can equally be seen as the rhetorical equivalent of asymmetrical warfare. Unable to call upon the same skillset that is second nature to the gatekeepers of public discourse, they, like Joseph Smith, attempt to change the ground on which they fight to better suit the skills they do have. And I would like to suggest that it is in the public sphere's interest to recognize that if this strategy has begun to find some success, in the face of all the resources marshalled against it, that success is due as much to the public sphere's genuine exclusivity and the real psychological violence of being left out, as it is to any innate deplorableness on the part of those who do not engage according to the principles of civil discourse. If the facts presented by mainstream media and the major political parties cannot account for and address the anger of people who know they are silenced but, being silenced, cannot say how that is so, then those people will have to find some other way, some other advocate through whom to present their 'alternative facts'. And if the society in which these frustrations are fostered can do no better than treat those other ways, those other advocates, those other facts, as scandals unworthy of a so-called enlightened society, then perhaps *The Book of Mormon's* apocalyptic prophecies deserve to be taken a little more seriously than as the febrile imaginings of an unschooled rustic that, of course, they are.

# Notes

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- 1 Harold Bloom, *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 85, 86.
- 2 Mark Twain, *Roughing It* (Hartford, CT: American Publishing Company, 1872), 127.
- 3 Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 116.
- 4 A generation before *The Book of Mormon's* publication, plebian writers like William Manning and Walter Brewster—and, at a lower level of sophistication, Smith's own maternal grandfather, Solomon Mack—had found the US public sphere closed off to them, despite the obvious talents of the first two writers, and the public sphere's own profession of openness to all. Manning and Brewster even share a number of concerns with Smith. Manning warns of the damage done to the polis by the flattery of the public by unscrupulous politicians, a topic taken up repeatedly in *The Book of Mormon*, which this article analyses in later pages. Brewster's experience is an exemplary case of the difficulty a worker faced if he wanted to participate in the allegedly open public sphere. Christopher Grasso writes,

He began writing with high hopes. This was a new age, when mechanics could write to the newspaper and intelligently discuss policy and politics ... Enlightenment optimism and the new accessibility of public discourse, Brewster believed as he began his series of essays, could give men who worked with their hands a public voice and allow them to contribute – intellectually, not just physically – to the commonweal. But he soon despaired. The elite men who continued to dominate politics and public discussion only mocked or ignored him, and the laboring class did not listen: "There is scarce an old woman who knows not a sentence I have written, but exclaims, What! a man bred up to mechanical employment pretends to have common sense, and to write on the great and

mysterious subjects of taxation and government! O folly.

- And Mack's pamphlet, which, admittedly, does not share the insightfulness or clarity found in the work of Manning and Brewster, is a litany of his many miseries and an extended complaint that nobody listens to him, which he published at his own expense and, in a grimly comic confirmation of his criticism, to no success. One does not need to believe that Smith could have known of these specific predecessors' struggles to see that his prospects would be no better than theirs, nor that the disingenuousness of the public sphere's self-promotion would not build up ever deeper frustrations over the intervening thirty years. Christopher Grasso, *A Speaking Aristocracy: Transforming Public Discourse in Eighteenth-Century Connecticut* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 14.
- 5 Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge: Polity, 1992), 168.
  - 6 Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002), 56.
  - 7 Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), 109–42, 124.
  - 8 Craig Calhoun, *The Roots of Radicalism: Tradition, the Public Sphere, and Early Nineteenth-Century Social Movements* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 154.
  - 9 Warner emphasizes that there is no guarantee that one will manage to construct or discover a counterpublic suited to oneself, in which one could reconstruct one's humanity:

In the idea of a public, political confidence is committed to a strange and uncertain destination. Sometimes it can seem too strange. Often one cannot imagine addressing a public capable of comprehension or action.

This is especially true for people in minor or marginal positions or people distributed across political systems. The result can be a kind of political depressiveness, a blockage in activity and optimism, a disintegration of politics toward isolation, frustration, anomie, forgetfulness. This possibility, never far out of the picture, reveals by contrast how much ordinary belonging requires confidence in a public. *Publics and Counterpublics*, 69–70.

It is not, I think, especially melodramatic to suggest that one could characterize the stakes of this outwardly directed ontology in terms of a fundamental shift, brought on by the rise of publics, in the understanding of the nature of being. Under the regime of publicity, Descartes' *cogito* could be altered to read, 'I speak therefore I am'.

- 10 Sean Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy* (New York: Norton, 2005), 182.
- 11 Johnson sees the temperance movement as a nexus for the tense dynamic of expectations and resentments at work under the new regime. Of 'the liquor question,' he writes, 'it pitted a [newly] culturally independent working class against entrepreneurs who had dissolved the social relationships through which they controlled others, but who continued to consider themselves the rightful protectors and governors of their city'. *A Shopkeeper's Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815–1837* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2004), 61.
- 12 Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Vintage, 2007), 28, 47. See also Fawn Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet*, revised 2nd ed. (New York: Vintage, 1995), 9–11.
- 13 For a summary of these events, see Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815–1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 266–8. For an analysis of Freemasonry's role in the creation of Mormonism, see John L. Brooke, *The Refiner's Fire: The Making of Mormon Cosmology, 1644–1844* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), especially chapter 7.
- 14 In nearby Genesee County, Kathleen Smith Kutolowski writes that although 93% of workers were farmers, 80% of Lodge members were merchants or professionals. "Freemasonry Revisited: Another Look at the Grass-roots Bases of Antimasonic Anxieties," in *Freemasonry on Both Sides of the Atlantic: Essays Concerning the Craft in the British Isles, Europe, the United States, and Mexico*, ed. R. William Weisberger, Wallace McLeod, and S. Brent Morris (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 586–91.
- 15 David G. Hackett, *That Religion in which All Men Agree: Freemasonry in American Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 111.
- 16 The paranoid style in Smith's work is very much in keeping with Richard Hofstadter's famous exposition of 'The Paranoid Style in American Politics'. My hope with this article is to give a better picture as to how the text makes its case for being paranoid.
- 17 Gordon Wood, "Evangelical America and Early Mormonism," *New York History* 61, no. 4 (October 1980): 358–86, 378.
- 18 The complex association between politics and religion in the USA is, of course, quite well documented. In a book on the culture that proved such fertile soil for religious movements like Mormonism, Whitney R. Cross has provided a specific way to understand the link between the embrace of superstition on the one hand, and the equal commitment to rationality on the other. For people in western New York in this period, who were in large part displaced and disappointed Yankees from northern New England, their reliance on and study of religious superstition was a way of being good empiricists. Cross writes, 'they were credulous in a particular way: they believed only upon evidence. Their observation, to be sure, was often inaccurate and usually incomplete, but when they arrived at a conclusion by presumably foolproof processes their adherence to it was positively fanatic.' Alan Taylor, picking up Cross's argument with particular attention to 'the persistent themes of restless migration and recurrent economic disappointment despite hard work' that characterize the lives of those who, like Smith, channelled what they considered to be empirically confirmed magical powers to search for buried treasure, argues, 'Rural folk located at that point in the evolution

of popular economic attitudes were prepared to act the part of capitalists as they understood it: to employ the latest occult technology to manipulate the supernatural in order to tap the presumed abundance of treasure chests'. Whitney R. Cross, *The Burned-over District: The Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York, 1800–1850* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell, 1982), 82. Alan Taylor, "The Early Republic's Supernatural Economy: Treasure Seeking in the American Northeast, 1780–1830," *American Quarterly* 38, no. 1 (Spring 1986): 6–34, 21 and 19. See also Jan Shippo, *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1985), and D. Michael Quinn's *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1998).

19 Solomon Chamberlin, "Solomon Chamberlin's Missing Pamphlet," *BYU Studies* 37, no. 2 (1997–1998): 130–40, 136.

20 Chamberlin, "Solomon Chamberlin's Missing Pamphlet," 136.

21 *Ibid.*, 137.

22 Joseph Smith, *The Book of Mormon: An Account Written by the Hand of Mormon, Upon Plates Taken from the Plates of Nephi* (Palmyra, NY: E.B. Grandin, 1830), 3, hereafter cited parenthetically.

23 Hatch, *Democratization*, 11.

24 Armand L. Mauss, *All Abraham's Children: Changing Mormon Conceptions of Race and Lineage* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 116.

25 The Lamanites' grievance on this score receives some attention from Zeniff, a Nephite colonizer (whose account can productively be read with the same agnosticism with which one reads Thomas R. Gray's version of Nat Turner's confessions), who describes the Lamanite lore this way: 'Believing that they were driven out of the land of Jerusalem, because of the iniquities of their fathers, and that they were wronged in the wilderness by their brethren; and they were also wronged, while crossing the sea.' And again: 'That they were wronged while in the land of their first inheritance, after they had crossed the sea; and all this, because that Nephi was more faithful in keeping the commandments of the Lord ...' And again: 'They were wroth with him,

because he departed into the wilderness as the Lord had commanded him, and took the records which were engraven on the plates of brass; for they said that he robbed them. And thus they have taught their children, that they should hate them, and that they should murder them, and that they should rob and plunder them, and do all they could to destroy them; therefore, they have an eternal hatred towards the children of Nephi' (pp.176–7).

- 26 Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader's Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 263.
- 27 Elizabeth Fenton, "Open Canons: Sacred History and American History in *The Book of Mormon*," *J19: The Journal of Nineteenth-Century Americanists* 1, no. 2 (Fall 2013): 339–61, 341.
- 28 Fenton, "Open Canons," 341.
- 29 Jared Hickman, "The Book of Mormon as Amerindian Apocalypse," *American Literature* 86, no. 3 (Sept. 2014): 429–61, 444.
- 30 Hickman, "Amerindian Apocalypse," 445.
- 31 For example:

I bare record that the people of Nephi did seek diligently to restore the Lamanites unto the true faith in God. But our labors were vain; their hatred was fixed, and they were led by their evil nature, that they became wild, and ferocious, and a blood-thirsty people; full of idolatry, and filthiness; feeding upon beasts of prey, dwelling in tents, and wandering about in the wilderness, with a short skin girded about their loins, and their heads shaven; and their skill was in the bow, and the cimeter, and the axe.—And many of them did eat nothing save it was raw meat; and they were continually seeking to destroy us.

On the other hand, the same writer declares, 'the people of Nephi did till the land, and raise all manner of grain, and of fruit, and flocks of herds, and flocks of all manner of cattle, of every kind, and goats, and wild goats, and also much horses' (pp.144–5).

- 32 Hickman, "Amerindian Apocalypse," 432.
- 33 *Ibid.*, 444.
- 34 Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*, 87.
- 35 The resemblance of the Nephites' 'secret combinations' to the Freemasons, then



- the object of the Anti-masonic firestorm in western New York, is described by Dan Vogel in "Echoes of Anti-Masonry: A Rejoinder to Critics of the Anti-Masonic Thesis," in *American Apocrypha: Essays on the Book of Mormon* ed. Dan Vogel and Brent Lee Metcalfe (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002).
- 36 The Nephites do discover one group of people, also refugees from Jerusalem, called the 'people of Zarahemla', but these people do not possess that all-important record of their ancestry, and they are rapidly assimilated into the Nephites, and disappear from the narrative.
- 37 Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2012), 152.
- 38 Cross, *The Burned-over District*, 181.
- 39 Peter S. Onuf, *Jefferson's Empire: The Language of American Nationhood* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 2001), 190, 72.
- 40 Alexander Campbell, *Delusions: An Analysis of the Book of Mormon* (Boston, MA: Benjamin H. Green, 1832), 7, 10, 13.
- 41 Campbell, *Delusions*, 13.
- 42 Brodie, *No Man Knows My History*, 380.
- 43 Cross, *The Burned-over District*, 145–6.
- 44 David F. Holland, *Sacred Borders: Continuing Revelations and Canonical Restraint in Early America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 146–7.
- 45 Curiously, he chooses not to teach his children as he was taught, even though this hinders their ability to make effective use of the record that he killed Laban to obtain. He writes, 'For behold, Isaiah spake many things which were hard for many of my people to understand: for they know not concerning the manner of prophesying among the Jews' (102).
- 46 For a discussion of the Book of Mormon's appropriations from, and even competition with, the Bible, see Robert M. Price, "Joseph Smith: Inspired Author of the Book of Mormon," in *American Apocrypha: Essays on the Book of Mormon*, especially pp. 352–61.
- 47 Criticizing Habermas's attempt to answer the question 'what counts as a use of reason' with 'a highly idealized account of argumentative dialogue', Michael Warner writes that, against the prevailing construction of discourse as only that which can be 'propositionally summarizable', 'it is not possible to assume the habitus according to which rational-critical debate is a neutral, relatively disembodied procedure for addressing common concerns, while embodied life is assumed to be private, local, or merely affective and expressive. The styles by which people assume public relevance are themselves contested.' Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, 115, 51.
- 48 Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Library of America, 2004), 295.
- 49 David Waldstreicher describes the self-congratulatory tone of antebellum US nationalism in, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776–1820* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1997). He writes, 'After the War of 1812 as before, if there was one thing that white Americans could agree upon, it was their national greatness' (296). This produces a 'babel of patriotic performance', to which the only solution the people of the day could find was 'More national celebration' (282).
- 50 Smith frequently sounds like the shirtless Democrat Mike Walsh, condemning the people 'who fawn upon us and call us the bone and sinew of the country ... and who would use us until there was nothing but bone and sinew left of us', although he is rarely so pithy. Michael Walsh, *Sketches of the Speeches and Writings of Michael Walsh: Including his Poems and Correspondence* (New York: Thomas McSpedon, 1843), 10.
- 51 While *The Book of Mormon* is especially confused and confusing in its presentation of democracy, one thing it is clear about is that the institution of democratic elections does not necessarily make for a democracy. Indeed, many of the Nephites' elections are in fact designed to subvert the rule of the people. The 'Amlicites' and the 'king-men', both of whom are minority parties creating discord and contention in otherwise stable Nephite cities, actually force elections to take place, when the Nephites seem to have gotten out of the habit, so that they can elect kings and bring about a permanent end of voting.
- 52 Wood, "Early Mormonism," 377.

- 53 Eran Shalev, *American Zion: The Old Testament as a Political Text from the Revolution to the Civil War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), 23.
- 54 For an especially vivid description of this elite anxiety operating in Joseph Smith's neighbourhood, see Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium*.
- 55 Kathleen Flake, "Translating Time: The Nature and Function of Joseph Smith's Narrative Canon," *Journal of Religion* 87, no. 4 (October 2007): 497–527, 500.
- 56 Maurice S. Lee nicely captures 'the tautology of the [conventional] jeremiad'. He writes, 'Present sins, religious and political, become signs of future grace'. Maurice S. Lee, *Slavery, Philosophy, and American Literature, 1830–1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 75.
- 57 Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 217–52, 241.