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Bible Culture and Authority in the Early United States

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That the Bible played a major role in the early history of the United States is well known. Margaret Hills documented over fourteen hundred editions of the Bible that were printed in the United States between 1776 and 1850, the vast majority of which were Protestant editions. Perry sees the proliferation of Bibles not only as a reflection of America’s unique culture but also, rightly, as a contributor to that culture.



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Bible Culture and Authority in the Early United States
By Seth Perry

Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2018

Reviewed by Kent P. Jackson

In his introduction to *Bible Culture and Authority in the Early United States*, author Seth Perry of Princeton University writes of “a shared set of symbols, types, behaviors, and vocabulary” that derive from or were influenced by the King James Bible (2). The book discusses the interaction of this shared set with early American society, asserting that the Bible and biblical language were resources that individuals in the nineteenth century used to create legitimacy—that is, *authority* in their relationships with others. *Scripturalization* is the term Perry employs to describe how people, language, rhetoric, and other aspects of society obtained this authority by drawing from the stories and texts of the Bible.

That the Bible played a major role in the early history of the United States is well known. Margaret Hills documented over fourteen hundred editions of the Bible that were printed in the United States between 1776 and 1850, the vast majority of which were Protestant editions.¹ Perry sees the proliferation of Bibles not only as a reflection of America’s unique culture but also, rightly, as a contributor to that culture.

Also of notable influence were the “parabiblical texts” that accompanied Bibles—the cross-references, concordances, commentaries, and other resources that surrounded Bible verses on the printed page or that were published in separate volumes meant to complement one’s Bible reading. “Because they carry interpretive meaning and instruct readers in that meaning, paratexts carry scholarly, ecclesiastical, social, or state authority into the text itself” (41). In the absence of clerical

1. Margaret T. Hills, *The English Bible in America: A Bibliography of Editions of the Bible and the New Testament Published in America, 1777–1957* (New York: American Bible Society and New York Public Library, 1962), 1–207.

intermediaries, guides of this sort were an essential part of scripture reading for many Protestants. Because of these parabiblical texts, “*scriptura* was never, ever, *sola*”—that is, the scriptures were not, in fact, the sole source of authority for early nineteenth-century Americans (22, italics in original).

Bible Culture and Authority highlights several individuals of the period to demonstrate the interplay between their religious careers and the language and content of printed Bibles. Some, like Lorenzo Dow and Ellen White, are well known, but Perry also introduces his readers to some who are less widely known, such as Adeline Hosner and Zilpha Elaw. In the case of Ellen White, Perry writes, “When seventeen-year-old Ellen Harmon [White] began slipping into trance states in 1844 she was joining a very old tradition of female visionaries, but she had access to an unprecedented print-bible culture that allowed her to parlay her visionary authority into something enduring: a fully articulated bible-based authority” (58). Perry might have written the same about the other individuals he discusses as well. Interacting with people who were part of a biblically infused culture, preachers and visionaries could speak in the language of scripture, placing themselves in the roles of biblical characters.

The book’s discussion culminates in the career of Joseph Smith, who not only presented himself in scriptural terms but also published volumes of new scripture. In most ways, the Latter-day Saint prophet fits well within Perry’s discussion of scripturalization: his followers were part of a Bible-based culture, and he produced scriptures and revelations that are often in the language of the King James translation. Joseph Smith’s life was scripturalization on a grand scale.

Explaining where the Latter-day Saint scriptural texts came from is, no doubt, a difficult task. Perry attempts to take on this topic in the last chapter of the book. Beginning from the premise that the Book of Mormon is a nineteenth-century creation and not ancient scripture, as Latter-day Saints believe, Perry suggests that the biblical phraseology of the Book of Mormon is the result of two factors: young Joseph Smith knew the Bible far better than other historians believe he did, and he used tools like commentaries, Bible dictionaries, and cross-references when he wrote the Book of Mormon. Perry views the parabiblical aids that were available in the early nineteenth century as key to understanding the Latter-day Saint scriptures. Joseph Smith knew these aids well, Perry writes, and drew from them as he wrote the Book of Mormon. He suggests that the Prophet and his scribes searched for biblical passages

in cross-references and concordances and arranged the passages in innovative ways to produce the unique Book of Mormon text (115–16). Perry makes the same case for the production of Joseph Smith's revelations and his Bible revision.

Perry's solution is a good-faith effort by someone who rejects the Book of Mormon's truth claims to explain the origin of its text. But his analysis often falls short. He fails, for instance, to account for the short timeframe (three months) in which Joseph Smith and his scribes produced the text. The book also does not consider the textual evidence provided by the existing sections of the original Book of Mormon manuscript and the printer's manuscript, which indicate no signs of hesitation, research, deliberation, or significant editing, which would be expected if the Prophet were consulting and studying biblical and parabiblical texts. Perry's argument regarding Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon is also harmed by a spattering of inaccuracies: Joseph was not the youngest son in his family (113), he never marked up his printed Bible "with corrections and additions" (126), and he did not continue to make corrections to the end of his life (126, 128).

The role of the parabiblical resources is an ongoing theme in *Bible Culture and Authority*, but I suspect that Perry overstates their importance in the lives of ordinary people. Paul Gutjahr points out that the presence of various charts, tables, lists, cross-references, concordances, and summaries printed in Bibles was a major factor in marketing the Bibles.² The evidence of sales shows that parabiblical content made a difference in what kinds of Bibles people bought because those add-ons made Bibles look scholarly, sophisticated, and useful—especially to consumers who did not possess religious libraries.³ Though Perry discusses the significance of cross-references, commentaries, and concordances vis-à-vis the biblical text itself, he argues, unconvincingly in my view, that they made sequential reading of the Bible increasingly less common. There is no doubt that preachers and pastors availed themselves of these tools in preparing sermons and publications, but Perry does not present compelling evidence that lay people made much use of them.

2. Paul C. Gutjahr, *An American Bible: A History of the Good Book in the United States, 1777–1880* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999), 39–88.

3. See Kent P. Jackson, "The Cooperstown Bible," *New York History* 95, no. 2 (Spring 2014): 255–61.

Readers who pick up *Bible Culture and Authority* will be disappointed if they are expecting an engaging and enlightening narrative like Paul Gutjahr's *An American Bible* or a revealing analysis like David Holland's *Sacred Borders*.⁴ *Bible Culture and Authority* seems more like a collection of essays than a monograph, and the chapters do not always logically lead from one idea to the next. Later chapters often unnecessarily repeat some of the information presented in earlier chapters. On the whole, the book contains, in my view, much over-reaching in an effort to package its stories within the book's thesis.

Kent P. Jackson is a professor emeritus of religion at Brigham Young University. His most recent book is an introduction to Islam: *Islam: A First Encounter* (Provo, Utah: Jerusalem Center for Near Eastern Studies, Brigham Young University, 2019).

4. David F. Holland, *Sacred Borders: Continuing Revelation and Canonical Restraint in Early America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).