

“EXTRAVAGANT FICTIONS”:
THE BOOK OF MORMON IN THE ANTEBELLUM
POPULAR IMAGINATION

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CHAPTER 1

“A BURLESQUE ON THE BIBLE”

Sometime in late August or early September, 1831, Robert Dale Owen, son of the Scottish utopian reformer Robert Owen, received a letter from his brother William, who had hurriedly written from an Erie Canal boat somewhere near Syracuse, New York. Just as hastily Robert published the correspondence in his New York City newspaper, the *Free Enquirer*, not knowing that he would receive another, longer letter from William within days, just in time to be included in his weekly's next run. What proved to be so pressing was what William had discovered onboard the canal boat: “I have met,” he announced dramatically, “with the famous ‘Book of Mormon.’”¹ Published in 1830, the Book of Mormon claimed to be nothing short of scripture, an account of America's ancient inhabitants (themselves a scattered Hebrew remnant) and God's dealings with them over a long and bloody history. The book's translator (or author, if one suspected the surrounding story) was a New York rustic named Joseph Smith, Jr., a farmer in his mid twenties who credited an angel for having revealed to him in vision the location of the buried record—a set of golden plates “hid up unto the LORD,” as the book's title page announced, to someday “come forth by the gift and power of GOD.”² Once the book rolled off the press in late March 1830, itinerants, beginning with Smith's younger brother Samuel, loaded their satchels with leather-bound copies and set out to spread this

¹ William Owen, “Mormon Bible,” *Free Enquirer* (New York City) 3, no. 45 (3 September 1831): 364.

² Joseph Smith, Jr., *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).

American scripture—including the copy that somehow found its way onto a flatboat on the Erie Canal.

William Owen was not the first to have met with that particular copy of the already “famous” volume. According to his first letter, an earlier traveler had apparently discarded it on the boat, but not without first writing his (or her) opinion of the book on one of its pages. “This work,” the unnamed reader concluded, “seems throughout a burlesque on the Bible,” probably written as a hoax “to show what ridiculous things people can be made to believe, and upon how little authority.” Owen, after his own hasty perusal of the book, likewise found it “so similar to the Bible and such a parody on it” that he seconded the earlier assessment. He also seemed to appreciate the more vulgar appraisal written elsewhere on the discarded copy, either by the same unidentified reader or a like-minded critic given to doggerel verse. Dismissing the Book of Mormon by alluding to the fantastic story of its discovery, the anonymous reviewer wrote:

“He who’d believe the plates of brass
Of Mr. Smith must be an ass.”³

Finding each of these assessments to match his own impression, Robert published them approvingly in the *Free Enquirer* and anxiously awaited further news.

That news would not be long in coming. Reports of the Book of Mormon and its supernatural origin made for excellent copy in America’s burgeoning penny press, appearing in over 100 articles throughout New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Vermont, and even Maryland, Virginia, and Kentucky by the time William Owen stumbled upon that abandoned copy. His brother Robert had in fact reported on the Book of Mormon a month and a half earlier, though at the time he was only reprinting

³ William Owen, “Mormon Bible,” *Free Enquirer* (New York City) 3, no. 45 (3 September 1831): 364.

and commenting on what was being published elsewhere.⁴ William therefore knew of his brother's interest in what was widely known as the "Gold Bible," and promised in his first letter to "try and get a copy of it at Palmyra [where the book had been printed] if I can, as I suppose you will be well pleased to see it." The "elegant new excitement" surrounding the book—namely a group of believers some were calling "Mormonites," complete with their own "prophet," Joseph Smith—had, in the words of one of Owen's competitors, sprung up "like Jonah's gourd," and the Owen brothers were eager to see the Book of Mormon for themselves.⁵

Finding an allusion to Mormonism in the Biblical story of Jonah would have seemed fitting to Robert Owen, though for his own purposes he chose to employ an earlier part of the narrative. In introducing William's first letter, Robert retold "a good story" he had heard about a group of incredulous Scotsmen discussing the odds of Jonah actually being swallowed by a whale. An old woman, responding to the skeptics around her, raised her spectacles and sardonically asked why it was so hard to believe that the whale swallowed Jonah when "ye see thousands swallowing baith [both] Jonah and the whale every day?" For Owen and the freethinking readers of his socialist, anti-Christian newspaper, the impossibility of the biblical story was no more shocking than the gullibility of those who believed it. The whale's "gullet" was too small to have swallowed the prophet, Owen implied, lamenting that "the same remark will certainly not apply to the spiritual esophagus of our believing race."⁶

⁴ Robert Dale Owen, "Authenticity of the Golden Bible," *Free Enquirer* (New York City), 16 July 1831.

⁵ "A New Excitement: Mormonism versus Anti-masonry," *Morning Courier and New-York Enquirer* (New York City) 7, no. 1247 (21 May 1831).

⁶ "Mormon Bible," *Free Enquirer* (New York City) 3, no. 45 (3 September 1831): 364.

Owen, for one, choked on the claims of Mormonism and mainstream Christianity alike, finding neither the Book of Mormon nor the Bible digestible. We will return to that subject (and to the Owens' view of the Mormon scripture) in greater detail later, but here it is worth recognizing the composite impression of the Book of Mormon evidenced in the Owens' account. Robert's irreverent use of the Bible to frame the story, like the colorful assessments of William and his anonymous Erie Canal collaborators, was a rhetorical mix of subtle skepticism and clever wit. As historical sources, each offers a glimpse into contemporary views of early Mormonism. But more importantly, they provide a fascinating point of entry into America's varied nineteenth-century attitudes towards such broader issues as religion and reason, emotionalism and the Enlightenment, the question of biblical literalism in the face of scientific empiricism, and the potential of Scottish Common Sense Realism and Baconian induction to inform both sides of these ongoing debates. Because each of these issues found analogs in the contest over the Book of Mormon, writers such as Robert and William Owen saw in Mormonism a chance to explain their broader views and advance their associated agenda. Furthermore, it gave them reason to laugh. Whether they expressed their views in words like "parody" or "burlesque," or framed their critiques using vulgar rhymes from canal travelers or jokes about old ladies, many of Mormonism's early observers—especially at the popular level—frequently found humor in what they saw. As William admitted in his second letter, "the generality of Christians . . . scoff . . . and hoot at the idea of believing in such a monstrously absurd book."⁷

Admittedly, most of the nineteenth-century Americans who actually grappled with the claims of the Book of Mormon came to take the book seriously—some life-

⁷ Robert Dale Owen, "Authenticity of the Golden Bible," *Free Enquirer*, 16 July 1831.

alteringly so. Within twenty years of its publication, over 23,000 people from throughout the United States and abroad had accepted it as the word of God and converted to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,⁸ sacrificing their homes, their reputations, and sometimes their lives for a faith grounded in additional scripture.⁹ Multiplying at the same time were the numbers of individuals openly hostile to the Mormon faith and the book that lay at its center: writers of vitriolic anti-Mormon literature (whose works now number in the thousands) and armed mobs who could “stand any thing but men who profess . . . to believe the book of Mormon.”¹⁰ But this study is not about these polar opposites. Those in each group had their reasons for judging the Book of Mormon as they did, but the present work makes no pretensions to deciding whose reasons are more convincing (as a reporter of the yet-to-be-published volume said in January 1830, “We do not intend at this time, to discuss the merits or demerits of this work.”¹¹) Instead, I am interested in the group positioned somewhere in the middle, not sufficiently persuaded to accept the Book of Mormon as scripture, but not sufficiently opposed to act out in angry opposition; in other words, the vast majority of common nineteenth-century Americans. What did they think about the Book of Mormon (when they thought of it at all)? Granted, most of the figures we will encounter were critical of Mormonism, but those we will

⁸ “The Church of Jesus Christ” was the name used when first established on April 6, 1830. Eight years later the official name was changed to (and has since remained) “The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,” commonly abbreviated as the “LDS Church.” Because it was more commonly referred to as the “Mormon Church” during the period covered by this study (with its members more often called “Mormons” rather than “Latter-day Saints”) those terms will be employed throughout this study.

⁹ On the number of early Mormon converts, see Susan Easton Black, “How Large Was the Population of Nauvoo?” *BYU Studies* 35, no. 2 (1995): 91–94. On the significance of the Book of Mormon to early converts, see Terryl L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture that Launched a New World Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 62–88.

¹⁰ Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon*, 68. On anti-Mormon literature, see Daniel H. Ludlow, ed., *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* (New York: Macmillan, 1992), s.v. “Anti-Mormon Publications.”

¹¹ “Gold Bible,” *The Reflector* (Palmyra, NY), new series, no. 2 (2 January 1830): 13.

study found just enough humor and humanity in their subject to have some lighthearted fun. Indeed, with the exception of those virulent anti-Mormons who saw the movement as wholly serious and sinister (and the aforementioned converts who embraced it as truth), many early observers found something unmistakably comical about Mormonism and its foundational text. Moreover, a surprising number of commentators—especially newspaper editors, but even ex-Mormon apostates and rival ministers—maintained that humorous tone when expressing their negative views: though sarcasm and satire, parody and poetry, name-calling, ridiculing, and more.

Though never as prevalent as more serious or more scathing treatments, the quantity and compass of this comic material begs the question: What did people find so funny about the Book of Mormon, especially when others embraced it as sober, salvific truth? Furthermore, why did so many of those who commented on the Book of Mormon, from benign observers to bitter opponents, employ humor in their depictions and even their attacks? In short, what was it about the Book of Mormon that struck a comic chord? As we shall see in attempting to answer these questions, what this humor says about early Mormonism may be less significant than what it says about nineteenth century America, and it promises to reveal as much about the country's mind and heart as about its funny bone. "One's sense of humor is a clue to the most serious part of one's nature," observed poet Marianne Moore, and in this, what is true of the individual is true of the nation, especially when certain punch lines and laughingstocks achieve a sort of cultural currency.¹² "If one wishes to know . . . 'what is really on the collective mind,'" wrote historian Joseph Boskin, citing Alan Dundes, "'there is no more direct and accurate way of finding

¹² Quoted in Joseph Boskin and Joseph Dorinson, "Ethnic Humor: Subversion and Survival," *American Quarterly* 37, no. 1 (Spring 1985): 97.

out than by paying attention to precisely what is making people laugh.”¹³ Thus, for a time we will have to ignore the caution of E. B. White, who warned, “Humor can be dissected, as a frog can, but the thing dies in the process and the innards are discouraging to any but the pure scientific mind.”¹⁴ Noting that risk, but trusting in its value to those minds interested in the history of antebellum America, the study that follows seeks to “dissect” some of the humor aimed at early Mormonism, specifically that which targeted the Book of Mormon during roughly the first decade of its presence in print. Later critics and commentators would poke fun at Mormonism’s economic experiments in Ohio, military misadventures in Missouri, and political posturing in Illinois, to say nothing of the 1852 announcement of plural marriage that offered critics “literary possibilities . . . too good to miss.”¹⁵ But before these later comic windfalls, and continuing sporadically even beyond them, observers trained their wit most frequently on the Book of Mormon and its story of origin. Few other subjects within early Mormonism could provide such comic fodder as Joseph Smith’s tale of an Indian angel (to protect the record), magic spectacles (to aid in its translation), and buried plates of gold; few achieved such prominence in the cultural imagination, and few could be employed more effectively to marshal popular opinion toward certain identifiable ends. After a brief review of humor’s place in rhetoric, therefore, let the dissection begin: first, to establish that one of America’s first impressions of the Book of Mormon was that it was a laughable work of imaginative fiction; second, to show that its comic description by many commentators

¹³ Joseph Boskin, *Rebellious Laughter: People’s Humor in American Culture* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1997), 200.

¹⁴ E. B. White, “Some Remarks on Humor,” in *Essays of E. B. White* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1977), 303.

¹⁵ Terryl Givens, *The Viper on the Hearth: Mormons, Myths, and the Construction of Heresy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 143.

reveals much about the incongruities being worked out in the American mind; and third, to analyze why many of the Mormons' early enemies resorted to ridicule to counter the faith's religious claims.

CHAPTER II

“THE ASSAULT OF LAUGHTER”

No less a humorist than the immortal Mark Twain offered a telling commentary on his trade in his unfinished final novel *The Mysterious Stranger*. Though some confusion exists as to whether Twain intended to keep this scene in his final version,¹ at one point in the narrative he portrays the Stranger (none other than Satan) discussing humor’s commanding corrective effect. Dismissing humanity’s facile ability to “see the comic side of a thousand low-grade and trivial things—broad incongruities, . . . grotesqueries, absurdities, evokers of the horse-laugh,” Satan points his companions to humor’s greater power to “detect the funniness of these juvenilities and laugh at them—and by laughing at them destroy them.” As Satan sees it, the human race only possessed “one really effective weapon—laughter. Power, money, persuasion, supplication, persecution—these can lift at a colossal humbug—push it a little—weaken it a little, century by century; but only laughter can blow it to rags and atoms at a blast. Against the assault of laughter,” Satan summarizes in a well-known line, “nothing can stand.”²

Whether Twain intended his own scathing wit to serve as corrective social commentary or merely descriptive comic farce can be debated, though most assume the

¹ For a brief explanation of the issue, see Paul Lewis, *Cracking Up: American Humor in a Time of Conflict* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 222n1.

² Mark Twain, *The Mysterious Stranger: A Romance* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1926), 141–42.

former.³ And even though Twain himself is an alluring source for comic treatments of Mormonism in general and the Book of Mormon in particular (famously calling the volume “chloroform in print”), his classic descriptions of Mormon life in Utah lie outside the historical parameters of this study.⁴ Instead, the comments from Twain’s Satan on the “assault of laughter” serve to highlight one of humor’s most historically significant rhetorical roles. Known to theorists as superiority theory, humor has been recognized as a means of belittling, embarrassing, dismissing, and shaming one’s opponent at least since the days of Plato and Aristotle, who saw aggression at the root of laughter, targeted at the perceived defects and deformities of others. Seventeenth century English philosopher Thomas Hobbes popularized this theory with his oft-quoted description of laughter as the “sudden glory” that erupts upon overcoming an opponent. During the eighteenth century, such aggressive humor had grown common in debate, since ridicule tended to make one’s adversary laughable and therefore more easily dismissed, a tactic that would characterize much of the nineteenth-century treatment of early Mormonism, as well.⁵

Of particular interest to the present study is sociologist Christie Davies’ observation that regardless of the country or region in question, aggressive humor is invariably directed at members of a subculture who are considered to be similar to the

³ Constance Rourke, an early expert on American humor, considered it “a mistake to look for the social critic . . . in Mark Twain,” calling him a *raconteur* instead. Constance Rourke, *American Humor: A Study of the National Character* (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1953; reprint of New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1931), 168. For two of the many alternative views, see Louis J. Budd, *Mark Train: Social Philosopher* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2001), and Philip Sheldon Foner, *Mark Twain: Social Critic* (New York: International Publishers, 1972).

⁴ On Twain’s Mormon-related humor, see Richard H. Cracroft, “The Gentle Blasphemer: Mark Twain, Holy Scripture, and the Book of Mormon,” *BYU Studies* 11, no. 2 (Winter 1971): 119–40; as well as Cracroft’s “‘The Assault of Laughter’: The Comic Attack on Mormon Polygamy in Popular Literature,” *Journal of Mormon History* 34, no. 1 (Winter 2008): 233–62.

⁵ Much of the theoretical framework presented here has been summarized by Rod A. Martin, *The Psychology of Humor: An Integrative Approach* (Burlington, MA: Elsevier Academic Press, 2007).

mainstream, but sufficiently different to become objects of ridicule.⁶ Mormons in the 1830s were *almost* like other Christians, and the Book of Mormon seemed *almost* like the Bible, but not quite, and the perceived differences became both cause and content of much of the humor directed against them. Most forms of ethnic humor expresses itself in this way, especially as comic stereotypes take shape—caricatures that at once marginalize the targeted subgroup and justify that marginalization by implying the group’s inferiority. Thus when Terryl Givens convincingly argues that nineteenth-century novelists reconstructed Mormonism into a morally abhorrent ethnic Other in order to avoid more complicating religious concerns, the rhetorical power of humor can be seen as employing similar means toward similar ends.⁷

Though often considered rather innocuous, disparagement humor can be stubbornly resistant to repudiation. Moreover, because of humor’s tendency to reduce the apparent seriousness of its object, aggressive humor can, as Sigmund Freud observed, distract its audience so that one does not fully recognize what one is laughing at.⁸ On the one hand, the kind of serious-to-non-serious mental shift that humor initiates tends to minimize a subgroup’s perceived threat to the mainstream, and thus may forestall more active forms of hostility. On the other hand, however, disparagement humor also tends to minimize the mainstream’s sense of prejudice and intolerance against the sub-group, creating what sociologists Thomas Ford and Mark Ferguson call “a normative climate of tolerance of

⁶ See Christie Davies, *Ethnic Humor Around the World: A Comparative Analysis* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).

⁷ See Givens, *Viper on the Hearth*, chapter 7.

⁸ See Harry F. Gollob and Jacob Levine, “Distraction as a Factor in the Enjoyment of Aggressive Humor,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 5, no. 3 (1967): 368–72.

discrimination.”⁹ In other words, humor allows a group in power to ignore a subgroup’s perceived threat, but it also allows them to ignore the threat they pose to that subgroup—a helpful insight into society’s mixed reaction to early Mormonism, which was a blend of passivity and persecution. As humor leads a person to be less critical and discriminating in the academic sense, that person is free to become more critical and discriminatory in the prejudicial sense. Consequently, much intolerance, injustice, and aggression has been justified in the name of what Kristin Anderson labels “benign bigotry.”¹⁰

Though superiority theory has long been the dominant explanation of humor, it fails to account for many comic instances and has therefore been supplemented by other hypotheses. In the eighteenth century, German philosopher Immanuel Kant drew attention to the humor inherent in absurdities “in which the understanding . . . can find no satisfaction” and defined laughter as “an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing.”¹¹ At roughly the same time, the Scottish poet James Beattie identified the object of laughter as “two or more inconsistent, unsuitable, or incongruous parts or circumstances, considered as united in one complex object or assemblage.”¹² What came to be known as incongruity theory describes this kind of humor—when one takes pleasure in experiencing what John Morreall calls a “cognitive

⁹ Thomas E. Ford and Mark A. Ferguson, “Social Consequences of Disparagement Humor: A Prejudiced Norm Theory,” *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 8, no. 1 (2004): 79–94.

¹⁰ Kristin J. Anderson, *Benign Bigotry: The Psychology of Subtle Prejudice* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

¹¹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, Division I, Book I, Section 54.

¹² James Beattie, “An Essay on Laughter and Ludicrous Composition,” in *Essays*, 3rd ed. (London: 1779), 320; quoted in John Morreall, *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor* (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 12.

shift,” or in layman’s terms, when a person expects one thing and instead finds a non-serious “something else” that does not quite fit.

As a more sophisticated and encompassing hypothesis, incongruity theory has shown considerable interpretive and staying power, and has all but replaced superiority theory as the dominant explanation of humor. This shift was occurring in earnest during the early nineteenth century, to the point that even some of the relevant definitions began to change. “Wit” began replacing “ridicule” to describe laughter’s aggressive side, and “humor” was seen as more sympathetic and benign. In Rod Martin’s words, “Wit was intellectual, sarcastic, and related to antipathy” (more akin to the aggression of superiority theory), while “humor was emotional, congenial, and related to ‘fellow-feeling’” (more at home in the less belligerent incongruity theory).¹³ The two also followed predictable social class distinctions, with the more intellectual “wit” associated with the barbed scorn of the elite, and the more democratic “humor” sounding in the belly laughs of the common folk (though both superiority and incongruity certainly existed at both levels). Early Mormonism earned its share of both types of laughter and from both levels of society, as most observers considered its religious claims “incongruous” with nineteenth-century sensibilities and “inferior” to existing social and religious norms.

In the early twentieth century, Sigmund Freud similarly distinguished between what he called “tendentious” and “non-tendentious” forms of humor, but rather than simply renaming the earlier division between superiority and incongruity, he characteristically connected the tendentious variety to the release of libidinal drives. “Humor has in it a liberating element,” Freud argued, a release of tension that has earned

¹³ Martin, *Psychology of Humor*, 23.

this school of thought the title “relief theory.”¹⁴ Or as Beaumarchais famously said, “I laugh so that I may not cry.”¹⁵ In some instances, this “comic relief” figures as a benign inversion of superiority theory, “not so much a glorifying of the self,” as Norman Holland observed, “as a minimizing of the distresses menacing the self.”¹⁶ But it is not solely individual pressure that is given vent in laughter; social steam escapes as well. Thus historian Leonard Arrington could describe humor as “a social event,” one which acts as “a barometer of the internal and external pressures of a social group, and as a relief valve for those pressures.” Before such tensions erupt in more earnest demonstrations, humor allows “inner fears and frustrations to surface in a socially acceptable manner,” one that allows the historian to use humor as a window to society’s soul.¹⁷ Early Mormonism added considerable pressure to an already tense social scene, especially as its exclusivist truth claims became more widespread and its membership grew in size and status. Persecution became the most well-documented vent for these apprehensions, but humor directed at the Mormons helped to serve the same ends.

A fourth view is that of “play theory,” which sees in laughter the intellectual equivalent of physical, even animalistic, play. Not intended to account for all instances of humor, it more correctly serves as an overlay to the other theories described previously, emphasizing humor’s social effect as it functions within relationships. As Rod Martin has observed, all forms of joking “seem to serve an important function of regulating social

¹⁴ Quoted in Martin, *Psychology of Humor*, 35.

¹⁵ Quoted in Maurice Charney, ed., *Comedy: A Geographic and Historical Guide* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2005), 2:395.

¹⁶ Norman Norwood Holland, *Laughing: A Psychology of Humor* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982), 45.

¹⁷ Leonard J. Arrington, “The Many Uses of Humor,” *Journal of Mormon History* 34, no. 3 (2008): 4, 7.

interactions and maintaining social harmony and stability.”¹⁸ Humor helps define group identity and advance social cohesion. The mere telling of a joke “involves the assumption of certain shared normative values,”¹⁹ and where those shared values do not exist, they are often pretended, as anyone who has laughed at a joke they did not “get” can attest. Humor even allows us to gauge others’ views and prejudices in a nonthreatening way, one that requires neither party to fully reveal their position.²⁰ Coupled with superiority theory, this verbal “play” helps establish dominance within hierarchies; paired with incongruity theory, it helps define what is socially or intellectually acceptable (or “congruous”); together with relief theory, it restores to a group under stress a sense of order and security; and in each case, it does so in a pleasurable way. As “play,” humor is the joust instead of the battle charge, the blank instead of the bullet, but its targets and intentions may be no less real. Especially “in a land without intellectual or moral authorities,” to borrow the words of David Brion Davis, where “the only arbiter was public opinion,” a playful popular humor could be marshaled to impressive effect.

Superiority, incongruity, relief, and play. Though phenomenologically humor has been frustratingly resistant to simple taxonomies, and though additional models have been suggested *ad infinitum*,²¹ these four theories (especially the first three), are arguably the most compelling, and for the purposes of this study, the most constructive. None fully accounts for laughter in all of its forms, and each has found its detractors, but together,

¹⁸ Martin, *Psychology of Humor*, 116.

¹⁹ David Nokes, *Raillery and Rage: A Study of Eighteenth Century Satire* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1987), 18.

²⁰ Martin, *Psychology of Humor*, 117–22.

²¹ Jon E. Roedeklein lists over 70 theories of humor in an appendix to his *Elsevier’s Dictionary of Psychological Theories* (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2006), 658–59.

these overlapping explanations offer excellent avenues for analysis. Far from being mutually exclusive, even a simple joke can resonate at multiple frequencies, making it less important to isolate individual classes of humor and more useful to recognize the various motives and objectives behind one's use of humor and the various reasons for and consequences of its comic effect.

Such is the goal of the present study—not simply to classify the humor directed at the Book of Mormon in its earliest years, but to analyze the purposes and effects of that humor. In a way, this exploration partakes of the recent scholarship of Terryl Givens, Spencer Fluhman, Susan Juster, and David Holland, and hopefully extends it in a meaningful way. Givens provides a ground-breaking analysis of the Book of Mormon, including an early reception history of the book, as well as a separate study of anti-Mormon fiction in the mid- to late-nineteenth century.²² Spencer Fluhman analyzes antebellum America through the lens of anti-Mormon literature, using it to uncover “the tacit assumptions grounding anti-Mormon arguments.”²³ Susan Juster uncovers the world of early Anglo-American popular prophecy, especially as it was both advanced and attacked in the popular press.²⁴ And David Holland chronicles the “border wars” that occurred in early America whenever canonical boundaries were threatened, showing the stakes each side had in the conflict and the larger issues that were also in play.²⁵ In

²² Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon*; Givens, *Viper on the Hearth*.

²³ J. Spencer Fluhman, “Anti-Mormonism and the Making of Religion in Antebellum America” (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin–Madison, 2006), 5. Fluhman’s dissertation is about to be published as *‘A Peculiar People’: Anti-Mormonism and the Making of Religion in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

²⁴ Susan Juster, *Doomsayers: Anglo-American Prophecy in the Age of Revolution* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003).

²⁵ David F. Holland, *Sacred Borders: Continuing Revelation and Canonical Restraint in Early America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

concert with these influential monographs, the present study will play harmonious notes on a narrower range of keys. As with Givens' work, the Book of Mormon will be the focus, but principally through reader rejection rather than reader reception, and mostly in non-fiction newspapers and books rather than fictional novels. As with Fluhman's study, Mormonism will be a lens to larger issues in America, but for much of the material "anti-Mormon" may be too strong a term to employ. Like Juster and Holland, I will treat the conflict of prophecy confronting canon, but will limit myself to a single rhetorical battlefield. Like each of these scholars, I am interested in the ways that early Americans understood their world, but specifically, I want to watch them laugh. From sarcastic sermons to parodies in the press, from low-blow name-calling to high-brow repartee, I hope to show the wise-cracking underbelly of America as it trained its comic sights on a book at the center of a fledgling faith. And more importantly, I hope to show how this rhetoric of ridicule reveals a befuddled young nation nervously laughing at itself.

CHAPTER III

“MUCH SPECULATION”: FIRST IMPRESSIONS OF THE BOOK OF MORMON

On June 26, 1829, a small town New York newspaper, Palmyra’s *Wayne Sentinel*, first printed a piece of local gossip that “for some time past” had been stirring up “much speculation”: the “pretended discovery, through superhuman means, of an ancient record.”¹ The article gave a sneak peek of the book’s intended title page “as a curiosity,” but perhaps the report’s most revealing line was the following: “Most people entertain an idea that the whole matter is the result of a gross imposition and a grosser superstition.” In this one sentence, printed exactly nine months before the Book of Mormon actually emerged from the press, we find a constellation of elements that scores of later writers would reconfigure in language that evidenced varying degrees of hostility and often humor: public opinion (“most people”), vague impressions (“entertain an idea”), scheming pretenders (“gross imposition”) and gullible dupes (“grosser superstition”). And at the confluence of these elements, a yet to be published book that, according to this article, had already become “generally known and spoken of as the ‘*Golden Bible*.’”²

On the whole, this spare account is neither comical nor contentious. It qualifies neither as “humor” nor as “anti-Mormon,” and not merely because an identifiable “Mormonism” did not yet exist to oppose. To the contrary, the report admits that

¹ *Wayne Sentinel* (Palmyra, NY), 26 June 1829.

² *Wayne Sentinel* (Palmyra, NY), 26 June 1829. Almost without exception, the nineteenth-century publications quoted in this paper can be found in a Brigham Young University digital collection available online at <http://lib.byu.edu/digital/bompublications/>. An online collection of transcribed newspaper reports related to early Mormonism can be found at <http://www.sidneyrigdon.com/dbroadhu/artindex.htm>.

“speculation” about what would become Mormonism had existed for some time—Smith himself stated that he had known about the record since 1823 and had finally obtained it in 1827—and must have been based on at least enough information, judging by its nickname, to hint at its religious nature (“Bible”) and its purported worth (“Golden”). The *Sentinel* was undeniably skeptical, but saw no real cause for concern. As it said of the book’s title page, so it seemed to consider the volume supposedly to follow—a mere “curiosity” and nothing else.³

But as any humorist can attest, curiosities, especially those that capture the cultural imagination, have great comic potential, and the story of the “Golden Bible” was quickly recognized as having this type of humorous appeal. Less than a month after the *Wayne Sentinel* published its initial notice, the “Golden Bible” appeared in a periodical dedicated to gossip and social satire: *Paul Pry’s Weekly Bulletin*, published in Rochester from 1828 to 1829.⁴ Named after a theatrical farce popular in London and New York only a few years earlier, Rochester’s *Paul Pry* was meant to reflect its namesake’s mischievous curiosity (hence his last name), poking fun at the notable goings-on that were garnering

³ For a historical account of Joseph Smith during these years, and of the translation and publication of the Book of Mormon, see Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith, Rough Stone Rolling: A Cultural Biography of Mormonism’s Founder* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 41–108.

⁴ The editorship of Rochester’s *Paul Pry* (as it was known in 1828) and *Paul Pry’s Weekly Bulletin* (as it was known in 1829), is difficult to establish. Louis Midgley links it to Anne Newport Royall, one of the earliest female newspaper editors in the country, who may have relocated the paper to Washington, D.C. where *Paul Pry* was published from 1831 to 1836 (then renamed *The Huntress* and published until 1854). Louis Midgley, “Prying into Palmer,” *FARMS Review* 15, no. 2 (2003): 365–410. However, Cynthia Earman, “An Uncommon Scold: Treasure-Talk Describes Life of Anne Royall,” *The Library of Congress Information Bulletin*, January 2000, places Royall in Washington, D.C. in late July 1829 (answering a legal charge, no less, of being “a common scold and disturber of the peace,” for which she was found guilty). Royall may have had someone else edit the Rochester paper for a time before moving the operation to Washington; then again, the Library of Congress lists newspapers entitled *Paul Pry* being published during the 1830s and 1840s in New York City, Philadelphia, Montrose (Pennsylvania), and Richmond (see www.chroniclingamerica.loc.gov). It was evidently a common name for tabloid-type newspapers, leaving the Rochester paper’s authorship unclear.

public attention.⁵ It was an ideal venue for an unnamed “Chronicler” to publish a few satirical chapters that, based on their title, reportedly came “From the Golden Bible.” Published in July and August of 1829, these “chronicles” beat even the Palmyra printers to the punch (the typesetting for the Book of Mormon did not begin until August 1829), so *Paul Pry* had no specific content upon which to base its burlesque. However, if the details *in* the Book of Mormon were not yet known, enough information *about* it had traveled the twenty-five miles from Palmyra to Rochester to allow an enterprising editor to use it as a backdrop for framing other news—“*all* [of which] things,” the paper promised, “yea many more, are graven on the massy leaves of the Golden Book, and are now in the custody of *Joseph* the prophet.”⁶

The chronicles expose—in mock biblical language—a group of characters that included “Horace the Publican,” “Israel the Darkey Paramour,” “Wanton the Physician,” “Chad the Money-Lender,” and “Samuel the Miser,” presumably representations of real individuals *Paul Pry* intended to lampoon. Whether or not “Joseph the dealer in fine linens” and “Hiram the Jeromite” referred specifically to Joseph Smith and his brother Hyrum cannot be conclusively established, but either way, claiming that the mock exposé had come from the “Golden Bible” took advantage of the book’s earlier description in the *Sentinel*—the biblical language, the revelation of unknown information, the appeal to

⁵ Paul Pry, as a comic character, had impressive cultural staying power. Several songs about “Poor Paul Pry” appeared in *The Universal Songster; or, Museum of Mirth: Forming the Most Complete, Extensive, and Valuable Collection of Ancient and Modern Songs in the English Language*, vol. 3 (London: John Fairburn, 1826), 97, 300–01, 433, and his character was still appearing in the British comic periodical *Punch* as late as 1883. See Julie Codell, “Imperial Difference and Culture Clashes in Victorian Periodicals’ Visuals: The Case of ‘Punch,’” *Victorian Periodicals Review* 39, no. 4 (Winter 2006): 416, 420. [410–28]. For a fascinating late-twentieth century reappropriation of the character by an anti-Mormon writer (writing under the pseudonym “Paul Pry Jr.”), see Midgley, “Prying into Palmer.”

⁶ Chronicler, “From the Golden Bible,” *Paul Pry’s Weekly Bulletin* (Rochester) 1, no. 12 (25 July 1829): 1–2; 1, no. 14 (8 August 1829): 1; 1, no. 16 (29 August 1829): n.p.

“curiosity” (Paul Pry’s signature attribute)—and reworked it in an intentionally satirical piece. Plus, the *Sentinel’s* insinuation of “imposition” behind the Golden Bible would have underscored *Paul Pry’s* scornful dismissal of those it accused of “cunning and deceit” and “double dealings,” placing its targets in the company of such pretenders as Joseph and Hyrum Smith seemed to be. Indeed, at the end of one of the chronicles, the unrepentant are warned that they would “be delivered over to the folly of Smith, and with his exhortations be tormented day and night forever”—implying that their punishment would fit their crime. That “folly” may even have been hinted at in an unrelated list of local impertinences, in which Pry asks “if the Fire Warden intends to make his everlasting eternal fortune out of the Gold Bible,” suggesting that the book may have been seen as a money-making venture, a concern that would surface repeatedly in the future.⁷

Couching local concerns in such imprecise allusions, *Paul Pry’s* rhetorical use of the Golden Bible leaves some questions unanswered, an unfortunate challenge with which all analysts of humor must contend. “Humor is,” after all, what one scholar called “crystallized ambiguity” that “cannot be read simply and straightforwardly.”⁸ Interpretive difficulty aside, however, the fact that the earliest repeated journalistic treatment of the Book of Mormon appeared in a comic framework should not go unnoticed. Furthermore, this framing does suggest several inferences regarding the public’s initial impression of the Book of Mormon. First, news of the Golden Bible was spreading from its epicenter in Palmyra even before the actual Book of Mormon appeared, and in Rochester that

⁷ Castigator, “For *Paul Pray’s Weekly Bulletin* [from Palmyra],” *Paul Pry’s Weekly Bulletin* 1, no. 14 (8 August 1829): 1.

⁸ Elliott Oring, review of *Rebellious Laughter: People’s Humor in American Culture*, by Joseph Boskin, *Journal of Folklore Research* 36, no. 1 (January–April 1999), 106.

knowledge was deemed sufficiently widespread as to be assumed common knowledge. After all, *Paul Pry* never explains the Golden Bible; it only pretends to be prying into its contents. In other words, the Golden Bible had already achieved enough cultural currency, at least on the regional level, to be merely alluded to, as if it were already part of a well-known joke. Secondly, “joke” may be the operative term, as the Golden Bible story was thought a perfect fit for the mocking tone of *Paul Pry*. Whether Joseph Smith was that joke, as when his “folly” was mentioned, or whether Smith was *playing* a joke on others, as a trickster seeking his “fortune,” the Golden Bible was considered nothing more than imaginative fiction. And that fiction—a third inference—was deemed potentially profitable, either to Smith himself or, as *Paul Pry*’s editor must have hoped, to creative minds able to capitalize on the curiosity surrounding Smith’s story.

Of course, comic creativity was not the only way to frame the story of the Book of Mormon when the news first started to spread. As with the treatment of any other news item, journalistic tone depended largely on the nature of the newspaper and the personality of the editor that gave it its voice, a voice that could be serious or droll, detached or more clearly opinionated. A prime example of this divergence in tone came in late August and early September 1829—still more than six months before the Book of Mormon actually appeared—when a pair of Rochester papers picked up an article on the Golden Bible that had appeared in the short-lived *Palmyra Freeman* a few weeks earlier.⁹ The *Gem*’s report was much more evenhanded than that of the more sensational *Advertiser and Daily Telegraph*, which added insinuation, innuendo, and a surplus of

⁹ “Golden Bible,” *Rochester Daily Advertiser and Telegraph*, 31 August 1829; “Golden Bible,” *The Gem, of Literature and Science* (Rochester), 5 September 1829; quoting article from the *Palmyra Freeman*, 11 August 1829.

exclamation points. When the accounts are compared side by side, their common source becomes obvious, as does their divergent tone:

<p>“Golden Bible,” <i>The (Rochester) Gem, of Literature and Science,</i> 5 September 1829.</p>	<p>“Golden Bible,” <i>Rochester Daily Advertiser and Telegraph,</i> 31 August 1829.</p>
<p>“. . . he proceeded to the spot, removed earth, and there found the bible, together with a large pair of spectacles.”</p>	<p>“. . . he proceeded to the spot, and after penetrating ‘mother earth’ a short distance, the Bible was found, together with a huge pair of spectacles!”</p>
<p>“He had also been directed to let no mortal see them under the penalty of immediate death, which injunction he adheres to.”</p>	<p>“He had been directed, however, not to let any mortal being examine them, ‘under no less penalty’ than instant death! They were therefore nicely wrapped up and excluded from the ‘vulgar gaze of poor wicked mortals!’”</p>
<p>“The treasure consisted of a number of gold plates, about 8 inches long, 6 wide, and one eighth of an inch thick, on which were engraved hieroglyphics. By placing the spectacles in a hat and looking into it, Smith interprets the characters into the English language.”</p>	<p>“It was said that the <i>leaves</i> of the bible were <i>plates</i> of gold about 8 inches long, 6 wide, and one eighth of an inch thick, on which were engraved characters of hieroglyphics [<i>sic</i>]. By placing the spectacles in a hat, and looking into it, Smith could (he said so, at least,) interpret these characters.”</p>

The more serious, restrained tenor of the *Gem* was likely due to its audience, it being a journal of literature and science, whereas the *Advertiser* was a common daily. In fact, the *Gem* printed its report in a section entitled “Scientifical,” right after the description of another “curious manuscript volume” which had been acquired by a library in Philadelphia (an illuminated manuscript of biblical and liturgical texts possibly dating from the 14th century). Both books had the potential of being significant “scientific” discoveries, and the *Gem* was withholding judgment on the Gold Bible until it would “ere long [come] before the public,” at which time the *Gem*’s editor would “endeavor to meet it with the comment it may deserve.” Coincidentally, one of the “Maxims” printed on the

same page warned, “Small talk sometimes seems great to small people,” and the *Gem* seemed to be taking its own advice, refusing either to sensationalize or to scoff at the Gold Bible’s preliminary reports. Casting aspersions at less restrained voices like the *Advertiser* and its presumed audience, the *Gem* simply noted, “The subject attracts a good deal of notice among a certain class.”¹⁰

Meanwhile the *Advertiser* seemed to be aiming precisely for that class—the less well-educated reader for whom charged language and mocking humor would have been a welcome journalistic device. As we shall see, early treatments of the Book of Mormon were disproportionately made to cater to that popular taste, partly due to a subject that seemed to call for that type of treatment, but also to meet the demands of the market. At the level of the “popular press” especially, competition required some degree of differentiation, and an editor’s sharp wit would have contributed to his paper’s survival.¹¹ The greater ease and lower cost of printing in the early nineteenth-century had glutted the market with an explosion of publications, and newspapers were popping up—and often fizzling out—almost overnight. Over half a dozen imprints would come and go in Palmyra during the 1820s and 30s alone, making popular appeal a matter of economic survival.¹² Abner Cole, a Palmyra publisher we will meet shortly, knew this going into

¹⁰ “Golden Bible,” *The Gem, of Literature and Science* (Rochester, NY) 1, no. 9 (5 September 1829): 70. See also “An Illuminated Manuscript” and “Maxims” on the same page.

¹¹ The *Rochester Advertiser* survived into the late 1850s; see <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov>.

¹² The *Palmyra Freeman* (1828–29), the *Palmyra Herald and Canal Advertiser* (1822–23), the *Palmyra Register* (1817–21), the *Reflector* (1828–31), the *Spectator and Anti-Masonic Star* (1831–31), the *Wayne Sentinel* (1823–?), the *Western Farmer* (1821–22), and the *Western Spectator & Wayne Advertiser* (1830–31); http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/titles/places/new_york/wayne/palmyra/.

the business, comparing in his first issue the “multiplication of books and newspapers” to the “fecundity of the insect tribe.”¹³

In the face of cutthroat competition, aggressive humor and light-hearted abuse seemed a winning combination, and they characterized much of the popular press in the mid nineteenth century, as editors alternated their aim between the funny bone and the jugular. If Ben Franklin had stretched the truth to undercut the circulation of a competitor a few generations earlier, standards had only deteriorated since then, and by the time Mormonism captured the imagination, comedy and contention—as opposed to decorum and objectivity—were par for the course. The antebellum period of publishing was “emphatically the Age of Fun,” as one contemporary described it. “Everybody deals in jokes, and all wisdom is inculcated in a paraphrase of humor.”¹⁴ Additionally, within a few decades it would be “a very general opinion in the journalistic profession (if profession it could be called) that caustic personalities were necessary in order to give spirit to a journal and keep up its circulation. They were a convention of the art.”¹⁵

Terryl Givens describes the period as a time when “new mediums, subjects, and audiences outstripped the containment and organization of public discourse,” leaving the popular press a place of “unpoliced rhetorical violence.”¹⁶ In some ways, the antebellum popular press was almost a lawless literary frontier, where a form of journalistic

¹³ *The Reflector* (Palmyra, NY) 1, no. 1 (2 September 1829), 1.

¹⁴ *Knickerbocker* 28 (August 1846): 181; quoted in Frank Luther Mott, *A History of American Magazines, 1741–1850* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1938; reprint 1966), 424. Mott observed that during the period from 1825 to 1850, “Humor [was] far more prominent in American periodical literature . . . than it had ever been before.”

¹⁵ Frank Luther Mott, *A History of American Magazines, vol. 3, 1865–1885* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1938; reprint, 1966), 64.

¹⁶ Givens, *Viper on the Hearth*, 108.

vigilantism, not unlike other forms of frontier justice, “worked to strengthen . . . the existing norms and values of society.”¹⁷ Though more unobtrusive than mobs, a writer’s sharp wit could provide enough intimidation in print to “compel acquiescence from weak or unpopular minorities, or to punish them for their beliefs or their behavior.”¹⁸

Appearing at the confluence of these trends—midway between the cleverness of Franklin’s *Poor Richard* and the quick-wit of Clemens’s *Mark Twain*—Mormonism and its foundational scripture captivated the press at a time in which aggressive humor and comic abuse seemed the order of the day. And just as the *Book of Mormon* was being typeset in E. B. Grandin’s Palmyra print shop, an editor cut from comic cloth began publishing his own newspaper on the same Palmyra press.

¹⁷ Patrick Q. Mason, *The Mormon Menace: Violence and Anti-Mormonism in the Postbellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 6.

¹⁸ Michael Feldberg, *The Turbulent Era: Riot and Disorder in Jacksonian America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 90 – 91; quoted in Mason, *Mormon Menace*, 8.

CHAPTER IV

ABNER COLE AND THE PALMYRA *REFLECTOR*

No writer was better situated to chronicle the coming forth of the Book of Mormon than Abner Cole, a former justice of the peace who edited the weekly Palmyra *Reflector* under the pseudonym Obadiah Dogberry, Esq. In Cole's *Reflector*, we see the ideal combination for the present study—the right place (because he used the same press that was printing the Book of Mormon he had access to the proofs before they were bound), the right time (the *Reflector* ran from 1828 to 1831, the years most germane to the printing of the Mormon scripture), and the right personality, for Cole had both a quick wit and a quick temper and a flair for sarcastic reporting.¹ Over the course of eighteen months, from September 2, 1829 to March 19, 1831, over 40 articles appeared in the *Reflector* that at least mentioned the Book of Mormon or Joseph Smith—seventeen of which were printed even before the Book of Mormon was published at the end of March, 1830. In fact, just under 50% of the first 90 newspaper accounts to touch upon the Book of Mormon came from the pen of Abner Cole, making him, as other scholars have observed, the most significant early shaper of public opinion regarding the Book of Mormon.² The fact that his began as a comic shaping is therefore particularly significant. In his reports, one sees not only America's first protracted treatment of Mormonism's

¹ Lucy Mack Smith, mother of the Mormon prophet, gave a secondhand account portraying Cole as hot tempered. See Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 81.

² See, for example, Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 120; Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon*, 94. For a brief (and incomplete) compilation of Cole's newspaper treatments of the Book of Mormon, see Russell R. Rich, "The Dogberry Papers and the Book of Mormon," *BYU Studies* 10, no. 3 (Spring 1970): 315–20.

foundational scripture, but an evolution of style that included the repeated use of humorous rhetoric. By following his train of thought over this year and a half, we can watch the Golden Bible take its place within the popular imagination. Cole's work therefore deserves a detailed examination.

It is worth clarifying from the start that Cole did not set out to become the nation's first anti-Mormon, and his earliest allusions to the Book of Mormon were more bemusement than invective. Though his tone shifted over time, at first he simply hoped, as he said in his paper's third issue, that by his efforts "some little may be added to the present rather scanty stock of knowledge, in too many of our otherwise respectable yeomanry." Like other republican citizens of his day, he gloried in America's wide diffusion of both literacy and literature, believing that "the very existence of our civil as well as religious liberties will ultimately depend on [just such] a general diffusion."³ "As to our religious creed, (if we have any)," he would later write, he was "willing to give publicity" to whatever opinions others held, "firmly believing that *error* is never dangerous when TRUTH is left free to combat it."⁴ Though Cole rhetorically framed what he considered "error" with a bit of his own opinion, it was only when "error" threatened the free exchange of "truth" that he considered it dangerous and aggressively attacked it as such. Thus it was with an attitude of undisturbed openness that he initially approached the story of the Book of Mormon, an attitude that he wished the alarmists—whom he jokingly called "old women of both sexes"—would have shared.⁵ In a January

³ "Our Own Affairs," *The Reflector* (Palmyra, NY) 1, no. 3 (16 September 1829): 1.

⁴ *Liberal Advocate* (Rochester, NY) 3, no. 16 (6 April 1834): 124.

⁵ Palmyra indeed seemed to be full of alarmists, many of whom banded together in an agreement to boycott the Book of Mormon once it went on sale. As a result, lamented a Mormon itinerant, "The Books will not sell for no Body wants them." See Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 81–82.

1830 report, for example, as he waited for the book's printing to be completed, Cole expressed surprise that any of his readers, who were "probably quite as ignorant on the subject [of the Book of Mormon] as we are, should give themselves *quite* so much uneasiness about matters that so little concern them." Based on the volume's first chapter, which Cole had pirated and illegally printed on the front page of that issue (a practice he would continue until Smith threatened him with legal action), the book contained nothing "treasonable, or which will have a tendency to subvert our liberties." It was hardly a cause for concern—at least not in the areas that mattered most to Cole. "As to its religious character," the report added, "we have as yet no means of determining, and if we had, we should be quite loth [*sic*] to meddle with the *tender* consciences of our neighbors."⁶

In short, in Cole's mind the news surrounding Joseph Smith was nothing to lose sleep over—not important enough to offend either religious or democratic sensibilities. The stories behind the book (and the first peek within) appeared harmless enough, and therefore, whether to satisfy the public's growing curiosity or to poke fun at what seemed the patent absurdity of the tale, discussing the volume in print seemed to Cole an innocent diversion as well. If anything, even as Cole's reports on the Book of Mormon grew more caustic, they seem less motivated by bigotry against Mormonism in particular than by concern over religious extremism and exclusivism in general.⁷ After all, his was a "freethought" newspaper, one of a growing number of humanist imprints that flourished

⁶ "Gold Bible," *The Reflector* (Palmyra, NY) new series, no. 2 (2 January 1830): 13.

⁷ When Cole relocated to Rochester in 1832 he was no more respectful of revivalist Charles G. Finney than he had been of Joseph Smith. See Joseph W. Barnes, "Obediah Dogberry: Rochester Freethinker," *Rochester History* 36, no. 3 (July 1974): 1–24. In an article in his later *Liberal Advocate*, representative of his openly skeptical tone, religion is defined as "any thing the wild phantoms of a distempered brain hapens [*sic*] to conceive; . . . [It is] used by designing men to get from the people their *living*; . . . and have not Priests in all countries got their bread by teaching something they do not understand? and it makes no difference what it is. The people will believe it is true." "Communications," *Liberal Advocate* (Rochester) 4, no. 3 (7 June 1834): 20.

in America between 1825 and 1850.⁸ In opposition to the growing emotionalism and sectarianism of the Second Great Awakening, it was dedicated to the kind of secular humanism evidenced by the epigram from Alexander Pope that graced the paper's masthead: "Know then thyself, presume not God to scan! / The proper study of mankind is MAN."

Cole's paper should therefore be considered anti-fanatical rather than anti-Mormon, and his tone was typically jocular rather than incensed. "Every thing in this world, is big with jest,—and has wit and instruction too, if we can but find it out," one article quipped, adding, by way of illustration, "we only require JO SMITH'S Magic Spectacles, or some other powerful optical instrument to turn them to our own advantage."⁹ And turn them to advantage he did. As the example just mentioned suggests, Cole found humor in Smith's story and used that humor to enliven the other news he was reporting. By his own admission, Cole "intend[ed] to give in each paper a portion of *light* reading" as an "attempt to provoke the laughing deity,"¹⁰ and in this the Gold Bible story was truly a godsend (pun intended). Most of the first brief mentions of the yet-to-be-published volume appeared among other "Selected Items" meant to entertain as much as inform—humorous reports of tardy fire fighters, jokes about dishonest lawyers, and cheeky descriptions of wildly dressed "Dandies." In the Gold Bible's case, Cole began by simply attaching fanciful remarks to the one-sentence reports of its pending publication: "Great and marvellous [*sic*] things will 'come to pass,'"¹¹ or "Priestcraft is short lived."¹²

⁸ Albert Post, *Popular Freethought in America, 1825–1850* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1943), 11–74.

⁹ *The Reflector* (Palmyra, NY) 3d series, no. 14 (28 August 1830): 108–09.

¹⁰ "Our Own Affairs," *The Reflector* (Palmyra, NY) 1, no. 3 (16 September 1829): 1.

¹¹ *The Reflector* (Palmyra, NY) 1, no. 3 (16 September 1829): 10.

¹² *The Reflector* (Palmyra, NY) 1, no. 1 (2 September 1829): 2.

Within weeks the Gold Bible became almost a stock image within the *Reflector's* pages, appearing in nine separate “items” in the first six issues alone. Cole wrote of the “Gold Bible Apostles” and warned in mock dismay that “the Anti-Masons have declared war against the Gold Bible.—Oh! how impious.”¹³ He described a sixteen century sect that claimed “celestial visions” and “divine illumination” and asked, “How does this *tally* with the pretensions of Jo Smith Jr. and his followers—ha?”¹⁴ Even in an article that had nothing to do with the Mormon scripture, he questioned a news source used by a rival editor by asking, “Has he been permitted to examine the hidden mysteries of ‘the Book of Mormon?’”¹⁵ Like *Paul Pry* before him, Cole saw the story’s potential for guilt-by-association jibes, not just as a direct subject of jest; moreover, as a still-unpublished record promising hidden truths, the Gold Bible could potentially contain anything, and Cole was happy to supply fanciful possibilities. As if to play along with Smith’s millenarian aspirations, Cole laughingly referred to his own paper as the “New-Jerusalem Reflector,” and promised that “the TEMPLE OF NEPHI” (the first character mentioned in the Book of Mormon) was about to be built. “Thousands are already flocking to the standard of Joseph the Prophet. The Book of Mormon is expected to astonish the natives!!”¹⁶

As time went on and Cole witnessed the printing of the Book of Mormon progress, his humor began to aim at the book’s contents more directly, even after threats

¹³ *The Reflector* (Palmyra, NY) 1, no. 4 (23 September 1829): 14.

¹⁴ “An Extract,” *The Reflector* (Palmyra, NY) 1, no. 5 (30 September 1829): 18. A similar entry comparing another “new religious sect” to “the followers of ‘JO SMITH JUNIOR’” appeared in *The Reflector* 3, no. 9 (1 January 1831): 69.

¹⁵ *The Reflector* (Palmyra, NY) 1, no. 5 (30 September 1829): 17.

¹⁶ *The Reflector* (Palmyra, NY) 1, no. 6 (7 October 1829): 22.

of legal action forced him to stop printing pirated excerpts after only three installments.¹⁷ In a February 1830 article, Cole compared the challenge of “translating our foreign correspondence” (feigning the far-reaching circulation of his small-town newspaper) to the work of “the inspired man who wrote the ‘Gold Bible’ on ‘plates of brass,’ in the ‘reformed Egyptian’ language.” He then pointed out the absurdities of spelling and punctuation in his foreign manuscripts, but in such a way that the Book of Mormon seems to be the real target of his joke. He finally laments—in mock dismay—that were it not for his pledge to “drag the deeds of darkness to the light of day,” he would much rather write either a history of “the captivity, dispersion, trials, hardships, sufferings, and final restoration of the ten lost tribes of Israel” (another dig at the Book of Mormon), or, as an equal (im)possibility, “the works of a celebrated Chinese philosopher, whose life we have a great itching also to write.”¹⁸ The same week that the completed Book of Mormon was first offered for sale, Cole printed another anonymous letter to the editor that again took a jab at the volume. The secret to a successful paper, it suggested, was to “give it a *cast* of originality,” by writing it “in imitation of the *translators* of the Book of Mormon, or the ‘Gold Bible.’” All that this entailed, the letter continued, was to take a story set in “France, Italy, or the holy land, (this will be more interesting to the unlearned reader,) cut off the head and *tail* of it, alter the names, and commence from the bottom of the page to copy upwards.”¹⁹ Such was this writer’s sardonic estimation of the book finally for sale in Palmyra.

¹⁷ Those excerpts (from 1 Nephi 1, 1 Nephi 2, and Alma 43), appeared in the *Reflector* issues of 2 January 1830, 13 January 1830, and 22 January 1830, respectively.

¹⁸ “Diabolical,” *The Reflector* (Palmyra, NY) new series, no. 8 (27 February 1830): 66–67.

¹⁹ Newsmonger, letter to the editor, *The Reflector* (Palmyra, NY) new series, no. 13 (30 March 1830): 106–07.

As the public slowly became more familiar with the contents of the Book of Mormon, Cole built off his earlier plagiarism and began writing parody instead, publishing a chapter from what he called “The Book of Pukei.” He had earlier created a satirical “Chapter of Ontario Chronicles” that was set “in the days of *J****h the Prophet*” and mentioned “the Temple of Nephi,” but “Pukei” placed the Book of Mormon in the crosshairs much more directly.²⁰ Like *Paul Pry*’s parody, Cole’s used mock biblical language (as the Book of Mormon seemed to do), but now that the Book of Mormon was available in print, Cole could populate his story with elements taken directly from Smith’s own account: “reformed Egyptian,” “Nephites and . . . Lamanites,” “an angel,” and “the ‘Gold Bible,’ Spectacles, and breast plate.” In an even more obvious allusion, Cole described a magician of “ignorance” and “impudence” whose “mantle fell upon the prophet Jo. Smith Jun.,” enabling him to placate the “Idle and Slothful” by finding the place “where the Nephites hid their treasures.” That treasure, which included “a box of gold watches” together with the power to interpret “the gold Bible,” would allow Smith to “raise money” and make him “greater than all the ‘money-digging rabble.’”²¹ We will return to the subject of money-digging shortly, but it is again worth recognizing Cole’s essentially comic approach, a tactic he would employ in a pair of later scriptural parodies (of the Book of Daniel and the First Book of John) in which his stories were again set “during the reign of the prophet Joseph.”²² The Bible had been parodied

²⁰ “The Biter Bit—Or, Anti-Masonic Wit Outwitted,” *The Reflector* (Palmyra, NY) new series, no. 2 (2 January 1830).

²¹ “The Book of Pukei.—Chap. 1,” *The Reflector* (Palmyra, NY) 3d series, no. 5 (12 June 1830): 36–37, and “The Book of Pukei.—Chap. 2,” *The Reflector* (Palmyra, NY) 3d series, no. 8 (7 July 1830): 60.

²² Joppa, “Book of Daniel,” *The Reflector* (Palmyra, NY) 3d series, no. 10 (27 July 1830): 79; “The First Book of John,” *The Reflector* (Palmyra, NY) 3d series, no. 12 (14 August 1830): 94.

by American writers at least since the days of Benjamin Franklin,²³ but that the Book of Mormon was now being used as both source and target speaks to its increasing visibility in western New York, as well as its fictive role in the popular imagination. Recall that both William Owen and the unnamed critic of the Book of Mormon he found considered the book a parody on the Bible. Abner Cole was simply offering the Book of Mormon a few parodies of his own.

What readers thought of these parodies is difficult to determine, but some earlier evidence suggests that Cole's humorous treatment of the Book of Mormon seemed to be working almost too well, to the point that some people were not sure when to take him seriously. One contributor related an experience in which he noticed four or five respectable looking men who were discussing a recent article from the *Reflector* about the story of "The Devil and Doctor Faustus." "Never having (before) heard the story," the writer recalled, the men "at last came to the *sage* conclusion that 'it must be a hit at Jo Smith's *gold bible*.'" In other words, Cole's comic attacks on the Book of Mormon were by then so well-known among these readers that when they failed to understand an article, they assumed he was again poking fun at his usual target. This observer lamented that there were men "so profoundly ignorant that they could not discern a shade of difference" between classic literature and Cole's typical fare, which in his words consisted of "burlesque upon one of the most ridiculous attempts at imposture ever witnessed."²⁴ To this critic, the Book of Mormon ranked far below the classic works of

²³ See Prudence Steiner, "Benjamin Franklin's Biblical Hoaxes," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 131, no. 2 (June 1987): 183–96. For a discussion of other examples of "Biblical imitations" during the revolutionary period, see Holland, *Sacred Borders*, 69–73.

²⁴ "When Ignorance is Bliss 'Tis Folly to Be Wise," *The Reflector* (Palmyra, NY) 3d series, no. 1 (1 May 1830): 6.

fiction, but it unquestionably belonged in the same genre; Cole habitually treated the Gold Bible as a fictional absurdity, and others were intuitively quick to agree.

To this point of our story—the initial availability of the printed Book of Mormon—news of the Mormon scripture had existed primarily as rumors circulating around town, and Cole’s lighthearted reporting had more of laughter than alarm. His allusions and exaggerations played off of Palmyra’s most sensational local curiosity, and therefore made for good copy. Thus Cole can be excused for joking, still months before the book’s appearance, that “The ‘Gold Bible’ is fast gaining *credit*; the *rapid spread* of Islamism was no *touch* to it!”²⁵ In reality, Cole had every reason to promote the spread of what others would call “Gold Bible fever,” since his newspaper stood to benefit from a growing public interest, especially in the story’s early months when he almost had a monopoly on reporting the tale.²⁶ “To you, and you alone, do we look for an expose [*sic*] of the principal facts, and characters,” read a letter to the editor from “Plain Truth” in January 1831. “The [other] two papers published in your village, for reasons easily explained, decline at present, throwing any light on this subject.”²⁷ Though these reasons were never actually given, one of the explanations for the relative silence of Palmyra’s other papers, the *Sentinel* and the *Spectator*, may have been their hesitation to draw attention to a book with which they were connected, especially if that book was generating more comic amusement than genuine interest, as Cole’s popular treatment seems to suggest. The *Sentinel* was published by Egbert Grandin, the man hired to print

²⁵ *The Reflector* (Palmyra, NY) 1, no. 5 (30 September 1829): 18.

²⁶ Of the first one hundred entries in Brigham Young University’s database of “19th Century Publications about the Book of Mormon (1829–1844),” which span chronologically from 26 June 1829 to 21 June 1831, forty-four come from the *Reflector*. By comparison, the *Wayne County Sentinel* only appears five times. The term “Gold Bible fever” appeared in the *Painesville* (Ohio) *Telegraph* on 29 March 1831.

²⁷ Plain Truth, letter to the editor, *The Reflector* (Palmyra, NY) 2, no. 10 (6 January 1831): 77.

the Book of Mormon, and the book's binding was done by Luther Howard, editor of the *Spectator*. Guaranteed a substantial sum from Smith and his associates, these newspapermen may have been loath to offend paying customers on one hand, but eager to avoid being seen as accomplices to an absurdity on the other; best, therefore, simply to stay quiet.²⁸ Cole, on the other hand, was happy to meet the market's demands. People were curious, competitors were quiet, and the Gold Bible accordingly went from brief interior mention to front-page news. "Much curiosity has been excited in this section of the country on the subject" of the Gold Bible, Cole noted, and his earlier decision to leak the book's opening pages only came "at the solicitation of many of our readers."²⁹ Cole may even have invented "Plain Truth" in order to have one more excuse to "solicit an exposure."³⁰ After all, in his response to Truth's letter (printed in the same issue), Cole admitted that he too had "long been waiting, with considerable anxiety, to see some of our cotemporaries attempt to explain . . . that anomaly in religion and literature, which

²⁸ Aside from an arms-length announcement that the Book of Mormon would soon be available and another scant notice once it was ready for sale (*Wayne Sentinel*, 19 March 1830 and 26 March 1830), the *Sentinel* remained largely silent regarding the Book of Mormon, a notable exception appearing on 1 January 1831. A few months later it reported the departure of a group of the book's believers, including the honorable Martin Harris (who had financed the publication) whose "delusion" it pitied (*Wayne Sentinel*, 27 May 1831), but the *Sentinel* contained only two other references to the Book of Mormon (in 1831 and 1833) before the Mormons were far enough removed in time and space that the paper could laugh about its "old neighbor Smith, the *money digger*, father of JOE, the great Mormon prophet" (*Wayne Sentinel*, 17 June 1836). (The other instances referred to appeared in the issues of 23 August 1831 and 20 December 1833.) As for Luther Howard (whose paper apparently never said a word about the Book of Mormon), his involvement seems to have gone almost completely unnoticed, except for a derisive allegation that he "*privately advocates the 'Gold Bible,'*" a claim which appeared in the *Palmyra Reflector*" (16 March 1830).

²⁹ "Gold Bible," *The Reflector* (Palmyra, NY) 1, no. 15 (9 December 1829): 57.

³⁰ I make this suggestion based on some of the language of the letter, which mirrors earlier wording from Cole himself. See, for example, "dire damnation" in Plain Truth's letter and in *The Reflector* (Palmyra, NY), 30 June 1830. The letter also exhibits the same preference for human reason, the same deference to "liberty of conscience," and the same underlying skepticism and anti-sectarianism which characterized Cole's other writings. Furthermore, "Truth" appeared as a source for some of Cole's articles in the *Liberal Advocate* once Cole relocated to Rochester.

has most strikingly excited the curiosity of our friends at a distance, generally known under the cognomen of the Book of Mormon, or the Gold Bible.”³¹

Granted, it is impossible to pinpoint exactly what caused the relative success of Cole’s *Reflector*; however, Cole’s humorous tone certainly helped make the news more appealing, and may in fact help account for his repeated treatment of the Book of Mormon when other journalists took far less notice of the subject at the time. As more of a humorist than his competitors, Cole was drawn to the Gold Bible story in ways others were not at first; he was at least more inclined to tap what he saw as the tale’s comic potential. “INSTRUCTION” may have been his “*chiefest* aim,” as he reminded readers in a February 1831 note, but his tone was always an “attempt to amuse, or please,”³² and in these attempts his characterizations of the Gold Bible proved both suitable and successful—Plain Truth lauded Cole’s ability to “relieve the dryness of the subject.”³³ A new subscriber to the Palmyra *Reflector*, responding to the first issue, wrote that he was “not as fond of *light* reading as many young people are,” but admitted its necessity in an age in which “foppery in learning as well as dress, has become quite the order of the day.”³⁴ Another early patron congratulated the editor for producing a paper that was “hunt for and read with avidity” by people “who scarce ever looked into a book or newspaper of the ordinary *cast*.” Even “if acquired in light articles,” the writer confessed, the habit of reading was well worth developing over “not read[ing] at all.”³⁵ As a

³¹ “Gold Bible [No. 1],” *The Reflector* (Palmyra, NY) 2, no. 10 (6 January 1831): 76.

³² *The Reflector* (Palmyra, NY) 2, no. 12 (1 February 1831): 92.

³³ Plain Truth, letter to the editor, *The Reflector* (Palmyra, NY) 2, no. 10 (6 January 1831): 77.

³⁴ *The Reflector* (Palmyra, NY) 1, no. 3 (16 September 1829): 10.

³⁵ *The Reflector* (Palmyra, NY) 1, no 4 (23 September 1829): 14.

freethinking newsman with a comic bent, Cole found in the Gold Bible a message to match the man.

More Serious “Reflections”

Of course, not everyone agreed with Cole’s style of comic reporting, especially when it meant surrendering a competitive advantage. The *Countryman*, published in Lyons, New York, less than fifteen miles away, admitted that the *Reflector* was “well known in this quarter,” but branded it “a sarcastical, obscene little paper,” presumably on account of its fault-finding content and mocking tone. The *Countryman* lumped it with the *Sentinel* as being “filled weekly with a tirade of abuse and insult,” all while the editors remained safely hidden beneath a cloak of anonymity (recall that Abner Cole wrote under a pseudonym). Most damaging of all in the *Countryman*’s eyes, the same press that issued both papers, owned by the *Sentinel*’s Egbert Grandin, had published “the infamous, catch-penny work, entitled the ‘Book of Mormon,’ or, as it is generally called, the ‘Golden Bible,’” an offense that “years of penance would not wipe away.”³⁶ In contrast to the *Reflector*’s assumed association with the Book of Mormon, the *Countryman* would have nothing to do with the presumed hoax. In the *Countryman*’s eyes, the Book of Mormon, and, by implication, the *Reflector* and the *Sentinel*, were mere “catch-pennies,” a term defined at the time as “something worthless, particularly a book or pamphlet, adapted to the popular taste, and intended to gain money in market.”³⁷ At a

³⁶ *The Countryman* (Lyons, NY), 7 September 1830.

³⁷ *Noah Webster’s 1828 American Dictionary Online*, s.v. “catchpenny,” accessed 12 June 2012, www.1828-dictionary.com.

time when lines dividing “high-brow” and “low-brow” were being drawn politically (Jacksonian populism) and religiously (Second Great Awakening revivalism), they were appearing literarily as well, separating “serious” journalism intended for the educated from light-minded gossip meant for the masses. How fitting, the *Countryman* seems to suggest, that a catch-penny paper would report on a catch-penny Gold Bible, and that both would roll off the same catch-penny press. According to the high-minded *Countryman*, neither work was anything more than money-making drivel.

The *Countryman* was not alone in believing that serious news deserved to be treated seriously, but up that point, the Gold Bible story did not seem to qualify. Only after the Book of Mormon became available to the public did other news outlets begin reporting on Mormonism in earnest, and by then they had good reason. At 5,000 copies, the Book of Mormon was a massive print run for the time, and, indicative of Smith’s intentions for the book, within weeks of its publication the “Church of Jesus Christ” was officially organized and its first missionaries were sent forth, Book of Mormon in hand.³⁸ Even Cole’s *Reflector* took on a slightly more concerned tenor once the book began to attract adherents. In June 1830 he reported that an “*apostle* to the NEPHITES” had embarked with a “load of ‘gOLD bibles’” to be spread throughout “all the principal cities of the Union,”³⁹ and later reported on the mission’s results: an array of what Cole variously dubbed “Gold Bible Apostles,” “Gold Bible Witnesses,” and “Gold Bible converts.”⁴⁰

³⁸ The size of the print run is especially massive considering the fact that by midsummer 1830 there were only about 50 baptized members of the Church. That Smith would print enough copies of the Book of Mormon to accommodate roughly a 100-fold multiplication of believers is but one early evidence of his ambition to spread the Mormon scripture across the earth. For an accounting of membership during the first months of the church’s existence, see Joseph Smith, Jr., *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 7 vols., 2d ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1971), 1:76-77n.

³⁹ *The Reflector* (Palmyra, NY), 1 June 1830.

⁴⁰ See, for example, *The Reflector* of 22 June and 30 June 1830, and 1 February 1831.

What had brought laughter only months earlier seemed now to be finding belief—a cause of concern for any freethinker—but what truly offended Cole’s non-sectarian sensibilities was the exclusivism he detected in the missionaries’ message. Accusing the itinerants of “denouncing dire damnation” on those who opposed the Book of Mormon, Cole’s wit became more barbed than bubbly, and he thundered against “that *spindle shanked* ignoramus JO SMITH,” and the stories he was telling, which Cole branded “the most ridiculous impostures ever promulgated.”⁴¹ As a letter to the editor petitioned, “Please advise *hyrum* smith [Joseph’s brother], and some of his ill-bred associates, not to be quite so impertinent, when *decent* folks denounce the imposition of the ‘Gold-Bible.’ The anathemas of such ignorant wretches, although not feared, are not quite so well relished by some people.” The letter concluded with sarcasm reminiscent of Cole’s own writing: “Apostles should keep cool.”⁴²

Only after uncovering what he considered Mormonism’s intimidating exclusivism did Cole assume a truly adversarial role, and in the process, his typically lighthearted tone shifted to one of more determined opposition. Up to that point, he had been willing to treat Mormonism as a harmless absurdity, more deserving of humor than hostility, but as alluded to earlier, when he saw “error” impinging on “truth’s” ability to defend itself, he felt compelled to come out in open opposition. Freethinker to the core, Cole protested that he did not want to infringe upon anyone’s religious freedom, and assured his readers that he would have been willing to allow “even that gross and bungling imposition the ‘gold bible,’ [to] have passed unnoticed, . . . but when a cloak of religion . . . is made use of for the vilest of purposes, and where a pretended messenger of heaven principally [*sic*]

⁴¹ *The Reflector* (Palmyra, NY), 30 June 1830.

⁴² “Mr. Editor,” *The Reflector* (Palmyra, NY), new series, no. 16 (19 April 1830): 130.

exerts his influence, on the superstitious and ignorant, for the sole purpose of seducing them from the path of virtue, it is time the wretch was unmasked and his hideous form exhibited for the inspection of an indignant public.” Whether that unmasking came through parody, jest, or more somber invective, and whether it was aimed at the “pretended apostles” of Mormonism or Catholicism (which he also despised), he hoped that “no half literary poppinjay [*sic*] will accuse us of being inimical to the cause of virtue.”⁴³

From that point forward, Cole’s treatment of the Book of Mormon was mostly confined to a series of more serious articles offering what he called “a plain and unvarnished” history of the Gold Bible, covering everything from ancient superstitions to modern money-diggers, from the prophet “Mahomet” to “the Morrystown Ghost.” He even welcomed outside assistance—anyone able to offer any additional “interesting notices” would be rewarded with a copy of Cole’s paper, free of charge.⁴⁴ In the six “Gold Bible” installments that resulted, Cole focused largely on humanity’s lamentable propensity for “superstitious error and imposition,” the Smith family’s “ignorance and stupidity,” the folly of treasure seeking, and the absurdity of the book’s alleged existence.⁴⁵ But in terms of tone, Cole essentially replaced sarcasm with scorn. By the time the series ended in the spring of 1831, the Gold Bible believers had left New York for Ohio and Cole, as if in search of a new target, moved to Rochester to begin a new paper. Content that “‘Gold Bible’ stock [was] below par even in the state of Ohio,” and assured that the Mormon

⁴³ “The Marion Monk,” *The Reflector* (Palmyra, NY) 3d series, no. 16 (13 September 1830): 124–25. This article is specifically aimed more at Catholics, and it promised a future exposé of “monks [and their] female co-workers in lasciviousness (we mean the nuns).” However, as made clear by his included attack on the “gold bible,” he saw the two groups in the same light and denounced them with the same kind of language.

⁴⁴ “Gold Bible [No. 1],” *The Reflector* (Palmyra, NY) 2, no. 10 (6 January 1831): 76.

⁴⁵ These six articles appeared in *The Reflector* on 6 January, 18 January, 1 February, 14 February, 28 February, and 19 March 1831.

story was “pretty well understood in this vicinity,” Cole turned his attention and his wit to other concerns, confident that his rhetoric had yielded at least one desired effect.⁴⁶ If readers were “not *reformed*” by his piercing wit, he admitted in February 1831, at least they would “confess themselves instructed and amused.”⁴⁷ This was also the conclusion of Cole’s associate and competitor Egbert Grandin, who dedicated a few stanzas of a New Years Day poem to various men of his trade. Referring to Abner Cole by his well-known pseudonym, Grandin summarized the man’s journalistic objectives, common-man qualifications, and sharp-witted style:

*Now last, not least, my muse would name
Old Obadiah, (“) and his fame.
Eccentric quite,—and full of fun,—
Sad stories tells of wrong that’s done—
Flogs fop or fool where’er they’r found,
And single-handed stands his ground—
And with his pen discourses knowledge,
The same as tho’ he’d been to College.⁴⁸*

⁴⁶ “Mormonism,” *The Reflector* 2, no. 15 (9 March 1831): 117; “Gold Bible, No. 6,” *The Reflector* 2, no. 16 (19 March 1831): 127.

⁴⁷ *The Reflector* (Palmyra, NY) 2, no. 12 (1 February 1831): 92.

⁴⁸ *Wayne Sentinel* (Palmyra, NY), 1 January 1831.

CHAPTER V

“BAREFACED FABLING”: THE GOLD BIBLE AS (UN)POPULAR FICTION

After *Paul Pry*'s short-lived allusive parodies, Abner Cole produced the earliest and most sustained comic treatment of the Book of Mormon, but he was not alone in finding humor in the story. Granted, the tone of most reports was more serious and scornful—“fraud,” “blasphemy,” and “deception” were among the book’s most common characterizations¹—but occasionally a creative mind would approach the Book of Mormon with more of a crooked grin than an angry scowl. E. B. Grandin, who had printed the Book of Mormon, ventured two lines of his lighthearted New Years Day poem to the tale, starring former Campbellite preacher Sidney Rigdon, Mormonism’s most notable convert to date. “*Rigdon*, dipt in many waters,” the couplet read, “Preaches *Gold Bible* to the loafers,” a knock on what Grandin apparently considered a capricious Rigdon’s serial baptisms as well as the low-class laziness of Mormonism’s intended devotees.² Two weeks later an Ohio editor named Eber Howe (who would soon factor heavily in the history of Mormonism) facetiously called Smith’s New York hometown “the seat of wonders” and expressed mock reverence for the Mormons’ enviable “batch of revelations . . . which Moses had neglected to record.”³

Even after the Book of Mormon’s publication allowed the curious to examine its religious contents, it remained in many minds at best a work of imaginative fiction—a

¹ See, for example, “Blasphemy—‘Book of Mormon,’ alias THE GOLDEN BIBLE,” *Rochester Daily Advertiser*, 2 April 1830; “The Book of Mormon, or Golden Bible,” *Village Chronicle* (Dansville, NY), 27 April 1830; “The Golden Bible,” *Observer and Telegraph* (Hudson, OH), 18 November 1830.

² *Wayne Sentinel* (Palmyra, NY), 1 January 1831.

³ “Mormonism,” *Painesville (OH) Telegraph*, 18 January 1831.

“tale” according to a Buffalo newspaper, that “amused” the “credulous.”⁴ For example, an 1831 letter to the editor called it “a fiction of hobgoblins and bugbears,” and another report saw in it nothing but “silly stories.”⁵ An 1835 article called the book a “fable” and laughed at its “extravagant and monstrous fictions,” which “outdo the Arabian Night’s Entertainment, or the stories of Sinbad the Sailor.” It even teased about one of the wars of annihilation mentioned in the Book of Mormon, joking that not even the “Kilkenny cats” had “fought up tails and all!”⁶ Isaac Scarritt compared Smith’s story of gold plates to tales of “Captain Kidd’s money chests,” and a Methodist lecturer remarked that “Tom Thumb, Jack the Giant Killer, and Cock Robin, are gentlemen, when compared with this queer thing.”⁷ John Clark labeled it a “HISTORICAL ROMANCE” and a foreign commentator, calling it “a fabulous tale, a mere fiction,” “venture[d] to affirm, that a more wild, romantic tale, was never invented and published.”⁸ Even a Boston *Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* categorized the Book of Mormon as “a series of puerile eastern romance” with no “connexion [*sic*] of any sort with sober history,” and a London literary magazine essentially agreed, concluding that the book “belongs to literary history.”⁹ Such opinions were so widely and firmly held that over sixty years

⁴ “The New Bible,” *Buffalo Journal & General Advertiser*, 8 December 1830.

⁵ “Mr. Howe,” Letter to the Editor, *Painesville (OH) Telegraph*, 1 March 1831; *Evangelical Magazine and Gospel Advocate* (Utica, NY), new series 2, no. 6 (5 February 1831): 47.

⁶ “Mormonism,” *New York Weekly Messenger and Young Men’s Advocate*, 29 April 1835.

⁷ “Latter Day Saints,” Isaac Scarritt to Mr. H., 13 July 1835, *Western Christian Advocate* (Cincinnati) 2, no. 30 (20 November 1835): 120; H. Stevenson, *A Lecture on Mormonism* (Newcastle: J. Blackwell and Co., 1839), 3–32.

⁸ John A. Clark, “Gleanings by the Way, No. VIII,” *Episcopal Recorder* (Philadelphia), 26 September 1840; Samuel Haining, *Mormonism Weighed in the Balances of the Sanctuary, and Found Wanting: The Substance of Four Lectures* (Douglas, Isle of Man: Robert Fargher, 1840).

⁹ J. Newton Brown, *Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* (Boston: Shattuck & Company, 1835), s.v. “Mormonites.” “The Book of Mormon and the Mormonites,” *Athenaeum, Museum of Foreign Literature, Science and Art* (London) 42 (July 1841): 370–74.

later, another critic could say essentially the same thing as his mid-century counterparts, offering a fitting summary of a view that was common from the start: “For climacteric comicality Mormonism should be awarded the palm. Its romancing is refreshing in its very audaciousness. Jules Verne dreaming is here eclipsed. Baron Munchausen marvels seem commonplace. Of absurdities Pelions are piled upon Ossas, but the pile rises ever higher. Untruth was never more picturesque. From first to last the history of this cult is dramatic and spectacular. One feels that he has stumbled upon a scene in the Arabian Nights, rather than upon a sober chapter of a real religion.”¹⁰

In this fascinating turn-of-the-century critique, Mormonism, and by implication the book from which it sprang, is placed in lofty company, but not of the religious kind. Rather, the author suggests, the story of Mormonism belongs alongside German tall tales, French science fiction, Arabic folklore, and Greek mythology—a truly American contribution to the great imaginative storytelling of the world. While this commentator was offering only mock praise (his stated intent was to “counteract . . . the baneful effects of the Athenian itching for new things”¹¹), his comment is illustrative of the fact that for many early observers, the Book of Mormon seemed little more than an attempt at popular fiction—better yet, of *double* fiction: a collection of ancient adventures *within* the book, and a tale of marvelous occurrences *surrounding* its fanciful discovery. In this author’s mind, if one can only come to appreciate Mormonism’s “comicality” and “romanc[e],” its “picturesque” “absurdities,” it can be lauded as literary fiction rather than vilified as religious fraud. Therefore, beyond the list of *religious* pretenders typically attached to early Mormonism—Joanna Southcott, Ann Lee, and Jemima Wilkinson are the standard figures—there may

¹⁰ George Hamilton Combs, *Some Latter-day Religions* (Chicago: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1899), 205.

¹¹ Combs, *Latter-day Religions*, Foreword.

have been an additional *literary* reason for assuming that Smith's story was mere idle fiction.¹² In short, it seemed to fit a host of comic tropes at the heart of American humor.

To understand this concept, we turn to the pioneering experts of America's comic spirit, Constance Rourke and Walter Blair, whose respective seminal works, *American Humor* and *Native American Humor*, are standards that have defined the topic for subsequent scholars. They see in "American" humor a decidedly "native quality" that stems from its subject matter and technique, both of which reflect what has come to be identified with "Americanness": liberty, individuality, and optimism; a limitless frontier, and the promise of prosperity; the superiority of innovation over tradition, and common humanity over privileged authority; a flair for exaggeration, and no patience for stupidity; all "expressed," as an 1838 critic noted, "in the language of the ludicrous."¹³ Such is American humor. One writer in 1875 tried to capture it in the identities of America's comic characters: "the scheming Yankee, the big, bragging brave Kentuckian, and the first family Virginian. . . . Indeed, the history of every American's life is humorous."¹⁴

That humor had probably always been there, but during the Age of Jackson, when "every American's life" took on added significance, humor rose in importance as well, until "American myth-making," to borrow Rourke's phrase, passed into "its great popular diffusion."¹⁵ Economic advances led to the possibility of leisure, social stresses built up steam in need of venting, and the literate masses seemed a promising marketplace for

¹² For early comparisons of Mormonism to Southcott, Lee, Wilkinson, and others, see, for example, "Gold Bible, [No. 1]," *The Reflector* (Palmyra, NY) 2, no. 10 (6 January 1831): 76; Eber D. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled* . . . (Painesville, OH: by the author, 1834), viii–ix.

¹³ Walter Blair, *Native American Humor* (San Francisco: Chandler, 1960), 3–16.

¹⁴ S. S. Cox, "American Humor," *Harper's Magazine* 50, no. 700 (April 1875), quoted in Blair, *Native American Humor*, 9–10.

¹⁵ Constance Rourke, *American Humor: A Study of the National Character* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor, 1953; reprint of New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1931), 145.

publishers who could make them laugh at others and at themselves. As a result, comic periodicals began to be popular in America during the period, giving the lie to what one researcher called the “views of our nineteenth-century ancestors as wholly earnest prudes and humorless conformers to social mores of the era.” In 1846 *Yankee Doodle* appeared in New York City, claiming to be “The First Illustrated Humorous Newspaper ever Published in the United States” or the “First President of Fun.” Within a few years, *The Comic Bouquet* began its run in Philadelphia, and New York was home to both *Figaro, or Corbyn’s Chronicle of Amusements* and *The Lantern*, the latter edited by a comic actor and hailed by one scholar as “one of the best American comic papers.” Even earlier, the *American Comic Annual* appeared in Boston in 1831, and in 1839, *The Corsair*, published in New York City, was advertised as being “as amusing a periodical as can be made from the current wit, humor and literature of the time.”¹⁶

The crescendo of comic reporting had begun even earlier. In the first few decades of the nineteenth century, the Colonial and Revolutionary Era humor that had merely been a transplant of British subjects and styles began to take on a distinctively American flavor, one that “did not come into widespread existence until about 1830,” when it became what Blair called “a graspable phenomenon.”¹⁷ By then, the year the Book of Mormon entered the cultural conscious, comic characters like Jack Downing began appearing in popular fiction as well, soon to be followed by the likes of Sam Slick, Sam Patch, Hezekiah Biglow, Mike Fink, Davy Crockett, Simon Suggs, Sut Lovingood, Major Jones, and others. Famous humorists like Mark Twain and Artemus Ward were heirs to

¹⁶ Information in this paragraph comes from Jerold J. Savory, “An Uncommon Comic Collection: Humorous Victorian Periodicals in the Newberry Library,” *Victorian Periodicals Review* 17, no. 3 (Fall 1984): 94–102.

¹⁷ Blair, *Native American Humor*, 3, 17–37, 39.

this American tradition and raised it to new heights, but long before they trained their wit on both American and Mormon peculiarities, Joseph Smith emerged with a story that seemed tailor made for those of their trade. What could be more American, after all, than a homegrown religion with a native word of God? What better example of the new rising out of the old than a fresh revelation that dared compete with the Bible? The triumph of the common man? A plowboy-turned-prophet. Even environment explanations were couched in terms of Mormonism's Americanness: as a New York City paper explained, Mormonism sprang from an area with "a character peculiarly her own; strikingly original, purely American, energetic and wild to the very farthest boundaries of imagination."¹⁸

Smith and his followers could have passed as examples of the comic American character writ-large. Like the 1875 critic quoted earlier, Constance Rourke distilled American humor into a few stock figures that together have shaped the American character ever since: the "Yankee Peddler," the "Backwoodsman," and the "Black Minstrel." As she describes them, the Yankee peddler is "indefatigably rural, sharp, uncouth, witty." He was "a wanderer, given to swapping" to make a profit, and often guilty of "practical joking" and "masquerade." The Backwoodsman was obsessed with strength—"size, scale, power"; he was "a bragger and a liar" who "gently retouched his exploits." Linguistically, he was "full of free inventions"; spiritually, he "had a touch of the supernatural"; and culturally, this westward wanderer intersected with the unfamiliar world of the Indian. The Black Minstrel was a slightly later addition, and due to the racism of the day, served as both source and target of jest. "To the primitive comic sense, to be black [was] to be funny," Rourke observed, and part of their humor lay in their

¹⁸ "Mormonism—Religious Fanaticism—Church and State Party," *Morning Courier and New-York Enquirer* (New York City) 7, no. 1333 (31 August 1831).

otherness. They were “outcasts even beyond the obvious fate of the slave.”¹⁹ During the period in which Mormonism appeared, these three characters were combined into what Rourke called “a comic trio,” a composite of characteristics to which were later added those of the noble savage and the adventurous seafarer, together providing a “loosely striated underply of comedy which ran through the life and consciousness of the entire country through the first half of the [nineteenth] century.”²⁰

“The Yankee Peddler”

Against the backdrop of this comic consciousness, to those first learning of Mormonism through hearsay or brief notices in the press the story may have had a familiar ring. Starting about the time of the Book of Mormon’s publication, word also began to circulate in the press about the Smith family’s money-digging, treasure-hunting past, giving a swindling-Yankee cast to this family of displaced New Englanders.²¹ Abner Cole had written about the “money-digging rabble” in one of his Book of Mormon parodies,²² and a Vermont newspaper not only labeled Smith a “money-digger,” but called his followers “peddlers,” an even more obvious allusion to the well-known Yankee

¹⁹ Rourke, *American Humor*, 19, 25, 40, 46, 48, 58, 74, 84.

²⁰ Rourke, *American Humor*, 86, 98, 114, 123.

²¹ See, for example, “Imposition and Blasphemy!!—Moneydiggers, Etc.,” *The Gem* (Rochester), 15 May 1830; A. W. B., “Mormonites,” *Evangelical Magazine and Gospel Advocate* (Utica, NY) 2, no. 15 (9 April 1831): 120. On Smith’s money-digging and treasure-seeking, see Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 48–52; D. Michael Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, 2d ed., rev. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1998); Mark Ashurst-McGee, “A Pathway to Prophethood: Joseph Smith Junior as Rodsman, Village Seer, and Judeo-Christian Prophet,” Master’s thesis, Utah State University, 2000.

²² “The Book of Pukei.—Chap. 2,” *The Reflector* (Palmyra, NY) 3d series, no. 8 (7 July 1830): 60; see also Plain Truth, “Mr. Editor,” *The Reflector* 2, no. 10 (6 January 1831): 77, which speaks of “money digging mania.” “Gold Bible, No. 3,” *The Reflector* 2, no. 12 (1 February 1831): 92–93, and “Gold Bible, No. 5,” *The Reflector* 2, no. 14 (28 February 1831): 109, also focus heavily on money-digging.

stereotype.²³ Alexander Campbell had specifically referred to the Book of Mormon as “a Yankee trick to make money,” to the point that one Mormon leader laughed, “This is a new one. We have heard our worthy brother Joseph Smith jr. called almost every thing but a book-peddler.”²⁴ Similarly, a New York City newspaper in September 1831 portrayed the Mormons as shrewd deceivers, masquerading for quick financial gain. Mormonism was little more than a “religious plot” thought to “have a better chance of working upon the credulity and ignorance” of the public than a purely secular commercial venture. When “people laughed at the first intimation of the [Gold Bible] story,” the article continued, Smith and his associates simply changed their tactics, deciding to “talk very seriously, to quote scripture, to read the bible, to be contemplative, and to assume that grave studied character, which so easily imposes on ignorant and superstitious people.” In this paper’s portrayal, Smith went from “an idle young fellow” to “a very grave parsonlike man”—both “Yankee” conventions—and once he began “getting a living” from his converts “the gingerbread factory was abandoned.”²⁵ About the same time a story ran in both New York and Philadelphia that drew upon the stereotype even more explicitly in describing both Joseph Smith Sr. and Jr.: “Old Joe Smith had been a country pedlar [*sic*] in his younger days, and possessed all the shrewdness, cunning, and small intrigue which are generally and justly attributed to that description of persons. He was a great story teller, full of anecdotes picked up on his peregrinations—and possessed a tongue as smooth as oil and as quick as lightning. He

²³ Clericus, Letter to the Editor, *Brattleboro (VT) Messenger* 9, no. 43 (20 November 1830).

²⁴ Alexander Campbell, “Signs of the Times,” *Millennial Harbinger* 5, no. 4 (April 1834): 148; Oliver Cowdery, “Trouble in the West,” *Latter Day Saints’ Messenger and Advocate* (Kirtland, OH) 1, no. 7 (April 1835).

²⁵ “Mormon Religion—Clerical Ambition—Western New York—The Mormonites Gone to Ohio,” *Morning Courier and New-York Enquirer* (New York City) 7, no. 1331 (1 September 1831).

had been quite a speculator in a small way in his younger days, but had been more fortunate in picking up materials for his tongue than stuff for his purse.” Meanwhile, “Young Joe was an idle, strolling, worthless fellow. . . . He was, however, the son of a Yankee pedlar [*sic*], and brought up to live by his wits.”²⁶ Such stock elements were found in any number of Yankee yarns common at that time in America. Had a reader not been careful, he may have thought he had picked up a new novel from Washington Irving or James Fenimore Cooper, with “Joe Smith” as a typecast character. Meanwhile, suggested a New York Christian journal, Mormon converts need beware, since Smith, ever the Yankee swindler, would “gladly, no doubt . . . have swapped his whole interest in the concern for a fifty acre farm in Michigan.”²⁷

Beyond the *context* of the Book of Mormon, even its *content* struck some as pure “Yankeeism.” Origen Bachelier thought it hilarious that one of the brothers of the Book of Mormon character Nephi was named Sam. “One of his brothers was a real Yankee—Sam!” Bachelier roared, “Well done, Prophet Smith; you can’t get rid of your Jonathanisms. Sam indeed! Fie, Joseph, how you forget yourself. Can’t you forge better than this? Precious little of the Yankee *wit*, have you in your composition, to let a *Yankeeism* creep into the *ancient* ‘Book of Nephi’ in this manner.”²⁸ Besides Bachelier’s obvious ridicule, this statement suggests the comic milieu in which he was writing his critique of the Book of Mormon. What made “Sam” such an obvious “Yankeeism” in Bachelier’s mind was the popularity of a pair of stereotypical Yankee Sams then famous

²⁶ “Mormonism—Religious Fanaticism—Church and State Party,” *Morning Courier and New-York Enquirer* (New York City) 7, no. 1333 (31 August 1831); “Mormonism,” *The Herald of Truth* (Philadelphia), December 1831, p. 406–07; reprinted from the *Broome County Courier* (Binghamton, NY), 22 December 1831.

²⁷ “Prevalence of Mormonism,” *Christian Advocate and Journal* (New York) 16, no. 17 (8 December 1841).

²⁸ Origen Bachelier, *Mormonism Exposed Internally and Externally* (New York, 1838).

in comic literature. Sam Patch, “The Yankee Jumper,” was a daredevil who had died jumping off a waterfall into Rochester’s Genesee River in 1829. By the time Bachelier published his exposé in 1838, Sam Patch had become a popular folk hero, his leaping ability immortalized in poems, stories, stage plays, and even Andrew Jackson’s horse.²⁹ Also in 1838, Thomas Chandler Haliburton, an internationally bestselling humorist, was publishing the second of three comic series on “Sam Slick of Slicksville,” stories about a wise-cracking Yankee bent on social satire.³⁰ Bachelier saw the Book of Mormon’s Sam in the context of the Sams of contemporary comic literature; due to the popularity and prevalence of this material, we can presume that he was not alone in judging the Book of Mormon in this light.

“The Backwoodsman”

Compared to the clear allusions to humor’s “Yankee Peddler” trope, the connections to the “Backwoodsman” motif found in early treatments of the Book of Mormon are less obvious, but can be seen in the patterns of exaggeration with which the Book of Mormon is often described, especially those that pit old against new or foreign against American in a contest for superiority. A Philadelphia newspaper did both when it ran a fanciful letter from a foreigner named “Giovanni Smithini” (a play on Joseph Smith) who credited the Book of Mormon’s remarkable success to the fact that it was not

²⁹ On Sam Patch, see Ruth Rosenberg-Naparsteck, “The Real Simon Pure Sam Patch,” *Rochester History* 52, no. 3 (Summer 1991): 1–24; Paul E. Johnson, *Sam Patch, the Famous Jumper* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2003), especially chapter 5.

³⁰ On Sam Slick, see Richard A. Davies, *Inventing Sam Slick: A Biography of Thomas Chandler Haliburton* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005).

written on a “comparatively worthless medium” like Moses’ “hard old stone laws,” but upon “plates of *gold*—an article highly valued in this western world.”³¹ An 1837 Illinois gazetteer (not a place one would expect to find humor) described the state’s Indian mounds and then referred those interested in ancient American history to “the ‘golden plates’ of that distinguished antiquarian Joe Smith!” The author praised the Book of Mormon for being “far superior” to other books on ancient America but couldn’t keep a straight face, abruptly concluding, “But, seriously,” and getting back to non-fiction.³² An 1841 “Letter on Mormonism” sarcastically spoke of the hill Cumorah as a pilgrimage site and expressed surprise that some “farmer carelessly ploughing, or the beast grazing upon it, is not struck dead by the power of God, for their sacrilege.”³³

With the Gold Bible story cast as tall tale, Joseph Smith practically became the Paul Bunyan of religious innovators. Who else could carry a stack of golden scriptures out of the woods—one critic through some creative estimation put their weight at “not less than five hundred and fifty pounds!”³⁴ Who else could see through “stone spectacles” to translate unknown languages?³⁵ Abner Cole joked that “no prophet since the destruction of Jerusalem by Titus has performed half so many wonders”³⁶ as Joseph Smith and even “old women” who followed him were believed to “again become young,

³¹ “Letters from Palmyra,” *Pennsylvanian, for the Country* (Philadelphia), 24 January 1839. See also Henry Brown, *The History of Illinois, from its first discovery and settlement, to the present time* (New York: J. Winchester, New World Press, 1844), 394.

³² John Mason Peck, *A Gazetteer of Illinois . . .*, 2d ed. (Philadelphia: Grigg & Elliot, 1837), 36.

³³ “Letter on Mormonism, 26 July 1841,” *Christian Advocate and Journal* (New York) 15, no. 52 (11 August 1841).

³⁴ See LaRoy Sunderland, “Mormonism,” *Zion’s Watchman* (New York) 3, no. 8 (24 February 1838).

³⁵ L. M. F., “Interview the Mormon Prophet,” *Evangelical Magazine and Gospel Advocate* (Utica, NY) 5, no. 14 (5 April 1834): 107.

³⁶ *The Reflector* (Palmyra, NY), 30 June 1830.

and become fruitful and replenish the earth.”³⁷ The British were particularly amused by America’s comic overstatement and when a Connecticut newspaper reran an article first published in London, Smith’s story had swelled considerably during its trans-Atlantic trip. According to Smith’s own version, he used a lever to lift the stone under which the golden plates were buried, but in this account, not only was the stone much larger, but Smith would have to use faith alone to “perform the herculean task.” Not even permitted to remove his coat, Smith was assured that even “if the stone weighed ten thousand tons, divine assistance, through *saving faith*, would enable him to lift it.” Sure enough, like any of America’s frontier heroes, Smith lifted the stone and found it “weighed as *nothing* in his hands!”³⁸

According to Rourke, the tall tale “came into its great prime” in the early 1830s, and with it,

a sudden contagion was created. A series of newspaper hoaxes sprang into life in the East. The scale was western, the tone that of calm, scientific exposition of wonders such as often belonged to western comic legend. Explorations of the moon by telescope, voyages to the moon or across the Atlantic by balloon, were explained in the imperturbable manner of the tall tale, verging aggressively toward the appearance of truth and sheering away again. They were circumstantial, closely colored; yet they broke all possible bounds and reached toward poetry, making snares out of natural elements or even from the cosmos.³⁹

Had one of those newspaper hoaxes reported a voyage across the ocean in a submergible ship or by the guidance of a compass that worked according to its owner’s character (both

³⁷ *Evangelical Magazine and Gospel Advocate* (Utica, NY), new series 2, no. 6 (5 February 1831): 47.

³⁸ “Mormonism,” Supplement to the *Connecticut Courant* (Hartford) 5, no. 22 (15 December 1838): 175–76.

³⁹ Rourke, *American Humor*, 56–57.

elements of the Book of Mormon that were ridiculed by critics⁴⁰), had they given an account of magic spectacles that translated unknown tongues or mysterious treasures bearing apocryphal truths, they would not have seemed far out of place with these other tall tales. Described, at best, with scientific calm, their breach of normal bounds aligned the stories in and around the Gold Bible with other “western comic legends.” A Utica newspaper suggested as much when it said that the Mormon absurdity was no more believable than a person who might “appear on the stage and assert that he had been an inhabitant of the moon for five hundred years, and had finally fallen on this earth to make a new revelation.”⁴¹ With “the spirit of burlesque . . . abroad in the land like a powerful genie,” the curious were left wondering “when burlesque was involved, when fakery, [and] when a serious intention.”⁴² Under the circumstances, with so much of the Book of Mormon story suggestive of fiction and so little verifiable as fact, the majority would probably have agreed with the conclusion of Ephraim Ensley, who wrote of the Mormon scripture, “If I am not very much mistaken the book is all a farce.”⁴³

“The Black Minstrel”

Judging from the comments of many of its critics, the Mormon story provided ample examples of Yankee wit and Backwoods bravado, but at first blush, very little in

⁴⁰ See, for example, “The ‘Northern Times,’” *Chardon Spectator and Geauga Gazette* (Chardon, OH), 28 February 1835; Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled*, 32.

⁴¹ *Evangelical Magazine and Gospel Advocate* (Utica, NY), new series 2, no. 6 (5 February 1831): 47.

⁴² Rourke, *American Humor*, 101, 113.

⁴³ Ephraim Ensley to Brother Badget, 1835, Reading, NY, *Christian Palladium* (Union Mills, NY) 4, no. 18 (15 January 1836): 280.

the way of Book of Mormon criticism plays upon the Black Minstrel motif directly. As stated earlier, this character was only beginning to take its place in the “comic trio” when the Book of Mormon appeared. However, one of the elements that Americans found humorous in their stereotype of the Black Minstrel was his unsophisticated ignorance, with comedians often taking the stage in blackface to mimic the ungrammatical speech patterns of plantation slaves. In a way, the Book of Mormon seemed to be doing the same thing: taking the Bible and, as Abner Cole once remarked, “entirely alter[ing it] for the worse . . . by the want of grammatical arrangement.”⁴⁴ Even the caricatured Backwoodsman displayed this type of disdain for proper speech, such that some readers may have been amused to see “the king’s English [so] terribly mangled and murdered” in the Book of Mormon.⁴⁵

Though most critics who accused the Book of Mormon of being literarily crude took it as proof of Smith’s fraudulent imposture, more than a few found humor in what a Cleveland paper called its “string of Jargon,” the way spectators would have laughed at the parroted speech of the comic Black Minstrel.⁴⁶ An evangelical periodical in 1831 laughed that based on the contents of the Book of Mormon, God must have written it “in his younger days, before he had become much acquainted with the proper analogy of language!” Four years later the same magazine retooled its earlier joke and accused the Mormon Deity of being “mentally as weak as any of his worshippers . . . or he would

⁴⁴ “Gold Bible, No. 5,” *The Reflector* (Palmyra, NY) 2, no. 14 (28 February 1831): 109.

⁴⁵ Western Traveller, “Mormonism,” *Christian Advocate and Journal* (New York) 7, no. 30 (22 March 1833): 1.

⁴⁶ “The Golden Bible,” *The Cleveland Herald*, 25 November 1830.

never have thus horribly *murdered language*!”⁴⁷ Another writer wondered similarly if the spirit that had inspired Smith “was in want of common sense, as well as a long training in Walker’s Dictionary and Murray’s Grammar, and the spelling book.”⁴⁸ *The Christian Watchman* asked about the angel’s reported involvement, worried that if he was “as defective in Egyptian grammar as he is in English, we can place very little confidence in the integrity of the translation.”⁴⁹ A curious David Marks read 250 pages of the book before he abandoned its “uncouth expressions and ungrammatical sentences,” but for those accustomed to the burlesque of black humor, such a “ridiculous imitation of the manner of the Holy Scriptures” (as a Boston paper described it) may have been just what some readers expected.⁵⁰

The Black Minstrel stereotype may have also led them to expect the kind of adjectives that followed Mormons wherever they went: ignorant, lazy, and ridiculous. These adjectives naturally fit a group of people who would believe in such a comic fiction as the Book of Mormon. In spite of significant evidence to the contrary (which was admitted by some but ignored by most others), believers in the Book of Mormon were typically described as being “the dregs of community,” “the lazy and the worthless classes of society,” or that “odious description of population . . . nearly [at] the low

⁴⁷ *Evangelical Magazine and Gospel Advocate* (Utica, New York) 2, no. 6 (5 February 1831): 47; see also “Complaints of a Mormonite,” *Evangelical Magazine and Gospel Advocate* (Utica, New York), 5 September 1835, 285.

⁴⁸ S. Williams, *Mormonism Exposed*, 1838.

⁴⁹ Gimel, “Book of Mormon,” *The Christian Watchman* (Boston) 12, no. 40 (7 October 1831).

⁵⁰ David Marks, [Untitled Remarks on Mormonism], *Morning Star* (Limerick, ME) 7, no. 45 (7 March 1833): 177; “Mormonism,” *Boston Recorder* 17, no. 41 (10 October 1832).

condition of the black population.”⁵¹ Smith was “an ignoramus” and his followers could be considered no better; at best, offered one Ohio newspaper, “they get along better than could be anticipated, from the absurdity of their doctrine.”⁵² Even less negative descriptions such as this one evince a subtle paternalism, as was the case in an 1842 exposé that called Mormons “an ignorant, simple, honest, industrious, deluded people.” These were terms often assigned to blacks during the period; indeed, much of what was said about the Mormons would have been equally applicable to that “benighted” race considered inferior and potentially dangerous by the white majority. “There is indeed an alarming amount of ignorance among them,” observed a Boston newspaper, “ignorance that is in many the parent of superstition, and in some, of crime.”⁵³ Alexander Campbell never mentioned the Black Minstrel in his critiques of Mormonism, but alluded to Mormon ignorance with a literary metaphor of his own: referring to the river of forgetfulness in Greek mythology he said, “The waters of Lethe in their fabled powers of stupefaction, were not half so efficient as the infatuations of Mormonism.”⁵⁴

By elevating the Black Minstrel to the level of comic hero, white humorists could not only take advantage of blacks’ perceived ignorance and simplicity as an object of humor, but

⁵¹ *Painesville (OH) Telegraph*, 22 March 1831; “Mormonism,” *Atkinson’s Saturday Evening Post* (Philadelphia) 10, no. 541 (23 July 1831); “Regulating’ the Mormonites,” *Niles’ Register* (Baltimore) 3, no. 9 (14 September 1833): 47–48; reprinted from the *Missouri Republican*, 9 August 1833. For an example of reports that avoided perpetuating this stereotype, see “Mormonism,” *Dayton (OH) Journal and Advertiser* 5, no. 45 (4 October 1831): 1; “The Book of Mormon and the Mormonites,” *Athenaeum, Museum of Foreign Literature, Science and Art* (London) 42 (July 1841): 370–74. See also Steven C. Harper, “Infallible Proofs, Both Human and Divine: The Persuasiveness of Mormonism for Early Converts,” *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 10, no. 1 (Winter 2000): 99–118.

⁵² “Imposition and Blasphemy!!—Moneydiggers, Etc.,” *The Gem* (Rochester), 15 May 1830; P. H. B., “The Mormonites,” *Ohio Eagle* (Lancaster, OH), 20 April 1833.

⁵³ “Mormons and Mormonism,” *Christian Register and Boston Observer* 20, no. 52 (25 December 1841).

⁵⁴ Alexander Campbell, “Mormonism Unveiled,” *Millennial Harbinger* (Bethany, VA) 6, no. 1 (January 1835): 44–45.

were able to do so in a way that shielded them from admitting their own susceptibility to such negative traits.⁵⁵ Blacks were seen as unmistakably different—the fact that white performers blackened their faces to play the part added to this perception—giving white audiences the opportunity to associate stupidity with an obvious “other” and thus free themselves from such uncomfortable self-perceptions. When it came to depicting Mormonism, no face paint was needed; the caricature of ignorant naïveté was already well established and critics could draw upon its elements to paint Mormonism in similar hues. The stage acts of Thomas “Jim Crow” Rice were immensely popular in the 1830s and blacks were comically “flattened” and safely marginalized during every performance; through comic portrayals of Mormons’ supposed ignorance, the same safe distance could be established, and to similar humorous effect.

The “Novel” Book of Mormon

With sly Yankee peddlers, boastful backwoodsmen, and ignorant black minstrels populating the popular imagination in the 1830s, and with the story of the Book of Mormon seemingly partaking of all three, it should come as no surprise that Mormon Elders had a difficult time presenting it as sober scriptural truth. It should also be unsurprising that when an explanation for the Book of Mormon appeared that confirmed its status as mere creative fiction, the theory unquestioningly took hold. According to the allegations of ex-Mormon Philastus Hurlbut (which were published in Eber Howe’s 1834 exposé *Mormonism Unveiled* [sic]), the story at the core of the Book of Mormon was

⁵⁵ On Black Minstrelsy, see Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

written by a minister-turned-novelist named Solomon Spaulding (also spelled Spalding) roughly twenty years earlier. Hurlbut's sources remembered Spaulding's unpublished manuscript recounting a migration of Hebrews from Jerusalem to America, and connected its characters by name with those of the Book of Mormon. Though the manuscript was soon found and proved not to be as similar to the Mormon scripture as announced (and devoid of any religious material), continued conjectural efforts were made to connect Spaulding to Sidney Rigdon and ultimately to Joseph Smith, until the so-called Spaulding Theory was essentially accepted as established fact.⁵⁶

For their own part, the Mormons could not understand how their scripture could be taken as imaginative fiction, and in fact considered it “really amusing to hear” that with Hurlbut and Howe's help it was at once being called a “romance” and a “rhapsody.” “What will it be next?” they wondered.⁵⁷ But unfortunately for those Mormons who found it impossible to dislodge the Spaulding Theory, public perception—as is typically the case—trumped reality. The idea that a common novel lay at the heart of the Mormon scripture simply reaffirmed what many already believed. For the majority, therefore, the Spaulding Theory did little to change their view of the Book of Mormon, and its refutation did even less. Neither revelation would have significantly altered their perceptions, which had already been shaped by American humor.⁵⁸ Thus a foreign correspondent could preface his report “that the Golden Bible was originally composed

⁵⁶ On the Spaulding Theory, see Lester Bush, “The Spalding [*sic*] Theory Then and Now,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 10, no. 4 (Fall 1977): 40–69.

⁵⁷ *The Evening and the Morning Star* (Kirtland, OH) 2, no. 19 (April 1834): 150.

⁵⁸ Mormon Apostle Orson Hyde remarked that Hurlbut and Howe's writings seemed to be having “no influence in the world at all.” While this is not entire true, and while Hyde credited the truthfulness of Mormonism for its power to overcome its enemies, it does suggest the limited impact their words had in a society that seemed to need no convincing. Orson Hyde to the Editor, *Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate* (Kirtland, OH) 2, no. 7 (April 1836): 296.

for a Novel” with the dispassionate introduction, “But to conclude, (for I think the reader must be tired of Mormonism).”⁵⁹ It seemed like old news even when the news was breaking. Even a host of accompanying affidavits attesting to the Smith family’s contemptible character (also collected by Hurlbut and published by Howe, and also of questionable reliability) would have done little to change the public perception of Mormonism’s founder. His story already bore the marks of the comic imagination and, if anything, would only have shocked people were they to discover that “Joe Smith” and his followers were actual people rather than stock characters in a somewhat familiar tale. Thus a non-Mormon visitor to the Church’s headquarters in Kirtland, Ohio can be excused for “scarcely suppress[ing] a laugh” when he was “introduced to the Immortal Prophet, Jo Smith, and his renowned condjutor [*sic*], Sidney Rigdon, and a host of the inferior satellites.” An offended Mormon reporter may have credited the man’s underwhelmed impression to “Rumor, that bane of social society, that fiend of hell, that destroyer of virtuous reputation,” but in reality, the man may simply have come with a comic caricature in mind, and been amusingly surprised to meet people actually playing the envisioned parts.⁶⁰

True “anti-Mormons” (like Hurlbut and Howe), of course seized upon such affidavits as evidence of Mormonism’s diabolical aims, but to a generation of more disinterested observers they meant little. With regard to a faith at the fringes, the majority of Americans simply did not care enough to oppose it, for the same reason they did not care enough to embrace it. For many Americans—and their comic culture would have

⁵⁹ D. Griffiths, Jun., *Two Years’ Residence in the New Settlements of Ohio, North America: With Directions to Emigrants* (London: Westley and Davis, 1835), 132–41.

⁶⁰ “The ‘Atlas’ Article,” *The Latter-day Saints’ Messenger and Advocate* (Kirtland, OH) 2, no. 7 (April 1836): 302.

prepared them for this—the story of Mormonism was simply a tale to tell, a yarn to spin. Like any number of lighthearted novels, chapbooks, or stage plays, the Book of Mormon story was something to laugh about and then let go.

Scottish writer and traveler Thomas Hamilton certainly saw it this way. To him, the Book of Mormon was simply a fascinating curiosity that deserved comment rather than contempt. In his *Men and Manners in America*, Hamilton provides an excellent window into the contemporary view of Mormonism that was beginning to circulate abroad—one that would have been far more common than that gaining momentum in anti-Mormon circles. Learning of the story behind the Book of Mormon from someone he met on his travels (he had never heard of Mormons before), Hamilton’s description is more comic yarn than cautionary tale, and bears the marks of the comic tropes so popular in the period. In his recounting, it all began when “a bankrupt storekeeper, whose name, I think, was Smith, had an extraordinary dream.” Hints of the Yankee peddler then give way to a description of the Book of Mormon that borders on tall tale, one that suggests another strand of American humor, that of American superiority over European expertise: “He found a book with golden clasps and cover, and a pair of elegantly mounted spectacles, somewhat old-fashioned to be sure, but astonishing magnifiers, and possessing qualities which it might puzzle Sir David Brewster to explain on optical principles.” (Brewster was a British scientist renowned for his work on optics but even more famous in America as the inventor of the kaleidoscope.) Hamilton’s story then continues to its climax:

Smith had some difficulty in undoing the clasps of this precious volume, but on opening it, though his eyes were good, it appeared to contain nothing but blank paper. It then occurred to him to fit on his spectacles, when, lo! the whole volume was filled with certain figures and pothooks to him unintelligible. Delighted with his good fortune, Smith trudged home with the volume in his pocket and the spectacles on his nose, happy as a bibliomaniac who had been lucky enough to

purchase some rare *Editio Princeps* “dog cheap” from the ignorant propriety of an obscure book-stall.

Concluding the tale with a nod to Yankee ingenuity and minstrel gullibility, and ending on a note of frontier exaggeration, Hamilton writes, “Smith’s worldly prospects now brightened. With this invaluable treatise in his strong box, he commenced business afresh, under the firm of Mormon, Smith, and Co., and appears to possess an unlimited credit on the credulity of his followers. He has set up an establishment something similar to that of Mr. Owen [founder of the utopian community at New Harmony, Indiana], and already boasts a considerable number of opulent believers.”⁶¹ Had Dickens created a character to stumble upon a mysterious book in the corner of a back-alley London book-seller, he could have done little better than Hamilton’s creative casting of the story of the Golden Plates.

⁶¹ Thomas Hamilton, *Men and Manners in America* (Philadelphia: Carey, Lea & Blanchard, 1833), 364–65.

CHAPTER VI

A RHETORIC OF RIDICULE

The dispassionate, nonchalant attitude with which the majority of antebellum Americans would have approached the Book of Mormon, and the assumption that it was simply imaginative fiction, which America's comic conscious would have almost instinctively supplied, unfortunately found a sizeable obstacle in its path to absolute acceptance—namely, the book and its adherents refused to abide by the genre. In fact, Smith and his followers rejected such comic caricatures outright. He repudiated his money-digging past, he confessed no exaggeration in his history, and he vouched for the intelligence of his followers. If anything, Smith played upon the more positive attributes of the American comic trio: the ingenuity to redeem an errant Christianity, the optimism to gather a chosen people to a frontier New Jerusalem, and the innocence to weather the scorn of the nation's religious and societal elites.

Moreover, Smith unwaveringly held to the story behind the Book of Mormon, complete with witnesses and signed testimonies to its truth. As Terryl Givens has said of those who try to “devise nonliteral readings of [Smith's] discourse”: “The problem . . . is that Joseph's prophetic writings were grounded in artifactual reality, not the world of psychic meanderings. It is hard to allegorize—and profoundly presumptuous to edit down— a sacred record that purports to be a transcription of tangible records hand-delivered by an angel.”¹ In other words, the Book of Mormon and those who proclaimed

¹ Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon*, 80; for an extended discussion of the concept of Book of Mormon “middle ground,” see pp. 79–88, 155–84.

it left no middle ground. The book was either fact or fiction, but not the innocent, imaginative, purely literary kind so many would have naturally assumed it to be. In other words, it was either *religious* fact or *religious* fiction, the kind that religious people must either embrace as divine truth or combat as devised heresy. The so-called “anti-Mormons” understood this perfectly and therefore refused to sit idly by like the majority of Americans; the Saints should have at least credited them for taking seriously their claims. The Mormons mocked Alexander Campbell for having so publicly mocked them, but they should have applauded his rejection of the word “romance” that was being applied to the Book of Mormon. “This is,” Campbell recognized, “for it a name too innocent.”²

A reviewer for Boston’s *Christian Watchman* understood the issue perfectly. “Did not this book claim the honours of divine revelation,” he wrote, “a review would have been needless,” but this was no ordinary book, and therefore no ordinary book review. “As a work of imagination, it might have passed as an ill-written romance, and we should have been at liberty to read it, or not, as we thought proper.” As discussed in the previous chapter, this is precisely the manner in which Thomas Hamilton approached the story of the Book of Mormon (though never delving into its contents), the way most Americans would have judged the Book of Mormon from afar. “But as it demands our faith as a divine revelation,” the *Watchman*’s reviewer admitted, “it becomes our duty to examine it.”³ Other critics made the same realization. “They might pass for wild romances,” wrote one, “were it not for the blasphemous [religious] assertion[s].” And if such a book “in general is a fable,” the author warned, “then Joe Smith Junior, is a base imposter—a

² Alexander Campbell, “Delusions,” *Millennial Harbinger* (Bethany, VA) 2, no. 2 (7 February 1831): 85–96.

³ Gimel, “Book of Mormon,” *The Christian Watchman* (Boston) 12, no. 40 (7 October 1831).

worthless fellow, and all his followers are most wretchedly deceived and deluded.”⁴ In other words, Smith may have passed as a novelist, but he claimed the title of prophet instead. Fictional treatments were never meant to be an option, and therefore, for those most serious about guarding Christian orthodoxy, Mormonism had to be forcefully opposed.

What is fascinating about this opposition, however, at least in the context of the present study, is the degree to which those who opposed Mormonism maintained a sense of humor in the process. Granted, it often came in the form of a scathing, sarcastic, rhetoric of ridicule, but it evinced and evoked humor nonetheless, and may, in fact, have purposely invoked humor as a means of establishing its authority. As a mid-century writer observed, “Wonderful is *the detective power of ridicule and mirth*. Penetrating through the finest pretences, all the most brilliant but shallow patriotisms, exaggerated opinions, and well drest shams in top boots, are transparent to its eye; the defects of character are instantly weighed and understood; the defects of an argument, or a book, the defects of faith or of formalism. . . . To the eye of humour he stands unmasked.”⁵ This seems to be the attitude of these self-professing anti-Mormons, employing wit as G. K. Chesterton defined it: as “reason on its judgement seat.”⁶ At a time in which religious freedom and frontier opportunity combined to level the religious playing field and provide an opening for Mormonism’s establishment and growth, the movement’s most determined opponents often turned to humor in hopes of shutting that door. Using the

⁴ “Mormonism,” *New York Weekly Messenger and Young Men’s Advocate*, 29 April 1835.

⁵ Edwin Hood, *The Mental and Moral Philosophy of Laughter* (London: Partridge & Oakley, 1852), 67; quoted in Jennifer A. Wagner-Lawlor, ed., *The Victorian Comic Spirit: New Perspectives* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2000), xv.

⁶ Quoted in Richard S. Carlson, *The Benign Humorists* (North Haven, CT: Archon Books, 1975), 4.

Book of Mormon story as one of their favorite targets, they caricatured the Latter-day Saints as ignorant dupes of an obvious imposture, doing so through the persuasive power of rhetoric. Though many voices could be heard laughing at what they repeatedly called Mormon “absurdities,” three of the most recognized also happened to be three of the most humorous: Alexander Campbell, Eber Howe, and Origen Bachelor.⁷

Alexander Campbell

One of the brightest lights in the early Restorationist movement, Alexander Campbell has been credited as being one of the “best informed of [Mormonism’s] early critics” since, unlike most other commentators, he actually read a large portion of the Book of Mormon before offering a “reasoned critique.”⁸ And he had good reason to do so: he had just lost one of his ablest ministers, Sidney Rigdon, and a host of former followers to the growing Mormon faith. Moreover, Mormonism’s brand of restorationism bore some resemblance to Campbell’s own, and he was anxious to correct the type of assumptions that led one writer to title an article “The Golden Bible, or, Campbellism Improved.”⁹ As

⁷ Mormon Apostle Orson Hyde specifically mentioned the writings of Campbell and Howe as being among the “first weapon[s] raised against the spread of truth.” (He called Campbell’s “Delusions” a “wicked and scurrilous pamphlet.”) Orson Hyde to the Editor, *Latter Day Saints’ Messenger and Advocate* (Kirtland, OH) 2, no. 7 (April 1836): 296. Mormon convert Orson Spencer mentioned Origen Bachelor’s work as one of the sources he turned to when first studying the Book of Mormon. *Times and Seasons* (Nauvoo, IL) 4, no. 4 (2 January 1843): 50–54.

⁸ Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 89. On the tendency of the Book of Mormon’s critics not to have read the book, see Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon*, 86.

⁹ A. S., “The Golden Bible, or, Campbellism Improved,” *Observer and Telegraph* (Hudson, OH), 18 November 1830.

he would later write of the Mormons, “I would say nothing to the disparagement of this deluded people,” but he had no such qualms about attacking their book of scripture.¹⁰

Ever the theologian, Campbell’s critique—tellingly titled “Delusions”—was indeed “reasoned.” According to later anti-Mormon author Eber Howe, “It unequivocally and triumphantly sets the question of the divine authenticity of the “Book” [of Mormon] forever to rest to every *rational* mind.”¹¹ However, almost all of Campbell’s rational arguments were also punctuated with jest. Joseph Smith himself saw Campbell’s work as an attempt to “ridicule every man who may be disposed to examine the evidences which God has given to the world of its truth.”¹² Modern scholars have found that this is actually an ideal rhetorical combination, observing that as both persuasive tool and mnemonic technique, combining humorous and nonhumorous material accomplishes more than presenting either in isolation.¹³ In Campbell’s case, refuting the Book of Mormon by denying the possibility of a Nephite priesthood based on non-Levitical descent would have had far inferior staying power in the minds of most readers than his comparison of the Book of Mormon as “bat” to the Bible as “American eagle.” Similarly, more effective than reasoning over sermons contained in the Book of Mormon—he categorized one as “a patriarchal valedictory”—was simply linking the book’s ancient groups to more recognizable modern movements: Nephites were “Calvinists and Methodists,” Zoramites were “a sort of Episcopalians,” and Mormon, “a mighty general and great christian,” after leading his men to war was certainly “no Quaker!”

¹⁰ Alexander Campbell, “Signs of the Times,” *Millennial Harbinger* (Bethany, VA) 5, no. 4 (April 1834): 148.

¹¹ *Painesville (OH) Telegraph*, 1 March 1831.

¹² Joseph Smith to Oliver Cowdery, *The Evening and the Morning Star* (Kirtland, OH) 2, no. 24 (September 1834): 192.

¹³ See Martin, *Psychology of Humor*, 104–05.

Throughout his widely circulating analysis (it was reprinted in Boston as a pamphlet a year after appearing as an article in his *Millennial Harbinger*), reason and ridicule flowed and functioned seamlessly. He examined a host of what he considered the book's anachronisms, but concluded most with sarcastic exclamations: Nephites "in their wigwam temple"; Moroni "laments the prevalency of free masonry"; Mormon "must have heard of the Arian controversy by some angel!!" Drawing attention to one Book of Mormon prophet's plea not to condemn the book because of its imperfections, Campbell quips, "A very necessary advice, indeed!!" "Such is an analysis of the book of Mormon," Campbell submits, concluding that "the Bible of the Mormonites" and the Christian Bible could not have come "from the same Author." The Bible contained "the Oracles of the living God"; the Book of Mormon, mere "Smithisms." "It is patched up and cemented with 'And it came to pass'—'I sayeth unto you'—'Ye saith unto him'—and all the King James' *haths, did, and doths.*" In short, Campbell concludes, it is "without exaggeration, the meanest book in the English language."¹⁴ Offering a few last words denying the witnesses' testimony of the plates, Campbell remarked, "These men handled as many of the brazen or golden leaves as the said Smith translated," to which he added, sarcastically, "So did I." He had seen none and neither had they. The story of the Book of Mormon, like the stories within it, were, as he would later describe them, merely "old wives' fables," no more true than other tales in the popular imagination.¹⁵

Though extremely brief compared to the roughly 600-page volume it was lampooning, "Delusions" was, in its author's mind, sufficient dismissal, or so Campbell thought at the time. Writing four years later he admitted, "Perhaps we were too sanguine

¹⁴ Alexander Campbell, "Delusions," *Millennial Harbinger* (Bethany, VA) 2, no. 2 (7 February 1831): 85–96.

¹⁵ Alexander Campbell, "Inspiration of the Scriptures," *Millennial Harbinger* 7, no. 8 (August 1836): 347.

when we thought that the fable was so barefaced that it could not stand upon its legs or palms in the face of day and the American people,” for there proved to be more “great knaves,” “great simpletons,” and “dark spots” than he had originally expected. By then, however, a much broader treatment of the Book of Mormon and its origin was in print, one that Alexander Campbell eagerly endorsed.

Eber Howe

The book Campbell endorsed was a first-of-its-kind anti-Mormon volume that he called “a sure antidote against delusions”: *Mormonism Unveiled*, published in 1834 by Eber D. Howe, editor of the *Painesille Telegraph*. According to the Mormon newspaper in nearby Kirtland, Campbell had been “howl[ing] most prodigiously” about the book, the way a “whippet spannel [spaniel]” would when “afraid to face his enemy,” and though the paper pretended to be unconcerned with the endorsement—“bark on Alexander,” it derided—the volume would become the standard to which most subsequent anti-Mormon volumes adhered.¹⁶ Even after it had been out of print for over forty years its author could correctly affirm, “I have reason to believe [it] has been the basis of all the histories which have appeared from time to time since that period touching that people.”¹⁷ Unlike Campbell’s “Delusions,” *Mormonism Unveiled* was almost as long as the Book of Mormon itself. Its critique of the Mormon scripture only filled a portion (the rest focused on Mormonism’s subsequent history, and, as previously mentioned,

¹⁶ “A Summary,” *Latter Day Saints’ Messenger and Advocate* (Kirtland, OH) 1, no. 5 (February 1835): 76–77.

¹⁷ Howe, *Pioneer Printer*, 45.

published for the first time the Spaulding Theory and Hurlbut's defamatory affidavits), but in Campbell's words, would finally settle "the question of the 'Golden Bible'" for anyone who had "the half of five grains of common sense."¹⁸ And it was "common sense" to which Howe (and in his own work Campbell) seemed to be aiming. In their minds, the Book of Mormon was pure non-sense, more deserving of laughter than logical dispute, and like Campbell before him, Howe treated the volume accordingly.

Howe focused his readers' attention on the Book of Mormon in more ways than one, and in doing so, offers additional evidence of the book's place in America's comic imagination. The complete title of Howe's book, for example, included the phrases "Imposition and Delusion" and "Published as a Romance." Furthermore, in a telling typographic move, the title was arranged on the title page so that centered, bolded, and capitalized—in the largest typeface on the page—were the words "GOLDEN BIBLE." The frontispiece then showed a first-of-its-kind anti-Mormon cartoon, depicting Joseph Smith, plates in hand, being kicked off his feet by the devil.¹⁹ The message was clear: the Gold Bible was the devil's bait, being used to send the ignorant flying, and it all started out as mere fiction.

In singling out the Gold Bible (or "the brass plate revelation" as he also referred to it), Howe was choosing his target advisedly. "Whenever the fact is established in the mind that the Book of Mormon is true," he observed, "the victory is gained, and whatever

¹⁸ Alexander Campbell, "Mormonism Unveiled," *Millennial Harbinger* (Bethany, VA) 6, no. 1 (January 1835): 44–45.

¹⁹ Eber D. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled: Or, a Faithful Account of That Singular Imposition and Delusion, from its Rise to the Present Time. With Sketches of the Characters of Its Propagators, and a Full Detail of the Manner in which the Famous Golden Bible was Brought Before the World. To Which are Added, Inquiries Into the Probability that the Historical Part of the Said Bible was Written by One Solomon Spaulding, More than Twenty Years Ago, and By Him Intended to Have Been Published as a Romance* (Painesville, Ohio: E. D. Howe, 1834).

fictions, absurdities, contradictions or doctrines it may contain, they will be received as unerring as Deity himself.” Howe therefore intended to work in reverse: “place the Book, or Golden Bible, as it has been called, before the public,” and draw attention to its “fictions and absurdities,” thereby “prevent[ing] any further deception.”²⁰ Like Campbell before him, Howe’s critique would be a mix of logic and laughter. He promised “a scrupulous search, and a critical enquiry” but seldom hesitated to mingle these with mirth. On the rational side, he presented “incongruities, and unscientific mistakes”—from metallurgical anachronisms to linguistic wrinkles in time—but in presenting such findings he laughingly offered anyone able to “reconcile all these” a promising future attracting “enthusiastic devotees” to whatever “fooleries” he or she would care to invent. At one point he even wondered why the book’s author failed to mention the ancient “use of guns and amunition [*sic*].” If Mormon readers would fall for the other absurdities in the book, he questioned, why not really push the limits of “Mormon credulity and admiration”?²¹ Some pieces of evidence received brief mention but no explanation, Howe preferring on those occasions to “leave the intelligent reader to infer” whether what was presented “comports with his view of divine revelation or not.” Certain parts he included simply “to amuse the reader,” while other items were simply “too ridiculous and inconsistent to be noticed and refuted in a serious manner.” Howe saw the Book of Mormon as a book of “a thousand absurdities,” and he simply lacked the time or the inclination to debunk every one.²²

²⁰ Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled*, 31, 74, 37–38.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 38, 25, 28, 50, 46, 71.

²² *Ibid.*, 63, 75, 56, 65.

At several points Howe questioned the antiquity of the Book of Mormon by locating in its contents some of the contemporary issues of the day, much as Alexander Campbell had done earlier. And like his predecessor, Howe presented these anachronisms with scathing wit. He congratulated “the Episcopalians and Universalists” for the “great antiquity for their orders,” having found their doctrines in the supposedly ancient Mormon scripture. He wondered why John Bunyan had “pilfer[ed] terms from the Book of Mormon” when writing *Pilgrim’s Progress* and mourned that if only the Mormon scripture had been available earlier, “John Locke or the Bishop of Worcester” could have avoided their lamentable controversy. Similarly, the “learned divines of Harvard University” would have been stopped from “spread[ing] heresy,” and “the infidel caviling of Hume, Gibbon, and others, would doubtless have been avoided” as well. Sadly, Howe sighs, until the days of Joseph Smith the world had only the Bible, whose prophets “were only sattelites [*sic*], when compared to an inspired Nephite.”²³

In Howe’s depiction, the Book of Mormon was clearly a fiction from the start—a “Don Quixote adventure” from “our modern Knight of La Mancha.” Smith’s tales of “huge magic spectacles” were dismissed as comical “ghost stories,” with more folly than faith coming out of his “*bible quarry*” in New York. Book of Mormon characters became “good old Gideon,” “Chief Justice Alma,” or “Nephi . . . the archbishop.” Nephi was not a figure from history but rather a “person on the stage,” one who was constantly ducking behind the curtain to change costumes—from “scholar, [to] historian, [to] worker of metals, [to] ship-carpenter, [to] prophet and . . . priest.” The narrative was a “como-tragedy,” an odd mix of the comedic and the tragic that Howe apparently sought to

²³ Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled*, 75, 80, 73, 82.

duplicate in his rhetorical treatment of the text. For him, the comedy was the Book of Mormon itself; the tragedy was the fact that people would actually believe it.²⁴

By the time Howe was done commenting on the Book of Mormon, he had reduced the Mormon scripture to the absurd. In fact, the word “absurd” appears fourteen times in his volume, with “ridiculous” (12 times), “folly” (9 times), “silly” (4 times), and “madness” (4 times) appearing frequently as well. It was therefore not without a little sarcasm that Howe assured his readers that he was treating the Book of Mormon “with the solemnity which it deserves.” He considered the book “a ridicule upon the Holy Bible,” and therefore ridiculed it in return. In fact, since he assured his readers that he was “among the last who would be willing to vilify [*sic*], and ridicule, any thing that is counted sacred, without the best evidence of its falsehood and imposition,” the fact that he did vilify and ridicule the Book of Mormon so unflinchingly shows just what a falsehood and imposition he believed the book to be. Secure in an impression of the Book of Mormon that America’s comic imagination made likely, Howe was free to mock the Mormon scripture as the work of fiction most assumed it to be.²⁵

Origen Bachelier

The third of our comic commentators is less well-known than Alexander Campbell or Eber Howe, and his contribution to our discussion consists only of an 1838 pamphlet entitled *Mormonism Exposed Internally and Externally*. However, the fact that this pamphlet recounts a public debate between the author and Mormon Apostle Parley P.

²⁴ Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled*, 76, 163, 83, 109, 107, 71, 77, 97, 44, 33, 34.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 54, 30.

Pratt suggests that it reflects the type of rhetoric which was being used in persuasive public discourse—rhetoric aimed at popular opinion and drawing upon the cultural conscious of the time.

As we saw earlier in his laughter over Nephi’s “Yankee” brother, Sam, Bachelier was no less a reflection of his era’s comic temperament than Campbell or Howe. If anything, he was more of a humorist than the others, and in his debate with Pratt (or at least his presentation of it, which neglects to include Pratt’s portion) he portrayed the Book of Mormon as a complete comic farce, without even attempting the level of logical analysis that Campbell and Howe employed. In doing so, Bachelier reflected a style of speech that was common in public speech, when hearers of the spoken word would have been even less likely than readers of the written word to follow logical argumentation. Revivalist preachers actually employed this type of rhetoric in their pulpit humor in order to ridicule rival denominations. As historian Doug Adams observed, “In pulpit humor used to put down the favorite doctrines of different denominations or groups of believers, we do not find careful detailing of those doctrines. It was not in the nature of the humor to render precisely the thought to be ridiculed. To distort the doctrine to make it appear ridiculous was the point of the humor.”²⁶

In ridiculing Pratt’s book of scripture, Bachelier made no apologies for avoiding rational analysis. After all, he admitted, “To make an earnest attack on Mormonism, as if it had any plausible pretensions to credibility, would argue great want of discernment and good sense.” Taking the Book of Mormon seriously was granting it greater credence than it deserved, at least more than a generally skeptical public was affording it. The mere fact

²⁶ Doug Adams, *Humor in the American Pulpit: From George Whitefield through Henry Ward Beecher*, 4th ed. rev. (Austin: TX: The Sharing Company, 1986), 168–69.

that Bachelier could employ this type of rhetoric in public discourse attests to the common currency of his views, like earlier allusions to the “Golden Bible” that had no accompanying explanation. “Ridicule,” Hazlitt observed, “does not contain or attempt a formal proof” because it needs none. It “owes its power of conviction to the bare suggestion of it.” “Built on certain supposed facts,” ridicule is “a fair test, if not of philosophical or abstract truth, at least of what is truth according to public opinion and common sense; for it can only expose to instantaneous contempt that which is condemned by public opinion, and is hostile to the common sense of mankind.”²⁷ As a pair of later scholars agreed, when one seeks “the endorsement of laughter,” one “relies implicitly upon some assumed consensus of values or moral expectations by which its victims are to be judged.”²⁸

By then, the “assumed consensus” had categorized the Book of Mormon as imaginative fiction. Therefore, without having to defend his position or even explain his comparison Bachelier could assert that reasoning over such fantasy would be “somewhat like a labored attempt to disprove the story of Tom Thumb, or like the attack of Don Quixote on the windmill.” Instead of offering arguments, he could simply made fun of the “Yankeeisms” that Smith let creep into the Book of Mormon and know that his audience would join him in laughing at “Nephite” words like “sheum” and “ziff.” “Come, Joseph, on with thy goggles,” he quipped, “and translate thy translation.” Taking on another Book of Mormon word, “Irreantum,” which the text translates as “many waters,” Bachelier wants proof of that translation, since as far as he was concerned, the word

²⁷ William Hazlitt (1903), quoted in Louis I. Bredvold, “A Note in Defence of Satire,” *A Journal of English Literary History* 7, no. 4 (December 1940): 262.

²⁸ Nokes, *Raillery and Rage*, 17.

“signifies a complete ass, nearer than any thing else.” Other Book of Mormon phrases he finds comical elicit similar mockery: “Wear necks and heads! A curious kind of stocks and hats, to be sure. Genuine Mormon manufacture.” Or “Tame Fruit”: “Why, of course; why not tame fruit, as well as tame animals. Can’t you put fetters on wild fruit, and tame it? When a Book of Mormon group takes fish with them during their ocean voyage, Bachelier roars, “How provident! to carry fishes across the ocean! Think they took along with them any bottles of air?” Such were the absurdities that came from the creative mind of “Mr. Nephi Mormon Moroni Rigdon Harris Cowdery Smith.” “Even in a novel,” Bachelier laments,” such things “would ruin the work.” Such fiction as the Book of Mormon contains “befits only those monstrous productions called ‘Stories for Children,’ such as Fairy Tales, Little Red Riding Hood, and the like.”²⁹

Throughout his discourse, Bachelier seems to be having fun with his subject. After making one emphatic point, for example, he said in mocking rhyme: “Well, *Mister Pratt*, / What say to that?” adding, “Excuse my *poetry*. I have caught the inspiration of Mormonism already. But seriously . . .” By the end of the debate he assured his listeners, “I would exercise all due forbearance and compassion” on the poor Mormons, but what he had seen of their scripture was “Ridiculous! transcendently ineffably ridiculous!” Anyone who still believed such a farce “must either have lost their wits, or never have had any to lose.” Smith’s scheme, he joked, must have been an experiment to write the most preposterous book possible, and then “see how great fools he could make of some, by getting them to gulp it down in this condition.”³⁰

²⁹ Origen Bachelier, *Mormonism Exposed Internally and Externally* (New York, 1838).

³⁰ *Ibid.*

One who did “gulp down” the Book of Mormon was Orson Spencer, who having read Bachelier’s pamphlet while investigating Mormonism, may have had it in mind when he complained that in Joseph Smith’s case, as had been the case with Jesus Christ before, “the public mind is always forestalled” because of just such comic material. What Spencer considered lying slander, and what Bachelier had had such fun in relating, was being “published in the social circle and riveted by the butt of ridicule upon every mind,” leaving many with “sufficient apology for them not to examine it.”³¹ Then again, as we have seen, those of the American comic mindset would have seen little cause for an honest examination when presented with one reviewer called “barefaced fabling.”³² As an Ohio newspaperman admitted, the Book of Mormon was “infinitely beneath contempt as it is infinitely beneath criticism.” He therefore approached the book as a “fiction”—“the very apocrypha of all apocryphies”—and proceeded to lampoon Nephi as “Rabbi Nephi,” “father Nephi,” “Mr. Rawhead,” and “Mr. Goblin.”³³ To this way of thinking, the Book of Mormon hardly merited literary criticism; plain criticism would more than suffice.

Popular Polemics

Writers such as Alexander Campbell, Eber Howe, and Origen Bachelier were not merely commenting on the Book of Mormon as if it were a passing public fancy. Others less concerned with its effect were doing that. Instead, these men, and many others on a smaller scale, were taking on Mormonism as if in anticipation of Langston Hughes hopes

³¹ *Times and Seasons* (Nauvoo, IL) 4, no. 4 (2 January 1843): 50–54.

³² “Review of Parley P. Pratt, *A Voice of Warning*,” *Christian Examiner and General Review* (Boston: James Munroe and Co., 1839), 25:270–72.

³³ Walter Scott, “Mormon Bible—No. 1,” *The Evangelist* (Carthage, OH) 9, no. 1 (1 January 1841): 17–21.

of taking on racism: “Since we have not been able to moralize them out of existence with indignant editorials,” Hughes remarked, “maybe we could laugh them to death with well-aimed ridicule.”³⁴ Paradoxically, because these writers saw the Mormons as such a serious threat, they tried to keep the public from taking the Book of Mormon seriously.

Their brand of polemicism may be termed “popular” in that it appealed to what was assumed common within its audience. Humor has a certain universal—or universalizing—effect, speaking to shared perceptions of what is acceptable as opposed to what is laughable, drawing in hearers who find themselves wanting to be “in” on the joke. Thus Freud could speak of the “far-reaching psychological conformity” that humor engenders, as “every joke calls for a public of its own.”³⁵ If told effectively, anti-Mormon humor could make “co-hater[s] or co-despiser[s]” out of those who were ignorant or “indifferent to begin with.”³⁶ As Konrad Lorenz said of laughter, it both “forms a bond and simultaneously draws a line.”³⁷

Indeed, the common portrayals of Mormon absurdity which stemmed from their “novel” book of scripture did form a “bond” between a broad population who placed Mormons on the opposite side of a “line.” “It is indeed a matter of mute astonishment,” wrote a New York newspaper, “that any body can be found, among civilized men, so credulous as to embrace such prima facia [*sic*] absurdities,” but sure enough, a

³⁴ Quoted in John Lowe, “Theories of Ethnic Humor: How to Enter, Laughing,” *American Quarterly* 38, no. 3 (1986): 442.

³⁵ Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1960), 151.

³⁶ Freud, *Jokes*, 133.

³⁷ Konrad Lorenz, *On Aggression*, trans. Marjorie Kerr Wilson (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1963), 253; cited in John Lowe, “Theories of Ethnic Humor: How to Enter, Laughing,” *American Quarterly* 38, no. 3 (1986): 440.

Connecticut paper lamented, “multitudes of persons were found to be noodles enough to believe the absurd story.”³⁸ James M’Chesney wrote, “It is not for us to laugh and make light of Mormonism,” but to cry instead, that “any person in this enlightened day [would] allow himself to be prostituted to a belief of such silly falsehood.” Were it to be accepted by “any people of intelligence,” he concluded, it would be “a disgrace to [them], both in time and eternity.”³⁹ It was this feeling of “disgrace” that popular polemics helped create in a public already conditioned to fictionalize the Book of Mormon by its comic imagination. “Can candid, reflecting men,” asked one writer, “believe such an absurdity, such an utter impossibility?”⁴⁰ Not in an enlightened age. Not, as an unnamed traveler recorded, “amid the full-orbed effulgence of the nineteenth century.” In such enlightened times, it was unfathomable that anyone would fall for what this writer called the “chaos of nonsense—absurdity, nay madness,” that originated from “honest Joe Smith, priest of Mormon, finder of the golden plates.”⁴¹ As the *Anti-Mormon Almanac for 1842* recorded, even the devil, after writing the Book of Mormon, “felt ashamed of his work” and buried it. “Jo Smith dug it up,” the report lamented, implying that the public would be much wiser to leave it out of reach and out of sight.⁴²

³⁸ “Mormonism,” *Protestant Sentinel* (Schenectady, New York) 5, no. 1 (4 June 1834): 5; “Mormonism,” Supplement to the *Connecticut Courant* (Hartford) 5, no. 22 (15 December 1838): 175–76.

³⁹ James M’Chesney, *An Antidote to Mormonism; A Warning Voice to the Church and Nation; The Purity of Christian Principles Defended; and Truth Disentangled from Error and Delusion*, revised by G. J. Bennet (New York: Burnett & Pollard, 1838).

⁴⁰ Oliver Barr, “Mormonism No. iii,” *Christian Palladium* (Union Mills, New York) 5, no. 18 (16 January 1837): 273.

⁴¹ “Sketches of a Traveller [*sic*]—No. 25,” *Missouri Republican* (St. Louis) 15, no. 1205 (29 April 1837), 109–12; “Sketches of a Traveller [*sic*]—No. 23,” *Missouri Republican* (St. Louis) 15, no. 1231 (29 May 1837).

⁴² *Anti-Mormon Almanac for 1842* . . . (New York, 1841).

Of course this anti-Mormon humor was not exactly innocent merriment. As an excellent illustration of humor's superiority theory described earlier, much of this mockery betrays a sense of Hobbesian "sudden glory" at its core. "The jest is a sort of abuse," wrote Aristotle; "a psychical factor possessed of power," according to Freud.⁴³ It is an "attentive demolition" in the form of amusement.⁴⁴ But as James Hunt explained in 1844, it seemed fitting that Mormonism, being a joke itself, should be joked about. Being "in its own nature *ridiculous*," he wrote, the movement deserved to be treated with "much harshness and levity"—or even mocked in song, as Hunt did, mimicking a popular hymn: "God moves in a mysterious way, / His wonders to perform. / *He writes his will upon a plate, / His prophet reads it in a stone.*"⁴⁵ Still, there were legitimate fears hiding behind such humor, fueled by Mormonism's unaccountable growth and its exclusivist religious truth claims. Furthermore, for many concerned observers, there seemed to be no satisfactory alternatives. The Mormons' belief in their latter-day scripture was for them a matter of faith, and therefore, as a Cincinnati newspaper complained, "they are perfectly deaf to all reason that is against them."⁴⁶ Rational argument was therefore largely ineffective. Persecution, which some tried, only seemed to arouse sympathy,⁴⁷ so what other venues remained? As modern research has shown, "wisecracking humor may be the

⁴³ Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. David Ross, rev. with an introduction and notes by Lesley Brown (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 78. Freud, *Jokes*, 133.

⁴⁴ Roger Scruton, "Laughter," in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, ed. John Morreall (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 19.

⁴⁵ See James H. Hunt, *Mormonism: Embracing the Origin, Rise and progress of the Sect, with an Examination of the Book of Mormon; Also, their Troubles in Missouri, and Final Expulsion from the State* (St. Louis, Ustick & Davies, 1844).

⁴⁶ "Mormonism," *The Standard* (Cincinnati, Ohio), 1 June 1832, 4.

⁴⁷ See Truman Coe, "Mormonism," *Cincinnati Journal and Western Luminary* (25 August 1836); John A. Clark, "Gleanings by the Way. No. VI," *Episcopal Recorder* (Philadelphia) 5 September 1840, 94; "Prevalence of Mormonism," *Christian Advocate and Journal* (New York) 16, no. 17 (8 December 1841).

single most effective way to block indoctrination,”⁴⁸ and whether or not anti-Mormon writers understood this when they began mocking Mormonism, it at least gave them another way to cope. As philosopher John Morreall has argued, in humor one experiences “a cognitive shift . . . that would be disturbing under normal conditions, that is, if we took it seriously.” But the pleasure of a joke is that we don’t have to take such things seriously; in Morreall’s words it “aestheticizes” the joke on one hand; and in McDougall’s words it offers us “emotional anesthesia” on the other.⁴⁹ In Mormonism’s case, once concerned observers were able to laugh at the Gold Bible, they were freed from the anxiety of processing Mormonism’s disturbing claims. Worries over possible Christian apostasy and biblical insufficiency could be alleviated, threats to the religious and political order could be dismissed, and, like the grease paint that covered the era’s black minstrels, a comfortable distance could be established from those who had actually fallen for the joke.

Furthermore, by framing the Gold Bible as patently absurd, anti-Mormon writers made rejecting its claims an evidence of one’s intellect, a powerful enticement in an age that increasingly valued rationality. All that was required to recognize the deception was, in the words of the *Warsaw Signal*, “half common sense,” or “one fiftieth part of [a] grain of reason.”⁵⁰ Ironically, this was *pathos* masquerading as *logos*—emotional confirmation of an intellectual investigation that never took place. For this reason, Freud ranked humor’s effect on *pathos* “psychologically . . . more effective” than reason’s effect on

⁴⁸ John Morreall, *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor* (West Sussex, England: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 120.

⁴⁹ Morreall, *Comic Relief*, xii, 107; William McDougall (1903), quoted in Martin, *Psychology of Humor*, 49.

⁵⁰ “Mr. Editor,” *Warsaw (Illinois) Signal*, 11 August 1841.

logos, since in his words, “where argument tries to draw the hearer’s criticism over on to its side, the joke endeavours to push the criticism out of sight.” It essentially “bribe[s] the hearer with its yield of pleasure into taking sides . . . without any very close investigation.”⁵¹

This was precisely what the anti-Mormon writers hoped for—a condemnation of Mormonism before it ever got to trial, a rejection that stood independent of the reality it ridiculed and was therefore immune to rational refutation.⁵² As Terry Givens asked in his own study of anti-Mormon literature, “How does one refute a joke?”⁵³ No wonder Mormon missionaries complained that they could not get a fair hearing, for “ridicule occupies the place of reason.”⁵⁴ They came to recognize—and lament—the truth expressed by a pair of modern scholars, that humor serves to establish stereotypes that are “obstinately rigid, devilishly tenacious,” and “extremely difficult to dislodge,” making aggressive humor “one of the most effective and vicious weapons in the repertory of the human mind.”⁵⁵

⁵¹ Freud, *Jokes*, 103, 133.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 200.

⁵³ Givens, *Viper on the Hearth*, 118.

⁵⁴ *Times and Seasons* 5, no. 8 (15 April 1844): 509.

⁵⁵ Joseph Boskin and Joseph Dorinson, “Ethnic Humor: Subversion and Survival,” *American Quarterly* 37, no. 1 (Spring 1985): 81, 83.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION: THE LAST LAUGH

In spite of the prevalence of aggressive humor in the popular polemic described in the last chapter, it must not be forgotten that those intensely opposed to Mormonism, like those intensely converted to it, were always a small minority of the population. The vast majority of average Americans, the perceptions of which this study has attempted to explore, would have been much nearer the center of that spectrum—somewhere between amusement and indifference. Shaped by the comic undercurrents of American humor, they would have seen the Book of Mormon, when they saw it at all, as an imaginative work of fiction.

One final example of this phenomenon is worth noting from the 1830s, when this assumption first began taking its place in the cultural frame of mind. Like Rochester's *Paul Pry* and Palmyra's Abner Cole did this in the earliest days of "Gold Bible fever," it confirms that the story of the Book of Mormon was achieving cultural currency. In 1833, a compilation of "Mother Goose's Melodies" was published in New York and Boston, a collection in some ways not unlike those Mother Goose stories that had been in circulation in Europe and America since the seventeenth century. But this collection promised a significant distinction, as evidenced by its lengthy title page: "Mother Goose's Melodies. The only Pure Edition. Containing all that have ever come to light of her memorable writings, together with those which have been discovered among the mss. of Herculaneum, likewise every one recently found in the same stone box which hold the

golden plates of the Book of Mormon. The whole compared, revised, and sanctioned, by one of the annotators of the Goose Family. With many new engravings. (Entered, according to the Act of Congress, in the year 1833, by Munroe & Francis, In the Clerk's office, of the District Court of Massachusetts.)”¹

Of course it was a complete farce. The idea that a book of fairy tales would need to be “compared, revised, and sanctioned”—and all this by one so well connected to the fictional “Goose family”—was preposterous. But as with its appropriation by *Paul Pry*, the story of the Book of Mormon was here assumed to be as well-known as the rediscovery of Herculaneum. Regarding the latter, the ruins of Herculaneum had first been discovered over a century earlier, but excavation had only just been reinstigated in 1828, piquing the public imagination. *Herculaneum and Other Poems* was published in England that year, James Fenimore Cooper and Ralph Waldo Emerson had spent time there in the late 1820s and early 1830s, respectively, and the *New York Mirror* published a series of well-received travel letters from a correspondent who visited the site in 1833, the same year this compilation of nursery rhymes appeared.² The publisher must have assumed that the Golden Bible filled a similar place in the popular imagination, and would evoke similar laughs at the thought of serving as a repository of ancient fairy tale texts. Obviously it was no more likely for lost Mother Goose nursery rhymes to have been secreted in nineteenth-century New York than in first-century Italy. It was all meant to be fiction—fairy tales authenticated by another fairy tale, as if either one merited the attention of district courts or acts of Congress. In fact, even this was a dig on the Book of

¹ *Mother Goose's Melodies* (New York: C. S. Francis and Co., 1833).

² Charles Room, *Herculaneum and Other Poems* (London: Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown and Green; Birmingham: J. C. Barlow, 1828); Meyer Reinhold, “American Visitors to Pompeii, Herculaneum, and Paestum in the Nineteenth Century,” *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 19, no. 1 (Spring 1985): 120–21.

Mormon, since its opening pages included a copyright that referred to “the Congress of the United States” and was authorized by the “Clerk of the Northern District of New York.”³ The other details on *Mother Goose’s* title page provide additional allusions to the Book of Mormon: its claims to the “only pure edition” of the gospel, its astonishing discovery as an ancient artifact, its miraculous translation supervised by a being not believed to exist. Readers of fairy tales would have known that such fantasy was not worth the time of courts and congresses, and would have laughed accordingly. The Book of Mormon seemed a likelier source of nursery rhymes than of apocryphal books of scripture.⁴ These subtle allusions spoke volumes about the Book of Mormon—things that apparently went without saying in the nineteenth-century mind.

Taking the ruins of Herculaneum and the tales of Mother Goose as opposite ends of the spectrum, in the early nineteenth century the American mind was beginning to differentiate more starkly between the two—the world of scientific discovery and historical investigation, and the world of folk tales, folk magic, and folk religion. The question for the Book of Mormon was on which side did it belong? As Richard Bushman rightly observed, when the public first caught wind of the Book of Mormon, “Joseph Smith stood on the line dividing visionary supernaturalism from rational Christianity—one of the many boundaries between the traditional and modern world in early-nineteenth-century America. He was difficult to place in relation to that line because he

³ Joseph Smith Jr., trans. *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), ii.

⁴ Earlier in the nineteenth century, an American visiting Italy had lamented that the papyri found at Herculaneum produced no lost books of Tacitus, Livy, or Polybius. Meyer Reinhold, “American Visitors to Pompeii, Herculaneum, and Paestum in the Nineteenth Century,” *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 19, no. 1 (Spring 1985): 117. By contrast, Mormons believed the Book of Mormon to contain lost books of ancient Christian prophets, something the general public found laughable.

faced in both directions.”⁵ The Book of Mormon seemed bidirectional as well, with angels and seer stones on one side of the cultural divide, and witnesses and affidavits on the other. Invariably these divisions inherent to the Book of Mormon led to even more obvious divisions about it, a distinction the Rochester *Gem* drew clearly: skeptics who labeled the book a “bantling of wickedness and credulity” versus believers who considered it “the only revelation which men can safely live and die by.” Siding with the skeptics, the *Gem* did not “anticipate a very great turning to this heresy,” especially since “the press” had already “aimed a blow at it.” After all, it concluded, “the public are too much enlightened.”⁶

But it was precisely the principles of the Enlightenment that Mormon missionaries were quick to invoke. In presenting the Book of Mormon they often began by showing the set of testimonies included with the text: one from three witnesses avowing that along with Joseph Smith they too had seen the angel and beheld the plates, and one from eight additional witnesses who affirmed that they had “seen and hefted” the plates as well.⁷ Martin Harris, one of the three original witnesses, had gone to New York City to substantiate some of Smith’s translation, and though contradictory stories of his exchange with Columbia professor Charles Anthon exist, Harris returned more convinced of the record’s authenticity than ever.⁸ Thus the Saints claimed empirical evidence for the plates, and seldom missed an opportunity to draw parallels between the Book of Mormon and any information that was forthcoming about America’s ancient inhabitants. Though

⁵ Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 57.

⁶ “Book of Mormon,” *The Gem* (Rochester), 25 December 1830, p. 135.

⁷ See, for example, the account of Samuel Smith and Phineas Young recounted in Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon*, 236.

⁸ See Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon*, 28–30.

they looked to Joseph Smith as a prophet, they welcomed whatever claims of archeology and linguistics might corroborate the Book of Mormon story, showing early Mormon converts to be as interested in “scientific” empiricism as their more “enlightened” counterparts.⁹ As historian Steven Harper has observed, these converts saw in Mormonism an eminently “reasonable” faith that “simultaneously satisfied both [their] intellectual and spiritual longings,” one in harmony with the period’s “democratization of rationalism.”¹⁰

On the other hand, as already shown, the more common opinion of the Book of Mormon placed it unquestionably on the side of Mother Goose. One wonders then, if Joseph Smith never deviated from his assertion that the Book of Mormon was an authentic scriptural record, and if a growing number of followers embraced it as the reasonable, verifiable word of God, why was the Book of Mormon so readily seen as a laughable piece of imagination? The previous chapters have suggested an American comic mindset as one explanation, complete with tropes into which the Mormon story neatly fit. However, a far more obvious answer exists as well: such a story simply could not be accepted as fact. Repeated references to their “enlightened age” suggests that for many Americans, no comic stereotypes were needed to forewarn anyone with common sense that seer stones and golden bibles were ridiculous, that angels and prophets belonged in ancient Israel, not in the contemporary United States. In fact, in much of the country at the time, the pendulum had swung so far from revelation to reason that even the ancients were under strict investigation. Still, Mormonism held, and yet holds on.

⁹ See Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon*, 89–106.

¹⁰ Harper, “Infallible Proofs,” 99–118.

Which brings us to a final question, one which cannot adequately be addressed here. It is, in fact, essentially the same question we have been discussing all along, but now posed to the twenty-first century: What place does the Book of Mormon hold in the popular imagination? Again, not to committed Latter-day Saints, of whom there are relatively few, and not to committed anti-Mormons, of whom there are even fewer, but to average Americans, what is the Golden Bible?

As was the case in the early nineteenth century, nearly two centuries later humor still promises to be one of our best points of entry. Popular humor still reveals—perhaps now in a “viral” age more than ever—the commonalities of our culture. As Joseph Boskin argues, it is “a social fulcrum,” one that remains what Constance Rourke called it nearly a century ago: “a fashioning instrument in America, cleaving its way through the national life, holding tenaciously to the spread elements of that life.” And somehow, after nearly two hundred years, the Book of Mormon still retains its cultural resonance, its “social signification,” to borrow another Boskin phrase.¹¹ People still joke about the Mormons’ “Gold Bible.” As late as October 2011 Jon Stewart’s wildly popular satirical news report, *The Daily Show*, could speak of “golden plates buried in upstate New York” in a spoof on the weirdness of all religion. A few months earlier, comedian Stephen Colbert did the same. *South Park* creators Trey Parker and Matt Stone, neither of whom is a Latter-day Saint, could say, “We love Mormons. We love the whole mythology, we love the whole thing.” But as they admitted, their interest “isn’t really about being a Mormon. That just seems like the vessel or the vehicle for whatever the metaphor is.”¹²

¹¹ Boskin, *Rebellious Laughter*, 2, 9.

¹² These statements come from episodes of *The Daily Show* that aired on October 17, 2011 and March 10, 2011. Colbert’s comment was part of the August 10, 2011 episode of *The Colbert Report*. Past episodes can be accessed at www.thedailyshow.com and www.colbertnation.com.

“Whatever the metaphor.” Such a vague allusion bespeaks the breadth of America’s potential appropriation of what Parker and Stone would call Mormon’s “mythic” possibilities. As historian Gordon Wood once summarized, “Mormonism,” from its inception, “was both mystical and secular; restorationist and progressive; communitarian and individualistic; hierarchical and congregational; authoritarian and democratic; antinomian and arminian; anti-clerical and priestly; revelatory and empirical; utopian and practical; ecumenical and nationalistic.”¹³ And—and here is the point—so is America. This string of dichotomies suggests a highly bifurcated if not self-contradictory faith—a “people of paradox” as Terryl Givens recently called the Latter-day Saints—yet Wood argues that it was precisely this active “tension” between “contradictory forces” that accounts for Mormonism’s initial rise to prominence within the confused and extremely competitive religious marketplace of early nineteenth-century America.¹⁴ America itself was struggling to plot a course amid the conflicting currents and shifting crosswinds of the time—and it still is—and if not a conscious reaction *to*, early Mormonism was at least a telling reflection *of*, that turbulence. At no other time in American history, Wood argues, could Mormonism’s unique amalgamation of “different tendencies of thought” have taken root in the popular imagination.

Fittingly, it was just such a revolutionary period that spurred Dickens’ famous opening of *A Tale of Two Cities*. Only during such times of contested cultural upheaval, in which conflicting opinions are held so strongly by those on opposite ends of the spectrum, can society be simultaneously described in such contradictory terms. Channeling Gordon

¹³ Gordon S. Wood, “Evangelical America and Early Mormonism,” *New York History* 61 (October 1980): 380.

¹⁴ Terryl L. Givens, *People of Paradox: A History of Mormon Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

Wood through Charles Dickens then, early Mormonism was, depending on one's perspective, a melding of wisdom and foolishness, belief and incredulity, Light and Darkness, hope and despair. It was a child of the best, and the worst, of times.¹⁵

But as just mentioned, the point here is that Mormonism's "different tendencies of thought" are *still* at least a partial reflection of America's popular imagination, because America itself is home to such a tangle of tendencies. We still live in the best and worst of times. Hence society still jokes about golden plates and the Angel Moroni, and in the process, wrestles with its own ambiguities. Humor surrounding the Book of Mormon therefore still plays apart in outing incongruities in such a way that we can bear to face them. That a Broadway *Book of Mormon* could win nine Tony Awards in 2011 and that an equally Gold Bible-based *Angels in America* could win a Pulitzer Prize nearly twenty years before speaks volumes about the Book of Mormon—not about its truth or falsehood, but about its resonance in American culture. As Richard Bushman recently remarked in looking back at his own half-century of Mormon studies, "Mormonism is a cultural resource within the American imagination." It "intrudes on artistic minds." Certain elements of Mormonism have become "part of national lore, elements in a great depository upon which writers and artists can draw to express their sense of where we are as a people." As such, as stories are spun and tales told, the Book of Mormon will remain "a mythic presence in the national imagination."¹⁶

¹⁵ Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 1999), 1. Each pair of adjectives cited comes from this oft-quoted opening paragraph.

¹⁶ Richard L. Bushman, "After the Golden Age," *Journal of Mormon History* 38, no. 3 (Summer 2012): 229–30.

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