[FORTHCOMING IN *AMERICANST APPROACHES TO THE BOOK OF MORMON*

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NEPHITE SECULARIZATION; OR,

PICKING AND CHOOSING IN *THE BOOK OF MORMON*

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> Every man has a natural, and, in our country, a constitutional right to be a false prophet, as well as a true prophet.
> --Joseph Smith, "The King Follett Sermon"

> And they are free to choose liberty and eternal life, through the great Mediator of all men, or to choose captivity and death, according to the captivity and power of the devil.
> --2 Nephi 2:27

Sometime in 1820—or so the story goes—a fourteen-year-old Joseph Smith, "wrought up in [his] mind, respecting the subject of religion" and vexed by "the different systems taught by the children of men," ventured into the woods to ask for divine guidance about which one among the competing sects that had by then flooded the "burned-over" district of Western New York was "right or [which] was wrong."[1] God, he figured, "could not be the author of such confusion," and so he pleaded for clarity, armed with the words of the epistle of James: "But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him" (James 1:5). Alone in the forest he witnessed God and Christ descend from heaven in a pillar of light to dispense the promised wisdom. But the two figures did not instruct him about which existing system to choose; instead, they informed him that all were false. This blanket negation was not the end of the story, of course, for subsequent revelations would reportedly lead Smith to a set of plates buried in a hill near Palmyra, NY that, once translated, would become known as *The Book of Mormon*.

There is an admirable matter-of-factness to Smith's first vision. Confronted with disparate, even contradictory, creeds, he very reasonably turned to an ultimate source to resolve, as he put it, this "war of words, and tumult of opinions."[2] And as the verse from James had promised, he received his answer. No doubt scores of thoughtful fourteen year olds then and now, upon facing a sprawl of religious possibilities, have asked to know which the right one to follow is. But Smith's experience, shaped by the conditions of religious life in his historical moment and animated by his furtive and penetrating imagination, uncovered tectonic movements in the background of American religious and social life of the early nineteenth century, revealing not only the deep anxieties of having to choose a religion but also a method (divine revelation) by which such a choice could be made.

Because it hews so closely to the patterns of the classic American evangelical conversion narrative, Smith's first vision has struck many as a mere duplication of a well-worn form of Protestant religious experience. Nearly all the evangelical luminaries of Smith's own moment and before ventured alone into the woods to empty their hearts in prayer. The narratives of men like Charles Grandison Finney, Jonathan Edwards, and John Marrant (to name a few) are full of rich, sensory details and vivid descriptions of profound transformations of the heart. Finney, for instance, recalls in his *Memoirs* the "waves and waves of liquid love" that rolled over him during his conversion, and Edwards writes of the comparatively mild but no less nourishing "inward, sweet delight in God and divine things."[3] Yet nowhere in Smith's first vision is there a description of the agonies and ecstasies of conversion. He presents himself not as one whose heart needs changing but one whose mind needs persuading. "Information," he told the infamous prophet Matthias in 1835, was what he "most desired" at the time.[4] Smith's need to know which among the sea of clashing creeds he should cling to transforms the deeply affective experience of evangelical conversion into a fundamentally cognitive one. As the English polymath Sir Thomas Browne wrote in defense of a religious faith that did not depend on visible miracles, "to credit ordinary and visible objects is not faith, but perswasion."[5] In Smith's first vision, the conventional scene of religious *conversion* collapses into rhetorical *persuasion*, and divine intervention settles a state of cognitive dissonance rather than ravishing a sinful heart with infinite love.[6]

By turning the evangelical conversion narrative into a story about the resolution of the sociological and theological crisis posed by religious voluntarism, Smith signals just how far the imperative to choose had permeated the region of his upbringing. In the first quarter of the nineteenth century the burned-over district became, in the words of one historian, a "center of gravity for spiritual stimuli," a hotbed of theological innovation fueled by a profusion of religious zeal.[7] Between upstart prophets, nomadic sects, masonic chapters, and a medley of Protestant denominations vying tirelessly for new congregants (Universalists, Baptists, Presbyterians, and Methodists among them) the social world that was growing up along the banks of the Erie Canal was primed to foster a deep sense of uncertainty within those who had come to care for the fate of their immortal souls. Furthermore, the imperative to choose a religion in a territory bereft of an established church and swarmed with religious sects is indicative of wider changes then occurring within Western modernity that here took on distinctively American forms.[8]

Smith was among the first generation in the United States to experience what the sociologist Peter Berger calls the "universalization of heresy," in which heresy—here thought of in both its etymological sense of *haeresis,* or "choice," as well as its more familiar theological sense—shifts from being a "possibility" to a "necessity" as the result of the pluralization of disparate worldviews. Under these conditions, Berger argues, "picking and choosing becomes an imperative."[9] In his monumental work, *A Secular Age*, the philosopher Charles Taylor shows how Berger's pluralization thesis remains bound (at least within Latin Christendom) to a story of *secularization*.

Historically understood as a sociological process describing the retreat or decline of religious belief under the peculiar pressures of modernity, secularization reigned for much of the twentieth century as a master narrative for modern sociology. In its most familiar formulations, scholars have pointed to the excision of theological language from the public sphere and the perceived decline in religious belief among individuals as evidence of this movement. But the secularization thesis, once posited as an inevitable consequence of modernization, has come under intense scrutiny during the last three decades as religiosity has exploded across the globe. Taylor's version of secularization, however, focuses not on the mostly debunked (or at least unevenly distributed) theses of privatization and decline but rather on the changing conditions that govern how individuals experience religious belief. In his view, secularization describes the shift "from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace."[10] Among the many threads of Taylor's sweeping argument is his claim that modern secularity rests upon a changing conception of the self. Selves that were once "open and porous and vulnerable to a world of spirits and powers" are steadily supplanted by selves that are "buffered," innured from the forces of the beyond through a virtually impermeable barrier that separates self from world and in which "the possibility exists of taking a distance from, disengaging from everything outside the mind."[11] This capacity for detachment makes the experience of belief as choice a live possibility and, by means of a process of "mutual fragilization" generated by the contact between competing religious and non-religious worldviews, multiplies indefinitely the kinds of belief that can be chosen.

The young Smith undoubtedly encountered the existential trial of religious choice that Taylor and Berger identify, but Taylor's framework nevertheless fails to account for how Smith and so many of his contemporaries experienced secularity, which we may here define as the set of background conditions that "constitut[ed] the real in a social imaginary and establish[ed] religion as a category."[12] This is so first because Smith's dilemma was occasioned not by the predominating presence of unbelief (as in Taylor's account) but by an array of contradictory orthodoxies. In short, Smith's religious milieu was one in which there was too much belief rather than too little. And second, the self experiencing this particular dilemma was neither exclusively porous nor exclusively buffered. As many historians have noted, the burned-over district was a region still teeming with magical forces, and Smith himself had accrued a reputation among his neighbors as an able scryer and treasure seeker through his ability to locate valuable hidden artifacts.[13] The self that Smith presents in his accounts of the first vision is at once open to the interventions of magical forces yet nevertheless destabilized by the din of irreconcilable religious truth claims, a self kept porous by the collective faith in magical forces yet buffered by the cognitive dissonance produced by sectarianism. In a case like Smith's, concepts like disenchantment or buffering do little to explain the experience of religious choice.[14]

Taylor begins his study of secularity with the question, "What does it feel like to live within a secular age?" Any answer to this question, claims John Lardas Modern, must "explain those processes . . . in which religion becomes naturalized as an option rather than an obligation."[15] Smith's solitary prayer in the wilderness gives us a glimpse into the experience of religious optionality, but it is *The Book of Mormon* that aspires to explain, in its own distinctive terms, how this reality came to be.

Smith's supposed discovery and translation of an ancient set of golden plates were the marvelous and baroque culmination of events that began with his adolescent arboreal plaint. Discovered in a hill near Palmyra, NY, their solidity and weight provided a concrete resolution to an ephemeral if powerfully felt anxiety. The book strives to quell the problem of religious choice through an astonishing—if deeply problematic—gathering of Hebraic scripture, counterfactual Amerindian history, and Protestant pluralism. But its narrative is no mere reflection of the conditions of Smith's religious mileu, for its epic narrative of the decline and fall of the Nephite people is also an alternative history of how religion came to be seen as a choice rather than an obligation and an exploration of how religious truth might continue to be asserted under such conditions. A story of the transatlantic exodus of a pre-Christian group of Israelites from Jerusalem to the Americas, *The Book of Mormon* has the distinction of thinking through American history without recourse to the history of Europe. The secularization story it tells, therefore, bypasses Eurocentric narratives of secularization like Taylor's in order to carve out a fresh historical channel to explain the emergence of religious choice in a world unambiguously penetrated by the divine and unencumbered by the institutional weight of the Catholic Church. In crafting such a story from scratch—one in which the gravitational force of the old orthodoxies is notably absent—*The Book of Mormon* explores the furthest implications of the naturalization of choice and at the same time theorizes how this historical process might be reversed through the mechanism of revelation.

In what follows, I reconstruct the submerged tale of Nephite secularization in *The Book of Mormon* through a consideration first of the peculiar trajectories of Nephitic political and spiritual institutions and then of the ways that heterodoxy expresses itself in the public sphere. This story is confined to what are known as the large plates, the series of historical books (Mosiah – Mormon) that Smith translated first during the period April – June 1829 but that appear after the small plates (1 Nephi – Jacob) in the published manuscript. In the conclusion, I turn to those sections of the book that Smith translated last (the small plates) in order to examine how the book itself, in all its materiality, attempts to resolve the problems posed by Smith's particular experience of secularity in the early nineteenth-century United States.[16]

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Nephite secularization is not European secularization. This is to say that it is not a process born out of ecclesiastic infighting, institutional fragmentation, and the rise of political powers independent of a universal spiritual institution (the Catholic Church). Instead, it begins with the disarticulation of theological authority from political authority and the creation of a public sphere in which dissenting voices compete for congregants. This pluralization of religious possibilities, I aim to show, eventually spawns a form of unbelief that radicalizes the principle of choice into a peculiarly Nephitic brand of secularism, a "self-sufficient humanism" whose legitimacy is grounded in the denial of a prophetic tradition rather than the rejection of a spiritual institution. This immanent humanism, in turn, creeps into the social imaginary and produces a public that is—approximately—phenomenologically secular.[17] But this particular social process also occurs within a world that is never *actually* disenchanted. Nephite selves eventually become buffered, but the world they are buffered from has not changed: signs, wonders, heavenly emissaries, and revelations continue to abound. The cataclysmic theophany of the resurrected Christ in 3 Nephi, I will argue, erupts into the narrative as a collective and undoubtable manifestation of divine presence whose function is to reverse the secularizing trajectory of Nephitic life.

The book of Mosiah, which is the first book inscribed on the large plates of Mormon, begins almost in the manner of a fairy tale. It opens at the tail-end of a long period of stability and social unity brought about through the benevolent reign of King Benjamin. A monarch and a prophet, a sovereign and a high priest, we first see Benjamin as he is preparing to transfer his crown to his son Mosiah. Before he abdicates the throne, however, he delivers one final address to his subjects. His long dispensation, which he proclaims to all his people, is public in the fullest sense of the word. The buzzing hive of human life that swarms to the temple to hear the king is so numerous that Benjamin is forced to "erect" a tower in order that "his people might hear the words which he should speak unto them" (Mos. 2:7). In the address, Benjamin relates the recent visit paid him by an angel of the Lord who had delivered a prophecy of the coming Christ. (At this point in the large plates, it is ambiguous whether any such prophecies had been made prior.) The redemptive force of this prophetic vision prompts him to rename his subjects the "people of Christ," a designation that in one fell swoop links theological expectation with ethnic identity and territorial domain. It is a signal moment of perfect religious and political unity. But when Benjamin's reign concludes and his son Mosiah assumes the crown this harmonious unanimity is fractured; the geography of the book begins to expand, and internal divisions and political reconfigurations begin to tear and fragment the tightly knit social fabric that Benjamin had woven.

Mosiah turns out to be the last of the Nephite monarchs, and his final sovereign act is to abolish the institution of the monarchy itself. This sets in motion a process that progressively distinguishes religion from politics within Nephite culture. Mosiah's decision to disassemble the office of the king stems both from the fact that none of his own sons wish to assume the crown—which would precipitate an interruption in the monarchical line and leave a power vacuum after his death—as well as the example of the wicked King Noah, whose life and reign prove to Mosiah that not all monarchs are by nature benevolent. In place of the monarchy he institutes a diffuse system of judges, the structure of which reads like a hybrid of a republican government and the judge system of ancient Israel. Although this legislative-judicial system retains a theological grounding (the judges are responsible for "establish[ing] the laws of God" in Zarahemla and "judg[ing] the people according to his commandments" [Mos. 29:13]), because they are chosen "by the voice of the people" (Mos. 29:29) each judgies occupies a secular office independent from the Nephite church. The division effected between priests and judges is a subtle one but with important consequences, for between the end of the book of Mosiah and the beginning of the book of Alma church-state relations within Nephite culture undergo another dramatic transformation—one the book does not explicitly chronicle—by legalizing a nascent form of religious liberty. The institution of the judge system and the steady dislodgement of theological from political authority creates conditions whereby belief in the Messiah, which in *The Book of Mormon* is a necessary component of social stability and a cornerstone of orthodoxy, ceases to be a given.

The liberty these new political conditions afford enables dissent to enter the public sphere, a transformative process that both naturalizes religious choice and generates competitive orthodoxies. The slow drift of religion and politics into semi-autonomous spheres thus marks the institutional prelude to Nephite secularization. And, just as Smith went into the wilderness to ask which of the competing sects he had encountered in Palmyra was right and which wrong, *The Book of Mormon* grapples with the problem of how the principle of religious liberty, which produces multiple dissenting groups, can co-exist with a particular form of orthodox belief.

Nephitic approaches to the problems raised by religious liberty are mentioned twice in the large plates. Both are in the book of Alma and both occur in relation to a specific instance of heretical intrusion into the public sphere. Each, however, resolves the problem quite differently. The fact that explicit reflections on the shifting meanings of religious liberty are paired with representations of the consequences of such a policy helps to chart the book's increasingly sophisticated narratological solutions to the problems posed by religious difference.

The first of these moments appears in Alma 1 in response to the sudden rise of the roving preacher Nehor. Nehor, we learn, has been disseminating a doctrine of theological universalism (all people are saved regardless of conduct) and a defense of a tax-supported clergy. On one of his itinerant journeys he encounters the Christian hero Gideon, and the two argue with one another over Nehor's beliefs until Nehor, enraged, suddenly murders his interlocutor, a crime we are led to believe is a direct consequence of his belief in universal salvation. Since Nehor believes himself saved regardless of his actions, the logic goes, what's the harm in murder? When he is eventually apprehended, Nehor is tried only for Gideon's murder and not for his erroneous beliefs. Yet, with his head on the chopping block, he nevertheless confesses his error. What it is that prompts this eleventh hour change of heart, however, remains decidedly vague: "And it came to pass that . . . they carried [Nehor] upon the top of the hill Manti, and there *he was caused, or rather did acknowledge* . . . that what he had taught to the people was contrary to the word of God" (Alma 1:15, emphasis added). The semantic gulf between "was caused" and “did acknowledge” is not a trivial one and leaves the actual cause of Nehor’s repentance frustratingly indeterminate.

Underlying this episode is the claim that bad conduct is a direct consequence of bad belief, which in this case implies that a belief in universal salvation lifts the prohibition on murder. We might call this the *cynical* argument in defense of religious liberty, one that the novelist Catharine Maria Sedgwick—a contemporary of Smith’s—dramatizes to great effect in her anti-Calvinist novel *A New-England Tale* (1822). The explanation of this principle that the narrator (Mormon) offers comports with the events described in the text. Noting the fact that Nehor’s eventual execution has not prevented the spread of his doctrine, Mormon observes that numerous individuals continued “preaching false doctrines; and this they did for the sake of riches and honor. Nevertheless, they durst not lie, if it were known, for fear of the law, for liars were punished; therefore they *pretended* to preach according to their belief; and now the law could have no power on any man for his belief” (Alma 1:17, emphasis added). Mormon’s displeasure with the law’s inability to punish false beliefs is palpable. False prophets, he claims, use the freedom of belief as a loophole to get away with deliberate lying. In this view, religious freedom is nothing more than a tool for deceit. Nevertheless, as Nehor’s case exemplifies, freedom of belief continues to be permitted because it is assumed that erroneous beliefs will result, at the end of the day, in criminal behavior punishable by law. The supposed linkage of good practice to right belief and bad practice to heterodox belief thus allows the law to legislate belief indirectly, a work-around solution that goes some way towards explaining how disparate religious systems can be allowed to co-exist without threatening the orthodoxy they challenge.

By asserting an unambiguous correlation between belief and practice, however, the treatment of religious liberty and the public containment of dissent in Alma 1 is overly reductive.

For what is to be done when radical dissent fails to issue in criminal acts and when the content of dissenting beliefs challenge a prevailing orthodoxy on the grounds of reason rather than of self interest? In Alma 30 is an episode that parallels this earlier one, but it substantially reformulates the terms of the previous scene even as it retains its structure. The resemblances between the two are immediately apparent: both contain narratorial discussions of religious liberty and both represent the rise and eventual downfall of a popular heretical preacher. The critical revision that separates these two scenes, however, lies in the degree to which choice has become a central theological problem and the richness with which it is figured.

The chapter begins with a restatement of Nephite religious freedom, but this time Mormon it as a centerpiece of religious orthodoxy rather than a regrettable necessity of social life:

> Now there was no law against a man's belief; for it was strictly contrary to the commands of God that there should be a law which should bring men on to unequal grounds. For thus saith the scripture, 'Choose ye this day, whom ye will serve.' Now if a man desired to serve God, it was his privilege; or rather, if he believed in God it was a privilege to serve him; but if he did not believe in him there was no law to punish him. (Alma 30:9)

In this positive, if guarded, defense of the principle of religious choice the absence of a law that would punish individuals for their beliefs is no longer treated as an oversight to be exploited by the deceitful and lamented by the faithful, but is in fact a legal realization of the "commands of God." For a society to require uniform belief would, Mormon concludes, "bring men on unequal grounds" and deny them the "privilege" of choice. The prooftext he offers for this claim is Joshua 24:8 wherein the biblical judge Joshua, addressing all the tribes of Israel in Canaan, asks his audience to decide what god or gods they will serve: “And if it seem evil unto you to serve the Lord, choose you this day whom ye will serve; whether the gods which your fathers served that *were* on the other side of the flood, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land ye dwell: but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord” (Josh. 24:15). Joshua’s audience unanimously answers this command by saying, “God forbid that we should forsake the Lord, to serve other gods” (Josh. 24:16-17). Where Joshua’s imperative leaves no ambiguity as to the right choice, Mormon’s citation of the verse uses the speech not to underscore what the right choice is but to legitimize choice as a precondition of orthodox belief. This shift reveals the degree to which the naturalization of choice has become a keystone of piety within Nephitic culture.

This defense of choice is a prelude to the introduction of Korihor, another false prophet who roams the countryside preaching a doctrine that would not have seemed out of place among freethinkers in the early nineteenth century United States. Korihor is a more richly rendered dissenter than the heterodox strawman Nehor, and, unlike his predecessor, Korihor’s beliefs don’t result in any conduct punishable by law. As far as we can tell, his behavior is unimpeachable. Moreover, he’s afforded far more space than any other dissenter in *The Book of Mormon* to articulate and defend his views, which, to eyes grown accustomed to panegyrics of human autonomy and to critiques of the excesses of religious authority, have the ring not only of familiarity but also of sensibility. Finally, and most importantly, where Nehor had only differed on very specific points of ecclesiology (a tax-supported priestly class) and theology (universal salvation) Korihor rejects Nephite orthodoxy wholesale. The threat he poses is more far-reaching because he issues direct challenges to the messianic prophecies that are the keystone of Nephite theology. Korihor doesn’t just peddle new theological baubles, he embodies choice as an existential condition.

Motivating Korihor's proselytizing is his denunciation of the prophecies of the coming of Christ, which he decries as nothing more than the "foolish tradition of your fathers" (Alma 30:14). He condemns these traditions first for their improbability ("How do ye know of their surety? Behold, ye cannot know of things which ye do not see; thererefore ye cannot know that there shall be a Christ") and, second, for their misuse by Nephite religious leaders who invoke "visions and pretended mysteries" to oppress and manipulate a credulous people (Alma 30:15). Korihor goes on to pathologize the Nephite prophets themselves by reducing visionary experience to the "effect of a frenzied mind" (Alma 30:16). In place of the old prophecies, he proposes a philosophy of immanent self-reliance and human perfectibility, declaring that "every man fared in this life according to the management of the creature; therefore, every man prospered according to his genius, and that every man conquered according to his strength; and whatsoever a man did was no crime" (Alma 30:17). This idealization of the "management of the creature" extends choice beyond either believing or not believing in God—although this is where it begins—into a philosophy of untroubled and unrestrained human autonomy, a valorization of the will and a celebration of atomistic human flourishing. His is a worldview that radicalizes the principle of choice by extending it beyond religion to every facet of human life; it is the *heretical* counterpart to Mormon's *orthodox* defense of religious liberty.

I should pause here to note that Korihor's articulation of his self-sufficient humanism is a critical juncture in the larger story of Nephite secularization, for it is at this moment that Nephite secularization and Nephitic secularism (or Korihorism) intersect with Taylor's narrative of secularization in the West. For Taylor, the availability of exclusive (i.e., immanent) humanism as a live option for individuals is the crucial harbinger of the "coming of modern secularity."[18] Exclusive humanism, argues Taylor, is defined by its having "no final goals beyond human flourishing," as apt a characterization as any for Korihor's philosophy.[19] Considered in this light, we might think of Korihor as the first Nephite secularist and perhaps even the first representative of exclusive humanism in the Americas. But, as we shall see below, Taylorian secularism and Nephitic secularism, although they share many common assumptions, are not simply equivalents of one another.

The secularization story Taylor tells in *A Secular Age* tracks how exclusive humanism became a legitimate option in European history through a series of convoluted intellectual, institutional, and theological reforms within Latin Christendom. It's not a linear narrative by any means (Taylor calls it a "zig-zagging story"), but its hairpin turns and unintended consequences notwithstanding, it is fundamentally a story about the Catholic Church, the institutional bastion of orthodox Christianity. Yet, the politico-theological dilemma posed by the changing roles of the Catholic Church in Europe, which the political theorist Pierre Manent has called the "key to European development," is a dynamic conspicuously absent from Nephitic life.[20] There is no equivalent in Nephite church history to Taylor's Master Reform Narrative (MRN), in which reform-minded Friars gave way to the early Protestants who, in turn, created space for the rise of latitudinarians and Deists (the forerunners of modern humanists), a steady movement of reformation within the church that had the unintended effect of Christianizing the Christianity right out of Europe and opening the floodgates for an explosion of worldviews, each of which attempted to mediate in its own way the poles of orthodox Christianity and unbelief.

Nephite civilization, however, because it enacts political disestablishment and the naturalization of religious choice through quasi-biblical forms of governance, ends up producing an exclusive humanism differently situated than the kind Taylor describes. First, Nephitic humanism is not the cause of pluralization but the effect of a public sphere already pluralized, and second, the orthodoxy against which Korihor rages is not a monolithic institution (the Catholic Church) but a diffuse tradition of messianic prophecy. Korihor's humanism is therefore distinctive insofar as it legitimizes itself through its declared opposition to a particular prophetic tradition within a pre-advent New World culture, the validity of which would be decided once and for all when the Christ either is or is not born, crucified, and resurrected. The explicit claim at the heart of Nephite orthodoxy makes it so that any heretical opposition is potentially falsifiable through future events. Where in Taylor's narrative the variety of belief positions generated by exclusive humanism multiplies indefinitely, Korihor's humanism, because it opposes a very specific set of prophetic utterances, is invested with a distinctly temporal dimension. Either the prophecies of a Messiah will be gloriously fulfilled or they will be refuted once and for all.

The Book of Mormon flags this temporal aspect of Korihor's apostasy by referring to him as an "Anti-Christ." Although other figures in *The Book of Mormon* also warrant this title, Korihor is the only one to whom it's explicitly applied. As it's used here, "Anti-Christ" should be understood in a sense nearer to its original meaning—drawn from the first and second epistles of John—which denoted merely an individual who denied Jesus's divinity rather than (as we now tend to hear it used) a singular antagonist to Christ whose appearance in the world heralds the end of days.[21] The word is thus a convenient term to characterize a class of people who deny Jesus's messianic status. But where the epistolist uses "antichrist" to refer to post-advent deniers of the Christ, *The Book of Mormon* uses it in a pre-advent context, which is to say that these dissenters deny things to come and not things that have already occurred. The virtue of this proleptic orientation is that it attaches the equivalent of a countdown timer to all religious dissent. If the old prophecies are fulfilled then denial (and thus dissent from Nephite orthodoxy) will be impossible.

Before we can consider the endgame of Nephitic secularism in the fulfillment of messianic prophecy it is instructive to ask how—in the moment of Korihor's appearance on the Nephite scene—orthodoxy can be defended without sacrificing the imperative to choose, which as Mormon's orthodox defense of the principle of religious liberty quoted above demonstrates, had become a precondition for Nephite religious life. How, to put it another way, can individuals be brought to accept religious truth without being compelled by law to conform to it? The problem, as in Smith's first vision, is one of persuasion and not conversion.

In the Korihor episode, persuasion initially takes the form of argumentation when the High Priest Alma confronts Korihor about his beliefs. The encounter between the two religious leaders is one of few in *The Book of Mormon* where the narrative mode borders on the novelistic. The antebellum novel, it should be said, because of its investments in character and plot, was a genre much more deeply committed to the ideals of deliberation and dialogue than *The Book of Mormon*. (One might think here of the verbal exchanges over religious belief and practice in the novels of James Fenimore Cooper, Lydia Maria Child, or Harriet Beecher Stowe.) As scholars like Sandra Gustafson and Amanda Anderson have demonstrated, deliberation and argumentation are two of the novel's principle means of guiding characters towards truth.[22] Curiously, however, the dispute between Alma and Korihor ultimately amounts to nothing. Even after Alma methodically refutes his accusations, Korihor holds fast to his heresy. When their exchange reaches a standstill, Korihor insists that the only way he will be "convinced that there is a God" is if Alma shows him a "sign" (Alma 30:43). Alma at first resists his antagonist's demand, but when Korihor continues to press him on this point he finally relents and tells his interlocutor that he shall have his sign; Korihor, he says, “shall be struck dumb” and “shall no more have utterance” (Alma 30:49). And, in an instant, he is. The miraculous intervention persuades Korihor of God’s existence and power, who—now incapable of speech—writes his confession on a piece of bark. The scene, which begins as a nuanced theological dialogue that seems as if it will model a liberal faith in the power of argument, quickly devolves into a demonstration of argument’s incapacity to persuade. In a theologically-inflected retort to the aspirations of the liberal novel, *The Book of Mormon* suggests that only the unambiguous intervention of supernatural forces can finally do the work of persuasion.

This underlying claim of the episode is further insisted upon in the content of Korihor’s confession. Having been cowed by the power Alma commands, Korihor admits he did not arrive at his views through a process of careful reasoning, but that the devil had “appeared unto [him] in the form of an angel, and said unto [him], ‘Go and reclaim this people, for all they have all gone astray after an unknown God’” (Alma 30:52). In a world of semi-porous selves, even one’s most deeply held beliefs, it would seem, are the product of either true or false revelation. No wonder, then, that argumentation proves to be an inadequate means of persuasion, acting as little more than ornamentation laid atop primary experiences of intuition or revelation.

Religious choice, then, boils down to a choice between revealed claims. And divine intervention, whether through signs, wonders, or revelation, is the only effective means of persuasion. But this is not to say that choice is in any way obviated by the primacy of revelation. Although their outcomes have the air of inevitability, the encounter between Korihor and Alma and similar episodes throughout *The Book of Mormon* are not “metaphysically rigged” in the way Gustafson argues many episodes from the Hebrew bible are. Demonstrations of divine power enter only to provide evidence of truth, but they nevertheless remain at some fundamental level *resistible*.[23] Individual agency, therefore, insofar as it is expressed through the power of religious choice, is not negated, but the difficulty of maintaining heterodox views becomes exponentially more difficult.

Korihor dies ignominously beneath the rampant hooves of another heretic's horse, and his name disappears with him. But the story of Nephite secularization does not end with his demise. This large-scale social transformation continues apace as Korihor's ideas—through acts of transmission the book neglects to detail—seep into the water table of the Nephite social imaginary and come to achieve a kind of taken-for-granted status among the people. Korihor, in short, heralds the virtually universal acceptance of Nephitic secularism.

The effects of this process are most clearly on display in chapter 16 of the book of Helaman in a scene that occurs several decades after Korihor's death. As the birth of the Messiah gets ever nearer, Mormon informs his readers that during this time "there were great signs given unto the people, and wonders; and the words of the prophets began to be fulfilled. And angels did appear unto men, wise men, and did declare unto them glad tidings of great joy; thus in this year the scriptures began to be fulfilled" (Hel. 16:13-14). The people, however, willfully ignore this overflow of heavenly signs by maintaining a fragile immanent frame about themselves, even going so far as to call into question the veracity of the prophecies. Speaking singularly as the *vox populi* they declare,

> *It is not reasonable that such a being as a Christ shall come*; if so, and he be the Son of God, the Father of heaven and of earth, as it has been spoken, why will he not show himself unto us as well as unto them who shall be at Jerusalem? . . . But behold, we know that this is a wicked tradition, which has been handed down unto us by our fathers, *to cause us that we should believe in some great*

> *and marvelous thing which should come to pass, but not among us, but in a land which is far distance, a land which we know not; therefore they can keep us in ignorance, for we cannot witness with our own eyes that they are true*. And they will, by the cunning and the mysterious arts of the evil one, work some great mystery which we cannot understand, which will keep us down to be servants to their words . . . and thus will they *keep us in ignorance* if we will yield ourselves unto them, all the days of our lives. (Hel. 16:18–21, emphasis mine)

The resonances with Korihor's speech are everywhere evident in this passage. The characterization of prophetic tradition as a tool for oppression parallels Korihor's accusations against Nephite clergy, and the collective demand they make for prophecies to be "reasonable" mirrors Korihor's demands for "surety." What solidifies the link between Korihor and this collective expression of the Nephite people is the fact that the only two places in the entirety of *The Book of Mormon* where the phrase "keep [us/them] in ignorance" appears are in this passage and Korihor's speech to the high priest Giddonah in Alma 30:23. The Nephite people in this collective utterance rehearse not only the substance of Korihor's critiques of Nephite orthodoxy but also his distinctive language, a clear indicator of the degree to which Korihor's worldview has consolidated into a normative way of seeing the world in Nephite culture.

Korihor, we can now see, stands at the beginning of the end of Nephite secularization. His life and posthumous influence demonstrate how a kind of political secularism (a nominal distinction between political and theological spheres of authority) over time naturalizes religion as choice rather than obligation and opens the door, in turn, for the universalization of a phenomenological secularism in which heterodoxy consolidates into Christ-denial.

When this unique brand of secularism, Korihorism, reaches peak saturation in Nephite culture the problem of persuasion escalates from an individual encounter to a collective event. As we have already seen, because this is a world in which insights are arrived at solely through either true or false revelations, forms of argument and deliberation are inadequate to such a task. Only divine intervention remains as a viable persuasive mechanism, but because the culture itself has undergone a secularization process that defines itself in opposition to messianic prophecies, and because these new background conditions entail a buffered public, mere signs and wonders fall short. Collective theophany, which in this case takes the form of Christ's post-resurrection advent among the Nephites, becomes the sole antidote.[24]

In their collective speech in the book of Helaman quoted above, the Nephite people raise for the first time the question of why Christ, who they have been told will live, die, and be reborn in a region of the globe far removed from their own experience, won't also appear to them. Prior to this moment, the possibility of Christ's visitation to the Nephites is only raised twice, leading Grant Hardy to the conclusion that the large plates are "*not* structured around a straightforward expectation of Jesus' postresurrection appearance among the Nephites that is satisfied and brought to an unambiguous conclusion" (Hardy, 182). If we see *The Book of Mormon* as a text that is evolving in almost real time, however, it becomes clear that the evidentiary demands of a secularized Nephite public transform the possibility of Christ's appearance among the Nephites from a possibility into a necessity.[25] The event becomes the last remaining narratological solution to the problem of Nephitic secularism.

Although preceded by all the supernatural fanfare one could hope for—a booming, disembodied voice and terrifying climate events—Christ's appearance to the Nephites in 3 Nephi is a little deflating. Since nearly all of Jesus's speech is drawn verbatim from the gospels and thus offers little novelty to the eager reader of a new scripture, Hardy acknowledges that this profound moment of theophanic drama might strike a reader hoping for a radically new revelation from the resurrected Christ as "dissapointing or frustrating."[26] But the import and interest of Jesus's appearance are not in what he says but in *how* he manifests himself. In the gospel accounts of his resurrection, Jesus only ever appears to his small coterie of apostles, but in *The Book of Mormon* he makes himself known to an entire populous simultaneously. This collective experience of theophany is intended to override the axiomatic doubts of an entire populous and to demonstrate the unambiguous fulfillment of the prophetic tradition at the heart of Nephitic orthodoxy. And it works, if only for a time.

The effect of Christ's appearance is a social and theological unity that lasts for more than two centuries, a testament to the persuasive capacities of collective revelation if there ever was one. And yet, its effectiveness at resolving difference slowly fades as time marches on. After two hundred and ten years we learn that the problem of sectarian division had begun to rear its ugly head once again. Mormon, now in a tone of lamentation, observes that during this period "priests and false prophets . . . buil[t] up many churches" (4 Ne. 1:34); religious options multiply exponentially with the rise of both false Christian churches that "did deny the more parts of his gospel" (4 Ne. 1:27) and Christ-denying churches that "did persecute the true church of Christ" (4 Ne. 1:28). This new eruption of unmediated dissent—pluralization on steroids—sends Nephitic culture along an irreversible course toward irreversible contention and bloody religious warfare. From the *cynical*, *orthodox*, and *heretical* approaches to religious liberty with which we began, we can now add the *apocalyptic*, a vision of religious choice as unfettered and uncontainable sectarian division.

The history of the Nephites and Lamanites, because it began as an explanation of Amerindian declension, was always going to be a tragedy. But the mechanisms by which this inevitable outcome occurred are worth reflecting upon. To borrow an old cliché: the journey, in this case, is more interesting than the destination. Christ's appearance to the Nephites, as we have seen, creates a theological consensus that reverses the secularizing trends within Nephite culture—but only for a time. Revelation, it seems, even as grand a one as Jesus's descent among the Nephites, has a half-life; its effects decay with time, creedal profusion recurs with even more force, and the trajectories that had been in place earlier proceed with renewed vigor.

The movement I've been tracking can be restated as follows: in the large plates of the *Book of Mormon*, Smith constructs—consciously or not—a counterfactual history of the globe to explain the conditions of his own trial of religious choice, a story of the emergence of religious liberty within a "New World" context that sidesteps European history entirely. In this narrative, the dilemma of choice in a religiously plural landscape sets in motion events and encounters that give rise to a kind of secularism (*heretical choice*) in which the human will is so valorized that it expands the power of choice beyond the confines of religion into all facets of life. The best available method of curbing this tendency and for reasserting orthodoxy is through divine intervention, here understood as a form of persuasion peculiarly adapted to a world comprised of semi-porous selves. Yet because the persuasive impact of revelation weakens over time, the capacity to choose—at least in the Nephite case— eventually spirals outward into an apocalyptic din. The question thus remains, then, of how the *orthodox* view of choice can be maintained without either devolving into an immanent view of unfettered human autonomy or into pluralistic chaos. For choice to continue to be meaningful, therefore, *revelation needs to be renewable*.

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Thus far, this analysis has been confined to the large plates of the *Book of Mormon*, which comprise the books of Mosiah – Ether. When Smith began translating the plates in earnest in April 1829, this was the material he dictated first. A year prior, he had translated Mormon's "abridgement" (*D&C* 10:44) of a series of earlier records, but the 116 pages that had been produced were destroyed by the wife of Martin Harris—Smith's ever credulous scribe and patron—after Harris had lent her the manuscript to prove to her the veracity of the great work that had been undertaken. A chastising revelation from the angel Moroni ultimately prohibited Smith from translating any more for several months, and when he again took up his seer stones, the narrative reopened at the exact point in the narrative where the earlier material had concluded. After completing the entirety of the large plates, he was finally able to return to the material that had been lost, but this time he was tasked not with translating an abridgement of the early records of the first Nephite prophet, but the actual records themselves, which had been engraved—or so he claimed—on a series of smaller plates. Comprising these writings were the first-person records of Nephi and other early Nephite leaders and prophets, and they differed dramatically in character from the sweeping histories and folksy vignettes of the large plates. As they appear in the *Book of Mormon*, the small plates are a generic mélange that move fluidly between prophesy, narrative, visions, and interpretation, and what narratives they do contain more closely resemble the Hebraic tales they strive to emulate than the broad historical accounts of the large plates: intimate family dramas, the trials of having been chosen by God, and concentrated instants of moral uncertainty. Although they now appear first in the *Book of Mormon*, the small plates, because they were composed last, are extensions of the deep problems we have so far tracked in the large plates. Most importantly, they bring the entangled issues of choice, revelation, persuasion, and time to bear on the very form of Smith's new scripture as well as on its anticipated reception in the early nineteenth-century United States. The impulse to *persuade* rather than to *convert* becomes an explicit feature of these texts, as when the prophet Nephi records—in one of several similar moments—that the "fulness of mine intent is that I may persuade men to come unto the God of Abraham" (1 Ne. 6:4).

Though their aim is persuasion, the small plates do not shy away from thematizing the diminishing capacities of revelation as a persuasive mechanism, which we have already seen becomes a cause for concern late in the large plates. This is an issue that Berger glibly labeled the "problem of the morning after," the unfortunate phenomenon that occurs when the flood of details, habits, and obligations which structure quotidian experience diminish or even negate the revelatory experiences of the previous evening, week, or year. (The failure of Christ's post-resurrection appearance to effect a permanent social change within Nephite civilization is this phenomenon manifested at the level of an entire civilization. The "morning after," in that case, takes two centuries to arrive.) Early in 1 Nephi, the book that begins *The Book of Mormon*, the Hebrew patriarch Lehi, having recently had a vision commanding him to leave Jerusalem, tasks his four sons (Nephi, Laman, Lemuel, and Sam) with recovering a set of brass plates kept by Laban, a wealthy Hebrew living in the city. After two botched attempts to retrieve the plates, Laman and Lemuel decide to abandon the mission. When their brother Nephi insists they try again the two begin to beat and chastize him and Sam. In the midst of this attack, an angel appears to them to remind them of their task and to promise its imminent fulfillment. Laman and Lemuel remain skeptical, but Nephi reminds them of God's mightiness and of his aid to Moses against the armies of Pharaoh: "Now behold, ye know that this is true; and ye also know that an angel hath spoken unto you; wherefore can ye doubt?" Wherefore indeed. Later, while the entire family struggles to survive in the desert away from the comforts of Jerusalem, Laman and Lemuel bind Nephi with rope and beat him, demanding again that the family return to their home. Shocked and enraged, Nephi cries out: "How is it that ye have forgotten that ye have seen an angel of the Lord?" (1 Ne. 7:10). Again, several chapters later, while sailing aboard the ship that carries the family of Lehi to the Americas, Nephi reminds his brothers in a sermon, "Ye are swift to do iniquity but slow to remember the Lord your God. Ye have seen an angel, and he spake unto you; yea, ye have heard his voice from time to time; and he hath spoken unto you in a still small voice, but ye were past feeling" (1 Ne. 17:45). Nephi's repeated invocations of the angel's visitation gives voice to the bafflement and frustration of revelation's failure to persuade once and for all, thematizing its apparent inadequacy to maintain its hold over minds across time.

It was while dictating *The Book of Mormon* that Smith began to conceive of revelation as a process that was at once occasional and continuous. His many revelations were recorded and published first in the *Book of Commandments* (1830) and subsequently in *Doctrine and Covenants* (1835). Not all of these would come to fruition, and many were revised or overwritten by subsequent revelations, but the continuing stream of dicta and theological insight being delivered to Smith from on high enabled him to preserve the experience of private and continuous revelation as a viable tool for cultivating power and enacting political, social, and ecclesiastical change. As a way of further consolidating revelatory authority and assuring its continuity across time, Smith also established hierarchies within the church which guaranteed that continuous revelation would be enshrined as a fundamental principle of the Church of Latter-Day Saints.[27] This is how he devised to renew revelation across time within the church, but *The Book of Mormon*, because it is a text and not an institution, solves this problem slightly differently in the small plates. By virtue of its being a material artifact, the book doesn't have the same capacity to evolve and change with time.[28] As a revelation, it is—Smith's subtle revisions throughout his life notwithstanding—fixed. But *The Book of Mormon* nevertheless sidesteps the problem of scripture's seeming fixity through formal strategies that invest every reading of it with the experience of renewed revelation, recreating by means of the intimate relationship between reader and text both the sociological dilemma of religious choice traced in the large plates and its resolution.

It does this by generating what we might call prophetic loops, narrative cycles of prediction and fulfillment that occur entirely within the confines of the text. These loops tend to be either highly localized, as in the promise made by the angel who visits the sons of Lehi, or more sweeping, as in the case of the numerous prophecies of the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus. But even the most dramatic and far-reaching of these prophecies remain locked within the bounds of the text. They are, ultimately, movements of prediction, anticipation, and fulfillment that function as theological equivalents to more conventional forms of narrative suspense, which Roland Barthes memorably compared to the "pleasure of the corporeal striptease."[29] But there is another class of prophecies in *The Book of Mormon* that looks beyond events chronicled in the book itself to the circumstances of its composition, production, and reception, prophecies that seem to be fulfilled by the book's sheer existence rather than by its mere content.

This class of prophecies, all of which are issued in the small plates, concerns the particular historical circumstances that birthed *The Book of Mormon*. One resonant example of these occurs in the pattriarch Lehi's last address to his sons. Speaking directly to his son Joseph, Lehi quotes from the Brass Plates that Nephi had obtained from the Hebrew leader Laban. The passages he quotes were supposed to have been written by the biblical Joseph (of Genesis) and anticipate the eventual arrive of a "choice seer" who "shall write" (2 Ne. 3:7; 2 Ne. 3:12). This seer's name, writes Joseph, "shall be called after me; and it shall be after the name of his father. And he shall be like unto me; for the thing which the Lord shall bring forth by his hand, by the power of the Lord, shall bring my people unto salvation" (2 Ne. 3:15). Joseph Smith, Jr., the son and namesake of Joseph Smith, Sr., seems to fit the bill of the original Joseph's prophecy. Nephi will later echo these words in a series of prophetic statements that anticipate the discovery and reception of *The Book of Mormon* in the nineteenth-century United States. To future readers of his records, he declares that his writing "shall be kept and preserved, and handed down unto my seed, from generation to generation, that the promise may be fulfilled unto Joseph" (2 Ne. 25:22).[30] Elsewhere, in an appropriation of Isaiah's prophecy, he speaks of a sealed book that "shall be delivered unto the man of whom I have spoken" and that "the eyes of none shall behold it, save it be that three witnesses shall behold it by the power of God, besides him to whom the book shall be delivered" (2 Ne. 27:12). (The first edition of *The Book of Mormon* included the testimony of three witnesses in its concluding pages.) God, speaking through Nephi, also looks forward to how nineteenth-century Americans will likely view the emergence of a new scripture: "And because my words shall hiss forth—many of the Gentiles shall say, 'A Bible! A Bible! We have got a Bible, and there cannot be any more Bible'" (2 Ne. 29:3). To these hypothetical Gentiles God responds with a defense of continuous revelation, "because that I have spoken one word, ye need not suppose that I cannot speak another; for my work is not yet finished" (2 Ne. 29:9). From one angle, these moments, all of which lay begin to answer the kinds of objections that would eventually meet *The Book of Mormon* upon its publication (Why was this book revealed to a farmboy in 1830? How can there be a new Bible?), may be read as instances of what Mark Currie calls "rhetorical prolepsis," attempts to inoculate the book from critique by answering objections before they're raised.[31] From another angle, they may be seen as part of the "symbiotic relationship of mutual credentialing" then developing between the book and the Prophet.[32] But considered in the light of a reader's experience of the material book, the more important effect of this pattern is how it sacralizes the book in the moment of its reading.

In his monumental study of the idea of scripture, *What is Scripture?*, Wilfred Cantwell Smith answers his book's titular question in the negative by asserting that there is, finally, no "ontology of scripture."[33] Instead, he defines scripture tautologically: "for a work to be scripture means that it participates in the movement of the spiritual life of those for whom it is so."[34] Scripture is thus the construct of a community of readers over time, and the *Book of Mormon* issues prophecies and fulfills them as a means of constructing this community through reading. Those prophecies within 2 Nephi that anticipate both the translation of the *Book of Mormon* by a nineteenth-century American named Joseph as well as the book's subsequent reception in the nineteenth-century United States transform what would otherwise be mere history into scripture and what would otherwise be mere reading into the inhabitation of revelation. They create a closed loop whereby the very nature of the text one reads is changed via the text's own predictions of its coming into being, shuttling the reader between the text and its context and between the story and the scene of its composition. The reader of the *Book of Mormon* is thus placed into a position—albeit a private one—akin to that occupied by a figure like Korihor, where an individual's religious doubt is met with the self-evident fullness of divine revelation. The book's many acts of self-scripturalization aim to persuade a doubtful reader by requiring her to experience the unique thrill of witnessing prophetic fulfillment. Given this aspect of the book, it should come as no surprise that one of the LDS church's primary methods of winning converts is to urge them to read the *Book of Mormon* and, ideally, to experience the sensation of revelation. This ingenious device is at the heart of the book's aesthetic. Choice, it seems, to go back to where we began, may indeed be, as Mormon says, a privilege, but it may also be a pleasure.

The *Book of Mormon* does not utterly resolve the intertwined problems of secularization and pluralization that sprout and blossom from the principle of religious choice. But revelation, thought of here as the primary force capable of negotiating difference and guiding choice under the conditions of American secularity, is nevertheless preserved and renewed within the text itself. *The Book of Mormon* yet remains and will remain, according to the early Mormon apostle Parley Pratt, "A STRANGE BOOK, a VERY STRANGE book."[35] This is as it should be, for secularity is also shot through with a deep strangeness well-masked by its utter familiarity, and few works of the nineteenth century can claim to grapple with its intricacies as imaginatively or as richly as the *Book of Mormon* does.

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[1] Joseph Smith, Jr., "Sketch Book for the use of Joseph Smith, jr.," *Journal, Sept. 1835–Apr. 1836*, 9 Nov. 1835, http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/journal-1835-1836. Although all the versions of the First Vision are slightly different, Richard Bushman is right to claim that such discrepancies do not imply intentional deceit, but are more likely than not simply the messy and dynamic process of continued reflection as it reshapes experiences over time, shading features that once were light and illuminating others that once were dark. The multiple versions of the First Vision are collected in Dean C. Jesse. "The Earliest Documented Accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision." In *Exploring the First Vision*, ed. Samuel Alonzo Dodge and Steven C. Harper (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, 2012), 1–40.

[2] Joseph Smith, *Joseph Smith—History* 1:14 in *Pearl of Great Price*.

[3] Charles Grandison Finney, *The Original Memoirs of Charles G. Finney*, ed. Richard A. G. Dupuis and Garth M. Rosell (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 16; Jonathan Edwards, *A Jonathan Edwards Reader*, ed. John E. Smith, Harry S. Stout, and Kenneth P. Minkema (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1995), 283.

[4] Dan Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1994), 43. For more on Smith's remarkable encounter with the prophet Matthias see Paul E. Johnson and Sean Wilentz, *The Kingdom of Matthias* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1994), 3-12; and Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Vintage Books, 2007), 274-78.

[5] Sir Thomas Browne, *Religio Medici and Urne-Buriall* (New York: New York Review Books Classics, 2012), 14.

[6] This cognitive version of religious experience has been retained in the Church of Latter-Day Saints to this day, where the process of conversion is "not generally seen as the recognition of one's sinful nature and transformation to a state of grace, but the moment of one's spiritual confirmation of a particular set of propositions about God and his work of modern restoration" (Terryl Givens, *Wrestling the Angel*, volume 1 of *The Foundations of Mormon Thought: Cosmos, God, Humanity* [New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2015], 82).

[7] Whitney R. Cross, *The Burned-Over District: The Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York, 1800-1850* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1950), 13.
[8] The significance of choice as a means of explaining the vibrant religiosity of the nineteenth-century United States is well documented in Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, *The Churching of America, 1776-2005: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick: Rutgers Univ. Press, 2005). See also R. Stephen Warner, "Work in Progress Toward a New Paradigm for the Sociological Study of Religion in the United States," *American Journal of Sociology* 98.5 (1993): 1044-93.
[9] Peter L. Berger. *The Heretical Imperative: Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation* (New York: Anchor Books, 1979), 25.
[10] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2007), 3.
[11] Taylor, 27, 38.
[12] Michael Warner, "Was antebellum America secular?" *The Immanent Frame*, 2 Oct. 2012, http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2012/10/02/was-antebellum-america-secular.
[13] See D. Michael Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1998); and Brant A. Gardner, *The Gift and Power: Translating the* Book of Mormon. Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2011, 23-52.
[14] For discussions of how how secularity, secularism, and secularization should be conceptualized within the context of the United States see Wilfred M. McClay, "Secularism, American-Style," *Society* 44.6 (2007): 160-63; Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2004), 92-117; Warner; and John Lardas Modern, *Secularism in Antebellum America* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2011).
[15] Modern, 3.
[16] Throughout this essay I read *The Book of Mormon* as an evolving text engaged in a continual process of self-revision, by which I mean that key episodes are revisited and revised at different points in the text that mark novel approaches to problems raised earlier in the work. This I take to be a consequence of Smith's dynamic and nearly spontaneous composition of the text. Although this approach takes for granted that Smith's is the sole mind responsible for *The Book of Mormon*, I nevertheless think it is one in keeping with Smith's view of the imprecise nature of revelation itself. Smith, writes Terryl Givens, thought of prophets as "flawed and fallible vessels" (Givens, 38) and revelation, consequently, as a continuous and often revisionary process of acquiring knowledge. It might therefore be profitable to think of spontaneous narration and literary composition as being analogous in character. Such an approach does not obviate Grant Hardy's "narrator-based reading," but it does see narratorial identity (especially in the large plates) as uneven and emergent, rather than everywhere consistent and coherent. As Ann Taves has suggested in her brilliant analysis of *The Book of Mormon*'s origins, a leap of compositional faith may have been necessary to begin the writing process, which once accomplished allowed the words (and there are so very many of them) to pour forth from the mouth of the prophet. See Taves, "History and the Claims of Revelation: Joseph Smith and the Materialization of the Golden Plates." *Numen: International Review for the History of Religions* 61/2-3: 182-207. For more on how revelation was being reconceived as a continuing process within American culture more broadly see David F. Holland. *Sacred Borders: Continuing Revelation and Canonical Restraint in Early America* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2011).
[17] See José Casanova, "The Secular and Secularisms," *Social Research* 76.4 (2009), 1049-66.
[18] Taylor, 18.
[19] Taylor, 18.
[20] Pierre Manent, *An Intellectual History of Liberalism*, trans. Rebecca Balinski (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1996), 4.
[21] Admittedly, the epistolist's uses of "anti-christ" carry a whiff of the endtimes, but the label itself is always a common, not a proper, noun. It's more descriptive than it is evaluative: "For many deceivers are entered into the world, who confess not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an antichrist" (2 John 1:7).
[22] See Sandra Gustafson, *Imagining Deliberative Democracy in the Early American Republic* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2011) and Amanda Anderson. "The Liberal Aesthetic," in *Theory After "Theory,"* ed. Jane Elliot and Derek Attridge (New York: Routledge, 2011): 249-61.
[23] Gustafson, 18.
[24] Because dissent in the Nephi world occurs before the birth of Christ, it thus assumes a temporal character it lacked in the nineteenth-century United States. Smith's own historical moment was suffused with the expectation of the second coming of Christ and the beginning of the millennium, but no one could be quite certain how, when, or even if such an event would occur. The antebellum era is littered with attempts to pinpoint the exact date of Christ's second coming, with William Miller's botched calculation that it would occur on October 22, 1844 being but the most infamous example. (Even Smith himself, who toyed with millennial thought, was pressed at times by followers

to give a date for Christ's return, a question he wisely learned to sidestep.) One of the great narratological triumphs of *The Book of Mormon* is that it narrates the history of a society whose experience of religious difference in crucial ways mirrors that of the nineteenth-century United States but relocates familiar tropes of millennial expectation and Christian prophecy to an era before Jesus's birth. Because Christ's birth and *first* resurrection would have been virtually indisputable events for Smith's contemporaries, every reader of *The Book of Mormon* knows in advance that the Nephite prophecies will prove to be true. This readerly foreknowledge generates the experience of what we might call cosmo-dramatic irony. The large plates of *The Book of Mormon*, therefore, have all the qualities of a millennial narrative without any of the doubt.

[25] One might conclude that the trajectory the narrative had taken made the representation of this event imperative. Perhaps Smith, like other great serialists of the nineteenth century, was improvising a plot and biding time until he chanced upon a narrative solution that would pave the way for a suitable catalyst. The clock that ticks away in the background of the narrative would have laid the groundwork for this moment, but evidence in the book itself suggests that what exactly occur at this momentous time remained nebulous.

[26] Hardy, 183.

[27] For Smith's "politics of revelation" see Steven C. Harper, "'Dictated by Christ': Joseph Smith and the Politics of Revelation," *Journal of the Early Republic* 26.2 (2006): 275-304.

[28] Smith made hundreds of minor revisions—some of them substantive—to *The Book of Mormon* between its publication and his death. Although many of these emendations are theologically significant, they did not alter the narrative itself in any meaningful way.

[29] Roland Barthes. *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), 11.

[30] See Hardy, 80 for a handy chart of these echoes.

[31] Mark Currie. *About Time: Narrative, Fiction and the Philosophy of Time*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 2007, 29. See Elizabeth Fenton, "Secularization and Nineteenth Century American Literature," in *A Companion to American Literary Studies*, ed. Caroline F. Levander and Robert S. Levine (New York: Blackwell Publishing, 2011), 65-69 for a thoughtful discussion for how the small plates of *The Book of Mormon* use prolepsis as a strategy for evading critique.

[32] Paul Gutjahr, *The Book of Mormon: A Biography* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2012), 61.

[33] Wilfred Cantwell Smith. *What is Scripture?: A Comparative Approach* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 237.

[34] W. C. Smith, 36.

[35] Parley Pratt, *The Autobiography of Parley Parker Pratt* (New York: Russell Brothers, 1874), 37.