Book Review


Reviewed by Daniel N. Gullotta, Stanford University.

Following his highly praised biography of Brigham Young, Pioneer Prophet (2012), John Turner continues his study of Mormonism with another biography. This time focused on the Mormon Jesus. Although traditional Latter-day Saint doctrine maintains that Jesus visited the Americas, Turner’s work is not a Mormon version of the quest for the historical Jesus. Rather, Turner’s Mormon Jesus offers a rich cultural, theological, and historical biography of how Mormonism over the years has understood the figure of Jesus. Yet unlike most books which focused on distinctive Mormon thought, which typically concentrate on dry doctrinal writings, Turner draws on a wide range of cultural, artistic, and literately sources. Some of these include the Book of Mormon, the Hill Cumorah Pageant, artwork, dreams, songs, poetry, and even Sunday school lessons. The product is a highly engaging study of the many ways Mormonism’s understanding of Jesus is simultaneously comparable to other Christian traditions and yet completely distinctive.

Turner’s layout is topical rather than chronological, although each chapter typically begins with the earliest witnesses to these subjects and progresses to more recent developments. Turner begins with Mormonism’s central experiences with Jesus, namely the Book of Mormon, the Joseph Smith translation of the Bible, visions, revelations, and the Second Coming. The Mormon Jesus emphasizes that during the early years of Mormonism, one would be hard pressed to see any major differences in the Christological beliefs of the Latter-day Saints and their Protestant contemporaries. In studying at the Book of Mormon, the figure of Jesus appears incredibly similar to how he is presented in the Synoptic Gospels, even quoting almost verbatim the King James Version of the Sermon on the Mount (cf. Matt 5–7; 3 Nephi 12). Likewise, when focusing on Joseph Smith’s “translation” of the Bible, a project which included significant additions and revisions to Christian scriptures, Turner rightly notes, Smith was not alone in these sorts of ventures. Alex-
ander Campbell, Abner Kneeland, and even Thomas Jefferson had partaken in editing the Bible. Additionally, like many Protestants during the Second Great Awakening, Mormons were influenced by Christophanies in the Bible and actively experienced and sought out visionary experiences of Jesus. By highlighting these factors, Turner rightly demonstrates how early Mormonism’s experience and understanding of Jesus makes perfect contextual sense within the early American republic.

The next two chapters focus on visions and revelations of Jesus. Turner details how, like many Protestants during the Second Great Awakening, Mormons were influenced by Christophanies in Bible and actively experienced and sought out visionary experiences of Jesus. Although many of these experiences were personal some of them were communal, such as the 1836 Kirtland Temple dedication. Yet as time went on, due to clashes of authority and leadership, visions became discouraged and more emphasis was placed on Smith’s First Vision in 1820 as a marker of Smith’s authority as a prophet, the inauguration of the last dispensation, and the restoration of Christ’s true church. Similarly, although Smith experienced frequent revelations in which Christ spoke to him, later church leaders began listening for revelations through the “still small voice.” Turner attributes this change to the accommodation of modernity, making Mormonism another fascinating case study for the scholars to see the interplay between tradition and change, religion and modernity.

Chapter Five, “I Come Quickly,” focuses on the evolving understanding of the Second Coming within Mormonism. As their name sake suggests, the Latter-day Saints (like other groups from the Second Great Awakening) were originally fervent believers in Christ’s imitate Second Coming, with church president Lorenzo Snow even predicting it would happen within roughly ten to twenty years in 1899. Like most modern mainline denominations, however, Mormonism eventually embraced an uncertain view of the future. Although many evangelical Americans today believe that the Second Coming will come soon, Turner unfortunately does not grapple with or explain the decline of apocalypticism among the Latter-day Saints.

Other chapters focus on the role Jesus plays in Mormon temple rites, as well as Christ’s changing depictions within Mormon conceptions art, with special attention to his race and masculinity. Perhaps Turner’s most important (if not most interesting) chapter is focused on Jesus’ marital status. Due to the attention this subject has received in popular culture thanks to the Da Vinci Code and the forged Gospel of Jesus’ Wife, Mormonism’s unique tradition is both complex and fascinating. Although Christians have often symbolically
called Jesus the bridegroom to the church as bride, Mormons in the Nau-
vo period (ca. 1839) took this language to be literal. Turner details how
this vision of a married Jesus evolved into a polygamist Jesus, being married
to Mary Magdalene, and Mary and Martha of Bethany. Yet as Mormonism
strived to join the American mainstream and distance themselves from their
polygamous past, this married Jesus became a single Jesus like the majority if
Christian traditions.

A common theme throughout *The Mormon Jesus* is how supposedly strange
Latter-day Saint doctrine should not be so strange to Protestants and Catho-
lics or people familiar with the Christian tradition. On the subject of the
married Jesus, Turner observes how Catholic nuns often understand their
calling as a “bride of Christ” or how hymns like “Jesus, Lover of My Soul”
evokes an erotic image of Jesus. And even if Mormons do have peculiar tra-
ditions, Turner emphasizes that these traditions are comparable to those of
other peculiar Christians, such as the Moravians and their linking of the
side wound of Christ to the vaginal. Ultimately, by using Mormon traditions
and cultural understandings of Jesus, Turner demonstrates that the Latter-
day Saints, like all Christians traditions, have fine-tuned their understanding
of Jesus to suit their context and climate. According to Turner, it is precisely
because the Mormon Jesus changes with the times that proves that Mormons
belong within the Christian religion.

Given the subject matter, one cannot help but relate Turner’s project to
similar cultural biographies of Jesus, such as Jaroslav Pelikan’s *Jesus Through-
out the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture* (1985) and Stephen Pro-
But as Pelikan’s text does not mention Mormonism and Prothero’s briefly
engages with Mormonism, *The Mormon Jesus* makes for a perfect comple-
mentary text. In its tone and approach, *The Mormon Jesus* is comparable to
Edward J. Blum and Paul Harvey’s *The Color of Christ: The Son of God and the
Saga of Race in America*, as both offer brief studies on draw on a rich cultural
history and mention Mormonism’s changing approach to racial portrayals of
Jesus. Turner’s work, however, highlights how Mormonism had changed its
approaches in the modern era, offering a more sympathetic view.

Because of the havoc German Higher Criticism and the quest for the his-
torical Jesus has caused in how mainline church understand of Jesus’ life and
teaching, it was disappointing to see no attention given to how Mormonism
has grappled with these dilemmas. After all, James Talmage’s *Jesus the Christ*
(a text Turner references often) relied heavily on the scholarship of Frederic
Farrar, Cunningham Geikie and Alfred Edersheim for contextualizing the life

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of Jesus within ancient Palestine. Furthermore, Brigham Young University does offer courses through its Department of Ancient Scripture that relates to the historical Jesus. It would have been beneficial to see how or even if the Mormon Jesus has been affected by the historical Jesus.

Turner’s *The Mormon Jesus* is an excellent study and a welcome addition into the growing field of Mormon studies. *The Mormon Jesus* provides welcomed insights into how the image and understanding of Jesus has evolved within Mormonism since its inception. By comparing Mormonism’s theology and doctrines to other Christian traditions, Turner delivers an impressive amount of nuance to his research and conclusions. Latter-day Saints, interested lay readers, and historians of American religion will all benefit from engaging with *The Mormon Jesus*, as it provides both sensitivity and rigor. Turner is once again to be praised for his work in Mormon studies and *The Mormon Jesus*, like *Brigham Young: Pioneer Prophet*, is an essential read.