

John G. Turner. *The Mormon Jesus: A Biography*.
 Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016.

Reviewed by Andrew C. Reed

Many scholars within Mormon studies and interested readers are well aware of John Turner's significant contribution to the history of Mormonism through his biography of Brigham Young (Harvard University Press, 2012), which received high praise. Turner's more recent work follows a similar style and performs equally well in exploring a topic of considerable interest within Mormon studies. In *The Mormon Jesus*, Turner argues for a more carefully constructed understanding of the Jesus within whom Mormons place tremendous faith and trust and for whom they exhibit great love. Cleverly titled *The Mormon Jesus: A Biography*, Turner is less interested in writing a biography of Jesus within Mormonism than he seems to be in writing about the culturally constructed notions of who Jesus is to Latter-day Saints. His thesis, which emerges clearly throughout the book is that there is "a history of change and variety over the course of the church's nearly two-hundred-year history" (5). The book brings very little new historical data to the game, but therein lies its beauty. While Turner takes on many ideas and subjects that have long remained on the outskirts of traditional histories written by Latter-day Saint scholars, he bursts through the old arguments with entirely novel (and perfectly plausible) explanations.

Mormon Jesus provides a thematic structure for Turner's examination of the changing course of Mormon thought on the central figure of Latter-day Saint belief. The first part of the book traces Joseph Smith's encounter with Jesus in the Book of Mormon, the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible, and his teachings designed to help followers experience the embodied Jesus. The early chapters focus on the life and teachings of Joseph Smith and show the developmental nature of Joseph the Prophet and his growth into that role. After Turner situates Joseph firmly within the Latter-day Saint narrative, the author explains the varied course

of development, debate, and alteration of Church “doctrine” about Jesus. Within the second part of *Mormon Jesus* (chapters 4–9), the book becomes less about Joseph Smith’s particular teachings and more about the Latter-day Saint experience after the Prophet’s death. Thus, readers encounter rich discussions about Jehovah and Jesus, the voice and apparatus of revelation among Latter-day Saint prophets, the justification of plural marriage, and discussions of whiteness.

Turner argues for a stronger affinity and place of belonging for Latter-day Saints among American Christianity. Most often, the author has in mind Protestant Christianity—this makes good sense in the earliest part of the book and within early Mormon history. In each chapter, Turner places Mormonism within the broad American Christian setting, and more often than not the point is to show where Latter-day Saints were not entirely out of context in the religious landscape. This approach is a refreshing alternative to other books that argue for a unique form of belief among Latter-day Saints (both by scholars inside of Mormonism and those outside). Some scholars have argued that Mormonism belongs outside the bounds of historical Christianity. Turner suggests the opposite. For the author, there has always been a Mormon reliance on Protestantism in both doctrine and practice. However, Turner willingly admits that at times Latter-day Saints pushed the boundaries beyond where others may have gone. To see Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, and their successors as part of, and often in line with, mainline Protestant and evangelical movements lessens the stigma that Latter-day Saints worship an entirely different Jesus.

Some readers may get frustrated with *Mormon Jesus* for a couple of reasons. First, it is difficult to anticipate where the next turn will take them. Turner moves so quickly from one idea to the next that significant information gets glossed over in such rapid fashion that it leaves the reader wanting more discussion before moving on. For example, within just three pages, the author introduces William Miller (a millenarian), the idea of a New Jerusalem, and Orson Hyde’s journey to Palestine, all while he situates Smith within the broader American Protestant landscape (130–32). The approach taken in *Mormon Jesus* is chaotic and winding, allowing only very brief stops to catch one’s breath before plowing into another barrage of ideas that need careful unpacking. However, this approach is not all bad, and it does not undermine the significance of the volume. For those who immerse themselves in the highly technical, methodical, and all-encompassing nature of the Joseph Smith Papers volumes, *Mormon Jesus* opens up new interpretive lenses without laboriously

calculating every point. The flow of the book is quick, unpredictable, and thought provoking.

The second way in which this book may annoy readers is perhaps more problematic than the first. Before I wage the following criticism, it might be best to commend Turner's book as a prime example of what a university press monograph ought to do—present clear ideas that do not get lost for the trees. Some readers, however, will expect more of his historiography. While Turner is capable as a historian, his historiographical prowess occasionally falls short of his own high expectations. Frequently, the book leaves the reader to wonder about the sources and the apparent lack of context for the myriad figures who show up on the pages of *Mormon Jesus*. For example, many believing Mormon readers will demand a more robust discussion of Denver Snuffer and his efforts to draw away some from the Church (83–84). At the same time, there are statements that pass over recent critical scholarship that might prevent Turner from appearing to lack awareness of more nuanced scholarly debates, were these statements more carefully composed. For example, Turner suggests that Joseph Smith produced his biblical translation “without scholarly resources” (49). This point does not account for the recent work of scholars who are finding greater evidence for the existence of external factors (sources) for some of Joseph's translation of the biblical text. Such evidence does not declare for or against the miracle of the Joseph Smith Translation, but presents possible approaches for understanding how the text came into existence. In other places, Turner moves rapidly over some points that perhaps might benefit from a stronger pause to clarify, explaining the context behind statements or ideas that some readers unfamiliar with Latter-day Saint theology or history might not understand. These are minor points that at least for this reader did not undermine the significance of the book, but others might want more careful source criticism along the way.

Turner seems to recognize his limitations and leaves to others the more focused studies that drill down further into the gritty details. His use of secondary sources is generally strong; for example, his chapter on Mormon millennialism (chapter 5, “I Come Quickly”) employs Grant Underwood's *The Millenarian World of Early Mormonism* (University of Illinois Press, 1993) wisely and then moves quickly on to make his own point that is more sweeping and painted in broad strokes. All this makes for an enjoyable and challenging read that will challenge scholars to think differently about discussions of “doctrine” and “theology” for some time.

Readers will find Turner's *Mormon Jesus* enticing in part because it does not force them to traipse through every detail of early Mormon history, since he leaves much of the technical work to others who want to pore over documents and minutiae. Instead, Turner's is a wonderful effort at the history of ideas and one that will stand the test of time as an interpretive work of Mormon thought on the nature, role, and atonement of Jesus Christ.

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