

Bible Culture and Authority in the Early United States.

By Seth Perry. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 2018. xv + 197 pp. \$35.00 cloth.

“The Bible says!” Billy Graham, the greatest revivalist of the twentieth century, proclaimed so frequently—waving his Bible in one hand, pointing to the crowd or to heaven with the other—that if Graham were leading revivals today, teenagers worldwide would certainly turn Graham’s catch phrase into a TikTok meme. Historians of biblical culture of the twentieth century have long noted (Susan Harding, *The Book, of Jerry Falwell*, Princeton University Press, 2001; Kristin Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne*, Liveright, 2020) that less important was what the Bible actually said. More important, for Graham and for the legions of curious or converted who flocked to his revivals, was the Bible as an icon of authority, a sign that if properly revered—even if it wasn’t frequently read—would lay to waste communism, secularism, feminism, and other threats to Christian hegemony and American masculinity.

The Bible as icon, Seth Perry argues in *Bible Culture and Authority in the Early United States*, began not with Graham but more than a century and a half earlier during the early national period. To be sure, books abound on the Bible’s impact on American culture during this era (see Nathan Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, Yale University Press, 1991; Mark Noll, *In the Beginning Was the Word*, Oxford University Press, 2015). Perry claims that what distinguishes his study is that it questions the basic assumption of these previous works, which “have tended to echo Protestant rhetoric in suggesting that the Christian Bible became the era’s preeminent religious authority” (3). Borrowing from Vincent Wimbush’s notion of “scripturalization,” Perry’s central argument is that, in the decades after the American Revolution, the “Bible” became authoritative not as a singular object or even as a singular text (5–7). Contrary to the claims of Billy Graham and his bible-wielding, finger-pointing predecessors like the itinerant preacher Lorenzo Dow (77–84), who claimed they looked to “the Bible alone” (2) to settle debates within American Christianity, according to Perry, for Graham and for Dow “the Bible served as a source of symbols and models for the creation of authoritative relationships” (2). As such, the Bible stood “in the middle” (6) of networks “written, oral and performative,” (3) which Americans from diverse and divergent backgrounds—slave owners and leaders of slave revolts, Latter-day Saints as well as anti-Mormon crusaders—created to assert religious and cultural power. The Bible’s authority also emerged from its relationship with the sundry new translations and readers produced in the Atlantic World in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as well as from its relationship with new American-born “bibles,” too.

Part I of *Bible Culture and Authority in the Early United States* focuses on the development of markets for American-produced bibles and bible readers, which emerged in the early national period. Perry argues that the “American Bible Reader” was created with a distinct “imagined reader” in mind (37). This imagined reader (American, semi-literate, lacking in formal education, and female) was distinct from the imagined reader (British, educated, and male) of the previous century. These “imagined readers” created flesh-and-blood bible readers, Perry argues, who, through citing specific chapter and verse and using “the Bible” as a material object, asserted their own authority. Perry points to the famous case of Ellen Harmon, who, as a young woman in the 1840s, became a Millerite. After the “Great Disappointment,” Harmon, who married James White, helped

to reorganize Millers's followers into what became the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Perry argues that White established her authority by performing thousands of ritualized visions, at the center of which was the Bible, or more specifically *bibles*. During her visionary trances, White deployed various bibles produced during the era as "totems and as sources" (59)—holding them in her own hands or laying them on her followers, then citing passages and prophetically explicating them for her specific audiences (58–60).

In Part II, Perry studies the ways in which other Americans engaged in "performed biblicism," reading biblical narratives onto their own lived experiences (67). Court records indicate that, during the trial in which he was accused of organizing a slave revolt, Denmark Vesey claimed that the enslaved people he hoped to lead to freedom would put into action biblical exigencies against injustices that required "wholesale slaughter" (66) of all white citizens of Charleston who supported and benefited from the evil of chattel slavery. While her husband, Lorenzo, described his life of itinerant church planting as a nineteenth-century enactment of Paul, in her writings, Peggy Dow described her life as the present-day versions of the lives of biblical matriarchs Martha, Mary, Phoebe, and Priscilla (78–85).

Perry's last is also his strongest case study of performed biblicism—that of Joseph Smith Jr. Smith and the Mormon movement he inaugurated were distinguished from other performances of biblicism because the Mormons went beyond engaging with the Bible as text and icon. "Smith's ability to signify on the Bible," Perry asserts, allowed him "to synthesize, compile, rearrange, allude to, and play with bible texts" (111–112). The fruits of Smith's signifying were twofold: first, a set of new bibles (ostensibly translations of extant ancient texts), most notably the Book of Mormon, and second, a restoration of a Hebrew Bible-era patriarch and prophet who had the authority to receive divine revelations, which then became scripture themselves. Still, according to Perry, although he was perhaps the most "idiosyncratic" of his contemporaries (128), Smith and other religious innovators of the era could not have enacted their bible performances without the ubiquity of material bibles and oral and printed biblical citations, as well as bible-infused cultural ideations—memes, if you will—that surrounded them. This culture, Perry argues compellingly, made the "Bible" the ur-text of the era, but a text that changed each time Americans engaged it.

Perry's thesis—that Americans couldn't read the same bible twice—is thoroughly convincing. It's so convincing that my major issue with this fantastic book is about the cases he leaves on the table that would further diversify and refine his argument. A study of the performed biblicism of say, *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1831) or of the Pequot Methodist minister William Appes's *A Son of the Forest* (1829)—both texts produced in the same two-year period as Smith's *Book of Mormon*—might have replaced Perry's least successful chapter, a study of *The Vision of Isaac Childs*. And yet, the fact that I can suggest other cases—from the early national period and up to the present (the insurrection on the Capitol on January 6, 2021, could certainly be read as a performance of American biblicism)—shows the vitality and importance of Perry's excellent study of how "the Bible" became "the bibles."

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