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Author(s) William J. Hamblin

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Abstract Review of "Prophecy and Palimpsest" (2002), by Robert M. Price.

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William J. Hamblin

In "Prophecy and Palimpsest," an article appearing in a recent issue of *Dialogue,* Robert M. Price offers his perspective on the origin of the Book of Mormon and a recommendation for how Latter-day Saints should understand the meaning and origin of that book. Dr. Price's position is straightforward and none too innovative; while providing no evidence, he insists that "virtually all critical scholars . . . agree that Joseph Smith did not discover the Book of Mormon but rather created it" (p. 67).[1] He further maintains that the claims Joseph Smith made surrounding the origin of the Book of Mormon are "manifestly false"

A version of this review appeared under the title "'There Really Is a God, and He Dwells in the Temporal Parietal Lobe of Joseph Smith's Brain'" in *Dialogue* 36/4 (2003): 79–87.

1. Price seems to be completely unaware of, or at least unwilling to engage, a large body of scholarship on the issues he raises. For the most recent popularizing summary (with detailed notes to numerous studies), see Donald W. Parry, Daniel C. Peterson, and John W. Welch, eds., *Echoes and Evidences of the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2002); see also Noel B. Reynolds, ed., *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited: The Evidence for Ancient Origins* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1997); and Terryl L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture That Launched a New World Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

Review of Robert M. Price. "Prophecy and Palimpsest." *Dialogue* 35/3 (2002): 67–82.

(p. 76). But all hope for Mormons is not lost. If we recognize that fiction can be called inspired, then the Book of Mormon, as fiction, can also be called inspired. Price asserts that this insight will provide "a quantum leap in interpretative possibilities" that will "only enhance Smith's prophetic dignity, not debunk it" (p. 82).[2] In reality, this is simply more of the same type of assertions we have been hearing for years from cultural Mormons in venues such as *Sunstone, Dialogue,* and Signature Books. Price's entire case rests largely on argument from analogy. Unfortunately, none of the analogies he proposes are authentic.

Inspired Fiction?

Price believes that the insistence of most Latter-day Saints that the Book of Mormon is historical derives from our stubborn inability to

> understand the difference between fiction and lying. The problem [is] one of "bifurcation," the reduction of a complex choice to an over-simple one. One's alternatives are not either "fact or deception," "hoax or history." For example, were the parables of Jesus either factual or deceptive? Did he intend anyone to think he was talking about a real prodigal son . . . ? Of course not; he knew that his audience knew he was making it up as he went. (pp. 68–69)

I admit to being baffled by such statements. Is Price so uninformed about the controversy over the origin of the Book of Mormon that he thinks this is a significant analogy? While it is true that Jesus never claimed his parables were intended to describe actual historical events (and no one ever understood them as such), does Price not realize that Joseph Smith consistently claimed the Book of Mormon was authentic

2. Price makes these types of assertions throughout his article without once ever attempting to actually argue for his position. Why an inventive fiction writer—Stephen King, for example—should be said to have greater "prophetic dignity" than a man who actually saw God and spoke with him still remains obscure to me, even after reading Price's article.

ancient history and that *all* of his early followers accepted it as such?[3] It is obscure how the two examples are even vaguely analogous.

On the other hand, no one who accepts the Book of Mormon as authentic ancient history and scripture rejects the idea that fiction can be revealed and inspired by God. Indeed, acceptance of the historicity of the Book of Mormon necessarily entails the existence of inspired fiction since the Book of Mormon itself contains examples of inspired fiction: Jacob's allegory of the olive tree (Jacob 5) and Alma's allegory of the seed and the tree of life (Alma 32) are the two most obvious examples. The problem is not that believing Latter-day Saints are so simpleminded that we don't understand the difference between lying and fiction or the possibility of inspired fiction such as Jesus's parables. The problem is that cultural Mormons who reject the history of the Book of Mormon don't seem to grasp the fact that the debate surrounding the origin of the Book of Mormon is not framed by believers as a question of history versus fiction.[4] I have elsewhere outlined a simple logical argument related to the historicity of the Book of Mormon:

> 1. Joseph Smith claimed to have had possession of golden plates written by the Nephites, and to have been visited by Moroni, a resurrected Nephite.
> 2. If the Book of Mormon is not an ancient document, there were no Nephites.
> 3. If there were no Nephites, there were no golden plates written by Nephites; and there was no Nephite named Moroni.
> 4. If there was no Moroni and no golden plates, then Joseph did not tell the truth when he claimed to possess and translate these nonexistent plates, and to have been visited by a resurrected man.
> 5. Hence, Joseph was either lying (he knew there were no plates or angelic visitations, but was trying to convince others

3. Kent P. Jackson, "Joseph Smith and the Historicity of the Book of Mormon," in *Historicity and the Latter-day Saint Scriptures,* ed. Paul Y. Hoskisson (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 2001), 123–40.

4. For a general introduction to a number of issues surrounding this question, see Hoskisson, *Historicity and the Latter-day Saint Scriptures.*

> that there were), or he was insane or deluded (he believed there were golden plates and angelic visitations which in fact did not exist).
>
> If [agnostics and cultural Mormons] wish to maintain that the Book of Mormon is not an ancient document, but that Joseph Smith was somehow still a prophet, they must present some cogent explanation for Joseph's wild claims of possessing nonexistent golden plates and being visited by nonexistent angels. Thus the argument [made by believers in the historicity of the Book of Mormon] is not "If the Book of Mormon is not ancient, then it is not scripture," as [agnostics and cultural Mormons] would have us believe, but "If the Book of Mormon is not ancient, then Joseph Smith was not a prophet."[5]

Throughout his paper Price ignores the real issue; indeed, there is no evidence that he is aware that such arguments even exist. Instead, Price emphasizes his claim that the fact that "Joseph Smith [is] the author of the Book of Mormon, with Moroni and Mormon as its [fictional] narrators" (p. 69) does not imply that Joseph Smith was "a mischievous or malicious hoaxer" (p. 73) or "charlatan" (p. 69). Unfortunately, Price never explains why he feels this is the case. It is mere assertion, not argument. Instead of a serious study of the historical evidence and arguments, Price again argues by analogy that Herman Melville, the author of *Moby Dick,* uses Ishmael as a fictional first-person narrator, and no one has ever accused Melville of being a charlatan or hoaxer (p. 69). Unfortunately, this is an extraordinarily weak analogy. As far as I know, Melville never claimed that the resurrected Ishmael appeared to him and gave him the manuscript of *Moby Dick* on golden plates. Nor did he convince eleven people to publicly testify that they had seen the golden plates of *Moby Dick.* He did not proclaim the divine origin of *Moby Dick* throughout his life, nor did he go to the

5. William J. Hamblin, "An Apologist for the Critics: Brent Lee Metcalfe's Assumptions and Methodologies," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 6/1 (1994): 453. In actuality, Price tacitly accepts this argument. As I will note below, since Price is an atheist, for him Joseph Smith cannot be a true prophet in any meaningful sense of the word.

grave defending those supernatural claims. I think we are justified in maintaining that there are some significant differences between the claimed origins of *Moby Dick* (which Melville always represented as fiction) and the claimed origins of the Book of Mormon (which Joseph Smith always represented as ancient and divinely inspired). Of course, using a first-person narrator in writing fiction does not make one a charlatan. But writing fiction and falsely testifying that the fiction is actual ancient history, taken from an ancient document provided by an angel, and proclaiming oneself a prophet on the basis of that "fiction" does make one a charlatan. Although not all fiction writers are charlatans, some fiction writers most certainly are. None of Joseph Smith's contemporaries were under any confusion about this issue. They either accepted the Book of Mormon as authentic ancient scripture or as a fraudulent fiction.

I have seen the claim that fiction can be inspired, and therefore that the Book of Mormon can be fiction and still be inspired, asserted endlessly by cultural Mormons. I have never *once* seen a response to the actual arguments of believers in Book of Mormon historicity regarding the significance of the question of historicity. The "inspired fiction" model is a red herring and a straw man. While I can understand why Price, who is apparently a neophyte when it comes to Book of Mormon studies, might think this argument is a significant new insight, the editors and peer reviewers of *Dialogue* have no such excuse. If they are aware of the actual history of the debate on the topic, they should have rejected Price's article for failing to engage and advance that debate, or at least they should have asked him to rewrite it to include a serious engagement with the real issues. If they are unaware of the history of the debate on historicity, they have no business publishing on the topic at all.

Pseudepigrapha?

A major claim of Price's article is that the Book of Mormon is pseudepigraphic—that it is falsely attributed to an ancient prophetic author. According to Price, "both the new prophets [authors of pseudepigrapha] and the establishment [supporters of a closed canon] try to

hide behind the names of the ancient, canonical prophets in order to claim authority" for their new pseudepigraphic scriptures (p. 72). He believes the Book of Mormon was created in precisely the same way that Old and New Testament pseudepigrapha were written (pp. 67–74). Indeed, for Price much of the Bible itself is essentially pseudepigraphic (pp. 78–81). He believes, for example, that Peter's vision in Acts 10:9–16 never really happened; instead, it was a literary pastiche created by cobbling together random phrases from the Septuagint Old Testament (pp. 79–80). For Price, "the Book of Mormon must be the product of that same process . . . the scrambling of motifs and distinctive phrases from previous literary texts in order to produce a new text of the same basic type" (p. 81). But Price's argument in relation to the Book of Mormon is problematic on a number of levels.

First, according to Price, new "inspired" pseudepigraphic authors wrote their new "revelations" under biblical pseudonyms such as Enoch, Moses, or Daniel (p. 70).[6] This was because new scripture would not be accepted since the scriptural canon was closed:

> The new visionary [author of a pseudepigraphic text] may not dare appear in public, but neither will the authorities dare to condemn "newly rediscovered" writings by the old, canonical prophets. In this way, the newer prophets managed to slip under the fence built around the scriptural canon. (p. 71)

Whatever the merits of this interpretation—and it is surely overly simplistic[7]—it is not analogous to Joseph Smith because the Book of Mormon does not claim to be the work of ancient biblical authors. Rather,

6. Price's overall explanation for pseudepigraphic writings is simplistic on a number of levels. There is no scholarly consensus as to the definition of pseudepigrapha; ideas about pseudepigraphy changed through time; the writing of pseudepigraphic texts began centuries before the closing of the canon—thus the existence of a closed canon cannot be the core cause for pseudepigraphy; many different Christian and Jewish communities understood canon and scripture differently; some had an open canon rendering pseudepigraphy pointless; different pseudepigraphic texts are accepted and rejected in different canons; etc. Furthermore, in Price's view, many biblical texts are pseudepigraphic (pp. 78–81), making the distinction between pseudepigrapha and canon rather arbitrary.

7. Price provides no bibliographic references to scholarly discussions of the pseudepigrapha that outline the evidence for his theory.

it is an entirely new set of scriptures by *nonbiblical* prophets. Joseph's intention was clearly not to make the Book of Mormon acceptable to contemporary Christians by creating new prophecy in the mouth of a revered biblical author such as Moses or Isaiah.[8] By Price's own definition, the Book of Mormon is not actually pseudepigraphic.

As a further part of his assertion that Joseph Smith wrote the Book of Mormon as a pseudepigraph in order to make it more acceptable to readers of a closed biblical canon, Price believes that "after setting forth the Book of Mormon, Joseph Smith began to prophesy in his own voice" (pp. 74–75). Unfortunately for Price, the historical reality of Joseph's prophecies is quite different from Price's model. In an example of pure speculation, Price describes what he believes Joseph was thinking while considering foisting a fictitious Book of Mormon on the Christians of early nineteenth-century America: "If writings of old prophets are the only ones taken seriously, then by all means let's write one! It's the only way to gain media access!" (p. 72).

According to Price, Joseph decided to write a fictional scripture set in ancient times because the closing of the biblical canon prevented his own personal prophecies from being acceptable among other Christians. But the Book of Mormon was actually published in March 1830.[9] By that time Joseph Smith had already revealed seventeen sections of the Doctrine and Covenants (D&C 2–18) over the course of twenty-one months in his own "prophetic voice." If the purpose of writing the Book of Mormon was to avoid the problems associated with claiming to be a new prophet with new scripture in a prophetless world with a closed canon, as Price claims, why was Joseph Smith making independent new prophecies originating from his own new personal revelations at precisely the time he was supposedly writing a book to avoid the very problem he was creating for himself?

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8. This statement applies to the Book of Mormon as a whole, even though it does contain quotations from biblical figures: for example, Isaiah (2 Nephi 12–24 = Isaiah 2–14) and Christ (3 Nephi 12–14 = Matthew 5–7). On the other hand, Joseph does restore revelations from Moses (Moses 1–6), Enoch (Moses 7), and Abraham (Abraham 1–5); Price does not mention these texts in his argument.

9. Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 110.

Whence God?

A final serious concern I have with Price's article is his confusing use of religious language. Throughout his article Price talks of God and inspiration as if they were real objective facts. He describes "reading the prophetic Word of God" (p. 70); he claims (without providing any evidence) that "most theologians now accept that God might inspire an authoritative pseudepigraph as easily as he might inspire a parable" (p. 74). Joseph obtained an "inspired result" (p. 76) of scripture writing. Elsewhere Price speaks of the "divinely inspired prophecy of Joseph Smith" (p. 77). Take, for example, this statement: "If we feel entitled to decree that God could never sink to inspiring a pseudepigraph (and if we think we are privy to the literary tastes of the Almighty, we are claiming to be prophets ourselves!), then we have no option but to dismiss the biblical pseudepigraphs along with the Book of Mormon" (p. 73). This language is astonishingly confusing given the fact that Price is an atheist and believes in neither God nor divine inspiration.

Red flags certainly should go up in one's mind when reading Price's brief biography at the end of this issue of *Dialogue;* it mentions that he has published with Prometheus Books and is director of a "Secular Humanist Center" (p. 249). These organizations are all associated with Paul Kurtz's secular humanist movement, which is a strong ally of George D. Smith in his atheistic attacks on Mormonism.[10] Price's personal atheism is made abundantly clear from his publications in other venues, of which I will cite only a few.[11]

For example, in "From Fundamentalist to Humanist,"[12] Price documents his personal odyssey from fundamentalist adolescent through

10. See Louis Midgley, "The Signature Books Saga," in this number of the *FARMS Review,* pages 361–406; Midgley, "Atheists and Cultural Mormons Promote a Naturalistic Humanism," review of *Religion, Feminism, and Freedom of Conscience: A Mormon/Humanist Dialogue,* ed. George D. Smith, *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 7/1 (1995): 229–38; Midgley, "George Dempster Smith, Jr., on the Book of Mormon," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 4 (1992): 5–12.

11. Price is a member of the Atheist Alliance and an editor for their journal, *Secular Nation;* see www.atheistalliance.org/library/news_082602.html (accessed 9 January 2004).

12. "From Fundamentalist to Humanist (1997)"; see www.infidels.org/library/modern/robert_price/humanist.html (accessed 9 January 2004).

seminary to a liberal Christian view, and finally to atheism. As such it is a fairly typical "testimonial" of apostasy—the conversion from belief to disbelief. The result is that for Price religion is merely a form of literature, poetry, or drama.

> [Religion] was really a kind of esthetic experience. Worship was something akin to the awe we feel at great art or at beholding the starry sky. Poetry could offer essentially the same, genuinely spiritual experience. Religion came to seem to me basically a matter of drama and theater. That is not to denigrate it. Rather, to see it as theatrical is to explain why it is so powerful, like an engrossing film or play that leaves the viewer changed.[13]

For Price, God is simply a character in fiction: "I had come to view religion simply as a matter of spiritual experience. 'God' was mainly part of the language of worship, not necessarily anything more."[14] "To get something out of a Shakespeare play, you by no means need actually believe in Hamlet or Polonius. Only a fool would think you do. And, I suggest, no Christian need believe in a historical Jesus or his resurrection to have a powerful Easter."[15] On the other hand, to my knowledge Shakespeare never said that the resurrected Hamlet appeared to him in a dream and gave him a prewritten play *Hamlet* on golden plates. Shakespeare also never claimed to have been resurrected and ascended into heaven. Frankly, the two examples are not even slightly analogous.

If there is no God, there is naturally no inspiration. Prophecy and revelation are merely forms of literature.

> But this meant that religion is nothing more than a creation of human imagination. . . . I realized I do not esteem Jesus as any greater a teacher than Aristotle or Epicurus. I guess I agree

13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Robert M. Price, "Religious and Secular Humanism: What's the Difference?" at www.secularhumanism.org/library/fi/price_22_3.htm (accessed 9 January 2004), a reprint from Robert M. Price, "Religious and Secular Humanism," *Free Inquiry* 22/3 (2002).

> more with Nietzsche than with Jesus. . . . Religion now seems to me a kind of nursery school version of philosophy. . . . The Bible continues to fascinate me . . . though now it seems as bizarre to "believe" the Bible as it would be to "believe" the Iliad or Hamlet![16]

In fact, religion is nothing more than brain chemistry:

> One of the most intriguing areas of recent research in brain science, and one that bears directly on our question, is that of the physical, organo-chemical character of religious experiences. As discussed in books like Matthew Alper's *The God Part of the Brain,* studies indicate that the mystical experience of God . . . [is a function] of the temporal parietal lobe of the brain. . . . I suspect that this is the final reduction, the ultimate demystification of religion's metaphysical claims.[17]

Far from believing that Joseph Smith's writings are truly inspired in the sense that Latter-day Saints understand the term, when Price writes that Smith's writings are "the same sort of thing as the Bible . . . [and] no more a hoax than Deuteronomy" (p. 82), he is simply saying they are both equally bogus, but bogus in an interesting and pleasantly aesthetic, fictional sort of way, though necessarily nursery-schoolish. When he talks of the God of Mormonism, Price is referring to electrochemical activity in the temporal parietal lobe of Joseph Smith's brain—nothing more.

I could go on, but I think the point is obvious. Price is an atheist. Religion can be called inspired in precisely the same way that literature or art can be called inspired. Spirituality is simply an interior human emotion with its origins in brain chemistry. Let me emphasize

16. Price, "From Fundamentalist to Humanist."

17. Price, "Religious and Secular Humanism." What studies like Alper's actually deal with is brain activity during "mystical" experiences, which Price reductionistically assumes are normative for all types of religious experience. But even if the temporal parietal lobe of the brain is stimulated during all religious experiences, it no more proves that there is no objective divine reality outside the brain than the fact that certain regions of the brain are stimulated by light or sound proves that there is no such thing as light or sound outside the brain.

that I am not revealing a dark hidden secret here. In his publications outside of *Dialogue,* Price makes no attempt to mask his true beliefs or lack thereof. On the contrary, he openly evangelizes for atheism. Nor am I claiming that Price is a bad person because he is an atheist; he may well be a wonderful father and ethical human being. I am not even claiming that his position is wrong because he is an atheist. But the masking of his atheism in his *Dialogue* article does make a monumental difference in trying to understand what he is really saying. And his talk of God, prophecy, and inspiration is confusing at best, and perhaps disingenuous when given to a Latter-day Saint audience who understand those terms in a very specific, real, and concrete sense. What Price is really saying is that if we cease to believe in the reality of God and revelation, then the Book of Mormon is scripture in precisely the same sense that the Bible or Qur'an or Bhagavad Gita are scripture—they are all equally "inspiring" fiction.

While I can't speak to Price's motives for writing this article, I find it very difficult to believe that the editors and peer reviewers of *Dialogue* are not aware of the real implication of Price's position. The peer reviewers and editors of *Dialogue* have not done Latter-day Saints a service publishing this type of equivocation—and this is by no means the first time they have done so. For me this is an issue of truth in advertising. Does it not make a difference if God exists? Does it not make a difference if Jesus is the Son of God? Does it not make a difference if Christ really rose from the dead? Does it not make a difference if Joseph Smith really saw God? Does it not make a difference if the resurrected Christ really appeared to real Nephites? Does it not make a difference if there really is the possibility of eternal life? Does it not make a difference if the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is the restored church that has the keys to eternal life? The answer, I think, is obvious: it makes a difference; it makes all the difference in the world and in the world to come. For those truly seeking the way, the truth, and the life, Price's view is lentil pottage he is trying to trade us for our true birthright.