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Abstract Review of *The Pre-Nicene New Testament: Fifty-four Formative Texts* (2006), by Robert M. Price.

Maverick Scholarship and the Apocrypha

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Review of Robert M. Price. *The Pre-Nicene New Testament: Fifty-four Formative Texts*. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2006. xxvi + 1211 pp., with bibliographic essay and index. $49.95.

According to his own declaration, Robert M. Price, in his newest contribution, *The Pre-Nicene New Testament: Fifty-four Formative Texts*, wanted to create a volume that uniquely represented his own viewpoints on the formation of the Christian textual canon. In his words, "I might have invited other scholars to join me in preparing translations for these [apocryphal] books, but I decided not to because I wanted my own distinctive viewpoint to be reflected throughout the whole collection. In my experience, committee translations tend to be dull and safe. I wanted neither" (pp. 1187–88). And so it goes with the footnotes also. The entire volume contains virtually no citations to the vast body of secondary literature on the texts in question, but only textual notations concerning variant readings and random musings, which begs the question of what purpose this volume is intended to achieve.

Price's impressive yet random collection of texts from early Christianity includes those with origins in the first century and those that are typically thought to have been written in the fourth century or later (e.g., the Mandaean Book of John). Because the author avoids scholarly discussions of dating, he is able to sift through the extensive

body of apocryphal literature and cull out those writings that may contain fragments, sayings, and historical notes from earlier centuries even though the texts in which they are included were written much later. So, for example, *Thunder: Perfect Mind*, a decidedly esoteric gnostic text from Nag Hammadi (before the mid-fourth century AD), is used to illuminate the writings attributed to John the Apostle in the first century. Price does this because he thinks it bears some affinity to Johannine thought, particularly language found in the Revelation of John. But the troubling issue is whether the author of *Thunder: Perfect Mind* borrowed from and copied portions of John's writings rather than merely being an inheritor of John's teachings and faith. This and related issues are never even mentioned.

This volume purports to contain "translations" of fifty-four "formative" texts from early Christian history. They are not truly new translations in all instances, for some are described as "accurate English paraphrases" (p. 1187). The author admits he is not "fluent in Arabic, Aramaic, Coptic, Hebrew, or Latin" (p. 1187), although he implies fluency in Greek. So it appears that he has offered new translations only when the texts in question were in Greek, while for other texts he was forced to use existing English translations to create "paraphrases" representing his own views of textual content. These paraphrases of non-Greek texts were carried out without consulting any of the original texts!

The Pre-Nicene New Testament is divided into eight sections: "Pre-Apostolic Writings," "Matthean Cycle," "Marcion's Apostolicon," "To Theophilus," "The Testament of John," "The Petrine Corpus," "Heirs of Jesus," and "The Pauline Circle." In each of these categories, apocryphal and canonical texts are included together. They are each intended to demonstrate a school of thought associated with various early Christians figures. For example, under the heading "Matthean Cycle," the Gospels of Mark and Matthew are included first, followed by *Gospel according to the Hebrews*, *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, and *Generations of Jesus*. These texts, according to Price, reveal a pattern of emerging proto-orthodoxy in the pre-Nicene era, an orthodoxy that had an interest in canonizing the story of Jesus in light of com-

peting versions. Once the peculiar orthodoxy of the Matthean school was established, other forms of Christianity would simply fade away, or so the author supposes. The origin of this peculiar Matthean form of Christianity stems from the earliest known Gospel, the Gospel of Mark, which Price shockingly dates to "the mid-second century AD/CE" (p. 69). Each subsequent writing in the Matthean cycle supposedly builds on previous writings from members of the school until a more nearly perfect representation of their ideas is achieved in later texts.

One of the most startling texts contained in Price's book is a "translation" of the *Gospel according to the Hebrews* (also known as the *Gospel of the Hebrews*). Early Christian commentators like Eusebius and Hegessipus quoted from or referred to a Gospel of the Hebrews. Eusebius contended that this text was a source, if not an earlier version, of our canonical Gospel of Matthew. Others, such as Epiphanius and Origen, quoted brief snippets from this text in order to demonstrate to their audiences its unorthodox character. Unfortunately, only small portions of this text have survived through patristic quotations. Surprisingly, Price includes a full text of the *Gospel of the Hebrews* in his volume. He has created this text by pruning the Gospel of Matthew according to what early patristic authors said about the *Gospel of the Hebrews*. Price uses his own judgment to decide which portions of the canonical Gospel of Matthew were not included in this early source and has therefore produced an English text that has no textual support whatsoever.

Such an effort to create a text from ancient quotations of that text is not without merit, but in this particular instance the effort is hampered by the omission of scholarly literature on the subject. If this text of the *Gospel of the Hebrews* is to have any value for students of early Christianity, then it must conform to scholarly standards already established. Hermeneia's *The Critical Edition of Q*[1] is commendable in this regard. It also reconstructs an ancient text for which there are no surviving manuscripts, a text whose existence many scholars doubt. However, those involved in producing that volume have carefully set

1. Paul Hoffmann, John S. Kloppenborg, and James M. Robinson, eds., *The Critical Edition of Q*, Hermeneia Supplement Series (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000).

out their reasons for including and excluding certain passages so that the reader is able to fully assess the value of each reading in the hypothetical text.

The Pre-Nicene New Testament includes all twenty-seven canonical books from the New Testament in new, eclectic translations, as well as twenty-seven apocryphal books. Some of these apocryphal books originate from the Nag Hammadi collection, while others come from patristic authors or from disparate textual discoveries and sources. No class of books, canonical or apocryphal, is given preference in Price's attempt to present a more complete and doctrinally inclusive canon. "The goal of the present collection," Price explains, "is to try to strip away the Nicene, that is, the orthodox, traditional gloss from the underlying early Christian texts" (p. xxiii).

It is important to note that *The Pre-Nicene New Testament* seems to be aimed at exposing a larger audience to the vast body of apocryphal literature and at demonstrating how prevalent apocryphal literature was in some early Christian communities. This is certainly a commendable goal, and the reader will often be rewarded for studying the diversity of early Christian beliefs. In fact, the relevance of noncanonical texts has been emphasized repeatedly in recent decades as prominent scholars have attempted to present a more complete picture of early Christianity based on a broader collection of early Christian texts, including the apocryphal literature. At the end of his volume, Price addresses the issue of modern scholarship and how it has come to terms with the Apocrypha. The final essay (pp. 1145–85) is insightful in this regard.

This final essay also reveals Price's penchant for admiring liberal scholarship and denigrating conservative scholarship. Certainly Price did not draw the lines between these two camps, nor did he define the scholarly arguments between them. However, his work is clearly dependent upon a more liberal, post-Bultmannian perspective that has been informed considerably by a new *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule* (literally "history of religions school," or biblical criticism). Contrary to Price's viewpoint, however, no scholarship, whether liberal or conservative, is unbiased in its presentation. The truly unbiased scholar

is a phantasm of a previous generation. Scholars working in the field of biblical studies today must address their own preconceived notions and attempt to account for them in their academic endeavors. Price's book is an egregious example of someone who neglects to address his own biases. For such a work to be useful to a wide audience, it must help the reader apply a new paradigm more broadly. When that paradigm is so entrenched in a single viewpoint, it is difficult for anyone outside that viewpoint to use it.

For example, one of my favorite biblical passages is the Sermon on the Mount as recorded in the Gospel of Matthew, particularly the passages known as the Beatitudes. Price provides some startlingly loose translations of the biblical text. For example, the third beatitude as translated by Price reads, "Blessed are the meek, for when the great ones destroy one another fighting over it, the meek shall remain to inherit the earth" (p. 124). And the sixth beatitude reads, "Blessed are those with a clean conscience, for only they shall see God" (p. 125). These two beatitudes, as well as five of the other seven in Price's volume, are radically distant from the Greek text. Perhaps Price is trying to achieve a translation that approaches what Jesus might have *meant* rather than what Jesus is actually recorded as having *said*. For both beatitudes, the King James text is much closer to how the Greek text reads. How can the modern reader trust Price to determine what Jesus meant when it is so unlike what Jesus is recorded to have said?

Price provides little for the scholar specializing in the field of New Testament studies and early Christian Apocrypha. All of the texts in his volume, with the exception of the hypothetical *Gospel of the Hebrews*, are available elsewhere in more careful and thorough scholarly editions and translations. Price's eclectic "translations" are too far removed from their textual bases to further the scholarly enterprise. For the average reader who wants more information about the Apocrypha and early Christian literature that did not make it into the canon, Price's volume is also problematic because of its strong, unexamined bias. There are numerous translations of these texts that are considerably less problematic than Price's editions. Three books stand out as exemplary in making Christian Apocrypha available to a

wide audience. They are J. K. Elliott's *The Apocryphal New Testament*,[2] W. Schneemelcher's *The New Testament Apocrypha*,[3] and James Robinson's *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*.[4] Each of these is more comprehensive than Price's volume and offers the reader a wealth of information about the texts in question.

2. J. K. Elliott, ed., *The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

3. Wilhelm Schneemelcher, ed., *The New Testament Apocrypha*, 2 vols. (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1991).

4. James M. Robinson, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, 3rd rev. ed. (Leiden: Brill, 1998).