

"There Really is a God, and He Dwells in the Temporal Parietal Lobe of Joseph Smith's Brain"

William J. Hamblin

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 significance of that book.¹ Dr. Price's position is straightforward and none too innovative; while providing no evidence, he insists "virtually all critical scholars. . . agree that Joseph Smith did not discover the Book of Mormon but rather created it" (67).² He further maintains that the claims Joseph Smith made surrounding the origin of the Book of Mormon are "manifestly false" (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 de-

1. Robert M. Price, "Prophecy and Palimpsest," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, 35, no. 3 (Fall 2002): 67-82. A fuller version of this article, "Joseph Smith: Inspired Author of the Book of Mormon," appeared, in Dan Vogel and Brent Lee Metcalfe, *American Apocrypha*, (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002), 321-366. There is no indication in *Dialogue* that this article is actually an abridged reprint; it is unclear why the editors felt this article merited reprinting less than a year after it originally appeared. My citations are to the *Dialogue* article. Additional material not in the *Dialogue* abridgement can be found in the *American Apocrypha* version on pp. 321-327, 328-9, 335-6, 339, 341-2, 346, 347-366. Parallel passages in the *Dialogue* article and the *American Apocrypha* edition are as follows: 67=321-4; 68-77=324-339 (with several paragraphs omitted), 78=340, 342-3; 79-82=343-7.

2. Dr. Price seems to be completely unaware of, or at least unwilling to engage, a large body of scholarship which challenges his prejudices on this issue. For the most recent popularizing summary (with detailed notes to numerous technical studies), see Donald Parry, Daniel Peterson, and John Welch, eds. *Echoes and Evidences*, (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2002); see also Noel Reynolds, ed., *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited: the Evidence for Ancient Origins*, (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1997).

bunk it" (82).³ In reality this is simply more of the same kind of assertions we have been hearing for years from some cultural Mormons.⁴ Price's entire case rests largely on argument from analogy. Unfortunately, none of the analogies he proposes are valid.⁵

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 was 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. (68-69)

I admit to being baffled by such statements. Is Dr. 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 has ever understood them as such), does Price really not know that Joseph Smith consistently claimed the Book of Mormon was authentic ancient history and that *all* of his early followers accepted it as such?⁶ 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—as Price asserts—that believing Latter-day Saints are so simple-minded that we don't understand the difference between lying and fiction, or the possibility of inspired fiction such as

3. Price makes these types of assertions throughout his article without 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.

4. The most recent examples can be found in Vogel and Metcalfe, *American Apocrypha*.

5. For a discussion of the fallacies of false analogy—several of which occur in Price's article, see David Hackett Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought*, (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1970), 243-259.

6. Kent P. Jackson, "Joseph Smith and the Historicity of the Book of Mormon," in Paul Y. Hoskisson, ed., *Historicity and the Latter-day Saint Scriptures* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, 2001), 123-140.

Jesus' parables. The problem is that some of those who reject the historicity 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 vs. fiction.⁷ The issue is: if the Book of Mormon is fiction, then Joseph Smith could not be a true prophet, a point tacitly accepted by most of those who reject historicity, since all of their accounts include serious equivocation or redefinition of the key concepts revelation, inspiration, and prophet (as I'll explain below).

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 there were 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 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 some 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."⁸

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," (69) does not imply that Joseph Smith was "a mischievous or malicious hoaxer" (73) or "charlatan" (69).

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

8. William J. Hamblin, "An Apologist for the Critics" *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon*, 6, no. 1 (1994):453.

Unfortunately, Dr. 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 only 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 (69). Unfortunately, this is again an extraordinarily weak analogy. 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 the *Book of Moby*. He did not proclaim the divine origin of *Moby Dick* throughout his life, nor did he go to the 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 or a madman. Although not all fiction writers are charlatans, some fiction writers most certainly are. None of Joseph Smith's contemporaries had any confusion about this issue. They either accepted the Book of Mormon as authentic ancient scripture or a fraudulent fiction.

In the full version of his article in *American Apocrypha*, Price actually attempts to engage the question of historicity in a bit more detail.

It would take a large-scale scrutiny of the Book of Mormon, and in minute detail, to determine if there is evidence of oral, preliterate traditions underlying the stories of the book. If scholars were to conclude that the narrative of the Book of Mormon had been worked up from traditional material, this would go a long way toward vindicating the claim of the book to be based on ancient accounts of ancient events.⁹

Remarkably, Price seems to be genuinely unaware that such studies have been going on for years by literally dozens of scholars, with quite positive results.¹⁰

I have seen variants on Price's claim—that fiction can be inspired and,

9. Price, "Joseph Smith," 346.

10. For an excellent overview of the cultural and historical background to such debates, see Terryl L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002). In addition to Parry, Peterson, and Welch, *Echoes and Evidences*, and Reynolds, *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited*, see Stephen D. Ricks and John W. Welch, eds. *The Allegory of the Olive Tree* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1994); S. Kent Brown, *From Jerusalem to Zarahemla* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, 1998), Stephen D. Ricks and John W. Welch, eds. *King Benjamin's Speech* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1998), Donald W. Parry and John W. Welch, eds., *Isaiah in the Book of Mormon* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1998).

therefore, that the Book of Mormon can be fiction and still be inspired—as asserted endlessly by some cultural Mormons. I have never *once* seen a response to the actual arguments of the believers in the historicity. From this perspective the "inspired fiction" model is a red herring and a straw man.

PSEUDEPIGRAPHY?

Another major claim of Price's article is that the Book of Mormon is pseudepigraphic—that is falsely attributed to an ancient prophetic author. According to Price, in the formulation of biblical pseudepigrapha "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" (72). He believes the Book of Mormon was created in precisely the same way that Old and New Testament pseudepigrapha were written (67-74). Indeed, for Price much of the Bible itself is essentially pseudepigrapha (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 carefully selected phrases from the Septuagint Old Testament (79-80).¹¹ For Price, "the Book of Mormon must be the product of the 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" (81).

Dr. Price's argument in relation to the Book of Mormon is problematic at 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 (70).¹² This was because new scripture would not be accepted since the scriptural canon was closed:

11. To consistently apply Price's method—that because an author describes events using scriptural language we should assume that the event being described did not really happen—leads to historical absurdity. Using Price's method, we must assume there was no First Crusade because the crusaders are described as circumambulating Jerusalem before their attack in conscious imitation of the ancient Israelite attack on Jericho (Joshua 6). Martin Luther King never led the civil rights movement because he used biblical language and models when proclaiming "Let my people go!" (Exodus 9:1). And because Brigham Young consciously imitated the camp organization of the Israelites as described in Exodus, there was obviously no real Mormon trek westward (D.C. 136); after all, they even claim to have gone to a land with a Jordan River and a salt sea! While conscious imitation of biblical models or language may indicate fictionalization, it is by no means proof of lack of historicity of the events being described. If the principle is manifestly inaccurate in many verifiable historical examples, why should we assume it is necessarily valid in interpreting scriptural texts?

12. Price's overall explanation for pseudepigraphic writings is simplistic at a number of levels. There is no scholarly consensus as to the definition of pseudepigrapha; ancient and modern ideas about pseudepigraphy change 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, like first century Christians, had an open canon rendering pseudepigraphy pointless; some pseudepigraphic texts are accepted as canonical in some traditions (e.g. 1 Enoch among the Ethiopian Christians), etc. Furthermore, in Price's view, many canonical biblical texts are in fact pseudepigraphic (78-81), making his distinction between pseudepigrapha and canon rather arbitrary.

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

Whatever the merits of this interpretation—and it is surely overly simplistic¹³—it is not analogous to Joseph Smith because the Book of Mormon does not claim to be the work of ancient *biblical* authors. Rather, it is an entirely new set of scriptures by *non-biblical* 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.¹⁴ By Price's own definition the Book of Mormon is not pseudepigrapha.

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" (74-5). Unfortunately for Dr. Price, the historical reality of Joseph's prophecies is quite different than 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!" (72). According to Dr. Price, Joseph decided to write 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 1830.¹⁵ By that time Joseph Smith had already revealed seventeen sections of the Doctrine and Covenants (DC 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 and revealing 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 obviously creating for himself?

13. Price provides no bibliographic references to scholarly discussions of the pseudepigrapha providing the details and evidence for his theory.

14. This statement applies to the Book of Mormon as a whole, even though it does contain quotations from biblical figures: e.g., 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), after—not before—the start of his prophetic career; Price does not mention these texts in his argument.

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

WHENCE GOD?

A final serious concern I have with Dr. Price's article is its unclear 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" (70); he claims (again without providing any evidence), that "most theologians now accept that God might inspire an authoritative pseudepigraph as easily as he might inspire a parable" (74). Joseph was "inspired" (76) in the writing of his scripture. Elsewhere Price speaks of the "divinely inspired prophecy of Joseph Smith" (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. (73)

All of this language is certainly confusing given the fact that Price is an atheist and believes in neither God nor divine inspiration.

Price's personal atheism is made abundantly clear from his publications in other venues, of which I will cite only a few.¹⁶ In "From Fundamentalist to Humanist,"¹⁷ Price documents his personal odyssey from fundamentalist adolescent through seminary to a liberal Christian view, and finally atheism. As such it is a fairly typical "testimonial" of 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.¹⁸

16. Price is a member of the Atheist Alliance and an editor for their journal, *Secular Nation*, http://www.atheistalliance.org/library/news_082602.html. He is also associated with Paul Kurtz' Prometheus Press and Secular Humanist Movement, (see *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, "Contributors," 249), on which see Louis Midgley, "On Caliban Mischief," *FARMS Review of Books* 15, no. 1 (2003):xi-xxxv; Louis Midgley, "Atheists and Cultural Mormons Promote a Naturalistic Humanism," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 7, no. 1 (1995):229—238; Louis Midgley, "George Dempster Smith, Jr., on the Book of Mormon," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 4 (1992):5-12.

17. "From Fundamentalist to Humanist" (1997) http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/robert_price/humanist.html.

18. *Ibid.* I am puzzled by what Price might view as a "genuinely spiritual experience," given the fact that in his world view there is no "genuine spirit." I suspect the term "spiritual" is reductionistically used by Price as a synonym for "emotional."

For Price, God is simply a recurring fictional character in multifaceted works of 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."¹⁹ "To get something out of a Shakespeare play," he insists, "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."²⁰

If there is no God, there is naturally no inspiration. Prophecy and revelation are merely exotic 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 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!²¹

In fact, religious experiences are 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. . . are *all functions of the temporal parietal lobe of the brain*. . . I suspect that this is the final reduction, the ultimate demystification of religion's metaphysical claims.²²

Far from believing that Joseph Smith's writings are truly inspired in the sense the Latter-day Saints understand the term, when Price writes that Smith's writings are "the same sort of thing as the Bible. . . [and are] no more a hoax than Deuteronomy," he is simply saying they are both equally bogus, but bogus in an

19. Ibid.

20. "Religious and Secular Humanism: What's the difference?" http://www.secularhumanism.org/library/fi/price_22_3.htm. On the other hand, as noted above in relation to Melville, 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, I am astonished that anyone would think the two examples are even remotely analogous.

21. Price, "From Fundamentalist to Humanist"

22. Price, "Religious and Secular Humanism," emphasis added. 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 were 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.

interesting and pleasantly aesthetic fictional sort of way—though necessarily nursery-schoolish. When he talks of the God of Mormonism, Price is referring to electro-chemical 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 who believes that scripture can be called inspired in precisely the same way that literature or art can be called inspired. Spirituality is simply a subjective human emotion with its origins in brain chemistry. In his publications outside of *Dialogue* Dr. Price makes no attempt to mask his beliefs, or lack thereof. On the contrary, he openly evangelizes for atheism. I am not claiming that Dr. 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 atheistic beliefs are necessarily incorrect. But his confusing use of religious terminology in his *Dialogue* article does make a monumental difference in trying to understand what he is really saying and the implications of those claims. His talk of God, prophecy and inspiration is at best imprecise when presented to an LDS audience who understand those terms in a very specific, real, and concrete sense. What Dr. 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 is scripture—they are all equally "inspiring" fiction. In this I agree with him.

In my view, however, Dr. Price's article ignores the truly fundamental questions. 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 is really 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 genuinely seeking the way, the truth and the life, Price's view is lentil pottage he is trying to trade us for our true birthright. A slightly different version of this article appears in *The FARMS Review of Books*, 16/1 (2004).

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