

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Song of Songs

Another forbidden subject breached. The brave ones lead. Molly Bennion's "Singing the Song of Songs" (Autumn 2003) was bold and showed wisdom. Mormons seem frightened to talk about our humanness. More like that, please.

Mike Oborn
Bellevue, Washington

Reply to Professor Hamblin

I am gratified and delighted that my modest piece "Prophecy and Palimpsest" was of sufficient interest to call forth the remarks of Professor Hamblin (Winter 2003). He has afforded me the welcome chance to try to clarify things that I, a novice in Book of Mormon scholarship, have left blurred. He raises four points that I would like to discuss.

First, though, as Dr. Hamblin surmises, I am shamefully ignorant of some relevant work previously done on these issues, I am aware of a large volume of apologetics for the ancient authorship of the Book of Mormon. But I must say that it strikes me as basically axe-grinding in nature. And I do not feel it is wise for those unconvinced by such attempts to delay attempts at creative, new critical experiments, feeling that we are forever obliged to refight the same battles with the rear guard again and again. There may be a place for that (as when I debate evangelicals on the historicity of the gospels and the resurrection of Jesus), but I want to get on with the studies made possible by a

new paradigm—not spend all my time trying to beat the old one to death.

So, in my opinion, articles like mine properly take as read the apologetics debate and invite the consideration of those who have come out of that debate on the same side, those of us who agree that the Book of Mormon is a monument of the nineteenth century. We must take the trouble to follow out the implications of our basic insight. I don't see why our team should let the other side forever set the agenda for us. If we do, we will never get anywhere. Of course, apologists probably don't want us to.

Second, let me try to clarify my position on whether Joseph Smith should be considered a hoaxer, a deceiver, etc. This is really a manifestation of the intentional fallacy. We can never be sure we have captured the intention of any author; and even when we do happen to know it, it is not the final word. It is the text—the work itself—that tells the tale, not the writer. In this sense, with Roland Barthes, we can speak of "the death of the Author." When we engage the Book of Mormon as a text to see what it has to say for itself, it becomes evident that it is a massive work of edifying fiction. It has not the nature of a malicious hoax, which we might describe as propaganda, disinformation, incitement to fear or hate, or manipulation of the reader for financial exploitation. It is a work of edifying fiction, like a parable, no matter what may have been said by the first one to promulgate it.

We may indeed seek to infer what

was going on in Joseph Smith's mind (or in his temporal parietal lobe!), but this will be a provisional, tentative judgment of a biographical kind concerning Joseph Smith, not about the Book of Mormon. I would be willing to say that Joseph Smith, like Madame Blavatsky, Father Divine, G.I. Gurdjieff, and others was something of a hoaxer. But I would rather use the anthropological term *trickster*, which usually refers to mythic characters embodying the sort of serious divine "play" we see when Zeus and Hermes visit Baucis and Philemon in mortal disguise, when Jehovah invites Abraham to think he must sacrifice his son as a test of faith, or when Krishna plays tricks on his faithful milkmaids.

Religious founders are playing such a trick when they undertake the almost ritual procedure of claiming revelations from God, whether immediately vouchsafed to the imagination's eye (what Jung would call the "active imagination") or laboriously composed like Deuteronomy or the Book of Mormon. I believe all such "tricks" carry with them a whisper of "he who has ears, let him hear." In short, I think the Book of Mormon is put forth as a parable.

The claim that it is an ancient book from God is more a metaphorical characterization of the role in the faith community the book will play. This is why I am happy, in the responsive readings of my beloved Episcopal Church, to say "Thanks be to God!" when the Scripture lesson is completed with the formula: "The Word of the Lord." To me that phrase does not count as a theory as to the production of the book being read from, but rather as an acknowledg-

ment of the centrality the text holds in our worship life.

The degree to which Joseph Smith actually did his best to persuade people to adopt a factually inaccurate belief (known by him to be nonfactual) would be the degree to which he was a deceiver but, as I say, a benign one. But his intent hardly matters. The text tells its own story. And besides, for a man to have spent hour upon hour, day after day, gazing into the bottom of that hat . . . ! Well, he must have thought he was scrying the secrets of the past in some manner or other. It can't simply have been a hoax. The psychology of religion in general and of prophets in particular is perhaps more complex than the syllogisms of Professor Hamblin leave room for.

Third, have I contradicted my own theory when I make Joseph Smith a writer of pseudepigrapha? Dr. Hamblin points out two ambiguities in my article. First, I offer *biblical* examples of pseudepigraphical texts while defining pseudepigrapha as writings that resort to sacred pen names because it is too late for them to have been included in the canon of scripture. But there is no problem here after all. The canon has evolved. The book of Daniel didn't make it into the canon when it contained only the Law and the Prophets, but later there was a new "catch-all" division added to the canon, "the Writings," and Daniel was deposited there. With Deutero-Zechariah, part of canonical Zechariah, it was a case of someone adding new chapters to a book that already had a place in the canon, really

a large-scale textual interpolation. And then again, different sects and churches have different canons, different lists, so that today the Ethiopian Church has 1 Enoch in its canon, just as Tertullian wanted, while most others don't. Joseph Smith was certainly trying to secure admission for the Book of Mormon into the Christian canon, at least that of his own new sect. Even today the Book of Mormon is packaged and promoted as "another Testament of Jesus Christ," which certainly suggests it is more Bible.

The second ambiguity with regard to pseudepigraphy was the fact that, whereas I said ancient pseudepigraphists hid behind the names of biblical heroes, Joseph Smith did not. Yes, but that seems to me an irrelevant distinction here, since, given the nature of the fiction—a collateral Bible representing an unknown dispensation in the western hemisphere—you would have had to use Bible-related characters with new names since, unfortunately, the Bible contains the names of no Americans. If only because the Book of Mormon must report the final slaughter of the Nephites, the narrators cannot have been portrayed as (much more ancient) Bible personalities. In any case, they *are* ancient Israelite characters. I do not think it weakens my point.

On a related matter, the fact that the Prophet Joseph Smith began promulgating revelations in his own name previous to and simultaneous with the publication of parts of the Book of Mormon seems to me not that important. Dr. Hamblin contends that Joseph Smith need not have resorted to pseudepigraphy to gain credence by cir-

cumventing canonical bounds (which is why, I said, people wrote under sacred pen names) since he already had acknowledged prophetic authority. Well, yes and no. It remains true that his announced discovery of new portions of scripture was instrumental in making his first converts (and many subsequently). And it is safe to say that his own prophecies carried weight only with those who no longer needed convincing. So he hid behind Mormon's and Moroni's names to get people to believe in him, then spoke in his own name once they did believe in him. Even today, if TV evangelism is any clue, outsiders are attracted by the offer of "another Testament of Jesus Christ," not by the oracles of Joseph Smith in the Doctrine and Covenants.

The fourth major point I want to address is that of my own faith. Am I disingenuous? Do I claim that the Book of Mormon is what I believe does not even exist: a work of divine inspiration? Dr. Hamblin has erred in reading my various articles as direct commentary upon one another. In fact, I believe my various fragmentary writings are quite consistent in a manner that I now find myself obliged to sketch. Basically, my theological position is a phenomenological one, a theology of religious experience as it appears to consciousness. I do not suppose that mortals can have knowledge of ostensible metaphysical realities. "Such knowledge is too wonderful for me. It is high; I cannot attain it" (Ps. 139:6). In Kant's wake, I regard the failures and absurdities of conventional arguments for theism as

the inevitable and farcical results of the doomed attempt to speak of the unknowable in terms of the known. It is such absurdities and fallacies I seek to combat, along with the kindred fallacies of evangelical biblical apologetics (which strike me as bad biblical studies), in my writings for atheist and humanist venues. I take very seriously the dictum of Paul Tillich who said that the God the atheists reject is rightly rejected. In some of my writings, I am busy doing that.

I agree with Don Cupitt that the only proper place for God-language is worship, not, for instance, scientific or historical explanation, as if one were to explain a plane crash by saying, "Well, it looks as if God wanted those people dead." It would not be so much false as ludicrous. Where is God? He inhabits the praises of his people (Ps. 22:3). Where may we speak of God? In the zone of worship, like the ancient high priests who dared utter his name only once a year behind the veil. Recent brain science bids fair to account for how we have religious/spiritual/emotional/esthetic experiences. Fine. That does not spoil their value, any more than a knowledge of optics undermines or co-opts the appreciation of art. I think the core religious experience—the sense of awe and wonder before Being itself—is basically esthetic. Thus, esthetic means are needed to awaken it, as all hymn-writers and church architects know very well. So I am not ashamed of the "dramatic" or "theatrical" understanding of worship as Dr. Hamblin appears to be. While no doubt appreciating the artistic dimension, he seems to think that a metaphysical opinion

about what is going on in worship is required as well, like the Catholic priest who demands that the communicant believe in Transubstantiation before he will allow him to partake.

If asked whether I "believe in" God, I have but an oblique answer: I worship God. I do not make him an object. When asked if I believe Joseph Smith is a true prophet, my criteria are twofold: Did/does he so function in the life of the community he founded? And do his teachings lead his people into a wholesome and virtuous life? I answer "Yes" to both. I offer the same answer to the question of whether Rev. Sun Myung Moon is a true messiah. I am an atheist in that I reject the personal deity of literalistic biblical religion. I am an agnostic and a humanist in that I do not see how we may get around the insight of Protagoras: Man is the measure of all things. I am a Christian and an Episcopalian in that I rejoice to sing the hymns, to observe the liturgical cycles, to partake of the Eucharist, and to cherish the Bible.

Reality is vast, and I do not think I am in any position to map it all out neatly. I do not intend to wait to have religious experience, which is plainly available and wholesome, till I can figure out unseen metaphysical realities. Nor, as a lover of the Bible, do I wish to let discredited hokum be ascribed to it in vain. Further, as a worshipper, I feel obliged to knock down theological idols unworthy of that worship. How the pieces of this puzzle fit together, I do not know, but I see nothing inconsistent between them.

Robert M. Price
Selma, North Carolina