

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Signature Books Defended

I'd like to echo the sentiments expressed by John Sillito ("Navigating the Difficult Terrain of the Mormon Experience," 36, no. 3 [Fall 2003]: 266-70) regarding Ronald W. Walker's, David W. Whittaker's, and James B. Allen's brief discussion of Signature Books in their book *Mormon History*.

Never once during my fifteen years as Signature's director of publishing did anyone ever attempt directly or indirectly to dictate a decision to accept or reject a manuscript for publication. The assertion that Signature favors any one person's ideology is simply wrong. I know from attending countless meetings of Signature's editorial board and board of directors that decisions regarding what to accept are governed exclusively by the quality of writing, responsible use of sources, cogency in presentation and organization, contribution to the general intellectual environment, and marketability. To suggest otherwise is to perpetrate a lie.

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Hamblin Ad Hominem?

"Reagan's economic policies are absurd; but what should we expect from an actor?" While this impromptu quotation may have been

inspired by the recent death of the former president, it is a very good example of a rhetorical method called the *ad hominem*.

The *ad hominem* has today become one of the most frequently used rhetorical arguments employed in discrediting the claims of others. It is my thought that ignorance, as well as its ubiquity, has dulled many to the point that the device has become unrecognizable for what it is: a method used in discrediting the claims of another in which the person rather than his or her argument becomes a point of argumentation. The *ad hominem* is a poor substitute for logical and scholarly argument and criticism.

Having to do with the irrelevancy of the appeal made rather than its falsity is where the *ad hominem* lurks. Reagan was indeed an actor, not an economist, but is that what makes his economic policy absurd? In the above quotation, my imaginary interlocutor's appeal simply criticizes Reagan's occupation, rather than logically and systematically explaining why the economic policy is absurd. While here we have a criticism of one's occupation, other forms of criticism might include one's character, associations, hobbies, motives, preferences, or beliefs.

I mentioned how frequently

this rhetorical device is used, but why? Perhaps the appeal of the *ad hominem* is that it is so very simple to do. It requires little if any effort to compose. One need simply find a point one's audience will consider unfavorable. The simple introduction of such a point goes a long way toward essentially "charming" one's audience to disregard the entire argument or position of one's opponent. Many it seems are seduced and swayed by its power without ever realizing it. It is a tool of the demagogue. Its power lies in its ability to convince the reader or listener that such bad ideas (i.e., those you disagree with) naturally come out of the mouths of bad people.

So what can be the purpose of this lesson in rhetoric? In a recent issue of *Dialogue*, an article featured an irrelevant argument in the form of an *ad hominem*. That article was William J. Hamblin, "There Really Is a God, and He Dwells in the Parietal Lobe of Joseph Smith's Brain," 36, no. 4 (Winter 2003): 79-87. Hamblin's article was composed in response to a previous *Dialogue* article by Robert M. Price, "Prophecy and Palimpsest," 35, no. 3 (Fall 2002): 67-82. Both articles deal with the origin of the Book of Mormon and whether it was a composition from the imagination of Joseph Smith himself.

Price's argument essentially cul-

minated in the theory that the Book of Mormon was inspired fiction written by Joseph Smith, a conclusion against which Hamblin's article quite convincingly and systematically argues. But where Hamblin missteps is in his conclusion, in which his scholarly and logical argument lapses, to be replaced by the *ad hominem*. Hamblin here simply and facetiously attacks Price's beliefs rather than continuing to present additional relevant points. Price is an atheist, a point Hamblin makes expressly clear.

My question is: Why, after such good scholarship in responding to Price, would William Hamblin resort to such irrelevant tactics? True, Price is a self-proclaimed atheist, but what is the point of bringing up his religious beliefs? Hamblin holds that there is a relevant purpose for highlighting Hamblin's atheism—that in essence an atheist is incapable of commenting on or understanding the "ways of God" and is thus ill qualified to comment on the "divine" origin of the Book of Mormon.

As much as Hamblin denies that he is making it sound like Price is a "bad person" because of his atheism, what effect does this observation have upon his predominantly believing Christian

audience? In this respect, Hamblin's comments about Price's atheism suggest really something quite close to the irrelevant argument of my imaginary interlocutor: Price's theory of the origin of the Book of Mormon is absurd, but what should we expect from an atheist?

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Erotic Literature and the Lord

I haven't taught the Gospel Doctrine class nearly as long as Molly Bennion has, nor have I researched the Song of Songs as she has ("Temporal Love: Singing the Song of Songs," 36, no. 3 [Fall 2003]: 153–58), but I discovered this year with the help of *Dialogue* and a search on the Church's website that the Lord may read erotic literature.

The description of the lady lover in Solomon's Song 6:10 is quoted in the March 1836 Kirtland Temple dedicatory prayer which Joseph Smith received by revelation (D&C 109:73). There, of course, the description is not erotic but is rather a description of the Church which was to "come forth out of the wilderness of darkness, and shine forth fair as the moon, clear as the sun, and terrible as an army with banners." See also Doctrine and Covenants 5:14 (March 1829) where the Lord refers to "the coming forth of my church out of the

wilderness—clear as the moon, and fair as the sun, and terrible as an army with banners," and Doctrine and Covenants 105:31 (June 1834), where the Lord enjoins his (Zion's Camp) army to be sanctified "that it may become fair as the sun, and clear as the moon, and that her banners may be terrible unto all nations."

These uses follow the centuries-old allegorical interpretation of the Song of Songs with Christ represented by the male and the Church represented by the female. That interpretation appears in the page headings of my LDS missionary edition of the Bible—perhaps because it was merely "specially bound" for, but not edited by, the Church. These headings have been removed from the 1979 LDS edition and chapter headings without allegorical interpretations being added. In view of the Lord's use of the Song in the Doctrine and Covenants, those LDS readers like Molly Bennion and Wayne Schow ("Sexual Morality Revisited," 37, no. 3 [Fall 2004]: 114–36) may need to acknowledge at least some kind of validity in the allegory.

The 1979 LDS edition also notes that the Joseph Smith Translation manuscript states: "The Songs of Solomon are not inspired writings." This is an issue

of canonization rather than of translation, Article of Faith 8 notwithstanding. Perhaps we should just accept the Lord's familiarity with uninspired erotic arts and emulate Him.

P.S. to Molly Bennion: How did the Song come to be included in the biblical canon anyway?

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Sexual Morality Revisited

A recent reading of Wayne Schow's article "Sexual Morality Revisited" (37, no. 3 [Fall 2004]: 114–36) reminded me of why I cancelled my one-year subscription to *Dialogue* some fifteen years ago. I have problems with many of Schow's arguments, but I will mention only two here: Schow didn't do his homework regarding Church doctrine on the subject of sex (indeed, he disregarded the issue almost completely in favor of rehashing antiquated notions), and his arguments regarding the possible permissibility of nonmarital sex bespeak a lack of understanding of scriptural and prophetic teachings.

Regarding the nature of sex, I found it interesting that Schow took no effort to evaluate the statements of Church leaders anywhere in his essay. Indeed, he didn't even reference the Church by name until the very end of the article (134). His only mention of a General Author-

ity statement was apocryphal at best and no citation for it was given (135). Schow obviously has problems with how religion has distorted the message of sex and seems wont to accuse the Church right along with the rest of sectarian Christianity for "distortion" and "repressions" (135, 133). While his perspective may accurately reflect the uninformed sentiments of many Church members during the days of his "childhood and youth" (133) and even some today, a perusal of General Authority statements, both past and present, reveals a comprehensive doctrine of sex that includes the elements of edification, unification, joy, love, and validation. (See Jeffrey R. Holland, *Of Souls, Symbols, and Sacraments* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2001], and *A Parent's Guide* [Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985], 46–49.) I think that if Schow did his homework he would find an LDS view of sex that contains much of the "balance, proportion, and holis[m]" (128) he seeks.

On the subject of nonmarital sex, Schow asserts the existential argument that the outcome of an act determines its morality, not the nature of the act itself; that sexual acts resulting in "positive outcomes" are moral if the contex-

tual and motivational circumstances are right, if everybody feels good, and if nobody gets hurt. But who gets to decide which motives are pure and which outcomes are positive? And who can tell ahead of time what the real outcome of a decision will be, especially when long-term consequences may not be appreciated for weeks or years?

My professional work with hundreds of patients over the past twenty-three years suggests that negative consequences always arise in connection with sexual activity outside marriage. The consequences are frequently long-lasting and multigenerational in nature, are nearly always devastating to innocent spouses and children, and are inevitably destructive to personal integrity and/or the marriage relationship itself. Sexual activity outside marriage cannot be considered acceptable in any circumstance since one cannot accurately predict *a priori* that there will be no negative consequences.

Finally, regardless of what sociological theses might be proffered to the contrary, I believe that the best argument against non-marital sex is that it is always offensive to the Lord. (The scriptural citations are too numerous to mention.) How can the morality of non-marital sex be debated when God has clearly and repeatedly said it is wrong? In this instance, He leaves no wiggle room for personal interpretation, unless one does not believe those scriptural and prophetic pronouncements to be valid. Such an assumption is often the underlying contention in *Dialogue* arguments and is certainly the implied line of reasoning in Schow's article. I think a person will only be confused regarding what is right in sexual areas if he or she chooses to not believe latter-day revelation and prophetic statements.

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