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Book Review

*Latter-day Scripture:
Studies in the Book of Mormon*

Robert M. Price

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BOOK REVIEW

Louis C. Midgley

Robert M. Price. *Latter-day Scripture: Studies in the Book of Mormon*. Self-published e-book, 2011 (<http://www.eBookIt.com>). 78 pp., no index, no pagination. \$10.95.

Latter-day Scripture is a potpourri of nine essays, eight of which are, as the subtitle of the introduction indicates, “critical studies in the Book of Mormon” (p. 1, emphasis added).¹ Price’s title for his e-book, his promotional blurb,² and his introduction constitute what is sometimes called *paratext*, ancillary textual matter that an author or publisher can use to manage the way a book will be read by its intended audience. Price’s introduction, “The Golden Bible of Joseph Smith” (p. 1, emphasis added), seems to be an effort to coach his potential readers on how to understand his endeavors. He reassures his fellow atheists, “I am not a Mormon. I am a Religious Humanist” (p. 1).

Price further assures his atheist audience that he follows Nietzsche in believing that “God is dead” (p. 1). He cobbles together atheist platitudes (pp. 1–3) and claims that “even if there were a God, his would be but one more opinion, though theoretically we might be in danger, as less powerful beings, if we did not hold it, or pretend to” (p. 1). He admits that atheists face

1. Beginning with the introduction, I have provided page numbers.

2. See <http://www.ebookit.com/books/0000000288/Latter-day-Scripture.html>. See also http://www.amazon.com/Latter-day-Scripture-ebook/dp/B004TSCSLI/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1325529941&sr=8-1.

an abyss because the “human ability to know is so limited that we can never, by ourselves, know that there is nothing to know” (p. 1). The only meaning in a “terrifying universe, indifferent to our needs, indeed, to our very existence” (p. 4), is that which human beings fashion or imagine for themselves. He also believes, as “a Nietzschean,” that “the Universe is devoid of intrinsic and objective rules of right and wrong” (p. 2), but for him “this godlessness is no bleak vision” (p. 1). Why? Because “it is up to us [humans] to write the inscription of meaning onto the blank sheet of the world” (pp. 1–2).

While conceding that religion is “very often . . . noble and edifying,” Price insists “that both New Testament Christianity and Book of Mormon Christianity are human creations from page one” (p. 3). It follows from this credo that “both are creations of the boundless and glorious human imagination. And as a Humanist,” he adds, “I cannot but stand amazed at the accomplishment of Joseph Smith, a man who willed a fictive universe into being” (p. 3). Price reads the Book of Mormon as imaginative fiction fashioned by Joseph Smith. After all, “virtually all critical scholars agree that Joseph Smith did not discover the Book of Mormon but rather created it” (p. 12). Of course, the word *critical* begs the question, turning the claim into an empty tautology. There is little that is really new in Price’s amphygory since he merely scrapes together the work of hypercritical biblical scholarship and lashes it to the slogan of his dogmatic atheism.

When Price addresses his cultural Mormon audience in his introductory essay, he announces that he will not read the Book of Mormon as an authentic ancient text *recovered* by Joseph Smith, but rather as “a genuine scripture *authored* by Joseph Smith” (p. 1, emphasis added). This approach, he claims, overcomes the “stalelated” and “rancorous debate over the date and authorship of the Book of Mormon” (p. 1). Reading the Book of Mormon as a kind of prophetic fiction will make “pos-

sible a rebirth of Book of Mormon scholarship” (p. 1), with his miscellany of essays opening “a flood of new light . . . on the sacred American text” (p. 1). Price promises to uncover “new levels of meaning in the Book of Mormon, as well as hitherto-unguessed literary and theological acumen on the part of its author, Joseph Smith. Such an approach,” he insists, “vindicates his role as a genuine prophetic writer, not merely as an amateur archeologist stumbling on a buried book in upper New York State” (p. 1). It also “actually turns out to elevate the importance of [Mormonism’s] founder and [its] scripture, not the least in the eyes of non-Mormons” (p. 1).

In a promotional blurb, Price indicates that he “lays out a case for considering the Mormon scripture as . . . merely another case of ‘pseudepigraphy,’ the genre of fictive ‘as if’ authorship common to the Bible as well.”³ Since there is no God, the Book of Mormon cannot be an authentic history. It must be, instead, a pastiche of New Testament texts, which were themselves a rehashing of Old Testament texts and hence are not genuine history. This is spelled out in chapter 2, “Prophecy and Palimpsest.”⁴ Seeing the Book of Mormon this way, Price claims, “will bring Mormon and non-Mormon Americans closer together by revealing their common scriptural heritage” (p. 1).

Price goes on to explain that the Book of Mormon is the American story of the conquering of a wilderness, coupled with a war against evil. He ends his introduction by claiming that “the Mormon paradigm makes sense of our world crisis like nothing else does. In the present moment, we are all Mormons” (p. 5). What could this possibly mean? “Christian civilization, already perversely despised, is the target of obliteration” by Muslims/Lamanites; and the Americans/Nephites “must not

3. See <http://www.ebookit.com/books/0000000288/Latter-day-Scripture.html> or the promotional blurb on Amazon. Subsequent references to this blurb will not be cited.

4. A version of chapter 2 was originally published in *Dialogue* 35/3 (Fall 2002): 67–82.

wait till it is too late to steel our will and resist the onslaught, perhaps nuclear, of the Lamanites” (p. 5).

Price boasts that his way of reading the Book of Mormon is “championed by liberal Mormons and sympathetic non-Mormons” (p. 1), none of whom are identified in his introduction. But elsewhere he opines that these “liberal Mormons and fellow travelers tend to recognize Joseph Smith as the author of the book” (p. 21). As an example, he refers his readers to an effort to show that Joseph Smith cribbed the Book of Mormon from Ethan Smith’s *View of the Hebrews* (p. 21).⁵ In addition, one of his close cultural Mormon comrades is indirectly identified in his promotional blurb, where it is revealed that this self-published e-book is “a series of papers presented mainly at the Book of Mormon Round Table.”⁶ This was a series of conferences that Mark Thomas held in Provo in the summers of 2003 to 2006. The purpose of this aborted endeavor was to find non-LDS authors who would argue that the Book of Mormon is merely a nineteenth-century imaginative reworking of biblical language and not an authentic ancient history.⁷ It seems that Price saw this as an opportunity to opine about the Book of Mormon from his strictly “Religious Humanist” perspective. Other than Price’s self-published e-book, nothing seems to have come from Thomas’s project.

In his final chapter, “Morton Smith as Joseph Smith,” Price argues that Morton Smith’s controversial “discovery” of a fragment of a “Secret Gospel of Mark,”⁸ though a hoax, makes

5. Price cites the second (1991) printing of David Persuitte’s *Joseph Smith and the Origins of the Book of Mormon* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1985), not the revised edition published in 2000. See Tom Flynn’s “Powerful Advocacy, Concise Biography,” *Free Inquiry*, Fall 2001, for a glowing review of the revised edition of Persuitte’s book.

6. See <http://www.ebookit.com/books/0000000288/Latter-day-Scripture.html> or the promotional blurb on Amazon.

7. See Mark D. Thomas, “Was Joseph Smith for Real? How He Lied, Perhaps Even to Himself,” *Free Inquiry*, Fall 2001.

8. Morton Smith, *The Secret Gospel* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973).

forged Morton Smith “one of the writers of scripture” (p. 76). Price claims that Morton Smith once told him that the spurious New Age gospels (and apparently by implication the forged Markan fragment too) were authentic, “no matter who wrote them or when,” since they “embodied someone’s faith” (p. 74). Of course, this all implies that the Book of Mormon is likewise merely a human and altogether fictive production that, to Price’s way of thinking, nevertheless passes off as authentic scripture.

When Price actually confronts Latter-day Saint scholarship on the Book of Mormon, he lashes out with sarcasm and bald assertions. The sole indication that he is familiar with this scholarship turns up in chapter 7 of his book. He is aware of several essays by John W. Welch and Stephen D. Ricks⁹ showing the presence of subtle, authentic ancient rituals found in the first chapters of Mosiah. Though he grants, for example, that Ricks has set out in great detail ancient coronation rituals and “a fascinating series of correspondences with Benjamin’s speech” (p. 69), Price merely opines that “if there is a Kingship Renewal rite behind this story, it has been completely distorted, concealing the very different import of the hypothesized original” (p. 70). This is an assertion and not a demonstration. “Mosiah chapters 1–5,” according to Price, “are analogous to a ransom note in an old gangster movie. Just as the kidnapper’s note appears to have been pasted together from isolated bits of typed pages and magazine ads, the Book of Mormon is a pasting together, a ‘sampling,’ of biblical texts split and spliced in new combinations” (p. 62). This is sarcasm and not an argument (for other examples, see pp. 37, 59, 64). It seems that the problem with the effort to read the Book of Mormon

9. Price cites (p. 70 nn. 3–4) the following essays from John W. Welch and Stephen D. Ricks, eds., *King Benjamin’s Speech: “That Ye May Learn Wisdom”* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1998): Welch, “Benjamin’s Speech: A Masterful Oration,” 55–87; Welch, “Parallelism and Chiasmus in Benjamin’s Speech,” 315–410; and Ricks, “Kingship, Coronation, and Covenant in Mosiah 1–6,” 233–75.

as Joseph Smith's theological speculation is that the non-LDS scholars that Mark Thomas hoped would open a flood of new light on the Book of Mormon fizzled.

Price claims to have provided his readers with a new appreciation of Joseph Smith's supposed imaginative rewriting of the Bible in the Book of Mormon. However, reading the Book of Mormon as a hocus-pocus hodgepodge has not yielded a new and presumably positive assessment of the primary ground for the faith of Latter-day Saints. The Saints should easily see through Price's "religious" secular humanist ruse.

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