

Grant Palmer's Mormon Piece: Why We Printed It.



JERRY A. JOHNSON*
Academic Editor
Midwestern Journal of Theology

I. A VERY TYPICAL ENCOUNTER

Lori played the trump card. She challenged me to read the Book of Mormon and to pray for the “spirit” to give me a feeling of assurance that it was true.

She had just heard me preach a biblical sermon about the Trinity, or the tri-unity of God, among other things. After the sermon, some Christian friends of hers brought Lori to me so that I might explain the biblical teaching about Jesus and salvation, in contrast to Mormon beliefs. I tried this for about half an hour. She responded with a vague appeal to the Book of Mormon and to Joseph Smith as a prophet. Then I noted historical, archaeological, and doctrinal problems with Mormonism and Smith. I also argued that the Bible and the Book of Mormon are not compatible in their teachings and she would have to choose. But none of this mattered. In her mind she had the winning hand. Lori had received the “burning bosom” from the “spirit” that gave her a feeling of assurance that the Book of Mormon was true and that Joseph Smith was a true prophet—case closed!

Some might assume that this Mormon was not a thinking scholar, hence the retreat to an apologetic based on feelings instead of facts. To the contrary, she was a highly educated participant in a conference made up of political conservatives. Her job, and her cause, was to head a pro-

*On behalf of the Editors, with the assistance of the Managing Editor.

ject to identify and preserve (online) early source documents essential to the founding of the United States. Her passion entailed the historical accuracy of primary documents. What an opening! I simply challenged her to apply the same rigor to the historical accuracy of the Book of Mormon that she applied to the founding documents and hoped she would see that my criticisms of Smith and his book were valid. But she would have nothing of it. She already knew Mormonism to be true, she felt it so from the “spirit.” Instead, it was I who needed merely to read the Book of Mormon and pray for that same existential confirmation that it was true.

This personal story illustrates why Grant Palmer’s piece is so important and why we included it in our last journal. If there were such a thing as an Official Mormon Playbook, we can be sure that under “Apologetics,” tactic A1, we would find: “Play the burning bosom card when confronted with challenges to Joseph Smith or the Book of Mormon.”

II. WHAT WERE WE THINKING?

So what were we thinking? Why would a Southern Baptist theological journal print an article penned by a Mormon? We have been asked this question about our Spring 2010 issue of the *Midwestern Journal of Theology* (see “Religious Feeling and Truth” by Grant H. Palmer). It is a good question. It must be answered. In one sense the above should be enough. But some readers want more, so here it is.

The *Midwestern Journal of Theology* is an academic journal, which by its very nature, will occasionally contain lines, paragraphs, and even articles that do not reflect the theology of Midwestern, Southern Baptists, or even Christians. For instance, see Bart Erhman’s material in the current issue. But when this happens, it is the duty of the editors to provide context, and rebuttal, when needed. Of course, we provide both in the current journal regarding Ehrman. This back and forth is essential if we are going to address the great debates of our time.

For Palmer’s piece we originally provided context in the opening “Editorial” (p. vii). Here, the editor qualified the piece in several ways. First, he noted it was of “special interest” as opposed to a general article that would represent Midwestern. Second, he noted “Palmer is not a Southern Baptist, indeed he still considers himself a Mormon.” Third, and most important for the discerning reader, he limited the purpose of printing the Palmer piece to *one* specific point:

Even so, we will find it informative to look over his shoulder as he challenges a teaching central to Mormon belief and epistemology, namely the idea that the best, perhaps even the only, way to be sure that the Book of Mormon is true or that Joseph Smith really was a prophet of God is to pray to get a confirmatory testimony, or “burning of the bosom.” Every Christian who has had any sort of extended interactions with Mormons will appreciate the importance of Palmer’s discussion.

There it is. We thought it would be “interesting” to “look over his shoulder” and see how Palmer rejects the oft-spouted “proof” given by so many Mormons as to how they know that the Book of Mormon is true—the “burning in the bosom.”

As if this general introduction was not clear enough, a second editorial in italics was placed immediately prior to Palmer’s piece (p. 115). Some of the same disclaimers were made, especially that *the point* of his piece in the MBTS journal was “how he came to the conclusion that one must not ultimately base the acceptance or rejection of religious truth on feelings.” Again, the motivation in publishing Palmer is expressed in a slightly different way:

In making his case, Palmer challenges the central Mormon belief that the best (perhaps the only) way to be sure that the Book of Mormon is true and that Joseph Smith is really a prophet is to pray to receive a testimony, or “burning bosom,” providing assurance that they are.

So let us be clear again, to the extent of belaboring of the point, just in case some of our readers are still missing our rationale. The reason behind printing Palmer’s article was to call attention to the fact that he, as a Mormon, is removing one of the most significant weapons in the Mormon arsenal. This Mormon at least does *not* accept “the burning in the bosom” argument. We do believe this is an interesting development, indeed. It is worth reading and passing on to other readers. Should the same kind of development occur in the writing of say a Muslim or Jehovah’s Witness apologist, we would cover that in the journal as well.

III. LIMITATIONS

So Palmer’s article was published as a point of interest for its negative dimension—what he was saying against the typical Mormon apologetic. Having said all of this, we acknowledge that Palmer’s piece has serious limitations as to its positive dimensions. What he asserts as a

replacement is not clear and at some points misguided. The main confusion arises from the fact that Palmer still counts himself a Mormon and one cannot be sure what he means as he uses terms like God, Christ, or the Holy Spirit. As one of our readers, our good friend Fred Wheeler, asked:

Which God, which Jesus and which Holy Spirit is Mr. Palmer really talking about? Latter-day Saints (LDS) use the same words as Christian orthodoxy, however, they have a totally different meaning.

The point is well taken, while Mormonism and Orthodox Christianity use the same vocabulary, they follow a different dictionary. Wheeler develops this challenge using a Palmer quote:

What does Grant Palmer really think truth is? Is his first paragraph he states, "For the Christian, Christ is religious truth." That statement seems unclear. Does he believe that Christians, Mormons, Jehovah's Witness and even Muslims believe in the same Jesus?

Wheeler puts his finger on an important point. The Jesus of Mormonism, like the Jesus of Jehovah's Witness, or Islam, is not the Jesus of the Bible and Christianity. But neither is he the Jesus of the Book of Mormon, which is much closer to the Christian Jesus than the Jesus of contemporary Mormonism. Current Mormonism teaches a plurality of Gods, rejecting the doctrine of the Trinity held by all Christians. Consider for example the following remark by LDS writer Gary J. Colman, who declared in 2007 that "false doctrines about the Godhead were fashioned out of the Nicene Creed and Constantinople councils, where men declared that instead of three separate beings, the Godhead was three persons in one God, or the Trinity."¹ Near the end of his life the Mormon prophet Joseph Smith said, "I have always declared God to be a distinct personage, Jesus Christ a separate and distinct personage from God the Father, and that the Holy Ghost was a distinct personage and a Spirit: and these three constitute three distinct personages and three Gods."² It has long been recognized that Smith's statement here is not entirely true, that the doctrine of God in the Book of Mormon reflects a more or less traditional doctrine of the Trinity, but one that has been

¹ Gary J. Colman, "Mom, Are We Christians?" *Ensign* (May 2007): 92.

² From a sermon preached 11 June 1843, quoted here in *Teachings of the Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City, UT: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2007), 41-2.

tainted by modalism.³ Modalism is a view that describes the Trinity not as three persons in one God but as one person in three different roles or expressions. A number of passages in the Book of Mormon seem to reflect a modalistic doctrine of God, such as, for example, Ether 3:14: “Behold, I am Jesus Christ. I am the Father and the Son,” and 3 Nephi 1:14: “Behold, I come unto my own . . . to do the will, both of the Father and of the Son—of the Father because of me, and of the Son because of my flesh” (cf. Alma 11:26–29, 38–39; Mosiah 3:5, 8). The idea seems to be, in the second passage at least, that the spirit of Jesus is the Father and the body of Jesus is the Son. Traditional Trinitarianism accepts neither modalism nor the idea of a plurality of gods, but steers a course between the two. The Athanasian Creed, for example, put it this way:

We worship one God in trinity, and trinity in unity, *neither confounding the persons nor dividing the substance*. For the person of the Father is one; of the Son, another; of the Holy Spirit, another. But the divinity of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit is one. (italics added)

The Book of Mormon falls to one side of the orthodox Trinitarian position by “confounding the persons” (only one person in the godhead) while contemporary Mormonism falls to the other by “dividing the substance” (ending up with more than one God). In addition the Book of Mormon represents Jesus as the eternal, omnipotent God as is seen for example in Mosiah 3:5: “For behold, the time cometh, and is not far distant, that with power, the Lord Omnipotent who reigneth, who was, and is from all eternity to all eternity, shall come down from heaven among the children of men, and shall dwell in a tabernacle of clay, and shall go forth amongst men.” The question of the extent to which Palmer’s own views might fall along this continuum or where they depart from it altogether is an interesting question and one that can be pursued in a book he wrote on the subject entitled *The Incomparable Jesus*.⁴ As to Palmer’s statement “for the Christian, Christ is religious

³ Two key early studies on this issue are Dan Vogel, “The Earliest Mormon Doctrine of God,” in *Line Upon Line: Essays on Mormon Doctrine* (ed. Gary James Bergera; Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books, 1989), 17-33, and Melodie Moench Charles, “Book of Mormon Christology,” in *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon: Explorations in Critical Methodologies* (ed. Brent Lee Metcalfe; Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books, 1993), 81-114. See further, Ronald V. Huggins, “Joseph Smith’s Modalism: Sabellian Sequentialism or Swedenborgian Expansionism?” (2006) (<http://www.irr.org/mit/modalism.html>).

⁴ Grant H. Palmer, *The Incomparable Christ* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Greg Kofford Books, 2005).

truth,” it was our understanding that he was merely trying to represent what he believed to be generally true of all Christians. In letting Palmer express his own ideas in his own words we in no way intended to minimize the difference between the Christ of the Bible and the Christ of Mormonism, even if such a distinction might not be as clear in Palmer's mind as it is in ours.

The Palmer piece also runs into trouble in relation to the doctrine of inspiration. While invoking the “Christ” test for truth, Palmer makes another problematic statement, “The Holy Spirit may well tell a person the Book of Mormon is true because it testifies and brings a person to Christ, who is the Truth, but not whether the Book of Mormon’s theological doctrines are true.” Again, the second half of the sentence was our main interest; i.e., the “spirit” test is not the winning argument on whether or not Mormon books are true. To be fair to Palmer, this half of the sentence is the main point.

However we would certainly agree with friends of *Midwestern* who took issue with the first part of the sentence, “The Holy Spirit may well tell a person the Book of Mormon is true because it testifies and brings a person to Christ, who is the Truth.” That would be tantamount to saying that in the process of the affirming Jesus, the Holy Spirit might lead us also to embrace the Book of Mormon, a false book of “Scripture” fabricated by an unscrupulous nineteenth-century religious charlatan! Yet the fact is that the Jesus of the Book of Mormon is closer to the Biblical Jesus than the Jesus of current Mormonism. This is partly due to the fact that much of the language of the Book of Mormon was plagiarized directly out of the King James Bible, sometimes for chapters on end, as when Joseph Smith copied pretty much the whole of Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount out of the King James Bible and into 3 Nephi 12-14.⁵ The result is that much of what you read in the Book of Mormon *is* the Bible. But then long stretches of it are not, but rather are Joseph Smith’s tedious bible-flavored ramblings. The latter part drew forth Mark Twain’s famous description of the Book of Mormon as

⁵ See Jerald & Sandra Tanner, *Joseph Smith’s Plagiarism of the Bible in the Book of Mormon* (rev. ed.; Salt Lake City, UT: Utah Lighthouse Ministry, 2010). For a discussion of Joseph Smith’s plagiarism of the Sermon on the Mount, see Ronald V. Huggins, “Did the Author of 3 Nephi Know the Gospel of Matthew,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 3.3 (Fall 1997): 137-148; Stan Larson, “The Sermon on the Mount: What Its Textual Transformation Discloses Concerning the Historicity of the Book of Mormon,” *Trinity Journal* 7 (Spring 1986): 23-45, and idem, “The Historicity of the Matthean Sermon on the Mount in 3 Nephi,” in *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon*, 115-163.

“chloroform in print.”⁶ The Book of Mormon author, Twain goes on to say,

“labored to give his words and phrases the quaint, old-fashioned sound and structure of our King James’s translation of the Scriptures; and the result is a mongrel—half modern glibness, and half ancient simplicity and gravity. The latter is awkward and constrained; the former natural, but grotesque by the contrast. Whenever he found his speech growing too modern—which was about every sentence or two—he ladled in a few such Scriptural phrases as ‘exceeding sore,’ ‘and it came to pass,’ etc., and made things satisfactory again.”

Mormons do not usually read the Book of Mormon in the same way Christians read the Bible. They are never encouraged nor even allowed to pit the doctrine of the Book of Mormon against current Church, despite the fact that the two contradict each other at many crucial points. When they say that it is true, they do not usually mean that its doctrines and teachings are true, indeed the vast majority of Mormons who affirm that it is “true” have no real idea what it teaches. Rather what they mean is that the story about its coming forth—about the first vision, about the angel Moroni and the finding and supernatural translation of the Golden plates—really happened. The Book of Mormon is presented by the current LDS Church as providing the *object* not the *content* of faith, i.e., a physical artifact of the divine encounter Joseph Smith supposedly had with the Angel Moroni.

However, occasionally some Mormon will somehow or other get it into his head to actually take the next logical step of seriously trying to understand what the Book of Mormon actually says about Jesus, and comes to understand where that differs from official Mormonism and agrees with the Bible. Sometimes this leads to their leaving the LDS Church while still clinging to the Book of Mormon and occasionally it results in people finding more of what they like about the Book of Mormon in the Bible than in the Book of Mormon, letting the Book of Mormon go, and becoming Christians. That was the story of some of the most effective Christ missionaries to Mormons of the present generation, Jerald and Sandra Tanner. Who first gave up Mormonism, and only later gave up the Book of Mormon. (See Sandra’s article in the present issue). What man intended for evil, God once again uses for good!

⁶ Mark Twain, *Roughing It* (Hartford, CT: American Publishing Company, 1891), 127.

The friend who made the point that one might equally be drawn to Jesus through truths about him in places like the Koran, *Newsweek*, *Sports Illustrated*, or “even a Marvel Comic book” is perfectly right. If God uses any part of any book to draw someone to Christ, that in and of itself is not the test of a “scriptural” level of inspiration or truth. The truth of any book is true. Yet we would insist that any attempt to compare Grant Palmer’s (or anyone’s) view of the inspiration of the Book of Mormon to *Midwestern Journal’s* view of the inspiration of the Bible really amounts to a comparison of apples and oranges.

Certain Evangelicals and Mormons have been known to get together and celebrate “how much they have common” because they both hold to a high view of the inspiration of their respective Books of Scriptures. The reality is that when the Mormon makes the same kind of affirmations about the Book of Mormon that the Christian makes about the Bible he is doing something very different than what the Christian is doing.

When the Mormon, for example, insists that the events described in the book of Mormon were real historical events he does so in the teeth of all the evidence. When the Christian makes the same claim about the Bible he is to a considerable extent confirmed in what he says even by many secular historians. Even secular scholars who do not allow for the possibility of miracles still venture to write about Biblical people and places. An example of this is the classicist Michael Grant, who, in addition to his writings on the ancient Roman world and the Caesars, has also attempted biographies of Jesus, Peter and Paul. No secular scholar would seriously undertake to write biographies of Book of Mormon figures like Nephi, Laman, or Moroni. They didn’t exist, and a considerable body of evidence confirms that the story of the Book of Mormon fails to jibe with the real history of ancient America.⁷

IV. CONCLUSION

Noting or even applauding Palmer’s movement in the right direction on a single issue, does not mean we endorse him or his piece at other points, especially where he remains sympathetic to Mormon thought. Perhaps we should have published more stage instructions and disclaimers along this line with Palmer’s original article. However, we took for granted our readers knew our position on Mormonism. Our

⁷ On the seriousness of the problems see Stan Larson, *Thomas Stuart Ferguson’s Archaeological Search for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: UT: Freethinkers Press, in assoc. with Smith Research Associates, 2004); Jerald & Sandra Tanner, *Archaeology and the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City, UT: Utah Lighthouse Ministry, 1969).

seminary president and executive editor of this journal, Dr. R. Philip Roberts, has written a well known book on Mormonism whose title leaves no doubt as to its author's perspective: *Mormonism Unmasked: Confronting the Contradictions between Mormon Beliefs and True Christianity* (1998).⁸ He also contributed to a second book entitled *The Counterfeit Gospel of Mormonism: The Great Divide Between Mormonism and Christianity* (1998).⁹ Dr. Roberts was also featured extensively explaining the differences between Mormonism and Christianity in the SBC North American Mission Board video project *The Mormon Puzzle: Understanding and Witnessing to Latter-day Saints* (1997).

As recently as last month Midwestern Seminary held a conference that featured critical presentations on Mormonism, in which all four presenters drew attention to the importance of understanding Mormonism's roots in the occult. One of the presenters was Sandra Tanner, who, as we have already noted, has contributed an article to this issue of our journal. Are we compromising here? Certainly not! Our stand on Mormonism is clear and well known. MBTS considers it a given that our readers know our position is that official Mormon doctrine falls outside the bounds of Christianity on many important topics, including Christ, Scripture, salvation, and heaven.

But again, that is not why we published the article. The article was printed to show a significant fault line, among Mormon ranks, that could lead to an earthquake if followed to its logical conclusion. If feelings and a burning in the bosom cannot settle the issue, how can one assess the *Book of Mormon*? As the former Mormon James Walker pointed out to me recently, he prayed for this confirmation when he read the *Book of Mormon*, but the Spirit showed him that it was a *false* book and that Smith was a *false* prophet. Given that Lori, who we mentioned at the beginning, felt sure that the Spirit told her that the Book of Mormon was *true*, but James that the Spirit told him that it was *false*, it seems clear we need a different test for knowing which of them is right. When all the facts are known, we are confident of where this will lead every time.

Jerry A. Johnson
Academic Editor

⁸R. Philip Roberts, with Tal Davis and Sandra Tanner, *Mormonism Unmasked: Confronting the Contradictions between Mormon Beliefs and True Christianity* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1998).

⁹Francis J. Beckwith, Norman L. Geisler, Ron Rhodes, Phil Roberts, Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *The Counterfeit Gospel of Mormonism: The Great Divide Between Mormonism and Christianity* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1998).