



Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1989–2011

Volume 15 | Number 2

Article 3

6-1-2003

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Glen M. Cooper

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Cooper, Glen M. (2003) "Appendix, On Aping Aristotle: Modern-day Simplicios," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1989–2011*: Vol. 15 : No. 2 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/msr/vol15/iss2/3>

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Title Appendix: On Aping Aristotle: Modern-day Simplicios

Author(s) Glen M. Cooper

Reference *FARMS Review* 15/2 (2003): lxiii-lxvii.

ISSN 1550-3194 (print), 2156-8049 (online)

Abstract Cooper addresses the claim that Thomas Murphy's DNA research is a "Galileo event." He provides information on Galileo's life to show that Galileo was not against religion and that the Catholic Church was not against science. Cooper then parallels that information with the Murphy situation. Like Galileo, Murphy has not taken a stance against religion, only against a particular religious text.

Appendix

ON APING ARISTOTLE: MODERN-DAY SIMPLICIOS

Glen M. Cooper

The anthropologist Thomas Murphy has recently been called the “Mormon Galileo,” and the controversy that his DNA “research” has spawned has been labeled a “Galileo event.” The implication is, of course, that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (and its member scientists) are just as benighted and corrupt as it is commonly thought the Roman Catholic Church was in Galileo’s day—especially as manifest in its suppression of Galileo and its (largely successful) campaign to squelch free intellectual inquiry in Catholic lands. (Critics of the Church of Jesus Christ go one step further, by accusing the church of knowingly concealing potentially self-destructive information about its history, scripture, or origin stories.)

The above comparison not only shows a noteworthy ignorance of the facts, but is risible in the extreme. As a historian of science, I would dismiss the whole business but for the fact that there is a relatively unknown similarity between the “Galileo affair” and the “Murphy affair” that deserves discussion. For, in addition to Galileo and the institutional church, there was yet another group, strident and obnoxious, involved in the Galileo affair, the group that was responsible for inciting the trouble and pursuing it to its conclusion. Comparing the role of this group in those epoch-defining events to their analogue in the present situation is where the real lesson of the Murphy affair may be found.

It is a common misconception among those who understand little about science or religion or their histories that there is an inherent

conflict between science and religion and that clashes of the Galileo or Murphy type are inevitable. Galileo did not believe that to be so, and neither does (for example) Pope John Paul II, who has spoken more than anyone I know for the cause of accord between science and religion. And I sincerely doubt that many of the informed church officials involved in the Galileo affair thought so. The church was not backward or benighted, but it was a large bureaucracy, with many interests that had to be reconciled. The work of Stillman Drake brought to my attention the following new twist, revealing, in his words, “a very important aspect of the entire Galileo affair that has been generally neglected” but that “runs like a red thread through the whole sad story from beginning to end.”¹ I highly recommend to Murphy’s partisans, or anyone else who sincerely desires to know what really happened to Galileo, that they read Drake’s scholarship.²

During the lifetime of Galileo, there were many new scientific ideas and discoveries, some of which, such as the Copernican theory, threatened the traditional theological understanding of the world. Intelligent men, both inside and outside the church hierarchy, were aware that the new discoveries conflicted with traditional understanding of passages of holy writ. But, as in other enormous institutions, change in the church of Rome often happens exasperatingly slowly. Acutely aware of the threat, in 1615 Galileo himself wrote a letter to church officials outlining how to reconcile the new findings of science with the scriptures. He urged the church to take no official position regarding the Copernican theory. To bolster his argument, Galileo cited Augustine’s sage advice against making an astronomical doctrine an article of Catholic belief since heretics who know science

1. Stillman Drake, “Galileo and the Church,” *Rivista di Studi Italiani* 1/1 (1983): 82–97. This quotation is from p. 155 of the reprint edition: Stillman Drake, *Essays on Galileo and the History and Philosophy of Science* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 1:153–66.

2. Stillman Drake, *Galileo at Work: His Scientific Biography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978); *Galileo against the Philosophers* (Los Angeles: Zeitlin & Ver Brugge, 1976); and *Galileo* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980). In addition, the following work by Giorgio de Santillana should be read: *The Crime of Galileo* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955).

well could use such knowledge to cast doubt on genuine religious doctrines. In fact, as Drake argues, the actual purpose of Galileo's fateful trip to Rome in 1615 to meet with Cardinal Bellarmine—traditionally thought to be for the purpose of battling for the cause of truth—was to persuade the church not to take an official position regarding any scientific issue. Yet by the next year the church was committed to just such a position. On the surface, both Galileo and the theologians were in agreement about how truth is to be sought: by “sense experience and necessary demonstration”—that is, by experiment and reasoned argumentation.

There was, however, a group of intellectuals—the academic philosophers—whose influence was disproportionate to their size or actual understanding of the relevant issues. These men substituted “doctrines from Aristotle” for “sense experience” in the above formula, and they followed a kind of a priori, prescriptive science by which they sought to prove what they already believed rather than to learn anything new about the way the world works.

As an example of the pernicious influence of this group, Drake asks us to consider a court breakfast at the ducal palace in Tuscany that occurred in 1613 while Galileo was away. The ruling Medicis had invited leading thinkers of their realm to discuss informally the major intellectual issues of the time. Cosimo Boscaglia, a professor of philosophy at the University of Pisa, denounced Galileo in front of his Medicean employers, accusing him of holding and teaching heretical ideas about the motion of the earth. The Grand Duchess Christina, alarmed that she might be patronizing a heretic, asked Benedetto Castelli, a theologian and former student of Galileo, to defend his teacher. Castelli did so and reported the matter to Galileo, who promptly wrote to the Grand Duchess a now-famous letter explaining his position on science and scripture³—apparently to her satisfaction.

Drake notes the irony: a professor of philosophy pronounces on the religious orthodoxy of a scientific proposition, something that he

3. Galileo Galilei, “Letter to the Grand Duchess Christina,” in *Discoveries and Opinions of Galileo*, trans. Stillman Drake (New York: Doubleday, 1957), 145–216.

almost certainly did not understand—few people at the time understood the mathematical astronomy of Copernicus—while a *theologian*, who having studied with Galileo we must assume did understand, speaks on its behalf. Boscaglia’s ungentlemanly conduct (it was considered poor manners back then to say bad things about someone to his employer) was not an impulsive remark, but the poisonous fruit of a long-nourished enmity toward Galileo. For throughout his career Galileo had offended many traditionalists. He was fond of ridiculing the foolish beliefs of the leading intellectuals and publicly humiliating them in debates over everyday physical phenomena, such as why objects float on water—subjects far removed from celestial physics.

In fact, in the previous year a “league” of Florentine and Pisan philosophers had been formed against Galileo. This cabal hatched a plan to thwart him in every way possible, and its members sought a priest who would denounce him and his followers as heretics. Such a priest was eventually found, and the notorious chain of events began to unfold. In the subsequent trials and humiliation of Galileo, these professors were only too willing to provide the church with incriminating evidence against Galileo. Galileo satirized these professors of an ossified tradition in his great *Dialogue concerning the Two Chief World Systems*, by putting their doctrines in the mouth of the interlocutor Simplicio (“Mr. Simpleton”).⁴

In the Murphy affair, the role played by the philosophers is taken by the self-styled intellectuals, the critics of the church and the Book of Mormon. Murphy’s intellectual partisans provide what they take to be damning “evidence” against the Church of Jesus Christ, just like their spiritual forebears had done to Galileo. Yet, as in the former case, the charges reveal a fundamental (and embarrassing) lack of understanding about the real issues. This vocal group is responsible for agitating the situation and for providing a controversy-hungry media with material. These “intellectuals” create conflict where there is none, at least none of the grandiose kind they imagine. Just as with the Simplicios of Galileo’s day, this group reveals its ignorance of both the relevant scientific and

4. Galileo Galilei, *Dialogue concerning the Two Chief World Systems, Ptolemaic and Copernican*, trans. Stillman Drake (New York: Modern Library, 2001).

religious issues. For such tyros, anything that sounds the least bit “scientific” carries authority—never mind that Murphy has used others’ scientific data in an unscientific fashion and that he is attacking a belief *about* the Book of Mormon—the global settlement hypothesis—and not what the Book of Mormon says about itself.

The Church of Jesus Christ wisely takes no official stand on controversial scientific issues, except where these bear upon moral issues such as abortion and the family. And it seems that being an adherent of the faith is no hindrance to scientific endeavors. On the contrary, Latter-day Saints have produced scientists—some of whom have achieved international recognition—out of proportion to their numbers. The church has many respected scientists who are content to live with a degree of intellectual uncertainty regarding apparent conflicts between science and religion. In fact, practicing scientists are in an excellent position to know where the gaps in our knowledge are—where physics ends and metaphysics begins.

Yet, as ever, it is the “intellectuals” who stir the pot, whose ravings harm those who know even less than they do. Philosophers in all ages, whether academically certified or merely self-styled, have tried to legislate how others think, though they usually lack firsthand expertise in the fields they seek to colonize intellectually. Philosophy is a tool and not an end in itself. Such arrogance spelled trouble for Socrates and led the aristocratic ivory-tower philosopher Plato to denounce what would eventually develop into the university system (I refer, of course, to the Sophists), offering instead his otherworldly who-knows-what. On the other hand, Aristotle, who in reality was the founder of scientific inquiry, would have been horrified had he known that his writings would one day be used as an excuse to avoid fresh investigations along with the new knowledge they might bring.

After all this, the Galileo affair was not even about science versus religion; it was, rather, about one kind of science versus another kind of science—namely, philosophical versus experimental science. The Murphy affair is not about science versus religion either; rather, it is about pseudoscience versus a caricatured religious text. If nothing else, it shows how much influence modern-day Simplicios can have in the media.

