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Abstract Review of *An Insider's View of Mormon Origins* (2002), by Grant H. Palmer.

PRYING INTO PALMER

Louis Midgley

When I do it, it's not gossip, it's social history.

Saul Bellow¹

Sometime prior to August 1987, I acquired a copy of a rough manuscript entitled “New York Mormonism” that was circulating in what was then known as the “Mormon Underground.” The author of this anti-Mormon propaganda identified himself merely as “Paul Pry Jr.”² Though not now a household label, the name Paul Pry once had considerable allusive power. By calling himself Paul Pry, the secretive author of “New York Mormonism” emphatically signaled his bias, at least for aficionados of anti-Mormon literature. Who or what was Paul Pry? And what might an enigmatic Paul Pry Jr. have to do with Grant H. Palmer’s *Insider’s View of Mormon Origins*? I believe that the answers to these questions are

1. Saul Bellow, *Ravelstein* (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), 65.

2. In 1987, D. Michael Quinn made some use of “New York Mormonism.” See *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1987), 277, for the bibliographic entry in which Quinn indicated that the “typed manuscript [was] in circulation in 1986.” In *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City:

Review of Grant H. Palmer. *An Insider’s View of Mormon Origins*. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002. xiii + 281 pp., with selected bibliography and index. \$24.95.

essential to a proper understanding of Palmer's book and are thus worthy of careful consideration.

Paul Pry was the name of a fictitious, inquisitive fellow whose exploits were once celebrated in theater and song. Such a one was inclined especially to *prying* into and mocking political mischief and pious fraud. Anne Newport Royall (1769–1854)—an interesting, highly contentious, independent figure,³ and perhaps the first American female newspaper writer and editor—seems to have appropriated the name to signal to those who subscribed to *Paul Pry's Weekly Bulletin*,⁴ her gossipy newspaper, what they could expect to find therein. “Pryism” was thus alive and well in the United States in the 1820s.

With but one tiny exception,⁵ the first mocking remarks by early critics about Joseph Smith and his “Gold Bible” were published under the now virtually forgotten pseudonym of Paul Pry. On 25 July 1829, months before the Book of Mormon was even published, an unsigned item—a spoof—bearing the belittling title “From the Golden Bible: Chronicles Chapter I” appeared in Anne Royall's

Signature Books, 1998), 469 n. 162 and 540 n. 69, the date for “New York Mormonism” was simply given as 1986. A close reading of the manuscript indicates that the portion entitled “More Than a Salamander,” which its author called “Chapter V,” had to have been written after 16 August 1985 since a talk entitled “Reading Church History” given on that date by Elder Dallin H. Oaks is cited. Robert F. Smith, who was the first to cite “New York Mormonism,” merely indicated that his copy of the manuscript was dated “ca. 1985.” See Smith's “Oracles & Talismans, Forgery & Pansophia: Joseph Smith, Jr. as a Renaissance Magus,” bound typescript (“August 1987—Draft”), 30 n. 90.

3. For some of the details, see Cynthia Earman, “An Uncommon Scold: Treasure-Talk Describes Life of Anne Royall,” *The Library of Congress Information Bulletin*, January 2000, available at www.loc.gov/lcib/0001/royall.html (accessed 17 December 2003). On one occasion, Anne Royall was arrested for cursing a minister who stood outside her window praying. She violently objected to what she considered to be his effort to convert her. She was charged with disturbing the peace and “being a public nuisance, a common brawler and a common scold.” She was convicted and “thus became the first North American legally declared a common scold”—hence the title of Earman's essay (*ibid.*).

4. Anne Royall's *Paul Pry's Weekly Bulletin* first appeared in 1828–29 in Rochester, New York. In 1831, she moved her *Paul Pry* venture to Washington, D.C., where it eventually morphed into something called the *Huntress* (1836–54).

5. See the *Wayne Sentinel*, 26 June 1829.

newspaper. Two more items quickly followed in *Paul Pry's Weekly Bulletin*.⁶ Subsequently, the so-called Gold Bible or Golden Bible became the object of much derision in numerous newspaper essays in Palmyra, Rochester, and elsewhere, and literary anti-Mormonism was launched. The name Paul Pry, then, was historically used by a writer in 1829 to express opposition to the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith's prophetic truth claims. Who, I wondered in the summer of 1987, was this cagey "Paul Pry Jr.," the author of "New York Mormonism"? Within days I had figured out that it was Grant Palmer, a veteran, seemingly faithful, trusted employee of the Church Educational System (CES).⁷

Palmer, who now boasts of having had a "passion for church history" (p. x), appears also to have been during his CES career an ardent consumer of revisionist, essentially anti-Mormon accounts of Latter-day Saint origins. This passion led him twenty years ago to fashion what he then described as his own "more secular scenario for the origins of Mormonism."⁸ Ron Priddis, currently managing director of Signature Books, got it right at the Sunstone Symposium in Salt Lake City in 2002 when he indicated that *An Insider's View* was a project that Palmer had been working on "for twenty years."⁹ "New York Mormonism" was the

6. "From the Golden Bible: Chronicles Chapter III," *Paul Pry's Weekly Bulletin*, 8 August 1829, followed on 29 August 1829 by "Chronicles, Chapter I."

7. In 1987, Quinn did not know—or, at least, did not reveal—the identity of "Paul Pry Jr." But in 1998, he indicated that Grant Palmer, whom he did not otherwise identify, was the author of "New York Mormonism." See *Early Mormonism* (2nd ed.), 469 n. 162 and 540 n. 69. He wrote as follows: "Palmer was identified as 'Pry' in Robert F. Smith, 'Oracles & Talismans, Forgery & Pansophia: Joseph Smith, Jr. as a Renaissance Magus,' bound typescript ('August 1987—Draft'), 30n90." Quinn neglected to indicate where a copy of "New York Mormonism" could be located; instead, he merely indicated where one might find copies of Robert F. Smith's paper. A copy of Palmer's "New York Mormonism" can now be found in the Papers of Louis C. Midgley (MSS 2806), L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah (hereafter Perry Collections).

8. Introduction to Palmer [Pry, pseud.], "New York Mormonism," 11.

9. Ron Priddis, "Twenty Years! Celebrating Signature Books and Its Contribution to Mormon Studies," paper presented at 2002 Sunstone Symposium, Salt Lake City, Utah, August 2002. An audio recording is available from Sunstone (SL 02 #333).

first draft of *An Insider's View*. And it was written and circulated by Palmer to his friends while he was still teaching Latter-day Saint high school students for CES. What exactly was it, one might ask, that eventually turned Palmer from a consumer of anti-Mormon literature into the clandestine author of “New York Mormonism”?

“Hook, Line, and Salamander”: Swallowing the Tales of Hofmann and Hoffmann

Palmer boasts that, while employed by CES, he was “always open to new ideas and freely shared them with others.”¹⁰ This appears to be his cautious way of indicating that, among other things, during the 1980s he was circulating revisionist materials to his CES colleagues and friends.¹¹ Still, he claims that from 1967 to 1985 he was “totally a true believer.”¹² Then in 1985 he turned away from the faith. He explains what happened in the following language: “In the fall of 1984, the Martin Harris Salamander Letter caused me to explore what impact Joseph Smith’s magical mind-set may have had upon the Moroni golden plates story and the witnesses to the Book of Mormon.”¹³ In 1985 he drafted his radically revisionist “New York Mormonism.”

The precursor to *An Insider's View* demonstrates that in 1985 Palmer uncritically accepted the speculation fueled by the circulation of a letter dated 23 October 1830 that was supposedly written by Martin Harris to W. W. Phelps. In this notorious letter, which eventually turned out to be one of Mark Hofmann’s clever forgeries, Harris claimed that Joseph Smith, when he visited the place where the plates were hidden, was confronted by a tricky guarding spirit—a white salamander changeling—instead of a heavenly messenger. Palmer saw this letter as a final proof that secular and sectarian critics of Joseph Smith had always been right.

10. Grant H. Palmer, “Biographical Sketch of My CES Career, 1967–2001,” www.signaturebooks.com/excerpts/insider's2.htm (accessed 4 January 2004).

11. Though these items provide an indication of Palmer’s disposition prior to his drafting of “New York Mormonism” in 1985, they have not yet been assembled and archived, and I will make no use of them in this essay.

12. Palmer, “Biographical Sketch.”

13. *Ibid.*

Though its importance cannot be overestimated, it was not merely Palmer's enthrallment with the forged so-called white salamander letter that launched him as an author. He has indicated to me that it was a fairy tale entitled "The Golden Pot"¹⁴—written by the gifted and eccentric composer, painter, conductor, musical critic, theater director, stage designer, and Romantic writer Ernst Theodor Amadeus Hoffmann (1776–1822)—that provided him with his prize original contribution to the vast array of details that have been used to embellish both secular and sectarian explanations of Latter-day Saint origins. It was Hoffmann's tale that provided Palmer with his controlling, central thesis for "New York Mormonism."¹⁵ It is noteworthy that in *An Insider's View*, Palmer does not claim originality for his secular explanations of Joseph Smith; instead, he claims to be setting out for misinformed or uninformed members of the church "a near-consensus on many of the details" (p. ix) that has been reached by professional Latter-day Saint historians over the past three decades. He implies that he speaks for virtually the entire Mormon history profession on the issues he raises (see especially pp. vii–viii).

In *An Insider's View*, Palmer now suppresses the fact that it was the presence of salamander lore in E. T. A. Hoffmann's "The Golden Pot" that, when coupled with the salamander references in Mark Hofmann's

14. E. T. A. Hoffmann's *Der goldne Topf* was first published in German in 1814 and then made available by Thomas Carlyle in English in 1827 under the title "The Golden Pot." Palmer relies on the Carlyle translation. It can now easily be found as "The Golden Flower Pot" in E. F. Bleiler, ed., *The Best Tales of Hoffmann* (New York: Dover, 1967), 1–70. The Carlyle translation is also available in *The Nutcracker and the Golden Pot*, ed. Philip Smith (New York: Dover, 1993), 1–70, for the modest price of one dollar. I use this Dover edition for my quotations. A summary of its plot and an examination of the claims Palmer makes for it appear later in this essay. An online version of "The Golden Pot" can be found, with a different pagination, at Blackmask Online: www.blackmask.com/books72c/goldpot.htm (accessed 13 January 2004).

15. See "Memo of Conversation between Grant H. Palmer and Louis Midgley." This memo, a six-page, single-spaced, typed version of the notes I made during a phone conversation I had with Palmer on 17 October 2003, is available in the Perry Collections (MSS 2806; I informed Palmer that I was taking detailed notes and that I would type them and make them available to him for correction and amplification, which he subsequently declined to do).

forged white salamander letter, sent him down his current path.¹⁶ Hence the following: “This early 19th century account by Hoffmann is a story complete with a salamander with all the appearance[,] form[,] abilities[,] and personality traits of Joseph Smith’s salamander, set in the very Moroni story itself! To put it bluntly, there is far more to explain here than a salamander!”¹⁷ Even when the identity of the secretive author of “New York Mormonism” became known and Palmer’s Paul Pry ploy got him into severe difficulties with his employer, he never turned away from his long enthrallment with anti-Mormon ideology, with the basic contents of his “New York Mormonism,” with the key element in one of Mark Hofmann’s notorious forgeries, and especially with E. T. A. Hoffmann’s “The Golden Pot.” What has disappeared from Palmer’s most recent version of his explanation of Mormon origins is overt references to what got him started as an author—that is, to the salamander lore found in the tales of both Hofmann and Hoffmann.¹⁸ “New York Mormonism” does not seem to have been the product of original research but, instead, a compendium of anti-Mormon arguments bolstered by speculation generated by Hofmann’s forgeries and Hoffmann’s fairy tales (cf. pp. 135–74).

In “New York Mormonism,” Palmer attacks the historical foundations of the faith of the Saints by drawing upon the sensational forgeries of Mark Hofmann. In addition to being enthralled with the white salamander letter, he was also infatuated with the lies Mark Hofmann told his friend Brent Metcalfe about an imaginary Oliver Cowdery history supposedly secreted in the vault of the First Presidency, as well as with many of the affidavits in E. D. Howe’s notorious *Mormonism*

16. Palmer briefly mentions Mark Hofmann’s forged salamander letter in his “Biographical Sketch.”

17. Chapter V, entitled “More Than a Salamander,” in Palmer, “New York Mormonism,” 1.

18. I have borrowed the expression “tales of Hoffmann” from Jacques Offenbach’s *Les contes d’Hoffmann* (The Tales of Hoffmann), which is based on several of Hoffmann’s stories, including the dancing doll from “The Sand-Man,” the wonderful barcarole from a Venetian tale, and so forth. See Palmer’s “Biographical Sketch” for details concerning his enthrallment with the forged salamander letter and his subsequent adoption of the most radical speculation concerning Joseph Smith’s involvement in occult and magic lore and practices.

Unveiled, all of which he wove together with opinions drawn from some marginal contemporary critics of the faith of the Saints. But the casual reader of *An Insider's View* is shielded from all of this. Instead, Palmer now presents himself—and is pictured by his publisher—as a faithful Saint and CES “insider.” However, the fact is that by the end of 1984 Palmer had swallowed, “hook, line, and salamander,” the revisionist anti-Mormon propaganda popular at that time.

It must be remembered that Mark Hofmann’s sensational forgeries helped generate, and at least partially gratified, a passion for textual exotica that was then the rage among Mormon historians, faithful or otherwise. One of the “devil’s Golden Questions” back then was, “Have you any documents?” In the 1980s, dissidents salivated with anticipation at the prospect of some previously unknown letter or other document that could be used to support or ground a radically different way of telling the story of the restoration. Hofmann’s “discoveries,” all of which were eventually shown to be forgeries, as well as the rumors spread by Metcalfe about the history supposedly written by Oliver Cowdery, are now known to have been the products of a combination of low, mercenary motives and a passion to harm the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. It was in this intellectual context that “New York Mormonism” was written.

Palmer seems to have imagined that he could fashion a stunning revisionist history that would pull the Church of Jesus Christ from its historical foundations by drawing upon what was then being made of the Hofmann forgeries. The first draft of *An Insider's View* appears to have been Palmer’s effort to exploit the white salamander letter, coupled with the speculations of a few highly controversial Mormon historians and sectarian propagandists.¹⁹ His only original “contribution” to this “more secular scenario” of Mormon origins was E. T. A. Hoffmann’s salamander lore from “The Golden Pot.”

19. The authors Palmer drew upon include sectarian critics Sandra and Jerald Tanner and the late Reverend Wesley P. Walters, as well as Brent Lee Metcalfe, Marvin S. Hill, D. Michael Quinn, and Sterling M. McMurrin.

Palmer was not, as he now claims, reluctantly or painfully driven to the position he now takes in *An Insider's View*. “New York Mormonism,” despite being a rough draft, reveals someone caught up in the poorly reasoned, half-understood revisionist literature about the historical foundations of the faith of the Saints that was then circulating, supplemented by Hofmann’s mischievous forgeries and the speculation they fueled.

The “Paul Pry” Palmer Version of Mormon Origins

I located a portion of the manuscript of “New York Mormonism” in the summer of 1987. It was divided into what appeared to be three “chapters,” each of which is numbered separately. I subsequently acquired a copy of the crucial, fifty-four-page fifth “chapter.”

- I. “Introduction” (ten pages);²⁰
- [II. Palmer has informed me that he never drafted a second chapter.]
- III. “No Man Knows My History” (fifteen pages);
- III. “No Man Knows My History” (nine pages);²¹
- IV. “The Early Story of the Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon” (eighteen pages);
- IV. “The Early Story of the Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon” (also eighteen pages);²²
- V. “More Than a Salamander” (forty-one pages of text, with thirteen pages of notes paginated separately).²³

20. The entire manuscript of “New York Mormonism” is single-spaced.

21. Though it carries the same number and title, this item is different from the one preceding it.

22. This is also entirely different from the one above it that carries the same number and title.

23. In his endnotes to “New York Mormonism,” Palmer mentions three appendixes, which seem to have included the notorious white salamander letter and some affidavits from the Philastus Hurlbut collection printed in Eber D. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled* (Painesville, Ohio: by the author, 1834). These items may have only been planned and hence not actually circulated by Palmer.

The first chapter of “New York Mormonism” provides an indication of how Pry approached the Latter-day Saint past and what would follow in the manuscript. This portion consists almost entirely of long quotations from Sterling McMurrin, then a prominent “cultural Mormon” and critic of the church. Palmer offered no commentary. He also quoted passages from something written by D. Michael Quinn in which he attacked several of the Brethren.²⁴ In subsequent portions of “New York Mormonism,” Palmer claimed that the Saints have been lied to or otherwise misled by the Brethren right from the start; the Saints have therefore gravely misunderstood the crucial founding events. He insisted that this pattern of deceit began with Joseph Smith even before the publication of the Book of Mormon and has continued to the present. From his perspective, the Saints have never been able to face what he thinks is the truth about the Latter-day Saint past. What follows is his effort to show that the Book of Mormon is not what it claims to be, that there were no ancient records, and that Joseph Smith was not a prophet as understood by the Saints. These conclusions are not presented as somehow reluctantly reached, but as part of an aggressive secular agenda.

“Paul Pry Jr.” and Grant Palmer

In a recent phone conversation, Palmer told me that he was not aware of *Paul Pry’s Weekly Bulletin* and was not really familiar with “Pryism”—he actually claimed that he did not fully understand what the name Paul Pry signaled. I have a hard time believing this. His knowledge of the Latter-day Saint past is derivative, as he emphasizes in *An Insider’s View* (see pp. vii–ix). When he chose to hide his identity behind the name Paul Pry, I doubt that he was unaware of the significance of the name or of its anti-Mormon symbolic power. One does

24. For his own polemical purposes, Quinn distorted some of my views on how we ought to deal with the Latter-day Saint past. For the relevant details concerning the confusion manifested by Quinn about my views in the essay from which Palmer quotes, see Louis Midgley, “Comments on Critical Exchanges,” *FARMS Review of Books* 13/1 (2001): 91–126, especially 93–103.

not simply pluck that name out of thin air. With his vaunted “passion for church history” (p. x), would he not have determined the significance of the name, even if one of his associates or anti-Mormon handlers—the one who proposed in 1985 that he use the name Paul Pry to cloak his real identity—neglected to inform him of its unique history and significance?²⁵ But even if he did not fully understand the significance of Paul Pry, by hiding behind that persona he clearly sought to keep his CES colleagues in the dark about his rejection of the historical foundations and content of the faith of the Saints.²⁶

What exactly was it that led Palmer to draft and then circulate “New York Mormonism” under a pseudonym? He has, I believe, spelled out the reasons for his having shifted to circulating his radically revisionist speculation under a pseudonym rather than under his own name. Though his chronology is a bit garbled, he has set out most of the crucial details in his “Biographical Sketch.” Palmer explains that his opinions unsettled his colleagues at the Brighton High School Seminary. He admitted that “during the 1985–86 school year, [he] experienced some difficulty with [his] file leaders while at Brighton Seminary.”²⁷ Among the problems he faced, he mentions having “shared [his] research on Joseph Smith and magic with faculty members and several of them did not appreciate it.”²⁸ Hence he “was placed on probation [by his CES supervisors] for one year, beginning on 3 January 1985.”²⁹ He “agreed to tone things down and [he] apologized to the Brighton [seminary] faculty for creating an unsettling environment in the seminary by sharing with them.”³⁰ So it seems that his problems with his colleagues and supervisors had actually be-

25. See “Memo of Conversation,” 2.

26. Palmer has an amazing capacity to rationalize his behavior. For example, he told me that he thinks that he has convinced his bishop that he is a heretic rather than an apostate. In his case, this seems to me to be a distinction without a difference. See “Memo of Conversation,” 3. And he justified circulating “New York Mormonism” under a pseudonym because of what he described as the “repressive” CES atmosphere. *Ibid.*

27. Palmer, “Biographical Sketch.”

28. *Ibid.*

29. *Ibid.*

30. *Ibid.*

gun in 1984 and not “during the 1985–86 school year.” In addition, he indicated that in the fall of 1984 he had swallowed Mark Hofmann’s forgeries and the speculation they fueled. He was in 1984 opining to his colleagues about what he considered Joseph Smith’s involvement in magic. While on probation, instead of “sharing” his opinions with his colleagues, he drafted “New York Mormonism” and this time circulated his opinions under a blatant anti-Mormon pseudonym. And, as Palmer also admits, “the Area Director over the entire Salt Lake valley knew I was struggling.”³¹ What Palmer did not indicate in his “Biographical Sketch” is that his CES supervisors had discovered his Paul Pry ploy. Palmer’s way of explaining what happened is that, “preferring to teach the adult mind,” he “asked to teach inmates at the Salt Lake County jail.”³² In Palmer’s “Biographical Sketch,” there is, unfortunately, no mention of (1) his hiding behind the name Paul Pry or (2) the role “New York Mormonism” played in getting him assigned to counseling at the Salt Lake County jail.

If, with very little effort, I could figure out who was hiding behind the name Paul Pry, it was inevitable that others, including his colleagues and supervisors in CES, either already knew or would soon discover that Palmer was the author of a craven bit of anti-Mormon propaganda. And this is exactly what happened. He has informed me that late in 1987, or early the next year, after his CES supervisor became aware that he had been circulating “New York Mormonism” under the name Paul Pry Jr., he was released from teaching seminary and allowed to “volunteer,” as he puts it,³³ for what he described to me as “chaplain duty” at the Salt Lake County jail.³⁴ In this role he

31. Ibid.

32. Ibid.

33. Compare the following: “I volunteered toward the end of my career to be the LDS Institute director at the Salt Lake County jail” (p. x).

34. Palmer freely discussed with me his confrontation with his CES supervisor when it was discovered that he had been covertly circulating “New York Mormonism.” See “Memo of Conversation,” 2. In my phone conversation with Palmer, he never described his work at the jail as directorial, but merely as “chaplain duty.” I have no objections to the use of that label.

indicated that he was not allowed to teach what he called “Mormon theology” but was, instead, permitted to do some counseling and to give ethical advice.³⁵ This he did until his retirement.

Palmer seems to have drawn from the CES deck a card reading “Go to jail; do not pass go.” But he seems to have held his own card reading “Accept retirement from the tithe payers and then receive applause for an anti-Mormon book.”

“Primarily an Institute Director”?

Why, one might ask, has Palmer’s publisher emphasized his having been “three-time director of LDS Institutes of Religion in California and Utah” (back cover)?³⁶ Is this a way of portraying him as a loyal “insider” since Signature Books clearly wants him to be seen as being right there in the center of CES things? Or is it a way of puffing Palmer’s credentials since “Institute director” sounds more impressive than “seminary teacher”? In addition to this claim of his being a “three-time director of LDS Institutes of Religion,” Palmer himself claims in the opening line of his preface to *An Insider’s View* that “for thirty-four years I was *primarily an Institute director* for the Church Educational System (CES)” (p. vii, emphasis added). “Primarily”? I have looked into this claim and it turns out to be a bit of an exaggeration. With Palmer’s assistance, I have been able to reconstruct his CES assignments.³⁷

Palmer began his CES career teaching at the Church College of New Zealand, which is the Latter-day Saint high school in Templeview

35. See “Notes . . . on the Grant Palmer Book Signing at the Sam Weller Bookstore in S[alt] L[ake] C[ity] on Saturday, November 30, 2002,” 5. This is a six-page, single-spaced, typed report including a description of the setting and those present, a summary of Palmer’s speech and the questions and answers that followed, a note on conversations following the question period, and addenda concerning more of what Palmer had said during his speech and answers. This item is available in MSS 2806 in Perry Collections.

36. This is also quoted by Tom Kimball, the Signature publicist, in a news release entitled “Event Launches New Book: Mormon Founder Borrowed Ideas, Says Scholar,” *Signature Books News*, 26 November 2002.

37. See Palmer, “Biographical Sketch,” and cf. “Memo of Conversation,” 1.

(1967–70). He was hired to teach British Empire history but was eventually shifted to teaching religion classes. For health reasons, he did not complete his four-year contract. Palmer was then made the CES coordinator, his official title, for the Whittier Stake in California (1970–73), where he also taught some college-age students at Rio Hondo Jr. College and Whittier College. He then worked one year on a Ph.D. at Brigham Young University before being again assigned as CES coordinator for the Chico Stake (1975–80), where he also taught college-age students at Butte College in Oroville, California. These assignments, where he was the sole CES employee, came at the beginning of his career. He had nothing to do with LDS Institutes of Religion, as that label is commonly understood, for the last two decades of his CES career. Why? In 1980 he relocated to the Salt Lake Valley, where he taught seminary first at East High School (1980–81) and then at Brighton High School (1981–87). He ended his CES career not teaching but counseling in a jail.³⁸ What the word “primarily” means is that for nine of the thirty-four years of his CES career, while supervising local seminary teachers, he was also an institute “director.” Even if one were inclined to count his counseling work at a jail as being an institute director, which I am not willing to do, his career seems to have taken a downward spiral, but neither this fact nor any of the reasons for it is mentioned by Palmer or in the Signature hype for *An Insider’s View*.

I realize that some will complain that, by probing Palmer’s background (or beliefs), I offer a diversion from the issues he raises and that what I have presented is an ad hominem attack. This is nonsense. Palmer and his publisher have made his CES career an issue. And his book has a history; he and his book cannot be separated. His book is the product of motivations and sources that also have a meaning and history. In addition, he makes claims about himself. Looking into such things is called intellectual history. It should be noted that Palmer strives to engage in just such a venture by attempting to set out what he thinks were the sources of Joseph Smith’s story, the Book of Mormon, and so forth. If my look at Palmer’s motivations and his own history of

38. Information in this paragraph is found in Palmer, “Biographical Sketch.”

attempting to unravel the faith of the Saints is a personal attack, then the same is true of his treatment of Joseph Smith. But neither Palmer's attack on Joseph Smith nor my treatment of his attack on the Prophet should be dismissed as an *ad hominem* or as a personal attack.

From "New York Mormonism" to *An Insider's View*

It is common for historians—Michael Quinn comes to mind—and various journalists to warrant their work by thanking virtually everyone they have met for assisting them with their research,³⁹ but Palmer gives only a general nod of appreciation to nameless "friends and colleagues" who read the "first and subsequent drafts" of *An Insider's View* (p. xiii). Are these people nameless because revealing who they are would signal that he is an "insider" among those on the fringes—that is, among apostates, dissidents, and cultural Mormons? He also neglects to indicate what triggered the first draft of his book, who helped him get started on his book in the 1980s, who encouraged him, who provided him with information then or more recently, who fed him ideas, or who it was that polished his manuscript for publication.

There is, however, evidence in "New York Mormonism" indicating that, when the Hofmann affair was taking place, Palmer was deeply involved with Brent Metcalfe. Palmer also indicated to me that in 1987 (or soon thereafter) George D. Smith, the wealthy owner of Signature Books, wrote to him and urged him to turn "New York Mormonism" into a book.⁴⁰ This seems to have been an important bit of encouragement since it came soon after Mark Hofmann was ex-

39. For pages of such acknowledgments by D. Michael Quinn, see his *Early Mormonism* (1st ed.), vii–xv; *The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1994), xiii–xv; and *The Mormon Hierarchy: Extensions of Power* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1997), ix–xii. Lavish acknowledgments are, especially in the case of journalists, a way of appearing to have done much consultation and scholarly research; they are also a way of warranting their opinions without the potentially messy business of citing sources to back them up. Journalists thus eschew footnotes for the very reason scholars appreciate them.

40. "Memo of Conversation," 2. Palmer neglects to mention this in his "Biographical Sketch."

posed as a forger and the basis for Palmer's Paul Pry project had been blown away; it was thus at a time when he was in deep trouble with his CES employers.

While doing "chaplain duty" at the Salt Lake County jail, even with some personal distractions, he continued supplementing and revising the opinions he had begun to set out in "New York Mormonism." The fall of Mark Hofmann may have temporarily put a bit of a damper on Palmer's project, but soon, with help from others, he was back working on his manuscript, which he published under his own name following his retirement. Unlike his first effort, this time he suppressed his infatuation with salamanders.

The Tales of Hoffmann (and Hofmann) and the Society of Salamanders

In the final chapter of his initial draft of *An Insider's View*, entitled "More Than a Salamander," Palmer made much of Hoffmann's "The Golden Flower Pot," as its English translation was sometimes called. In neither his first draft nor in his final book version is Palmer arguing that, as a young boy, Joseph Smith was involved for a while with a group that dug for supposedly buried treasure. That story is well-known to interested Latter-day Saints.⁴¹ Instead, Palmer took a different tack by claiming that Joseph Smith plagiarized the entire story of a heavenly messenger with an ancient record from elements he believed were in Hoffmann's tale. In 1985, Palmer insisted that the Joseph Smith story, in all its rich detail, is exactly the same as Hoffmann's tale, particularly including the presence of an elemental spirit—a changeling, trickster, magician, wonder-working salamander. He boldly proclaimed that Joseph Smith and his family had plagiarized their entire story from Hoffmann.

What linked, for Palmer, E. T. A. Hoffmann's tale to Joseph Smith? It was Mark Hofmann placing a salamander in one of his forgeries

41. See, for example, Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984). In the first draft of his book Palmer neglected even to mention Bushman's book.

and then inventing an Oliver Cowdery history, which, he said, also included talk about a salamander. Without Mark Hofmann, it is likely that no one would have linked “The Golden Pot” and the story of the restoration. But this fact is entirely suppressed in *An Insider’s View*. In its direct form, of course, Palmer’s secular explanation of Joseph Smith’s prophetic truth claims and of the Book of Mormon collapsed when Mark Hofmann was exposed as a forger. But unfortunately, a somewhat more cautious version of the speculation generated by Hofmann’s forgery remains covertly behind Palmer’s current appeal to E. T. A. Hoffmann’s fairy tale.

How, one might wonder, did Palmer start down this road? How did he “discover” E. T. A. Hoffmann’s bizarre tale that contains references to an imaginary society of salamanders? In October 1985, someone seems to have called Robert F. Smith’s attention to the salamander motif in Hoffmann’s *Der goldne Topf* and its possibility as the source for the salamander image in Mark Hofmann’s sensational forged salamander letter. Smith seems to have then brought Hoffmann’s tale to the attention of Ronald Walker, who, along with Brent Metcalfe, was employed at the time by Steven F. Christensen to do research on magical, occult practices and lore in Joseph Smith’s environment.⁴² According to Palmer, it was Walker who introduced him to the Hoffmann tale. Palmer’s subsequent treatment of “The Golden Pot” became the key element in his effort to show that Joseph Smith had fashioned his own story of encounters with a heavenly messenger and of his subsequent possession of a record engraved on golden plates from Hoffmann’s tale, stressing the salamander theme.

Palmer coyly indicates in *An Insider’s View* that “about a decade and a half ago, there was some consternation and confusion over

42. For details on Steven Christensen’s employment of Ronald Walker, Brent Metcalfe, and Dean Jessee, see Richard E. Turley Jr., *Victims: The LDS Church and the Mark Hofmann Case* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 83–84, 88, 95. Robert Smith informs me that, beginning in 1984 and at the request of Walker, he prepared various drafts of his “Oracles & Talismans.” Smith only made the last version of this paper, dated August 1987, widely available two years after the research project was terminated just before Christensen’s murder by Mark Hofmann in October 1985.

Mark Hofmann's forgeries and murders. In fact, it has taken a while to sort through and correct the damage he caused" (p. ix). Damage to what?—among other things, to Palmer's revisionist history as he had set it out in "New York Mormonism." Palmer has had to suppress direct mention of the salamander motif from his later attacks on Joseph Smith. In *An Insider's View*, Palmer merely mentions the salamander motif from "The Golden Pot" in the obscurity of two footnotes. In the first instance, he casually mentions that a salamander can represent fire, an elemental power (p. 151 n. 27), which is true. In the second, he claims that "in the Hoffmann novel and the New York story [that is, in Joseph Smith's story], both archivists are spirits capable of appearing in a kingly or majestic form, a frightful form, and as a pleasant old man" (pp. 151–52 n. 28). This highly problematic assertion makes it clear that Palmer is still trying hard to turn Moroni into a salamander: he argues that the Archivarius Lindhorst in Hoffmann's tale sometimes "appears as a frightening old man or as a serpent or salamander" (p. 152 n. 28). Other than these two tangential instances, there is no mention at all in *An Insider's View* of the salamander motif. But Palmer mentioned salamanders 235 times in forty-one single-spaced pages of his fifth and key chapter of "New York Mormonism." Why has Palmer suppressed his initial fascination with the salamander motif in "The Golden Pot"? If nothing else, Palmer (or one of his handlers) has toned down, moderated, and essentially obscured the bold claims he once made about Joseph Smith encountering a trickster salamander changeling rather than a heavenly messenger.⁴³

Without the evidence of the white salamander letter to bolster his assertions, there was, as Palmer grants, at least "some consternation and confusion," as well as much "damage," to his own revisionist enterprise.

43. At the Sunstone panel entitled "Author Meets Critics: An Insider's View of Mormon Origins," held in August 2003 (tape recording SL 03 #275), Palmer indicated that Ron Walker "put the word *salamander* into his computer and got all these books and he brought them home and read them and he read 'The Golden Pot' by E. T. A. Hoffmann." However, in 1984–85, there was no Internet and little or no capacity to search for any literary item with a computer. The fact is that Palmer was not aware of how Walker came to know about Hoffmann's tale.

But these embarrassing details are suppressed in *An Insider's View*. Instead, Palmer's notion of what he calls a "New Mormon History"—that is, radically revisionist accounts of Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon—are said to have moved relentlessly forward toward a near-consensus among Mormon historians, with perhaps a mere snag here and there. Instead of abandoning the idea that Joseph Smith borrowed his story, down to the smallest details, from Hoffmann's bizarre fairy tale, Palmer has tacitly shifted his ground somewhat and moved on as if nothing much has happened to challenge his original explanation. Instead of the lurid language in the key portion of his original draft, Palmer's argument is now much more modestly set out in *An Insider's View*. But the truth is that without Hoffmann's forged white salamander letter, there is simply no longer any good reason to see "The Golden Pot" as a source for the story of a heavenly messenger with an ancient history that Joseph Smith would eventually translate "by the gift and power of God."⁴⁴ Palmer cheats when he talks about what he claims is the key relationship between "The Golden Pot" and the account given by Joseph Smith. Why? No one in the Hoffmann tale translates anything—and certainly not by the gift and power of God. When I drew this to Palmer's attention, he complained that Hoffmann had not been sufficiently clear. In other words, Hoffmann unfortunately failed to say what Palmer wished he had said to make his case against the Prophet.⁴⁵

Unlike Palmer, it should be noted that Robert Smith provided a reasonably accurate description of the contents of Hoffmann's tale.⁴⁶ He was anxious to identify where Mark Hofmann might have gotten the idea of inserting a salamander into one of his forged letters, as well as his motives behind the lies he told Brent Metcalfe about a nonexistent Oliver Cowdery history hidden in the vault of the First Presidency. Unlike Palmer, Smith thought that Joseph Smith "is unlikely to have cribbed anything from the story (the differences are

44. This is how Palmer described what Hoffmann has his fictional Anselmus doing in "The Golden Pot." This language was used by Palmer in a Sunstone symposium panel discussion entitled "Author Meets Critics."

45. See "Memo of Conversation," 5.

46. See R. F. Smith, "Oracles & Talismans," 93.

far too striking).” But Robert Smith granted that the salamander changeling “fitted much better into Joseph’s day than anyone has imagined heretofore.”⁴⁷ For him, “the real questions are ‘Where do the elements used by E. T. A. Hoffmann come from?’ and ‘Did the forger use this story?’”⁴⁸ “The forger,” for Robert Smith, was Mark Hofmann and certainly not Joseph Smith. Robert Smith showed that the bulk of whatever vague parallels there may appear to be between “The Golden Pot” and Joseph Smith’s account of his encounters with heavenly messengers seems to depend on Hoffmann’s having embellished themes like the “Holy Grail, and [the] golden manna pot of Exodus.”⁴⁹ Palmer fails to notice any of these. Robert Smith also claimed that Mark Hofmann must have borrowed the salamander image, which he slipped into one of his forgeries, from Hoffmann’s tale of “The Golden Pot” since “the name of the author probably made it too attractive to pass up.”⁵⁰ True, he had no direct evidence that Mark Hofmann knew about E. T. A. Hoffmann’s bizarre fairy tale, but, then, neither does Palmer have any evidence at all that Joseph Smith knew of or in any way drew upon “The Golden Pot.”

Certain other revisionist Mormon historians have been attracted by Palmer’s early determination to describe a heavenly messenger as a fiery changeling salamander that, in Quinn’s words, “commissioned a young man to translate ancient records.”⁵¹ It seems that Quinn learned of Hoffmann’s bizarre tale from Robert Smith’s manuscript—upon which he seems a bit more dependent than can be seen from his endnotes—and also, perhaps, from Palmer’s “New York Mormonism.”⁵² One bit of evidence is that, in “New York Mormonism,” Palmer describes Joseph Smith as having been “in a kind of out of body *metaphysical experience*,

47. Ibid.

48. Ibid.

49. Ibid., 91.

50. Ibid., 93.

51. Quinn, *Early Mormonism* (2nd ed.), 154.

52. See *ibid.*, 469 n. 162, where Quinn mentions Palmer’s discussion of the salamander image without citing the fifty-four page “chapter” in Palmer’s “New York Mormonism” entitled “More Than a Salamander” and without either paraphrasing or evaluating its contents.

believing he's in the hill translating in his 'sacred grove'" and so forth.⁵³ For his part, Quinn seems not to have recovered from his own early fascination with the idea that Joseph Smith's experiences were what he calls "metaphysical,"⁵⁴ whatever that language may mean, and perhaps something very much like an encounter with what E. T. A. Hoffmann described as a salamander changeling. Be that as it may, Quinn points his readers to Palmer's discussion of "The Golden Pot" and then to a footnote in Robert Smith's 1985 manuscript in which Palmer is identified as "Paul Pry Jr." Quinn does not reveal the content of Palmer's discussion, nor does he mention Robert Smith's assessment rejecting "The Golden Pot" as a source from which young Joseph Smith crafted his initial story of encounters with a heavenly messenger and then with ancient artifacts.⁵⁵ It is Palmer's initial speculation of a link between Hoffmann's tale and Joseph Smith, which Robert Smith flatly rejected and Quinn seemed to accept, that now forms the foundation of Palmer's account in *An Insider's View* of Joseph Smith's divine revelations.⁵⁶

53. Chapter V, "More Than a Salamander," in Palmer, "New York Mormonism," 32, emphasis added.

54. This extraordinarily loose and imprecise use of a word borrowed from the technical literature of philosophy may actually have been started by Palmer since he uses similar language in the final chapter of "New York Mormonism" (see p. 32) and then again in *An Insider's View* (see pp. 231, 232, 260, 262). Palmer contrasts real events with "metaphysical experiences," by which he means something taking place only in the imagination. In *Early Mormonism* (2nd ed.), Quinn refers casually to "the metaphysical, the occult" (p. xii), "belief in the metaphysical" (p. xii), a "metaphysical conclusion" (p. xxxiii), "metaphysical dynamics" (p. 3), "one dramatic (and metaphysical) event" (p. 60), a "metaphysical experience" (p. 175), "a world view . . . both metaphysical and hermetic" (p. 307), writers who "believe in the metaphysical," something called a "metaphysical topic," and "the possibility of metaphysical experience" (p. 352 n. 98).

55. Hugh Nibley started complaining as far back as 1962 about the parallelomania of anti-Mormons anxiously engaged in trying to locate nineteenth-century sources for the Book of Mormon. See his *The Prophetic Book of Mormon* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1989), 230, for an essay in which he used that label in 1962. Nibley, of course, was borrowing from Samuel Sandmel's "Parallelomania," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 31 (1962): 129–56, conveniently reprinted in Samuel Sandmel, *Two Living Traditions: Essays on Religion and the Bible* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1972), 291–304.

56. Palmer does not seem familiar with Robert Smith's treatment of Hoffmann's work "The Golden Pot." And Quinn, who is deeply into what is pejoratively known as "parallelomania," does not seem to have drawn the extreme conclusions that Palmer does concerning a link between E. T. A. Hoffmann and Joseph Smith.

Translating or Copying?—Testing Palmer’s Claim

It is clear that Palmer has now silently suppressed the salamander motif, which he once thought was the key link between E. T. A. Hoffmann’s tale and Joseph Smith. But he still retains some of the ingenious speculation and bold claims that marked his original analysis of “The Golden Pot.” It would be tedious and, I believe, unnecessary to examine every detail in Palmer’s appeal to Hoffmann’s tale.⁵⁷ Instead, I will examine what appears to be his key claim: that Lindhorst, the salamander changeling in Hoffmann’s tale, has young Anselmus translate ancient manuscripts.⁵⁸

The Signature Books publicist issued a press release in which he claimed that Palmer argues in his *An Insider’s View* that “a theology student [Anselmus] receives visits from a supernatural being who, the student learns, is the last archivist of an ancient history of Atlantis. The student is empowered to dictate the history to a modern audience.”⁵⁹ This is all garbled. In the actual tale, Anselmus—mad, or at least drunken—sits down under an elder tree beside the Elbe River on Ascension Day and imagines or hallucinates about three little gold-green snakes that come out of the tree. Later he meets Archivarius Lindhorst, who eventually employs Anselmus to *copy* manuscripts in Arabic, Coptic, and other, unknown languages. These texts are not translated, and there is little or nothing to suggest that they were historical accounts. Lindhorst eventually reveals to Anselmus that he is an elemental spirit representing fire—and, hence, a descendant of a race of salamander changelings. He also reveals that the three little snakes Anselmus had encountered are actually his daughters, who

57. See Mark Ashurst-McGee, “A One-sided View of Mormon Origins,” in this number, pages 309–64.

58. Palmer is prone to exaggeration and embellishment, especially when he addresses a sympathetic audience. He has claimed, for example, that when Anselmus “went to get the ancient records to translate the history of this Atlantian society—this lost civilization—he gets abused,” just as did Joseph Smith “by a white serpent.” See “Author Meets Critics.” It is pure invention to refer to Anselmus going “to get the records to translate” anything.

59. Kimball, “Event Launches New Book.”

were out looking for husbands. The one to whom Anselmus was attracted, Serpentina—the one with the large blue eyes—eventually tells the drunk (or mad) copier-calligrapher the story of her father’s marriage to a snake and how she and the two other little snakes were born in a magic lily growing in a golden flower pot. We must ask: can this bizarre fairy tale really be, as Palmer claims, the source for Joseph Smith’s story?

Without indicating in *An Insider’s View* that the archivist who employed Anselmus to *copy* old manuscripts for him was a change-living salamander, Palmer claims that “when the transformed archivist gives Anselmus work, it is to copy and *translate* the records of Lindhorst’s ancestors” (p. 138, emphasis added). This is, as I will demonstrate, simply not true. Palmer then asserts that “Anselmus receives the Atlantean records . . . and begins to *translate*” (p. 138, emphasis added). This is again not true—Anselmus merely *copies* manuscripts and other items in foreign languages.

After a very brief and quite inaccurate summary of Hoffmann’s tale,⁶⁰ Palmer then turns to the Second Vigil—one of the twelve scenes, or vigils, that make up this fairy tale. Palmer’s heading reads as follows: “He [Anselmus] is called to translate ancient records” (p. 148). There are two problems with this assertion: Anselmus is not “called” in any religious sense but is employed by Lindhorst to work as a calligrapher and copyist; Anselmus copies old manuscripts but never “translates” anything.

Palmer, referring to language in the Second Vigil, claims that Lindhorst gives Anselmus “a number of manuscripts, partly Arabic, Coptic, and some of them in strange characters, which do not belong to any known tongue. These he wishes to have copied [and translated] properly, and for this purpose he requires a man who can draw with the pen, and so [to] transfer these marks to parchment, in Indian ink, with the highest exactness and fidelity. The [This] work is to be car-

60. Palmer’s summary in *An Insider’s View* of the contents of “The Golden Pot” does not provide one unfamiliar with that tale even a slight idea of its genuinely bizarre contents. Instead, it is designed to emphasize what Palmer considers to be links with Joseph Smith’s account of the recovery of the Book of Mormon.

ried out in a separate chamber of his house, under his own supervision . . . he will pay his copyist a speziesthaler, or specie-dollar, daily, and promises a handsome present” (p. 148, bracketed portions Palmer’s), but Palmer has not finished the line, which reads “when the copying is rightly finished.” Even though the words used in the tale are *copied*, *copyist*, and *copying*, Palmer inserts the phrase *and translated* into the text. This is entirely gratuitous; nothing in Hoffmann’s tale justifies such an emendation or amendment, and, by not quoting the final clause in the sentence, Palmer has suppressed crucial evidence since that language shows that Anselmus was not hired to translate an ancient Atlantean history, but merely to copy some old manuscripts.

Then Palmer reports that Lindhorst sketches for Anselmus something of his ancestry, and he adds: “This is told in more detail in Vigil 8 when Anselmus actually translates the history” (p. 153). But there is no mention in the Eighth Vigil, as I will demonstrate, of Anselmus translating anything. Palmer must interpolate the word *translate* into Hoffmann’s tale to make the argument that somehow Joseph Smith used it, directly or indirectly, to fashion his own story. But he is not consistent about it. Later—inadvertently, it appears—he quotes Lindhorst taunting Anselmus as follows: “‘Hey, hey, this is Herr Anselmus that was to copy my manuscripts’” (p. 155). Still later he casually reports that “in the library ‘Lindhorst now brought out . . . an Arabic manuscript’ which Anselmus eagerly begins transcribing” (p. 162). A little further on, Palmer quotes Lindhorst as saying to Anselmus, “You have gained my confidence; but the hardest is still ahead; and that is the transcribing or rather painting of certain works, written in a peculiar character; I keep them in this room, and they can only be copied on the spot” (p. 166). There is no mention of translating. But when Lindhorst introduces Anselmus to “books with gilt leaves . . . [of] parchment,” Palmer adds that “Anselmus begins to translate these” (p. 167).⁶¹ On the same page, however, Palmer grants

61. Palmer’s ellipsis points connect fragments of language from two entirely different episodes in his source. The books in the first episode (Seventh Vigil) are never said to be of parchment, and the leaves of parchment in the latter episode (Eighth Vigil) are green (not gilt) leaves from a palm tree.

that “Anselmus wondered not a little at these strangely intertwined characters; and as he looked over the many points, strokes, dashes, and twirls in the manuscript, he almost lost hope of ever *copying* it” (p. 167, emphasis added).

Palmer does not seem to see that copying ancient manuscripts is Hoffmann’s technique for gradually introducing Anselmus into a higher mythic world of nature rather than into a world of bureaucracy and technology. After starting him in a library, carefully copying ancient texts—which has to be the most boring, tedious, dull, bureaucratic, and prosaic work imaginable—his salamander mentor eventually introduces Anselmus into an imaginary magic garden, where he unfolds a leaf from a tree and sees something that looks like polished marble or lichens on a rock. He then gets close to nature by copying nature. He is fitted to experience the wonders of nature directly, instead of copying words on a page. He reads the book of nature rather than something artificial and alienating, written in conventional signs by mere human beings. At the end, Anselmus is permanently swept away to an imaginary Atlantis, where human and divine things disappear and he is able in his madness to experience immediately the clash of earth and fire—that is, the struggle of the elemental powers of air, water, earth, and fire and the harmony presumably behind all of that.⁶² As he learns his lessons and as Lindhorst holds his hand, Anselmus becomes a participant in the mythic struggle between earth and fire. And Lindhorst is the salamander figure representing fire. This is not the Joseph Smith story, and nothing like it appears in the Book of Mormon.

Finally, a subsection of Palmer’s chapter on “Moroni and ‘The Golden Pot’” carries the heading “He translates by inspiration” (p. 169). Hoffmann does not, however, mention “inspiration,” except that which might come from wine or some other form of alcohol, and he does not have Anselmus translate an ancient history or translate any text; he is not inspired to translate. He is, instead, a skilled calligrapher whose job is to

62. For a similar reading, see L. C. Nygaard, “Anselmus as Amanuensis: The Motif of Copying in Hoffmann’s *Der goldne Topf*,” *Seminar: A Journal of German Studies* 19/2 (1983): 79–104.

copy manuscripts as accurately as possible. Palmer stretches things a bit further by claiming that “Anselmus receives ‘help’ in translating” (p. 169). Hence the following: “Lindhorst specified that his special records needed to be interpreted and copied ‘with the highest exactness and fidelity’ and ‘the greatest clearness and correctness’” (p. 170). He embellishes Hoffmann’s tale in an effort to imply similarities with language describing Joseph Smith’s experiences. Palmer thus claims that “when Anselmus translated, his work stood ‘perfect on the parchment’” (p. 170).⁶³ But Lindhorst never mentions translating or interpreting those manuscripts, nor is there a clear indication that any of the manuscripts that Anselmus was asked to copy were historical texts, as Palmer claims.

I will present the relevant language in E. T. A. Hoffmann’s tale concerning the task given to Anselmus by the salamander changeling, Lindhorst. I quote this language in the exact order in which it appears in the tale. Palmer, it will be seen, obscures the descriptions of the tasks given to Anselmus by his employer⁶⁴ in his effort to make it appear that the bizarre salamander tale was the inspiration for Joseph Smith’s account of the recovery of the Book of Mormon.

First Vigil

“What did it matter when Conrector Paulmann gave me hopes of *copywork*.”⁶⁵

Second Vigil

“Besides many curious books, he [Privy Archivarius Lindhorst] possesses a number of manuscripts, partly Arabic, Coptic, and some of them in strange characters, which do not belong to any known tongue. These he wishes to have *copied* properly, and for this purpose he

63. The last phrase in the quotation comes from an episode at the *beginning* of the copying sessions, not at the end. In context, “At every new word that stood fair and perfect on the parchment, his courage increased, and with it his adroitness.” See Hoffmann, “The Golden Pot,” 34.

64. I cite “The Golden Pot” in Smith’s 1993 slight revision of the Thomas Carlyle translation (see note 14 above). I have placed emphasis on the key language in each passage I quote.

65. *Ibid.*, 3.

requires a man who can draw with the pen, and so transfer these marks to parchment, in Indian ink, with the highest exactness and fidelity.”⁶⁶

Lindhorst “will pay his *copyist* a speiesthaler, or specie-dollar, daily, and promises a handsome present when the *copying* is rightly finished.”⁶⁷

“Herr Archivarius Lindhorst having in vain tried one or two young people for *copying* these manuscripts, has at last applied to me to find him an *expert calligrapher*, and so I have been thinking of you, my dear Anselmus, for I know that you both write very neatly and *draw* with the pen to great perfection.”⁶⁸

“The Student Anselmus was filled with joy at Registrator Heerbrand’s proposal; for not only could the Student write well and *draw* well with the pen, but this *copying* with laborious *calligraphic* pains was a thing he delighted in more than anything else.”⁶⁹

Anselmus “brought out his black-lead pencils, his crowquills, his Indian ink; for better materials, thought he, the Archivarius can find nowhere. Above all, he gathered together and arranged his *calligraphic* masterpieces and his *drawings*, to show them to the Archivarius, as proof of his ability to do what was desired.”⁷⁰

Anselmus went to meet Lindhorst “with a roll of *calligraphic specimens and pen-drawings* in his pocket.”⁷¹

Third Vigil

“In fact, these friends regarded [Anselmus] as troubled in mind, and considered ways for diverting his thoughts; to which end, Registrator Heerbrand thought, there could nothing be so serviceable as *copying* Archivarius Lindhorst’s manuscripts.”⁷²

“ . . . till such time as Archivarius Lindhorst should in one way or another see him, and the bargain for this *copying work* be settled.”⁷³

66. Ibid., 10.

67. Ibid., 11.

68. Ibid.

69. Ibid.

70. Ibid.

71. Ibid.

72. Ibid., 16.

73. Ibid.

“Most esteemed Herr Archivarius, here is the Student Anselmus, who has an uncommon talent in *calligraphy and drawing*, and will undertake the *copying* of your rare manuscripts.”⁷⁴

“Did not the Archivarius tell me he was most particularly glad to hear that I would undertake the *copying* of his manuscripts . . . ?”⁷⁵

Fourth Vigil

“Hey, hey, what whining and whimpering is this? Hey, hey, this is Herr Anselmus that was to *copy* my manuscripts.”⁷⁶

“I will grant you this real satisfaction: if you stick tightly and truly to your task, that is to say, *copy* every mark with the greatest clearness and correctness . . .”⁷⁷

Fifth Vigil

“These two days he has been with Archivarius Lindhorst, *copying* manuscripts.”⁷⁸

Sixth Vigil

“The Student Anselmus put his *pen-drawings*, and *calligraphic masterpieces*, his bars of Indian ink, and his well-pointed crow-pens, into his pockets.”⁷⁹

“At that moment, he felt as if Serpentina’s love might be the prize of some laborious perilous task which he had to undertake; and as if this task were nothing else but the *copying* of the Lindhorst manuscripts.”⁸⁰

“The Student here gathered full courage; and not without internal self-complacence in the certainty of highly gratifying Archivarius Lindhorst, pulled out his *drawings* and *specimens of penmanship* from his pocket.”⁸¹

74. Ibid.

75. Ibid., 17.

76. Ibid., 19.

77. Ibid., 21.

78. Ibid., 23.

79. Ibid., 30.

80. Ibid.

81. Ibid., 33.

“My dear Herr Anselmus,’ said Archivarius Lindhorst, ‘you have indeed fine capacities for the *art of calligraphy*.”⁸²

“The Student Anselmus spoke at length of his *often-acknowledged perfection in this art*, of his fine Chinese ink, and most select crow-quills.”⁸³

“The Student Anselmus had often *copied* Arabic manuscripts before.”⁸⁴

“If the *copying* of these Arabic manuscripts had prospered in his hands before dinner, the task now went forward much better.”⁸⁵

“And as, in the fullness of secret rapture, he caught these sounds, the unknown characters grew clearer and clearer to him; he scarcely needed to look at the original at all; nay, it was as if the letters were already standing in pale ink on the parchment, and he had nothing more to do but *mark them in black*.”⁸⁶

Lindhorst started to look over Anselmus’s work, “but no sooner had he glanced over the *copy* . . .”⁸⁷

Eighth Vigil

“His *copying* proceeded rapidly and lightly; for he felt more and more as if he were writing characters long known to him; and he scarcely needed to cast his eye upon the manuscript, while *copying* it all with the greatest exactness.”⁸⁸

“Except at the hour of dinner, Archivarius Lindhorst seldom made his appearance; and this always precisely at the moment when Anselmus had finished the last letter of some manuscript: then the Archivarius would hand him another.”⁸⁹

Anselmus enters a room that has “a table overhung with violet-coloured satin, upon which lay the writing gear already known to

82. Ibid.

83. Ibid.

84. Ibid., 34.

85. Ibid.

86. Ibid., 34–35.

87. Ibid., 35.

88. Ibid., 42.

89. Ibid.

Anselmus. ‘Dear Herr Anselmus,’ said Archivarius Lindhorst, ‘you have now *copied* for me a number of manuscripts, rapidly and correctly, to my no small contentment: you have gained my confidence; but the hardest is still ahead; and that is the *transcribing* or rather *painting* of certain works, written in a peculiar character; I keep them in this room, and they can only be *copied* on the spot.’⁹⁰

In the imaginary garden, “one of these leaves the Archivarius took hold of; and Anselmus saw that the leaf was in truth a roll of parchment, which the Archivarius unfolded, and spread out before the Student on the table. Anselmus wondered not a little at these strangely intertwined characters; and as he looked over the many points, strokes, dashes, and twirls in the manuscript, he almost lost hope of ever *copying* it.”⁹¹

“And with this, he began studying the foreign characters on the roll of parchment.”⁹²

After earlier hearing a tale about Lindhorst’s cursed brother in which a necromancer “looks after a salamander in his garden,”⁹³ “before long [Anselmus] felt, as it were from his inmost soul, that the characters could denote nothing else than these words: Of the marriage of the Salamander with the green snake.”⁹⁴

He engages in a conversation, instead of copying, “and it fell heavy on his heart that today he had not *copied* a single stroke.”⁹⁵

“O wonder! the *copy* of the mysterious manuscript was fairly concluded; and he thought, on viewing the characters more narrowly, that the writing was nothing else but Serpentina’s story of her father, the favourite of the Spirit-prince Phosphorus, in Atlantis, the land of marvels. And now entered Archivarius Lindhorst . . . : he looked into the parchment on which Anselmus had been *writing*.”⁹⁶

90. Ibid., 43.

91. Ibid.

92. Ibid.

93. Ibid., 15.

94. Ibid., 44, emphasis omitted.

95. Ibid., 48.

96. Ibid.

Ninth Vigil

Without his effort at all, after his enlightening conversation with the salamander, “the wild legend of the Salamander’s marriage with the green snake had merely been *written down* by him from the manuscript.”⁹⁷

“‘Ah, Herr Conrektor!’ answered the Student Anselmus, ‘are you not aware that I must go to Archivarius Lindhorst’s and *copy*?’”⁹⁸

“The Student Anselmus [sat] down at the table to begin the *copying* of the manuscript, which Archivarius Lindhorst had as usual spread out before him. But on the parchment roll, he perceived so many strange crabbed strokes and twirls all twisted together in inexplicable confusion, offering no resting point for the eye, that it seemed to him well nigh impossible to *copy* all this exactly.”⁹⁹

Tenth Vigil

“‘Ho, ho!’ replied the crone [old, evil hag representing the earth], ‘not so proud, my fine *copyist*.’”¹⁰⁰

Please notice that the key words, right to the very end, are *copy*, *copying*, *copied*, *copywork*, *copying work*, *transcribing*, and *writing down* what he sees on old manuscripts or, when he is fully absorbed into the imaginary world, what looks like marble or lichens. Anselmus is employed as a *calligrapher*; his work is *calligraphic*, he has *calligraphic specimens*, or specimens of his penmanship; he *draws* and *writes*, produces *pen drawings*, but he does not, as Palmer repeatedly claims, translate any text. He is, instead, told the salamander story by Serpentina, his gold-green snake consort, and then by Lindhorst, her imaginary salamander father. Anselmus merely assumes that the text he is finally asked to copy must be the history of a race of salamanders that he has just been told (or imagined).

97. *Ibid.*, 50.

98. *Ibid.*, 51.

99. *Ibid.*, 55.

100. *Ibid.*, 58.

Every claim that Palmer makes concerning parallels between Hoffmann's weird tale and the story of the restoration is just as tenuous and problematic—just as forced or contrived—as is his claim that there is translation of an ancient history being described in that tale. This brief examination helps to demonstrate the shortcomings of Palmer's analysis.

Overcoming “A Sense of Loss”—The Nostalgia of an “Insider”

Currently Palmer presents himself not under his former guise of the militant anti-Mormon Paul Pry Jr. emboldened by Mark Hoffmann's forgeries. Instead, he poses as one who, after surveying the work of Mormon historians over the past three decades, has agonized over what he considers the distortions of the Latter-day Saint past by the Saints. These now include the story of angelic visits to young Joseph Smith, the resulting Book of Mormon (pp. 1–133), Joseph Smith's encounters with a heavenly messenger with news of an ancient sacred history (pp. 135–74), the witnesses to the plates (pp. 175–213), the restoration of the priesthood (pp. 215–34), and the first vision (pp. 235–58). He is pictured by his publisher as one who, in the twilight of his career, has reluctantly come to some very difficult decisions. He rejects all these events because he now sees them as the unfortunate products of a primitive, magic-saturated environment, as imaginary and not real events, as illusions or delusions—merely outlandish and controversial tall tales. In his concluding remarks, Palmer insists that the Saints ought to turn away from what he claims were “Joseph Smith's largely rewritten, materialistic, idealized, and controversial accounts of the church's founding” (p. 263). He also believes that the Book of Mormon, the priesthood, and Joseph Smith's prophetic truth claims should be abandoned by the Saints. But at the same time, he insists that his “intent is to increase faith, not to diminish it” (p. ix).

Palmer wants to be seen as a devout fellow who, now that he is retired, must courageously tell the Saints what he *feels* in his soul (see p. ix). He claims that when he discovered the hard truth about the

Latter-day Saint past, he experienced “a sense of loss” (p. 261). And yet, he opines, “faith needs to be built on truth—what is, in fact, true and believable. After that comes the great leap” (p. ix). But a leap to what? His answer is that all that is necessary is a “leap” to Jesus (pp. 261–63). It is, however, not at all clear why Palmer’s emotional “leap”—what he *feels* deeply—is somehow “true and believable” (p. ix). Why? He has adopted a kind of “faith” that “has to do with the *unknown*, not about what can be proven or can be *shown to be reasonably based on the evidence*.” He has not explained why his own religious sentiments—which he grants are mere *feelings* about what he calls the “unknown”—are not subject to the same acids with which he has striven to dissolve what he insists is the essentially false faith of the Saints.

The Saints, according to Palmer, ought to shed whatever understandings they attribute to the Holy Spirit. Why? He has had, he claims, a few of these experiences himself, as he has listened to people tell stories that turned out to be false (see pp. 131–32 for two illustrations). From such merely emotional experiences, he remarks that some conclude “that these feelings are self-manufactured and that there is no objective existence of something called the Holy Ghost.” He then asserts his belief “that the Holy Ghost does exist, that it does speak to human beings,” but that “it is an unreliable means of proving truth” (p. 133). Instead of depending on what he describes as the “unreliable” promptings and direction of the Holy Spirit, the Saints should instead make his unreasonable emotional “leap” into what he calls the “unknown” since he grants that what he calls his “faith,” whatever its contents, is not “based on evidence.” He gives no convincing reason why others should follow what he himself *feels* about the “unknown.”

Palmer now wants the Saints to place more emphasis on what he calls the “character of Jesus Christ and his promises” (p. 261), which he *feels* is all that should concern them, since he *feels* that this is what makes one a “Mormon.” He has, he claims, sought to “convey what I feel in my soul” (p. ix). He can, with a combination of emotional, secular “testimony” bearing tacked onto a bit of circular reasoning,

picture himself as a faithful “Mormon” even though he denies that there ever was a Mormon and insists that the Book of Mormon is merely frontier fiction. He says nothing about ever having experienced a divine witness to the saving power of Jesus Christ. Instead, he reduces the work of the Holy Spirit to what one might experience in hearing emotion-laden talks by ambitious people, in one case selling themselves as they sought public office (for example, see p. 133). And yet he claims that as a young fellow he got “involved in CES” because of a “commitment to the gospel” and his “love of the scriptures” (p. x). This may be true. He also mentions an obvious “passion for church history” (p. x). But this passion, especially when he encountered Mark Hofmann’s forgeries, has undermined whatever love he may have had for the restored gospel of Jesus Christ.

In my presence, however, Palmer has said that he still believes in the resurrection of Jesus.¹⁰¹ Why? Can he explain how a belief in the resurrection could survive a cynical treatment of the stories upon which such a belief is grounded—that is, one similar to the treatment he has provided of the other stories upon which the faith of the Saints is grounded? Well, he claims, he has an emotional attachment to the stories about Jesus and has made a “leap of faith.”

I suspect that Palmer might have experienced a sense of loss as he has abandoned the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith’s prophetic truth claims. He appears to have filled the empty space generated by his cynicism with sentimentality about Jesus. Faith, he opines—and I quote his language again, since it is significant—is “not about what can be proven or can be shown to be reasonably based on the evidence” (p. x). Instead, he insists, his present “faith” is what he describes as an unreasonable “leap” into the “unknown.” The Saints, he believes, should follow him down this road. There is, however, no hint in the first draft of his book that foreshadows his current fascination with Jesus or anything to suggest a spiritual return to what might be a version of the old liberal Protestant “social gospel.”

101. “Grant Palmer Book Signing,” 5.

I have wondered when Palmer started to substitute some emotions about Jesus for the full restored gospel of Jesus Christ. Fortunately, he has explained when and how he came to talk about the need to emphasize Jesus. “During 1999–2000,” he reveals, as he was finishing work on *An Insider’s View*, he “often discussed with others how to find a positive conclusion to the book”¹⁰² since what he had written blasts away at the historical foundations of the faith of the Saints. His concluding remarks (see pp. 259–63), he indicates, were generated by these conversations. In addition, his editors were, he reveals, insisting that he “write an extended conclusion to the manuscript in the summer of 2000 and submit it by August.”¹⁰³ He reflected on his counseling work at the jail and came up with the idea of recommending that the Saints just stress Jesus.¹⁰⁴ The sentimental core of his conclusion, it turns out, was a kind of afterthought generated by pressure from his publisher. In addition to being his way of trying, as he says, “to increase faith, not to diminish it” (p. ix), his concluding references to his feelings help to explain why he has not applied the same critical standards that he has striven to use against Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon to the New Testament account of Jesus.

And yet, after blasting away at Joseph Smith’s prophetic truth claims and trying to explain the Book of Mormon as nineteenth-century fiction fabricated by a clever liar, he makes the following remark: “I cherish Joseph Smith’s teachings on many topics, such as the plan of salvation and his view that the marriage covenant extends beyond death” (p. 261). Is he serious? If he is, then he has neglected to explain why he would cherish something taught, as he

102. Palmer, “Biographical Sketch.”

103. Ibid. It seems that while counseling at the Salt Lake County jail, Palmer had not revealed to his CES supervisors that he was again working on his anti-Mormon book. Even with his sentimental remarks about Jesus at the end of *An Insider’s View*, he was again faced with being in trouble with his associates in CES. Be that as it may, he admits that he simply “could not find an orthodox way out of our foundational problems and thus applied for early retirement.” Ibid.

104. See “Memo of Conversation,” 3.

has argued passionately, by a charlatan who lied about having had any genuinely divine, special revelations. His lingering emotional attachment to a few teachings associated with one whose prophetic truth claims he flatly rejects makes no more sense than his “leap” into the “unknown.”

And he now has a fondness for Jesus. However, if one can accept the virgin birth or genuinely believe that Jesus is the Messiah or Christ—that he is the Son of God and hence divine—then Joseph Smith’s prophetic truth claims should not, in principle, be all that hard to accept. If one is really serious about Jesus, then one must also accept his miracles, his atoning death, his subsequent bodily resurrection, and the other postresurrection theophanies witnessed by his disciples. If Palmer can genuinely accept even some of these—if he is not merely mouthing the platitudes of a limp form of the “social gospel”—then it should not be all that difficult for him to accept the appearance of real heavenly messengers to Joseph Smith or his translation of the gold plates through seer stones.

Palmer speaks to and for a small group of dissidents on the fringes of the church. The community in which he is a genuine *insider* is one made up of, in addition to his associates at Signature, disaffected or “cultural” Mormons, apostates, and sworn enemies of the Church of Jesus Christ. Evidence for this can be found on various Internet message boards where he is routinely lionized and turned into a heroic figure by those who need a peg upon which to hang their own unbelief. But he presents himself (and is, of course, advertised by Signature Books) as an *insider* at the very heart of the Church Educational System, as well as one who both knows the “real” truth about the Latter-day Saint past and is courageously willing to reveal to the Saints what historians “know” about Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon—now that he is safely retired. His own way of making this crucial point is as follows: “Now that I am retired, I find myself compelled to discuss in public what I pondered mostly in private at that time” (p. x).

He implies, wrongly, that he is speaking for “the faculty of the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Church History at Brigham Young

University, BYU history and religion professors and scholars from other disciplines and other church schools, and seminary and institute faculty,” as well as other “unaffiliated scholars” (pp. vii–viii). He also implies that his views represent “a near-consensus on many of the details” of the Latter-day Saint past (p. ix).

The “Quinn Rule”—Does It Apply to Palmer?

One of Palmer’s stated purposes for publishing *An Insider’s View* “is to introduce church members who have not followed the developments in [Latter-day Saint] church history during the last thirty years to issues that are central to the topic of Mormon origins. I hope,” he continues, “my survey will be enlightening and useful to anyone who has wanted to understand what has been termed the New Mormon History” (p. x). Does he succeed in reaching this goal? He merely surveys what he includes under the notoriously amorphous label “New Mormon History.” He includes under the label only anti-Mormon literature or radically revisionist literature, much of which has been issued by his publisher. I wish to test Palmer’s performance against what might be called the “Quinn rule.”

D. Michael Quinn once declared that an author is guilty of what he calls fraud or dishonesty if the relevant literature is suppressed or manipulated, or that the writer is incompetent if he or she does not know or fails to cite and deal with all the relevant literature on the topic under consideration. In a book published by Signature, Quinn sets out this rule, vehemently and with much overstatement, as follows:

writers are certainly “dishonest or bad historians” if they fail to acknowledge the existence of even one piece of evidence they know challenges or contradicts the rest of their evidence. If this omission of relevant evidence is inadvertent, the author is careless. If the omission is an intentional effort to conceal or avoid presenting the reader with evidence that contradicts the preferred view of the writer, that is fraud whether by a scholar or non-scholar, historian or other specialist. If authors write in scholarly style, they are equally dis-

honest if they fail to acknowledge any significant work whose interpretations differ from their own.¹⁰⁵

Put more modestly and, I believe, more accurately, the point Quinn seems to make is that those who write about the past ought to know, as best they can, the relevant literature, and know it as well as possible. In addition, they ought to lead their readers to the relevant literature, or at least to the best of that literature, where appropriate, and then do their very best to show how and why their reading of the relevant literature tells the story most accurately or otherwise yields the conclusions they have drawn in their study. If some of the relevant literature seems to challenge their interpretations, they at least ought to try to show why their way of seeing things is superior to alternative understandings. This Palmer does not do. Instead, he suggests that what he is presenting is a kind of summary of a widely held consensus. But this is simply not true. He does not provide a competent, open, and honest survey of the recent literature on Latter-day Saint origins. Instead, he offers a compendium of some of the stances taken by revisionists on the margins of the Latter-day Saint intellectual community.

It is noteworthy that Palmer completely ignores everything published under the FARMS imprint on the Book of Mormon or other relevant topics. Since 1989, this *Review* has published a steady stream of essays responding in great detail and with considerable sophistication to the revisionist literature upon which Palmer tends to rely. But from Palmer's "survey," one would never know that any of this literature even existed. In striking contrast to Palmer's narrow approach, Terryl Givens has recently surveyed virtually all the arguments and relevant literature on the Book of Mormon.¹⁰⁶ He examines the entire range of literature on the historical authenticity of the Book of Mormon and comes to conclusions dramatically different from those of Palmer, who merely

105. D. Michael Quinn, "Editor's Introduction," in *The New Mormon History: Revisionist Essays on the Past* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), xiii n. 5.

106. See Terryl Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The Book That Launched a New World Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

presents whatever he can marshal to attack the Book of Mormon without even making a modest effort at summarizing the relevant literature or setting out the fierce debate that is going on. Or one can compare and contrast Richard Bushman's treatment of much of the same range of issues on the Book of Mormon and the background and early career of Joseph Smith.¹⁰⁷ Bushman published his book when Palmer was busy fashioning the first draft of *An Insider's View*. Palmer mentions Bushman, but one would never know from what he says that Bushman moves in an entirely different direction from Palmer or why his direction is so different. One would never know that Bushman's book was available to Palmer when he was drafting "New York Mormonism" and hence that Bushman had already dealt with virtually the full range of issues that Palmer finds so troubling.

In addition to not representing CES, Palmer clearly does not speak for Latter-day Saint historians, nor does he set out a near-consensus that has recently been reached by historians on key issues.¹⁰⁸ Why? There are several reasons. If the sources upon which he relies, as presented in *An Insider's View*, are indications, as they should be, he is either woefully unfamiliar with Latter-day Saint historical scholarship or he is concealing much of that literature from his readers. The bibliography appended to *An Insider's View* certainly is "selected." His unwillingness to mention any of the literature published under the FARMS imprint shows that he has in mind a radically revisionist ideology when he refers to a New Mormon History. This also shows that Palmer is either misleading or perhaps badly informed on the topics he treats. One might also profitably contrast the narrow range of literature he cites with what is listed on the relevant topics in the massive bibliography of essays on the Latter-day Saint past recently prepared by James Allen, Ronald Walker, and David Whittaker.¹⁰⁹

107. See Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism*.

108. See the statement from the historians at the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Latter-day Saint History, in this number, page 255.

109. See James B. Allen, Ronald W. Walker, and David J. Whittaker, comps., *Studies in Mormon History, 1830–1997: An Indexed Bibliography* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000).

Some Shenanigans Selling *An Insider's View*

In a press release announcing the publication of *An Insider's View*, Tom Kimball, the Signature Books marketing director, indicated that Palmer would be at Sam Weller's Zion Bookstore in Salt Lake on 30 November 2002 to give a speech, answer questions, and sign copies of his book. He "welcome[d] friends and critics alike."¹¹⁰ With my wife, I turned up at this event. A brief news item in *Sunstone* mentioned some of what took place.¹¹¹ According to the news item in *Sunstone*, Palmer "didn't know what to expect" because his "book challenges many conventional and traditional LDS teachings about the early days of Mormonism."¹¹² According to *Sunstone*, "many responded positively to Palmer's comments; however, . . . Louis Midgley created several tense moments as he took issue with Palmer's assertions."¹¹³ Many? There were seventeen people present, including the two associate editors of this *Review* and their wives. Representatives from Palmer's publisher were there and, of course, were supportive, as were two other belligerent counterculture anti-Mormons. "In an e-mail detailing his reactions to the event," *Sunstone* reported, "Midgley admitted, 'I was aggressive . . . I raised a bit of hell with Palmer.'"¹¹⁴ I will explain, since *Sunstone* neglected to do so, what happened on that afternoon.

In those notes I indicated that "I asked a few questions. I was aggressive. I would insist that I raised a bit of hell with Palmer." My notes also indicate that I pointed out that "from 'Paul Pry' to the present the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith have been controversial. Do we need to suddenly cave in to all that [criticism] simply because we suddenly become aware that there are others, who are not believers, and who actually hate our beliefs and our founding story . . . ? The Saints, I

110. Kimball, "Event Launches New Book."

111. See "Challenged," *Sunstone*, December 2002, 76.

112. *Ibid.*

113. *Ibid.*

114. *Ibid.* Those at *Sunstone* or Signature Books would not explain how they got hold of my e-mail message.

pointed out, have always had to defend against attacks from those who do not believe.”¹¹⁵

However, as noted previously, Tom Kimball had earlier claimed that Palmer believes that “one of the many influences on Joseph Smith was the 1820s publication of German writer E. T. A. Hoffman’s [*sic*] ‘The Golden Pot.’ In this popular story . . . a theology student receives visits from a supernatural being [who turns out to be, among other things, a changeling elemental spirit and salamander figure] who, the student learns, is the last archivist of an ancient history of Atlantis. The student is empowered to dictate the history to a modern audience.”¹¹⁶ Then Palmer is quoted as follows: “This parallels Joseph Smith’s account of acquiring golden plates and translating them into the ancient history of America,” and “Hoffman’s [*sic*] writings were available in Smith’s village and were advertised in the local newspaper.”¹¹⁷ In addition, Palmer is quoted as holding that “much of the Book of Mormon reflects the intellectual and cultural environment of Joseph’s own time and place.” “We find strands of American antiquities and folklore, the King James Bible, and evangelical Protestantism woven into the fabric of doctrines and setting.”¹¹⁸

Kimball had previously asked me for a very brief evaluation of Palmer’s book. Hoping to sell the book by generating controversy, the Signature press release stressed that “Palmer isn’t without his critics. Louis Midgley . . . says that ‘Palmer, a retired CES administrator, in this book has made a clear effort to repudiate Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon. Even though [Palmer] still has some lingering sentimental and cultural ties to the community of Saints, his opinions mirror those of secular and sectarian, anti-Mormon outsiders.’”¹¹⁹ Palmer responded to my remarks as follows: “No, I’m not secular or sectarian . . . and certainly not anti-Mormon,”¹²⁰ conveniently forgetting

115. “Grant Palmer Book Signing,” 4.

116. Kimball, “Event Launches New Book.”

117. *Ibid.*

118. *Ibid.*

119. *Ibid.*

120. *Ibid.*

that the early draft of his book carried the name Paul Pry; he then announced that he was attempting to set out a “more secular scenario” on Latter-day Saint origins. I did not, however, say that Palmer is secular or sectarian, since it is not clear where he stands on such matters; what I said is that “his opinions mirror those of secular and sectarian anti-Mormon outsiders.” This seems to me to be undeniable.

Palmer went on the offensive: “Midgley likes to think that anyone who disagrees with him is beyond the pale.”¹²¹ Perhaps what he meant is that I disagree with those who emphatically reject the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith’s prophetic truth claims, which is quite a different thing. Palmer then claimed that “the current trend in the upper levels of the church is to emphasize Christ over Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon. Though not yet evident on the local level, the trend is clear. Maybe Midgley didn’t get the memo.”¹²² This remark seems to me to be disingenuous. If Palmer wants to know if anyone “at the upper levels of the church” accepts his version of the Latter-day Saint past, then he can easily find out. All it would take is a few phone calls. Be that as it may, he is confused on this matter. If Jesus the Christ and his redemptive sacrifice for sin are being emphasized—and I believe that they are—it is so precisely because there has also been a dramatic return to the Book of Mormon and increased attention to Joseph Smith’s foundational theophanies. If there has been a trend, it has been to insist on the reality of the very things Palmer is trying to explain away as illusions or delusions.

Though this was not mentioned in *Sunstone*, I also pointed out that if one approached the New Testament with the presuppositions and explanations Palmer employs in dealing with the founding stories of the restoration, one could, if one were so disposed, tell of a simple, highly magical, and superstitious beginning to the story of Jesus that eventually becomes more detailed and more heavily laced with questionable

121. Ibid.

122. Ibid. Palmer may have in mind something like a memo from someone in the Community of Christ, which he pictures as having moved in the direction he wishes that the Church of Jesus Christ would follow.

claims—for example, about a dead body coming back to life. With Palmer’s presuppositions one could, as Protestant liberal biblical critics have, easily wipe away virtually every reason for not reducing the New Testament to mere sage advice by a gentle Galilean peasant on how to be a nice person. One could entirely remove from it the Redeemer of fallen, sinful, death-facing human beings.

I asked Palmer if his fondness for Jesus included a belief in his resurrection. Could one not, I asked, do the same thing with the stories found in the Bible, including the witnesses to the resurrection, that he had done with the Latter-day Saint sacred texts and founding stories? And, I asked, is it not necessary to apply exactly the same assumptions and preunderstandings to the New Testament with which he had just attempted to demolish the Latter-day Saint founding stories and texts? I pointed out that the authors from whom he has borrowed much of what is in his book have no use for Jesus or for God, however either is understood. They see little or nothing even of moral worth in the teachings of Jesus. Palmer admitted that I was right. But he said that he still accepted the resurrection. Why? He did so by making what he called “a leap of faith.”¹²³ Without the resurrection there is, he granted, no reason to talk about Jesus—there would be no genuine Messiah, or Christ. When Jesus is reduced to a nice moral teacher, or whatever fits the fancy of the critic, Palmer admitted, there is no reason for giving him or any version of the Christian faith any further serious attention. I argued that without the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith’s prophetic truth claims, which he had just striven to explain away, there is no justification for pretending that one is a Latter-day Saint.

Then I asked Palmer if it is not true that the resurrection is controversial since he had just indicated that his fundamental objection to the founding stories and the sacred texts of Latter-day Saints is that they have critics and hence are very controversial. He granted that I was right. Should Christians, following his method, turn to

123. Compare Palmer’s similar remark in *An Insider’s View*, ix.

the explanations offered by those who do not believe? Should we adopt the stance taken by the Jesus Seminar? Yes, he said, to be consistent we would have to do just that. But he also indicated that he just accepts the resurrection despite its being contrary to ordinary experience and seemingly part of what could easily be seen as a primitive, magical worldview. So, I asked him, could he not then understand why the Saints accept the founding stories despite their being controversial and flying in the face of the complaints of critics? He had no response except to argue that the Adventist movement and the Community of Christ have prospered after jettisoning their distinctive beliefs and founding stories.

But if worldly success is the measure, then the fact is, as I and others have shown in considerable detail, that the Community of Christ—the controlling faction of what was once known as the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints—has not prospered. Instead, those in charge of the Community of Christ have managed, since the late 1960s, to turn the nearly 250,000 on their membership rolls into something like 70,000 members. This dramatic decline has been the result of adopting radically revisionist guesswork about Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon.¹²⁴ Palmer thinks that this is the direction that the Church of Jesus Christ should now take. This is simply amazing.

Packaging Palmer

The title given to his book and the stress on his supposed “insider” status has placed Palmer and his publisher in an awkward position. Since its publication, Palmer has had to explain and justify the title. He has put the blame for the title on his publisher. He claims that in 1996, when he started preparing his manuscript for publication, “it was called ‘Understanding Mormon Origins’ and was submitted to Signature Books

124. Independent congregations of former RLDS members, many of whom have joined what is called the Restoration Branch movement, strive to retain the Book of Mormon and consider Joseph Smith a genuine prophet. They seem to be thriving and are perhaps almost equal in number to those participating in what is now called the Community of Christ.

with that title. *For sales purposes* they re-titled the book, *An Insider's View of Mormon Origins*, which by contract was their prerogative."¹²⁵ He also admits that "New York Mormonism" was the first draft of *An Insider's View*,¹²⁶ though he has yet to explain publicly why he used a pseudonym when circulating a manuscript that clearly signaled its strident anti-Mormon content. He has also had to hide the fact that "New York Mormonism," following his earlier apology in 1985 for "creating an unsettling environment" to his colleagues at the Brighton High School seminary, got him into additional trouble with CES supervisors late in 1987. His being advertised by Signature Books as a CES insider, and hence presumably a loyal, faithful Latter-day Saint, has forced him to rationalize his continuing employment in CES. He thus claims to have "served a long, successful, and *honorable* thirty-four year career" with CES, while also admitting that he was placed on probation in 1985 by his CES supervisors.

If there were a truth-in-advertising law for book titles, Grant Palmer might well be sent to jail a second time. He should not have allowed his book to be given the title *An Insider's View*. For at least twenty years, he has been a passionate but covert *outsider* to the faith of the Saints. By hiding behind the name Paul Pry, Palmer signaled his anti-Mormon agenda in the first draft of his book. Since then, he seems to have realized that overt "Pryism" simply will not sell in the Latter-day Saint community; he now appears to have exchanged his original, more strident anti-Mormon stance for a measure of feel-good sentimentality about Jesus. His passion to unravel what he calls "Mormon origins" led initially, he grants, to a sense of loss that he has now seemingly displaced by this vague, emotional religiosity featuring Jesus. For his continuing focus on Jesus, and for whatever good he accomplished at the Salt Lake County jail, Palmer is, I suppose, to be commended. But clearly his understanding of Jesus is not the one known anciently by Mormon or more recently by Joseph Smith or by

125. Palmer, "Biographical Sketch," emphasis added.

126. Ibid.

faithful Latter-day Saints. He should therefore identify himself as an *outsider* who has been for at least twenty years profoundly beset by doubts and misgivings about the faith of the Saints.

It is oxymoronic to argue, as Palmer does, that those who believe that a real ancient prophet named Mormon was the redactor of a sacred text are thereby somehow anti-Mormon, while at the same time claiming to promote faith by arguing that Mormon was merely an imaginary figure in a kind of extended allegory fabricated entirely out of nineteenth-century sources by Joseph Smith. Certainly the story is controversial, but is that in itself a good and sufficient reason to jettison both the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith's prophetic truth claims? Those few on the fringes who reject the Book of Mormon, with all that such a rejection implies, cannot in honesty claim to be insiders. That term applies to faithful Saints who honor their covenants with probity and principle. I prefer the kingdom in the hands of those who pay and pray, serve and sacrifice—those committed to manifesting their faith with deeds rather than with doubts.

Epilogue

After this essay was ready for publication, someone called my attention to an effort by Grant Palmer to defend himself against the criticism I have made of his claim that Joseph Smith (and his family) were familiar with E. T. A. Hoffmann's "The Golden Pot" and that this bizarre tale gave the Prophet the idea of pretending to recover the history contained in the Book of Mormon.

Palmer now admits that he is often asked whether Anselmus "is a copyist or a 'translator' of the work assigned to him by Archivarius Lindhorst."¹²⁷ This appears to be his coy way of indicating that those who have actually read "The Golden Pot" know that Anselmus is pictured, not as a translator, but as a calligrapher-copyist and painter. When confronted by this fact, Palmer responds by granting, just

127. See Grant H. Palmer, "Note on the Golden Pot," www.signaturebooks.com/excerpts/insider's3.htm (accessed 26 January 2004).

as he did in conversation with me, that “frankly, Hoffmann should have been clearer on this matter.”¹²⁸ That is, he now argues that Hoffmann should have written something he did not write so that Palmer’s explanation could work. But Hoffmann merely indicates that Anselmus was a calligrapher-copyist, with no mention of his having translated anything. Palmer now responds by claiming that “Anselmus is both a copyist and later a ‘translator.’”¹²⁹

Instead of his original claim in 1986 and then again in 2002 that Anselmus was a translator, he now is reduced to claiming that he was “a kind of ‘translator.’” It should be noted that by having to put that crucial word in quotation marks, Palmer has modified his stance; he has moderated his original claims and is equivocating. But his current explanation makes his claim that Hoffmann’s tale was the source for Joseph Smith’s story even less plausible. For Palmer’s explanation to work, the mysterious figure who read Hoffmann’s tale in German or French and who then passed on his own misunderstanding of this weird tale to Joseph Smith would have to have understood it exactly as Palmer now does.¹³⁰ Can Palmer’s far-fetched, convoluted speculation possibly explain the story of the recovery of the Book of Mormon? I doubt that those who have actually read “The Golden Pot” will accept Palmer’s theory, which was his only original contribution to an understanding of what he calls “Mormon origins.”

128. Ibid.

129. Ibid.

130. It should be remembered that Joseph Smith could not have used the 1827 Carlyle translation of “The Golden Pot,” since his own story, even according to Palmer, had already begun in the early 1820s.