

## **The Royal Scam: Josiah, Joseph Smith and Believing One's own Pious Fraud**

*Program Unit: Metacriticism of Biblical Scholarship*

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As is well known the history of religions is replete with stories of the discovery of purportedly lost or miraculously appearing books with messages from deities. This includes instances from ancient Egypt and Rome to 19th century America with the claimed discovery and translation of the book of Mormon. Some of these discovery tales have been accorded legitimacy while others have been suppressed or denounced as forgeries. Joseph Smith found an accepting audience but also incurred the accusation of fraud from many others. The historicity of the story of Josiah's law-book and reform (2 Kings 22-23) occupies a central position in debates about the composition of much of the Hebrew Bible and the work of so-called deuteronomists. In a 2003 paper in *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*, that revolves around the story of Josiah, Arthur J. Droge finds it curious that the lexica of Religious Studies tends to exclude the term "fraud" despite it occurring frequently within religious discourse. He writes that a cynic may well regard fraud as the "modus operandi religiousus." Droge refrains from asserting that fraud should be an analytical category for religious studies, preferring to call attention to the need for critical analysis of how religious communities—and academic disciplines—construct legitimacy and illegitimacy within the socio-political contexts in which their texts are produced. Yet, the question of fraud or forgery is not easily subsumed under this larger project. This paper takes a "cynical" approach to Josiah and Joseph Smith as a thought experiment to tease out some interpretative benefits of asking directly if a given religious text is the result of a deliberate fraud or forgery and relating this to legitimizing strategies that generate religious belief.

## **On the Fairytales of Bronze Age Goat-Herders: Ancient Israel as the New Atheists' Foil**

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One common dismissal of the biblical material by those active in the so-called New Atheist Movement is the description of the Old Testament as bronze age goat herders' fairy-tales. With this as a starting point, this paper addresses how the religions of ancient Israel and the biblical texts are often misrepresented in this popular literature and online resources. Of course, such characterizations are academically indefensible but for their proponents they serve to relegate the biblical materials to the past and to highlight that the Bible should be inadmissible in discussions of scientific topics or modern political and ethical questions. Some secular biblical scholars may well share the overall goal of de-privileging the Bible in modern discourse and so the question of the relationship between scholarship and activism with its sometimes less than academic rhetoric becomes an important issue. Without seeking to defend the Bible's relevance to the modern world (while admitting that relevance is a subjective evaluation) this paper argues that secular biblical scholars should be as concerned about these kinds of anti-religious mischaracterizations of ancient Israel and the Bible as they are of the literalist and conservative religious misrepresentations of biblical origins. This is especially the case when mischaracterizations are found in contexts which do influence how people address social issues, such as the works of influential writers such as Sam Harris or Richard Dawkins. Mischaracterization impacts the perception of the worth of the humanities as a broad discipline and can have more serious political implications. This

paper, then, seeks to open a dialogue on the social roles and responsibilities of the secular study of ancient Israel and the Bible.