

“‘Truth according to our language, unto our understanding...’

## Towards an LDS Epistemology”

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Scholarship involves making distinctions, classifying and categorizing. In this presentation, I seek to clarify the distinction and interaction of faith and scholarship. I suggest a framework that takes seriously the fact that God’s purpose is to maximize the salvation of his children more than to disseminate historical details. In order to teach us, he communicates within our psychological, sociological, cultural frameworks. As Nephi puts it, God speaks “according to [our] language, unto [our] understanding” (2 Nephi 31:3). We need to be careful applying revelation to answer historical questions, because that is not God’s purpose. The core of religion involves practice—loving and serving each other, making correct choices, and so forth. Our faith that motivates this proper behavior must be based on personal experience with the Divine. If our faith hinges on details such as the punctuation of the scriptures or the décor of the Relief Society Room, it is vulnerable. Faith must be living and based on central truths (such as the existence of a loving God); the rest is details. I believe that certain matters of faith, such as God’s existence, are beyond scholarship; there is no way to prove or disprove them. To the details, however, scholarship can be applied with rich rewards. In this presentation, I will first outline my epistemological framework; and then apply that framework to examples drawn from the Bible, the Pearl of Great Price and the Book of Mormon.

Two sources contribute to our understanding of reality: either we know something from personal experience, or we know something from indirect teaching. An experience with my

young daughter highlighted this insight. She was about two years old, and I was giving her a bath. She was making her foam frog say “ribbit, ribbit.” Because I am an academic who thinks too much, her play prompted the following train of thought: my daughter has never heard a frog. The only way she knows what noise a frog makes is because I told her. I could have told her that frogs say “moo.” My point in sharing this anecdote is to emphasize how hard it could be for her to overcome my incorrect teaching. The first time she heard a frog say “ribbit,” and asked why it didn’t say “moo,” I could tell her that it is a sick frog, and that healthy frogs say “moo.” If she heard more frogs, I could tell her that frogs in this region ribbit, but others moo. She might not learn the truth until she experienced an uncomfortable epiphany in the middle of high school biology.

I would submit that most of us carry at least a few “frogs say moo” beliefs. In my proposed epistemological framework, three elements combine to shape our knowledge: 1) truth, 2) human limitation, and 3) historical process. These elements overlap, of course, but realization of this combination allows for a productive application of scholarship to religious subjects. Sifting these elements becomes critically important when one attempts to apply revelation to historical questions.

Yes, some things we believe are actually true. The purpose of the Holy Ghost is to testify of truth and is the conduit for much of our correct knowledge, I believe. I also believe that the more discerning our questions are, the more accurately the Spirit can testify to us. In addition, we can make use of all the tools at our disposal, scientific and otherwise, as we attempt to describe our reality accurately. When discussing truth in a religious setting, it is critical to determine exactly what we mean by “true.” I would submit that when most

members of the church pray to know if the Book of Mormon is “true,” their question does not involve the historical and linguistic accuracy of all its details. This testimony relates more to Joseph Smith’s claim, that following its precepts will draw people closer than those of any other book. The potential for crises of faith increases when people, often unaware of doing so, take their testimony of the Book of Mormon’s “truth” and make assumptions about historical details.

Other things we believe are *not* true. Inaccurate information stems from numerous sources, centered in our human limitations—just as our senses and brain filter our environment, our psychological and cultural make up filter the knowledge we acquire. If philosophical oversimplification can be allowed, Absolute Truth would be a perfect description of Ultimate Reality. As limited human beings, we have very little access to either of these grand principles. In a home teaching visit more interesting than many, my nuclear physicist friend shared with me that we can only perceive about 2% of matter than exists! We can perceive 5%, but 3% is neutrinos. 25% is dark matter, which we can see *act* on things, but cannot actually see; and the other 70%, we have no access to at all. This staggering picture should instill us with humility when it comes to knowing truth.

Two observations relating to “truth” may be helpful. Realizing how little we do and can know results in valuable humility. Furthermore, this realization fosters openness to new ideas, one admirably modeled in this conference. Our knowledge and understanding is necessarily limited by many factors; we can at least remove the unnecessary limitation of cultural conditioning.

Lastly, I propose that we believe things because of the manner in which the history of ideas and interpretation have developed. Understanding of reality has evolved over time, and we have inherited this understanding. For example, the creation narratives found in Genesis presuppose ancient Mesopotamian worldviews and share many similarities with other creation myths of the Ancient Near East. Many in our culture believe that these creation myths represent literal geological fact, and can be taken at face value. Biblical literalism, of which this is one example, has a specific history. This reading, which I believe runs counter to the purposes both of God and the authors, prevents many from accepting scientific theories regarding the age and creation of the earth. The chemist Henry Eyring asks a provocative question: “if the word of God found in the scriptures and the word of God found in the rocks are contradictory, must we choose between them, or is there some way they can be reconciled?” (*Reflections of a Scientist*).

I support the ideal advocated by Eyring and others—to seek truth whatever its source, and allow information from all sources and methods. Once we have evaluated how revealed truth is filtered through human worldviews, we can more productively apply it to historical question, and open the paths to scholarly analysis. This process allows us to put aside some presuppositions and prepares the way for humble, Spirit-guided application of critical methods. I believe this approach produces inspired and receptive faithful scholars and will maximize our access to truth historical and spiritual.

I now turn to examples that apply these principles to textual and historical interpretation. Some have found my conclusions troubling, but I believe that applying critical methods and putting revelation in its proper role can increase rather than compromise faith.

First, I want to discuss a popular story from the Book of Daniel—that of the fireproof wonder kids, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Virtually all readers in LDS culture read this story as literal fact—these three young men really did withstand the fire and the story plays out exactly as the surface text recounts. Scholars have argued persuasively, however, that the final form of the Book of Daniel was written not in 6<sup>th</sup> century Babylon, but rather in 2<sup>nd</sup> century Palestine. During this period, the Syrian king Antiochus Epiphanes IV outlawed Judaism, set up a golden statue in the Jerusalem temple, and commanded the Jews to worship it. In other words, he acted out the horrors described in the first chapters of Daniel. The book of Daniel seems to have been written to encourage its hearers to be faithful in the midst of these trials. If we take this story literally, we have an entertaining and awesome, somewhat comic-booky account of superhumans. But taken in its historical context, this story becomes much more poignant. The proper historical context amplifies the primary message from Daniel 3:18, where the young men testify that God can save them, “but if not,” they will still be faithful. I believe that in this case, a critical reading increases its inspirational power, rather than diminishing it.

In my second and third examples, namely the Book of Abraham and the Isaiah chapters in the Book of Mormon, critical examination does not necessarily render the texts more inspiring, but it does explain the features in them. In addition, I propose that applying critical analysis to religious text illuminates the nature of revelation in our lives and those of prophets who produced them.

Regarding the Book of Abraham, I do not have time to delve into the debate concerning the relationship between this text and the papyri the saints purchased from Michael Chandler. One influence is clear, however, and that is Joseph's study of Hebrew in 1834-35. The plural of "gods" likely comes from this study, and the word "Kokob" translated as star in Abraham 3:13, is the exact Hebrew word. Most strikingly, the word *gnolam* in Abraham 3:18 translated 'eternal' is the Hebrew word *'olam* as it would have been pronounced by Joshua Seixas, Joseph's Hebrew teacher. This evidence seems to indicate that the Egyptian papyri, along with Joseph's study of Hebrew, catalyzed the revelations found in the book of Abraham. The important fact is that this probability in no wise diminishes the inspirational power of this text. This view does provide the benefits of explaining the features of the text as well as shedding light on how revelation worked in this instance for Joseph Smith. Further, this approach diminishes the possibility that a reader's faith would be shaken upon learning historical details about the papyri. Little is lost, and much is gained.

I draw my final example from the Book of Mormon. Many theories exist concerning the translation technique of the Book of Mormon, but I was surprised when three years ago during a NT seminar at BYU, I had to fight an uphill battle to argue that Joseph Smith depended on the King James Version of the Bible for the Isaiah chapters in the Book of Mormon. For me, the textual evidence is indisputable. The chapter headings tell us to "compare Isaiah...". I did, verse by verse, and found that most of the changes centered around italicized words. Italicized words indicate words lacking in the original language but necessary to make sense in English. I believe therefore that in this section of the Book of Mormon, the translation process paralleled that of the JST or better called "Inspired Version

of the Bible.” Strikingly, the 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon shows that italicized portions were changed even when the sense of the passage was damaged.

Two examples from Isaiah’s call narrative:

2 Ne. 16:5 Two Hebrew words, “Oy li”, “Wo is unto me” in KJV, “ wo me” in 1830 BoM

2 Ne. 16:8 Again, two Hebrew words “hineni shlahktani”, “Here am I send me” in KJV, “Here I, send me” in 1830. Therefore, for these passages, it is clear Joseph used the Bible, and this should inform our conception both of Book of Mormon origins and the nature of revelation.

While the Book of Mormon is not exactly the precise historical record many readers assume it to be, neither is it a work of fiction. It is filled with 19<sup>th</sup> century elements, but also contains a minority of intriguing details that seem ancient. If we presuppose an ancient document, we can easily explain all 19<sup>th</sup> century details as divine truth being filtered through Joseph’s worldview. Lacking an ancient document, the minority of ancient features becomes difficult to explain. I want to expand somewhat on the difference between the Book of Mormon being fundamentally different than most think, and being completely fictional. In the first instance, the content of the golden plates would have been filtered through Joseph Smith’s world view in a way that maximized its salvific effectiveness. In the second, there would have been no gold plates. The first option seems to fit with what we know about human nature, revelation, historical process, and common sense. For example, 2 Ne 10:3 and 25:19 equate Messiah with Christ. In a Semitic language, this just doesn’t make any sense, as they both mean “Anointed,” one in Hebrew, one in Greek. Yet “Jesus Christ” is the only thing that the 19<sup>th</sup> century readership of the Book of Mormon would have understood. It is not as if “and the name of (whatever their name for him was; I was

going to say Quetsacoatl until Mark spoke) will be Joshua Messiah” would have had the same impact. In Joseph’s day, it was hard enough to get the people to accept new ideas within the framework of dispensationalist Christianity. If he were to overthrow the whole schema in the interest of historical “accuracy,” people would have never gotten past it. In general, it makes sense that Joseph would have “improved” the Bible to make things clearer and conform to his revealed theology. This also conforms to how Biblical scribes and editors have worked in the past, as well of the historical process of theology and historiography becoming more refined and congruent over time. But the big thing is that it makes sense for God to reveal truth in the way that will lead the maximum number of His children to salvation. So as radical and possibly disturbing as the first option is, it makes sense.

The other option not only doesn’t make sense or conform to human nature, it would be ineffective. So if there weren’t any golden plates or Nephites, what would be the point? Why wouldn’t God use a different avenue to restore His Church? It crosses the line for me to imagine God talking to an angel and saying, “Here, you pretend to be Moroni, and make up an 1000 year history of your people, and plant some plates,” or even more extreme, that there was no angel or plates, but only Joseph’s mental derangement used for the salvation of mankind. Where would this minimalist argument stop? Does everything go but the Atonement? Even that? This process easily is reduced to absurdity.

I do not have time in this paper to discuss the solutions I have found to questions such as the relationship between the Lamanites and Native Americans, or the cataclysm after



Christ's death and North American geography, or the fascinating relationship between the gold plates, the Bible, and the Book of Mormon. This framework I have laid out, however, nurtures responsible investigation of these topics. This approach respects the purpose of revelation—to teach and transform us in matters relating to salvation while allowing the full integration of academic methods in addressing historical and textual details. With this distinction between the relationship between the realms of faith and scholarship, faith can only be challenged, not destroyed. Furthermore, I feel this approach allows for the most productive application of critical methods to religious history and literature. In my personal experience, this process has both nurtured a personal relationship with God and clarified my scholarly views. New information has modified my views of God, his purposes, the role of revelation and other topics, but I do not believe that any particular datum could shake my testimony. This model represents my effort to take all the knowledge I have and integrate it into a complete picture. It will be different for each person, but I believe that this approach will maximize the chance of fostering the integration of faith and knowledge.