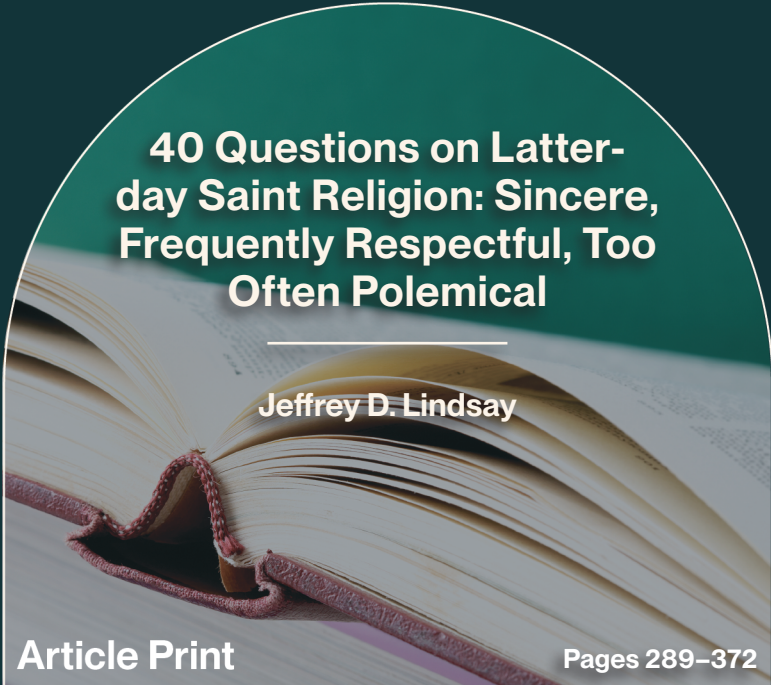


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40 Questions on Latter-day Saint Religion: Sincere, Frequently Respectful, Too Often Polemical

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40 Questions on Latter-day Saint Religion: Sincere, Frequently Respectful, Too Often Polemical

Jeffrey D. Lindsay

Review of Kyle Beshears, 40 Questions About Mormonism (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2026). 352 pages; \$26.99 (paperback).

Abstract: *In 40 Questions, Evangelical pastor Dr. Kyle Beshears tries to help readers understand the doctrines, practices, and history of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. He deals with forty questions, each presented as a short chapter, said to reflect numerous dialogues he has had over the years with members of the Church. Sincere efforts to be factual and dispassionate are found in many portions of the book. Nevertheless, its goal is to help non-LDS Christians better rescue Latter-day Saints. As such, a quest for understanding often takes a back seat to criticism. In discussing doctrines or practices, he sometimes preemptively leads with time-worn arguments, then introduces our beliefs, typically without discussing how informed Latter-day Saints often respond to the opposing arguments. Withholding the strengths, the evidence, and the things that add intellectual satisfaction in the lives of serious Latter-day Saints sometimes results in shadow boxing and contributes to the sense of a polemical agenda. This is especially true in the sections on the Book of Mormon.*

Having faced many “anti-Mormon” works over the years, I was pleased to read the introduction of Kyle Beshears’s recent work on the faith taught by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.¹

1. Kyle Beshears, *40 Questions About Mormonism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel

It seemed that he had changed his approach. Years ago, I reviewed his doctoral thesis for the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary,² where I objected to his scholarship but also to his tone, for he often used the slur *mormonic* (as in *Mormon* + *demonic*) to describe all things related to the Book of Mormon. My review pointed out that he condemned the Book of Mormon for being not enough like the Bible when it comes to praising King David as the standard of a good king (actually rather logical for those with a Northern Kingdom legacy like Lehi) and for not referring to David's Psalms frequently (an incorrect claim), while also complaining that the book was *too much* like the Bible in its use of KJV language and its quoting of Isaiah (this he repeatedly called "plagiarism").³ But in his new book, his introduction pointed to welcome improvements in his approach:

What began as a mission to save Mormons from their beliefs transformed into a genuine quest for understanding. I had to find out the truth, and doing so has led to a lifelong journey of trying to understand Mormonism—not just its doctrines but its people, culture, and the ways its adherents live out their faith. Along the way, I've encountered surprises that challenged my preconceptions. I've found areas of common ground I never expected, and I've gained a deeper appreciation for Latter-day Saint culture. At the same time, I've come to recognize our real differences more clearly, free from the fog of misunderstanding and caricature—differences that are serious and, in some instances, utterly irreconcilable. (p. 11)

A genuine quest for understanding, seeking for the truth, finding new common ground, and deeper appreciation—that all sounds great. These words set the stage for a more careful, respectful, open-minded approach based on dialogue, careful investigation, and a

Academic, 2026).

2. Jeff Lindsay, "Too Little or Too Much Like the Bible? A Novel Critique of the Book of Mormon Involving David and the Psalms," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 29 (2018): 31–64, interpreterfoundation.org/journal/too-little-or-too-much-like-the-bible-a-novel-critique-of-the-book-of-mormon-involving-david-and-the-psalms. The thesis is Kyle Beshears, "Davidic References in the Book of Mormon as Evidence Against its Historicity," Master of Theology thesis, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, May 2016, repository.sbts.edu/entities/publication/5f6c9a19-15be-40b3-b8de-353058c962a0.

3. Beshears, "Davidic References," esp. 33–37.

sincere effort to understand, something I think we all should welcome. With the stage so nicely set, it's a shame the curtains never quite open for the presentation I was hoping for. While less offensive in tone than his earlier thesis, it remains a book more dedicated to undermining our faith than to understanding it. The back cover of the book speaks of "years of dialogue with LDS church members" (in praise from Craig L. Blomberg), but that dialogue has somehow left Beshears seemingly unaware of meaningful Latter-day Saint replies to the many time-worn objections he raises and unaware of significant evidence or arguments in favor of many beliefs, practices, and other issues he criticizes.

Based on his opening words, one might expect Beshears's quest to have embraced the essence of the "three rules of religious understanding" from the highly regarded Krister Stendahl (1921–2008), who served as the dean of Harvard Divinity School and the bishop of Stockholm in the Lutheran Church of Sweden. His three rules were:

1. When you are trying to understand another religion, you should ask the adherents of that religion and not its enemies.
2. Don't compare your best to their worst.
3. Leave room for "holy envy." (By this Stendahl meant that you should be willing to recognize elements in the other religious tradition or faith that you admire and wish could, in some way, be reflected in your own religious tradition or faith.)⁴

Regarding rule #1, Beshears has talked with many Latter-day Saints over the years and has certainly read some Latter-day Saint sources, but too often his reporting on our beliefs seems informed by critics rather than faithful Latter-day Saints, though he seeks to write in a fair tone and frequently is accurate in reported facts. What is sometimes lacking, though, is an *understanding* of how we actually think and believe, and certainly how we might respond to common criticisms. Thus, a Latter-day Saint might frequently feel that what has been said is a mischaracterization, such as saying that we don't believe God is eternal.

As for rule #2, I would characterize *40 Questions* as an effort to repeatedly contrast the obvious truth of "traditional Christianity"

4. Pete Ellertsen, "Here's what Krister Stendahl said, in his own words, about 'holy envy' in the context of effective interfaith dialog," *Ordinary Time* (blog), 3 August 2022, ordinaryzenlutheran.com/2022/08/03/stendahl-on-holy-envy/.

against the benighted views of Latter-day Saints, giving emphasis to what that is perceived as weak and failing to mention our strengths or the evidences supporting our views and practices. Not all chapters are this way, but many are.

Rule #3, “holy envy,” is not to be found in *40 Questions*, unless I am missing something. The book is designed to help those wanting to rescue Latter-day Saints from our allegedly non-Christian state. It does so with relatively nice words, mercifully avoiding terms like *mormonic*, and in a voice that seems dispassionate, but the passionate zeal is revealed in many ways, including what is *not* said.

Nevertheless, the book is well written and nicely organized, and is likely to be well-received by those who question Latter-day Saint doctrines as well as by some Latter-day Saints who wish to know more about why some Evangelicals so strongly object to our faith. Of course, as with any faith, there are conundrums and painful issues that can be raised by critics that aren’t easily resolved with a Bible verse or pithy argument. But there are still answers and thoughts that have been developed within our faith to answer many of the criticisms raised. A person claiming to be on a quest for understanding should at least be aware of those and mention them. That courtesy is often lacking.

Based on the introduction, I recognized that the author would necessarily talk about differences between his faith and ours, but I also had the hope that there would be many moments of recognizing the good in our faith and some of its strengths. I would expect him to have detailed knowledge of that based on extensive dialogues with real members and learning of the blessings and joy that the faith has brought into their lives. I expected to have at least a few questions aimed at recognizing some of the goodness of our faith, such as:

- Why is the Church so noted for raising happy families and strong marriages? What elements in the faith support those outcomes?
- Why does the Church put such emphasis on education?
- Why are highly educated Latter-day Saints so often faithful believers?⁵

5. See Stan L. Albrecht and Tim B. Heaton, “Secularization, Higher Education, and Religiosity,” *Review of Religious Research* 26, no. 1 (September 1984): 43–58, [jstor.org/stable/3511041](https://www.jstor.org/stable/3511041).

- What is seminary and how does it affect the lives of young people?
- What things about the Church appeal most to new converts?
- Why does the Church put so much emphasis on temporal welfare, even to the point of having welfare programs that also promote self-reliance and self-respect for those in need?
- Why do Latter-day Saints fast once a month?
- How does the system of "ministering brothers and sisters" work and what is its history? How does it affect the lives of members?
- Why is service given such emphasis in the Church, and what are examples of typical service projects?
- Why do so many Latter-day Saints sacrifice a large part of their lives to serve as missionaries?
- What is Family Home Evening? What are other ways that the Church helps strengthen families?
- Why is morality so important in the Church?
- What are priesthood blessings and patriarchal blessings? How do they affect the lives of members?
- Why do you consider yourself to be Christian? Why do so many critics claim that the Church is not Christian? How do Latter-day Saints answer their objections?
- How important is the Book of Mormon in the lives of faithful members? What are the strengths of the Book of Mormon? How does it help their lives? What are the reasons for accepting it as authentic ancient scripture rather than something Joseph Smith composed?

Perhaps none of these issues were encountered in the author's dialogues and studies. Maybe the focus was on tough but loving questions, not understanding positives. While the tone generally is largely neutral, which is welcome, many chapters seem to follow the pattern of raising controversy about a doctrine or historical issue in the Church, and then criticizing the Church and contrasting its doctrines or practices to what Christians (we don't get included in that category, unfortunately) or "traditional Christians" believe and what the Bible allegedly teaches, leaving little room for common ground and even less for acknowledgement of good.

On the positive side, he does recognize that we use the Bible, support some of the same social issues that Evangelicals often do

(p. 22), and worship Jesus Christ—but a different Jesus, it turns out. He notes that we try to do good and keep commandments, which, however, only shows how poorly we understand grace and the Jesus of the Bible. Apart from these things, I struggle to find positive statements about the Church in this book, even though I planned to lead with a section summarizing such ecumenical comments. I could be missing some nuggets, though I've searched many times.

Much is missing in his treatment, such as the topics listed above with questions I wished he had asked. When there are significant evidences or arguments for our positions, they are generally ignored or whittled down to a mere sliver that can be flicked away. Another gap in his treatment is the failure to sympathetically recognize how significant the effect of past persecution has been on the Church. But he does note that seventeen people were killed by a mob at Haun's Mill, that Joseph was murdered (p. 79), and that violent mobs drove out the Saints (p. 74)—all that in about three sentences. But it's a short book, so long reviews of history would not fit well.

Beshears's stated goal initially was to thoroughly understand our faith and then help others understand it better. When I read that, I wondered if this book would be the fruit of thoughtful and intense dialogues with Latter-day Saints, perhaps like *Claiming Christ: A Mormon-Evangelical Debate* by Latter-day Saint professor Robert L. Millet and the Evangelical professor Gerald R. McDermott.⁶ Or like *How Wide the Divide: A Mormon and an Evangelical in Conversation*⁷ by Craig L. Blomberg, a professor of the New Testament at Denver Seminary, and Stephen E. Robinson, a professor of ancient scripture at Brigham Young University, where the two clearly sought to understand the other side with respect and recognition of common ground. Or perhaps he would kindly identify positive aspects of our faith, as did Dr. Steven H. Webb, originally an Evangelical who became Roman Catholic and eventually had much good to say about the Latter-day Saints and our doctrines, evidenced by his book, *Mormon Christianity: What Other Christians Can Learn From the Latter-day Saints*.⁸ Webb deeply understood the beauty and significance of the metaphysics

6. Robert L. Millet and Gerald R. McDermott, *Claiming Christ: A Mormon-Evangelical Debate* (Ada, MI: Brazos Press, 2007).

7. Craig L. Blomberg and Stephen E. Robinson, *How Wide the Divide: A Mormon and an Evangelical in Conversation* (Lisle, IL: IVP Academic, 1997).

8. Steven H. Webb, *Mormon Christianity: What Other Christians Can Learn from the Latter-day Saints* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

found in modern scripture and other Restoration teachings and says much that could help clarify some of the issues raised by Beshears.

Beshears pursues a different agenda: helping others understand us in order to draw Latter-day Saints away from their faith. That becomes more apparent as he gradually clarifies his stance on why people should learn about our faith. It's more nuanced than dispelling misunderstandings:

- After observing that the Church has large financial resources and "influential roles in business, politics, media, and culture," Beshears warns, "That's a lot of power, and Christians ought to be aware of Mormon influence" (p. 22). Note that the term *Christians* here and elsewhere is apparently exclusionary; it does not include Latter-day Saints.
- On a more practical note, he suggests that "perhaps Christians [again not used inclusively] ought to consider studying Mormonism to aid us in developing closer social alliances. . . . As traditional theology and morality are challenged, traditional Christians and Latter-day Saints will inevitably share common ground. Willingness to get to know our new neighbors may surprise us with fruitful partnerships, like mutual support on social issues" (p. 22).
- A further reason for the need to understand Latter-day Saints is to be able to more fully bring them to Christ: "Why should traditional Christians learn about Mormonism? The standard answer (especially among the missionally minded) is the Great Commission, but the correct answer is the Greatest Commandment because it's impossible to fulfill the former without the latter. . . . Love that lacks a gospel witness has no home in the kingdom of God, but a gospel witness that lacks love is equally foreign. You cannot bear witness to the Lord Jesus while harboring apathy or fear or hate against those for whom he died and rose again. So when it comes to studying Mormonism, first things first. If Christians are called to love their Latter-day Saint neighbors as themselves, how can we possibly do so without knowing anything about them, their beliefs, or their lives?" (p. 23). With this intention, with "love . . . as our chief motivation, our study of Mormonism takes on a virtuous form" (p. 23).

Beshears seeks to arm real Christians with what they need to know

about Latter-day Saints to help them convert to real Christianity. It's a noble goal, and if what he has to say about our faith is correct, it may be a wise goal as well. Sharing one's faith to bless others is a Christian act, so we can respect his intentions. But a book with a primary purpose of helping other Christians convert Latter-day Saints, who from the beginning are depicted as non-Christian, is not likely to be based on a serious quest to accurately *understand* us and our faith. Too much of it is ultimately polemics, raising weary arguments with little awareness of the strengths and goodness of the faith, and with little understanding of how Latter-day Saints might respond to his objections. He has pursued extensive dialogue with Latter-day Saints, but it seems he may have been talking with people unaware of many positives.

Much of his information obviously comes from various publications, some of them rather arcane, rather than from dialogues. The sources are typically used fairly, but a few times serious errors occur ranging from neglecting information that ought to have been included, to more serious mischaracterization.

A disturbing example comes early in the book, when Beshears repeats the common claim that Latter-day Saints once “swore a ritual oath to avenge the blood of Joseph Smith” (p. 30), citing Devery S. Anderson’s *The Development of Latter-day Saint Temple Worship*.⁹ I obtained the Kindle version of the book and, in a search, found that Anderson mentioned this issue three times, all in the context of *asking members to pray* that God might avenge the blood of Joseph and other martyrs. Here is the relevant passage:

He [David H. Cannon] had been asked to explain the law of retribution: The law of retribution is: To *pray the Father to avenge the blood of the prophets and righteous men that has been shed*, etc. In the endowment house this was given [as a personal responsibility] but as persons went there only once, it was not so strongly impressed upon their minds; but in setting in order the [script for] endowments for the dead it was given as it is written in [the] 9[th] Chapter of Revelations[,] and in that language *we importune our Father, not that we may, but that He, our Father, will avenge the blood of martyrs*

9. Devery S. Anderson, ed., *The Development of Latter-day Saint Temple Worship 1846–2000: A Documentary History* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2011), 163–64.

shed for the testimony of Jesus. –Temple Minute Book, St. George, Feb. 22, 1912¹⁰

Perhaps the nineteenth rather than the ninth chapter of Revelation was meant, which states that God “hath avenged the blood of his servants at her hand” (Revelation 19:2). But Revelation 6:9–10 is also relevant, as martyrs for the “testimony” of God cry out, “How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?”

A footnote added to the passage from Anderson gives further information:

The “oath of vengeance” had its origin in Nauvoo when the shock of the assassinations of Joseph and Hyrum Smith were still fresh. The oath was retained in the Endowment House and in the first four temples in Utah. It received national attention in the U.S. Senate committee hearings to seat Apostle Reed Smoot. “Negative publicity from the Smoot Hearings led to a de-emphasis of this oath in the temple endowment,” wrote historian David John Buerger. When Salt Lake temple president George F. Richards headed a committee in the 1920s to revise the temple ceremony, the oath of vengeance was removed.¹¹

Mormonr.com discusses this issue¹² and also provides the text of the “oath of vengeance” that came up in the Senate committee hearings related to Reed Smoot:

You, and each of you, covenant and agree that you will pray, and never cease to pray, Almighty God to avenge the blood of the prophets upon this nation; and that you will teach the same to your children unto the third and fourth generation. All bow your heads and say yes.¹³

10. Anderson, *Temple Worship*, Kindle ed., location 4294 of 10789, emphasis added.

11. Anderson, *Temple Worship*, Kindle ed., location 4653 of 10789.

12. See “Joseph & Hyrum Smith’s Martyrdom,” *Mormonr* (blog), mormonr.org/qnas/BxkBU/joseph_and_hyrum_smiths_martyrdom; and “Changes to the Temple Endowment,” *Mormonr*, mormonr.org/qnas/8yXbNf/changes_to_the_temple_endowment.

13. Walter M. Wolfe, “Endowment Oaths and Ceremonies,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, 9 February 1906, p. 8, mormonr.org/qnas/BxkBU/joseph_and_hyrum_smiths_martyrdom/research#re-6kQ26b-0J7Ly1.

While I recognize that there are conflicting reports about this controversial matter, the source Beshears cites does not support the claim he makes. That's a red flag, but it can be an innocent mistake. One possibility is that he repeated a well-worn claim from critics and then did a brief search to find a reliable source to cite, not noticing that Anderson only presents the issue of vengeance as part of a prayer to God that he might avenge the murders of righteous men, not unlike the prayers of martyrs in Revelation 6:9–10. Beshears cites Anderson a couple more times later, making me think he must have had access to the physical book, but just missed an important detail.

One issue for readers to consider: rather than quoting commonly used and easily accessible sources in discussing Latter-day Saint doctrines (e.g., articles, sermons, and other resources on the Church's website or app, including the *Saints* series on Church history, or other online or commonly owned resources), Beshears tends to use less available materials such as *Early Mormon Documents* by Dan Vogel, some rather obscure sources, and many Church history sources that may be difficult for most members to find. Some documents he cites can be found on the *Joseph Smith Papers* website, but that site is rarely mentioned. I don't think I saw a single URL in the footnotes.

Selected Topics

Commandments: A word subtracted?

As a preliminary observation, in numerous passages across *40 Questions*, Beshears expresses a passionate love for our Savior, Jesus Christ. He summarizes the message of Christ on page after page while suggesting that Latter-day Saints are missing the essence of his Gospel message. In all of these summaries, one word that Jesus emphasized repeatedly seems to be missing: *commandments*. Christ bristles at those who did not keep the commandments or sidestepped them with perversions of the law (Matthew 15:3–9; Mark 7:6–13). He teaches by example as he explains that he is keeping the commandments that he has been given by the Father (John 10:18, 12:49, 14:31), implicitly giving us an example to follow. He then repeatedly urges us to keep the commandments:

Whosoever therefore shall *break one of these least commandments*, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall *do and*

teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5:19)

And he said unto him, Why callest thou me good? there is none good but one, that is, God: but *if thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments*. (Matthew 19:17; cf. Mark 10:16–22; Luke 18:18–22)

Master, which is the great commandment in the law? Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. *This is the first and great commandment*. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. *On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets*. (Matthew 22:36–40; cf. Mark 12:28–31)

Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to *observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you*: and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world. Amen. (Matthew 28:19–20)

So likewise ye, when ye shall have *done all those things which are commanded you*, say, We are unprofitable servants: we have done that which was our duty to do. (Luke 17:10)

A new *commandment I give unto you*, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. (John 13:34; cf. John 15:12, 17)

If ye love me, *keep my commandments*. (John 14:15)

He that hath *my commandments*, and *keepeth them*, *he it is that loveth me*: and he that loveth me shall be loved of my Father, and I will love him, and will manifest myself to him. (John 14:21)

If ye keep my commandments, ye shall abide in my love; *even as I have kept my Father's commandments*, and abide in his love. (John 15:10)

Ye are my friends, if ye *do whatsoever I command you*. (John 15:14)

The commandments of God aren't just suggestions, for our response to them can affect our salvation, as Christ taught: "Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of

heaven; but *he that doeth the will of my Father* which is in heaven” (Matthew 7:21). He who hears Christ’s teachings “and doeth them” is like a wise man that built his house upon a rock (v. 24), while he who “doeth them not” is like a foolish man who built his house on sand, destined to experience a great calamity (vv. 26–27). There’s much more I could say, but the important thing is what Beshears does not say, leaving important and biblical Latter-day Saint beliefs and practices improperly represented and poorly understood.

Though *40 Questions* lacks a subject index, it does have a thorough scripture index showing the hundreds of verses cited and where they occur. I looked up every one of the verses cited in this section so far. Beshears cites only two of these. He does refer to the “Great Commandment” to love one another in Matthew 22:37–40, but only to explain that believers should try to love Latter-day Saints in witnessing to them (p. 23). He also cites Matthew 28:19–20 when he mentions that baptism was included in Christ’s final charge to his apostles (p. 243) but does not mention the part about “teaching them to *observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you.*” Of the fifty-three passages from John that are cited, none of them include the verses about the need to do what he has commanded us.

One exception of sorts is on p. 145, when he states that Jesus offered himself as a sacrifice mediated “between God and ‘all that obey him’ (Heb 5:9).” Otherwise, the author seems cautious not to repeat verses that indicate we need to obey God and keep his commandments to be saved—there are many more throughout the New Testament, including many that don’t use words related to commandments.

That silence becomes a strong scolding voice when he addresses our concept of making and keeping temple covenants in chapter 34, “What is the Temple Endowment?” (pp. 283–90). He sees such efforts not only as fruitless, but as an offensive way to revitalize the law. Here, as in other passages, I suspect that he may confuse the fulfilled and now obsolete Law of Moses with the commandments of God and Christ that still apply to us.

When it comes to our redemption, where does the greater emphasis lie: in the promises we make to God, or in the promises God makes to us? The Bible is filled with broken promises to God. . . . Even something like the law of chastity is impossible to keep considering the Sermon on the Mount. “Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not commit adultery” (Matt 5:27), said Jesus, reinforcing the

good command to remain faithful only to one's lawful spouse. But he cautioned that the mere act of lust is tantamount to adultery in the heart (see Matt 5:28). How often have commitments to the law of chastity been broken by the temptations of private lust? Each covenant promise we make with God establishes a new law for ourselves— one that God will hold us accountable to. Since we are imperfect, we will inevitably fail to obey these laws, thereby meriting nothing less than death itself (see 1 Cor 15:56). No wonder Paul cautioned against such law-based, spiritual self-improvement. **Not only is it impossible to be sanctified by making and keeping covenants with God, but it nullifies the gospel's power**, "for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing" (Gal 2:21, NIV). (p. 298)¹⁴

The only covenants we make with God are the ones we break. But praise God that the only covenants he makes with us are those he keeps. . . . The beginning of our redemption is not found in our promises to God but in his promises to himself for us. All people, traditional Christians and Latter-day Saints alike, must tune their ear to hear the sweet "I will" promises of Jesus. . . . "I will raise him up at the last day" (John 6:40) for those who place their trust not in their own faithfulness to Christ but in Christ's faithfulness to God alone (see Phil 3:9). (pp. 289–90)

Beshears rejects the concept of making and keeping covenants, arguing that we cannot do that, that all efforts to obey God will fail. Here he seems to miss the joyous message of repentance, a core doctrine of the Gospel of Christ. We can repent and overcome sin. To teach otherwise is dangerous (see Matthew 5:19, quoted above). It is true that we all have sinned, and thus need repentance, but the Bible clearly teaches that there are people who are righteous and keep the commandments. Of Zacharias the priest and his wife Elizabeth, the parents of John the Baptist, Luke 1:6 states, "And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless." Christ repeatedly asked us to follow him, to follow his example, and even to "be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). Of course, it is

14. In any quotations from *40 Questions*, bold text represents emphasis that I have added.

coming unto Christ and accepting his grace that gives us power to repent fully, but effort and sacrifice on our part to follow Christ and keep his commandments is clearly required. We must choose to follow Christ, pressing toward him day by day.

Beshears's denunciation of covenant making above concludes with Philippians 3:9. Let's consider that in context with v. 8:

Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ, And be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith. (Philippians 3:8–9)

Paul has sacrificed much and “suffered the loss of all things” in his quest to follow Christ, “that [he] may win Christ.” Paul goes on to urge us to pursue that goal as he does, following his quest and his example:

Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect: but I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus. Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus. Let us therefore, as many as be perfect, be thus minded: and if in any thing ye be otherwise minded, God shall reveal even this unto you.

Nevertheless, whereto we have already attained, let us walk by the same rule, let us mind the same thing. Brethren, be followers together of me, and mark them which walk so as ye have us for an ensample. (Philippians 3:12–17)

Paul's example that we are to follow is one of an *urgent effort* to follow Christ. It is Christ's grace that saves us, but we must follow him. Beshears may view our position as irreconcilable with his theology, but it's not irreconcilable with the scriptures.

Faith and grace: Recall their original meanings to better grasp the “irreconcilable” views of Latter-day Saints

Beshears observes that Latter-day Saints use a lot of the same words as his kind of Christians do, but they can have different

meanings—this is the point of Beshears’s chapter 28, “What Are Common Terms about Salvation Shared by Traditional Christians and Latter-day Saints” (pp. 235–41). This is a fair point, and even Beshears may not realize how right he is. A large portion of the seemingly irreconcilable gap between our views and those of Beshears and many of his religious compatriots is rooted in the linguistic gap between the current and the ancient meanings of two essential words, *faith* and *grace*. Faith is mentioned as one of the words where we may have different definitions, but he does not follow up and discuss the difference in chapter 28. I hoped that our differing definitions for faith and grace might have been addressed in that chapter, but they are not.

Another missed opportunity occurs in chapter 37, “What Are the Concerns Latter-day Saints Have About Traditional Christianity?” (pp. 309–14), where concerns over the different definitions of key terms such as *faith*, *grace*, and *Christian* might have made that chapter much more interesting. (It is still interesting, though. See the discussion later in this paper.)

Scholars have long recognized that the way we use *faith* today is quite different than how the related Greek word, *pistis* (πίστις), was understood in the era of the New Testament (also true of *fides* in Latin). The same applies to the Greek word, *charis* (χάρις), often translated as “grace,” and its Latin counterpart, *gratia*. The shifts in meaning are significant and have had a profound impact on modern theology that few Christians recognize today.

Here I must recommend to Beshears, to his audience, and to anyone seeking to better understand the doctrines of the Latter-day Saints, two important works of scholarship that trace the loss of the ancient meaning of *pistis* and *charis* (and their Latin counterparts). These works are both by Dr. Brent J. Schmidt, who has a Ph.D. in classics and is on the Brigham Young University New Testament Commentary Series board, where he is a co-author with John W. Welch for several volumes on the New Testament. The books are *Relational Faith: The Transformation and Restoration of Pistis as Knowledge, Trust, Confidence, and Covenantal Faithfulness*¹⁵ and his earlier *Relational Grace: The Reciprocal and Binding Covenant of Charis*.¹⁶

15. Brent J. Schmidt, *Relational Faith: The Transformation and Restoration of Pistis as Knowledge, Trust, Confidence, and Covenantal Faithfulness* (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2022).

16. Brent J. Schmidt, *Relational Grace: The Reciprocal and Binding Covenant of Charis* (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2015).

Schmidt shows that both faith and grace in the Mediterranean world of Paul had long invoked relationships rooted in reciprocity. To have faith was to be *faithful* and *true* to another in a relationship, such as a covenant relationship. As Schmidt puts it,

Almost all modern Bible translations diverge significantly from what *pistis* meant in about AD 50, when Paul was writing. Because of later theological changes and biases, *pistis* has not been translated according to its original meaning; the idea of faith in modern times has been contaminated by later thinking primarily to mean conformity of belief or emotional, mystical inner feelings equated with instant salvation. Many of Paul's writings have been distorted in translation and have become difficult to understand because the original context has been lost. . . .

For the Gentile and Hellenized Jewish audiences that Paul and others addressed, *pistis* implied action, including knowledge, understanding, faithfulness, and trust within covenantal relationships. . . .¹⁷

In the first century, *pistis* implied active loyalty, trust, hope, knowledge, and persuasion in the patron-client relationship or within the new covenant brought about through Christ's Atonement. Atonement or "at-one-ment" implies the restoration to a preexisting, covenantal relationship. Even in instances where the *pist-* words [variants of *pistis* related to "faith"] cannot be directly translated as "loyalty," they frequently reflect active forms of conduct that are consistent with such meanings.¹⁸

Changes in the meaning of *faith* from the teachings of Augustine and later theologians resulted in concepts such the Rule of Faith (the need to agree with the Catholic church) and salvation by "faith alone" that seem distant from the faith, covenants, and requirements for salvation in the New Testament — as it would have been understood in New Testament times. For example, the doctrine of "faith alone" seems puzzling when one considers that "faith only" and "faith . . . alone" are each mentioned only once in the KJB, and only *negatively*:

17. Schmidt, *Relational Faith*, 2.

18. Schmidt, *Relational Faith*, 11–12.

Even so *faith*, if it hath not works, is dead, being *alone*. (James 2:17)

Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and *not by faith only*. (James 2:24)

On the other hand, a connection between faith and obedience or commandment keeping or avoiding sin is found in numerous passages (e.g., Acts 6:7, 26:18; Hebrews 11:8; Revelation 14:12, etc.). One example is from Paul in Romans 16:26:

But now is made manifest, and by the scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the everlasting God, made known to all nations for the *obedience of faith*.

Paul uses the same Greek phrase, ὑπακοὴν πίστεως (*hypakoēn pisteōs*), also in Romans 1:5:

By whom we have received grace and apostleship, for *obedience to the faith* among all nations, for his name.

There was certainly a connection between *pistis* and obedience in Paul's day that seems to have been lost in much of modern Christianity. That drift was a serious loss for *pistis*, but was perhaps more serious for the related Latin word with similar relational and covenantal overtones, *fides*, which was largely replaced in the Latin church with a word lacking all connections to *pistis*:

Scholars have noted that later developments in Christian history resulted in a disturbing semantic shift of *pistis* from the idea of loyal faithfulness through a covenant relationship to an amorphous idea that was intricate, confusing, complex, and ultimately passive on the part of the would-be believer. The Latin-speaking church chose *credo*, meaning "I believe" as defined by one's heart and emotions, from the Latin *cor* (heart), as its term for self-commitment and the oath of loyalty; it began to use creeds as a testimony at baptismal services. In time, the Latin-speaking church opted for *credo* to signify in its Latin translations of the Bible the standard interpretation of *pisteuō*, "the having of faith." Although *pistis* had direct cultural ties to *fides*, there was no linguistic connection between *pistis* and *credo*. By subordinating *fides* to *credo*, later Christians lost their connections to the obligations, rites, and covenants with God that first-century Christians associated with the doctrine and with the word

pistis. In the Latin-speaking Western church, “faith” gradually became devoid of knowledge, emphasis on proper Christian action, and the ordinances earlier associated with faith.¹⁹

In extensive detail and with impressive support from numerous primary sources, Schmidt illustrates how concepts of faith in Greek culture, Roman culture, and Jewish culture were based in relationships and rooted in loyalty, trust, and reciprocity. Faith, whether referred to with the Greek *pistis*, the Latin *fides*, or the Hebrew *’emunah*, was not about intellectual belief in the correct creeds or a mysterious gift that ensured salvation, but about relationships, and often expressed in language consistent with loyalty in a covenant relationship.

Similar praise can be offered for Schmidt’s treatment of the Greek *charis* or Latin *gratia*, for these terms were anchored in systems of client-patron relationships where gifts played an important role in reciprocal relationships and where faithfulness was often crucial. Parent-child relationships also helped inform that nature of gifts and the reciprocity involved.²⁰ But the meaning of grace shifted, especially after Augustine’s innovation of “grace alone” (*sola gratia*), original sin, predestination, and Trinitarian concepts. Such developments had the result of “making it seem impossible for faith to be an active principle leading to repentance and covenants relationships with a loving, physical Heavenly Father.”²¹

The famed New Testament scholar, N. T. Wright, has expressed views that are aligned with basic aspects of Schmidt’s work. Wright, for example, recognizes the importance of faithfulness and covenant relationships in Paul’s writings and discusses *pistis* in that context. For example, in *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, Wright speaks of the importance of believers to be “marked” by their own *pistis*:

The outpouring of the spirit indicated to Paul that the promises of Deuteronomy 30, and the echoing promises of Jeremiah and Ezekiel, had been fulfilled. The Messiah had been vindicated; but he was not alone. Somehow, he would share his status and role with his people. **There was now already a circumcised-heart people, in whose common life and individual transformation a strange new**

19. Schmidt, *Relational Faith*, 17.

20. Schmidt, *Relational Grace*, 104–6.

21. Schmidt, *Relational Faith*, 236.

form of "law-keeping," both related and unrelated to the Pharisaic keeping of Torah, had now appeared. This offered a kind of parallel to the Pharisaic hope of a present zealous keeping of Torah through which one might be marked out in the present with a "righteousness," a covenant status, that would be vindicated in the future. But the new kind of life was of an utterly different kind, not least in that it was a fresh and free gift from the covenant God himself. In particular, the first and most characteristic sign of this people, which became its badge, had nothing to do with the "works of Torah" which marked out the Jew from the pagan (or with the sectarian "works of Torah" which marked out one sect from another. . .). **Its badge was the Messiah-badge, namely *pistis*.** This is the explanation . . . of why ***pistis* is the single badge by which the single Abraham-family, "justified sinners," are recognized.** *Pistis* is, in other words, the Israel-characteristic which, according to Romans 3.2 and 3.22, was lacking in Israel itself and provided by the Messiah. ***Pistis* is therefore the appropriate sign that a human being is a Messiah-person, "in the Messiah," "belonging to the Messiah": part of the covenant people,** one of those about whom the covenant God himself declares, in advance of the final declaration which will consist in resurrection itself, that this person is *dikaïos* [righteous], **part of Abraham's single, sin-forgiven covenant family. Within this *pistis* we must therefore include all that Paul includes: cross-and-resurrection-shaped belief, trust and faithfulness.**²²

The Messiah's faithful obedience to the divine plan for Israel means that **the identifying mark of the Messiah's people is precisely their own *pistis*,** indeed their own *hypakoē pisteōs*, "**obedience of faith**" (which Paul would have said, and sometimes did say, was the result of the spirit's work through the gospel). . . . His central answer to the question, "Who are we?" is: We are the Messiah's people, defined

22. N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 2:931, bold added, archive.org/details/paulfaithfulness0034wrig/page/930/mode/2up.

by our membership “in” him, marked by our sharing of his *pistis*.²³

Those who believe the gospel, “who believe in the one who raised from the dead Jesus our lord” ([Romans] 4.24), are thus appropriately **marked out by that badge of *pistis*, their own *pistis***, not as an arbitrary sign, not because it means that they have had some kind of religious experience and so must have been converted, not because “faith” is a special, meritorious form of interiority which this God decides to reward, **but because *pistis*, faithfulness**, (a) always was supposed to be the badge of Israel, (b) now has been the badge of Jesus, and so (c) **is the appropriate badge—the only badge!—by which Jesus’ followers are to be marked out**.²⁴

The gift of Christ’s faithfulness in doing all that he was called to do, redeeming us and conquering sin and death, is truly a free gift, but not one without reciprocity. The people who accept this gift are expected to follow Christ and also display trust and faithfulness as the badge they wear to be a light to the world and servants of God. “The *status* of being ‘justified,’ declared to be ‘in the right’ and a member of the people of the one God, is given on the basis of *pistis*, the ‘faith’ of the believer which identifies him or her as part of the family of the ‘faithful’ Messiah.”²⁵ In his monumental *History and Theology*, Wright discusses the significance of the new covenant through the successful mission of Christ: “The result is that those who belong to Jesus and *follow him faithfully* are welcomed into the heavenly sanctuary ([Hebrews] 12.18–24).”²⁶

Wright recognizes the importance of obedience not just in the old covenant but also in the new, as we see in his discussion on Paul and the Shema (Deuteronomy 6:4–5): “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is

23. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 1:544, bold added, archive.org/details/paulfaithfulness0012wrig/page/544/mode/2up.

24. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 2:839–40, bold added, archive.org/details/paulfaithfulness0034wrig/page/838/mode/2up.

25. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 2:832, archive.org/details/paulfaithfulness0034wrig/page/832/mode/2up.

26. N. T. Wright, *History and Eschatology: Jesus and the Promise of Natural Theology* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2019), Kindle ed., 244, emphasis added.

one Lord: And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might.” Wright states:

The connection between [Romans] 8.27 and 8.28 is important: Paul is not plucking “those who love God” as a new category out of the air, but is indicating that “loving God” is the proper way to describe what is going on at the heart of the experience he is describing. The inarticulate groaning of the spirit deep within God’s people is heard and understood by the listening “heart-searcher.” God works all things together for good, he says, “to those who love him”: in other words, **to those who keep the great command** that belongs with “Hear, O Israel,” **to love YHWH with all the heart, life and strength, that is the “obedience”** that Jewish monotheism requires. *The spirit enables God’s people to keep the Shema.*

The very word **Shema**, in fact, means not merely “hear,” as in “allow your ears to take in the sound,” **but “hear” as in “hear and obey.”** A case can be made, in this light, for allowing **Paul’s remarkable phrase “the obedience of faith,”** *hypakoē pisteōs*, **to resonate closely with the Shema: this is the “obedience” in which the “hearing” takes place, namely pistis.**²⁷

Incidentally, Schmidt explains that Wright has objected to the concept of salvation by “faith alone” (*sola fide*) because it neglects the Bible’s frequently reiterated doctrine of a final judgment according to works.²⁸ This is one of many concerns Latter-day Saints also have about modern Evangelical discourse. The downplaying of commandment keeping and covenant keeping has led to overlooking key issues to be considered on the day of judgment (e.g., Revelation 20:12–15).

An important observation from Schmidt in both of his works is that the original covenant and relational aspects of faith and grace were restored in Joseph Smith’s work, especially in the Book of Mormon but also in Joseph’s other revelations. For example, Schmidt explores the question of what is required in return for grace in exploring King Benjamin’s speech in Mosiah 2–5:

As King Benjamin teaches of mercy, atonement, service,

27. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 2:721–22, bold added, archive.org/details/paulfaithfulness0034wrig/page/720/mode/2up.

28. Schmidt, *Relational Faith*, 232.

obedience, wisdom, power, and justice (Mosiah 2:39; 3:26; 4:2; 5:15), he teaches that disciples should serve God and others, even though in so doing they still remained unprofitable servants and unable to repay God for his gifts; the very air we breathe is a gift from God (Mosiah 2:22). Even though no one can come close to repaying God for his offer of forgiveness, resurrection, and eternal life, there is still much that disciples must do. Benjamin does not say that nothing is required in return. The recognition of this obligation to keep God's commandments and praise and thank him parallels the ancient idea of reciprocity. Benjamin's teachings thus align with the view of *hesed*²⁹ and *charis* in the ancient Mediterranean world.³⁰

Indeed, the temple themes that Wright also sees as important but neglected aspects of the New Testament, with their emphasis on covenants, have also been restored. Beshears's chiding of covenant making and modern temples will not wear well with time, in my view.

Again, for those who wish to understand the status of some of the biggest clashes between "traditional Christianity" since the 1500s and what we might call Restored Christianity, reading Brent Schmidt's works on *pistis* and *charis* can open new horizons and hopefully fresh, more fruitful dialogues and a recognition that there may be more to Latter-day Saint doctrine than meets the critical eye.

Another problematic definition: Beshears's claim that our God is not "eternal"

One further preliminary comment involving definitions is needed. It seems that Beshears's greatest objection to our faith is the claim that God is not "eternal." The same objection applies to our views on Christ. Examples of his objections:

In Latter-day Saint thought, **God is immortal but not eternal.** (p. 178)

Jesus, then, is the "only begotten" Son of the Father who became so—but was not always so—by virtue of being

29. Schmidt discusses *hesed* earlier, describing it as a Hebrew word that can connote "the reciprocal relationship between God and people" and means "faithful love, enduring lovingkindness, and persistent mercy" and can imply "an extended, covenantal relationship." Schmidt, *Relational Grace*, 42.

30. Schmidt, *Relational Grace*, 158–59.

born first and achieving exaltation prior to us, his spiritual younger siblings, who receive glorified states through our elder brother. Thus, **the glorified nature of the Son is not truly eternal (having no beginning)** and neither is his membership in the Godhead. . . . In this way, Latter-day Saint Christology departs significantly from orthodox Christology. (p. 183)

According to Mormonism, Jesus is literally the Son of God, the firstborn child of God the Father and Heavenly Mother, making Christ our eldest spirit brother, **whose membership in the Godhead is not timeless** but began after his ascent to godhood by personal progression. (p. 180)

We thus are said to worship a "different God" and "another Jesus" because our teachings supposedly don't recognize God or the Son as eternal. The first thing I hope Beshears might have done here is to ask Latter-day Saints what the Church actually teaches about the "eternal" nature of God. What he says about us directly contradicts our scriptures. A sampling of the many verses on the eternal nature of God and Christ follows:

By these things we know that there is a God in heaven, who is *infinite and eternal, from everlasting to everlasting the same unchangeable God*, the framer of heaven and earth, and all things which are in them. (Doctrine and Covenants 20:17)

Which Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are *one God, infinite and eternal*, without end. Amen. (Doctrine and Covenants 20:28)

O *God, the Eternal Father*, we ask thee in the name of thy Son, Jesus Christ, to bless and sanctify this bread to the souls of all those who partake of it. . . . (Doctrine and Covenants 20:77)

O *God, the Eternal Father*, we ask thee in the name of thy Son, Jesus Christ, to bless and sanctify this wine to the souls of all those who drink of it. . . . (Doctrine and Covenants 20:79)

Listen to the voice of the Lord your God, even Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, whose course is *one eternal round, the same today as yesterday, and forever*. (Doctrine and Covenants 35:1)

According to that which was ordained in the midst of the *Council of the Eternal God* of all other gods before this world was, that should be reserved unto the finishing and the end thereof, when every man shall enter into *his eternal presence* and into his immortal rest. (Doctrine and Covenants 121:32)

And they are one God, yea, the very *Eternal Father* of heaven and of earth. (Mosiah 15:4)

Teach them that redemption cometh through *Christ the Lord, who is the very Eternal Father*. Amen. (Mosiah 16:15)

And also to the convincing of the Jew and Gentile that *JESUS is the CHRIST, the ETERNAL GOD*, manifesting himself unto all nations. (Title Page of the Book of Mormon)

And the angel said unto me: Behold *the Lamb of God, yea, even the Son of the Eternal Father!* Knowest thou the meaning of the tree which thy father saw? (1 Nephi 11:21)

And as I spake concerning the convincing of the Jews, that Jesus is the very Christ, it must needs be that the Gentiles be convinced also that *Jesus is the Christ, the Eternal God*. (2 Nephi 26:12)

Now Zeezrom saith again unto him: Is the Son of God the very Eternal Father? And Amulek said unto him: Yea, he is the very *Eternal Father* of heaven and of earth, and all things which in them are; he is the beginning and the end, the first and the last. (Alma 11:38–39)

And when ye shall receive these things, I would exhort you that ye would ask *God, the Eternal Father*, in the name of Christ, if these things are not true; and if ye shall ask with a sincere heart, with real intent, having faith in Christ, he will manifest the truth of it unto you, by the power of the Holy Ghost. (Moroni 10:4)

And thou art after the order of *him who was without beginning of days or end of years, from all eternity to all eternity*. (Moses 6:67)

And Enoch said unto *the Lord*: How is it that thou canst weep, seeing thou art holy, and *from all eternity to all eternity*? (Moses 7:29)

Behold, I am God; Man of Holiness is my name; Man of Counsel is my name; and *Endless and Eternal is my name*, also. (Moses 7:35)

Beshears might then wish to consider what the Greek behind the word “eternal” in the New Testament means. That word is αἰώνιος (*aiōnios*), related to αἰών (*aiōn*), the source of the English word eon. Turning to William Arndt and Wilbur Gingrich’s *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*,³¹ we find three definitions for *aiōnios*: 1) without beginning, 2) without beginning or end, and 3) without end. These parallel some of the meanings for *aiōn*, such as 1) very long time, eternity; 1a) of time gone by: the past, earliest times, then eternity; 1b) of time to come which, if it has no end, is also known as eternity; 2) a segment of time, age.³² Thus, we can say that Christ has a glorious and “eternal” body because it will never end, but it had a beginning. Similarly, in the future, if we accept Christ and follow him in faith (with true *pistis*), we will receive fully of his grace (*charis*) and have eternal life (ζωὴν αἰώνιον, *zōēn aiōnion*). Our lives will be eternal, and we will be eternal, in spite of a beginning, though we also believe that we are eternal beings with God and Christ, but our “eternal life” has a specific beginning point. That word allows for several possibilities, none of which necessarily poses an irreconcilable problem. God and Christ are eternal.

Change seems to be the real issue for Beshears. No reasonable definition for “eternal” eliminates change. An eternal Jesus Christ absolutely could come to earth, be born as an infant in a little human body, grow up, suffer and die, and become spirit only again without losing the right to be called eternal. He could then return to earth and take up his body, turning it into a glorious, eternal resurrected body, without losing his status as eternal. Given all those changes, will Beshears still insist that any change such as obtaining a physical or spirit body would make God or Christ non-eternal?

Unfortunately, Beshears is troubled by the thought that God can grow or “progress,” even though Christ obviously did. A God that increases in any way apparently is impermissible. But in revelation given to Moses, God declared that “this is my work and my glory — to

31. William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: and Other Early Christian Literature*, 4th ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), s.v. “αἰώνιος,” 27–28, archive.org/details/greek-englishlexi0000will_j9a5/page/26/mode/2up.

32. Arndt and Gingrich, *Greek-English Lexicon*, s.v. “αἰών,” 26.

bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man” (Moses 1:39). With each baby born, with each human soul that grows and comes unto Christ, with each Christian sharing the Gospel with another person, with each prayer and song of praise, God’s work is moving forward and his infinite glory is increased. That’s his joy and his work, and thus I would suggest that his increase is unstoppable and something to be celebrated. He does not change his love, his work, his principles, but surely the expansion of his marvelous, endless work represents a form of growth.

Beshears makes much of the uncanonized but influential King Follett discourse where Joseph taught a variety of doctrines, including the unclear concept that God the Father also must have once been a Son. The details of what that means (was it even in this universe — when, where, how?) remain mysterious and frankly is something that Latter-day Saints tend to “put on the back burner” and rarely discuss, especially since this incomplete idea is in tension with other basic statements about God in our scriptures and in other sermons from Joseph Smith. In my view, it does not define our faith nor affect our worship of God the Eternal Father. Beshears treats that discourse as completely clear and extrapolates it to suggest that God was just an ordinary mortal whose “personal progress” led him to become God the Father. I don’t accept his views and don’t think they do justice to what faithful Latter-day Saints teach and believe nor to what our scriptures teach. We tend to (or at least ought to) refrain from making major extrapolations on topics where we know very little.

The scriptures refer to God as eternal, but Beshears demands more than this. He demands that God be *anarchos* (ἀναρχος, without a beginning) — a word not used in the Bible:

For Smith, however, God is immortal — he’s forever unending — not *anarchos* nor immutable, or unchanging. . . . The only truly eternal thing to God is his intelligence and matter (attributes we share with him as humans), but God as he is has not always been so. (p. 174)

If the Bible requires God to be *anarchos*, why is that absent in the Greek New Testament? Here is another non-biblical concept imported into the requirements for Christians and used to reject the Christian faith of the Latter-day Saints. We believe God is eternal, as taught in all our scriptures. But for Beshears, there is a special narrow definition: being eternal must mean having no change and having no

beginning. He's welcome to believe that, but don't hold us accountable for not importing the same extra-biblical paradigms into our faith.

We'll now examine a number of Beshears's forty chapters. We'll start with my longest response on what was one of the most problematic portions of the book, the chapters dealing with the Book of Mormon, and then cover several other chapters.

The Book of Mormon (Chapters 13 and 14)

After reading the introduction, I was anxious to see the fruits of Beshears's growth in understanding since writing his problematic doctoral thesis. Had he come to learn in his dialogues that the Book of Mormon has, in the opinion of some scholars in the Church, only become stronger over time, in light of evidence from both the Old and New Worlds and through a deeper understanding of the ancient literary aspects of the text? Did he recognize how intellectual Saints can greatly appreciate the Book of Mormon as an ancient text relevant for our day, with profound messages and evidences pertaining to the divinity and mission of Christ? Could there be a kind word or two for the book and those who cherish it? I'm afraid not, but that's understandable given his mission.

Beshears is highly factual in chapter 13, "What is the Book of Mormon?" (pp. 105–10), one of his most neutral chapters, as he describes some basic aspects of the story of the Book of Mormon and its content, just missing some subtleties that may not be well known. One understandable gap is characterizing the English text as *Jacobean English*, when a surprising and growing body of scholarship points to a significant influence of non-Jacobean syntax from the Early Modern English era.³³ Though apologetics played no role in this data-driven discovery, the implications strongly suggest that

33. This feature was first observed by Royal Skousen in his studies of the original text of the Book of Mormon. See, for example, Royal Skousen, "The Language of the Original Text of the Book of Mormon," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 57, no. 3 (2018): 81–110, byustudies.byu.edu/article/the-language-of-the-original-text-of-the-book-of-mormon/. For a rapid overview of some key issues uncovered in the research of Stanford Carmack on the presence of Early Modern English syntax in the Book of Mormon, see Stanford Carmack, "A Plain Exposition of Book of Mormon English by Means of Short Questions and Informed Answers," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 63 (2025): 107–20, interpreterfoundation.org/journal/a-plain-exposition-of-book-of-mormon-english-by-means-of-short-questions-and-informed-answers. For a large fraction of his papers on this topic, see the

Joseph Smith was not the author of the English text since the unusual language he dictated not only is demonstrably inconsistent with the King James Bible, it also is not found in pseudo-biblical texts seeking to imitate KJV language, nor can it be explained as Joseph's dialect. Careful analysis of the text suggests that Joseph produced the Book of Mormon by seeing and reading aloud text that his scribes then wrote.³⁴ It truly was a miraculous translation process with a linguistic signature distinguishing the text from the language of the Bible, from the vernacular of Joseph's day, and from his own language.

Chapter 14, "Where Did the Book of Mormon Come From?" (pp. 111–19), is more problematic. To Beshears's credit, he recognizes that it is "unlikely" that Joseph was the author of the Book of Mormon, since writings from him during the time of producing the Book of Mormon show poor literacy, plus "he seems to have grown more familiar with the text over time, which is peculiar if he made it up" (p. 112) — these are positive indications that he has talked with some knowledgeable Latter-day Saints. Beshears notes that a popular theory is that Joseph and his peers obtained a manuscript from someone else, such as Solomon Spaulding, that they used to create the Book of Mormon. He generously grants that there is "insufficient evidence" to prove this theory definitively and even provides a footnote accurately stating that the discovery of Spaulding's "Manuscript Lost" caused the theory to "deteriorate" (p. 112). Bravo!

He then claims that the Book of Mormon deals with topics from debates among Protestants in the nineteenth century and is "keenly attuned to the religious *Zeitgeist* of the day. If Smith and ancient authors are both excluded from possibilities, then its authorship remains a mystery" (p. 113). Beshears argues that textual clues point to someone "with an American Protestant background and immense creativity, capable literacy, and theological acumen. From this perspective, the Book of Mormon is American pseudepigrapha" (p. 113).

Beshears dismisses ancient authors too hastily, but this is understandable for a non-believer. However, there is nothing in the text that is uniquely nineteenth century.³⁵ Discourse over theology and salvation

current set of Carmack's articles at *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship*, interpreterfoundation.org/all/author/stanfordc.

34. Stanford Carmack, "Joseph Smith Read the Words," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 18, no. 1 (2016): 41–64, interpreterfoundation.org/journal/joseph-smith-read-the-words.

35. For some treatments of common allegations of nineteenth-century influence, see "Possible 19th Century Influences on the Book of Mormon," FAIR

is not unique to Joseph's era, and the various parallels that critics have proposed do not withstand scrutiny nor offer explanatory power for the origins of the text with its many hallmarks of antiquity. For example, America's Revolution and its system of government have only superficial resemblance to the establishment of the reign of judges during a portion of Nephite history.³⁶ King Benjamin's speech at a Nephite temple has much more in common with ancient coronation assemblies than a frontier revival meeting and has remarkable ties to ancient Near Eastern covenant-making patterns (the covenant formulary).³⁷ Questions over infant baptism have occurred over many centuries and could have arisen independently in the New World.³⁸ Numerous factors in the text, ranging from rhetorical and literary tools such as chiasmus to many unusual scenarios that are more at home in, say, ancient Mesoamerica than nineteenth century New York all offer evidence that the Book of Mormon is derived from an ancient text, as has been discussed at length by authors such as Hugh Nibley, Brant Gardner, John L. Sorensen, Noel Reynolds, and many others.

In this chapter, Beshears makes a statement on the historicity of the Book of Mormon that may be easily misunderstood if not misleading for many readers:

Throughout the history of Mormonism, Latter-day Saints have been guilty of approaching the text primarily in an apologetic posture to prove, if possible, its historicity. It's important to note, then, how **LDS apostle Neal A. Maxwell argued that the substance of the Book of Mormon is "basically spiritual, not historical"** during a time of growing interest in its theological message. Today, an enormous

(website), fairlatterdaysaints.org/answers/Possible_19th_Century_influences_on_Book_of_Mormon.

36. Richard L. Bushman, "The Book of Mormon and the American Revolution," in *Book of Mormon Authorship: New Light on Ancient Origins*, ed. Noel B. Reynolds (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University [BYU], 1982), 189–212, rsc.byu.edu/book-mormon-authorship/book-mormon-american-revolution.
37. Stephen D. Ricks, "The Treaty/Covenant Pattern in King Benjamin's Address (Mosiah 1–6)," *BYU Studies* 24, no. 2 (Spring 1984): 151–62, byustudies.byu.edu/article/the-treaty-covenant-pattern-in-king-benjamins-address-mosiah-16 (a PDF file is also available at that link).
38. Scripture Central Staff, "Why Did Moroni Include Mormon's Condemnation of Infant Baptism?," Scripture Central, KnoWhy 253, 21 August 2019, scripturecentral.org/knowwhy/why-did-moroni-include-mormons-condemnation-of-infant-baptism.

body of work ranging anywhere from lay devotionals to scholarly exegesis and commentaries is made available by Latter-day Saint scholars and authors. Still, effort exists to discover both external and internal evidence of its historical nature.

Some Latter-day Saints take the position that the Book of Mormon is not a historical document but is still inspired. Proponents of “inspired fiction” do not believe the Book of Mormon is a historical record but nevertheless argue that abandoning its historicity need not jeopardize its authority or veracity for the believing reader. Others, however, recognize the potential pitfalls of rejecting its historicity. (p. 113)

Beshears is quoting Neal A. Maxwell in *Plain and Precious Things*.³⁹ Maxwell was not downplaying the authenticity of the Book of Mormon or hinting that there are reasons to doubt its historicity, as Beshears’s characterization of Maxwell’s statement may suggest—Elder Maxwell was adamant in affirming the reality and authenticity of the Book of Mormon throughout his life, and was interested in the kind of apologetic efforts that Beshears mentions. Maxwell was explaining that the “richness” of the book is in its spiritual message, not the historical details. Here is his quote in context:

Throughout these books of scriptures [scriptures other than the Book of Mormon], we see the summational and recurring themes that dominate in the Lord’s declarations given in various dispensations. He is not random in His observations; He keeps them focused on the things that matter most—for which we should be everlastingly grateful. . . .

Inevitably, it is the very doctrinal and spiritual content of these other books of scripture that one marvels and rejoices over. The structure, setting, and plot of the Book of Mormon, for instance, are interesting—much more complex and instructive than casual readers imagine as to style, form, and symbolism. But even so, by divine design such features are secondary to the book’s major theme and messages.

The richness of the Book of Mormon is basically spiritual, not historical. It is one thing to focus on stage and scenery and quite another to focus on substance. The spiritual

39. Neal A. Maxwell, *Plain and Precious Things* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1983).

dimensions of this book of scripture are what this present volume focuses on. How reassuring and reverberating are its teachings about Jesus and the promises, perils, and purposes of this mortal life. And how real the perils in this earthly probation!⁴⁰

Here I fear that Beshears's conviction that the Book of Mormon is not historical may have hindered his understanding of what Elder Maxwell was teaching.

Book of Mormon evidence: Did it ever come up in the dialogues?

While many Latter-day Saints don't spend a lot of time exploring Book of Mormon evidence, there is still a broad awareness of some of the exciting developments. This includes the discovery of chiasmus and many other ancient rhetorical tools in the Book of Mormon; the heavy use of apparent Hebrew or even Egyptian wordplays around names in the Book of Mormon, especially as described in the work of Matthew Bowen;⁴¹ details of ancient American society and civilization that add meaning to Book of Mormon details; geographical and even geological details in the Book of Mormon that support authenticity; scholarly linguistic analysis of Uto-Aztec languages that support the idea of infusions of Ancient Near Eastern languages into the Americas; and especially an abundance of discoveries in the Arabian Peninsula that profoundly support the ancient origins of the book of 1 Nephi.

The most basic evidence: Book of Mormon witnesses

Of course, perhaps the most significant basic Book of Mormon evidence to consider is the many witnesses to the physical reality of the gold plates, including the Three Witnesses who saw them under miraculous conditions with an angel present and the voice of God being heard, plus the Eight Witnesses who saw and handled the plates under entirely mundane conditions, along with a number of other witnesses. The carefully scrutinized histories of the Three Witnesses and the Eight Witnesses, who all remained true to their witness — in spite of differences with Joseph Smith or the Church that eventually led some to leave the Church — provides impressive evidence that they testified of real experiences.

40. Maxwell, *Plain and Precious Things*, 2.

41. Matthew L. Bowen, *Name as Key-Word: Collected Essays on Onomastic Wordplay and the Temple in Mormon Scripture* (Orem, UT: Interpreter Foundation; Salt Lake City: Eborn Books, 2018).

There is much that could be said about the importance of the evidence from the many witnesses, as well as the witnesses of the translation. But Beshears finds a rather parsimonious way to summarize the evidence:

Some witnesses claimed to have seen the plates. . . . The first witnesses claimed to have “seen the engravings which are upon the plates,” while the second witnesses said that they handled the plates, having “hefted” them. (p. 117)

There is no recognition of the diversity of these experiences: one miraculous with an angel showing the plates to the Three and the voice of God being heard, the other mundane, with the plates being shown in ordinary circumstances to the Eight as they felt and lifted the plates. There is no recognition of the lifelong impact of the experience on all the witnesses, no recognition of the extensive scholarship on the witnesses, nor acknowledgement of the others who were additional witnesses in various ways, giving a total of perhaps twenty witnesses.

Beshears does recognize that one witness, John Whitmer, maintained his testimony even after being excommunicated, “lending credence to his word” (p. 117) — one of the most generous admissions Beshears makes.

Martin Harris, on the other hand, “complicated his testimony by having ‘repeatedly admitted the internal, subjective nature of his visionary experience,’ argued one historian [Dan Vogel]” (pp. 117–18). It is not Harris that “complicated his testimony,” but hostile sources who provided the hearsay statements that historian and noted critic Dan Vogel favors over Harris’s actual words and actions.⁴² Even if Harris did tell someone about seeing with, say, “spiritual eyes” in his angelic vision involving the plates, this does not mean that the vision was not real. Christians are widely aware of Paul relaying a powerful vision with a question about the uncertain physics of it: “Whether in the body, I cannot tell; or whether out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth” (2 Corinthians 12:2). If “out of the body,” one is probably seeing with spiritual eyes, but still seeing nonetheless. But one can also have a divine encounter while in the body and still call the experience spiritual:

Although skeptics over the centuries have represented visions and spiritual sight as being distinct from natural

42. Steven C. Harper, “Evaluating the Book of Mormon Witnesses,” *Religious Educator* 11, no. 2 (2010): 37–49, rsc.byu.edu/vol-11-no-2-2010/evaluating-book-mormon-witnesses.

experience, this does not reflect how the Witnesses understood their own experience. David Whitmer explained, “Of course we were in the spirit when we had the view, for no man can behold the face of an angel, except in a spiritual view, but we were in the body also, and everything was as natural to us, as it is at any time.”⁴³

There is a bounty of historical work that has been carried out on the witnesses of the Book of Mormon. The testimony of Martin Harris is strong and compelling,⁴⁴ as are those of the other witnesses.⁴⁵ Rather than suggesting that his experience was something subjective and questionable, Harris said, “Gentlemen, do you see that hand? Are you sure you see it? Are your eyes playing a trick or something? No. Well, as sure as you see my hand so sure did I see the angel and the plates.”⁴⁶

To understand faithful Latter-day Saints, it’s important to understand and properly characterize the inspiration and compelling evidence provided by the many witnesses of the Book of Mormon. They play an important role in our faith, and their voices should not be hushed—if one’s goal is to promote understanding of our faith and the intellectual girders that can strengthen it.

Other evidences?

Beshears also addresses other external evidences for the Book of Mormon, while saying almost nothing about the substance of the internal evidences except to suggest that they have little value. External evidences are discussed after first reminding readers how extensive

43. Scripture Central Staff, “Why Did Martin Harris Sometimes Say He Saw the Plates with Spiritual Eyes?,” KnoWhy 775, 28 January 2025, scripturecentral.org/knowwhy/why-did-martin-harris-sometimes-say-he-saw-the-plates-with-spiritual-eyes. The quotation from David Whitmer is in a letter from David Whitmer to Anthony Metcalfe, 2 April 1887; see Dan Vogel, ed. and comp., *Early Mormon Documents*, (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2003), 5:193, archive.org/details/volume-5_202011/page/193/mode/2up.

44. Susan Easton Black and Larry C. Porter, *Martin Harris: Uncompromising Witness of the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2018).

45. See, for example, Richard Lloyd Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981).

46. Statement of William M. Glenn in C. Frenk Steele, “Harris Testimony Recalled: Canadian Tells of Seeing Witness,” *Deseret News*, Church Edition, 2 October 1943, 6. The source is available at [Newspapers.com](https://newspapers.com), but shows as page 32 in their database because the Church Edition begins on page 27; see newspapers.com/image/595244182/.

the evidence for the Bible is compared to the paucity for the Book of Mormon. Beshears does admit that writing on gold plates adds a “very speculative” degree of plausibility for the concept of a record on gold plates (p. 114). But “no archaeological findings in the Americas have definitively established any connections between ancient ruins, like those of Mesoamerica, and the people and events described in the Book of Mormon” (p. 114). These are carefully chosen words that excise Old World archaeology where extremely clear archaeological evidence for some aspects of the book of 1 Nephi has been found.

The load-bearing strut in Beshears’s claim of no significant archaeological findings in the Americas isn’t just the exclusion of the Old World to excise some of the most impressive finds so far, but rather the demanding limitation that to be counted as evidence, archaeological finds must “have **definitively established** any connections between ancient ruins, like those of Mesoamerica, and the people and events described in the Book of Mormon” (p. 114). I believe he means that the Book of Mormon connections must be clearly established such that critics and scholars outside the Church will look at the data and say, to their chagrin, “Yes, we have to admit, this site is definitely Zarahemla as described by the Book of Mormon.”

That’s quite a high bar for a part of the world where almost all written records were destroyed by invaders, where we know almost none of the names that various sites originally bore, where the various civilizations that once occupied major sites were destroyed and replaced with new peoples, sometimes multiple times, and where archaeology is still in its infancy with less than 10% of known sites having been excavated. Further, if Mesoamerica is indeed the setting for the Book of Mormon as many Latter-day Saint scholars conclude, that is a part of the world where plants and erosion tend to cover and destroy much more than happens in the Near East.

We don’t expect evidence to be so definitive that no faith will be needed to accept the Book of Mormon. But for those willing to seek, there are marvelous hints that can help overcome obstacles to faith.

Beshears has become somewhat more generous in discussing Book of Mormon evidence than he was in his doctoral thesis. For his thesis, I was critical of his failure to consider any of the many external evidences for the Book of Mormon, a complaint that is only partly true

of *40 Questions*. Here is an excerpt from my critique,⁴⁷ with the footnotes being those given in that passage:

The complete unawareness of any external evidence relevant to the Book of Mormon is unfortunate, and if he wishes to update his work, I hope Beshears will consider the significance of, say, the many hard evidences (non-LDS archaeological evidence included) from the Arabian Peninsula described in, for example, Warren Aston's *Lehi and Sariah in Arabia*,⁴⁸ or works related to the New World such as John Sorenson's *Mormon's Codex*,⁴⁹ Brant Gardner's *Traditions of the Fathers*,⁵⁰ Jerry Grover's *Geology of the Book of Mormon*,⁵¹ and Brian Stubbs's works on Uto-Aztec language and relationships to Hebrew and Egyptian such as *Changes in Languages from Nephi to Now*⁵² and *Exploring the Explanatory Power of Semitic and Egyptian in Uto-Aztec*.⁵³

Good news: Nahom is mentioned

I'm happy to report that Beshears has now mentioned a publication by the first of the authors I recommended, Warren Aston, famous among Latter-day Saint scholars for his personal explorations in the Arabian Peninsula related to the Book of Mormon. Rather than the extensive

47. Lindsay, “Too Little or Too Much Like the Bible?,” 33–34.

48. Warren P. Aston, *Lehi and Sariah in Arabia: The Old World Setting of the Book of Mormon* (Bloomington, IN: Xlibris Publishing, 2015).

49. John L. Sorenson, *Mormon's Codex: An Ancient American Book* (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2013).

50. Brant Gardner, *Traditions of the Fathers: The Book of Mormon as History* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2015).

51. Jerry D. Grover Jr., *Geology of the Book of Mormon* (Vineyard, UT: Grover Publications, 2014), academia.edu/18172439/Geology_of_the_Book_of_Mormon.

52. Brian D. Stubbs, *Changes in Languages from Nephi to Now* (Blanding, UT: Four Corners Digital Design, 2016); 3rd edition available at jefflindsay.com/Stubbs-Changes-in-Languages.pdf. Designed for general readers, this explores how languages change over time and then considers a sampling of the evidence for infusions of Hebrew, Aramaic, and Egyptian into the Uto-Aztec language family of North America in ways that are consistent with the Book of Mormon.

53. Brian D. Stubbs, *Exploring the Explanatory Power of Semitic and Egyptian in Uto-Aztec*, 2nd ed. (Provo, UT: Grover Publications, 2023), PDF at jefflindsay.com/Stubbs-Explanatory-Power.pdf. This is a work for linguists showing linguistic evidence for infusions of Hebrew, Aramaic, and Egyptian into the Uto-Aztec language family, with 1,650 cognates involved.

book I recommended, *Lehi and Sariah in Arabia*, Beshears cites an older, brief academic paper, but it's still a valuable one: "A History of NaHoM."⁵⁴ Recognizing that Nahom is part of the external evidence for the Book of Mormon and citing a paper by Warren Aston is a significant breakthrough for which I am grateful. But there is also a problem or two. To explain, I must first review what the finds related to Nahom can mean for Latter-day Saints who take the Book of Mormon seriously.

Background on Nahom and the associated complex of Arabian Peninsula evidence

Aston's "A History of NaHoM" describes the significance of archaeological data showing that the modern Yemeni Nihm tribe, which is represented in ancient inscriptions with the three consonants NHM, had been in substantially that same area from before Lehi's day to now. The ancient NHM name corresponds well with Nephi's report in 1 Nephi 16:34 that mentions "the place which was called Nahom," where Ishmael was buried.

Three recently discovered stone altars from a member of the NHM tribe found at an ancient temple site in Marib, Yemen, dated to roughly 800 to 700 BC, well before Lehi's journey, confirm that the tribe was in the same general region as the Nihm tribe today, part of a long chain of evidence for the geographical stability of that tribe. Contrary to what some critics claim, the name NHM is not merely a family name or tribal name. Such tribal names can also be place names.⁵⁵ Further, as Neal Rappleye demonstrates, "the name *Nihm* (and its variant spellings) has deep roots far into the past as both a tribal name and a toponym and is part of a long-standing, ancient tradition in Yemen, where tribes have been strongly linked to their territories for millennia."⁵⁶

Adding to the excitement is the location of the Nihm tribal lands relative to other key sites on Lehi's Trail, including Wadi Tayyib al Ism, the stunning candidate for the River of Laman and Valley of Lemuel,

54. Warren P. Aston, "A History of NaHoM," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 51, no. 2 (2012): 79–98, byustudies.byu.edu/article/a-history-of-nahom.

55. Jeff Lindsay, "Nahom/NHM: Only a Tribe, Not a Place?," *Arise from the Dust* (blog), 5 August 2022, arisefromthedust.com/nahom-nhm-only-a-tribe-not-a-place/.

56. Neal Rappleye, "The Place—or the Tribe—Called Nahom? NHM as Both a Tribal and Geographic Name in Modern and Ancient Yemen," *BYU Studies* 62, no. 2 (2023): 71, byustudies.byu.edu/article/the-place-or-the-tribe-called-nahom.

first documented by George Potter and Richard Wellington⁵⁷ and further examined by Warren Aston.⁵⁸ Another site of great importance is Khor Kharfot, the primary candidate for Bountiful, as named by Lehi's group, the unexpected fertile wonder on the east coast of Oman that, according to other publications of Aston, meets all twelve criteria that can be extracted from the text of 1 Nephi.⁵⁹ This is a type of place critics have long mocked as impossible but now may be the most impressive Book of Mormon site found so far — certainly the one that I think has received the most attention among Latter-day Saints, but the River Laman in the Valley of Lemuel may be equally surprising and impressive.

Each of these locations individually provides important evidence for the authenticity of at least a portion of 1 Nephi, suggesting that whoever wrote the text must have been to these locations that were unknown to the West until recent years. But what makes them collectively so impressive is their geographical relationship to one another in light of the Book of Mormon, which gives specific directions of travel: Lehi's group generally travelled *south-southeast* (1 Nephi 16:13) after leaving their encampment and walking across the shallow stream/river in the Valley of Lemuel, where there is a hidden exit from the valley that can lead them to their next stop four days later, and that south-southeast direction is consistent with the direction heading toward Nihm tribal lands far to the south, a few miles northeast of Sana'a in Yemen.

More surprising is the issue of the eastward turn that Lehi's family makes after reaching Nahom. For travelers going south-southeast beginning near the Gulf of Aqaba (more specifically, Wadi Tayyib Al Ism), changing to a direction of "nearly eastward" (1 Nephi 17:1) to reach the eastern coast of the Peninsula is quite a challenge. It would be a fatal mistake at almost any point along the south-southeast vector from

57. George Potter and Richard Wellington, *Lehi in the Wilderness: 81 New Documented Evidences that the Book of Mormon is a True History* (Springville, UT: Cedar Fort, 2003).

58. Warren P. Aston, "Lehi and Sariah's Escape from Jerusalem, Perspectives Suggested by New Fieldwork," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 58, no. 4 (2019): 99–126, byustudies.byu.edu/article/into-arabia-lehi-and-sariahs-escape-from-jerusalem-perspectives-suggested-by-new-fieldwork.

59. Warren P. Aston, "Nephi's 'Bountiful': Contrasting Both Candidates," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 55 (2023): 219–68, interpreterfoundation.org/journal/nephis-bountiful-contrasting-both-candidates. Also see Aston, *Lehi and Sariah in Arabia*.

the River Laman/Wadi Tayib Al Ism (near the Gulf of Aqaba) through the region of Sana'a and beyond to the southern coast of Yemen, for eastward of such a path one typically would encounter difficult sand and a complete lack of water. But there is one place where such a turn is possible, and that happens to be the precise region of the Nihm area, as Warren Aston noted in the article that Beshears cites:

Only recently has satellite-assisted mapping enabled us to appreciate that after traveling southward into Arabia, as the Lehitese did, people are prevented from easterly travel by the shifting, waterless dunes of the vast Empty Quarter, as much today as in the past. However, a narrow band of flat plateaus beginning in the Nihm area, marking the southern end of the Empty Quarter, presents the first opportunity for travel in an easterly direction. . . .

Perhaps assisted by the Liahona, which arrived on the very morning the Lehite group departed into Arabia, Nephi makes it clear that he could distinguish quite precise cardinal directions, not merely southeast or a generic “southwards” for example [i.e., in 1 Nephi 16:13, Nephi states that their direction away from the River Laman was generally south-southeast, or SSE]. A route ENE or ESE from Nahom leads into the Empty Quarter or into the equally forbidding Ramlat Saba'tayn desert. Very significantly, the direction of travel from Nahom is specified by Nephi as *nearly* eastward, a direction that we now know is possible across the plateau.

Finally, only in recent decades has research shown that eastward from Nihm is the only fertile area in over a thousand miles of coastline, the few miles of coast in Oman touched by the annual monsoon rains. This small fertile region lies within just a degree or two (thus “nearly”) of being directly east of Nihm.⁶⁰

Nahom is important not just because it shows that a rare place name in the Arabian Peninsula actually did exist before and after Lehi's day in a plausible location, but also because it is in exactly the right place to be connected to two distant sites once said to be impossible and now confirmed as plausible based on fieldwork. These sites are the River Laman and the leading candidate for Bountiful, a surprisingly

60. Aston, “A History of NaHoM,” 84–85.

fertile site on the east coast of Oman that can be accessed by going nearly eastward (but not ENE or ESE) from Nahom, as Nephi states.

In other words, when faithful, informed Latter-day Saints in their dialogues with others mention Book of Mormon evidence from the Arabian Peninsula, they aren't just talking about a cartographical coincidence in which a Book of Mormon place name ends up being a real name in antiquity. They are talking about a network of evidences involving multiple sites and multiple disciplines showing unexpected treasures in the right place and right time in ways that go beyond random luck or advanced research using information available in 1829. The evidence demands a modicum of respect. It merits recognition that a growing number of Latter-day Saints see intellectual strength in and positive evidence for Book of Mormon authenticity, most famously in the journey of Lehi across the Arabian Peninsula. Outsiders don't need to change their faith to recognize that we have some noteworthy external evidence for the Christ-centric Book of Mormon, or to notice that scholarship continues to bear unexpected fruit for our scriptures and our faith.

There's much more to consider, by the way. The body of evidence, for example, includes the finding of a burial marker in Nihm tribal lands dating to the sixth century BC for an apparent foreigner with the name *Ishmael*, as Neal Rappleye has demonstrated: “The inscribed $y s'm'$ is exactly how the Hebrew name $yšm'$ (לאעמשי) — typically rendered as ‘Ishmael’ in English — would be spelled in Epigraphic South Arabian.”⁶¹ (Note that Rappleye is not arguing that this was the Ishmael of the Book of Mormon, but it certainly escalates the plausibility of that story.) Many other subtle details in the text are also bearing fruit when tools of scholarship are applied, as shown in recent work by Godfrey Ellis on the eight-year journey to (or including the stay at) Bountiful.⁶²

It's also noteworthy that immediately after Nahom is introduced in 1 Nephi 16:34, an apparent word play based on the Hebrew meaning of Nahom occurs in v. 35.⁶³ That's an example of the numerous internal evidences whose existence Beshears mentions in passing (p. 114)

61. Neal Rappleye, “An Ishmael Buried Near Nahom,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 48 (2021): 33–48, interpreterfoundation.org/journal/an-ishmael-buried-near-nahom.

62. Godfrey J. Ellis, “Nephi's Eight Years in the ‘Wilderness’: Reconsidering Definitions and Details,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 57 (2023): 281–356, interpreterfoundation.org/journal/nephis-eight-years-in-the-wilderness-reconsidering-definitions-and-details.

63. Scripture Central Staff, “Book of Mormon Evidence: Wordplay on Nahom,”

without any details or footnotes, though issues such as abundant and sophisticated chiasmus, numerous word plays (see, for example, the numerous word plays on Book of Mormon names detected by Matthew Bowen in his book *Name as Key-Word*), many Hebraisms, and ancient rhetorical devices are compelling evidence of ancient origins that cannot be plausibly explained away.

Downsizing Nahom to a ho-hum

So, what does Beshears have to say about Nahom and the associated body of Arabian Peninsula evidence, the topic of multiple books and dozens of scholarly articles, including many popular articles and videos? He manages to condense it neatly into two sentences, reducing not just three ancient altars into one, but reducing almost everything else in a master stroke of brevity:

And in the 1990s, when archaeologists discovered an ancient altar in Yemen inscribed with a reference to *Nhm*, Latter-day Saints took notice. The altar, they argue, is potentially located in a place the Book of Mormon called “Nahom” (1 Nephi 16:34), which is not something a nineteenth-century author could have known. (p. 114)

That’s a welcome morsel, but there’s no mention of Bountiful, the River Laman, specific directions, the eastward crossing, etc.

Beshears doesn’t just stop with noting the existence of a name similar to Nahom, but his mission, it seems, drives him to add a critical footnote:

As one critic pointed out, however, it could just as easily be argued that Nahom is a variation of biblical names like Naham (1 Chr 4:19), Nehum (Neh 7:7), or Nahum (Nah 1:1). See Vogel, *Joseph Smith*, 609. (p. 114n20)

So since personal names (not place names) with the NHM consonants exist in the Bible, the mention of Nahom can be neatly explained away, with Vogel’s help. This reduces the nexus of interrelated bodies of evidence from each of three sites into a mere piece of luck: there was once a place with a name that sounds like a random place mentioned once in the Book of Mormon, and that one lucky name can “just

as easily” be explained by plucking a personal name from the Bible. Yawn.

Sadly, Beshears remains unaware of what the NHM discoveries in context mean to Book of Mormon believers, at least those who have noticed the dramatic evidence. Our critics want to reduce Nahom and the associated Arabian evidence to a meaningless coincidence of just three letters that Joseph could have obtained from anywhere.⁶⁴ Beshears seems aligned with them and has downsized Nahom to a ho-hum.

So, after summarizing Book of Mormon evidence as the discovery of one place name and miscellaneous internal evidences not worthy of specific mention, he says the real value of the Book of Mormon is in understanding the issues of the nineteenth century. It’s not a witness of, nor a lens into, the divine work of the Messiah anciently, but a way of understanding the contentions of bickering men in the nineteenth century.

Sadly, *40 Questions* will not help readers *understand* why the Book of Mormon still inspires Latter-day Saints and often brings intellectual satisfaction to educated members of the Church.

With the disappointing results of digging into this treatment of the Book of Mormon, I wasn’t surprised to face similar disappointments across the rest of *40 Questions*. Beshears was often fair but certainly more focused, perhaps unintentionally, on pointing out flaws, problems, and weaknesses rather than helping others understand our faith.

In more brevity, we now consider a number of other chapters treated by Beshears.

Chapters 4 and 5: Who Was Joseph Smith? Why Was He Considered a Prophet?

As with many chapters, Beshears leads with arguments against the Latter-day Saint position. In the first paragraph, Beshears asks,

Was he truly a prophet of God, as he said? If so, then how do his believers reconcile the unpolished character of his mission and message? Smith himself expected this dilemma: “I never told you I was perfect,” he confessed. . . . Those who don’t believe him are faced with deciding whether he was a

64. Jeff Lindsay, “The Significance of Nahom: Just Three Letters?,” *Arise from the Dust* (blog), 13 December 2013, arisefromthedust.com/the-significance-of-nahom-just-three/.

fallen prophet, misguided visionary, pious fraud, con man, or something else altogether. (p. 39)

Beshears is being far gentler than many, but it's still not a great start in understanding why Latter-day Saints revere Joseph Smith.

Many people have attempted to solve the prophet puzzle, which has proven to be a herculean task. First, there's the fact that it's a *prophet* puzzle. . . . Was he a true prophet or a false one, and how could we tell? Was he even a prophet at all if, "in these last days" (Heb 1:2) God has spoken finally by his only begotten Son, the Word of God (see John 1:1), and not a mere man? (pp. 39–40)

This is a common tactic: introducing a topic with a front-loaded polemical spiel to undermine the Latter-day Saint view, apparently as a key part of promoting understanding. Scriptural language is thrown out with an implicit assumption that the Evangelical spin is the correct interpretation. Throw in a word or two to strongly shift the meaning in the desired direction. It sounds like God has said that his speaking to us "in the last days" was all wrapped up when he spoke "finally" through Jesus Christ—thus no need for prophets in the last days. But "finally" is not found in Hebrews 1:2. We will hear similar arguments again, as if the Bible explains that there is no more revelation needed apart from the Bible itself—a most unbiblical doctrine.

Here I would like to ask Beshears why Christ said that "man shall not live by bread alone, but by *every word that proceeds from the mouth of God*" (Matthew 4:4, quoting Deuteronomy 8:3). He did not say that we should live only by words written centuries ago. Since he said this early in his ministry, with many more new teachings from the mouth of God yet to come, surely, he was not telling people to only live by ancient writings but to also accept words yet to be spoken by the mouth of the living God to his prophets and apostles. How, then, can Beshears be so certain that only ancient words can be accepted—but certainly not the ancient words from newly uncovered sacred texts like the Book of Mormon?

Beshears goes on to repeat many of the most popular criticisms of Joseph, including treasure hunting, money digging, and "magical seer stones" (p. 41), along with the claims of numerous people that Joseph and his family were "destitute of that moral character" required to gain the trust of a community (p. 41). We are introduced to Joseph's duplicity in denying polygamy, his short temper, and other flaws, with

occasional acknowledgement that he tried to be compassionate. Latter-day Saints know that there were flaws in Joseph but still accept him as a prophet of God. Perhaps reasons for that will come up later in the book, one might assume, for surely this had to be a topic in some of the numerous dialogues that Beshears had. But I think that will remain a mystery to readers unfamiliar with Latter-day Saints.

Chapter 5, "Why Was Joseph Smith Considered a Prophet, Seer, Revelator, and Translator" (pp. 47–53), suggests that we might learn why Latter-day Saints revere his divine callings that led to the Restoration. Rather, the chapter focuses on how Joseph heaped these titles upon himself. But having already told us about how flawed Joseph Smith was, Beshears further guides his readers by explaining how holiness is needed to be a prophet of God:

Ideally, righteous prophets who faithfully modeled God's purposes delivered his word, and a single sour note in the harmony of his prophetic choir warranted the rejection of a fallen or false prophet (see Deut 18:22). (pp. 49–50)

Deuteronomy 18:22 says that if a prophecy does not come to pass, the prophet can be ignored. However, this is a problematic test in mortal hands, especially critical hands, for sometimes a prophecy is fulfilled in ways that are not expected, or may take longer than expected to be fulfilled, or may be made moot by the actions of humans. Shalom Paul, who was Yehezkel Kaufman Professor Emeritus of Bible at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and chair of the Dead Sea Scrolls Foundation, pointed to the danger of strict use of this verse:

The true prophet, as intercessor, was ready to risk a confrontation with God, in contrast to his counterpart, the false prophet. The problem of distinguishing between them was indeed perplexing, as is shown by two separate passages in Deuteronomy. According to Deut. 13:2ff., if a prophet delivers an oracle (even if it is subsequently confirmed by an external sign) to worship other gods, he obviously is a false prophet. In turn, Deut. 18:20–22 raises the question, "How can we know that the oracle [uttered in God's name] was not spoken by the LORD?" The answer given is that if the "oracle does not come true, that oracle was not spoken by the LORD; the prophet uttered it presumptuously." *This, however, cannot serve as an infallible criterion, because there are several occasions when an oracle delivered by a true*

prophet did not materialize even in his own lifetime. Such unfulfilled prophecies include Jeremiah's prediction of the ignominious fate of king Jehoiakim (Jer. 22:19), which was belied by 2 Kings 24:6, and Ezekiel's foretelling the destruction of Tyre by Nebuchadnezzar (Ezek. 26:7–21), which later was admitted to have failed but was to be compensated by the Babylonian king's attack on Egypt (29:17–20).⁶⁵

For further thoughts on Deuteronomy 18:22, such as how its strict application would turn many real prophets of the Bible into false prophets, or for details on alleged errant prophecies of Joseph Smith, see the FAIR Latter-day Saints website.⁶⁶

For Beshears, one sour note requires that a prophet be rejected, but the divine standard for Christians is quite different. In fact, trying to “faithfully model” God’s word is futile and dangerous, it seems. Beshears explains his views in chapter 34, “What Is the Temple Endowment” (pp. 283–90), where he argues about the folly of making and keeping covenants:

Each covenant promise we make with God establishes a new law for ourselves—one that God will hold us

65. Shalom M. Paul, “Prophecy and Prophets,” in *Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary*, David L. Lieber, ed., (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2001), 1410–11, emphasis added, archive.org/details/etzhayimtorahcom0000unse/page/n1435/mode/2up. Also see related issues involving a test in Deuteronomy 18: “Abuse of a Bible Test for Joseph Smith: A Case Study,” FAIR (website), fairlatterdaysaints.org/answers/Biblical_Keys_for_Discerning_True_and_False_Prophets/Considering_Joseph_Smith/Abuse_of_a_Bible_test?title=Biblical_Keys_for_Discerning_True_and_False_Prophets%2FConsidering_Joseph_Smith%2FABuse_of_a_Bible_test&mw=1782345328808.

66. On the strict application of Deuteronomy 18:22, see “Question: Are there biblical examples of prophets which evangelical interpretations of Deuteronomy 18 would cause one to have to reject as true prophets?,” FAIR (website), fairlatterdaysaints.org/answers/Question:_Are_there_biblical_examples_of_prophets_which_evangelical_interpretations_of_Deuteronomy_18_would_cause_one_to_have_to_reject_as_true_prophets%3F. On alleged false prophecies of Joseph Smith, see “Question: Does Joseph Smith fail the ‘prophetic test’ found in Deuteronomy 18?,” FAIR, fairlatterdaysaints.org/answers/Question:_Does_Joseph_Smith_fail_the_%22prophetic_test%22_found_in_Deuteronomy_18%3F?title=Question%3A_Does_Joseph_Smith_fail_the_%22prophetic_test%22_found_in_Deuteronomy_18%3F&mw=1782345800994; and John A. Tvedtnes, “The Nature of Prophets and Prophecy,” FAIR, fairlatterdaysaints.org/archive/publications/the-nature-of-prophets-and-prophecy-2.

accountable to. Since we are imperfect, we will inevitably fail to obey these laws, thereby meriting nothing less than death itself (see 1 Cor 15:56). No wonder Paul cautioned against such law-based, spiritual self-improvement. **Not only is it impossible to be sanctified by making and keeping covenants with God, but it nullifies the gospel's power**, "for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing" (Gal 2:21, NIV).

The only covenants we make with God are the ones we break. But praise God that the only covenants he makes with us are those he keeps. . . . The beginning of our redemption is not found in our promises to God but in his promises to himself for us. (p. 289)

I suggest God wants holiness of prophets as well as the rest of us, but we do not require near-infallibility from prophets, though we may need patience and faith in seeing how and when prophecies from real prophets may be fulfilled. And no, of course the law (i.e., the Law of Moses) does not bring salvation. But that law was not what Christ referred to when, responding to the question, "Good Master, what good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life?," he said, "If thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments" (Matthew 19:16–17), asking him also to "come *and* follow me" (v. 21). Of course, we may have difficulty in following Christ and keeping his commandments. That's why he died for us and makes repentance possible. The response to our weakness is not to pretend that covenants no longer matter, or to conflate God's commandments to us with the fulfilled and now inapplicable Law of Moses, but to embrace the gift of grace Christ offers by repenting and continuing to follow him, even until the end (Matthew 24:13).

The primary objection Beshears makes against Joseph Smith as a prophet is that Joseph insisted on "expansion" (p. 51), adding more, and did not do what real Christian preachers and visionaries have done, which is, "They looked back to **prophets and apostles who reminded the Christians of what they already knew** to be true: **the sufficient message of the Bible** called them to delight in and serve God" (p. 51).

This is a common theme for Beshears. The Bible is all that we have ever needed and ever will need. All modern ministers, preachers, or apostles should do is what ancient prophets and apostles did,

which is just remind people to follow the Bible. Here, Beshears seems to completely miss the theme of continuing revelation in the original church of Jesus Christ.

In the early church, Peter, the man who held the keys of authority (Matthew 16:19), received the revelation that the Gentiles should be welcomed in the church (Acts 10, 11). This did not come by reviewing the scriptures of their day but by direct revelation from God to the leader of the church. But this expansion in the work of the ministry led to debates over circumcision and other aspects of the Law of Moses with respect to the Gentiles. A decision was made to hold a council in Jerusalem with the apostles. Peter declared that they should not put an unnecessary yoke upon the Gentile converts (Acts 15:10). They then heard from Paul and Barnabas, after which James made a proposal that the Gentiles not be burdened with circumcision but follow the dietary prohibitions against eating blood and strangled things and avoid idols and fornication (Acts 15:19–20). The group approved this and sent out letters with the new guidance from the leaders of the church, including a statement on how that decision was reached. Latter-day Saint author Richard L. Anderson describes the significance of that statement:

The apostles' letter to Antioch underlined not only the decision, but how the decision was reached: "*It seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things*" (Acts 15:28). Few Christians today see the implications of this powerful ruling of the Twelve. Conservatives today search the Bible for answers, but had the apostles done this, they would have required circumcision for the Gentiles, since it is commanded in the Bible. *The apostles were inspired to go beyond the Bible*, to reverse the lesser law given earlier and to extend the higher law through Christ. *In other words, not past scripture but new revelation was the foundation of the Church of Christ.* What guided the apostles was not the New Testament, for their acts created it. The Bible does not make the true church, but the true church makes the Bible. Past scriptures are a guide to truth, but living prophets give new scripture.⁶⁷

Revelation to prophets and apostles was a critical and necessary

67. Richard L. Anderson, *Understanding Paul* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1983), 53.

feature of the early church. It's an important mechanism by which Christians can "live . . . by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4). Suggesting that the leaders of the early church only reminded people of the sufficient message of the Bible seems to require overlooking if not subtracting much of the text of the Bible. How could any of its books ever come into existence if apostles and prophets could not "expand" the word of God or fulfill God's commands to create new things, whether it was a tabernacle, temple, church organization, mission activity, new policies to meet the needs of new converts, or sharing whatever new information or directions that God wished to reveal by his mouth at that time? To me, the Bible demonstrates the ongoing *expansion* of God's work and word among men, one revelation at a time, one prophet at a time, with no hint that humanity has had or ever will have enough of the word of God and that all we need is the Bible and the post-biblical doctrine of *sola scriptura*.

Of course, there is the command to not add or subtract—meaning that unauthorized humans should not change words that God has revealed. Otherwise, why did Moses continue writing scripture after he revealed God's command in Deuteronomy 4:2?

Ye shall not add unto the word which I command you, neither shall ye diminish ought from it, that ye may keep the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you.

Moses is referring to the words that he has written and *will continue to write*, as inspired by God. God, of course, can add all he wishes to, in spite of errant humans insisting that we now have enough and no more is needed now, thank you. But unauthorized humans have no right to tinker with God's words.

The command against adding or subtracting in Revelation 22:18 obviously refers to the words of the book that John the Revelator was writing. There was no compiled Bible then, just waiting for John's final chapter to seal up the work and officially shut off the spigot of revelation. If revelation to prophets and apostles ceased, might it be because mankind rejected them and murdered them, causing the loss of apostolic authority in the Church?

Beshears in his tradition cannot see that. I can understand why and would not say that he is not a Christian for having doctrines I disagree with. But I hope he'll consider the conundrum here. If he thinks Joseph should have acted like the prophets and apostles of old in just talking

about the sufficiency of the Bible, I would ask him to look at what they actually did and compare that to Joseph. The real prophets and apostles of the past challenged the status quo, brought new revelation, wrote new scripture, drew opposition from the powerful in established religion or government, and often ended up as martyrs. This is usually not the fruit of simply reminding people of what they already know.

Beshears sees Joseph's expansion as absolutely incompatible with traditional Christianity since Christ has achieved everything we need, so how can there be more?

Christians believe that **God has spoken fully and finally** in his Son, the very Word of God incarnate (John 1:1, 14), who has **fulfilled all divine purposes and plans** for redemption as communicated **by his gospel and the teachings of his apostles in the Bible** (see John 1:1, 14; Heb 1:1–3). From this view, Smith's additional revelations are not merely unnecessary; rather, they are **incompatible**. (p. 51)

So, someone thinking we need something more than the Bible, such as apostles and prophets again, more revelation, etc., is incompatible with the Bible, per Beshears. Has he noticed that *all* the words of the New Testament were written *after* Christ had come, spoken, completed his work, and ascended to heaven? If God “has spoken fully and finally” by sending his Son, why do we need the letters of Paul written decades later, or the Revelation of John?

Beshears declares that God's words are done, but that's the declaration of Beshears, something not found in the purportedly sufficient message of the Bible. If no more revelation is given, will Christ remain silent when he comes again and rules on earth in the great Millennium? The angels who precede Christ's return don't plan on silence, per John's Revelation (e.g., Revelation 14:6). And if no more prophets are needed, Revelation 11:1–10 needs some serious subtracting, since as now written, it tells of “two prophets” (v. 10) or “two witnesses” (v. 3) in the future who shall prophesy (v. 3) and work miracles for 1,260 days (vv. 3–6). Then, as has often happened to God's prophets, the outraged forces of wickedness will slay them (v. 7). Those two prophets may be joined by yet others, as Joel prophesied of a time before the great day of the Lord when the spirit would be poured on mankind and “your sons and your daughters will prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions” (Joel 2:28). The Lord is not done with revelations and his mouth may yet have more words

to utter, though many humans may refuse to listen and will mock the idea of continuing revelation.

We don't need to look to the last days to see prophets playing an important role following the ascension of Christ into heaven. Prophets and apostles were an integral part of the original Church that Christ founded. The apostles, of course, were chosen by Christ and given authority to run his Church.

For example, Acts 11 tells us something valuable about Antioch. That is where the disciples were first called *Christians* (v. 26), and then in the next verse, we read, "And in these days came **prophets** from Jerusalem unto Antioch" (v. 27). So as soon as Christians are first mentioned in the Bible, we learn that they were being visited by prophets from Jerusalem, apparently the center or headquarters of the Church. Having living prophets does not make a church antithetical to Christianity—it was an original characteristic of Christianity. (In fact, if one were to rely on the Bible to define who is "Christian" and who is not, having prophets must be one of the criteria for which groups are real Christians, per Acts 11:26–27.) That's not to say that their role and manner of operation is precisely the same as in the modern Church of Jesus Christ, but both prophets and apostles were among the essential offices in the established original Church and played an important role in work of the Church, as Paul explained:

And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ: That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive. (Ephesians 4:11–14)

Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellowcitizens with the saints, and of the household of God; And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone; In whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord. (Ephesians 2:19–21)

Christ is the chief corner stone, but not the only stone in the Church,

which should be framed with the offices and powers God gave it to serve as a holy temple unto God.

If there were apostles and prophets in the early Church, and at least two prophets will be on earth shortly before the Millennium, what is the canonical basis for declaring that we no longer need prophets? Has Christianity with its thousands of churches achieved a unity of the faith? Have Christians developed their “knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ,” free from the influence of Satan? Or do we still have a long way to go?

If we remain fractured, scattered, contentious, and filled with sin and deception, that’s precisely why we need authorized prophets and apostles sent by God in these days to get us back on course. Since the apostles were rejected, persecuted, and slain long ago, surely there is a need for a restoration of divine authority and divinely called offices that the Church may operate as intended, under their direction, acting as representatives of Christ.

Beshears lacks justification in declaring that all the truth and revelation we will ever need is already in the Bible. He also lacks authority to tell us *which Bible* has the full, inerrant word of God—could it be bibles based on the very ancient *Codex Sinaiticus*, which contains several books not in the KJB, such as the Pastor of Hermas with its lengthy treatment of early Christian baptism for the dead?

The Church is meant to be guided by revelation through apostles and prophets. Latter-day Saints rejoice that these offices and the required authority have been restored. One can disagree with them and our doctrines, but if seeking to help others understand the views of Latter-day Saints, it’s helpful to at least point out the obvious issue of missing prophets and apostles in Christianity, selected by revelation and ordained with authority from Christ, to lead, guide, and unify his church. Readers should understand why we feel they are a part of the prophesied “restitution of all things” (Acts 3:19–21).

Beshears complains that the Restoration has apostate if not satanic overtones since it is like “another Gospel,” “another spirit,” and “another Jesus” (2 Corinthians 11:4) (p. 52). The age-old “another Jesus” charge will be levied again in a following chapter. Believing that we need the apostles, prophets, and ongoing revelation that Christ installed in his original Church seems like a poor reason to accuse someone of worshipping a different Jesus.

A final issue in painting Joseph Smith as a self-aggrandizer is the

issue of the title of "Prophet, Priest, and King" that he received from the Council of Fifty. Beshears objects since this is "traditionally reserved by Christians for Christ alone" (p. 52). That term is not in the Bible, but comes from John Calvin. As with many parts of his book, Beshears calls attention to Latter-day Saint arcana that are not really a part of what Latter-day Saints teach and think about. If asked who should be given the title of king, Latter-day Saints (in any nation without kings) would almost certainly say that it is Christ (apart from inevitable wise-cracks about politicians). Few heard of the event where that title for Joseph was proposed and voted on. A helpful discussion comes from the highly documented Mormonr.com website, which indicates that Joseph had some hesitancy about the "king" part of that essentially unused title, and that the Council of course recognized that the Lord is the "King of Kings."⁶⁸

Overall, while Beshears is doing a good job at maintaining a reasonable tone and sharing basic facts, he could do much more to reflect the views and arguments of Latter-day Saints. But his book may help other Evangelicals have some basic talking points against Latter-day Saints and may help some Latter-day Saints understand some of the reasons why some Evangelicals find our faith so problematic.

Chapter 6: The Great Apostasy

Chapter 6 in *40 Questions* treats what is sometimes called "the Great Apostasy." Here Beshears begins with counterarguments. "Jesus promised the disciples that he would build his church through them and that 'the gates of hell shall not prevail against it' (Matt 16:18)" (p. 55). Christ also sent his apostles into the world with another "promise: 'I am with you always, to the end of the age' (Matt 28:20 CSB)" (p. 52). Beshears notes that Christianity would face many challenges, including external opposition and internal heresy, apathy, and rebellion. Such apostasy (of some) was prophesied by Paul in 2 Thessalonians 2:3, a passage Latter-day Saints see as more foreboding than simply the occasional apostasy of some individuals or factions. For Beshears, there can be no need for a restoration, for Christ already won the victory, established a church that could not be overcome by the forces of evil, and would be with that church to the end.

After the preemptive arguments, though, Beshears succinctly and

68. "Joseph Smith's Presidential Campaign," *Mormonr* (website), mormonr.org/qnas/4pB28/joseph_smiths_presidential_campaign.

fairly explains Latter-day Saint views, including the recognition that much truth and beauty was preserved by other Christian faiths in spite of the loss of such things as apostles, prophets, and priesthood authority. He also notes our tendency now to say less about apostasy and more about the blessings of the Restoration.

Then he further explains how wrong it is to think that a restoration would be needed, for it would impugn Christ. Christ said, “I have overcome the world” (John 16:33), also reflecting the victory that his church would have, in Beshears’s view. Christ’s promise to always be with his disciples “unto the end of the world” (Matthew 28:20) is repeated. Here Beshears could prevent potential confusion among readers by pointing out that Christ’s Great Commission was being given not to his disciples in general, but to “the eleven disciples” (v. 16 — that it’s the eleven is also made clear in Mark 16:14–15). And then one should wonder, “How can Christ be with his apostles to the end when the apostles already ended long ago?” He certainly was with them as long as there were true apostles. But the lack of apostles is a serious problem for the Church, one that required the Restoration.

Also repeated is the passage about the gates of hell not prevailing against the Church. Because in that passage, Christ says, “I will build my church,” Beshears explains that it is *his* church, not the result of the disciples but the work of Christ. Therefore, “the Great Apostasy suggests a great failure not of Christians but of their Christ. It assumes Christ failed to build his church like he promised, which is a prospect no one — neither traditional Christian nor Latter-day Saints — should entertain” (pp. 60–61).

I was rather stunned at this logic. God built the house of Israel and freed them from captivity, gave them the law of Moses, and even gave them his temple that he built for them through his servants. These blessings were meant to be “everlasting,” “perpetual,” and “for all generations.” For example, consider Solomon’s temple:

And it came to pass, when Solomon had finished the building of the house of the Lord, and the king’s house, and all Solomon’s desire which he was pleased to do,

That the Lord appeared to Solomon the second time, as he had appeared unto him at Gibeon. And the Lord said unto him, I have heard thy prayer and thy supplication, that thou hast made before me: I have hallowed this house, which thou hast built, to put my name there *for ever*; and mine eyes and mine heart shall be there *perpetually*. (1 Kings 9:1–3)

God built it, accepted it, and put his name there forever, where his eyes and heart will be perpetually — so where is that temple today? Due to the wickedness and apostasy within the house of Israel, it was ultimately desecrated and completely destroyed. The house of Israel was scattered, first the Ten Tribes and then the rest, exiled into captivity. The throne of David was vacated and destroyed, contrary to the expectations that Judah would forever be safe because of the promise to David in 2 Samuel 7:16: "Thine house and thy kingdom shall be established for ever before thee: thy throne shall be established for ever." When David's kingdom was overthrown, it was hard to reconcile that with the tragedy of the Exile.

The blessings of the Lord are often contingent on obeying him. Wickedness and apostasy led to tragic loss, both for the Ten Tribes and for the House of David. Fortunately, many centuries later the Son of David came and completed his mission and now sits on the throne as the King of Kings, and yet will do much to gather Israel back into a covenant relationship.

The blessing of Solomon's temple, the house of the Lord, intended to be perpetual, was utterly destroyed, requiring the temple to later be rebuilt. Then, as Christ prophesied, the day came when Herod's temple also would be destroyed, with not one stone left on top of another. If the sacred temple can be destroyed — twice — when its people rebel and fall into wickedness, this does not impugn God, but those who broke their covenants with him.

Likewise, if the original Church of Jesus Christ, founded on Christ the cornerstone with a foundation of apostles and prophets, which was once "fitly framed together" and once grew "unto an holy temple in the Lord" (Ephesians 2:19–21), should reject God's servants (the prophets and apostles of Ephesians 2:20) and fall into wickedness, is there no risk that it, too, like the temple, could be lost, or at least lose the gift of revelatory leadership and priesthood authority from the apostles and prophets? The temple could fall and need to be rebuilt, and the Church could stray and need to be restored. It has been, and the temple of God has been restored as well.

If the losses of the past were just a temporary apostasy of a few people followed by course correction, whether by the Protestant Reformation or other movements, we might ask where are the divinely authorized apostles and prophets of the church, the foundation (with Christ being the chief cornerstone) of the church, according to Paul? We might also ask where is the corrective force to recover the lost

meanings of the New Testament words for *faith* and *grace*, as discussed above and in the scholarship of Brent Schmidt,⁶⁹ which has led to so much confusion and erosion of scriptural knowledge even among famed pastors of our day? And if Christ is to return suddenly to his temple at the beginning of the Second Coming (Malachi 3:1), how will that temple be built unless there is revelation by God to those who understand what it is?

It is not only Latter-day Saints who bemoan the loss of important knowledge since Bible days. In his monumental *History and Eschatology*, N. T. Wright discusses the gradual loss of understanding regarding temple themes in the Christian message, that were understood and informed the earliest Christians:

But all the signs are that they were bringing into fresh focus biblical themes and ideas which were already current, rather than drawing attention to those biblical themes and ideas in a way which had no parallel or forerunner.

There is of course a sharp difference between this way of approaching a Christian assessment of Jesus and the kind of thing we find among the Fathers of the third or fourth century. It seems to me that the worldview, thought-forms and implicit narrative embedded within what I am calling a Temple-cosmology and a Sabbath-eschatology were *not so much rejected by the later church as simply not grasped*. The music of the scriptures was being played in a different echo-chamber. Different resonances were being set up.

If that was so in the third and fourth centuries, how much more was it the case in the middle ages, and then at the time of what we now call the rise of historical exegesis in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Within on the one hand mediaeval Aristotelianism and on the other hand the Epicureanism that was coming into its own with the Enlightenment, the whole idea of a temple as a place where heaven and earth would be drawn together was straightforwardly incomprehensible.⁷⁰

Wright is focused on Christian theology and the temple and sabbath themes that should guide our understanding of what Christ has achieved for us, and is not calling for a restoration of the physical

69. Schmidt, *Relational Grace* and Schmidt, *Relational Faith*.

70. Wright, *History and Eschatology*, 244.

temple itself. But he might be pleased to understand that the ancient temple has been restored, along with a growing awareness of long-lost ancient temple themes. The Latter-day Saint temple is directly linked to the Sabbath and is a place that unites heaven and earth.

For Latter-day Saints, long-neglected temple themes and motifs from the ancient world infuse the temple beautifully and are a testament to its ancient and inspired origins. It's unfortunate that Beshears did not pick up this awareness from those members of the Church that he has engaged with. I don't expect him to accept the temple as a divine institution, but to understand it from the Latter-day Saint perspective, and why it is so spiritually and intellectually fulfilling for at least some of us. He could have noted the positives we can find in the way it aligns with ancient temple cosmology, sabbath eschatology, covenant-making patterns, and the early Christian views of Christ's merciful ministry to the dead. We are energized by the temple and can understand why the Saints in the great Millennium will serve God there day and night (Revelation 7:15), doing far more than merely meditating. There is sacred work to be done!

Beshears makes his points passionately and clearly, but to help others understand the Latter-day Saint view properly, there should be consideration of the positives that we see in the Restoration and our various responses to his arguments against it.

For example, how do Latter-day Saints respond to the statements about the gates of hell? Surely, he has heard some kind of response to this basic argument. Latter-day Saints may point out, for example, that the Greek word used for *hell* is *Hades*, the world of the dead. Did the gates of Hades, or death, prevail against Christ? No! Though he died, he broke down those gates and became the first fruits of the Resurrection. He died, but only for a while. His body would be brought back to life, restored to its perfect form, reunited with his spirit and made immortal and glorious.

If Christ, against whom the gates of death did not prevail, could die, then is it not possible that His Church could also die—and later be brought back to life (restored)? And is it really “the church” when it is many hundreds of different churches with many disagreements on doctrines and practices? How is that the “one Lord, one faith, one baptism” that Paul spoke of (Ephesians 4:5)?

Those in the Church, who have faith in Christ, have repented of their sins, have been baptized, and endure in following Christ to the end (Matthew 24:13), will also have victory through Christ over the gates of

death, for they will be freed from death and freed from spiritual death because their sins have been removed. The gates of hell do not prevail against those who come unto Christ. But this does not guarantee that the church as an organization turned over to mortals will remain intact and on course. It also can suffer death and need to be revived.

Beshears argues that the Church persisted, and all we need to do is seek for unity among its divisions to return to the foundation, the Bible. Here he overlooks that the work of establishing unity was an important task of the specific apostolic organization Christ gave the Church (see Ephesians 4:11–14).

The Lord's mechanism for bringing the unity that Beshears advocates, and the means for helping individuals avoid false doctrine and personal apostasy, is the existence of Christ's authorized leadership in the Church, especially the existence of apostles and prophets who can receive revelatory guidance.

The importance of revelation from prophets and apostles in the Church of Christ was noted by Paul one chapter earlier, as he discusses the "dispensation of the grace of God" (Ephesians 3:2):

If ye have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which is given me to you-ward: How that by revelation he made known unto me the mystery; (as I wrote afore in few words, Whereby, when ye read, ye may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ) Which in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men, as it is *now revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets* by the Spirit; That the Gentiles should be fellowheirs, and of the same body, and partakers of his promise in Christ by the gospel: Whereof I was made a minister, according to the gift of the grace of God given unto me by the effectual working of his power. (Ephesians 3:2–7)

After Christ had ascended into heaven, God's "holy apostles and prophets" were active in revealing "the mystery of Christ" and in leading the work to bring the gospel to the world. Was their role meant to cease? Why, then, was Judas replaced with Matthias and other apostles added later? Were they meant to no longer be present in the last days? How did the Church transcend them without losing the authority and vital function they provided? Micah foresaw a time when "the sun shall go down over the prophets," a time when "there is no answer

of God” (Micah 3:6–7). This was something to mourn, a time of dark apostasy.

Chapters 21 and 22: On the Nature of God and Christ

Some of my most frustrating experiences in discussing the gospel with other Christians has been the widespread claim, especially from Evangelicals, that we aren’t Christian at all, in spite of our faith in Christ, our testimony of him, our desire to follow him, our daily prayers in his name, and our belief that it is only through his infinite grace that we can be saved.

The problem typically is that we don’t accept some particular point from the post-biblical creeds or because we understand one or more verses of scripture differently than another faith does, thus making our Jesus “different” than theirs. It’s not just that our theology is imperfect — our purported misunderstanding makes our faith in and worship of Christ utterly vain and without salvific power because we don’t get a perfect score on the Great Theology Quiz (GTQ) that God apparently gives on the day of judgment. In other words, we will be eternally damned for misinterpreting some particular verses of scripture. Salvation, apparently, is “by grace alone” plus a perfect GTQ score. The Jesus in my Bible never seemed to be a stickler on metaphysics and theology among the masses he taught, but maybe I’ve been reading a different Bible as well.

After reading Beshears’s welcome introductory words, I looked forward to his thoughts on our status as Christians. I was hoping to encounter gentle views on the fraught question of whether Latter-day Saints should be considered Christians by those who disagree with us. I was hoping that with his newly deepened understanding of our faith and scriptures, he might encourage some of our harshest critics to back off and at least respect the fact that we look to the Jesus Christ of the Bible for salvation and should be recognized as fellow Christians in spite of our differences. On this crucial issue, I was disappointed.

In chapter 22, “What Is the Latter-day Saint View of Jesus Christ?” (pp. 179–85), some of the arguments are deeply puzzling. Beshears begins by warning about the danger of giving an incorrect answer to the question that Christ asked Peter: “Whom do men say that I the Son of man am?” (Matthew 16:13).

Answering incorrectly risks reducing Jesus to a mere prophet or moral teacher in the long tradition of God’s

representatives to Israel. Certainly, this was the case for those who equated him with John the Baptist or “one of the prophets” (Matt 16:14). To answer correctly, though, as Peter did, was to recognize not only that God sent his Messiah to secure our redemption, but that the Son of God himself was dwelling among us on earth, our Immanuel, God with us. So, Peter confessed, “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matt 16:16). (p. 179)

Wonderful, I thought—he knows that’s exactly what we believe and is going to show us a little love here. Emphasis on *little*, I’m afraid. The next paragraph fired off one of the strangest arguments I’ve heard:

An early LDS revelation echoed Peter’s confession, describing the Messiah as “Jesus Christ the Son of the living God,” and signaling Joseph Smith’s intent for his future church. Jesus Christ would play the central role in what would become The Church of *Jesus Christ* of Latter-day Saints.⁷¹ Yet, as the revelation continued, it also promised the imminent restoration of “the fulness of [Christ’s] gospel,” **implying the church he promised to build on Peter’s confession was somehow incomplete** (see Matt 16:18). The Christ of traditional Christianity was insufficient; something more was needed, which latter-day revelation gradually supplied. Thus, the Jesus presented by Mormonism is both familiar and foreign to traditional Christians. Claiming that Latter-day Saints worship an utterly different Jesus than traditional Christians is both rashly uncharitable and **yet precisely true**. (pp. 179–80)

The problem is this:

According to Mormonism, Jesus is literally the Son of God, the firstborn child of God the Father and Heavenly Mother, making Christ our eldest spirit brother, whose membership in the Godhead is not timeless but began after his ascent to godhood by personal progression. **These differences overshadow every shared conviction between traditional Christianity and Mormonism about the nature of the Son of God.** (p. 180)

71. This may be the only time that “The,” in the official name of the Church, is properly capitalized in *40 Questions*.

First, I must point out that we really don't know much about all that happened before the Creation, except that Christ was the Chosen One and was the agent through whom God carried out the Creation. When I hear the term "personal progress," that sounds like what we try to do in mortality with continued growth being possible thereafter. But when it comes to Christ's "personal progress," such as his growth in mortality, his learning, his victory over all and his exaltation, what little we know comes largely from the New Testament:

And the child grew, and waxed strong in spirit, filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon him. (Luke 2:40)

And *Jesus increased in wisdom and stature*, and in favour with God and man. (Luke 2:52)

Though he were a Son, *yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered*; And *being made perfect*, he became the author of eternal salvation unto all them that obey him. (Hebrews 5:8–9)

Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, *he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death*, even the death of the cross. *Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him*, and given him a name which is above every name. (Philippians 2:5–9)

But while he grew, learned, and was exalted by God, he also had glory with God before the world was made and was our Savior and the Lamb of God from the beginning.

Per Beshears, it seems that nothing else that we believe about Christ—his role as our Creator, our Savior, the author and finisher of our faith, the Lamb of God who sacrificed himself for the sins of all mankind, the Messiah, the Resurrection and the Life, the One we seek to follow to the end—none of this matters because we think the one who called himself the Son of God, the one who said, "My Father is greater than I" (John 14:28), the Only Begotten Son, is *literally* the Son of God, contrary to the metaphysics of a fifth-century creed that insists he must be "begotten, not made." The "Father of Spirits" (Hebrews 12:9) must not be the father of the spirit of Christ, because he then

would not be timeless, even though we believe that his essence or “intelligence” was not created and is co-eternal with God (as are we), and importantly, that Christ declared, “Behold, I am Jesus Christ the Son of God. I created the heavens and the earth, and all things that in them are. I was with the Father from the beginning. I am in the Father, and the Father in me; and in me hath the Father glorified his name” (3 Nephi 9:15).

While we know almost nothing of the era before this mortal existence, I may still ask this question: If Christ could transition from a glorious spirit in the presence of God to obtain a mortal body and then a glorified resurrected body, without giving us any just cause to reject his divinity for going through such a change, is it then unthinkable that Christ also could have gone through some kind of transition to obtain whatever a spirit body is, becoming the First Born of God? Would that limit him, make him less united with the Father, less worthy of our worship, less able to be the Creator and our Redeemer? I see no reasonable cause for objecting to the Christ we worship, the Only Begotten and literal Son of God, the Christ of the Bible. Perhaps the problem is that we simply take the Bible too literally.

In any case, the idea that Christ might actually have been the literal Son of God means that differences between our views create “two familiar yet distinct visions of Jesus Christ **and God’s means of salvation**” (p. 185). I may have missed something, but I have not found where he explains why a difference in understanding a detail about the Son of God changes anything about His salvific power, his role as our Redeemer, our need to repent and follow him, etc. Christ is the means of salvation. We may differ on the interpretation of things he said or what or where his body is and whether baptism is essential or just a great idea, but what is it about the means of salvation that is affected—unless one assumes that we are saved by grace, plus a perfect score on some Great Theology Quiz on the day of judgment.

Beshears is adamant that “there is no genetic relationship, so to speak, between God and humanity” (p. 271) and apparently between the Father and the Only Begotten Son. Twice Beshears quotes one phrase of Acts 17:28, “For in him we live, and move, and have our being” (pp. 182, 223), but leaves off the more interesting words that follow:

For in him we live, and move, and have our being; as certain also of your own poets have said, *For we are also his offspring. Forasmuch then as we are the offspring of God, we*

ought not to think that the Godhead is like unto gold, or silver, or stone, graven by art and man’s device.

Knowing that God is our Father, even the “Father of spirits” (Hebrews 12:9 — another unmentioned verse in *40 Questions*), suggests that being God’s offspring is not merely metaphorical. Since the Father is a living God and we are in his image; he is not an inert material. But the heritage of all mankind as children of God is not enough. We need to let God also be the author of our salvation by coming unto him, for Christ “became the author of eternal salvation unto all them that obey him” (Hebrews 5:9). Yes, just as Christ obeyed, we are expected to obey and follow Christ — though we will fail repeatedly and may need to repent — not to earn anything, but to accept his grace in a covenant relationship, for “blessed are they that do his commandments, that they may have right to the tree of life” (Revelation 22:14).

Ultimately, I think it is the possibility of change that is especially difficult for Beshears to bear. “I change not,” Beshears reminds us, from God’s words in Malachi 3:6. But surely Christ’s ministry on Earth reflects some aspects of change: taking on a body, growing, being slain, and taking up that body again, but in a glorious, resurrected form. But these changes do not change his truths, his grace, his love, his status as Creator and Savior, and the path for human redemption. Yet even Paul notes that through that ministry, he was made perfect (Hebrews 5:9). And of course, the Law of Moses was changed and other details of worship. It’s sometimes problematic to stretch a short verse into broad worlds of meaning that it was not meant to cover.

The nature of God and Christ: Can we rely on antiquated views about matter?

What happened to the body of Christ after he was killed? When Mary and others came to his tomb after three days, it was empty. Mary then saw Christ and apparently threw her arms around the resurrected Lord, for he asked her to “hold me not” (JST John 20:17, more true to the Greek than the KJV’s “touch me not”) since he had not yet ascended to His Father in heaven. So apparently that missing body was now his again. Mary was not hugging or touching an immaterial being but the tangible Son of God. Even in the resurrected state, having conquered all, it is clear that relative to Jesus, the Father was physically separate and remote. If he were literally One Being with the Father, there would be no need to ascend to return to himself, no need to pray to the Father when he is alone in the Garden of Gethsemane, and no need

to fast forty days to draw closer to the Father. But now he needed to leave Mary's arms and ascend back to His Father — with his body, of course, a body in the image of the Father, a body such that to see Christ is to see the Father (John 14:9), not because they are the same Being, but because the Son is in the physical image of the Father.

Paul adds another perspective in Hebrews 1:3 when he declares that the resurrected Christ is “the express image of his person,” where the Greek word translated as “express image,” *χαρακτήρ* (*charaktēr*), conveys “an exact representation of his (=God’s) nature” or person,⁷² where “nature” or “person” is *ὑπόστασις* (*hypostasis*), the underlying, fundamental or substantial nature of someone, essence, actual being, reality.⁷³

Shortly after Mary's encounter with the resurrected Lord, Christ walks with two disciples on the road to Emmaus and ends up dining with them, holding bread in his hands, breaking it, and then eating it. He showed them in multiple ways that he has a physical body — one that can walk, see, talk, hear, hold, tear, chew, and swallow. He taught this lesson after showing his apostles his hands and his feet, and when he asked for food and then ate broiled fish and honeycomb before them (Luke 24:36–43). He would teach this same lesson in John 20 as he came to some disciples on the shore of Galilee and asked if they had any fish. He took that fish and dined with them, undoubtedly using his tangible hands to put it in his tangible mouth, and then surely chewed it and swallowed it. His actions again taught them a vital truth: I am the resurrected Lord. This body is real and physical.

When he appeared to his puzzled disciples in Luke 24, they were afraid and thought he was a ghost (or spirit). The Master left no doubt about the materiality of the Resurrection and his physical body:

And he said unto them, Why are ye troubled? and why do thoughts arise in your hearts? Behold my hands and my feet, that it is I myself: handle me, and see; for a spirit hath not flesh and bones, as ye see me have. (Luke 24:38–39)

Was Christ merely deceiving them when he spoke about having flesh and bones now, unlike a spirit and certainly unlike an immaterial being? Surely not!

72. Arndt and Gingrich, *Greek-English Lexicon*, s.v. “χαρακτήρ,” 884, archive.org/details/greekenglishlexi0000will_j9a5/page/884/mode/2up.

73. Arndt and Gingrich, *Greek-English Lexicon*, s.v. “ὑπόστασις,” 854, archive.org/details/greekenglishlexi0000will_j9a5/page/854/mode/2up.

That he was certainly alive was confirmed during the forty-day ministry after the Resurrection in Acts 1:3–11, with “many infallible proofs.” Paul also mentions that he was seen by over 500 brethren at the same time (1 Corinthians 15:6) — of course, in his body. He was later seen by Stephen as he was being martyred, who saw Christ standing next to the Father (Acts 7:55–56) — two Beings, glorified, but in whose image we are created. When Christ returns, we will see him again and know that it is he, the living Lord, with his physical, tangible body.

When our day of resurrection comes, if we have accepted Christ, we, too will be resurrected with a glorious body like his. Will that resurrected body limit us? Does it limit Christ? Does it make him less divine? Paul did not seem to think so:

For our conversation is in heaven; from whence also we look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ: Who *shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body, according to the working whereby he is able even to subdue all things unto himself.* (Philippians 3:20–21)

Paul shows no awareness of Plato’s ancient foundational doctrine about immaterial “forms” being superior to anything made of matter. He does not think that Christ would be limited by having a physical body. In fact, he writes that it is *through Christ’s glorious body* that he is *able* to subdue all things. The body is a divine *tool* that gives him great power. The fusion of spirit and matter in the resurrected body may be some great key to control over all forms of matter and energy, but we have no idea how this works.

The philosophies of men teach that a body is limiting because it is in only one place and because immateriality is higher or more perfect. This is based on imagination coupled with science somewhere in the range of the stone age to the medieval era, where you could only see and know of things in your immediate vicinity. The paradigms of the fourth- and fifth-century creeds have been challenged by minor advances in human science since then. From the world of physics, we know that matter and energy can be equivalent or converted from one to another (Einstein’s $E=mc^2$), that energy in all its forms is not immaterial, that matter can have wave properties as well as particle properties, that matter includes many strange types of particles such as neutrinos that only weakly or rarely interact with matter and bizarre forms that we only learned of recently, especially “dark matter” and “dark energy” that together comprise about 95% of the cosmos, making the

matter-energy that we can interact with and think we understand only a tiny fraction of what we are surrounded by.⁷⁴ Matter and energy are vastly more complex and interesting than we ever imagined.

Stephen Webb in *Mormon Christianity* writes about the implications of new knowledge about the complex nature of matter:

More importantly, scientists have demonstrated that the nature of the material world is much more perplexing than anyone could have imagined prior to the twentieth century. Scientists keep discovering new forms of matter with strange names like quark-gluon plasmas and Bose-Einstein condensates, and nobody knows what dark matter is, even though it constitutes more than 80 percent of the mass of the universe. Physicists have poked so many holes in the atom that there seems to be little left of our common-sense preconceptions of what matter is. The world all around us is not as solid as it once appeared to be.

Scientists have changed their minds about matter, but have theologians? And if theologians did change their minds about matter, wouldn't they have to change their minds about God? Not every Christian doctrine is implicated in theories about matter, but what about those that are?⁷⁵

It seems that all the matter and energy we can see and interact with turns out to be about 5% of the matter-energy of the very material but wondrously mysterious cosmos. Its matter is dominated by the strange "dark matter" that Webb mentions, which has profound effects on galaxies and their motion or structure, but it remains a mystery. Weighing even more heavily on the scales of the cosmos is a strange form of energy that is moving galaxies apart, counteracting gravitational attraction with great power, the so-called "dark energy." Deducting the combined impact of dark matter and dark energy from the matter-energy budget of the cosmos leaves that 5% number for the "normal" matter and energy we can manipulate. There could be still other forms of fine, invisible matter or new energy forms that we

74. See, for example, Chelsea Gohd, "Dark Matter," NASA, (website), science.nasa.gov/dark-matter/; Saul Perlmutter, "Supernovae, Dark Energy, and the Accelerating Universe," *Physics Today*, April 2003, 53–60, supernova.lbl.gov/PDFs/PhysicsTodayArticle.pdf; and Gianfranco Bertone and Dan Hooper, "A History of Dark Matter," Fermi National Accelerator Laboratory Publication (FERMILAB-PUB-16-157-A), Arxiv.org, 26 May 2016, arxiv.org/pdf/1605.04909.

75. Webb, *Mormon Christianity*, 6–7.

still haven't detected in our gazing of the heavens and our experiments in labs. When we finally understand matter and energy, we may be much more ready to understand God and his nature. For now, we must trust God and not make assumptions about what he can or cannot be based on the guesswork and maxims of ancient philosophers with almost no knowledge of what matter and energy are.

Some of these advances in knowledge about matter and energy and how they can be used have supported profound advances in technologies. Today a human being in a weak mortal body can sit on a little chair in a small, isolated room and almost instantly communicate with people all over the world while observing live images not just of numerous parts of the world but of many parts of the heavens. That person may have access to hundreds of sensors or data feeds that can allow him or her to understand what is happening in the economy or the stock market, on a battlefield, an airplane, a naval vessel, or an orbiting space station, and to even take actions that affect any of those. In some cases, this person may have dozens of other intelligent people working with him or her, all handling large tasks, carrying out instructions based on thousands of sources of information that are continuously updated. The fact that this person, as a mortal, may have many physical limitations such as bad knees, poor hearing in one ear, a need for eyeglasses, and a bad case of acne makes little difference.

When the creeds were formulated, a physical body in one place absolutely limited one's knowledge and power—not to mention the problem in Neoplatonic philosophy of a body being made with inferior, lowly matter. But today there is no valid reason to believe that the glorious tangible body of Christ is a limitation that he has long since abandoned, and no valid reason to think that God would have some huge advantage if he were completely immaterial. I think Paul's views on this are more worthy of respect than those of the creeds. It's time for Christian theology to update its views related to matter.

That person sitting on a chair in a small room can literally be in only one place at a time, while having extensive access to and influence over many places. Just based on lessons from our primitive technologies today, the idea that God must be immaterial and cannot have a physical body due to its limitations and the limitations of matter can be viewed as an archaic relic. We know a little more today, including a lot about how much we don't know, but what we do know suggests that we need to update old metaphysical paradigms about God.

A big step toward such an update has been revealed in the

“metaphysics” given to Joseph Smith about the material nature of spirit, the importance of physical bodies, the lack of “immaterial matter,” etc. But for those who don’t want to listen to Joseph, at least listen to Paul: the glorious physical body of Christ (and thus of God the Father as well) adds to his power, for through the majestic tool of that body, “he is able even to subdue all things unto himself.”

Christ and the Father are real and tangible. They have glorious bodies. Christ was not fooling believers when he ate and swallowed food or asked them to feel his hands and his feet. We are created in their image. We will be even more fully in their image once we resurrect.

But Beshears argues that our belief in a God with a physical body is an apostate doctrine. I suggest that were it not for the heavy influence of Neoplatonic Greek philosophy in the early era of Christianity, it would be difficult to see how one could read the witness of the New Testament and conclude that Christ and God are one immaterial Being and that the “image” we are created in has nothing to do with the physical appearance of Jesus Christ and the Father, whose image Christ bears. Only by studious reworking or “wresting” of the scriptures can this thesis be maintained, in my opinion. It’s necessary to support the incomprehensible proclamations of post-biblical creeds. Though we agree with most of the contents in the creeds, the metaphysics are not from the revelations of God.

The revelations of God show us a glorious Being with whom Moses spoke face to face (Exodus 33:11), whose feet the elders of Israel saw (Exodus 24:9–11), whose body hundreds in Israel saw while in the mortal flesh and then in the resurrected flesh (Acts 1 and 1 Corinthians 15:6), whose resurrected hands and feet his disciples felt (Luke 24:36–39). The witness of Stephen about Christ standing at the right hand of the Father (Acts 7:55–56) was not a dangerous “expansion” by Joseph Smith, but a restoration of truth that occurred when Joseph Smith saw the two Beings standing above his head in glorious light. Beshears suggests that if verses about the arms or hands of God suggest that God has a body, then does a poetical metaphor about God being like a bird protecting its young mean that God has feathers and wings? He cites Psalm 91:4 for this: “He shall cover thee with his feathers, and under his wings shalt thou trust: his truth *shall be thy* shield and buckler.” A quick answer to Beshears’s question is “of course not.” Readers need to recognize when poetic metaphors are being applied. The hands and feet of Christ in Jerusalem or of God on the mount don’t appear to be mere metaphors. A more thorough

answer might appeal to the Book of Mormon, where Psalm 91:4 may be alluded to when the voice of Christ speaks to the Nephite peoples right after his Crucifixion, telling them “how oft would I have gathered you as a hen gathereth her chickens, and ye would not” (3 Nephi 10:4–6). They would later see and witness the resurrected Jesus, seeing and handling the marks in his hands and feet, and feeling the mark of a wound in his side, seeing that he is real, physical, triumphant, and glorious — that prior touch of poetry apparently causing no confusion at all.

Beshears also may surprise readers by telling them that we think God “is neither omnipotent (all-powerful overall) nor omniscient (all-knowing overall)” (p. 178). I did not notice this charge supported in chapter 21 or elsewhere. Perhaps there is some trick question behind this, such as “Can God make all numbers even integers only?” But for any practical purposes related to faith, our scriptures repeatedly declare that God knows everything and is all-powerful. Beshears uses the extremely rare terms “maxipotent” and “maxiscient” to distinguish us from traditional Christian belief. According to Google’s Gemini, maxipotent is “a concept in theology and philosophy describing a being with the highest possible power *within the constraints of logic*, distinct from ‘omnipotence,’ which implies unlimited power without logical restrictions.” Of course God should not be expected to do the logically impossible. I don’t think there is real distinction of maxiscient over omniscient, which apparently means knowing the most that is possible to know. That should be enough for all faiths. In any case, I think Beshears’s argument here verges on the maxivacuous.

The oneness of God

The oneness of God occurs multiple times in *40 Questions*, such as in chapter 24, “What Is the Latter-day Saint View of the Trinity” (pp. 195–203). Beshears characterizes our doctrine of the unity of the Godhead as in opposition to the concept of one God (p. 195). Beshears may not recognize that Latter-day Saints are comfortable with the statement that “my Father and I are one” (John 10:30) or “God is one” (Deuteronomy 6:4). The issue is not oneness, but *what kind* of oneness?

Beshears fails to understand or engage with common Latter-day Saint arguments to explain our views. Some of these arguments are important passages in the Bible. While there are prooftexts to support the modern view of the Trinity, key aspects of the confusing doctrine

are not found in the Bible, such as the issues of “one essence” (pp. 183, 197, 270) or being “coessential with God” (p. 197), or being “consubstantial” (p. 201) that Beshears emphasizes to contrast the Latter-day Saint view. Yet these are used to rule out our views as impossible (for example, pp. 201–2).

The simplicity of the New Testament witness of Christ is hard to extricate from the Nicene Creed, for example. Contrast this with the clarity on the nature of the oneness of God provided by Christ himself in his great intercessory prayer in John 17:

And now I am no more in the world, but these are in the world, and I come to thee. Holy Father, keep through thine own name those whom thou hast given me, *that they may be one, as we are*. (John 17:11)

Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word; That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, *that they also may be one in us*: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me.

And the glory which thou gavest me I have given them; that *they may be one, even as we are one*: I in them, and thou in me, that *they may be made perfect in one*; and that the world may know that thou hast sent me, and hast loved them, as thou hast loved me. (John 17:20–23)

Other passages indicating that humans, too, can be one, include:

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for *ye are all one in Christ Jesus*. (Galatians 3:28)

Stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel. (Philippians 1:27)

So we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another. (Romans 12:5)

While Christ fully represents God, and all three members of the Godhead have perfect unity in purpose and will, making them truly one, the Bible abounds in indications that distinct beings are involved. Such arguments have been made many times but are not acknowledged by Beshears. Examples include the popular John 3:16, where the great poignancy of sending one’s Son is weakened if God is not an actual Father sending an actual Son to suffer and die, John 14:28 (“my Father is greater than I”), Matthew 24:36 (“But of that day and

hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels of heaven, but my Father only”), Luke 22:42 (“Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done”), Luke 23:46 (“Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit”), the various prayers of Christ to the Father, John 5:30 (“I seek not mine own will, but the will of the Father which hath sent me”), etc.

On the issue of the Trinity, as with other issues, Beshears mentions our doctrines but not the logic and support behind them, as if we have blindly accepted heretical, unbiblical doctrines that just need a verse or two to be quoted by a loving reader for our eyes to finally be opened. That may be my main complaint about *40 Questions*: it’s shadowboxing that does not reflect an understanding of *the strengths* of the Latter-day Saint position. It seems he’s just attempting to unveil our weaknesses, sometimes real, often merely alleged.

What the book delivers is a far cry from his opening statements about impressive replies from missionaries and an obvious need to dig deeper to understand Latter-day Saints. I don’t believe he delivers on that aspiration. The focus on weaknesses and the neglect of strengths may cumulatively reflect a caricature of our faith rather than provide a deeper understanding for those outside the Church.

Is the Book of Mormon trinitarian?

There are passages in the Book of Mormon declaring God and the Son are one God, and this can sound Trinitarian. This is a fair point, but here Beshears may have missed its clear explanation, very similar to the explanation on John 17, about the nature of this oneness. When Christ blesses the Three Nephites—his disciples in the Americas who asked that their lives might be extended to continue ministering until the Second Coming—his blessing taught important principles about the way God and Christ are one:

And again, ye shall not have pain while ye shall dwell in the flesh, neither sorrow save it be for the sins of the world; and all this will I do because of the thing which ye have desired of me, for ye have desired that ye might bring the souls of men unto me, while the world shall stand. And for this cause ye shall have fulness of joy; and ye shall sit down in the kingdom of my Father; yea, *your joy shall be full, even as the Father hath given me fulness of joy; and ye shall be even as I am, and I am even as the Father; and the Father and I are one.* (3 Nephi 28:9–10)

They are, of course, subservient to God and Christ. They are the creatures, not the Creator. They are the redeemed, not the Redeemer. But as children of God, they can share their joy, a “fullness of joy,” and be like them.

Chapter 23: Failing to Understand the Gift of the Holy Ghost

In chapter 23, on our view of the Holy Spirit, most of the chapter is about Beshears’s views on the Holy Spirit, with a few basics about our views at the end and in the first couple of paragraphs. Not until the last page does Beshears mention the distinction between the working of the Spirit, which can influence anybody, versus the unique “*gift* of the Holy Ghost” which comes by the laying on of hands after repentance and baptism, and is most effective in our lives if we seek to be in tune with the Spirit (yes, that means seeking to obey God and shun sin, repenting as needed).

After pointing out that Latter-day Saints believe repentance and worthiness are needed for the Holy Spirit (no, but they are needed for the effective operation of the gift of the Holy Ghost), Beshears critiques the idea that worthiness could play any role. He says, “The Holy Spirit does not depart the saint when they sin” (p. 188). He asks if a doctor leaves a patient when they are ill, at the time the doctor is needed most.

Of course not. . . . So it is with the Comforter of God. **Personal qualification or worthiness neither invites nor maintains one’s companionship with the Holy Spirit**; instead, it is the Spirit’s love for sinners . . . that keeps his residence in our heart. We do not make ourselves worthy to receive the Holy Spirit rather, the Holy Spirit is received by faith as a gift to make us worthy. (p. 189)

As with common Evangelical assertions that commandment keeping, covenants, and obedience are not needed, I struggle with the claim that our actions do not affect the *companionship* of the Holy Spirit, but again, the Spirit can briefly move sinners but not provide the blessings of the gift of the Holy Ghost. Obedience certainly plays a role. As Acts 5:32 states, “We are his witnesses of these things; and so is also *the Holy Ghost, whom God hath given to them that obey him.*”

In all such discussions, it may be helpful to remind our Evangelical friends that it is possible to depart from God and fall from grace, as Paul explains several times in Hebrews alone:

Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God. But exhort one another daily, while it is called To day; lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin. For we are made partakers of Christ, if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast unto the end. (Hebrews 3:12–14)

For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were *made partakers of the Holy Ghost*, And have tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come, *If they shall fall away*, to renew them again unto repentance; seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame. (Hebrews 6:4–6)

Follow peace with all men, and *holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord: Looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God*; lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled. (Hebrews 12:14–15)

A distinction between being touched by the Spirit and having the enduring gift of or the companionship of the Holy Ghost seems to occur in Acts 2:37–38. After the Spirit “pricked” listeners in their heart, stirring a desire to learn more, they asked the apostles what they should do. Peter answered, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.”

The gift of the Holy Ghost can be considered a fruit of the “baptism by fire and the Holy Ghost” that can accompany baptism (or, in some cases, precede it as may have happened with some Gentiles in Acts 10:45). It can not only purify us and help us remember the things of truth, but can give us comfort and guidance—revelation from God for our personal lives. It is given as a special priesthood ordinance by one with proper authority through “the laying on of hands” (see Acts 8:13–18)—a short prayer given in which the recipient is confirmed as a member of the Church and is told to “receive the Holy Ghost.” Having that gift manifest in our lives as constant companionship does require that we seek to be in tune with the Spirit.

Chapters 27 and 28: Salvation

Chapters 27 and 28 address the Latter-day Saint view of salvation, rehashing many old arguments. I was disappointed that Beshears ignored most Latter-day Saint arguments, such as Christ's response to the rich young man that asked about salvation:

And, behold, one came and said unto him, Good Master, *what good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life?* And he said unto him, Why callest thou me good? there is none good but one, that is, God: but *if thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments.* (Matthew 19:16–17)

I have had Evangelical pastors tell me that Christ here is mocking the rich young man by talking about commandment keeping, which we all should know is impossible. But sarcasm is clearly not the tone. The version in Mark 10 makes that especially clear:

Then Jesus beholding him loved him, and said unto him, One thing thou lackest: go thy way, sell whatsoever thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come, take up the cross, and follow me. (Mark 10:21)

Jesus *loved* him and gave a loving answer tailored for his situation. It was an invitation of love to come follow Jesus. He could have done it. It was not impossible. But he loved his riches more, sadly.

Despite the numerous passages that show how sin puts souls at risk and that believers can fall, Beshears introduces the term “perseverance” as he argues that God won’t let the saints fall. Does this include saints who think that Christ is literally the Son of God? I’m not sure. Beshears cites John 10:28 for this claim, shown here in context:

My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and *they follow me*: And *I give unto them eternal life*; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand. (John 10:27–28)

Of course those who follow Christ will have eternal life. And that implies that they don’t depart from following Christ but endure in the faith, for as Christ said, “He that shall endure unto the end, the same shall be saved” (Matthew 24:13). It is important to always recall that promises of blessings are contingent upon following God. God does not remove the freedom to rebel.

Chapter 30: “What Is the Latter-day Saint View of Marriage and Family”

This chapter flounders with questions and speculation that reminded me of the Pharisees throwing wild marriage scenarios at Christ to object to the doctrine of resurrection. There are speculations about God and Heavenly Mother and the procreation of spirit children. We don’t know about this. Beshears’s speculations seem more meant to ridicule than to promote understanding. But Beshears soon gets back to more familiar ground by objecting that people “neither marry nor are given in marriage” in the resurrection (Matthew 22:30). They aren’t baptized, either, nor ordained to the priesthood nor given the gift of the Holy Ghost. We believe that these ordinances need to be taken care of on earth before the resurrection and entering into heaven. Christ’s rather evasive answer from people that were looking for trouble, not an explanation, needs to be considered in context.

One of Beshears’s frustrating questions is aimed at eternal marriage: “Whom do we look forward to being with the most in the after-life? Our spouse and families, or God? If the answer is not the latter, then marriage and family have become an idol.” Ouch. Why not both? This is not an either-or question relevant to the eternities. God has given us both. Eternal relationships with God and loved ones will be the greatest blessing of heaven. Loving our families with joy and perfect charity in the next life is not idolatry.

This chapter is also another place for Beshears to raise the specter of polygamy.

Chapter 34: The Temple

Beshears reports that there is a Freemasonry influence in the Temple. This is a topic many Latter-day Saints can discuss — perhaps he was aware of the numerous works of scholarship showing the alleged Masonic influence does little to explain the temple, though some superficial elements were borrowed. Jeffrey Bradshaw’s recent book may be especially helpful.⁷⁶

Most troubling, though, is the harsh take on covenants. He sees covenant-making to follow God to be a corrupt practice: “Not only is it impossible to be sanctified by making and keeping covenants with

76. Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, *Freemasonry and the Origins of Latter-day Saint Temple Ordinances* (Orem, UT: Interpreter Foundation; Salt Lake City: Eborn Books, 2022).

God, but it **nullifies the gospel's power**, 'for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing' (Gal 2:21, NIV)" (p. 289). Note, however, that Paul's many references to the law are to the Law of Moses, not the gospel of Jesus Christ which also has commandments. Equating all obedience with the law (the Law of Moses) is improper.

Given the number of times that Christ urges us and warns us to keep the commandments, to follow his teachings, to reject sin, etc., I am dismayed that one's theology can dim such teachings so much that they are virtually subtracted. Following Christ and living his teachings are what we are supposed to do—this enhances the gospel's power to help us do more good, overcome more sin, resist the power of darkness, and serve God with all our heart, might, and strength. It is what faith (the ancient concept of *pistis*) is all about: faithfulness in a covenant relationship, not just intellectual belief.

Chapter 35: "Why Do Latter-day Saints Baptize for the Dead?"

The Bible, according to Beshears, excludes the possibility of baptism for the dead or for preaching to the dead, for Hebrews 9:27 teaches us that "it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment" (p. 298). I think the logic is that since preaching of the gospel is not mentioned between dying and the judgment, it cannot happen. This is a logical fallacy. The judgment *does* come after death—but that does not mean nothing else can occur before the judgment.

This logic is especially problematic given that Peter twice points to the mercy of the gospel being preached to the dead. To his credit, Beshears cites both passages, 1 Peter 3:18–20 and 1 Peter 4:6, as passages Joseph Smith used, but does not quote them or discuss their content. 1 Peter 4:6 is quite clear: "For for this cause *was the gospel preached also to them that are dead*, that they might be judged according to men in the flesh, but live according to God in the spirit." The other passage tells us that after Christ was killed, "he went and *preached unto the spirits in prison*" (1 Peter 3:19). These are evidences supporting Latter-day Saint views, along with 1 Corinthians 15:29, "Else what shall they do which are *baptized for the dead*, if the dead rise not at all? why are they then baptized for the dead?" These passages are not the source of our teachings and practices related to baptism for the dead. Rather, it was direct revelation to Joseph Smith that gave us knowledge of this practice and instructions on how to do it.

Beshears suggests that many confusing possibilities have been introduced by scholars on what 1 Corinthians 15:29 really means (pp. 296–97), and so they have been left “shrugging their shoulders” because it is so uncertain (p. 297n30). Here is where I hope dialogues with informed Latter-day Saints might have helped him recognize the growing evidence related to baptism for the dead as a legitimate Christian practice and the preaching to the dead as a serious aspect of early Christianity.⁷⁷

One of the most important sources is the *Pastor of Hermas*, the early Christian text that was accepted as scripture by some early Christians and even is present in *Codex Sinaiticus*, the fourth century manuscript that is one of the earliest Bibles we have. (To avoid adding or subtracting from scripture, maybe it’s time to bring Hermas back.) Similitude 9 in Hermas is the section where baptism for the dead is introduced as a parable. Richard L. Andersen explains:

The Shepherd of Hermas is not a source for new doctrine, for its main theme is preserving the faith. Its author is dutiful and conservative, seeking to hold to what he had been taught in a Christian career going back to the turn of the century and Clement of Rome, whom he mentions. . . . Thus, he is a source for the common doctrines and practices of the Christian Church. And he welds preaching to the dead to baptism for the dead. These doctrines come in the allegory of building the tower, which the angel defines as the Church [Anderson cites *The Shepherd of Hermas*, Similitude 9.16.2–4⁷⁸]. The three lower courses of stones represent the foundation generations of the righteous men of the Old Testament, with the last and largest number of 40 represent-

77. See, for example, David L. Paulsen and Brock M. Mason, “Baptism for the Dead in Early Christianity,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 19, no. 2 (2010): 22–49, scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms/vol19/iss2/4/; David L. Paulsen, Roger D. Cook, and Kendel J. Christensen, “The Harrowing of Hell: Salvation for the Dead in Early Christianity,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 19, no. 1 (2010): 56–77, scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms/vol19/iss1/7/; and Janet Ewell, “Easter and Doctrine and Covenants 138: Our Harrowing of Hell, Our *Descensus Christi ad Inferos*, Our Anastasis,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 68 (2026): 243–88, interpreterfoundation.org/journal/easter-and-doctrine-and-covenants-138-our-harrowing-of-hell-our-descensus-christi-ad-inferos-our-anastasis.

78. An online version of *Pastor of Hermas* is *The Shepherd of Hermas* (Book III), New Advent (website), newadvent.org/fathers/02013.htm.

ing the “prophets and teachers of the preaching of the Son of God.” These have the seal, clearly defined as baptism by (1) the requirement “to come up through the water that they might be made alive”; (2) the quotation of John 3:5, referring to water as the way to “enter into the kingdom of God”; and (3) the summary, “the seal, then, is the water.” As the following passage begins, Hermas’s messenger is explaining that the pre-Christian dead — “who had fallen asleep” — were also baptized; this is followed by the explanation that the New Testament priesthood bearers had been baptized again to make this possible [Anderson cites Sim. 9.16.3–7; see also *The Third Book of Hermas*, Sim. 9, vs. 152–160]:

“So these also who had fallen asleep received the seal of the Son of God and ‘entered into the kingdom of God’. . . . This seal, then, was preached to them also, and they made use of it ‘to enter into the kingdom of God.’”

“Why, Sir,” said I, “did the 40 stones also come up with them from the deep, although they had received the seal already?”

“Because,” said he, “these apostles and teachers who preached the name of the Son of God, having fallen asleep in the power and faith of the Son of God, preached also to those who had fallen asleep before them, and themselves gave to them the seal of the preaching. They went down therefore with them into the water and came up again, but the latter went down alive and came up alive, while the former, who had fallen asleep before, went down dead but came up alive. Through them, therefore, they were made alive, and received the knowledge of the name of the Son of God. . . . For they had fallen asleep in righteousness and in great purity, only they had not received this seal. You have then the explanation of these things also.”

Some parts of the above message are obvious, and others are clear in the light of Hermas’s purpose in writing. Since the above words explain the vision-parable or allegory, they relate to Christian doctrine and practice. The

plainest point is that after death the "apostles and teachers" continued their missionary labors in the spirit world, adding the dimension that preaching to the dead continued after Christ. The consequences of that doctrine are revolutionary. Thus, the spirits do not merely receive an announcement of Christ's victory; continued preaching assumes individual growth there and acceptance of gospel principles beyond simple belief. Thus, the emphasis on baptism for the pre-Christian righteous logically fits the scheme. But what kind of baptism? . . .

Hermas's book proves that he is a Christian traditionalist, and the spirit-world passage underlines the point by three repetitions of the words of John 3:5 on entering the kingdom of God through water. He is so bound by scripture that he cannot imagine salvation without baptism, and he obviously writes with consciousness of Peter's words on preaching in the spirit world. Thus, Hermas also writes with awareness of Paul's reference to baptisms of the living for the dead. Those "fallen asleep" in his passage are, of course, the dead, and his subject closes with plain words about the righteous who had died without baptism. So Hermas is discussing what Christians believe about baptism for the dead; so this "pious and conscientious" author certainly refers to the known baptism for the dead and not the unknown. That explains his question to the angel, for he found it contradictory that the New Testament priesthood leaders went into the deep again, the symbol of their personal baptisms. If they would merely baptize others, there could be no puzzle. So Hermas's question was really about rebaptism of those already baptized. The explanation was that both groups go into the water, but the effect of remission of sins is only for those dying without baptism. This cooperative baptism is proxy baptism, the only type mentioned by the "apostles and teachers" that he refers to. The joint immersion in water is part of the symbolism not expressly interpreted, referring to the earthly baptisms that were a shared experience of the living and the dead.⁷⁹

79. Richard L. Anderson, *Understanding Paul* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1983), 408–10.

Beshears gives a reasonable summary of our practice of baptism for the dead, without mentioning how it is prized by many members as a wonderful expression of God's mercy, ensuring that all will have a chance to hear the Gospel and accept it if they will.

He concludes by suggesting that baptism isn't really essential:

In the end, the eternally blessed are those whom God ushers into his celestial presence—who “enter the city by the gates” (Rev 22:14 ESV)—with cleansed robes, not having washed their souls by water but having “washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the lamb” (Rev 7:14 ESV). (p. 298)

This passage reflects another logical fallacy: those who have their robes made white by the blood of the lamb cannot be assumed to have never been baptized nor to have never repented of sins nor to have never offered prayer simply because such details are not mentioned in a verse that was never meant to be a comprehensive checklist of man's duties in following Christ. John 3:5 should come to mind to those tempted to dismiss baptism as essential: “Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.” It was the sinless Christ that set the example and was baptized. (By the way, it is the baptism of fire and the Holy Ghost that purges sins, not baptism by water, as the Book of Mormon consistently explains.⁸⁰)

There is also some irony in Beshears's citation of Revelation 22:14 in suggesting that keeping commandments such as baptism is not really needed. What is left out of that verse is significant:

Blessed are they that do his commandments, that they may have right to the tree of life, and may enter in through the gates into the city.

Again, nothing man can do can possibly overcome death or remove our sins. We cannot merit eternal life by our deeds, but we can meet the conditions attached to the infinite, unearnable gift of grace. Those who keep the commandments gain access to the miraculous gift of the tree of life and may enter the holy city or kingdom of God.

It is also somewhat ironic in quoting Revelation 7:14 about those

80. Noel B. Reynolds, “Understanding Christian Baptism through the Book of Mormon,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 51, no. 2 (2012): 4–37, byustudies.byu.edu/article/understanding-christian-baptism-through-the-book-of-mormon.

wearing white robes, often a temple symbol, for the next verse tells us what they are doing during the great Millennium:

Therefore are they before the throne of God, and *serve him day and night in his temple*: and he that sitteth on the throne shall dwell among them. (Revelation 7:15)

The temple, which was an essential part of the revealed ancient Jewish faith, was the sacred house of God revered by Christ where he taught often and where he cast out those who made it a place of profit. It is the place where early Christians gathered often while they could ("And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple . . .," Acts 2:46), the place where Christ will return swiftly at the beginning of the Millennium (Malachi 3:1), and that place that will also be the focal point for those serving God in the Millennium. And yet, somehow, we are to believe that a temple is no longer needed and that temple ordinances such as baptism for the dead and the endowment are unneeded and reflect a lack of faith in Christ.

Mainstream Christianity, having been without a temple for nearly 2,000 years, has out of necessity created many reasons to justify its absence. For Latter-day Saints, it is a testimony to the reality of the Restoration that the temple has been restored. Here Beshears might have considered having dialogues to let Latter-day Saints share their experiences and the joy and blessings they find in the temple. He might have been surprised to dialogue with Latter-day Saints familiar with ancient temple themes and their abundance in our scriptures, in the Ancient Near East, and their beauty as restored in the temple. He might have been fascinated to learn, for example, how an ancient formulation for covenants, the "covenant formulary" as discovered by Bible scholars and others in the twentieth century, is one of many factors supporting the ancient nature of the restored temple.⁸¹ While I appreciate his willingness to talk to Latter-day Saints, I hope he will keep asking and listening.

Chapter 37: Concerns of Latter-day Saints

Chapter 37, "What Are the Concerns Latter-day Saints Have About Traditional Christianity?" (pp 309–14), could have been a long chapter

81. See Klaus Baltzer, *The Covenant Formulary: in Old Testament, Jewish, and Early Christian Writings*, trans. David E. Green (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), online at archive.org/details/covenantformular0000balt/page/n5/mode/2up. Also see Ricks, "The Treaty/Covenant Pattern."

given the many issues that various Latter-day Saints might express over the doctrines or even sometimes the behaviors of other Christians. But in general, our attitude is one of gratitude for the good they do and respect for the work that has been done to preserve scriptures and share the gospel. We do have some genuine concerns over the different definitions of key terms like *faith*, *grace*, and *Christian*.

One legitimate concern is with the behaviors of some groups that won't recognize that Latter-day Saints worship Jesus Christ and are Christians. Telling their flocks that we aren't even Christian seems like a disservice, though I can understand the practical motivations for that. However, it's interesting that in Christian history, the heretical losers of debates behind the creeds such as the Arians, who had some views close to ours on the relationship of the Son to the Father, were not said to be non-Christian for having the "wrong" understanding. Apparently, we're much worse than the ancient heretics.

Discussing such concerns might have made a more fascinating chapter, along with many other topics I could list, but instead only two concerns are raised: 1) traditional Christianity was Hellenized, and 2) traditional Christianity is fractured. The answer to #1 reflects, in my opinion, a lack of understanding about how serious the problem is (Beshears argues that it may actually be Hellenism that was Christianized), and the answer to #2, a "concern" that is not high on my list, is the truly unconvincing claim that "the church is united not by polity or creeds but by the lordship of the resurrected Son of God, who transcends confessional and institutional boundaries" (p. 313). That majestic transcendence of policy, creeds, and boundaries of doctrine or organization, allowing a huge variety of conflicting theologies to share the common umbrella of Christianity, apparently does not apply to the Latter-day Saints, of course. We stand far outside that umbrella due to our differences in metaphysics or in the interpretation of certain Bible verses, and especially our taking of some Bible passages too seriously, such as the Son of God actually being the literal Son of God.

This chapter particularly did not have the feel of being the fruit of genuine or serious dialogues with believing and reasonably well-educated members of the Church. It could have been much more interesting.

Other Brief Notes

Chapter 7, "What Is the First Vision" (pp. 63–69), is a generally accurate and respectful discussion of the First Vision, the challenges with

multiple accounts, and the significance of that vision in the commissioning of Joseph Smith as a prophet. His objections to what Joseph claimed to see (two Beings) are given elsewhere.

Chapter 11, “Is Mormonism Just an American Religion?” (pp. 89–94), is a generally factual treatment of the international Church. However, Beshears is not willing to call us a “global church” even though most of our members are now outside the United States:

A truly global religion does not necessarily have a large quantitative presence but a strong qualitative presence, one that adapts to local norms of ritual and values without sacrificing social and religious distinctives that make it unique. (p. 93)

I’ve never seen that definition, which might have been better placed in the chapter on the apostasy. Beshears suggests that, to reach true globalization, the Church should decentralize control so that various peoples can develop their own unique versions of Mormonism (p. 93). With a touch of irony, this is right after chapter 10, “Are There Other Traditions That Claim to Be Mormon?” (pp. 83–88), where he criticizes the Church for having “splintered” into so many other “schisms” (expressions of the Restoration movement) (pp. 84–85). He argues that if authority from God “were restored in the latter days and manifested in a central prophetic figure, then presumably the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints would be less susceptible to the discord that partitioned other churches” (p. 83). We do have a lot of related expressions of our faith, as did early and later Christianity. I’m not sure his critique is valid, but the rise of multiple expressions is a fascinating and complex story,⁸² and his observations in both chapters 10 and 11 are made in good faith.

Chapter 12, “How Do Latter-day Saints View the Bible” (pp. 97–103), repeats the claim that the Bible is entirely sufficient and final. If any more scripture were needed, this would be dangerous, Beshears explains, because it would undermine the doctrine of *sola scriptura* (not found in the Bible, ironically) and this in turn would jeopardize the authority of scripture by disregarding its inerrancy (p. 102). Here it would

82. See R. Jean Addams, “Aftermath of the Martyrdom: Aspirants to the Mantle of the Prophet Joseph Smith,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 62 (2024): 335–402, interpreterfoundation.org/journal/aftermath-of-the-martyrdom-aspirants-to-the-mantle-of-the-prophet-joseph-smith.

have been wise to note that Latter-day Saints sometimes worry that Evangelical views may elevate a book to almost divine status, a book that has been written, copied, translated, and printed by one fallible mortal after another, giving us numerous variants among the surviving ancient manuscripts, none of which is original, and with many variations over the centuries even in what books to include, some obvious gaps such as missing words or even missing books, and many shades of meaning among the numerous versions of the standard Bible that exist today. Which of these variants for every verse are the sufficient ones? Which Bible is the most inerrant one? And who is authorized to answer that question once and for all?

Chapter 17, “What Is the Book of Abraham?” (pp. 135–42), offers the well-known objections to the Book of Abraham and its apparent lack of connection to the surviving fragments of the Joseph Smith Papyri, but it fails to note that Latter-day Saint scholars such as Stephen Smoot, John Gee, Kerry Muhlestein, and others have offered not only reasonable explanations for many of the alleged problems, but many indications of ancient roots in the Book of Abraham translation. There are reasonable intellectual arguments, in the view of many Latter-day Saints who have examined the evidence, to recognize that the Book of Abraham was not simply made up by Joseph Smith.

Chapter 25 on our view of the Creation makes a number of statements that need to be viewed with caution, such as stating that we believe that “whatever now exists always has existed” (p. 208). That’s certainly not true of my neighborhood, nor of most neighborhoods across the galaxies. Caution is needed to avoid making too much of statements on the eternal nature of matter. Such doctrines also do not mean that God did not select and orchestrate the marvelous properties of matter that make life and suns possible, nor is he a mere “carpenter-God” (p. 211). New scientific perspectives, even just $e=mc^2$, could have strengthened the discussion. Some peer review from a scientifically oriented Latter-day Saint could have made this chapter more meaningful.

Similar problems occur in chapter 26 on our view of the nature of humanity. Brief statements are sometimes taken to extreme applications. There the issue of the image of God is discussed, insisting that this cannot refer to the physical appearance (as the Bible seems to imply) but to human identity. Again, reasonable arguments often made for the Latter-day Saint position are not given much, if any, attention.

Chapter 30 on our views on the sacrament or Lord’s supper was

nicely done. It is one of my favorite chapters in *40 Questions*. I especially appreciate Beshears's recognition of the links between the sacrament and baptism—many don't notice that—and the profound connection of the sacrament prayers to the Book of Mormon.

Conclusion

Beshears has done some good work in exploring a wide range of questions about Latter-day Saints. His chapters are readable, tend to focus on important areas—at least from the perspective of Evangelicals—and may be a useful tool for those wanting to share Evangelical perspectives with Latter-day Saints or for Latter-day Saints wanting to better understand the discomfort some Evangelicals may have with our doctrines. He naturally explains differences with respect to his "traditional Christianity" (recent Protestantism) and often gets critical of the Latter-day Saint position, but without showing awareness of potential rebuttals or potential strengths of many of the positions he disagrees with. Yet some of his chapters are even-handed, accurate, and deserve credit for good observations.

To me it was helpful to see just how problematic our metaphysics are to him—deep, mysterious issues involving the nature of matter and origins of the universe that we really know almost nothing about. Those principles can be inspiring, in my opinion, but clash with some basic precepts of Beshears's perspective. I think there is a need for further dialogue in light of breakthroughs coming from modern physics and other scientific fields that may help alleviate concerns about alleged limitations of matter and a physical body, and perhaps will help resolve other concerns. But some of the differences may be irreconcilable, especially if some of the assumptions of the creeds remain firmly in place. Reading *40 Questions* may help Latter-day Saints understand what is likely irreconcilable and where potential lies for more common ground and cooperation in the future, through the kind of dialogues Beshears has already been pursuing.

I disagree with many things Beshears writes, but I also appreciate what an impressive and good-faith effort went into this book. I congratulate him for it. I thank him for his interest in our faith and hope he will continue having dialogues with us in the future.



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