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Questioning: The Divine Plan

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QUESTIONING: THE DIVINE PLAN

Daniel C. Peterson

Some critics of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, chiefly of the secular variety, claim that Latter-day Saints are mind-controlled robots who are forbidden to think for themselves. I collected an example of this claim nearly twenty years ago that will serve to represent many other such expressions before and since.

On 3 March 1997, a caller named Laurie (or something similar) phoned in to a program on Salt Lake City's television station KUTV (Channel 2) called "Take Two." The host, Rod Decker, had been discussing past disagreements among the General Authorities with his two guests, D. Michael Quinn and Marvin Hill. Speaking with obvious irony, she wanted to know how such disagreements could possibly occur, since Mormonism forbids unregulated individual opinion:

Laurie: "Mormon scripture itself discourages independent thought when it states that, and I quote, 'The thinking has already *been* done,' and when independent thought —"

Rod Decker: "All right. I'll ask him that, okay? We've heard that. 'When the Church leaders speak, the thinking has been done.'"¹

To my frustration, neither Mr. Decker, Dr. Quinn, nor Dr. Hill challenged the substance of the quoted passage, nor did anyone ask the caller for a scriptural reference.

The source for the statement in question is actually a June 1945 ward teachers' message, and it doesn't occur in any Latter-day Saint scriptural book. Since its first appearance seventy years ago, however, it has become quite popular among certain critics of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Back in the early 1980s, for example, in an article addressed to intellectually inclined religious skeptics, George D.

1 I cite my own transcription of the exchange.

Smith, the owner of Signature Books, cited the statement as evidence of the true nature of Mormonism.²

In 1986, in response to such claims, a private 1945 repudiation of the statement by George Albert Smith was published in the Mormon-oriented journal *Dialogue*.³ Since, at the time of his repudiation, George Albert Smith was the president of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, some of us fondly hoped that his forceful rejection of the statement would euthanize it. After all, as the June 1945 ward teachers' message itself explains, "When our leaders speak, the thinking has been done. ... When they give direction, it should mark the end of controversy."

But such hopes were naïve. Probably no other ward teachers' message from the 1940s is remembered today. This one, however, lives on. Despite the 1986 *Dialogue* article, for example, one critic used it to criticize the church during an address to the 1991 annual meeting of the Mormon History Association.⁴ And a simple search on the key words from the statement will easily find scores of sites where it's still used to reveal the alleged truth about Mormonism.

In that light, I would like to submit a few brief words in favor of thinking and questioning.

The restoration of the Gospel in the latter days began with earnest questions. Consider, for instance, the canonized statement from Joseph Smith about the circumstances leading to his First Vision:

In the midst of this war of words and tumult of opinions, I often said to myself: What is to be done? Who of all these

2 George D. Smith, "Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon," *Free Inquiry* 4 (Winter 1983/84): 27.

3 The full text of the ward teaching message, as well as that of a letter of concerned inquiry that it inspired from Rev. J. Raymond Cope and the important reply of President George Albert Smith, can be found in "A 1945 Perspective," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 19/1 (1986): 35–9. For a different (and, since they were career anti-Mormons, predictably hostile) viewpoint on the exchange between Rev. Cope and Pres. Smith, see Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *The Mormon Purge* (Salt Lake City: Utah Lighthouse Ministry, 1993), 56. In a remarkable passage, the Tanners effectively contended that Pres. Smith's statement, in which he refused to assume the role of a religious dictator, must be rejected. Why? Because, they contended, he and his successors and colleagues actually want to be religious dictators and, thus, deny that anybody ever has a right to reject or even question their statements.

4 Edward H. Ashment, "Canon and the Historian," a paper presented at the 26th annual meeting of the Mormon History Association, 1 June 1991, page 10.

parties are right; or, are they all wrong together? If any one of them be right, which is it, and how shall I know it?

While I was laboring under the extreme difficulties caused by the contests of these parties of religionists, I was one day reading the Epistle of James, first chapter and fifth verse, which reads: *If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him.*

At length I came to the conclusion that I must either remain in darkness and confusion, or else I must do as James directs, that is, ask of God. I at length came to the determination to “ask of God,” concluding that if he gave wisdom to them that lacked wisdom, and would give liberally, and not upbraid, I might venture.

So, in accordance with this, my determination to ask of God, I retired to the woods to make the attempt.⁵

We all know the spectacular, even world-transforming, answer that Joseph Smith received when he went into that grove of trees near his home with some questions and a desire for wisdom. It was, certainly, a far bigger answer than he had anticipated.

And the public portion of his prophetic ministry, effectively the rest of his life, also began with questions:

On the evening of the above-mentioned twenty-first of September, after I had retired to my bed for the night, I betook myself to prayer and supplication to Almighty God for forgiveness of all my sins and follies, and also for a manifestation to me, that I might know of my state and standing before him.⁶

There followed the appearance of Moroni and the recovery of the Book of Mormon, which is the founding and distinctive text of the restored church.

The importance of asking questions and the assurances that God will answer them runs like a *leitmotif* throughout the Book of Mormon.

5 Joseph Smith-History 1:10–11, 13–14.

6 Joseph Smith-History 1:29.

Nephi, for example, tries to encourage his rebellious and disobedient older brothers to ask:

For he truly spake many great things unto them, which were hard to be understood, save a man should inquire of the Lord; and they being hard in their hearts, therefore they did not look unto the Lord as they ought. ...

And I [Nephi] said unto them: Have ye inquired of the Lord?⁷

In counseling his son Corianton, the prophet Alma recalls his own questioning, which had led him to deeper doctrinal understanding:

Behold, [the Lord] bringeth to pass the resurrection of the dead. But behold, my son, the resurrection is not yet. Now, I unfold unto you a mystery; nevertheless, there are many mysteries which are kept, that no one knoweth them save God himself. But I show unto you one thing which I have inquired diligently of God that I might know — that is concerning the resurrection. ...

Therefore, there is a time appointed unto men that they shall rise from the dead; and there is a space between the time of death and the resurrection. And now, concerning this space of time, what cometh of the souls of men is the thing which I have inquired diligently of the Lord to know; and this is the thing of which I do know.⁸

A letter of the prophet Mormon, preserved and cited by his son Moroni, recounts how that late Nephite leader, troubled by disputes concerning the baptism of very young children, had gone to the Lord in prayer with questions on the subject:

For immediately after I had learned these things of you I inquired of the Lord concerning the matter. And the word of the Lord came to me by the power of the Holy Ghost.⁹

The entire missionary program of the Church of Jesus Christ is, in fact, predicated upon the necessity of seekers asking and of God granting light in response:

⁷ 1 Nephi 15:3, 8.

⁸ Alma 40:3, 9.

⁹ Moroni 8:7.

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.

And by the power of the Holy Ghost ye may know the truth of all things.¹⁰

“Ask,” said the Savior in his Sermon on the Mount, “and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you.”¹¹

The story of the brother of Jared, recounted in the book of Ether in the Book of Mormon, provides an especially instructive case of asking questions. In preparation for the approaching transoceanic voyage, the Jaredites, under his direction, have constructed special seafaring vessels. But they’re so tightly sealed that he wonders how the passengers traveling in them will be able to have any light. “Behold, O Lord, wilt thou suffer that we shall cross this great water in darkness?”¹²

But the Lord doesn’t respond with a simple answer. Instead, he replies with a question of his own (“What will ye that I should do that ye may have light in your vessels?”), offering a pair of possible solutions to the problem but pointing out their impracticability.¹³ The situation, the Lord indicates, is really quite difficult, in view of the nature of the boats and the voyage they’re about to undertake. “Therefore,” he asks again, “what will ye that I should prepare for you that ye may have light when ye are swallowed up in the depths of the sea?”¹⁴

If the brother of Jared was expecting merely to ask a question and receive a simple answer in response, he was surely disappointed. Instead, the Lord has encouraged him to give his own thought to the problem and to return with his own proposed solution to it. And that, of course, is exactly what he does (as recorded in the following chapter), and it leads to one of the most remarkable theophanies in all of scripture. It’s yet another illustration of the principle that “out of small things” (in this

10 Moroni 10:4–5.

11 Matthew 7:7.

12 Ether 2:22.

13 See Ether 2:23.

14 See Ether 2:24–25.

case, an inquiry about interior lighting for some boats, and a proposal involving a few rocks) “proceedeth that which is great.”¹⁵

The Lord doesn’t intend for us to be marionettes. He has no intention of being our puppeteer:

Verily I say, men should be anxiously engaged in a good cause, and do many things of their own free will, and bring to pass much righteousness;

For the power is in them, wherein they are agents unto themselves.¹⁶

In an April 1829 revelation given to Oliver Cowdery through Joseph Smith at Harmony, Pennsylvania, the Lord offers a commentary on the general principle that seems to be involved here. Oliver had sought to be included in the process of retrieving the Book of Mormon, not merely as a scribe but as, himself, a translator. But he expected the translation to simply be handed to him, apparently without significant effort on his part. “Behold,” the Lord gently chided him,

you have not understood; you have supposed that I would give it unto you, when you took no thought save it was to ask me.

But, behold, I say unto you, that you must study it out in your mind; then you must ask me if it be right, and if it is right I will cause that your bosom shall burn within you; therefore, you shall feel that it is right.¹⁷

Perhaps, in its own way, Doctrine and Covenants 88, the wonderful revelation given at Kirtland, Ohio, through the Prophet Joseph Smith at the very end of 1832 and the beginning of 1833, also provides some insight into this principle:

And as all have not faith, seek ye diligently and teach one another words of wisdom; yea, seek ye out of the best books words of wisdom; seek learning, even by study and also by faith.¹⁸

In other words, questions about the Gospel aren’t to be posed in a purely secular and academic way, though conventional tools of careful

15 Doctrine and Covenants 64:33.

16 Doctrine and Covenants 58:28.

17 Doctrine and Covenants 9:7–8.

18 Doctrine and Covenants 88:118.

reading, gathering information, thought, and analysis are often both relevant and appropriate. Nor are they to be asked in a merely passive manner, expecting the Lord to do our work for us while we simply sit back and wait (preferably not too long).

A few more examples of righteous and appropriate questioning may be helpful:

When Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery were ordained to the Aaronic priesthood under the hands of the resurrected John the Baptist, this significant event — marking the return of divine priesthood authority to the earth, presaging the imminent restoration of the Melchizedek priesthood, and permitting the first divinely authorized baptisms in many centuries — came in response to questions that arose from their translation of the Book of Mormon and from a desire for greater understanding: “We ... went into the woods,” Joseph Smith later wrote, “to pray and inquire of the Lord respecting baptism for the remission of sins, that we found mentioned in the translation of the plates.”¹⁹

According to the note that precedes it in the published scripture text, Section 76 of the Doctrine and Covenants records

A vision given to Joseph Smith the Prophet and Sidney Rigdon, at Hiram, Ohio, February 16, 1832. Prefacing the record of this vision, Joseph Smith’s history states: “Upon my return from Amherst conference, I resumed the translation of the Scriptures. From sundry revelations which had been received, it was apparent that many important points touching the salvation of man had been taken from the Bible, or lost before it was compiled. It appeared self-evident from what truths were left, that if God rewarded every one according to the deeds done in the body the term ‘Heaven,’ as intended for the Saints’ eternal home, must include more kingdoms than one. Accordingly, ... while translating St. John’s Gospel, myself and Elder Rigdon saw the following vision.” At the time this vision was given, the Prophet was translating John 5:29.

Plainly, Joseph and Sidney had been intensively involved with a studious reading of the New Testament, which prepared them for the reception of a remarkable revelation:

19 Joseph Smith-History 1:68. See, altogether, JS-H 1:68–73 and Doctrine and Covenants 13.

By the power of the Spirit our eyes were opened and our understandings were enlightened, so as to see and understand the things of God.²⁰

The revelation on celestial and plural marriage, too, came about because of questions occasioned by study. (Time and time again, and perhaps never more clearly than in this case, Joseph Smith's prophetic ministry illustrates the rule, "Be careful what you ask for!")

Verily, thus saith the Lord unto you my servant Joseph, that inasmuch as you have inquired of my hand to know and understand wherein I, the Lord, justified my servants Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, as also Moses, David and Solomon, my servants, as touching the principle and doctrine of their having many wives and concubines —

Behold, and lo, I am the Lord thy God, and will answer thee as touching this matter.²¹

Doctrine and Covenants 119, which provides the financial basis for the church, is a

Revelation given through Joseph Smith the Prophet, at Far West, Missouri, July 8, 1838, in answer to his supplication: "O Lord! Show unto thy servants how much thou requirest of the properties of thy people for a tithing."²²

Many of the revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants, along with many of the Prophet's insights incorporated into the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible, apparently came in response to his wondering questions. Sometimes, though, they left him still wondering:

I was once praying very earnestly to know the time of the coming of the Son of Man, when I heard a voice repeat the following:

Joseph, my son, if thou livest until thou art eighty-five years old, thou shalt see the face of the Son of Man; therefore let this suffice, and trouble me no more on this matter.

20 Doctrine and Covenants 76:12.

21 Doctrine and Covenants 132:1-2.

22 From the explanatory preface immediately preceding Doctrine and Covenants 119.

I was left thus, without being able to decide whether this coming referred to the beginning of the millennium or to some previous appearing, or whether I should die and thus see his face.

I believe the coming of the Son of Man will not be any sooner than that time.²³

Many more such examples could be given of questioning by church leaders and the answers that have come in response, but I cite just one in passing: The historic revelation that came to President Spencer W. Kimball in June 1978, extending the blessings of ordination to the priesthood to all worthy male members of the Church of Jesus Christ, came after a lengthy period of study and reflection. In other words, of questions.²⁴

The Interpreter Foundation is fundamentally committed to the faithful asking of questions and, to the best of our ability, to answering them. This is no merely academic exercise, an indulgence in curiosity for the sake of curiosity. It's an attempt to comply with the scriptural admonition to "feast upon the words of Christ."²⁵ Not merely to sample them, but to "feast" upon them.

Interpreter's approach is only one of several appropriate ways to do so, but it is, we believe, a legitimate way, consistent with scriptural examples and the historic experiences of modern prophets.

And if thou wilt inquire, thou shalt know mysteries which are great and marvelous; therefore thou shalt exercise thy gift, that thou mayest find out mysteries, that thou mayest bring many to the knowledge of the truth, yea, convince them of the error of their ways.²⁶

23 Doctrine and Covenants 130:14–17.

24 See, e.g., Edward L. Kimball, *Lengthen Your Stride: The Presidency of Spencer W. Kimball* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 2005), 195–224.

25 2 Nephi 32:3.

26 Doctrine and Covenants 6:11.

