

# INTERPRETER

— ∞ —  
A JOURNAL OF MORMON SCRIPTURE

Volume 3 · 2013 · Pages vii-xxxiv

## Reflecting on Gospel Scholarship with Abū al-Walīd and Abū Ḥāmid

Daniel C. Peterson

Offprint Series

© 2013 Interpreter Foundation. A nonprofit organization.



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 444 Castro Street, Suite 900, Mountain View, California, 94041, USA.

The goal of the Interpreter Foundation is to increase understanding of scripture through careful scholarly investigation and analysis of the insights provided by a wide range of ancillary disciplines, including language, history, archaeology, literature, culture, ethnohistory, art, geography, law, politics, philosophy, etc. Interpreter will also publish articles advocating the authenticity and historicity of LDS scripture and the Restoration, along with scholarly responses to critics of the LDS faith. We hope to illuminate, by study and faith, the eternal spiritual message of the scriptures—that Jesus is the Christ.

Although the Board fully supports the goals and teachings of the Church, Interpreter Foundation is an independent entity and is neither owned, controlled by nor affiliated with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, or with Brigham Young University. All research and opinions provided are the sole responsibility of their respective authors, and should not be interpreted as the opinions of the Board, nor as official statements of LDS doctrine, belief or practice.

This journal is a weekly publication. Visit us at [MormonInterpreter.com](http://MormonInterpreter.com)

## REFLECTING ON GOSPEL SCHOLARSHIP WITH ABŪ AL-WALĪD AND ABŪ ḤĀMID

*Daniel C. Peterson*

The theologian, jurist, philosopher, and mystic Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad b. Muḥammad al-Ghazālī (d. AD 1111 in his Persian hometown of Tūs, after spending much of his career in Baghdad) has sometimes been characterized as the single most influential Muslim besides the Prophet Muḥammad himself. The Andalusian philosopher and jurist Abū al-Walīd Muḥammad b. Aḥmad b. Rushd (d. AD 1198 in Marrakesh, modern-day Morocco, but ultimately buried in his family tomb in Córdoba, Spain) is generally considered to be the greatest medieval commentator—whether Jewish, Christian, or Muslim—on the works of Aristotle. Often known as Averroës, a corruption of his Arabic name, Ibn Rushd was respected even by medieval Christians. For example, Dante Alighieri, in his immortal *Inferno*, placed him only on the rim of Hell—in the relatively benign Limbo of unbaptized infants—and not among the torturous punishments of Hell’s lower levels.<sup>1</sup>

It was the best that Dante could do for a non-Christian. Even Dante’s guide through Hell and Purgatory, the great pagan Roman poet Virgil, could not enter Paradise with him. And, in Limbo, Virgil explains why:

“You don’t ask,” my good Teacher said to me,

---

1. See Dante, *Inferno*, 4:144, where the poet mentions “Averois che ’l gran comento feo” (“Averroës, who created the great Commentary”) amidst such other titans as Homer, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Euclid, Ptolemy, Galen, Hippocrates, and Ibn Rushd’s fellow Muslim, Avicenna (or Ibn Sīnā).

“who are these souls you look upon? Before  
 you go on in your journey, you must know  
 They did not sin. If they had merits, these  
 were not enough—baptism they did not have,  
 the one gate to the faith which *you* believe.  
 And if they lived before the Christian faith,  
 they did not give God homage as they ought,  
 and of these people I myself am one.  
 For such a falling short, and for no crime,  
 we all are lost, and suffer only this:  
 hopeless, we live forever in desire.”<sup>2</sup>

Though al-Ghazālī died fifteen years before Ibn Rushd was even born, thousands of miles to the east, Ibn Rushd was very much aware of his predecessor, and part of their fame rests upon a legendary “debate” between the two. One of al-Ghazālī’s greatest books is entitled *Tahāfut al-falāsifa* (“The Incoherence of the Philosophers,” or, as the medieval Latin translation rather evocatively put it, *Destructio philosophorum*).<sup>3</sup> In it, he brilliantly argued that the philosophers of the Aristotelian tradition could not deliver the religious certainty that they claimed to be able to provide, and that, in some respects at least, they had departed from orthodox Islamic belief into heresy. Decades later, Ibn Rushd responded with his *Tahāfut al-tahāfut*, “The Incoherence of *The Incoherence*.”<sup>4</sup>

These two men, al-Ghazālī and Ibn Rushd, among the very greatest thinkers ever produced by the Islamic intellectual tradition, thought long and hard, and wrote extensively, about the relationship between reason and revelation. I can only scratch

---

2. Dante, *Inferno*, 4:31–42, as rendered in Dante, *Inferno*, trans. Anthony Esolen (New York: The Modern Library, 2003), 35.

3. See Michael E. Marmura, trans., *Al-Ghazali's The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, 2d. ed. (Provo, UT: BYU Press, 2002).

4. See Simon van Den Bergh, trans., *Averroes' Tahāfut Al-Tahāfut: The Incoherence of the Incoherence, Volumes I and II* (London: Luzac, 1978).

the surface of their arguments in this brief introduction, but I think it worthwhile to consider some of what they had to say.

I will draw chiefly on a brief essay by Ibn Rushd entitled *The Book of the Decisive Treatise* (*Kitāb faṣl al-maqāl*).<sup>5</sup> The essay can be viewed as a plea before a tribunal in which the divinely revealed Law of Islam (whether the *sharī'ah* or the Qur'an itself) is the sole acknowledged authority. Together with its explanatory *Epistle Dedicatory*, it provides an impassioned defense of the legitimacy and proper role of reason in a community of faith. Ibn Rushd was writing at a time when forces of xenophobic anti-intellectualism were on the rise in Muslim Spain, and this was his defense.

"The goal of this statement," he writes at the beginning of his essay, "is for us to investigate, from the perspective of Law-based reflection, whether reflection upon philosophy and the sciences of logic is permitted, prohibited, or commanded—and this as a recommendation or as an obligation—by the Law."<sup>6</sup> In other words, is it appropriate for a devout Muslim to rely on scholarship that draws upon non-Muslim sources, that seeks to understand the universe not only according to the Qur'an and Islamic tradition but also on the basis of reason and science?

Now, it must be understood that, although he was Islam's first and last pure Aristotelian, Ibn Rushd was not thinking of philosophy as a body of dogma to be received nor as a school of thought to which one adhered (e.g., as Platonism, Neoplatonism, Aristotelianism, Scholasticism, Marxism, empiricism, idealism, logical positivism)—importing such external bodies of "doctrine" into a religious tradition is an obviously risky venture, and a separate issue. Rather he saw philosophy as a way of thinking and living. The word *philosophy*, after all,

---

5. Averroës, *The Book of the Decisive Treatise Determining the Connection between the Law and Wisdom, and Epistle Dedicatory*, translated with introduction and notes by Charles E. Butterworth (Provo, UT: BYU Press, 2001).

6. Averroës, *Decisive Treatise*, 1 (1:4–8).

simply means “love of wisdom.” He imagined a life guided by reason instead of fideism.

Ibn Rushd strikes quickly. He loses no time in announcing his conviction that philosophy, thus broadly understood, is required by the Qur’an itself. His position is daring, especially when one considers the time and place in which he wrote.

Ibn Rushd cites several verses from the Qur’an in support of his viewpoint: “Consider, you who have sight,” advises one Qur’anic verse after reciting an example of God’s action in history (Qur’an 59:2).<sup>7</sup> We are, therefore, admonished to reflect on what history has to teach us about God. And we are to consider what nature tells us, as well. “Did they not look at the kingdoms of the heavens and the earth and what God has created?” (Qur’an 7:185). “And thus did We show Abraham the kingdoms of the heavens and the earth, so that he might be among those who are certain” (Qur’an 6:75). “Do they not look at how the camel was made, and how the sky was lifted up, and how the mountains were fixed in place, and how the earth was spread out?” (Qur’an 88:17).

Behold, in the creation of the heavens and the earth and the alternation of night and day are signs for those of understanding, who remember God while standing, sitting, and lying on their sides and who contemplate the creation of the heavens and the earth. O Lord, you did not create this for nothing. Praise be to you! (Qur’an 3:190–91)

From these passages—and there are many others that he could have cited—Ibn Rushd concludes that philosophy, taken in the minimal, fundamental sense of a disciplined quest for understanding rather than as a body of doctrines, is not merely permissible to Muslims but actually mandated by their sacred book:

---

7. This and all other translations from the Qur’an are mine.

So we say: If the activity of philosophy is nothing more than reflection upon existing things and consideration of them insofar as they are an indication of the Artisan—I mean insofar as they are artifacts, for existing things indicate the Artisan only through cognizance of the art in them, and the more complete cognizance of the art in them is, the more complete is cognizance of the Artisan—and if the Law has recommended and urged consideration of existing things, then it is evident that what this name indicates is either obligatory or recommended by the Law.<sup>8</sup>

One might be justified, I think, in chiding Ibn Rushd for a bit of equivocation here—a terminological sleight of hand. For philosophy, in his day, was typically more narrowly pursued as Platonism, Neoplatonism, and, especially for him, Aristotelianism. Philosophy as it was undertaken in his day was more than a desire for wisdom. It was a comprehensive worldview and way of life embodied in systematic doctrine.<sup>9</sup> But for purposes of discussion, let's take him at his word.

There are many analogous passages in the Bible and in Latter-day Saint scripture. Several of these call upon believers to “remember” events of the historical or scriptural past and to learn from them.<sup>10</sup> I will cite three examples.

---

8. Averroës, *Decisive Treatise*, 1 (2:9)–2 (2:3).

9. I treated this topic in “What Has Athens to Do with Jerusalem?": Apostasy and Restoration in the Big Picture,” *FARMS Review* 12/2 (2000): xi–xxxvii; at <http://maxwellinstitute.byu.edu/publications/review/?vol=12&num=2&id=349>.

10. Louis Midgley has written extensively on this topic, in such essays as “The Ways of Remembrance,” in John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne, eds., *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1991), 168–76; “‘O Man, Remember, and Perish Not’ (Mosiah 4:30),” in John W. Welch, ed., *Reexploring the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1992), 127–29; “Preserving and Enlarging the Memory of the Saints,” *FARMS Review* 19/2 (2007): 21–24; with Gary Novak, “Remembrance and the Past,” *FARMS Review* 19/2 (2007): 37–66; “To Remember and Keep: On the Book of Mormon as an Ancient Book,” in Stephen D. Ricks, Donald W. Parry, and

“When I consider thy heavens,” writes the contemplative Psalmist, “the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained; what is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him?” (Psalm 8:3–4). In the New Testament, the apostle Paul draws a moral lesson from his reflections on the external world:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness; because that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God hath shewed it unto them. For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse (Romans 1:18–20).

The Book of Mormon prophet Alma also considers the testimony of the heavens and the earth in order to make a straightforward argument for the existence of God:

I have all things as a testimony that these things are true; and ye also have all things as a testimony unto you that they are true; and will ye deny them? . . . The scriptures are laid before thee, yea, and all things denote there is a God; yea, even the earth, and all things that are upon the face of it, yea, and its motion, yea, and also all the planets which move in their regular form do witness that there is a Supreme Creator. (Alma 30:41, 44)

Unlike proponents of “revealed theology,” Alma, Paul, and the Psalmist cite no revelations and quote no scriptures to



make their arguments. They are, rather, quite plainly engaging in a simple form of “natural theology,” an approach founded upon reasoned reflection about ordinary experience (e.g., in these cases, upon looking at the night sky and thinking about the natural world). It seems to me that Ibn Rushd is correct in believing that such passages charter efforts in natural theology and philosophy. Indeed, one could go further and argue that they legitimate attempts to detect “intelligent design” in nature—aside from the question of whether current intelligent design theories have any scientific merit.

Ibn Rushd carries his argument forward by remarking that

Since it has been determined that the Law makes it obligatory to reflect upon existing things by means of the intellect, and to consider them; and consideration is nothing more than inferring and drawing out the unknown from the known; and this is syllogistic reasoning or by means of syllogistic reasoning, therefore, it is obligatory that we go about reflecting upon the existing things by means of intellectual syllogistic reasoning.<sup>11</sup>

In other words, having established our obligation to reflect upon the world, it follows that we should do so in a rational manner, according to logic. And logic, for Ibn Rushd, is a matter of syllogisms—structures of reasoning in which a proposition is correctly inferred from two or more valid premises (e.g., “All men are mortal. Socrates is a man. Therefore, Socrates is mortal.”). Thus, Ibn Rushd concludes, the revealed command to reflect upon the world around us implies that we should do so in the best possible manner. And that, he says, entails the study of logic and sound reasoning:

---

11. Averroës, *Decisive Treatise*, 2 (3:22–27). The adjective *intellectual* here represents the Arabic *‘aqli*, which could also be translated as *rational*.

Since the Law has urged cognizance of God (may He be exalted) and of all of the things existing through Him by means of demonstration; and it is preferable—or even necessary—that anyone who wants to know God (may He be blessed and exalted) and all of the existing things by means of demonstration set out first to know the kinds of demonstrations, their conditions, and in what [way] demonstrative syllogistic reasoning differs from dialectical, rhetorical, and sophistical syllogistic reasoning; and that is not possible unless, prior to that, he sets out to become cognizant of what unqualified syllogistic reasoning is, how many kinds of it there are, and which of them is syllogistic reasoning and which not; and that is not possible either unless, prior to that, he sets out to become cognizant of the parts of which syllogistic reasoning is composed—I mean, the premises and their kinds—therefore, the one who has faith in the Law and follows its command to reflect upon existing things perhaps comes under the obligation to set out, before reflecting, to become cognizant of these things whose status with respect to reflection is that of tools to work.<sup>12</sup>

The idea that the methods of logic are analogous to tools used in carpentry and similar work is a significant one, to which I will return. The idea didn't originate with Ibn Rushd, though. The standard collection of Aristotle's six works on logic—*Categories*, *On Interpretation*, *Prior Analytics*, *Posterior Analytics*, *Topics*, and *Sophistical Refutations*—had already long been known as the *Organon*, which, in Greek, means “instrument” or “tool.”

Ibn Rushd makes important distinctions between demonstrative, dialectical, and rhetorical reasoning. (“Sophistical”

---

12. Averroës, *Decisive Treatise*, 3 (4:3–19).

reasoning, as might be expected, simply means, for him, bogus arguments. These can be safely dismissed. Nobody with any integrity advocates their use.) Demonstrative reasoning ranks the highest in Ibn Rushd's view. In fact, to him it's the only kind of reasoning worthy of a philosopher. Dialectical reasoning proceeds from absolutely sure premises via logically sound patterns to absolutely certain conclusions. Thus, what it says can be taken as undoubtedly true. (As Ibn Rushd himself says, "demonstration is only of the truth.")<sup>13</sup> Nobody doubts, for example, that all men are mortal. And nobody doubts that Socrates was a man. Accordingly, the conclusion that Socrates was mortal is indisputably true. Ibn Rushd, along with virtually all pre-modern Aristotelians, may have been overconfident about the absolute truth of the premises that they used to build up an elaborately systematic worldview, but the concept of demonstrative reasoning seems fairly clear.

The trouble is that only a relative handful of people have the ability and the training to master Aristotelian syllogistic reasoning in its full complexity. "People's natures," explains Ibn Rushd:

vary in excellence with respect to assent. Thus, some assent by means of demonstration; some assent by means of dialectical statements in the same way the one adhering to demonstration assents by means of demonstration, there being nothing greater in their natures; and some assent by means of rhetorical statements, just as the one adhering to demonstration assents by means of demonstrative statements.<sup>14</sup>

---

13. Averroës, *Decisive Treatise*, 13 (16:7–8).

14. Averroës, *Decisive Treatise*, 8 (11:10–16). On page 18, intriguingly, Ibn Rushd seems to suggest that Islamic "combat" against false beliefs is to be conducted not by military campaigns but by these three modes of persuasion.

Far more people can follow an argument from the scriptures (whether the Bible or the Qur'an). And this, in fact, represents a good example of dialectical reasoning. It works from widely accepted premises—widely accepted, for example, within a particular tradition or community of faith—that are not absolutely certain, or, at least, aren't universally recognized as beyond dispute. Thus, for instance, a person might be able to demonstrate that the Book of Mormon teaches a certain doctrine, and that all who believe in the Book of Mormon are obligated to accept that doctrine. But a person who rejects the Book of Mormon will feel no such obligation, any more than a Latter-day Saint will feel bound to adopt a certain view of God simply because it's taught in the Qur'an.

Dialectical reasoning, on the other hand, will leave some people behind. And this would have been especially true in a pre-modern era like that of Ibn Rushd, when the majority of people were uneducated and illiterate. However, even an uneducated individual might still be persuaded via sermons and anecdotes and similes to accept true beliefs and to act properly. Strictly speaking, even though such similes, anecdotes, and sermons might not "prove" anything at all, they might still be "convincing" and lead to sound faith and good behavior. As a modern analogy, we might think of commercials: They seldom reason with us. Rather, they try to persuade us that, if we drink a certain kind of beer, we'll soon be frolicking with beautiful models on a beach, too. The ends may be a bit low, but the attempt to persuade and motivate is not altogether different. And, given the vast sums that advertising agencies can command, it seems that such efforts are effective.

"Not all people," Ibn Rushd remarks:

have natures such as to accept demonstrations or dialectical arguments, let alone demonstrative arguments, given the difficulty in teaching demonstrative

arguments and the lengthy time needed by someone adept at learning them; and since what is intended by the Law is, indeed, to teach everyone, therefore, it is obligatory that the Law comprise all the manners of the methods of bringing about assent and all the manners of the methods of forming a concept.<sup>15</sup>

For people are of three sorts with respect to the Law. One sort is in no way adept at interpretation. These are the rhetorical people, who are the overwhelming multitude. That is because no person of unimpaired intellect is exempted from this kind of assent.<sup>16</sup>

It's clear that the Abrahamic religions aren't intended merely for an intellectual elite; they try to reach all people, regardless of educational attainments or occupation or academic talent. Thus it is not surprising that the scriptures are replete with stories, parables, exhortations, and other attempts to convey the message of repentance and salvation to Everyman:

Since some of the methods for bringing about assent—I mean, assent taking place because of them—are common to most people, namely, the rhetorical and the dialectical, the rhetorical being more common than the dialectical; and some of them are particular to fewer people, namely, the demonstrative; and what is primarily intended by the Law is taking care of the greater number without neglecting to alert the select [few], therefore, most of the methods declared by the Law are the methods shared by the greater number with respect to concept or assent taking place.<sup>17</sup>

---

15. Averroës, *Decisive Treatise*, 24 (39:7–13).

16. Averroës, *Decisive Treatise*, 26 (44:7–10).

17. Averroës, *Decisive Treatise*, 24 (40:14–22).

Concerning the things that are known only by demonstration due to their being hidden, God has been gracious to His servants for whom there is no path by means of demonstration—either due to their innate dispositions, their habits, or their lack of facilities for education—by coining for them likenesses and similarities of these [hidden things] and calling them to assent by means of those likenesses, since it is possible for assent to those likenesses to come about by means of the indications shared by all—I mean, the dialectical and the rhetorical.<sup>18</sup>

Of course, there are some who simply won't pay any attention, no matter what method of persuasion the scriptures and the prophets attempt to use:

When this divine Law of ours called to people by means of these three methods, assent to it was extended to every human being—except to the one who denies it obstinately in speech or for whom no methods have been determined in it for summoning to God (may He be exalted) due to his own neglect of that.<sup>19</sup>

But Ibn Rushd is principally concerned to defend the legitimacy of philosophy or, in his terms, of demonstrative reasoning against the criticisms of those who see it as unscriptural if not apostate and certainly as foreign, the province of outsiders and unbelievers. Accordingly, he concentrates on it and leaves dialectical and rhetorical reasoning alone. Nobody in his world is contesting their legitimacy.

Since, according to Ibn Rushd, we're under an obligation to use sound logic when considering the universe around us, we should be willing to study the principles of logic and sound

---

18. Averroës, *Decisive Treatise*, 19 (27:1–8).

19. Averroës, *Decisive Treatise*, 8 (11:17–21).

reasoning, even if the best way of doing so involves immersing ourselves in the work of those whose faith differs from ours. For if logic is a tool, we should be no more concerned about the religion or lack thereof of the person who created it than we would be worried about whether an unbeliever made the saw and the trowel that we're using to build a temple:<sup>20</sup>

From this it has become evident that reflection upon the books of the Ancients is obligatory according to the Law, for their aim and intention in their books is the very intention to which the Law urges us. And [it has become evident] that whoever forbids reflection upon them by anyone suited to reflect upon them—namely, anyone who unites two qualities, the first being innate intelligence and the second Law-based justice and moral virtue—surely bars people from the door through which the Law calls them to cognizance of God—namely, the door of reflection leading to true cognizance of Him. That is extreme ignorance and estrangement from God (may He be exalted).<sup>21</sup>

Ibn Rushd is now going on the offensive against those who don't believe that believers ought to study philosophy and logic. He plainly implies, though, that only those believers ought to involve themselves in such fields who possess the intellectual, and moral, and spiritual qualifications to do so.

I do not find an equivalent within the Latter-day Saint tradition to Ibn Rushd's concept of absolutely certain demonstrative reasoning. In fact, it's plain that the old triumphalist view of philosophy methodically building vast, systematic, comprehensive structures by means of indisputable syllogisms

---

20. Averroës, *Decisive Treatise*, 4 (5:11–6:31). I've substituted a Mormon example for his in order to make the same point, because explaining the use of tools in Muslim festival sacrifices would be an unnecessary distraction here.

21. Averroës, *Decisive Treatise*, 6 (10:20)–7 (10:4).

is largely dead elsewhere, too. As has sometimes been pointed out, the scandal of the history of philosophy is that it *has* a history. After two and a half millennia of philosophical argument, living Thomists, Platonists, Neoplatonists, Aristotelians, Marxists, empiricists, absolute idealists, logical positivists, existentialists, and representatives of other schools still hold forth. Even consensus on small issues is rare, and there is certainly no comprehensive system to which all philosophers adhere.

In Mormonism, spiritual certainty doesn't come through demonstrative syllogisms or philosophy, but personally and nontransferably through personal revelation.<sup>22</sup> But in place of Ibn Rushd's "philosophy" we might think of a range of areas of advanced study—of Mormon history and scripture, for example—that are seen as powerfully conducive to faith by some (including myself) but that are stumbling blocks to others:

If someone goes astray in reflection and stumbles—due either to a deficiency in his innate disposition, poor ordering of his reflection, being overwhelmed by his passions, not finding a teacher to guide him to an understanding of what is in them, or because of a combination of all or more than one of these reasons—it does not follow that they are to be forbidden to the one who is suited to reflect upon them. For this manner of harm coming about due to them is something that attaches to them by accident, not by essence. It is not

---

22. The classic example is, of course, Moroni 10:4–5. In his famous intellectual autobiography, *Al-munqidh min al-ḡalāl* ("The Deliverer from Error"), al-Ghazālī tells of his futile search for religious certainty among "the people of authoritative instruction" (essentially the Ismā'īlī sect of Shī'ism, with its purportedly infallible imams), the theologians, and the philosophers, and how he finally found what he was looking for in personal mystical experience, which he compares to the incommunicable experience of *dhawq* or "taste." The similarity to Latter-day Saint epistemology is striking, and merits consideration. His autobiography is translated in W. Montgomery Watt, *The Faith and Practice of al-Ghazālī* (Chicago: Kazi Publications, 1982).



obligatory to renounce something useful in its nature and essence because of something harmful existing in it by accident.<sup>23</sup>

Ibn Rushd lists several factors that might lead people to “go astray” and “stumble” in reflection on religious or theological matters. They might simply be incapable of handling difficult subjects—perhaps because they lack intelligence or maturity. (We seldom try to teach algebra or calculus to six-year-olds, no matter how great their native intelligence. Latter-day Saints do indeed have a reasonable notion of “milk before meat.”) Or they might have gone about their reflections in a disorderly way, failing to grasp the basics before trying to go on to more advanced topics. (This is perhaps related to another of the factors he lists: “not finding a teacher to guide him to an understanding.” Think, perhaps, of the historically uninformed Mormon who suddenly stumbles upon some troubling and previously unknown historical claim on the Internet.) Finally, the aspiring student might be “overwhelmed by his passions,” which would prevent him from acquiring a proper understanding of divine things. (Latter-day Saints are very familiar with this kind of caution; we’re frequently told that unworthiness, or lack of personal preparation, can interfere with our ability to grasp spiritual things or maintain our testimonies of religious truth.)

But, Ibn Rushd insists, the mere fact that philosophy can be dangerous to those not properly equipped to cope with it—whether because of mental, educational, or moral deficiencies—does not mean that it should be prohibited for people properly prepared. Quite to the contrary, he argues that denying the benefits of philosophy to those who are suited to it harms them grievously:

---

23. Averroës, *Decisive Treatise*, 7 (10:4–13).

Indeed, we say that anyone who prevents someone suited to reflect upon the books of wisdom from doing so on the grounds that it is supposed some vicious people became perplexed due to reflecting upon them is like one who prevents thirsty people from drinking cool, fresh water until they die of thirst because some people choked on it and died. For dying by choking on water is an accidental matter, whereas [dying] by thirst is an essential, necessary matter.<sup>24</sup>

But wherein, exactly, does the potential danger from philosophy consist? It's necessary to remember that Aristotelian philosophy wasn't merely the kind of thing taught in college philosophy departments today. It was, among many other things, the prestige science of the pre-modern world. So, in order to understand the challenge that it could pose, we need to think, perhaps, of the "established" science of our own time. Can it pose a threat to faith? Certainly it can. How should that challenge be handled?

"We firmly affirm," says Ibn Rushd, "that, whenever demonstration leads to something differing from the apparent sense of the Law, that apparent sense admits of interpretation according to the rule of interpretation in Arabic."<sup>25</sup> (We might, instead of "interpretation," say "allegorizing," or "taking as merely figurative," or "not taking literally.") "Muslims," he says,

have formed the consensus that it is not obligatory for all the utterances of the Law to be taken in their apparent sense, nor for all of them to be drawn out from their apparent sense by means of interpretation, though they

---

24. Averroës, *Decisive Treatise*, 7 (10:18–24). The phrase "some vicious people" (Arabic: *qawman min arādhil al-nās*), incidentally, refers not to people who are nasty but, literally, to people who are "vile," "contemptible," or "low," meaning that they are involved in actual "vice." They are, thus, neither morally nor spiritually prepared to recognize or receive religious truth.

25. Averroës, *Decisive Treatise*, 9 (14:23–25).

disagree about which ones are to be interpreted and which not interpreted.<sup>26</sup>

And so it is today. Our knowledge of the natural world around us has progressed rapidly in the past century or two, and our understanding of it must constantly be revised. We know far more about ancient history, too, and Mormon historical studies are much more sophisticated today than they were a few generations back—new facts and interpretations flow in a steady stream. But our understanding of scripture and revelation hasn't yet reached the equilibrium of perfection, either. While the words of our canonical scriptures don't change, our understanding of them is fallible and conditioned by our surroundings, our upbringing, and our personalities. In this life, said the apostle Paul (including himself in the statement), "we know in part, and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away. . . . For now we see through a glass, darkly" (1 Corinthians 13:9–10, 12).

Al-Ghazālī lamented the damage that could be done by:

the man who is loyal to Islam but ignorant. He thinks that religion must be defended by rejecting every science connected with the philosophers, and so rejects all their sciences and accuses them of ignorance therein. He even rejects their theory of the eclipse of sun and moon, considering that what they say is contrary to revelation. When that view is thus attacked, someone hears who has knowledge of such matters by apodeictic

---

26. Averroës, *Decisive Treatise*, 10 (14:5–9). He immediately offers as an example of this disagreement certain passages in the Qur'an and the traditions of Muḥammad that seem to describe an anthropomorphic God: "The Ash'arites, for example, interpret the verse about God's directing Himself [2:29] and the Tradition about His descent, whereas the Hanbalites take them in their apparent sense." (Compare page 20.) On page 16, he suggests that the Qur'an itself subverts the traditional Islamic denial that the universe is eternal.

demonstration. He does not doubt his demonstration, but, believing that Islam is based on ignorance and the denial of apodeictic proof, grows in love for philosophy and hatred for Islam.

A grievous crime indeed against religion has been committed by the man who imagines that Islam is defended by the denial of the mathematical sciences, seeing that there is nothing in revealed truth opposed to these sciences by way of either negation or affirmation, and nothing in these sciences opposed to the truths of religion.<sup>27</sup>

Latter-day Saints can likewise damage the reputation of their faith or put at risk the testimonies of young minds and inquisitive older ones, if we take the position that being a faithful member of the Church entails a rejection of either science or historical scholarship. We needn't be slaves of the latest scientific doctrines—the history of science abundantly illustrates how many consensus views have been overturned by new discoveries—but we should be appropriately humble as well about how accurately we understand the mind of God and even the ultimate meaning of the scriptures. All truth, we're told, ultimately belongs to one great, harmonious whole, even if we sometimes can't quite see how that will be so.

Citing as an example a principle of Aristotelian logic, al-Ghazālī asks

What connection has this with the essentials of religion, that it should be denied or rejected? If such a denial is made, the only effect upon the logicians is to impair their belief in the intelligence of the man who made the denial and, what is worse, in his religion, inasmuch as he considers that it rests on such denials.<sup>28</sup>

---

27. Watt, *Faith and Practice of al-Ghazālī*, 34–35.

28. Watt, *Faith and Practice of al-Ghazālī*, 36.

Henry Eyring, a former president of the American Chemical Society and the American Association for the Advancement of Science and the father of the current First Counselor in the First Presidency of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, regularly reiterated as a personal motto that “in this Church you don’t have to believe anything that isn’t true.”<sup>29</sup>

“I do not . . . believe that there is a single revelation,” said President Brigham Young:

among the many God has given to the Church, that is perfect in its fulness. The revelations of God contain correct doctrine and principle, so far as they go; but it is impossible for the poor, weak, low, groveling, sinful inhabitants of the earth to receive a revelation from the Almighty in all its perfections. He has to speak to us in a manner to meet the extent of our capacities.<sup>30</sup>

Like children, we are only capable of receiving revelations in part, or in basic form, in concepts that are already at least partially familiar to us from our fallen earthly surroundings: “Behold, I am God and have spoken it; these commandments are of me, and were given unto my servants *in their weakness, after the manner of their language*, that they might come to understanding” (D&C 1:24; italics added).

“Oh, Lord,” prayed a frustrated Joseph Smith in an 1832 letter to William W. Phelps, “deliver us in due time from this little, narrow prison, almost as it were, total darkness of paper, pen and ink;—and a crooked, broken, scattered and imperfect language.”<sup>31</sup>

---

29. See Henry Eyring, “My Father’s Formula,” at <https://www.lds.org/ensign/1978/10/my-fathers-formula?lang=eng>

30. *Journal of Discourses* 2:314.

31. As reproduced in B. H. Roberts, ed. *History of the Church* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1978), 1:299.

So, given the danger that advanced study or thinking might pose to the faith of people ill-equipped to deal with it, what is the duty of the leaders of the Islamic faith, or, indeed, of the leaders of any other religious community—or even the parents of a family with small children? Ibn Rushd has an answer for that question:

It is obligatory that interpretations be established only in books using demonstrations. For if they are in books using demonstrations, no one but those adept in demonstration will get at them. Whereas, if they are established in other than demonstrative books with poetical and rhetorical or dialectical methods used in them, as Abū Ḥāmid [al-Ghazālī] does, that is an error against the Law and against wisdom.<sup>32</sup>

Why is it so dangerous? It endangers souls because demonstration or philosophy (or, we might add, history or science) has two functions with regard to certain scriptural passages: It dismantles the literal sense, and it guides to a figurative understanding. History can dissolve traditional understandings, and, if pursued, can often create a deeper and richer account. But what if someone fully follows the dismantling, fully comprehends the dissolving of traditional stories, but lacks the capacity, for whatever reason, to follow the argument all the way to the new reinterpretation that is now put in its place? It would be rather like someone leaving the security of one bank of a river in order to go to the other side, but, once in the water, discovering that the current is far too strong or even that she can't swim.

“When something pertaining to these interpretations,” says Ibn Rushd,

---

32. Averroës, *Decisive Treatise*, 21 (35:24–30).

is declared to someone not adept in them—especially demonstrative interpretations, due to their remoteness from things about which there is shared cognition—both he who declares it and the one to whom it is declared are steered to unbelief. The reason is that interpretation includes two things: the rejection of the apparent sense and the establishing of the interpretation. Thus, if the apparent sense is rejected by someone who is an adept of the apparent sense without the interpretation being established for him, that leads him to unbelief if it is about the roots of the Law. So interpretations ought not to be declared to the multitude, nor established in rhetorical or dialectical books—I mean, books in which the statements posited are of these two sorts—as Abū Ḥāmid [al-Ghazālī] did.<sup>33</sup>

Decades ago, I attended a gathering in southern California where the late Stanley Kimball, a professor of history at Southern Illinois University and a president of the Mormon History Association, spoke. His apparently unpublished remarks have stuck in my mind ever since.

Professor Kimball explained what he called the “three levels” of Mormon history, which he termed Levels A, B, and C. (Given my own background in philosophy, I might have chosen Hegel’s terminology instead: *thesis*, *antithesis* and *synthesis*. Those terms seem to me to catch very neatly what Professor Kimball had in mind.)

Level A, he said, is the Sunday School version of the Church and its history. Virtually everything connected with the Church on Level A is obviously good and true and harmonious. Members occasionally make mistakes, perhaps, but leaders seldom, if ever, do. It’s difficult for somebody on Level A to imagine why everybody out there doesn’t immediately rec-

---

33. Averroës, *Decisive Treatise*, 26 (45:17)-27 (45:2).

ognize the obvious truth of the gospel, and opposition to the Church seems flatly satanic.

Level B—what I call the “antithesis” to Level A’s “thesis”—is perhaps most clearly seen in anti-Mormon versions of Church history. According to many hostile commentators, everything that Level A describes as good and true and harmonious turns out actually to be evil and false and chaotic. Leaders are deceitful and evil, the Church’s account of its own story is a lie, and, some extreme anti-Mormons say, even the general membership often (typically?) misbehaves very badly.

But one doesn’t need to read anti-Mormon propaganda in order to be exposed to elements of Level B that can’t quite be squared with an idealized portrait of the Restoration. Every maturing member of the Church will eventually discover that other Saints, including leaders, are fallible and sometimes even disappointing mortals. There are areas of ambiguity, even unresolved problems, in Church history; there have been disagreements about certain doctrines; some questions don’t have immediately satisfying answers.

Dr. Kimball remarked that the Church isn’t eager to expose its members to such problems. Why? Because souls can be and are lost on Level B. And, anyway, the Church isn’t some sort of floating seminar in historiography. Regrettably, perhaps, most Latter-day Saints—many of them far better people than I—aren’t deeply interested in history, and, more importantly, many other very important priorities demand attention, including training the youth and giving service. Were he in a leadership position, Kimball said, he would probably make the same decision.

But he argued that once members of the Church have been exposed to Level B, their best hope is to press on to the richer but more complicated version of history (or to the more realistic view of humanity) that is to be found on Level C. In fact, he said that, as a historian, he would love it if everybody were



to reach Level C, which he regarded (and I concur) as far more nourishing and more deeply satisfying. Very importantly, he contended (and, again, I agree) that Level C—what I call the “synthesis”—turns out to be essentially, and profoundly, like Level A. The gospel is, in fact, true. Church leaders at all levels have, overwhelmingly, been good and sincere people, doing the best that they can with imperfect human materials (including themselves) under often very difficult circumstances.

But charity and context are all-important. Life would be much easier if we could find a church composed of perfect leaders and flawless members. Unfortunately, at least in my case, the glaringly obvious problem is that such a church would never admit me to membership.

The claims of the Restoration do, in fact, stand up to historical examination, although (very likely by divine design) their truth is not so indisputable as to compel acceptance—least of all from people disinclined to accept them. And people are lost on Level B.

Faced with a similar problem, Ibn Rushd is not content with simple confidence that Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* won’t likely be a bestseller at the supermarket checkout counter and, so, won’t damage those who are unprepared for it. Instead, he calls for a legal prohibition:

What is obligatory from the imams of the Muslims is that they ban those of his books that contain science from all but those adept in science, just as it is obligatory upon them to ban demonstrative books from those not adept in them. Yet the harm befalling people from demonstrative books is lighter, because for the most part only those with superior innate dispositions take up demonstrative books. And this sort [of people] is misled only through a lack of practical virtue, reading

in a disorderly manner, and turning to them without a teacher.<sup>34</sup>

And, on this, al-Ghazālī agrees with him:

The majority of men, I maintain, are dominated by a high opinion of their own skill and accomplishments, especially the perfection of their intellects for distinguishing true from false and sure guidance from misleading suggestion. It is therefore necessary, I maintain, to shut the gate so as to keep the general public from reading the books of the misguided as far as possible.<sup>35</sup>

But, in Ibn Rushd's judgment, at least, there shouldn't be a complete prohibition of such reading:

Totally forbidding demonstrative books bars from what the Law calls to, because it is a wrong to the best sort of people and to the best sort of existing things. For justice with respect to the best sort of existing things is for them to be cognized to their utmost degree by those prepared to be cognizant of them to their utmost degree, and these are the best sort of people.<sup>36</sup>

So much for the responsibilities of leaders. What, if any, are the obligations of those who are not qualified to plumb the depths of science, philosophy, and advanced history? If you plunge into the river, seeking the opposite bank, you need to be very sure that you can swim, and, if you can, that you have the endurance to reach the other side:

For anyone not adept in science, it is obligatory to take them [the descriptions of the next life] in their apparent sense; for him, it is unbelief to interpret them

---

34. Averroës, *Decisive Treatise*, 22 (36:13–20).

35. Watt, *Faith and Practice of al-Ghazālī*, 40.

36. Averroës, *Decisive Treatise*, 22 (36:21–26).

because it leads to unbelief. That is why we are of the opinion that, for anyone among the people whose duty it is to have faith in the apparent sense, interpretation is unbelief because it leads to unbelief. Anyone adept in interpretation who divulges that to him calls him to unbelief; and the one who calls to unbelief is an unbeliever.<sup>37</sup>

According to ancient Greek mythology, the Pierian spring in Macedonia was the metaphorical source of the arts and sciences because it was sacred to the nine Muses. Devotees of the spring believed that drinking from it brought great knowledge and inspiration. But Alexander Pope's 1711 poem "An Essay in Criticism" contains a famous warning about drinking from that source:

A little learning is a dang'rous thing;  
 Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian spring;  
 There shallow draughts intoxicate the brain,  
 And drinking largely sobers us again.  
 Fir'd at first sight with what the Muse imparts,  
 In fearless youth we tempt the heights of Arts,  
 While from the bounded level of our mind  
 Short views we take, nor see the lengths behind;  
 But more advanc'd, behold with strange surprise  
 New distant scenes of endless science rise!  
 So pleas'd at first the towering Alps we try,  
 Mount o'er the vales, and seem to tread the sky,  
 Th' eternal snows appear already past,  
 And the first clouds and mountains seem the last;  
 But, those attain'd, we tremble to survey  
 The growing labours of the lengthen'd way,  
 Th' increasing prospects tire our wand'ring eyes,

---

37. Averroës, *Decisive Treatise*, 21 (34:17–23).

Hills peep o'er hills, and Alps on Alps arise!<sup>38</sup>

In other words, a shallow draught of knowledge from the Pieran spring can intoxicate people such that they imagine themselves to know far more than they actually do. But “drinking largely” from it sobers them and makes them wiser. “Nobody,” says the Qur’an of itself, “knows its interpretation except God and those who are well-grounded in knowledge” (Qur’an 3:7).<sup>39</sup> In this light, it’s interesting to read Professor Steven Harper’s impression of at least some people who have lost their belief based on encounters with unexpected elements in Latter-day Saint history:

Having visited with many of them, I believe that they are generally sincere but poorly-informed souls who assumed they were well-informed and then found themselves in a crisis of faith when they encountered evidence that overturned their assumptions.<sup>40</sup>

This is obviously regrettable from the standpoint of a believing Latter-day Saint. But what is to be done about such cases? As we have seen, Ibn Rushd would forbid deeper knowledge to those who seem unable to handle it:

In general, with respect to everything in these [Law-based statements] admitting of an interpretation apprehended only by demonstration, the duty of the select is that interpretation, whereas the duty of the multitude is to take them in their apparent sense in both respects—I mean, with respect to concept and

---

38. Alexander Pope, “An Essay in Criticism,” lines 215–32.

39. I’m following Ibn Rushd’s punctuation proposal for the passage, which is not standard but is entirely plausible. See Averroës, *Decisive Treatise*, 12 (16:22–24).

40. Steven C. Harper, *Joseph Smith’s First Vision: A Guide to the Historical Accounts* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2012), 11.

assent—for there is nothing more than that in their natures.<sup>41</sup>

The duty of those within the multitude who are not capable of more than rhetorical statements is to let them stand in their apparent sense, and it is not permissible for them to know that interpretation at all.<sup>42</sup>

He compares the Lawgiver—that is, in his terms, the Prophet or imam of the Muslim community or, perhaps even better, a philosopher within that community—to a physician. Not all people are physicians. Patients, who, for the most part, won't understand what the physician is doing or requiring because they lack the requisite knowledge, should simply trust him.<sup>43</sup>

Modern Latter-day Saints take a much more democratic view. The priesthood is more widely diffused in this dispensation than at any earlier time. The temple is open to virtually everybody, if they meet basic standards, rather than being restricted to a hereditary, all-male priestly caste. Church leaders plainly want all members to know the scriptures well. Accordingly, counsel from a Latter-day Saint point of view might be to take responsibility for your own health, but in conjunction with, and with the help of, trusted authorities. “Would God that all the Lord’s people were prophets,” said Moses, “and that the Lord would put his spirit upon them!” (Numbers 11:29). Or, to put it another way, if you intend to swim to the other side of the river—and you really should—learn to swim first. And don’t swim without a buddy. And then, when you’re in the water and the current is strong, swim for all you’re worth.

The Interpreter Foundation exists to encourage and to publish scriptural and historical scholarship by faithful Latter-day

---

41. Averroës, *Decisive Treatise*, 25 (42:19–24).

42. Averroës, *Decisive Treatise*, 26 (43:3–6).

43. Averroës, *Decisive Treatise*, 27 (48:27)–28 (48:7).

Saints. We reject the notion that such scholarship should be the exclusive province of a small elite.

*Daniel C. Peterson (PhD, University of California at Los Angeles) is a professor of Islamic studies and Arabic at Brigham Young University and is the founder and editor-in-chief of the University's Middle Eastern Texts Initiative. He has published and spoken extensively on both Islamic and Mormon subjects. Formerly chairman of the board of the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS) and an officer, editor, and author for its successor organization, the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, his professional work as an Arabist focuses on the Qur'an and on Islamic philosophical theology. He is the author, among other things, of a biography entitled Muhammad: Prophet of God (Eerdmans, 2007).*



