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## **"Knowing" Mormon Style**

By: John D. Ferrer

"Read from the Book of Mormon, and pray to see if it is true," the two Mormon missionaries told me as they were wrapping up our meeting. I had heard this challenge before and was not surprised to hear it again. It has come to be a standard for Mormon missionaries, at least the ones I have run into. I would find out later that it is a standard part of the first lesson Mormon missionaries are trained to give to all "prospects."<sup>1</sup> I thanked them for their time. We prayed together and then closed out our session on cordial terms. They had been very friendly and warm in their approach. And they obviously believed passionately the message they shared. But as I thought to myself afterwards, I pondered that closing challenge and then a statement they had made earlier about the "burning in the bosom." They claimed to know that Mormonism was true because of a feeling they had, a "burning in the bosom." Had I not been familiar with the King James terminology I might have had to ask if guys even have "bosoms," but the missionaries made their point loud and clear. Spiritual truth is realized entirely by faith.

### **Can we know Epistemology?**

When a protestant Christian, such as myself, is witnessing to a member of the Latter Day Saints Church, that is, a Mormon, there are several things to keep in mind. The obvious factors are vigilant prayer, a ready knowledge of Scripture, a clean and fresh understanding of the Christian faith, a gracious and respectful tone, and a genuine love for the person—whether or not they become true believers. These are generally recognized as good practice and are extremely important. But what I want to share with you is an important tactical key that everyone should know in trying to share the true faith with a Mormon. If we miss this key we may find ourselves, like many unknowing Christians in times past, getting lost in the deceptive shared territory between Classical Christianity and Mormonism. Somewhere in the common terminology, the compatible ethic systems, and the shared appearances there are major differences, beneath the redefinitions of Jesus, God the Father and the Holy Spirit, beneath the radically different views on apostles, prophets, and Joseph Smith there is a core issue which can be summed up in the question of, "How do people know?" This is a question of **epistemology**, which can also be defined as, the "study of the nature of the grounds of knowing."<sup>2</sup> Without necessarily knowing ourselves to be philosophers we deal with epistemology all the time. It crops up whenever a person says, "You can't know that" or "Some day you'll understand" or simply, "I know." Christianity has the luxury of dignified faith. That is, our Christian worldview and religion is very much a faith system but that faith is bolstered by an agreement with reason. In other words, in our "knowing," we can employ not just faith but reason as well.<sup>3</sup> The interrelationship of reason and faith has been hotly debated for centuries, but for our purposes here we need to know only that Christians are commanded by Scripture to employ both. Faith is informed by reason. And reason is applied by faith. To this end, 1 Peter 3:15-16 says, "Sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always [being] ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you."<sup>4</sup>

Isaiah 1:18 shows God inviting the people of Israel, “Come now, and let us reason together.” And in Isaiah 5:3, after giving Israel a parable about a vineyard he appeals to their ability to reason by asking them to “judge between Me and My vineyard. What more was there to do for My vineyard that I have not done in it? Why when I expected it to produce good grapes did it produce worthless ones?”

And Paul, in the New Testament, would compliment the Bereans for testing his words with Scripture (Acts 17: 10-11). And elsewhere he would invite the Corinthian church to “judge what I [Paul] say” (1 Cor. 10:15). Furthermore, Paul’s sermon on Mars Hill in Athens, given to an audience composed of Stoic and Epicurian philosophers, is a marvelous apologetic demonstrating the reasonableness of the Christian faith (Acts 17:22-34). My point is simply this,

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Christians can rely on simple blind faith and get by on that, but, while many Christians do just that, our faith also stands up to right reason. We have the luxury and the responsibility of “studying to show ourselves approved.” An unreasoned faith is a shallow and vulnerable faith.

Mormonism, on the other hand, does not have such a luxury and has only faith to support its most outrageous claims. There are many Mormon apologists with strong minds and elaborate philosophical systems, but even among these, there is still a certain lynch pin privilege given to the prayer of faith. For example, Daniel C. Peterson, in an article called “Evidences of the Book of Mormon” printed on the website for the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS),

I think the primary evidence for the Book of Mormon will always be what it always has been, mainly the spiritual witness that people receive when they pray sincerely and in faith about the Book of Mormon.<sup>5</sup>

The “spiritual witness” therefore is recognized as having priority over any empirical, prophetic, or historical tests. And Peterson sets this “spiritual witness” at the end of the prayer by faith. The spiritual witness, therefore, is achieved entirely by un-testable subjective means and only after one has already accepted, by faith, the Book of Mormon. Blake T. Ostler, another scholar within Mormonism would say, quite tellingly,

Any religious commitment based on scientific evidence is tenuous and likely to be upset by new evidence. Because my commitment to Mormonism has greater prior epistemic probability for me than any scientific theory, it is more reasonable for me to question the acceptance of the scientific evidence as a basis of religious belief rather than reject my religious beliefs.<sup>6</sup>

Notice here that Ostler has implied that his faith and the broad spectrum of science are at odds. Also, note that his “commitment to Mormonism” is prior to his employing of science. He has not, in this statement, allowed the possibility of a mutually extended and mutually dependent combination of faith and science. Faith, for Ostler, comes before science or it is doomed to instability. It is quite convenient, and highly suspicious, to use or discard science based entirely upon whether it accommodates one’s prior faith commitment. And while I do not intent to launch into an extended discussion on the philosophy of science, I do want to point out however that whatever truth may be perceivable through the practice of science, in Ostler’s system of

knowing, it will remain suspect and disposable unless it agrees with the presumed-true Mormon faith.

### Fideism Alone

When a person holds to a religious belief entirely based upon faith it is called **fideism** (fee-dē-ism). If Ostler and Peterson, capable scholars that they are, resort to fideism, how much more necessary is it for the common laity within the Mormon Church to also resort to fideism? To be sure, many Protestant Christians will say, “I don’t have to understand it all, I just believe.” Or they will talk about Christianity as a “blind faith” or a “leap of faith.” And while it is true that no Christian—Protestant or Catholic—has all the answers or a perfect knowledge, still we have a responsibility to be prepared to answer for our faith (1 Pet. 3:15-16). That is to say, faith is not it’s own answer. We Evangelical Christians have the privilege of knowing that our God is the author of all truth so that any honest pursuit of truth is a pursuit of God and can only benefit right belief (John 14:6). Often, such claims of blind faith, for the Christian, are a cop out given to keep from having to study or dig at the hard truths of Christianity. But for Mormons, such “blind faith” is necessary since there has never been a single bit of archeology to substantiate the uniquely Mormon account of the history of the Americas.<sup>7</sup> Nor does their physically material God stand up to thoroughgoing a philosophy or science.<sup>8</sup> I do not intend to discuss the lengths to which Mormon theology is illogical. Many other authors have done a terrific job in pointing out such inconsistencies already.<sup>9</sup> This study is moreso a look at one aspect of how Mormonism is generally practiced.

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### Heart Versus Mind

Truth tests such as “Pray to see if it’s true” or the equally subjective “burning in the Bosom” are troublesome particularly because they bypass the mind. It must be noted however that both of these popular tests come with a reasoning facet. As has been said, the first challenge usually comes only after the challenge to, “read in the Book of Mormon.” The burning in the bosom likewise comes from Mormon scripture and is couched in a context of reason, but note the fence put around that reasoning,

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. But if it is not right you shall have no such feelings*, but you shall have a “stupor of thought” that will cause you to forget the thing which is wrong; therefore, you cannot write that which is sacred save it be given from me” (D&C 9:8-9, *italic mine*).<sup>10</sup>

Mormons time and time again use the phrase “burning in the bosom” in reference to this passage. And some of the more studied adherents will even point to the phrase in the first line, “you must study it out in your mind.” I applaud such a suggestion. But that study is useless if it is to be accepted or denied entirely because of a feeling. Whatever study a person may do, truth here remains trapped beneath the impetuous and fitful fancy of the heart. The heart has overridden the mind even though, as the prophet Jeremiah would say, “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure, who can understand it?” (Jer. 17:9, NIV). Truth is not a feeling. It may inspire

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feelings. It may quell feelings. But it stands outside of feelings and whether we like it or not, love it or hate, feel it or forget it, truth is what it is regardless of our subjective experience.<sup>11</sup>

Truth tests, such as that of the “burning in the bosom,” are prone to error for the following reasons. First, as already inferred, something can feel true and not be true. Second, it is empirically obvious that emotions and sensations are fitful and thus misleading. The mother who hates getting up at 3AM for early feedings has not ceased loving her child because she is feeling hateful and grumpy, nor has the truth of her motherhood faded because she is not feeling very motherly. And most any married couple who has stayed together for a long time can attest that one does not have to feel love sensations to be in love. Third, feelings are, by nature, subjective and thus unstable. Only objective realities can be shared because they are objectively true between people. If the “burning” being spoken of were in a bush and this burning bush appeared every time a true believer walked into the room, then the “burning” would be an objective truth. But because this burning is internal, and contained entirely within the subject, it remains personal and subjective. Fourth, this subjective experience is vulnerable to foreign intrusions. For example, if I prayed to see that Mormonism was the true faith and I felt a throb in my kidney, is that “bosom” enough to justify faith in Mormonism? What if my kneecap began to burn during that prayer, because I was kneeling at the time? And we all should know that bad pizza from an hour earlier does not make Mormonism true. Another Mormon might feel a warmth in their chest like drinking warm milk, but does mine have to be like theirs for it to be true? Fifth, feelings are also subject to psychological manipulations. Many people can attest to how they talked themselves into or out of loving someone. I can make my stomach burn with hunger if I just think about food long enough. It is quite possible to talk oneself into the “burning of the bosom” by sheer will power and psychological effort. These may seem like absurd examples but it really is important to recognize how subjective and manipulatable are our feelings.

### **If it Feels Good, Believe it.**

With this said, if you find yourself in an extended discussion with a Mormon about their faith, there will likely come a point, in which you will find yourself in the same position I was in when I tried to “reason” with a Mormon friend. It was a coffee house environment and two Mormon missionaries sat on the couch diagonal to me. I was trying to bridge the gap between them and myself by establishing that we are all fellow truth seekers and if we are honest and cordial we can all probably learn something from each other. They were perfectly willing to accept this premise. But when I showed them evidence of error in Mormon doctrine it flew right past them. As we journeyed deeper into the “why” questions of our beliefs, I was finding that they had tested their own faith only slightly. And they had accepted Mormonism because of the niceness of some Mormons they knew or because of their Mormon upbringing. In trying to refute Mormon doctrine with sound reasoning I found myself trying to nail jello to the wall.<sup>12</sup> My very

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categories or thought were different from theirs. For them it was “belief then reasoning” while for me it was “believe while reasoning.” To put it another way, I was finding myself trying to keep the discussion within the realm of objectively testable and discernable truths while they were trying to get the discussion into the realm of the un-testable and the subjective. As long as we stayed in the subjective realm of feelings, then my classical Christian faith was not distinguishable from their Mormon faith. And Hinduism, Buddhism, Jehovah’s Witnesses, or “Trash Can-ism” are likewise just as

viable faiths. <sup>13</sup> I experienced powerful emotional feelings when I first made a profession of faith. I have since wept and laughed and felt the gamut of feelings in response to Christian truth. But none of those feelings ever made anything true. Rather I have the responsibility to conform my emotions to the objective spiritual truth of Christianity.

The discussion ended in a stalemate between us, one saying, “come let us reason together” and the other saying “look for the burning in the bosom.”

### **Application**

What do we do then if we know that Mormonism generally puts faith before and above reason? Well there are several things to note in answering this question.

1) We must first look at our own Christian faith and ask to what extent have we been loving the Lord our God with all our minds (Matt. 22:37). Fideism is not common just among Mormons. With all the scientific, philosophical and theological evidence on our side, still countless Evangelical Christians still practice their faith with little to no brain power, and could not tell Abraham from a ham sandwich.

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2) We should put ourselves in their shoes. Imagine how you would think and respond if your whole worldview were being challenged by some witness from another church. Such sympathy can really help to motivate our own patience, sensitivity, and tact.

3) Soften your jab but sharpen your sword. In other words, refine and develop the content of your message, but approach them with the most genuine and loving manner. I try to establish common ground—interests, religious pursuits, goals, etc—and use those as bridges to earn their trust. I use humor to lighten the mood so that incisive questions do not come off as attacks but as questions from a friend. And that is my first goal, to be their friend. Even if they never convert, I will have succeeded on a lesser level by loving them, plain and simple. My second goal is to earn their permission to extend challenges to their beliefs or give expressions of my own belief. You will probably have to soften your language so as not to sound too philosophical, theological or preachy. If you can put scholarly thoughts into laymen’s terms you will be much more fit to share the true Gospel.

4) Appeal to their subjective experience. As you approach them with gentleness and love appeal to their feelings. One former Mormon, Derwin Gray, advises that Christians bring their Mormon friends to an Evangelical Worship service, especially one with some stirring worship music. That Mormon may very well feel a “burning in their bosom” and start to lose their Mormon faith right there. Another tactic is to appeal to emotional issues like, “How does a Mormon know that they have worked hard enough to reach the highest level of exaltation?” After all, a common expression in Mormonism is that after you work your hardest God’s grace covers the rest. But the question remains, how does a person know that they have worked their hardest? <sup>14</sup> Be careful though. In employing subjective emotional tactics you are plucking their heart strings. You do not want to pluck too hard and make an enemy. Nor do you want to win them based entirely upon a song. If they come to the true Christ entirely by emotionalism, then they can just as easily turn away from him in the same manner.

### **The Moral of the Story...**

I hope that you can see that Mormonism has fideism at its practical core and this issue deserves to be addressed. This issue must first be attacked where it exists within the true Church.

But it also must be identified and understood as it applies in Mormonism if we are to have the most effective and sensitive evangelism to Mormons. We as Evangelical Christians have a God who has shown himself through history, theology philosophy, and science. We therefore can worship him even as we are studying to better demonstrate the reasonableness and wisdom of the Christian faith. Why accept a system that appeals to the heart at the exclusion of the mind? Our God bids us to, “love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is [the] first and great commandment” (Matt. 22:37-38). Why love him with only our hearts when we have the rest of ourselves to give in loving sacrifice to Him? And why not extend faith and reason together letting them inform each other and together fuel a holistic worship, a sacrificial service, and a generous sharing of the one God of Truth?

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<sup>1</sup> The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints authors and publishes a six lesson teaching series in which each Mormon Missionary is trained. On page four of the accompanying instruction manual called *Instructions for Discussion: Uniform System for Teaching the Gospel* the full-length commitment challenge is, “Read in the Book of Mormon and pray to know that the Book of Mormon is true and that Joseph Smith was a prophet.” The line is mirrored in the associated *Discussion 1* pamphlet (pg 1-1) and the *Plan of Our Heavenly Father Study Guide 1* (pg 6), (United States: Intellectual Reserve, 1986).

<sup>2</sup> Merriam Webster, *Webster’s Dictionary 9<sup>th</sup> Ed.* (Springfield, MS: Merriam Webster, 1984).

<sup>3</sup> J.P. Moreland’s, William Lane Craig, Ravi Zaraharius, and Norman Geisler are all formidable apologists and each has multiple works demonstrating the viability and truthfulness of the Christian Faith.

<sup>4</sup> All Scripture references are from the NASB unless otherwise noted.

<sup>5</sup> The full article is available at <http://farms.byu.edu/free/transcripts/pf.asp?content=petevidences>

<sup>6</sup> Ostler, Blake T. *The Doctrine of Creatio Ex Nihilo is a Big Fuss over Nothing: Part II: The Inductive Argument.* <<http://fair-lds.org/apol/TNMC/TNMC05.html>> (Foundation for Apologetic Information and Research: 7 July 2002), Accessed: 23 September 2002.

<sup>7</sup> The Smithsonian Institute officially denied the existence of any evidence to support the uniquely Mormon account of the history of the American continents. See the Frank H. H. Roberts’ letter from the Smithsonian Institute Feb. 16, 1951, in Dee F. Green, *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* (1969), 76-78.

<sup>8</sup> See Francis J. Beckwith, Carl Mosser, and Paul Owen, gen. Eds., *The New Mormon Challenge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 95-152, 193-218. And, Francis J. Beckwith, and Stephen F. Parish, *The Mormon Concept of God: A Philosophical Analysis* (Lampeter, Dyfed, Wales: Edwin Mellen Press, 1991).

<sup>9</sup> For a strictly Scriptural discourse see, Ron Rhodes, and Marian Bodine, *Reasoning from the Scriptures with Mormons* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1995). For a wider but shallower dealing with Mormon history and theology see John R. Farkas, and David A. Reed, *Mormonism: Changes, Contradictions and Errors* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995); also, *The New Mormon Challenge* is an excellent book dealing with contemporary Mormonism and *The Mormon Concept of God* is a philosophical handling of Mormon Theology Proper. And many more authors could be cited including the much acclaimed Jerald and Sandra Tanner.

<sup>10</sup> The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, *The Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ. The Doctrines and Covenants of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. The Pearl of Great Price* (Salt Lake City: LDS, 1981).

<sup>11</sup> For a brief but strong survey level analysis of the nature of truth see Norman Geisler, “Truth, The Nature of” *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 741-45

<sup>12</sup> I am indebted to Dr. Norman Geisler for this expression.

<sup>13</sup> This is a hypothetical (IE: un-real) religion. Please do not start worshipping trashcans.

<sup>14</sup> Derwin Gray also recommended this latter tactical approach of appealing to their works based salvation. Derwin is a Christian speaker and evangelist as the founder and president of One Heart at a Time Ministries ([www.oneheartatatime.org](http://www.oneheartatatime.org)).