

Dialogue with a Prophet

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“Obey me”, he ordered, in the kindest of tones.

“Why?”, I replied.

“Because”, he patiently continued, “I have God’s authority. He tells me what is good for you, and what you should do. And while I am not certain to be right, I am much more likely to be so than you are.”

“Wow!”, I said. “If what you say is correct, I would be most fortunate to have such a sure guide in my life. But how can I be reasonably sure that you have this divine power?”

“You presume to question me!?” He sounded hurt.

“I do. I feel I must. Do you suggest that I accept your word on blind faith?” I said.

“Of course not” he said, his voice resonating confidence, “I would never ask that. Well, those who came before me had this authority and passed it on to me. The first of my predecessors spoke face to face with God and received authority directly from Him. Others have hinted of similar encounters with God, but have not been so clear in what they have told us. But in any event, because of our first leader, we are certain that we have God’s authority – there no questioning this fact. And from then until now we have an unbroken line of succession that assures you of my authority. No one else on earth can legitimately make this claim. And so you would be foolish not to obey me.”

“But many do make the same claim as you, or something similar to it, do they not?”, I enquired.

“There are many false prophets and impostors. Do not be fooled by them,” he continued.

“Do any of them acknowledge your authority?,” I asked.

“Of course not!”, he said. “They are impostors, and so try to deceive you for their own gain or other improper purposes.”

“May I assume that they tell their followers that you are an impostor and false prophet?” I wondered.

“They probably do, but this does not matter”, he said. “They are the false prophets, and you should simply ignore them.”

“Hmmm”, I paused. “But it seems that for someone who did not already believe you or them, it would be hard to say who is telling the truth. You can’t all be right. Since I do not believe any of you at the moment, how can I be reasonably sure that you are correct in what you are telling me? It is not that I think you might purposefully mislead me, and I would be thrilled if you are right in what you say. No other message could be more important for me. But many people in the past have believed they were inspired by God and had his authority, countless human beings have believed them, and it now appears virtually certain that few if any of these religious leaders told the truth. I know you agree with me on this point because I have read your statements to this affect. Wittingly or not, many religious leaders misled those who followed them, in many cases with disastrous consequences.”

“Of course”, he snorted. “But I am authorized by God, as I said. And all you have to do is study what I have told you about how God wants you to live, and if you feel a sense of peace in your heart, or what some call a ‘burning in your bosom’, you can be sure that I have God’s authority, and that you should obey me.”

“That makes sense,” I said. “But are not many of the things you tell me to do the same as what those you call false prophets also tell their followers? If I think about those things, would I not feel the same about what you say as about what they say? Don’t all of you tell me to be a good father, live the golden rule, etc.?”

“Hmmm”, he paused. “That is correct. Well, I suppose you will have to find the things respecting which I have said one thing and the impostors have said something else, and study those. That way you will be able to tell which of us is the most correct, and your feelings will mean something.”

“Now that really makes sense”, I said, “lets go down that path. Where do you suggest we start?”

“The first thing you should consider is the Book of Mormon”, he said. “This is the best evidence of our claim to divine authority. Our first leader received the text of this book by God’s power, and assured us that it is the ‘most correct book on the face of the earth.’ But, he also said that if it contained mistakes, they are the ‘mistakes of men’, so don’t be too critical of it.”

“As it turns out”, I said, “I have read that book over twenty times and a great of material respecting it, both pro and con, and I must be quite critical of it. It is fair to say that I have studied this book far more carefully than any other. We can’t be certain of anything, of course, but on the basis of the evidence available today, it seems highly probable that this book is not what your first leader attempted to lead people to believe it was. In fact, it seems clear that he misled people, intentionally or otherwise, as to what it was. I have studied this as carefully as I can, have prayed about it, and that is how I feel.”

“Then you are deceived!” His eyes narrowed.

“Perhaps so”, I acknowledged. “But what more can I do than what I have done, except to accept your word against my best judgement? I understand that many believe you, but I note that few of them have reviewed more than a tiny bit of the relevant evidence. Of those who have reviewed most of the evidence, the vast majority agree with the position I have adopted. And when I compare those who agree with you to those who do not, I find myself both more persuaded by, and more comfortable being in the company of, those who disagree with you. If I must reside somewhere after this life, I would prefer to be with those people, and if they will be in a place called “hell” I will likely be more at home there than elsewhere. And most importantly, when I do as you counselled in terms of studying, praying and considering, I was left with only the tiniest concern that I may be mistaken on this point in light of all of the evidence I have reviewed. I am as sure that the Book of Mormon is not what you say it is as I am that Holocaust did indeed happen, contrary to the belief of those who profess that it did not. And since I must make a decision respecting the important question of whether the Book of Mormon is what you say it is, it seems clear to me what I should decide.”

“You will regret what you are doing!” His words mixed anger, frustration and concern in equal proportion. “You are throwing away that which is most precious! And you will be responsible for leading your children astray! And ...”

“I am sorry to interrupt”, I interrupted, “but it won’t do any good to talk like that. I understand that your feelings are strong on this point and that you do not agree with my decision. And I ask that you try to understand that I am now beyond the influence of your threats and the guilt and fear they are designed to cause. If I am to be persuaded of the correctness of your position, it will be on the basis of the evidence, examined in the fashion you have suggested. Is there anything else you would like me to consider before we part company?”

His face reddened under the effort to control himself. A long silence passed, and then he said: “Our first leader and those who received their authority from him, as I did, have been guided by God to do many things that were to the profound benefit of our people. This is your heritage – part of what you seemed determined to throw away. Some examples include the Word of Wisdom and the emphasis we have put lately on the importance of the nuclear family and love between husbands and wives. These are wonderful things that your ancestors, and you, would not have enjoyed but for the inspiration God has showered down upon His prophets, including me as His representative in your day.”

“Let’s approach these things one at a time”, I suggested. “I recently learned that the ideas contained in the Word of Wisdom were part of a well understood, but less than dominant point of view respecting alcohol and tobacco etc., that existed during your first leader’s time, and that this was known to him. Are we on the same page?”

“I would go with you that far. Faithful scholars within our tradition have said as much”, he said.

“So”, I continued, “the most we can say for sure about what your first leader did in this regard is that he was wise enough to recognize these ideas as being worthwhile, and that this may have been as a result of God’s inspiration. Were all of the other groups that choose to follow similar paths also inspired of God?”

“They may well have been”, he acknowledged. “We don’t have a monopoly on God’s inspiration, but we do have more of it than any other group.”

“I will agree that you don’t have a monopoly on God’s inspiration,” I said. “Explain, then, why the Word of Wisdom has been applied in such different ways over the years? I understand the your first leader himself and many of his most prominent followers did not follow it strictly, and that your church even encouraged the commercial production of wine for a time, but that later the rule came to be strictly enforced. If it was important to be strictly interpreted later, why not earlier?”

“God’s ways are not always clear to us”, he replied. “He revealed to later prophets that the rule needed to be applied more strictly than before. We don’t need to understand more than that. God reveals his will line upon line, precept upon precept, here a little and there a little.”

“And if this rule is a rule of health”, I asked, “why does it seem to reflect only an understanding respecting what was healthy in your first leader’s time? Did God not know about the research that has come out during the last several decades about the benefits of the moderate use of wine, green tea, etc.? And what of the many other rules of health of which the Word of Wisdom does not speak?”

“Of course God knew about all that”, he said, “but God speaks through his sometimes imperfect vessels – his prophets – and His purposes are often hard to discern. He may tell us at some future time to modify the use of the rule again.”

“But I thought God’s word was absolute and unchanging, as He himself is?”, I asked.

“You are wrong”, he replied. “God tells us what we need to know, when it is wise for us to know it. Line upon line, etc.”

“So”, I said, “it is OK with God for massively overweight and unhealthy people to feel justified in their health habits because they don’t drink alcohol, coffee or tea and don’t smoke tobacco. I marvel when I hear people like that ‘tisk-tisk’ tri-athletes who drink a glass of red wine a day because it has been proven to be good for their health. If God cared for these people, I would expect him to provide better advice than he currently is, or to at least encourage them to seek that advice from other sources.”

“You are impertinent, and underestimate God’s wisdom!!” he thundered, finally losing composure for a moment. “The Word of Wisdom does counsel that we take care of our health, and I have often emphasized that myself!!”

“I agree that you have”, I conceded. “But, you cannot show me where in the Word of Wisdom it says what you just did, because it is not there. And in the temple recommend interview, which is the acid test of what is important to your church as far as how is the Word of Wisdom interpreted? Am I keeping the Word of Wisdom for that purpose if I avoid coffee, tea, tobacco, alcohol and drug abuse, but otherwise live in virtually any other unhealthy way? Could I go to the temple while I eat in a horribly unhealthy manner, and never give my body a fraction of the exercise it needs, perhaps in large measure because of the fact that my days are so filled with activities related to obeying the many demands you make upon my time?”

“I have to admit that this is the case”, he muttered.

“I recognize my lack of wisdom”, I said, “and am hopeful that God will communicate His will to me. But until he does, I feel the need to use common sense and guide myself with the best information available to me. And it seems to me that while God chooses not to assist you to enlighten me, I have little choice but to enlighten myself. So from now on, I plan to drink green tea by the bucketful, and have a glass of red wine per day wherever it is convenient to do so. And as the best medical advice of the day changes, I will change my habits and will teach my children to do the same. That seems to me to be the responsible thing to do. But in any event, lets move on your recent emphasis on the importance of the family and love between husband and wives. You probably are not aware that my great-grandmother was the fourth wife of a prominent Mormon leader during the late 1800s, and so I have taken the time to study polygamy carefully. It seems to me that your first leader has a lot of explaining to do with respect to his conduct in that regard, and that this chapter in your church’s history is one characterized by darkness of mind and morality. Even today what your predecessors did back then casts a shadow over many lives. The names Lafferty, Smart and Green come to mind, for example.”

“This need not be discussed,” he said quickly. “Our enemies always bring this up. Some of our past is hard to understand, but it is in the past and is irrelevant now. And how can we reasonably be held responsible for what crazy people do when they misinterpret our doctrine? Lets talk about our recent emphasis on the nuclear family and spousal love.”

“OK”, I said, “but I feel that I should note that the chapters of your past that you don’t want to talk about twisted the lives of countless human beings who relied upon your predecessors in the same way you want me to rely upon you, and that many of the “crazies” to whom you refer are doing precisely what your predecessors told others to do in times past, while publicly proclaiming that polygamy was no longer practised within your church. Again, it seems to me that many people who have relied upon your predecessors as you wish me to rely upon you have not been well served by having done so.”

“Lets talk about families and love between spouses,” he repeated with a sigh.

“OK”, I agreed. “And I am sorry for bringing up a topic you have made clear on many occasions that you do not wish to discuss. Now, about family values and love between spouses. How does what you teach in this regard differ from what the other churches teach? Are we talking about anything more than basic Christian family values?”

“Much more”, he said. “We have added to basic Christian family values the idea that families can be sealed together for eternity. We are preparing, by learning to live happily together in this life, for an eternal family life together. Is that not a wonderful, inspiring idea?!”

“I thought you did not want to talk about polygamy?”, I questioned.

“I don’t”, he replied. “That is in our past.”

“But is not eternal family life polygamous?” I asked. A long pause followed.

“That is not something we emphasize”, he said. “It is not important.”

“But if the eternal nature of family relationships are important, surely this aspect is as well”, I said. “In fact, your first leader and many of your predecessors felt that this was the most important aspect of family life. All else was sacrificed to it – intimacy, love, economic security, etc. And there can be no doubt about your first leader’s teachings in this regard. They are still recorded in D&C 132, although I recall that he did not make the dogma that section contains public until after about ten years of marrying and then bedding other men’s wives, young teenage girls and assorted others while telling the world and almost all of his followers that he was not doing any of those things. I have even read reliable, first hand accounts of the right to polygamously marry a particular woman being purchased by one of your first leader’s followers from another for the weight in catfish of the woman in question, and of another case in which one of his followers wished to marry a particularly attractive young girl who was the sister of two other women this man had already married, when God intervened by telling your first leader that it was not permitted that a man marry more than two sisters. There apparently was something about the marriage to a third sister that was likely to cause dissention within the family that marriage to the first two would not cause. It is probably a coincidence that your first leader then proceeded to attempt for some time marry that very girl, but was rebuffed. The girl was told she would go to hell as a result of her unwillingness to enter into polygamous marriage. Things of this ilk trouble me.”

“All of that is in the past and is not relevant!!!” the thunder again boomed. “Leave it alone!!”

“Sorry”, I apologized. “But these concepts seem central to your conception of what the family is about. What are you going to do if polygamy becomes legal in the United States, as is likely soon to be the case? And in Canada, where I live, polygamy is already legal. Your predecessors have made it clear that polygamous marriage will be the order of the day in the eternal world, and that this practise was only reluctantly and temporarily

suspended as a result of pressure that the US government brought to bear on your church.”

“I cannot predict the future in that regard”, he said. “God does not tell me everything.”

“Apparently not”, I noted, “and again, I say that I am sorry to belabour this point since you clearly do not want to talk about it. But I feel compelled to note that it does not appear to me that things went very well for many of the people, including my great-grandmother, who followed your predecessors’ advice on this important point and entered into polygamous marriages. And have you ever read the advice your predecessors gave regarding sexual matters and other aspects of family life? It does not seem very enlightened to me. In fact, I am certain that my ancestors and other members of your church in prior times would have been far better off following the advice of the scientists of their day, which while not correct, was far less damaging and foolish than what I have read coming from your predecessors. I can’t help but wonder about authority from God that entitles one to such ridiculous advice, and the wisdom of following someone who claims his authority from that root.”

“Why do you insist on living in the past?”, he queried, barely able to control his voice. “We are a church of the future! Look at all of the wonderful things we are doing!! Stop dwelling on the few mistakes our great leaders made in prior times, and focus on what our church is doing now!!!”

“Well”, I replied, “since we started with the idea that you are authorized of God and that this is why I should follow you, and since you received your authority from your predecessors, it seems sensible to me to check how sound the advice they provided to their followers was. I think it is reasonable to assume that your advice to me will be no better than theirs was to the people they led. And my studies have led me to conclude that there were many sources of advice available to those who followed your predecessors that would have served them far better than what your predecessors told them.”

“You are impertinent!! Again, the thunder. “I testify to you ...”

“Please”, I interrupted. “No more testimonies. Bring me evidence that your advice is good, or leave me alone. It seems clear to me that your current advice falls into two categories. First, you teach many of the same things other religious leaders teach – that we should treat each other as Christ and other great moral leaders have taught us. I commend you for this. There cannot be too many people sending this message out into the world. The second element of your message, which is the largest by far, is that those who follow you must engage in a host of time and other resource-consuming activities the main point of which seems to be to cause the people engaged in them to believe that you have the authority you claim to have. Does this not seem circular to you? Some of these activities are connected tangentially to the first part of your message, but not many. Your followers attend countless meetings at which they reaffirm in a variety of ways each other’s belief that you have the authority you say you do. And they spend their time

reading the things they are told to read, which support the idea that you have the authority you say you do, and avoiding the things they are told to avoid, which include anything that questions your authority. They send their children on missions, and in many cases leave their children and grandchildren to serve missions themselves, in attempts to persuade other people that you have the authority you claim to have. And they spend countless hours feeling guilty about not persuading their friends to become your followers. And so on. The programs required to initially engender and then support the belief that you have the authority you say you do seem to occupy a large percentage of your followers' time. If your claim is not valid, it seems to me that your followers have wasted much of their life's energy. And what of all those tithes and donations that they must pay so that you can build more buildings and other monuments ..."

"Monuments?!", he shouted. "Now you have gone too far!! How dare you imply ..."

"I am sorry", I said. "These buildings are monuments in the non-pejorative sense of that word. The only question is to what are they monuments. It is my view that they are monuments to the faith of a people in the fact that you have God's unique authority."

"Well", he said, "I can agree with that. And those people are right. You would be wise to follow them. But what of all the many other things my predecessors and I have done to benefit our people, and of course, you? What do you say about those things?"

"Tell you what", I replied, "if you don't go through the list you have in mind, I won't talk about the blacks and the priesthood, how women have been treated in Mormon culture, the problems your followers seem to have with depression, and a host of other things I could bring up. I have studied this matter as carefully as I can, and have concluded that when you and your predecessors venture into territory that involves teaching things that differ from what the other Christian churches teach, the results are on balance much more harmful for your followers than good, and seem to be connected to your predecessors' and your desire to perpetuate a position of authority over your followers. On this basis alone, I think it is wise that I not follow you. And in addition, it is my view that the evidence that you have God's authority is so weak that I cannot accept it. I have decided that it is best that I leave others to continue to tell each other that you are God's one and only agent here on earth, and build monuments for you, while I enjoy the wonders that came into view for me when I stopped doing the things you told me I must do and started paying more attention to the rest of life. I have no further time or energy for monument building or persuading others that you are what you say you are. This has done much more harm than good for me, but I can understand why you would want me to continue to do it – it aids both you and the organization you represent. I have decided that a rule generally applicable in sociology – what is good for the organization and its leaders is often not good for the individual members of the organization – applies to your church. How I was ever persuaded that so many rules I knew were generally applicable did not apply to your church I will never understand. But I was so persuaded. I am thankful that this false idea no longer holds sway over me. So in summary, I have decided that I should not trust your advice unless I can independently confirm that it makes sense.

After having done my best to do that, I don't believe that it is possible. Your advice is not trustworthy, and hence I decline to follow you further."

"Take care young man," he intoned. "You seem to have found yourself among those who have intellectualized themselves past the point where the faith rope can reach. There is hope in faith, and there is very little comfort in the coldness of hard facts at times. Balance is necessary. You have lost balance."

"Really?" I replied. "It seems to me you are encouraging me to ask the wrong question. The question for me is, in what should I place my faith? I have indeed intellectualized well past the point to which the rope tethered to LDS history and practise will reach, and for good reason in my view. I no longer believe people such as your first leader, whose history clearly indicates him to be an unreliable guide. And I no longer believe those who go to great lengths to try to make sure that I remain unaware of facts that are critical to my decision making process and in particular, whether I trust them or not. My inclination to trust your former colleague Paul Dunn declined after I found out that he had been making up stories and otherwise embellishing the truth. You should not be surprised that you have suffered the same fate now that I know that you and the other leaders of your church have been doing virtually the same thing, and a much larger and more important scale. And hence for good reason I no longer simply accept that the way of life you and others like you taught me is "best" and "true", but rather I try to collect and analyse the evidence to see what indeed is in my best interest and that of my family. In short, I do not accept and believe everything the Government tells me, or former employers used to tell me, or the executive committee of the large professional partnership of which I am a member tells me, or my athletic coaches used to tell me, and for the same reason I no longer accept uncritically what the Church says either. I recognize that each of these institutions is the same in one sense: Many things that they would like me to do are in their best interest, but not in mine. That, specifically, is the rope past the end of which my life experience has taken me, and I am grateful beyond what I can express for that. There is such a thing as false hope. And we do feel cold initially as we realize that what we once thought was real is not. But we need not stop there. The faith I now have enlivens, excites and helps me more than anything I have previously experienced. And I do not expect you to be able to understand that, and hence expect you to think me unwise. I am not certain why this is the case, but can offer a few guesses. Perhaps it is because you have never run to the end of your rope because you are comfortable where you are in the adulations of your followers. Or perhaps upon reaching the end of your rope, you were turned back by the fear that is the essence of the Mormon control system, as it is with virtually all fundamentalist religions as well as many other man-made social systems. Or perhaps you were turned back, or kept immobile in the first place, but the inertia caused by your leadership position and all that is at stake in that regard in terms of prestige, pride, family and social relationship etc. These are hard things for a person in your position to address."

"So you say", he said wearily. "I have seen a thousand of your type. Your ancestors were wonderful pioneers; you were raised by fine, faithful parents in a good home; and you are going through mid-life or some other crisis which will pass. Just as all

philosophers die in Plato's arms, so you will return to the Church. You may as well do it sooner than later, since the longer you wait the more crow you will have to eat when you realize that you have been tilting at windmills."

"Thank you – and I mean this sincerely – for your concern which I take to be genuine", I said. "My ancestors made decisions that I think were wise in their time. They were courageous people who resisted the tide of their society and believed your first leader because he offered them hope and what seemed at the time like a sensible way to improve themselves. I honor them for their courage and vision. And you are right about my parents – they are fine, wonderful people who have done their best to live in the manner their consciences have dictated. However, they had available to them while forming their worldview only a small fraction of the evidence I now have available to me. And you and I both know how hard it is to change a worldview once formed. How do the Jesuits put it – give me a child until he is seven, and he will never leave – something like that anyway. This uses some, but not a lot, of hyperbole. I am honoring both my ancestors and my parents by using my best judgement to determine what is right, and then at significant personal discomfort and cost, doing it."

"You have thrown away that which is most precious ..." His voice gradually faded as I walked away toward a beckoning, peaceful meadow where members of my family were playing Frisbee while waiting for me.

"Here he comes! Catch Dad!!", one of the kids shouted, throwing a Frisbee in my direction. "That didn't take as long as you said it might, Dad", another said. "Boy, you look happy! Who was that guy anyway?"

"An old acquaintance who does not matter to you", I said, smiling.

"Throw me a long one Dad", yelled a third as she ran off through the grass with sunlight dancing in her hair.

Time melted into laughter, color, sound and touch in my heaven – the only heaven I choose to know – into which I will pour all of my remaining life's energy.