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Letter to a Doubter

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LETTER TO A DOUBTER

Terryl Givens

I understand that some doubts have arisen in your mind. I don't know for sure what they are, but I imagine I have heard them before. Probably I have entertained some of them in my own mind. And perhaps I still harbor some of them myself. I am not going to respond to them in the ways that you may have anticipated. Oh, I will say a few things about why many doubts felt by the previously faithful and faith-filled are ill-founded and misplaced: the result of poor teaching, naïve assumptions, cultural pressures, and outright false doctrines. But my main purpose in writing this letter is not to resolve the uncertainties and perplexities in your mind. I want, rather, to endow them with the dignity and seriousness they deserve. And even to celebrate them. That may sound perverse, but I hope to show you it is not.

So, first, a few words about doubts that are predicated on misbegotten premises. I will illustrate an example of this from the life of Mormonism's greatest intellectual, and then address five other kinds in particular. The example comes from B. H. Roberts.

From his first experience debating a Campbellite minister on the Book of Mormon in 1881, Roberts was devoted to defending the Mormon scripture. While in England as a Church mission president in 1887 and 1888, he studied in the Picton

Library, collecting notes on American archeology that could serve as external evidence in support of the Book of Mormon. The three volumes of the work that resulted, *New Witnesses for God*, appeared in 1895, 1909, and 1911. Then, on 22 August 1921, a young member wrote a letter to Church Apostle James E. Talmage that would shake up the world of Mormon apologetics, and dramatically refocus Roberts's own intellectual engagement with Mormonism. The brief letter sounded routine enough. "Dear Dr. Talmage," wrote W. E. Riter, one "Mr. Couch [a friend of Riter's] of Washington, D.C., has been studying the Book of Mormon and submits the enclosed questions concerning his studies. Would you kindly answer them and send them to me."¹ Talmage forwarded the five questions to the Church's Book of Mormon expert, B. H. Roberts, expecting a quick and routine reply. Four of the questions dealt with anachronisms that were fairly easily dismissed by anyone who understands a little about translation theory. But one had Roberts stumped. It was this question: "How [are we] to explain the immense diversity of Indian languages, if all are supposed to be relatively recent descendants of Lamanite origin?" To put the problem in simple terms, how, in the space of a mere thousand years or so, could the Hebrew of Lehi's tribe have fragmented and morphed into every one of the hundreds of Indian languages of the Western Hemisphere, from Inuit to Iroquois to Shoshone to Patagonian? Languages just don't mutate and multiply that quickly.

Several weeks after Talmage's request, Roberts still had not responded. In late December, he wrote the President of the Church, explaining the delay and asking for more time: "While knowing that some parts of my [previous] treatment of Book of Mormon problems . . . had not been altogether as convincing as I would like to have seen them, I still believed that reason-

1. W. E. Riter to James E. Talmage, 22 August 1921, in B. H. Roberts, *Studies of the Book of Mormon*, ed. Brigham D. Madsen (Salt Lake City: Signature, 1992), 35.

able explanations could be made that would keep us in advantageous possession of the field. As I proceeded with my recent investigations, however, and more especially in the, to me, new field of language problems, I found the difficulties more serious than I had thought for; and the more I investigated the more difficult I found the formulation of an answer to Mr. Couch's inquiries to be."²

Roberts never found an answer to that question, and it troubled him the rest of his life. Some scholars think he lost his testimony of the truthfulness and antiquity of the Book of Mormon as a result of this and other doubts—though I don't see that in the record. But here is the lesson we should learn from this story. Roberts's whole dilemma was born of a faulty assumption he imbibed wholesale, never questioning, never critically analyzing it—that Lehi arrived on an empty continent, and that his descendants alone eventually overran the hemisphere from the Arctic Circle to the Straits of Magellan.

Nothing in the Book of Mormon suggests that Lehi's colony expanded to fill the hemisphere. In fact, as John Sorenson has conclusively demonstrated, the entire history of the Book of Mormon takes place within an area of Nephite and Lamanite habitation some five hundred miles long and perhaps two hundred miles wide (or a little smaller than Idaho). And though, as late as 1981, the Book of Mormon introduction written by Bruce R. McConkie referred to Lamanites as "the principal ancestors of the American Indians," absolutely nothing in that book of scripture gave warrant for such an extravagant claim. That is why, as of 2007, the Church changed the wording to "the Lamanites are *among* the ancestors" (emphasis added) No, the most likely scenario that unfolded in ancient America is that Lehi's colony was one of dozens of migrations, by sea and by land bridge. His descendants occupied a small geographical area and intermin-

2. B. H. Roberts to Heber J. Grant et al., 29 December 1921, in Roberts, *Studies of the Book of Mormon*, 46.

gled and intermarried with other peoples and cultures. Roberts couldn't figure out how Inuit and Patagonian languages derived from Hebrew because they didn't. And there was absolutely no reason to try to make that square peg fit into that round hole. You see, even brilliant individuals and ordained Seventies can buy into careless assumptions that lead them astray. That Joseph Smith at some point entertained similar notions about Book of Mormon geography only makes it more imperative for members not to take every utterance of any leader as inspired doctrine. As Joseph himself complained, "he did not enjoy the right vouchsafed to every American citizen—that of free speech. He said that when he ventured to give his private opinion," about various subjects, they ended up "being given out as the word of the Lord because they came from him."³

So what are some of the assumptions we might be making that create intellectual tension and spiritual turmoil? I will mention five: the prophetic mantle, the nature of restoration, Mormon exclusivity, the efficacy of institutional religion, and the satisfactions of the gospel—including personal revelation. I can only say a few words about each but enough, I hope, to provoke you to consider if these—or kindred misplaced foundations—apply to you.

1. The Prophetic Mantle

Abraham deceived Abimelech about his relationship with Sarah. Isaac deceived Esau and stole both his birthright and his blessing (but maybe that's okay because he is a patriarch and not a prophet, strictly speaking). Moses took glory unto himself at the waters of Meribah and lost his ticket to the promised land as a result. He was also guilty of manslaughter and covered up his crime. Jonah ignored the Lord's call, then later

3. Hyrum L. Andrus and Helen Mae Andrus, *They Knew the Prophet: Personal Accounts from over 100 People Who Knew Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1974), 140.

whined and complained because God didn't burn Nineveh to the ground as He had threatened. It doesn't get a lot better in the New Testament. Paul rebuked Peter sharply for what he called cowardice and hypocrisy in his refusal to embrace the gentiles as equals. Then Paul got into a sharp argument with fellow apostle Barnabas, and they parted company. So where on earth do we get the notion that modern-day prophets are infallible specimens of virtue and perfection? Joseph said emphatically, "I don't want you to think I am very righteous, for I am not very righteous."⁴ To remove any possibility of doubts, he canonized those scriptures in which he is rebuked for his inconstancy and weakness. Most telling of all is section 124:1, in which this pervasive pattern is acknowledged and explained: "for unto this end have I raised you up, that I might show forth my wisdom through the *weak* things of the earth" (D&C 124:1; emphasis added). Air-brushing our prophets, past or present, is a wrenching of the scriptural record and a form of idolatry. God specifically said he called weak vessels so that we wouldn't place our faith in *their* strength or power, but in God's. Most crippling, however, are the false expectations this paradigm sets up: When Pres. Woodruff said the Lord would never suffer his servants to lead the people astray, we can only reasonably interpret that statement to mean that the prophets will not teach us any soul-destroying doctrine—not that they will never err. President Kimball himself condemned Brigham Young's Adam-God teachings as heresy; and as an apostle he referred as early as 1963 to the priesthood ban as a "possible error" for which he asked forgiveness.⁵ The mantle represents priesthood keys, not a level of holiness or infallibility. God would not have enjoined us to hear what prophets, seers, and revelators have to

4. Manuscript History of the Church D-1, pp. 1555–57.

5. Spencer W. Kimball, *Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball* ed. Edward L. Kimball, (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1995), 448–49.

say “in all patience and faith” if their words were always sage and inspired (D&C 21:5).

2. The Nature of Restoration

Recently a Mormon scholar announced his departure from Mormonism and baptism into another faith tradition. “Mormons believe that the [Christian] church—Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant versions alike—completely died,” he said of his principal reason for leaving. Then he quoted another dissident as saying, “The idea that God was sort of snoozing until 1820 now seems to me absurd.” Well, guess what? That sounds absurd to Mormons as well. President of the Church John Taylor said, “There were men in those dark ages who could commune with God, and who, by the power of faith, could draw aside the curtain of eternity and gaze upon the invisible world . . . There were men who could gaze upon the face of God, have the ministering of angels, and unfold the future destinies of the world. If those were dark ages I pray God to give me a little darkness.”⁶ Joseph didn’t believe the Christian Church died either. He was very particular about his wording when he recast his first revelation about restoration to state specifically that God was bringing the Church back out of the wilderness, where it had been nurtured of the Lord during a period when priesthood ordinances were no longer performed to bind on earth and in heaven. Precious morsels of truth had lain scattered throughout time, place, religion, and culture, and Joseph saw his mission as that of bringing it all into one coherent whole, not reintroducing the gospel *ex nihilo*.

6. John Taylor, in Brigham Young et al., *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols., reported by G. D. Watt et al. (Liverpool: F. D. and S. W. Richards, et al., 1851–86; repr., Salt Lake City: n.p., 1974), 16:197–98.

3. Mormon Exclusivity

In a related way, some come to doubt Mormonism's "monopoly on salvation," as they call it. It grows increasingly difficult to imagine that a body of a few million, in a world of seven billion, can really be God's only chosen people and the sole heirs of salvation. I think this represents the most tragically unfortunate misperception about Mormonism. The ironic truth is that the most generous, liberal, and universalist conception of salvation in all Christendom is Joseph Smith's view. We would do well to note what the Lord said to Joseph in Doctrine and Covenants section 49, when he referred to "holy men" that Joseph knew nothing about and whom the Lord had reserved unto himself. Clearly, Mormons don't have a monopoly on righteousness, truth, or God's approbation. Here and hereafter, a multitude of non-Mormons will participate in the Church of the Firstborn.

As a mighty God, our Heavenly Father has the capacity to save us all. As a fond father, He has the desire to do so. That is why, as Joseph taught, "God hath made a provision that *every* spirit can be ferreted out in that world" that has not deliberately and definitively chosen to resist a grace that is stronger than the cords of death.⁷ The idea is certainly a generous one, and it seems suited to the weeping God of Enoch, the God who has set His heart upon us. If some inconceivable few will persist in rejecting the course of eternal progress, they are "the only ones" (D&C 76:37, 38) who will be damned, taught Joseph Smith. "All the rest" (D&C 76:39) of us will be rescued from the hell of our private torments and subsequent alienation from God.

7. Joseph Smith, *Words of Joseph Smith*, ed. Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook (Orem, UT: Grandin, 1991), 360.

4. Inefficacy of Institutional Religion

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote perhaps his greatest sermon on the fallacy of cheap grace. I think the plague of our day is the fallacy of cheap spirituality. I find among the college freshmen I teach a near-universal disdain for “organized religion” and at the same time an energetic affirmation of personal spirituality.

The new sensibility began innocently enough with the lyrical expression of William Blake, who suggested that God might be better found in the solitary contemplation of nature than in the crowded pews of churches. He urged readers “to see the world in a grain of sand, and heaven in a wildflower / Hold infinity in the palm of your hand, and eternity in an hour”⁸ It took a Marxist critic, Terry Eagleton, to point out that the Gospel of Matthew teaches us that “Eternity lies not in a grain of sand but in a glass of water. The cosmos revolves on comforting the sick. When you act in this way, you are sharing in the love which built the stars.”⁹ Holiness is found in how we treat others, not in how we contemplate the cosmos. As our experiences in marriages, families, and friendship teach us, it takes relationships to provide the friction that wears down our rough edges and sanctifies us. Then, and only then, those relationships become the environment in which those perfected virtues are best enjoyed. We need those virtues not just here, but eternally, because “the same sociality which exists among us here will exist among us there, only it will be coupled with eternal glory, which glory we do not now enjoy” (D&C 130:2).

In this light, the project of perfection, or purification and sanctification, is not a scheme for personal advancement, but a process of better filling—and rejoicing in—our role in what Paul called the body of Christ, and what others have referred to

8. William Blake, *Auguries of Innocence*, at http://www.poetryloverspage.com/poets/blake/to_see_world.html.

9. Terry Eagleton, *The Meaning of Life: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 95.

as the New Jerusalem, the General Assembly and Church of the Firstborn, or, as in the prophecy of Enoch, Zion. There are no Zion individuals. There is only a Zion community.

5. Satisfactions of the Gospel/Personal Revelation

Brigham Young said, “To profess to be a Saint, and not enjoy the spirit of it, tries every fiber of the heart, and is one of the most painful experiences that man can suffer.”¹⁰ We expect the gospel to make us happy. We are taught that God answers prayers, that all blessings can be anticipated as a direct and predictable result of a corresponding commandment. I love that quote, because I think Young was being truly empathetic. He realized that then, as now, thousands of Saints were paying the high price of discipleship and asking, “Where is the joy?” And he knew the question was born in agony and bewilderment.

I have no glib solace to offer. I will not bore you or insult your spiritual maturity with injunctions to pray harder, to fast more, to read your scriptures. I know you have been traveling that route across a parched desert. But do let me repeat here three simple ideas: be patient, remember, and take solace in the fellowship of the desolate. In Lehi’s vision, he recorded, he “traveled for the space of many hours in darkness” (1 Nephi 8:8).

Patience does not mean to wait apathetically and dejectedly, but to anticipate actively on the basis of what we know; and what we know, we must remember. I believe remembering can be the highest form of devotion. To remember is to rescue the sacred from the vacuum of oblivion. To remember Christ’s sacrifice every Sunday at the sacrament table is to say no to the ravages of time, to refuse to allow his supernal sacrifice to be just another datum in the catalogue of what is past. To remember past blessings is to give continuing recognition of the gift and to reconfirm the relationship to the Giver as one

10. *Journal of Discourses*, 12:168.

that persists in the here and now. Few—very few—are entirely bereft of at least one solace-giving memory: a childhood prayer answered, a testimony borne long ago, a fleeting moment of perfect peace. And for those few who despairingly insist they have never heard so much as a whisper, then know this: We don't need to look for a burning bush when all we need is to be still and remember that we have known the goodness of love, the rightness of virtue, the nobility of kindness and faithfulness. And as we remember, we can ask if we perceive in such beauties merely the random effects of Darwinian products, or the handwriting of God on our hearts.

At the same time, remembering rather than experiencing moves us toward greater independence and insulates us from the vicissitudes of the moment. Brigham said God's intention was to make us as independent in our sphere as he is in his.¹¹ That is why the heavens close from time to time, to give us room for self-direction. That is why the Saints rejoiced in a Pentecostal day in Kirtland's temple but were met with silence in Nauvoo—silence, and their memories of Kirtland. One can see the Lord gently tutoring us to replace immediacy with memory when he says to Oliver, "If you desire a further witness, cast your mind upon the night that you cried unto me in your heart, that you might know concerning the truth of these things. Did I not speak peace to your mind concerning the matter? What greater witness can you have than from God?" (D&C 6:22–23). Citing C. S. Lewis, Rachael Givens writes, "God allows spiritual peaks to subside into (often extensive) troughs in order [to have] 'servants who can finally become Sons,' 'stand[ing] up on [their] own legs—to carry out from the will alone duties which have lost all relish . . . growing into the sort of creature He wants [them] to be.'"¹²

11. See *Journal of Discourses*, 3:252, 13:33.

12. See C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (1941; reprint, New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 39–40, as cited in Rachael Givens, "Mormonism

Finally, find solace in what I have called the fellowship of the desolate—with Mother Teresa, who said, “I am told God loves me—and yet the reality of darkness and coldness and emptiness is so great that nothing touches my soul. . . . Heaven from every side is closed.”¹³

Or with the magnificent Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, who poured out his soul in this aching beautiful lament:

I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day.
 What hours, O what black hours we have spent
 This night! what sights you, heart, saw; ways you went!
 And more must, in yet longer light’s delay.
 With witness I speak this. But where I say
 Hours I mean years, mean life. And my lament
 Is cries countless, cries like dead letters sent
 To dearest him that lives alas! away.¹⁴

Or with my favorite poet, George Herbert, who expressed frustration with his own ministry, barren as it felt of joyful fruit, and described his—almost—defection from life lived in silent patience:

I STRUCK the board, and cried, No more.
 I will abroad.
 What? shall I ever sigh and pine?
 My lines and life are free; free as the road,
 Loose as the wind, as large as store.
 Shall I be still in suit?
 Have I no harvest but a thorn
 To let me blood, and not restore

and the Dark Night of the Soul,” at <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/peculiarpeople/2012/09/mormonisms-dark-night-of-the-soul/>.

13. Mother Teresa, *Come Be My Light* (New York: Random House Digital, 2009), 202.

14. Gerard Manley Hopkins, *Selected Poems of Gerald Manley Hopkins*, ed. Bob Blaisdell (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2011), 59–60.

What I have lost with cordial fruit?
Sure there was wine
Before my sighs did dry it: there was corn
Before my tears did drown it.
Is the year only lost to me?
Have I no bays to crown it?
No flowers, no garlands gay? all blasted?
All wasted?
...
Away; take heed:
I will abroad.
Call in thy death's-head there: tie up thy fears.
He that forbears
To suit and serve his [own] need,
Deserves his load.
But as I rav'd and grew more fierce and wild
At every word,
Methought I heard one calling, Child:
And I replied, My Lord.¹⁵

Finally, listen to Fyodor Dostoevsky who, like Herbert, found only the slim anchor of one memory ensconced in an overwhelming silence to hold onto—but hold on he did:

I will tell you that I am a child of this century, a child of disbelief and doubt. I am that today and will remain so until the grave. How much terrible torture this thirst for faith has cost me and costs me even now, which is all the stronger in my soul the more arguments I can find against it. And yet, God sends me sometimes instants when I am completely calm; at those instants I love and feel loved by others, and it is at those instances

15. George Herbert, *The Temple*, 2nd ed. (1633; repr., London: Pickering, 1838), 159, at <http://books.google.com/books?id=vv-PaLfn8wIC>. Spelling has been modernized.

that I have shaped for myself a Credo where everything is clear and sacred for me. This Credo is very simple, here it is: to believe that nothing is more beautiful, profound, sympathetic, reasonable, manly and more powerful than Christ.¹⁶

Conclusion

Maybe none of these issues apply to you. Maybe you have a whole different set of doubts. Or maybe none of my words are persuasive in allaying those doubts. In that case, I turn to my last but most important point. Be grateful for your doubts.

William Wordsworth was. Mormons know the early stanzas from his “Intimations” ode, the “trailing clouds of glory” lines. But more magnificent, in my opinion, are the later stanzas, where he tells us what he is most grateful for, where he finds the source of his joy. After struggling with the indelible sadness of adulthood, trying in vain to recapture the innocence and joy of childhood delight and spontaneity, he realizes it is the tension, the irresolution, the ambiguity and perplexity of his predicament that is the spur to his growth. That is why, as he tells us, in the final analysis he appreciates the very things that plague the questing mind. He is grateful *not* for the blithe certainties and freedom of a past childhood. He is thankful *not* for what we would expect him to appreciate:

Not indeed
 For that which is most worthy to be blest—
 Delight and liberty, the simple creed
 Of Childhood, whether busy or at rest,
 With new-fledged hope still fluttering in his breast: —
 Not for these I raise
 The song of thanks and praise;

16. Joseph Frank, *Dostoevsky: The Years of Ordeal, 1850–1859* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), 160.

But for those *obstinate questionings*
 Of sense and outward things,
Fallings from us, vanishings;
Blank misgivings of a Creature
 Moving about in worlds not realised...
 Those *shadowy recollections,*
 Which, be they what they may,
 Are yet the fountain light of all our day.¹⁷

You see, it was in the midst of his perplexity, of his obstinate questions, uncertainties, misgivings, and shadowy recollections that almost but don't quite pierce the veil, that he found the prompt, the agitation, the catalyst that spurred him from complacency to insight, from generic pleasures to revelatory illumination, from being a thing acted upon to being an actor in the quest for his spiritual identity.

I know I am grateful for a propensity to doubt because it gives me the capacity to freely believe. I hope you can find your way to feel the same. The call to faith is a summons to engage the heart, to attune it to resonate in sympathy with principles and values and ideals that we devoutly hope are true *and which we have reasonable but not certain grounds for believing to be true*. There must be grounds for doubt as well as belief in order to render the choice more truly a choice, and therefore more deliberate and laden with more personal vulnerability and investment. An overwhelming preponderance of evidence on either side would make our choice as meaningless as would a loaded gun pointed at our heads. The option to believe must appear on one's personal horizon like the fruit of paradise, perched precariously between sets of demands held in dynamic tension. Fortunately, in this world, one is always provided with sufficient materials out of which to fashion a life of credible convic-

17. William Wordsworth, *Poems of Wordsworth*, ed. Matthew Arnold (London: MacMillan, 1882), 205–6. Emphasis added.

tion or dismissive denial. We are acted upon, in other words, by appeals to our personal values, our yearnings, our fears, our appetites, and our egos. What we choose to embrace, to be responsive to, is the purest reflection of who we are and what we love. That is why faith, the choice to believe, is, in the final analysis, an action that is positively laden with moral significance.

The call to faith, in this light, is not some test of a coy god waiting to see if we “get it right.” It is the only summons, issued under the only conditions which can allow us to reveal fully who we are, what we most love, and what we most devoutly desire. Without constraint, without any form of mental compulsion, the act of belief becomes the freest possible projection of what resides in our hearts. Like the poet’s image of a church bell that reveals its latent music only when struck, or a dragonfly that flames forth its beauty only in flight, so does the content of a human heart lie buried until action calls it forth. The greatest act of self-revelation occurs when we *choose* what we will believe, in that space of freedom that exists between knowing that a thing is and knowing that a thing is not.

This is the realm where faith operates; and when faith is a freely chosen gesture, it expresses something essential about the self.

Modern revelation, speaking of spiritual gifts, notes that while to some it is given to know the core truth of Christ and His mission, to others is given the means to persevere in the absence of certainty. The New Testament makes the point that those mortals who operate in the grey area between conviction and incredulity are in a position to choose most meaningfully, and with most meaningful consequences.

Peter’s tentative steps across the water capture the rhythm familiar to most seekers. He walks in faith, he stumbles, he sinks, but he is embraced by the Christ before the waves swallow him. Many of us will live out our lives in doubt, like the unnamed father in the Gospel of Mark. Coming to Jesus, distraught over

the pain of his afflicted son, he said simply, “I believe, help thou mine unbelief” (Mark 9:24). Though he walked through mists of doubt, caught between belief and unbelief, he made a choice, and the consequence was the healing of his child.

“The highest of all is not to understand the highest but to act upon it,” wrote Kierkegaard.¹⁸ Miracles do not depend on flawless faith. They come to those who question as well as to those who know. There is profit to be found, and advantage to be gained, even—perhaps especially—in the absence of certainty.

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18. Søren Kierkegaard, *The Soul of Kierkegaard: Selections from His Journals*, ed. Alexander Dru (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2003), 213.

