

MORMON EPISTEMOLOGY 101

Aaron Brake

“...and if ye shall ask with a sincere heart, with real intent, having faith in Christ, he will manifest the truth of it unto you...”

Moroni 10:4

INTRODUCTION

Sometime ago I heard a knock on my door and was pleasantly surprised to see two young Mormon missionaries. Their crisp white shirts, stark black ties, and distinctive name tags instantly gave them away. Having spent time dialoguing with Mormons in the past and studying their beliefs and practices, I gladly invited them in. As we sat discussing important doctrines, they asked me a question which invariably arises in every discussion with Mormon missionaries: “*Would you be willing to pray and sincerely ask God if the Book of Mormon¹ is true?*” I told them, “No, I don’t think anyone should pray that prayer.” The reason I refused to pray it, and the reason I say everyone else should refuse, is because basing a belief on something so subjective is dangerous. In what follows I will explain the inherent problems and dangers with this type of epistemology and demonstrate a Biblical basis for testing religious truth claims.

WHAT IS EPISTEMOLOGY?

Epistemology is “the branch of philosophy that tries to make sense out of knowledge, rationality, and justified or unjustified beliefs.”² In other words, it is about what we know and how we know it. This is important because Mormons frequently appeal to religious experience as an important evidence for determining truth. They view it as an adequate means of gaining and grounding knowledge. The Book of Mormon states, “And when ye shall receive these things, I would exhort you that ye would ask God, the Eternal Father, in the name of Christ, if these things are not true; and if ye shall ask with a sincere heart, with real intent, having faith in Christ,

¹ Mormon scripture consists of the Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, Pearl of Great Price, and the King James Version of the Bible. These four are considered their “standard works.”

² J.P. Moreland & William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 71.

he will manifest the truth of it unto you, by the power of the Holy Ghost.”³ Mormon missionaries regularly quote this verse and accompany it with heartfelt personal testimony about how the Holy Ghost bore witness to them the truth of the Book of Mormon. They encourage potential converts to follow suit so that they too may know the Book of Mormon is from God. This is the essence of Mormon epistemology. Bruce McConkie, a doctrinal authority and former apostle within the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, wrote, “But the great and conclusive evidence of the divinity of the Book of Mormon is the testimony of the Spirit to the honest truth seeker.”⁴ While praying about the truth of a book may seem innocent, there are many inherent problems with this type of subjective epistemology.

WOULD YOU LIKE SOME FALLACIES WITH THAT?

Whenever a Mormon suggests that we pray to find out whether the Book of Mormon is true we should point out that this idea comes from the Book of Mormon itself. This in itself is problematic and amounts to a logical fallacy known as “begging the question” or circular reasoning. Begging the question occurs when you assume in your argument the conclusion you are trying to prove.⁵ In this example we have to assume Moroni 10:4 is true when it exhorts us to pray with sincerity about the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon. In other words, we have to assume the Book of Mormon is true in order to find out if it is true. This is nothing more than circular reasoning.

Notice also the passage says “*if* ye shall ask with a *sincere* heart, with *real* intent, having *faith* in Christ.” The built-in assumption is that if the truth of the Book of Mormon is not

³ *The Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1981), Moroni 10:4.

⁴ Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 99.

⁵ Madsen Pirie, *How to Win Every Argument: The Use and Abuse of Logic* (Great Britain: Continuum, 2006), 123.

manifest to you then your prayer must not have been sincere, real, and resulting from faith.⁶ But this commits another logical fallacy known as a “false dilemma.”⁷ A false dilemma occurs when a person is presented with only two alternatives to choose from though others exist.⁸ For example, imagine if I were to say, “Dan is either in his house or at the store.” The problem is that the two options presented here are not exhaustive. Dan may be in his car or at the park for all we know. In the same fashion, with regard to the Book of Mormon, the potential convert is presented with only two options: either the Book of Mormon is true in which case you will receive an inward subjective confirmation, or, you must not have prayed hard enough. But this ignores an obvious third alternative, namely, *the Book of Mormon isn't true*. The false dilemma encourages the individual having a positive religious experience to assume the Book of Mormon is true. If they do not receive an answer they are discredited as being disingenuous in prayer. This creates a win-win situation for the Mormon and prevents the Book of Mormon from being falsifiable through an objective truth test.

TOUCHÉ! THE MORMON RESPONSE

Mormon missionaries may reply by appealing to Biblical support in James 1:5: “But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him.” Mormons assure us that we simply need to ask God if we lack wisdom concerning the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon.

The problem with the Mormon’s use of this verse becomes apparent when we examine it in context. First, James is writing to those who are *already* Christian believers, not potential

⁶ John Farkas and David Reed, *Mormons: How to Witness to Them* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997), 26.

⁷ A false dilemma may also be referred to as a “faulty dilemma,” “false dichotomy,” “false bifurcation,” “bifurcation,” or the “either-or fallacy.”

⁸ Pirie, *How to Win Every Argument*, 19.

converts. These believers are experiencing trials (verses 2-4) and James instructs them to pray and ask for wisdom in the midst of their testing. Second, Christians here are encouraged to pray if they are lacking *wisdom*, not requiring *knowledge*.⁹ Wisdom is the proper application of knowledge. Third, nothing is mentioned in this passage about attempting to discover the truth of a book through a subjective test. This interpretation is contrived and must be read into the text. Moreover, finding Biblical support for the Mormon position is not the only problem we are confronted with.

PROBLEMS ABOUND

Another problem is that this sort of prayer test is specious since there are some things we do not need to pray about. For example, everyone can agree we do not need to pray about committing adultery or murder because Scripture has already revealed Biblical commands prohibiting these.¹⁰ By the same token, God has already warned believers about the dangers of a false gospel. Paul in Galatians 1:8 states, “But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed!” To pray about such things as adultery, murder, or a false gospel is to test God because He has already revealed to us the truth in these matters. So the question regarding the Book of Mormon is not whether or not we should pray about it but whether or not it teaches a false gospel.

But, we should point out that even if we did pray about the Book of Mormon, our problems are far from over. For example, we can ask, “Which edition of the Book of Mormon should we pray about?”¹¹ Numerous editions of the Book of Mormon have been published

⁹Farkas and Reed, *Mormons: How to Witness to Them*, 26.

¹⁰ Ron Rhodes and Marian Bodine, *Reasoning from the Scriptures with Mormons* (Eugene: Harvest House, 1995), 105-106.

¹¹ Rhodes and Bodine, *Reasoning from the Scriptures with Mormons*, 108.

including an 1830, 1921, and 1981 edition. Subjecting these editions to textual criticism shows that nearly 4,000 changes have been made to the text.¹²

And even if we did somehow receive confirmation that the Book of Mormon is true, which church should we join? Christian apologist Ron Rhodes has noted that there are over 100 different sects of Mormonism which use the Book of Mormon and claim Joseph Smith as a prophet of God.¹³ Some of these include the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the Community of Christ, and the Apostolic United Brethren.

And what about the faithful Muslim or Hindu who also has a personal testimony telling him his religion is true? He certainly has a sincere belief. Some Roman Catholics report visions of Mary and adherents to the New Age movement claim to speak with spirits. These religious experiences confirm the “truth” to faithful followers. Following the logic of Mormon epistemology consistently means all of these religions must be true as well. But obviously not everyone can be correct since various religions make contradictory truth claims.¹⁴

Finally, what happens if there are objective facts and evidences which contradict a personal testimony?¹⁵ Is greater authority given to the objective data or subjective experience? In

¹² Jerald and Sandra Tanner have produced a volume entitled *3,913 Changes in the Book of Mormon*. This is a photo reprint of the original 1830 edition with all subsequent changes marked. Not all of the changes made to the Book of Mormon affect doctrine. Nevertheless, each change casts doubt upon the authority of the LDS Church as well as Joseph Smith since he stated, “I told the brethren that the Book of Mormon was the most correct of any book on earth, and the keystone of our religion, and a man would get nearer to God by abiding by its precepts, than any other book.” See Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1973), 4:461, as quoted in *Reasoning from the Scriptures with Mormons* (Eugene: Harvest House, 1995), 30. Visit www.utlm.org for more information.

¹³ Rhodes and Bodine, *Reasoning from the Scriptures with Mormons*, 109.

¹⁴ Contradictory truth claims, religious or otherwise, cannot both be true. This violates the law of non-contradiction which states, “A and non-A cannot both be true at the same time and in the same sense.” See Moreland and Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview*, 132.

¹⁵ Unfortunately, space does not permit an extensive look at some of the historical inaccuracies, contradictions, and doctrinal changes contained within Mormonism. For more information consult the works cited page.

the end, there are simply too many logical problems and inconsistencies when we attempt to rely on such a limited and subjective truth test.

THE BIBLICAL TEST

This is not to say that religious experience cannot play a role in the justification of a belief. But it has a much more limited role than Mormons are willing to acknowledge. Religious experience by itself cannot function as the sole source of justification for any worldview. This sort of subjective test is not substantial or weighty enough to warrant any kind of dogmatic conclusion. In fact, relying exclusively on personal feelings is downright dangerous. Proverbs 14:12 says, “There is a way which seems right to a man, But its end is the way of death.” Religious matters are eternal matters; and eternal matters are weighty matters. We simply cannot place the importance of eternity in what *seems* right to us at any given time. Fortunately, the Bible provides Christians with numerous examples of how to test religious claims.

One such example is found in the book of Acts, chapter 17. In this passage, the apostle Paul and his companion Silas arrive in the city of Berea and immediately go into the synagogue to preach. Verse 11 describes the Bereans as follows: “Now these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, *examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so*” (emphasis added). First, notice the Bereans are commended in Scripture for being noble-minded. Second, note the *reason* they were considered noble-minded. They did not simply accept what Paul said as fact. Nor did they pray about the things Paul taught to see if they were really true. Instead, they took what Paul said and compared it with the Scriptures (Old Testament) to “see whether these things were so.” Here the Bible presents a much more objective standard to adjudicate between differing truth claims and

experiences: Scripture itself.¹⁶ Therefore, when presented with the Mormon gospel we need to follow the example given to us in Scripture. We should not pray about it; rather we should examine it in light of the teachings of the Bible.¹⁷

A BURNING IN MY BOSOM

In the Doctrine and Covenants we read, “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* [emphasis added]; therefore, you shall feel it is right.”¹⁸ Many Mormons testify to having experienced a “burning in the bosom” after praying to see if the Book of Mormon is true. The Mormon scripture quoted above authenticates this experience. However, Mormons also appeal to the Bible to support this teaching. For instance, in Luke chapter 24, the risen Christ appears to two of His followers on the road to Emmaus. In this passage Jesus explains to them all the things concerning Himself from the Old Testament. In Luke 24:32 we are told their reaction: “They said to one another, ‘Were not our hearts burning within us while He was speaking to us on the road, while He was explaining the Scriptures to us?’” Mormons argue that this passage directly corresponds with the burning bosom experience. Upon closer examination, however, this passage is not in any way analogous.

¹⁶ This appeal to Scripture should not be considered circular reasoning since both Christians and Mormons agree that the Bible is the Word of God. However, Mormons do qualify this by stating in their eighth Article of Faith, “We believe the Bible to be the Word of God as far as it is translated correctly...” Practically speaking, this means the Bible is the Word of God when it does not contradict other Mormon scripture. See *The Articles of Faith* as contained in *The Pearl of Great Price* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1981), 60.

¹⁷ Ironically, it seems Brigham Young, successor to Joseph Smith as Prophet and President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, would agree. He states, “Take up the Bible, compare the religion of the Latter-day Saints with it, and see if it will stand the test.” See *Journal of Discourses* (London: Latter-day Saints’ Book Depot, 1854-56), 16:46, as quoted in *Reasoning from the Scriptures with Mormons* (Eugene: Harvest House, 1995), 30.

¹⁸ *The Doctrine and Covenants* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1981), 9:8. This verse seems to start out on the right track by encouraging readers to “study it out in your mind.” But notice emphasis is once again shifted to a subjective experience: “you shall *feel* that it is right” [emphasis added].

First, notice these travelers on the road to Emmaus were *already* followers of Christ when their hearts burned within them. They were not non-Christians seeking to find out if Christianity was true. Second, the followers mentioned here did not pray about anything at anytime. Third, the followers experience was the result of what Jesus taught them concerning Himself from the Scriptures. John Farkas, former Mormon and President of Berean Christian Ministries, provides great insight:

Jesus Christ took them through all the verses about himself, all the teachings about himself. He did not say rely on your burning bosom, as the Mormon missionaries do. It was the truths found in what we now call the Old Testament that spoke to them and caused their hearts to burn. The burning of the heart was the result of the verses they heard, not the proof of the truths... The burning of their hearts was a by product, the evidence that they had become teachable. What Jesus Christ taught them was true, no matter what they were feeling, or did not feel... But He did open their eyes, opened their hearts, and they recognized that.¹⁹

Consequently, this passage in Luke in no way supports the idea that we should pray and seek a burning in our bosom that confirms the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon. Rather, it shows us the importance of going back to the Scriptures as the standard by which we judge all religious truth claims.

CONCLUSION: TEST THE SPIRITS

The Mormon challenge to pray concerning the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon is riddled with problems, both philosophically and Biblically. The Bible provides Christians with plenty of warnings against trusting in oneself as an arbitrator of truth. Jeremiah 17:9 says, “The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it?” The book of proverbs cautions that, “He who trusts in his own heart is a fool, but he who walks wisely will be delivered” (28:26). We are even told that Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light and

¹⁹ John Farkas, “How do we test for spiritual truths?” *Berean Christian Ministries* (May 1998), <http://www.bcmmin.org/truttest.html> (accessed September 19, 2008).

prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour (2 Cor. 11:14, 1 Peter 5:8). This is why we must constantly remain sober and vigilant. Rather than trust our feelings, Scripture continually encourages us to use our minds. God beckons us to come and reason with Him (Isaiah 1:18). We are told by the apostle Paul that we must examine everything carefully and hold on to that which is good (1 Thess. 5:21). We must “not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world” (1 John 4:1).

In summary then, we should never be tempted to accept the Mormon challenge to pray about the Book of Mormon. Rather, we should use our minds to investigate its origin, examine its teachings, and compare it with Scripture. In so doing, we remain consistent with Scripture and subject a book which claims to be the Word of God to a factual and realistic assessment.

WORKS CITED

1. Farkas, John. "How Do We Test for Spiritual Truths?" *Berean Christian Ministries* (May 1998), <http://www.bcmmin.org/truttest.html> (accessed September 19, 2008).
2. Farkas, John, and David Reed. *Mormons: How to Witness to Them*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997.
3. McConkie, Bruce R. *Mormon Doctrine*. 2nd ed. Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966.
4. Moreland, J.P., and William Lane Craig. *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2003.
5. Pirie, Madsen. *How to Win Every Argument: The Use and Abuse of Logic*. Great Britain: Continuum, 2006.
6. Rhodes, Ron, and Marian Bodine. *Reasoning from the Scriptures with Mormons*. Eugene: Harvest House, 1995.