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Addressing Prickly Issues

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ADDRESSING PRICKLY ISSUES

Rick Anderson

Review of *A Reason for Faith: Navigating LDS Doctrine & Church History*, ed. Laura Harris Hales. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 2016. 264 pp. \$24.99.

Abstract: This collection of essays conveniently assembles faithful and rigorous treatments of difficult questions related to LDS history and doctrine. While two or three of the essays are sufficiently flawed to give cause for concern and while some of its arguments have been expressed differently in earlier publications, overall this book can be confidently recommended to interested and doctrinally mature Latter-day Saints.

I've always been puzzled to hear critics claim that members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are discouraged from asking questions about the Church, its history, and its more obscure or controversial areas of doctrine. I've been a member of the Church for just over half a century, and I can't think of a single time that my parents, Church leaders, or fellow members have discouraged me from asking questions about those things or have failed to answer my questions as best they could when I did ask. Let me be clear: I have no doubt that some members have experienced such discouragement from others. But I do wonder whether my experience or theirs is the more typical one. Perhaps more importantly, I can say for certain which attitude is more in harmony with Church policy and teachings. As President Dieter F. Uchtdorf states in the epigraph to the book under review, "We are a question-asking people because we know that inquiry leads to truth."¹

The experience of inquiry is not always comfortable or easy. One has only to log on to Facebook or enter the word "Mormon" in a search engine

1. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, "The Reflection in the Water," Church Educational System fireside address (Nov. 1, 2009).

to be faced immediately with derision toward every aspect of LDS belief and practice and, more troublingly for many, with what are sometimes serious and challenging questions about some aspects of our history, our doctrine, and our organizational culture and traditions. When faced with such attacks, there's no question that prayer, faith, and patience are called for. But as the beloved Primary song has it, the "things that (we) must do" include not only praying but also searching and pondering.² The words of both ancient and modern prophets repeatedly urge us to educate ourselves, to learn truth both by study and by faith, and to inquire when we lack wisdom — to seek and to think and to reason.³

What shall we search when faced with challenges to our faith? Certainly and fundamentally, the words of scripture and the teachings of living prophets. However, though scripture study will deepen testimony and strengthen our doctrinal foundations, it is not likely to resolve troubling questions we might have about, say, the Mountain Meadows Massacre, prophetic succession after Joseph Smith's martyrdom, or race-based priesthood restrictions. And careful scripture study itself may raise questions even as it answers others, such as: Why do Book of Mormon prophets use "New Testament language" hundreds of years before Christ? Why did the Church embrace plural marriage given that the Book of Mormon seems to condemn it? Also — elephants? Seriously?

While it's true that some outside the Church use these types of questions as cudgels with which to beat the faithful, and some faithless Church members may use them as excuses for abandoning their covenant obligations, there are also committed and faithful members who sincerely struggle with such questions, who ask them in good faith, and who both want and deserve genuine answers to them. Sometimes the answers are not yet available, in which case faithful patience is called for — but in very many cases, good answers are available and have been for some time. Since our Church leaders encourage us both to ask and to pursue answers to our gospel questions, there is a real need for resources that are factually reliable, cogently presented, doctrinally sound, and written from the helpful perspective of one who has wrestled with them fruitfully and remained faithful.

Gratefully, such resources have proliferated in recent years — facilitated by the same advances in communication technology as those

2. "Search, Ponder, and Pray," *Children's Songbook*.

3. See, for example, D&C 90:15, D&C 88: 62–6 3, D&C 88:118, James 1:5, Alma 37:35, Romans 15:4, Moroni 10:3.

that have made it easier than ever to attack the faith of the Saints.⁴ *A Reason for Faith* is one such recent resource. It is a collection of 17 essays on difficult gospel topics, edited by Laura Harris Hales (who, with her husband Brian, is also co-editor of an outstanding book and website on Kirtland and Nauvoo polygamy).⁵ Its topics range from such obvious and frequently discussed issues as plural marriage, racial restrictions on priesthood, and Church policies on homosexuality, to controversies with which some rank-and-file members of the Church may be less familiar, such as DNA analysis and Book of Mormon population dynamics, Joseph Smith and “money digging,” and authorship controversies in the Isaiah sections of the Book of Mormon.

Like all edited essay collections, *A Reason for Faith* is uneven. If we were to evaluate each essay according the four criteria previously mentioned (cogency, factual reliability, doctrinal soundness, and faithfulness of perspective), we would find some that are stronger in two or three areas, some that excel in all four, and perhaps a couple that fall down fatally with regard to one or more.

At the outset, it's important to know that all these essays are written from a faithful perspective, which should not be surprising, given that the book is published under the twin imprints of Deseret Book and Brigham Young University's Religious Studies Center. None of the authors is using his or her contribution as a Trojan horse within which to smuggle faith-corroding arguments or insinuations. At no point in reading this book did I detect anything that seemed like either intellectual or spiritual dishonesty. That may seem like a low bar to have to clear, but it is an essential one and one that is not met by every book that purports to answer gospel questions for a Latter-day Saint audience — in fact, and unfortunately, there have been (and will continue to be) books on the market that lure the faithful with promises of bread only to hit them over the head with a stone.⁶

4. Noteworthy recent examples include Michael Ash's *Shaken Faith Syndrome*, 2nd ed. (Redding, CA: Foundation for Apologetic Information and Research, 2013); Robert L. Millet's *No Weapon Shall Prosper: New Light on Sensitive Issues* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2011); the collected works of Hugh Nibley published by FARMS; and of course the many essays and reviews published in the various incarnations of the *FARMS Review* and in the *Interpreter*.

5. <http://josephsmithspolygamy.org>

6. Consider, for example, *The Word of God: Essays on Mormon Scripture* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1990), and *The Word of God Is Enough: The Book of Mormon As Nineteenth-century Scripture* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1993). In both cases, the titles seem quite clearly designed to obscure these publications'

On the “faithfulness” criterion, then, this collection is uniformly sound. This leaves the criteria of cogency, factual reliability, and doctrinal soundness, and on these the results are more mixed — although never so much so that it fatally undermines the value and merit of the book overall.

Another of the book’s strengths lies in its topical coverage. Although I can think of a few issues that could profitably have been addressed here and were not, *A Reason for Faith* does a very good job of covering much of the necessary ground, and it does so unflinchingly. Some of these topics are both politically sensitive and genuinely knotty, and in most cases the authors engage them directly and with reasonable comprehensiveness. At the same time, the constraints of space are worth noting: For the most part this volume should be regarded not as an exhaustive treatment of its topics but as a high-level introduction to the questions and a review of some possible answers. Those who want to dig deeper should follow the citations — as well as the helpful list of “additional resources” at the end of each essay.

Among the strongest essays in this volume are Richard Bushman’s brief but effective treatment of Joseph Smith’s early “treasure seeking” and Brant Gardner’s essay on the Book of Mormon translation process. Paul Reeves contributes a strong and carefully argued essay on the origins and history of the priesthood ban while doing an admirable job of distinguishing between his own feelings and opinions and facts that can be established or reasonably inferred from the historical record. Don Bradley and Mark Ashurst-McGee provide a very helpful apologetic account of Joseph Smith’s encounter with the Kinderhook Plates, and Kerry Muhlestein’s clear and concise essay entitled “The Explanation-defying Book of Abraham” is among the best treatments I have seen of that fascinating and complex topic. Hales’s own introductory essay is also excellent and effectively lays out both the rationale for the book and some useful, overarching principles for dealing with challenges to faith. As an editor, Hales has served her authors well, and despite the large number of essayists with rather disparate writing styles, the book reads smoothly and well. Her decision to feature separate chapters on

apparent intention, which is to undermine the truth claims of the LDS Church. For useful discussion of this gambit, see Louis Midgley, “The Current Battle of the Book of Mormon: Is Modernity Itself Somehow Canonical?” *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 6/1 (1994): 200–5 4 and Stephen E. Robinson’s review of *The Word of God: Essays on Mormon Scripture* in *RBBM* 3/1 (1991): 312–1 8.

the issues of polygamy generally and of Joseph Smith's polygamy in particular struck me as especially wise.

There are weaknesses in the book, of course, and a few of them are troubling. Steven C. Harper's essay on "Freemasonry and the LDS Temple Endowment" provides some very useful historical background but indulges too much in speculation, at times bordering on *post hoc* mindreading: At crucial points in the narrative, Harper introduces observations about what Joseph Smith "undoubtedly thought" or "likely pondered" or "perhaps thought" (148), thus weakening the structure of his argument somewhat.

Two other essays caused me particular concern. Neylan McBaine's contribution on "Latter-day Saint Women in the Twenty-first Century" addresses complex issues like gender-specific administrative roles and priesthood authority with care and clarity and suggests convincingly that the temporal correlation of the rise of the LDS Church (and the early establishment of the Relief Society) and the broadening and deepening of women's rights in the world generally are not accidents of history but rather that the restoration of the gospel was one of the contributing factors to those developments. She also argues cogently for a more nuanced concept of "gender equality" than what we normally encounter in current political and social discourse.

However, at times McBaine indulges in straw-man argumentation that undercuts the effectiveness of her essay. In repeated references to "Church rhetoric," for example, she doesn't carefully discriminate between things that Church members say to each other and things that the Church itself teaches. For example, she asserts that "discussion of gender roles inevitably leads to the assertion that men 'hold the priesthood' and therefore *are* the priesthood" (196, emphasis hers). While it's true (in my experience) that members of the Church too often refer colloquially to groups of men as "the priesthood," this formulation is not only far from inevitable but is also regularly challenged — and it is in direct opposition to what the Church teaches.⁷ LDS men of all ages are regularly counseled *not* to regard themselves as the embodiment of priesthood power but rather as bearers of priesthood authority which is conferred upon them but which they will immediately lose as soon as they act in any degree

7. Consider, for example, this very direct teaching from Elder Russell M. Ballard in a talk titled "This Is My Work and My Glory," from the April 2013 General Conference: "In our Heavenly Father's great priesthood-endowed plan, men have the unique responsibility to administer the priesthood, but they are not the priesthood."

of unrighteousness. This principle is taught constantly in the Church, particularly in priesthood quorums.

Elsewhere, McBaine refers to “some members” who “believe that women’s participation in building the kingdom should be limited to being counselors and influencers rather than decision makers and leaders” (197). While some Church members may feel this way, they must feel very uncomfortable in an organization in which women are regularly called to positions of presidency and leadership. The leaders of the Relief Society, Young Women, and Primary organizations are called specifically as presidents, are always women, and are among the most influential leaders and decision makers in any LDS ward — certainly more so than their male counterparts in, for example, Sunday School presidencies. In all these positions women are given authority over budgets, and those who serve as Primary presidents regularly preside over men.

The most troubling essay in this collection is “Homosexuality and the Gospel” by Ty Mansfield. Obviously, this is an emotionally charged issue, one that would have benefitted greatly from a carefully written and doctrinally informed treatment. Unfortunately, what Mansfield has provided is neither of those things. Instead, we are treated to problems such as the following:

- Unsustainably broad and categorical assertions, such as “Our sexuality is ultimately the driving force in our quest for intimacy in *all* of our relationships, including with God” (204, emphasis his).
- Uncontroversial observations that seem to be presented as if they challenged LDS cultural beliefs, such as “I can imagine God smiling upon pure expressions of love, intimacy, and affection between those of the same sex” (205).
- An insufficient ability to discriminate between what the Church teaches about same-sex relationships and what is taught by worldly philosophies of social conservatism.

As an example of this last point, Mansfield quotes *Psychology Today* essayist Sam Keen as saying that “‘normal’ American men are homophobic, afraid of close relationships with other men. The moment we begin to feel warmly toward another man, the ‘homosexual’ panic button gets pressed” (207). For the stated purposes of this book, such an observation would have provided the perfect segue to point out that the cultivation of close, warm relationships between people of the same

sex is one of the most important goals of LDS sociality, that this goal is regularly expressed explicitly by Church leaders, and that it is in direct response to repeated revelatory instruction since the opening of the Restoration. The building and maintenance of such relationships is a regular topic of instruction in our priesthood quorums, Relief Society and Young Women classes, sacrament meeting talks, and Sunday School lessons. But Mansfield mentions none of these. Instead, the reader is left to infer that Church teachings (or at least LDS culture) either reflects or contributes to this larger cultural problem and that Mormons regard such relationships as abnormal and frightening. However, no one who has closely and honestly observed Mormons for any period of time would come away believing that Mormon culture teaches either men or women to fear the development of close and warm relationships between members of the same sex.

At times, Mansfield's arguments are logically garbled and unclear, which is particularly problematic when dealing with a topic as complex and doctrinally important as this one. It's hard to know what to make of the following paragraph, for example:

Given the diversity of experience, and the varied persistence of that experience, for whom might homosexual behavior become a sin and for whom is it simply unfair, as some would characterize, to be required to live the standards guiding sexual behavior and relationship as articulated by Church leaders? (209)

Depending on what Mansfield specifically means by "homosexual behavior," it's difficult to know how to think about the question "for whom might homosexual behavior become a sin?" And it's impossible to tell for certain where he stands on the issue of the "fairness" of requiring those dealing with same-sex attraction "to live the standards guiding sexual behavior and relationship as articulated by Church leaders." These are genuinely difficult issues, and dealing with them effectively requires care and clarity, both of which are lacking here.

Elsewhere, Mansfield promulgates doctrinal errors that should have been caught and corrected. For example, the assertion that "from an LDS perspective, the essential spiritual person within us exists independent of our mortal biology" (211) seems to fly directly in the face of clear Church teachings (which hold that "mortal biology" and spiritual identity are quite closely connected in significant ways, particularly including

gender identity).⁸ And when Mansfield urges us to a “more expansive view of ... the law of chastity” (213), what he proposes is a definition of chastity that effectively embraces all of our relationships with everyone and everything and thus strips the concept of any meaningful sexual specificity. While he is correct to observe that the words “chastity,” “chastening,” and “chastise” all share as a root the Latin word meaning “pure,” he stretches that observation into an unsustainably thin rhetoric of universal morality that doesn’t hold up either logically or doctrinally. Here Mansfield has made the classic mistake of confusing etymology with meaning, and he ends up proposing, for example, that sexual purity and environmental responsibility are manifestations of the same moral concept (214) and that for parents to reject a wayward child would be not only immoral but specifically “unchaste” (214). These are interesting assertions, but they are also quite tendentious and more confusing than helpful.

Overall, however, the strength of this collection greatly outweighs its weaknesses, and this is a book that can be confidently recommended to members of the Church who have sincere questions but are reasonably mature in doctrinal understanding. Most of its arguments are not groundbreaking, but one hopes that it will lead those who are unaware

8. Perhaps the clearest modern-day exposition of this teaching can be found in “The Family: A Proclamation to the World” (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1995). However, LDS scripture and Church leaders have also taught repeatedly that our physical bodies and our spirits are not essentially separate but are two indispensable parts of our identity following resurrection. In both Moses 3:7 and 2 Nephi 9:13, the term “living soul” is defined as a unified body and spirit. D&C 93:33–34 indicates that unless the “spirit” and “element” of man are “inseparably connected,” man cannot enjoy “a fulness of joy.” Joseph Smith taught that it is our purpose in coming to earth “that we might have a body and present it pure before God in the Celestial Kingdom” (as quoted by William Clayton, reporting an undated discourse given by Joseph Smith in Nauvoo, Illinois; in L. John Nuttall, “Extracts from William Clayton’s Private Book,” *Journals of L. John Nuttall, 1857–1904*, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University, pp. 7–8 ; copy in Church Archives). President Joseph F. Smith saw in vision that the dead experience the separation of their spirits and their bodies as “bondage” (see D&C 138:50). In a 1992 General Conference address entitled “Doors of Death,” Elder Russell M. Nelson taught that at the resurrection, “the same ... genetic code now embedded in each of our living cells will still be available to format new ones then. The miracle of the resurrection, wondrous as it will be, is marvelously matched by the miracle of our creation in the first place.” All of this indicates that our physical bodies have, at the very least, a meaningful connection to our eternal identities.

of the scholarship produced on these and other topics over the last few decades to explore that literature and deepen their understanding.

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