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How Doubt Built the Foundation of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

Joshua Hortin

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Abstract

Dr. Gregory A. Prince at this year's annual Arrington Lecture gave an intriguing biography of Leonard J. Arrington, focusing particularly on Arrington's own interplay between faith and doubt. Arrington's intellectual journey was sparked as he entered the world of academia and had his beliefs on evolution directly challenged. Having been raised as a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS or Mormon), he struggled with reconciling a Creationist viewpoint to that taught by the secular world. Eventually, he came to a harmony where both Mormonism and the theory of evolution could coexist in his worldview.

Arrington's open mind continued to shape his investigations of history. His two most influential works, according to Prince, were his financial history of the LDS church *Great Basin Kingdom* and his research on the origins of the Word of Wisdom. In both of these, Arrington concluded that factors more diverse than solely inspiration influenced various aspects of Mormon history. To Arrington, it appeared that the sweeping temperance movement of the 1830's was the spark of inspiration that ignited the Word of Wisdom; it also seemed to him that, despite a cultural trend towards a belief in prophetic inerrancy during Arrington's time (Mauss, 1994), church leaders could be less than inspired in economic matters. His conclusion, as summarized by Prince, was that not all institutions need to be under priesthood direction (Prince, 2013; Arrington, 1966).

At other times, Arrington let his doubts lie and let others do the research. He never really researched his questions about the priesthood ban for African descendants or the historicity of the Book of Mormon. However, Arrington reacted with joy when the priesthood ban was overturned and when a publication supporting the Book of Mormon, "An Ancient American Setting of the Book of Mormon" by John L. Sorenson, was published.

The theme of Arrington's life just might be best summed in his own words as quoted by Prince (2013): "It [doubt] might be the avenue to renewed faith, deeper faith, greater understanding." Because

of his ability to doubt the generally-accepted assumptions and investigate which facts were truly valid, he revolutionized our understanding of many aspects of church history.

One can hardly view Arrington's influential and revolutionizing work without recalling similar traits exemplified in Mormon history. The foremost example among these may be Joseph Smith, Jr., for in the words of one unnamed internet commentator, "If Joseph Smith hadn't doubted a whole bunch of things would we even have the LDS Church?" ("Faith vs. Doubt", 2009).

In this essay, it is argued that the same type of doubt which helped Leonard J. Arrington to discover new truths also had to be present in Joseph Smith, Jr. and his associates in order to have formed the beliefs of the LDS church we know today. This implication shows that doubt can be healthy, rather than detrimental, as (in the author's experience) today's culturally-influenced negative perception might indicate. The backgrounds to sections in the Doctrine and Covenants as well as other records of prominent events in Mormon history are used to chronicle the extent to which doubt played a key role in the LDS church's development.

Doubt in Smith's Personal Life

Although not recorded until many years later, Smith had his first experiences with doubt as early as age 12 (Smith, 1832). The first experience which redefined his life is referred to today by the church as the "First Vision", or the first personal experience that Smith had with deity. There are eight contemporary accounts, as published by the Joseph Smith Papers ("Primary accounts," 2013).

In the 1832 account, Smith states that his parents had been "instructing me in the christian religion". He also says that he had been taught to believe that the scriptures "contained the word of God" (Smith, 1832). Thus we can see that Smith, like Arrington, had a background to help construct his beliefs. As Smith began to investigate the various religions available, he began to doubt the scriptural interpretations presented to him. This was because he observed that the ministers of the various religions "did not adorn their profession by a holy walk and Godly conversation" (Smith, 1832).

Essentially, Smith noticed an incongruity between the way he believed things should be and the way he perceived them. He began to investigate all religion more thoroughly at this time. This seems to be a similar process to that which Arrington followed as he studied the subjects which he eventually redefined.

Smith described that his observation about the ministers “was a grief to my Soul” and “my mind become exceedingly distressed.” (Smith, 1832). However, Smith was not troubled by the mere presence of his doubts, as shown by a notable absence of negativity directed at the doubts themselves. Rather, they forged a stepping stone on the path to discovery.

The inability to resolve his feelings emotionally or logically propelled Smith to call upon God, resulting in the vision in which his sins were forgiven, where he was instructed to walk in God’s laws, and was told (in veiled terms) that all religion had departed from God (Smith, 1832). While the accounts of this vision occasionally disagree in certain details, they are consistent for our purposes in the elements outlined which mimic Arrington’s general experiences. Doubt and questioning inspired the grand beginning of Mormonism, even though Smith didn’t realize the significance of the First Vision himself for many years (Bushman, 2005, p. 39)

More visions bridged the gap between the First Vision and Smith’s first “marvelous work” (Smith, 1832), the translation of the Book of Mormon. These came by inquiry but were more personal than doctrinal in nature. It wasn’t until translation of the Book of Mormon started that new inconsistencies arose.

During the translation, three distinct questions came forward while Oliver Cowdery was helping to translate. Passages in the translated story either introduced new doctrines or did not entirely match Smith’s and Cowdery’s previous understandings of certain doctrines. One of these regarded whether or not John the Apostle from the New Testament had physically died. According to Richard Lyman Bushman (2005, p. 74), Smith and Cowdery disagreed on the answer but agreed to inquire for

revelation, which was received as a result. Smith and Cowdery also had questions about baptism and priesthood authority; as Cowdery said “it was as easily to be seen, that amid the great strife and noise concerning religion, none had authority from God to administer the ordinances of the gospel.” Bushman (2005, p. 74) notes that Smith said the question troubled them. They paused the translation to seek an answer through prayer. Again, a revelation resulted, this time in the form of an angel who identified himself as John the Baptist and who conferred the lesser or Aaronic priesthood on both of them (Bushman, 2005, p. 74).

Finally, a few passages in the Book of Mormon spoke of witnesses for the work that was being translated. Smith and his associates inquired and learned by revelation that there would indeed be witnesses and that they were to be Martin Harris, David Whitmer, and Oliver Cowdery (Allen & Leonard, 1992).

These three revelations are still core pieces of church doctrine today. The revelation on priesthood and the First Vision form the basis for authority which the LDS Church claims. The three witnesses declared the divinity of the Book of Mormon, which book Smith named “the keystone of our religion.” (Book of Mormon, Introduction to the Book of Mormon).

After the Book of Mormon was published, attention turned to more pressing matters; one in particular was that John the Baptist had promised a higher priesthood at the time of conferring the Aaronic Priesthood (Bushman, 2005, p. 75). In *History of the Church*, Smith recorded that this had been a matter of prayer for some time when they decided to meet and pray more specifically than ever previously on this promise. Smith said, “We had not long been engaged in solemn and fervent prayer, when the word of the Lord came unto us” (Smith, 1948, p. 60). In contrast to all prior inquiries, this was not spoken of in connection with feelings of turmoil or disagreement, likely because of the promise that had been previously given. Even so, the announcement again came in response to prayer and seeking.

This higher, or Melchizedek, Priesthood was the completion of the Aaronic Priesthood received earlier and became another key in the church's ecclesiastical authority.

The formal organization of the church brought more questions of which Smith had to inquire. Just five months after the formation of the church, an associate of Smith named Hiram Page began to receive revelations intended to govern the church using a stone. This was similar to the methods Smith used to translate the Book of Mormon. Presumably because of the parallels in receiving revelation seen between Page and Smith, many members believed Page (Bushman, 2005, p. 120). Smith, however, immediately became doubtful and declared that the revelations that Page was receiving "were entirely at variance with the order of God's house, as laid down in the New Testament, as well as in our late revelations" (Smith, 1948, p.109). Again, Smith was comparing what he knew with what was actually happening and felt an incongruity. Smith limited his intervention at first to discussions with other leaders until he learned that many prominent members believed Page, at which point "we thought best to inquire of the Lord concerning so important a matter" (Smith, 1948, p. 109). The following revelation ultimately denounced the authority of Page and established Smith as the only person able to receive revelation to govern the church (Doctrine and Covenants 28). This revelation can also be seen as the establishment of the precedent for Smith and future presidents as sole revelators over the whole church.

There are many other things Smith questioned and received inspiration on. This is not a comprehensive overview, but merely a demonstration of how many of the fundamental doctrines of the LDS church came by Smith's search for truth beyond the norms of the day.

Questions Presented by Other Members

Some doctrines were established through questions which apparently Smith had not considered himself. Just previous to the Hiram Page incident, some individuals wanted to become members but questioned whether they needed to be baptized into the new church since they had already been

baptized in other churches. Smith took this question seriously and found an answer through inquiry, which instructed to “enter... in at the gate, as I [the Lord] have commanded” (Doctrine and Covenants 22). As a result, all new members of the LDS church must be baptized by one who holds the priesthood authority described previously.

Around the same time, the culture of visions and spiritual manifestations was strong. Many early members reported bizarre, even disturbing phenomenon occurring among many of the saints. Parley P. Pratt, John Murdock, and others felt that something was wrong but were afraid to correct it themselves (Pratt, 1888, p. 65). They took the matter to Smith, who received another revelation addressing the characteristics of the Spirit of God and the proper manner of gospel teaching (Doctrine and Covenants 50).

A commandment somewhat unique to Mormonism, called the Word of Wisdom, began as a question as well. Emma Smith, Joseph’s wife, approaching her husband to ask for a solution to the problem of the smell and cleaning up the mess resulting from chewing tobacco and cigarettes (Allen & Leonard, 1992, p. 105). When Joseph Smith inquired, he received “A word of wisdom... not by commandment or restraint, but by revelation”, limiting the use of coffee, tea, alcohol, and tobacco for members (Doctrine and Covenants 89). While not a commandment during Smith’s lifetime, it was formally adopted by later church president Brigham Young in 1851 and received strong emphasis by presidents Joseph F. Smith and Heber J. Grant during the early 20th century (Alexander, 2012).

Things Not Questioned

While a great many doctrines were evaluated and reformed, some were not. In a way, this mimics Arrington’s own choice to not investigate certain matters. One of Smith’s most famous teachings is, “The fundamental principles of our religion are the testimony of the Apostles and Prophets, concerning Jesus Christ, that He died, was buried, and rose again the third day, and ascended into heaven; and all other things which pertain to our religion are only appendages to it.” (The Church of

Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2007, p. 49). The centrality of Jesus Christ was one such topic never changed by Smith, although it was expanded upon in the Book of Mormon.

The author of this essay speculates that Arrington's and Smith's motives in not publicly questioning certain subjects were probably very different. Despite not investigating the Book of Mormon or the Priesthood ban, Arrington likely entertained doubts in his mind for most of his life. Smith probably never entertained these same doubts regarding the role of Christ or other unchanged subjects. However, it seems that both men had a sort of inner compass that told them what to investigate and what to not question publicly, resulting in the same silence from both men on certain elements of the LDS gospel. Thus the parallels between Arrington and Smith can still be seen, even in this matter.

Conclusion

Arrington's intellectual journey began with his own fundamental understanding of a subject challenged by different worldviews, which led him to investigate which side was view was more correct. Smith's journey began when he likewise started to compare his personal understanding of the Christian gospel to that taught by various religions. Smith and Arrington both were able to accept new truths when they were thoroughly researched and revealed. A very similar pattern existed in both men.

In fact, this pattern was repeated over and over in Mormon history. How else was a church based on new truth to be established? It turns out that the nearly all the fundamental stances of the LDS church were those specifically received by question. Mormonism's "unique message to the world" (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2004, p. 159) can be used as a measuring stick to demonstrate this point a final time. According to *Preach My Gospel* (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2004, p. 41), this message is that of a modern-day prophet revealing lost truths, which is to be tested by the veracity of new scripture. All parts of this unique message came by asking: Smith's divine commission, the priesthood (which evolved to become the governing structure of the church), further witnesses of the divinity of the Book of Mormon, and the way of baptism. All of these doctrines

have a unique Mormon “twist” which differentiate them from what was being popularly taught in Joseph Smith’s day.

With such a rich history of questions, it might seem paradoxical that doubt is so taboo in Mormon culture. As far back as Brigham Young it was a concern. Young said,

I am more afraid that this people have so much confidence in their leaders that they will not inquire for themselves of God whether they are led by him. I am fearful they settle down in a state of blind self security. Let every man and woman know, by the whispering of the Spirit of God to themselves, whether their leaders are walking in the path the Lord dictates, or not.

(Widtsoe, 1925, p. 209)

Like all people, Mormons have not been alone in struggling to find the proper balance between skepticism and blind obedience. While skepticism can be taken to the harmful extreme, a review of Mormon history without addressing the role of questions and answers is incomplete. It is likely that the modern-day LDS church would not exist without a figure brave enough to doubt at the helm.

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