

Liahona and Iron Rod Revisited

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IN AUGUST 1967, I delivered a sermon in the Palo Alto Ward entitled "What the Church Means to People like Me." *DIALOGUE* published it that winter and the *Saints' Herald* reprinted it the following year. In response to an invitation from the John Whitmer Historical Association, I took occasion recently to reflect on what has happened to the Liahonas and Iron Rods of Mormonism in the last fifteen years.

The terms were proposed in 1967 in this language:

There are two distinct types of active and dedicated Latter-day Saints. . . . deeply committed to the gospel but also prone to misgivings about the legitimacy, adequacy, or serviceability of the commitment of the other.

The purpose of my inquiry is not to support either set of misgivings but to describe each type as dispassionately as I can, to identify myself with one of the types, and then to bear witness concerning some of the blessings which the church offers to the type I identify with.

Symbols for the two types came from the Book of Mormon — from Lehi's dream, the Iron Rod, and from Lehi's experience in the wilderness, the Liahona:

The Iron Rod was the Word of God. To the person with his hand on the rod, each step of the journey to the tree of life was plainly defined; he had only to hold on as he moved forward. In Lehi's dream the way was *not easy*, but it was *clear*.

The Liahona, in contrast, was a compass. It pointed to the destination but did not fully mark the path; indeed, the clarity of its directions varied with the circumstances

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of the user. For Lehi's family the sacred instrument was a reminder of their temporal and eternal goals, but it was no infallible delineator of their course. . . .

The Iron Rod Saint does not look for questions but for answers, and in the gospel — as he understands it — he finds or is confident that he can find the answer to every important question. The Liahona Saint, on the other hand, is preoccupied with questions and skeptical of answers; he finds in the gospel — as he understands it — answers to enough important questions so that he can function purposefully without answers to the rest.¹

The balance of the article describes the strengths and weaknesses of Iron Rod and Liahona testimonies in neutral terms and then witnesses to what the gospel and the Church mean to one member of the Liahona persuasion. Clearly, the nomenclature intends to take the curse off such terms as “orthodox” and “liberal” as they occur in Mormon dialogue, and the purpose of the sermon is to promote tolerance and mutual understanding.

Of the 1967 article's impact in the RLDS community I know only that a handful of people wrote for reprints and one reader sent a sharply critical letter, followed a few weeks later by an apology. Like a number of other readers who identified themselves as Iron Rods, she saw the delineation of an alternative style of gospel commitment as a threat. Unlike most such readers, however, she took a second look, discovered that she was not being proselyted but merely invited to peacefully coexist, and decided that she could. As I have come to know more about some of the very hard questions that RLDS leaders were confronting in the late 1960s, I can understand why the *Herald* editor may have seen the article as appropriate for his readers.

Among the Latter-day Saints, the Liahona-Iron Rod symbolism took on a life of its own. Immodesty prompts me to mention that fifteen hundred reprints of the *DIALOGUE* article found their way into circulation, mostly through the Brigham Young University Bookstore, the LDS institute and seminary system, and Deseret Book Store. More recently the sermon has been reprinted in *Sunstone* and its argument figures prominently in the conclusion of Arrington and Bitton's *The Mormon Experience*.² Quite a few Latter-day Saints know about Liahonas and Iron Rods, and most of them know which they are.

The article did little, I confess, to make Mormons of the two tendencies feel more accepting of each other. Its most significant contribution — to the extent that it went beyond providing handy labels — was to help make the Liahonas more accepting of themselves. As one correspondent succinctly put it: “You'll never know how delighted I was to find out that I have a ‘nice’ name like Liahona. . . . I just wasn't aware that there were so many of us who questioned.”

¹ *Saints' Herald* 115 (15 Oct. 1968): 15–16; *DIALOGUE: A JOURNAL OF MORMON THOUGHT* 2 (Winter 1967): 107–17.

² *Sunstone* 5 (July–Aug. 1980): 15–20; Leonard J. Arrington and Davis Bitton, *The Mormon Experience: A History of the Latter-day Saints* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), pp. 334–35.

That was fifteen years ago. What has happened to Liahonas and Iron Rods in the years since W. Wallace Smith, David O. McKay, and Lyndon B. Johnson were all presidents in the land of Zion?

Like the 1967 sermon, this presentation is a personal essay. It has no research base other than fifteen more years of living as a Mormon and the observations of several friends on the two questions I propose to consider here:

How has the concept of two basic types of committed Latter-day Saints stood up under scrutiny and reflection?

How does the recent record of Utah-based Mormonism look to “people like me”?

Reactions to the Liahona-Iron Rod dichotomy — then and now — fall into three groups. Some accept what they interpret to be the classification scheme, identify themselves as Liahonas, and find comfort and encouragement therein. One friend recently wrote: “I personally think your talk helped reassure Liahonas that they could remain in the Church in good conscience; many of them are now in leading positions in the Church.” A former member of a general board wrote from the mission field in 1968: “I can’t help being a Liahona, and it is important not to feel guilty about it. It is also important to accept the Iron Rods as they are.” A BYU colleague expressed the hope that “some ‘Iron Rods’ may read this and through it better understand the questioning mind.”

A second group was those who identified themselves as Iron Rods and had no intention of changing. However, their attitudes toward Liahonas were mixed. One stake president invited me to discuss the subject over dinner and accepted my assurances that the sermon was not intended to divide the Saints, or to provoke questions among the unquestioning, or to pass judgment on anyone. Others of the answer-oriented tendency were more critical — none more publicly than a counselor in the Church’s First Presidency. In a 1971 general conference address entitled “The Iron Rod,” he warned against those who “profess to be religious and speak of themselves as Christians, and according to one such ‘as accepting the scriptures only as sources of inspiration and moral truth,’ and then ask in their smugness: ‘Do the revelations of God give us a handrail to the kingdom of God, as the Lord’s messenger told Lehi, or merely a compass?’”³

The third group of responses came — and still comes — from people who object to being pigeonholed. Their perspective was well expressed by a recent respondent to my request for advice: “Is there not a continuum along which individuals may be categorized in terms of their interpretation and application of the gospel rather than being placed in a discrete category?”

Considerable discussion and reflection have brought me to these qualifying and hopefully clarifying observations:

1. In the metaphoric sense that I have proposed, the Iron-Rod-Liahona dichotomy has elements in common with, but not synonymous with, such classi-

³ Harold B. Lee, “The Iron Rod,” *Ensign* (June 1971): 7. The same sermon quotes with approval the definition: “A liberal in the Church is merely one who does not have a testimony.”

fications as dogmatism and empiricism, orthodoxy and heterodoxy, fundamentalism and modernism or even conservatism and liberalism. However, the identification is far from complete. Iron Rod Saints have demonstrated remarkable flexibility in regard to changes in theology that mean they see blacks in the temple, or to changes in policy that mean they stay home from church on Sunday evenings. Correspondingly, some Liahonas have defended evolution and the ERA with fervent dogmatism. The labels of Liahona and Iron Rod identify responses to religious authoritarianism in the sphere of Latter-day Saint testimony, not predictable positions on given issues, certain attitudes, or any particular behavior patterns.

2. The classification is not a separation of the good guys from the bad guys. Virtue and unrighteousness are found in individuals of both types. I freely acknowledge a special sensibility to Iron Rod sins and sinners, but I am well aware of some perils that particularly beset the Liahona path. One is a tendency to swing from self-doubt clear through self-acceptance to self-congratulation. In the words of one of my recent correspondents: "Liahonas see themselves as somehow *outside* the pale; over there are all the plodders, the iron rodders, clinging blindly to pull themselves through the fog, while over here are we liahonas, basking the the light of superior knowledge." Another peril is poignantly described in a DIALOGUE article called "Some Sentimental Thoughts on Leaving the Fold." For its author the Liahona concept was a halfway house to existential atheism. Others like him have followed their doubts to some destination outside the fold, usually without fireworks but not without pain.⁴

3. The Liahona-Iron Rod symbolism relates more directly to the quest for truth than to the pursuit of virtue. It is useful to recall that Joseph Smith defined truth in terms of knowledge, declared it to be very important, and suggested that its pursuit would extend far beyond this life.⁵ Thus, even the most knowledgeable Mormon lives with unanswered questions, with partial and tentative answers, and with authority-based answers that may not be persuasive to others. We should ask — Iron Rods and Liahonas alike — before entering into warm debate on any knowledge-related question: Is finding a "true" answer important to the business of Christ-like living? If we noted how often our response turned out to be negative, we might be more content to let our brothers and sisters treasure their tentativeness or cherish their certitude, as the case might be.

4. The distinction between Liahona and Iron Rod is most clearly discernible in responses to the question: Is the more reliable test of the validity of a statement its substance or its source? It involves differing perspectives on the dual approach to knowledge propounded by Joseph Smith: "Seek learning, even by study and also by faith" (D&C 88:14). The Liahona is a "by study" person; he relies on the tests of "prove all things" and "by their fruits" because he

⁴ Kent L. Walgren, DIALOGUE 13 (Winter 1980): 75–80.

⁵ See D&C 50:40; 84:19; 88:78–79; 93:23–36; 130:19.

regards no human authority as infallible. The Iron Rod sees some human authorities — prophets, scriptures and inner promptings — as sufficiently reliable to be accepted “by faith.” (Happily, the institutional Church accepts wide latitude of belief among its members. It emphasizes obedience, but it excommunicates for apostasy only those who challenge its authority in a public and hostile manner.)

5. The potential to be Iron Rod or Liahona is in each of us, but it is possible to be an active Mormon without making a conscious intellectual choice to be either. This is so because a typical LDS commitment is not to a set of rigorously examined “truth” propositions, but to a collection of activities, values, attitudes, hopes, customs, emotions, support systems, and verbal and visual symbols. The gospel, the Church, the scriptures, and the prophets are “true” in that they are seen as the sources of these personalized components of a Latter-day Saint life. Nonconforming behavior need not undermine confidence in the “truth” of these sources as long as such behavior can be self-excused by some form of the “I’m only human” rationalization. An active Mormon may, in other words, act and talk like an Iron Rod because he has never actually confronted a serious question that has tested his confidence in the validity of religious authority. One of my favorite Church leaders frequently quoted Will Durant: “No one deserves to believe unless he has served an apprenticeship of doubt.”⁶ It may be that the terms Liahona and Iron Rod should be applied only to those Mormons who have experienced that apprenticeship.

6. It may be that the most important single factor influencing whether one becomes an Iron Rod or a Liahona is vocational choice. Some occupations raise more questions and present more problems that seriously challenge religious authority than others. Education and emotional trauma also affect the outcome. As a consequence, among individual Latter-day Saints — converts as well as those reared in the Church — there is more movement from Iron Rod to Liahona than the reverse. Whether this is seen as a favorable or unfavorable trend, it is hardly surprising.

7. Certain characteristics of organizational behavior affect the way individuals of either persuasion function in the Church. The impression among most of the laity — much stronger in the LDS than in the RLDS Church — that the General Authorities agree on all matters of doctrine and policy — gives disproportionate influence to idiosyncratic views that are publicly and dogmatically expressed by individuals in the Church hierarchy. The institutional emphasis on compliance generates a certain bias toward placing Iron Rods in presiding positions at all levels of the organization, while calling Liahonas, as one of my correspondents wryly noted, “to teach classes, be Boy Scout leaders and do all kinds of things that require goodness and sensitivity, but not so much unquestioning obedience.” The primary criterion in the appointment process, however, is who — among the men and women available for prayerful con-

⁶ Eugene E. Cambell and Richard D. Poll, *Hugh B. Brown: His Life and Thought* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1975), p. 196.

sideration — is seen as most likely to get the job done. The consequence is a mixture of Liahonas and Iron Rods in offices and callings down to the ward level, and each member of the Church finds that his operating environment is affected considerably by whether his immediate file leaders happen to be one or the other. Finally, the desire for acceptance in a conformity-stressing church leads to a certain amount of role playing to conceal both doubts and disobedience.⁷ This blurs the distinction between Iron Rods and Liahonas and makes it easier for them to work together.

8. In the realm of both ideas and actions, Iron Rods and Liahonas can be quite utilitarian. Gospel “truth” may be eternal, but applications change in response to institutional and individual needs. Joseph Smith provided a rationale: “That which is wrong under one circumstance may be, and often is, right in another. . . . This is the principle on which the government of heaven is conducted — by revelation adapted to the circumstances in which the children of the kingdom are placed.”⁸ Of the adaptiveness of the institutional kingdom something will be said later. How the children of the kingdom also reshape gospel questions and answers to the circumstances of their own lives is beautifully expressed in one of the research letters: “Each Saint, will he or nil he, lives in a private world of doctrine, shaped to a great degree by Joseph Smith and his reinterpreters, but shaped much more profoundly by his own experience and his own will, which have edited all doctrines and teachings into a private reality in which he dwells.”

Having said all this, I reaffirm my impression that at any point in time an active Latter-day Saint can be identified as a Liahona or an Iron Rod by his initial response to questions and answers that bear seriously on his understanding of the gospel. Those who need “true” answers and see religious authority as a reliable source of such answers are Iron Rods. Those who see truth as elusive and *all* authority-based answers as liable to scrutiny are Liahonas. The Iron Rods pray for confirmation of answers that they have received, and frequently it comes. The Liahonas pray for strength to cope with uncertainty, and it also frequently comes.

I further reaffirm that individuals may move from either category to the other, that within each is a range of knowledge and commitment, and that the outer limit of each is apostasy — with or without institutional formalities. The Saints who abandon the fellowship of Iron Rods and Liahonas take their private worlds of questions and answers with them. Only the labels lose their relevance.

Let me now begin the consideration of how recent developments in Mormonism look to “people like me” with an overall generalization. Within the LDS

⁷ A perceptive discussion of how active Latter-day Saints use “obstructionism, pouting, procrastination, intentional inefficiency or stubbornness to reflect the disagreement or hostility one does not express openly” is K-Lynn Paul, “Passive Aggression and the Believer,” *DIALOGUE* 10 (Autumn 1977): 86–91.

⁸ Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1973 ed.), 5:135.

and RLDS churches we are still some distance from a “unity of the faith,” and in institutional terms we are moving in divergent directions. The official voice of the Reorganization sounds enough like a Liahona to give concern to some RLDS Iron Rods while the authorized voice of the Utah Church is more comfortable to those Saints who accept prescribed answers than to those who raise perplexing questions. However, the recent history of the LDS Church is far more complex than my one-sentence synopsis suggests.

For one thing, a striking development of the last fifteen years is that the Mormon Liahonas have gone public. They recognize each other readily and they fellowship openly in firesides, study groups, and a variety of conferences and symposia. They write for a growing number of publications. When *DIALOGUE* was an infant “journal of Mormon thought,” its survival was often in peril. Now it flourishes in a field of competitors — *Exponent II*, *Sunstone*, and *Sunstone Review* being prominent examples. *The Journal of Mormon History* and the *John Whitmer Association Journal* must also be considered. All publish material reflecting a broad range of individual viewpoints, but all clearly qualify in large measure as Liahona voices.

Concurrently, the formation of the Mormon History Association in 1966 led the way to organizations of LDS professionals in a number of disciplines — arts and letters, sociology, media arts, and family counseling among others. While membership ranges across the conservative-to-liberal spectrum, the nature of such activities is to address new questions and reexamine old answers. If one wants to broaden his circle of Liahona acquaintances, the gatherings and publications of these organizations provide opportunities matched only by the recently launched annual Sunstone Theological Symposium.

The Church university has grown in enrollment, faculty, football prowess, and importance as a forum for dialogue among Liahonas, Iron Rods, and observers of the Mormon scene. Conferences of remarkable scope are sponsored by academic departments and institutes. Women’s Week at Brigham Young University is an exciting reminder that the questions-and-answers business is becoming an equal opportunity employer. Despite its institutional connection, *BYU Studies* publishes more articles addressing open questions than proposing definitive answers. And the unofficial student-sponsored *Seventh East Press* gives wider-than-campus circulation to an unpredictable blend of investigative reporting, editorial page debate, up-beat features, and downright impertinence. The debate continues about whether a Church-related school can be a great university, while scores of Liahona and Iron Rod professors spend far more time and talent trying to make it so than they do tilting with each other.

It is my conviction that the growth of the Church and the continuing emphasis on education has generated a “critical mass” of Liahonas whose spiritual energy cannot be suppressed. It can be employed in the business of the kingdom or it can be excluded, but it cannot be confined. To be in touch with that energy is an exciting thing for “people like me.”

However, many of the Liahonas whom I know best see the recent past as “the day of the Iron Rod.” Certain developments in the institutional Church offer support for this view.

First are the increasingly strenuous efforts to promote uniformity and conformity in the wards and branches throughout the world. “Correlation” — the Mormon code word for standardization of curricula and elimination of competition and duplication in activities — has an eighty-year history, but only in the last fifteen years or so has it been the dominant concept in program building. One result has been the disappearance of many distinctive features of the Relief Society, Sunday School, and youth organizations of the Church. Another is a collection of committee-generated and committee-screened lesson manuals of singular blandness.

A coincident shift toward Christian fundamentalism is also apparent in the approach to the “standard works” incorporated in missionary plans, lesson manuals, official publications and the sermons of many General Authorities. The verbal infallibility of the scriptures is not explicitly asserted, and in specific instances — like the story of Adam’s rib — it is expressly denied. But the frequent and vigorous admonition to “search the scriptures” for authoritative answers to all gospel-related questions reverses a trend away from literalism that marked the first two-thirds of the twentieth century. One of my correspondents sees the 1979 edition of the Bible, with its mass of computer-generated cross references to other LDS scriptures and Joseph Smith’s revision, as “a serious mistake, as it encourages and facilitates the use of a proof-text method of reading the Bible that will only further diminish our understanding of it.”

The constant reminder to “follow the Brethren” is another Iron Rod characteristic of the past fifteen years. Implicit in the concept of living prophets, of course, is the idea that authoritative answers are available through chosen individuals, but the advice to depend upon Church leaders for guidance in what to think as well as what to do is more prominent at present than in many past periods of LDS history. The Church has not officially adopted the neo-Calvinistic theology or the dogma of prophetic infallibility that have been propounded by some Church leaders, but the authoritarian climate gives such doctrinal innovations widespread acceptance among answer-oriented Saints.

The downgrading of the study of Church history is a recent and — to many Mormons — regrettable consequence of the Iron Rod trend. Access to the rich archival resources of the Historical Division of the Church is more restricted than it was a decade ago, the research function of the division has been curtailed, its sponsorship of publications is being discontinued and one of the most important products of the enterprise, James B. Allen and Glen M. Leonard, *The Story of the Latter-day Saints* (1976), has been permitted to go out of print. The recent brouhaha involving several professional historians and an apostle who strongly advocates “safe” history has come to the attention of most of us.

It is arguable, however, that this accentuation of the authoritarian aspect of Mormonism is no more than a defensive institutional response to secular

trends in the world and the internal stresses generated by explosive growth in membership, intercultural differences, and great disparities in living standards, educational attainments, and gospel understanding. One of my "research" consultants notes the affinity between some Mormons and the Moral Majority: "Persons with Iron Rod mentalities . . . seem to agree that the world is going to hell in a handcart and that the only way to stop it is to establish hard and fast behavioral rules that everyone must obey." Another letter writer sympathizes with those who wear the mantle of leadership:

The potential for our fragmentation is high. Even the vaunted organizational tightness of the ecclesiastical structure is really fragile. Lack of a widespread bureaucracy and very high turnover at the local level lay the entire Church open to the possibility of schisms. . . . We lean against that by emphasizing rhetorically "follow the prophet," read the scriptures, etc. We cannot afford to recognize widely how much we follow Liahona because that recognition would encourage it to an unacceptable, disfunctional degree. Outsiders, and particularly intellectuals, hearing the rhetoric think we are far more constrained, authority-ridden, and channeled in thought and action than we are in fact.

That authoritarianism in the Utah Church is pragmatic and not wedded to tradition is well illustrated by significant recent changes that are at least as acceptable to Liahona Saints as to rank and file Iron Rod members. The abandonment of the policy of withholding priesthood from blacks is the most profound of these. But responsiveness to new circumstances may be seen also in the consolidated meeting schedule, the content of the *Ensign*,⁹ a new method for funding chapel construction, a redesign of temple garments, and a shortening of the missionary term — first for older couples and then for the young men and women who now proclaim the "only true gospel" in most countries of the free world. A study conducted by Correlation Evaluation to discover why so many converts do not remain active in the Church — like other data-oriented inquiries now in progress — may have important consequences for programs.

Nothing better illustrates the problems of developing an authoritative response to profound social change than the woman question. The Church emphasis on priesthood leadership and traditional family values is easier to express in sculpture than to apply in a world where Mormon women become psychiatrists and senators, adopt hyphenated names at marriage, and deliver their babies in the presence of their nervous husbands. The tactics of opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment generated a serious backlash among Mormons of both sexes, as did the short-lived experiment in restricting sacrament meeting prayers to priesthood holders. The process of institutional accommodation in so volatile a field is not measured by general conference endorsements of conventional answers but by the way Church publications, Social

⁹ Although the official Church magazine carries an aura of authoritarianism, external and internal evidence suggests that a number of its writers are Liahonas. Articles that deal with specific human problems are frequently suggestive rather than prescriptive in tone, as well as sensitive to the complexities of contemporary life that make some traditional answers irrelevant or difficult to apply.

Service agencies, and the Brethren as individual counselors deal with unconventional problems.

As we look toward the future, several factors sustain optimism and commitment in people like me.

One is the characteristic of Liahona testimonies that has been consistent since the 1967 sermon. They find in the gospel sufficient answers to enough important questions to function purposefully in the Church without answers to the rest.

The second is the historical record — generally better known among Liahonas than Iron Rods — that shows the tremendous capacity of the Institutional Church to accommodate new realities. When the mission of the Restoration is defined in terms of impact on the lives of people, every program, scripture, and prophetic pronouncement is subject to reconstruction or reinterpretation for the sake of that mission.

Furthermore, the limitations of authoritarian control operate as certainly and more swiftly in open communities like the Church than in states with plenary power to punish nonconformity. I am indebted to my brother, now bishop in the same California ward where the Liahona-Iron Rod concept was first proposed, for an illustration of the point:

Suppose I approached the brethren of the priesthood about home teaching as follows: "I'm sick and tired of your failing to visit all your families. Any elder or seventy or high priest who doesn't do 100 percent home teaching this month is going to have his district taken away from him. Now get out there and do it!"

Do you know how many families the bishopric would be home teaching next month? Two hundred and fifty. (That's a hundred and twenty-five for each counselor.)

And at the end of the second month do you know how many counselors the bishop would have? None.¹⁰

Finally, the trend of the last fifteen years has not altered the fact that the Church continues to be — as it has always been — a community of Liahona-type and Iron Rod-type believers. During this period my own research has given me a rather intimate acquaintance with two former counselors in the First Presidency — Hugh B. Brown and Henry D. Moyle. One was a Liahona, impatient with dogmatism. The other was an Iron Rod, impatient with opposition. Each was well-leavened with pragmatism, each was disappointed that the institutional Church did not follow the path that he would have preferred, and each was unquestionably "true to the faith." The tendencies in Mormonism that they represented did not die with them.

The same correspondent who noted that this is the "day of the Iron Rod" went on to remark: "The division into the two types is virtually universal in the Church. Sooner or later, Iron Rods will have to make peace with Liahonas. Else the church will split." Like this good friend — who happens not to be a Latter-day Saint — "I do not expect that to happen." On the contrary, I fully share the conviction of another good friend — a Mormon who knows as much about Liahonas and Iron Rods as anybody: "I have always believed that both can abide each other without difficulty as long as they have the spirit of Christ."

¹⁰ Carl W. Poll, "An Address to the Priesthood on Women's Day," Palo Alto First Ward, 21 March 1982. Copy in my possession.