

Lucifer's Legacy

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TWICE NOW I'VE BEEN TOLD STRAIGHT OUT and in so many words, "Don't be too honest!" Both times this earnest counsel came from men whose friendship I cherish and whose priesthood callings command my respect. Neither of them would countenance the slightest chicanery in a business deal or tolerate any disregard for the law. I believe that either might, in compelling circumstances, condone a little stretching of the truth to defuse a dangerous situation or to spare undue injury to someone's feelings, but even then only with some misgiving.

In spite of their generally scrupulous attitude there is, however, one brand of dishonesty my friends felt they must in good conscience promote. The purpose of their admonitions not to be too honest was to discourage careful, even if sympathetic, scrutiny of such things as church policies, rhetorical styles, or management techniques. They were even more wary of any probing examination of basic gospel concepts and ideas. They warned me against posing questions whose contemplation might expand an unwary companion's horizons into unknown and therefore possibly dangerous territory, and indeed to eschew such excursions even in my silent personal musings. Their ideal, as it unfolded in subsequent conversations, was a theocratic world made safe and sure not only by the absence of dissenting voices, but also by the existence of some foolproof mechanism which could obliterate each potentially troubling question at the very moment circumstances might bring it to mind.

Coming as they did after several decades of church activity, my friends' admonitions to curtail what I viewed as my intellectual integrity were not unusual in their intent. However, the forthright way in which they were expressed reminded me of a similar experience from long ago. As is the case with many childhood experiences, my own memories of it are uncertain, but I've been assured by others that I was there. Perhaps you'll find that this same experience skitters along the edges of your memory as well. Here's how it has been described by two of the more prominent participants after their own memories had been appropriately refreshed.

Now the Lord had shown unto me, Abraham, the intelligences that were organized before the world was; . . . And there stood one among them that was like unto God, and he said . . . We will go down, . . . and we will make an earth whereon these may dwell: And we will prove them herewith, to see if they will do all things whatsoever their God shall command them . . . (Abr. 3:22-25).

Satan . . . came before me, saying, "Behold, here am I, send me, I will be thy son, and I will redeem all mankind, that one soul shall not be lost . . . ; wherefore give me thine honor." But, behold, my Beloved Son . . . said unto me, "Father, thy will be done, and the glory be thine forever." Wherefore, because that Satan rebelled against me, and sought to destroy the agency of man . . . , and also, that I should give unto him mine own power; . . . I caused that he should be cast down; And he became Satan, yea even the devil, the father of all lies . . . (Moses 4:1-4).

Although eloquent on the tactics currently employed by the deposed Satan, the scriptures are silent about the means he proposed to use to assure the eventual return of all of God's children, had his plan actually been adopted. My poor memory can add nothing concerning the details of Lucifer's plan, but the issue being so fundamental to my eternal welfare I think it appropriate to speculate a bit. Just how might Satan have planned to destroy the free agency of humanity?

At the end of the twentieth century it seems very unlikely that the techniques of withholding, falsifying, or otherwise controlling information would not have been prominent among Lucifer's bag of tricks for assuring conformity. We've seen so many examples of the efficacy of these procedures, ranging from the oft criticized wiles of the advertising community to the nightmare of a modern, sophisticated nation whose citizens were kept largely unaware and thus led to tacit complicity in the massacre of millions of their fellows at the urging of a crazed Hitler. What better way has history taught us to control the actions of men and women than to limit the information available to them so that the need to choose never enters their minds, or in the event that it does, so as to obscure all but the desired option? Fortunately, we mortals have not yet been able to accomplish the next step. We have no universally applicable technique for obliterating each unorthodox thought at its inception. Perhaps a son of the morning could have brought that off as well.

Attempts to exercise some degree of control over our thoughts are so pervasive in today's world that some of us have become insensitive to their use, even in the most unlikely places. How many see it as an affront to a basic principle of the plan of salvation when they are told that historians need not be scrupulous in establishing veracity because the primary purpose of church history is to promote faith, not to establish a true record of the past? How many are similarly chagrined by the powerful

coercion to avoid the study of certain topics that is exercised when an authoritative writer asserts that one cannot simultaneously believe in organic evolution and have a testimony of the gospel? How many feel that their vote in the council in heaven is in danger of being nullified when they are told that historical, cultural, and political context is not pertinent to the correct interpretation of scripture? Assuredly, finding enough elements of the truth to illuminate a given situation is not the end, but only the beginning of the moral task, the testing for which we are here. But without enough of it to stir our awareness and clarify the options, how can the test proceed? Since our knowledge is always fragmentary, the role of faith and obedience in our quest for eternal life is fundamentally important, but ultimately the burden for making a stand based on one's own convictions cannot be shifted to others.

Nuggets of the truth are rare and elusive. Not only does it often take great effort to unearth them, just knowing where to look can require exquisite insight. Some will argue that our perspective is so limited that the search is foolhardy. They are, of course, nearly right. Restricted as we are by circumstances of time and place, heritage and paradigm, finite neural apparatus and pervasive psychological imperatives, our scope is indeed minute. It is, however, a fundamental tenet of Mormon belief that God's creation and the laws which govern it, both physically and spiritually, are reflections of the intelligence that is his glory, and a spark of which dwells eternally within each of us. It follows that brief glimpses into the broader landscape are not excluded by the essential nature of our selves. Our very kinship with God and our consequent possession of a modicum of the sentient stuff of the universe assure us that the quest is meaningful.

In an uncharacteristically pensive mood, a noted archaeologist who has often inspired me with his optimistic view of the life of the mind once wrote:

The unexpected event, if it ever comes, leaves one unprepared and fumbling. . . . a blink at the right moment may do it, an eye applied to a crevice, or the world seen through a tear. Then, to most of us, the lines reassert themselves, reality steadies out. Every now and then, however, there comes an experience so troubling that the kaleidoscope never quite shifts back to where it was. One must simply deny the episode or adjust one's vision. Most follow the first prescription; the others never talk.¹

How fatally tragic for humankind, if this were universally true! There is surely at least one group among us who must do all they can to keep it from becoming so. For those whose primary goal in life is to know the creator and in some measure to emulate his life, the burden cannot be

1. Loren Eiseley, *All the Strange Hours* (New York: Scribners, 1975).

shirked. Such flashes of insight cannot be surrendered. They must be seized, tenaciously held onto, and carefully passed on to fellow seekers.

The source of a new insight is often of little importance. It can come through prophetic vision as did Joseph Smith's revolutionary understanding of the nature of the Godhead. It can come from a lifetime of study and contemplation as did the mind-expanding suggestion offered by biologist N. J. Berrill in his popular book, *Man's Emerging Mind* (New York: Fawcett, 1957), when he opined that our pre-homo sapien progenitors might well include heroes as worthy of our adulation as, say, Leonardo or Columbus. It may even come from someone whose personal moral code we might find repugnant. Whatever the source, our attention should be tightly focused on expanding our own understanding of the truth. Integration into a cohesive world view of the vast expanse of human experience and thought that falls within the ken of each of us is challenge enough. We can leave the moral judgements to those appointed to that task. In order to illuminate our personal moral choices we need the truth, "and truth is knowledge of things as they are, and as they were, and as they are to become; and whatsoever is more or less than this is the spirit of that wicked one who was a liar from the beginning" (D&C 93:24-25).

What of the scriptures? Isn't the overview of reality which they provide sufficient to our needs? Unfortunately, as with all other tools of communication, their success depends not only on the originator of the message, but on the efficacy of the receiver as well. Joseph Smith once put it thus:

I do not believe that there is a single revelation, among the many God has given to the Church, that is perfect in its fullness. The revelations of God contain correct principles, so far as they go; but it is impossible for the poor, weak, low, groveling, sinful inhabitants of the earth to receive a revelation from the Almighty in all its perfection. He has to speak to us in a manner to meet the extent of our capacities.²

It is precisely the expansion of an essential category of those capacities that is at issue.

Through the centuries incalculable time and energy have been devoted to the search for truth by saints and sinners alike. The varied approaches range from the exploring hands and questioning voices of small children to the ponderings of academicians. They include spontaneous reading for fun, as well as the ritualized confrontation of highly trained proponents of different points of view in modern courts of law. Among

2. *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool, Eng.: Latter-day Saints' Bookseller's Depot, 1855-86), 2:314.

the searchers we find scientists carrying out experiments designed to minimize the ambiguity in the questions they pose of nature and striving for objectivity in interpreting the answers it provides. There are artists honing their skills, stretching their imaginations, and following their individual muses to discover and illuminate new vistas of experience and feeling. Others do not think of themselves as truth seekers, but must inescapably acquire appropriate knowledge of things as they are to carry out whatever work, family-rearing, or other activities engage their attention. In fact, each of us takes part in the search in one way or another, and of course, many in all walks of life seek guidance and succor for their search through prayer.

By eternal measures, our progress is slight, and the path we trod is not without pitfalls and dangers. In passing newfound insights on to others, it is obviously good practice to establish a proper groundwork and then to ladle thoughts out in appropriate doses. Still, "milk before meat" need not mean that the meatier parts of human intellectual experience be postponed forever. An honest attempt to clarify both the immediate and the eternal circumstances of our lives requires full use of all of our observational and critical faculties, together with our capacities to hope and dream and believe. It can be an exciting adventure, and surely most will agree that the very ability to conceive of the quest for truth, seen in this light, lies at the heart of our humanity. Its pursuit can give expression to much that is noble in our nature. How ironic then that many of us in both high and low stations, who have been blessed with the teachings of the restored gospel, sometimes place ourselves in the camp of those who would obfuscate.

The admonition to rein in our God-given perceptiveness and curiosity is not usually stated as bluntly as my friends put it to me, but who has not encountered it frequently in other guises? Who among us has not, in his or her role as a parent or in carrying out a church assignment, been sorely tempted to follow this path because of the simplicity and tranquility it seems to promise? How often have we succumbed and thus declared ourselves willing heirs to Lucifer's legacy?