

# Divine Reason

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That be far from thee to do after this manner, to slay the righteous with the wicked: and that the righteous should be as the wicked, that be far from thee: Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?

—Abraham, reasoning with Jehovah (Gen. 18:25)

MORMONISM SEEMS TO HAVE ADOPTED a position on the relation between reason and revelation. The two concepts frequently appear alongside each other in publications and talks by church apostles, officials of Brigham Young University, and others on topics concerning education, academic freedom, and the like. In most of these appearances, reason and revelation are intended to mark a division between two modes of learning. The position is for the most part uniform: one can learn things by reason or by revelation, but when the content of a revelation conflicts with what is supported only by reason, reason must give way to revelation.

The position is held with conviction, even though reason and revelation are compared with each other nowhere in canonized Mormon scripture. There is, however, some precedent in Mormon tradition for understanding reason and revelation as a conceptual dyad, even though views differ on their precise relation. In the mid-1830s various contributions to the *Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate* claimed that it is "founded both in reason and revelation"; that one must have an idea of God before one can have faith in God; that the universal applicability of gospel requirements makes sense "in the light of reason and revelation"; that "[r]eason and revelation lead us to conclude, that all . . . worlds and systems are adorned with displays of divine wisdom, and peopled with myriads of rational inhabitants"; and that "there appears, from reason and experience, as well as from the dictates of revelation, an absolute impossibility of enjoying happiness so long as malevolent affections retain their ascendancy in the heart of a moral intelligence."<sup>1</sup> In each of these instances reason and revelation appear as compatible avenues to truth

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1. *Messenger and Advocate* 2, 5:259; 2, 7:293; 3, 5:463 (twice).

without a hint that revelation operates as a check on reason.

This view continues into the 1840s and beyond. In a letter sent to the *Times and Seasons* on 28 October 1840, Heber C. Kimball, Wilford Woodruff, and George Albert Smith wrote that they considered "it perfectly consistent with [their] calling, with reason and revelation that [they] should form a knowledge of kingdoms and countries" by all available means.<sup>2</sup> Orson Pratt mentions reason and revelation together on several occasions. On 7 October 1854 he claimed that he sought to justify his teachings "by reason, or by, Thus saith the Lord, in some revelation either ancient or modern." Later that month he said that one can learn things "by experience, by reason, by reflection, by immediate revelation from higher powers, or by a revelation from [one's] fellow man." Finally, in 1872 he suggested that it is true "in the light of reason, independent of revelation," that a person constructing a religion "according to the best light that he had" would "suppose that we were going back to a personage we were well acquainted with."<sup>3</sup>

The view of reason and revelation as compatible avenues to truth had a rival, however. In a conversation between a clergyman and a Saint published in the *Times and Seasons* on 1 September 1842, the clergyman is represented as saying, "You Mormons have too much scripture—you take it all. Now we believe that reason and philosophy have the place of revelation"; to which the Saint responds, "[I]nstead of your reason and philosophy, Paul says, beware lest any man *spoil* you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the rudiments of the world."<sup>4</sup> Here "reason" marks a practice of theorizing about religious matters which ignores continuing revelation, a practice which substitutes human reason for revelation. Although not as stark, John Taylor's comparison of reason with revelation assumes a similar tension. On one occasion he said that building the kingdom of God "is a matter that requires more than human reason," and that "we are left entirely to Revelation, either past, present, or to come" on this matter.<sup>5</sup> On another he offered as an explanation for idol worship the idea that "[m]en of the world, generally, are engaged in the pursuit of objects that come within their natural reason unaided by the spirit of revelation."<sup>6</sup> The compatibilist view and its rival, therefore, have had their advocates from the earliest days of the LDS church.

Co-appearances of reason and revelation have been more plentiful in

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2. Joseph Smith et al., *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2d ed., 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1978), 4:234.

3. *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool, Eng.: F. D. Richards, 1855-86), 2:59, 3:98, 15:250.

4. *Times and Seasons* 3, 21:907.

5. John Taylor, *The Government of God* (Liverpool: S.W. Richards, 1852), 89.

6. *Journal of Discourses* 11:314.

this century. A search of *Conference Reports* of the 1950s and 1960s shows many instances of the compatibilist view. For example, Richard L. Evans in October 1958 said, "Just consistency and reason would suggest living prophets and continuous revelation without any deep-seated affirmation of it within our souls," and in October 1965 Howard W. Hunter said, "Without taking into consideration revelation which reestablishes this organization, reason alone would dictate that Christ's Church should be the same today as when organized under his direction." But where we find this view, we also find its rival. For example, Henry D. Moyle in October 1953 said,

Human reason works under the limitations of a finite mind and shares in the defects of a sinful nature. It has often taken the wrong side in debate and has tried to make "the worse appear the better reason." . . . It has been trammelled by prejudice, blinded by foregone conclusions, and dominated by pride. It has misread the facts, or misapplied the reasoning based upon them. All this goes to show that we need another light than that which reason gives. It can handle categories and make syllogisms, but it cannot make history; cannot survey the whole area of being; cannot speak with authoritative confidence on themes which only revelation can unfold and it transcends its prerogative when it says that a revelation is impossible. It is for reason to take the more modest part of showing us that what we confessedly need has been given us in the religion which came from God.

Whereas the compatibilist view holds that some truths can be learned by either reason or revelation, its rival considers reason a fumbling, degenerate substitute for revelation.

In spite of their differences, both views have a striking deficiency: they overlook the many times that reason is used in Mormon scripture, especially the times that reason is used as a mode of revelation. The same is true for the entry on reason and revelation in the recent *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*.<sup>7</sup> In this entry, as in most contemporary Mormon discussions of reason and revelation, the uses of reason in scripture go completely unnoticed. Were these instances to receive due attention, they would change not so much our understanding of what reason is, but our understanding of who has it and of who reasons with whom. Those who contrast reason with revelation implicitly assume that reason is a property of human beings only; God is not mentioned as a reasoning being, nor are any nonhuman animals. In spite of the possibility that they in fact conceive of God as a reasoning being, most Mormons seem to think that "reason" names the activity in which only humans engage when trying to figure things

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7. See Ralph C. Hancock, "Reason and Revelation," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1992), 4:1,192-94.

out. As a result, the possibility is not entertained that one and the same event could be both a revelation from God and an exercise of reason, for example, an event which consists of a human being reasoning directly with God or with one of his messengers, or one which involves the Holy Ghost's manifest participation in an act of otherwise purely human reason. Although scripture says that God invites us to reason with him, much of the Mormon tradition assumes along with the broader Christian tradition that reason is not a mode of revelation. The view of reason lying behind this assumption I shall henceforth call the *common view*.

The purpose of this essay is not only to explain how Mormons might have come to hold the common view, but to evaluate the common view according to what is said in scripture. When examined against the use of reason in the LDS standard works, we see that the common view fails to account for God's choice of reason as a mode of revelation. I therefore question the common view of reason not because I discount from the start the possibility that it is right, but because after examination I find it inconsistent with what is found in the writings we have canonized as revelation. I consider this inconsistency significant because the common view behind it removes reason from our relationship with God—an outcome which I think distances us from God and, perhaps, from each other. Some hold the common view because they wish to correct those who may trust too much the "arm of flesh" (cf. D&C 1:19). But they mistakenly identify this trust with reason itself—something of which we surely need more, not less.

The *alternative view* of reason implicit in scripture takes reason to be a property of both humans and God. There we find humans reasoning with God and God reasoning with humans. Since the same event may be both a revelation and an exercise of reason, the alternative view accepts reason as a possible mode of revelation. Before proceeding to the scriptural evidence for the alternative view, however, I first want to offer a characterization of reason and revelation in order to make explicit the content of the two concepts as I understand them. Next I discuss some remarks of contemporary Mormons who seem to accept the common view and then explain some of the relevant ideas of three medieval Christian theologians in order to suggest how the common view developed historically. I then present evidence for the alternative view, show how the alternative view dissolves the apparent tension between reason and revelation, and conclude by discussing briefly Abraham's conversation with Jehovah in Genesis 18.

#### WHAT ARE REASON AND REVELATION?

I understand revelation to be any sort of contact God makes with hu-

man beings which they interpret as such. It may be verbal or nonverbal. Examples of verbal revelations are God's command to Adam not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 2:16-17), Jehovah's command to Abram to be perfect (Gen. 17:1), and the resurrected Christ telling the young Joseph Smith not to join any of the sects of the time (JS-H 1:17). Examples of nonverbal revelations are the outpouring of the Holy Ghost on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2), the Lord showing his finger to the brother of Jared (Ether 3:6), and the vision received by Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon of the Father, the Son, and their heavenly attendants (D&C 76:20-21).

Reason is more difficult to characterize, but I suggest that the central notion behind reason is that of inference. To offer a simple sketch, reason is the process by which one infers that one thing is the case from the supposition that one or more other things are the case. A supposition, moreover, is *a reason* for a proposition it supports. This support may be deductive, inductive, or abductive. If one validly infers proposition *x* from propositions *y* and *z* by *deduction*, then the truth of *y* and *z* is sufficient to guarantee the truth of *x*. For example, if Gordon B. Hinckley is a prophet and God communicates with all prophets, then it follows by deduction that God communicates with Gordon B. Hinckley. If one infers *x* from *y* and *z* by *induction*, then the truth of *y* and *z* should make it likely that *x* is true. For example, if I know that the majority of Utah Mormons are Republican and that you are a Utah Mormon, then it is reasonable to infer by induction that you are a Republican as long as I do not have information suggesting otherwise. Unlike deductive reasons, inductive reasons are defeasible, that is, their truth does *not* guarantee the truth of the propositions for which they are invoked as reasons. *Abductive* inference is also defeasible, and so it is often classified as a kind of induction. One reasons abductively when one infers a cause from an effect or, more generally, when one postulates the truth of one proposition as an explanation for another. This is sometimes called an inference to the best explanation. For example, if I read the Book of Mormon and get a certain warm feeling about it, I might infer abductively that the warm feeling is the Holy Ghost's witness that the book is true. Joseph Smith provides another example. He once said that "the heavens declare the glory of a God, and the firmament showeth His handiwork; and a moment's reflection is sufficient to teach every man of common intelligence, that all these are not the mere productions of *chance*, nor could they be supported by any power less than an Almighty hand."<sup>8</sup> God's active participation in the creation and maintenance of the world is offered here as an explanation for the or-

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8. *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, ed. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1976), 56, emphasis in original.

der found in it. Abductive inferences like these are defeasible because they compete with other hypotheses which may explain better the facts in question. Epistemologists and philosophers of science, among others, investigate the norms according to which we judge one explanatory hypothesis better than another.

I intend this characterization of reason to extend to both the theoretical and the practical domains. Theoretical reason is reasoning about what one ought to believe. Practical reason is reasoning about what one ought to do and, more broadly, about how one ought to live. The two are connected by the fact that in order to decide what to do or how to live we must have *beliefs* about what is worth doing or what is worth pursuing in life. I think that we accept certain beliefs about what is valuable, as we do all other beliefs, for reasons which are sometimes good, sometimes bad. If we find our reasons weak, we may seek stronger ones in order to maintain a belief which we think must be right, or we may revise our belief by adopting a position we consider more justified. Hence, the norms of deductive, inductive, and abductive inference apply to all types of reasoning, including reasoning about what is good and bad, right and wrong.

If inference is the central notion behind reason, then we might expect instances of "reason" in ordinary language to have some connection to it. I have already shown how being "a reason" is related to inference, but we also say things such as "it stands to reason" that such and such is the case, "she reasoned with him" regarding a certain matter, and "reason should rule over passion." These too are connected to inference. The phrase "it stands to reason" seems to mean "there are good reasons for inferring" that such and such is the case. The phrase "she reasoned with him" seems to mean "she tried to get him to make certain inferences in support of a conclusion she wanted him to accept." Moreover, the "reason" of "reason should rule over passion" seems to refer to a psychological faculty with which one makes inferences about how one ought to behave. Other uses of "reason" in ordinary language may be found, but I am confident that these too are tied to inference.

#### REASON AND REVELATION IN MORMONISM TODAY

Those familiar with the public stances taken by university officials concerning BYU's mission know that they often employ pairs of concepts such as soul and mind, faith and intellect, sacred and secular, spiritual and temporal, reason and revelation. Former BYU president Rex E. Lee, for example, made the following series of claims in various speeches to BYU audiences: "Our goal is to blend technical, traditional, academic training with the restored truth into a single whole that develops not just the mind, but the entire eternal soul"; "Here on these 640 acres, faith and

intellect will work together, not just as partners, but as integral, inseparable parts of a single whole"; "The fact that we are not just another university, but a unique one that focuses on the integration of the sacred and the secular, must always support and enhance our seriousness about academic excellence"; "Real conviction concerning absolutes that are so essential to our stability and happiness can come only through additional processes beyond those of reason, logic, and mental exercise. Moroni told us how to do it. [Quotes Moro. 10:4-5.] In short, the final vindication for absolutes in this life necessarily comes through a process that is itself one of those absolutes, revelation."<sup>9</sup> One finds a similar set of concepts in the speeches of former BYU provost Bruce C. Hafen: "[O]ur professional credentials may have earned us passports to Athens, but our citizenship must always remain in Jerusalem"; "[W]e embrace the difficult but promising task of combining genuine religious faith and serious intellectual effort"; "[T]he sacred map of the universe is large enough to encompass the secular map, but the secular map is too small to include the sacred map."<sup>10</sup> Mind, intellect, reason, Athens, and the secular are on one side; soul, faith, revelation, Jerusalem, and the sacred are on the other. The contrast is between the human and the divine, and reason, just as the common view would have it, falls on the human side of the line.

Elder Boyd K. Packer has used similar conceptual divisions in general conference talks. For example, in October 1992 he quoted Doctrine and Covenants 88:118, which reads: "As all have not faith, seek ye diligently and teach one another words of wisdom, yea, seek ye out of the best books words of wisdom; seek learning, even by study and also by faith." He then says that "[t]he words *study* and *faith* each portray a type of education," and later claims that "[i]f there is ever an end to secular learning, surely there is no end to spiritual learning."<sup>11</sup> Elder Packer, therefore, seems to take this verse as supporting a scriptural division between the spiritual and the secular. Does he think this division corresponds to one between reason and revelation? Consider the following excerpt from a 1991 BYU devotional. Here he seems to interpret the con-

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9. "The State of the University: Sound Spiritually, Academically, and Financially," *Addresses Delivered at the 1991 University Conference* (Brigham Young University, 26-27 Aug. 1991), 10; "What We Are and What We Can Become: A President's Perspective," *Addresses Delivered at the 1993 Annual University Conference* (Brigham Young University, 23-26 Aug. 1993), 20; *ibid.*, 14; "Things That Change, and Things That Don't," Devotional Address, Brigham Young University, 14 Jan. 1992, typescript, 6-7.

10. "All Those Books, and the Spirit, Too!" *Addresses Delivered at the 1991 University Conference* (Brigham Young University, 26-27 Aug. 1991), 2; "The Spirit of the Army," *Addresses Delivered at the 1994 University Conference* (Brigham Young University, 22-23 Aug. 1994), 4; "Teach Ye Diligently and My Grace Shall Attend You," *Addresses Delivered at the 1993 University Conference* (Brigham Young University, 23-26 Aug. 1993), 4.

11. "To Be Learned Is Good If . . .," *Ensign* 22 (Nov. 1992): 71-73.

trasts between the spiritual and the temporal, science and religion, and reason and revelation as identical to each other—different names for the same thing:

The ties between universities and churches which founded them have been severed because of the constantly recurring contention between the spiritual and the temporal; the never-ending controversy between a narrow view of science and religion; the ancient conflict between REASON and REVELATION.

There are two opposing convictions in the university environment. On the one hand "SEEING IS BELIEVING"; on the other: "BELIEVING IS SEEING." Both are true! Each in its place. The combining of the two individually or institutionally is the challenge of life. Neither influence will easily surrender to the other. They may function for a time under some sort of a truce, but the subtle discord is ever present.

They mix like oil and water mix—only with constant shaking or stirring. When the stirring stops, they separate again.<sup>12</sup>

Later in the talk Elder Packer describes reason as "the thinking, the figuring things out, the research, the pure joy of discovery and the academic degrees which man bestows to honor that process." Apart from the comment about academic degrees, this account of reason is similar to the characterization of reason I offered above. Notice, however, Elder Packer's placement of reason among things human. Reason and revelation are thought to mix like oil and water because, I suggest, the common view is in play: reason, as a human thing, is different in character from things divine.

Other church apostles also have recently discussed reason and revelation.<sup>13</sup> The most detailed of these discussions is found in Elder Dallin H. Oaks's book, *The Lord's Way*.<sup>14</sup> Elder Oaks characterizes reason and revelation as two different methods of learning corresponding to the methods of study and faith. After quoting D&C 109:7, he writes, "Seeking learning by study, we use the method of reason. Seeking learning by faith, we must rely on revelation. Obedient to heavenly decree, we should seek learning by reason and also by revelation" (16). By character-

12. In "'I Say Unto You, Be One' (D&C 38:27)," *Devotional Address* (Brigham Young University, 12 Feb. 1991), typescript, 10-11, emphasis in original. Shortly before this passage, he suggests that BYU may be in danger of disaffiliation: "Now listen carefully! It is crucial that you understand what I tell you now. There is a danger! Church-sponsored universities are an endangered species—nearly extinct now" (9).

13. See, for example, Neal A. Maxwell, "From the Beginning," *Ensign* 23 (Nov. 1993): 18-20; and James E. Faust, "Enhancing Secular Knowledge Through Spiritual Knowledge and Faith," *Addresses Delivered at the 1994 Annual University Conference* (Brigham Young University, 22-23 Aug. 1994), 26-29.

14. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1991.

izing the commandment of section 109 as one to seek learning by reason and by revelation, Elder Oaks identifies "learning by study" with "learning by reason" and "learning by faith" with "learning by revelation." The identity does not hold, however, because we can and, I think, do accept things on faith *for reasons*. For example, I may have faith that God exists *because* a missionary whom I trust has told me that she knows God exists. My trust defeasibly justifies my faith. Similarly, I may agree to obey one of God's commandments on faith *because*, even though I do not have as full an explanation of the commandment as I would like, I believe that God has my best interests at heart. Instead of being identical to either learning by study or learning by faith, reason would seem to be involved in both.

Continuing, however, Elder Oaks says, "The source of the ancient conflict between (1) reason or intellect and (2) faith or revelation is the professor's rejection of revelation, not the prophet's rejection of reason" (50). He then describes how the prophet uses reason. He claims that reason, in its relation to revelation, has two functions (64-71). First, one should reason out what to ask the Lord, just as Oliver Cowdery was commanded to do in D&C 9. That is, one should not expect the Lord simply to reveal an answer to a question if one has not studied the issue first (D&C 9:8). Second, reason checks possible revelations for authenticity (67). That is, reason can be used to determine whether a revelation is from God or from some other source. Elder Oaks lists three criteria a possible revelation must meet in order to be authentic: "1. True revelation will edify the recipient" (67); "2. The content of a true revelation must be consistent with the position and responsibilities of the person who receives it" (68); and "3. True revelation must be consistent with the principles of the gospel as revealed in the scriptures and the teachings of the prophets" (69). In addition, Elder Oaks says that whatever we learn though reason may be trumped by revelation (71-72).

Reason plays a role in revelation, then, but it is a "before and after" role: reason prepares one for a revelation, and reason checks the revelation afterward for authenticity. Why, we might ask, does Elder Oaks not seem to accept a "during" role for reason, that is, why does he not consider reason a possible mode of revelation? He does mention two passages of scripture (Isa. 1:18, D&C 50:10-11) in which the Lord invites us to reason with him, but these are mentioned only as an aside and have no apparent effect on his account (19). I suggest that the common view of reason is again in play and that it is the explanation for Elder Oaks's conclusion: "In all its forms and functions, revelation is distinct from study and reason" (32).

Others besides BYU officials and church apostles assume the common view. In 1971 Lowell Bennion, a prominent Mormon liberal, argued

that there are three logical possibilities for establishing a "working relationship" between faith and reason: a person can cling to faith and ignore the workings of reason; a person can subordinate faith to reason and allow reason to pick and choose among the religious tenets held by faith; or one can keep one's religious commitments and still remain active in the pursuit of secular knowledge even though this may be the source of tension and unresolved conflict.<sup>15</sup> Bennion rejects the first option, saying, "Religion without thought is deprived of its distinctly human attribute" (111). He also rejects the second option because he thinks that questions of ultimate meaning and value are beyond the grasp of reason and because placing all of one's faith in reason overestimates the ability of human perspective and scientific method to arrive at a comprehensive knowledge of our world. Bennion therefore settles for the third option and chooses to view "religion and secular thought as being complementary to each other as well as conflicting at times" (112). Although Bennion's contrast is between reason and faith and not reason and revelation, it is clear that he, like the others, conceives of reason as something belonging only to humans and their mental activities.

The last contemporary example comes from a devotional address given by current BYU president and LDS general authority Merrill J. Bateman in January 1996.<sup>16</sup> Like Rex Lee, Elder Bateman claims that BYU must teach both "sacred or higher truths relating to the spirit" as well as "secular truth," but then seems to revise this by saying that "all truth is part of the gospel" and that "[t]eachers and students in this community should understand that all truth is spiritual, and thus the so-called secular truths may be discovered by revelation as well as by reason."<sup>17</sup> The claim about truth echoes Brigham Young's assertion that Mormons "believe in all good. If you can find a truth in heaven, earth or hell, it belongs to our doctrine. We believe it; it is ours; we claim it."<sup>18</sup> However, the claim about reason and revelation being different ways of discovering truth seems influenced by the common view of reason. Elder Bateman illustrates the role of revelation in scientific discovery with a story about BYU mathematics professor James W. Cannon. After working on a mathematical problem for many months, Cannon discovered the answer in

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15. "Carrying Water on Both Shoulders," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 6 (Spring 1971): 110-12.

16. "A Zion University," 9 Jan. 1996, published on the World Wide Web at <http://advance.byu.edu/devo.html>.

17. See paragraphs 12-14. He then switches back, however, to a distinction between secular truth and sacred truth: "Secular truth is revealed by the Spirit as well as sacred truth" (para. 16). If all truth is spiritual, what distinguishes secular from sacred truth? Elder Bateman offers no explanation.

18. *Discourses of Brigham Young*, ed. John A. Widtsoe (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1954), 2.

what Elder Bateman describes as a "flash of light" after "studying, puzzling, and dreaming" about the problem (para. 16). If the flash is the revelation, the studying and puzzling must be the reasoning. If so, reasoning is again portrayed as the human part of discovery in contrast to the divine part.

#### MEDIEVAL PRECEDENTS FOR THE COMMON VIEW

Why did the common view become so prevalent in Mormonism? The explanation is no doubt complex. It may be that the church as a large religious institution needs to maintain an orthodoxy in order to maintain an identity, and characterizing revelation as a trump on reason serves to encourage uniformity of belief. I think it is clear that church leaders today value orthodoxy greatly, and Elder Bateman's remark that the BYU faculty must have "no alibi for failure to achieve a first-class rank within the parameters set by the Board of Trustees" (para. 13) shows how revelation, as interpreted by apostles on the board, can be used to discourage heterodoxy. If orthodoxy is the end, however, why is a distinction between reason and revelation the means? I suggest that Mormons now conceive of reason's relation to revelation in a way influenced by historical Christianity—the tradition to which elders Packer and Oaks seem to be referring when they call the conflict between reason and revelation "ancient." I offer as support for this suggestion an account of the common view's development in the thought of three prominent medieval theologians: Tertullian, St. Augustine, and St. Thomas Aquinas.

In *Prescriptions against the Heretics* (ca. A.D. 200), Tertullian writes his fellow Christians in Carthage to attack the heretics Marcion, a Stoic, and Valentius, a Platonist, and anyone else who diverged from apostolic Christianity.<sup>19</sup> Since these men denied the resurrection of the flesh, introduced new doctrines about God's nature to make the Christian God fit their philosophies, and either excised or included material from the scriptures according to their own judgment, we can see why Tertullian was upset.<sup>20</sup> On the other hand, we are likely to consider Tertullian's attack on the heretics an over-reaction. Consider this famous passage:

What has Jerusalem to do with Athens, the Church with the Academy, the

19. *Prescriptions against the Heretics*, in *Early Latin Theology*, ed. S. L. Greenslade (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1956). See T. D. Barnes, *Tertullian* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 121, on the date of composition.

20. *Prescriptions*, 54-55, 59. Greenslade explains, "Marcion rejected the Old Testament, and his New Testament Canon consisted of Luke's Gospel and ten Pauline Epistles (not the Pastorals or Hebrews). From these many passages connecting Christ with the Old Testament or with flesh, and many passages about the Law, had to be excised" (59n94).

Christian with the heretic? Our principles come from the Porch of Solomon,<sup>21</sup> who had himself taught that the Lord is to be sought in simplicity of heart. I have no use for a Stoic or a Platonic or a dialectic Christianity.<sup>22</sup> After Jesus Christ we have no need of speculation, after the Gospel no need of research. When we come to believe, we have no desire to believe anything else; for we begin by believing that there is nothing else which we have to believe (36).

Tertullian claims that nothing else need be learned after one learns the gospel, thereby proposing the modern equivalent of abolishing the university. In other words, the revelation received is all the revelation there is (47). To Tertullian, if one continues searching for knowledge after one has the gospel, one's belief in the gospel must not be sure. Any form of research—including scriptural commentary—is a sign of apostasy.<sup>23</sup> Revelation leaves no room for reason.

St. Augustine is not as extreme. In *Letter 120* (ca. A.D. 410), he responds to the Tertullian-like view of Consentius that "the truth is to be grasped by faith more than by reason."<sup>24</sup> Augustine tells Consentius:

[Y]ou should change your statement of principle, not to lessen the value of faith, but so that you may see by the light of reason what you now hold by faith.

God forbid that He should hate in us that faculty by which He made us superior to all other living beings. Therefore, we must refuse so to believe as not to receive or seek a reason for our belief, since we could not believe at all if we did not have rational souls (301-302).

Augustine, then, thinks that a rational soul is necessary for both faith and reason. He continues by arguing that both faith and reason are necessary for understanding the gospel. The sequence of the two is important: we must first believe the gospel, he writes, and then seek reasons for our belief. We want to *understand* the gospel, but this is possible only if we have found reasons for those propositions accepted first on faith. Hence, Au-

21. As opposed to the porch (*stoa*) of Zeno of Citium, the founder of Stoicism.

22. Dialecticians, according to Tertullian, taught "the art which destroys as much as it builds, which changes its opinions like a coat, forces its conjectures, is stubborn in argument, works hard at being contentious and is a burden even to itself" (35). To gain a sense of the intellectual diversity present in the Greco-Roman world prior to and during Christianity's first few centuries, consult the entries on Hellenistic philosophy, Stoicism, Epicureanism, Skeptics, Megarics, Cynics, Cyrenaics, Peripatetic School, New Academy, Middle Platonism, Neoplatonism, Montanism, and related figures in the new (and inexpensive) *Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* (Cambridge University Press, 1995).

23. *Prescriptions*, 42: "Besides, arguments about Scripture achieve nothing but a stomach-ache or a headache."

24. *Saint Augustine: Letters*, vol. 2, trans. Sister Wilfrid Parsons (New York: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1953), 301.

gustine tells Consentius "these things to rouse [Consentius'] faith to a love of understanding to which true reason leads the mind and for which faith prepares it" (304). Searching for justifying reasons for the gospel without first believing the gospel is a vain exercise, for the person who does this will find the reasons absurd and will understand them only after he accepts on faith that the gospel is true (302, 306). However, if given the choice between believing without understanding and not believing at all, Augustine prefers the former (306). Still, believing *with* understanding is best: "[H]e who now understands by a true reasoning what he only believed a while ago is emphatically to be preferred to the one who wishes to understand now what he believes, but, if he does not also have a desire for the things which are to be understood, he considers them an object of belief only" (306-307). In sum, reason supplements faith by turning belief into an understanding more highly prized than mere belief.

Augustine's conception of reason, therefore, seems limited to making clear the grounds for one's belief in gospel propositions. The conception held by St. Thomas Aquinas (A.D. 1225-74), on the other hand, makes reason one of two avenues to understanding. The other is revelation. Aquinas argues in his *Summa Contra Gentiles* that there are some truths about God which can be understood by human reason, and that there are some truths which cannot be known by human beings without revelation. Those which human reason can discover include the truths "that God exists, that He is one, and the like."<sup>25</sup> But because God cannot be completely comprehended by human reason, revelation is necessary in order to inform us of those characteristics of God beyond reason's comprehension. This is not the only role for revelation, however. Even though things about God can be understood through reason alone, Aquinas says that, without revelation, few would know even these. Some people do not have the "physical disposition" for the work involved in such inquiries, some do not have the time, and some are too lazy (66-67). However, instead of allowing only a few to know the properties of God discoverable by reason, God saw fit, according to Aquinas, to reveal even these properties so that the knowledge of God would be more widespread, so that it would not take as long to discover the truth as it would by reason alone, and so that the conclusions reached by reason could be free of the falsity which results from the weakness of our minds (66-68).

Aquinas thinks that any truth for which we can find a logical demonstration is *known* by the person who knows the demonstration. This includes those truths about God for which human reason can find demonstrations. On the other hand, those truths about God for which

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25. See St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles (On the Truth of the Catholic Faith)*, trans. Anton C. Pegis (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1955), 63.

reason cannot find demonstrations, those truths of which we are aware only because God has revealed them to us, are held by *faith*. Aquinas argues that there are two ways in which the mind may assent to a proposition. First, the mind may assent to a proposition immediately known—one seen as intuitively true—or it may assent to a proposition demonstrated from other propositions immediately known. Second, the mind may assent to a proposition through “a voluntary choice that influences the mind in favour of one alternative rather than the other,” rather than by assenting to propositions which “cause the mind or the senses to know them.”<sup>26</sup> Religious faith—a type of the second kind of assent—is not the same as knowledge. Knowing and having faith are two different and mutually exclusive propositional attitudes for Aquinas. As Etienne Gilson put it, “I know by reason that something is true because *I see* that it is true; but I believe that [or have faith that] something is true because *God has said it*.”<sup>27</sup> Revelation from God, then, justifies assent to propositions which would not otherwise command it.<sup>28</sup>

The role of reason in seeking understanding, therefore, differs in each of these figures. Tertullian thought that those who rely on reason are flirting with apostasy. Augustine thought that reason is necessary for proper understanding of the gospel. Aquinas thought that reason suffices for understanding when demonstrations are available, but is insufficient for understanding those propositions beyond the comprehension of human reason. Augustine and Aquinas, moreover, thought that God too possesses reason, but of a non-inferential kind. It is non-inferential because making an inference involves undergoing a change, and, according to Augustine and Aquinas, God does not change. That said, it is clear that the use of the term “reason” in their central discussions of reason’s relation to faith or revelation refers only the inferential sort of reason possessed by humans. It is this use of the term which I believe has directly or indirectly influenced the conception of reason found in Mormonism today.

#### REASON IN MORMON SCRIPTURE

Mormon scripture characterizes both humans and God as reasoning beings. It also shows God reasoning with humans and humans reasoning

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26. See St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-IIae, qu. 1, a. 4, trans. T. C. O’Brien (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), 19-21. I use “proposition” instead of Aquinas’ “object” for the sake of consistency.

27. *Reason and Revelation in the Middle Ages* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1938), 72, emphasis in original.

28. See *Summa Theologiae*, I, qu. 46, a. 2: “Potest autem voluntas divina homini manifestare per revelationem, cui fides innititur.”

with God. An exhaustive study of reason in the scriptures would examine not only how the term "reason" is used in them, but give careful attention to the places where God and humans are shown reasoning either with each other or with other beings. I offer here a survey of terminological usage, and discuss but one example of reasoning in which the term "reason" is not itself mentioned. I hope, however, that this will be sufficient to show that the common view is incompatible with scripture and that the alternative view makes more sense of what we find there.

"Reason" appears hundreds of times in the King James Version of the Bible, the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price.<sup>29</sup> Most of the time it indicates a causal relation. An example is Genesis 47:13: "[T]he famine was very sore, so that the land of Egypt and all the land of Canaan fainted by reason of the famine." Another is 2 Nephi 9:6: "[T]he resurrection must needs come unto man by reason of the fall; and the fall came by reason of transgression." This meaning of "reason," however, is not the one contrasted with revelation according to the common view, so I offer no further comment on it.

"Reason" is also used in scripture (1) to name the process of inferring one thing from another or the activity of trying to get another person to make an inference,<sup>30</sup> (2) to name the proposition used as inferential support for another proposition,<sup>31</sup> and (3) to name the psychological faculty with which one makes inferences (see Dan. 4:36). Altogether, "reason" in this inferential sense is used 55 times in Mormon scripture: 11 times in the Old Testament, 26 times in the New Testament, twice in the Book of Mormon, 15 times in the Doctrine and Covenants, and once in the Pearl of Great Price.

The scriptures do not have a position on whether reason *qua* reason is good or bad; the value of reason depends upon the purpose of the reasoning and upon those included in or excluded from the reasoning process. For example, Isaiah 1:18 casts reason in a positive light: "Come now, let us reason together, saith the Lord: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool." Here the Lord invites us to reason with him for the apparent purpose of convincing us of the power he has to make us pure if we repent. The Hebrew *yākach*, here translated as "reason," has forensic over-

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29. I analyze the King James translation instead of the texts in the original languages because, in my opinion, the language it contains deeply influenced the vocabulary of Joseph Smith and, hence, the language of other Mormon scripture.

30. See 1 Sam. 12:7; Job 9:14; 13:3, 6; 15:3; Isa. 1:18; Matt. 16:7, 8; 21:25; Mark 2:6, 8; 8:16, 17; 11:31; 12:28; Luke 5:21-22; 9:46; 20:5; 20:14; 24:15; Acts 17:2; 18:4; 18:19; 24:25; 28:29; Hel. 16:17; D&C 45:10, 15; 49:4; 50:10-12; 61:13; 66:7; 68:1; 133:57; JS-H 1:9.

31. See Job 32:11; Prov. 26:16; Eccl. 7:25; Isa. 41:21; Acts 6:2; 18:14; 25:27; 2 Thess. 3:2; 1 Pet. 3:15; Hel. 16:18; D&C 71:8. In this group I have included those instances of *reason* in which it means "reasonable."

tones and can mean to judge, to rebuke, or to correct.<sup>32</sup> Each of these meanings sounds odd in this context since it is unlikely that the Lord is inviting us “to rebuke together.” It makes more sense to consider the Lord as inviting us to debate (as in court) his indictment against his covenant people.<sup>33</sup> In the verses that follow, the Lord makes clear the benefits of complying with his covenant and the costs of violating it. That is, he not only makes a claim, he offers reasons in its support.<sup>34</sup>

Reason is cast in a less favorable light in Luke 5:22. Here the scribes and Pharisees are caught wondering about Jesus’ professed ability to forgive sins. Jesus asks them, “What reason ye in your hearts?” The Greek word here, *dialogizesthai*, means to consider thoroughly, either by reflection or by discussion. In itself, this sort of reflection or discussion is harmless. But the impression we get from this verse, which is typical of the use of “reason” in the synoptic Gospels, is that the reasoning is going on behind Jesus’ back. In other words, it is a reasoning process which excludes Jesus as a participant. Elsewhere in the New Testament, however, “reason” is again used in a positive context such as when Paul in Corinth “reasoned in the synagogue every sabbath, and persuaded the Jews and the Greeks” (Acts 18:4).

The only appearances of “reason” in the Book of Mormon are in Helaman 16. Shortly before the birth of Christ, many of the Nephites and Lamanites refused to believe that prophecies were being fulfilled in spite of evidence to the contrary. We are told that they “began to depend upon their own strength and upon their own wisdom” (v. 15) and that they “began to reason and to contend among themselves, saying that it is not reasonable that such a being as a Christ shall come” (vv. 17-18). Though this verse may appear to present reason in a bad light, the real problem is not that the people were reasoning, but that they did not give place to the words of the prophets in their reasoning and consequently failed to interpret properly the evidence within their view.

That this is in fact the problem in Helaman 16 is evidenced by the use of “reason” in the Doctrine and Covenants where, without exception, reason is cast in a favorable light. It first appears in section 45, a revelation given through Joseph Smith on 31 March 1831, in which the Lord says that he has sent his “everlasting covenant into the world” (v. 9), and that “with him that cometh [to the covenant] I will reason as with men in days of old, and I will show unto you my strong reasoning” (v. 10). A few

32. See R. Laird Harris et al., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, Vol. 1 (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 376-77.

33. *Ibid.*, 377.

34. Although the reason offered against noncompliance—being destroyed by the sword—makes this an *argumentum ad baculum*. See “informal fallacy” in the *Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*.

verses later the Lord again says, “[H]earken, and I will reason with you, and I will speak unto you and prophesy, as unto men in days of old” (v. 15). A similar phrase is used in section 61, a revelation given on 12 August 1831, in which the Lord says, “I, the Lord, will reason with you as with men in days of old” (v. 13). These verses, as well as the Lord’s instruction to Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon in D&C 71:8 to “let [their enemies] bring forth their strong reasons against the Lord,” have ostensibly been influenced by two verses in Isaiah. One is Isaiah 1:18 which we have just seen: “Come now, and let us reason together.” The other is Isaiah 41:21: “Produce your cause, saith the Lord; bring forth your strong reasons, saith the King of Jacob.” That this intertextual influence took place is understandable if we consider that the Lord says his commandments “were given unto [his] servants in their weakness, after the manner of their language, that they might come to an understanding” (v. 24). It is reasonable to assume that Joseph Smith’s language was heavily influenced by the English of the King James Version, so we can expect that by speaking “after the manner of [Joseph’s] language” the Lord would use these memorable phrases from Isaiah in his revelations to Joseph.

The other primary biblical influence on the use of “reason” in the Doctrine and Covenants seems to be the descriptions of Paul’s activities in Acts, especially chapters 17 and 18. In these chapters we learn that Paul encountered many audiences, and that he “reasoned with them out of the scriptures” (17:2), that he “reasoned in the synagogue every sabbath” (18:4), that he “reasoned with the Jews” (18:19), and, in chapter 24, that “he reasoned of righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come” (v. 25). In the Doctrine and Covenants, we find the Lord commanding several men to reason similarly. In section 49 Leman Copley is commanded to “reason with [the Shakers] . . . according to that which shall be taught him by . . . my servants” (v. 4). In section 66 William E. McLellin is commanded to “go unto the eastern lands, bear testimony in every place, unto every people and in their synagogues, reasoning with the people” (v. 7). In section 68 the Lord says, “My servant, Orson Hyde, was called by his ordination to proclaim the everlasting gospel, by the Spirit of the living God, from people to people, and from land to land, in the congregations of the wicked, in their synagogues, reasoning with and expounding all scriptures unto them” (v. 1). Finally, in section 133 the Lord says that in order that “men might be made partakers of the glories which were to be revealed, the Lord sent forth the fulness of his gospel, his everlasting covenant, reasoning in plainness and simplicity” (v. 57). It is interesting to note that each of the sections which use this Acts-like language are revelations received in 1831: the first in March and the rest in late October or in November.

The passage most loaded with “reason” in the LDS canon is found in

D&C 50—another 1831 revelation. Before instructing the elders of the church to teach the gospel only by the Spirit (v. 14), the Lord says,

And now come, saith the Lord, by the Spirit, unto the elders of his church, and let us reason together, that ye may understand; let us reason even as a man reasoneth one with another face to face. Now, when a man reasoneth he is understood of man, because he reasoneth as a man; even so will I, the Lord, reason with you that you may understand (vv. 10-12).

Here it is implicit that God is a reasoning being and that reason belongs both in human-human relations and in divine-human relations. Of course God's understanding exceeds ours, but that does not prevent him from reasoning with us in terms we understand. If this alternative view of reason is right, it is clear that the common view must be rejected.

Almost thirteen years later at the funeral of King Follett, the prophet Joseph told the Saints, "We suppose that God was God from eternity. I will refute that Idea, or I will do away or take away the veil so you may see. It is the first principle to know that we may converse with him and that he once was a man like us, and the Father was once on an earth like us."<sup>35</sup> We are not, then, different *in kind* from God, but only *in degree*. "That," declared Joseph, "is the great secret."<sup>36</sup> The import of this great secret, this first principle, is absent from the common view. If the alternative view were accepted today, we would not speak of reason and revelation as if they were two sides of a dichotomy, one signifying the merely human ability to figure things out, the other a communication of the divine. As the passages of scripture and the teachings of Joseph show, God is a reasoning being who sometimes uses reason as a mode of revelation. The alternative view implied by the scriptures, therefore, dissolves the supposed tension between reason and revelation by leaving no conceptual space in which they might conflict. Human reason may conflict with divine reason, but this is a conflict of *reason*, not a conflict between reason and revelation. By recognizing conflicts between the human and the divine as those of reason, and by having faith in the rationality of the parties, we might hope that these conflicts will resolve themselves if the most justified view becomes manifest.

#### AN EXAMPLE

If reason is a part of the divine-human relationship, we might expect to find scriptural examples not only of God reasoning with humans, as

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35. Wilford Woodruff Journal, in *The Words of Joseph Smith*, ed. Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook (Orem, UT: Grandin Book Co., 1991), 344.

36. William Clayton Report, in *ibid.*, 357.

we do in Isaiah, but of humans reasoning with God. Abraham's argument with Jehovah over the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah is such an example (Gen. 18:16-33). A cry had reached Jehovah from the two cities. What was the crime evoking the cry? Recent tradition claims homosexuality. Ancient tradition, however, claims inhospitality.<sup>37</sup> Whichever, Jehovah had apparently formed an intention to destroy the cities even before he dispatched two angels to investigate—an intention he temporarily considered hiding from Abraham (Gen. 18:17). When Abraham learned of the plan, he questioned Jehovah about its justice. As the epigraph to this essay shows, Abraham engages Jehovah in moral argument. He reasons that the judge of the earth should do what is right, and killing the good along with the bad is not right. The text does not tell us whether Jehovah anticipated Abraham's argument, but it does show Abraham bargaining Jehovah down on the number of good people that must be found in Sodom in order to keep the Lord from destroying it. First it is fifty, then forty-five, then forty, then thirty, then twenty, then finally ten. Lot, Abraham's nephew, was a resident alien of Sodom at the time. Perhaps Abraham was motivated by concern for Lot and his family. When King Chedorlaomer and his allies pillaged Sodom and Gomorrah and took Lot and his family captive, Abraham mustered his own forces to rescue Lot and return the captives and their goods to their homes (Gen. 14). It is reasonable to assume that, under this new threat to Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham again felt compelled to defend Lot and other residents. Or his concern may have been more impartial. He might have thought that, Lot aside, innocent people would likely be killed in a blanket destruction. However, whether his concern was partial or impartial, and whether Jehovah knew the outcome in advance, it remains significant that Abraham reasoned with Jehovah in defense of those who might not deserve the punishment due the rest. Thus, in the divine-human relationship, reason may not only function as a mode of revealing God's will, it may also serve to influence divine action in the interest of the right.

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37. See John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 92-99, for an argument that Sodom's crime was uniformly interpreted by other Old Testament writers as inhospitality—a sin the culture evidently considered more grave than fornication.