

A REFLECTION ON JOSEPH SMITH'S RESTORATIONIST VISION OF TRUTH

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“Truth, the sum of existence . . .”
—John Jaques, 1851¹

The way of viewing truth in the Church differs from the common philosophical concept of truth as something that corresponds to the historical or present facts of a given situation. The Church's version of truth is that it is something possessed by God, it never varies, is eternally fixed, and is made known to humankind through revelation.² This absolute view of truth is problematic because it is open to being used by those in positions of power and influence to manipulate and oppress others. Everyone is familiar with the colloquialism “history is written by the victors.”³ This statement conveys the way that the concept of truth has been manipulated and used to oppress throughout history. The damage and trauma is littered across generations, from the ruthless persecution of so-called heretics after the adoption of Christianity as the religion of Roman empire to the Spanish Inquisition, from the Crusades to the witch hunts, from the massive slaughter, enslavement,

1. From “Truth,” a poem included in the first edition of the Pearl of Great Price. It was later set to music by Ellen Knowles Melling, titled “Oh Say, What is Truth?” and included in the LDS hymnal as no. 272.

2. *Doctrines of the Gospel Student Manual*, Religion 430 and 431 (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2010), chap. 1, available at <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/doctrines-of-the-gospel-student-manual/1-divine-truth?lang=eng>.

3. This statement is generally attributed to Winston Churchill, although this claim is unsubstantiated.

exploitation, and oppression of Indigenous peoples throughout the world sanctioned by Christian colonizers to the use of theological and scriptural “truth” to oppress and marginalize women and other vulnerable groups throughout history and into the present day.

In some cases, the concept of absolute truth is used to explicitly oppress and exploit in the name of religion. But more often, this view of truth leads to an inadvertent discounting or marginalizing of alternative views and groups. Due to the specific gender, racial, and cultural makeup of Church leadership, some groups or issues may not be addressed or considered. At an institutional level, religious organizations, including our own, may dictate acceptable positions, doctrinal beliefs, and practices and levy penalties for nonconformity. Those with different experiences who criticize or openly challenge official teaching or narrative can be subject to informal ostracization or formal ecclesiastical discipline. Thus, tight control is maintained over the interpretation and verification of truth by leaders, and the degree to which personal experience and opinion may be held to correspond to the truth is circumscribed. Because an absolute notion of truth is vulnerable to misuse and abuse, what is needed is a way to incorporate individual, varied, and diverse human experience into our understanding and conceptual view of truth.

Truth Revealed Anew

On May 6, 1833, following the summer adjournment of the School of the Prophets in Kirtland, Ohio, Joseph Smith received a revelation that was to become section 93 of the Doctrine and Covenants. The revelation taught that all humankind existed in the beginning with God and Christ as intelligences—autonomous agents organized by God: “Man was also in the beginning with God. Intelligence, or the light of truth, was not created or made, neither indeed can be.”⁴ In the very next verse comes a startling pronouncement which forms the basis of my exploration: “All truth is independent in that sphere in which God has

4. Doctrine and Covenants 93:29.

placed it, to act for itself, as all intelligence also; otherwise there is no existence.”⁵

There are three important aspects of the verse to consider: 1) truth is independent, 2) truth is an autonomous agent able to act for itself, 3) existence itself depends on this independence and autonomous agency.

Truth as an Independent Agent

For truth to be independent suggests that it exists outside of God's control. It has not been created, neither can it be, according to verse 29. God is able to place it in a specific sphere, but, once placed, it functions as an autonomous agent that acts outside of God's control. Aside from this verse, there is no further mention of the independence of truth anywhere in the scriptures. Teaching and interpretation of this concept by Church leaders often mentions this verse as indicative of the fact that there is absolute and relative truth.⁶ Absolute truths cannot be changed, whereas relative truth refers to facts that someone discovers that are not veridical statements of reality but approximations that change with further inquiry, experience, and revelation.⁷

Absolute truths are here referred to as the unchanging reality of God's relation to the world—even if people do not believe, they are still true. But it is unclear how this type of “truth” stands independent of a creator of the world to which it applies and by which it is circumscribed. Furthermore, according to Alma, God is also subject to eternal laws that must be obeyed or he will “cease to be God.”⁸ This presents

5. Doctrine and Covenants 93:30.

6. Spencer W. Kimball, “Absolute Truth” (devotional address given at Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, Sept. 6, 1977, available at <https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/spencer-w-kimball/absolute-truth/>).

7. D. Todd Christofferson, “Truth Endures” (address to CES religious educators, Salt Lake Tabernacle, Salt Lake City, Utah, Jan. 26, 2018, available at <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/broadcasts/article/evening-with-a-general-authority/2018/01/truth-endures?lang=eng>).

8. Alma 42:13, 22.

a conundrum in that it is unclear how laws that stand outside of God and to which he is subject could be “placed” anywhere by him, as is clearly stated in verse 30. For these and other reasons, truth here being independent does not seem to refer to an absolute truth of God or the universe that remains unchanging and unchangeable for eternity.

The fact that truth is referred to here as an autonomous agent that can act for itself has more scriptural and doctrinal parallels within our theology.⁹ The doctrine of agency is critical to our understanding of the purpose and meaning of the existence of humanity. The interpretation that truth is placed by God in a sphere to act for itself is consistent with foundational Mormon teachings about agency and supports interpreting verse 30 as indicating that truth is crucially related to embodied mortal experience.

Truth as the Action of Embodied Humanity in History

If we consider embodied human beings as a critical aspect of truth, our understanding of truth necessarily has to be informed and conditioned by the critical and varied aspects of human existence. The embodied nature of our existence means that each individual will live out their lives in different places, countries, cities, and are subject to different life experiences, opportunities, and challenges as a function of their particular state, including the impacts of gender, race, and ethnicity, along with cultural, economic, political, and other factors. If embodied human existence constitutes truth, then truth must encompass the range of experiences, perspectives, choices, consequences, and life trajectories of all humanity. Truth was placed in the world as embodied humanity in all its infinite diversity and continues to be truth as we grow and act as agents throughout our lives.

To clarify, truth can be defined as *the action of embodied humanity in history*. As such, truth in the world is ever evolving and becoming. Verse 24 says that truth is “knowledge” of things as they are, and were,

9. 2 Nephi 2:13–26; 2 Nephi 10:23; Alma 12:31; Helaman 14:30.

and are to come. I take this to mean that knowledge of these things comes through experience, either personally or through the works and words of others, or through divine gift of understanding the realities of human experience throughout history. In experiencing, we come to know the truth of human existence. Truth is, in actuality, things as they have been, are, and will be.¹⁰ For individuals, then, truth constitutes knowledge of human action in history. From an omniscient perspective, truth is the actual, ongoing action of humanity in history.

Jesus as the Truth

Because truth cannot be separated from individual human experience, only one who fully experienced what all of humanity experienced could claim to understand and comprehend all truth. In section 88, Joseph revealed how Christ's atonement and condescension into mortality had granted him such comprehension: "He that ascended up on high, as also he descended below all things, in that he comprehended all things, that he might be in all and through all things, the light of truth."¹¹ Now we begin to understand what Jesus means when he refers to himself as "the truth." His life in mortality, surrounded by the suffering of the poor, oppressed, and marginalized, already had allowed him to "bear witness unto the truth."¹² Furthermore, one interpretation of this view

10. This notion of truth parallels the thought of Hegel, who asserted that to truly know something was to know its past, present, and future state. All present "truth" is but a snapshot of the "absolute" or "totality" of truth that is becoming. See Georg Hegel, *The Science of Logic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015; first published in German in 1812). Similarly, Harold Joachim's "coherence" theory of truth suggests that something is true to the extent that it coheres with the character of a more significant "whole." For Joachim, there is only one "truth," and individual judgments or beliefs are only true "to a degree." See Harold Joachim, *The Nature of Truth* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1977; first published in 1906).

11. Doctrine and Covenants 88:6.

12. John 18:37.

is that Jesus' solidarity with humanity through his incarnation and atonement enabled him to experience all that embodied humanity had, would, and will experience. When Jesus personally experienced in mortality the sum total of human experience, he quite literally became the totality of truth.

Another interpretation that is consistent with the view of truth proposed here is that in calling himself the truth, Jesus was explicitly referring to his mortal embodiment. According to this view, Jesus was truth in the same way that embodied humanity is truth. By referring to himself as truth, Jesus affirmed this central characteristic of the truth of humanity. Although this idea may seem unfamiliar to many members of the Church, it has a long historical and scholarly tradition. At issue is the meaning of the phrase "son of man," which appears numerous times in the Bible. The translation of the phrase from Hebrew and Aramaic indicates that it was a colloquial way of referring to a generic human being, or humanity generally, but with a specific contrast to deity in its emphasis on the mortal condition.¹³

Why would Jesus refer to himself in this way? Why not refer to his own divinity, or use the other names that have become common for him: Savior, Redeemer, Lord, Messiah? In fact, at every opportunity to embrace these titles, Jesus rejected them, preferring this diminutive generic term for humanity. The revelation by Joseph Smith that Jesus grew from "grace to grace" and "received not of the fullness at first"¹⁴ suggests that he may have been unaware of his purpose and mission for a time. One might assume that once awareness struck, he would begin referring to his divinity, but this does not happen. There seems to be something very important to Jesus about his mortal embodiment and humanity in general. The view of truth taken here suggests that it was

13. Restoration scripture has been interpreted as indicating that the name is another title for the Savior. See Doctrine and Covenants 45:39; 49:6, 22; 58:65; Moses 6:57.

14. Doctrine and Covenants 93:13.

Jesus' humanity that made him the truth, not his divinity. His referral to himself as "son of man" seems to indicate that he recognized the truth of his embodied mortal action as a part of the ongoing truth of humanity acting in history.

God's Glory as Truth

We understand the purpose of this life as being to demonstrate that we can keep God's commandments, make and keep sacred covenants by receiving saving ordinances, and become progressively sanctified through the atonement of Christ. A succinct statement of this is given in the book of Moses: "For behold, this is my work and my glory, to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man."¹⁵ Here we find ourselves at loggerheads regarding what to make of a scriptural term that is used in multiple different ways. Specifically, what exactly is referred to here by God's "glory"? At various times in the scriptures, "glory" refers to worldly fame and accolades,¹⁶ heavenly blessing and favor,¹⁷ exultation,¹⁸ aesthetic beauty,¹⁹ brightness,²⁰ fullness of life in the world to come,²¹ and an enabling power,²² among other things. Later in the revelation in section 93, Joseph gives as succinct a definition of God's glory as we get

15. Moses 1:39.

16. Proverbs 25:27; Matthew 4:8; 6:2; John 7:18; 1 Thessalonians 2:6; 1 Peter 1:24; Doctrine and Covenants 10:19; 76:61.

17. 1 Samuel 4:21; Psalm 8:5; 62:7; 84:11; Proverbs 4:9.

18. Psalm 149:5; Jeremiah 9:24; 1 Corinthians 3:21; James 3:14; 1 Peter 1:8; 2 Nephi 33:6; Alma 26:16.

19. 1 Corinthians 11:15.

20. 1 Corinthians 15:41; 2 Corinthians 3:7; Doctrine and Covenants 76:70.

21. Proverbs 4:9; 2 Corinthians 4:17; Colossians 3:4; 1 Timothy 3:16; 1 Peter 5:1, 4, 10; 2 Peter 1:17; Alma 14:11; 36:28; Doctrine and Covenants 6:30; 29:12; 58:3; 66:2; 75:5; 76:6; 101:65; 104:7; 124:17; 130:2; 132:19; 133:32; 136:31; Moses 6:59; 7:3; Abraham 3:26.

22. Moses 1:2, 11, 14.

in scripture, yet when considered with the view of truth explored above, it provides a key to understanding God in relation to humanity and why human existence and experience as truth is crucial to God: “The glory of God is intelligence, or, in other words, light and truth.”²³ Up until now in the revelation, Joseph has played loosely with these three terms: intelligence, light, and truth. Here he clarifies for us that intelligence, light, and truth are synonymous. Not only that, they *are* the glory of God. When considered in conjunction with the interpretation of truth explored above, we can interpret this verse to mean that *the glory of God is the perpetual and ongoing truth being lived out in and through embodied humanity*.

This definition of glory helps us make sense of Moses 1:39 in context. The way we usually read this verse is that God’s work and glory, everything that he does and the crowning achievement of his being, is to bring to pass our immortality and eternal life. But this verse comes at the end of Moses’ vision of the creation and the natural and human history of the world.²⁴ God has here shown Moses all of the earth’s existence and inhabitants, the whole of the natural history of the earth. He has also intimated that there are numberless other worlds and inhabitants that he has created. It is at the end of this spectacular vision that verse 39 comes. God seems to be saying that the driving force in all of creation, including humankind, is to progress toward a state of godliness. Everything that has happened, everything that is happening, and everything that will happen, is moving toward that final end. God’s glory is creation and humanity in action in history. Because this theology considers all of our experience in mortality as helping us to become like God—indeed, gods in our own right—we can therefore view God as the potentiality of humanity and creation. As such, God’s glory is necessarily incomplete and ongoing and will not be realized fully until all humanity and creation lives out the totality of its existence. As long

23. Doctrine and Covenants 93:36.

24. Moses 1:27–28.

as there is an ongoing creation that acts with agency, God's truth and glory will continue to deepen and expand.

An Expanded Restorationist View of Truth

The view of truth as the action of embodied humanity in history cannot accommodate an interpretation of truth that includes anything less than the totality of human existence and experience. According to the current interpretation, God cannot create truth because truth is independent of God. He organizes it in creation, and it acts for itself. It is therefore not possible for any organization or religious tradition to hold either more or less truth than any other, any more than it is possible for God to create truth. This means that God also does not dictate what is true and what is not because truth is a function of embodied human experience. Intelligence, cloaked in mortal humanity, acts with agency, and this is truth. It is not something that can be revealed, verified, or witnessed to, at least not in the sense we traditionally think of. It is simply the ongoing action of humanity in history.

Rather than being a form of relativism or pointing to the belief that all truth claims are equally valid and therefore we can believe and act however we will, this position claims that truth, as understood by individuals, is incomplete because it forms only a part of the total truth as comprised by human existence. Therefore, it makes no sense to compare one "truth" to another because the sum total of all truths being lived out individually and in relation is the full truth. Thus, this view subsumes relativism within a totality of truth that is ongoing, continuously changing, and being realized in the lived experience of humanity.

Our faith tradition claims to accept all truth wherever it may be found, yet we often view and portray ourselves as holding a strict monopoly on truth. The interpretation explored here suggests that such claims are incompatible with the fundamental nature of truth as an independent agent. Thus, for our tradition to encompass all truth, we would need to recognize, accept, and claim all human experience as the ongoing truth of God. The challenge of our missionary and other efforts

would not be to determine and decide how most successfully to convert others to our faith but instead how to understand and experience our lives within our covenant community in light of, and in relation to, the ongoing truth around us in our communities, cities, nations, and the world.

Within our congregations and pews, we would feel less threatened and more empowered by the diversity of experience and perspective of our members. Historically oppressed groups, such as women, racial groups, LGBTQ+ individuals, and other minorities, would be given respected places in our conversations and efforts. We would recognize that prevailing views, understandings, and treatment of some groups and individuals have been conditioned by a long history of the normalization of their marginalization and oppression in society. Failure to acknowledge this, coupled with a position on truth that denies the reality of the truth of all unique existence and experience, has amplified marginalization in our faith tradition and theology. Recognizing all lived experience for the truth it is would help us to embark on the long-needed and painful journey of justice and reconciliation. Such reconciliation would allow our faith tradition to more fully reflect and embody the full majesty and beauty of the glory of God manifest in the ongoing truth of the lived experience of humanity. I believe that the seeds of a more universal, expansive, and inclusive vision of truth were revealed, however fleetingly and opaquely, to Joseph Smith in this brief but magnificent verse. Perhaps reflections like this one can contribute to the recovery and further imagination, development, and articulation of this unique and powerful restorationist concept of truth.

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