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# THE ROLE OF EVIDENCE IN RELIGIOUS DISCUSSION

*Questions often arise about the meaning of “proof.” What counts as evidence? What role does reason play in building or destroying faith? Arguments between Mormons and detractors often become overheated because parties have not thought enough about what it means to prove something, or what would count as evidence for or against the Book of Mormon, the resurrection, or the restoration of the priesthood.*

WITHOUT diminishing the essential power of the Holy Spirit in obtaining and bearing testimony of the things of God, and while humbly recognizing that the mind of God cannot be known or proven by mortals in absolute terms, I still speak favorably about the power of evidence in religious discussions and spiritual searches. Evidence is an important ingredient in God’s instructions to those who believe his word, as well as in his plan of happiness extended to all human beings.

## *Reason and Revelation*

Basic to the discussion of the role of evidence in the nurturing of faith is how one perceives the relationship between reason and revelation. One of my favorite scriptures is a passage from Doctrine and Covenants 88:118, a text posted conspicuously on a plaque in the

old stairwell between the third and fourth floors of the Harold B. Lee Library at Brigham Young University, where I was an undergraduate. It 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.” This passage gives significant place to the role of scholarship in any religious discussion, and it applies with special relevance to studying the claims of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. It commands all people not only to seek, which would include doing research, but to seek diligently, which suggests that the research should be thorough and careful. It invites people both to teach one another, which implies sharing their findings generously, and to draw out of “the best books,” which implies that some books will be better than others. Finally, it says that all this should be done “even by study and also by faith,” or in other words, both are required. Nothing is more fundamental for Latter-day Saint scholars than maintaining a proper balance between the intellectual and spiritual pursuits of life. In the material that follows below, I will explore this topic as a legal and religious scholar from a Latter-day Saint perspective but with a general audience in mind. Anyone seriously investigating Latter-day Saint scripture, doctrine, history, or culture—let alone dealing with highly charged anti-Mormon propaganda or enthusiastic pro-Mormon apologetics—will be well served by an appreciation of the following principles, which spell out the ground rules of epistemology, evidence, proof, and decision making in this area of life and inquiry.

### *Study and Faith*

Many Latter-day Saint Church leaders and authors have written about study and faith, and all of them agree that both are important, if not essential.<sup>1</sup> President Gordon B. Hinckley said, “There is incumbent upon each of us . . . the responsibility to observe the commandment to study and to learn. . . . None of us can assume that we have learned enough.”<sup>2</sup> Elder Neal A. Maxwell affirmed, “If there

is sometimes too little respect for the life of the mind, it is a localized condition and is not institutional in character.”<sup>3</sup> He also said, “The Lord sees no conflict between faith and learning in a broad curriculum. . . . The scriptures see faith and learning as mutually facilitating, not separate processes.”<sup>4</sup> President Boyd K. Packer stated, “Each of us must accommodate the mixture of reason and revelation in our lives. The gospel not only permits but *requires* it.”<sup>5</sup>

Thus the difficulty is not whether to learn by both study and faith but in what priority to combine them. In attempting to describe or prescribe the proper coordination of study with faith, Latter-day Saint thinkers have turned to various analogies, as people often do when they are confronted with the deepest intellectual or religious concepts. Each of these metaphors is potentially quite powerful. Some work better than others, but each may offer insight into the roles of scholarly evidence in nurturing or strengthening faith.

Some of these analogies emphasize the fact that both study and faith are necessary. In the bicycle-built-for-two metaphor, the relationship between reason and revelation is compared to two riders on a tandem bicycle. When both riders pedal together, the bicycle (the search for truth) moves ahead more rapidly. Each rider must work or the other must bear a heavy and exhausting burden. Only one (faith) can steer and determine where the bicycle will go, although the other (reason) can do some back-seat driving.

In another metaphor, these two necessary elements are brought together as in a marriage with “all the tension, adjustments, frustration, joys and ecstasy one finds in marriage between man and woman.”<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, the Apostle Paul used the human body as a metaphor to show the need for many parts in an organic whole. It would be unseemly for “the head [to say] to the feet, I have no need of you”; they are “many members, yet but one body” (1 Corinthians 12:20–21). As Elder B. H. Roberts cautioned, let us not have “the heart breathing defiance to the intellect,”<sup>7</sup> and one might equally add, let us also

not have the intellect pounding submission to the heart. Jesus himself affirmed the all-inclusive, multifaceted range of knowledge with the first commandment: “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind [*dianoia*], and with all thy strength” (Mark 12:30). Mind and heart, study and faith, reason and revelation—both halves of these pairs are needed.

### *Some Examples*

A few selected studies may illustrate the function of evidence in building faith or examining faith-based claims. The first comes from the use of doubled, sealed legal documents in ancient Israelite legal practice. Because ancient peoples did not have copy machines or county recorder’s offices, they often prepared important legal documents in duplicate, one part of the scroll being either a verbatim duplicate or an abridgment of the other. The open portion was available for routine inspection and daily use; the sealed portion was saved for use in court to resolve disputes or in case the open part got damaged or altered. The earliest known example of this practice using papyrus or parchment comes from Jerusalem and dates to around the time of Lehi, when Jeremiah wrote out a double deed, one part of which “was sealed according to the law and custom” and the other part “which was open” (Jeremiah 32:11). Subsequent examples of such legal documents have been found as this practice spread to Hellenistic Egypt and all around the eastern Mediterranean and the Roman Empire.<sup>8</sup> Jewish law required at least three witnesses in order for such a doubled, sealed document to be valid. There could be additional witnesses, often totaling six or more.

The potential parallel with the Book of Mormon seems quite striking. Nephi, who left Jerusalem during the lifetime of Jeremiah, may have been familiar with the customary legal practice that Jeremiah followed and took for granted. Nephi clearly envisioned from the beginning of Nephite history that the final Nephite record should eventually be configured as a two-part book, consistent with

this pattern of Israelite law and custom obscurely mentioned in Jeremiah 32. As early as about 550 BC, Nephi described the time when the Book of Mormon would come forth having two parts: the open part, the “words which are not sealed,” he said were to be delivered to Joseph Smith (2 Nephi 27:15), but Joseph would be told to “touch not the things which are sealed” (2 Nephi 27:21). The open part was, in a sense, less complete than the sealed part (see Ether 4:5). Three witnesses were specifically prophesied of and others were promised to “testify to the truth of the book and the things therein” (2 Nephi 27:12; Ether 5:4). At the judgment bar, God will show that the things found in the open part are true (see Moroni 10:29). Although this odd doubled and sealed document practice mentioned in Jeremiah 32 was not understood well by biblical scholars until the mid-twentieth century, and although nothing like it was used in American legal practice, it is right at home in Nephi’s Jerusalem and seems to offer a possible explanation for the idea behind the construction and assembly of the Book of Mormon plates.

One might object that Jeremiah’s documents were written on scrolls of parchment or papyrus, but archaeological evidence makes it clear that this doubling documentary procedure was used anciently in documents written on all sorts of writing materials, including clay, wood tablets, and metal plates. Although the procedures had to be modified slightly to accommodate metal, a pair of bronze plates from the Roman emperor Vespasian features a doubled text, witnessed by seven witnesses, and the two plates were sealed together with one text open and the other protected.<sup>9</sup> This rather intriguing scenario connecting the Book of Mormon plates with the ancient world of Jerusalem and its surrounding cultures could begin to “arouse the faculties of [our] souls” (Jacob 3:11) and could contribute to our spheres of faith.

Many other studies of numerous types could have a similar effect. To name only a few, fascinating evidence for the Book of Mormon has been found in the last few years in such things as the semantic

ranges of words like *thief* and *robber* (the meaning of the word *robber* in the Book of Mormon squares on all counts with its meaning in the ancient world).<sup>10</sup> The associated words *statute* and *ordinance* never happen to appear together in pleonastic lists in the Book of Mormon; neither do their Hebrew counterparts appear together in such lists in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>11</sup> Etymologies of several proper nouns in the Book of Mormon are intriguing (consider the word *Jershon* in Alma 27:22, which was given as a “land . . . for an inheritance,” the name itself meaning in Hebrew “a place of inheritance”). Word distributions show multiple authorship; for example, thirty phrases or expressions appear in Zenos’s otherwise unknown allegory in Jacob 5 that never again turn up in the Bible or other LDS scripture, giving evidence that Jacob 5 was written by someone other than by Joseph Smith, Nephi, or any other known scriptural author.<sup>12</sup> It has been said that no archaeological evidence exists for the Book of Mormon, but the broad trends in Mesoamerican archaeology over the last 175 years fit “the expectations for the Book of Mormon as history rather than hoax”; several hundred “claims in the book once thought absurd . . . have already been verified.”<sup>13</sup> In Yemen, an altar was discovered from the time of Lehi containing the name Nihm, which is amazingly close linguistically and geographically to the place name of Nahom in the Book of Mormon where Ishmael died and was buried just before the frankincense trail and Lehi’s route turned east (see 1 Nephi 16:34).<sup>14</sup> The accuracies of internal quotations within the Book of Mormon are remarkable, if not uncanny: Alma 36:22 quotes twenty-one of Lehi’s words in 1 Nephi 1:8 with complete correctness, and Samuel the Lamanite in Helaman 14:12 quotes another set of twenty-one words from King Benjamin’s speech in Mosiah 3:8 with precision. Given the circumstances under which the Book of Mormon was dictated, without notes and cross-referencing, this intertextual consistency cannot be explained, except as Joseph Smith always did, that it was “by the gift and power of God.” Literally hundreds of other similar examples generated by the research of



*Discovered in the 1990s, this small altar from northeastern Yemen was inscribed about 600 BC bears the local name NHM (Nehem, or Nahom), which fits hand in glove with 1 Nephi 16:34. It has been described as the most important archaeological evidence for the historicity of the Book of Mormon.*

dozens of scholars, not all of whom are Latter-day Saints, connect the Book of Mormon with ancient civilizations.

However, the present point is not to multiply such examples but to ask, do points like these build faith? Although we should not expect to find a sign somewhere that says “Nephi slept here” or a drop of blood on the Mount of Olives that establishes the truth of Christ’s ordeal in Gethsemane,<sup>15</sup> the world has been told to expect circumstantial rather than direct evidences of the truth. In 1842 when Joseph Smith was editor of the *Times and Seasons*, it published an editorial announcing some archaeological discoveries in Central America and boldly asserted, “We cannot but think the Lord has a hand in bringing to pass his strange act, and proving the Book of Mormon true in the eyes of all the people. . . . It will be as ever has been, the world will prove Joseph Smith a true prophet by circumstantial evidence, in experiments, as they did Moses and Elijah.”<sup>16</sup> We will return to this point shortly.

*Specific Ways Evidence Nurtures Faith*

Without overstating the value of these kinds of discoveries and arguments, it is fair to say that evidence plays several specific roles in the cultivation of faith. Many people have shared comments and experiences that are instructive and affirm the importance of evidence from the LDS perspective.

Elder John A. Widtsoe taught that evidence can remove honest doubt and give assurances that build faith. “After proper inquiries, using all the powers at our command,” he said, “the weight of evidence is on one side or the other. Doubt is removed.”<sup>17</sup> “Doubt of the right kind—that is, honest questioning—leads to faith” and “opens the door to truth,”<sup>18</sup> for where there is doubt, faith cannot thrive. Elder Joseph Fielding Smith likewise affirmed that evidence, as convincing as in any court in the land, proves “beyond the possibility of doubt that Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery spoke the truth.”<sup>19</sup>

Over and over, I have found that solid research confirms the revelations of God. As Elder Maxwell has stated, “The fact that a truth is given by God and then is confirmed through scholarship makes it no less true.”<sup>20</sup> President Hinckley has said that in a world prone to demand evidence, it is good that archaeology, anthropology, or historical research can “be helpful to some” and “confirmatory.”<sup>21</sup>

Evidence also makes the truth plain and plausible. In 1976, Elder Maxwell predicted, “There will be a convergence of discoveries (never enough, mind you, to remove the need for faith) to make plain and plausible what the modern prophets have been saying all along.”<sup>22</sup> I believe that this prophecy has been amply fulfilled in the last twenty years. Literally hundreds of newly discovered insights converge on the same supporting conclusion. Certain things that might at first have appeared outrageous, on closer inspection have turned out to be right on target. The ancient Jaredite transoceanic migration that lasted 344 days (see Ether 6:11) ceases to seem so fantastic when that turns out to be exactly the length of time it takes the Pacific current to go from Asia to Mexico.<sup>23</sup> The oddity of Nephi’s making new



arrows when only his bow had broken suddenly becomes plausible when one realizes that arrows and bows must match each other in weight, length, and stiffness.<sup>24</sup> The bizarre ritual of chopping down the tree as part of Zemnariyah's execution (see 3 Nephi 4:28) fits right into place in light of Jewish law that required the tree to be chopped down on which a person was hanged,<sup>25</sup> again making "plain and plausible" what the Book of Mormon has said all along.

In an important sense, evidence makes belief possible. I am very impressed by the words of the British theologian Austin Farrar in speaking about C. S. Lewis (and quoted by Elder Maxwell on several occasions): "Though argument does not create conviction, lack of it destroys belief. What seems to be proved may not be embraced; but what no one shows that ability to defend is quickly abandoned. Rational argument does not create belief, but it maintains a climate in which belief may flourish."<sup>26</sup>

Thus evidence in a sense brings people toward belief. Some people have the gift to believe quite readily (see D&C 46:13–14), but most people need evidence, clues, and inducements to believe because we are by nature stubborn. Alma told the poor in Antionum that they are blessed who believe in the word of God "without stubbornness of heart, yea, without being brought to know the word, or even compelled to know" (Alma 32:16), but being "brought to know" is better than never coming to know at all. I have been "brought to know" many things by means of evidence, even though that evidence has fallen short of compelling me to know.

Evidence is also useful in articulating knowledge and defending against error and misrepresentation. When scholars serve as "articulators" of evidence, and when this articulation is combined with "submissiveness and consecration," solid academic research can be useful "to protect and to build up the Kingdom."<sup>27</sup> If people misunderstand the thoroughly Christian character of the Book of Mormon, I would hope that statistical evidence about the pervasive references to Christ in the book would be informative.<sup>28</sup> I would hope

that evidence about the distinctively personal testimonies of Christ uniquely borne by ten Book of Mormon prophets would be deeply impressive and convincing.<sup>29</sup>

Evidence helps to keep pace in the give-and-take of competing alternatives. Should we expect “incontrovertible proof to come in this way? No, but neither will the Church be outdone by hostile or pseudo-scholars.”<sup>30</sup> The historical facts in support of Joseph’s testimony, to quote Elder Jeffrey R. Holland, leave one “speechless—absolutely, totally, and bewilderingly incredulous” at the bald suggestion that Joseph Smith simply wrote the Book of Mormon.<sup>31</sup>

Perhaps most of all, in my opinion, evidence promotes understanding and enhances meaning. In all study, one should seek understanding.<sup>32</sup> Just as traveling to the Holy Land has richly enhanced my understanding the world of the Bible, evidence provides essential building blocks in understanding the full character of the Book of Mormon. Many factors, like the study of chiasmus, help me understand this record better as a powerful and ancient testament; for to be understood, our facts must be placed “in their proper context.”<sup>33</sup> Evidence helps to put many parts of the Book of Mormon in context. Thus we understand Nephi’s slaying of Laban in its proper ancient and divine contexts when we consider the meaning and implications of Exodus 21:13–14, which in Nephi’s day defined excusable slayings differently than we do today.<sup>34</sup>

A clear delineation of evidence also strengthens the impression left by any text on my mind and soul. Evidence has a way of drawing my attention to subtle details that otherwise escape notice. With evidence about ancient Israelite festivals in mind, I read with heightened attention and gratitude the text in Mosiah 3:11 about Christ’s blood atoning for those who have “ignorantly sinned,” because on ancient holy days the high priest performed rites to purify the people from all their iniquities (see Leviticus 16:21–22), including sins committed in ignorance (see Numbers 15:22–29).<sup>35</sup>

Marshaling evidence builds respect for the truth. I have been amazed and pleased to watch the Book of Mormon win respect for itself and for the gospel of Jesus Christ. I had long appreciated and valued the Book of Mormon, but it was not until I began to see it speaking for itself before sophisticated audiences, especially in connection with my work on such things as chiasmus and law in the Book of Mormon, that I began to sense the high level of respect which the book really can command. On many grounds, the Book of Mormon is intellectually respectable.<sup>36</sup> The more I learn about the Book of Mormon, the more amazing it becomes in terms of its precision, consistency, validity, vitality, insightfulness, and purposefulness. I believe that the flow of additional evidence nourishes and enlarges faith.<sup>37</sup>

Finally, the presentation of evidence impels people to ask the ultimate question raised by that evidence. Once a person realizes that no one can explain how all this got in the Book of Mormon, the honest person is at last at the point where he or she must turn to God in order to find out if these things are indeed true. Elder Bruce R. McConkie advised readers to ask themselves over and over, a thousand times, "Could any man have written this book?"<sup>38</sup> By asking this question again and again, one invites all kinds of ideas that may bear one way or the other on the answer to that question. As ideas surface, evidence can help the reader explore those possibilities and inevitably return with increased intensity to the question, "Could any man have written this book?" If one will ponder the great miracle of the Book of Mormon, Elder McConkie promises, "the genuine truth seeker will come to know," again and again, "by the power of the Spirit, that the book is true."<sup>39</sup>

Moroni 10:3–4 promises this testimony, but on several prerequisites: one must "read these things" (one must study it); one must "remember how merciful the Lord hath been" and "ponder" this record. Then "if ye shall ask with a sincere heart, with real intent, having faith in Christ," the answer will be revealed. Many people

have told me how evidences have helped to impel them through this process of reading, studying, pondering, and asking.

The Holy Ghost bears record of the Father and of the Son (see 3 Nephi 11:32, 36). Scripturally, this is beyond question. B. H. Roberts wrote in 1909, "The power of the Holy Ghost must ever be the chief source of evidence for the truth of the Book of Mormon. All other evidence is secondary. . . . No arrangement of evidence, however skillfully ordered; no argument, however adroitly made, can ever take its place."<sup>40</sup> It would certainly be an abuse to supplant testimony and faith with evidence or with anything else, but scrutinizing evidence can help. As Elder Roberts continued, "Evidence and argument . . . in support of truth, like secondary causes in natural phenomenon, may be of first rate importance, and mighty factors in the achievement of God's purposes."<sup>41</sup> Indeed, the careful presentation of evidence clarifies the truth and enhances the power of testimony. As Elder Roberts concluded, "To be known, the truth must be stated and the clearer and more complete the statement is, the better opportunity will the Holy Spirit have for testifying to the souls of men that the work is true."<sup>42</sup>

### *Study and Faith Working Together*

In all of these faith-promoting functions, it is not enough for a person to simply have one's mind and one's spirit both engaged; the two must work together, each contributing in its own proper way. To use another metaphor, the correlation of faith and reason works like our two eyes (representing mind and spirit); working together they give depth to our sight, and with the aid of a pair of binoculars (representing scholarship and revelation), we see close up and in bold relief many marvelous things. In order for this to work, however, both eyes must be healthy and both lenses in the binoculars must be clean and in focus.

I also like to think of faith and reason like two arms working together to play a violin. One hand fingers the strings and the other

draws the bow. When these two distinct functions are brought together with skill and purpose, they produce expressions that ontologically transcend the physics of either part individually. According to this view, for an LDS scholar to proceed on either spirit or intellect alone is like trying to play a violin with only one arm.

### *Gaining Faith in General*

Nurturing faith in the Book of Mormon or deciding whether to believe arguments or weapons formed against it are just specialized cases of nurturing faith in general. Faith is increased by purposeful study, diligent prayer, attending church, rendering service, experimenting with the word, and feeling the Spirit. Evidence can play a role in this process in several ways.

First, Paul declared, “So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” (Romans 10:17). The presentation of evidence can help people to hear the word, to pay attention, to listen more closely, to hear what is really being said. King Benjamin admonished his people to “open your ears that ye may hear, your hearts that ye may understand, and your minds that the mysteries of God may be unfolded to your view” (Mosiah 2:9). I have seen evidence, when it is presented modestly and accurately, help people listen to the Book of Mormon or other Latter-day Saint ideas who otherwise would not give them the time of day. I have seen it soften hearts and prepare the way for testimony to be borne and received.

Second, faith comes by prayerful study. In the words of President Hinckley, “It will take study of the word of God. It will take prayer and anxious seeking of the source of all truth.”<sup>43</sup> The study of scriptural evidence can be a vital aid in this process, for faith is only faith if it is in things “which are true” (Alma 32:21). The intelligent use of evidence helps people sort out propositions that are clear, true, or plausible from those that are muddled, false, or bogus.

Third, faith also comes from sacrifice. For Elder McConkie, “faith and sacrifice go hand in hand. Those who have faith sacrifice freely

for the Lord's work, and their acts of sacrifice increase their faith."<sup>44</sup> "The tests and trials of mortality are designed to determine whether men will use their time and talents in worldly or spiritual pursuits."<sup>45</sup> These tests include tests of the mind as much as any other kinds of tests. And the quest for rigorous scriptural evidence demands the dedication of time, the consecration of talents, and the willingness to be swallowed up in the Lord's purposes.

### *Some Problems with Evidence*

While evidence may perform several useful functions, this is not to say that evidence is some kind of panacea or elixir of pure knowledge. People often misunderstand the way in which evidence works in our minds and in our lives. As a lawyer and law professor, I have become acutely aware that evidence can even raise certain problems if it is not kept in proper perspective.

For example, some people place too much weight on evidence. The scriptures caution against becoming overconfident or too secular. But such abuses are no different than anything else in life: riches may be abused, but that does not mean we stop working for a living; an artist runs the risk of pride, but that does not mean we cease improving our talents. Like all tools, the mind must be carefully used. Like a hammer, the intellect can be used either to build up or to tear down. Jesus gave us another analogy, that of a fruit tree, to help us determine the right balance: he said, "By their fruits ye shall know them" (Matthew 7:20).

Other people go the opposite extreme and give too little attention to evidence and latch onto answers too readily. Brother Sperry once commented, "Too many persons in every generation, including our own, hope for things—fantastic things—in the name of faith and religion, but give little thought as to whether or not they are based on truth."<sup>46</sup>

Others halt between the two and become consumed by questions. It is a fact of life that we can ask more questions than can ever

be answered. It takes skill and wisdom even to ask a good question. Asking better questions, for example, about the similarities between the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5–7 and the Sermon at the Temple in 3 Nephi 11–18 has led me to see the Book of Mormon text in entirely new ways, namely as a text related to the temple, which has not only satisfied all of my honest inquiries but has given me many unexpected insights. This study has elucidated the Book of Mormon beyond my remotest expectation and has turned what I saw as a potential problem into a great strength.<sup>47</sup>

### *The “Problem” of Proof*

Of course, no one can “prove” that the Book of Mormon or any other ultimate tenet of religious faith is true. Hugh Nibley has said, “The evidence that will prove or disprove the Book of Mormon does not exist.”<sup>48</sup> Our desire is not to become some Grand Inquisitor, wanting to put other people over a barrel by producing undeniable reasons for belief that will convince the whole world and compel everyone to believe.<sup>49</sup> Since this is so, why should one bother to gather evidence or to do religious research at all?

In an ideal world, evidence would not be necessary. Things would be known directly, immediately, and certainly. The only problem is, we do not live in an ideal world, and it was not intended by God that we should. We are surrounded in this probationary state by possibilities, choices, and the need to seek and to work out our salvation with fear and trembling.

Moreover, in working with evidence, we must not forget what or who is really on trial. To quote President Benson, “The Book of Mormon is not on trial—the people of the world, including the members of the Church, are on trial as to what they will do with this second witness for Christ.”<sup>50</sup> In the same way, when the world presumed to judge its Messiah to be a thing of naught, in reality the world was being judged: “He that believeth not is condemned already,” says the Gospel of John, “and this is the condemnation, that light

is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light” (John 3:18–19). As so often occurs, the gospel of Jesus Christ stands things on their heads: the weak are strong, the rich are poor, and the losers are the finders. And likewise, the testers are being tested. In dealing with and reacting to evidence, we actually reveal more about ourselves than we do about the subjects being tested, and we sharpen the sword, not of human discernment but of divine judgment.

For this reason, also, we can understand why evidence does not affect all people in the same way. Not everyone will need evidences, and not all people will need them at every stage of their lives. Individuals see data differently, and “God made us free so to do.”<sup>51</sup> In the end, it will always come down to the choice each person must make between believing the good or rejecting it. Abundant miraculous and physical evidence was given to Pharaoh, but he still rejected Jehovah. Evidence makes the plan of choice and accountability viable; without evidence both for and against two alternatives, no bona fide choice could ever be possible. Paraphrasing Lehi, we might add, Adam fell that men might choose; and evidence is that they might have a basis on which to choose.

### *Faith, Choice, and the Nature of Evidence*

These theological observations about evidence invite a closer look at the nature and operations of evidence itself. The better we understand both faith and evidence and the subjective elements that bridge the two, the better we will be able to bring them both beneficially together. Having seen how evidence contributes to faith, consider the elements of faith and the roles of personal choice in the nature of evidence and how evidence works.

People often misjudge the nature of evidence because, a la Perry Mason, they may take an overly simplistic view of evidence. The concept of evidence is complex. The power of evidence is shaped by metaphysical assumptions (such as causation) and cultural conditions (such as the value placed on proof), and it combines wide



fields of human experience (including such philosophical concerns as epistemology, the reliability of sensory experience, the adequacy of language, the nature of history, and the psychology of persuasion).

The word *evidence* derives from the Latin *ex-videns*, meaning anything which comes from *seeing*, and also from *seeming*. Evidence is literally what meets the eye and, more than that, what seems to be from what we see. Evidence is based on hard facts, but even under the best of circumstances it works less automatically and more subjectively than many people realize. If evidence were not such a complicated matter, many things would be much simpler in our courtrooms, legislative sessions, and corporate board rooms, as well as in our academic lecture halls, classrooms, and study carrels.

While this complexity will present problems in many cases, it also allows evidence to combine with faith, because in its complexity evidence is both a product of empirical data attractive to the mind amendable to study and the result of personal choices generated by the spirit in faith. Not only is seeing believing, but believing is seeing, as has been often said. Philosophical worldviews that would have it be only one of these two ways offer a model that hobbles on one leg.

In exploring the workings of evidence, I have found that the practice and study of law is a valuable experimental laboratory. Every legal case requires judges, lawyers, jurors, witnesses, and parties to define the issues, to organize evidence relevant to those issues, and to reach conclusions about the relative persuasiveness of the evidence. This wrenching world of legal experience—as problematic as it may seem to the general population after the advent of public television in the courtroom—is a furnace of realities that can teach us many things about the use and abuse of evidence. From these experiences, several operational rules emerge that illustrate the combination of objective and subjective elements in evidence, opening the way for one to add reason to one's faith and to engage faith in one's reason.

First, any piece of evidence is deeply intertwined with a particular question. No real evidence exists until an issue is raised which that

evidence tends either to prove or to disprove. By choosing what questions one will ask, one already introduces a subjective element into the inquiry. Seeking and asking begins in faith, just as at the same time, questions determine what will become evidence.

Some questions are relatively simple and mostly objective: Where was Tom on the day of the crime? Other questions are more difficult and intermediate: What was Tom thinking? Ultimate questions frame the crux of the case and are largely subjective: Did Tom commit murder? Evidence may answer the simpler questions, but it rarely settles the ultimate issues. Judges and jurors adopt “findings of fact” and “conclusions of law” which are based on evidence, but those findings do not emerge spontaneously. They are separate, subjective formulations made by them in response to the evidence.

Similarly, religious matters are approached by asking different levels of questions. Certain queries ask ultimate questions: Did Joseph Smith tell the truth? Did Jesus appear to the Nephites? Such questions are usually tackled by breaking the question down and asking intermediate and easier questions: Is it reasonable to think that Lehi came from Jerusalem around 600 BC? Does it appear that many authors contributed to the writing of the Book of Mormon? To answer the intermediate questions, we start looking for specific bits of data. Was there timber in Arabia suitable for ship building? (Indeed there was.) In what style did the Jews write around 600 BC? (They used many varieties of parallelism.) In response to such evidence, we then voluntarily form our own “findings of fact” or opinions relative to the questions we have asked.

The study of chiasmus in the Book of Mormon illustrates in more detail this interaction of questions and data in the operation of evidence. One might ask, What does the presence of chiasmus in a text prove? Chiasmus is usually thought of as evidence of Hebrew style, which it is, but it may be evidence of many other things as well, depending fundamentally on what question a person asks. For example, is the English text of the Book of Mormon orderly,

My son give ear to my *words* (v. 1)  
*Keep the commandments* and ye shall *prosper in the land* (v. 1)  
 Do *as I* have done (v. 2)  
*Remember the captivity* of our fathers (v. 2)  
 They were in *bondage* (v. 2)  
 He surely did *deliver* them (v. 2)  
*Trust* in God (v. 3)  
 Supported in *trials, troubles, and afflictions* (v. 3)  
 Lifted up at the *last day* (v. 3)  
*Born of God* (v. 5)  
 I sought to destroy the church (vv. 6–9)  
 My *limbs* were paralyzed (v. 10)  
 Fear of being in the *presence of God* (vv. 14–15)  
*Pains* of a damned soul (v. 16)  
*Harrowed up by the memory of sins* (v. 17)  
 I remembered *Jesus Christ, a son of God* (v. 17)  
 I cried, *Jesus Christ, son of God* (v. 18)  
*Harrowed by the memory of sins* no more (v. 19)  
 Joy as exceeding as was the *pain* (v. 20)  
 Long to be in the *presence of God* (v. 22)  
 My *limbs* received strength again (v. 23)  
 I labored to bring souls to repentance (v. 24)  
*Born of God* (v. 26)  
 Therefore *my knowledge* is of *God* (v. 26)  
 Supported under *trials, troubles, and afflictions* (v. 26)  
*Trust* in him (v. 27)  
 He will *deliver* me (v. 27)  
 And *raise me up at the last day* (v. 28)  
 As God brought our fathers out of *bondage* and captivity (vv. 28–29)  
 Retain a *remembrance of their captivity* (v. 29)  
 Know *as I* do know (v. 30)  
*Keep the commandments* and ye shall *prosper in the land* (v. 30)  
 This according to his *word* (v. 30)

*The use of chiasmus in Alma 36 is nothing short of brilliant. Based on the most sophisticated statistical analyses, it ranks as one of the very best examples of inverted parallelism anywhere in world literature. (John W. and J. Gregory Welch, Charting the Book of Mormon, chart 132.)*

complex, precise, and interestingly composed in purposeful units, or is it dull, chaotic, and redundant (as some have suggested)? Chiasmus gives evidence to answer that question. What is the meaning of a text? Form is often linked with content,<sup>52</sup> as in Alma 36, where Alma meaningfully places the turning point in his life at the chiasmic turning point of his beautiful chapter.<sup>53</sup> Were Book of Mormon authors well trained and careful in utilizing their skills? Did they revise and rework their own earlier texts? The abrupt antithetical parallelisms in Mosiah 27:29–30 that were reworked into the chiasmic pattern of Alma 36 offer internal evidence of the skill and care of these authors. Because all authors did not use chiasmus in the same ways, this literary element also provides evidence of multiple authorship and historical development in the Book of Mormon. King Benjamin is quite classical in his use of chiasmus. Alma the younger is more creative and personal in his use of chiasmus.<sup>54</sup> Chiasmus also provides evidence that the Book of Mormon was translated from an underlying Hebrew text. In Helaman 6:10, for example, the chiasmic turning point features the two words “Lord” and “Zedekiah” at the very center of this textual unit. The theophoric suffix at the end of the name Zedekiah, “-iah,” would in all probability have jumped out at the ancient reader as an obvious parallel to the Hebrew word for *Lord*. The chiasmus in Helaman 6 works even better in Hebrew than it does in English.<sup>55</sup> Chiasmus may further prove something about the precise nature of Joseph Smith’s work as translator. Each time a word appears within these given frameworks, it seems to have been rendered by the same English word.

Each of these bits of evidence is interesting in its own right, but these points do not begin to function as evidence until we have provided the question we seek to answer. Thus, we are involved in the inception and conception of evidence by the questions we choose to raise.

Some of these questions are simple, and objective answers to those questions from the realm of evidence may, to a large extent, confirm faith or make faith plausible. But the ultimate questions are

more subjective, and although influenced by reason, their answers remain predominantly in the realm of belief.

Just about anything can serve potentially as evidence, depending on what a person wishes to emphasize. Some have viewed violent opposition to the Book of Mormon as evidence of its divinity.<sup>56</sup> Others see evidence of the same in its acceptance worldwide. Some rightly find evidence for the spiritual truthfulness of the Book of Mormon in its clarity, plainness, and expansiveness.<sup>57</sup> Others rightly find evidence for its miraculous origins in its complexity, subtlety, and precision. Some properly find persuasiveness in its uniformity and its conformity with eternal truths, while others appropriately find confirmation in its variety and cultural idiosyncracies.

When we seek evidence of something, we are prospecting, looking around at just about anything to see what we can find. Of course, not everything we find will ultimately amount to useful evidence, but just because some people may go overboard and wish to see every hole in the ground in South America as evidence of pre-Columbian baptismal fonts, or to see every use of a King James phrase as evidence of plagiarism or forgery, that does not mean that one should reject all evidence as worthless. Thomas Edison had several silly ideas before coming up with his many inventions.

For this reason, evidence can almost always be found or generated for and against just about any proposition. Only a very impoverished mind cannot find evidence for just about anything he or she wants. Once again, this points out that evidence is not only discovered but also created. That creation is not arbitrarily *ex nihilo*, but neither is it impersonally predestined.

Different kinds of evidence evoke different kinds of responses. The law allows physical evidence, written documents, oral testimony, and so on. But at the same time, different people or legal situations may require or prefer one kind of evidence over another. No rules automatically determine how one kind of evidence stacks up against another or what kind of evidence is best.

In fact, many different types of evidence likewise exist concerning the Book of Mormon: internal and external, comparative and analytic, philological and doctrinal, statistical and thematical, chronological and cyclical, source critical (the seams between the texts abridged by Moroni in the book of Ether are still evident),<sup>58</sup> and literary. Its historical complexity and plausibility is supported by the study of warfare in the Book of Mormon (including remarkable coherence in its martial law, sacral ideology of war, and campaign strategy, buttressed by archaeological evidence regarding weaponry, armor, fortifications, and seasonality).<sup>59</sup> Evidence is found to enrich the prophetic allegory of Zenos by researching the horticulture of olives (it is evident that whoever wrote Jacob 5 had a high degree of knowledge about olives, which do not grow in New York).<sup>60</sup> Numerous legal practices in the Book of Mormon presuppose or make the best sense when understood against an ancient Israelite background. And so on, many times over. One can scarcely avoid wondering: How could any author keep all of these potential lines of evidence concurrently in his head while dictating the Book of Mormon without notes or a rough draft? It also subjectively engages the spirit: How should all these different kinds of evidence be received, assessed, and evaluated?

Legal evidence is often circumstantial. The more direct the evidence, the more probative it usually is, and in some courts “circumstantial evidence only raises a probability.”<sup>61</sup> But on the other hand, people may also choose to view circumstantial evidence as desirable and even necessary in certain situations. Indeed, the circumstances surrounding a particular event or statement are usually essential to understanding the matter. To quote Henry David Thoreau, “Some circumstantial evidence is very strong, as when you find a trout in the milk.”<sup>62</sup> A dictum from the United States Supreme Court explains the power of circumstantial evidence: “Circumstantial evidence is often as convincing to the mind as direct testimony, and often more so. A number of concurrent facts, like rays of light, all converging to the same center, may throw not only a clear light but a burning

conviction; a conviction of truth more infallible than the testimony even of two witnesses directly to a fact.”<sup>63</sup> Accordingly, the convergence of huge amounts of circumstantial evidence, such as the astonishingly short time in which the Book of Mormon was translated,<sup>64</sup> may be viewed quite favorably, if a person’s spiritual disposition inclines one to receive and value such evidence.

Another fascinating and crucial question is how are we to evaluate the cumulative weight of evidence? Some compilations of evidence are strong; other collections are weak. Yet once again, in most settings, no scale for evaluating the cumulative weight of evidence is readily available. No canons of method answer the question “How much evidence do we need in order to draw a certain conclusion?” Answering this question is another choice that combines and bridges faith and evidence.

An interesting scale has developed in the law which prescribes specific levels of proof that are required to support certain legal results. The world of evidence is not black and white; there are many shades of gray. Ranging from a high degree of certitude on down, standards of proof on this spectrum include the following:

1. beyond a reasonable doubt, dispositive, practically certain
2. clear and convincing evidence, nearly certain
3. competent and substantial evidence, well over half
4. preponderance of evidence, more than half, more likely than not
5. probable, as in probable cause, substantial possibility
6. plausible, reasonably suspected
7. material, relevant, merely possible

Thus, for example, a person cannot be convicted of a first degree murder, unless the prosecution can prove its case “beyond a reasonable doubt.” A civil case, however, between two contesting parties to

a contract will be decided by a simple preponderance of the evidence. A grand jury can indict a person on probable cause.

But even within this spectrum, as helpful and sophisticated as it is, no precise definitions for these terms exist. Lawyers and judges still have only a feeling for what these legal terms mean, and their applications may vary from judge to judge. For example, a survey conducted in the Eastern District of New York among ten federal judges determined that the phrase “beyond a reasonable doubt” ranged from 76 to 95 percent certainty (although most were on the high end of this range). “Clear and convincing evidence” covered from 60 to 75 percent.<sup>65</sup> Obviously, a degree of subjectivity is again involved in deciding what level of certitude should be required or has been achieved in a given case.

In a religious setting, no arbiter prescribes or defines the level of evidence that will sustain a healthy faith. All individuals must set for themselves the levels of proof that they will require.<sup>66</sup> Yet how does one privately determine what burden of proof the Book of Mormon should bear? Should investigators require that it be proved beyond a reasonable doubt before experimenting with its words to learn of its truth or goodness? Should believers expect to have at least a preponderance of the evidence on their side in order to maintain their faith? Or is faith borne out sufficiently by a merely reasonable or plausible position, perhaps even in spite of all evidence? Few people realize how much rides on their personal choice in these matters, and that their answer necessarily originates in the domain of faith.

Moreover, different types of legal cases call for different configurations of evidence. Some matters of common law or statute are what one might call “single factor cases”: the presence or absence of a single factor is dispositive of the matter. More often, however, legal rules call for “multiple mandatory elements” that must be proved in order for a claim to be established. In such cases, every element is crucial and each must be satisfied in order for the legal test to be met. In other cases, however, several criteria are recognized by law, none



of which is absolutely essential, but the “facts and circumstances” of the particular case may be indicative factors. Thus, for example, in determining whether a person is either an independent contractor or an employee, over twenty factors have been recognized by law as being potentially significant in resolving the issue; some are more important than others, but none of them is absolutely essential, and the outcome of the case turns on how they all stack up.<sup>67</sup>

Similarly, simple Book of Mormon evidences may come in all three of these configurations: the point of granting military exemption to the Ammonites but requiring them to “serve in the rear” by providing supplies compares readily with a single point of Jewish law,<sup>68</sup> the destruction of Ammonihah is consistent with the defined set of seven requirements found in the Israelite law of apostate cities (see Deuteronomy 13:12–16),<sup>69</sup> while evidence for Hebrew literary forms in the Book of Mormon is an open-ended accumulation.

In ultimate matters of faith, however, the individual must decide what configuration of evidence to require. Is the ultimate issue of Book of Mormon origins to be answered by putting it to a single factor test (and if so, who decides the criterion?), by deciding if it satisfies the requirements of a multiple element set (and if so, who defines what the essential elements are to be?), or by drawing on various facts and circumstances accumulated through spiritual experience and research? Individual choice on this matter will again affect how the objective evidence works in any given individual’s mind and spirit.

In certain cases, the sum of the evidence may be greater than the total of its individual parts. “Pieces of evidence, each by itself insufficient, may together constitute a significant whole, and justify by their combined effect a conclusion.”<sup>70</sup> The cumulative effect of evidence is in some ways perplexing but again reflects the role of the observer’s preference in how evidence works. Individual pieces of evidence, each of which standing alone is relatively insignificant and uninteresting, may take on vast importance in a person’s mind as they combine to form a consistent pattern or coherent picture.

It is in some senses ironic that a few strong single facts can be overwhelmed and defeated by a horde of true but less significant facts, a strategy I used in winning several tax cases. But should one give greater credence to a wide-ranging accumulation of assorted details or to a few single strong factors? Only personal judgment will answer that question.

Another interesting effect occurs when a good case is actually weakened by piling on a few weak additional points. A bad argument may be worse in some minds than no argument at all if the weak arguments tend to undermine confidence in the strong points. But who can tell what will work or not work for one person or another? The degree of confidence a person is willing to place in any evidence is another manifestation of faith or personal response.

Similarly, advocacy and rhetoric are virtually part of the evidence. The techniques of presenting evidence are often as important as the evidence itself, and the subjective decision to feature certain points in favor of others can be the turning point of a case. Important facts forcefully presented take on added significance; crucial evidence overlooked and underutilized will not always be even noticed by the judge or jury.

Again, it is a sobering reality that the apparent victory in debates often goes to the witty, the clever, the articulate, and the overconfident. Hopefully, good arguments will always be presented in a clear manner so as not to obscure their true value, but because this will not always happen, prudent observers need to be careful to separate kernels of truth from the husks they are packaged in.

Not all evidence ultimately counts. In a court of law, the judges and jury will eventually decide to ignore some of the evidence, especially hearsay, mere opinions, or statistical probabilities. Similarly, in evaluating Book of Mormon evidence, one needs to be meticulous in separating fact from opinion. Likewise, fantastic statistics can be generated by either friends or foes of the book. This does not mean that statistical presentations should be ruled out of Book of Mormon



*Just as judge and jury in a court of law must be careful to weigh appropriate evidence before passing judgment, so must we, when judging spiritual matters, consider all of the evidence. (Courtesy of Marcelo Gerpe).*

discussions; some word-printing studies, for example, have achieved noteworthy results.<sup>71</sup> But such evidence must not be exaggerated and must be approached with sophistication.

Constraints on time and the availability of witnesses or documentary evidence may be completely fortuitous yet also very important. If a witness is unavailable to testify in court, the case may be lost. Documentary evidence known or presumed once to have existed is scarcely helpful. In order to reach a legal decision, time limitations are imposed on all parties; and in most cases, evidence discovered after a decision has become final is simply ignored.

In much the same way, important evidence relevant to religious matters will often be perpetually lacking. Thus, a person must subjectively choose at what point enough has been heard. Further historical or archaeological discoveries may eventually surface, but in the meantime, one must choose. In this regard, Elder LeGrand Richards has counseled, “And when we find ourselves in conflict and confusion, we can well learn to wait a while for all the evidence and all the answers that now evade us.”<sup>72</sup> And President Hugh B. Brown recommended: “With respect to some things that now seem difficult

to understand, we can afford to wait until we have all the facts, until all the evidence is in. . . . If there seems to be conflict, it is because men, fallible men, are unable properly to interpret God's revelations or man's discoveries."<sup>73</sup>

### *The Need for Caution*

Clearly, the matter of evidence is complex. While certain evidences will be demonstrably stronger and more objective than others, the processing of evidence is not simply a matter of feeding the data in one end of a machine and catching a conclusion as it falls out the other. Even in the law we read: "Absolute certainty and accuracy in fact-finding is an ideal, rather than an achievable goal."<sup>74</sup> Caution and care are in order.

Caution on the side of reason tells us that the power and value of evidence may be overrated in the world. Although evidence is certainly required in order to prevent our legal system of justice from degenerating into the Salem witch trials, even under the best of circumstances, evidence is often ambiguous, incomplete, or nonexistent.

On the side of faith, caution is also advised. Revealed knowledge must be understood and interpreted correctly. What has actually been revealed? Do we know by revelation where the final battles in the Book of Mormon were fought? Do we know that because twenty-one chapters of Isaiah are quoted in the Book of Mormon that all sixty-six were on the plates of brass? Moreover, the implications of revelation are not always clear. Does the revealed fact that God is a God of order require us to reject the Heisenberg uncertainty principle? Elder Widtsoe thought so. Perhaps that principle is only an expression of incomplete information that will "disappear with increasing knowledge,"<sup>75</sup> but until we have further knowledge we must walk with caution in both spheres.

### *A Puzzle*

At this point, perhaps another metaphor can be of help: that of an old jigsaw puzzle. The picture on the box represents a broad or holistic view of some reality given by revelation; but the picture on our box of religious knowledge is yet incomplete and unclear in spots; as the Apostle Paul says, “we see through a glass, darkly” (1 Corinthians 13:12; see also Articles of Faith 1:9). Moreover, we are also missing several pieces of the puzzle, and we are not even sure how many of them are absent or lost. It appears at first glance that some of the pieces in our box may not belong to our puzzle, while others quite definitely are strays. The picture on the box becomes clearer to us, however, with greater study of the details on it and on the individual pieces. The closer we look and the more use we make of our minds, the more we are able to put together a few pieces of solid truth here and there. We may, of course, put some of the pieces in the wrong place initially, but as other pieces are put into position and as we continually refer back to the picture on the lid, we are able to correct those errors. As our understanding of both the picture and the pieces progresses, we have greater respect for what we know, how it all fits together, and what we yet do not know.

Good scholars and inquirers keep the big picture of faith and revelation in mind while at the same time being aware of the need to scrutinize individual details closely. In the study of any serious religious matter, one strives to put the puzzle pieces together as far as one can, recognizing that critical study and thought is necessary, while at the same time remaining well aware of the limitations of our knowledge and theories.

### *The Choice Is Ours*

We do not have time here to probe individual arguments for and against the doctrines and scriptures embraced by the Latter-day Saints. But what is assuredly remarkable is the mere fact that so many arguments in favor of them can be made at all. Who would have

predicted after Alexander Campbell's scorching repudiation of the Book of Mormon in 1831 or the barrage of anti-Mormon literature that began with E. D. Howe's *Mormonism Unveiled* in 1834 that Joseph Smith's new religious movement could still be taken seriously at all, let alone more than 175 years later? Indeed, the variety of points in its favor is broader and deeper today than it was even twenty or thirty years ago. While I do not wish to overstate the case for any of these points, neither should they be understated. Nor do I want to deny the many gifts this faith and way of life has given me.

I have been actively and professionally involved in Book of Mormon research and Mormon studies generally now for over forty years. My experiences as the founder of the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, as an editor of Macmillan's *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, as the editor in chief of *BYU Studies*, and as a teacher and author in these areas of inquiry have shown me that Latter-day Saint texts and teachings lend themselves to rigorous and beneficial examination better than most people realize. But since others disagree, a seeker of truth is left with these questions: Who will judge between these views, and on what basis? Who is making sense? Whose footnotes are reliable? Who is credible, if anyone? Who can judge if the points made by Margaret Barker and others in glimpsing Lehi's Jerusalem<sup>76</sup> succeed in situating the Book of Mormon in preexilic Israel? Who can judge if the naturalistic explanations for the Book of Mormon have succeeded or fallen short? Who can confirm that the Gadianton robbers are much better understood in terms of ancient brigandage than nineteenth-century Masonry?<sup>77</sup> Who can judge what is anachronistic when our knowledge is incomplete and when we do not have Nephi's or Benjamin's prophetic originals but only an English translation of Mormon's much later compilation or abridgement? Who can authoritatively declare the Spaulding theory finally dead and give it a proper burial?<sup>78</sup> Regarding the Book of Abraham, forty elements found in the Book of Abraham but absent in the Bible have now been found in obscure Jewish and Islamic

traditions about the early life of Abraham.<sup>79</sup> But who is to say if these forty points are significant?

One might imagine impaneling a body of judges, but doing so would probably be far trickier than confirming Supreme Court nominees, and it is doubtful that such a process could ever be any less problematic than the Jesus Seminar has been. Perhaps with Mormon studies programs now being inaugurated in highly regarded universities, an unofficial community of qualified peer reviewers may eventually emerge. Could such a panel of academicians be composed of highly informed but also disinterested observers? Not likely. Could they judge strengths and weaknesses according to disclosed assumptions and articulated criteria? Perhaps. Could they be methodologically savvy but not ideologically slavish? Could they produce responsible, cautious, written opinions? Or at least call preliminary attention to misleading statements and material omissions? That much we can hope for.

And then again, who will finally say when enough has been heard? While many interesting things continue to surface, all the evidence still is not in yet. Good science takes time. Much careful work remains to be done. In the meantime, we may need to wait for conclusive answers that now evade us. Indeed, in all matters of faith, important evidence will always be lacking. The result will always be a hung jury, as arguments can be made on both sides. These are surely debatable subjects. One should not expect these examinations to be any more conclusive than the inconclusively arrayed approaches in biblical and Christian studies generally. Full agreement on religious issues will probably always remain elusive, but that does not excuse fair-minded people from striving to state the evidence clearly and to seek to achieve agreements where possible.

In the meantime, the choice remains in the hands, minds, and hearts of all those who care and who seek to increase their knowledge and faith. "Of all our needs," President Hinckley has said, "the greatest is an increase in faith."<sup>80</sup> Anything that truly helps in that

process, even a little bit, should be useful to us. As a young man and still today, I have always felt very satisfied in my testimony of the gospel of Jesus Christ as taught and revealed in the Bible and LDS scripture. At first, I believed that there was little or no evidence of any kind at all. Never expecting to find great proofs or evidence for the gospel, I have been astonished and richly satisfied with what the Lord has done.

It seems clear enough that the Lord does not intend for the Book of Mormon, the Bible, or any other sacred matters to be open-and-shut cases intellectually, either pro or con. If God had intended this, he could have left more concrete evidences one way or the other. Instead, it seems that the Lord has maintained a careful balance between requiring people to exercise faith and allowing them to find reasons that affirm the stated origins of his revealed word. Instead, the choice is, then, entirely ours. Ultimately, evidences may not be that important; but then again, it is always easy to say that a parachute is irrelevant after you are safely on the ground.

Of course, it would be ideal if all could accept the gospel without suspicion and then, upon humble prayer, receive the witness of the Holy Ghost that it is true. And it would be good if weapons in the war of religious discussion could be designed only for defensive and constructive purposes, to build up without only tearing down. But in this less than ideal world, it is good that so much evidence exists, creating an environment in which belief may prosper, nurturing faith, and helping our unbelief. By combining study and faith, I find myself drawn closer to God. I am grateful as this deepening relationship enriches the love I feel for him and his Son. Thankfully, as my knowledge grows, my faith grows too.

### *Notes*

I express appreciation to my wife, Jeannie, for her astute and insightful suggestions in shaping and refining this paper, and also to other family members and colleagues whose comments and examples have contributed in many ways to the thoughts presented here.



1. See, for example, Henry B. Eyring, ed., *On Being a Disciple-Scholar* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1995); Robert L. Millet, ed., *To Be Learned Is Good If. . .* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1987).
2. Gordon B. Hinckley, *Faith: The Essence of True Religion* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989), 73.
3. Neal A. Maxwell, *Deposition of a Disciple* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 15.
4. Neal A. Maxwell, "The Disciple-Scholar," in Eyring, *On Being a Disciple-Scholar*.
5. Cited in John W. Welch, "BYU Studies: Into the 1990s," *BYU Studies* 31, no. 4 (1991): 25.
6. Used by Lowell L. Bennion, "The Uses of the Mind in Religion," *BYU Studies* 14, no. 1 (1973): 47–55. He argues that one cannot turn one's back on either the religious (biblical) or the rational (Greek) tradition, 48.
7. Truman G. Madsen, "Philosophy," in B. H. Roberts, *The Truth, The Way, The Life*, ed. John W. Welch, (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 1994), lxxiii.
8. See generally, Elisabeth Koffmahn, *Die Doppelurkunden aus der Wüste Juda* (Leiden: Brill, 1968); Leopold Fischer, "Die Urkunden in Jer 31 11–14 nach den Ausgrabungen und dem Talmud," *Zeitschrift der Altertums Wissenschaft* 30 (1910): 136–42; Leopold Wenger, "Über Stempel und Siegel," *Zeitschrift der Savigny-Stiftung* 42 (1921): 611–38.
9. Von Domaszewski, "Ein neues Militärdiplom," *Die Altertümer unserer heidnischen Vorzeit* 5, no. 4 (1911): 181–86, Tafel 33, published by the Römisch-germanischen Zentralmuseum in Mainz.
10. John W. Welch, ed., *Reexploring the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and Provo, UT: FARMS, 1992), 248–49.
11. Welch, *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*, 64–65.
12. John W. Welch, "Words and Phrases in Jacob 5," in Stephen D. Ricks and John W. Welch, eds., *The Allegory of the Olive Tree* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1994), 176.
13. John E. Clark, "Archaeological Trends and the Book of Mormon Origins," in *The Worlds of Joseph Smith: A Bicentennial Conference at the Library of Congress*, ed. John W. Welch (Provo, UT: BYU Press, 2006), 95.
14. See this example and others in John W. Welch, "Joseph Smith and the Past," in *The Worlds of Joseph Smith*, 106–9.
15. "The Lord does not convince men of his truth by placing before their eyes and in their hands tangible evidence, as a lawyer may do before the court, marking it exhibit A and exhibit B, and then expect it to be accepted. The Lord expects the searcher after truth to approach him with a contrite spirit and with sincerity of purpose, if he will do this and keep the commandments of the Lord, he shall receive the witness through the Holy Spirit and shall know the truth." Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1954), 3:228.

16. *Times and Seasons*, September 15, 1842.
17. John A. Widtsoe, *Evidences and Reconciliations* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1943), 31.
18. Widtsoe, *Evidences and Reconciliations*, 32.
19. Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, 2:124.
20. Maxwell, *Deposition of a Disciple*, 16.
21. Hinckley, *Faith*, 10.
22. Maxwell, *Deposition of a Disciple*, 49.
23. John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and Provo, UT: FARMS, 1985), 111.
24. Welch, *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*, 41–43.
25. Welch, *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*, 250–52.
26. Austin Farrar, “Grete Clerk,” in Jocelyn Gibb, comp., *Light on C. S. Lewis* (New York: Harcourt and Brace, 1965), 26; cited by Neal A. Maxwell, “Discipleship and Scholarship,” *BYU Studies* 32, no. 3 (Summer 1992): 5.
27. Maxwell, “Discipleship and Scholarship,” 5.
28. Susan Easton Black, *Finding Christ Through the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1987).
29. John W. Welch, “Ten Testimonies of Jesus Christ from the Book of Mormon,” in Bruce A. Van Orden and Brent L. Topp, eds., *Doctrines of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992), 223–42.
30. Maxwell, *Deposition of a Disciple*, 49. Elder Maxwell has enumerated a lengthy list of evidences that raise “vexing challenges for disbelievers and critics who reject the true account but remain surrounded by increasing incredibilia.” Neal A. Maxwell, “The Ends of the Earth Shall Inquire after Thy Name,” speech delivered at the Missionary Training Center, Provo, UT, August 23, 1994.
31. Jeffrey R. Holland, “A Standard unto My People” (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1994), 7. This speech was delivered at the CES Annual Symposium in the BYU Marriott Center on August 9, 1994.
32. Stephen L. Richards, in Conference Report, October 1954, 96.
33. Hinckley, *Faith*, 78.
34. John W. Welch, “Legal Perspectives on the Slaying of Laban,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 1, no. 1 (1992): 119–41.
35. John W. Welch, “The Temple in the Book of Mormon,” in Donald W. Parry, ed., *Temples of the Ancient World* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1994), 353–55.
36. John W. Welch, “A Book You Can Respect,” *Ensign*, September 1977, 45–48.
37. B. H. Roberts, *Deseret News*, October 11, 1930.
38. Bruce R. McConkie, *A New Witness for the Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 466.
39. McConkie, *A New Witness for the Articles of Faith*, 466.

40. B. H. Roberts, *New Witnesses for God* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1909), 2:vii.
41. Roberts, *New Witnesses for God*, 2:vii; quoted most recently by Ted E. Brewerton in General Conference, October 1995.
42. Roberts, *New Witnesses for God*, 2:vii.
43. Hinckley, *Faith*, 5.
44. McConkie, *A New Witness for the Articles of Faith*, 189.
45. McConkie, *A New Witness for the Articles of Faith*, 188.
46. Sidney B. Sperry, "Some Universals in the Book of Mormon," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 4, no. 1 (1995): 232.
47. John W. Welch, *The Sermon at the Temple and the Sermon on the Mount* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and Provo, UT: FARMS, 1990).
48. Hugh W. Nibley, *Since Cumorah* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1967), vii; quoted in *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1987), vol. 7.
49. Richard L. Bushman, "My Belief," *BYU Studies* 25, no. 2 (1985): 23–30. Bushman rightly learned that such expectations are unrealistic, 28–29, but there are other alternatives besides discarding all evidence as "essentially irrelevant," 30.
50. Ezra Taft Benson, "A New Witness for Christ," *Ensign*, November 1984, 8.
51. Maxwell, *Deposition of a Disciple*, 18.
52. In Mosiah 5:10–12, for example, King Benjamin is interested in contrasting those who remember the covenantal name and those who do not. The structure of the chiasm in this text accentuates this sharp contrast, the either/or separating these two options. In Alma 41:13–15, the balanced sense of divine justice, which will reward good for that which is good, and righteous for that which is righteous, is conveyed subtly by the balanced sense implicit in its literary structure. A similar effect is achieved in Leviticus 24, where the "bruise for bruise, eye for eye" sense of talionic justice is reflected perfectly in the chiasmic structure that embraces that content. John W. Welch, "Chiasmus in Biblical Law," *Jewish Law Association Studies IV: The Boston Conference Volume*, ed. Bernard Jackson (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), 7–11.
53. John W. Welch, "Alma 36: A Masterpiece," in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon*, ed. John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1991), 114–31.
54. The pair of lists that is inverted to become a list of pairs in the opposite order in Alma 41:13–15 is brilliantly creative.
55. John W. Welch, "Chiasmus in Helaman 6:7–13" (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1987); see also Welch, *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*, 230–32.
56. McConkie, *A New Witness for the Articles of Faith*, 462.
57. McConkie, *A New Witness for the Articles of Faith*, 467.

58. John W. Welch, "Preliminary Comments on the Sources behind the Book of Ether" (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1986).
59. William J. Hamblin and Stephen D. Ricks, eds., *Warfare in the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1990).
60. Stephen D. Ricks and John W. Welch, *The Allegory of the Olive Tree* (Salt Lake City: FARMS, 1994), 484–562.
61. *Reg. v. Rowton* (1865), 13 W.R. 437; cited in Norton-Kyshe, *Dictionary of Legal Quotations*, 88.
62. Henry David Thoreau, Journal, November 11, 1850; cited in Angela Partington, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 696.
63. *Thompson v. Bowle*, 71 U.S. (4 Wall.) 463, 473 (1867), cited in Eugene C. Gerhart, ed., *Quote It! Memorable Legal Quotations* (New York: Boardman, 1969), 205.
64. John W. Welch and Tim Rathbone, "The Translation of the Book of Mormon: Basic Historical Information" (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1986).
65. *United States v. Fatico*, 458 Federal Supplement 388, 410 (Eastern District of New York, 1978). See also Timothy J. Martens, "The Standard of Proof for Preliminary Questions of Fact under the Fourth and Fifth Amendments," *Arizona Law Review* 30 (1988): 119–33.
66. Elder Widtsoe felt that "the weight of evidence" on one side or the other was sufficient to remove all doubt. Widtsoe, *Evidences and Reconciliations*, 31. Joseph Fielding Smith asserted that the highest standard of proof could be met, that evidence "prove[d] beyond the possibility of doubt that Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery spoke the truth." Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, 2:124.
67. Revenue Ruling 87-41, 1987-1 Cumulative Bulletin 296.
68. Welch, *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*, 191.
69. Welch, *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*, 176–79.
70. Lord Wright, J., in *Grant v. Australian Knitting Mills, Ltd.*, A.C. (1936) 85, 96; cited in M. Frances McNamara, ed., *2,000 Classic Legal Quotations* (Rochester, New York: Lawyers Cooperative, 1992), 207.
71. John L. Hilton, "On Verifying Wordprint Studies: Book of Mormon Authorship," *BYU Studies* 30 (1990): 89–108.
72. LeGrand Richards, in Conference Report, October 1952, 96.
73. Hugh B. Brown, in Conference Report, April 1955, 82.
74. Perry Meyer, "Evidence in the Future," *Canadian Bar Journal* 51 (1973): 118.
75. Widtsoe, *Evidences and Reconciliations*, 19. "Chance, disorder, chaos are ruled out of the physical universe." Widtsoe, *Evidences and Reconciliations*, 19.
76. John W. Welch, David Rolph Seely, and Jo Ann H. Seely, eds., *Glimpses of Lehi's Jerusalem* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2004).
77. Regarding similarities between the Gadianton robbers and the complex phenomenon of ancient brigandage, see John W. Welch, *Reexploring the Book of*

- Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992), 248–49, and “Legal and Social Perspectives on Robbers in First-Century Judea,” in *Masada and the World of the New Testament* (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 1997), 141–53.
78. For a candid assessment, see Lance D. Chase, “Spaulding Manuscript,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 4:1402–3, which concludes, “Since 1946, no serious student of Mormonism has given the Spaulding Manuscript theory much credibility. In that year Fawn Brodie . . . dismissed the idea of any connection between Spaulding and Smith or their writings.” Yet the notion lingers in some circles.
79. John A. Tvedtnes, Brian M. Hauglid, and John Gee, comps., *Traditions about the Early Life of Abraham* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2001), 537–47.
80. Gordon B. Hinckley, “Lord, Increase Our Faith,” *Ensign*, November 1987, 54.