

# THE DANGERS OF REVELATION

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Because of the pitfalls of revelations, we must proceed with both faith and skepticism.

ILLUSTRATION BY DAN OLSEN

UNLIKE many faiths, the rock foundation of the Mormon religion is not the Bible but the continuous flow of divine revelation, not only to prophets and apostles, but even to the "least Saint."<sup>1</sup> Revelation, we believe, is a personal, intimate doorway to the sublime. In recalling the power of personal inspiration in my own life, I am led to affirm that no amount of rationality or logic could take the place of the undergirding insights, reassuring comfort, or sustaining resolve that has been mine through the power of prayer. Still, though revelation has been compared to a solid rock upon which the Church is built and against which the gates of Hell shall not prevail,<sup>2</sup> there are nevertheless numerous indications that it is a delicate, elusive, even tenuous phenomenon. Because of the complexities involved in recognizing revelation and discerning its source, I would like to discuss what I perceive as several important aspects of revelation— aspects which I shall refer to as the *dangers of revelation*.

*DANGER NUMBER ONE: Revelation can be cause for intolerance and arrogance.*

Because revelation is considered by some to be the last word on any subject, those who feel inspired on a particular topic are sometimes tempted to assert that their insight is superior. A good example is Norman Bloom, described by one writer as "a contemporary American who incidentally believes himself to be the

Second Coming of Jesus Christ." Bloom is convinced "that he has been chosen to reveal God's presence. [He] has been a fixture at some scientific meetings where he harangues the hurrying, preoccupied crowds moving from session to session." To those who fail to listen to his divine message, Bloom asserts that "though you reject me and scorn me, and deny me, YET ALL WILL BE BROUGHT ONLY BY ME. My will will be, because I have formed you out of nothingness. You are the Creation of My Hands. . . . I AM THAT I AM. I AM THE LORD THY GOD IN TRUTH." To Bloom, the scientists who have been either too busy or too uninterested to respond to his claims are nothing but "hypocrites and mockers."<sup>3</sup> Obviously, this man's religious convictions have done little for his generosity towards and acceptance of those who disagree with him, not to mention his humility.

Since it is usually impossible to disprove a revelation, there mere *claim* of revelation has enabled many would-be leaders to manipulate obedient disciples. While some such manipulation of individuals has been relatively harmless, it is questionable how quickly this generation will forget the horror that resulted when hundreds of Americans chose to believe that the Reverend Jimmy Jones somehow acted with the authority of God.

But Bloom's arrogance is insignificant compared to other examples of religious intolerance. History is replete with devout religionists who have humiliated, ostracized, banished, jailed, tortured and even murdered those who would not believe as they do.<sup>4</sup>

**Editors' Note:** This paper and the following response were delivered at the 1982 Sunstone Theological Symposium.

It is easy enough to ignore such problems outside our own church, especially if we believe that such people have been influenced by something other than true revelation. But unfortunately, Mormons are not immune to such intolerance. I am ashamed when I reflect on the great number of members, particularly missionaries, whom I have heard make disparaging comments about Jehovah's Witnesses, Born-Again Christians, Catholics, or members of other religions. Who is exempt? What words, for example, came to mind when I described Norman Bloom? Crackpot? Looney? Weirdo? The assumption inherent in such intolerance is, I believe, "we are right and they are wrong." Why are we right? Because we have the "true revelation" from God.

Perhaps a little self-pride would be justifiable if it bound us together and gave our religion more internal unity. But personal revelation can become a source of intolerance even among members of the Church. I am informed, for example, that a translator preparing an early draft of one of the oriental editions of the Book of Mormon asserted he had been inspired by God; it was God's translation. When another Church translator attempted to correct glaring, confusing grammatical errors in his manuscript, he was extremely offended and went to an administrator to protest changes in his "inspired version."

Another example comes from a BYU professor who reports that after airing his views on a particular religious topic, he received a number of phone calls from individuals who opposed his belief. At least one caller berated him rather severely for saying things which did not agree with the revelations she had received.

*DANGER NUMBER TWO: The emphasis on our leaders' receiving revelation to guide the Church can lead to an unhealthy devotion to Church administrators bordering on blind obedience.*

Individuals in the Church, perhaps insecure about their own inspiration, have told me that they are more willing to trust the revelations of apostles and prophets than their own religious experiences. While it is easy to see wisdom and practicality in this approach, it is unfortunately also easy to see deep-seated self-doubts and flagging self-images.

The reason for this may be that when one begins with a belief in dramatic, obvious, undeniable, Cecil-B.-DeMille-Steven-Spielberg-George-Lucas type of revelations and then discovers that one's own experience with inspiration is far more subtle, it becomes easy to assume such dramatic manifestations are still experienced by our Church leaders who are probably somehow entitled to a better or more direct line to heaven.

I see two fallacies in this kind of thinking. First of all, in trusting other people's spiritual experiences more than our own, we make an assumption about their inspiration which is not necessarily founded in fact. Joseph F. Smith, for example, while president of the Church, explained before the United States Congress that while he had experienced impressions of the spirit just as any good Methodist or any other good church member might, he did not profess to have received any revelation, "except so far as God [had] shown to [him] that . . . Mormonism [was] God's divine truth."<sup>5</sup>

Second, while personal visitations of deity and other impressive displays may indeed occur on occasion, their

lack does not justify self-deprecation or waning self-confidence, especially if one believes, as Joseph Smith taught, that "God hath not revealed anything to Joseph, but what He will make known unto the Twelve, and even the least Saint . . . as fast as he is able to bear them."<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, trusting others' revelations more than our own can lead to a kind of unthinking obedience that hurts not only the individual, but also leaders, who may be in as much need of their followers' insight as they are of their own. Addressing this concern, Brigham Young made a statement which is now well-worn in fundamentalist propaganda:

I am more afraid that this people have so much confidence in their leaders that they will not inquire for themselves of God whether they are led by Him. I am fearful they settle down in a state of blind self-security, trusting their eternal destiny in the hands of their leaders with a reckless confidence that in itself would thwart the purposes of God in their salvation, and weaken that influence they could give to their leaders, did they know for themselves, by the revelations of Jesus, that they are led in the right way. Let every man and woman know, by the whispering of the Spirit of God to themselves whether their leaders are walking in the path the Lord dictates, or not.<sup>7</sup>



TRUSTING OTHERS' REVELATIONS MORE THAN OUR OWN CAN LEAD TO UNTHINKING OBEDIENCE THAT HURTS NOT ONLY THE INDIVIDUAL BUT ALSO THE LEADERS.

Unfortunately, Brigham Young's solution to the problem leads to

*DANGER NUMBER THREE: The emphasis on the necessity of members receiving revelations for themselves occasionally causes agonizing confusion for some.*

The insistence that members can and will receive revelation from God depending on their faithfulness, sincerity, and readiness to receive is pervasive. It is in James' exhortation to ask of God (James 1:5) and Moroni's oft-quoted "promise of the Book of Mormon" (Moroni 10:4-5); it is in the writings of Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, and other Church leaders. And it is ingrained in many of our missionary lessons and pamphlets. The result of such a thorough campaign is that when some individuals seek the promised revelation and then do not receive it, they often blame their own unworthiness. Such turmoil and confusion

can be extremely distressing, as Robert Elliot illustrated so well in his play, *Fires of the Mind*.

A similar problem was once common in Language Training Missions where missionaries were promised that *all* could learn the language and memorize the discussions if only they had the faith. Inevitably, many sincere, hard-working missionaries became extremely frustrated and began to question their standing before the Lord. While we have come a long way in resolving this problem for missionaries, I fear that in the case of personal revelation, there are still members of the Church who suffer similar anguish.

*DANGER NUMBER FOUR: For others, the pressure for every member to receive personal revelation leads some individuals to become skilled in self-deception.*

I am concerned that in encouraging members to get their own revelation by "noticing the first intimation of the spirit,"<sup>8</sup> we sometimes unwittingly teach them to interpret almost any good feeling as revelation, whether that feeling comes from the spirit or from our own emotional yearnings. By so doing, we lead them down a path of self-deception until some individuals no doubt become very skilled at subconsciously concocting revelations of their own.

A poignant example is that of Kent and Mischel Walgren, a young Mormon couple who, after extensive study, fasting, and prayer, came to the painful conclusion that their spiritual experiences in the Church were mere fictions.<sup>9</sup>

*DANGER NUMBER FIVE: While the notion of personal revelation may frighten some timid followers into blind obedience, it can also lead more confident persons into unrighteous dominion.*

Since it is usually impossible to disprove a revelation, the mere *claim* of revelation has enabled many would-be leaders to manipulate obedient disciples. Some have been relatively harmless; others, such as the Reverend Jimmy Jones, have been unforgettably cruel.

Using divine revelation to control or lead other people has also been widespread among Mormons. Most of the problems with the gift of tongues in the early days of the Church, for example, arose because individuals assumed that their interpretations constituted divine revelations which must be obeyed. The gift of tongues and interpretations was invoked by some to question the authority of Joseph Smith, by others to call individuals to repentance, by small children to command adults, and even by some as testimony in Church courts.<sup>10</sup>

While most modern Mormons do not fall prey to schemes involving the gift of tongues or seer stones, the problem of using inspiration to manipulate others is with us still. Indeed, in Utah Valley stories of individuals who use tales of revelation to convince their sweethearts to marry them are so common they have become a local joke. It would almost be funny, if it weren't for the fact that such infringements on people's personal lives occasionally *do* happen.

*DANGER NUMBER SIX: Revelation and religious conviction can produce feelings of satisfaction which impede the search for truth.*

Too often, people have allowed their faith in the religious world to interfere with their investigation of the physical world. The progress of medicine, for example, was impeded for hundreds of years by the belief that disease was caused by spiritual or supernatural forces. Similarly, progress in the physical

sciences was effectively halted for generations by individuals who believed that to challenge Aristotle's views of the world was to challenge the inspiration of the highest religious authorities who supported those teachings.

Not only has revelation left some people with little or no desire to search for truth on their own, but in many cases it has also prompted them to forbid others to seek greater knowledge. As one writer has noted, "the aged Galileo was threatened by the Catholic hierarchy with torture because he proclaimed the earth to move. Spinoza was excommunicated by the Jewish hierarchy, and there is hardly an organized religion with a firm body of doctrine which has not at one time or another persecuted people for the crime of open inquiry."<sup>11</sup>

Such prejudices also emerge in Mormonism. Members have been told to "leave the 'mysteries' alone,"<sup>12</sup> and "when our leaders speak, the thinking has been done."<sup>13</sup> As Joseph Fielding Smith put it, "We should keep our feet on the ground and not get off in . . . the things which the Lord has not made plain."<sup>14</sup>

Typical of this attitude is this same leader's remarks concerning the exploration of space. Labeling the notion of space travel "foolish," he claimed man is destined to remain on earth, and "should be content to stay," not because of economical concerns or practical priorities, but merely because "there is no prophecy or edict ever given that mortals should seek dominions beyond this earth."<sup>16</sup> It is staggering to think what primitive state we might still be living in if every scientist or inventor had believed that he or she had to wait for a divine edict before venturing into a new frontier.

Even at the Church-owned university, where one might expect a higher regard for the open exchange of ideas, professors have been harrassed by General Authorities and members of the university's Board of Trustees for expressing themselves on certain topics because such expressions are seen as challenging the finality of the word of God. Such leaders have, for example, expressed suspicion over or condemnation of such fields of study as the arts, hypnotism, organic evolution, certain management theories, and various economic, political, and psychological philosophies.

*DANGER NUMBER SEVEN: There are indications that revelation and prophecy are not reliable forecasters of future events.*

Joseph Smith, for example, incorrectly prophesied that Hiram Page and Oliver Cowdery would be able to sell the Book of Mormon copyright in Canada;<sup>17</sup> that the world should end within fifty-six years of the year 1835;<sup>18</sup> that a temple would be built in Jackson County during the generation that lived in 1832;<sup>19</sup> that many living on the earth in 1833 would see unparalleled bloodshed in the United States which would sweep the wicked of that generation off the earth and prepare for the return of the lost tribes of Israel from the north country;<sup>20</sup> that if the Congress of 1843 did not protect the Saints that they would be broken up and damned by God, and that there would be "nothing . . . left of them—not even a grease spot";<sup>21</sup> and that within three years of 1839, the Saints "should march to Jackson County and there should not be a dog to open his mouth against them."<sup>22</sup>

With equal accuracy, Parley P. Pratt asserted as a prophecy in 1838 that "there will not be an unbelieving

Gentile upon this continent 50 years hence; and if they are not greatly scourged, and in a great measure overthrown within five or ten years from this date, then the Book of Mormon will have proved itself false."<sup>23</sup>

Numerous individuals no longer living, including Wilford Woodruff, Heber C. Kimball, William Smith, Orson Hyde and others, were told in priesthood blessings that they would be alive in mortality to witness the Second Coming of the Savior.<sup>24</sup> A great many other Church leaders have made prophecies concerning the return of the Saints to Jackson County and other subjects which simply did not come to pass as scheduled.<sup>25</sup>

In light of the great number of prophecies that have failed, it is hardly surprising to discover revelatory predictions that have actually come to pass. Indeed, given the law of averages, it would be unusual *not* to be able to find at least some prophecies that were genuinely fulfilled.

A common explanation for unfulfilled prophecies and promises is that the individuals involved can render prophecy void by their unrighteousness. William McLellin, for example, never went south to preach to a large multitude nor heal the lame although Joseph Smith had seen a vision in which McLellin did those very things.<sup>26</sup> It is reasoned that since McLellin apostatized from the Church in Far West, he forfeited the possibility of this vision's coming to pass.

Other unfulfilled prophecies are explained by complicated reinterpretations of the original wording, such as assuming that the term "this generation" means something other than any normal, literate speaker of English thinks it means. This loophole makes it possible for almost any seemingly-failed prophecy to come true at some future date.

But such explanations render the gift of prophecy virtually useless. If prophecy depends on people's working to bring it to fulfillment, then revelation becomes little more than a statement of intent. And to suggest that revelations are given with such odd twists of semantics that they rarely mean what they say is tantamount to believing in a God who either can't or won't express himself clearly or doesn't really want us to know what's on His mind. Or else he has a very strange sense of humor.

The fallability of revelation would probably not be cause for concern at all if people viewed prophecy as an interesting phenomenon in which they made no investment. But such is simply not the case. Excessive devotion to revelatory predictions can result in shocking violations of common sense and even endanger life. A few years ago, for example, a young returned missionary suffered an injury when a falling beam crushed his arm. A priesthood holder, apparently acting under what he considered to be inspiration, blessed the young man and promised him that he would heal completely. When the arm did not respond to medical treatment, the boy was given another blessing, this time by a General Authority, who made the same pronouncement: the arm would be completely healed. But the arm turned gangrenous, and eventually the doctors (themselves active members of the Church) were forced to amputate. Because the boy and his parents had such faith in the fulfillment of the blessing,

they delayed the operation far longer than was wise. The delay nearly cost the boy his life as well as his arm.<sup>27</sup>

Even more shocking is the recent incident in Logan in which a seminary teacher believed he was commanded by God to sacrifice his infant son and restore him again to life. Tragically, only the first part of the experiment worked.<sup>28</sup>

*DANGER NUMBER EIGHT: Revelation often emerges in great variety, resulting in conflicting doctrines and troubling inconsistency.*

Conflicting teachings by men claiming inspiration is probably the leading cause for the proliferation in our century of so many so-called Mormon "fundamentalist cults." Such conflicts became a serious problem in the Church as early as 1830, when Hiram Page began receiving revelations through a seer stone which contradicted the revelations received by Joseph Smith. Fortunately for the survival of the Church, a solution was quickly arrived at whereby only the revelations of Joseph Smith were considered valid. Appropriately enough, this solution was given to the Church through the medium of inspiration.<sup>29</sup> Need I point out who received this revelation?



WHEN INDIVIDUALS SEEK PROMISED REVELATION AND THEN DO NOT RECEIVE IT, THEY OFTEN BLAME THEIR OWN UNWORTHINESS.

Obviously, any church can reduce the number of conflicting revelations by designating only one person as having authority to receive valid pronouncements from God. But such an action ignores the basic problem: Why should Joseph Smith's inspiration be considered superior to that of Ellen White? Or Mary Baker Eddy? Or Mohammed? Or Buddha? Or the Pope? Or for that matter, Hiram Page? The conflicts in the revelations of these religious leaders are not minor differences of emphasis. Indeed, as Carl Sagan has pointed out,

Human religions are mutually exclusive on such fundamental issues as one god versus many; the origin of evil; reincarnation; idolatry; magic and witchcraft; the role of women; dietary proscriptions; rites of passage; ritual sacrifice; direct or mediated access to deities; slavery; intolerance of other religions; and the community of beings to whom special ethical considerations are due. We do no service to any religion in general or any doctrine in particular if we paper over these differences.<sup>30</sup>

To phrase the problem in Joseph Smith's words, "Who of all these parties are right; or, are they all wrong together? If any one of them be right, which is it, and how shall I know?"<sup>31</sup> His answer to these questions was obtained by revelation, a solution which isn't an objective solution at all, but only continues a vicious circle created by the fact of conflicting inspiration. Some have suggested that the test of any revelation is the fruit that it bears over time. If an ideology brings forth good results, it must have been a true revelation. But this is not a satisfactory explanation. A multitude of religious sects carry on practices and rituals which could not be said to be either truly good or truly bad. Too, it is possible to find some "good fruit" in almost any event, even in many tragedies. Moreover, if one must wait for long periods of time to discern the truth of revelation, then inspiration loses its immediate revelance and might as well be discarded in favor of the wisdom of experience.

In making these several observations about the limitations of revelation, my purpose has not been to suggest that we should completely discard revelation and mysticism, but only that we be extremely wary of its pitfalls. Brigham Young observed that the Mormon people and Church have never yet received a perfect revelation.<sup>27</sup> Until that revelation comes, we must proceed with both faith and skepticism. Revelation must never be an excuse for intolerance or manipulation of others. Instead, leadership ought to be maintained, "only by persuasion, by long-suffering, by gentleness and meekness and by love unfeigned."<sup>33</sup> The search for truth must be carried forward on not just one, but many fronts. While cosmological insights, for example, may come through inspiration, they must be tested by rigorous objective standards, for revelation must never be divorced from, as Joseph Smith said, "time and experience and careful and ponderous and solemn thoughts."<sup>34</sup>

Complete solutions to these problems will not, I suspect, come quickly. But until we do know more about the universe, the beings that occupy it, their modes of communication and the limits of human perception, we are forced to be content with the conditions described by the Apostle Paul:

Whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away. For our knowledge is always incomplete and our prophecy is always incomplete, and when the complete comes, the incomplete shall be done away. . . . At present we see only puzzling reflections in a mirror, [but] the time will come when we shall see reality whole and face to face. At present all I know is a little fraction of the truth, but the time will come when I shall know it as full as God has known me.<sup>35</sup>

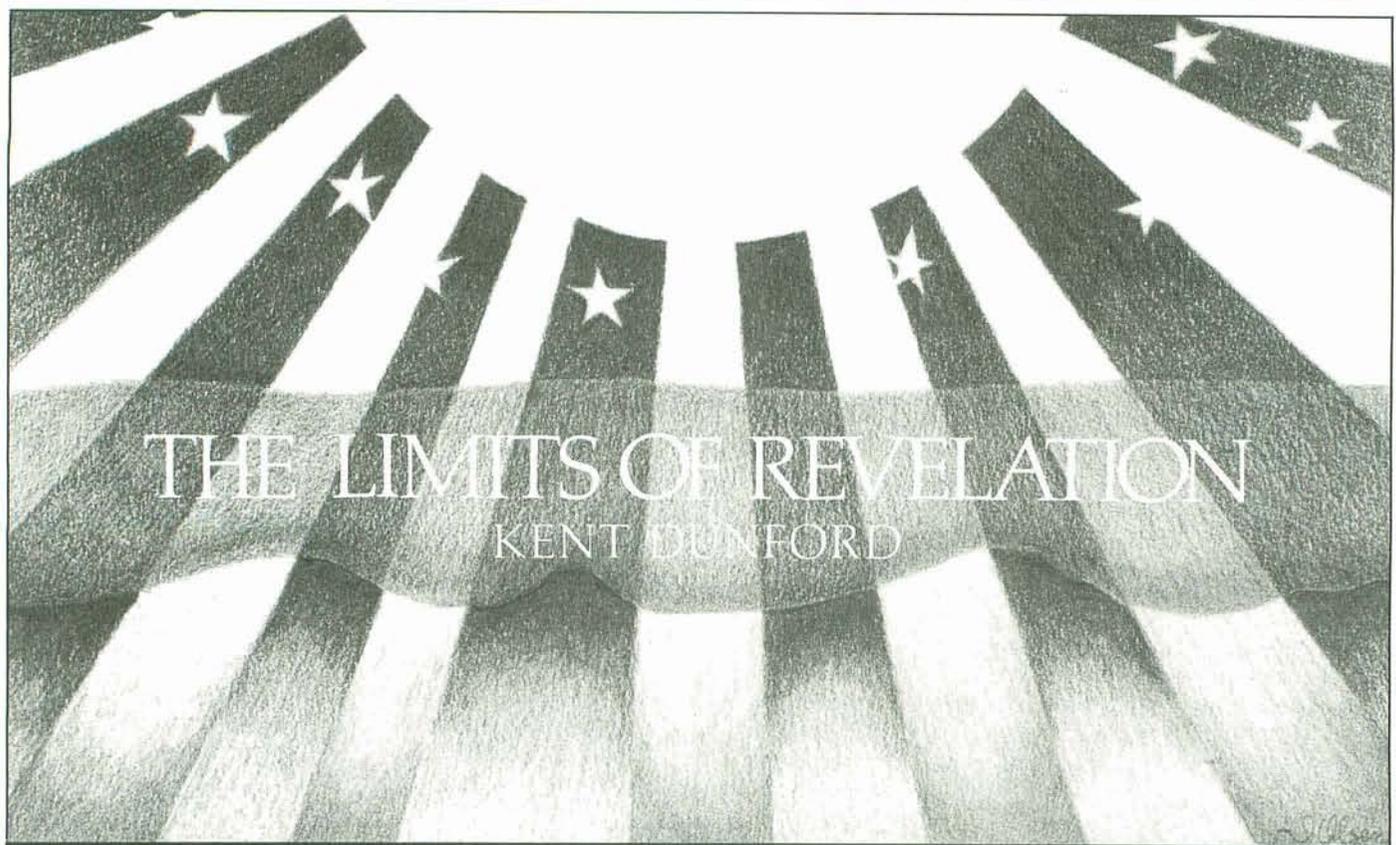
#### Notes

1. Joseph Fielding Smith, ed. *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1976), p. 149. Hereafter cited as *Teachings*.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 274.
3. Carl Sagan, *Broca's Brain: Reflections on the Romance of Science* (New York: Random House, 1979), pp. 130-31. Sagan is careful to point out that

the capitalization conventions are Bloom's alone.

4. Perhaps the best-known cataloging of religious martyrs is *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*, abridged from Milner's edition by Theodore Alois Buckley (London: Routledge, Warne, and Routledge, 1864).
5. *Proceedings Before the Committee on Privileges and Elections of the U.S. Senate in the Matter of the Protests Against the Right of Hon. Reed Smoot, A Senator from Utah, to hold His Seat* 4 vols. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1904-06) 1:483-84, 99.
6. *Teachings*, p. 149.
7. Address by Brigham Young, 12 January 1862, *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (London: Latter-day Saints' Book Depot, 1855-1886), 9:150.
8. *Teachings*, p. 151.
9. Kent Walgren, "Some Sentimental Thoughts on Leaving the Fold," *Dialogue* 8 (Winter 1980): 75-80.
10. Scott Dunn, "Glossolalia: Evolution of a Religious Phenomenon in Mormonism," unpublished paper, 1982.
11. Sagan, *Broca's Brain*, p. 284.
12. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, comp. Bruce R. McConkie, 3 vols. (Salt Lake City, Utah: Bookcraft, 1954) 1:305.
13. "Ward Teachers' Message for June, 1945: 'Sustaining the General Authorities of the Church,'" *Improvement Era* 48 (June 1945):354.
14. Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, 1:305.
15. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Answers to Gospel Questions*, 5 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1976), 2:191.
16. *Ibid.*
17. B.H. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of the Church*, 6 vols. (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1965), 1:162-63, 164-66.
18. Joseph Smith, Jr., *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B.H. Roberts, 2d ed. rev., 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1932-1951), 2:182 (hereafter cited as HC).
19. *Doctrine and Covenants*, 84:2-5, 31.
20. *HC*, 1:315-16.
21. "History of Joseph Smith," *Millennial Star* 22:455.
22. [Reed Peck], *The Reed Peck Manuscript: An Important Document Written in 1839* (Salt Lake City: Modern Microfilm Co., n.d.), p. 3.
23. Parley P. Pratt, *Mormonism Unveiled: Zion's Watchman Unmasked; and its Editor, Mr. L.R. Sunderland, Exposed: Truth Vindicated: The Devil Mad & Priestcraft in Danger*, 2d ed. (Painesville, Ohio: Reprinted from Wm. D. Pratt, 1838), p. 15.
24. Wilford Woodruff Journal, 15 April 1837, Library-Archives of the Historical Department of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City (hereafter cited as Church Archives); *HC*, 2:189; *HC* 2:191; "History of Joseph Smith," *Millennial Star*, 15:206; *HC*, 2:188.
25. Jerald Tanner and Sandra Tanner, *Mormonism: Shadow or Reality?* rev. ed. (Salt Lake City: Modern Microfilm Co., 1972), pp. 186-95.
26. *HC*, 2:381.
27. This story was related to me by a friend of the family.
28. "Man Faces Trial Over Stabbing Death of Baby," *Daily Herald* (Provo), 28 January 1982; "Plea of Insanity Accepted in Utah Murder Case," *Daily Herald* (Provo), 11 April 1982; "Baby Death Case Nears End," *Daily Herald* (Provo), 20 August 1982; "Woman Exonerated in Child Stabbing," *Daily Herald* (Provo), 22 August 1982.
29. *Doctrine and Covenants*, 28.
30. Sagan, *Broca's Brain*, p. 282.
31. *Joseph Smith History*, 1:10; *HC* 1:4.
32. Minutes and General Record of the First Council of Seventy 1847, p. 66 (10 February 1845), Church Archives.
33. *Doctrine and Covenants*, 121:45.
34. *Teachings*, p. 137.
35. 1 Corinthians 13:8-10, 12. The translation here is my own mixture of the King James, New English, and J.B. Phillips translations.

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# THE LIMITS OF REVELATION

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Learning to expect less than perfection of prophets and revelation does not mean we cease to revere them.

**H**AVING lived and worked in an academic environment for over two decades, one thing has become abundantly clear to my mind—that is the limitation of man’s knowledge. Although I have great respect for what man has attained intellectually, I maintain that man’s knowledge has not given us solid answers to life’s ultimate questions and, what’s more, I believe that man’s knowledge is incapable of providing such answers. What branch of knowledge at the university can prove or disprove the existence of God? Can prove or disprove the possibility of life after death? Can tell man how he should live his life? Scientific knowledge is earth bound. It is limited to an examination and evaluation of physical phenomena. It has little to offer concerning the great philosophical and religious questions of the ages. Religion, on the other hand, has claimed a source of information that lies beyond the boundaries of science, namely revelation. Our only hope lies in the reality of revelation. If God has disclosed his will to mankind, then we have a substantial body of truth upon which to base our lives. If there is no such revelation, if all we possess is the limited, finite knowledge of human minds, then we are all groping aimlessly in a world of intellectual uncertainty.

The claim to revelation is thus the most essential proposition in Mormonism. Joseph Smith once wrote that it was the principal concept that distinguished his

religion from other Christian churches.<sup>1</sup> If revelation is non-existent in the Mormon church, it would have little more to offer than any other man-made religion.

Yet some have argued that there are *dangers* in relying on revelation. While I agree that such dangers ought to be considered, I do not agree that all are of sufficient gravity to cause consternation among the faithful. I believe these dangers exist primarily because of an inadequate understanding of the *limitations* of revelation. A comprehension of such limits will solve or at least minimize many potential problems.

For our purposes we will define divine revelation simply as “an experience in which communication with God takes place.” There are various types of revelation. Sometimes God has communicated in dreams and sometimes through actual appearances of heavenly messengers. Inspiration or mental enlightenment is by far the most common method of divine communication. An example of this method is found in these words of Joseph Smith: “By the power of the Spirit our eyes were opened and our understandings were enlightened, so as to see and understand the things of God” (D&C 76:12). How definite and precise are the ideas revealed by this method? I believe that they are less than infallible.

There is, first of all, the problem of ascertaining whether the source of one’s revelation is divine. Inspiration may come from a demonic source as in the examples of Sherem (Jacob 7:18) and Korihor (Alma 30:53). The devil can appear as an angel of light (D&C 128:20); he can reveal false things (2 Nephi 28:20 f.). In

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1831 the Lord warned the Church "that there are many spirits which are false spirits, which have gone forth in the earth, deceiving the world" (D&C 50:2). The saints were counseled to "test the spirits."

To add to the difficulty, there is unquestionably another source of "revelation," namely, one's own psychic and emotional being. History is replete with examples of those who have claimed divine guidance and were in reality guided by their own illusions and hallucinations. There are numerous examples of this in our own Church history. One such story, although some question its historicity, is when Joseph Smith felt inspired to send a few of his associates to Canada to sell the copyright of the Book of Mormon. According to David Whitmer, Joseph explained their failure by saying, "Some revelations are of God; some revelations are of man; and some revelations are of the devil."<sup>2</sup>

There is often a fine line between what we designate "religious experiences"—such as an inspirational service or an exalted feeling while reading or praying—and what we designate "revelation." How does one tell in such instances whether such feelings are coming from "beyond" or are generated by one's own physical and emotional organism? Joseph Smith declared that a person would profit by noticing the "first intimations" of the spirit of revelation. He stated it would give the individual "sudden strokes of ideas" and would be like having pure intelligence flowing through the mind.<sup>3</sup> Joseph was here describing a divine communication, but have we not all had similar naturalistic experiences? How is one to know the difference? In the "Journal History of the Church" is found the following:

The Twelve met in their prayer circle room and began talking of the spirit of God. Pres. Orson Hyde said he had often found it difficult to discern between the dictation of the spirit of the Lord and his own desires in things which he wished accomplished.<sup>4</sup>

In a brilliant discourse on revelation, B.H. Roberts offered this counsel:

I take it to be one of the most important considerations that we make ourselves competent to distinguish between the promptings of our own human intelligence, to know when it is the spirit of the Lord that prompts, and when it is the adversary of men's souls who approaches us and whispers his counsels in our ears.<sup>5</sup>

It is probable that the competence mentioned by Roberts would take some time to acquire, and before that competence is developed, revelation would seem to be considerably less than an absolute guide.

Another common type of revelation in the Church is usually given the name of "spiritual confirmation." This occurs when an individual comes to his own conclusion and then asks God for some kind of feeling or indication that his decision is true, proper, or in harmony with God's will. The Lord's reply to Oliver Cowdery when he failed in translating is usually given as the best example of this method (see D&C 9:7-9). Knowing how emotion usually colors and distorts the thinking of human beings, this method seems especially risky. If a young man, to use a common example, is praying for the Lord to confirm his decision to marry the girl he loves, would he likely be unresponsive to a "no" answer? Could he mistake his biases and emotional propensities for the

divine answer?

Do not these conclusions force us to admit that the most common types of revelation are something less than an infallible guide and that there exists a possibility for confusion, error, and even deception in some revelatory experiences?

Other arguments corroborate this conclusion. Let us consider a few more; for instance, the fallibility of the revelatory receptor. When finite man experiences a heavenly vision, he may find it impossible to capture the totality of that experience in words or in print. Joseph Smith exulted over what he saw in the vision of the glories saying that they surpassed "all understanding in glory, and in might, and in dominion." He added that man was incapable of making these things known (D&C 76:114-116). A revelation from God and the written account of that experience are not synonymous. The record is not the revelation but an interpretation of the revelatory experience. John A. Widtsoe explained:

The message of the scripture is divine; the words in which it is clothed are human. Failure to make this distinction has led to much misunderstanding. Intelligent readers will separate the message of scripture from its form of presentation.<sup>6</sup>

The original writers of the Book of Mormon spoke of the inadequacy of their language in expressing the things of God. Moroni, for example, complained that

the Gentiles will mock at these things, because of our weakness in writing, for Lord thou hast made us mighty in word by faith, but thou has not made us mighty in writing....Wherefore, when we write we behold our weakness, and stumble because of the placing of our words; and I fear lest the Gentiles shall mock at our words.<sup>7</sup>

Joseph Smith also struggled to interpret the ancient language of the Book of Mormon plates and express them in his own words. The most commonly accepted theory of the Book of Mormon translation is that it required Joseph to be in spiritual harmony with God, to study the ancient linguistic symbols in his mind and then express their meaning in his own language. This explains why the first edition of the Book of Mormon had numerous grammatical errors and a considerable amount of early nineteenth century terminology. Daniel H. Wells once stated that the Book of Mormon would probably be worded differently had Orson Pratt or John Taylor been the translator.<sup>8</sup>

Is it not then likely that the personality of the prophet somewhat colors the final form of the translation or the revelation? B.H. Roberts thought so:

When we have a communication made directly from the Lord himself there is no imperfection whatever in that revelation. But when the Almighty uses a man as an instrument through whom to communicate divine wisdom, the manner in which that revelation is imparted to men may receive a certain human coloring from the prophet through whom it comes.<sup>9</sup>

In summary, we can see that there may be a good deal of the human element appear in the completed revelatory product. Pure truth comes from the mind of God, is filtered through the finite mind of man, is written in his imperfect language, and is then read by another human mind. Could there not be in this process

a diminution of the truth that originated in the mind of God?

Another limiting factor to revelation is the often neglected teaching of Joseph Smith that a prophet is not always a prophet, but only "when acting as such."<sup>10</sup> Apostle Bruce R. McConkie has admitted: "With all their inspiration and greatness, prophets are yet mortal men with imperfections common to mankind in general. They have their opinions and prejudices and are left to work out their problems without inspiration in many instances."<sup>11</sup> Doctrine and Covenants 68:4 defines scripture as words that men speak when "moved upon by the Holy Ghost." The statement implies that men of God may speak when they are not so "moved." How often are Church leaders speaking in their role as prophets? What percentage of their spoken words are inspired by the Holy Ghost? The answers vary. Some would argue that inspiration comes daily, and certainly this may be so if we are including every type of inspiration received by Church leaders. If, on the other hand, we are talking about significant, more definite types of revelation intended for the guidance of the Church, they may be relatively infrequent. B.H. Roberts even when so far as to say that this type of revelation is only an "occasional" phenomenon:

Now as to the third point, —about men being constantly under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, so that all they say and do is an inspiration of God, even the answering of questions.

There is nothing in the doctrines of the Church which makes it necessary to believe that, even of men who are high officials of the Church. Cases exist where men have been excommunicated for their discourses. They were certainly then not inspired. When we consider the imperfections of men, their passions and prejudices, that mar the Spirit of God in them, happy is the man who can occasionally ascent to the spiritual heights of inspiration and commune with God! . . . I think it improper to assign every word and every act of a man to an inspiration from the Lord. Were that the case we would have to acknowledge ourselves as being wholly taken possession of by the Lord, being neither permitted to go to the right nor the left only as he guided us. There could then be no error made, nor blunder in judgment; free agency would be taken away, and the development of human intelligence prevented. Hence, I think a factor in the administration of the affairs of the Church; not even good men, no, not even though they be prophets or other high officials of the Church, are at all times and in all things inspired of God. It is only occasionally, and at need, that God comes to their aid.<sup>12</sup>

There are two final conditions that often lead to confusion and criticism with regard to revelation. It is true that revelations of the present can differ from revelations of the past. What a great contrast, for instance, exists between the religion of the New Testament and that of the Pentateuch. This often brings charges of inconsistency and falsehood. Secondly, revelations are sometimes altered to make them more applicable to contemporary needs. This may be perceived by some as tampering with and distorting the divine word. But I believe such circumstances can be in full harmony with God's method of dealing with his children. First, the scriptures clearly teach that God reveals a level of truth that is consistent to the capacity and worthiness of his subjects. Joseph Smith declared

that "the Lord deals with this people as a tender parent with a child, communicating light and intelligence and the knowledge of his ways as they can bear it."<sup>13</sup> Secondly, revelation is usually given piecemeal—"line upon line, precept upon precept." Joseph Smith made many alternations in the Doctrine and Covenants as he learned greater truths and insights from heaven. Mormonism of the Kirtland period, for example, was considerably different doctrinally from the Mormonism of the Nauvoo period.

If one subscribes to the limitations of revelation discussed above, it would appear that the so-called "dangers" of revelation are either greatly minimized or nullified. How can we be "intolerant and arrogant" when we realize that the ground on which we stand is not so absolute and certain as we had thought? Would not a truer knowledge of the process of revelation greatly reduce the "blind and unhealthy devotion" to Church leaders and diminish the "self-deception" and "confusion" that often afflict Church members? An understanding of the foregoing conclusions should assist us in seeing the necessity of each conducting an individual quest for truth, in both the intellectual and spiritual spheres. Shouldn't we expect a prophet to sometimes be mistaken? Would diversity and inconsistency in the claims of revelations be anything different than we would expect?

Learning to expect less than perfection of prophets and revelation should not mean that we have ceased to revere their office and calling. Nor should it be concluded that because revelation is less than infallible that it is therefore useless as a source of knowledge. I have only hoped to help the dogmatic and unthinking to be wary of its limitations. I still believe that the accumulated total of all the recorded revelations of the ages give us a sure guide to truth. I reiterate my conviction stated at the beginning: If there is no such thing as revelation, we are lost without direction in a world of intellectual uncertainty.

#### Notes

1. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B.H. Roberts (2nd ed. rev.; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1959-60), IV, 42. Hereafter referred to as *HC*.
2. B.H. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1930), I, 162-163.
3. *HC*, III, p. 381.
4. Minutes in the Journal History of the Church, December 13, 1858. Located in LDS Church Historian's Office, Salt Lake City, Utah.
5. B.H. Roberts, *Defense of the Faith of the Saints*, (Deseret News: Salt Lake City, 1907), I, 507-532.
6. John A. Widtsoe, *Articles of Faith in Everyday Life*, p. 68.
7. Book of Mormon, Ether 12:23-25.
8. Minutes of the School of the Prophets, Salt Lake Stake, December 9, 1872, p. 3. Located in LDS Church Historian's Office, Salt Lake City, Utah.
9. B.H. Roberts, *Defense of the Faith of the Saints*, I, 507-532.
10. *HC*, V, p. 265.
11. Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1958), p. 547.
12. B.H. Roberts, "Revelation and Church Government," *Improvement Era*, March, 1905, pp. 358-370.
13. Alma Burton, *Discourses of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Deseret Book: Salt Lake City, 1956), p. 158.