
FROM THE EDITOR

DOUBTING IN THE CONTEXT OF FAITH



By Elbert Eugene Peck

A COUPLE OF years ago I sat through a Gospel Doctrine class responding silently to myself over and over, "I don't believe that. . . . I don't believe that. . . ." Fortunately that is not a regular occurrence for me. Still, the sense of alienation during that experience was frightening, for with each expression I felt further estranged from the community I cherish and want to be part of, fearing that verbally sharing my views would have branded me. Even if that wasn't true, I was in a double-edge situation: while speaking up would annoyingly and unappreciatively disrupt the prepared lesson, continued silence would only exacerbate my internal schism. So I became reflective. How many thoughtful, believing Saints, I wondered, increasingly feel like they are not full-fledged citizens because they mutely question some of the assumptions of the household of God?

This year the tables are turned: I teach Sunday School and, unfortunately, others silently dissent. While researching a recent lesson on Old Testament wisdom literature (Proverbs and Ecclesiastes) I unexpectedly encountered a hopeful dynamic: the scriptural marriage of prophetic revelation and human insight and a public dialogue between the Establishment voice and the doubter.

Diverging from the Law and the Prophets, which biblical books reveal Yahweh's covenant and warnings to Israel with unquestioned divine authority, the book of Proverbs celebrates the divine in human wisdom—the grass-roots knowledge attained from analyzing personal experience and from observing humankind and creation. Apparently, many of the collected sayings in the book were originally oral truisms of the tribes which were later gathered and artistically crafted by the Ben Franklins of Jerusalem. Believing that "the fear of the LORD is the foundation of knowledge" (1:7),¹ Proverbs subordinates its

human understanding to God and acknowledges its limitations by openly embracing conflicting maxims in the book. In pursuit of God and his righteousness, Proverbs' pragmatic counsel focuses on the worldly wisdom of how to achieve the good life here and now, covering such items as slothfulness, vanity, backbiting, thriftiness, as well as the practicable aspects of keeping the commandments. In spite of this down-to-earth agenda, when I read Proverbs I am inspired to live a higher ethical life directed to God and my neighbor, and I feel a spiritual affinity with the editors' quest to find the Divine in the world's learning.

Nevertheless, when you think about it, it is to Israel's credit that it placed these bottom-up, common-sense revelations of everyday Saints in the biblical canon *alongside* the top-down, "thus saith the Lord" revelations of Moses and Isaiah—an Old Testament tradition that has not yet been restored in this dispensation.

If we had a latter-day book of proverbs, what popular LDS phrases would be in it? Perhaps the famous (to Mormons) Emerson quote: "That which we persist in doing becomes easier. . . ." Probably "No other success can compensate for failure in the home" would be included as well as, "It's not where you serve, but how" and, "When the prophet speaks, the thinking is done." Maybe, using the parallel form of ancient Israel, we'd craft one proverb from two opposing commonplaces: "Obedience is the first law of heaven; but one should not live on borrowed light." (I realize most of the above examples originate with Church leaders, which might say something about our culture.)

In any event, I think we should acknowledge, celebrate, and consider the democratic aspects of inspiration among the rank and file members in today's commu-

nity—for instance, the increasing awareness of the lack women's contributions in Church deliberations—as well as the authoritative statements from the general prophets, seers, and revelators. Proverbs gives us a precedent and a model.

IN direct contrast to the believing aphorisms of Proverbs is the skeptical essay of Ecclesiastes.² The obviously well-educated author of this book was reared on the "how to" norms and commandments of the "Establishment" wisdom which produced Proverbs and prescribed a Puritan-like industriousness. Yet this Jewish sage, whose perceptions are also primarily based on observation and experience (not revelation), questions and rejects the simplistic platitudes in Proverbs and cynically notes that, although God rules, exactly how is an unfathomable mystery: "Sometimes the just person gets what is due to the unjust, and the unjust what is due to the just" (7:14) for "food does not belong to the wise, nor wealth to the intelligent, nor success to the skillful; time and chance govern all" (9:11).

Obviously sensitive to the injustices of his society and apparently not in a position to correct oppression, throughout his lengthy, "futile" ("vanity" in the King James) discourse of trying to discern cause and effect in the social world, the Preacher vehemently spurns the wisdom tradition of single-minded toil if it denies one from enjoying the good things of life now (2:22-23; 4:7-8; 5:11, 16) because success is unpredictable (3:1-11), because comfort from wealth is chancy (2:18-21), and because labor regularly brings neither profit, improvement, originality, nor remembrance (1:3-11). Similarly, the author abhors the zealous pursuit of luxury. Instead, he advocates an enjoyable work which keeps options open, embraces the day-to-day ordinary joys which are gifts of God (2:24; 3:22; 9:7-9) and accepts evil. "I know that there is nothing good for anyone except to be happy and live the best life he can while he is alive" (3:12).

Upon consideration, it is also remarkable that this book criticizing its own contemporary orthodox theology is in the biblical canon, especially with its emphasis on here-and-now enjoyment. Too, this disillusioned preacher is clearly a sincere intellectual who has had few or no personal spiritual experiences: "I perceived that God has so ordered it that no human being should be able to discover what is happening here under the sun. However hard he may try, he will not find out" (8:17-18). Yet, the speculative author

of Ecclesiastes does deeply believe in God and his justice, however incomprehensible, and concludes that our duty is to "fear God and obey his commandments. For God will bring everything we do to judgment" (12:13-14). (Interestingly, some scholars believe that that oft-quoted and reassuring closing affirmation is an upbeat addition by a post-exilic correlation committee.)

While Ecclesiastes' message obviously must be supplemented by and defer to the witnesses and oracles in the other books, the fact of its presence in the Bible is alone important: the devout doubter and the questioning intellectual have a dignified and visible place in the believing community. This point was recently affirmed by Lowell Bennion in commenting on the father's petition to Jesus on behalf of his convulsive, "dumb" son, "Lord, I believe; help thou my unbelief" (Mark 9:24):

The cry of the father . . . resonates in my own heart. . . .

Jesus did not rebuke the father for his unbelief, and the father confessed his unbelief to the Savior in the context of asking for help. I believe that our Heavenly Father is pleased with such confessions. What could make for healthier growth than expressing doubts in a context of faith.¹

What could indeed? Although Jesus and the Bible generously embrace doubters within a believing context, it is nevertheless a challenge for doubting, yet believing, Saints to share their questions within the believing community today and receive non-judgmental succor. Fortunately, the presence of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes gives solace and hope to the skeptic and to those who have few spiritual experiences. Still, we must find ways to cultivate our common faith in Christ while abiding—and hopefully bearing—the burdens of the questioning citizens in the Kingdom (which I believe all of us are on occasion); cultivating that healthy, believing context in which the expression of doubts engenders love, acceptance, and oneness. ☒

NOTES

1. All scripture quotes are from the Revised English Bible with the Apocrypha, Oxford University Press and Cambridge University Press, 1989.

2. See Addison G. Wright, "Ecclesiastes (Quoheleth)" in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* edited by Raymond E. Brown, et al., Prentice Hall (Englewood Cliffs: 1990), 490.

3. Lowell L. Bennion, *Legacies of Jesus*, Deseret Book Company (Salt Lake City, 1990), 44.

THE TABLE

The fan moving the New York night
cannot conceal the sound of someone turning
and turning in bed. Beth switches on the light,
and Elise laments, "I've spent years fighting
the idea of a broken heart and contrite spirit.
Wouldn't you know that truth would come
to me through images of food?"

"Moses had to see the whole world to realize
he was nothing. I saw me planning
a fine meal for a friend. Then I dreamed
I stood in the grocery line, realizing
I had no money. The friend paid.
And, of course, I'd filled too many bags,
but the friend carried them for me.
But then there was too much to do,
and this place is so small and hot,
so the friend pitched in. Oh, I grated
fresh ginger, basted cornish hens,
and set out the finest plates, but I
could give nothing of my own. And I cried."

"And then the sequence switched,
to a meadow with a table
so long no one could take it all in.
The linen was fine, the table heaped
with clear jellies, glazed meats,
puddings, berries and clotted cream."

"Minstrels came by, but they would not eat,
saying no one spreads a table for second-rate
musicians. Then well-dressed people
laughed that a table in a meadow
is a hoax. And beggars wanted to wash
their clothes before approaching the feast."

"It was true that no one could bring a thing
to the feast, but no one was expected to.
Being contrite is not sackcloth
and ashes, after all, not sacrifice.
Each person needs only to reach—
that's the whole thing, the reach."

"What about you?" asks Beth, fully awake.
"You reached to the table didn't you?"
"No," Elise cries, "I looked around to ask
you to go with me, and then I awoke.
But I'll reach next time, don't you think?"

Reassuring her, Beth turns out the light.
But no one in 12N can sleep. Each turns and turns,
seeing the times she's been afraid to reach,
seeing changes she must make to accept the feast.

—LORETTA RANDALL SHARP