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### Introduction: The Right of Man to Know the Meaning of Life

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# Introduction: The Right of Man to Know the Meaning of Life

All men know that they must die. And it is important that we should understand the reasons and causes of our exposure to the vicissitudes of life and of death, and the designs and purposes of God in our coming into the world, our sufferings here, and our departure hence. What is the object of our coming into existence, then dying and falling away, to be here no more? It is but reasonable to suppose that God would reveal something in reference to the matter, and it is a subject we ought to study more than any other. We ought to study it day and night, for the world is ignorant in reference to their true condition and relation. If we have any claim on our Heavenly Father for anything, it is for knowledge on this important subject.

Joseph Smith<sup>1</sup>

It is not only a privilege but a duty for the Saints to seek unto the Lord their God for wisdom and understanding, to be in possession of the Spirit that fills the heavens until their eyes are anointed and opened to see the world as it really is . . . to look through the “why’s” and “wherefore’s” of the existence of man, like looking through a piece of glass [that is] perfectly transparent; and understand the design of the ⟨Creator⟩ [Great Maker] of this beautiful creation.

Brigham Young<sup>2</sup>

This treatise is to be a search for the truth, as it relates to the universe and to man; a consideration of the way as it relates to the attainment of those ends which may be learned as to the purpose of man’s earth-existence; and the contemplation of the life that will result from the knowledge of the truth and the way.

It is to be a new study of an old theme: the whence, the why, and the whither of human existence. It intends to find out whether or not there is any purpose in human life; any scheme of things in the universe; and if ordinary men may cognize them and follow them. Is there a truth,

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<sup>1</sup>Smith, *History of the Church* 6:50.

<sup>2</sup>Brigham Young, *Deseret News*, May 8, 1853; *Journal of Discourses* 1:111.

a way, a life, that can be made to appeal to reason as well as to faith? Can it be made to satisfy the understanding as well as the longings of the human heart? Will it lead to something more than a pleasing hope, a fond desire, a mere longing after immortality? Or shall we accept the last statement and what is described as the most characteristic sentences of Professor William James, the American philosopher and psychologist, which he left written upon his desk at his death, namely: "There is no conclusion. What has concluded that we might conclude in regard to it? There are no fortunes to be told, and there is no advice to be given. Farewell."

To find all this out is the task we set before us; and when we contemplate the largeness of the theme, the height and the depth of it, and recall how many world-geniuses have wrecked their thought upon it, we marvel at the audacity that dares to attempt so much!

Yet there is great need that someone should seek to bring forth to the clear understanding of men the Truth, the Way, and the Life, for there is great confusion existing among men on these matters of such high import.

If the author of this proposed treatise were depending upon his own learning, or on any way of wisdom in himself to justify the investigation of these high themes, then he would not only shrink from the task but would abandon it altogether, as being inadequate to such an undertaking. But the author believes himself to be living in what, in the parlance of his faith, is called the Dispensation of the Fullness of Times in which a great volume of truth has been revealed in addition to, but in harmony with, the truth revealed in former dispensations. In fact in this Dispensation of the Fullness of Times all truth of former dispensations and the whole volume of it, is being merged into a unity. The veil of mystery is being rent to reveal the things of God in their completeness, and it is upon the basis of this more fully revealed knowledge that the author ventures to speak, rather than from any learning or intellectual excellence in himself.

The method of approach to the heart of the general theme is through the apparently paradoxical mental process of assuming that:

I know in order that I may believe;  
I believe in order that I may know.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>This remark paraphrases St. Augustine's *Sermon 43*, where he argues that one must first assent to the beliefs of the Christian faith before one can know the truthfulness of those beliefs, and that reason is then employed to increase faith and knowledge. Augustine found this principle of philosophical and theological enquiry in Isaiah 7:9, where the Greek version reads "Unless you believe you will not understand." See also Augustine, Epistle 120; and "we believed that we might

In other words, the author is seeking a basis for faith in the revealed things of God by examination of the things we know. Nor in this does he recognize any inconsistency in seeking for belief in revealed truth from a basis of knowledge. “Faith is . . . the evidence of things not seen,” says St. Paul (Heb. 11:1); and “evidence” must be the things known that lead to belief, which is “faith” in its simplest form. Speaking of belief in God, Paul asks, “How shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher?”—one sent to teach them (Rom. 10:14). “So then faith cometh by hearing” (Rom. 10:17)—by hearing the evidence on which faith in its simplest form necessarily rests, from which evidence faith struggles into existence and develops into robust life that shall enable it at last to attain to the sublime power of accepting and enduring as seeing that which is invisible. But one must find some basis of knowledge, some ground of evidence from which he may believe; from which ground of faith he may arise to the higher knowledge of things as they are.

One other working principle will frequently recur in the treatise—“how can we reason but from what we know?” Accepting the implication of the question as true, knowledge again becomes imperative, and hence our opening division of the treatise, what is truth, and how much do we know of it? And what foundation does it lay for that faith which leads to the realization of the deeper and higher truths of life, and its purposes, and of God?

The answer to these questions we trust will be found in the text of the discussion which follows.\*

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know: for if we wished first to know and then to believe, we should not be able either to know or to believe,” *Joannis Evangelium Tractatus*, 27, 9. The meaning of Roberts’s apparent reworking of the Augustinian maxim is not entirely clear. Does he mean that one must know first in order to believe? Might he be thinking of the censured Abelard who inverted the Augustinian maxim to “I cannot believe until I first know”? Roberts does not discuss the text sufficiently to make a final determination; but in that Augustine believed the intellect is properly used only in the service of Christianity, Roberts would basically agree with him. We are grateful to James Siebach for the information in this note.

\*At the end of this introduction, Roberts added this note: “It has been suggested that this work could be used to advantage as a textbook on theology, and to make it available for such use each chapter has been constructed in a manner and given such relation to the developing theme that it may be so utilized. Also a lesson analysis has been made for each chapter with collected references so that the textbook idea may be easily put into effect. These lesson analyses with accompanying references are printed as addenda at the end of the volume.” Because each lesson analysis was only a list of the subheadings in each chapter, these analyses have been combined into the consolidated chapter analysis or table of contents for *TWL* that appears on pages 3–13 above. The references are all listed in the bibliography at the end of this book and are also all cited in the footnotes in each chapter.