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Historicity and the Truthfulness of God

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Robert J. Matthews

While some may argue that gospel truth is separate from historical truth, the gospel cannot be true unless it is also historical. This means that events such as the Creation, Fall, Atonement, and Restoration all truly took place in an identifiable time and place, even if that time and place are not known to us. If these or any gospel events were not historically true, God could not render a righteous judgment on any person.

Unless the conditions of the gospel are historically true and are founded in both time and place, God could not render an honest and fair judgment on humankind.

It all begins with what a person thinks God is, what he thinks the devil is, what salvation is, what truth is, and what one's own existence is. Without some knowledge of these things, one has no frame of reference with which to understand oneself, what this mortal life is, or even what truth is. In order to have any firm grasp on these basic concepts, one has to recognize and accept the existence of *absolute* truth, that is, the existence of a body of truth or facts that are unvarying and everlasting, absolutely grounded in actual existence in both time and place. The scriptural definition of truth is knowledge of "things as they really are, and . . . as they really will be" (Jacob 4:13; D&C 93:24).

Finite mortal man cannot of himself obtain a knowledge of the absolutes because they are beyond his mortal capabilities of research. Methods and tools of human origin are too crude to measure infinite things. The acquisition of absolute truth requires revelation from an

absolute, unchanging, infinite God. When a revelation from God has been obtained, one has tapped into the limitless reservoir of divine knowledge, intelligence, and experience of eternity that transcends what any human mind could conceive of on its own. Even if the mind could formulate a concept of eternity, the mind could not be certain whether it was a figment of its own imagination or whether it was actual fact. Certitude can be possible only by the light of divine revelation.

The Prophet Joseph Smith stated that revelation from God is “the most glorious principle of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.”¹ He also explained that without divine revelation no person can know anything about God or the devil: “If it requires the Spirit of God to know the things of God; and the spirit of the devil can only be unmasked through that medium, then it follows as a natural consequence that unless some person or persons have a communication, or revelation from God, unfolding to them the operation of the spirit, they must eternally remain ignorant of these principles; for I contend that if one man cannot understand these things but by the Spirit of God, ten thousand men cannot; it is alike out of the reach of the wisdom of the learned, the tongue of the eloquent, the power of the mighty.”²

Since God is a God of truth, his revelations are always true. Each revelation does not contain the whole truth, but each will always be in accord with the absolute and be given from the perspective of the whole truth. I have often heard talk about the difference between spiritual truth and historical truth, but that is meaningless. Usually people talk about these so-called two areas of truth because they want to harmonize some concept the world has accepted with the revelations of God. They feel this approach will enable them to believe in the gospel without differing with the world. But it appears to me that it is not possible that there could be spiritual truth separate and apart from historical truth. Truth *is* historical or it is not truth. The nature of truth makes philosophical reasoning unnecessary to establish its existence.

Some examples may be helpful. First, let us consider the character of God. The seven *Lectures on Faith*, first delivered in Kirtland, Ohio, in the fall of 1834, explain that God’s character and personal attributes are, and of necessity must be, absolute. He is holy, just, truthful, merciful, knowledgeable, powerful, and unchangeable. He

is absolute in every characteristic, and He is permanent. If He were anything less, He would not be God.³

The Significance of Time and Place

Let us consider next the Creation, the Fall, and the Atonement. In both ancient and modern scripture, this absolute God declares that He created the earth and man for a wise purpose. He has not explained the entire process, but He has given us to understand that He was the authorizing agent in the Creation. He further declared that He placed Adam and Eve, real people who were not subject to death, in a Garden and gave them commandments, which they transgressed and thereby brought about a process of physical, spiritual, and moral degeneration resulting in death. This is called the Fall. We are duty bound to accept the fact of Adam's Fall, because a truthful God has spoken it.

To be historically true, the Creation has to fit into some identifiable time and place. The time and the place may not be identifiable to finite man, but they *are* known to God. Likewise to be historical, the Fall of Adam (whatever the process) had to occur at some actual geographical location that can be defined by such coordinates as longitude, latitude, and altitude and could be recorded chronologically.

Jesus Christ claims to be the Son of God in the flesh. In that way His precise lineage is superior to the lineage of other men. Because God the Father is the Father of Jesus' earthly body, Jesus was a God while on earth in the flesh, and therefore He could conquer death. We are duty bound to believe precisely these things about Jesus, because they were revealed in a serious manner by a truthful God. God revealed also that Jesus Christ did not commit any sin on earth, that He shed His blood for a ransom of humankind, and that He died on the cross and rose from the dead with His glorified, tangible body of flesh and bones. Each of these events had to occur in both time and place, so literally that they could be recorded by a chronometer, placed on a calendar, and marked on a map. Therefore we are duty bound to believe in them.

The same is true of Joseph Smith's First Vision, the coming forth of the gold plates of the Book of Mormon, the restoration of the priesthood by angels, and a large number of other events. All these

are historical and geographical events with a history in both time and place.

The Lord could have given Joseph Smith the Book of Mormon without the gold plates, or the Book of Abraham without use of the papyrus. He could have manufactured the finished products in heaven and handed them to us. But I think such would have seriously impaired our responsibility to understand how the Lord works. Since the earth is tangible, and we are tangible, it is consistent with God's ways and His plainness and openness that His work be made available to us in a plain, simple, and tangible manner as far as possible—without artificial magic, unnecessary mystery, or any deception. God is indeed a worker of miracles, but there seems to be a law that miraculous ways are not used if the matter can be accomplished without them. There were real plates, real papyrus, real angels with real hands to confer priesthood, and a real Savior who suffered real pain and shed real blood. Such literalness gives the gospel substance, justifies the believer, and more fully leaves the unbeliever without excuse.

Historicity and Judgment

The events we have listed above (such as Creation, Fall, Atonement, Resurrection) are the very foundation of the gospel of Jesus Christ, both anciently and in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints today. Furthermore, the Lord has spoken and instructed us as follows: “Ye shall be holy; for I am holy” (Lev. 11:44), and “I would that ye should be perfect even as I, or your Father who is in heaven is perfect” (3 Ne. 12:48). If the foundational events of the gospel of Jesus Christ did not literally occur—if there were no gold plates, no Urim and Thummim, no angel Moroni, no Father and Son in the Sacred Grove, no Fall of Adam, no resurrection of Jesus Christ—then nothing is true, and even God Himself has not told the truth and is therefore neither holy nor perfect. Our Judge cannot hold *us* to righteousness on the Day of Judgment, if *He* has not been truthful Himself.

Judgment would be a sham, and eternity would be chaos, if every aspect of the gospel is not totally and completely true. Consider the predicament that would arise at the judgment bar if the founding

events of the Christian faith did not happen. A righteous judgment could not be rendered against any part of humankind who did not believe the gospel if the plan is based on any falsehood. On the other hand, what about those who *did* believe the gospel if that gospel is not totally true? Could God in all honesty bless and reward them for believing a lie? That would make mockery of faith; for faith is to hope for things that “are not seen, which are true” (Alma 32:21). Or in other words, faith is the assurance that the gospel of Jesus Christ is true (JST Heb. 11:1). It is my conviction that God has not been playing games with us. The revelations and the founding events of the gospel are historically true, both in time and in place. I expect that the unbelieving portion of humankind will find on the day of judgment that what the Lord and His prophets have said about the plan of salvation is literally and historically true. Therefore, the way in which we respond to these events while in our mortal probation will exert a permanent influence in our final examination. If we have not believed the facts of the gospel of Christ, our lives have been built on a sandy foundation instead of on a rock. Everything about the judgment must be fair and open. There must never come a time when anyone can justifiably say that our Heavenly Father was unfair, or that any incompleteness or deception existed in the plan of salvation. God will be totally vindicated in every particular.

Of course I know that there are figurative statements in the scriptures, but such things are obviously figurative. Such expressions as “I am the door,” or “ye are the salt of the earth,” enrich the language and add layers of meaning that would be impossible to duplicate without the use of symbols. Nevertheless, actual historical events are not spoken of in such figurative terms.

The marvelous and wonderfully logical Paul spoke of the integrity of the gospel when he wrote:

Now if Christ be preached that he rose from the dead, how say some among you that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there be no resurrection of the dead, then is Christ not risen: And if Christ be not risen, then is our preaching vain, and your faith is also vain. Yea, and we are found false witnesses of God; because we have testified of God that he raised up Christ: whom he raised not up, if so be that the dead rise not. For if the dead rise not, then is not Christ raised: And if Christ be not raised, your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins. Then they also which are fallen asleep in Christ are perished. If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable.

But now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the first fruits of them that slept (1 Cor. 15:12–20).

Father Lehi, a doctrinal giant, was thinking along the same lines when he explained to his son Jacob that unless the Gospel is literally true, the earth

must needs have been created for a thing of naught; wherefore there would have been no purpose in the end of its creation. Wherefore, this thing must needs destroy the wisdom of God and his eternal purposes, and also the power, and the mercy, and the justice of God. . . . But behold, all things have been done in the wisdom of him who knoweth all things. Adam fell that men might be; and men are, that they might have joy. And the Messiah cometh in the fulness of time, that he may redeem the children of men from the fall. And because that they are redeemed from the fall they have become free forever, knowing good from evil; to act for themselves and not to be acted upon, save it be by the punishment of the law at the great and last day, according to the commandments which God hath given (2 Ne. 2:12, 24–26; see also 2 Ne. 11:7).

The Miracle of Salvation

The salvation that God promises is not simply the acquisition of some knowledge, manners, and learned responses. It is not a coating of intellectual polish, or a veneer of sophistication. It involves some of that, but the salvation that comes through Jesus Christ is considerably more. It includes: (1) a mighty change of heart, (2) a cleansing from past sins by a baptism of water and the Holy Ghost, or of fire, and (3) a sanctification of the very tissues of the body. Salvation involves being born again, becoming a new creature in Jesus Christ, having the dross purged by the Holy Ghost, and having an eye single to the glory of God. Attainment of knowledge, although an *aid* to salvation, will not sufficiently change and purge the heart of man. It takes the Spirit of God speaking to man's spirit to give a testimony, and it takes a cleansing by the Holy Ghost to change a person from a natural man into a saint. Without that divine change, a person is not saved. All of these processes are miraculous because they cannot be accomplished by the laws of the mortal world, but they are real, and they are historical.

For these very reasons we understand that the gospel is more than a system of ethics, a social order, or a mental exercise. Without the historical divine birth of Jesus Christ, His actual sinless life, the

historical shedding of His precious blood in Gethsemane, His literal death on the cross, and His literal physical resurrection from the grave, there could have been no redemption from sin or from death even if we had the same set of gospel rules, the same gospel ordinances, and the same ethics that we now have. The plan would lack power without the ultimate triumph over sin and death by Jesus Christ. Nothing is more basic to the gospel than the historical fact of Jesus' Atonement. He came to atone for the Fall of Adam, as well as for our personal sins. By His life, His death, and His blood, He paid for a broken law. Without that payment, nothing we could do would save us in this life or the next. If Christ had not made the Atonement and risen from the dead, nothing man could do could ever make up the loss, and the Day of Judgment would be indescribably dreadful. But the historical nature of the Atonement of Jesus Christ makes the inevitable judgment a day of rescue, ransom, and redemption.

When our personal standard is revealed truth, we have no difficulty with the matter of historicity. The Prophet Joseph Smith explained that the same sociality will exist among people in eternity as exists among us now. That situation calls for reality and tangibility (D&C 130:1–3). Eternity, based on reality, leads to a literal view of heaven. This was magnificently expressed by Elder Orson Pratt:

A Saint, who is one in deed and in truth, does not look for an immaterial heaven, but he expects a heaven with lands, houses, cities, vegetation, rivers, and animals; with thrones, temples, palaces, kings, princes, priests, and angels; with food, raiment, musical instruments, &c; all of which are material. Indeed, the Saints' heaven is a redeemed, glorified, celestial, material creation, inhabited by glorified material beings, male and female, organized into families, embracing all the relationships of husbands and wives, parents and children, where sorrow, crying, pain, and death will be known no more. Or to speak still more definitely, this earth, when glorified, is the Saints' eternal heaven. On it they expect to live, with body, parts, and holy passions: on it they expect to move and have their being; to eat, drink, converse, worship, sing, play on musical instruments, engage in joyful, innocent, social amusements, visit neighboring towns and neighboring worlds: indeed, matter and its qualities and properties are the only beings or things with which they expect to associate.⁴

If these are the true riches of eternity (D&C 38:20, 39), a real world in physical space, and if the historical relationships we enjoyed here continue there, only on a much higher plane, then the historicity of central gospel events takes on even deeper meanings. Indeed, the

historicity of key scriptural events will form one unbroken chain from the premortal existence, through the Creation, Fall, Atonement, Resurrection, and Judgment to our eternal reward.

Before his retirement, Robert J. Matthews was professor of ancient scripture, Brigham Young University.

Notes

1. Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1938), 298–99.
2. *Ibid.*, 205.
3. See Larry E. Dahl and Charles D. Tate Jr., eds., *The Lectures on Faith in Historical Perspective* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1990).
4. *Millennial Star* 28, no. 46 (17 November 1866): 722.