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11

R. Wayne Shute and Wayne E. Brickey

Through their words, prophets stimulate perplexity (the state of being in doubt, confusion or bewilderment), either inadvertently (by the nature of their message) or by design. This perplexity in turn causes people to search for understanding and personal meaning—the faithful inquire of God and find truth, while the critics only find fault. There are no better illustrations of how prophets stimulate perplexity than in the book of Helaman generally and through the utterances of Nephi and Samuel particularly.

We begin by asserting that perplexity is an essential precursor to inquiry and, therefore, learning. We turn first to J. T. Dillon's analysis of what he calls "moments of inquiry." The inquiry cycle begins, he says, with our first encounter with some indecipherable perception that enters our view. The cycle advances through various phases until our perplexity has been resolved by making sense of that initial perception. As we consider Dillon's "moments," please note that genuine personal learning requires personal inquiry, and that sincere inquiry simply can't be launched without a beginning condition of

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perplexity. Dillon's "moments" (which can take mere nano-seconds or can stretch into decades) go something like this:

1. A percept enters our mind, but does not fit coherently with the pattern or picture of things we have in our mind.
2. A sense of healthy perplexity emerges, a bafflement that admits ignorance.
3. Driven by perplexity, we begin a search for the question that fits our ignorance.
4. On finding the question which truly expresses our specific perplexity, we frame or pose it accurately, either to ourselves or to others.
5. Then begins the search for the answer which truly fits our question.
6. The answer now is joined with the question—the two fuse into knowledge.
7. The conjunction of question and answer now constitutes a new percept. Potentially, the process of inquiry driven by perplexity begins all over again (18–23).

So, these "moments" are simply the proceedings by which the mind moves from a state of equilibrium to a state of perplexity and then through inquiry to a resumed but elevated equilibrium—a finer and more realistic grasp of things. Dillon's dissection of inquiry may be self-evident, but there are important implications.

One implication is that personal learning is not a mere gathering of information, for a piece of information that does not resolve a bewilderment isn't yet of value—it doesn't fit into any puzzle we were trying to piece together. An "answer" not looked for—by that part of us that seeks to find meaning—*isn't* an answer at all.

A second insight from Dillon's model is that meaningful inquiry requires perplexity; the phases of inquiry carry from one moment to the next in a critical chain, as natural events in the mind, and perplexity is the vital beginning. Without it, inquiry cannot occur.

Thirdly, the moments don't have to progress through a complete cycle. The cycle can be aborted by an inadequate love of truth or by a lack of integrity.

So, healthy perplexity kindles inquiry in people and often jars them out of grogginess into seeing meaning and even making decisions. It is our purpose here to examine the way in which prophets use perplexity to prompt personal inquiry on the part of God's children.

Jesus and His Prophets Stimulate Perplexity

If we look for this pattern in the ministry of Jesus, we are not disappointed. During his mortal sojourn and most vividly during the last stage of his ministry, Jesus puzzles and awakens his otherwise equivocating "admirers"; he backs them into cognitive corners and gives them a mental need to sort things out and take a stand.

One case is his prophecy concerning the destruction of the temple. This foretold a strange and incoherent future as noted in Matthew 24:2: "See ye not all these things? verily I say unto you, There shall not be left here one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down." They must now, with questions, answers, and searching minds, sort out that future until it makes sense.

Or, there were the Herodians who, at first only pretending to be inquirers, asked the question about paying tribute to Caesar. Jesus directs their attention to the money itself: "Whose is this image and superscription?" And then, "Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's." How did Jesus' response affect their minds? "They marvelled" (Matt 22:16-22). They were filled with astonishment and wonder; their perplexity equipped them to become real inquirers if their integrity would only permit.

We remind you of this provocative statement in Matthew 20:27-28: "Whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant: Even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto,

but to minister,” added to which is the ponderous but puzzling assurance, “and to give his life a ransom for many.”

There is also the parable of the servant who lived prior to the Lord’s coming. Guilty of being unwatchful and of not feeding the members of the Lord’s household with their needed meat, the servant is classed as a hypocrite, to be cut asunder (Matt 24:42–51). Our astonishment at this harsh and startling penalty begs us inquire into the real nature of our stewardship from the Lord of the household. The penalty only makes sense when the stewardship does.

Other examples of perplexity from Jesus’ ministry no doubt come to your mind. They are everywhere. In each case, Jesus creates a healthy perplexity which gets us off neutral ground, whereupon we stand to either gain or lose our soul. The need to inquire carries with it both a grave jeopardy and a glorious opportunity. In either event, inquiry is necessary. Jesus and his prophets are determined that we take the playing field, if you will, and not remain passive spectators in the grandstand.

Another illustration of how God favors perplexity in his children is the story surrounding the first vision of Joseph Smith. When Joseph was just a lad, his family was proselyted by a number of religious faiths which led Joseph to serious reflection and “great uneasiness.” He was greatly confused and bewildered. His feelings were “deep” and “poignant,” his mind was “greatly excited” because of the “cry and the tumult” which arose from the religious scene about him (JS-H 1:8–9).

While his mind labored under these “extreme difficulties” (JS-H 1:11), perplexity drove him deep into the cycle of inquiry; his questions grew more clear and Joseph grew more intent. “What is to be done?” he often asked himself. “Who of all these parties are right; or, are they all wrong together?” and finally, “If any one of them be right, which is it, and how shall I know it?” (v 10).

It was in this condition of mind—a condition of highly defined perplexity resulting in focused, white-hot, personal inquiry—that this invitation leaped from the writings of James:

“If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him” (James 1:5). We see here the impact that a divine invitation can have on the mind which has deeply committed itself to resolving perplexity. Of that experience, Joseph wrote:

Never did any passage of scripture come with more power to the heart of man than this did at this time to mine. It seemed to enter with great force into every feeling of my heart. I reflected on it again and again, knowing that if any person needed wisdom from God, I did; for how to act I did not know, and unless I could get more wisdom than I then had, I would never know. (JS-H 1:12)

Joseph’s persistence as an inquirer is especially evident in the grove, kneeling before the Father and Son, for even there he “no sooner [gets possession of himself], so as to be able to speak” (JS-H 1:18), than, in accordance with his “determination to ‘ask of God’” (v 13), he asks the question which had driven him there. The answer resolved perplexity, but it generated yet more perplexities. Thus, there were to be many more cycles of inquiry by this probing prophet (D&C 6:14), resulting in a grand coherent picture—a plan of salvation—revealed line upon line, inquiry after inquiry, each inquiry having its own pathos of “moments” and each beginning with that disequilibrium, that bewilderment, which we have been calling perplexity.

As students and disciples of that plan and its author, we, like Joseph, have things to sort out. We may say, with Moses, “I will not cease to call upon God, I have other things to inquire of him” (Moses 1:18). We too, as James said it, “lack wisdom.” We cannot borrow someone else’s cycle, though we may sometimes benefit therefrom. We will need our own focused, important questions, stemming from personal perplexity, without which answers will not really be answers at all. All this is so if we really care and if we are really honest. And the prophets can be depended upon to prime us by surprising our minds with messages from the mind of God.

President Ezra Taft Benson prods the Church and the world not only with testimony and doctrine, but also with perplexing

issues such as working mothers, liberal politics, pride, unchastity, consumer debt. Thoughtful Latter-day Saints have raised many prayers to heaven seeking answers to the perplexity generated by President Benson. To puzzles and questions which prepare the mind for meaning, a loving Heavenly Father can give answers—such as assurances, understanding, perspective, and hope—to his inquiring children.

The Book of Helaman: A Study in Perplexity

In the book of Helaman, we find prophets perplexing ancient peoples, and giving us plenty to be puzzled about if we are willing. Through miraculous events and utterances, Nephi and Samuel the Lamanite certainly baffled the people they spoke to and thereby pressed them to wonder about the things of God, to probe after the mind of God, or to make inquiry at the feet of prophets who already knew that divine mind. Depending on their desire to know the truth, the people were given answers to their inquiries. If they inquired honestly, they learned the truth; if the perplexity deteriorated into anger or arrogance, they gained no cognition and suffered the consequences.

The Case of Nephi, Son of Helaman

The world of Nephi, son of Helaman, was one of evil, contention, intrigue, war, and murder on the one hand. But on the other hand, it was also one of splendid elements in which the humble followers of Christ enjoyed peace and joy; the Church had, at times, a vast saving influence upon society; there was even a time of widespread repentance; there were wonderful prophetic utterances; there were times of stunning prosperity.

But in sum, the Nephite world of that period was decidedly evil. It was a world, as ours is, “filled . . . with confusion,” to use the words of D&C 123:7. Nothing went well, nothing could

go well, under this “iron yoke,” the very “fettters of hell” (D&C 123:8) created by people’s determined but false view of things.

Nephi and his brother Lehi finally became “weary” of the iniquity (Hel 5:4), for, as verse 3 tells us, it came to the point where the people “could not be governed by the law nor justice, save it were to their destruction.” Seeing only one hope, Nephi and Lehi discontinued all attempts at political solutions in order “to preach the word of God all the remainder of [their] days” (v 4). This was just the right approach, for the evil of their time was driven by a smug but grossly mistaken view of things.

Nephi and Lehi conducted their ministry in various lands, even among the “dissenters,” a word that denotes people who see things (or endeavor to see things) differently. So powerful were their words that the dissenters were often “confounded,” a word that suggests perplexed or puzzled (Hel 5:14–17). The minds of many others were affected similarly. For example, the Lamanites were struck with great “astonishment,” a word that means sudden wonder, or amazement. Eight thousand of these astonished Lamanites, in the course of resolving their perplexity, were converted, being convinced that their former views had been all wrong (v 19). In other words, the general effect of the early ministry of Nephi and Lehi was to disturb the picture which the hearer held in mind and to improve that picture if only the hearer were honest and interested in truth.

Later, this dramatic instance took place in a Lamanite prison in the land of Nephi.

And it came to pass that Nephi and Lehi were encircled about as if by fire, even insomuch that they durst not lay their hands upon them for fear lest they should be burned. Nevertheless, Nephi and Lehi were not burned; and they were as standing in the midst of fire and were not burned. (Hel 5:23)

The Lamanites could not lay their hands on Nephi and Lehi and “stood as if they were struck dumb with amazement” (v 25). Nephi and Lehi said, “Fear not, for behold, it is God that has shown unto you this marvelous thing, in the which is shown unto you that ye cannot lay your hands on us to slay us” (v 26).

The earth shook as did the walls of the prison. A great cloud appeared and overshadowed the people and an “awful solemn fear came upon them” (Hel 5:28). And, if these events were not perplexing enough, a voice spoke from heaven, calling on the people three times to repent and not destroy Nephi and Lehi.

Finally, one among them named Aminadab saw the shining faces of Nephi and Lehi through the cloud of darkness. The onlookers, now fully engaged but entirely baffled, asked Aminadab, “What shall we do, that this cloud of darkness may be removed from overshadowing us?” (Hel 5:40). We see again the predictable cycle of meeting with an astounding disruption of one’s picture of reality and in honest perplexity asking and searching. Of course, the question they ask here does not have the power to clear things up much: “How can we get rid of this darkness?” But it was a question. To Aminadab’s answer, which only repeated what Nephi and Lehi and a heavenly voice had already declared, the Lamanites were all ears. Their wonder was now sincere and open. Aminadab said: “You must repent, and cry unto the voice, even until ye shall have faith in Christ” (v 41). They were now seeking to resolve something more than physical darkness, even more than quaking earth and shaking walls. They now understood that darkness of mind and precarious, shaky lives were at the root of their trauma. Joining their honest confusion with trust in Christ and with heart-broken repentance, they cried unto the Lord. Immediately two kinds of light were introduced to them. A new kind of stability began to surround them (vv 42–44).

We speculate that their freshly bewildered minds were entirely childlike at the hands of the angels who now came down and ministered unto them (Hel 5:48). The inquiry cycle later spread to “the more part” of their countrymen who, hearing of these and other astonishing events, also inquired and “were convinced” (v 50). With new hearts and changed lives, they laid down not only weapons, but old ways of looking at things (v 51).

However, Nephi's greater challenges lay yet ahead, for the remaining population of Nephites was hardened, "impenitent and grossly wicked" (Hel 6:2). Satan had gotten "great hold upon the hearts of the Nephites" (v 31). This hardness demanded that Nephi be at his prophetic, perplexing best. Surprising insights, along with abrupt, incisive accusations introduced mental alarm to the otherwise impenetrable minds of his audiences.

You will recall the chain of perplexing events that developed out of Nephi's prayer upon his tower:

Event 1: Witnessed by astonished passers-by, Nephi prayed in sorrow over the wickedness of his people. "The people came together in multitudes that they might know the cause of so great mourning for the wickedness of the people" (Hel 7:11).

Event 2: Following his prayer, Nephi spoke to the throng in startling accusations, only a few of which were these:

How could you have given way to the enticing of him who is seeking to hurl away your souls down to everlasting misery and endless wo? . . .

It is because you have hardened your hearts; yea, ye will not hearken unto the voice of the good shepherd; yea, ye have provoked him to anger against you. . . .

Yea, wo be unto you because of that great abomination which has come among you; and ye have united yourselves unto it, yea, to that secret band which was established by Gadianton! . . .

Yea, wo be unto you because of your wickedness and abominations!

And except ye repent ye shall perish; yea, even your lands shall be taken from you, and ye shall be destroyed from off the face of the earth. (Hel 7:16, 18, 25, 27-28)

Event 3: The always dependable Gadianton judges sought to stir up anger in the crowd toward Nephi. Interestingly, many in the group were too honestly pricked in their hearts for such cheap stuff, and said, "Let this man alone, for he is a good man, and those things which he saith will surely come to pass except we repent" (Hel 8:7). The attempt to destroy Nephi was thus countered (v 10). Just as important, a false picture of things,

always trusted before, was beginning to break down in the more honest minds.

Event 4: Nephi's address culminated in a prophetic statement about the murder of their chief judge, an episode even then in progress (Hel 8:27). Consider how utterly bewildering this must have been to the people, for not only was the subject abruptly changed from repentance to murder (though not a very great change after one thinks about it), but grisly news of the normally sensational sort was being sent by heavenly channels through a solemn prophet, and all this just minutes before the fact.

Event 5: Attempts to pin the blame on Nephi were answered by even more remarkable evidences of Nephi's credibility, as he predicted the very manner of the murderer's shocked and trembling confession (Hel 9:26–31).

Most of Nephi's perplexed investigators, even with solid reasons to admit his testimony, even with every need to reexamine their false traditions, apparently walked away in a dishonest, self-blinding huff (Hel 10:1). A few—such as the five who came to see the truth even while being punished in prison for their honesty of heart (9:39)—resolved the perplexity Nephi cast up for them by inquiring after righteousness and, as a result, we must suppose that they became new creatures through baptism.

The Case of Samuel, the Lamanite Prophet

Few prophets have been called upon to be more baffling than Samuel the Lamanite. His abrupt appearance and departure but suggest the mysterious, arresting content of his teachings and prophecies. In 6 BC, the prosperous and militarily strong Nephites were not able to grasp Samuel's descriptions of impending doom. His teachings didn't make sense to them because of their misunderstanding of, or their ignorance of, or their disinterest in simple moral principles and doctrines. Of course, the people would understand his accusations of wickedness. They might even see the justice in a punishment of some kind.

But the linking of unrighteousness with eminent doom, or even with tottering solvency, was perplexing, shocking, nonsensical. Consider these examples from Helaman chapter 13.

Verse 5: Samuel says “the sword of justice hangeth over this people.”

Verse 6: He describes their fate as “heavy destruction,” warning that “nothing can save this people save it be repentance and faith on the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Verse 10: The term is “utter destruction” which “shall surely come except ye repent.”

Verses 13–14: Samuel says that only the presence of the righteous has preserved their great city from destruction by fire from heaven, so that driving the righteous out of their midst would make them “ripe for destruction.”

Verses 18–21: Samuel describes an especially perplexing curse upon their riches, which, because of an insane greed, would become illusive, “slippery” (v 31), and unretainable even if hidden up in the earth.

Verses 33–37: He predicts the future script which will eventually be their bitter cry of regret. Though they cannot feature it yet, these self-assured people will not many years hence glimpse the big picture too late. “Behold, we are surrounded by demons,” they will say.

Yea, we are encircled about by the angels of him who hath sought to destroy our souls. Behold, our iniquities are great. O Lord, canst thou not turn away thine anger from us? And this shall be your language in those days. (Helaman 13:37)

Of course, the ministry of Samuel was jarring in other ways too. Imagine the people shaking their incredulous heads at predictions of a night without darkness, a new star with many accompanying “signs and wonders in heaven,” a day without light, and topographical trauma beyond anything in the memory of humankind (Hel 14:3–6, 20–24, 27). And how could these stylish folks have reacted to what we read in Helaman 14:7? “And it shall come to pass that ye shall all be amazed, and wonder, insomuch that ye shall fall to the earth.” Even the

sophisticated—especially the self-sophisticated—lose their composure when an abrupt, incompatible, unexpected, unreasonable reality bursts upon them. How much better that they should permit honest wonder, inquiry and rethinking now than that they should have to fall to the ground in unhappy perplexity when it is everlastingly too late.

But the most striking thread running through the perplexing ministry of Samuel is the constant reminder of a Redeemer. Those cosmic signs just summarized were, after all, aimed at authenticating the testimony of Jesus in one way or another. Not only must the Nephite minds be jarred into an openness regarding the miraculous birth, the redemptive death, and the victorious resurrection of Christ, but there is more.

For one thing there is the startling concept of a superior being “who surely shall come into the world, and shall suffer many things and shall be slain for his people” (Hel 13:6). Though people often conclude with natural minds that there is a God, the idea of a Redeemer, especially a suffering and slain Redeemer, requires an unearthly perspective, an outright revelation. It is a perplexing idea that takes some getting used to, though once accommodated lends new power and grasp to the mind.

Perhaps the *coup de grace* is the theme of our faith in this Christ, this Messiah-friend (see Hel 13:6; 14:12–13; 15:7). Trusting him, making faith in him the first principle of our lives, is something we just wouldn’t have thought of without the intrusion of prophetic testimonies like that of Samuel. To this add the prospect that “faith and repentance bringeth a change of heart” (15:7). Our hearts may be changed from something rather too down-to-earth to something more fit for the presence of our Lord. Who would have thought that we could, by a mighty change, become His eternal companions? And yet what soul cannot see this—and would not seek for it—after honest inquiry?

We have all noticed that prophets are types of Christ. In the words of Alma 13:2, the ministers of God “were ordained after

the order of his Son, in a manner that thereby the people might know in what manner to look forward to his Son for redemption." Neither Samuel nor Nephi are exceptions to this pattern of typology. The characteristics most perplexing in these prophets are the very items which reveal anticipatory hints about the Holy One himself: Nephi's unnerving power over the elements and climate, his incisive foreknowledge of human affairs; Samuel's mysterious advent and disappearance, his immunity to hostile arrows; the teachings, testimonies, and prophecies of both of these messengers. These men of perplexity invite our search after their even more perplexing Lord.

Implications for Us

The book of Helaman describes how perplexing ministries affected ancient people, but the book is aimed primarily at modern readers. The greater influence of Nephi and Samuel will increasingly be their influence upon us. That is, what is now important is not the impact of these prophets on ancient people, but the impact that the account has on us. A saving perplexity awaits the honest and searching mind encountering those ancient prophetic labors. Will we give it quarter? And will we give quarter to other perplexity, and hence, inquiry, that await us in other holy books as well? Again the determination of Moses comes to mind: "I will not cease to call upon God, [for] I have other things to inquire of him" (Moses 1:18).

Mind-enlarging, soul-saving inquiry is fostered by perplexity, just as it is hampered by self-sufficient, mindless disinterest. The mists of darkness—passive, misguided traditions of mind—are best countered by the iron rod, but only if that rod is held actively, only if the word of God is considered closely.

We refer again to the prophets, especially the living prophets who live in our world and yet belong to another. Prophets naturally perplex us because they speak from a perspective transcending the natural mind. Though their

wisdom isn't mortal, without them we could never make sense of mortality. To borrow from Isaiah, "[Our] thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways [our] ways, saith the [prophets]" (Isa 55:8).

So, when prophets speak, we are bound to have a great deal of perplexity, especially if our view of things is still under construction. But if we are disposed toward eternal things, what prophets say will be a *sweet* perplexity, a refreshment to the hungry mind, a stimulant to inquiry. However, if we are not so disposed, if we do not delight in the truth of all things, if eternal verity is not our aim, the prophetic message will be not only bewildering, but distasteful to us.

The invitation stands ever open to us:

Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened. (Matt 7:7-8)

And we remember this cordial promise: "Therefore, go ye unto your homes, and ponder upon the things which I have said, and ask of the Father, in my name, that ye may understand" (3 Nephi 17:3). Or,

If thou shalt ask, thou shalt receive revelation upon revelation, knowledge upon knowledge, that thou mayest know the mysteries and peaceable things—that which bringeth joy, that which bringeth life eternal. (D&C 42:61)

We don't suggest that prophets go around intentionally trying to perplex people per se; we suppose that this is largely inadvertent. But planned or not, perplexity can prompt sacred investigations. Confusion and bewilderment can lead to clarity and certainty if we, ourselves, will inquire of God.

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