

## TRUTH IS REASON

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The assigned theme for this lecture is “How My Scholarship Informs My Theology.” That appears to be an invitation to bypass some of the formalities of academic writing and use the first person. The phraseology also seems to indicate that scholarship, in general, may impart information and give character to my personal theology, but it does not imply that scholarship informs theology in general. I am comfortable with that.

In fact, the subjects I learn and teach in my academic discipline have made me aware of a number of connections and patterns in the scriptures that, without scholarly study, would have remained hidden from me. Perhaps that happens because I am a student of language, and the scriptures are written in language, but I think such experiences are not limited to people in the English Department. Nevertheless, in my case, insights have come as a result of studying and teaching literature, and also as a result of studying and teaching writing.

For this occasion, I will focus on just one of the areas I have learned as a student of language. That area of scholarship is formal logic. Interestingly, I have been acquainted with some academicians who laud scholarship but avoid formal logic with the same care they take to avoid salmonella poisoning. The contention is that they can “sense” when an argument is right or wrong, and they do not need to be encumbered with all of the tools and paraphernalia. That reasoning is similar—or parallel—to that of some artists who discount the work of illustrators and graphic designers as “non-art” because they take the time to lay out and measure their designs before they begin. “Real art,” apparently, just happens, somewhat like spontaneous combustion.

I am not creative enough to believe that logic just happens. I am all left brain and no right, which probably accounts for my attraction to formal logic. Things ought to make sense. Truth ought not to contradict itself or change with the shifting of the wind. Bruce R. McConkie happens to agree with me on these points. He writes:

Truth is absolute and eternal; it endureth forever (Doctrine and Covenants 1:39; 88:66; Psalms 100:5; 117:2). It never varies; what is true in one age is true in every age. The theories of men (scientific or otherwise) vary from discovery to discovery and are in a continuing state of flux, unless they chance on a particular point to reach ultimate truth. Then there is no more change, and the truth discovered is in complete harmony with every other truth in every other field. Truth never conflicts with truth.

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Truth is not relative; it is absolute. What is true in one eternity is true in the next. The knowledge men have of the truth may be great at one time and slight in another, or the reverse, but the quantity of ultimate truth is neither added to nor diminished from by revelations received or discoveries made.<sup>1</sup>

Those who accept this definition of *truth*, and then define *scholarship* as the search for truth, can say, in fact, that scholarship *is* their theology. Unfortunately, not all ideas advanced in the name of scholarship fit into the category of truth, so the sincere scholar needs a means to sort out ideas worth keeping. As the Apostle Paul said: “Prove all things; hold fast that which is good” (1 Thessalonians 5:21).

So, the apostle counsels, “*Prove* all things.” To *prove* is to establish the *truth* and *validity* of an idea by the presentation of argument or evidence.

Formal logic is a tool for knowing, not guessing, whether an argument is valid. It is also a means for exposing *all* the premises of an argument, many of which may only be implied, and subjecting them to evaluation in an attempt to determine their truth. It requires a bit of effort, but it has its rewards.

Any sound argument must be both true and valid. An argument is true only if *all* of the premises and the conclusions connected with it are true. Sometimes it is fairly easy to determine the truth of an assertion used as a premise or drawn as a conclusion. One such assertion is:

All human beings require oxygen to survive.

Other assertions may defy proof or disproof by empirical data. As an example, consider the following:

Adolf Hitler lived in Argentina from 1945 until his death in 1987, at age 98.

Instead of proof, such statements can be given a *plausibility rating*. Considering all the existing information on the subject and the credibility of the sources of such information, one can reason out, with the use of logic, just how likely it is that the statement is true. That is helpful in forming further conclusions, although such conclusions remain theory and are not fact.

An argument is *valid* (though not necessarily true) if it is structured properly so that the conclusion can be drawn reasonably from the premises. The following argument is valid:

All green apples are sour.

This apple is green.

It is sour.

**An argument is true only if all of the premises and the conclusions connected with it are true.**

Changing the structure of the argument, as in the next example, makes the argument invalid. In other words, the conclusion drawn is not based on the premises.

All green apples are sour.  
This apple is sour.  
It is green.

These are simple concepts and easy to remember. Applying them to the material one normally reads can enhance perception. For example, after I became familiar with the patterns of logic, I saw that the Book of Mormon is filled with logical arguments that are intended to persuade the reader to act or become convinced of some truth.

One such argument is the exchange between Zeezrom and Amulek. Having been sent to call the people of Ammonihah to repentance, Alma and Amulek find the citizens to be less than receptive, but, having gathered a group of people together, they deliver their message. Alma speaks first, and then Amulek, but the Ammonihahites contend with them from the beginning. The foremost to accuse the two prophets of lying and reviling against the law is the lawyer Zeezrom. In an attempt to find proof against them and have them destroyed, Zeezrom begins to question Amulek.

Zeezrom first gets Amulek to assert his belief that there is a true and living God. Then Zeezrom says, “Is there more than one God?” Amulek answers, “No.” Zeezrom asks if the Son of God will come, and Amulek answers, “Yes.” Then Zeezrom asks, “Shall he save his people in their sins?” Amulek says, “He shall not.”

It is easy to see how Zeezrom is trying to get Amulek to contradict himself so he might be convicted of lying. Having brought the dialogue to that point:

Zeezrom said unto the people: See that ye remember these things; for he said there is but one God; yet he saith that the Son of God shall come, but he shall not save his people—as though he had authority to command God.

Now Amulek saith again unto him: Behold thou hast lied, for thou sayest that I spake as though I had authority to command God because I said he shall not save his people in their sins.

And I say unto you again that he cannot save them in their sins; for I cannot deny his word, and he hath said that no unclean thing can inherit the kingdom of heaven; therefore, how can ye be saved, except ye inherit the kingdom of heaven? Therefore, ye cannot be saved in your sins. (Alma 11:26-37)

Obviously, both Zeezrom and Amulek are presenting arguments to establish their points of view. First, Zeezrom tries to show a contradiction

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in Amulek's statements. Amulek says there is only one God; yet he says the Son of God will come, and one God plus a Son of God makes two Gods. Zeezrom urges the people to remember this against Amulek.

Further, Zeezrom accuses Amulek of saying that the Son of God will not save his people. Zeezrom just omits the phrase, "in their sins." Leaving it out changes the argument, making it a great deal easier to disprove. Altering an argument to make it vulnerable to attack is known as the straw man fallacy.

Then Zeezrom argues that, by saying this, Amulek speaks as though he had authority to command God. One might paraphrase Zeezrom's statement this way: "Amulek, you speak as though you have authority to command God because you say His Son will not save his people." Even if Amulek's statement were incorrect, that does not mean he is claiming authority to command God. Zeezrom draws a conclusion that in no way relates to the premise, thus committing the fallacy of non sequitur.

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Counting his misrepresentation of the Godhead, Zeezrom commits at least three logical errors in one sentence. Most of my students can't do that. It takes some effort and a bit of understanding to create an argument as compact and subtle as Zeezrom's, and it seems clear that he uses the fallacies intentionally. Alma sees that Zeezrom "beheld that Amulek had caught him in his lying and deceiving," and being exposed made Zeezrom "tremble under a consciousness of his guilt."

Amulek responds by first pointing out the non sequitur. A paraphrase of his answer might read: "Zeezrom, you lied because you said I spoke as though I had authority to command God just because I said he will not save his people in their sins. In other words, you drew an incorrect conclusion from the premise." At the same time, Amulek corrects the straw man fallacy by reinserting the phrase, "in their sins." He does this in verse 36, but he waits until verse 44 to clear up Zeezrom's misconception of the Godhead.

In verse 37, however, Amulek presents an argument to establish the true doctrine of the atonement. Structured in the form of logical syllogisms—each of which has a major premise, a minor premise, and a conclusion—it reads thus:

No unclean thing can inherit the kingdom of heaven.

A person with sins is unclean.

A person with sins cannot inherit the kingdom of heaven.

You must inherit the kingdom of heaven to be saved.

A person with sins cannot inherit the kingdom of heaven.

You cannot be saved in your sins.

These two linked syllogisms are valid. All of the parts are in the right place, and the conclusion, in each case, logically follows the premises.

They are linked together because the conclusion in the first argument becomes the second premise in the second argument.

Amulek establishes the truth of his premises by taking them from the scriptures and asserting that the scriptures are the word of God. He says, essentially, “God said this, and I cannot deny his word.”

In just three short verses, two complete arguments face off against each other. The argument of Zeezrom is full of logical fallacies and is easily torn apart. The argument of Amulek is perfectly structured deductive reasoning. So how does this bit of scholarship inform my theology?

Probably a person could make a number of inferences, but the one I make is this: Joseph Smith did not write these arguments. Alma, an eyewitness, wrote them in his journal, and Mormon copied them onto the plates. Considering the difficulty of making up such a compact debate and then giving the bad guy all the fallacies while the good guy uses perfect logic, and even does it by asking rhetorical questions; I say again that Joseph Smith, with his limited education, did not compose that text. Of course anyone who wishes to prove me wrong may take the Lord’s challenge in the Doctrine and Covenants:

Now seek ye out...even the least [revelation] that is among them, and appoint him that is the most wise among you;

Or, if there be any among you that shall make one like unto it, then ye are justified in saying that ye do not know that they are true;

But if ye cannot make one like unto it, ye are under condemnation if ye do not bear record that they are true. (Doctrine and Covenants 67:6-7)

Another scriptural example of the use of faulty logic can be found in the Gospel of John, where the chief priests of the Jews try to convince each other that it is justifiable to put Jesus to death. It is important to know that this particular council was convened as a result of Jesus’ raising Lazarus from the dead. As soon as the rulers learned of the miracle:

Then gathered the chief priests and the Pharisees a council, and said, What do we? for this man doeth many miracles.

If we let him thus alone, all men will believe on him: and the Romans shall come and take away both our place and our nation. (John 11:47-48)

The conclusion seems compelling. None of them wanted the Romans to move them out of their place or destroy their nation. Having determined that, “Then from that day forth they took counsel together for to put him to death” (John 11:53).

The problem with the Pharisees’ logic is that they begin by arguing upon one premise, but they end the argument as if it were based upon

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another premise. It is important to analyze the first part of their argument. Paraphrased, it is:

We have to do something because this man does many miracles.

A good deal is implied in this statement. Considering this part of the argument alone, the reader is left to wonder why they have to do something and what they think they have to do. Their motive and intent are both made clear in the book of Matthew where it says: “[Pilate] knew that for envy [the Jews] had delivered [Jesus],” so that he might be crucified (Matthew 27:18). The rulers of the Jews envied Jesus because he could perform miracles and they could not. They envied Him because the people were beginning to think He was greater than the chief priests and the Pharisees. They took counsel to kill him to prevent him from destroying their priestcraft.

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The implicit minor premise and conclusion derived from the statement look like this:

This man does many miracles.

We have to do something.

With the knowledge of motive and intent derived from another source, however, one can reconstruct the argument, with logical validity, to look like this:

Whoever performs miracles and detracts from us must be eliminated.

This man does many miracles and detracts from us.

We have to do something to eliminate him.

This is the whole basis for the argument. Two other, conditional, parts follow. Each part implies ideas that are not stated.

If we let him alone,  
Then all men will believe on him.

If all men believe on him,  
Then the Romans will take away our place and our nation.

To complete these arguments, it is necessary to find the principles of cause and effect that compel the conclusions. Why will all men believe on Jesus? Because he just raised a man from the dead who had been in the grave four days. The evidence and witnesses to this miracle could not be denied, and no one, not even the Pharisees, could disbelieve; however, knowing this did not convert them. It only frightened them. So, they made up an argument that *appeared* logical to convince themselves to commit murder. The argument can be stated this way:

Jesus' miracles cannot be disproved or denied.  
If we let him alone,  
Then all men will believe on him.

The Romans will destroy any nation that has a powerful leader.  
If all men believe on Jesus,  
Then the Romans will take away our place and our nation.

This argument breaks down, of course, in the assumption that the Romans will be offended if all men believe on Jesus. The Pharisees ignore the fact that the term "all men" includes the Romans, who may, as likely as the Jews, be converted to Jesus by the miracles. They also seem to disregard what seems obvious: that a man who can feed five thousand people with a few loaves and fishes, who can avoid being taken by his enemies by passing through the midst of them unseen, who can command the wind and the waves to be still, and who can raise the dead will have little to fear from an army of Roman soldiers. And that is not the concern of the Pharisees. Their real purpose is implied in the first part of the argument, which demonstrates a desire to destroy Jesus because of envy. If the last syllogism were kept consistent with the first, it might read something like this:

A man on whom everyone believes will get the wealth and praise of the  
world.  
If all men believe on Jesus,  
Then he will take the wealth and praise of the world away from us.

This example shows that people can as easily use fallacious logic to deceive themselves as to deceive others. It is natural for evil people to be liars; on the other hand, the righteous use sound reasoning to establish the truth. As Eliza R. Snow wrote in one of her hymns, "Truth is reason."<sup>2</sup>

Lehi, in instructing his son Jacob, used a series of conditional arguments to teach an important concept. His line of reasoning is complex enough that the reader who fails to see all the connections between cause and effect may also miss the whole point of the argument. The first line of Lehi's teaching, though, is familiar to all:

For it must needs be, that there is an opposition in all things. If not so, my first-born in the wilderness, righteousness could not be brought to pass, neither wickedness, neither holiness nor misery, neither good nor bad. Wherefore, all things must needs be a compound in one; wherefore, if it should be one body it must needs remain as dead, having no life neither death, nor corruption nor incorruption, happiness nor misery, neither sense nor insensibility.

Wherefore, it 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

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thing must needs destroy the wisdom of God and his eternal purposes, and also the power, and the mercy, and the justice of God.

And if ye shall say there is no law, ye shall also say there is no sin. If ye shall say there is no sin, ye shall also say there is no righteousness. And if there be no righteousness there be no happiness. And if there be no righteousness nor happiness there be no punishment nor misery. And if these things are not there is no God. And if there is no God we are not, neither the earth; for there could have been no creation of things, neither to act nor to be acted upon; wherefore, all things must have vanished away. (2 Nephi 2:11-13)

Lehi makes his point in verses 11 and 12. Then, as if for emphasis, he repeats and summarizes the argument in verse 13. He begins by stressing the idea that, “it must needs be, that there is an opposition in all things.” That is a well-known concept, observable in every day’s experience. Why, then, does Lehi consider it important enough for this little lecture? He seems to be saying this: “Jacob, it is necessary for opposition to exist. Now I am going to tell you why.” The reason, in this case, is as important as the fact. Lehi begins with this condition:

*If* there is no opposition  
*then* there is no righteousness or wickedness,  
no holiness or misery,  
no good or bad.

**One opposite  
cannot exist  
without the other;  
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other.**

The reason these things could not exist without opposition is, of course, because they are opposites. One opposite cannot exist without the other; they define each other. If there were no wickedness, righteousness could not be known. A choice has to be possible for either one to exist. Then Lehi sets holiness and misery together as opposites. This may seem strange until one remembers that “wickedness never was happiness” (Alma 41:10). If so, then holiness equates to happiness, which is the opposite of misery.

Good and bad are recognizable opposites. It is important to realize, as Lehi wishes to teach, that one cannot exist without the other. Many people in the world try to avoid the conflict between good and bad by denying the existence of one or the other. For example, some artists will tell you that art can be good but it cannot be bad, at least in a moral sense. Many Germans, during Hitler’s regime, convinced themselves that they could do no evil if they acted under the authority of the Führer. Numerous atrocities were committed by the church during the Middle Ages because murder, done in the name of God, was thought to be sanctified. All of these means of justification are an illusion. They cannot destroy the opposition between good and evil.

Lehi goes on to say that:

*If* there is no good or bad  
*then* all things are a compound in one.

This statement seems to indicate that, without opposites, all things that exist would be the same. There would be no difference between one thing and another, so all things would be a compound in one. There would be no light and darkness, so we could not see. There would be no soft and loud, so we could not hear. There would be no rough and smooth, so we could not feel. Lehi continues:

**Without opposites,  
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*If* all things are a compound in one  
*then* all things are one body.

*If* all things are one body  
*then* it must remain as dead, having neither  
life nor death,  
corruption nor incorruption,  
happiness nor misery,  
sense nor insensibility.

When Lehi says the one body would “remain as dead,” he does not mean “dead” in the same sense as it applies to something that has lived and then died. This body never lived, so it must remain as dead, having neither life nor death. It cannot see corruption, as all things do that die, but it cannot be pure and incorruptible either. It cannot know happiness; therefore it has no misery. It has no sense, which I suppose means consciousness or awareness; therefore, it cannot be made insensible or unconscious. So:

*If* the one body remains as dead  
*then* it is a thing of naught.

One meaning of *naught*, and I think the one intended here, is *nothing*. It becomes clear at this point that Lehi is trying to describe something that is very hard to describe. It is a thing of nothing. How is it possible to give a mental picture of something that does not exist? It is really not a thing at all. It is nothing. Further,

*If* it is a thing of naught  
*then* it has no purpose.

Obviously, what does not exist has no purpose. Purpose implies opposites. Every purpose seeks one opposite at the expense of the other. For example, our purpose is to do good and not to do evil. Without opposites, there can be no purpose. Lehi continues:

*If* it has no purpose  
*then* it destroys God’s wisdom, power, mercy, and justice.

Of course, if it destroys God’s wisdom, power, mercy, and justice, it destroys God. If it destroys God, then it destroys all He has created. To make that point clear, Lehi goes through the whole argument again, from beginning to end, in verse 13.

*If* there is no law  
*then* there is no sin.

This is true because, as the scripture says, “sin is the transgression of the law” (1 John 3:4). The condition also implies the existence of agency and of opposites that one may choose between:

*If* there is no sin  
*then* there is no righteousness.

Again, sin and righteousness are opposites, and one cannot exist without the other. If a person were compelled to do one thing and there were no other choice, it could not be credited to that person as righteousness, and neither could it be condemned as sin. As hard as it may seem, people need to have the choice to commit murder as well as to save life, and to exercise agency in the choice, or there could be no exaltation. That freedom is what Lucifer sought to take away and what we have been given so graciously by Jesus Christ. Lehi continues:

*If* there is no righteousness  
*then* there is no happiness.

Here Lehi repeats the same principle he taught before. Righteousness leads to happiness, and “wickedness never was happiness.” It is an eternal principle and cannot be changed:

*If* there is no righteousness  
*then* there is no punishment or happiness or misery.

**Happiness comes largely through awareness of the escape from punishment and misery.**

It may seem strange to say that punishment and misery could not exist if there were no righteousness or happiness, and to propose, as a good thing, that punishment and misery do exist. In fact, happiness comes largely through awareness of the escape from punishment and misery. Amulek taught the poor among the Zoramites:

And now my beloved brethren, I would exhort you to have patience, and that ye bear with all manner of afflictions; that ye do not revile against those who do cast you out because of your exceeding poverty, lest ye become sinners like unto them;

But that ye have patience, and bear with those afflictions, with a firm hope that ye shall one day rest from all your afflictions. (Alma 34:40-41)

Alma taught the same concept to his son, Corianton:

And then shall it come to pass, that the spirits of those who are righteous are received into a state of happiness, which is called paradise, a state of rest, a state of peace, where they shall rest from all their troubles and from all care, and sorrow (Alma 40:12).

*If* these things are not  
*then* there is no God.

In other words, if righteousness, happiness, punishment, and misery do not exist, there is no God. This seems to imply that God exists because opposites exist. God is the embodiment of all righteousness and happiness, which righteousness and happiness could not exist without their opposites. Consequently:

*If* there is no God  
*then* there was no creation, and

*If* there was no creation  
*then* all things must have vanished away.

In other words, without opposites, nothing exists, or, conversely, all existence is based upon opposition. We find this same concept explained in the Doctrine and Covenants:

Man was also in the beginning with God. Intelligence, or the light of truth, was not created or made, neither indeed can be.

All truth is independent in that sphere in which God has placed it, to act for itself, as all intelligence also; otherwise there is no existence. (Doctrine and Covenants 93:29-30)

This scripture asserts that man, who is intelligence, which is the light of truth, was not created from nothing but has existed from all eternity, as has God. Man is made up of an eternally existing substance called intelligence that cannot be created or destroyed. That intelligence is the light of truth, and truth is what is. Truth is what exists now, what has existed, and what will continue to exist (see Doctrine and Covenants 93:24). That which does not exist is not truth, but is a thing of naught—nothing!

Man<sup>3</sup> is truth, and truth is independent—in other words, able to act for itself. It has agency. It can choose between opposites. Without agency and opposition, there is no existence. The eternal substance which exists, called the light of truth, had no beginning. Agency and opposition are necessary and unchangeable characteristics of that which exists, has

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always existed, and will always exist. This is the important concept that Lehi was anxious to teach to his son Jacob. If one is to understand truth at all, it is essential to know that truth is what *is* and falsehood is what *is not*. Truth has eternal existence. What does not exist is not true.

In our premortal life, Lucifer or Satan sought to “destroy the agency of man” (Moses 4:3). He wanted us to give up our independence, our ability to act for ourselves, in exchange for the security of salvation without risk or effort. In light of what Lehi taught, it would have been impossible for him to do that. Agency was never created. It is an intrinsic part of that which exists eternally. Agency cannot be destroyed. Neither can opposition. Satan’s plan was a lie. That is why he is called a “liar from the beginning” (Doctrine and Covenants 93:25) and the “father of lies” (2 Nephi 9:9). What he proposed could not happen, could not have being. Perhaps a corollary is that any order that denies liberty to man cannot endure.

Lehi knew that Jacob needed to understand this because Satan never ceases trying to destroy the agency of man. He presents his plan in new and subtle guises, but it is always the same plan. Knowing the truth about agency and opposition can help the disciple of Christ avoid the pitfalls of the adversary. Knowing that Satan’s dominion is temporary, that because it is a lie it cannot endure, is a reassurance.

The scriptures reassure me, as well, that truth is reason. It makes sense; it does not contradict itself; and it does not change. Reading of bad men using bad logic confirms what the scriptures teach about Satan and his agents, “for he persuadeth no man to do good, no, not one; neither do his angels; neither do they who subject themselves unto him” (Moroni 7:17). I also find one more reason why the words of the prophets seem to fit as well and comfort as much as a warm, familiar sweater. Their words are true, and their arguments are valid; they harmonize with every other truth the Holy Ghost has written upon my heart. So, one more inference I make from these scriptures is this: If the prophets use logic, then it is all right for me to use it. As I can better understand the scriptures through the influence of the same Spirit by which they were given, so I can better comprehend the logic of the prophets by understanding the same logical patterns they used. In this way, scholarship informs my theology. ☺

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#### NOTES

- 1 Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft Publishing, 1958), 811.
- 2 Eliza R. Snow, “O My Father” *Hymns of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (USA: Corporation of the President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985): 292.
- 3 *Man* means mankind. It includes both male and female. The name of God in the pure language is Ahman, which translates to Man of Holiness, and Jesus is the Son of Man

or Son Ahman (Moses 6:57, 7:35, Doctrine and Covenants 78:20). *Kind* comes from the same root as kindred, kinfolk, and kin and is related to those of the same race or family. Mankind literally means “the children of God.”