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DE PROFUNDIS

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Abstract: *Is the Gospel profound? Yes, it is. And one of the goals of the Interpreter Foundation is to call attention to that sometimes-overlooked profundity. In one sense, though, the question is a peripheral one. If we were drowning — which, figuratively and from the vantage point of eternity, we absolutely are — we wouldn't complain at a life preserver thrown to us if it were chipped, poorly painted, or unattractive, let alone if it were defective as a work of great art. We would simply be grateful to be saved. In another sense, the Gospel is clearly profound because it answers the deepest and most basic of human questions.*

There are innumerable questions about the Book of Mormon, as there are about the three other canonical works of Latter-day Saint scripture and about the Gospel as a whole. Among the very most important of them, of course, is the question of truth. “Is the Book of Mormon true?” “Is the Gospel true?” (An inescapably related question would be “What exactly does *true* mean?”)

Supposing it to be “true,” another question that presents itself would surely be “But does it have anything to say?” Does the Restoration have anything significant to offer? A proposition might be true but, at least for most people and in most contexts, trivial. The average square foot of grass, for example, contains 3,000 blades. Even the most fanatical lawncare enthusiasts would likely find that fact somewhat less than earth-shattering.

From time to time, in Latter-day Saint circles, I've heard the dictum repeated that “Richness is the new apologetic.” I've sometimes heard it attributed to James E. Faulconer, though Jim has disclaimed credit for it.

I cannot disagree with it, at least in part. Richness is genuinely an important area of potential apologetic argument. If, for example, the Book of Mormon turns out, upon examination, to be a rich and complex text, the probability of its being the hasty effusion of a thoughtless

frontier charlatan seems to decrease. If the Gospel sheds rich light upon our lives and their meaning, this is a powerful reason on its own for taking the Restoration seriously.

But what, exactly, should we understand by the word *richness*? Must scripture and prophets be profound in order to be true? And, again, what would *profound* even mean?

For the record, I *do* believe the scriptures — including those peculiar to the Restoration — are profound, subtle, nuanced, complex, and almost inexhaustibly rich. (The Interpreter Foundation exists, at least in part, to discover and exhibit such qualities in the texts and doctrines of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.) The apostle Paul’s exclamation represents my view, too:

O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out! (Romans 11:33)

To me, though, this is almost — not quite, but almost — a side benefit, an added grace. And so, for the purposes of this short essay, I intend to write as if the profound subtleties, nuanced complexities, and as yet unplumbed richness weren’t actually there.

Imagine an elegantly clothed audience gathered at a cinema in a mid-sized American city for a double feature of Krzysztof Kieslowski’s *Dekalog* and Jean Renoir’s *La Grande Illusion*. The theater is a relatively small one, with only two screens. Directly next door, as it happens, a large and boisterous crowd is thoroughly enjoying a film festival devoted to a Scooby-Doo retrospective. (The proprietor of the establishment cares nothing for what’s shown on his screens, as long as the seats are full.)

It’s probably impossible for at least some of the *cinéastes* gathered in the first theater not to experience some gratification, not to feel a small *frisson* of hauteur, at the difference between their own well-cultivated *bon gout* and the relative lack of taste manifest by the Scooby-Doo fans gathered in the directly adjacent room. While the latter shove fistfuls of heavily buttered popcorn into their faces, the *Amis du cinéma européen* enjoy an assortment of fine wines and cheeses.

In an obscure part of the theater, however, an employee suddenly notices flames that have already grown to alarming size and well beyond his control. Worried about the safety of those in the building, he runs first to the nearest screening room, where the crowd is watching Fred, Velma, Shaggy, Daphne, and Scooby with engaged and uproarious pleasure.

“Fire!” he yells.

Surprised but abruptly sober, the Scooby-Doo Fan Club exits the building.

Then he races next door. “Fire!” he cries.

The assembled cinephiles turn from a scene in *Dekalog: Six* during which the Polish actor Artur Barciś, arguably representing a supernatural being, has been shown carrying a bag of groceries. Quietly irritated at the interruption, they exchange critical observations among themselves. One of them objects to the fact that the warning wasn’t given in iambic pentameter, and another remarks that it demonstrated no familiarity whatever with Kantian ethical theory. Moreover, several point out, the theater employee who delivered the warning displayed poor vocal quality, evidenced absolutely no fashion sense, and failed to manifest the existential *angst* that such a warning should convey. As such, it lacked authenticity. In the end, they refuse to move.

The fact remains, though, that alerting the two audiences to the presence of threatening fire in the building was exactly the right thing to do, and it was said both truthfully and efficiently. And the appropriate response was to leave the theater.

One of the central and most basic messages of scripture is the similarly simple imperative: “Repent!”

The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God; as it is written in the prophets, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee. The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. John did baptize in the wilderness, and preach the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. And there went out unto him all the land of Judaea, and they of Jerusalem, and were all baptized of him in the river of Jordan, confessing their sins. ...

Now after that John was put in prison, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, and saying, The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel. (Mark 1:1–5, 14–15)

Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly, that God hath made the same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ. Now when they heard this, they were pricked in their heart, and said unto Peter and to the rest of the apostles, Men and brethren, what shall we do? Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name

of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost. (Acts 2:36–38)

We believe that the first principles and ordinances of the Gospel are: first, Faith in the Lord Jesus Christ; second, Repentance; third, Baptism by immersion for the remission of sins; fourth, Laying on of hands for the gift of the Holy Ghost. (Articles of Faith 4)

In the Hebrew Bible and in Jewish tradition, repentance is called *teshuvah*, a Hebrew word that can also be translated as “returning.” One of the Hebrew words for sin is *chet*, which in Hebrew means “to go astray.” Thus, the fundamental idea of repentance in Jewish thinking is a return to the path of righteousness. In the Greek New Testament, repentance is *metanoia*, which, at its base, suggests a transformative change of mind (or, we might say, of heart). Another way of expressing it would be as a “conversion” or a “reformation,” even a repudiation of old ways of thinking.

There is much to be learned by considering the meaning of *metanoia* and *teshuvah*. But, surely, the fundamentally important and urgent thing is, actually, to repent.

In some contexts, the barked command “Hit the brake!” or “Duck!” might be the very thing called for, and in a sense, the richest message because it is the most apt. And it may be the most radical possible answer to the question of what to do or what to think, because it gets to the absolute root or *radix* of the matter at hand.

Surely, as we think about depth or profundity, the so-called “razor” generally attributed to the English Franciscan friar, philosopher, and theologian William of Ockham (ca. 1287–1347) should be relevant. It is related in various forms — e.g., *Numquam ponenda est pluralitas sine necessitate* (“Plurality must never be posited without necessity”) and *Entia non sunt multiplicanda praeter necessitatem* (“Entities must not be multiplied beyond necessity”) — and it is generally taken to mean something like “no more assumptions should be made in explaining something than are necessary for an adequate explanation.” Analogously, I would contend, the answer to a question need be no more complex than is required for an adequate answer to the question.

Of course, not everybody is happy with simplicity. As the illustrious German poet and thinker Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832) remarked, “Es ärgert die Menschen, daß die Wahrheit so einfach ist.”¹

1. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, quoted in *Jahrbuch der Illustrierten Deutschen Monatshefte: Ein Familienbuch für das Gesammte Geistige Leben der Gegenwart*,

(“It irritates people that the truth is so simple.”) The Book of Mormon suggests such a case in the prophet Jacob’s reflections upon the people that his parents and older siblings had left behind in Jerusalem shortly before his own birth:

But behold, the Jews were a stiffnecked people; and they despised the words of plainness, and killed the prophets, and sought for things that they could not understand. Wherefore, because of their blindness, which blindness came by looking beyond the mark, they must needs fall; for God hath taken away his plainness from them, and delivered unto them many things which they cannot understand, because they desired it. And because they desired it God hath done it, that they may stumble.

And now I, Jacob, am led on by the Spirit unto prophesying; for I perceive by the workings of the Spirit which is in me, that by the stumbling of the Jews they will reject the stone upon which they might build and have safe foundation.

But behold, according to the scriptures, this stone shall become the great, and the last, and the only sure foundation upon which the Jews can build. (Jacob 4:14–16)

I’m inclined to agree with the great theoretical physicist and Nobel laureate Richard Feynman (1918–1988), who observed, “You can recognize truth by its beauty and simplicity.”²

Surely, too, any rating of the depth of an answer ought to be correlated with the nature of the question to which it responds. An answer to a fundamental question can be considered “deep,” it seems to me, even if the answer is simple and easily comprehended. When a speeding freight train is bearing down on you, a friend’s urgent suggestion that you step out of its path is far more helpful — and in a sense, therefore, far more “deep” — than another’s fervent admiration of its beautiful coloring and impressive power or yet another’s learned exposition of the evolution of locomotive design.

And the Gospel is all about urgently important and absolutely fundamental questions: Is God real? Does life have a purpose? Are moral values grounded in reality or merely arbitrary? Is there, somehow, genuine right and wrong, or are moral choices no more fundamental than

vol. 46 (Braunschweig: Druck und Verlag von George Westermann, 1879), 218.

2. Richard Feynman, quoted in Thomas Dubay, *The Evidential Power of Beauty: Science and Theology Meet* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999), 9.

questions of personal taste? Why are we here? Where did we come from? Where are we going? How should we live? What happens at death? Will our relationships continue beyond the grave? Will our personalities, and the personalities of those we love, survive? Is there hope for us from the tragedies, sorrows, sufferings, betrayals, failures, and injustices of this life?

With respectful apologies to my fellow academics, it seems obvious to me that these questions are far deeper than such conventional topics of serious mainstream scholarship as “Stylistic Ambiguity in the Early Novels of Hemingway,” “Florentine Painting and the Representation of Nature,” “Developmental Timelines for *Drosophila melanogaster*,” “Defective Verbs in the Fragmenta of Chrysippus of Soli,” and “Othering the Undead in Japanese *Manga*, 1975–1983.”

The English classical scholar and poet A. E. Housman (1859–1936) was an atheist who, I suspect, wanted to believe but could not. Nevertheless, as his posthumously published “Easter Hymn” suggests, he did not dismiss the question of hope — one might even call it the hope for hope — as a trivial or shallow matter:

If in that Syrian garden, ages slain,
 You sleep, and know not you are dead in vain,
 Nor even in dreams behold how dark and bright
 Ascends in smoke and fire by day and night
 The hate you died to quench and could but fan,
 Sleep well and see no morning, son of man.

But if, the grave rent and the stone rolled by,
 At the right hand of majesty on high
 You sit, and sitting so remember yet

Your tears, your agony and bloody sweat,
 Your cross and passion and the life you gave,
 Bow hither out of heaven and see and save.³

Prophetic counsel of the kind typically offered at General Conferences of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints — urging parents to spend time with their children, exhorting fathers to pay more attention to their families rather than being wedded primarily to career, exhorting all of us to chastity before marriage and to fidelity within it, extolling hard work, encouraging provident living, and teaching self-discipline — may often seem humdrum and prosaic, but following such

3. A. E. Housman, “Easter Hymn,” in *More Poems* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1936). This poem, and others, were published posthumously in *More Poems* by Housman’s brother, Laurence Housman.

principles will do far more good for individuals, their families, and society than any number of government programs. Such advice is, yes, deep.

When I was a boy back in the early Paleolithic Age, cigarette ads were still permitted on television. (Yes, we had television then.) In fact, they were not only permitted — they seemed omnipresent. And one of the most common among them featured a catchy syncopated rendition of the jingle “Winston tastes good like a cigarette should.”

Grinchy sticklers for good grammar pointed out, however, that the jingle should properly read “Winston tastes good *as* a cigarette should.” As it stood, the ad confused the preposition *like* with the conjunction *as*. To which the Winston ad campaign unrepentantly responded with a rhetorical question that became yet another effective slogan, “What do you want, good grammar or good taste?”

That response presupposed, probably correctly, that most people would respond “We want good taste!” Of course, I’m an over-educated pedant, so good grammar is really important to me, as well. More than anything, though, even more than either good taste or good grammar, we should prefer a message that doesn’t extol behavior that will ultimately kill us. And my testimony is that, if we take it to heart, the messages of the scriptures won’t kill us. Quite the contrary: They will save our lives.

The Gospel must not be misunderstood as an attempt at a philosophical system. It doesn’t purport to answer every question that might be raised by a graduate seminar in analytic philosophy. That isn’t its purpose. It need not define philosophically precise answers to questions about divine foreknowledge, the nature of preexistent personhood, or the ultimate origins of morality. Such definitions are no part of its intent.

There are good reasons why Latter-day Saints have distinguished themselves in journal-keeping, the recording of history, and historical writing but have not produced systematic theologians. Our scriptural texts are often couched as stories. They are never presented as manuals of doctrine, let alone as theological treatises. The Gospel is about building a relationship with the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost and about entering into covenants with God. It is not simply a list of propositions to be affirmed, whether deep or shallow.⁴ Our faith rests not merely in a creed. It is firmly placed in a Person and in a relationship to a Person — a Person who, we are told and we have reason to believe, is accessible to us throughout all of existence, however high and however low:

4. Jeffrey L. Thayne and Edwin E. Gantt, *Who ~~What~~ is Truth? Reframing Our Questions for a Richer Faith* (n.p.: Verdand Press, 2019).

He that ascended up on high, as also he descended below all things, in that he comprehended all things, that he might be in all and through all things, the light of truth;

Which truth shineth. This is the light of Christ. As also he is in the sun, and the light of the sun, and the power thereof by which it was made. (D&C 88:6–7)

The Son of Man hath descended below them all. (D&C 122:8)

Here is real depth, and it resides not in doctrines but, again, in a Person. To fully know him and his Father — not merely to know *about* them — is eternal life (John 17:3). Moreover, we are assured, no matter how far we fall, no matter how deep we sink or even attempt to flee, God is there for those who sincerely call upon him. “For I am persuaded,” wrote the apostle Paul,

that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:38–39)

Or, as the ancient Psalmist put it,

Whither shall I go from thy spirit? or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there: if I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there. If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea; even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me. If I say, Surely the darkness shall cover me; even the night shall be light about me. Yea, the darkness hideth not from thee; but the night shineth as the day: the darkness and the light are both alike to thee. (Psalm 139:7–12)

“Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord!” the Psalmist exclaimed.⁵ Or, as St. Jerome rendered that passage in the Latin Vulgate Bible, “De profundis clamavi ad te, Domine.”⁶

New Testament Christianity taught that Christ literally answered such prayers from the righteous dead who were in Hades or Sheol, the realm of spirits, having “descended into the underworld” (*descendit ad inferos*) during the period

5. Psalm 130:1 (English Standard Version).

6. Psalm 129:1 (Biblia Vulgata). The numbering of the Psalms in the Vulgate differs from the numbering in most modern translations of the Bible.

between his crucifixion and his resurrection.⁷ “[H]e went and preached unto the spirits in prison,” says Peter (1 Peter 3:19). “[T]he gospel [was] preached also to them that are dead, that they might be judged according to men in the flesh, but live according to God in the spirit” (1 Peter 4:6). He willingly and deliberately “descended . . . into the lower parts of the earth,” says the author of the epistle to the Ephesians (Ephesians 4:9). “For,” says the Psalmist, “thou wilt not leave my soul to Sheol.”⁸

One of the greatest revelations granted in this last dispensation was a vision given to President Joseph F. Smith on 3 October 1918 that greatly clarified this idea of the Lord’s descent into the spirit world.⁹

God’s willingness to answer us even in our deepest depths has been illustrated from the very first minutes of the Restoration, as reflected in these words of Joseph Smith:

After I had retired to the place where I had previously designed to go, having looked around me, and finding myself alone, I kneeled down and began to offer up the desires of my heart to God. I had scarcely done so, when immediately I was seized upon by some power which entirely overcame me, and had such an astonishing influence over me as to bind my tongue so that I could not speak. Thick darkness gathered around me, and it seemed to me for a time as if I were doomed to sudden destruction.

But, exerting all my powers to call upon God to deliver me out of the power of this enemy which had seized upon me, and at the very moment when I was ready to sink into despair and abandon myself to destruction — not to an imaginary ruin, but to the power of some actual being from the unseen world, who had such marvelous power as I had never before felt in any being — just at this moment of great alarm, I saw a pillar of light exactly over my head, above the brightness of the sun, which descended gradually until it fell upon me.

It no sooner appeared than I found myself delivered from the enemy which held me bound. (Joseph Smith — History 1:15–17)

7. The Latin phrase occurs in both the Apostles’ Creed and the Athanasian Creed.

8. Psalm 16:10 (American Standard Version).

9. See D&C 138.

Those who contribute to the Interpreter Foundation do so not because they like the intellectual sheen of the Gospel, but because they see in it liberation from sorrow, sin, and death and hope for a glorious future for all of our Father's children who will accept it. I want to express my appreciation here to those who have made Interpreter's existence and its flourishing possible through their donations of time, effort, and, yes, money. I'm grateful to the authors, copy editors, source checkers, and others who have created this particular volume, and I especially want to thank Allen Wyatt and Jeff Lindsay, the two managing or production editors for the journal. Like all of the other Interpreter Foundation leadership, they serve as volunteers and without financial or other compensation. We could not function without their efforts.

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