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Learning by Study and Also by Faith: An Interview with Steven C. Harper

Steven C. Harper

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Grover: You take seriously the aims of a BYU education that classes should be spiritually strengthening, intellectually enlarging, and contribute to lives of learning and service. I understand that you spend the first day of class discussing the idea of how to acquire knowledge and enlarge faith through the dual combination of learning history and implementing what Elder Dallin H. Oaks called “the principle of independent verification by revelation.”¹ Would you please discuss your ideas and classroom methods related to this approach.

Harper: In my Church history class, I start by asking a couple of questions. I ask my students what they know and how it is that they know it. They understand that I do not mean only proximate knowledge or even necessarily what we might call scientific or factual things. I’m not interested in minor details, such as how they know their name or when their flight leaves. I am interested in what they know about God ultimately. And then the follow-up question is how they know it. I really want them to think in terms of what a philosopher would call epistemology. I want them to engage epistemological questions; in other words, I want them to assess what they know and how they know what they know.

Mormonism is historical. We do not have theological schools; we have Church history classes. Instead of philosophical creeds that define the nature of God, we tell the story of Joseph’s First Vision, for example. Early in the spring of 1820, in a specific place, upstate New

York, a specific young man did historical things that evoked a vision of Heavenly Father and Christ. As a result of that vision, we understand the nature of God. So I want my students to think about those things: what it is that they know about God and how they know it.

Now, they have had these things in their mind a long time, but many of them have never thought much about how they know what they know or even tentatively assessed, “What do I know?” So on the first day of class in Church history, we make a couple of assertions. We assert that without a historical record we would know little or nothing about God. In other words, let’s say no prophets’ teachings are ever recorded or transmitted, then it doesn’t matter whether God has ever revealed Himself or not; we don’t know it. And that is especially true with Joseph Smith and the Restoration. If Joseph had his First Vision and learned the true nature of the Godhead but somehow did not transmit that knowledge to me, then I might as well be in the middle of the Apostasy; I would not know any better.

The point is that the historical record is fundamental. Without the documentation of the historical events of the Restoration, we would know nothing about the true nature of God. But as soon as that point is established, I try to help the students understand that the historical record is problematic—that just because something is documented doesn’t make it true, and just because something *isn’t* documented doesn’t make it *untrue*. There are people who are trained in history who *worship* history (I use that strong term purposefully) as if history were the ultimate way of knowing.

I want to emphasize to my students that history is only part of the best way of knowing, that once there has been a historical claim, that once Joseph has borne testimony, we have a wonderful way of verifying whether that testimony is true or not. And, of course, most of my students recognize this from the Book of Mormon. Probably the best-known explanation of this epistemology is in the tenth chapter of Moroni, which many of my students have tested. They know what we mean at this point in the discussion, what Elder Oaks means when he talks about the principle of “independent verification by revelation.”

To sum up, we know things about God, ultimate things, because somebody who knows them bears a testimony, and those testimonies are recorded for us, they are documented. We don’t know simply because the testimonies are documented. We know, or can know, because we can verify the testimony for ourselves by direct revelation, in an unmediated experience, except for the testimony itself. This, to me, is the most marvelous kind of knowing that there is. It beats



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agnosticism, not knowing. It beats enlightenment rationalism, or strict scientific method, as a way of knowing. It beats any other epistemology that I have ever learned about or understood anything about.

Grover: Have you always done this the first day of class, or when and why did you decide to do this?

Harper: I have not always done it. I have done it for the last few years, and I refine it a little bit all the time. Although I am never quite satisfied with how it works, I feel it is the right way to go. I feel that what I can teach my Church history students is more than stories about Church history. I feel I have the obligation to teach them how to think about history or to model for them a way of thinking and inquiring and knowing. I feel I have the responsibility to give them an appropriate sense of respect for and skepticism of historians, their methods, and the historical record—the documents themselves.

I just came from a class where my students and I read a couple of the affidavits that Philastus Hurlbut collected in the early 1830s and which Eber Howe published in *Mormonism Unveiled*, one of the first anti-Mormon books, which is still very influential. And our work in class was to understand what Joseph experienced between his First Vision and the appearance of Moroni in 1823. We were not using these documents as sources of objective truth; we were letting them speak to

us, and we were asking them questions. We were assessing their claims. We were analyzing and triangulating what they had to say. We were, in other words, using other sources, other documents to see if we could verify their claims. Then, ultimately, we understood that we would have to test these claims by revelation. Do these claims agree with the Book of Mormon and the testimonies that we have of the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon? Insofar as they do, we can trust them. Insofar as they don't, we can't.

I feel it is my obligation to, as Arthur Henry King put it, "arm the children,"² and I take that very seriously. I differ in this way from some of the other professors who are doing the same kind of work but might do it in a little different way or with different methods, and that is fine because there is more than one way to teach. We all do different things well and take different approaches, and I feel one thing I can contribute to the study of Church history is not only to tell the story but also to give students a sense of the provenance of the story. Again, what do we know and how do we know it? The students are fascinated when they get to read for themselves Joseph's first written account of the First Vision or the variety of other accounts that he gave, then test those claims for themselves. They hear the claims of the critics saying, "Oh, do you know that Joseph made such and such a number of statements about the First Vision and they're inconsistent with each other?" In class we say, "Let's see."

We show them how they can open these documents on the Internet through the selected collections from the archives of the Church database, accessible online via the Harold B. Lee Library Web site. They get terrific electronic images of these documents, and they read them for themselves. And I haven't had one student yet come to the conclusion that Joseph Smith was lying to them. They feel enriched. They feel like the historical record is rich. And they feel like they are empowered by this way of learning about Church history. They feel like they have access to the raw materials, and they can test them. They can verify the claims that Joseph makes by themselves through hard intellectual work accompanied by prayer to their Father in Heaven. Revelation comes through that process.

That's the thinking behind this method, and we're trying constantly to refine our methods so we accomplish those purposes as best we can. I want the students to be empowered so that when they hear critics of Joseph Smith make a claim, the students will either know from their own experience with the historical record that the claim isn't true or they'll have the tools to go find out for themselves. I tell them

they should do that with everything *I* tell them—don't take my word for it. They had better say, "How does Brother Harper know that?" and I'd better be able to give them a good answer to that question.

Grover: *You have an academic background in history and, as I understand, a degree in non-LDS history. How does this affect the way you teach?*

Harper: Well, I wrote a master's thesis on the first decade of the restored gospel, but I wrote a book on colonial Pennsylvania purposefully to broaden my understanding. I wanted to understand the world into which Joseph Smith was sent. I wanted to understand the stage on which the Restoration of the gospel took place.

I feel very much that although this training has equipped me, I have also gained in the process what I regard as a very healthy skepticism of the historical method. It is not a way to ultimate truths. I started out studying the ancient Near East, and I just couldn't get very satisfied reconstructing the past out of pottery shards and papyrus scraps. The folks who do that are really remarkable; I have the greatest admiration for them. But the point is that all of history is in some ways a very primitive set of tools, of reconstructing the past with very finite minds out of very limited source material and technique. So our historical method is primitive. It's like Fred Flintstone-era technology, but we have that wonderful blessing of being able to verify the things we learn, at least the most important things.

When I say that, I do not mean to treat prayer casually. I don't think we should necessarily go and ask the Lord whether every little thing is true. What I mean is that we can test Joseph Smith's claims. You can verify whether the Book of Mormon is true by an independent experience, independent of anybody else except you and the Godhead. You can do that with Joseph Smith's First Vision, and you can do that with all important questions. It does not happen when you treat it flip-pantly or when you are unwilling to exercise the faith but when you are willing to exercise the faith and work hard intellectually and believe in the marvelous power of revelation. And it is the most empowering way of knowing that I have ever seen or experienced.

Grover: *Church history seems to be undergoing a period of secularization, such as the Mormon studies programs at Utah State and Claremont. How important is it that BYU or Church education keep up with this current trend of engaging Mormon studies academically?*

Harper: I think those programs are good things, but I do not think of them as doing any kind of ultimate good. God's work and glory is to bring His children to eternal life. Academically speaking those are fine

things. I am pleased with the increased attention to Mormon studies both here and abroad. I encourage these developments. I keep up with what is going on there, but I want to have a healthy sense of perspective and priority. So those are, by no means, the most important things that are going on. I think that one of the most important things going on with respect to Church history is when we empower students with the understanding that they had better bring their very best brainwork to the project. They had better get their intellect out and working, their spiritual sensitivities heightened, their lives moral, and their proximity close to the Holy Ghost, which will make them fit recipients for revelation and for the testifying whisperings of the Holy Spirit. I know people with very impressive intellects who study Mormon history and have no faith in the divine Restoration. I also know people who study it and have the testimony that it is a divine restoration but seem fearful—and I use that word purposefully—of studying it in an academic way. I do not see why those things are incompatible given the commandment to “seek learning, even by study and also by faith” (D&C 88:118).

I believe Elder Neal A. Maxwell and others have articulated the responsibility we have that if we are going to study our history academically, we need to master the tools, the techniques, and the skills to seek learning by study. But just as important, if not more so, we had better have the spiritual sensitivities to seek learning by faith. Either we keep both dimensions of that commandment or we don’t keep it at all. I am concerned about emphasizing only one aspect or the other.

Grover: I often hear students say they do not want religion classes to be academic. Do you think that students have trouble intellectually engaging their beliefs?

Harper: It’s not that students cannot intellectually engage their beliefs. They certainly can. They are very capable of it. I used to teach at Lehigh University when I was doing my graduate work there, and the students were smart young men and women. But generally speaking, they were not as gifted as students at BYU. The student body at BYU and BYU–Hawaii, where I taught for two years, are sharp and capable. Some of them are sometimes lazy, and some of them have this assumption that they shouldn’t work their brains very hard in a religion class. I resent that. They are assuming a passive position. Elder David A. Bednar wrote a wonderful piece published in the *Religious Educator* that I use in my classes to illustrate this point about acting on what we know. He evoked Joseph Smith as someone who learned by acting. As soon as Joseph had a piece of knowledge to act upon, he went and did what he was supposed to do.

Well, our students need to get that in their lives too. They need to be willing to act—that is, to be active and not just passive learners. It is not my obligation to feed them Church history or the Doctrine and Covenants as they sit passively by. It is my obligation to *facilitate* their active seeking of learning by study and by faith. I will bend over backwards to meet them on those terms, but I get frustrated with them when they are not very anxiously engaged.

I'll tell you a story. I rode up the elevator one day to my office with a student, and I don't know what experience the student had just had, but it must have been frustrating. With some hostility the student said, "Are you a religion teacher?"

I said yes.

Then the student said, "Why isn't it fun?" I mumbled some incoherent answer. I didn't know what to say. I was quite taken aback.

I could not stop thinking about this conversation for hours afterward. I resented the assertion that my job description was to make sure the students have fun. I felt like I was supposed to be an entertainer. I do not want my students to have a bad experience. I do not try to be mean or ruin their lives by any stretch, but I am not very worried about making it fun.

I think all the time about how to make it right, about how to increase the likelihood that we will learn by study and by faith, and that is what I really care about. Now, I would say that overwhelmingly the students warm up to this idea. The students at BYU overwhelmingly want to achieve the aims of a BYU education. They want what the restored gospel has to offer to them.

In some ways, many of these students have had relatively easy academic lives, because of their conditioning in high school or elsewhere, and the university may be the first real challenging thinking they have done. I would say that a lot of them warm up to it, maybe after some initial chafing, and lots of them come here hungering and thirsting after it.

So I would not trade this student body for any in the whole world. We start class with an opening prayer, and I feel a sense of gratitude to my Father in Heaven that I have students who are as sharp intellectually as any on the planet, who also bring with them that faith that is manifest in their prayerfulness, in the gratitude they express in their prayers, and in asking the Lord to bless them with His Holy Spirit as they learn in an academic setting. It is the most wonderful mixture—to learn by study and faith.

Grover: Is there anything else you would like to say about the topic?

Harper: Well, just that I think when we do our best work, we consecrate our minds to God. We obey the commandment to love God with all our mind and heart when we take our religion seriously from an academic perspective. I think, though, that there is a danger of congratulating ourselves about how smart we are, and how much we have figured out, and so on. It seems to me that higher education has a terrible occupational hazard, and I have experienced this myself. I remember it as a student, and I see some of my own students wrestling with it, as I have done, and that is avoiding the gain of a real heady sense of yourself—a kind of intellectual arrogance: “To be learned is good *if* they hearken unto the counsels of God” (2 Nephi 9:29; emphasis added). One of the conditions on which the Lord will open to us is if we consider ourselves *fools* before God (see 2 Nephi 9:42). There needs to be a devout humility and a recognition of one’s nothingness. If we understand ourselves in that way, as we really are, then it will be a worshipful thing to work with our brains falteringly—but as best as we can—toward the fullness of God’s truth (see D&C 93). But if we start to get too confident that our intellect is sufficient by itself to find truth, then we are in a very dangerous predicament.

You began by talking about some of the secularization of Church history. Some of that is very good. In other words, we have had some excellent research and writing done, by which we understand an enormous amount more about the Restoration than we otherwise would have. Holding our research and writing to high scholarly standards and a rigorous historical method leads to far greater understanding than less informed or disciplined methods. But there is also some of it that is so arrogant, so narrow-minded in its assurance of its superiority, that in an ultimate sense it is of no value at all. So it’s a fine line. It is a balance that we try to strike, and it is a wrestle. It is a challenging and very intellectually and spiritually stimulating exercise to try to learn by study and by faith and to try to help students do that as well. **RE**

Notes

1. Dallin H. Oaks, “Joseph Smith in a Personal World,” *BYU Studies* 44, no. 4 (2005): 167 (published as *The Worlds of Joseph Smith: A Bicentennial Conference at the Library of Congress*, ed. John W. Welch).

2. Arthur Henry King, *Arm the Children: Faith’s Response to a Violent World* (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 1998).