



2019

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BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Welch, Rosalynde (2019) "How to Do Things with Doubt," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*: Vol. 28: No. 1, Article 10.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms/vol28/iss1/10>

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Review Essays

How to Do Things with Doubt

Rosalynde Welch

Review of Terryl L. Givens and Fiona Givens. *The Crucible of Doubt: Reflections on the Quest for Faith*. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2014; Patrick Q. Mason. *Planted: Belief and Belonging in an Age of Doubt*. Provo, UT, and Salt Lake City: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship and Deseret Book, 2015; Thomas Wirthlin McConkie. *Navigating Mormon Faith Crisis: A Simple Developmental Map*. Self-published, 2015; Adam S. Miller. *Letters to a Young Mormon*. 2nd ed. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2018; Blair G. Van Dyke and Loyd Isao Ericson, eds. *Perspectives on Mormon Theology: Apologetics*. Draper, UT: Greg Kofford Books, 2017.

WITH FEARS OF FAITH CRISIS AND disaffection rising like seawater, Latter-day Saint apologetic discourse has gone forth, like Noah's dove, in search of living branches in which the sap runs. Defenders of the faith, including those addressed here, have returned with new academic

sophistication, new critical interpretations, and new methods to address doubt among Latter-day Saints. In this review essay, I propose a pair of critical terms, the *semantic* and the *performative*, with which to consider this new apologetic discourse. I open with a brief reading of chapters 8 and 11 of 1 Nephi—Lehi’s dream of the tree and Nephi’s messianic vision—which, I’ll argue, offer a neat bifocal lens with which to consider these two modes of religious expression.

Consider first Lehi’s dream. Among other striking features, it is curiously free of explanation. Without narrative or psychological preamble, an unnamed guide bids Lehi follow without inquiry into his desired destination. After wandering for hours in darkness, Lehi prays not for direction or knowledge, but for mercy. And when he beholds the tree, its qualities seem to be immediately plain to him: the “fruit was desirable to make one happy” (1 Nephi 8:10). Lehi goes to the tree and eats the fruit instinctively, without instruction or interpretation. The experience is visceral, grounded in an existential force that acts on both Lehi and the reader from outside the mental operations of explanation or comprehension. It is the *taste* of the fruit, not its analysis, that beckons from the page.

Consider, now, Nephi’s vision. Unlike Lehi, Nephi actively seeks to know a particular set of *things*: he wants to “know the things that my father had seen” (1 Nephi 11:1). The kind of knowledge Nephi seeks becomes clear as his vision unfolds in dialogue with the Spirit of the Lord. “What desirest thou?” the Spirit asks. Nephi responds, “I desire to behold the things which my father saw” (1 Nephi 11:2–3). It emerges that Nephi already believes that his father has seen the tree—he does not doubt Lehi’s veracity—but desires some further epistemological grasp of the image of the tree that Lehi has described. Nephi, in fact, desires something very specific with regard to the tree: a statement of its meaning. The Spirit of the Lord asks again, “What desirest thou?” Nephi responds, “To know the interpretation thereof” (1 Nephi 11:11).

This moment should, I think, elicit a mental gasp of astonishment and perhaps dismay from the reader. Within the logic of Lehi’s dream, desire is directed again and again to the fruit of the tree: the fruit is thrice

described as “desirable,” and, upon eating it, Lehi is twice described as “desirous” that his family eat it also (see 1 Nephi 11:10, 12, 15, 17). Yet Nephi, repeatedly asked by the angel what he desires—as if, perhaps, answering incorrectly the first time—responds not with desire to *eat* of the fruit, but with desire to *know* of the fruit. Indeed, Nephi himself never partakes of the fruit within the events of his own dream. He receives instead knowledge of the tree’s meaning in the linguistic form of a statement: “Yea, it is the love of God, which sheddeth itself abroad in the hearts of the children of men” (1 Nephi 11:21). Is it coincidence that Nephi’s desire to “know the interpretation” of the tree is followed by the abrupt departure of the Spirit of the Lord, whose presence is now, it seems, summoned to appear in the pageant of Christ’s life that immediately follows? Has Nephi forfeited the *presence* of the Lord in favor of an interpretive *representation* of the Lord?

The latter suggestion is speculative, of course, but it seems to me significant that Nephi’s and Lehi’s juxtaposed responses to the tree dramatize two distinct modes of spiritual understanding, figured in Nephi’s knowing and Lehi’s tasting. Nephi wants, above all, to know the fruit’s meaning. He believes Lehi’s words, but that’s insufficient: Nephi wants to *know* the true interpretation of the tree. The true meaning of the prophetic word will become an important theme in Nephi’s sweeping vision of the Restoration, a major purpose of which is to convince the Gentiles and Jews that “the records of the prophets and of the twelve apostles of the Lamb are true” (1 Nephi 13:39). Nephi’s approach to the fruit is fundamentally semantic, centered around meaning, communication, and truth. Lehi’s relationship to the fruit, by contrast, is visceral and non-semantic, concerned not so much with meaning as with experience. Lehi seems to understand much about the tree’s sacred nature, but its meaning is never explained to him. Rather, the fruit stimulates the intimate sense of taste and fills Lehi with happiness and desire. The tree seems simply to act on him with its own particular happy power. The fruit is neither true nor false in a semantic sense; it’s *felicitous*. It *works*. It *does things*.

Some readers may here recognize my gesture toward J. L. Austin’s critical work on performative utterance, collected in a book titled *How*

to *Do Things with Words* (Oxford University Press, 1975), from which I've drawn the title of this essay. As the title indicates, Austin is interested in the power of words to do things other than convey semantic statements of meaning, which he calls its "constative" function. He's interested, rather, in the "illocutionary" function of language, the way language can act directly—rather than representationally—on reality. This ability is sometimes called the "performative" power of language. The classic example of a performative utterance is the sentence "I do take this woman to be my lawfully wedded wife" in the course of the wedding ceremony. In this example, language does not describe or represent something true; instead, it creates a new condition that, as a result of the utterance, is now the case. It is not falsifiable in a conventional sense, because its very utterance *performs* the act it contains. We'd ask not whether the sentence is true or false, but whether it worked or it didn't. Austin calls this criterion the "felicity condition," rather than the "truth condition," of the utterance.¹

The purpose of my brief comparative reading of Lehi's and Nephi's different approaches to the fruit of the tree of life is to suggest that the Book of Mormon itself recognizes something like Austin's distinction between the performative and constative modes of language. For Lehi, the fruit exercises a performative or illocutionary power, a power that works outside the operations of explanation, verification, and meaning. It would make little sense to ask Lehi if the fruit is "true": the live question instead is whether the fruit *works* to make one happy and stimulate desire. Is the fruit *felicitous*?, we might ask. For Nephi, the fruit's value seems largely to be semantic: the fruit matters for what it means, for what can be explained, verified, and known about it. For Nephi, the question "Is the fruit true?" would probably make quite a bit of sense, and be rendered as something along the lines of "Is the interpretation of the fruit's meaning valid?" This is a question that matters to Nephi.

1. J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975).

I'd like, at last, to bring the categories of semantic and performative linguistic modes—now preliminarily grounded in Latter-day Saint scripture and, I hope, justifiably invoked here—to bear on the topic at hand, which is a recent raft of books published for Latter-day Saint readers about or around religious doubt and disillusionment. These books, five of which I'll discuss in this essay, approach difficult matters in Latter-day Saint history, ecclesiology, and scripture with candor and with compassion for Latter-day Saints who find themselves in spiritual distress. Published by a handful of prominent Latter-day Saint presses and imprints, including Deseret Book, Brigham Young University's Religious Studies Center and Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, and FairMormon, these books take diverse approaches to a common pastoral concern to comfort Latter-day Saints in spiritual upheaval, repair their trust in the leaders and teachings of the Church, and address the struggles of doubt. The question of *what to do with doubt*—Should it be tolerated? resolved? dignified? praised?—appears to be an open question among this cohort of Latter-day Saint authors. Much has been written about the phenomenon of faith crisis in contemporary Latter-day Saint culture and the effectiveness of various responses. It is my aim in this review essay not to ask what to do *about* doubt, but instead to ask how to do things *with* doubt. I propose to use the approaches modeled by Nephi and Lehi, refracted through the language of Austin—the performative and semantic modes—as the axis of analysis. Through this lens, how successful are these authors at doing things with doubt?

A note, first, on apologetics. Discussion of religious doubt is often tied to discussions of the legitimacy of apologetics, a polarized and acrimonious topic. The breadth of that polarization, as well as the epistemological morass that can engulf discussion of apologetics, is aptly demonstrated in a 2017 offering from Greg Kofford Books, *Perspectives on Mormon Theology: Apologetics*, edited by Blair G. Van Dyke and Loyd Isao Ericson. This collection of essays brings together a wide range of prominent Latter-day Saint or former Latter-day Saint scholars, many of whom have appeared on opposing sides of recent debates over the

proper role of apologetics in academic study of the Latter-day Saint tradition. The table of contents features defenses of traditional apologetic approaches to Book of Mormon historicity and similar issues by authors like Daniel Peterson and Michael Ash, together with sharp critiques of such approaches by authors like Benjamin Park and David Bokovoy; it features a few essays that deal with particular apologetic issues, such as Fiona Givens on gender and David Knowlton on Lamanites and anthropology; and it features a number of interesting reflections on Latter-day Saint apologetics as a social practice, including Julie Smith on women in apologetics and Joseph Spencer on a radical apologetics that eschews palatability.

Several of the implicit conversations within the volume are brought into the open in Loyd Ericson's essay "Conceptual Confusion and the Building of Stumbling Blocks of Faith." Ericson makes a vigorous critique of the traditional apologetic approach that answers rational or inductive challenges to faith claims, such as denial of Book of Mormon historicity, with rebuttals of the same epistemological kind. Such an approach is misguided, he argues, because it treats faith as the kind of thing that can be verified—and, it follows, falsified—with observation or syllogism. This approach hollows out faith, leaving it fragile and prone to epistemological crisis and disruption whenever opposing reasons are newly generated by ongoing empirical inquiry. Instead, he urges the faithful to simply turn aside such empirical challenges and recognize that "religious claims are things of the soul and can only be evaluated and known by the experiences of the soul" (p. 220). Ericson seems to share my suggestion above that a Nephi-like obsession with the true—that is, empirically confirmed—meaning and interpretation of religious claims may inadvertently banish God's real presence to a pantomime of representations.

While I'm sympathetic to Ericson's concerns, it seems to me that his essay demonstrates the limitations of Nephi's epistemological lens on these questions. Ericson argues for a two-tiered epistemological regime, but, within the terms on each side, there is great slippage: religion, soul, transcendence, spirituality, and faith are set against secularism,

non-religion, the facts of history, evidence, scholarship, and similar terms. Each of the two alliances is highly debatable: one could readily argue against the affinity of religion and spirituality, for instance, or the enmity of faith and history. This is because epistemologies do not coolly describe timeless categories of knowing; rather, they must be actively built and maintained to produce knowledge. Just as Ericson accuses apologists of re-inscribing empiricism in responding empirically to challengers, Ericson may himself re-inscribe epistemology in responding epistemologically to apologetics. Ericson, it seems to me, would like to convince the faithful to savor the fruit of faith, like Lehi, rather than obsess about its meaning, like Nephi, but his critical paradigm keeps him busy in refereeing epistemological boundaries.

What if we were to set aside the semantic questions addressed by the *Apologetics* volume—what is meant by faith and reason, and which interpretation should prevail—and instead look at its performative qualities. What does the book *do*, rather than say? For one thing, it places apologetics in a multi-volume series on Latter-day Saint theology with five projected volumes, only two of which—*Apologetics* and *Scriptural Theology*—have been realized. It thus participates in both the failures and the hopes of Latter-day Saint theology. Furthermore, in bringing together intellectual adversaries within the covers of a single volume, the book dramatizes in miniature the capacity of a community to encompass conflict. And the book's imperfectly edited text, sprinkled with typos and grammatical errors, performs the endearing scrappiness and amateurishness—in the best sense of being motivated by love—of the querulous intellectual community from which it arises. Those failures and hopes, that scrappy community, can be *tasted*. This is one way to approach the performative work of a book, though not every performance-oriented reading need focus on these particular illocutionary features.

I've briefly demonstrated, I hope, something of a performance-oriented reading, and suggested why I'll decline in this essay to adjudicate the particular polemical claims and interpretations at play in the books I consider. Now, then, what do these books do with doubt? To begin a

comparative consideration, we might order the books along a spectrum from the purely topic-based, organized around a list of answers to difficult issues, to the purely framework-based, which set aside particulars in favor of exploring the mental contexts of faith and doubt. Such an ordering roughly describes a movement from semantic to performative approaches, from Nephi to Lehi.

At the topic-based, semantic end of the spectrum are Laura Harris Hales's edited volume *A Reason for Faith: Navigating LDS Doctrine & Church History* (2016) and Michael R. Ash's book *Shaken Faith Syndrome: Strengthening One's Testimony in the Face of Criticism and Doubt* (2013).² Hales's volume boasts an impressive list of contributors, including Richard Bushman, Steve Harper, and Paul Reeve, tackling difficult topics ranging from scriptural discrepancies like anachronism in the Book of Mormon, to scandalous historical practices like polygamy and the race-based temple and priesthood ban, to present-day cultural conflicts around gender and sexuality. Ash's book opens with a long discussion of the cognitive biases—particularly cognitive dissonance—that inflect one's processing of information, which he relates to the entrenched disputes between Latter-day Saint apologists and critics who were formerly Latter-day Saints. The second part is organized topically around a similar stable of difficult issues in scripture and history. Hales's volume benefits from the professional expertise of her contributors and in general offers more sophisticated treatments, but the two volumes are substantially similar in their approach. Comparable to online resources like the Gospel Topics essays at lds.org and Book of Mormon Central's KnowWhy series, these books are intended to be used primarily as reference materials for Latter-day Saints who encounter troubling information online and seek interpretations to neutralize a challenge to their faith.

2. See *A Reason for Faith: Navigating LDS Doctrine & Church History*, ed. Laura Harris Hales (Provo, UT, and Salt Lake City: BYU Religious Studies Center and Deseret Book, 2016); Michael R. Ash, *Shaken Faith Syndrome: Strengthening One's Testimony in the Face of Criticism and Doubt*, 2nd ed. (Redding, CA: Foundation for Apologetic Information and Research, 2013).

Like all the books considered here, these volumes take a compassionate view of doubters and recommend an open and flexible approach to faith. They offer a summary of current academic research as well as a range of strategies to resolve doubt and reduce its personal turmoil. These strategies include normalizing the experience of doubt; inoculating readers to troubling information available online; offering historical contexts that recast difficult practices in a more palatable or plausible light; and emphasizing the institutional Church's increasing historical transparency. Their aim, in other words, is to reduce or resolve doubt—to do something *about* doubt, not to do anything with it. For a Saint who presently enjoys a vibrant spiritual connection to God's love manifested in the Church, such volumes and the online reference materials they resemble certainly provide useful and enlightening interpretations to enrich understanding. But for a young Latter-day Saint whose experience of God is just emerging, or a Latter-day Saint whose faith crisis has damaged her trust and sense of belonging in the Church, these books, with their emphasis on the semantic over the performative, are unlikely to nourish. In response to problems, they seek, Nephi-like, admirably accurate "interpretation[s] thereof" but offer little by way of Lehi's fruit to stimulate the desire of the soul.

Two volumes fall roughly between the semantic and performative poles. Terryl and Fiona Givens's *The Crucible of Doubt: Reflections on the Quest for Faith* (2014) and Patrick Q. Mason's *Planted: Belief and Belonging in an Age of Doubt* (2015) are erudite, compassionate, and deeply faithful observations from several leading Latter-day Saint thinkers. Both books have stimulated much insightful conversation. Each volume attempts to make something constructive with doubt rather than to interpret it away. For the Givenses, doubt works performatively—and paradoxically—to allow space for *elective* faith. In the presence of doubt, no single interpretation may compel intellectual assent, and thus "faith that we elect to profess in the absence of certainty is an offering that is entirely free, unconditioned, and utterly authentic" (p. 144). In a twist, then, the performative work of doubt is ultimately deployed to enhance the value of the semantic, the divine "principles and values and ideals"

(p. 144) that constitute their fresh articulation of the Restoration. The Givenses, indeed, sound a Lehi-like note to conclude their volume: citing Joseph Smith's famous comment that "you say honey is sweet, and so do I," they conclude: "We believe the doctrine of the Restoration to be true for the same reason: It tastes good" (p. 145). In the end, however, it is the true "interpretation thereof" that matters when one has passed through the crucible.

If Patrick Mason does not go quite so far as the Givenses in elevating doubt to the role of midwife to authentic faith, he does work carefully to demystify and destigmatize the experience of faith crisis. Mason sees doubt as morally neutral on an individual level, neither virtue nor vice in itself, but potentially salutary at the community level, by introducing spiritual diversity into Latter-day Saint pastoral settings. The friction produced by doubters in settings of faith provides occasion for the practice of charity, as Latter-day Saints "learn from the unique gifts of others and then glorify God for the gift of his diverse creation. Part of what it means to have charity is to learn to cherish the unique gifts found in all our sisters and brothers . . . especially those within our faith community who see things differently than we do" (p. 41). While he offers several paradigms for interpreting prophetic authority, Church history, and other matters, Mason places his primary focus not on the *epistemological* contest between faith and doubt but on the *social* negotiation between the faithful and the doubter. "More than anything," he writes, "this book is intended as an act of friendship" (p. 6). Mason's choice to prioritize relationality over epistemology exemplifies, I'd argue, something like Lehi's performative desire over Nephi's semantic pursuit of meaning. Mason's irenic yearning stimulates the spiritual desire of the reader, wholly aside from the meaning he proposes for the Restoration.

A final book occupies the extreme performative pole of the spectrum. Thomas Wirthlin McConkie's book *Navigating Mormon Faith Crisis: A Simple Developmental Map* (2015) eschews particular interpretations of Latter-day Saint teaching altogether in favor of a purely contextual approach. Growing out of the author's own experience of

disaffection and rapprochement with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, McConkie adapts a staged framework similar to James W. Fowler's 1981 *Stages of Faith*. He identifies five stages of faith development for Latter-day Saints, moving from a dogmatic focus on orthodoxy and obedience through a fully "integrated" perspective that discovers truth in every context. Doubt is celebrated, but its difference is neutralized as it becomes indistinguishable from faith: "Faith is at the heart of doubt and doubt the heart of true faith, like the yin in the yang. The Strategist experiences both increasingly as one and the same movement" (p. 112). McConkie's vision resembles and surpasses that of the Givenses in both its lionization of doubt as an essential stage of human enlightenment and in its revelation of the authentic self as the means and the end of faith: "Your life is a great Mystery inviting you into always more subtle discoveries of who you really are. And to *become* who you inherently are is the deep joy of Mormonism" (p. 20).

There is much to admire in McConkie's book. The lessons of his personal journey, including deep immersion in Eastern religion and mindfulness practices, are evident, as is the depth of his conversion and the sincerity of his desire to help the reader. McConkie is a Lehi: he clearly grasps the power of performative apologetics to act directly on the soul and stimulate spiritual desire. Yet his book illustrates both the appeal of the performative mode and its risks—namely, that performances can fail. And when performative utterance fails, it is not merely a mistake, but a miscarriage. The thing he tries to do with doubt doesn't work. Certainly, different readers' perspectives will vary; McConkie's approach will certainly move and inspire some. But for this reader, despite McConkie's evident goodwill, the limitations of the staged structure of his argument are decisive. While he hedges with many disclaimers that one need not pass through the stages sequentially and that advancement does not confer superiority, the logic of the stage format inevitably sweeps these disclaimers aside. What are stages, if not sequential and progressive? If not sequential and progressive, then why frame them as stages? One ultimately cannot escape the conclusion that advancement through McConkie's stages of intellectual enlightenment

confers a moral or existential advantage over those stuck in the early stages—the majority of Latter-day Saints, in McConkie’s view. Such an approach, I fear, often breeds smugness and self-congratulation inimical to the charity that must thrum at the center of any performative apologetics. The fruit *must* be love, or the performance is in vain.

A fit comparison to McConkie’s book is Adam Miller’s *Letters to a Young Mormon* (2nd ed. 2018). Like McConkie, Miller offers few particular interpretations of controversial issues. Miller’s approach, like McConkie’s, is personal, non-dogmatic, and sincere. Both books operate at psychological and existential levels, foregrounding life as it is lived and ruminating on life lived faithfully. But whereas McConkie’s book is structured around the individual progress of the self toward enlightenment, Miller’s is framed as a series of letters to his child. This relational device offsets the smugness that lurks in McConkie’s device. For Miller, religious doubt is neither to be praised nor feared, only to be used in the service of life: “In itself, doubt is neither good nor bad. Its value depends on what you do with it. . . . You can use doubt to protect you from the truth or you can use doubt to leave you vulnerable to it. You’ll have doubts regardless. Repurpose them for the sake of faith” (pp. 23–24).

Miller articulates what Lehi enacts in his dream of the tree: faith must be eaten, not just described. Faith does not—or does not merely—report on the facts from the most enlightened perspective; it acts on the ground. Declaring one’s faith “commits you to living in such a way as to *make* that love true” (p. 24). Faith itself is performative.

While writing this essay, I couldn’t resist the reference to Austin in my title, but I confess that it is misleading. This is merely a review essay, not a manifesto or how-to guide for a new movement in Latter-day Saint apologetics. Nevertheless, a few general remarks about performative apologetics might be hazarded by way of conclusion. A performative apologetics, one that aims to act within the reader rather than simply explain away doubt, must channel Lehi at least as much as Nephi. The reader’s desire must be directed toward the fruit itself, the love of God, not simply toward the correct interpretation thereof. This is no easy

task. It can only be accomplished through the non-coercive workings of charity, thus ruling out dogmatic assertion, emotional manipulation, unfair play, or coercive appeal to authority. (This is not to say that performative apologetics must always be warm and fuzzy—far from it!) A performative treatment of doubt must have some *excess*, some element that exceeds its semantic meaning, to carry the taste of the fruit into the reader's mind and heart. This excess may reside in the book's literary style, its originality or artfulness, its wit, erudition, or personal vulnerability, its enthusiasm for the subject matter, its community-building, or indeed the meticulous care of its research. One might conclude from this essay that a research-based book, trading as it does in interpretation and meaning, will have no performative power. Not so. But over and above its impeccable scholarship, it will exercise some illocutionary power for good. It will succeed on conditions of "happiness" as well as conditions of truth. It will act as much as it will mean. It will taste as much as it will say. It will lead readers to the fruit of the tree and bid them to eat for themselves.

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