

What's the Church's Official Position on Official Positions? Grappling with "Truth" and "Authority"

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In the previous essay, Dr. Rabbi Peter Haas considered how some of our Jewish friends have approached the issue of authority in their search for truth. During my engagement with such approaches as a student at Baltimore Hebrew University, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and the Spertus Institute of Jewish Studies in Chicago, I have wondered how this approach might inform my own quest for truth within the context of my faith tradition. As a Latter-day Saint, what authorities should I consult? Where do I turn for truth? How can I know whether a certain claim is an "official position" of the Church or where to find the "official position" if one exists? If the Church does not have an "official position" on a particular issue, then how do I proceed in formulating my own personal "official position"?

While some Latter-day Saints might believe the search for truth is as simple as figuring out the Church's current position on any given matter, this approach does not work for me, as I will explain. Instead, I am convinced that a dialectical approach that brings in a wide range of authorities is the responsibility of all Latter-day Saints. While there are certainly religious differences between Jews and Latter-day Saints, there is much we can learn from the way our Jewish friends have navigated this difficult aspect of the human experience.

I have sometimes worried about my students who seem to reduce their own search for truth to the question of what is "official doctrine" or the "official position." When they ask me the "official position" of any given topic, they usually imagine such a position can be found in the teachings of living prophets, with scripture following as an important but inferior source. From this standpoint, when they ask questions about the Church's official interpretation on a scriptural passage, women working outside the home, dating practices, guns, communism, or evolution and the age of the earth, they are conflating "truth" and "official positions." For

them, the *perceived* “official position” of the Church is prophetic truth, and therefore divine truth, straight from the mind of God. There seems to be very little nuance in how many of them conceptualize truth, doctrine, “official positions,” and general teachings of prophets.

My hope in this chapter is to demonstrate how much more complicated these issues of truth and authority are, and how much more agency and responsibility my students and others might assume for establishing their own “official positions” on many matters. My hope is also that this approach results in my students being fairer to Church leaders by not holding them to such an impossible standard. In order to avoid misunderstanding, I must state from the outset that I am *not* applying the following framework to the very few core and revealed doctrines of the Church. I am *only* comparing the non-revelatory aspects of our faith tradition with the non-revelatory aspects of Judaism.¹

Official Positions are Complicated

Latter-day Saints in general seem to crave certainty, because we imagine that if we can identify an official position, then we can place our finger on a fundamentally and eternally “true” principle. Many Latter-day Saints do not respond well to ambiguity and complexity. Most of us have been conditioned to think that we have all the answers. It is often expressed that if any group on earth can answer life’s questions, both big and small, it is the Latter-day Saints. Consequently, when many Church members realize that some of our answers are significantly more complex than previously thought, or have been overstated, we do not know how to deal with it. The quest for, and expectation of, certainty has led to the diminishing convictions of many Church members. Joseph Smith observed in 1844 that some Saints “fly to pieces like glass, as soon as anything comes that is contrary to their traditions.”² My observation is that this remains a problem for many today. Given this context within the information age, many Latter-day Saint religious educators have weighed in on the subject of how to determine “truth,” “doctrine,” and “official positions” (a common phrasing among Latter-day Saints) of the Church. I offer a few examples

1. I appreciate and thank the nearly two dozen readers, reviewers, and interlocutors at BYU and elsewhere for their feedback and support regarding this essay.

2. “History, 1838–1856, volume E-1 [1 July 1843–30 April 1844],” p. 1867, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed March 12, 2021, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-e-1-1-july-1843-30-april-1844/239>.

to show that determining truth or an official position in our religious tradition is not simple on *all* matters.

In 2003—with similar versions published in 2007 and 2013—Robert Millet, professor emeritus of BYU Religious Education, proposed several criteria for determining official positions and doctrines of the Church. His criteria identified authoritative voices that transmit authoritative truths. Doctrine or “official positions” are found in (1) the four standard works and official declarations or proclamations, (2) general conference or other official gatherings by general Church leaders, (3) general handbooks or approved curriculum of the Church, and (4) the teachings of the Church *today*. He also posited that doctrine is time tested—perpetuated over time by leaders of the Church.³ Ironically, what was an attempt to help bring clarity to the problem seemed to raise more questions than it answered. LDS philosopher Loyd Ericson pointed out that there was “no justification” for why Millet thought this “particular set of criteria should be used over any other.”⁴ The complicated nature of the subject is demonstrated by the fact that Millet responded to Ericson in the same journal,⁵ and Ericson subsequently offered a rejoinder to Millet’s response.⁶ One glaring takeaway is that they could not even agree—and understandably so—on what the most authoritative voices and settings for Latter-day Saints are.

Similarly, in 2016 three BYU Religious Education professors published a piece wherein they propose potential sources of Latter-day Saint authority. These are (1) scripture—and better yet, repeated occurrences within scripture, (2) the united voice of the current brethren, (3) current—and

3. Robert L. Millet, “What Is Our Doctrine?,” *The Religious Educator: Perspectives on the Restored Gospel* 4, no. 3 (2003), 15–33; Robert L. Millet, “What Do We Really Believe? Identifying Doctrinal Parameters within Mormonism,” in *Discourses in Mormon Theology: Philosophical and Theological Possibilities*, ed. James M. McLachlan and Loyd Ericson (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 265–81; Robert Millet, “What is Our Doctrine?” in *Common Ground, Different Opinions: Latter-day Saints and Contemporary Issues*, ed. Justin White and James Faulconer (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2013), 13–33.

4. Loyd Ericson, “The Challenges of Defining Mormon Doctrine,” *Element: The Journal of the Society for Mormon Philosophy and Theology* 3, no. 1–2 (Spring & Fall 2007): 71.

5. Robert L. Millet, “Defining Doctrine: A Response to Loyd Ericson,” *Element: The Journal of the Society for Mormon Philosophy and Theology* 5, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 1–7.

6. Loyd Ericson, “Is it Mormon Doctrine that Mormon Doctrine is True: A Rejoinder,” *Element* 5, no. 1 (Spring 2009), 21–26.

continuously taught—teachings of General Authorities and general officers acting in their official capacity, and (4) recent Church publications or statements.⁷

Michael Goodman, a BYU Religious Education professor, offered his own three-point criteria for doctrine: (1) true doctrine is eternal and unchanging, (2) true doctrine is taught by the united voice of the brethren, and (3) true doctrine is salvific (i.e., essential for salvation).⁸ Goodman’s approach echoed a statement from the Church’s newsroom that warned that “some doctrines are more important than others and might be considered core doctrines.”⁹

Again, a year later, another Religious Education professor, this time Scott Woodward at BYU–Idaho, published a mechanism for his students to utilize while assessing proposed truths. He suggested that if the following are in place, then our confidence level might increase if a certain teaching is true: (1) Does the teaching accord with the repeated teachings of the scriptures? (2) Is the teaching consistently or unitedly proclaimed by the apostles? (3) Is the teaching confirmed by the Holy Spirit?¹⁰ In Woodward’s model, *the* authoritative voice for Latter-day Saints is not any one of these voices; it is rather a combination of them.

These are only a sampling of the many publications, blogs, and podcast episodes that grapple with this question. If the answers to “What is the primary authoritative voice for Latter-day Saints?” or “What is the Church’s official position on this or that?” were so obvious, then so many people would not be both asking and attempting to answer these questions. But why is the issue of authority so confusing for many Latter-day Saints? I provide four brief examples below that further illustrate the

7. Anthony Sweat, Michael H. MacKay, and Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, “Doctrine: Models to Evaluate Types and Sources of Latter-day Saint Teachings,” *Religious Educator* 17, no. 3 (2016): 101–25.

8. Michael Goodman, “What is LDS Doctrine?” LDS Perspectives Podcast, Episode 27, March 15, 2017, <https://ldsperspectives.com/2017/03/15/lds-doctrine-michael-goodman/>.

9. LDS Newsroom, “Approaching Mormon Doctrine,” May 4, 2007, <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/approaching-mormon-doctrine>; Elder D. Todd Christofferson, “The Doctrine of Christ,” General Conference, April 2012; President Dallin H. Oaks, “Trust in the Lord,” General Conference, October 2019.

10. Scott Woodward, “A Primer on Latter-day Saint Doctrine,” *Scott Woodward.org*, April 19, 2020, <http://www.scottwoodward.org/new/a-primer-on-latter-day-saint-doctrine/>.

complexity. These are as follows: the authority of prophets, the Word of Wisdom, the nature of God, and race.

Authority of Prophets

In other faith traditions, the sacred texts are the primary authority. Some traditions, like Judaism, make room for secondary authorities (e.g., legal experts) to help make sense of laws contained within the sacred texts. Latter-day Saints add a layer of authority; not only are there sacred texts, but there are also modern-day prophets. Central to the question of official authoritative positions is the primacy of *living* prophets in Latter-day Saint thought.

A sentiment is often expressed that living prophets are more authoritative than dead prophets, even more than those dead prophets whose writings are preserved in scripture. This idea has been posited in various settings, including, for example, in 1897 when Wilford Woodruff relayed a story about Brigham Young, who said, “When compared with the living oracles those books [referring to the scripture] are nothing to me. . . . I would rather have the living oracles than all the writing in the books.”¹¹ President Ezra Taft Benson echoed this notion in a 1980 Brigham Young University address: “Beware of those who would pit the dead prophets against the living prophets, for the living prophets *always* take precedence.”¹² Likewise, in 1916, Elder Orson F. Whitney said the following, which was quoted six decades later by Elder Loren C. Dunn in his April 1976 general conference talk:

The Latter-day Saints do not do things because they happen to be printed in a book [i.e., Scripture]. They do not do things because God told the Jews to do them [i.e., the Bible]; nor do they do or leave undone anything because of the instructions that Christ gave to the Nephites [i.e., the Book of Mormon]. Whatever is done by this Church is because God, speaking from heaven in our day, has commanded this Church to do it. *No book presides over this Church, and no book lies at its foundation.*¹³

11. *Report of the Semi-Annual Conference of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, October 1897 (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, semiannual), 22 (hereafter cited as *Conference Report*).

12. Ezra Taft Benson, *The Fourteen Fundamentals in Following the Prophet*, BYU address, February 26, 1980, <https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/ezra-taft-benson/fourteen-fundamentals-following-prophet/>; emphasis added.

13. Orson F. Whitney, *Conference Report*, October 1916, 55; quoted in Loren C. Dunn, “A Living Prophet,” *Ensign*, May 1976; emphasis added.

These statements seem clear enough—living prophets trump scripture. Full stop. Thus, one must look first to living prophets to find “official positions.” If living prophets do not speak on a particular issue, only then should one look to the teachings of dead Latter-day Saint prophets and canonized scripture.

Along these lines, some have taught that Latter-day Saints must *always* follow the prophets. Consider President Benson’s statement in the same 1980 speech: “If there is ever a conflict between earthly knowledge and the words of the prophet, you stand with the prophet and you’ll be blessed and time vindicate you.”¹⁴ Elder Marion G. Romney more provocatively stated: “[Heber J. Grant] put his arm over my shoulder and said: ‘My boy, you always keep your eye on the President of the Church and if he ever tells you to do anything, and it is wrong, and you do it, the Lord will bless you for it.’”¹⁵ Elder David A. Bednar, speaking in a 2005 BYU devotional, stressed that Latter-day Saints must “promptly and quietly obey the counsel of the prophet in *all things* and at *all times*.”¹⁶ And in a more recent general conference address in 2014, Sister Carol McConkie declared, “Following the prophet is *always* right.”¹⁷

At this point, my students and others should not be confused. Given what we read, we should assume that “official positions” and “truth” are posited by ordained prophets through revelation, or in scripture, as long as they do not contradict modern prophets. Moreover, Latter-day Saints are expected to always default to follow prophets’ teachings. So why the confusion?

Well, first, many of these types of statements are rarely qualified, thus leading to confusion. Lifelong members of the Church have been taught repeatedly since childhood to “follow the prophets.” While the aptly named children’s hymn “Follow the Prophet” contains the word “prophet” sixty-eight times and “follow the prophet” fifty-nine times, the primary message exemplified by the song is rarely offered with clarification of what it actually means to follow the prophet. I have read on social media the following two comments: “If the prophet told me to wear purple socks to

14. Benson, *Fourteen Fundamentals*.

15. *Conference Report*, October 1960, 78.

16. Elder David Bednar, “Quick to Observe,” Brigham Young University devotional, May 6, 2005; emphasis added.

17. Carol McConkie, “Live According to the Words of the Prophets,” General Conference, October 2014; emphasis added.

Church, I would do it”; “If the prophet told me to kill someone, I would do it, no questions asked.”

Are proponents of the paradigm of “always follow the prophet” referring to matters exclusively related to institutional functions and priesthood ordinances? Certainly, Elder Bednar’s and Sister McConkie’s comments extend beyond these. What about social, political, historical, familial, and financial matters? What about prophets who engage in scriptural interpretation? Must those interpretations be accepted without question as “official” interpretations? Are Latter-day Saints only required to follow prophets when they are transmitting a direct revelation from God, while all other statements are general thoughts that do not purport to be instruction from heaven? I myself have wrestled with these questions for two decades as I have tried to figure out where I fit into the grand scheme as a Latter-day Saint truth-seeker.

Despite the claim that living prophets take precedence over scripture and that Latter-day Saints must always follow the prophets, a counter-narrative has also been posited. For example, Elder B. H. Roberts understood that “the *only* sources of absolute appeal for our doctrine”—what is ultimately binding on Latter-day Saints—are the standard works (Bible, Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, and Pearl of Great Price).¹⁸ President Harold B. Lee and Elder Joseph Fielding Smith both explained that if any member of the Church, even a prophet, teaches anything that contradicts what is in scripture, then Latter-day Saints are “not bound to accept it as truth.” In fact, Joseph Fielding Smith was so bold to teach that if a prophet “writes something which is out of harmony with the revelations [referring to those contained in books of scripture], then every member of the Church *is duty bound to reject it.*”¹⁹ In a letter to a scholar, McConkie agreed that prophets have contradicted themselves and each other on multiple occasions, and used Brigham Young as an example: “Which Brigham Young shall we believe and the answer is: we will take the

18. Brigham H. Roberts, sermon, Salt Lake Tabernacle, July 10, 1921, printed in *Deseret News* 4, no. 7 (July 23, 1921); emphasis added.

19. Harold B. Lee, *The First Area General Conference for Germany, Austria, Holland, Italy, Switzerland, France, Belgium, and Spain of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, held in Munich Germany, August 24–26, 1973, with Reports and Discourses*, Family and Church History Department, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, 69; Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, ed. Bruce R. McConkie, 3 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1954–56), 3:203–204; emphasis added.

one whose statements accord with what God has revealed in the standard works.” In the same letter, he wrote, “Wise gospel students do not build their philosophies of life on quotations of individuals, even though those quotations come from presidents of the Church. Wise people anchor their doctrine on the standard works. . . . We do *not solve our problems by getting a statement from the president of the Church.*”²⁰ McConkie expressed this same position in his classic *Mormon Doctrine*: “[P]rophets . . . do not rank with the standard works.”²¹

Current Church leaders have recently reaffirmed this stance in a 2007 statement, repeated by Elder D. Todd Christofferson in the April 2012 general conference, and repeated again by President Dallin H. Oaks in the October 2019 general conference: “Not every statement made by a Church leader, past or present, necessarily constitutes doctrine. A single statement made by a single leader on a single occasion often represents a personal, though well-considered, opinion, but is not meant to be officially binding for the whole Church.” The quote further explains that doctrine is found in “the four standard works of Scripture” and “official declarations and proclamations.”²² Note that this statement does not claim that everything in scripture and official declarations or proclamations are binding doctrine, but that binding doctrine is found *within* these sources; the same can be argued about the teachings of prophets.

The Word of Wisdom

Over eighty times between 1908 and 2002, Latter-day Saints were counseled not to consume caffeine. This counsel is found in Church-produced magazines, Church news, general conference reports, and publications of

20. Bruce R. McConkie, Letter to Eugene England, February 19, 1981. Retrieved from the Eugene England Foundation at <http://www.eugeneengland.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/BRM-to-EE-Feb-80-Combined.pdf>; accessed January 12, 2021; emphasis added.

21. Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 111.

22. LDS Newsroom, “Approaching Mormon Doctrine,” May 4, 2007, <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/approaching-mormon-doctrine>; Elder D. Todd Christofferson, “The Doctrine of Christ,” General Conference, April 2012; President Dallin H. Oaks, “Trust in the Lord,” General Conference, October 2019.

prophets.²³ Yet, caffeinated drinks are now offered at Church-owned facilities like Brigham Young University. Were these statements about caffeine “official,” given that the platform was repeated counsel, across time, in various publications, and in general conference? As we have seen, some within the Church maintain that modern prophets trump scripture. The Word of Wisdom was originally canonized in the 1830s as just that, a piece of wisdom for the “temporal salvation of all saints” and “not by commandment or constraint” (D&C 89:2). Thus, it was not a problem for Joseph Smith to purchase and drink beer from Frederick Moesser’s store one month before his death or for Joseph Smith and his associates to drink wine in Carthage Jail in 1844.²⁴ In fact, the Word of Wisdom itself permits the consumption of “mild barley drink” (i.e., beer). However, Church members generally do not drink (or even sip) wine or beer today, and they no longer see the Word of Wisdom as temporal wisdom; instead, it is viewed now as a commandment from God, given statements from Presidents Brigham Young and Heber J. Grant.²⁵ In this case, Church members side with current leaders over canonized scripture.

Intriguing, however, is that despite prophets counseling members over eighty times in the last hundred years to avoid caffeine, Brigham Young University started serving caffeine in 2017.²⁶ Some pointed to the Church’s statement on its Newsroom as a rationale for members to drink caffeine:²⁷ “The Church revelation spelling out health practices (Doctrine and Covenants 89) does not mention the use of caffeine.”²⁸ This appeal to the canonized revelation is made while the revelation itself permits beer and

23. “Caffeine,” in *Sermons and Speeches*, on *Gospelink*, Digital Library by Deseret Book.

24. Steven Harper, “Did Joseph Smith Obey the Word of Wisdom?” September 26, 2019, <https://stevencraigharper.com/did-joseph-smith-obey-the-word-of-wisdom/>.

25. “The Word of Wisdom,” <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/manual/doctrine-and-covenants-student-manual/section-89-the-word-of-wisdom>.

26. Sean Rossman, Sept 21, 2017, “BYU Students Can Now Get Caffeinated Soda on Campus,” <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation-now/2017/09/21/byu-students-can-now-get-caffeinated-soda-campus/690013001/>.

27. Danielle B. Wagner, “Caffeine: What the Prophets Have Actually Said,” August 25, 2017, *LDSLiving*, <https://www.ldsliving.com/What-the-Prophets-Have-Really-Said-About-Caffeine/s/86182>.

28. “Mormonism in the News: Getting It Right,” August 29, 2012, The Newsroom Blog, <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/mormonism-news--getting-it-right-august-29>.

prohibits frequent consumption of meat—neither of which are promoted today. In the case of caffeine, Church members side with the original revelation over numerous prophets who lived *after* that time. So which is it? Do we follow modern prophets or scripture? The answer is not always clear.

The Nature of God

The classic debate between Brigham Young and Orson Pratt is another example of why the issue of “official” is sometimes confusing in the Latter-day Saint tradition. Brigham Young and Orson Pratt engaged in a decades-long debate about the nature of God. All of Orson Pratt’s peers sided with Brigham Young.²⁹ In 1873, Brigham Young claimed that his position on the nature of God was “revealed to [him].”³⁰ After Brigham Young died, all the apostles moved away from his doctrine, and they sided with Orson Pratt’s position. In 1897, Joseph F. Smith, who served as a counselor to Brigham Young, denounced Young’s doctrine:

President Young no doubt expressed his personal opinion or views upon the subject. What he said was not given as a revelation or commandment from the Lord. The Doctrine was never submitted to the Councils of the Priesthood, nor to the Church for approval or ratification, and was never formally or otherwise accepted by the Church. It is therefore in no sense binding upon the Church.³¹

Spencer W. Kimball also rejected Brigham’s “false doctrine,”³² as did Bruce R. McConkie.³³

29. David John Buerger, “The Adam-God Doctrine,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, vol. 15 (Spring 1982): 14–58; Gary Bergera, *Conflict in the Quorum: Orson Pratt, Brigham Young, Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002).

30. Sermon delivered on June 8, 1873, and printed in the *Deseret Weekly News*, June 18, 1873.

31. Joseph F. Smith, Letter to the Honorable A. Saxey, Joseph F. Smith Papers, 1854–1918, 1896 September 4–1898 April 1; Church History Library.

32. “We warn you against the dissemination of doctrines which are not according to the Scriptures and which are alleged to have been taught by some of the General Authorities of past generations. Such, for instance, is [Brigham Young’s] theory. We denounce that theory and hope that everyone will be cautioned against this and other kinds of false doctrine.” Spencer W. Kimball, “Our Own Liahona,” *Ensign*, November 1976, 77.

33. Bruce R. McConkie, “The Seven Deadly Heresies,” *Brigham Young University*, June 1, 1980.

In short, the entire First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve, except for Orson Pratt, agreed that Brigham's doctrine was revelatory. However, several Church leaders later rejected this teaching, and most Latter-day Saints today would agree with Orson Pratt's position.

The Race Doctrine

President Harold B. Lee taught that some people were "unfaithful or not valiant" in the pre-earth life, and so they were "permitted to take mortal bodies although under penalty of racial or physical or nationistic limitations."³⁴ Elder Melvin J. Ballard taught that people who were not faithful in the preexistence were born to "Chinese mothers" and "Negro mothers," whereas faithful spirits were born to "*beautiful* white Latter-day Saint mothers."³⁵ Consequent to these beliefs was the teaching that interracial "mixing of seed" is forbidden. President Brigham Young advocated for the death penalty for any white man "who mixes his blood with the seed of Cain" (i.e., people of African descent),³⁶ and Elder J. Reuben Clark referred to interracial marriage as a "wicked virus."³⁷ In 1947, the First Presidency under George Albert Smith explained that not only has "the Lord forbidden" interracial marriage, but also that "social intercourse between the Whites and the Negroes should certainly not be encouraged."³⁸ Note that the 2013 statement, currently on the Church's website as of

34. Harold B. Lee, *Decisions for Successful Living* (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 1973), 165.

35. Melvin J. Ballard, "Three Degrees of Glory," delivered at the Ogden Tabernacle, in Bryant S. Hinkley, *Sermons and Missionary Services of Melvin J. Ballard* (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 1949), 247–48; emphasis added.

36. "If the white man who belongs to the chosen seed mixes his blood with the seed of Cain [i.e., African race], the penalty, under the law of God, is death on the spot. This will always be so." Brigham Young, March 8, 1863, *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (London and Liverpool: LDS Booksellers Depot, 1854–86), 10:110.

37. "It is sought today in certain quarters to break down all race prejudice, and at the end of the road . . . is intermarriage. That is what it finally comes to. Now, you should hate nobody; you should give to every man and every woman, no matter what the color of his or her skin may be, full civil rights. You should treat them as brothers and sisters, but do not ever let that wicked virus get into your systems that brotherhood either permits or entitles you to mix races which are inconsistent." J. Reuben Clark, *Improvement Era* 49 (August 1946): 492.

38. Letter from the First Presidency (Smith, Clark, McKay), to Virgil H. Sponberg, May 5, 1947, in Bennion papers, as quoted in Lester Bush,

2021, rejects teachings on race by past prophets. In other words, current prophets are disavowing statements and proclamations of prior prophets:

Today, the Church disavows the theories advanced in the past that black skin is a sign of divine disfavor or curse, or that it reflects unrighteous actions in a premortal life; that mixed-race marriages are a sin; or that blacks or people of any other race or ethnicity are inferior in any way to anyone else. Church leaders today unequivocally condemn all racism, past and present, in any form.³⁹

We might also recall that following the 1978 revelation extending the priesthood and temple ordinances to all worthy adult members, Elder Bruce R. McConkie told the Saints to disregard previous statements of the Brethren regarding issues of race and priesthood: “Forget everything that I have said, or what President Brigham Young or President George Q. Cannon or whomsoever has said in days past. . . . We spoke with a limited understanding and without the light and knowledge.”⁴⁰ Would not the same rationale apply in the case of prophets opining on ten thousand other unrevealed matters, regardless of whether they ended up being correct or mistaken on those opinions? Were these teachings “official positions” of the Church (i.e., revealed truth) fifty years ago but not now? Do eternal doctrines with salvific implications change that drastically and that quickly, thus giving Latter-day Saints doctrinal whiplash?

These types of paradoxes often lead to confusion among the Saints. When should Latter-day Saints follow the prophets’ teachings, guidance, and interpretations? In their conference sermons, regional talks, regional training sessions, social media posts, fireside Q&As with youth and young adults, Church magazine articles, brief remarks at community events, remarks at historic building ribbon-cutting dedications, press conference answers, comments in Church-produced videos and documentaries, and published books? Given the aforementioned paradoxical schools of thought, the answer is unclear.

These are questions that I myself have grappled with, and I have heard my students ask them as well. The simple answer is, no, Latter-day Saints

“Mormonism’s Negro Doctrine: An Historical Overview,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 8, no. 1 (Spring 1973): 11–68.

39. “Race and the Priesthood,” *Gospel Topics Essays*, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, December 2013, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics-essays/race-and-the-priesthood>.

40. Bruce R. McConkie, “All Are Alike Unto God,” CES Religious Educators Symposium, August 18, 1978, <https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/bruce-r-mcconkie/alike-unto-god/>, accessed on October 18, 2019.

do not believe in the infallibility of their leaders. As Elder Uchtdorf articulated in the 2013 general conference, “There have been times when members or leaders in the Church have simply made mistakes. There may have been things said or done that were not in harmony with our values, principles, or doctrine.”⁴¹

So how can one find an “official position” on a given question? Or, how can one at least find out *if* the Church even has an “official position”? If there is no “official position” on a given issue, then what method do we employ to seek truth on the matter, or to establish an “official position” for ourselves? The Jewish community has grappled with the same problem for over two thousand years. Judaism is a legal religion. Jews are expected to perform many tasks, and they are prohibited from performing many other practices. Jews have authoritative sources that answer some questions but do not sufficiently answer others. How, then, do they solve this problem? Let us explore this question using Haas’s essay as our reference point.

A Jewish Approach to “Official Positions”

Peter Haas explained the conceptualization of authority among the rabbis by walking his reader through Jewish history and demonstrating that many Jews, starting with the rabbis, defaulted to “the mode of public debate and discussion” as the primary process for establishing truth. He concluded his essay by articulating that the rational, dialectical mode—as opposed to emotion, miracle, and appeal to authority—“is the mode of Jewish discourse that has become baked-in, that is, become part of the very DNA of Judaism,”

Despite all vicissitudes of history and changes in cultural surroundings, the open debate and discussion of what constitutes Judaism and its norms have proven to be both sustainable and productive. It is in this mode, maybe, that we as humans can most closely echo the voice of the Divine in our religious communities. (p. 51)

Remember from Haas’s essay that Rabbi Eliezer appealed to miracles to prove the primacy of his claim when challenged. However, each time Eliezer relied on a spiritual witness to prove his own case, his peers said, “No proof can be brought from [this miracle].” After the third miracle, Rabbi Joshua said, “When scholars are engaged in a legal dispute, why do

41. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “Come, Join with Us,” General Conference, October 2013, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2013/10/come-join-with-us/>.

you [heavenly witness] interfere?” He then said, “[The authoritative voice] is not in Heaven.” The rabbis explained the meaning of this statement. Only reasoned argumentation can establish a particular claim. According to Haas,

For [Jews], it is discussion and debate that are our vehicles for realizing Torah in community life, not this, that, or the other claim to intuitive or supernatural insight, no matter how apparently compelling. After all, anyone can claim to have had a revelation, but it is only through open discussion in the marketplace of ideas that communal consensus can achieve legitimacy. (p. 39–40)

The late Dr. Rabbi Byron Sherwin (philosopher and bioethicist) offered a Jewish perspective on the role of human beings in the process of identifying truth:

For many Jewish ethicists and legalists, God has the initial word, but human beings have the last word. Though fallible by nature, their task is to apply divine wisdom—using human intelligence and intuition—to particular human situations. Objective divine revelation and subjective human speculation coalesce to produce guidelines for correct moral behavior. . . . Jewish tradition apparently found the human condition too precarious, human thought and emotion too unreliable, to leave the task of moral guidance to the vicissitudes of the human mind and heart alone. Jewish ethics grants us a vote but not a veto regarding moral principles that derive from revelation and tradition.⁴²

God gives the foundation, the broad principles, and then allows humans to work out the particulars themselves. Given the limited nature of revelation and of divine-human interaction in Judaism, Dr. Jacob Neusner, a foremost scholar in Jewish studies, took seriously the role of the dialectic and scholarship. He made famous among Jewish studies scholars the line “What we cannot show, we do not know.”⁴³ In other words, if a person cannot support a doctrine, legal claim (“legal” because Judaism is a system of law), or position with evidence, careful reason, and responsible scholarship, then they cannot claim to know the absolute truth on the matter.

When a Jew has a question about Jewish law, they consult someone, often a rabbi, who is deeply knowledgeable in Jewish beliefs and practices. The rabbi has rabbinical training, which entails an in-depth knowledge of the Tanakh (what Christians call the Old Testament), the Hebrew language, Jewish law, the writings of rabbinic sages, and the expositions of medieval

42. Byron L. Sherwin, *In Partnership with God* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1990), 51.

43. Jacob Neusner, *Rabbinic Literature and the New Testament: What We Cannot Show, We Do Not Know* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2004).

and modern scholars. These knowledgeable figures in the Jewish community would provide an intellectual and reasoned answer based on a combination of the founding texts of Judaism, subsequent debates of the rabbis, and current scientific knowledge. All of these voices, combined, serve as *the authoritative voice* for the Jewish people.

Here I will use one example to illustrate the dialectical approach in Judaism for establishing an official, or legal, position. An often-debated issue in Judaism is the role of women as communal leaders. On occasion, the conversation centers on whether a woman can serve as an authoritative judge to hear and adjudicate matters of law and practice. In the Hebrew Bible, the prophetess Deborah is called a *shafiah*—a judge or lawgiver—who served in that capacity for the entire Israelite people (Judg. 4:4–5). This seems authoritative enough—women can serve as judges. However, the rabbinic sages of late antiquity asked if, on the basis of Deborah's example, women in general can indeed serve as judges. Was Deborah an exception in this one case? One group of rabbis prohibited women from serving as judges for various reasons, while in another rabbinic source the issue is not raised at all, thus leaving the question open to further inquiry and debate.⁴⁴

In the medieval and early modern periods, we find arguments both permitting and prohibiting women to serve as judges. Those who argued for permission cite the case of Deborah, and those who argued for prohibition cite the opinions of some of the rabbinic sages.⁴⁵ Some medieval commentators suggested that Deborah was an exception to the rule because she was a prophet—an extreme circumstance. The twelfth-century sage Maimonides understood from another biblical passage that positions of sovereignty are reserved for a “king,” which is followed by explicit injunctions for male leaders (Deut. 17:14–20).⁴⁶ The implication for Maimonides is that leadership—including priests and judges—is reserved for males. In his ruling, Maimonides privileged the book of Deuteronomy over the book of Judges. For many Jews, Deuteronomy is more authoritative than the books of the prophets, because it is one of the five books of the Torah, the Law. Maimonides is universally recognized as the preeminent Jewish

44. Jerusalem Talmud, Sanhedrin 3:8, 21c; Yoma 6:1, 43b.

45. Aliza Bazak, “Women Serving as Judges: An Analysis of the Sources of the Law and Their Examination in Light of the History of Legal Interpretation Regarding Judgeship and Authority,” in *To Be a Jewish Woman: Proceedings of the Third Biennial Conference ‘A Woman and Her Judaism’* [Heb.], ed. Tova Cohen and Aliza Lavie (Jerusalem, 2005), 77–122.

46. Maimonides, *Hilkhot Melakhim*, 1:5

authority in matters of exegesis and halakhah (Jewish law). However, even he was not spared criticism. Later commentators challenged Maimonides; they questioned whether he had done justice to the “official” rulings in the Hebrew Scriptures, or if he had imposed his bias onto the biblical text.

The debate has continued today. Chana Henkin, founder and Dean of Nishmat, the Jeanie Schottenstein Center for Advanced Torah Study for Women in Jerusalem, wrote that women serving as judges “is *non-controversial*. Nowhere . . . is there an opinion [in the Torah] that [Jewish Law] prohibits in principle the issuing of a halakhic [i.e., legal] ruling by a woman.”⁴⁷ She further argued that if an exception to the rule permitted Deborah to be a leader and judge, for whatever reason, could not the same argument be made today? Could not another exception be made that would permit a woman to be a judge? Henkin also quoted the authoritative wording of the Talmud to support her position. While the Talmud warns against an unqualified person being permitted to issue rulings, it also warns of the dangers of withholding a qualified person from issuing rulings. What if a woman was highly qualified to comment on Jewish law? Would she not be an ideal judge? What does gender have to do with anything?⁴⁸ According to this argument, how does a person acquire authority? The answer is *adequate knowledge on the subject*.

We could go on with examples of how rabbis and other Jews have conceptualized authority. Large volumes have dealt with this topic; however, Haas’s essay and my short treatment in the few previous pages suffice for our purpose. In short, this particular “Jewish approach” is that (1) subjective miracles, spiritual feelings, or heavenly witnesses—although inspiring to experience—cannot be used to support a claim or to establish an authoritative position; (2) divine revelations, as at Mt. Sinai, often lacked specificity and leave room for interpretation—God generally provides broad parameters and only occasionally gives specifics; (3) God expects humans to participate in the process of seeking truth by wrestling with the particulars, which requires debate, deliberation, discussion, trial and error, and reliance on reasoned, human methods; (4) if we can’t show it, we don’t know it—meaning that on unrevealed matters, evidence must be provided to support a position; and (5) consequent to all of these points is that those steeped in Judaism and trained to employ methods of critical

47. Chanah Henkin, “Women and the Issuing of Halakhic Rulings,” in *Jewish Legal Writings by Women*, ed. Micah D. Halpern and Chana Safrai (Jerusalem: Urim Publications, 1998), 284; emphasis in the original.

48. For the full argument, see Henkin, 278–87.

thinking (e.g., some rabbis, scholars, and other thinkers) are entrusted with playing a major role in formulating “official” Jewish legal matters and interpretation of scripture. Let me add that the situation within the community, as I have described above, broadly characterizes the Jewish people, although admittedly there have been and continue to be a diversity of thought.

A Latter-day Saint Dialectic Approach

I mentioned above that some traditions, like Judaism, make room for secondary authorities (scholars and legal experts) to help make sense of laws contained within the sacred texts. I mentioned that Latter-day Saints add a layer of authority (viz. prophets); but what about scholars and various other kinds of authorities (therapists, scientists, philosophers, and health professionals)? What role do they play for Latter-day Saints? Moreover, does a precedent exist within the Latter-day Saint tradition for employing a dialectical approach similar to what occurs in Jewish tradition? I have asked myself these questions for two decades. The answer I have reached is, yes, the various experts do play a role, and there is a precedent within our tradition for employing a dialectical approach. But in what realm and capacity is the dialectical approach appropriate? Many of my students and others are not confident in answering this question.

Elder Bruce R. McConkie interpreted the flood story as a scientific fact, and even criticized the “so-called geological” experts who concluded that a worldwide flood occurred over “ages of time” when in reality, “[it] occurred in a matter of a few short weeks,” as suggested in scripture (at least according to McConkie’s reading).⁴⁹ Elder John A. Widtsoe, a trained scientist, sided with current geological scholarship on the Flood over the biblical account: “It is doubtful whether the water in the sky and all the oceans would suffice to cover the earth so completely. . . . The scriptures must be read intelligently.”⁵⁰ For McConkie, scripture is the superior authority over scientific theories, but for Widtsoe, current scientific scholarship was the superior authority in this case. Widtsoe’s colleague in the Quorum of the Twelve, Elder James Talmage, agreed that Latter-day Saints must not necessarily privilege scripture over scientific scholarship: “We cannot sweep aside

49. Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 289.

50. John A. Widtsoe, *Evidences and Reconciliation: Aids to Faith in a Modern Day*, Vol. 1 (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1943), 109–12.

all the accumulated knowledge in geology, archeology, or any other branch of science simply because our interpretation of some isolated passage of scripture may seem to be opposed thereto.”⁵¹ They are directly validating the contribution of science and critical thinking in the enterprise of establishing both truth and “official positions,” even if those “official positions” are not institutional but personal positions.

I get a sense from my students and others that Latter-day Saints have been conditioned into an overreliance on prophets concerning every aspect of life, not just within the bounds of revelation, institutional policy, and administration of priesthood ordinances. Yes, Latter-day Saints believe that prophets—as stewards of priesthood ordinances and Church institution—hold certain keys to function in those capacities, but somehow many Latter-day Saints have extrapolated that narrowly defined role of prophets to all aspects of life. Many Latter-day Saints seem to think that Church leaders possess a vast knowledge of Church history and scripture that regular pew members do not. Perhaps many Latter-day Saints believe that God performs a revelatory data dump in their brains in the hours and days following their call to the apostleship.

About this, McConkie explained, “Though general authorities are authorities in the sense of having power to administer church affairs, they may or may not be authorities in the sense of doctrinal knowledge . . . or the receipt of the promptings of the Spirit.” He further explained that simply being called into the apostleship “adds little knowledge or power of discernment to an individual.”⁵² Elder Boyd K. Packer echoed this sentiment when he said that unless a Church leader (in this case, bishops, stake high council members, stake presidents, and regional representatives) “knew the fundamental principles of the gospel before his call, he will scarcely have time to learn them along the way.”⁵³ This also applies to prophets. In other words, the fifteen prophets fall on a spectrum similar to the general Church population in terms of their doctrinal understanding, ability to interpret scripture, and Church history knowledge. Some prophets might have a vast knowledgebase in these areas, while others, a very meager one. Thus, Latter-day Saints must not assume that apostles

51. Talmage, Letter to F. C. Williamson, April 22, 1933, Talmage Papers, 88, in L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University.

52. Bruce R. McConkie, “General Authority,” *Mormon Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1966), 309.

53. Boyd K. Packer, “Principles,” *Ensign*, March 1985.

are all walking encyclopedias on all things doctrine, scripture, social issues, and history.

Joseph Smith was concerned that Latter-day Saints were depending too much on “the prophet” and, therefore, had become “darkened in their minds.” He quoted a passage in Ezekiel to illustrate his point: “If the prophet be deceived when he hath spoken a thing . . . the punishment of the prophet shall be even as the punishment of him that seeketh unto him” (Ezek. 14:9–10).⁵⁴ This caution against relying too much on a prophet seems to stand against the aforementioned teaching by President Benson and others that Church members must always follow the prophet, even if the prophet is wrong. In fact, according to Joseph Smith, those who err because they followed the incorrect teachings of a Church leader will be punished as much as the prophet who led them. Similarly, Brigham Young lamented that Latter-day Saints were not judiciously considering leaders’ teachings but were instead accepting them without question, and that they had adopted the counterproductive practice of mindlessly following the prophets: “I am fearful they settle down in a state of blind self-security, trusting their eternal destiny in the hands of their leaders with a reckless confidence.”⁵⁵

Near the end of the nineteenth century, Elder Charles W. Penrose distinguished between binding revelations and non-binding teachings: “President Wilford Woodruff is a man of wisdom and experience, and we respect him, but we do not believe his personal views or utterances are revelations from God.”⁵⁶ In that same era, Elder George Q. Cannon, a counselor in three first presidencies, said, “The people who have embraced this Gospel have had to think for themselves. It is no light matter to become a ‘Mormon.’”⁵⁷ On another occasion, Cannon was much more direct:

Do not, brethren, put your trust in man though he be a Bishop, an Apostle, or a President; if you do, they will fail you at some time or place . . . but if we lean on God, He never will fail us. When men and women depend on God alone and trust in Him alone, their faith will not be shaken if the highest in

54. “Nauvoo Relief Society Minute Book,” 51, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed March 8, 2021, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/nauvoo-relief-society-minute-book/48>.

55. Brigham Young, “Eternal Punishment—‘Mormonism’ &c,” January 12, 1862, *Journal of Discourses*, 9:150.

56. “The Doctrine of Revelation,” *Millennial Star* 54, no. 12 (March 21, 1892): 191.

57. July 24, 1881, *Journal of Discourses*, 22:366.

the Church should step aside. . . . Perhaps it is His own design that faults and weaknesses *should appear in high places* in order that His Saints may learn to trust in Him and not in any man or woman.⁵⁸

In the 1940s, a message was published in the Church’s *Improvement Era* magazine that advocated for a complete and unquestioning reliance on Church leaders: “When our leaders speak, the thinking has been done.” However, the president of the Church at the time, George Albert Smith, explicitly rejected this idea in a letter to the editor: “Even to imply that members of the Church are not to do their own thinking is grossly to misrepresent the true ideal of the Church.”⁵⁹ Despite President Smith’s rejection, the “thinking has been done” mentality seems to be the dominant view among Church members today. As noted earlier, President Joseph Fielding Smith empowered each member in the 1950s to accept judiciously the directives of prophets as long as they are congruous with scripture, and if they are not, then “every member of the Church is duty-bound to reject it.”⁶⁰ The always-colorful Elder J. Golden Kimball expressed a similar principle in general conference:

Some people fancy that because we have the Presidency and Apostles of the Church that they will do the thinking for us. There are men and women so mentally lazy that they hardly think for themselves. To think calls for effort, which makes some men tired and wearies their souls. No man or woman can remain in this Church on borrowed light.⁶¹

Many Latter-day Saints downplay the individual-authority paradigm by rushing to Doctrine and Covenants 1:38: “My word shall not pass away, but shall all be fulfilled, whether by mine own voice or by the voice of my servants, it is the same.” This passage is often interpreted to mean that whatever the prophets say, especially from the pulpit, is the same as if God said it. The passage, however, does not make this claim. It clearly states that God’s word will be fulfilled—his prophecies will be fulfilled—regardless of whether God himself spoke the prophecies or revealed them to prophets who then spoke them. Furthermore, “servants” is not referring

58. “Knowledge of and Dependence on God,” *Millennial Star* 53, no. 42 (October 19, 1891): 658–59, quoted in *Gospel Truth: Discourses and Writings of President George Q. Cannon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 1974), 1:319; emphasis added.

59. President George Albert Smith, Letter to Dr. J. Raymond Cope, December 7, 1945, cited in “A 1945 Perspective,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 19, no. 1 (Spring 1986): 38.

60. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, 3:203–204.

61. J. Golden Kimball, *Conference Report*, April 1904, 97.

exclusively to prophets. The title of “servant” is found 380 times in the Doctrine and Covenants, and many of them are connected with figures who were not apostles or prophets (like missionaries and others who worked to build the Church).

Likewise, Latter-day Saints frequently appeal to President Ezra Taft Benson’s 1980 BYU devotional address, “Fourteen Fundamentals in Following the Prophet.” Among his fourteen points were: “The living prophet is more vital to us than the standard works”; “The prophet will never lead the Church astray”; “The prophet is not required to have any particular earthly training or diplomas to speak on *any subject* or act on any matter at any time”; and “The prophet may well advise on civic matters.”⁶² Benson expanded, it seems, the role of prophets far beyond what previous prophets had done, claiming that they can speak authoritatively on any subject at any time, including politics, and they are not required to inform their listeners that they are, indeed, speaking for God. For Benson, the current President’s positions were both absolute and infallible, trumping both prior prophets and scripture. This talk was instantly popular with many Latter-day Saints. According to Benson’s biographer, within two weeks of his speech, over six hundred requests for copies had come to Benson’s office.⁶³ His talk has been repeated many times since then, including twice in the 2010 general conference, wherein two members of the Seventy repeated all of Elder Benson’s fourteen points.⁶⁴

This talk, however, stirred controversy, even in the national media.⁶⁵ Not only have several of Benson’s points been challenged by other apostles, the Church’s president at the time, Spencer W. Kimball, was agitated by the speech. Kimball’s son and biographer wrote, “Spencer felt concern about the talk, wanting to protect the church against being misunderstood as espousing . . . unthinking ‘follow the leader’ mentality.”⁶⁶ Following his speech, the First Presidency called Benson to stand before

62. Ezra Taft Benson, “Fourteen Fundamentals,” February 26, 1980.

63. Sheri Dew, *Ezra Taft Benson: A Biography* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1987), 469.

64. Claudio R. M. Costa, “Obedience to the Prophets,” General Conference, October 2010; Kevin R. Duncan, “Our Very Survival,” General Conference, October 2010.

65. “What Mormons Believe,” *Newsweek* 96 (September 1, 1980): 71; “Thus Saith Ezra Benson,” *Newsweek* 98 (October 19, 1981): 109.

66. See Edward Kimball, *Lengthen Your Stride: The Presidency of Spencer W. Kimball: Working Draft* (Salt Lake City: Benchmark Books, 2009), chapter 16,

all general authorities on two occasions to explain, justify, and apologize for his statements; some “were dissatisfied with his response.”⁶⁷ The day after his devotional speech at BYU, the First Presidency’s spokesperson, Don LeFevre, commented to the press that it is “simply not true” that the President’s “word is law on all issues.”⁶⁸

The notion that prophets are not necessarily the end-all-be-all in identifying and establishing “official positions” on a host of unrevealed matters is combined with some examples of prophets and scholars working *together* in the pursuit of truth, similar to the Jewish experience. In 2010, Church leaders sent a general authority Seventy and a historian to speak to the group of Swedish Saints who were struggling in their faith convictions. They spent several hours discussing doctrine, scripture, and Church history; the historian did most of the talking.⁶⁹ In 2012, Elder Boyd K. Packer directed a group to write scholarly essays on difficult gospel topics that were driving people out of the Church. These eleven essays were written by scholars between 2013 and 2015 that the apostles later approved to be included on the Church’s website.⁷⁰ Elder Quinton L. Cook invited two scholars to join him in a 2018 young adult Q&A broadcast. Throughout the broadcast, Cook deferred to the scholars to answer historical questions. Cook’s role was to offer a general apostolic testimony of the Church and its major doctrines.⁷¹ It was not assumed that the apostle in this setting knew all the answers.

As we saw above, this parallels the practice, almost two thousand years old, within Judaism. However, adopting such an approach is not

page 13, in CD ROM included with Edward Kimball, *Lengthen Your Stride: The Presidency of Spencer W. Kimball* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005).

67. See Kimball, *Lengthen Your Stride*, chapter 16, page 13; Dew, *Ezra Taft Benson*, 469; Woodward, “What Mormons Believe,” 71; D. Michael Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Extensions of Power* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1997), 111, 449fn, 353.

68. Kimball, *Lengthen Your Stride*, chapter 16, page 13. For more details and sources about the aftermath of Benson’s address, see Matthew L. Harris, *Watchman on the Tower: Ezra Taft Benson and the Making of the Mormon Right* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2020), 102–3, footnotes 105–12 on page 186.

69. Matthew L. Harris and Newell G. Bringham, *The LDS Gospel Topics Series: A Scholarly Engagement* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2020), 1–2.

70. For the essays, see <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics-essays>; for the backstory, see Harris and Bringham, *Gospel Topics*, 2–19.

71. Worldwide Devotional for Young Adults: A Face to Face with Elder Cook, Sept. 9, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kpLN6AomRQY>.

without massive challenges. A few years ago, I heard a tenured BYU professor (speaking to a group of about two hundred, many of whom were students) say, “In other religions, the scholars lead the way and the clergy follow, but in our religion we have prophets who lead—scholars only contribute in little ways.” It is no wonder that Church members, certainly our youth and young adults, are often confused about authority and identifying truth. This professor was conflating two very different endeavors: (1) Church administration and revealed knowledge, and (2) the enterprise of scholarship. Those sustained as prophets are expected to lead the way in Church administrative affairs (including priesthood ordinances); scholars lead the way in scholarship. Elders D. Todd Christofferson and M. Russell Ballard have addressed this very issue. Christofferson explained in 2012:

In some faith traditions, theologians claim equal teaching authority with the ecclesiastical hierarchy, and doctrinal matters may become a contest of opinions between them. . . . Others place primary emphasis on the reasoning of post-apostolic theologians or on biblical hermeneutics and exegesis. We value scholarship that enhances understanding, but in the Church today, just as anciently, establishing the doctrine of Christ or correcting doctrinal deviations is a matter of divine revelation to those the Lord endows with apostolic authority.⁷²

Notice Christofferson's clarification: prophets are the primary authority on doctrinal matters that have been solved by “divine revelation” (we might also add institutional policy and administration of priesthood ordinances). In my reading of it, prophets are not the primary authority on matters that fall outside this realm. In 2017, Elder Ballard seemed to want to correct the often-conflated roles of prophets and scholars when he emphasized the importance of seeking out appropriate authorities given the specific context:

I am a general authority, but *that doesn't make me an authority in general*. My calling and life's experiences allow me to respond to certain types of questions. There are other types of questions that require an expert in the specific subject matter. This is exactly what I do when I need an answer to such questions. *I seek others including those with degrees and expertise in such fields. I worry sometimes that members expect too much from Church leaders and teachers, expecting them to be experts in subjects well beyond their duties*

72. D. Todd Christofferson, “The Doctrine of Christ,” General Conference, April 2012, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2012/04/the-doctrine-of-christ>.

and responsibilities. . . . Our [i.e., apostles’] primary duty is to build up the church, teach the doctrine of Christ, and help those in need of our help.⁷³

Some might think Ballard would seek out “experts” only on matters unrelated to religion and scriptural interpretation; after all, haven’t many Latter-day Saints been conditioned to think that prophets *are* the experts on religion and scriptural interpretation? This is what I and all of my companions taught on the mission: we need prophets to interpret scripture for us so that we can know the truth. According to our narrative, the reason why thousands of religions exist, many of which are based on the Bible, is because we didn’t have prophets interpreting scripture for us, but now we do as of 1830. Note, however, that in a 2015 address, Ballard explicitly mentioned scripture as one area in which he seeks out “trained scholars” for clarification:

When I have a question that I cannot answer, I turn to those who can help me. The Church is blessed with trained scholars and those who have devoted a lifetime of study, who have come to know our history and the scriptures. These thoughtful men and women provide context and background so we can better understand our sacred past and our current practices.⁷⁴

I am not sure that a Church leader could be clearer on the limitations and boundaries of the role of prophets; yet it seems that a significant portion of Latter-day Saints too often default to asking the prophets, “What’s the Church’s official position on this?” even if the issue has not been solved by revelation and has nothing to do with institutional administrative policy or priesthood ordinances.

So what would this dialectical approach to establishing an authoritative position look like in a Latter-day Saint context? Let’s examine a few topics the way Jews have fruitfully debated the case of Deborah.

73. Elder M. Russell Ballard, “Questions and Answers,” BYU Devotional, November 14, 2017, <https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/m-russell-ballard/questions-and-answers/>; emphasis added.

74. Elder M. Russell Ballard, “To the Saints in the Utah South Area,” September 13, 2015, <https://www.lds.org/prophets-and-apostles/unto-all-the-world/to-the-saints-in-the-utah-south-area?>; Elder Ballard made similar comments in his 2016 CES fireside, “The Opportunities and Responsibilities of CES Teachers in the 21st Century,” on February 26, 2016, in the Salt Lake Tabernacle, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/broadcasts/article/evening-with-a-general-authority/2016/02/the-opportunities-and-responsibilities-of-ces-teachers-in-the-21st-century>.

The first issue is whether Isaiah 7:14 refers to Jesus. Latter-day Saint scholars have debated this issue quite aggressively. Joseph Spencer (BYU Religious Education professor), in his 2016 book on Isaiah in the Book of Mormon, posited that Isaiah does not directly refer to Jesus, but rather to a child born to a “young woman” living at the time of Isaiah. For Spencer, the direct historical context does not allow for Jesus to be part of the equation in this particular prophecy, although he does allow for the possibility that this passage might act as a type for Jesus.⁷⁵ In 2020, Donald Parry (BYU professor of Hebrew in the Department of Asian and Near Eastern Languages) challenged Spencer’s conclusion. Parry did not provide counterevidence within the context of Isaiah 7; he instead appealed to the Gospel of Matthew, which states that Isaiah 7:14 does refer to Jesus (Matt. 1:21–23).⁷⁶ Spencer’s preemptive response to such an argument was, “It’s entirely possible that [the author of Matthew] read the passage messianically,” not that Isaiah 7 was necessarily messianic.⁷⁷ After quoting Matthew, Parry cited, as evidence to support his claim, four Latter-day Saint prophets who used Isaiah 7 to describe Jesus—not that they were authoritatively declaring that Isaiah 7 referred to Jesus.⁷⁸ Parry then made a case that one must know Biblical Hebrew at an advanced level in order to adequately interpret Isaiah,⁷⁹ which Spencer does not. This was an intriguing retort given that Parry did not actually appeal to Hebrew linguistic and textual evidence to make the case specifically for Jesus in Isaiah 7, but he appealed to the author of Matthew and four Latter-day Saint apostles. Note that none of these four apostles know biblical Hebrew, and none of them claimed that they were transmitting a divinely revealed interpretation.

In a very Jewish fashion, Joshua Sears (BYU Religious Education professor) entered the debate by writing a response to Parry’s review.⁸⁰ He listed the arguments of both Spencer and Parry, and claimed that Parry

75. Joseph M. Spencer, *The Vision of All: Twenty-Five Lectures on Isaiah in Nephi’s Record* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2016), 209–210.

76. Donald W. Parry, “An Approach to Isaiah Studies,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 34 (2020): 245–64 (esp. 250).

77. Spencer actually wrote this about Nephi, but the same logic could be applied to the author of Matthew, which Spencer himself acknowledged. Spencer, *The Vision of All*, 2010.

78. Parry, “An Approach to Isaiah Studies,” 251–52.

79. Parry, 258–63.

80. Joshua M. Sears, “An Other Approach to Isaiah Studies,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 37 (2020), 1–20.

misrepresented Spencer. According to Parry, Spencer in no way sees Jesus in Isaiah. Sears pointed out that Spencer does allow for the possibility of a dual meaning, one of which refers to Jesus. Sears also mentioned that Parry did not allow for a dual meaning of Isaiah 7 in his review of Spencer, but that elsewhere, Parry did argue that Isaiah 7 can be interpreted for an eighth-century BCE audience, but that this was a secondary meaning, the primary meaning being a reference to Jesus.⁸¹ Since Parry used quotes from apostles in his argument, Sears used the same method to challenge Parry. He cited Elder Dallin H. Oaks, among others, who wrote, “The book of Isaiah contains numerous prophecies that seem to have multiple fulfillments. One seems to involve the people of Isaiah’s day or the circumstances of the next generation. Another meaning, often symbolic, seems to refer to events in the meridian of time [i.e., Jesus’s day].”⁸² Here, Oaks seems to acknowledge that the more practical reading is that Isaiah 7 directly refers to events in Isaiah’s own day, and only “symbolically” refers to Jesus’s time—the implication being that the second reading is more hidden and spiritual, rather than direct and practical. Thus, one could leave Jesus completely out of Isaiah 7 and remain intellectually honest.

This discussion of Isaiah 7:14 illustrates that there is no “official interpretation” by the Church that solves this issue. Several prophets have discussed this verse, but one cannot simply appeal to one of their sermons to settle the debate. There are different opinions and nuances that must be considered, and the dialectical process of scholars and others can be a productive way to reach an authoritative position, while acknowledging that this position might shift as more evidence and considerations enter the equation.

A second example is Jesus’s place of burial. When I take tour groups to Israel, we always visit the Garden Tomb. When I explain that scholars conclude that this could not be the site of Jesus’s burial, sometimes a tourist asks, “But didn’t a few prophets say that this site is where Jesus was buried?” Well, yes, some of them did make this claim: Harold B. Lee: “We felt it was definitely the place”;⁸³ Gordon B. Hinckley: “We felt that we

81. Sears, 10.

82. Dallin H. Oaks, “Scripture Reading and Revelation,” *Ensign* 25, no. 1, January 1995, 8.

83. Harold B. Lee, “Qualities of Leadership,” address to the Latter-day Saints Student Association (LDSSA) Convention, August 1970. As cited in David B. Galbraith, D. Kelly Ogden, and Andrew C. Skinner, *Jerusalem: The Eternal City* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1996), 506.

were standing where the risen Lord had talked with Mary”;⁸⁴ Spencer W. Kimball: “I feel quite sure that this is the place where His body was laid.”⁸⁵

I have often grappled with this issue as a scholar. Should I simply agree with these prophets without conducting my own research, as so many others do? What if the evidence shows otherwise? Am I bound to accept these statements as absolute revelatory fact? How have Latter-day Saints traditionally reacted to and utilized these statements from apostles? They have often used them to settle a non-revelatory, academic debate. For example, on one LDS discussion board in 2018, a debate ensued about the authenticity of the Holy Sepulcher location. After a long back and forth, with many links to biblical archaeologists, one participant wrote, “I find no good evidence to support any belief that The Church of the Holy Sepulchre is the site of Jesus’s burial. Perhaps you [addressing his interlocutor] just believe that Constantine was more inspired than God’s prophets? You do know that a LDS Church President felt the garden tomb was a likely spot for His burial, right?”⁸⁶

Similarly, a Latter-day Saint scholar in 2005 reviewed the evidence for each supposed site of Jesus’s tomb. After providing the evidence against the Garden Tomb location, the author negated the evidence by appealing to statements from Church leaders: “It must be noted, however, that latter-day prophets who have visited sites in the Holy Land have voiced some strong and impressive feelings about . . . the Garden Tomb.”⁸⁷ Another scholar in 2003, while discussing Jesus’s death, provided the evidence for and against each burial site. After reviewing the scholarly evidence against the Garden Tomb location, the author similarly negated the evidence by appealing to an apostle’s statement: “These objections, and others, have persuaded the majority of scholars to reject the Garden Tomb as a candidate for the actual execution and burial site of Jesus. Latter-day Saints will, however, recall President Harold B. Lee’s response to and comment

84. *Church News*, December 16, 1972, “Holy Land Tour Thrills, President Lee, Elder Hinckley,” 12.

85. *Church News*, November 3, 1979, section 5.

86. Mormon Dialogue and Discussion Board, September 6, 2018, <https://wayback.archive-it.org/3613/20191018093916/http://www.mormondialogue.org/topic/70994-the-cross-and-religious-symbols/page/5/>.

87. Andrew Skinner, *The Garden Tomb* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005), 24–25.

on the Garden Tomb after a visit to Jerusalem.” The author then provides the quote from the leader.⁸⁸

Rather than settling this academic debate by defaulting to a few impressions from prophets, I suggest that we consider employing a dialectical approach using all methods of critical inquiry before drawing conclusions. Based on the aforementioned statements from Church leaders about the limitations of their own prophetic role, we might ask a few questions: Are these prophets experts in biblical archaeology? Did they claim to receive an unmistakable revelation from God on the location of Jesus’s burial? Would these prophets have likely adjusted their conclusions based on new and scholarly information? Remember that Elder Talmage cautioned to not “sweep aside all the accumulated knowledge in geology, archeology, or any other branch of science simply because our interpretation . . . may seem to be opposed thereto.”⁸⁹ In this case, archaeologists have determined through their method of science quite convincingly that the Garden Tomb was not a newly cut, first-century style tomb where “no man had been laid” (Matt. 27:60; John 19:41).

The Garden Tomb looks nothing like the other first-century tombs in the Land of Israel, nor do any of the tombs in the immediate area. Its structure and features closely resemble tombs in the eighth century BCE (seven hundred years before Jesus!). The first person to popularize this location was a British traveler Charles Gordon in 1883. No early Christian tradition places Jesus’s burial in this area, which is significant because they tended to be highly conscious about preserving locations associated with Jesus. One BYU professor and biblical archaeologist, Jeffery Chadwick, who has been conducting archaeological surveys in the Bible lands for four decades, has concluded that the data does not support the Garden Tomb as being a viable candidate for a first-century tomb where Jesus would have been buried.⁹⁰

These two brief examples illustrate how a dialectic approach can be utilized in the Latter-day Saint tradition on matters that fall outside of

88. Cecilia M. Peek, “The Burial,” in Thomas Wayment and Richard Neitzel Holzapfel, *From the Last Supper through the Resurrection* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003), 338–78 (quote from 376).

89. Talmage, Letter to F. C. Williamson, April 22, 1933, Talmage Papers, 88, in L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University.

90. See a brief treatment in Jerome Murphy-O’Conner and Barry Cunliffe, *The Holy Land: Oxford Archaeological Guides* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 141; Jeffery R. Chadwick, “Revisiting Golgotha and the Garden Tomb,” *Religious Educator* 4, no. 1 (2003): 13–48.

Church policy and administration of priesthood ordinances. Like the rabbis and scholars who debated the case of Deborah using various and sundry types of evidence, Latter-day Saints can do the same. These topics should be debated because they have not been settled unmistakably by revelation. Well-trained and knowledgeable individuals, then, have a role to play in establishing “official positions,” even if the “official position” is that there is no “official position” and, therefore, the debate must continue. Joseph Smith taught that in July 1843, “One of the grand fundamental principles of Mormonism is to receive truth. Let it come from whence it may.”⁹¹ Brigham Young similarly maintained that being a Latter-day Saint means that “if you can find a truth in heaven, earth, or hell, it belongs to our doctrine. We believe it; it is ours; we claim it.”⁹² The implication, at least for me, is that Latter-day Saints look to various sources for truth, whether it be prophets, popes, pastors, philosophers, therapists, scientists, health professionals, or various other thinkers and experts. President Oaks provided his thoughts on this issue, some of which echo the Jewish experience: “I only teach the general rules. Whether an exception applies to you is your responsibility. You must work that out individually.”⁹³

As presented near the beginning of this essay, several of my colleagues concluded that identifying “doctrine,” “truth,” or “official teachings” must involve the following criteria (although many of them fail to state whether the entire criteria must be applied simultaneously or if only one criterion would suffice in a given case):

- Is repeatedly affirmed in the standard works (i.e., canonized scripture)
- Is found in *recent* official declarations or proclamations
- Is repeatedly taught in *recent* general conferences or in other official gatherings by general Church leaders
- Is found in *recent* general handbooks or approved curriculum of the Church

91. Nauvoo address, 9 July 1843, “Journal, December 1842–June 1844; Book 2, 10 March 1843–14 July 1843,” p. [302], The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed March 15, 2021, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/journal-december-1842-june-1844-book-2-10-march-1843-14-july-1843/310>.

92. Journal of Discourses 13:335.

93. Dallin H. Oaks, “Dating versus Hanging Out,” May 1, 2005, young adult fireside, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2006/06/dating-versus-hanging-out>.

- Is taught by the repeated or united voice of the brethren
- Is time tested—perpetuated over time by leaders of the Church
- Is eternal and unchanging
- Is salvific (i.e., essential for salvation)
- Is confirmed by the Holy Spirit

I wish not to misrepresent my colleagues, so I must emphasize that not every proposed criteria mentioned near the beginning of this essay includes all of these points. I simply lumped all of my colleagues’ criteria together because there was significant overlap between them and because it allows for a broad view as I discuss them in general terms.

In my assessment, statements from prophets that fall within this list are “official positions” for what Latter-day Saints generally believe and emphasize *today*. However, the sets of criteria from my colleagues appear to be insufficient for ensuring that one can confidently identify authoritative statements for what is ultimate and timeless social, theological, or historical truths—as opposed to the biases and philosophies of humans. We will not deal with the first criterion (*repeatedly affirmed in scripture*) here. But let’s examine the few subsequent points: true doctrine is found in recent declarations, proclamations, handbooks, and general conferences (or official gatherings by general Church leaders).

First, Latter-day Saints would need to be able to define “recent,” “declarations,” and “official gatherings.” Even if an average, church-going Latter-day Saint could adequately define these terms, why would they need to privilege what is “recent”? Birth control was once forbidden (or strongly discouraged) but not now. Was it once doctrine (i.e., “recently” taught in those generations) but no longer? People of African descent were thought to be cursed and not valiant in the preexistence by leaders in prior generations; this has now been explicitly rejected by Church leaders. Cannot something be true even if it was taught in only one generation? And vice-versa, cannot something be false if it was taught in multiple generations? What if something is taught by the “united voice of the brethren” but then later disavowed by a different set of “united voices” (such as with teachings on race or Brigham’s understanding of the nature of God that was supported by every apostle except one, which was later rejected by every apostle from Joseph F. Smith to the present)? We could go on, but the point is made. Each criterion on my colleagues’ list is insufficient by itself; therefore, no one criterion by itself can be applied to determine whether

a particular claim is either true or an “official position,” a point on which my colleagues would probably agree.

If all the previous criteria of my colleagues are insufficient, in my opinion, then what do I utilize in answering a question about truth or the Church's official position on X or Y? It depends on the type of question I am dealing with. If I want to know what “the Church” emphasizes today, regardless of whether it is a divine truth, then I would apply one (or all) of the sets of criteria proposed by my colleagues. Those are the best sources (i.e., recent manuals, conference talks, and handbooks) for determining what is emphasized currently among Latter-day Saints. If I am dealing with questions about administrative policy or priesthood ordinances, then I would also consult the sources mentioned in my colleagues' criteria. The prophets and other general Church leaders are, indeed, stewards and administrators of the institution, its priesthood, and its ordinances.

The more confusing questions, however, are theological, social, historical, and scriptural in nature. Other than the primary, most important doctrines, my students are asking questions like: Can we watch R-rated movies? Should we pay tithing on gross, net, or surplus income? Should women stay at home or can they pursue graduate education and a career? Is birth control prohibited? Is interracial marriage discouraged? Is the earth six thousand years old or millions of years old (a question that has implications for what Latter-day Saint parents teach their children about the age of the earth and evolution given their curriculum in public schools)? These types of questions, and thousands more, have been answered in different ways (including contradictory ones) by Church leaders.

Thus, I suggest to my students and others that when I wonder if a particular piece of information is true or wonder what “the Church's official position” is—whether it be theological, historical, sociological, psychological, political, archaeological, anthropological, geographical, geological, biological, astronomical, or any other “ical”—then I employ two criteria. First, I ask myself, has this issue been answered and solved by revelation, or is this issue relevant to administration of the priesthood or institutional policy? Second, if the answer is “no,” and I want to formulate an “official position” for myself, then I employ a dialectical approach. I use my brain. I debate and search.

Nowhere in my colleagues' criteria above do we find anything about the utilization of science, scholarship, and rational thinking when discerning whether a piece of information is true, or might be an “official position” of the Church. Most of my colleagues favor a framework of using a combination of scripture, prophets' teachings, and confirmation from the

Holy Spirit. However, I am proposing that we include a fourth factor: the dialectical approach. We do as Elder Ballard counseled: we consult experts who have authority (via their training), and then we search, concentrate, read, study, consult more experts, reread, question, debate, and think.⁹⁴ And that is the point!

Consulting prophets on non-revelatory matters, or on issues that fall outside of institutional policies and functions, is like asking a lawyer for medical advice or a medical professional for legal advice. Yes, someone might argue that my criterion of using scholarship, science, and reason to discover truth or establish personal “official positions” is also flawed. After all, how many scholars and scientists have “gotten it wrong”? My response is that, indeed, scholars, doctors, and other experts are *often* wrong, but prophets have also gotten things wrong, especially when they weren’t “acting as prophets.” Thus, we should not pit prophets against experts in contests for who is right or wrong. Everyone is fallible. However, while flawed, the intellectual approaches—the critical methods of scholarship, the peer review process, the debates—are best positioned to get us closer to truth than biased and flawed human thinking, personal feelings, social customs, traditions of the fathers, faith-promoting rumors, and unsubstantiated claims. All branches of science and scholarship are better at helping us identify what we know and don’t know about a particular subject than are handbooks, hymnbooks, declarations, unrevealed teachings in ecclesiastical sermons, or official pamphlets. If a particular topic has not been settled unmistakably by revelation, then we are left with critical thinking.

In my understanding, it seems that several prophets are stressing that members must know *when* to follow the prophets and *when* to take their statements as truth or “official positions.” And what seems to be the answer? To *always* follow the prophets *only when* they are acting as prophets. Joseph Smith counseled as much: “I . . . visited with a brother and sister . . . who thought that ‘a prophet is always a prophet’; but I told them that a prophet was a prophet only when he was acting as such.”⁹⁵ In January 2018, in his first press conference as the new President of the Church, Russell M. Nelson made this bold declaration: “Every member needs to

94. Elder Russell Ballard, “Questions and Answers,” BYU Devotional, November 14, 2017, <https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/m-russell-ballard/questions-and-answers/>; emphasis added.

95. “History, 1838–1856, volume D-1 [1 August 1842–1 July 1843],” p. 1464, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-d-1-1-august-1842-1-july-1843/107>.

know the difference between what is doctrine and what is human. . . . Give your leaders a little leeway to make mistakes as you hope your leaders will give you a little leeway to profit by your errors.”⁹⁶

In sum, I have tried to take what I perceive as a general phenomenon among Jews, which is that the authoritative voice for seeking or identifying truth is a dialectical approach, not solely an appeal to ecclesiastical leaders. I utilized Haas's paper as a guide and attempted to argue that Latter-day Saints also have a precedent in our tradition for appealing to a dialectical approach to answer unrevealed doctrinal, theological, and historical questions, as opposed to appealing to leaders simply because they are leaders.

Furthermore, I have done my best at allowing my position to be shaped by how the prophets have talked about the limitations of their own authority. As a scholar of religion and a man of faith who has wrestled with the question of authority for two decades, who has students who frequently raise concerns about this issue, and who is raising five children of his own, I am simply attempting to propose a criteria for my students that will help them to know *when* to follow prophets versus when to employ a dialectical approach to establish their own “official positions.”

Some might wonder how Latter-day Saints might learn from Judaism on this issue since Jews don't currently have a priesthood hierarchy with a president–prophet at its head. My response is that I am *only* comparing the non-revelatory aspects of our faith tradition with the non-revelatory aspects of Judaism. Both religions have scriptural texts that are believed to be revelatory. Both religions have statements of dead prophets that are quoted and consulted in order to answer questions of religious expectations. Both religions wrestle with questions that have unrevealed answers.

I stress that my position must not be taken to the extreme. I wish not to convey that Latter-day Saints must always be radical skeptics and reject every suggestion by bishops or prophets unless they provide a written revelation. But perhaps we should be a bit more sophisticated in our thinking about why we are doing what we are doing. If the answer is, “Because that's what we're told to do,” then we are not following the prophets, because many of them have specifically warned that such an approach is inappropriate. It is ironic, then, that a hyper-literal interpretation of “following the prophets” itself isn't following the prophets.

96. “First Presidency News Conference,” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, January 16, 2018, accessed on May 25, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C8Cd3vcWYnc>. The following link includes a time stamp for the exact quote, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C8Cd3vcWYnc&t=2373s>.