When I was growing up there was a television show in which I was a huge fan called “The Adventures of the Book of Virtues” in which animals would teach children moral lessons through stories from all sorts of cultures and histories. This show gave me the first idea that virtues would characteristics in which made you a good person, but as I have gotten older the word Virtue has shown to mean so much more then “moral characteristics.” In media we can see prime examples as how the many define virtue. For example when someone says you have “compromised your virtue” that do not mean that you have lacked a moral characteristic they mean that you have become sexually impure. So does virtue have one definition and if it does how can we discover what it means to be virtuous? In this paper I hope to examine the definition of virtue and how it has changed by looking at historical figures that were considered virtuous and also looking at what different cultures have defined as virtue throughout the ages.

The oxford dictionary defines virtue as behavior showing high moral standards or a characteristic that is morally good or desirable in a person. This definition comes from the idea that a person can be “virtuous” if they have certain characteristics, such as patience. A prime candidate or a virtuous person would be Jesus Christ, whom Christians believed saved the souls of the world by sacrificing himself for their sins after living a “virtuous life” or life filled with good moral characteristics. Some of these characteristics include being humble, kind, loving and faithful. In the bible we hear accounts of Jesus fulfilling these characteristics; he was kind lifting
up those who were sick and poor, he was humble as he lived without excess or riches but gave all he had to those around him, he was loving to followers and enemies, and he was faithful not only living these principles but teaching them and a love of God to all he came across.

I think the best example of this is the story of Christ raising Lazarus from the dead. Jesus when he first arrived was loving and compassionate towards Lazarus’s sisters Mary and Martha. He weeps with them for the loss of their brother, he was also humble because he did not come in making claims that he could do anything for them but comfort them. But Christ was also faithful and believed that through the power of God he could help the family. In this we see something else, that just because Christ was humble, kind, loving, and faithful did not mean he was weak but actually he was very strong. He was able to use the power of God to raise Lazarus from the dead, to fully heal his body and spirit, and that required a lot of strength.

Many times looking at virtuous people we tend to make these spiritual people of great strength into more than innocent but almost naïve as if they are unable to understand the world they live in. But if the greatest idol for virtue is Christ who was not naïve to the world but very aware of what happened in it and was filled with power and strength then why when we picture “virtuous” people do we believe them to be naïve? This belief with most of western culture can be traced back to the portrayal of virtuous figures such as Mary, mother of Jesus, and Jesus by people who believe in the notion that highly spiritually people were “above” things like marriage, family and sexually intimacy. This is shown historically and today through the Catholic beliefs in Christ and Mary. Christ is shown as someone who practices Asceticism or is not interested in physical intimacy, marriage or family, but we know from looking at his relationship with his mother, step-brothers and others that Christ is very much family oriented and know that from historians it is highly likely that Christ was married and had children before
he began his mission in which he traveled with the apostles. Not only Christ but Mary is portrayed to practice Asceticism throughout her life, there are records dating back to 380 BCE from the Catholic Church stating the Mary remained a virgin all her life and the thought that she could ever have had a normal marital relationship with her husband Joseph is abhorrent to many historical Popes.

This has then been ingrained upon those of Western culture, as throughout history the Catholic Church has had major influence on the education of the people of the Western world and as they taught Mary was a pinnacle of virtue and remained a virgin all her life the association of the two ideas became widely acknowledged. Though, the truth of the matter is that it is highly likely that Mary did have other children, commonly referred to as the “brethren of Christ” within the bible. Evidence to this idea has been presented by Protestants throughout the years especially through the story of when Christ turned the water into wine, his mother Mary was hosting the wedding feast, which almost always was held by the groom’s family. Making the groom in this situation Mary’s son, and as it was not Christ’s wedding in question, the obvious conclusion is that Mary had another son after Christ’s birth. This conclusion helps us to see that the idea of being naïve or practicing Asceticism comes from the control of the Catholic Church over Western education wanting to portray the Saints as “above the world.” Not that this aim is a terrible one but it changed Virtue into something forever associated with being virginal and feminine.

This idea of Virtue being virginal and feminine and only looking at traits like kindness and love is not historically what Virtue means. The world virtue’s root come from the Latin word virtus and the Ancient Greek word arête. Virtus approximate meaning is to be strong, while arête meaning is moral excellence, making the word virtue’s mean “strength in moral
excellence.” Let us focus on the full definition then, we have seen as aforementioned that those who are considered virtuous idols within Christian belief are shown to have moral excellence but are often portrayed as virginal and naïve rather than wise and strong, but if we look farther back into the Old Testament of the bible we can see this is not always the case. For instance looking at people such as Abraham who not only had a son with his wife but also had a son with his wife’s handmaiden, yet Abraham is considered the father of the Jewish people, a prophet, and a virtuous man. He was someone that was not just wise, but was physically strong, and a father figure. He had strength both physically and spiritually, and was considered virtuous. So, if Abraham is virtuous and yet was not virginal, the teaching of the world virtue had changed drastically. The question is what could have caused this change? Could it been changed by an influence of cultures on another?

A long held belief within Eastern religions is that in order for men to overcome the sins of this world they must become unattached and above earthly things such as family. This is most easily seen in the fundamentalist Buddhist beliefs. In the story of Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama chooses to leave his home, riches, wife and new born son in order to learn how to reach enlightenment, because his family would distract him from focusing on his inner spirit and would give him more attachment to the world. Attachment is cause of suffering according to Buddhist beliefs and in order to rise above the world and attain enlightenment you must get rid of suffering by ending your attachments to this world.

To rise above people needed to achieve “divine states” known as Brahmavihara or as we known it in the Western cultures “virtuous living.” With these people are encouraged to not only have love, kindness, altruistic joy, but equanimity. Equanimity is accept the highs and lows of life while remaining detached without distinguishing whether your love goes to an enemy, a
stranger, or your family. Within Buddhism there is a specific group called Theravada Buddhists who believe that women are unable to rise above attachments within their life span because they are built to be mothers and thus must be attached to their children. This belief system in which Asceticism is encouraged in order to achieve enlightenment or in western concepts “salvation” could be the source of influence that changed the definition of virtue for the western world.

Buddhism began around 486 BCE and flourished throughout India between 272-231 BCE and began to spread through the eastern world in 100-0 BCE and spread all the way to China by 68 CE. When reaching China you can see the affect that Buddhism had on the structure of the family, as a man grows with Chinese Buddhist tradition he goes through stages of his life in the following order; student, teacher, husband, father, monk. In this time after Men establish their family they are supposed to separate themselves and become unattached within tradition in order to achieve spiritual enlightenment they choose to leave their wives, often separating themselves to one room of the house while others will even go into the mountains to become less attached. By 200 CE most of central Asia had been exposed to Buddhism and accepted its beliefs. Throughout this time trade occurred between these ancient eastern worlds, especially between China and what is now Italy through the Silk Road which was in used from 130 BCE to 1453 CE in which not only were goods exchanged but so were ideas though the different traders. This allowed the influences of different definition through the exchange of language to change between the different cultures especially within major trading points such as Italy.

Italy which was a major trading point between the silk road and Europe was also home to the papal states in which Catholicism the major Christian power was based, with the exchanged of Eastern concepts of Asceticism being something that was considered spiritually important especially for those who taught or guided new believers with the Western concepts of
moral strengths being something that spiritual leaders needed to show through actions. We can see how these exchanges between religious concepts within language could easily effect how virtue is defined not only as a strength of moral characteristics but also a being something that allowed to rise above the world through achieving “divine states” through Asceticism.

Especially as according to Catholic records the earliest acceptance that Mary was a Saint and an “Ever Virgin” and thus denial of her having additional children started around 242 BCE give or take a few years, and that the “brethren of Christ” were from Joseph’s previous marriage. Of course it could be a coincidence that this occurred within the time frame of when the Silk Road was at its peak in trading of goods and ideas or it could be a show of how with the exchange of concepts within cultures can affect how we define different traits and thus how we define different people. To the people of the Eastern world someone of spiritual strength and moral excellence was someone who was practiced Asceticism, someone who rose above people in order to achieve divine states. This concept was not strange to the Western world, as even within the bible Eve “tempted” Adam, and Joseph was “tempted” by Potiphar’s wife, thus denying attachment to women of the world was already commonly accepted, devoting one’s life to spiritual fulfillment was not strange but easily accepted, and with sharing their beliefs by finding common themes the acceptance of Asceticism within the achieving Sainthood much like achieving enlightenment with Buddhism allowed the exchange of ideas to influence how people viewed their spiritual leaders and even change the definition of virtue from something of strength to being linked with innocence.

Now that we have established how Eastern and Western cultures though history have affected the definition of Virtue through trade of ideas of what it means to be morally and spiritually strong and thus changed the perspective of how we view virtuous leaders such as
Christ, and Mary to match the new definition of Virtue, lets change gears to look at how this change in definition has effected how Virtue has been taught in modern times, especially in the difference in how Virtue is taught within the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Being a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints during my adolescence I can tell you that when the lesson of virtue was brought up with the Young Women’s program it was not about having “strength of moral excellence” or establishing the actual meaning of virtue in the minds of the girls. Instead it was usually a continuation lesson on Modesty and Chasity and how we as young women should up hold ourselves to the standards within the Law of Chasity. This lesson usually began with something like a rose being dipped in bleach or a cupcake being licked and then offered to us. In order to drive home that once we “gave up our virtue” we were unclean and scarred for life. It certainly worked well as a scare tactic and it almost always ended with the scripture Proverbs 12:4 “A virtuous woman is a crown to her husband…” or Proverb 31:10 “Who can find a virtuous woman? For her price is far above rubies.” These are great scriptures but if we actually look at what proverbs defines a Virtuous women as so much more than a young lady who keeps the Law of Chasity and is modest.

According to Proverb 31 a virtuous women is someone in whom people can trust and depend on, someone who does good deeds and serves other, someone who “worketh willingly with her hands” and sacrifices for her family but I think the most important point that is missed with these scriptures is that a virtuous woman is not a submissive, naïve, sheep minded person who constantly needs help, but is a woman of strength. In Proverbs 31 versus 17-21 it says a virtuous women “Girdeth her loins with strength, and strengtheneth her arms. She perceiveth that her merchandise is good: her candle goeth not out by night. She layeth her hands to the spindle, and her hands hold the distaff. She stretcheth out her hands to the poor; yea she
reacheth forth her hands to the needy. She is not afraid of the snow for her household; for all her household are clothed in scarlet.”

A virtuous women is not just clean physically and spiritually but is also strong. She is a person in which seeks out those whom she can serve and serves her family well because she is strong. To think that the only people who are virtuous are people who are submissive and meek and naïve is wrong, because virtue cannot come without strength. Specifically moral strength, this is not to say this is the only way within it is taught.

Many of the General Conference talks discuss being morally strong as being virtuous. Specifically Elder Pace’s talk on “Let Virtue Garnish thy Thoughts” talks about being morally strong in which he says, “Today I wish to speak about personal traits we call virtues. Virtuous traits form the foundation of a Christian life and are the outward manifestation of the inner man. The spelling in English of many individual virtues concludes with the letters ity: integrity, humility, charity, spirituality, accountability, civility, fidelity, and the list goes on and on. Relying on literary license, I refer to the virtues ending in ity as the “ity” virtues. “Ity” is a suffix that means quality, state, or degree of being.” He is one of the few to discuss that virtue is moral strength versus talks such as “A Return to Virtue” by Elaine S. Dalton in which she says, “Virtue is a prerequisite to entering the Lord’s holy temples and to receiving the Spirit’s guidance. Virtue “is a pattern of thought and behavior based on high moral standards.” It encompasses chastity and moral purity. Virtue begins in the heart and in the mind.” But I think this is most interesting that almost all of these talks are addressing the women of the church and almost always includes talking about being chaste. In fact while researching this subject I discussed what virtue meant to different people and what I discovered is that the majority of people when asked, “What do you think when you hear the word virtue?” almost all of those of from the Church of Jesus Christ
of Latter-day Saint immediately thought of the Law of Chasity. In fact of those I asked who attended the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints during their adolescence the young women associated it with the Law of Chasity lessons while the young men usually could not think of one instance in which they had a lesson on virtue. Yet almost all of them could remember bring taught morals and how they needed to keep their standards through obedience. They could not remember an instance where they had a lesson on Virtue that addressed “strength of moral excellence.” Is it any wonder with how we associate the word Virtue with female Virginity that this is the result?

Do not get me wrong, part of learning about virtue and being morally strong is keeping yourself chaste, but I do not believe it should be the point that emphasize so regularly within the our beliefs. In my opinion Virtue should be more than an extension on then lessons on Chasity. Virtue should be teach both men and women to have “strength in moral excellence” and even to draw back to the Buddhist belief of achieving a “divine state.” Virtue should be about attaining the attributes of Christ and reaching a stronger place both in morals and in faith. We should not allow how our culture and media has changed the definition of virtue through the years to change how we learn about virtue and to twist our perspective of what a virtuous person looks like.

In conclusion we can see from how we view virtuous idols such as Christ and Mary how the idea of virtue has changed through the century and from that we can see that the definition of virtue has changed. We can conclude that it is possible this change of definition came about from the exchange of ideas through trade along the Silk Road between the Eastern and Western world, especially as they attempted to find similarities within religious belief systems. Finally we can see how this change in definition has effected how virtue is taught within our own practice which is highly different from what the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints actually believes
according to the prophets and the scriptures. From this we can see that virtue within our society has changed in definition and meaning, but that we can still change how it is taught if only we learn what the true meaning of virtue. Remembering that virtue is not just keeping clean and obedient but going back to the root of word, which is Virtus, strength. If we can reintroduce the root of this word to the meaning today we can achieve better “strength of moral excellence” and with it achieve a true return to virtue.
Works Cited


