

Chapter 4

Confusing Tradition With Doctrine

In a 1984 General Conference address Elder Ronald Poelman said,

Sometimes traditions, customs, social practices and personal preferences of individual Church members may, through repeated or common usage be misconstrued as Church procedures or policies. Occasionally, such traditions, customs and practices may even be regarded by some as eternal principles.¹

Unfortunately, but unavoidably, we—and even prophets—sometimes confuse tradition-based interpretations with doctrines or official positions. Of the many possible examples, I’ll choose Book of Mormon geography as an illustration. Most members have believed (and perhaps still believe) that Book of Mormon events took place over the entire hemisphere of North and South America. A cursory reading of the Book of Mormon suggests that North America was the land northward and that South America was the land southward. Present-day Panama naturally comes to mind as the “narrow neck” of land connecting the north and the south.

It’s likely that Joseph Smith, most of his contemporaries, and probably most modern-day prophets assumed and even embraced this hemispheric view. It also seems likely that Joseph and his contemporaries believed that the Indian remnants of his local vicinity furnished evidence of the lives and wars of the Nephites and Lamanites. From where did such beliefs arise? A superficial reading of the Book of Mormon—in the context of cultural beliefs about the Indians in Joseph’s day—plausibly suggests such a scenario. Some early nineteenth-century frontiersmen, for example, believed that the Indians were originally white settlers from the lost tribes of Israel.² In the weakness of early LDS understanding it would have made logical sense to envision Book of Mormon geography in context of what they believed about the existence of Indians in North America.

Early LDS leader and writer, Orson Pratt, became a primary promoter of the hemispheric Book of Mormon geography and some of his thoughts were eventually incorporated as footnotes to geographical events in the 1879 edition of the Book of Mormon. These notes were removed in the 1920 edition, but the influence had already made its impact on many Latter-day Saints. The hemispheric model was born

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from supposition in context of nineteenth-century American speculation and achieved quasi-official status among many members because of tradition rather than revelation. For most members, there was no need to question a hemispheric geography—it appeared to be the obvious interpretation of the Book of Mormon text.

Through the years, however, there were a few Latter-day Saints (both lay members and leaders) who questioned a hemispheric geography. Book of Mormon travel distances suggest a limited geography, and several scholarly studies propose a Mesoamerican location for Book of Mormon events. Today, most LDS scholars and an increasing number of members and leaders believe that Book of Mormon events transpired in Mesoamerica. This topic is covered in greater detail in Chapter 13.

It was the traditional view of a hemispheric geography, however, that was passed from generation to generation of Latter-day Saints as an unarguable truth. This “truth” was spoken from the pulpit, integrated into manuals, taught in classes, and casually *implied* as LDS doctrine for nearly two hundred years among most Church members.

If we assume that Book of Mormon events actually took place in a limited geography, how do we reconcile the fact that past prophets were wrong about the location of Book of Mormon events or the make-up of pre-Columbian peoples? (It should be remembered that some LDS leaders—including some early LDS leaders—did *not* unquestioningly accept the traditional interpretations.) We might similarly ask how Old Testament prophets could be wrong about the shape of the earth. Such concerns should be tempered by the previous chapter’s discussion on prophetic *thoughts*.

New light results in new knowledge. When a 1978 revelation extended the priesthood to all worthy males, for instance, this new revelation ran contrary to some of the prior public pronouncements of certain LDS leaders. Elder Bruce R. McConkie, for example, had previously made statements about blacks and the priesthood that became outdated when President Spencer W. Kimball announced the new revelation. Shortly after the prophet’s revelation, McConkie remarked,

“Forget everything I have said, or what... Brigham Young... or whomsoever has said... that is contrary to the present revelation. We spoke with a limited understanding and without the light and knowledge that now has come into the world.”³

Outdated and erroneous views are superseded by revelation or increased understanding. Unlike the revelation on blacks and the priesthood, however, there has never been a revelation regarding Book of

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Mormon geography. Without a revelation, members—including leaders—are free to speculate. Elder John Widtsoe once wrote,

We set up assumptions, based on our best knowledge, but can go no further. We should remember that when inspired writers deal with historical incidents they relate that which they have seen or that which may have been told them, unless indeed the past is opened to them by revelation.⁴

In some ways, traditions seem to follow Newton's first law of motion which states (in part) that an object in motion tends to stay in motion unless acted upon by extraneous forces. Until some new information unbalances our traditional views and makes us critically examine those views, we generally tend to uncritically accept most traditions—even when they are wrong. Prophets, like other mortals, accept traditions that may be in error simply because they've never thought about challenging such traditions.

Sometimes when new light is given we resist. Most of us are adverse to change; after all, we are creatures of habit. "I have tried for a number of years," said Joseph Smith, "to get the minds of the Saints prepared to receive the things of God; but we frequently see some of them, after suffering all they have for the work of God, will fly to pieces like glass as soon as anything comes that is contrary to their traditions."⁵

It really doesn't matter how long or how many people (including prophets) believed an erroneous non-doctrinal idea. Doctrine is not determined by how long something is believed, or by the belief's popularity. As English author, Gilbert Keith Chesterton, once observed, "Fallacies do not cease to be fallacies because they become fashions."⁶ Prophets for many centuries believed that the earth was shaped like a dish—but that doesn't mean that such a traditional (and popular) belief is part of Judaeo-Christian doctrine.

If prophets are entitled to opinions and speculations, then what are the doctrines? *I* believe that very few LDS teachings qualify as true doctrines. Among true doctrines are: There is a living God; God is our Father and is interested in our happiness; Jesus is the Son of God and He atoned for our sins, and was resurrected so that we might live once again; Joseph Smith was a prophet of God; Gordon B. Hinckley is currently the prophet of God; the scriptures are the words of God; and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has the authority to administer ordinances that potentially bind or unite us with God. While there are other true doctrines, many of the things we believe are actually

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traditions, policies, practices, and wise counsel. Non-doctrinal beliefs may be useful and true, but they are not *official doctrine* unless the First Presidency officially expresses them as such.

Sometimes we conflate the implementation or presentation of a doctrine with the doctrine itself. The temple endowment ceremony, for example, has changed since the days of Joseph Smith (see Chapter 25 for more details on temple changes). When some members see such changes they mistakenly think that *doctrine* has changed. They become troubled and wonder how doctrines of God could change. Elder Boyd K. Packer has pointed out, however, that procedures, programs, patterns of organization, as well as the practice, presentation, and implementation of doctrine can change without changing the actual doctrine.⁷

When we recognize that both members and non-members sometimes mistake official LDS doctrines with traditions, procedures, policies, and the presentation of doctrine, many anti-LDS arguments lose what potency they might have had.