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WHEN AN EVIDENT FACT CANNOT BE ALLOWED TO BE TRUE

Daniel C. Peterson

Abstract: *Miracles occur relatively often in scripture, as do people who, for various reasons, want or even need to deny their occurrence. The arguments that are deployed to justify such denial haven't changed all that much over the centuries. In fact, they're still around today.*

Most if not all present or former missionaries for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are quite familiar with the first three verses of the ninth chapter of the gospel of John:

And as Jesus passed by, he saw a man which was blind from his birth.

And his disciples asked him, saying, Master, who did sin, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind?

Jesus answered, Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents: but that the works of God should be made manifest in him.
(John 9:1–3)

We know these verses because they seem to presuppose at least the possibility of premortal human existence. Thus, and importantly, they are congruent with the Latter-day Saint belief that we all lived in the presence of our Heavenly Parents before we were born. The notion that undergirds the disciples' question, that the "man which was blind from his birth" might have been born blind because he had sinned, presupposes the idea that the man *could* have sinned prior to his birth. Obviously, though, that makes no sense if he hadn't *existed* before his birth.

To pursue the typical missionary argument a bit further: Assuming, for the sake of argument, that the disciples' implicit belief in an antemortal human existence was misguided, the Savior could easily

have corrected them. He could simply have informed them that the blind man *couldn't* have sinned before his birth because he hadn't yet *existed*. That he didn't do so suggests rather strongly that he didn't regard belief in human premortal human existence as misguided. He didn't reject the concept, and the text may even imply that he shared it.

This is, as I say, all quite familiar and unexceptional. I expect that very few Latter-day Saint missionaries, at least among those who have served in predominantly Christian areas of the world, have never used John 9:1–3 in order to ground the restored doctrine of human existence before mortality. What I would like to do here, though, is to look briefly at some of the rest of the account, which takes up almost the entirety of John 9.

So, we return to the account of the *healing* of the blind man. Of course, a life of genuine Christian discipleship isn't merely one of subscribing to a set of theological propositions — it entails action. The apostle James is unmistakably clear on this point:

But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves ...

Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world. (James 1:22, 27)

Accordingly, it's significant that Jesus doesn't simply pass on after using the unfortunate blind man as a teaching tool for a doctrinal lesson on the problem of evil. He *cures* him. Or, anyway, he initiates the *process* of curing the man:

When he had thus spoken, he spat on the ground, and made clay of the spittle, and he anointed the eyes of the blind man with the clay,

And said unto him, Go, wash in the pool of Siloam, (which is by interpretation, Sent.) He went his way therefore, and washed, and came seeing. (John 9:6–7)

It may be significant, though it's quite beyond the scope of this little essay to consider possible explanations or implications, that the Savior doesn't instantly *cure* the blind man in this story — as he seems to have done in other cases. Instead, the anointing seems to represent the first stage of a two-stage cure. The man is told that he needs to proceed to the pool of Siloam and wash himself there. Clearly, action on his part, as well as on the Savior's, is required. Probably, too, someone else's help was

required for the still-blind man to make his way to the pool of Siloam, which was located outside of Jerusalem's city walls. I suppose that we might, if we choose to read it so, see in this story a justification for seeking medical help when it's available and not "merely" relying upon the power of prayer and of priesthood blessings. But I won't pursue that thought here. It's also interesting that Jesus uses a material substance — and pretty much the most humble material substance that we can possibly imagine — as part of his healing of the blind man. That, too, is surely worthy of contemplation. But I'll leave such contemplation to others elsewhere, at least for now.

What interests me here is the reaction of those who become aware of the miraculous healing of the "man which was blind from his birth." Is everybody willing to credit the miracle? No, definitely not. Is everybody even happy about it? It would appear that they aren't. In what ways do they seek to dismiss what Jesus has done? We shall see.

The neighbours therefore, and they which before had seen him that he was blind, said, Is not this he that sat and begged?

Some said, This is he: others said, He is like him: but he said, I am he. (John 9:8–9)

The people who were familiar with the blind man who had sat for much of his life, begging for alms in their neighborhood, knew that he was the same person as this man who could now see. And, of course, *he* knew that he was the same man. Others, though — and very probably people who weren't as familiar with him, who didn't know him as well — granted that he looked a lot like the familiar street beggar but they insisted that it couldn't really be the same person. Why not? Presumably because there wasn't room in their worldview for such a miracle, that a man blind since birth could be given his sight. Perhaps they disallowed miracles in general. Perhaps they believed in miracles long ago, but not in *present-day* miracles, not in *this* particular miracle.

In the Americas, as recorded in the Book of Mormon, people who were determined not to accept the authority of the prophets likewise sought to evade the evidence of accurate predictions that had been made and fulfilled in earlier years:

Nevertheless, the people began to harden their hearts, all save it were the most believing part of them, both of the Nephites and also of the Lamanites, and began to depend upon their own strength and upon their own wisdom, saying:

Some things they may have guessed right, among so many;
but behold, we know that all these great and marvelous works
cannot come to pass, of which has been spoken.

And they began to reason and to contend among themselves,
saying:

That it is not reasonable that such a being as a Christ shall
come ... (Helaman 16:15–18)

In the Middle East, there's a well-known figure of popular folklore who, although recognizably the same "wise fool" across languages and cultures, goes by various interrelated names such as *Goha*, *Juha*, and *Nasr al-Din Hoja*. One of the tales told about him involves a neighbor who comes to him, seeking to borrow his donkey. Goha (to use the Egyptian form of the character's name) tells the neighbor that, while he would very much like to loan his donkey to the man, another neighbor has already borrowed the animal. As the neighbor walks away, though, he hears the donkey braying loudly from within the walls of Goha's property. Understandably displeased, he returns and confronts Goha. But Goha is serene. "Whom do you believe?" he asks. "Me or a donkey?"¹

Goha is suggesting that his neighbor should be persuaded by his words rather than by the plain evidence of the neighbor's own senses (in this case, from his sense of hearing), which Goha implies cannot be trusted. In similar fashion, the unbelieving Nephites and Lamanites persuade themselves, and seek to persuade others, to reject the evidence of what they directly know — it was just "guesses," after all — in favor of skeptical conclusions based "upon their own strength and upon their own wisdom" and upon their standard of what is "reasonable." Helaman, however, finds a deeper, more fundamental explanation for their clear desire to disbelieve: It is, he says, because they had hardened their hearts.

Some of the unbelieving neighbors of the formerly blind man seem to have done precisely the same:

Therefore said they unto him, How were thine eyes opened?

He answered and said, A man that is called Jesus made clay,
and anointed mine eyes, and said unto me, Go to the pool
of Siloam, and wash: and I went and washed, and I received
sight.

1. The story is widely told, and I've heard it orally more than once. For an example, see Idries Shah, *The Sufis* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1964), 78–79, https://www.google.com/books/edition/The_Sufis/S6pLvb5FYE0C?hl=en&gbpv=0.

Then said they unto him, Where is he? He said, I know not.
(John 9:10–12)

For the moment, at least, the idea that this man is merely a *Doppelgänger* of the familiar beggar seems to have been abandoned. So, the questions shift. But the formerly blind man didn't know where Jesus was because, obviously, he had still been unable to see until after he had made his way to the pool of Siloam — and the text suggests that, while Jesus sent him to the pool, he did not accompany him and may even have departed from the place where he had anointed the man's eyes.

The questions that are asked of the man here are interesting, though. It's possible that the questioners are looking for aspects of the miracle — its method, perhaps, or the identity of the particular person by whom it was performed or initiated. Perhaps there might be something in the manner of the healing, or in the identity of the healer, that can be used to discredit what had happened. Of course, it also may be the case that, as we all would be, they were simply curious about how this seemingly inexplicable change, the transformation of a congenitally blind man into a seeing one, had come about. Now, though, the religious leaders of Jerusalem's Jews become involved in the matter, and the man is once again asked to tell what happened to him:

They brought to the Pharisees him that aforetime was blind.

And it was the sabbath day when Jesus made the clay, and opened his eyes.

Then again the Pharisees also asked him how he had received his sight. He said unto them, He put clay upon mine eyes, and I washed, and do see.

Therefore said some of the Pharisees, This man is not of God, because he keepeth not the sabbath day. Others said, How can a man that is a sinner do such miracles? And there was a division among them. (John 9:13–16)

When the Pharisees enter into the matter, their preferred mode of rejecting the miracle is a different one. They take direct aim at the character of the man who had initiated the cure: Jesus had healed a man on the Sabbath day. That did not sit well with their doctrines or teachings about proper Sabbath behavior. Accordingly, in their judgment, he was a sinner and any miracle wrought by him need not be taken seriously as entailing any theological implications or religious conclusions. They accorded more weight to their doctrinal understanding, in other words,

than to what might seem, at least at first glance, to be the undeniable empirical fact of a divinely wrought, humanly inexplicable miracle.

But they understand that the miracle is a powerful one, and that it may require still more firepower to dismiss it completely. And, in the next verse, they take their first step toward constructing yet another reason for dismissal:

They say unto the blind man again, What sayest thou of him, that he hath opened thine eyes? He said, He is a prophet.
(John 9:17)

They will drop this approach for now, but they will return to it very soon as a means of devaluing the testimony of the formerly blind man. He was, it must be remembered, the direct recipient — and, thus, the primary and very literal eyewitness — of the miracle wrought by Christ. And, for that reason, those who needed to reject the miracle knew that he needed to be discredited. First, though, they resort yet again to the suggestion that there has been a mistake, that this man who can see simply isn't the same man as the blind beggar whom they had seen so often over previous years:

But the Jews did not believe concerning him, that he had been blind, and received his sight, until they called the parents of him that had received his sight.

And they asked them, saying, Is this your son, who ye say was born blind? how then doth he now see?

His parents answered them and said, We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind. (John 9:18–20)

So *that* avenue of escape has now been pretty well sealed off: The neighbors, the parents, and the man himself all certify that he is indeed the formerly blind beggar and that suddenly, somehow, he can now see. But they had also asked another question: Exactly how was this done? They're probably hoping that the parents will confess to some explanation other than the one that has been repeatedly provided. They would like an explanation that doesn't validate the inconvenient messianic claims of Jesus.

Remember how the unbelieving Nephites and Lamanites in the book of Helaman explained inconvenient truths such as miracles and accurate prophecies:

And they will, by the cunning and the mysterious arts of the evil one, work some great mystery which we cannot

understand, which will keep us down to be servants to their words, and also servants unto them, for we depend upon them to teach us the word; and thus will they keep us in ignorance if we will yield ourselves unto them, all the days of our lives.

And many more things did the people imagine up in their hearts, which were foolish and vain; and they were much disturbed, for Satan did stir them up to do iniquity continually; yea, he did go about spreading rumors and contentions upon all the face of the land, that he might harden the hearts of the people against that which was good and against that which should come. (Helaman 16:21–22)

Compare the response of the Jewish leadership in Jerusalem to the first report of the resurrection of Jesus and of the empty tomb:

Now when they were going, behold, some of the watch came into the city, and shewed unto the chief priests all the things that were done.

And when they were assembled with the elders, and had taken counsel, they gave large money unto the soldiers,

Saying, Say ye, His disciples came by night, and stole him away while we slept.

And if this come to the governor's ears, we will persuade him, and secure you.

So they took the money, and did as they were taught: and this saying is commonly reported among the Jews until this day. (Matthew 28:11–15)

Back, however, to the story of the blind beggar in John 9. The parents decline to *say* how the miracle was done, and not merely because they most probably don't know:

But by what means he now seeth, we know not; or who hath opened his eyes, we know not: he is of age; ask him: he shall speak for himself.

These words spake his parents, because they feared the Jews: for the Jews had agreed already, that if any man did confess that he was Christ, he should be put out of the synagogue.

Therefore said his parents, He is of age; ask him. (John 9:21–23)

They refuse to commit, hoping against hope not to be involved. There is plainly humor in the evasive responses of the parents but, just as plainly, there is also fear. The religious authorities hold intimidating power, and there is no question that they are willing to use it. Dissent from orthodoxy, as the Pharisees define orthodoxy — and please recall that their authority is assumed rather than divinely ordained — can result in social exclusion and marginalization. Not a pleasant option in a close-knit ancient society that was largely based upon a religious identity and that was many centuries away from any real notion of religious pluralism.

So, the parents effectively avoid testifying. But their son *cannot* avoid it. His very existence — sighted as he now is — is an ongoing public testimony in and of itself, even if he says nothing at all, and a challenge to those who wish to deny the claims of Jesus.

Then again called they the man that was blind, and said unto him, Give God the praise: we know that this man is a sinner.

He answered and said, Whether he be a sinner or no, I know not: one thing I know, that, whereas I was blind, now I see.
(John 9:24–25)

Having abandoned their attempt to maintain that the miracle simply hadn't actually happened, that it was just a case of mistaken identity, the Pharisees now return to trying to discredit Jesus as an unworthy sinner, a violator of (their interpretation of) the law of Moses. And this, of course, won't be the last time that such a technique is employed. As William Smith, Joseph's younger brother, would much later reminisce regarding his own family,

We never knew we were bad folks until Joseph told his vision. We were considered respectable till then, but at once people began to circulate falsehoods and stories in a wonderful way.²

Yes, the Pharisees concede, a miracle has occurred. Quite implausibly, though, they insist that Jesus was not the agent through whom the miracle took place. But the onetime blind beggar sticks to the

2. John W. Peterson, "Wm. B. Smith's last Statement," *Zion's Ensign* 5, no. 3 (Independence, MO), 13 January 1894, quoted in Dan Vogel, "William Smith Interview with E. C. Briggs, 1893," in *Early Mormon Documents*, Vol. 1 (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996), 512, https://archive.org/details/volume-1_202010/page/512/mode/2up.

basic fact, that he was the recipient of an undeniable divine miracle. As of yet, though, he draws no theological conclusion from that fact.

However, they continue to press him, and — he is plainly his parents' son — he responds with scornful sarcasm:

Then said they to him again, What did he to thee? how opened he thine eyes?

He answered them, I have told you already, and ye did not hear: wherefore would ye hear it again? will ye also be his disciples? (John 9:26–27)

He has had enough of their questioning, of their attempt to find some way to deny the significance of what he personally, more than anybody else, knew to have been a miraculous cure of his blindness. His impatience and his growing lack of respect for their self-assigned authority angers them, so, having failed to muster a sound argument, they resort to insult and personal abuse and, in the end, essentially to force:

Then they reviled him, and said, Thou art his disciple; but we are Moses' disciples.

We know that God spake unto Moses: as for this fellow, we know not from whence he is.

The man answered and said unto them, Why herein is a marvellous thing, that ye know not from whence he is, and yet he hath opened mine eyes.

Now we know that God heareth not sinners: but if any man be a worshipper of God, and doeth his will, him he heareth.

Since the world began was it not heard that any man opened the eyes of one that was born blind.

If this man were not of God, he could do nothing.

They answered and said unto him, Thou wast altogether born in sins, and dost thou teach us? And they cast him out. (John 9:28–34)

Unable to discredit the message, they attempt to discredit the messenger — an approach that, overall and much more importantly, they had also been pursuing with Jesus himself and the report of this particular miracle that he had performed. Compare the experience of Joseph Smith after receiving his First Vision in the early nineteenth-century United States:

I soon found ... that my telling the story had excited a great deal of prejudice against me among professors of religion, and was the cause of great persecution, which continued to increase; and though I was an obscure boy, only between fourteen and fifteen years of age, and my circumstances in life such as to make a boy of no consequence in the world, yet men of high standing would take notice sufficient to excite the public mind against me, and create a bitter persecution; and this was common among all the sects — all united to persecute me. (Joseph Smith — History 1:22)

But the formerly blind beggar of John 9 has properly sensed the message, and he accepts it:

Jesus heard that they had cast him out; and when he had found him, he said unto him, Dost thou believe on the Son of God?

He answered and said, Who is he, Lord, that I might believe on him?

And Jesus said unto him, Thou hast both seen him, and it is he that talketh with thee.

And he said, Lord, I believe. And he worshipped him. (John 9:35–38)

Jesus lamented the inability of most of those in his day and his environment to hear and accept his message,

...because they seeing see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand.

And in them is fulfilled the prophecy of Esaias, which saith, By hearing ye shall hear, and shall not understand; and seeing ye shall see, and shall not perceive:

For this people's heart is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes they have closed; lest at any time they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears, and should understand with their heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them. (Matthew 13:13–15)

“But,” he said to his disciples, “blessed are your eyes, for they see: and your ears, for they hear” (Matthew 13:16).

Human patterns of accepting and rejecting God's outreach to us have scarcely changed, if in fact they have changed at all, since the beginning of time. Illustrating that fact is one of the many ways in which

the scriptures can benefit us, if we will permit them to do so. May we always find ourselves among the Lord's disciples, who see and who hear.

Helping us to see and hear is a principal focus of the work of The Interpreter Foundation. As always, I want to express my gratitude here to the authors, reviewers, designers, source checkers, copy editors, donors, and other volunteers who generally make that work — very much including this publication — possible. I especially want to thank the authors who have contributed to this particular volume, along with Allen Wyatt and Jeff Lindsay, both members of the Interpreter Board of Trustees who also serve specifically as the managing or production editors for the Journal. As all of the other officers of The Interpreter Foundation do, they volunteer their time, their talents, and their labor without financial compensation. Were it not for them, however, there would be no *Interpreter*, and were it not for others like them, The Interpreter Foundation as a whole could not function. As I write, the Foundation has recently celebrated the tenth anniversary of its inception. That is a remarkable achievement, made possible by a large number of very good and selfless people. I'm deeply grateful to all of them, past and (mostly still) present.

Daniel C. Peterson (*PhD, University of California at Los Angeles*) is a professor emeritus of Islamic studies and Arabic at Brigham Young University, where he founded the University's Middle Eastern Texts Initiative. He has published and spoken extensively on both Islamic and Latter-day Saint subjects. Formerly chairman of the board of the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS) and an officer, editor, and author for its successor organization, the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, his professional work as an Arabist focuses on the Qur'an and on Islamic philosophical theology. He is the author, among other things, of a biography entitled *Muhammad: Prophet of God* (Eerdmans, 2007).

