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Understanding How the Scriptures Came to Be

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UNDERSTANDING HOW THE SCRIPTURES CAME TO BE

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One might think that an author as prolific as Michael Ash might have run out of things to say by now. After all, he has produced ten books, over 160 articles in such periodicals as the *Ensign*, *Sunstone*, the *FARMS Review*, and *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*. He has also been featured on almost 100 podcast episodes and in 30 videos. And yet his latest work, *Rethinking Revelation and the Human Element in Scripture: The Prophet's Role as Creative Co-Author*, weighs in at a whopping 750+ pages. It is an impressive (and heavy) tome.

Ash's thesis is deceptively simple: God and the prophet work together to produce scripture. He uses that thesis to thread the very tiny needle of understanding how humans have a place in God's revelatory work without asserting that they alone create the reality. In a phone interview

Ash was quick to say that his thesis is not to be taken as supporting the position that says, “Joseph Smith made up the Book of Mormon,” but it’s also not to be taken in support of the idea that a prophet acts like a human dictation machine either.

Why Is This Book Important?

In some ways, Ash’s book is the more academic version of his earlier work, *Shaken Faith Syndrome*,¹ and he references that book frequently. But where *Shaken Faith Syndrome* attempts to catalog all the difficult issues that cause members to leave the church or investigators to be wary, this book specifically addresses those concerns that come about where human will meets God’s agenda. Ash is seeking to help believers and skeptics embrace the intersection of inspiration and intellect.

Scholars in many other parts of the Christian world have been playing with this idea for decades, but it’s a particularly tricky idea for many Latter-day Saints. It might be fine to think of the Bible as having an element of “creativity” in it because Latter-day Saints already hold some suspicion toward the Bible — it is only worthwhile as it is translated correctly. Ash demonstrates that there are two extremes which should be avoided. One is believing that since the Prophets had a role in creation of scripture that it is therefore all fiction. But the other is believing that Prophets go into some trance-like state and practice some kind of automatic writing where they channel the mind of God without those thoughts needing to be processed through their own brain and language. So, when Ash says that the Prophet has a role in co-creating scripture, he is using the word “create” to mean, “to bring into existence,” and not to mean “creative writing,” a form of fiction writing.

Literalists, Mythicalists, and Extensibilists

Ash observes that faithful members of the Church generally fall into three categories when thinking about these issues: literalists, mythicalists, and extensibilists. In sorting members into these three groups, Ash is not trying to ascribe goodness to one and not another. What he seems to be doing is identifying the thinking patterns of each group, which in turn reveals where they may be most likely to have a faith crisis.

Literalists might be described as being extremely skeptical of science that contradicts their view. They tend to believe in young-Earth

1. Michael R. Ash, *Shaken Faith Syndrome: Strengthening One’s Testimony in the Face of Criticism and Doubt* (Redding, CA: The Foundation for Apologetic Information and Research, 2013).

creationism and that every word in the scriptures describes historical events as accurately as a photograph. Ash's observation is that this group is far more likely to be upset by learning information that contradicts their literalist views or that goes against a traditional telling of church history.

Mythicalists think in exactly the opposite direction. They see the Book of Mormon as some kind of "inspired fiction." They probably do not believe there were a people called the Nephites, but they still say, "the Church is true." What they mean by that is that truths can be learned in the Church, which bring people closer to Heavenly Father, and that worrying about the pesky historical details isn't really the point. The danger for this group is that they could hold the same belief about any church. A congregation of Methodists or Catholics or Hindus can also help people be closer to God. Once it doesn't matter which specific church one is in, it's not a far jump to, "I don't need to go to church at all anymore; I find God in nature."

Extensibilists are in the middle of these two groups. They are attempting to be elastic thinkers who can fully accept the scriptures as being records of a real people and real events while also understanding that scripture is not written like a story book and that science can shed light on issues in ways that faith cannot. While Ash doesn't say it outright, the biggest danger for this group is probably that people on all sides will misunderstand them — the radical middle is never an easy place to be.

Uncovering Truth

Ash goes on to explain the intricate system through which humans make meaning. For Him, inspiration and intellect are two sides of the same coin. Latter-day Saints believe God still communicates with His children but, as Ash points out, neither side of the coin provides infallible data. The information that both inspiration and intellect produce has to be interpreted correctly, by faith.

This applies to prophets, too. Ash's point is that prophets have special responsibilities, not special brains. He rehearses the basic elements of cognitive function in humans and makes the case that prophets are helpful to us specifically because they have normal brains that must take in information, interpret it, and produce new thoughts exactly as the rest of us do.

Uncovering truth becomes especially dicey when science and scripture appear to be in conflict. Ash lays out a paradigm wherein scripture and science can be understood as part of one great whole,

not two conflicting data points. God uses both sides of the coin to inspire His children to contextualize their faith in their circumstances. This is very similar to what the apostle Paul is doing in the epistles of the New Testament. Paul is writing to churches in very different socioeconomic structures, in different parts of the known world, and living under different conditions. He is not creating a new Gospel for each church, even though he seems to give conflicting advice to different churches. He is simply contextualizing the gospel into the Church's circumstances. Ash makes the point that modern prophets must do this too – contextualize the scriptures for us today “after the manner of their language.” In order to do this, the prophet must be one of us; he must understand the times in such a way that he knows how to make gospel issues make sense today.

Truth is truth, rather it be discovered through science or scripture. And somehow all truths work into a grand unifying theory of everything, one great whole. Ash is passionate about helping people find a humble place to stand in the midst of living at a time where we have more information than ever before.

Sometimes a Comforter, Sometimes a Trouble-Maker

In this book Ash is doing his level best to model what it's like to walk a middle line, to thread a very tiny needle. Openness, humility, eagerness to learn, and a willingness to hold faith and questions at the same time are all required for a person to be successful in this endeavor. Ash is deeply concerned about those who are susceptible to a faith crisis and longs to give them not just comfort, but room to belong. And, at many points in the book, Ash seems delighted to invite trouble to believers who are a little too smug in their tidy beliefs. It is said that a good preacher learns to comfort the troubled and trouble the comfortable, and Ash hits the mark here.

The biggest downside of this book, as Ash himself will tell you, is the length. A book coming in at over 750 pages will limit the readership, and that's unfortunate because his ideas need to be read.

A Psychological Critique

The picture that Ash paints of the believer who understands the human element in scripture (and in any aspect of following God) is beautiful. I love to be around people who can hold tension between two things and still continue to learn and grow, and the Church needs more of the kind of people Ash paints.

Ash says up front that his goal in this book is to address intellectual concerns, not emotional ones. He does; the work is good. This is a solid addition to any thinking person's library. But when he describes the idea of an extensibilist, a person with flexible thinking, he is also describing a highly emotionally mature person. He is not wrong in the case he paints, but for this mental health therapist, it feels a bit like only working one pedal of a bicycle. The other pedal — the emotional maturity required to not be emotionally triggered by these issues — deserves no less attention.

I recommend this book. Don't let the length intimidate you into passing it by. Ash has important things to say, and his passion to help those who struggle with the intellectual issues of a faith crisis is inspiring. The kind of flexible thinking he espouses would increase any believer's faith and would help any skeptic or person with questions.

Jennifer Roach holds a Master of Divinity from The Seattle School of Theology and was an ordained pastor before converting to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in 2019. She currently works as a licensed mental health therapist and lives in Seattle with her husband and two dogs.

