

Weighing Evidence for and Against Religion:

Ye Shall Find What Ye Seek

By Cameron Ford 2/7/2015

Summary: The human mind excels at seeing only what it wants to see in all areas of life, such as personal relationships, politics, science, and religion. This is especially true when scholarly methods are used to try to prove or disprove issues of faith. How then can mankind find its way to real truth?

The ability of the human mind to see only what it wants to see never ceases to amaze. It manifests itself in the way we view the people that surround us, justify our own or others behaviors, or in the way that we analyze and interpret facts. Some parents see their children as angels, while their neighbors see these same children as undisciplined and rude. In divorce, people that once could only see the good in each other only seem to be able to see the bad as the marriage unravels. At the extreme end of the spectrum, serial killers, mass murderers, and sociopaths always appear to be able to twist their minds into justifying their behaviors.

This bias of the mind easily and naturally extends into politics. For conservatives, data clearly show that big government programs and high taxes are a drag on the economy and oppressive to the general welfare of the people. The same data show to liberals that the solutions to the ills of society are to be found in higher taxation and more government programs. Both sides will spawn research that focuses on questions that are unconsciously (and sometimes consciously) designed to filter for the answers that fit their view of the world.

The ability of the mind to see what it wants to see also consistently reveals itself in the realm of science; an area that most people would think should be completely objective and free from emotional interpretation. The bias of the scientific mind comes in the form of what questions are asked, how they are asked, and how the data are gathered and interpreted. One such example is determining whether diet sodas help with weight loss or actually cause people to gain weight. Some research studies correlate weight gain with the consumption of diet sodas, but there are also studies that indicate diet sodas help in weight loss. David L. Katz, MD, director of the Yale Prevention Center indicates a kind of balance: “For every study that shows there could be a benefit or harm, there’s another that shows no ‘there’ there.”

(<http://www.webmd.com/diet/features/diet-sodas-and-weight-gain-not-so-fast>).

The topic of God and religion is an area where the human mind excels at seeing only what it wants to see. This is especially true when scholarly methods are used to try to prove or disprove

issues of faith. One such case is seen in relation to the Book of Mormon. The claim that the Book of Mormon is an actual history of a real people in ancient America is extremely important to the truth claims of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. This is because the book's truthfulness is accepted as evidence that Joseph Smith was a Prophet and the Church he restored is true. Therefore, much scholarly research has been conducted by both sides of the issue and, not surprisingly, both sides have arrived at completely opposite conclusions. Richard L. Bushman's biography on Joseph Smith gives a summary of the research of both sides.

Of the critics he says:

"...modern critics... are certain that any reasonable person who takes an objective scientific approach to the Book of Mormon will recognize "the obvious fictional quality" of the book. They point to evidence in the book of anti-Masonic agitation stirring New York in the years when it was being translated. In the doctrinal portions, they see anti-Universalist language and imitations of camp-meeting preaching. The critics complain that the Isaiah passages quoted by Nephi draw upon portions of the book now thought to be pseudepigrapha, composed long after the Nephites left Jerusalem. Turning to archeology, they point out that archeological digs have produced no evidence of Nephite civilization, yielding no horse bones, for example, an animal named in the Book of Mormon. Most recently, an anthropological researcher has claimed that Native American DNA samples correspond to Asian patterns, precluding Semitic origins. In view of all the evidence, the critics believe defense of the book's authenticity is hopeless." (Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*, pg 92)

Of the proponents he says:

"The proponents ... draw attention to scores of details that resemble the local color and cultural forms of ancient Hebrew culture, many of them unknown even to scholars when Joseph Smith was writing. They find passages written in the Hebrew poetic forms of chiasmus, where a series of statements reverses at a midpoint and repeats itself in reverse order. The proponents note how chapters about a Nephite king bestowing his crown on his son conform to the coronation rituals of antiquity. The "reformed Egyptian" in the Book of Mormon, the proponents say, compares to ancient Meroitic, which used Egyptian characters to write Meroitic words. The extended parable of the olive orchard in Jacob 5 reveals an accurate understanding of olive tree culture. In response to the absence of horse bones in Latin American archeology, the proponents point out that no archeological evidence of horses has been found in regions occupied by the Huns, a society dependent on horses. Proponents are quick to note that a Book of Mormon archeological site in the Middle East has been tentatively located. The Book of Mormon describes Lehi's journey down the Arabian peninsula and directly east to the Gulf of Arabia. Here Lehi's people came upon a pocket of fertile land and bounteous food in an otherwise desert area. A site in Oman fulfills many of the Book of Mormon requirements. Along this route, a site has been located that bears the name "Nhm," corresponding to the name Nahom given in the Book of Mormon as one stop on Lehi's journey. On point after point, the proponents answer the critics and assemble their own evidence." (Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*, pg 92)

How can people look at the same topics and arrive at such different conclusions? It is because everyone is focused on looking for answers that fit their preconceived scientific, emotional, political, and religious ideas.

Finding the Truth

Because of the unavoidable impact of emotional biases upon the conclusions of the intellect, finding and recognizing real truth depends upon finding the correct emotional framework that will allow us to ask the right questions and weigh and interpret evidence correctly. There are many emotional frameworks to choose from in the world. Some people choose negative frameworks such as doubt, cynicism, distrust, skepticism, or apathy. Others choose cultural frameworks such as blind faith and loyalty to family, regional, or national traditions. But what is the correct framework? One strong candidate was proposed over 2000 years ago by Jesus of Nazareth. He said:

"I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now. Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth"
(John 16:12-13)

Of the emotions that accompany the spirit of truth, the Apostle Paul said:

"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance..."(Galatians 26:12-13)

According to this framework, mankind will be guided to truth through the spirit, and the language that is spoken by the spirit is the language of positive uplifting emotions such as love, happiness, gentleness, kindness, humility, and self control (temperance).