

THE RING OF PHARAOH

to the principle of delegation, to stand surety for the leaders He entrusts.

It is at this point that the hard cases erupt into the conversation. Just how far will the Lord go in allowing a delegated authority to err? We sometimes interpret divine providence as a precisely detailed and flawlessly executed game plan. Farrer warned against the mistake of assuming “a perfect conformity of Peter’s [or the prophet’s] decision with a foreordaining will of God, conceived as a creative blueprint, or Platonic idea, which Peter [or the prophet] faithfully copies.”¹³ The Church moved to make its members’ expectations in this regard more realistic when it published the sobering opinion of B. H. Roberts: “I think it is a reasonable conclusion to say that constant, never-varying inspiration is not a factor in the administration of the affairs even of the Church; not even good men, no, not though they be prophets or other high officials of the Church, are at all times and in all things inspired of God.”¹⁴ In other words, to put it starkly, God really means it when He delegates His authority to men and women—and expects them to use their wisdom and judgment in executing His will.

Does it matter that not all pronouncements will be equally inspired? It does, insofar as it creates a personal responsibility from which we cannot escape. Brigham Young feared that members would accept unthinkingly all that came from the Tabernacle pulpit. So what is the key to knowing when we may repose perfect confidence in a leader’s pronouncement, and when we may not? Nathaniel Givens observed:

As for the question of what is or is not revelation, the answer is simple. People just don’t like to hear it. . . . D&C 68:4 says: “And whatsoever they shall speak when moved upon by the Holy Ghost shall be scripture, shall be the will of the Lord, shall be the mind of the Lord, shall be the word of the Lord, shall be the voice of the Lord, and the

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power of God unto salvation.” There’s your answer and, in terms of simple language, it’s not hard to understand. The problem is that it doesn’t do what people want. What people want is to be absolved of responsibility. They want a formula, a rulebook, or an oracle to which they can defer tough questions. God says: “If you want to know if it’s scripture or not, you’re going to have to have your own connection to the Holy Ghost sufficient to figure that out.” In other words: “The burden is on you.” People say: “That sounds like hard work. Please give us a cheat sheet.” . . . And, when God refuses to give out a cheat sheet, people just invent one. They invent doctrines of prophetic or scriptural inerrancy or sufficiency or infallibility, all of which serve more or less the exact same purpose as the original golden calf: a simulacrum of the divine that doesn’t ask us to do any genuine hard work.¹⁵

Elder Todd Christofferson repeats counsel given earlier by J. Reuben Clark Jr. with an interesting caveat: “The Church will know by the testimony of the Holy Ghost in the body of members, whether the brethren in voicing their views are ‘moved upon by the Holy Ghost’: *and in due time that knowledge will be made manifest.*” Hence the “in all patience” part of the Lord’s revelation on the subject.¹⁶

One comfort is to be found in a God whose power is in His magnanimity as well as His wisdom. These two traits mean that His divine energies are spent not in precluding chaos but in reordering it, not in preventing suffering but in alchemizing it, not in disallowing error but in transmuting it into goodness. Satan’s unhindered efforts in the garden were simply assimilated into God’s greater purpose. The malice of the biblical Joseph’s brothers became instrumental in their entire household’s salvation. (“The brothers of Joseph could have never done him so much good with their love