



UNDERSTANDING CHURCH HISTORY BY
Study AND **Faith**

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As we study these records, we must remember that they
do not represent the entirety of the past.*



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History means far more than memorizing dates and facts for a test. Every day, archivists, librarians, and historians in the Church History Library collect, preserve, and share records of the past that help us discern God’s hand in the Church’s history and in our individual lives. Understanding our history involves a process of learning and discovery that can help us strengthen our testimonies, deflect doubt, tell the best stories, discern true doctrine, and improve our thinking. As we “obtain a knowledge of history,” we will also assist in bringing about “the salvation of Zion” (D&C 93:53).

As a historian, I’ve come to appreciate that we learn about history “by study and also by faith” (D&C 88:118). Faith and study combine as we prayerfully feast on the scriptures, read and reflect on multiple historical sources, make connections between scripture passages and historical sources, consider information within proper contexts, look for patterns and themes, and draw out relevant lessons. These practices help us make sense of historical facts and find answers to our questions. Several principles can help us think about history in ways that open our minds to a deeper understanding.

The past is gone—only pieces remain

From our perspective in the present, the past is mostly gone. The people have passed away; their experiences have ended. However, pieces of the past remain—letters, diaries, records of organizations, material objects. Today, we can learn about the past only indirectly through the pieces that remain. Information is always lost between the past and the present. We must study the records that do survive while remembering that they do not represent the entirety of the past.

Consider one example: When Joseph Smith preached a sermon to the Saints, he typically had no prepared text, and no audio or video recording was made. Though a few in attendance may have written notes or reflections, even fewer of those notes survive. Thus, we cannot claim to know everything Joseph Smith ever said, though we can, for instance, quote Wilford Woodruff’s notes about Joseph’s sermon.

In other cases, important pieces of the Church’s history have not yet been discovered. For example, we do not have records of the visit of Peter, James, and John that are as detailed as the accounts of the visit of John the Baptist (see Joseph Smith—History 1:66–75). Similarly, though we have records of the priesthood’s being withheld from men of black African descent, no record has survived that authoritatively explains why the practice began. In the study of history, the absence of evidence is not a valid cause for doubt. Learning about the past is an effort of gathering as much trusted and, where possible, verifiable evidence while reserving final judgment on the portions of history that we are unable to fully understand because of the lack of information.

Facts don't speak, but storytellers do

Because the surviving pieces of the past are incomplete, people attempt to put the pieces together in order to tell a story. The earliest stories were told by participants and typically describe what they experienced and why it was important to them. Some participants told their stories on multiple occasions to different audiences. Some events prompted many participants to relate their experiences. Other events were forgotten until a later experience called them to mind.

Stories are collected and retold by others for many reasons—to entertain an audience, sell a product, shape public opinion, or lobby for change. Each story becomes an interpretation of the past, built on factual pieces and influenced by the teller's memory, interests, and goals. As a result, stories about the past are incomplete and sometimes contradictory. We must always consider who is telling the stories, how they are telling them, and why they are telling them.

Joseph Smith provided an example of how to evaluate storytellers and facts. In 1838, he observed that there were already “many reports which have been put in circulation by evil-disposed and designing persons, in relation to the rise and progress of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.” As a result, he wrote a history intended to “put all inquirers after truth in possession of the facts, as they have transpired, in relation both to myself and the Church, so far as I have such facts in my possession” (Joseph Smith—History 1:1). All of the stories told about Joseph Smith do not bear equal value or accuracy. Stories told by persons more closely connected to past events may be more reliable. The best stories consider all available pieces of the past and recognize the perspectives of the sources.



As we encounter history that is incomplete, open to interpretation, and different than we assumed, we must “put [our] trust in that Spirit which leadeth . . . to walk humbly” (D&C 11:12). It requires humility not to judge people in the past by our standards.

The past is different from the present (and that's OK)

As we seek to make sense of the pieces of the past and the stories told about it, we discover people, places, experiences, and traditions different from our own. Changes in science, technology, and culture produce different experiences with birth, eating, travel, holidays, hygiene, dating, medicine, and death. Different political and economic systems create different experiences with education, choice, freedom, and opportunity. Past views differ from our views on work, family, public service, and the role and status of women and minorities. Every temporal aspect of human experience changes over time in ways both small and great.

For example, from our perspective in the present, Joseph Smith's use of a seer stone to translate the Book of Mormon appears very different. In his time, however, many people believed that physical objects could be used to receive divine messages. These beliefs were based, in part, on biblical stories in which objects were used for divine purposes (see Numbers 17:1–10; 2 Kings 5; John 9:6). A revelation Joseph received for the organization of the Church explained that God “gave him power from on high, by the means which were before prepared, to translate the Book of Mormon” (D&C 20:8). Though the “means” included a seer stone as well as the Urim and Thummim, we can still discern the doctrinal message “that

God does inspire men and call them to his holy work in this age . . . ; thereby showing that he is the same God yesterday, today, and forever” (D&C 20:11–12).

Present assumptions distort the past

Because the past was different from our day, we must take special care not to make assumptions about the past based on our present ideas and values. We cannot assume that people in the past were just like us or that they would appreciate our culture or beliefs. We cannot assume that we now know everything, that we have read every source, or that our current understanding of the past will never change. Frequently, so-called problems with the past are actually just bad assumptions made in the present.

For example, Joseph Smith declared, “I never told you I was perfect.”¹ If we were to assume that prophets never made mistakes, then we might be startled to discover times when Joseph did. To “fix” this problem, we should neither stubbornly hold that Joseph was perfect nor charge the Church with deception. Rather, we can acknowledge Joseph’s humanity and see him in the context of other scriptural stories about prophets. As a result, we can adjust our assumptions to recognize that all

prophets are mortal and therefore have imperfections. We can feel grateful that God patiently works with each of us. Admitting the errors in our own thinking is sometimes the most difficult part of understanding history.

Learning history requires humility

As we encounter history that is incomplete, open to interpretation, and different than we assumed, we must “put [our] trust in that Spirit which leadeth . . . to walk humbly” (D&C 11:12). From our perspective today, we obviously know more than participants did about the outcome of the past, but we also know far less about their experience of living in it. The people who lived in the past belonged to their own times and places and circumstances. To have charity for their differences and empathy for their experiences, we must begin with humility about our own limitations. It requires humility not to judge people in the past by our standards. It requires humility to admit we do not know everything, to wait patiently for more answers, and to continue learning. When new sources are discovered that provide new insight into things we thought we knew, it requires humility to revise our understanding. ■

NOTE

1. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (2007), 522.

A PATTERN FOR LEARNING BY STUDY AND FAITH

Faithful study of Church history can follow the pattern illustrated by Alma’s comparison of planting a seed (see Alma 32:27–42):

1. We *give place* for learning history by applying the principles outlined here.
2. We *plant* the seed in our minds and hearts through careful reading and reflection. (Is this a piece of the past or a story told later? Who created it and why? What is the main idea? What evidence supports it?)
3. We can *discern* the importance of our reading by considering how authentic and reliable the source is, placing our answers in proper historical contexts, and identifying eternal principles that can be applied to our personal circumstances.
4. Throughout our lives, we can *nourish* a faithful study of Church history through diligent reading, thinking, praying, sharing, and teaching.
5. By so doing, we will come to *reap* the fruit of faithful study as our understanding improves and our faith deepens, making us better learners and teachers, parents and children, disciples and Saints.