

# LDS Subjective Epistemology Is Unreliable

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LDS Apologetics Research

ABSTRACT

## 1. Introduction

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One of the most frequently raised objections to Latter-day Saint epistemology is the charge that it rests on subjective feelings — specifically, the "burning in the bosom" or spiritual witness described in Moroni 10:3-5 and D&C 9:8. Critics argue that this method of determining truth is unreliable because adherents of many different religions claim similar spiritual confirmations for mutually exclusive truth claims. If a Latter-day Saint's burning bosom confirms the Book of Mormon, and a Muslim's spiritual experience confirms the Quran, and a Hindu's meditation confirms the Vedas, then the method itself is unreliable — it cannot distinguish between true and false claims. This document engages the strongest version of this criticism and presents a comprehensive response.

## 2. The Criticism (Steelmanned)

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The critic's argument is epistemologically serious:

1. **The reliability problem:** A method of determining truth is reliable only if it consistently leads to true beliefs. If the same method (spiritual feelings) leads different people to contradictory conclusions (Mormonism is true; Islam is true; Hinduism is true), then the method does not reliably track truth.
2. **The universality of religious experience:** Spiritual experiences are not unique to Latter-day Saints. Muslims report powerful confirmations of the Quran's truth. Evangelical Christians report born-again experiences. Hindu meditators report experiences of divine union. Practitioners of nearly every religion report subjective spiritual confirmations. These experiences are mutually exclusive (they confirm contradictory truth claims), yet they feel equally powerful and convincing to the experiencer.
3. **Confirmation bias:** People who pray about the Book of Mormon expecting an answer are psychologically primed to interpret any positive emotion as divine confirmation. This is textbook confirmation bias — interpreting ambiguous data in line with prior expectations.
4. **Neuroscience of religious experience:** Functional MRI studies (e.g., Anderson et al., University of Utah, 2016) have shown that spiritual experiences activate the brain's reward centers (nucleus accumbens) in the same way that other emotionally pleasurable activities do. This suggests spiritual feelings are neurological events, not communications from God.
5. **The closed epistemic loop:** If someone is told to pray about the Book of Mormon and interpret a positive feeling as God's answer, they are trapped in a closed loop: the method of verification (spiritual feeling) is prescribed by the very claim being verified (the Book of Mormon). There is no independent check on the system.
6. **Elevation emotion:** Psychologist Jonathan Haidt has identified "moral elevation" — a warm, uplifting feeling experienced when witnessing acts of moral beauty. This emotion can be triggered by

secular contexts (inspiring speeches, acts of kindness) and is not unique to religious settings. "Spiritual" feelings may simply be elevation emotion misidentified as divine communication.

This is a genuinely strong objection that cuts at the epistemological foundation of Latter-day Saint testimony. It deserves a rigorous, honest response.

### 3. Biblical Response

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#### *The Bible Itself Prescribes Experiential Epistemology*

The critic's argument, if valid, does not merely undermine Latter-day Saint epistemology — it undermines biblical epistemology. Scripture repeatedly directs believers to rely on spiritual experience as a means of knowing truth:

- **John 7:17** — "If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself." Jesus prescribes an experiential test: obey and you will know. This is precisely the method critics reject.
- **Romans 8:16** — "The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God." The Holy Spirit's witness is described as an internal, experiential confirmation.
- **1 Corinthians 2:10-14** — "The things of God knoweth no man, but the Spirit of God... the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned." Paul explicitly states that spiritual truth is known through spiritual discernment, not through natural or empirical methods.
- **Galatians 5:22-23** — The "fruit of the Spirit" — love, joy, peace — are experiential markers of the Spirit's presence. These are subjective states used to identify divine influence.
- **1 John 4:1-6** — John instructs believers to "try the spirits whether they are of God." This presupposes a capacity to discern authentic spiritual communications from false ones — a capacity that operates through experience.
- **Acts 2:37** — At Pentecost, hearers were "pricked in their heart" — an emotional/spiritual response that led to conversion. Peter did not dismiss this feeling; he built on it: "Repent, and be baptized."
- **Luke 24:32** — The disciples on the road to Emmaus: "Did not our heart burn within us, while he talked with us by the way, and while he opened to us the scriptures?" A burning heart is presented as a legitimate means of recognizing Christ's truth.

**The critical point:** If spiritual/experiential epistemology is unreliable, then the entire New Testament model of knowing God is unreliable. The critic must either accept experiential epistemology or reject the biblical model of spiritual knowledge.

#### *The Bible Acknowledges False Spiritual Experiences*

Scripture does not naively assume that all spiritual experiences are genuine. It explicitly warns of counterfeits and provides criteria for discernment:

- **1 John 4:1** — "Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God."

- **Matthew 7:15-20** — "By their fruits ye shall know them." The test is pragmatic and observable — what does the belief produce in a person's life?
- **Galatians 1:8** — "Though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed." Doctrinal content serves as a check on spiritual experience.
- **Deuteronomy 13:1-3** — Even if a prophet produces signs and wonders, if his message contradicts God's revealed word, he is false.

The biblical model is not "accept all spiritual feelings uncritically." It is a multi-factor model: spiritual experience + doctrinal consistency + moral fruit + rational analysis. This is precisely the Latter-day Saint model.

## 4. Early Christian/Historical Evidence

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### *The Early Church Relied on Experiential Knowledge of God*

The earliest Christians understood their faith as grounded in experience, not merely in intellectual argument:

- **Clement of Alexandria** (*Stromata* 5.1): Distinguished between *gnosis* (knowledge through experience of God) and mere intellectual assent. True knowledge of God involves personal encounter.
- **Origen** (*Contra Celsum* 1.46): Defended the validity of spiritual experience against the pagan philosopher Celsus's demand for purely rational proof. Argued that spiritual realities require spiritual means of apprehension.
- **Augustine** (*Confessions* 7-8): Augustine's conversion was an experiential event — he heard a voice saying "Tolle, lege" ("Take up and read") and experienced a flood of assurance. His entire theological career was built on this experiential foundation.
- **Pascal** (*Pensees* 277, "The Wager"; *Memorial*): Pascal distinguished between "the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" (known through experience) and "the God of the philosophers" (known through argument). His famous *Memorial* records an overwhelming experiential encounter: "Fire. God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, not of philosophers and scholars. Certitude, certitude, feeling, joy, peace."

### *All Epistemologies Have Limits*

The critic demands an epistemology that produces certainty without any possibility of error. No such epistemology exists:

- **Empiricism** relies on sense perception, which can be mistaken (optical illusions, hallucinations, measurement errors). Empiricism is also unable to verify its own foundational principle (that sense experience is reliable) without circularity.
- **Rationalism** relies on logical deduction from axioms, but axioms must be accepted without proof. Godel's incompleteness theorems demonstrate that even formal logical systems contain truths they cannot prove.

- **Testimony** (the primary means of legal evidence and historical knowledge) is notoriously fallible. Eyewitnesses are unreliable, memories are reconstructed, and expert witnesses disagree. Yet no one argues that testimony should be abandoned as a form of evidence.
- **Science** relies on induction — generalizing from particular observations. Hume demonstrated that induction cannot be rationally justified without circularity. The "problem of induction" remains unsolved in philosophy of science.

The demand for an error-proof epistemology is not met by any system of knowledge. Spiritual epistemology's fallibility does not uniquely disqualify it.

## 5. LDS Doctrinal Position

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### *Moroni 10:3-5 Is Not "Pray and Feel Good"*

The actual text of Moroni's promise is considerably more nuanced than the caricature suggests:

- **"When ye shall receive these things"** — The promise presupposes engagement with the content. This is not a prayer offered in ignorance but after reading and pondering the text.
- **"I would exhort you that ye would remember how merciful the Lord hath been unto the children of men, from the creation of Adam even down until the time that ye shall receive these things, and ponder it in your hearts"** — The invitation involves reflection on God's historical dealings with humanity. It is an intellectually engaged process, not a passive emotional exercise.
- **"Ask God, the Eternal Father, in the name of Christ"** — The prayer is directed to God, through Christ. It is relational and theologically specific.
- **"With a sincere heart, with real intent, having faith in Christ"** — The conditions are sincerity, genuine intent to act on the answer, and faith. These are not trivial — they require moral commitment and intellectual honesty.
- **"He will manifest the truth of it unto you, by the power of the Holy Ghost"** — The answer comes through the Holy Ghost, not through generic positive feelings.

### *D&C 8 and 9: A Multi-Modal Epistemology*

The Latter-day Saint revelatory model described in the Doctrine and Covenants is not purely emotional:

- **D&C 9:8** — "You must study it out in your mind; then you must ask me if it be right, and if it is right I will cause that your bosom shall burn within you; therefore, you shall feel that it is right."
- **D&C 9:9** — "But if it be not right you shall have no such feeling, but you shall have a stupor of thought that shall cause you to forget the thing which is wrong."

This is a two-step process: (1) rational analysis ("study it out in your mind"), and (2) spiritual confirmation. The method integrates reason and revelation. It is not anti-intellectual; it is multi-modal.

## *The Full LDS Epistemological Framework*

Latter-day Saint epistemology, properly understood, incorporates multiple factors:

1. **Rational analysis:** Study, ponder, evaluate evidence, consider arguments (D&C 9:8; 2 Nephi 9:29: "to be learned is good if they hearken unto the counsels of God").
2. **Spiritual witness:** The Holy Ghost confirms truth through feelings, thoughts, impressions, and enlightenment (Moroni 10:5; D&C 8:2-3: "I will tell you in your mind and in your heart, by the Holy Ghost").
3. **Moral fruit:** "By their fruits ye shall know them" (Matthew 7:20; Alma 32:33-36). Does the belief produce goodness, growth, and Christlike character?
4. **Doctrinal consistency:** Is the teaching consistent with revealed scripture and established doctrine? (Galatians 1:8; 2 Nephi 28:29-31).
5. **Communal confirmation:** Individual revelation is checked against the teachings of living prophets and the collective witness of the body of the church (D&C 28:2-7).
6. **Ongoing experiential evidence:** Alma 32:26-43 describes faith as an ongoing process of planting, nurturing, and observing growth — not a one-time emotional event but a sustained pattern of experiential evidence.

This is not naive subjectivism. It is a sophisticated, multi-factor epistemological model.

## *Addressing the "Other Religions" Problem*

The fact that people in other religions have spiritual experiences does not invalidate spiritual epistemology. Several responses are relevant:

- **The Light of Christ is universal:** D&C 93:2 — "I am the true light that lighteth every man that cometh into the world." Moroni 7:16 — "The Spirit of Christ is given to every man, that he may know good from evil." Latter-day Saint theology explicitly predicts that people in all religions will have authentic spiritual experiences — because the Light of Christ operates everywhere. The existence of genuine spiritual experiences outside the Church confirms, rather than undermines, LDS theology.
- **Partial truth produces partial confirmation:** The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints affirms that other religions contain genuine truth (see the First Presidency statement of 1978: "The great religious leaders of the world such as Mohammed, Confucius, and the Reformers... received a portion of God's light"). If other religions contain truth, then spiritual experiences confirming those truths are expected and legitimate. A spiritual confirmation of the Quran's teaching about God's oneness, for example, is a confirmation of a true principle — even if the Quran also contains errors.
- **Similar does not mean identical:** The fact that spiritual experiences occur across religions does not mean they are all the same experience confirming the same thing. A burning bosom confirming the Book of Mormon and a sense of peace during meditation may be different phenomena with different sources. The critic assumes they are identical without demonstrating it.
- **The method includes cross-checks:** As outlined above, the LDS model does not rely solely on spiritual feelings. It integrates rational analysis, moral fruit, doctrinal consistency, and prophetic

guidance. A spiritual experience that contradicts scripture, produces bad fruit, or conflicts with prophetic teaching is not accepted as genuine.

## 6. Key Scriptures

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- **Moroni 10:3-5** — The promise: ask with sincerity and real intent; the Holy Ghost will manifest truth
- **D&C 9:8-9** — "Study it out in your mind; then ask" — rational + spiritual confirmation
- **D&C 8:2-3** — "I will tell you in your mind and in your heart, by the Holy Ghost"
- **John 7:17** — "If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine"
- **Romans 8:16** — "The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit"
- **1 Corinthians 2:10-14** — Spiritual things are "spiritually discerned"
- **Luke 24:32** — "Did not our heart burn within us" — the Emmaus road experience
- **Galatians 5:22-23** — Fruit of the Spirit as experiential markers
- **1 John 4:1** — "Try the spirits" — discernment is required
- **Matthew 7:15-20** — "By their fruits ye shall know them"
- **Alma 32:26-43** — Faith as ongoing experimentation and observation
- **D&C 93:2** — The Light of Christ given to every person
- **Moroni 7:16** — Spirit of Christ given to all, to know good from evil

## 7. Responses to Common Objections

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***"People in all religions have spiritual feelings, so spiritual feelings prove nothing."***

This argument proves too much. People using empirical observation reach contradictory scientific conclusions (conflicting medical studies, disputed archaeological interpretations, competing physical theories). This does not prove empirical observation is worthless — it proves that empirical observation requires careful methodology, cross-checking, and interpretation. The same is true of spiritual epistemology. The existence of false positives does not invalidate a method; it means the method must be applied carefully, with appropriate cross-checks. The LDS model provides those cross-checks: rational analysis, moral fruit, doctrinal consistency, and prophetic guidance.

***"The burning in the bosom is just an emotion."***

D&C 8:2-3 clarifies that the Holy Ghost speaks "in your mind and in your heart." The witness of the Spirit includes cognitive dimensions (thoughts, insights, understanding) as well as emotional dimensions (peace, assurance, joy). Reducing it to "just an emotion" is a strawman. Additionally, the epistemological challenge applies to all experiential knowledge: sensory perception is also "just" neural firing. If we can trust neural activity to report on the physical world, the question of whether we can trust spiritual perception to report on spiritual reality is not absurd — it is analogous.

### ***"This creates a closed epistemic loop — you're told what answer to expect."***

Every epistemological method involves some degree of prior framework. Scientists are trained what to look for and how to interpret data before conducting experiments. Legal systems instruct juries on what constitutes evidence before deliberation. The existence of a framework does not invalidate the results obtained within it — provided the framework includes genuine tests that can produce negative results. Moroni 10 and D&C 9 include the possibility of negative results (D&C 9:9: "you shall have no such feeling, but you shall have a stupor of thought"). The system is not closed — it allows for disconfirmation.

### ***"Neuroscience shows spiritual experiences are just brain activity."***

Every conscious experience — seeing a sunset, hearing music, solving a math problem, falling in love — is correlated with brain activity. The fact that spiritual experiences have neural correlates tells us nothing about whether they have a cause beyond the brain. If God communicates with human beings, that communication would necessarily involve the human brain. Finding brain activity during spiritual experiences is exactly what theism predicts. The argument is a non sequitur: it confuses correlation with causation and mechanism with explanation.

### ***"Elevation emotion explains spiritual feelings."***

Jonathan Haidt's research on moral elevation is genuinely relevant. However: (1) The identification of a psychological mechanism does not disprove a theological explanation. If God designed the human emotional system, He could use it as a channel for communication. (2) Elevation emotion does not account for the cognitive dimensions of spiritual experience — specific thoughts, doctrinal insights, and personal guidance that accompany many spiritual witnesses. (3) Elevation emotion does not account for experiences that are uncomfortable, challenging, or contrary to the person's prior expectations — which many genuine spiritual witnesses are.

### ***"If you got a 'no' answer, would you accept it?"***

The honest answer must be yes — and many people do. Many investigators pray about the Book of Mormon and do not receive a confirming witness. They are not baptized. Many members experience crises of faith in which the spiritual witness they once had fades or is contradicted by new information. The system is not rigged to produce only one answer. The conditions in Moroni 10:4 — sincerity, real intent, faith in Christ — are demanding, and not everyone meets them. But the system does produce negative results and ambiguous results. It is not a guarantee of confirmation.

## **8. Conclusion**

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The charge that LDS epistemology is merely subjective is a caricature of the actual Latter-day Saint model, which integrates rational analysis, spiritual witness, moral fruit, doctrinal consistency, and prophetic guidance into a multi-factor system. The biblical model of knowing God is equally experiential

— Jesus, Paul, John, and the disciples on the Emmaus road all prescribe or describe experiential knowledge of spiritual truth. Every epistemological method — empirical, rational, testimonial, scientific — is fallible and subject to misapplication. The existence of false spiritual experiences no more invalidates spiritual epistemology than optical illusions invalidate visual perception. The fact that people in other religions have spiritual experiences is explained, not undermined, by the Latter-day Saint doctrine of the Light of Christ (D&C 93:2; Moroni 7:16), which explicitly predicts that authentic spiritual experiences will occur across all cultures and religions. The honest response to the critic is not that LDS epistemology is infallible, but that it is a sophisticated, multi-modal, self-correcting system that takes both reason and revelation seriously — and that no alternative epistemology offers the certainty the critic demands.

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**Further Reading:**

- [Testimony — ChurchofJesusChrist.org](https://www.ChurchofJesusChrist.org)
- [FairLatterdaySaints: Moroni's Promise](#)
- [FairLatterdaySaints: Spiritual Witnesses](#)
- Robert L. Millet, "What Is Our Doctrine?" *Religious Educator* 4, no. 3 (2003)