

Robert Bowman has done a wonderful service for anyone interested in the foundations of traditional Christianity and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. With fairness, and yet historical rigor, he examines the central events that lie at the heart of both Christianity and Mormonism. *Jesus' Resurrection and Joseph's Visions* is a must-read for scholars and lay people who are open to considering the historical credibility of the respective religions. Even if you disagree with Bowman's conclusions, you will gain a much deeper understanding of the evidence in favor of (and against) the foundational events for traditional Christianity and Mormonism.

**Sean McDowell**

Associate Professor of Apologetics, Talbot School of Theology

Author, *The Fate of the Apostles*;

Co-editor, *Sharing the Good News with Mormons*

Seldom are readers treated to such a scholarly evaluation of a prominent religious movement as Robert Bowman has undertaken in this volume. Time and again the necessary care is taken to document the myriad details, along with the corresponding, painstaking analysis and interpretation. The notes and sources by themselves are truly worth the price of the volume. Highly recommended.

**Gary R. Habermas**

Distinguished Research Professor & Chair,

Philosophy Department, Liberty University

Author of numerous books including *The Historical Jesus: Ancient Evidence for the Life of Christ* and *The Risen Jesus and Future Hope*

The apostle Paul claimed the risen Jesus had appeared to him. So did Joseph Smith. Is one justified in believing the former while doubting the latter? No one on Earth is more qualified to answer this question than Robert Bowman, a very careful scholar who is an expert on both the historical Jesus and Mormonism. You will not find Mormon-bashing in this volume. Instead, readers will encounter carefully and clearly articulated arguments based on a robust knowledge of the primary sources of early Christianity and Mormonism. If you are a Mormon or are considering joining the LDS Church, or if you have any other interest in Mormonism, I commend this book to you above all others.

**Michael Licona**

Associate Professor of Theology, Houston Baptist University

Author, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historical Approach*

Mormon leaders know full well that if Joseph Smith's account of his First Vision and of his encounter with the angel Moroni can be discredited, Mormonism itself would be discredited. Robert Bowman invites readers to experience the environment in which Joseph Smith lived, and in doing so, offers compelling evidence as to why both of these events must be seriously questioned—and ultimately rejected.

**Bill McKeever**

Founder, Mormonism Research Ministry

Co-author, *Mormonism 101: Examining the Religion of the Latter-day Saints*

In *Jesus' Resurrection and Joseph's Visions*, Robert Bowman beautifully compares the foundational claims of Mormonism and those of Christianity. Comparative explorations help to illuminate the distinctions between strong and weak evidence in ways otherwise not seen. Remarkably, he shows that the evidence for Jesus' resurrection is both very good and overwhelmingly more credible than that of the visions of Joseph Smith. Mormons examining the quality of evidence might justifiably reject the visions of Smith and yet form a positive judgment about the resurrection of Jesus. They needn't throw out the baby with the bathwater.

**Corey Miller**

President, Ratio Christi: Campus Apologetics Alliance

Co-author, *Leaving Mormonism: Why Four Scholars Changed Their Minds*

Robert Bowman invites us to the court of reason. Those on trial are Jesus, Joseph, the apostle Paul, and all who became part of the 'Restoration of the Gospel.' *Jesus' Resurrection and Joseph's Visions* is a compelling case, and no doubt Mormons and Evangelicals will want to dialogue about it. The research is thorough and thought-provoking. No matter your view, you will follow intently as Dr. Bowman examines the witnesses to see if any were frauds. From the evidence, you can draw your verdict.

**Donna Morley**

Co-founder, Faith and Reason Forum

Adjunct Professor, The Master's University

Author, *What Do I Say to Mormon Friends and Missionaries?* and *Evidence of the Bible and Book of Mormon Compared* (forthcoming)

In an age when many former Mormons are turning to atheism, Robert Bowman does an excellent job of explaining why Mormons should believe in Jesus' resurrection and not in Joseph's visions. This book will help Mormons understand why they should not throw out Jesus with Joseph.

**Keith Walker**

President, Evidence Ministries

# JESUS' RESURRECTION AND JOSEPH'S VISIONS

Examining the Foundations of Christianity and Mormonism



# **Jesus' Resurrection and Joseph's Visions**

**Examining the Foundations of Christianity and Mormonism**

**Robert M. Bowman Jr.**



*Jesus' Resurrection and Joseph's Visions: Examining the  
Foundations of Christianity and Mormonism*

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On the cover: stained glass windows depicting the conversion of Paul at Saint-Pierre-et-Saint-Paul in Jouy-sur-Morin (left) and the first vision of Joseph Smith at the Museum of Church History and Art (right). Both images are in the public domain.

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## *Abbreviations*

Note: Standard abbreviations for books of the Bible are used throughout.

|       |  |
|-------|--|
| AD    | Anno Domini (instead of CE)  |
| BC    | Before Christ (instead of BCE)   |
| BC    | Book of Commandments   |
| BYU   | Brigham Young University   |
| D&C   | Doctrine and Covenants   |
| EMD   | <i>Early Mormon Documents</i> , ed. Dan Vogel  |
| FARMS | Foundation for Ancient Research & Mormon Studies   |
| HC    | <i>History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints</i> ,<br>ed. B. H. Roberts |
| JS-H  | Joseph Smith–History   |
| KJV   | King James Version   |
| LDS   | Latter-day Saints  |
| M&A   | <i>Latter-day Saints' Messenger &amp; Advocate</i>                                       |
| NT    | New Testament  |
| JSP   | Joseph Smith Papers  |
| TEW   | Testimony of Eight Witnesses   |
| TTW   | Testimony of Three Witnesses   |



## INTRODUCTION

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### *Jesus' Resurrection and Joseph's Visions*

If you accept the Apostle Paul's testimony that he saw the risen Jesus, why don't you accept Joseph Smith's testimony that *he* saw the risen Jesus? And if you reject Joseph's testimony, why not reject Paul's as well? The purpose of this book is to answer these questions.

Paul was one of the most influential apostles of first-century Christianity. Almost half of the New Testament books—13 out of 27—bear his name, accounting for almost one-fourth of the New Testament in length.<sup>1</sup> Although Paul was in no sense the founder of Christianity,<sup>2</sup> he was the principal apostle who expanded the Christian movement to include non-Jewish (Gentile) believers within the church. Paul was a zealous Pharisee who persecuted Christians until, he said, the risen Jesus appeared to him and called him to be an apostle.

Joseph Smith Jr. was the founder in 1830 of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, whose members are commonly called Mormons.

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<sup>1</sup>The epistles bearing Paul's name as author account for about 32,400 of the 138,000 words in the Greek New Testament, or 23.5%.

<sup>2</sup>Many critics of traditional Christianity have tried to argue that Paul was its founder, e.g., Hyam Maccoby, *The Mythmaker: Paul and the Invention of Christianity* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1998); Gerd Lüdemann, *Paul: The Founder of Christianity* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2002). The evidence is decisively against this claim, which Paul himself rejected (see 1 Cor. 15:1–11; Gal. 1:1–12). Excellent treatments of the issue include N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997); David Wenham, *Paul and Jesus: The True Story* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), one of three books Wenham has published on the subject. See also the very helpful survey in Craig L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the New Testament: Countering the Challenges to Evangelical Christian Beliefs*, B&H Studies in Christian Apologetics, ed. Robert B. Stewart (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2016), 413–60.

Latter-day Saints (LDS) regard Joseph (commonly referenced by his first name only) as the inspired translator or revelator of nearly all of their scriptures other than the Bible. These additional scriptures include the Book of Mormon, several short writings collected as the Pearl of Great Price, and 133 of the 138 of the sections in Doctrine & Covenants (D&C). In Joseph Smith–History, one of the texts in Pearl of Great Price, Joseph gave an account of Jesus Christ and God the Father appearing to him in 1820, and Joseph explicitly compared his vision to the one Paul had of the risen Jesus.

There are many excellent books that discuss the evidence for the historical truth of Jesus' resurrection from the dead.<sup>3</sup> Most such books, however, do not compare the evidence for Jesus' resurrection with supernatural claims of other religions. The most notable exceptions are recent books comparing the claims of Christianity, especially the death and resurrection of Jesus, with the claims of Islam.<sup>4</sup> In this book, we will be comparing the evidence pertaining to the foundational historical claims of traditional Christianity and of Mormonism. Our focus with regard to Christianity will be on the testimonies of Paul and the other first-century witnesses who claimed to have seen Jesus Christ after he had risen from the dead. The focus with regard to Mormonism will be on the testimonies of Joseph Smith who claimed to have seen the resurrected Jesus Christ in 1820 and to have had numerous other visions of heavenly beings that are foundational to the LDS faith.

Our focus on Jesus' resurrection and Joseph's visions means that we will not be addressing a variety of other issues pertaining to Jesus Christ or

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<sup>3</sup>Excellent academic treatments include William Lane Craig, *Assessing the New Testament Evidence for the Historicity of the Resurrection of Jesus*, Studies in the Bible and Early Christianity 16 (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1989); N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God 3 (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2003); Timothy McGrew and Lydia McGrew, "The Argument from Miracles: A Cumulative Case for the Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth," in *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology*, ed. William Lane Craig and J. P. Moreland (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 593–662; Michael R. Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010). Perhaps the best work on the subject for general readers is Gary R. Habermas and Michael R. Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2004).

<sup>4</sup>Nabeel Qureshi, *Seeking Allah, Finding Jesus: A Devout Muslim Encounters Christianity*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018); *No God but One: Allah or Jesus? A Former Muslim Investigates the Evidence for Islam and Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016); Michael R. Licona, *Paul Meets Muhammad: A Christian–Muslim Debate on the Resurrection* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006).

Joseph Smith that also merit attention. For example, in this book I will not be discussing Jesus' virgin birth, his teachings on the kingdom of God, or his divine claims. Nor will I be discussing Joseph's views on race, his view of the Bible, or his changing theology.<sup>5</sup>

### Defining Mormonism and Christianity

I have already used terms that often become the flash point of debates that can distract us from the most important issues. As used here, the terms *Christian* and *Christianity* refer to members and church groups that affirm the traditional beliefs about God and Jesus Christ that were formally articulated in the early creeds of the fourth and fifth centuries. The Catholic Church, the Orthodox Church, and numerous Protestant denominations all historically share these beliefs. Various other religious bodies view themselves as Christian but are not Catholic, Orthodox, or Protestant. Such groups can be called "Christian" in a broader sense than the way it is being used here. Both broader and narrower uses of these terms are legitimate; what is important is that we be clear about our intended meaning.

As used here, the terms *Mormonism* and *Mormons* refer to the religious tradition, groups, and members that trace their origins to the teachings of Joseph Smith. As of the end of 2017 the LDS Church had about 16 million members worldwide, accounting for about 98 percent of all Mormons. In common usage, the term Mormons simply means members of the LDS Church, the institutional religious body that Brigham Young led after Joseph Smith's death. On the other hand, there are various small "Mormon" or "LDS" offshoots that believe in Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon but are institutionally separate from the LDS Church. These include the Community of Christ, formerly known as the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (RLDS),<sup>6</sup> and about two dozen much

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<sup>5</sup> For an interesting book addressing more broadly what can be known about Jesus and Joseph, see Tom Hobson, *The Historical Jesus and the Historical Joseph Smith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson—Elm Hill, 2019).

<sup>6</sup> The Community of Christ, which numbers about 250,000 members, formally organized in 1860 and adopted its new name in 2001. They still officially regard the Book of Mormon as scripture, but generally views both the Bible and the Book of Mormon through a very liberal perspective (e.g., questioning their historical authenticity and moral authority). They do not consider themselves Mormons or LDS but remain part of the tradition due to their esteem for the Book of Mormon.

smaller sects.<sup>7</sup> For our purposes, such groups can be included in a broad use of the terms Mormon and Mormonism.<sup>8</sup>

For most of the twentieth century, the LDS Church discouraged the use of the term Mormons, a nickname for its members first used by outsiders that was based on the title of the Book of Mormon. In the early twenty-first century, the LDS Church accommodated itself to the term, operated a website entitled Mormons.org (which still exists), and even launched a public relations campaign with the slogan “I’m a Mormon.”<sup>9</sup> Then in 2018, the new President of the LDS Church, Russell M. Nelson, issued a directive prohibiting the use of the terms Mormonism and Mormon. The LDS “Newsroom” set forth a policy statement on the matter:

When a shortened reference is needed, the terms “the Church” or the “Church of Jesus Christ” are encouraged. The “restored Church of Jesus Christ” is also accurate and encouraged.... The term “Mormonism” is inaccurate and should not be used. When describing the combination of doctrine, culture and life-style unique to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the term “the restored gospel of Jesus Christ” is accurate and preferred.<sup>10</sup>

On March 6, 2019, the LDS Church announced that it would redo its websites using the main web address ChurchofJesusChrist.org. The web-

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<sup>7</sup>These smaller groups fall into three categories. (1) Some 40,000 people belong to about half a dozen sects that broke away from the main LDS Church in the mid-19th century, led especially by James J. Strang (1844) or William Bickerton (1862). (2) Roughly a dozen so-called “fundamentalist Mormon” sects with about 27,000 members in all originated with Mormons disaffected from the LDS Church beginning in the 1920s after it abandoned the practice of polygamy. (3) Some 13,000 individuals belong to about half a dozen or so groups that broke away from the RLDS Church between 1980 and 2000 as it drifted away from its LDS roots. The statistics given here are only rough approximations and do not consider tiny groups with less than a hundred members each. A useful resource on this subject is the Wikipedia article “List of denominations in the Latter Day Saint movement,” which is frequently updated. Although Wikipedia is not always a reliable source of analysis or interpretation, this article is about as current and complete a list of these groups as one is likely to find.

<sup>8</sup>So also Kurt Widmer, *Unter Zions Panier: Mormonism and Its Interaction with Germany and Its People, 1840–1990* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2013), 15–16.

<sup>9</sup>As of March 6, 2019, found at <https://www.mormonchannel.org/watch/series/im-a-mormon>. In this book, full URLs for web pages will generally not be given since they tend to change over time (as indeed this one did less than a year after I first accessed it).

<sup>10</sup>“Style Guide: The Name of the Church,” Newsroom, Aug. 16, 2018. Ironically, the website of this agency at the time was MormonNewsroom.org. As of March 6, 2019, that URL still worked, but the agency announced its new URL would be changed to Newsroom.ChurchofJesusChrist.org.



site Mormon.org, aimed at attracting non-members, would change at least temporarily to ComeuntoChrist.org.<sup>11</sup>

The LDS Church is free to use language in any way its leaders choose. However, Christians who do not view the LDS religion as the one true church are not about to call it “the Church of Jesus Christ.” This book uses the terms Mormon, Mormonism, and LDS to designate adherents to the religious tradition founded by Joseph Smith, almost all of whom are found in the LDS Church. These terms have a long history of usage and are familiar to everyone in the religion and to many people outside it. The terms are also short and convenient to use, and they neither assume that Mormonism is true (as “the Church of Jesus Christ” or “the restored Church of Jesus Christ” do, for example) nor denigrate its members.<sup>12</sup> Even the well-known LDS religion writer Jana Reiss has stated that she will continue to use the term Mormon in her writing.<sup>13</sup>

In the broadest sense of the term Christianity, Mormonism is a type of Christianity. That is, the LDS Church and its offshoots originated historically from within a broadly Christian context as a religious movement that views Jesus Christ as their central religious figure. On the other hand, in the somewhat narrower sense used in this book, Mormonism is not a type of Christianity because it does not accept some of the important, distinctive Christian beliefs that the three major streams of Christianity—Catholicism, Orthodoxy, and Protestantism—all share. Distinguishing Mormonism from Christianity in this way does not necessarily imply any negative judgment against the LDS faith, but only a recognition that it is fundamentally different from historic, traditional forms of Christianity. On this basis, both Mormon and non-Mormon scholars sometimes describe the LDS movement as a new world religion

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<sup>11</sup>“Changes to Emphasize the Correct Name of the Church of Jesus Christ,” Newsroom, March 6, 2019.

<sup>12</sup>See further Robert M. Bowman Jr., “And Don’t Call Us Mormons: The LDS Church and Language Control,” RobertBowman.net, Aug. 16, 2018.

<sup>13</sup>Jana Reiss, “Why Journalists Will Keep Using the Word ‘Mormon,’” Flunking Sainthood (opinion column), Religion News Service, March 7, 2019. Reiss gives some of the same reasons for this word choice as mentioned here.

or new religious tradition.<sup>14</sup> Whether or not we should term Mormonism a “world religion” is debatable (in part because the definition of *world religion* is itself debatable),<sup>15</sup> but in any case, Mormonism is undeniably in significant ways a new religious tradition that differs markedly from traditional Christianity.

The LDS Church's leaders and theologians have made numerous remarks about Christianity that confirm the validity of this distinction between Mormonism and Christianity. Of course, the LDS Church certainly insists that it is Christian. However, its understanding of the Christian faith draws a bright line between Mormonism and the historic, traditional Christian religion. Joseph Smith claimed that the LDS Church is “the only true and living church upon the face of the whole earth” (D&C 1:30). Spencer W. Kimball, one of the LDS prophets, in 1976 proclaimed that the LDS Church sends missionaries “to the world of the Catholic, the Protestant, all the so-called Christian world.”<sup>16</sup> The reason it does so is that according to Joseph Smith, Jesus Christ appeared to him in 1820 and told him that the churches of his day “were all wrong” and that “all their creeds were an abomination in his sight” (Joseph Smith–History 1:19). Mormon scholar Kent Jackson, in a 1984 article published in the LDS Church's official magazine *Ensign*, stated that “Christianity died from an internal wound, the rejection of true doctrine by the members of the Church.” He claimed in the same article that although not everything about Christianity is satanic, “Satan sits in the place of God in Christianity after the time of the Apostles.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> E.g., Rodney Stark, “The Rise of a New World Faith,” *Review of Religious Research* 26/1 (Sept. 1984): 18–27, reprinted with a postscript in *Latter-day Saint Social Life: Social Research on the LDS Church and its Members*, ed. James T. Duke (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, BYU, 1998), 1–8; Jan Shipp, *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1987); *Mormons and Mormonism: An Introduction to an American World Religion*, ed. Eric A. Eliason (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2001); Terryl L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture that Launched a New World Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>15</sup> See the helpful discussion in Gerald R. McDermott, “Testing Stark's Thesis: Is Mormonism the First New World Religion Since Islam?” in *The Worlds of Joseph Smith: A Bicentennial Conference at the Library of Congress*, ed. John W. Welch, special issue, *BYU Studies* 44/4 (2005): 271–92.

<sup>16</sup> Spencer W. Kimball, “The Stone Cut without Hands,” *Ensign*, May 1976.

<sup>17</sup> Kent P. Jackson, “Early Signs of the Apostasy,” *Ensign*, Dec. 1984.

In the light of such statements, it should not be surprising that Christian denominations have issued statements of their own distinguishing Mormonism from Christianity:

- In 2000 the United Methodist Church, a mainline Protestant denomination, adopted a statement at its general conference concluding that “the LDS Church is not a part of the historic, apostolic tradition of the Christian faith.”<sup>18</sup>
- Another mainline denomination, the Presbyterian Church (USA), in a 2010 publication agreed that “Mormonism is a new religious tradition distinct from the historic apostolic tradition of the Church.... Its theology and practices set it apart from the Protestant, Orthodox, and Roman Catholic Churches.”<sup>19</sup>
- The Catholic Church, which generally recognizes as valid baptisms performed in Protestant churches, in 2001 issued a statement denying that “the baptism conferred” in the LDS Church “is valid.”<sup>20</sup>
- Although there is no official statement by the Orthodox Church on Mormonism, its stance is clearly that Mormonism is not part of Christianity. According to the website OrthodoxWiki, the Orthodox view Mormonism as “heretical” rather than as “heterodox,” its classification of “the Roman Catholic and most major Protestant faiths.” It denies that Mormonism is Christian because Mormonism does not accept “the God worshiped by Orthodox Christians (and other Trinitarians).”<sup>21</sup>

The point of these statements is not to disparage Mormons as people or to prejudge them as individuals. Rather, the point is that due to the radical differences that separate Mormonism from the major streams of historic Christianity, it is appropriate to view Mormonism as a distinct religion.

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<sup>18</sup>“806-NonDis,” United Methodist Church General Conference, May 2–12, 2000.

<sup>19</sup>In the leaflet *Presbyterians and Latter-day Saints* (Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations, Presbyterian Church USA, 2010), found online at PresbyterianMission.org.

<sup>20</sup>See the explanation in Fr. Luis Ladaria, S.J., “The Question of the Validity of Baptism Conferred in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,” *L’Osservatore Romano*, Aug. 1, 2001, available at EWTN.com.

<sup>21</sup>“Mormonism,” Orthodox Wiki, accessed Feb. 15, 2019, at <https://orthodoxwiki.org/Mormonism>.

In this book, then, we will refer to Mormonism as a religion distinct from Christianity, as we have defined both terms here. This choice of terminology does not prejudge whether Mormonism is true or false, nor does it deny that Mormons believe in Jesus (according to the doctrinal understanding they have of him).

### **The Importance of Jesus' Resurrection for Christianity**

As most readers will already know, the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ together form the cornerstone event of the Christian faith. As the apostle Paul put it, the death and resurrection of Christ were “of first importance” with regard to “the gospel” (1 Cor. 15:1–4).<sup>22</sup> He pointed out that Peter, James, and all of the other apostles also proclaimed the resurrection of Christ (15:5–8). This fact means, among other things, that there was no group of Jesus followers in the first century who did not believe he had risen from the dead. Sean McDowell comments, “For all the first-century disagreements within the church, the lack of any evidence for disputation on the resurrection [of Jesus] speaks loudly to its centrality and universality among the first believers.”<sup>23</sup> Paul went on to say that if Christ has not been raised, then the Christian faith is in vain and the apostles were misrepresenting God by claiming that he had raised Christ from the dead (1 Cor. 15:13–19).

The importance of Jesus' resurrection for Christianity can hardly be exaggerated. It is a basic presupposition of the Christian faith: As the risen Lord, Jesus has conquered sin and death on our behalf, has been exalted to the throne of heaven at the Father's right hand, and has sent the Holy Spirit to give us new life and to make us God's people through faith in Christ. This is why the resurrection of Christ is a key element in the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, and most of the other confessions and statements of faith that Christians have written throughout church history.

Mormonism without question affirms the reality and importance of Jesus' resurrection from the dead. The following statement by Joseph Smith is often quoted:

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<sup>22</sup> Biblical quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV) unless otherwise noted.

<sup>23</sup> Sean McDowell, *The Fate of the Apostles: Examining the Martyrdom Accounts of the Closest Followers of Jesus* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2015), 23.

The fundamental principles of our religion are the testimony of the Apostles and Prophets, concerning Jesus Christ, that He died, was buried, and rose again the third day, and ascended into heaven; and all other things which pertain to our religion are only appendages to it.<sup>24</sup>

LDS prophet Harold B. Lee affirmed that “the greatest event in the history of the world” was “the literal resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Savior of mankind.”<sup>25</sup> Similar statements from LDS leaders could be multiplied.

Unfortunately, Mormons commonly hold to the mistaken idea that Christianity denies the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ. William O. Nelson, in an article in the *Ensign*, wondered aloud, “How did traditional Christianity come to the idea that somehow Jesus’ bodily identity was dissolved into spirit essence?”<sup>26</sup> Stephen Robinson, a prominent Mormon biblical scholar, even claimed in an article published in *Ensign* that the early church threw out or radically reinterpreted the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead:

In order to satisfy the Gentiles steeped in Greek philosophy, Christianity had to throw out the doctrines of an anthropomorphic God and the resurrection of the dead, or reinterpret them drastically. Denying or altering the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead is precisely what some Greek Christians at Corinth had done, and Paul responded against them forcefully in 1 Corinthians 15.<sup>27</sup>

In actuality, Christianity has always affirmed the literal, material resurrection of Jesus’ flesh-and-bone body and the hope that believers will be resurrected with immortal human bodies. The Apostles’ Creed<sup>28</sup> is an early confession that is formally accepted and used in the Catholic Church,

<sup>24</sup>In *Elders’ Journal* (July 1838): 44, quoted in *History of the Church* 3:30.

<sup>25</sup>*Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Harold B. Lee* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2011), chap. 23.

<sup>26</sup>William O. Nelson, “Is the LDS View of God Consistent with the Bible?” *Ensign*, July 1987.

<sup>27</sup>Stephen E. Robinson, “Warring against the Saints of God,” *Ensign*, Jan. 1988.

<sup>28</sup>The apostles did not actually compose the Apostles’ Creed. Rather, it was a creedal statement based on the apostles’ teaching as expressed in the New Testament that probably originated in the late second century. See Michael F. Bird, *What Christians Ought to Believe: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine through the Apostles’ Creed* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 221–25.

the Orthodox Church, and many Protestant denominations. It states, “I believe in...the resurrection of the flesh” (often translated today as “the resurrection of the body”). The ancient Greek form of the creed used the word *sarx* and the ancient Latin form used the word *carne*, both of which meant “flesh,” the physical substance of the body. The Westminster Confession of Faith (1646), an influential confession in the Reformed or Calvinist tradition, states, “On the third day he arose from the dead, with the same body in which he suffered” (8.4). The Baptist Faith and Message (2000), the official doctrinal statement of the Southern Baptist Convention, affirms that Jesus Christ “was raised from the dead with a glorified body and appeared to His disciples as the person who was with them before His crucifixion” (II.B).

The LDS confusion the traditional Christian understanding of Jesus' resurrection is due to a lack of understanding of another key Christian belief: the doctrine of the Incarnation. Historically, Christians believe that Christ is the eternal Son of God and that he became a man in order to redeem us. As the eternal Son, Christ is transcendent deity, possessing the divine nature, which is incorporeal, omnipresent spirit (Ps. 139:7–10; 1 Kings 8:27; John 4:20–24). We see this aspect of Christ's divine nature in some of his miracles reported in the Gospels (Matt. 8:5–13; Mark 7:24–30; Luke 7:1–10; John 1:47–49; 4:46–54) and in Christ's promise that he would be with all of his disciples wherever they were until the end of the age (Matt. 18:20; 28:20). In the Incarnation, the divine Son took on or added to himself our finite, physical human nature while retaining his divine nature (cf. John 1:1, 14; Col. 2:9).<sup>29</sup>

Mormonism does not have this idea of the two natures of Christ. It teaches that God, Christ, the angels, and mortal humans are all beings of the same nature at different stages of development or progress. Thus,

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<sup>29</sup>The classic work on the subject from the church fathers is Athanasius's *On the Incarnation of the Word* (ca. 327). Recent textbooks on the subject include *The Deity of Christ*, ed. Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson, Theology in Community (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011); Graham A. Cole, *The God Who Became Human: A Biblical Theology of Incarnation*, New Studies in Biblical Theology 30 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013); Michael Welker, *God the Revealed: Christology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014); and Stephen J. Wellum, *God the Son Incarnate: The Doctrine of Christ*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology, gen ed. John S. Feinberg (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016).

when Mormons hear Christians affirm that Jesus Christ is God and that his divine nature is incorporeal spirit, they mistakenly infer that Christians are denying that the risen Christ has a human, material body. This is not the case: in Christian theology, Christ possesses both the divine nature, which is immaterial and incorporeal, and human nature, which is material and corporeal. Christians believe that had Jesus Christ not risen from the dead with his human body, now made immortal and glorious, we would be without hope (1 Cor. 15:12–19).

The sum of the matter is that if Jesus' resurrection really happened, then some form of Christian belief is true, but if it did not happen, then Christianity is certainly false. The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ are the foundational events of Christianity. If someone wishes to investigate the truth of Christianity, the death and resurrection of Jesus should be the focus of that investigation.

### **The Importance of Joseph Smith's Visions for Mormonism**

The truth of Mormonism depends as much on Joseph Smith's visions as Christianity depends on Jesus' resurrection. The key elements of the Mormon religion are all based in some way on Joseph's claims to have seen the risen Christ and other heavenly beings.

According to the LDS Church, the most important of Joseph's many visions was also his first vision, in which he saw God the Father and Jesus Christ in the woods near his home in upstate New York in the spring of 1820. The official, canonical account of this vision is found in the first part of the LDS scripture book called *Joseph Smith–History* (JS–H 1:5–26), part of the collection called the *Pearl of Great Price*. LDS scholar James B. Allen has observed:

This singular story has achieved a position of unique importance in the traditions and official doctrines of the Mormon Church. Belief in the vision is one of the fundamentals to which faithful members give assent. Its importance is second only to belief in the divinity of Jesus of Nazareth. The story is an essential part of the first lesson given by Mormon missionaries to prospective converts, and its acceptance is necessary before baptism. The nature and importance of the vision is the subject of

frequent sermons by church members in all meetings and by General Authorities of the Church in semiannual conferences.<sup>30</sup>

Numerous LDS prophets and apostles have asserted that this event, commonly called the First Vision, functions in Mormon thought as the cornerstone event of the LDS Restoration. The statement of Gordon B. Hinckley, the 15th President of the LDS Church (1995–2008), is typical:

This glorious First Vision...was the parting of the curtain to open this, the dispensation of the fulness of times. Nothing on which we base our doctrine, nothing we teach, nothing we live by is of greater importance than this initial declaration. I submit that if Joseph Smith talked with God the Father and His Beloved Son, then all else of which he spoke is true. This is the hinge on which turns the gate that leads to the path of salvation and eternal life.<sup>31</sup>

LDS leaders have also often explicitly stated that the First Vision is the greatest event in history second only to the Resurrection. According to the LDS Church's official website, "Joseph Smith's first vision stands today as the greatest event in world history since the birth, ministry, and resurrection of Jesus Christ."<sup>32</sup> The church's manual for preparing missionaries quotes Joseph F. Smith on the importance of the First Vision:

The greatest event that has ever occurred in the world, since the resurrection of the Son of God from the tomb and his ascension on high, was the coming of the Father and of the Son to that boy Joseph Smith, to prepare the way for the laying of the foundation of his kingdom—not the kingdom of man—never more to cease nor to be overturned.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup>James B. Allen, "The Significance of Joseph Smith's 'First Vision' in Mormon Thought," in *Exploring the First Vision*, ed. Samuel Alonzo Dodge and Steven C. Harper (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 2012), 283–84.

<sup>31</sup>Gordon B. Hinckley, *Ensign*, Nov. 1998, also quoted in *Church History in the Fulness of Times Student Manual* (Salt Lake City: Church Educational System, 2003), 29.

<sup>32</sup>"The First Vision," JosephSmith.net (part of the ChurchofJesusChrist.org website), Sept. 9, 2013.

<sup>33</sup>Joseph F. Smith, *Gospel Doctrine*, 5th ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 1939), 495, quoted in "The Restoration and the Coming Forth of New Scripture," chap. 9 in *Missionary Preparation Student Manual* (2005), 72. The statement is frequently quoted in LDS publications.



The LDS Church's leaders have repeatedly predicated the truth of its religion on the First Vision. Heber J. Grant, the 7th President of the LDS Church (1918–1945), stated:

Either Joseph Smith did see God and did converse with Him, and God Himself did introduce Jesus Christ to the boy Joseph Smith, and Jesus Christ did tell Joseph Smith that he would be the instrument in the hands of God of establishing again upon the earth the true Gospel of Jesus Christ—or Mormonism, so-called, is a myth. And Mormonism is not a myth!<sup>34</sup>

Howard W. Hunter, the 14th LDS Church President (1994–1995), made the same point:

I am grateful for my membership in the Church; and my testimony of its divinity hinges upon the simple story of the lad under the trees kneeling and receiving heavenly visitors—not one God, but two separate, individual personages, the Father and the Son, revealing again to the earth the personages of the Godhead. My faith and testimony hinge upon this simple story, for if it is not true, Mormonism falls. If it is true—and I bear witness that it is—it is one of the greatest single events in all history.<sup>35</sup>

Gordon B. Hinckley likewise asserted that the truth of Mormonism depends on the First Vision:

Our whole strength rests on the validity of that vision. It either occurred or it did not occur. If it did not, then this work is a fraud. If it did, then it is the most important and wonderful work under the heavens.... The truth of that unique, singular, and remarkable event is the pivotal substance of our faith.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup>Heber J. Grant, "Some Things We Must Believe," *Improvement Era*, Sept. 1938, 519, quoted, e.g., in "Praise to the Man: Latter-day Prophets Bear Witness of the Prophet Joseph Smith," chap. 47 in *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2011), 541–57.

<sup>35</sup>Howard W. Hunter, "Joseph—The Seer," address given on Dec. 15, 1960, in Logan, UT; in *Annual Joseph Smith Memorial Sermons* (1966), 2:197–98; quoted in *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith*, chap. 47.

<sup>36</sup>Gordon B. Hinckley, "The Marvelous Foundation of Our Faith," *Ensign*, Nov. 2002.

Although the First Vision occupies this special, revered place of importance, Joseph claimed to have had other visions that are of great importance to the LDS religion. Most of these visions fall into two categories: those connected to the production of the Book of Mormon and those connected to the establishment of the LDS Church's religious authority, especially its priesthood.

Visions play an integral role in Joseph Smith's accounts of how he came to publish the Book of Mormon. In particular, Joseph claimed that he had numerous visions of an angel named Moroni between 1823 and 1829. According to Joseph, Moroni (understood to be the last of the human authors of the Book of Mormon, now resurrected as an angel) showed him where to find the gold plates on which the ancient Book of Mormon was written (JS-H 1:30–54). Moroni eventually entrusted Joseph with the plates until the translation was finished (in 1829), at which point Joseph returned the gold plates to the angel (JS-H 1:59–60).

Another sort of “vision” reportedly was involved in the actual production of the handwritten English manuscript of the Book of Mormon. According to Joseph's canonical account, Moroni told him that alongside the gold plates in a stone box “there were two stones in silver bows—and these stones, fastened to a breastplate, constituted what is called the Urim and Thummim—deposited with the plates; and the possession and use of these stones were what constituted ‘seers’ in ancient or former times; and that God had prepared them for the purpose of translating the book” (JS-H 1:35). In effect, these two stones set in silver bows supposedly functioned like spectacles or eyeglasses, except that by using these “Urim and Thummim” Joseph was able to translate the ancient text on the gold plates into English.<sup>37</sup> The traditional understanding among Mormons is that Joseph was enabled supernaturally through the use of this instrument to see English words that properly translated the ancient script on the gold plates. Joseph then dictated the words that he saw to

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<sup>37</sup> See Joseph Smith, “Answers to Questions,” *Elders' Journal* 1 (July 1838): 42–43, in *Early Mormon Documents*, ed. Dan Vogel (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996–2003), 1:52 (hereafter *EMD*); Joseph Smith, letter to John Wentworth, March 1, 1842, in *EMD*, 1:171; see his similar account in 1843, “Latter Day Saints,” in I. Daniel Rupp, *He Pasa Ekklesia* (Philadelphia: Humphreys, 1844), in *EMD*, 1:185.

his scribes, who wrote them down in the handwritten manuscript from which the Book of Mormon was published.

Finally, Joseph Smith claimed that the LDS Church had a divine authority that had been restored to the earth through him, making the LDS Church the only true church on the earth with Joseph as its founding prophet. After his account in Joseph Smith—History of the First Vision and the production of the Book of Mormon through the visions of Moroni and the use of the Urim and Thummim, Joseph gave a brief account of John the Baptist appearing in May 1829 to confer the “Aaronic Priesthood” on Joseph and his Book of Mormon scribe Oliver Cowdery, authorizing them to baptize one another (JS-H 1:68–74; see also D&C 13; 27:7–8). The next month, according to a passage in Doctrine and Covenants, the apostles Peter, James, and John appeared to Joseph and Oliver, ordaining them as apostles (D&C 27:12–13; cf. 128:20). Speaking of this priesthood authority, Spencer W. Kimball, the 12th President of the LDS Church, said, “Without it there could be a church in name only, lacking authority to administer in the things of God. With it, nothing is impossible in carrying forward the work of the kingdom of God.... The holy priesthood carries with it the authority to govern in the affairs of the kingdom of God on the earth.”<sup>38</sup>

Joseph is said to have had other visions, but the ones we have briefly summarized here are the foundational visions of Mormonism. The validity of Joseph’s calling, the authenticity of the Book of Mormon, and the authority of the LDS Church as the only true, restored church all rest on the visions of Joseph Smith. If he really did see God and Christ, Moroni, John the Baptist, and Peter, James, and John, then Mormonism is true and the LDS Church specifically is the one true church. If these things did not happen, then Mormonism is false. If someone wishes to investigate the truth of Mormonism, the visions of Joseph Smith, along with the text of the Book of Mormon, must be the focus of such an investigation.

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<sup>38</sup> Spencer W. Kimball, “Priesthood Restoration,” *Ensign*, Oct. 1988.

**The Plan of This Book**

The structure of this book very directly reflects its purpose. Chapter 1 explains the method or type of reasoning that will be used in evaluating the foundational claims of Christianity and Mormonism.

The heart of the book consists of four chapters on Jesus' resurrection (2–5) and four parallel chapters on Joseph Smith's visions (6–9). One chapter will place the (alleged) supernatural events in the context of their central figure, focusing on what that person did prior to those events. Two chapters will examine the evidence pertaining directly to the most fundamental revelatory events. Finally, one chapter will consider the evidence of what occurred after those claimed early supernatural experiences. (In the case of Joseph Smith, what reportedly happened after his early visions were still more visionary experiences.) Table 1 shows how the two series of chapters closely parallel one another.

| <b>Table 1: Outline of <i>Jesus' Resurrection and Joseph's Visions</i></b>             |   |
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| <b>Chapter 2</b><br>Jesus' Resurrection in Context:<br>What We Know about Jesus Christ | <b>Chapter 6</b><br>Joseph's Visions in Context:<br>What We Know about Joseph Smith |
| <b>Chapter 3</b><br>Jesus' Resurrection:<br>Did It Happen?                             | <b>Chapter 7</b><br>Joseph's Angelic Visions:<br>Did They Happen?                   |
| <b>Chapter 4</b><br>Jesus' Appearance to Paul:<br>Did It Happen?                       | <b>Chapter 8</b><br>Joseph's First Vision:<br>Did It Happen?                        |
| <b>Chapter 5</b><br>After Jesus' Resurrection:<br>Testing the Apostles                 | <b>Chapter 9</b><br>After Joseph's Early Visions:<br>Testing the Prophet            |

Hopefully, this parallel plan of study will facilitate a fair-minded comparison of the evidence for Christianity's foundational claim that God

raised Jesus Christ from the dead with the evidence for Mormonism's foundational claim that God and Jesus Christ appeared to Joseph Smith. That comparison will be presented in the final chapter (10).

## ONE

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# *Testing the Foundational Claims of Christianity and Mormonism*

Christianity and Mormonism both rest on claims that specific events in history truly occurred. These truth claims are essential to their religious beliefs and foundational to their religious practices. As we explained in the Introduction, the resurrection of Jesus is an essential, foundational belief for both Christianity and Mormonism. In addition, the visions of Joseph Smith are essential elements of the foundation of Mormon religious belief.

In this book, we will be subjecting these foundational truth claims to rational scrutiny. Before we do so, however, we need to answer two questions. First, why should Jesus' resurrection or Joseph's visions be critically examined? This is an important question because many people suppose that submitting religious beliefs to rational examination is inconsistent with faith. Second, if we are going to test these foundational truth claims, how should we go about doing so? We will offer some answers to those questions in this chapter.

### **If You Believe Paul, Why Don't You Believe Joseph?**

Mormon leaders and theologians, following Joseph Smith's own lead, have compared the "First Vision" to the experience of Saul of Tarsus (who became the apostle Paul) seeing the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus. In the canonical account of the First Vision, Joseph Smith makes the com-

parison explicit. He says that he “felt much like Paul,” who was also “ridiculed and reviled” for his testimony that he had seen the risen Christ:

But all this did not destroy the reality of his [Paul’s] vision. He had seen a vision, he knew he had, and all the persecution under heaven could not make it otherwise.... So it was with me. I had actually seen a light, and in the midst of that light I saw two Personages, and they did in reality speak to me; and though I was hated and persecuted for saying that I had seen a vision, yet it was true (JS-H 1:24–25).

Joseph’s comparison of himself to Paul is the underlying premise of several arguments defending the historical authenticity of the First Vision. These arguments conclude that criticisms of the First Vision, if applied consistently, would also call into question the historicity of the resurrection of Christ. Richard Lloyd Anderson, for example, states:

Both Paul and Joseph Smith had a “first vision.” ... Many Christians who comfortably accept Paul’s vision reject Joseph Smith’s. However, they aren’t consistent in their criticisms, for most arguments against Joseph Smith’s first vision would detract from Paul’s Damascus experience with equal force.<sup>1</sup>

Anderson makes two specific comparisons in this regard. First, he argues that the differences in the various accounts of the First Vision are no more worrisome than the differences in the accounts in the book of Acts of Paul’s experience on the road to Damascus.<sup>2</sup> Second, he argues that the time that passed between Joseph’s vision and the first written record of it was actually shorter than the time that passed between Paul’s vision and his earliest written mention of it.

In recent years, skeptics have employed a very similar argument but turned it around into an objection to belief in Jesus’ resurrection. They ask Christians why they accept the Resurrection but not the First Vision or other reports of supernatural occurrences, the point being that the Christian is

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Lloyd Anderson, “Parallel Prophets: Paul and Joseph Smith,” *Ensign*, April 1985.

<sup>2</sup> See also John A. Tvedtnes, “Variants in the Stories of the First Vision of Joseph Smith and the Apostle Paul,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 2 (2012): 73–86 (hereafter *Interpreter*).

supposedly inconsistent in accepting the one but not the other. John Loftus, a former evangelical turned atheist, expresses the objection as follows:

You know of many reports of miracles by Oral Roberts and assertions by psychics. Do you believe them? There are religious leaders like Joseph Smith, who claimed the angel Moroni visited him, and Sun Myung Moon, whose followers believe he is the Messiah. Do you believe them?<sup>3</sup>

David McAfee presents a rather extreme version of the argument:

If you accept one otherworldly claim on unconfirmed reports of alleged eyewitnesses alone—for instance, the resurrection of Jesus—then you should logically accept all other claims based on the same foundation, like extraterrestrial visitation, the existence of Bigfoot, the Loch Ness Monster, Allah, and reptile-human shape-shifters.<sup>4</sup>

Guy Harrison is a notable atheist who has elaborated on this objection to Christianity and cited Joseph Smith specifically:

As with all extraordinary religious claims, evidence is the sticking point for anyone who decides it's wise to think before believing. Why, for example, should anyone believe that all supernatural elements of the Jesus story are true when so many other stories make equally unusual claims? If you believe that Jesus rose from the dead and the tomb was empty, then why not also believe that Joseph Smith met an angel in New York and that Mormonism is the most perfect form of Christianity? Mainstream Christians can't really charge "lack of evidence," can they?<sup>5</sup>

Harrison's challenge is reasonable, up to a point. As a skeptic, what he is demanding is not merely evidence but "proof" of a kind one cannot expect with regard to any account of the supernatural occurring in history. Nevertheless, we should take the challenge seriously. Is the evidence pertaining

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<sup>3</sup>John W. Loftus, *Why I Became an Atheist: A Former Preacher Rejects Christianity* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2008), 353.

<sup>4</sup>David G. McAfee, *No Sacred Cows: Investigating Myths, Cults, and the Supernatural*, foreword by Yvette d'Entremonte (Durham, NC: Pitchstone, 2017), 170. This line of argument crops up repeatedly in McAfee's book.

<sup>5</sup>Guy P. Harrison, *50 Simple Questions for Every Christian* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2013), 217–18.



to Jesus' resurrection really no better than the evidence pertaining to Joseph Smith's visions? How should we go about addressing this question?

### **Evidence, Reason, and Argument**

The issues that both Mormons and skeptics have raised concerning why Christians accept Jesus' resurrection but not Joseph's visions are concerned with *evidence* and *reason*. Although most readers likely are already familiar with these terms, it might be helpful to define them and say something about these matters.

By *evidence* I mean factual information that provides objective support for a particular conclusion. For example, the testimony of someone who says that he or she saw something occur is evidence the event took place. A bystander who reports seeing a blue sportscar run a red light is giving evidence for that claim. A police report listing five previous traffic violations in a twelve-month period by the driver is another kind of evidence.

By *reason* I mean the use of methods of drawing conclusions from available information. For example, citing a driver's record of repeated traffic violations to establish the credibility of an eyewitness's report that he saw the driver run a red light seeks to support a conclusion (the driver ran the red light) on the basis of the evidence (his record of repeated traffic violations). We call such appeals to reason *arguments*. An "argument" in this context is not an angry confrontation or an expression of hostility toward someone else. Rather, an argument is a verbal presentation of reason in support of a conclusion.

Arguments do not necessarily "prove" their conclusions with absolute certainty, but they can justify increased confidence in those conclusions. In our example, the driver's record of repeated past traffic violations does not prove that he ran the red light on the occasion in question, but it enhances the credibility (believability) of the eyewitness who claims he saw the driver run the red light. Likewise, the word of one eyewitness does not "prove" that the event took place, but it counts as evidence that must be taken into account in some way. It is often the case that we are presented with conflicting evidence, or at least factual claims that appear to conflict with one another. In such cases, we need to make a reasoned judgment as