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# “Written, That Ye Might Believe”: Literary Features of the Gospels

*Julie M. Smith*

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If you want to know what tomorrow’s weather will be, you don’t look in the phone book. If you misplace a friend’s phone number, you wouldn’t expect to find it included in the latest Harry Potter book. And no one turns to nineteenth-century Russian novels for a little light reading at the beach. We know what to expect from phone books and popular novels because they are the familiar products of our culture. But when it comes to texts written in distant times and places, we are not always so sure what to expect. This is certainly true of the Gospels, where many of the features common to ancient writing are quite foreign to us.

I will explore several literary features of the Gospels and offer practical suggestions for teaching them with the hope that increased familiarity with these writing techniques will improve understanding of the Gospels and lead to an increased testimony of Jesus Christ. As noted near the end of the Gospel of John, that text was “written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name” (John 20:31).

## **Important Statements**

The Gospel writers commonly use two statements that have rich meaning. To understand the first, we need to begin with Exodus 3. In verse 13, Moses asks God how he should respond when the people ask him what the name of God is. In verse 14, we read: “And God said unto Moses, I AM THAT I AM: and he said, Thus shalt thou say unto

the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you.” When the Old Testament was translated into Greek, “I am” was rendered with the Greek expression *egō eimi*. Because this wording was associated with the name of God, Jews in Jesus’s day regarded the expression as sacred and would have found a different way to express the idea “I am.”

When Jesus used this expression, He wasn’t simply saying “I am”—He was identifying Himself with the God of the Old Testament. Jesus used this language in several passages.<sup>1</sup> Consider, for example, Luke 24:39, where Jesus is speaking to His disciples after the Resurrection: “Behold my hands and my feet, that it is I [*egō eimi*] myself: handle me, and see; for a spirit hath not flesh and bones, as ye see me have.” In this case, not only is Jesus presenting His resurrected body to the disciples, but also because of His use of “I am” (here translated “it is I”), He is identifying Himself with Jehovah. Similarly, the attempt to stone the Savior in John 8:59 (stoning was the penalty for blasphemy) is better understood when the reader realizes that Jesus testified that He is the God of the Old Testament in the preceding verse. Instructors should be aware of this usage so they can share its importance with their students. The passages in which it occurs take on a new level of meaning when we realize that Jesus Christ is teaching the people that He is, in fact, Jehovah.

One occurrence of *egō eimi* is worthy of special attention: Matthew 28:20, Jesus’s final words to His disciples in Matthew’s Gospel. In this case, the expression that was translated into English as “I am with you” is an *egō eimi* statement with a difference: in Greek, the words *egō* and *eimi* are separated, and the words for “with you” have been inserted in the middle. In other words, the Greek literally reads, “I with you am.” In these, His parting words to the faithful, Jesus emphasized the idea that His Resurrection makes possible the reconciliation of humanity with God. The very placement of the words teaches the reality of the Atonement.

A second noteworthy statement in the Gospels is usually translated as “verily, I say unto you” (sometimes “verily” is repeated). The Greek word translated as “verily” is *amēn*, which is the origin of the English word *amen*. A modern translation of this usage might be “truly, truly I tell you.” He uses these words as a method of verbal underlining; that is, the statement indicates that whatever follows it is of particular importance. Seminary students are probably already familiar with the idea of verbal underlining if they have teachers who say, “You *might* want to write this down because it *might* be on the test.” Consequently, this is a statement that should be marked when it occurs because its use indicates that what comes next was deemed especially significant. This important statement occurs frequently as Jesus teaches.<sup>2</sup>

There are several ways to teach students about “I am” and “verily” statements. Most simply, teachers could mark their scriptures ahead of time and then mention the statements to the class when discussing that passage. Alternatively, scripture chains could be made for either statement, with the student writing an explanatory note about the usage in the front of the scriptures (for example, “When Jesus uses the statement ‘I am,’ He is identifying Himself with the Jehovah of the Old Testament; see Matthew 14:27,” or “When Jesus says, ‘Verily, I say unto you,’ He is indicating that whatever is said next is especially important; see Matthew 5:18”) and then linking together all the instances of that statement with cross-references in the margins. An additional benefit of this approach is the opportunity it provides to look for patterns concerning what types of sayings are preceded by “verily I say unto you” and in what types of situations Jesus reveals Himself to be Jehovah. Another option is for the teacher to explain the two statements to the students, give them a handout listing all of the relevant verses, and then perhaps allow time to mark all the passages.

### Paired Examples

Frequently, stories or sayings about men and women are paired in the Gospels. This pattern is especially prominent in the Gospel of Luke, although it occurs to some extent in all four Gospels. One example of a paired saying is Luke 4:25–27: “But I tell you of a truth, many widows were in Israel in the days of Elias, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, when great famine was throughout all the land; But unto none of them was Elias sent, save unto Sarepta, a city of Sidon, unto a woman that was a widow. And many lepers were in Israel in the time of Eliseus the prophet; and none of them was cleansed, saving Naaman the Syrian.”

In this case, Jesus uses an example involving a woman, the widow, and one involving a man, the leper, to make the same point: throughout the Old Testament, God showed mercy to those outside of Israel as well as to the Jewish people.

The Gospel of Luke frequently includes paired examples. For example, the angelic appearances to Zacharias and Mary form a pair (see Luke 1:5–20 and 1:26–38). Although these stories have many similarities, they also have some key differences, such as Zacharias’s and Mary’s responses to the angel. Often, we can gain new insights by comparing and contrasting paired stories.<sup>3</sup>

Teachers may want to discuss with their classes the significance of this pattern. Points to bring out in the discussion might include the following: Jesus made sure that women knew they were included in the

gospel message; Luke, in writing about Jesus's life, made it clear to the audience that women played important roles in Jesus's ministry; and when we teach, we should be sure that all audience members feel that the message applies to them.

Several different methods might be used to teach seminary students about paired examples. The simplest way is for the teacher to mark them in advance and share them with the class in the course of discussing each passage. Should the teacher desire to present all the paired examples in one lesson, one way to do this would be to explain the concept of paired examples, give students a handout listing the pairs, and then allow time for the students to mark the pairs in their scriptures. If desired, students can play a concentration-type game afterward in which each concentration card has one scripture reference and the card that matches it has the other passage necessary to form the paired example. Another option is for the teacher to develop an activity sheet with one column listing half of the pair and a second scrambled column listing the other half. Students then use their scriptures (perhaps working with a partner) to find the match. Although many of the matches are quite easy to find, because they are adjacent in the scriptures, some, such as Luke 13:16 and 19:9, are much more difficult to locate. Another option is for the teacher to make a handout with three columns: a reference in the first column, a description in the middle column (such as "Jesus teaches that God's mercy extends beyond the people of Israel"), and the matching reference in the third column. Then, the teacher cuts the chart into pieces and places them in an envelope. Students use their scriptures to reassemble the chart.

### **Intratextuality and Intertextuality**

*Intratextuality* refers to the relationship between two stories within the same text; *intertextuality* considers the relationship between two stories in different texts (in this case, in different books of scripture).

Intratextuality is an important aspect of the scriptures to consider because of the constraints under which the Gospel writers labored. As John 21:25 indicates, there wouldn't be room on earth for books enough to adequately present the life of Jesus Christ. Although perhaps not as difficult as writing on metal plates, writing the Gospels was still incredibly time-consuming, laborious, and expensive by modern standards. One of the ways that the writers pressed the most information into the least space was to be sure that not only would each passage convey an important lesson, but that additional meaning could

be gleaned when passages were read in light of other passages. By comparing and contrasting passages, we can learn more than we can from considering the passages in isolation.

In some cases, Jesus Himself suggests that intratextual reading can help us better understand the scriptures. For example, after the two feeding miracles, Jesus asked His disciples: “Having eyes, see ye not? and having ears, hear ye not? and do ye not remember? When I brake the five loaves among five thousand, how many baskets full of fragments took ye up? They say unto him, Twelve. And when the seven among four thousand, how many baskets full of fragments took ye up? And they said, Seven. And he said unto them, How is it that ye do not understand?” (Mark 8:18–21).

Clearly, Jesus intended for His disciples to compare the two feeding miracles (see Mark 6:33–44 and Mark 8:1–9) and to learn something that is not apparent in either story but becomes evident when we consider them side by side. Also, the numbers involved are apparently significant, perhaps symbolic. What a far cry from some scholars who claim that the presence of two feeding miracle stories in this Gospel is evidence of sloppy editing on Mark’s part and that the differing numbers in them suggest that no one got the story straight!

A second example where the arrangement of the stories can lead to greater insight is Mark 12:40–14:9, which has the following pattern:

1. The widow donates money to the temple (see Mark 12:40–44).
2. Jesus teaches about true discipleship in the last days (see Mark 13).
3. The woman anoints Jesus (see Mark 14:1–9).

In this case, we see real-life examples of Jesus’s teaching about discipleship manifested in the stories of the two women who act as true disciples.

Mark 5:25–34, which relates the story of the woman with the hemorrhage who was healed through touching Jesus’s hem, can also benefit from intratextual reading. The careful reader will recall Mark 3:10 (“For he had healed many; insomuch that they pressed upon him for to touch him, as many as had plagues”) and Mark 6:56 (the sick “besought him that they might touch if it were but the border of his garment: and as many as touched him were made whole”). These two verses from the same Gospel add new light to the story in chapter 5. They remind the reader that healing was not an uncommon event in Jesus’s ministry. Second, these verses encourage the reader to ponder why Mark chose to relate the incident in chapter 5 at length instead of developing the events related in 3:10 and 6:56. While there are many possible answers to this question, one worthy of exploration is that

the healing in 5:25–34 teaches about more than Jesus’s healing power (which would have been accomplished by including any of these three events in the Gospel record). The careful reader would therefore look for what else is taught in this passage.

Intertextuality would have us ask of this passage: What other stories does this one remind me of? In this case, our horizon is a little broader; we want to consider similar stories in all of the scriptures, not just in the Gospel of Mark. One point of comparison could be other occasions when someone was raised from the dead (see 1 Kings 17:17–24 and 2 Kings 4:18–37). By studying these Old Testament stories, the reader might come to many different conclusions: (1) Jesus is affirming His status as a prophet by doing what Old Testament prophets did, (2) Jesus shows that He is more than a prophet because He is able to raise the dead immediately without the intermediary steps required by the Old Testament prophets (see 1 Kings 17:21 and 2 Kings 4:32–35), and (3) in all of these stories and, in fact, in all occasions in the scriptures when a resurrection or raising from the dead is described at any length, women are present.

Another way in which intertextual study of the Gospels can be useful is that it can help the reader realize that, on many occasions, Jesus’s words are either quotations of or allusions to Old Testament texts. Although the footnotes indicate some of these, they do not include all of them. For example, Jesus’s statement that “ye have the poor with you always” (Mark 14:7) has struck some readers as a recognition of the futility of trying to end poverty. However, Jesus’s statement does not exist in isolation; He is quoting Deuteronomy, where the context makes clear that, far from condoning poverty, Jesus expects His disciples to help those in need: “For the poor shall never cease out of the land: therefore I command thee, saying, Thou shalt open thine hand wide unto thy brother, to thy poor, and to thy needy, in thy land” (Deuteronomy 15:11). Similarly, the reader who notes that all of Jesus’s responses to Satan’s temptations (see Matthew 4:4, 7, and 10) are Old Testament quotations will realize that there are important lessons here. When read in their Old Testament context, the quotations that Jesus used have additional meaning (see especially Deuteronomy 8:1–10). The careful student will also learn the following from Jesus’s use of scriptures: when He used them, how He used them, and why He used them. Satan’s (mis)use of scripture in Matthew 4:6 (see Psalms 91:9–12) is also revealing.

In addition to quotations and allusions, intertextual reading considers events and stories. For example, when Jesus prepares for His entry into Jerusalem, He tells the disciples to “find a colt tied, whereon

never man sat; loose him, and bring him” (Mark 11:2). Why does He do this? One useful way to approach this question is to consider what significance His actions might have when viewed in light of the Old Testament background. Consider Zechariah 9:9: “Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; shout, O daughter of Jerusalem: behold, thy King cometh unto thee: he is just, and having salvation; lowly, and riding upon an ass, and upon a colt the foal of an ass.” Clearly, Jesus’s actions fulfill prophecy and are meant as a testimony to the people that He is the promised Messiah. But why does it need to be an animal “whereon never man sat” (Mark 11:2)? Verses 32–34 in 1 Kings chapter 1 may provide a clue: “And king David said, Call me Zadok the priest, and Nathan the prophet, and Benaiah the son of Jehoiada. And they came before the king. The king also said unto them, Take with you the servants of your lord, and cause Solomon my son to ride upon mine own mule, and bring him down to Gihon: And let Zadok the priest and Nathan the prophet anoint him there king over Israel: and blow ye with the trumpet, and say, God save king Solomon.”

In this case, the fact that Solomon is riding upon David’s mule indicates that he is the one chosen to be king. Therefore, when Jesus makes clear that He wants an animal with no previous rider, He is suggesting that His kingship is unique—it fits the pattern and procedure of Israel but at the same time transcends it. When the reader is unaware of the Old Testament background of the Gospels, Jesus’s words and actions can lose some of their meaning. Making an effort to read the Gospels with the Old Testament in mind can remedy this problem.

When it comes to teaching seminary students about intratextual and intertextual reading techniques, there is no magic formula. However, periodically asking students, “Does this remind you of any Old Testament stories (or other events in this Gospel)?” may yield rich results.<sup>4</sup> Of course, the footnotes are an invaluable reference, and students should actively use them. But not all relevant cross-references are found in the footnotes. One way to explore connections on your own is to use the electronic scriptures at [www.lds.org](http://www.lds.org). By typing in some of the main words from a phrase or story, we might find connections to other texts. For intratextual readings, it may be useful to keep a chart in the classroom containing brief descriptions of the stories that have already been studied. Then, students can scan the chart and consider whether the story currently being studied has any interesting parallels to the others. When intratextual or intertextual parallels are found, students will benefit from noting the cross-reference in their scriptures to aid them in future study.

## Reading for Details

A final technique is to look closely at the details in a text. To demonstrate how this may be done and what insights can be gained from the process, John 4 will be used as an example. In our examination of John 4, we'll also rely on intertextual and intratextual reading.

Consider verse 4, which describes Jesus's travels: "And he must needs go through Samaria." At this point, a careful reader would consult a map and notice that when traveling from Judea to Galilee (see verse 3), a traveler does not necessarily have to go through Samaria. Consequently, the detail-oriented reader realizes that verse 4 describes not a geographical necessity but a theological one. This leads to a useful question to ponder while reading the rest of this chapter: Why did Jesus go to Samaria?

The next three verses establish that the story involves a man, a woman, and a well. If we consider what Old Testament stories had similar settings, we find several: Isaac (technically, his servant) and Rebekah (see Genesis 24:10–28), Jacob and Rachel (see Genesis 29:1–11), and Moses and Zipporah (see Exodus 2:15–21). Notice that all of these involve couples who will later marry. Of course, Jesus does not marry the woman at the well, but this setting suggests that she will enter into covenants with Him, which the scriptures sometimes symbolize as a marriage between the Lord and His people: "Turn, O backsliding children, saith the Lord; for I am married unto you: and I will take you one of a city, and two of a family, and I will bring you to Zion" (Jeremiah 3:14). One other detail helps establish a setting that is more than just a setting: John 4:6 notes that it was the sixth hour (that is, around noon). Why include this detail? This would have been an unusual time to draw water; most women would have completed this chore earlier in the day, both to avoid the heat and to have water for their households throughout the morning. We have a hint that this woman may be avoiding other people. The careful reader will recall that in the previous chapter, Nicodemus came to Jesus "by night" (John 3:2). We could consider the following: In what ways might the woman's and Nicodemus's approaches to Jesus be understood symbolically? In what ways are they different? What do they have in common?

As the above discussion of John 4:4–6 shows, a focus on the details allows the reader to interact with the text in a new way. As questions about details are considered, the student has an opportunity to ponder, and it is this pondering that creates an opportunity for the Spirit to whisper truth. Another benefit of studying details in the scriptures

is that we’ll never run out of them; scripture study can always be new and interesting and never dull or repetitious.

Although a detailed study of John 4 is well beyond the scope of this article, one more detail should not escape the reader’s attention. Consider John 4:28. Remember that, at the beginning of the story, the woman’s sole motivation was to fill her waterpot. But by the end, because of her conversation with Jesus Christ, she has undergone a transformation substantial enough that she forgets her waterpot. She is so eager to share with others the truths that she has learned that her daily chores pale in significance. In the subtly humorous detail of the abandoned waterpot, we find evidence of her spiritual awakening and her new priorities.

Again, there is no simple way to get seminary students to read for details, but the following ideas may help teachers accomplish that goal. Direct students to consider the details *before* the passage is read: “As we read verses 5–7, please focus your attention on the details in this passage.” Ask direct questions: “Why do you think Matthew included this detail in the record?” “Do you think it might be symbolic that Nicodemus met Jesus at night?” “Why do you think John mentions that Jesus had to go through Samaria?” As teachers do this, they establish the habit of attention to detail that will become ingrained in their students. Although teachers don’t want to get bogged down with details, they should periodically consider focusing on the details in a passage so that students will internalize this reading approach and be able to use it in their own scripture study.

*The CES Current Teaching Emphasis* states that “we are to help students understand the scriptures and the words of the prophets, identify and understand the doctrines and principles found therein, and apply them in their lives in ways that lead to personal conversion.”<sup>5</sup> The teaching techniques described in this article are designed to help students meet the first third of that goal. It is crucial that teachers remember to incorporate the identification of doctrine and personal application in each lesson.

As written documents, the Gospels contain important literary features. Paying attention to details, important phrases, and paired examples, as well as reading intratextually and intertextually, will help us to better comprehend the message of the Gospels, which, in turn, means that we can gain a better understanding of Jesus Christ and His earthly ministry. **RE**

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## Notes:

James E. Faulconer and Reed A. Russell provided helpful feedback on an early draft of this article.

1. Occurrences of *egō eimi* are Matthew 14:27, 28:20; Mark 6:50, 14:62; Luke 22:70, 24:39; John 4:26; 6:20, 35, 41, 48, 51; 8:12, 18, 24, 28, 58; 10:7, 9, 11, 14; 11:25; 13:19; 14:6; 15:1, 5; and 18:5, 6, and 8. (Note that *egō eimi* is not always translated into English as “I am.”)

2. Instances of “verily” phrases are Matthew 5:18, 26; 6:2, 5, 16; 8:10; 10:15, 23, 42; 11:11; 13:17; 16:28; 17:20; 18:3, 13, 18, 19; 19:23, 28; 21:21, 31; 23:36; 24:2, 34, 47; 25:12, 40, 45; 26:13, 21, 34; Mark 3:28; 6:11; 8:12; 9:1, 41; 10:15, 29; 11:23; 12:43; 13:30; 14:9, 18, 25, 30; Luke 4:24; 11:51; 12:37; 13:35; 18:17, 29; 21:32; 23:43; John 1:51; 3:3, 5, 11; 5:19, 24, 25; 6:26, 32, 47, 53; 8:34, 51, 58; 10:1, 7; 12:24; 13:16, 20, 21, 38; 14:12; 16:20, 23; 21:18; JST Matthew 21:51; JST Mark 8:43; JST Luke 6:30, 12:42, 44, 47; 16:23.

3. Paired examples in the Gospel of Luke are 1:5–20 and 1:26–38; 1:46–55 and 1:67–79; 2:25–35 and 2:36–38; 4:27 and 4:25–26; 4:33–37 and 4:38–39; 7:1–10 and 7:11–16; 8:41–42, 49–56, and 7:11–16; 8:41–42, 49–56, and 8:43–48; 10:25–37 and 10:38–42; 11:32 and 11:31; 13:18–19 and 13:20–21; 14:1–6 and 13:10–17; 15:3–7 and 15:8–10; 17:34 and 17:35; 18:9–14 and 18:1–8; 19:9 and 13:16; 24:12 and 24:1–11; and 24:13–35 and 24:1–11.

4. Paradoxically, the younger and the more inexperienced students are with the scriptures, the more they seem to be able to identify intertextual connections. In several cases, my six-year-old son has surprised me by pointing out similarities that I hadn’t previously noticed between two stories. It may be that lack of familiarity with the details makes the larger pattern of the story more obvious.

5. From “A Current Teaching Emphasis for the Church Educational System,” available at [www.ldsces.org/training/teach/emphasis.html](http://www.ldsces.org/training/teach/emphasis.html).