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Lessons from the Scriptures: A Conversation with Keith H. Meservy

Interview by Richard Neitzel Holzappel and Kent P. Jackson

Keith H. Meservy, who passed away shortly after this interview, was a professor emeritus of ancient scripture at BYU.

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Holzappel: *During a lifetime of scripture study, what have you learned about the process of studying the scriptures?*

Meservy: This is something I feel deeply about. The Apostle Peter says, “No prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation. For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost” (2 Peter 1:20–21). So it is scripture when the Holy Ghost is involved. In Romans the Apostle Paul states that it is the Spirit that brings conviction. He says that faith comes by “hearing by the word of God” (Romans 10:17). He would say to the Jews that they had ears to hear but they don’t hear, and I presume that means hearing by the Spirit. To me, that is the key to understanding anything we do in the Church, whether it is sustaining the prophets to be our leaders or something else, the Holy Ghost whispers to us that this particular selection is true, that it’s inspired.

When people speak in conference, we expect them to speak with the Spirit, and if they speak with the Spirit, we expect we will be able to pick it up by the Spirit. Well, when we pick it up by the Spirit, we know that what they are saying is true. Faith comes by hearing deep down in the heart. I think there must be something to the Spirit’s functioning in the center of our anatomy because we talk about a burning in the bosom or feeling in our heart. The Spirit confirms the truth in a more powerful way than knowledge gained through our eyes and ears and



A conversation with Keith H. Meservy

sense of touch. And the Spirit brings a conviction in such a way that we know what we have heard is true.

Students of the scriptures need to be connected to the Holy Spirit to come away with the proper interpretation. Peter says there is no alternative. Holy men of God speak when they are moved upon by the Holy Ghost, and their writings are not to be privately interpreted, and that is why the world has so many churches, because people have privately interpreted the scriptures. So I think the greatest thing we can do for students is to help them appreciate that their biggest key to interpretation to any truth is to interpret it by the Spirit. The scriptures cannot be properly understood in any other way than by the Spirit. You cannot have a correct interpretation in any other way than by the Spirit.

Faith comes by hearing. That is where testimony comes. It is amazing what we can stand up and testify to when the Spirit is present. I was reading a testimony of President Hinckley in which he said, “I know there is a God. I know He created this earth. I know He has a plan. I know that the plan is for the happiness of His children. And I know that Jesus is at the center of the plan and makes it operate.” He was going right on through these things, and here is Keith Meservy

reading his testimony, saying, “Hey, I know what the prophet knows.” And that is the thing that keeps me a faithful member of the Church; I know what he knows.

This Church has had such a fantastic history that if people did not have that spiritual conviction, they would have dropped off like flies. I remember Wilford Woodruff talking about one woman who moved from Kirtland and did not want to move anymore. She said, “I moved from Kirtland down here. I’ll be damned if I move any further.” And he said, “Yes, she may well be.” That’s it, the difference between having a testimony or not. If you have a testimony, you know that regardless of how difficult it is to do what you’re being asked to do, you’ll do it. Anyway, that’s discovering that you can learn by the Spirit.

When I returned from the service, I took a New Testament class at Brigham Young University in preparation to go on a mission. Then I went into the mission field, and we four missionaries decided on a Sunday that we would like to start reading the New Testament. That week became one of the marvels of my life. I don’t know how to describe the feelings I had as I read the New Testament. What I was learning now was a dramatic contrast with what I had experienced in that class. I remember Elder Harold B. Lee talking about being appointed to be an Apostle and reading through the New Testament and having a sense that he was there. I had that same kind of feeling. It was so vivid and real, and I am so grateful for this great testimony about the truth of the gospel, despite all the inadequacies of the record. It’s just a marvelous record!

It irks me when scholars date the Gospels after AD 70 simply because they feel that the prophets cannot see beyond their own time, and so none of the books that have these prophecies in them about the destruction of Jerusalem could have been written before AD 70. I say, “That’s ridiculous.” Prophets do see beyond their time. Jesus did, and we have all kinds of evidence in our scriptures about people being able to see beyond their time. The Lord touched Enoch in such a way that Enoch could see beyond his time, and we have examples of others. Moses looked at all the children of men and knew that many generations were going to fall away. The point is that prophets could see beyond their day, and these rational scholars who haven’t had that kind of experience deny that prophets could have that experience. Consequently, they deny that Isaiah could have known about the things he talks about, the restoration of the Jews to Jerusalem and so forth. So I think it’s bad for Church members to use AD 70 as a cutoff point for the Gospels.

From the earliest days of the earth, Jehovah told his prophets to record things. He told Adam to make a record. Later Enoch had the record of Adam. Abraham said he had the records of the fathers and discovered he had the right to all these blessings that his ancestors experienced. It was the scriptures that opened his eyes to what was available to him in this life. His father surely did not teach him about the records of the ancestors, but Abraham discovered it on his own.

In our day too, the Prophet Joseph Smith felt an obligation to make a record of all he experienced: all the difficult problems, all the things he was doing, all the harassment he was getting, and all the plans for the Church. It seems amazing to me that he had time to do anything beyond the demands of getting through each day.

I like the way the Gospel of Luke starts out: “Forasmuch as many have taken in hand to set forth in order a declaration of those things which are most surely believed among us” (Luke 1:1). I wonder who those witnesses were. Were they members of the Church? People from the outside? Luke says these things were delivered by “eyewitnesses, and ministers of the word” (v. 2). So it is clear he had access to primary source material to make his record. The phrase “having had a perfect understanding of all things from the very first” (v. 3) shows how much confidence he had in the record. These records bear witness of the greatest life in the history of the world.

Holzappel: What is one thing you have come to appreciate about the Old Testament from a lifetime of study—you know, the language, the history, the context?

Meservy: Mostly that I know it’s true. I think it provides an essential background to anybody that wants to study the New Testament and the Book of Mormon or the Doctrine and Covenants. It’s a rich mine that you have to search in order to get all you can out of it.

Holzappel: Why is study of the Old Testament important for the Doctrine and Covenants?

Meservy: This is the day and age looked forward to by many of the prophets and people of old who yearned to see this day. This is the day of God’s fulfillment of his promises. The Old Testament is packed with prophecies of what he would do in the latter days when prophets would bring to fruition all his work. I think Joseph Smith understood that, and he said it caused him difficulty in bringing the Latter-day Saints to understand the ideas he was trying to teach. I suspect that these prophets had many more prophecies than were ever recorded and a greater vision of what God was going to do.

One thing I appreciate about Isaiah is that he wrote his prophecies in a very wicked day. I don't know the proportion of the people that were faithful, but he promised them they were going to be destroyed, and here came the Assyrians. The Lord said he was going to use the Assyrians to avenge his anger, and they conquered forty-six of the fortified cities of Judah, devastating the country. The inspiring part of the story is that the Lord saved Jerusalem, but the point is that Isaiah lived among very wicked people. Violence and murder, deception, lying, and cheating—it was a very tough group. He saw they were going to be taken into captivity, but they would be brought back out of captivity. Another thing Isaiah saw is how the Lord was going to pull this all off and fulfill the prophecies.

Overall, there are more prophecies in Isaiah than in the books of any other prophet. He's just marvelous. He offers great testimonials about God. Read Isaiah and pull out all the testimonies that you find in there about God. Isaiah prophesies of a marvelous work and about the one who would bring it all about. The Lord knew Joseph Smith and said right from the beginning that he had a work for him to do, and we have watched that work unfold. It is clear that Joseph had this vision about how the Church is going to fill the mountains here. In Kirtland, he asked the brethren to bear their testimonies, and when they were through, he said, "You know no more concerning the destinies of this Church and kingdom than a babe upon its mother's lap."¹ They asked W. W. Phelps to compose this song that says "millions shall know 'Brother Joseph' again,"² and he was getting the message that this Church was going to grow and expand as Joseph Smith prophesied. To me that represents why the prophecies in the Old Testament are related to the work being done in the latter days by the Saints, the pioneers. You get the idea of how many times the Brethren refer to the Old Testament when they talk about the world today.

Holzappel: What have you learned about the Lord from studying the Old Testament? When you read from Genesis to Malachi, what central message emerges?

Meservy: That he's a personal God, that we are created in his image, and that he knows the end from the beginning. Something that impresses me about the Old Testament is that he is this mother hen trying to get the chickens back in under his protective wing, that he is committed to meeting the needs of his children down here, and that he is fair. All of the attributes of God that we learn about in the scriptures are displayed in the Old Testament. He's a merciful God. There are so many terms in Isaiah: "Ah sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity,

a seed of evildoers.” Can you imagine any of our Brethren standing up and addressing the congregation this way? “Seed of evildoers, children that are corrupters,” looking for Satan as lord, provoking “the Holy One of Israel unto anger”—why shouldn’t you be stricken? (Isaiah 1:4–5).

I think people need to read the covenant in Deuteronomy. There is a condition for the blessing and a condition for the curse. Ancient Israel would be stricken, existing in a small remnant like Sodom and Gomorrah. But then the Lord would say to them, “Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes; cease to do evil; learn to do well; seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow. Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool. If ye be willing and obedient, ye shall eat the good of the land: but if ye refuse and rebel, ye shall be devoured with the sword: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it” (Isaiah 1:16–20).

How had the faithful Saints in Jerusalem become as a harlot? The city was once full of justice, righteousness lodged in it, but now murderers—something went wrong. Princes have become rebellious, companions of thieves. These are the people he is addressing and promising forgiveness. “Every one loveth gifts, and followeth after rewards: they judge not the fatherless, neither doth the cause of the widow come unto them. . . . Ah, I will ease me of mine adversaries” (Isaiah 1:23–24). But he says, “Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes” (Isaiah 1:16), and I’ll forgive you.

Now you ask, “What do I learn about God in the Old Testament?” This is the answer: He is just what he purports to be. All the attributes of God are there. People have a hard time reading the Old Testament; they don’t know the history and the times of that era. One problem in Isaiah is all the metaphors. Nephi said if you have the Holy Ghost, then you can read Isaiah (see 2 Nephi 25:4), but he also says the wicked Jews understood Isaiah. I do believe that the knowledge about God is readily apparent in the Old Testament. He’s a God of judgment; it clearly comes through there.

Jackson: You talked about the knowledge of the Bible being indispensable for understanding the Doctrine and Covenants and other scriptures. What is the value of understanding modern revelation in order to understand the Bible?

Meservy: What we do is provide a description of how these things are being fulfilled, those ancient prophecies. I think it would be very satisfying if a Jew had an open heart and sat down and read our Doctrine and Covenants. I think it would ring bells. If he's a Bible scholar of the Old Testament, that is all he would have to go on, but it seems there would be a converting power in showing how the Church today is accomplishing what was predicted anciently. And a lot of those prophecies have to do with the millennial period, and those are still waiting to be fulfilled. Catholics don't believe in the Millennium, and I don't know how many other modern churches believe in it. We do.

Jackson: *Were you the first Latter-day Saint to come to the conclusion that the Garden Tomb was not the place where Jesus was buried?*

Meservy: I have no idea, but I feel rather strongly about that. Some people look at the hillside next to the Garden Tomb and see the features of a skull and say, "This has got to be Golgotha." They argue that the Garden Tomb is the place of Jesus's burial because it is outside the city walls. It was General Charles Gordon in the 1880s who came up with the idea that it was the place where Jesus was buried. There is nothing about his reconstruction of the scene that would suggest that it is the place where Jesus was buried. I don't like his explanation, and I just cannot imagine that it is the place. I've been there. Some people talk about having good feelings at the Garden Tomb. But I ask, "Are you having good feelings about the location or about the Resurrection?" If the Spirit is whispering to them that the Resurrection took place, that is one thing. But I can't imagine people going around Israel trying to identify sites by good feelings. The Brethren don't do that in America. When they wanted to find Joseph Smith's first home, they got the historians and archaeologists to go find it. If it were important to know exactly where something happened, why haven't the Brethren taken us into the Sacred Grove and said, "This is the place"? It's the same in the Garden Tomb. It seems to me that there is not much of an argument in favor of it. But when I go back and study the history, I ask, "Why do the Christians believe that the other place is the spot?"

Jackson: *The Church of the Holy Sepulcher?*

Meservy: Yes. Let's look at our history and say, how do we identify sites in our own history? How do we know where the Sacred Grove is? How do we know where the Hill Cumorah is? We can go back in our history to the sites, and we identify them now. We mark and restore places. I think that the early Christians must have known where things took place, especially the Crucifixion and burial of Jesus.

Jackson: How many years did you teach at BYU?

Meservy: Thirty-two years—1958 to 1990.

Jackson: You taught in Jerusalem in what years?

Meservy: 1972, 1981, 1988, and 1989.

Jackson: What is the value of studying the scriptures on-site?

Meservy: I tell people, you can read the Pearl of Great Price or the story of Joseph Smith, and you can know the story is true. We can read the Gospels and know the Gospels are true. But once you go back to Palmyra and walk out of the Sacred Grove, you will forever after be able to visualize what Joseph Smith saw. Every time you read this story, it comes alive, and it's more realistic. It's a sense of realism that we get in going to these places. The people on tour are there for such a brief time. One lady said to me, "This is my second time," and I said, "What brought you back?" I wanted her to tell me the land is just irresistible, but she said instead, "I'm here to just kind of sort things out." When I stop and think about what I'd do differently, I think I'd like to go back and prepare students for the site itself and build it up with stories. I would do more traveling about and going to the sites. There are so many things in the Old Testament that it was fascinating to be in the Holy Land.

Holzappel: Let me ask you one more question: what lesson of life did you learn from your students?

Meservy: One thing is the love for the Lord they have at an early age. This was especially true with the students in the Holy Land. They were over there because of how much they loved the Lord and the eagerness they exercised in their studies. Let me tell you a story. I think it was the last time I was there, and it turned out to be a profound experience for me. Monte Nyman said, "Keith, on Thursday night we all take our students and go up around the seashore." We asked students ahead of time to share what would have excited them if they had been able to live in the days of Jesus and experience his love. We asked for volunteers, and one girl came up and said she would want to be that woman taken in adultery. Another said she would want to be that woman who touched his garment. So we got together at the seashore and had prayers and songs. Then the people stood up, and after the songs we had a prayer. There were cabins nearby, but nobody left. We had only been together maybe three and a half weeks.

Suddenly this guy sitting on the sand stood up and said, "I can't stand it anymore. I've just got to tell you guys I love you." He didn't do more than that, but it was like he turned a key or pushed a button, and the kids fell into each other's arms. He came over to me and

asked, “Brother Meservy, can I give you a hug?” I thought, “What is it? After being here such a brief time, how can he say ‘I love you?’” I realized that he knew some things about the other students because of the program they were in. They had all come over to study about the Lord and Savior and come to love him better. They had testimonies and were faithful members. He knew that. He’d been with those people three weeks, and in those three weeks he’d heard those students express appreciation for one another. He had found a corresponding response in his heart. He had heard them talk; he had heard them reflect their values in this or that situation. So in three weeks he had come to learn they were people like him, people who wanted to return to the Lord. I thought, “The Lord is here. This person loves the Lord. That person over there loves the Lord. They all love the Lord, and he loves them.”

That is how I feel about my wife. It dawned on me one night as I heard her talk about things that were important to her. I knew she wasn’t saying things just to impress me, but she was saying things out of her heart. I think that is why testimony meeting is my favorite. One person will stand up and bear testimony of things that are important to me, or maybe of things that I haven’t experienced that they’ve experienced. Someone else will stand up and do the same thing, and at the end of the meeting we have this wonderful feeling of love that ties us together. I think the spirit of love is the thing that binds us together, and that was the discovery I made at Galilee. The students’ spirit and desire for goodness—that was a wonderful revelation to me as I taught over the years. Students are just choice, wonderful people. I think of them going into the world, and I want to have a small part in their life to help them make their contribution. **RE**

Notes

1. Wilford Woodruff, in Conference Report, April 1898, 57.
2. William W. Phelps, “Praise to the Man,” *Hymns* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), no. 27.