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Each of us may engage with scripture for different purposes,  
be motivated by different goals, and value the journey for different reasons.

# How Young Latter-day Saints Read the Scriptures: Five Profiles

ERIC D. RACKLEY

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Current empirical studies investigating youths’ religious literacies are broadening our understanding of the diverse literacy practices that youth from a variety of faiths use as part of their religious learning and development.<sup>1</sup> Yet, notwithstanding our knowledge that Latter-day Saint youth engage in scripture study groups,<sup>2</sup> talk in their families about religious things (including scripture),<sup>3</sup> and “tend to be the ‘spiritual athletes’ of their generation,”<sup>4</sup> there is a noticeable lack of research that explores Latter-day Saint youths’ literacy practices. Surely we know that youth in the Church *should* read scripture and that many of them *do*, but we know next to nothing empirically about *how* they read scripture: What are their purposes for reading? What are their motivations? Are there certain ways they prefer to read scripture? Are these productive? If so, why? If not, why not? What struggles do they face while reading scripture? Do they overcome their struggles? If so, how? If not, why not? What value does scripture hold for them? What strategies do they use while they read? These are just a few of the key questions about our youths’ scripture reading that we have yet to develop a substantive body of research to address. Because we know so little empirically about the

nature of our youths' scripture reading practices, instructional and curricular decisions may be informed more by rhetoric than reality.<sup>5</sup>

The purpose of this study is to identify how Latter-day Saint youth read scripture, which I operationalize by focusing on the strategies they use as they read. The knowledge produced by this study may be useful to parents and religious educators in the Church because it contributes to a more robust understanding of the nature of our youths' scripture reading practices. Once we know how our youth read scripture, we are better positioned to make more-informed instructional and curricular decisions about how best to facilitate their learning of gospel truths with and through scripture. Moreover, this research may also sensitize parents and religious educators to the realities of scripture reading from a youth's perspective, which can inform the development of instructional practices that can help youth address their struggles with scripture and leverage their strengths. Given the enormous temporal and spiritual importance of scripture in the Church, it behooves parents, as well as professional and lay religious educators, to develop a clearer understanding of how young people actually read it. This study is an attempt to begin developing that knowledge.

### Relevant Literature

Ancient and modern prophets have taught the importance of scripture. For example, scripture helps us know what to teach and can develop faith that spans generations (see Mosiah 1:4). Scripture also enlarges our memories, convinces us of the error of our ways, and brings us to the knowledge of God "unto the salvation of [our] souls" (see Alma 37:8–9). Furthermore, as we develop a testimony of scripture, we are brought to "rejoice in Jesus Christ [our] Redeemer" (Alma 37:9). President Hinckley hoped that our scripture study would "become a love affair with the word of God," promising that "as you read, your minds will be enlightened and your spirits will be lifted . . . [and you will have] a wondrous experience with thoughts and words of things divine."<sup>6</sup>

In the April 2014 general conference, leaders of the Church taught that scripture is a source of spiritual power<sup>7</sup> and a foundational part of our training for life,<sup>8</sup> and that as we study it carefully and prayerfully, it can "invite impressions and revelations and the whisperings of the Holy Spirit."<sup>9</sup> Moreover, scripture can reduce stress, provide direction in our lives, and protect our homes from such things as pornography.<sup>10</sup>

Explaining the importance of the Book of Mormon, President Joseph Fielding Smith stated, “No member of this Church can stand approved in the presence of God who has not seriously and carefully read the Book of Mormon.”<sup>11</sup> Without serious attention to studying scripture, we, as the Lamanites of old, may suffer “in ignorance . . . not knowing the mysteries of God” (Mosiah 1:3) and may dwindle in unbelief, knowing “nothing concerning” the Lord (Mosiah 1:5). Clearly, anciently and today, scripture matters a great deal in terms of gospel learning and spiritual development. Yet, as a Church we know very little empirically about how young people actually read it.

Current research suggests that LDS youth and young adults struggle to read the Book of Mormon and may engage in literacy practices that some may see as prescriptive and thin. For example, in a two-phase study exploring the Book of Mormon and “conventional text” reading achievement of 1,623 LDS high school students, young adults, and full-time missionaries, data identified five key findings related to what the author called “scripture literacy.”<sup>12</sup> First, participants struggled to comprehend scripture; specifically, less than half of the participants demonstrated proficient comprehension of the Book of Mormon. Second, reading conventional texts well did not transfer into reading scripture well, suggesting that there was more to reading scripture that was not accounted for by facility with non-scripture. Third, participants’ struggles comprehending the Book of Mormon were informed by numerous language features, rather than a single one. Fourth, instruction and maturity appeared to improve reading achievement, with the greatest gains occurring after high school. Finally, compared to narrative and expository content, doctrinal content appeared to be the most difficult for participants to understand. As an outline of youths’ struggles with scripture, this study provides important insights, but it does not address the techniques that they *do* use to make sense of scripture.

In a recent two-year study comparing the literacy practices of Latter-day Saint and Methodist youth, data suggested that LDS youth engaged in religious literacy in unique religio-cultural ways.<sup>13</sup> Informed by the religious beliefs, values, and practices of their families and their faith, the Latter-day Saints in this study read scripture regularly (with the intention of believing what they read) and engaged in scripture games to commit key passages to memory. Situated within a culture of listening that privileged passive reception of meaning from scripture, these practices were marked by low-level

cognitive investigations of scripture and infrequent verbal interactions between the teachers and the students, and among the students themselves.

The existing empirical work on Latter-day Saint youths' literacy practices suggests that our young people may struggle with scripture and may engage with it in ways that are sometimes seen as restrictive and naive. Yet this work also highlights key issues that remain open for investigation; namely, what approaches do Latter-day Saint youth use to construct meaning from scripture? Addressing this question may provide insights into the development of practices and programs to help our youth more effectively engage with scripture to develop their gospel knowledge and their faith.

### **Methodology**

*Research contexts and participants.* The present study is part of a larger investigation of Latter-day Saint youths' literacy practices and the motivations that drive them. It took place in a midwestern Latter-day Saint community, primarily in a seminary classroom, which I observed three days per week for nine months, and the various classes during Sunday worship services, which I observed each Sunday for nine months. All of the youth lived in a middle-class community influenced economically and intellectually by a large public university. Many of the youths' parents had completed advanced degrees at the university or were employed by the university. Demographically, the youth were thirteen to sixteen years old at the beginning of the study, and they were all of European descent. They all attended local public schools known for their academic rigor. Moreover, all of the youth in the study had grown up in the faith, indicated that they believed in the tenets of the Church and practiced them, and regularly attended their Sunday meetings and weekday activities, and as appropriate, seminary. They all stated that scriptures were the most important texts in their lives and that they read them every day or nearly every day on their own or with family.

To recruit for this study, I emailed all of the active youth in a selected ward and their parents, soliciting the youths' participation. Nine of the eighteen youth agreed to participate. In this study, I focus on the five who completed the reading process interview (see below): Jonathan, Paul, Priscilla, Samantha, and Vincent (all personal names are pseudonyms.) Because the youth were from the same ward, they may have had the same teachers and leaders and similar experiences with scripture. Rather than seeing this as a constraint of the study, sharing similar scripture and non-scripture experiences in a single

religio-social context can enhance our understanding of that context and the richness embedded therein.

*Reading process interviews.* For the larger study, data consisted of five semi-structured interviews over a two-year period, nine months of participant observations, and the collection of relevant artifacts. For this paper, I draw primarily from the interviews, focusing on one of the reading process interviews. As a means of gaining access to individuals' thinking processes, verbal protocol methodologies may be particularly effective because they ask learners to verbalize their thought processes, or think aloud, as they are engaged with a task.<sup>14</sup> Because the purpose of the study was to explore how Latter-day Saint youth actually read scripture, I asked the youth to verbalize what they were thinking as they read a self-selected passage from scripture. First, I asked questions about their conceptualization of literacy, their perception of their reading abilities, and the nature of their scripture reading practices. Next, I explained the purpose of the verbal protocol and what I expected of them. I did not instruct youth in specific reading processes or practices because I did not want to influence the manner in which they read the passages. Instead, I provided them with an opportunity to practice verbalizing their thinking with 1 Samuel 17:32–37. As they read, I prompted them throughout with the phrases “please keep talking” and “what are you thinking?” After I felt that they were comfortable verbalizing their thinking with the practice passage, youth thought aloud as they read their self-selected chapters, all of which were from the Book of Mormon. All of the reading process interviews were audio recorded, lasted between twelve and fifteen minutes, and were transcribed in their entirety prior to analysis. Although completing the chapter was not the purpose of the interview, it usually marked a logical stopping point.

*Analytic procedures.* Informed by data-driven inductive thematic procedures,<sup>15</sup> I analyzed the reading process interviews by focusing on the manner in which the youth read scripture. I read and reread the reading process interviews, focusing on the youths' verbalized thinking. During these initial readings, I identified and annotated specific approaches used by each youth. The unit of analysis was a single approach or strategy. Sometimes this was as short as a phrase, other times it was several sentences long. A single analytic unit could be coded more than once because it could represent more than one approach to reading scripture. After all of the interviews were coded I

counted the reading approaches used by each youth and how many times they used each approach. I created a matrix to visually represent their strategy use.<sup>16</sup>

Informed by the matrix, I reread the interviews, looking for larger patterns within and across the youth and the strategies. Analyses revealed groups of reading approaches used by various youth. Although all of them used summary more than any other strategy, they each demonstrated a preference for a particular approach. For example, Paul favored making personal connections to the chapter, Priscilla focused on fact-based comments about what she was reading, and Samantha and Vincent made numerous inferences, although they differed in the nature of their inferences. Because each youth had a signature approach for reading scripture, the data suggested a set of five distinct cases,<sup>17</sup> or profiles, to explain their scripture reading practices rather than a single, overarching approach. As such, I created a brief profile of each youth as a reader of scripture, drawing upon the four other interviews completed for this study to inform their views of and experiences with scripture.

*Exploratory qualitative research.* Qualitative research is especially well suited to explore or uncover processes in emerging areas of study about which we may know very little. Because it focuses on identifying, describing, and understanding specific processes in contexts, such as the scripture reading processes of Latter-day Saint youth in one community, qualitative research does not typically seek to generalize findings beyond the targeted context, nor does it demand large numbers of participants.<sup>18</sup> As exploratory, qualitative research, this study describes the processes by which five youth in one context read scripture. It does not aim to conclude that there are only five ways to read scripture or that these five ways are representative of the ways Latter-day Saint youth in other contexts read scripture. Instead, as one of the first published, empirical studies of Latter-day Saint youths' scripture reading processes, this small-scale study is relevant because it makes an initial contribution to understanding the nature of youths' scripture reading by identifying and describing some of the unique ways that youth read scripture, each of which focuses on different meaning-making processes. Moreover, because this five-participant study seeks to gain insights into youths' scripture reading, it can provide lenses through which teachers, researchers, and parents can "see" or learn to understand the scripture readers with whom they work. Additional research may seek to verify or generalize the nature and frequency, as well as the complexity, of these five reader profiles, which may require a larger number of participants and more than one research context.

In the end, because it is consistent with the nature and purposes of qualitative research, this study *explores* a specific, contextualized phenomenon within an emerging area of study rather than attempting to verify the phenomenon or generalize it for broader contexts, although such may be the aim of future research.

## Findings

To demonstrate how these five Latter-day Saint youth read scripture, I first provide a brief description of their experiences with scripture to contextualize their actual scripture reading practices. Next, I detail how they read scripture, highlighting the characteristics that situate them as certain types of readers (table 1). By positioning these young people thus I do not mean to suggest that they were always and only these types of readers; indeed, many factors influence the manner in which one reads. What I aim to show is that there are a number of ways to read scripture and youth actually read scripture in many different ways, each of which offers certain affordances and constraints.

Table 1. Five Profiles of Latter-day Saint Readers

Pseudonym	Age	Reader Profile	Key Reading Question	Conception of Reading	Reading Behaviors
Jonathan	13	Summarizing	What does the text say?	Knowing literal meaning of the text.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Translate unfamiliar passages into modern equivalents</li> <li>• Attend to word-level features or phrases</li> </ul>
Priscilla	16	Commenting	What do I think about the text?	Making personal observations about the text.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Make fact-based comments</li> </ul>
Paul	13	Connecting	What is the text like?	Connecting prior knowledge and experience (the old) with the text (the new).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Privilege prior knowledge.</li> <li>• Develop a heightened sense of the novel</li> </ul>

Pseudonym	Age	Reader Profile	Key Reading Question	Conception of Reading	Reading Behaviors
Vincent	14	Inferring	What lesson or conclusion can I draw?	Developing conclusions and finding lessons to live by.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Make logical interpretations based on textual evidence</li> <li>• Apply lessons to life</li> </ul>
Samantha	13	Problem Solving	What could the text mean?	Constructing conditional knowledge about what a text might mean.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Solve text-based or personal problems</li> <li>• Use strategies flexibly.</li> <li>• Marshal diverse resources</li> </ul>

*Summarizing: What does it say?* Notwithstanding the importance of scripture in Jonathan's life, he struggled to understand it. He said, "I'll just be reading it, but my mind would stray away, so I'd just be looking at the page, just like going down slowly . . . but I'd be thinking about something else." Jonathan attributed his reading difficulties to the unusual words in scripture. To manage this, Jonathan developed a strategy that he called "translating," in which he reworded confusing phrases or verses into more familiar equivalents. He claimed that "it's easier to understand it that way . . . especially if I'm really confused." In effect, to get the gist of what he read, Jonathan read every verse twice.

For the reading process interview, Jonathan chose to read Jacob 7 because he thought it was an interesting story that was not talked about much. He estimated that he had read this chapter about five times. Jonathan clearly favored summarizing and translating in his reading. Of the thirty-eight coded units, thirty were summaries. The other strategies he used included recognizing when he was confused (1), making connections (1), empathizing with the characters (1), inferring (1), visualizing (2), creating an analogy (1), and predicting (1). Jonathan's literal orientation toward scripture reading seemed to focus on the question "What does scripture say?" In response, Jonathan spent almost all of his energy summarizing what he read into more understandable, modern-day equivalents.

For example, as he was reading Jacob 7:7, Jonathan said the following: “And make sure that you have changed to the right way of God. And keep the law of Moses, which is the right way. And changed the law of Moses into the worship of someone who is supposed to come a hundred years from now and Sherem said that this is blasphemy. And no man can know such things. You can’t tell of such things like this to come . . . in the future. And this is the way that Sherem fought against Jacob.”

Unusual insofar as it represents an uncommonly long summary for him, this excerpt captures the essence of Jonathan’s translation practice. Most of Jonathan’s summaries were one or two phrases long interspersed between one or two phrases from scripture at a time. Jonathan summarized phrase by phrase as he read, presumably to create as clear a representation of the passage as he could. In these shorter summaries and the longer one above, Jonathan’s translations were not entirely of his own making. His summaries borrowed phrases from the verses he was reading. This makes sense because he was trying to identify what the words meant in the context of the other words. Ostensibly, all of the words and ideas were not challenging for Jonathan, so he used what made sense to him and then translated the others so that, on the whole, he could capture the spirit of the verse.

For Jonathan, summarizing appeared to be his reading goal. He did not conceptualize reading scripture as much more than being able to paraphrase the narrative, verse by verse, which may have restricted his ability to see the larger picture of the chapter. As Jonathan demonstrated, it was as if summarizing scripture meant *knowing* scripture, which may have limited his ability or willingness to go any further mentally, personally, or spiritually with his reading.

*Commenting: What do I think about it?* Priscilla said that scripture gave her “a better understanding of religion,” provided her with “standards and basics to make decisions on,” and helped “make [her] happier.” Although she stated that she had never “been uncomfortable reading the scriptures,” she was hesitant to claim that she was good at it. When asked how well she read scripture, Priscilla stated, “Um, I mean, I do it a lot [laughs]. I don’t know.” Part of her hesitation may have been influenced by the confusion she felt as she read. “Things are written differently,” she said, “and there’s a lot of symbolism in the scriptures that you don’t really get.”

Priscilla selected 3 Nephi 12 for the reading process interview, stating that she had read it “a few times” in her life. During the interview she

summarized (13), made fact-based comments (5), identified when she was confused (3), applied passages to her life (3), made text-to-text connections (3), inferred (2), created an analogy (1), and identified, but did not use, textual resources (1). One of the things that made Priscilla's reading stand out was her commentary, which was usually about a sentence or two in length. She introduced her commentary with statements such as "I think" or "it's interesting," which suggest that her comments were often statements of intellectual curiosity. As such, Priscilla's conception of reading was partially informed by what she *thought* about what she read with little or no additional investigation of the text.

In 3 Nephi 12:1, for example, Priscilla commented, "It is interesting that he calls the disciples 'servants.'" In the next verse she stated, "It's interesting how he says 'more blessed' and not just 'blessed.' That people of faith are 'more blessed.'" In verse 10 she said, "I think that's interesting that being persecuted for our beliefs will accumulate blessings in the end." In each of these statements, Priscilla made fact-based observations about the content she was reading. Although clearly interested in the passage, Priscilla's commentary could actually limit her understanding of scripture insofar as each of these comments marked the end-point of her line of thinking, indicating that making an intellectual observation could mark the culmination of her scripture reading.

*Connecting: What is it like?* Paul stated that reading scripture was about developing a "deeper understanding instead of just reading it for fun." He explained: "It's more like reading the same thing several times just to better understand it. Or, you know, reading it more in-depth instead of just reading the words on the page, trying to think about what they're saying." Across our interviews, Paul talked about scripture reading providing him with "a deeper understanding" and helping to explain "why we do certain things" in the Church. Unlike Jonathan, who viewed scripture reading as a language-translation process, or Priscilla, who privileged fact-based commentary, Paul viewed reading scripture as a cognitive activity that could inform his knowledge of the Church and Church doctrine.

For the reading process interview, Paul chose to read 3 Nephi 9 because he was reading it over several weeks with his Young Men class. In his reading, Paul summarized (14), made connections to the text (12), inferred (4), identified when he was confused (3), and critiqued the text (3). Second only to summarizing, Paul favored text connections. Interestingly, ten of the

twelve connections were text-to-text connections. The question that seemed to guide Paul's conception of reading was "What is it like?" To address this question, Paul drew heavily from his prior knowledge of scripture to connect with, or make sense of, the chapter. Put another way, to understand what he read, Paul connected the old—what he already knew—with the new—what he was reading.

At the beginning of 3 Nephi 9, for example, Paul stated, "I guess the voice is Jesus because I think that's what happened in the earlier [chapters]." Here, Paul first inferred what he thought was happening, then defended his inference with evidence he drew from his knowledge of previous chapters in 3 Nephi. Elsewhere, Paul stated, "He talks about people coming up to him as a little child, which also gets mentioned in the Bible a lot." In this instance, Paul first summarized what he read and then made an intertextual connection between 3 Nephi and the Bible. During the reading process interview, it was as if Paul was sifting through his knowledge and experiences, looking for ways to cohere what he was reading with what he already knew. That is, he seemed to be trying to understand scripture in terms of previously established knowledge and experience from other scripture.

Because Paul focused on making text-to-text connections, he demonstrated a heightened sense of the novel. Four of his twelve connections were actually recognitions of things that were new to him or different from what he thought he knew. For example, when he read about the cities that were destroyed, Paul stated, "I don't think I ever heard this mentioned in any other chapter like this one." Later, he stated, "And so now there are the cities that I've actually read before, as opposed to cities I've never heard of." Relying heavily upon his previous knowledge of and experiences with scripture, Paul demonstrated a sensitivity to the "new," ostensibly because he struggled to connect it to anything that he had previously known.

*Inferring: What lesson or conclusion can I draw?* Vincent used colorful metaphors to explain his view of scripture. He called it "a time machine you can kind of step into" and "this giant diamond sitting in front of you." Although Vincent believed that he was "pretty good" at reading scripture, he said that he still found it difficult "because of the language in it. It's often misinterpreted or interpreted different ways, and so it's really easy to kind of get off track when you're reading the scriptures." When he read, Vincent stated that he usually "would take [scripture] apart verse by verse."

Like Paul, Vincent selected 3 Nephi 9 for the interview because he was already reading it in Young Men. Vincent estimated that he had read this chapter two or three times. During his reading process interview, Vincent summarized (22), inferred generally (7), inferred lessons or morals (6), made connections (3), critiqued the text (1), and made a fact-based comment (1). Vincent's reading was characterized by special attention to inferences, or logical interpretations based on evidence from the text and his own reasoning. Inferring requires attention to text content, skillful marshalling of background knowledge, and careful reasoning to reach justifiable conclusions.

Half of Vincent's inferences were general inferences that functioned as specific interpretations of pieces of the text. For example, as he read the first part of 3 Nephi 9:22 about becoming as a little child, Vincent stated, "You often hear things like, 'You should become as a little child.' Just because children are—they're just really pure because they haven't been exposed to as many things. So it is harder for them to question things and to deny things." Drawing upon the verse, Vincent activated his background knowledge about children, purity, conceptions of "the world," faith, "worldly" experience, and so forth to reach what he thought was a logical conclusion about why Jesus Christ would command these people to become as little children. Vincent had to develop a reasoned interpretation of the rationale behind the Savior's statement because the verse did not provide one.

The other half of Vincent's inferences were life lessons or morals that he drew from the chapter and phrased as statements that he could presumably apply to his life. For example, after his general inference above, Vincent stated, "And Christ wants you to have that faith . . . that you are not questioning or denying, like the scripture or the spoken word or that sort of thing." After drawing an inference based on the chapter, Vincent took the next step and inferred additional understanding from the verse that meant something to him personally. In effect, Vincent applied the principle of becoming childlike to his own life, interpreting it to mean that he, or the general and ubiquitous "you," should not question or deny ancient and modern scripture. That, to him, was being childlike.

Interestingly, after Vincent drew a general inference or inferred a moral or lesson, he stopped that particular line of thinking and continued reading the chapter. This suggests that inferring may have been the goal of Vincent's scripture reading. So, after he drew a logical conclusion about a verse or idea or generated a reasonable lesson that he could live by, Vincent may have

believed that his immediate work of taking the scriptures “apart verse by verse” was done.

*Problem solving: What could it mean?* When I asked if she was good at reading the scriptures, Samantha stated firmly, “No. Because I don’t understand them.” Samantha justified her lack of facility with scripture by explaining, “the scriptures are written in a different format. And the scriptures are written in a different way of talking. They are from a different time. . . . Sometimes it just doesn’t make sense to me.” Although Samantha struggled with understanding scripture, she did not give up. Indeed, Samantha conceptualized scripture reading as a multimodal problem-solving process, stating that reading scripture is “more of discovering your own opinion and then having others sort of tell you what they think and then you can sort of morph them all together and sort of really learn what you believe.” For her, the question guiding her reading of scripture was “What could it mean?”

Samantha chose to read Alma 32 because her father said that it was a good chapter to read for our interview. She estimated that she had read Alma 32 about five times. During the reading process interview Samantha summarized (21), inferred (13), recognized when she was confused (5), made connections to the chapter (5), applied concepts to her life (3), identified resources she could draw from as she read (2), and critiqued the text (1). Based on these approaches, nothing really seemed to stand out about Samantha’s scripture reading; however, closer analyses revealed two important elements of Samantha’s approach to scripture.

First, Samantha was plumbing the depths of the chapter by engaging in reading as a problem-solving process. As the reading process interview unfolded, Samantha’s think-aloud responses became longer and more complex. Instead of reading a phrase and then commenting in a phrase, as did many of her peers, Samantha began making mini exploratory epistles as she read. I call them “exploratory” because she seemed to be trying to find answers and discover truths buried within the verses. She did not appear to be looking for a “right answer”; rather, she seemed to be guided by the exploration of possible meanings until she felt satisfied with one. I call them “epistles” because they were religious in nature and, by comparison to her peers’ observations, they were quite long. Although conscious of space limitations, I cite the following single verbal response in its entirety to demonstrate how Samantha plumbed the depths of Alma 32:

It's talking about how when the seed starts to grow and sprout it begins to grow and asks is it a good seed and it says, "Yes, it's a good seed," but that the knowledge isn't perfect yet. So you have faith in something, but you don't have faith in the whole concept of the thing. You have a good feeling about it, but you're not sure if it will turn out exactly how you want it to. And so then, it says that if the seed begins to grow, then you know that the seed is good and then your knowledge will be perfect because you know that your faith is dormant. And I don't know what dormant means. And so it seems to mean that if your faith starts to grow, then you know that you're on the right track, but if you're just trying to cause it to grow but nothing is happening and you feel like you're playing mind games with yourself then it's not a good seed, I guess. And they say the spiritual food is like reading scriptures, so if you're planting your seed of faith, then you have to read the scriptures to feed the seed otherwise it will just sort of wither and not be as full as it used to be, because it's sort of like when you have something strike you and you have to write it down and talk about it right then, otherwise it just won't seem important later. And if you neglect your tree of faith it won't get any root and then if something bad happens, then you just won't have faith anymore and you didn't really work on it. And it says that it's not always because the seed wasn't good, but sometimes crops just don't grow because farmers don't take care of them. It's not the seed's fault. It says that you have to be patient and look forward to the fruit. If you put a lot of care into developing faith and belief in the Lord then the end result will be good and you'll have the fruit of faith. . . . And there will be fruit, which is good.

Among the striking features of this excerpt is its extended focus on a single line of thought, which demonstrated Samantha's vigilance in her pursuit of meaning and her ability to wallow through a problem—in this case, the meaning of "faith is a seed," or more to the point, "trying to understand when exactly your faith turned into a perfect knowledge." Notice how Samantha used a variety of different approaches to deepen and extend her understanding of a single piece of the text and explore her confusion. She summarized, inferred, recognized when she was confused, used context clues to overcome her confusion, made connections and comparisons to prior knowledge, and created analogies. Samantha's approach to scripture demonstrated here is indicative of her statement that "sometimes there's stuff that you have to analyze more than just read the words."

Second, Samantha was conscious of and used the resources that she had available to make sense of Alma 32. This multimodal approach to reading provided Samantha with several sources to assist her construction of knowledge.<sup>19</sup> Struck by the rapidity and fluency with which she verbalized her responses, I asked her after the interview about her experience reading. Sparked by the phrase "faith is a seed," Samantha said that she saw a previously watched video in her head as she was reading, explaining, "So, it has this

song. And there was Alma planting a seed of faith and then you got to see it grow as the song went on. And there was a sort of a montage of the time of his faith growing and him preaching to the multitudes with the music in the background.” Samantha also explained that as she read, she recalled her father explaining that Alma 32 was “about faith being a seed.” When she remembered this, she said, “I was like, ‘Oh, that is what I’m reading!’ And it made a lot more sense.” Furthermore, Samantha stated that verbalizing her thinking helped her “absorb” the chapter, which she was pleased to say “makes sense now.”

In addition to the text of Alma 32, Samantha utilized video, music, her father’s words, and the nature of her reading practice to help her construct knowledge of the chapter. A general formula of the multiple modalities Samantha used while she read might look like this:

$$\text{Scripture} \times \text{Supporting Texts and Experiences} \times \text{Nature of Reading} = \text{Knowledge}$$

Clearly, Samantha was conscious of the resources she had available to help her construct a more robust understanding of Alma 32. Not only that—she used these resources to good effect to dig into scripture and not “just read the words.”

## Implications and Conclusion

Clearly, reading scripture is a critical part of learning religious truths, including the gospel of Jesus Christ. This study extends our current knowledge of Latter-day Saint youths’ religious literacy by investigating the nature of the scripture reading practices of youth in one Latter-day Saint community. With this study, we now have a clearer understanding via empirical evidence about how Latter-day Saint youth can read scripture, which raises some important issues for religious literacy instruction.

*Summarizing plus.* By a factor of four, summarizing was the most common approach used by the youth in this study, and it played an intriguing role in the youths’ scripture reading. Jonathan summarized almost extensively, point by point, phrase by phrase, but the four other youth used summaries as launching points for further investigation of the texts. For example, Paul’s summaries seemed to clarify ideas so that he could see if he could make connections before he actually made them, and Vincent’s summaries appeared to help him explain what the passage said before determining if he could infer a life lesson from it. This might be called “summarizing plus” because it suggests

that for these youth, knowing what a text says serves as a critical precursor to delving into the text in informed and strategic ways.

Summarizing may be an especially appropriate element of reading scripture because of the complexity of scripture. All of the youth in this study claimed that scripture was hard for them to understand. They all also used summaries more than any other approach. On the surface, summarizing may appear to be a simple skill, but when done well it helps develop students' abilities to generalize important points, use supporting details to defend their selection of main ideas, identify text structures, filter out less important details, and see how ideas are related to one another.<sup>20</sup> The ability to summarize also allows youth to remember what they have read and use that knowledge later to construct meaning with other texts or in other situations. Although summarizing may be an important element of reading complex texts such as scripture, on its own it is not sufficient. Instructionally, it may be more appropriate to conceptualize helping students develop robust summaries as building the infrastructure for more in-depth investigations of what scripture means because they would already have a clearer understanding of what scripture says.

*A complex meaning-making process.* Given the nature of scripture as the word of God, the complex demands it places on young readers, and the importance of knowing what scripture says, what it means, and why it matters, it seems appropriate to conceptualize reading scripture as a complex meaning-making process. By this, I mean that one cannot simply read the printed words in scripture and hope to understand them. Indeed, the youth in this study demonstrated a variety of ways in which they tried to make sense of their respective passages. When engaged with difficult and fundamentally important texts, such as scripture, reading is usually anything but simple. It involves false starts, confusion about unfamiliar or unusually used words, and rereading to regain conceptual or narrative coherence. We might also engage in internal conversations about what we are reading, why it matters, and what we think about it. We may need to stop and activate our prior knowledge of the chapter or the content to help us understand the passage. Moreover, we may find ourselves enraptured by the lilt of the language, disagreeing with what we have read, or confused by the dislocation between what we think we have read and what we think we know. As these examples demonstrate, reading, particularly complex texts like scripture, is not usually a simple, straightforward procedure. It is a complex process of making sense of words,

ideas, people, places, and events from the text that are often highly anachronistic, as they come into contact with individual readers' thoughts, experiences, penchants, skills, knowledge, purposes, and so forth. For religious educators, viewing scripture reading as a complex meaning-making process changes the game, if you will. It signals to youth that understanding scripture requires strategic effort, persistence, and heavenly intervention. It also provides a conceptual and practical entry point to teach youth the skills required to navigate the complex demands of scripture and how to use these skills purposefully and flexibly in the construction of gospel knowledge and faith.

*Demystifying thinking.* The verbalization protocol appeared to be a useful way to capture how the youth read scripture. It also appeared to be a useful practice for the readers insofar as all of them spoke favorably about the effects of verbalizing their thinking on their understanding of their self-selected chapter. Jonathan stated that his reading was "more detailed." Priscilla claimed that verbalizing her thinking as she read helped her realize that "I didn't understand quite as much as I thought." Paul said it helped him "better understand the structure of the chapter," "draw comparisons between various verses in this chapter and other chapters," and "read more carefully." Vincent agreed, stating that verbalizing his thinking clarified his understanding of what he read and "really helped me to take a closer look at [the scriptures]." And Samantha said that after verbalizing her thinking, the chapter "makes sense now."

Given the value of verbalizing one's thinking as one reads,<sup>21</sup> thinking aloud may hold promise in religious education. Specifically, parents and religious educators could model their own reading practices, demonstrating and capturing the processes they go through to make meaning as they read scripture. Moreover, they could articulate *why* and *when* they would do certain things. For example, "Because I am starting the Isaiah chapters in 2 Nephi, I know I'm going to need some help. Let's see what resources I have." To make thinking aloud an even more productive learning tool, students could write down what parents or teachers do to make meaning, identify places where parents or teachers become confused, and note how they overcome their confusion. Following a conversation about the parent/teacher model, students could practice thinking aloud during their own scripture reading.

Highlighting the manner in which we engage with scripture can demystify scripture reading for young people. It can help them see that scripture is supposed to make sense and that they can do things to improve their

comprehension of it even, or especially, when it gets difficult. Additionally, thinking aloud can bring to a conscious level what it takes to understand scripture and can pave the way for rich discussions not only about what scripture might mean, but also about *how* we have come to know what it means, particularly the doctrine, which may be most difficult for our youth to understand.<sup>22</sup>

*Being vs. becoming literate.* Because we are continually developing our scripture literacy, or our meaning-making practices with scripture, there is no such thing as *being* scripturally literate. If we believe that scripture has things to teach us over the course of our life experiences, then we must understand our relationship with scripture as constantly evolving, and by extension, we must see the process of constructing knowledge from scripture as always a work in process—a fluid state of perpetual *becoming*—that requires time, attention, and careful, strategic nurturing. Instructionally, viewing ourselves as becoming literate with scripture not only highlights the process of developing facility with scripture, but it honors that process by recognizing that each of us may engage with scripture for different purposes, be motivated by different goals, and value the journey for different reasons. Yet we are all on the same journey with scripture, seeking to become literate with the word of God so that we might know Deity for ourselves (see John 20:31). **RE**

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## Notes

1. See Jonathan A. Eakle, “Literacy Spaces of a Christian Faith-Based School,” *Reading Research Quarterly* 42, no. 4 (2007): 472–510; Andrea Fishman, *Amish Literacy: What and How it Means* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1988); Eric D. Rackley, “Scripture-Based Discourses of Latter-day Saint and Methodist Youths,” *Reading Research Quarterly* 49, no. 4 (2014): 417–35; Cynthia C. Reyes, “El Libro de Recuerdos [Book of Memories]: A Latina Student’s Exploration of Self and Religion in Public School,” *Research in the Teaching of English* 43, no. 3 (2009): 263–85; and Loukia K. Sarroub, “In-Betweenness: Religion and Conflicting Visions of Literacy,” *Reading Research Quarterly* 37, no. 2 (2002): 130–48.

2. See Christian Smith and Melinda L. Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

3. See Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*.

4. Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers Is Telling the American Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 51.

5. See Dennis A. Wright, “Realities of Scripture Literacy,” faculty forum, Brigham Young University, McKay School of Education, Provo, UT, February 1997.

6. Gordon B. Hinckley, “The Light within You,” *Ensign*, May 1995, 99.

7. See Randall L. Ridd, “The Choice Generation,” *Ensign*, May 2014, 56–58.

8. See Gary F. Stevenson, “Your Four Minutes,” *Ensign*, May 2014, 84–86.

9. Boyd K. Packer, “The Witness,” *Ensign*, May 2014, 94–97.

10. See Linda S. Reeves, "Protection from Pornography—A Christ-Focused Home," *Ensign*, May 2014, 15–17.
11. Joseph Fielding Smith, in Conference Report, October 1961, 18.
12. See Wright, "Realities of Scripture Literacy."
13. See Rackley, "Scripture-Based Discourses."
14. See K. Anders Ericsson and Herbert A. Simon, *Protocol Analysis: Verbal Reports as Data* (Cambridge, MA: Bradford Books/MIT Press, 1984/1993); Kathryn Hilden and Michael Pressley, "Verbal Protocols of Reading," in *Literacy Research Methodologies*, ed. Nell K. Duke and Marla H. Mallette (New York: Guilford Press, 2011), 427–40; and Michael Pressley and Peter Afflerbach, *Verbal Protocols of Reading: The Nature of Constructively Responsive Reading* (Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1995).
15. See Richard E. Boyatzis, *Transforming Qualitative Information: Thematic Analysis and Code Development* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1998).
16. The Scripture Reading Strategies Matrix that I developed as part of the analytic procedures for this article is available upon request.
17. See Robert E. Stakes, *The Art of Case Study Research* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1995); Robert K. Yin, *Applications of Case Study Research* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2012); and Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research: Design and Methods* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2013).
18. See Erin Horvat, *The Beginner's Guide to Doing Qualitative Research: How to Get into the Field, Collect Data, and Write Up Your Project* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2013).
19. Multimodality claims that meaning is constructed through various modes, or signs and symbols, including print, writing, speech, gesture, music, and so forth. Each of these modes is partial insofar as no single mode in a communicative event carries all of the meaning; instead, all of the modes in a communicative event contribute to the construction of meaning in different ways. See Carey Jewitt, "Multimodality and Literacy in School Classrooms," *Review of Research in Education* 32 (2008): 241–67.
20. See Tom Trabasso and Edward Bouchard, "Teaching Readers How to Comprehend Text Strategically," in *Comprehension Instruction: Research-Based Best Practices*, ed. Cathy Collins Block and Michael Pressley (New York: Guilford, 2002), 176–200.
21. See Beth Davey, "Think-Aloud—Modeling the Cognitive Processes of Reading Comprehension," *Journal of Reading* 27, no.1 (1983): 44–47; Ruth Schoenbach, Cynthia Greenleaf, and Lynn Murphy, *Reading for Understanding: How Reading Apprenticeship Improves Disciplinary Learning in Secondary and College Classrooms* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2012).
22. See Wright, "Realities of Scripture Literacy."