Editor’s Note

Seminary-Supported Gospel Study

“W e think it is a tremendous development at this time when our young people need ever more strength,” Elder Jeffrey R. Holland recently declared when explaining the alignment of seminary curriculum with the churchwide program *Come, Follow Me*. “We believe that it’s going to be wonderfully symbiotic with the home-centered concept—Church-supported, home-centered—and now to that we add seminary-supported, home-centered gospel study.”

This issue of the *Religious Educator* aims to help teachers and families prepare for and benefit from these changes. It features an interview with Elder Kim B. Clark, recently released commissioner of education, who shares how the realignment came about while offering practical advice for improving gospel study because of it. He also reflects on his own lifetime of deep learning, including lessons he learned as commissioner.

We are also pleased to feature articles by several seminary and institute faculty, including Chad H Webb, administrator of Seminaries and Institutes, together with those of other religious educators. Authors share scholarship centered on coming to know Christ and learning from him, especially through the Bible, the book currently being studied simultaneously in Sunday School and seminary. Articles explore the Crucifixion of Christ, help students appreciate how the Jehovah in the Old Testament and the Savior in the New Testament are one, and examine the value of study Bibles. Others focus on better understanding the prophet Isaiah and the historical context behind the ministry of Jeremiah.

These articles will help teachers and families adopt these changes while giving them insight into their own discipleship. I share in the belief of the First Presidency that “making this change will enhance the home-centered, Church-supported approach to gospel study through a unified study at home, Sunday School, and seminary.”

Scott C. Esplin
Editor in Chief
## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>A Lifetime of Deep Learning</td>
<td>Elder Kim B. Clark, Barbara Morgan Gardner, and Scott C. Esplin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>“We Talk of Christ, We Rejoice in Christ”</td>
<td>Chad H Webb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>Study Bibles: An Introduction for Latter-day Saints</td>
<td>Joshua M. Sears</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>59</td>
<td>Circumcision in the Old Testament</td>
<td>Ryan J Wessel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>73</td>
<td>The Stem of Salvation and the Rod of Restoration: Revisiting Biblical Exegesis and Latter-day Saint Interpretation of Isaiah 11:1</td>
<td>Jared A. Jepson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>97</td>
<td>The Imprisonment of Jeremiah in Its Historical Context</td>
<td>Kevin L. Tolley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>115</td>
<td>A Savior with a Sword: The Power of a Fuller Scriptural Picture of Christ</td>
<td>Kerry Muhlestein</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>133</td>
<td>Teaching the Scriptural Emphasis on the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ</td>
<td>John Hilton III</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>155</td>
<td>CES Missionary Couples Serving around the World</td>
<td>Poonen (Felipe) Chou and Petra Chou</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>176</td>
<td>Recent and Upcoming Publications</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>180</td>
<td>Upcoming Events</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>181</td>
<td>Staff Spotlights</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Gardner: Thank you for the chance to interview you previously, and now one final time as you conclude your service as Church Commissioner of Education. The question I’ve asked every time I’ve met with you is, What have you learned this last year that you didn’t already know before being Commissioner? What has stood out to you as a Commissioner? What experiences have you had?

Clark: First, I think what happens is that I relearn things. And each time they go deeper or I get more confident. Second, one thing’s really clear—there’s a lot of help from heaven in this work, even more than I had imagined. There are so many things that have happened that you just stand in awe. So it makes me think—I’ve joked to people, but I don’t think it’s a joke—there’s got to be a group of people up there assigned to this situation in heaven. They are working on Church education.

Gardner: I personally find that fascinating because that’s the same answer you gave last year when I met with you. You probably recognize that, but of all the things you’ve learned, it was that the Lord’s hand is in everything that’s been happening.
Clark: He’s in everything. It’s just amazing. So there is a corollary, which is that my prayers change. My prayers change to “Help me have a pure heart so that I want what Thou wouldst want, so my desires are perfectly aligned with Thy desires.” There’s a plan, and we just need to make sure that what we’re doing is really aligned with it. That means in everything we do. So that’s another really powerful thing—to try to pray for a pure heart so that you don’t have any other desires except that the Lord’s will be done. Because that’s why we are here.

Esplin: I have a related question. You have in part opened my eyes to the breadth of the Church Educational System. I most frequently associate the Church Educational System with seminaries and institutes, the Church universities, and the Church schools. But what you are discussing is much bigger than that. What can you share about your understanding and your feelings for the Church’s role in educating all of God’s children, regardless of membership in the Church, regardless of educational level? It seems like your vision is larger than what many of us in seminaries and institutes or religious education think about when we consider Church education.

Clark: Go back in your mind to 1970 when Neal A. Maxwell became the Commissioner of Education. Joseph Fielding Smith was the President of the Church, but Harold B. Lee had the education portfolio. They called Elder Maxwell and gave him a responsibility to come and think about all of Church education. They did a big study and held numerous discussions: “Should the Church invest more in higher education? Should it invest in religious education?” The higher education question was really interesting, and the report was fascinating because it anticipated BYU-Pathway Worldwide when the technology was still a dream. They talked about your television talking to you and things like that. They said, “The day will come when you won’t need bricks and mortar.” But the decision was made to invest in religious education. That began this huge project to offer seminary wherever the Church was established. Today it’s not a big deal to open up a seminary. You don’t have to get permission from the Church Board of Education. You don’t have to check the budget or anything. The stake president calls and says to a coordinator, “I think we need another seminary class.” Or if you form a new stake, you’ve got to figure out new seminary classes. So you just do that all over the Church. And as the Church grows all over the world, seminary grows. In the fall of 2015, we took a proposal to the board to apply that same idea to education generally.

Gardner: Was that when you first started?

Clark: August of 2015 was when I started. The proposed policy read, “The Church Educational System will provide opportunities for education to the members of the Church wherever the Church is organized.” Now, how to do that, when to do it, where to do it are all questions ultimately decided by the Board. We already do it with religious education, and that’s clear. In higher education, the founding of BYU-Pathway was a commitment to provide educational opportunities in higher education across the Church. And we have just begun, just scratched the surface. We also have been exploring pilot programs in secondary education. We are asking questions like: Are there things we could do that would be helpful and useful? Is it the right thing for us to be in some kind of secondary education—perhaps, for example, providing after-school classes to support children in school—beyond the Church schools that we already have? Can we provide educational opportunities in a way that’s sustainable and blesses people’s lives? Is it the right thing to do? The answers to those questions are still pending; we are still in a pilot stage. In time we’ll get answers to those questions. Sometimes the answers don’t come right now because the time is not quite right, and sometimes they come even faster than you expect.

I’ll give you another great example. As we’re working to explore options, we have learned to conduct these pilots: study them; present them to the prophets, seers, and revelators; and let them be prophets. So we’re using the right approach, and then we just have to see what the prophets, especially the prophet, feel is right. Here’s a good example that goes back to around 2005–6. Especially for Youth, or EFY, of course, had a long, very successful history. Permission was granted to run a pilot to do EFYs in Europe and in Mexico to see if EFY could work there. They were hugely successful, by any measure. They were a great experience for the youth; they were sustainable and doable. Everything worked great with locations and staffing. A proposal came to the board, and the board said, “No. Shut them down.” President Hinckley’s response at the time was, “If we do this, we will undercut the Church organization, the youth organization. It won’t grow and mature the way it should because BYU would come in and run the program.” Now, fast forward to today—all across the international Church conferences called For the Strength of Youth have been developed. Essentially, these are EFY-like programs run by the stakes, the coordinating councils, and the areas of the Church. They’re a big success. And now, FSY is going to be part of the new
Child and Youth effort both internationally and in the US and Canada. BYU will bring all of their EFY experience and help run FSY in the US and Canada. And all of this is happening today because of the inspiration of the prophet of God.

Everything I see and feel teaches me that the Lord desires to bless His children with education. Education is a religious responsibility for parents and children. Learning is essential in building the kingdom and is part of the plan of salvation. Exactly how we implement education we have to decide, but the Holy Ghost is in this process. I believe that educational opportunities will happen all across the Church. In what form? We’ll see. But I think the technologies are moving forward to make those opportunities possible in ways and at a cost that we would not have thought possible twenty years ago. For years, going back to that 1970s study, people have had a dream to extend opportunities for education to many, many more people in the Church. For example, when Merrill Bateman was president of BYU, he thought about expanding educational opportunities. He tried some things, but the technology wasn’t quite there, and it got shut down. But with the growth of the Church and with the tremendous reach of the Seminaries and Institutes program, we have been able to open Pathway sites all across the earth in five or six hundred locations.

I know there is a hunger for education among God’s children, especially in the kingdom—just a hunger to learn and to gain knowledge. It’s amazing to watch. You can go into one of these Pathway locations and feel the yearning for education. It’s palpable. These are people who never thought they would get an education, never imagined they would have this opportunity. They had no hope, therefore, of what education could bring into their lives. They once thought, “Well, I’m here, and Heavenly Father’s providing this for other people but not for me.” Now, however, they feel His love, and they have hope. It’s just like feeding starving people.

Esplin: This makes Pathway, and other initiatives like this, more expansive than other educational opportunities that have been offered by the Church.

Clark: I’ll tell you another fascinating thing that happened this year. Going back many years, the Seminaries and Institutes people here in these offices have wrestled with the question, “Is there any way for us to be aligned with Sunday School and the Church in the study of the scriptures? Can they line up in any way?” “The answer was always, “It’s completely impossible.” We went through one exercise about two years ago where we really tried. We concluded, “This is really hard. We just can’t do it.” We actually did this in conjunction with the individuals in the Priesthood and Family Department who are responsible for all the Church’s curriculum, and they agreed. They looked at it and said, “Yes, it’s too hard.” Then in October of 2018, President Russell M. Nelson said, “Home-centered gospel learning—that’s what we need.” Then he announced the change to the Sunday schedule and the change to the integrated curriculum. One day Sister Bonnie Cordon, Young Women General President, said to Chad Webb, administrator of Seminaries and Institutes of Religion, “You should do this.” He said, “No, it’s too hard.” She said, “I don’t care. You should do it.” Chad came to me and told me what happened, and I said, “Let’s think it through.”

You know what changed? The prophet said, “home-centered, Church-supported.” That changes the whole thing because you don’t say, “Can we do this?” You flip it around and say, “We’re doing this. So what do we need to do? Are we going to do it. What are the issues?” And so we sat here and talked, and they went to work and said, “Well, here is what we’ll have to do, and it is messy.” It is messy because you have schools starting at different times of the year and there are other challenges. But there never was a question of, “Are we going to do it?” We already had answered that. And we took it to the board, and they approved it. Then we confronted a huge challenge because the different school calendars are a real problem. What are we going to do about trimesters, and how are we going to handle programs that start in February or in June? How are we going to do this? We started working and solutions came.

Then we confronted something that was much more difficult. We said, “Well, you know, if the curriculum in seminary was not sequential but doctrinal, it would actually be a lot easier to integrate with the Church curriculum.” So then we had to confront changing the practice of sequential teaching of the scriptures in seminary that goes way back.

Gardner: It has a lot of emotion.

Clark: There was a lot of emotion, but we made the decision and prayed for Chad and his team. It was absolutely time for this new approach. Now we need to create new manuals. We decided the courses should connect the doctrine and principles from throughout the breadth of the scriptures, rather than focus on a single passage at a time. So instead of teaching a little about a lot of verses, we’re going to spend more time discussing and learning and applying the fundamental principles of the restored gospel. That decision
coincided with another thing that happened to us as we talked and learned. We talked and listened to students and learned that our students don’t know the doctrine as well as we want them to—basic things like repentance and faith. So we went to work from there. But that all came—that was heaven’s work. It felt that way too; it felt like, “Oh, it’s time. You’re supposed to do this.”

Esplin: Wonderful. Thank you for sharing. You addressed several of the questions I had wondered about for our readers. In the interview with yourself, Elder Jeffrey R. Holland, Sister Bonnie Cordon, and Brother Chad Webb announcing the realigning of the seminary curriculum, you stated, “We are going to do this, and then we’ll figure out how to make it happen.” What can you share with readers regarding the process of figuring these things out? You’ve done some of that. Is there anything else that would be helpful for our readers?

Clark: One thing that is really helpful is to realize, and this was the eye-opener, that the students in all parts of the world start in the scriptures in January with their family, and they’re studying the scriptures all year. So that means now we actually are supporting what is happening in the home. Before we thought of the families supporting us. But now we’re going to support the families. How do we do that? What’s the best way to support? Well, we have a calendar, a school calendar. But not to worry, the youth are reading the scriptures even in summer. It doesn’t matter if you start in March with us because they’ve already been in the scriptures for a couple of months. They’re doing the reading and learning with their families. Then we worry about things like assessments, but you say, “Well, they’re reading their scriptures.” So, what kind of requirements do we establish, what kind of assessments? In making those decisions we can take into account this home-based reading program that is going on all year long. It makes a huge difference.

The second thing has been to abandon, where necessary, the claim that “this is how we do this,” and instead say, “That was then, this is now. So how are we going to do this?” Once you open your mind up that way, a lot of things occur, and the Holy Ghost can talk to you. This is a principle that’s true everywhere—if you’re trying to get something done and you’re working hard to have the Spirit teach you, but you’re stuck and you say, “We can’t do this,” it’ll never work. You’re stuck there, and the Spirit can’t talk to you. The Spirit can’t do anything to you because you’ve already said, “I’m not going to do it.” But once you open up your mind and start praying for help to do it, the Spirit can talk to you. I’m talking now about Chad and his administrators. They were sitting there wrestling with these mighty problems like trimesters. They worry about things like, “How is this going to work for somebody that’s starts school in September, but they’re not in seminary?” These are knotty problems. But they prayed about it, and then somebody got an idea, a revelation. They said, “What if we didn’t start the Book of Mormon (the 2020 scripture) until March instead of January? What would that look like? Run it out. “Oh. That would actually make it work.” Because otherwise, your kids will end up getting a quarter of this and a quarter of that. But if we start in March, that’s now the beginning of a trimester. So how would that work? Once again, they realize that the students would be reading the Book of Mormon with their families starting in January. And the realization settles in that starting in March will work.

Gardner: Just to clarify, would they be starting the Book of Mormon, in 1 Nephi, in March?

Clark: Yes.

Gardner: So they’re going back to kind of catch up with their parents, with their families and the Church?

Clark: Yes, except they’re now going to focus on doctrine, and they’re there every day, for fifty minutes, so they’re going to cover a lot more ground. But it’s OK, it will be familiar ground for them. And it works to accomplish what needs to be done in a trimester. They figured it out. You can look at things and say, “Well, it’s not perfect.” Is anybody worried about losing two months? I’m in the room, and I responded, “Sounds good to me. That’ll be OK.” Everybody will figure this out, starting with study in families, and seminary will pick up. There’s a little period of time that’s not matched up, but it really simplifies things. The alternative to that is really hard. And getting continuity in studying the scriptures by starting in March is way better for kids educationally, so we made that little compromise.

Gardner: So they will continue to take the previous year’s studies through March?

Clark: No, not through March, to March. When January comes the students in a trimester system would be in their middle semester. They will finish the previous year’s scripture in that trimester, and then begin the Book of Mormon at the beginning of March. If you run it out over multiple years, it actually works.

Gardner: So teachers have to be on the ball, right?
**Clark:** Oh, yes. Now you have to train the teachers, and you have to help them understand this is what we’re doing. It’s a lot of work to make this happen. That’s exactly what’s happened. It’s revelation by receiving counsel and sitting in council, opening your mind to the Spirit. It’s freeing up, getting rid of constraints you thought were there. It’s being ready to say, “No, we’re going to do this.”

**Esplin:** One of the changes will be the long-held focus on sequential study. In the interview explaining the realignment, Elder Jeffrey R. Holland said, “This is going to require some modification of the curriculum. We’re going to go deeper on some matters. It won’t be sequential study; it will be more doctrinally based and always focused on the Savior.” And you added, “We are also, through the curriculum, going to make it so that they go deeper into doctrine. And that’s been an objective of this change—instead of covering lots of things a little bit, we want to cover a few things really deep.”

What counsel might you share with teachers so that they can facilitate this deeper learning throughout this new curriculum? How can teachers, who might be very familiar with a sequential approach, change their own preconceived notions or constraints to accommodate what you and Elder Holland described?

**Clark:** We’ll do our best to support everybody who is going to teach. So eventually they won’t need us; they’ll be able to do it. But what I would say is, in addition to that support, the same principle that we just articulated for how to do this calendar works in how to teach. You open up your mind and your heart, and the Spirit will teach you. You’ll know what to do because this is from heaven. We didn’t just make this up. We didn’t sit back here in our little offices and think of all the cool ways we could change seminary. This came from heaven. It’s just like whom the Lord calls, He qualifies—He will teach you. It might feel a little bit awkward, but my guess is it’ll feel just so good to be able to teach youth certain things and to teach deeper and help the young people. That means you’ll have more time to engage in deep learning with the students. Because you’re not going to be concerned about covering a certain section of material, it’s going to be about helping the students learn more deeply the fundamental principles of the gospel. You will also give them the time and opportunity to raise questions. In a sense, doctrinal mastery will still have the scripture part, but doctrinal mastery has been integrated into the curriculum rather than being a special thing to do on certain days. That means there will be more opportunity to explore, “What does this mean for my life? How is this going to affect what I do? What am I going to do about this? How can I be more effective in learning how to apply this doctrine in my life? What does it mean for me?” I think it will be great. I think people will like it. I know the students will like it. The students will love it. The students love doctrinal mastery, and so do the teachers. They’ll go into all sorts of wonderful doctrine. I think it will be great. I think where it’s headed is that the curriculum writers are trying to think through, “How much time should we spend on what topics, and what doctrines?” And so, you might spend a whole week on something, or it might be two- or three-week class sessions. It will vary with the topic.

**Esplin:** Thank you. The last question from the announcement was something that you offered to teachers during the interview. You said, “We also hope that—and this is speaking to the teachers—we’ll do away with the idea that you have to cover material. We are not really about ‘covering material.’ We want to dive deep into some things—get a flavor for the flow of the book, the way it was written—and yet give the students an opportunity to really dive deep and really understand the doctrines of the gospel. We want the students to live them—to really learn how to live the principles. And then we want them to become what the principles help us become.”

How can teachers make this change? Are there things that might change with the design of the curriculum relating to pressure to cover material or to go deeper? How can we, as teachers, catch this vision that you’re sharing as the announcement was presented?

**Clark:** I think one way, in part, comes through the curriculum itself. Take a verse that you really love and think about. “What would I do if I were going to spend a whole week on this verse? What would we do? What would we talk about? How would we spend a week?” Take, for example, 2 Nephi 31:20: “Wherfore, ye must press forward with a steadfastness in Christ, having a perfect brightness of hope, and a love of God and of all men.” So, you take that verse, and you say, “How would we spend a week on it?” Five class sessions, what will you do? Well, it’s rich. How is it rich? Well, it’s got at least four or five topics in there in the whole verse. You know, what does it mean to “press forward”? What does “with steadfastness in Christ” mean? Where does that come from? How do you develop it? What is it? What does a “perfect brightness of hope” mean in your life? I mean, what is “hope”? What does it
We’ll study the allegory, and we’ll have all this rich stuff. But when we get to
What are you feeling? What are you doing to have the Atonement of Christ
What does that mean? Why does it say pressing? Why the word ‘press’? That
OK.” So we’re going to see Nephi, and we’re going to understand his family’s
How do you do that?” And pretty soon you’ll say, “Oh, I could spend a year
journey. We’re going to see Nephi writing all these amazing things in his life
“press forward with a steadfastness in Christ”?
conjures up an image of opposition—what is that opposition?” Then you get
a long list and say, “How do you deal with that? How do you do this every
day? What does it mean to ‘press forward with a steadfastness in Christ’? How
do you do that?” And pretty soon you’ll say, “Oh, I could spend a year
on this.” And I think that’s one way to help them see, “Oh, that’s what this is
about.” Now, it’s not going to be just one verse. You could spend, as you know,
an entire course on 1 and 2 Nephi. You could do an entire course on 2 Nephi.
I mean, it’s incredibly rich. I mean with all the Isaiah material, people
say, “Oh. Isaiah.” But then you say, “No, let’s take 2 Nephi 25 and use it as
our guide.” And we can spend days and days on that. There are all sorts
of things in there, and it’s rich. And then you say, “Oh, that’s what this is about.
OK.” So we’re going to see Nephi, and we’re going to understand his family’s
journey. We’re going to see Nephi writing all these amazing things in his life
and learn what he’s trying to teach us. We’ll see Jacob, and we’ll have Sherem.
We’ll study the allegory, and we’ll have all this rich stuff. But when we get to
the allegory, you’re going to spend more than ten minutes because that’s the
gathering of Israel. But you’ll say, “Oh, I see how he did this.” And we’re going
to pick and choose things that are doctrinally rich and go deeper into them.

Clark: It’s an opportunity for the teachers to say, “I really love this stuff.
Let’s really get into it. Let’s really take the time to read carefully and yet always
remember to bring it back to the students.” Because in the end, it’s all about
the Savior and them. It’s all about the Savior. How is He affecting your life?
What are you feeling? What are you doing to have the Atonement of Christ
bless you? I think it’s going to be really fun. I think the teachers are going to
love this. Now, it’ll be a little scary. But at first we’ll do our best to give sup-
port, and then the new manuals will start to appear.

Gardner: It’s seems like it’s a strong connection to the teaching and
learning emphasis before, but giving even more tailoring to allow the teachers
to understand what needs to happen in the classroom.

Clark: You’ve got to engage the youth, because they’ll respond. Just
that question of, ”Do you guys ever experience any opposition? What kind?
Make a list. So, let’s pick a couple, what can we do about this? Can the Savior
help you with this? What can you do? Can we help each other? We’re in this
together! How do we overcome opposition?”

Gardner: You’ve reiterated a number of things in our interviews over the
years. Frankly, one of the interviews wasn’t a formal one at all. I visited you
at BYU–Idaho when you were first called, and you had mentioned that same
idea: we receive this revelation from the Lord, and we are doing it. And your
comment, I believe, was, “And we just don’t look back. Whatever happened
in the past is the past—we move forward.”

So, on that same topic, this is more toward your experience of working
now with youth, young adults, and teachers who are struggling, perhaps, with
authority and prophets today. I know when I talked to you last time, we had
a similar conversation about using the doctrine to help understand, and the
internet age, and everything else. What I’ve noticed lately, in our classes and
just through talking to people, is that it seems like some of the youth are just
struggling with the idea of authority, with the idea of a prophet on the earth
today. And with my experience in the past, you have a very strong testimony
of having a prophet on the earth. I’m just wondering how you would help
students, young adults, and even teachers gain and understand the role of a
prophet and the importance of a prophet today. You sit in a very specific posi-
tion where you are working with the Brethren on a regular basis, and you are
following this revelation from them. So, if you could just guide us and help
us and help teachers.

Clark: I think it starts with your understanding of who Heavenly Father
is and who the Savior is because everything flows from that. There’s a prophet
on the earth who speaks for Them. I think, speaking personally and for my
own children, if you have a testimony of your Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ
and you have faith in Them, then you’ve come a long way toward under-
standing the role of the prophets because they speak for God. He speaks through
them. So that’s one of the ways Heavenly Father speaks to us. There are some
basic questions that you can use to help students understand. “Do you believe
in the Book of Mormon? Do you have a testimony of the Book of Mormon?”
If so, then you now have a source where you can see prophets in action. And you can see why God has prophets on the earth. It all revolves around understanding the plan of salvation. Why are we on earth? And why does it work this way? It all has to do with the purpose of our mortal life, our agency, the Lord’s work, His Church, and His living prophets. So, I think that’s how you help people: with a foundation of understanding about why the prophets are there. And we can see what happens when they’re not. There’s a number of things that all wrap around the plan of salvation that, I think, make sense when you have living prophets. So, when I speak in June, I’m speaking to my last S&I broadcast. And I talk about this. I talk about personal revelation. And one of the ways you get personal revelation is through living prophets. They speak to us. They speak the words of the Lord.

Gardner: It seems like there’s a bigger divide now. And maybe it’s just me that’s seeing this. I was surprised by how many students really struggled with a recent policy change. The first class at 9:00 in the morning? Great. 10:00? Dampening down a little bit. My 1:00 class? There were more questions. By 2:00? They were questioning. I found it fascinating to go from excitement to questioning within a four-hour period of time, and of course a lot of it’s just the internet and what they’re seeing on Facebook and what they’re seeing on the tweets and everything else. And I’ve felt, for me, and other teachers have as well, this need to help the students recognize that the prophet speaks for God. To really get that testimony deep down. Which is what you’re saying, but it’s surprising to me how many would say, “Well, how can the prophet be the prophet if he changed his mind from what he said three years ago to now?” And it’s just this basic . . . for me it seems like a basic lack of testimony where they think they have a testimony but they’re questioning the prophet.

Clark: There is no question about that. That is why I started where I started. Do you know your Heavenly Father? Do you have a testimony of Him? Do you have a testimony of the Savior? Do you have a testimony of the Book of Mormon? Do you know it’s true? OK then. The other thing that I found helpful with this particular change we’re talking about here is to help people find analogies that they relate to. I think a really good one is Zion’s Camp. Here you have a prophet that receives a revelation from the Lord, which he wrote down and said, “OK, put these people, take them together, go to Missouri. And we’re taking our weapons, we’re going to march, we’re going to liberate our brothers and sisters.” At least, that’s what they thought. And, you know, that was a hard trek. That was a tough, tough road. Not a piece of cake to walk a thousand miles. And it was tough on Joseph and everybody else. And then the purpose got changed. You know, they get there, and they’re rescued by the storm from being annihilated by the Missourians. And they’re there and get sick—it’s just a mess. And some of them die. And then the Lord says, “OK, that’s enough. Let’s go home.” And then the people say, “What? We’ve come all this way. We haven’t done anything!” There was a lot of disension. But Joseph said, “The Lord has spoken. We’re going home.” And they turned around and walked home. People who have a secular eye, or a worldly eye, cannot make sense out of that. It just seems so strange. But that’s exactly how the Lord works. And in that group were all the leaders of the Church. Brigham Young spoke for all of them when he said, “Everything I learned about how to run this Church I learned in Zion’s Camp.” So, it wasn’t about liberating the brothers and sisters anyway, it was about something else.

Gardner: That’s where I think a lot of the students are missing it.

Clark: And the Lord doesn’t tell us why. We just have to trust Him. But I heard one of the members of the First Presidency make a really interesting comment, “You know, sometimes the Lord gives the whole Church a revelation that is designed to help some person. And sometimes it’s changed to help another person.” We just don’t know. So we trust, because we trust in the Lord. We love Him, we love His prophet, we know President Nelson, we know these Brethren. And they’re not capricious by any means. It’s not random. This is not something they cooked up. There’s a reason. And we fully don’t know what it is. And that’s very often how the Lord works. Actually, on a personal level I’ve sat in counsel with people who say, “Why did this happen? Why did this happen?” I had a young man who was sitting in that chair right there say to me, “I pled with the Lord not to take away my physical strength.” And now he’s hunched over from a car accident, with terrible back injuries and a shattered neck. He’s really big, six feet five inches, a big guy who was always really strong—he could go all day long. Now he said, “Why?” And I said, “Well, there are times when He doesn’t really tell us why. He just doesn’t.” And that’s true for prophets too. But we trust them and love them because we love the Lord. It’s not because we have faith in President Nelson. I mean, you might have faith in him, but it’s faith in the Lord. And you know he speaks for the Lord.

Gardner: Which for me, is why I hope this doctrinal experience framework works, right? Because I would say, as a teacher, the students think they want more history—this is from my perspective—they think they want more
context, they think they want everything else. But I’m saying, they’re leaving the Church. So let’s make sure they’re getting the doctrine straight.

Clark: I think I’ve told you this before—we get all this stuff. People teaching context and history. The daughter of one of my general authority colleagues took a class in the New Testament, and in the first seven weeks they never, ever, opened the Gospels. No. Never read a verse. This is all context. But it was not the New Testament. It wasn’t about the doctrine and the Savior. Some context is helpful, but you’ve got to read the scriptures.

Gardner: Elder Clark, the last question. After seeing you over this four-year framework as Church Commissioner of Education, I wonder if you have any general thoughts, anything specific that you’d like to share? Are there themes or things that you have learned?

Clark: I know this: Education, of any kind—religious or secular—is really important to the Lord. It is really important. He cares about it. And He cares about it because it’s an important part of the plan of salvation. There are a lot of things that people need to learn. Elder Bednar said this in his book, he said, “The overarching purpose of the plan of salvation is to learn.” It’s not to learn specific things; it’s to become like our Father in Heaven. We have to learn. You have to learn in those ways. So that’s been a sweet experience to be part of. And there’s just lots of work to be done. And it’s been that way for a long, long time. And I imagine that all those brethren who have gone before us, all those sisters who spent all that time teaching the kids, rejoice to see this happen.

I have a great-great-grandmother who is named Lucy Hawes. She lived in Payson, Utah, most of her life. She was so committed to getting her children an education that she just did everything in her power. There are amazing stories about what she did and the sacrifices she made. The work she did. In fact, she once said, and I think she got it right, “If I were a man, I would be wealthy.” It’s true. Because she was really capable. She was constrained by the world where she lived, but she made gloves, she made rugs, she took in boarders, she did all sorts of things to make money. She put it all into her children and their education. I’m grateful for that because it came down.

One of her children was a man named Josiah. Josiah Hickman was in the Church Educational System. He taught in academies—he taught at Brigham Young Academy for a while. And he was one of the very first Latter-day Saints to go east for a graduate degree. He received a graduate degree from the University of Michigan, and then he studied at Columbia. But he had a grandson named Martin Hickman. Do you know who Martin Hickman was?

Gardner: I don’t know who Martin Hickman was.

Clark: Martin Hickman was the dean of the College of Family, Home, and Social Sciences at BYU for a long time. He was a great dean, revered. He came to BYU in ’67, died in ’91. He was dean for much of that time. Anyway, another one of the grandsons was a professor at the University of Washington, and he invented something called the Hickman catheter. He was a great teacher and a great physician. You just look at that family, and you can see Lucy Hawes and her commitment to education all the way down the generations. And she got that commitment because of her faith in Jesus Christ and His restored gospel. Learning is important to the Lord.

Gardner: How has your education influenced your life? You’ve had so many opportunities, and so many opportunities to teach. You are talking about how important education is. How has education influenced you, Elder Clark?

Clark: In a nutshell, I love school. I have since I was a little boy. I love to read, I love to learn, I love school. And I’ve never left since I started when I was four or something like that. I’ve never left. Except for my mission and a few other short periods, I’ve basically been in school. So the question “How has education affected your life?” is not the right question. Education is my life. It is very, very true actually—I think it is my life. It’s what I’ve done with my life, in addition to being a husband and father to my children, which is an education within itself. I’ve been greatly blessed. I’ve had great teachers. And that started when I was just a little boy. I had some really, really great teachers. And I’ve had teachers who’ve opened doors for me, and it’s been a real blessing. I had the privilege to be educated in some pretty amazing places. And I’m grateful for that. The most powerful education has been through the Holy Ghost, without any doubt. Learning from the Lord has been a great blessing to me.
The gospel is not a list of demands; it is the good news that Jesus Christ overcame sin and death.

“We Talk of Christ, We Rejoice in Christ”  

CHAD H WEBB

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From a Seminaries and Institutes of Religion annual training broadcast, 12 June 2018.

Thank you, that was wonderful. We’re so blessed. It’s such a privilege to be together with all of you today. Thank you for all you’re doing. We love you and love serving with you.

With many of you, I think often of the opportunity that is ours to teach the youth and young adults of the Church and think often of how we might teach them with more power in helping them to build deep and abiding faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. As I’ve considered this important question, I’ve reflected on the idea that Elder Kim B. Clark shared last January with us when he said that the Savior’s invitation to learn of Him first means that we must learn to know Him. And second, that we must learn from Him. He quoted Elder Neal A. Maxwell, who referred to the Savior’s invitation to “learn of me” and added, “There is no other way to learn deeply.”

I have come to understand and believe that the single most important way in which we can help increase faith in the rising generation is to more
fully place Jesus Christ at the center of our teaching and learning by help-
ing our students come to know Him, to learn from Him, and to consciously
strive to become like Him. Every day, we must "talk of Christ, . . . rejoice in
Christ, . . . [and] preach of Christ." 2

Many of you have already begun to respond to this invitation, intention-
ally preparing lessons with these ideas in mind and looking for opportunities
to testify of Jesus Christ and of His divine attributes, His boundless power,
and His unfailing love. In these classes there has been an increased influence
of the Holy Ghost, more expressions of gratitude for the Savior, more mean-
ingful and relevant personal application, and more young people acting in
faith.

Of course, the most important way we can help our students come to
know the Savior is to help them prepare for sacred priesthood ordinances and
to keep their covenants. 3 To help them qualify for the blessings of the temple
is to help them know and follow Jesus Christ. But there are other things we
can do, while they are with us, that will help them to rely on the Him and on
His teachings and Atonement.

To this end, may I suggest four ways that we can place Jesus Christ more
in the center of our learning and teaching every day?

Focus on the Titles, Roles, Character, and Attributes of Jesus Christ

First, focus on the titles, roles, character, and attributes of Jesus Christ.
President Russell M. Nelson gave us an invitation to "let the scriptural cita-
tions about Jesus Christ in the Topical Guide become [our] personal core
curriculum." 4 This invitation is intended to help us go beyond knowing about
the things Jesus did and help us to come to know Him—His attributes and
character.

For example, one of the titles of Jesus Christ is Creator. Under the direc-
tion of His Father, Jesus created the heavens and the earth. Creator is also
one of His divine roles and speaks to His nature. As we study how and why
Jesus created the earth, we might ask, "What does this teach us about who He
is? What does it teach us about His motives, His love, and His power? What
divine attributes of the Savior are revealed in His role as the Creator?" 5

You may remember that President Boyd K. Packer was an accomplished
artist who enjoyed carving wooden birds. One day he was a passenger in a
car driven by Elder A. Theodore Tuttle, and one of his carvings rested on the
backseat of the car. At an intersection Elder Tuttle slammed on the brakes,
and the carving tipped upside down on the floor and broke into pieces. Elder
Tuttle was devastated, but President Packer was not. He simply said, "Forget
it. I made it. I can fix it." And he did. He made it stronger than it was and even
improved it a bit. President Packer explained, "Who made you? Who is your
Creator? There is not anything about your life that gets bent or broken that
He cannot fix and will fix." 6

When our students understand Jesus’s role as the Creator, and as they
ponder the scripture accounts that witness of His incredible power to fix and
heal His creations, their hearts will long to experience that power and prom-
ise in their own lives. They will then act in faith to experience His incredible
power to fix what is broken in them.

Another of Jesus’s sacred titles is Redeemer. The scriptures refer to Him
in this role 930 times. What does this title teach us about His character and
attributes? What did His redeeming power mean for Alma, Saul, and the
woman taken in adultery? What did it mean to Matthew, the publican and
Gospel writer?

I find it interesting that we learn of Matthew’s call to the Twelve in the
same chapter as the accounts of Jesus performing miracles and "healing every
sickness and every disease among the people." 7 The motive for these miracles
was that Jesus was “moved with compassion." 8 But why does Matthew alone,
of all the Gospel writers, include his call in the midst of these miracles? It may
have been a chronological account, but I think there is something else we can
learn. Is it possible that Matthew recognized that the greatest miracle that
Jesus did was to redeem us by forgiving, and loving, and lifting, and show-
ing a person his or her true identity and potential, just as He had done for
Matthew?

Another way to help students recognize Jesus’s attributes is to focus not
just on scripture events but on what those events teach us about the Savior.
For instance, why do we teach the story of Ammon cutting off the arms of
men who scattered King Lamoni’s sheep? Is it to talk about the greatness of
Ammon? Or is this story actually about the greatness of God? What does this
story teach us about the Lord and the way He blesses those who put their
trust in Him? Ammon’s own account concludes with this enthusiastic testi-
mony: "I do not boast in my own strength. . . . I know that I am nothing; . . .
therefore . . . I will boast of my God, for in his strength I can do all things." 9

A few months ago, I was with a group of wonderful teachers and asked
them to choose any scripture story or event in Church history and to think
about what it reveals about the nature of God. The first teacher responded with, “Polygamy.” My first thought was, “Thanks a lot! You couldn’t have chosen a more difficult topic.” But as we started to talk, a wonderful thing happened. People began to bear testimony to the fact that Heavenly Father loves all of His children and wants them to be cared for. Another talked about the Lord’s willingness to ask hard things of us, but that He always sustains us and rewards our obedience. Another spoke of God as someone who loves families and wants children to be taught by loving parents. As the conversation went on, I realized that the Spirit was witnessing of the nature and character of God, that we felt closer to our Father in Heaven and His Son Jesus Christ, and that we had come to know and love Them a little more.

Jesus Christ is our Creator. He is our loving and forgiving, compassionate Redeemer and Deliverer. He is also Immanuel, the Lamb of God, the Messiah, the Holy One of Israel, and the Author and Finisher of Our Faith. As we focus on His titles, roles, character, and attributes, the Spirit will testify of Him, bringing greater understanding and love for who He truly is and a greater desire to become like Him.

Emphasize the Example of Jesus Christ

A second way to place Jesus at the center of our teaching is to recognize and emphasize that He is the perfect example, the embodiment and expression of all gospel principles.9 One of our teachers recently shared with me that for their family scripture study, they’ve decided to read the New Testament again. But this time, rather than focusing on what Jesus said, they’re focusing primarily on what Jesus did. Focusing on His perfect example also invites the Holy Ghost to testify of Him.

Even when Jesus is not directly referred to in a story we’re teaching, we can still point to Him as the example of the principle that the story illustrates. For example, after identifying and analyzing a principle, we might ask, “Can you think of a time in the scriptures when Jesus exemplified this principle?” Or, “When have you seen Jesus exemplify this principle in your life or on your behalf?” One student was recently asked that question with regard to the Savior’s example of gentleness. Her thoughts and feelings raced to the gentle way in which the Savior has always treated her. This experience, right in a classroom, created in her a deep desire to be more Christlike and gentler with the people who depend on her, as she depends on the Lord.

You could scour all the books ever written and not find a better illustration of each gospel principle than is found in the scripture accounts of Jesus and His eternal ministry. Pondering examples of the Lord in His roles as Jehovah, the mortal Christ, and the resurrected Savior will increase our students’ power and capacity to take effective, righteous action. It will take our lessons beyond discussions about ethics and self-mastery and connect students to the power of the Savior and the eternal plan of happiness.

By way of illustration, how might we teach the principle of honesty? Simply as the “best policy,” because people will trust us more if we are honest? Or is integrity central to the character of Christ? If we’re to be like Him, must we learn to follow His perfect example in being totally honest? The same types of questions could be asked for every principle of the gospel.

Arthur Henry King taught this idea beautifully when he said, “We symbolize [good] in a real individual—Jesus Christ, the Son of God. He is a man, not a principle, a man who includes all principles… And following a man is very different from following a principle… We do not have to work out philosophical complexities of ethics. It has nothing to do with that. We have to study the Gospels, see what Christ did, and try to identify ourselves with what he did. It is because we catch the spirit of the Master, the Master’s love, and because we have soaked ourselves in the gospel, that we know what it is that we must do. The gospel which we have stored within us enables us at any moment to feel what we should do in a certain situation.”10

There is power that comes when we connect our efforts to live the gospel to Jesus Christ. If we ever feel we are just going through the motions or that living the gospel has become a list of tasks to perform, we may have disconnected from the source of the grace and joy we seek. We might even be doing all the right things but find that we are missing the mark. The gospel is not a list of demands; it is the good news that Jesus Christ overcame sin and death. Jesus Christ is the central figure in our Father in Heaven’s plan to help us to become like Him. He is the perfect example of how we are to live and the source of the divine enabling power we need. As we learn to follow His example and connect our efforts to live the gospel to Him, we will find joy in being His disciples.

Look for Types and Shadows of Jesus Christ

Third, we should look for types and shadows11 of the Savior in the lives of prophets and other faithful men and women as they are recorded in the
As the prophet Jacob taught, “All things which have been given of God from the beginning of the world, unto man, are the typifying of him.”

Because of this idea, when I taught the Old Testament in seminary, I placed large pieces of paper on the back wall of the classroom. On the top of each paper I wrote the name of an Old Testament prophet. When we had finished studying a section of the Old Testament, I asked the students to think of the things they had learned about the prophet we had been studying and how his experiences foreshadowed or reminded them of the Savior. After learning about Adam, students wrote things like “Adam was a son of God.” “He was immortal.” “He went into a garden.” “He voluntarily took upon himself death that we might live.” It would not take long before someone would ask, “Are we still talking about Adam, or are we talking about Jesus?”

During that time, a student came early to class to share with me her experience studying the scriptures. The night before she had been reading about the consequences of the Fall of Adam in Moses 4, which says, “Thorns also, and thistles shall it bring forth to thee.” Since she had learned to ask the question, “How does this account testify of Christ?” she was led to ask, “Did Jesus know when He was speaking to Adam that someday He would literally wear the consequences of the Fall as a crown of thorns?”

Our students found another example in the life of Joseph of Egypt, identifying over sixty ways in which he is a type of the Savior. Students pointed out that both of them were beloved by their Father, despised by their brothers, and sold for the price of a slave. They noticed the similarities in their temptations and in the fact that God was always with them. These connections are so much more than merely something interesting to note. The lives of the Lord’s chosen prophets are types of Him and teach us of His divine attributes. When used effectively, this set of lenses can help us come to know Jesus better and to be more like Him.

My wife, Kristi, was recently teaching this same scripture account of Joseph in Egypt and asked the class, “What Christlike characteristics do you see in the example of Joseph?” We talked of his ability to turn every trial into a blessing. We talked of his obedience, his patience, his willingness to remember those in need, and his willingness to forgive. The question caused me to remember a previous time studying this story and imagining what it was like when Joseph revealed himself to his brothers. The scriptures say they were “troubled at his presence.” Can you envision what that moment must have been like and how they must have felt, knowing what they had done? But

Joseph responded to them, “Come near to me . . . I am Joseph your brother. . . . Be not grieved . . . for God did send me before you to preserve life.” As I picture that event in my mind, I better understand what it will be like when we stand before the Lord at Judgment Day. Certainly I can imagine that we will remember our sins and may feel “troubled” being in His presence. But I can also imagine Him saying as He lifts us from our knees, “Come to me, come near to me, I am your brother. God did send me to preserve life.”

When we focus on types and shadows of Jesus Christ, we can then help our students recognize His attributes and characteristics by asking questions such as:

- “What Christlike characteristics do you see in the life of this prophet?”
- “When have you been blessed because Jesus possesses this attribute?”
- “What could you do to become more like Jesus Christ and acquire this divine attribute?”
- “What have you learned about your Father in Heaven and Jesus Christ that inspires you to act in faith to follow Them?”

And when students give answers like “pray” or “read the scriptures,” we would do well to help them connect those actions to Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ by asking them questions like

- “How will your prayers be different knowing whom you are talking to?”
- “How will you study the scriptures in a way that will help you know the Savior better and be more like Him?”

These types of questions will help our students develop greater power and capacity to know the Savior and to learn from Him.

Bear Pure Testimony of Jesus Christ

The fourth thing that we can do is to bear pure testimony of Jesus Christ.

We need to speak of Him more often and more powerfully and with more reverence, adoration, and gratitude. We need to share our own testimonies, and we must find effective ways to invite our students to share their
testimonies with each other. In a recent class discussion on the principle of prayer, a teacher invited students to consider what the Lord’s invitation to pray and His promise to teach us about the nature of our Father in Heaven. They were then invited to consider the attributes of the Savior that allow us to pray in His name. With these simple questions, a lesson on prayer turned into the opportunity for students to bear testimony of the power and love of our Father in Heaven and His Son, Jesus Christ. Students left with increased appreciation for their relationship with Deity and for the incredible blessing we have been given to pray in the name of Jesus Christ, who is our Advocate with the Father.

Another essential way to testify of Jesus Christ is to allow the testimony of prophets, both ancient and modern, to be heard in our classrooms. The apostle Peter said we are “witnesses chosen before of God. . . . He commanded us to . . . testify that it is he which was ordained of God. . . . To him give all the prophets witness.”

More recently, Elder Robert D. Hales made a statement that has caused me much reflection. He said, “We watch, hear, read, study, and share the words of prophets to be forewarned and protected. For example, ‘The Family: A Proclamation to the World’ was given long before we experienced the challenges now facing the family.” And then he added this thought, “‘The Living Christ: The Testimony of the Apostles’ was prepared in advance of when we will need it most.”

I am not one who is given to gloom and doom, but it has become evident why the proclamation was given in advance of the strong winds that have been blowing against traditional families. And to hear a prophet say that the “Living Christ” document was given “in advance of when we will need it most” makes me think that additional winds will be blowing, battering the faith of our students and our children.

“The Living Christ: The Testimony of the Apostles” declares:

We offer our testimony of the reality of His matchless life and the infinite virtue of His great atoning sacrifice. . . . He was the Great Jehovah of the Old Testament, the Messiah of the New. . . . He walked the roads of Palestine, healing the sick, causing the blind to see, and raising the dead. He taught the truths of eternity. . . . He gave His life to atone for the sins of all mankind. . . . He rose from the grave to ‘become the firstfruits of them that slept.’ . . . He and His Father appeared to the boy Joseph Smith, ushering in the long-promised ‘dispensation of the fulness of times.’ . . . We testify that He will someday return to earth . . . [and] rule as King of Kings and reign as Lord of Lords. . . . Jesus is the living Christ, the immortal Son of God. He is the great King Immanuel, who stands today on the right hand of His Father. He is the light, the life, and the hope of the world. . . . God be thanked for the matchless gift of His divine Son.”

This witness of God’s prophets was given before the time our students and our children will need it most. We must help them plant this testimony deeply in their minds and hearts. There is nothing we can do that will bless our students more than to help them to come to know Jesus Christ. We must help them to love Him, follow Him, and intentionally strive to become like Him. To the witness of God’s prophets I add my humble testimony that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God and Savior of the world.

In the sacred name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

2. 2 Nephi 25:26.
8. Alma 26:11–12.
11. Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2007), 49.
Latter-day Saints can benefit from combining the strengths of the King James translation with the strengths of modern translations and from combining the strengths of the study aids in the official Latter-day Saint editions of the Bible with the strengths of the study aids in academic study Bibles.

Study Bibles: An Introduction for Latter-day Saints

JOSHUA M. SEARS

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Behold, a man of Ethiopia, an eunuch of great authority under Candace queen of the Ethiopians, . . . [was] sitting in his chariot . . . And Philip ran thither to him, and heard him read the prophet Esaias, and said, Understandest thou what thou readest? And he said, How can I, except some man should guide me? —King James Version, Acts 8:27–28, 30–31

The word Ethiopian, in Luke’s day, referred to anyone with dark or black skin. A eunuch is a castrated male who serves the queen in some ancient societies. . . . Candace is a title and not the specific name of an Ethiopian queen. . . . [The] quotation [is] from Isaiah 53:7–8. —The New Testament: A Translation for Latter-day Saints—A Study Bible

Latter-day Saints revere the Bible as “the bedrock of all Christianity” and are instructed to feast upon its teachings regularly. Although Latter-day Saints appreciate so much about the Bible, many struggle with some of its language and its deeply contextual messages. Fortunately, special editions known as study Bibles can help make the Old and New Testaments much
clearer. There are many kinds of study Bibles, but for present purposes we will define them as an edition of the Bible featuring a modern English translation and sophisticated, context-focused study aids—including book introductions, footnotes, and appendixes—that provide textual, historical, cultural, literary, linguistic, and theological insights about the biblical text. Because many Latter-day Saints may not be familiar with these kinds of Bibles, in this article I will describe what study Bibles are and the benefits they offer readers. I will also give suggestions for choosing a study Bible and discuss how these Bibles might be used to supplement one’s study of the official Bible editions published by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Latter-day revelation instructs that we utilize the ”best books” to ”seek learning, even by study and also by faith” (Doctrine and Covenants 88:118), and I recommend study Bibles as among the ”best” resources available to help us study the scriptures.

The Development of Study Bibles

The idea of adding explanatory notes or commentary to accompany biblical texts has a long history. Scribes since ancient times have added clarifications to the margins or in between the lines of the handwritten biblical texts they were copying. They would also add background information to the beginning or end of a text, such as in the case of the subscripts that appear at the end of Paul’s epistles, which provide information about the place of composition and the person who helped Paul write or deliver the letter.

Over time, manuscripts and books that combined biblical text with later commentary became more sophisticated. In 1517 Venetian printer Daniel Bomberg published the first Rabbinic Bible (Mikra’ot Gedolot), which was prepared by Jacob ben Hayyim. It functions in many ways like a modern study Bible: on any given page, several verses from the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) are presented, along with a parallel Aramaic translation called the Targum, textual notes known as the Masorah, and two running commentaries from notable medieval Jewish interpreters Rashi and Ibn Ezra. This presentation allowed Jewish readers to study their scriptures with the added richness of their extensive interpretive traditions.

For Christians, the Geneva Bible of 1560 is often considered the ancestor of modern study Bibles. This Bible—used by Shakespeare and carried by the Pilgrims aboard the Mayflower—contains book introductions, chapter summaries, maps, illustrations, cross-references, and marginal notes that provide alternative translations or explain the meaning of the biblical text. The strengths of the translation and the helpfulness of the study aids made the Geneva Bible enormously popular, although in the heated religious climate of the late sixteenth century, some did not appreciate the theological and political messages that the marginal notes promoted. To avoid any potential controversy, the translators assigned to work on the King James Version (KJV) a half century later were explicitly instructed to include “no marginal notes at all . . . [except] for the explanation of the Hebrew or Greek.”

Despite the popularity of the commentary-free King James Version, study aids proved too helpful to leave out forever. In 1909 the runaway success of
the Scofield Reference Bible demonstrated how well the right kind of study Bible could sell in the modern age—and how much its theological interpretations could influence readers.8

The study aids in modern study Bibles, which have increased in sophistication over time, are designed to meet a diversity of needs. Some study Bibles interpret the text from the point of view of a specific religion, such as The Catholic Study Bible or The Jewish Study Bible, which draw upon centuries of interpretive history from their respective faith traditions. Other study Bibles, such as The HarperCollins Study Bible or The New Oxford Annotated Bible, aim to be ecumenical; they explain biblical texts in their original context without favoring one modern theological system over another.

In addition to varying in religious orientation, study Bibles differ in whether their notes emphasize contextual interpretation or personal application. At the first end of the spectrum, an edition like the Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible focuses on “background—the missing pieces of information that the biblical writers did not need to state explicitly because their original audiences intuitively knew them.”13 The notes are full of comparisons between Israelite culture and that of Babylon, Ugarit, and Egypt, and color pictures and maps help establish historical context. As another example, the online NET (New English Translation) Bible (https://netbible.org/) contains over 58,000 notes that focus on linguistic and textual information.14 At the other end of the spectrum, editions like the Starting Point Study Bible or the Christian Basics Bible are light on the verse-by-verse context but instead use sidebar comments to orient new believers in their life of faith.15 Bibles in the middle of the spectrum, such as the Life Application Study Bible, include a great amount of contextual detail mixed with modern application.18

Features in Study Bibles

Study Bibles often share some common features, especially if they focus on explaining original context. Instead of using older translations such as the King James Version, most study Bibles favor newer versions, which use contemporary language, take advantage of more recent textual evidence and biblical scholarship, and in some cases are translated more accurately (more on this below).19 Because these insights are incorporated directly into modern translations, study Bibles using these translations have more room in the footnotes to dedicate to other subjects.20

The 1560 Geneva Bible is supplemented with chapter summaries, cross-references, alternative word meanings, and short commentaries.
After the translation itself, the most prominent feature of study Bibles is the footnotes, which are often copious. At the discretion of the scholar(s) assigned to annotate any particular section of the biblical text, these notes may provide historical background, cultural context, and textual variants; point out literary features such as narrative structures, poetic forms, and rhetorical devices; or provide such basic services as cross-references or explanations of difficult passages. Most study Bibles are very careful about distinguishing between the ancient scriptural text and the modern scholarly additions. For example, the *NIV Zondervan Study Bible* prints notes in a different font and with a pale green background. Other Bibles use simpler methods, such as printing the footnotes in smaller type.

As an example of these notes and the value they can provide, consider the narrative in Isaiah chapter 7. While this chapter is well-known because of the Immanuel prophecy in verse 14 (“a virgin shall conceive”), it is difficult to understand as a whole because in this chapter Isaiah also describes so many contemporary individuals, nations, and events—including Ahaz, Jotham, Judah, Rezin, Syria, Pekah, Ephraim, and Assyria. Without some background, reading this chapter today is akin to reading a story about World War II without knowing the identifications of France, Hitler, America, Stalin, Roosevelt, or Japan; they’re all just names. But this is where study Bibles can come to the rescue. For example, the *Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible* contains this information immediately below the text of Isaiah 7:

Rezin . . . was an Aramean (Syrian) King who was dethroned when his nation was incorporated into the Assyrian Empire in 712 BC. He had been paying tribute to Assyria for some time. . . . In order to forestall incorporation, Rezin joined Pekah, son of Remaliah (Is. 7:6–5:86) and king of Israel from c. 757–732 BC, to oppose Assyria. Rezin, Pekah and Hoshea (Pekah’s son and successor after Pekah was killed by the Assyrians), pressured Jotham, king of Judah (c. 750–732 BC), to join their anti-Assyrian coalition (2 Kin. 15:29, 37), but Jotham refused. To present a united front against their common enemy, Aram/Syria and Israel (called “Ephraim,” the name of its major tribe, in Is. 7:2, 4) united against Judah, now led by Ahaz (732–715 BC), to force their cooperation. This attack by Aram/Syria and Israel against Judah is called the Syro-Ephraimite War.

In very little space, this note helps readers get a basic sense of what is going on; they may then return to the biblical text with a much greater comprehension of what Isaiah is saying.

Other common aids in study Bibles include maps, tables, and illustrations, which may appear on a page where they are most relevant or might be
collected together in an appendix. Introductory essays at the beginning of each book of the Bible provide some basic information regarding that book’s subject matter, literary organization, genre(s), historical and theological significance, and interpretive difficulties.

How to Choose a Study Bible

The study Bible industry is extensive, and dozens of options are currently on the market. I have two recommendations for Latter-day Saints.

First, choose a study Bible prepared by recognized scholars with appropriate academic credentials. The counsel of former Church historian Steven E. Snow applies to biblical scholarship as much as it does to the study of Church history: “Look for sources by recognized and respected historians, whether they’re members of the Church or not.” Such scholars have spent many years immersed in the history, culture, and literature of the ancient Near Eastern and Mediterranean worlds. While that experience does not always guarantee accuracy, their expertise usually helps filter reasonable conclusions from the occasionally quirky proposals of armchair Bible enthusiasts.

How does one identify good scholars? No set characteristics apply in every case, but a few apply in many cases. Most legitimate biblical scholars have earned PhDs from accredited universities. Most have degrees in biblical studies or related fields like Egyptology, Northwest Semitics, Assyriology, classics, early Christianity, or Near Eastern archaeology. Most publish original research in academic journals and books that are peer reviewed by experts in the field. However, these are only rules of thumb: excellent work has been published by writers who do not match all of these descriptions. In a world where so much is published that is outdated or idiosyncratic, we simply need to be mindful of whom we are reading and to pay attention to what their training and experience qualifies them to say authoritatively.

Second, choose a study Bible that is aligned with, or at least respectful of, your faith in the Savior and your commitment to the restored gospel. Study aids prepared by Latter-day Saints should of course qualify, and scholarship written from other perspectives should at least be respectful of our beliefs and broadly aligned with our desire to seek out truth. A personal story illustrates the potential pitfalls of an antagonistic source. Some years ago I was gifted the ESV Study Bible, which I had eagerly anticipated after reading many excellent reviews. This is a truly comprehensive and beautiful book (of over 2,700 pages) with helpful notes, ample use of color, and a user-friendly format.

As I began to use it, I started coming across scattered instances in which the notes unnecessarily criticized Latter-day Saints, but I was most shocked when I arrived at an appendix with a multipage exposé of “Mormonism” as a “cult.” For obvious reasons, I do not recommend this study Bible to fellow Saints.

Given that some study Bibles are disrespectful of our beliefs, one good option is to choose a study Bible that is ecumenical in its scholarship. Editions such as The New Oxford Annotated Bible or The HarperCollins Study Bible fit this description; they are written by best-in-their-field scholars who are trying...
to help readers of any religious background better understand biblical texts in their original context.

A second option is to deliberately choose a study Bible that incorporates insights from another religious tradition—one that is not antagonistic towards others. I particularly enjoy *The Jewish Study Bible* (for the Old Testament) and its companion volume, *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, because few people have better insight into Jewish history, culture, and literature than Jews themselves (see 2 Nephi 25:5). Even though the restored gospel gives me a different point of view than secular scholarship or than Jewish/Catholic/Protestant scholarship, I have found that my own understanding is often enriched by reading what others have noticed.

A third option is to use a study Bible expressly prepared by and for Latter-day Saints. This option has historically been limited because, despite the number of helpful commentaries written by Latter-day Saints, few could be categorized as a fully functioning, academic study Bible as I have been using the term. The recent release of Thomas Wayment’s *The New Testament: A Translation for Latter-day Saints—A Study Bible* has now provided that option, at least for the New Testament. This edition includes a fresh translation of the entire New Testament, and the notes combine the historical and cultural background available in other study Bibles with selections from the Joseph Smith Translation and comprehensive cross-references linking the New Testament with Restoration scripture.

**My Personal Study Bible Recommendations**

*There are several good study Bibles, and different people will have their own preferences. These are my favorites in no particular order—check to see if newer editions are available.*

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<tr>
<th>Title</th>
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<tr>
<td><em>The New Testament: A Translation for Latter-day Saints—A Study Bible,</em> by Thomas A. Wayment</td>
<td>Religious Studies Center at Brigham Young University; Deseret Book</td>
<td>New Testament only; Latter-day Saint perspective</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>The Jewish Study Bible, 2nd edition</em></td>
<td>Oxford University Press</td>
<td>Old Testament only; Jewish perspective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The New Oxford Annotated Bible, 5th edition</em></td>
<td>Oxford University Press</td>
<td>Theologically neutral; often used in college courses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The HarperCollins Study Bible, 2006 update</em></td>
<td>HarperOne and the Society of Biblical Literature</td>
<td>Theologically neutral; often used in college courses</td>
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**Using a Study Bible as a Supplement to the Official Latter-day Saint Editions**

While I encourage using study Bibles, I do not recommend that Latter-day Saints set aside the official editions of the Bible published by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which currently include the Latter-day Saint edition of the King James Version (published in 1979, updated in 2013), the Spanish *Santa Biblia: Reina-Valera 2009*, and the Portuguese *Bíblia Sagrada—Almeida 2015*. Church leaders have instructed that “members should use” these editions. At the same time, using other editions in addition to the Church’s has never been prohibited. Indeed, several modern apostles have set an inclusive example by quoting other editions of the Bible in their general conference addresses.

I first experienced the value of reading two different editions side by side when I was a missionary in Chile. In those days the Church had not yet produced its own Spanish Bible, and when I arrived at the missionary training center I was handed the 1960 edition of the Reina-Valera Bible published by the American Bible Society. During the course of my mission, the constant comparison of that Bible with my Latter-day Saint Bible helped me learn things I never would have noticed using just one translation or one set of study aids. In more recent years, I have continued to use the Latter-day Saint editions as my primary Bible for devotional reading while keeping one or two good study Bibles close at hand as supplementary study aids.

As I have read through the Bible multiple times using different editions simultaneously, I have found great benefit in combining the strengths of the King James translation with the strengths of modern translations and in combining the strengths of the study aids in the official Latter-day Saint editions with the strengths of the study aids in academic study Bibles.
Translations

The influence of the King James Version “on the English-speaking world is unparalleled. . . . It has a fair claim to be the most pivotal book ever written, a claim made by poets and statesmen and supported by tens of millions of readers and congregations.”32 As the Bible of nineteenth-century America, the language and text of the KJV had a profound influence on Joseph Smith and other early leaders of the Restoration.33 Especially noteworthy is the use of King James language in the English translation of the Book of Mormon,34 as the revelatory idiom of the Doctrine and Covenants,35 and as the basis for the Prophet’s own translation of the Bible.36

The influential role of the King James Version in the production of latter-day scripture means that using the KJV gives readers several advantages. When the English translation of the Book of Mormon and other revelations of the Restoration quote phrases from the KJV, attentive readers can spot the connections and see how modern scripture interprets and adapts biblical scripture. Certain doctrinal ideas are more easily identified in the KJV because that version provided the phrases Joseph Smith used to articulate those doctrines for a latter-day audience.37 And finally, because the archaic and heightened language of the KJV has been the traditional register for scriptures, hymns, prayers, and sermons for so long, English-speaking Saints tend to instinctively view such language as more “spiritual” than everyday language.

As an example of a scripture block where the King James Version gives Latter-day Saint readers an advantage, consider Jesus’s famous Olivet Discourse in Matthew 24–25 (compare Mark 13 and Luke 21). While reading Matthew 24–25 in a modern translation does clarify vocabulary and syntax, using the KJV is crucial for Latter-day Saints because Joseph Smith received two revelatory texts that are based on Matthew 24 as rendered in the King James Bible. A 7 March 1831 revelation (now Doctrine and Covenants 45) draws upon the language of KJV Matthew 24 to teach about the signs of the times, beginning with Doctrine and Covenants 45:16 (“I shall come in my glory in the clouds of heaven”), which adapts KJV Matthew 24:30 (“the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with . . . glory”). These allusions continue with great frequency until the Lord stops and says more will be revealed “concerning this chapter” (meaning Matthew 24) when Joseph gets to it as part of his new translation of the Bible (Doctrine and Covenants 45:60–61). When Joseph reached Matthew 24 a few months later, he was given a revelatory reworking of the biblical text (now canonized as Joseph Smith—Matthew in the Pearl of Great Price) that both clarifies and adds to the original discourse.39 However, while these latter-day revelations in Doctrine and Covenants 45 and Joseph Smith—Matthew can be fruitfully studied on their own, their meaning is significantly enhanced when they are compared with the biblical chapter on which they build, and when making those comparisons one must use the King James rendering or many of the connections will be obscured. Thus, while modern translations are useful for studying the Olivet Discourse in its biblical context, the KJV is essential for seeing how the themes of Matthew 24 have been adapted for a latter-day context.

Despite the advantages of the King James Version for Latter-day Saints, there are other ways in which the KJV puts readers at a disadvantage. Brigham Young University scholars Lincoln Blumell and Jan Martin explain:

There are essentially two fundamental challenges with the English of the KJV: accessibility and accuracy.

An accessible text uses language that its readers easily understand. Unfortunately, the sixteenth-century English of the KJV can make comprehension difficult in places.

An accurate translation of a text uses a second language to carefully represent the original language as closely as possible. Since the publication of the KJV in 1611, there have been important advances in understanding Biblical Hebrew and Greek and numerous discoveries of additional biblical manuscripts that have provided important textual variations and clarifications. . . . Unfortunately, the KJV text does not reflect these advances and in places is simply an inaccurate translation.40

The problem of accessibility has increased over time as the English language moves further from the vocabulary, grammar, and syntax of the KJV. The narrative portions of the KJV (such as Genesis and Acts) are still relatively accessible, but the poetic books (such as Job) or the prophetic books of the Old Testament (such as Isaiah), as well as many of Paul’s epistles in the New Testament, can be extremely difficult to follow.

The problem of accuracy has also grown more pronounced since scholars know much more about biblical languages than they did four centuries ago. This is particularly problematic in the Old Testament because the KJV translators struggled with several aspects of the Hebrew language, such as how its poetry worked or what some of the rare vocabulary words meant (sometimes the translators simply guessed).41 In addition, the discovery of many
additional ancient biblical manuscripts has allowed scholars to render some passages more accurately than the KJV translators could. This is particularly problematic in the New Testament because the KJV translators had access to only a few late (medieval) Greek manuscripts, which contain more errors than manuscripts from earlier centuries. As an example of a passage in which the King James Version falls short, consider Hosea 11:1–4:

When Israel was a child, then I loved him, and called my son out of Egypt.

2 As they called them, so they went from them: they sacrificed unto Baalim, and burned incense to graven images.

3 I taught Ephraim also to go, taking them by their arms; but they knew not that I healed them.

4 I drew them with cords of a man, with bands of love: and I was to them as they that take off the yoke on their jaws, and I laid meat unto them.

Passages like this can be very challenging to understand, even for experienced, college-educated readers. When I come to such passages, I follow a simple three-step procedure:

1. read the passage in the KJV,
2. read the passage in a modern translation, and
3. reread the passage in the KJV and see if the modern translation helps make sense of it.

In this case, after reading Hosea 11:1–4 in the KJV, I might glance at my New Oxford Annotated Bible, which uses the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) as its translation:

When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.

2 The more I called them, the more they went from me; they kept sacrificing to the Baals, and offering incense to idols.

3 Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms; but they did not know that I healed them.

4 I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love. I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them.

Reading the NRSV does not eliminate all challenges, but because the NRSV is more clearly written, fixes certain words based on ancient manuscript evidence, and presents the text of Hosea in a poetic format, the meaning pops out with greater clarity. In the NRSV, as Latter-day Saint scholar Grant Hardy has observed, “The entire passage takes on a striking poignancy as God compares his love for Israel to the tender care of a father for a toddler.” Once I get a better sense of Hosea’s meaning, I can then return to the KJV and reread it with greater comprehension.

This compare-and-contrast approach allows the best of both worlds: the traditional text and beautiful cadence of the King James Version combined with the accessibility and accuracy of newer translations. Using either the KJV or a modern translation in isolation comes with certain advantages and disadvantages, but using both in tandem allows them to productively complement one another.

### Strengths and Weaknesses of the Study Aids in the Latter-day Saint Editions of the Bible and Academic Study Bibles

Editions of the Bible published by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints include study aids designed to help Church members appreciate the teachings of ancient prophets and apostles in light of the truths of the restored gospel. These study aids include

- cross-references that tie biblical texts to Restoration scripture,
- a subject concordance (the Topical Guide, or the Guide to the Scriptures in foreign-language editions) that displays how doctrinal ideas are expressed across dispensations and scriptural texts,
- interpretive chapter headings that steer readers toward key doctrinal matters,
extensive quotations from the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible, and

• a dictionary (the Bible Dictionary, or the Guide to the Scriptures in foreign-language editions) that addresses Latter-day Saint concerns and viewpoints.

These unique study aids make the Latter-day Saint editions an indispensable tool for Church members. Academic study Bibles also aim to help readers understand the Bible, but they focus on elucidating the ancient, contextual meaning of the text. These aids, which might be found at the bottom of the page, in essays preceding an individual book, or in appendixes, can include

• variant readings for a particular passage as found in ancient manuscripts;
• alternate translations, or notifications of when the Hebrew or Greek is particularly difficult;
• explanations of historical, cultural, or linguistic information necessary to properly understand the meaning of the text;
• identifications for the origin of quotations; and
• a synopsis of how famous or controversial passages have been interpreted by different faith traditions over history.

In sum, the study aids in the official Church editions excel at bringing restored doctrinal insights to the text. They are weaker at helping with the verse-by-verse details and at providing historical and cultural context. Even the Bible Dictionary, which provides the most help with that context, has become increasingly out of date. In contrast, the study aids in academic study Bibles excel at illuminating the contextual worlds of the text. Many provide nearly verse-by-verse insight. But with the exception of resources prepared by Latter-day Saints, study Bibles do not incorporate the teachings of modern prophets or help Latter-day Saint readers connect biblical and Restoration scripture, and some may even offer doctrinally incorrect interpretations.

Personally, if I had to choose between the Restoration insights available in the Church’s Bible editions or the historical context available in academic publications, my clear choice would be the Church’s editions. But there is no reason to choose—we can take advantage of both! Their respective strengths and weaknesses complement one another so that when one falls short, the other can help. Let us examine two illustrative examples, John 21:20–23 and Jeremiah 1:11–12.

John 21:20–23 contains a rather enigmatic statement regarding the fate of “the disciple whom Jesus loved,” the apostle John. It raises the possibility that this disciple “should not die,” and yet the text itself hints at some uncertainty regarding what Jesus meant. With little else to go by, the HarperCollins Study Bible states, “According to legend, the apostle John . . . lived to a great age.” The Jewish Annotated New Testament says that “the Beloved Disciple has apparently died. This verse corrects the rumor that Jesus had promised him eternal life.” The MacArthur Study Bible interprets Jesus’s saying as a mere "hypothetical statement for emphasis."

In contrast, the Latter-day Saint edition of the Bible is able to speak more conclusively about John’s fate. The chapter heading states unequivocally that “John will not die.” A footnote points readers to Doctrine and Covenants 7, which contains a revelation given to the Prophet Joseph Smith in April or May of 1829 regarding this very issue: John the Beloved asks Christ for “power over death, that I may live and bring souls unto thee,” and Christ explains that he will make John “as flaming fire and a ministering angel.” Another footnote directs readers to the Topical Guide entry for “Translated Beings,” which expounds on this topic with three references from the Old Testament, six from the New Testament, six from the Book of Mormon, six from the Doctrine and Covenants, and two from the Pearl of Great Price. The benefits of the Church’s official scriptures are very clear in this case: where academic study Bibles are lacking or misleading, the Latter-day Saint edition of the Bible fills in the interpretive hole.

On the other hand, Jeremiah 1:11–12 highlights a weakness in the Latter-day Saint editions. While studying the Old Testament in Sunday School, I once observed an interesting interaction as the Gospel Doctrine teacher called on class members to read and interpret this passage:

11 Moreover the word of the Lord came unto me, saying, Jeremiah, what seest thou? And I said, I see a rod of an almond tree.
12 Then said the Lord unto me, Thou hast well seen: for I will hasten my word to perform it.

Try as they might, the members of the class were at a loss to explain how “a rod of an almond tree” connects with “hastening my word to perform it.” It just made no sense. Furthermore, the only footnote in the Latter-day Saint
Bible was attached to the word *seest* and pointed readers to the Topical Guide entry for “Vision,” which offered no help in interpreting Jeremiah’s words. This is a case in which the Latter-day Saint edition falls short because its weakness is in providing historical, cultural, and literary context—precisely what is needed to understand Jeremiah 1:11–12. In contrast, any good study Bible will provide the needed information:

- **The HarperCollins Study Bible**: “In the first vision a wordplay, *branch of an almond tree* (Hebrew *shaqed*) and watching (shoqed), stresses that God will enact the content of the prophetic word.”
- **The New Oxford Annotated Bible**: “Jeremiah sees *an almond tree* (Heb ‘shaqed’) and is assured that God is *watching over* (Heb ‘shoqed’) the prophetic word to fulfill it. For similar vision/puns see Am 7.7–9; 8:1–3.”
- **The Zondervan NASB Study Bible**: “The Hebrew for ‘watching’ sounds like the Hebrew for ‘almond tree.’ Just as the almond tree blooms first in the year (and therefore ‘wakes up’ early—the Hebrew word for ‘watching’ means to be wakeful), so the Lord is ever watchful to make sure that His word is fulfilled.”
- **Robert Alter’s The Hebrew Bible**: “The question about the riddling vision . . . hinge[s] on a pun. . . . ‘Almond-tree’ is *shaqed*; ‘vigilant’ is *shoqed*.”

The Church’s edition of the Bible is simply not designed to explain every verse in this kind of detail. In cases like this, however, a study Bible used as a supplementary study aid can be enormously helpful and ultimately enriches one’s experience with the Latter-day Saint edition.

### Strengths of Church edition study aids

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<tr>
<td>Connections to latter-day scripture and correct doctrinal interpretations</td>
<td>Very little historical/cultural context, some of which is outdated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strengths of academic study aids</td>
<td>Weaknesses of academic study aids</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detailed and up-to-date historical/cultural context</td>
<td>May not benefit from revealed doctrinal insights</td>
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### Challenges and Opportunities

As I have introduced fellow Saints to study Bibles, I have heard a few common questions and concerns, which I will briefly respond to below. They highlight some of the challenges involved in supplementing the official Latter-day Saint Bibles with academic resources, but also some of the great opportunities for spiritual learning.

“A new translation is just someone’s interpretation of the scriptures.” It is true that translation always involves interpretation; translators must make myriad choices, from which ancient manuscript to use to which meaning of a word to pick. However, for many English-speaking Saints, our default familiarity with the King James Version leads us to assume that the KJV represents “the scriptures” while modern translations are simply an “interpretation” of the scriptures. In so doing, we forget that the KJV itself is a translation from Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek manuscripts and that the translators commissioned by King James I were real people with their own biases—they were white, male, British, Protestant (mostly bishops or priests of the Church of England), early-seventeenth-century scholars, whose theological views reflect the turbulent years following the Reformation. This is not a criticism, simply a recognition that reading a new translation of the Bible is not to introduce human interpretation, but to move from one set of interpretations to another. In some cases the KJV translators’ interpretive choices may be better, and in other cases, those of modern translators. Supplementing the KJV with a modern translation allows readers to compare those interpretations under the guidance of the Spirit.

“Why would I want to read what scholars have to say about the scriptures? Interpreting scripture is the responsibility of prophets and apostles.” In recommending the academic expertise of biblical scholars, I am in no way discounting the crucial role of modern prophets. In doctrinal matters, interpretive authority accompanies priesthood keys. President M. Russell Ballard has reminded us, however, that apostolic authority and academic training are not the same thing and that different kinds of questions require looking for answers from different kinds of sources. “The Lord called the apostles and prophets to invite others to come unto Christ,” President Ballard said, “not to obtain advanced degrees in ancient history, biblical studies, and other fields that may be useful in answering all the questions we may have about the scriptures.” While apostles can readily “respond to certain types of questions,” he continued, “there are other types of questions that require an expert in
2018 Face to Face devotional: while answering questions from young adults, Elder Quentin L. Cook demonstrated this distinction in his 9 September 2018 Face to Face devotional: while answering questions from young adults, Elder Cook responded to doctrinal questions while deferring historical questions to the two professionally trained historians, Kate Holbrook and Matt Grow, who shared the stage with him. In light of President Ballard’s counsel and the examples of other apostles like Elder Cook, I recommend that study Bibles prepared by experts in the field are a responsible way of answering our historical, cultural, linguistic, and textual questions about the scriptures.

“Modern English translations make the scriptures too easy. The King James Version may be difficult to read, but mentally engaging with the words encourages pondering and invites revelation.” Based on my own experience, I agree that the KJV’s heightened language can promote a more active mental and spiritual engagement with the biblical text, sometimes precisely because of its difficulty. However, this virtue can be pushed too far: there is a fine line between difficulty that encourages a productive struggle to understand and difficulty that leads readers to frustration or misunderstanding. For example, many Latter-day Saints suffer from what one writer calls an “Isaiah complex”—that feeling of guilt that follows frustrating attempts to make sense of Isaiah. However, as someone who has read the book of Isaiah in the original Hebrew and in various translations, I would estimate that the difficulty of reading Isaiah in the KJV is reduced by half when one simply follows along in a modern translation. Reading two translations side by side preserves the productive spiritual engagement that comes with the KJV’s archaic/heightened language while also giving readers linguistic help as needed. This in turn gives us a greater opportunity to “seek inspiration concerning the message of scripture rather than relying on the Holy Ghost to parse convoluted syntax and obsolete vocabulary.”

It is also worth observing that almost none of the biblical authors wrote in a “fancy” register; they generally wrote Hebrew and Greek in a straightforward way that was meant to be understood by common people. While there is value in what modern English speakers perceive to be the special, even spiritual, register of the KJV, we should recognize that this is not how native Hebrew and Greek speakers would have heard their scriptures. Thus, a translation using straightforward, contemporary language does not by its nature betray the intent of the biblical authors and in some cases may in fact more closely approximate what they were aiming for.

“Are the scholars who are writing all these notes just overcomplicating the scriptures? Why would God make the scriptures so obscure that you need a PhD to understand them?” Certainly much of scripture—particularly central messages such as the love of God, the saving power of the Atonement of Jesus Christ, and the need for repentance—is so straightforward that even children can understand. And certainly the Lord wants to be understood, which is why he reveals his word “unto [his] servants . . . after the manner of their language, that they might come to understanding” (Doctrine and Covenants 1:24). The problem is that many messages that were once easily understood by their original audience can be difficult for a later audience when “the manner of their language” changes—when assumed knowledge about historical context, linguistic rules, or cultural expectations is no longer assumed but has changed for new audiences living in different times, speaking different languages, and seeing the world through different cultural lenses. When scholars write notes for a study Bible, much of what they are trying to do is simply get twenty-first-century, Western, English-speaking readers caught up with the historical, linguistic, and cultural background that the biblical authors assumed their audience already possessed. Without that background, misinterpretation is often inevitable.

“I have always looked at this passage in a certain way that has great meaning to me, but this study Bible is saying that it means something different.” One reason the scriptures are so spiritually stimulating is that they are multilayered and can address different needs. It is perfectly possible that a passage of the Bible might have one meaning in its original context, additional meanings as used in the Book of Mormon or the Doctrine and Covenants, and any number of other meanings for readers who receive personalized direction from the Holy Ghost. Be open to new meanings. Whether an interpretation comes from the Topical Guide’s use of a scripture or from a scholar’s historical analysis, we do not want to limit any scripture passage by assuming that with one explanation we have exhausted its rich interpretive possibilities. As President Dallin H. Oaks has taught, while “scholarship and historical methods” may be especially helpful in illuminating “what was meant at the time the scriptural words were [originally] spoken or written,” we must remember that “a scripture is not limited to what it meant when it was written but may also include what that scripture means to a reader today.” Because of this,
“commentaries, if not used with great care, may illuminate the author’s chosen and correct meaning but close our eyes and restrict our horizons to other possible meanings.”

“I don’t read the scriptures to learn about history; I just want to get some personal revelation.” If someone needs inspiration and simply reading the scriptures is doing that for her, I commend that effort and am pleased the scriptures are helping. For long-term spiritual growth, however, more serious engagement with the word of God yields rich rewards. President Gordon B. Hinckley taught that “this restored gospel brings not only spiritual strength, but also intellectual curiosity and growth. Truth is truth. There is no clearly defined line of demarcation between the spiritual and the intellectual. . . . The Lord Almighty, through revelation, has laid a mandate upon this people in these words: ‘Seek ye out of the best books words of wisdom; seek learning, even by study and also by faith’ [Doctrine and Covenants 88:18].”

The Lord, through revelation, has laid a mandate upon this people in these words: ‘Seek ye out of the best books words of wisdom; seek learning, even by study and also by faith’ [Doctrine and Covenants 88:18].

Latter-day Saints have a wonderful example of this kind of inclusive learning in the Prophet Joseph Smith. This was a man who could take his King James Bible, read the opening words of Genesis, and see a vision of Moses beholding creation (Moses 1). He could ponder John 5:29 and see through those words the three kingdoms of glory (Doctrine and Covenants 76). He could declare that the enigmatic book of Revelation “is one of the plainest books God ever caused to be written.” But despite all that he was able to learn through the Spirit, Joseph did not believe that this discounted the value of learning “by study” out of the “best books.” He saw revelation and academic study as not only complementary, but also mutually reinforcing. For example, Joseph went through great effort in the winter of 1835–36 to hire a master of them. He wrote of how much “my soul delights in reading the word of the Lord in the original [Hebrew], and I am determined to pursue [sic] the study of languages untill [sic] I shall become master of them.”

While working on his new translation of the Bible, the Prophet also drew upon both spiritual insight and the “best books”—in this case, a kind of study Bible. Some scholars have suggested that while reading out of his copy of the King James Version, Joseph would occasionally consult a six-volume commentary series written by Methodist scholar Adam Clarke. Clarke’s commentary, though lengthier than the single-volume study Bibles we typically use today,
11. Harold Attridge, ed., *The HarperCollins Study Bible*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2006). The study aids in this edition, which were produced by the Society of Biblical Literature, accompany the New Revised Standard Version, a 1989 translation that was produced by an ecumenical group of scholars and is often used in academic writing.


14. The New English Translation (Biblical Studies Press, 2006), now in its second edition (2017), is available to purchase in physical form, but the notes are so extensive that it is easiest to use on the web. Although the NET is a fresh translation of the entire Bible, when I use the website, netbible.org, I am usually not as interested in the translation itself as in the tens of thousands of translators’ notes that allow someone to peek behind the scenes at the different problems and possibilities in the translation. Other websites showing the words operating behind English translations include biblehub.com and www.blueletterbible.org.


17. In addition to study Bibles that focus on personal application, there are also niche editions that single out some other theme. For example, *The Green Bible* (New York: HarperOne, 2008) supplements the New Revised Standard Version with essays and sidebars discussing our responsibility to care for the environment, as well as God’s relationship with nature. Verses that have something to do with the earth, animals, stewardship, or related issues are printed in green. Another example is Catherine Clark Kroeger and Mary J. Evans, eds., *The Women’s Study Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). This edition uses the New Living Translation, and the study aids are particularly sensitive to women’s perspectives, both ancient and modern.


20. One study Bible using the King James Version is the three-volume *Footnotes to the New Testament for Latter-day Saints*, edited by Kevin Barney and freely available to download as PDF files at feastupontheword.org/Site/NTFootnotes. While the notes on each page do offer some insights regarding historical, cultural, literary, or doctrinal issues, these kinds of notes are outnumbered by those interpreting the four-hundred-year-old vocabulary, grammar, and syntax of the KJV. Barney observes, ”Much of the need for this book would be obviated if one were simply to read the [New Testament] in a good, modern translation” (Barney, *Footnotes*, 1:iii).


29. For example, in an address at Brigham Young University, Elder John K. Carmack said, ”We clearly prefer the King James Version. . . , but we are not adamant about that. Any responsibly prepared version could be used and might be helpful to us,” John K. Carmack, ”The New Testament and the Latter-day Saints,” in *Sperry Symposium Classics: The New Testament*, ed. Frank F. Judd Jr. and Gaye Strathman (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2006), 9.

33. See Grant Underwood, “Joseph Smith and the King James Bible,” in Jackson, King James Bible, 215–31; and Barlow, Mormons and the Bible, 10–79.
34. See Daniel L. Belnap, “The King James Bible and the Book of Mormon,” in Jackson, King James Bible, 162–81. Regarding the presence of King James language in the Book of Mormon, Jan J. Martin, “The Theological Value of the King James Language in the Book of Mormon,” Journal of Book of Mormon Studies 27 (2018): 91–92, points out that the Book of Mormon self-identifies its purpose as both establishing truths in the Bible and restoring truths lost from the Bible. “At the time the Book of Mormon was translated into English,” Martin writes, “the King James translation was the authoritative version of the Bible, making it the Bible that the Book of Mormon had to clarify. Furthermore, because theological concepts are inseparable from the language used to express them, ... the Book of Mormon could not convincingly establish truths articulated in the KJV unless it employed seventeenth-century terminology.”
37. Examples of Latter-day Saint doctrines that are articulated using phrases from the King James Version include the “dispensation of the fulness of times” (Ephesians 1:10; compare Doctrine and Covenants 112:30; 121:31; 124:41; 128:18, 20; 136:48), the “celestial” kingdom (1 Corinthians 15:40; compare Doctrine and Covenants 76:70, 78, 87, 92, 96: 78:7, 14; 89:2, 4, 18, 20, 22, 35, 28–29; 101:65; 105:4–5; 110:13; 133:1; 137:1, 7, 10; “A Facsimile from the Book of Abraham, No. 2”), and premortal life as a “first estate” (Jude 1:6; compare Abraham 1:16, 28). Because newer Bibles often translate these phrases differently, their biblical origin is only apparent when consulting the KJV.
41. Because of the significant influence of the King James Version, Christians have built up a great deal of mythos regarding the knowledge and skill of its translators, and Latter-day Saints have sometimes repeated these exaggerations. For example, without diminishing in any way the translators’ obvious expertise or the possibility of inspiration in their work, it is simply not the case that “it would be difficult today to gather 50 scholars with the knowledge of ancient languages possessed by these men,” Richard N. W. Lambert and Kenneth R. Mays, 400 Years of the King James Bible, Ensign, August 2011, 42. There are any number of biblical scholars today whose language expertise is superior simply because they are drawing from over four hundred years of additional research on biblical languages.
42. As one example, KJV Proverbs 26:13 reads, “Burning [savor]ent lips and a wicked heart are like a potsherd [=an earthen vessel] covered with silver dross.” The KJV translates the Hebrew phrase ᵃᵉᵖᵉᵍ as “silver dross,” but this does not make sense within the context of this passage on hypocrisy because dross is a negative material and the image requires something attractive that hides something inferior underneath, just as “burning lips” and a “wicked heart” are negative qualities within a person. Furthermore, silver dross was not used to cover earthenware but would have been discarded. A solution to this puzzle became available in 1929 when French archaeologists uncovered the remains of Ugarit, a late-second-millennium BC city that once thrived on the coast of what is now Syria. The people there spoke Ugaritic, a language closely related to Biblical Hebrew, and the decipherment of Ugaritic texts has allowed scholars to better understand the Hebrew vocabulary of the Old Testament. In this instance, a Ugaritic word ʰᵉᵖᵉᵍ “glaze” makes it possible to reinterpret the Hebrew of Proverbs 26:13 as ᵃᵉᵖᵉᵍ ᵃᵉᵖᵉᵍ, meaning “like glaze,” which better fits the context because glaze was indeed something attractive used to hide ordinary earthenware underneath. See Kenneth L. Barker, “The Value of Ugaritic for Old Testament Studies,” Bibliotheca Sacra 113 (1976): 128–19. Several modern English translations of the Bible reflect this insight (e.g., the English Standard Version, the New English Translation, and the New Revised Standard Version). The point is that the King James translators could not have possibly made better sense of the Hebrew without additional data, which did not come until after 1929. Recognizing instances like this in which modern translations are more accurate than the KJV does not demean either the skill or the sincere intent of the KJV translators, it simply acknowledges that modern scholars have learned a great deal since that time and are able to use that knowledge to translate the Bible more accurately than ever before.
44. Hardy, “King James Bible and the Future of Missionary Work,” 16.

45. The Latter-day Saint editions of the Bible do include some footnotes that offer information on historical, cultural, or textual matters, but they appear very infrequently, and several of the notes need to be revised. Some examples of mistakes that remain uncorrected include Isaiah 15:5, footnote b (the phrase “heifer of three years old” in the KJV does not suggest that Zoar “should still have been young and vigorous,” rather the Hebrew phrase translated “heifer of three years old” should have been transliterated as a town named Eglath-shelishiyah); Ezekiel 27:16, footnote a (the Hebrew behind KJV’s “Syria” is indeed “Aram,” but the Hebrew word itself is misspelled and should read “Edom”); Mark 13:1, footnote a (the Joseph Smith Translation does not entitle the book “The Testimony of St. Mark”); Mark 13:26, footnote a (the JST of Mark 13 was originally created by copying the JST of Matthew 24, but subsequent revisions created some differences between the two texts); Luke title footnote (the Joseph Smith Translation does not entitle the book “The Testimony of St. Luke”); John 1:42, footnote a (“Cephas” is Aramaic, not Greek); and John 5:1, footnote a (the description of Greek manuscripts is not correct).

46. The Bible Dictionary, which first appeared in the 1979 edition of the Latter-day Saint Bible, is a revision of a Bible dictionary published decades earlier by Cambridge University Press, with the updates focusing primarily on aligning the entries with Latter-day Saint doctrine. See Robert J. Matthews, “Using the New Bible Dictionary in the LDS Edition,” Ensign, June 1982, 47–50; and Barlow, Mormons and the Bible, 229–32. Although a few minor adjustments were made in the 2013 edition, the scholarly information has not been significantly revised in well over half a century and several entries are now out of date.

As one example, the entry titled “Jamnia” describes it as a place “where, about A.D. 90, a council of rabbis declared the Old Testament canon to be completed. . . . Traditionally, at this council the canon of the Old Testament was decided.” The idea that there was a “council of Jamnia” where the Old Testament canon was fixed became popular in the early twentieth century, but has been thoroughly discredited since the 1960s. See Jack P. Lewis, Jamnia Revisited, in The Canon Debate, ed. Lee Martin McDonald and James A. Sanders (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), 146–62.

Even entries focused on Latter-day Saint topics are not all current. For example, the entry “Joseph Smith Translation” states, “Although the major portion of the work was completed by July 1831, [the Prophet] continued to make modifications while preparing a manuscript for the press until his death in 1844.” Although scholars used to think the Joseph Smith Translation was never finished, further research has since concluded that Joseph completely ceased work on the Joseph Smith Translation in 1833, and from then on his sole aim was to publish the work. See Kent P. Jackson, “New Discoveries in the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible,” Religious Educator 6, no. 3 (2005): 156–57.

While the Bible Dictionary remains reasonably functional for most Church members’ everyday needs, its deficiencies are yet another reason it can be helpful to supplement the Church’s official Bible with a modern, academic resource. Robert J. Matthews, one of the primary editors for the Bible Dictionary during the 1970s, himself recognized that not all the information would remain current and is “subject to reevaluation as new discoveries or additional revelation may require.” He advised that “if an in-depth discussion is desired, the student should consult a more exhaustive dictionary.” Matthews, “Using the New Bible Dictionary,” 48.

47. HarperCollins Study Bible, 1854.


50. This is the reading in the 2013 edition of the Latter-day Saint Bible in English. The original 1979 heading spoke of “John’s translation.”


52. Of course, modern revelation and academic scholarship are not mutually exclusive. Thomas Yancy’s New Testament study Bible, written specifically for a Latter-day Saint audience, uses the best academic scholarship but in this case also points out that John’s fate is described in 3 Nephi 28:6–16 and Doctrine and Covenants 7:1–6.


56. For the context from which the King James translators emerged and worked, see Adam Nicolson, God’s Secretaries: The Making of the King James Bible (New York: HarperCollins, 2003). Nicolson notes, “Of course, the King James Bible did not spring from the soil of Jacobean England as quietly and miraculously as a lily. There were arguments and struggles, exclusions and competitiveness. It was the product of its time and brings the marks of its making” (xiii).

57. M. Russell Ballard, “Questions and Answers” (BYU devotional, 14 November 2017), speeches.byu.edu/talks/m-russell-ballard_questions-and-answers/. On another
occasion President Ballard gave similar counsel: “Wise people do not rely on the internet to
diagnose and treat emotional, mental, and physical health challenges. . . . Instead, they seek
out health experts, those trained and licensed by recognized medical and state boards. . . .
[Similarly,] we should find thoughtful and faithful Church leaders to help us. And, if neces-
sary, we should ask those with appropriate academic training, experience, and expertise for
help. This is exactly what I do when I need an answer to my own questions that I cannot
58. See a recording of the devotional at www.churchofjesuschrist.org/media-library/
video/2018-09-10-worldwide-devotional-for-young-adults-a-face-to-face-event-with-
elder-cook.
59. Several Latter-day Saints have pointed to this positive aspect of the KJV’s archaic
language. Ronan Head observes that “there is merit in the struggle to understand, as it
forces the Latter-day Saints to rely on revelation.” Ronan James Head, “Unity and the King
James Bible,” Dialogue 45, no. 2 (2012); 50. Lincoln Blumell and Jan Martin write that “the
seventeenth-century phraseology feels richer and more capable of carrying complex and
multiple meanings than most twentieth- and twenty-first-century translations do. Flattened
language, language that is submissive to its audience, loses some, if not all, of its ability to
move, challenge, chastise, and inspire. It is true that the language of the KJV can be strange
and difficult in places, but strange does not mean incomprehensible and difficult does
not always mean detrimental.” Blumell and Martin, “King James Translation of the New
60. See Joseph M. Spencer, The Vision of All: Twenty-Five Lectures on Isaiah in Nephi’s
Record (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford, 2016), 1–2.
61. Hardy, “King James Bible and the Future of Missionary Work,” 27; emphasis added.
62. Of course, the language register in biblical books varies from text to text. Isaiah was
an educated poet with a firm command of his native Hebrew, so his writings often incor-
porate creative literary touches like wordplay. At the other end of the spectrum we might
place the Gospel of Mark, While Mark in the King James Version “strikes the modern reader
as elegant, formal, and magisterial[,] . . . Mark’s [original Greek] text . . . would not have
sounded antiquated, lofty, or reverent but rather common and plain.” Julie M. Smith, The
Gospel according to Mark, Brigham Young University New Testament Commentary (Provo,
63. See E. Randolph Richards and Brandon J. O’Brien, Misreading Scripture with
Western Eyes: Removing Cultural Blinders to Better Understand the Bible (Downers Grove, IL:
66. “History, 1838–1856, volume D-1 [1 August 1842–1 July 1843],” p. 1523, The
Joseph Smith Papers, www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-
volume-d-1-august-1842-july-1843/166.
67. See Matthew J. Grey, “The Word of the Lord in the Original: Joseph Smith’s Study
of Hebrew in Kirtland,” in Approaching Antiquity: Joseph Smith and the Ancient World, ed.
Lincoln H. Blumell, Matthew J. Grey, and Andrew H. Hedges (Provo, UT: Religious Studies
Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2015), 249–302.
68. See the journal entry for 17 February 1836 at “History, 1838–1856, volume D-1
[1 August 1842–1 July 1843],” p. 1523, The Joseph Smith Papers, www.josephsmithpapers.org
69. See the interview with Thomas A. Wayment at LDS Perspectives Podcast, www
ldsperspectives.com/2017/09/26/jst-adam-clarke-commentary/. A full treatment is
The Use of Adam Clarke’s Bible Commentary in Joseph Smith’s Bible Translation,” in Producing
Ancient Scripture: Joseph Smith’s Translation Projects in the Development of Mormon
Christianity, ed. Michael Hubbard MacKay, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Brian M. Hauglid
(Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press).
It can be awkward to say the word *circumcision* in the gospel classroom. The problem lies in that many students (and some teachers) know just enough about the physical process of circumcision to make mentioning the topic uncomfortable but not enough of the religious history and symbolic meaning to gain much spiritual insight from classroom time dedicated to the topic. Yet the concept of circumcision is related to many chapters in the Old Testament; it is interwoven into scriptures relating to the Abrahamic covenant, the Exodus from Egypt, the promised land, and teachings of multiple Old Testament prophets. An understanding of the religious significance of circumcision in the Old Testament not only teaches gospel principles directly, but also helps students more fully understand other Old and New Testament messages. Further, circumcision was important enough culturally and religiously to be practiced by Jehovah’s covenant people for over two thousand years. Skipping or glossing over the topic might not be the most effective practice.

This article will explore the concept of circumcision in the Old Testament through the eye of a gospel teacher and consider how the concept can be part
of an edifying classroom discussion. While articles that explore the concept of Old Testament circumcision already exist in the literature of the Restoration, most deal with the concept as either part of an explanation of the Abrahamic covenant or part of an exploration of the New Testament debates about the continuation of circumcision. This article adds to the literature in two ways. First, it seeks to be comprehensive by considering every Old Testament reference to the topic, including those related to Abraham, Moses, Joshua, Jeremiah, and others. Second, it is written with a gospel classroom in mind. A thorough study of the concept of circumcision in the Old Testament reveals that current covenant concepts find compelling antecedence in circumcision. Studying how the ancients honored this rite can help those in modern times better honor their own covenants.

**Beginnings**

When Abraham was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to him to establish a covenant with him. The Lord promised that Abraham would be “a father of many nations” (Genesis 17:4), that the Lord would give unto him “the land wherein [he was] a stranger” (Genesis 17:8), and that his “children [would] be known among all nations” (Joseph Smith Translation, Genesis 17:9). As a token of this covenant, the Lord commanded, “Every man child among you shall be circumcised. And ye shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin; and it shall be a token of the covenant betwixt me and you” (Genesis 17:10–11). Abraham was further commanded that whenever a male child was born in his extended household, the child should be circumcised when eight days old (Genesis 17:12). On the day he was commanded, Abraham took all the males of his household and circumcised the flesh of their foreskin. Abraham himself was also circumcised as a token of the covenant that God made with him (Genesis 17:23–26).

Why use circumcision as a token of this covenant with Abraham? One reason might be the connection between the Abrahamic covenant and posterity. When Abraham desired posterity, the Lord told him, “he that shall come forth out of thine own bowels shall be thine heir” (Genesis 15:4). Ishmael was born soon thereafter. However, it was not until after Abraham’s circumcision that Isaac was born (Genesis 17:23–26; 21:3). While no explicit connection is made in the text, it is interesting to note that Abraham’s covenant posterity arose from his covenanted body. Isaac was quite literally born of the covenant.

Lauri Hlavaty uses this connection to posterity to suggest a possible reason why circumcision is the sign of the Abrahamic covenant. She writes: “It is interesting that chapter 2 of Abraham, in which the Abrahamic covenant is again discussed, does not mention circumcision at all. It does, however, reiterate the fact that Abraham’s posterity—the seed of his body—would be partakers of this covenant. This is perhaps why circumcision, rather than a pierced ear or tattooed arm, was the emblem of the pre-Christ covenant with Abraham.”

The timing of circumcision also seems to be deliberate. Text unique to the Joseph Smith Translation of Genesis 17:4–7, 11 reveals one reason for circumcision and its timing:

> And God talked with him [Abraham], saying, My people have gone astray from my precepts, and have not kept mine ordinances, which I gave unto their fathers; and they have not observed mine anointing, and the burial, or baptism wherewith I commanded them; but have turned from the commandment, and taken unto themselves the washing of children, and the blood of sprinkling; and have said that the blood of the righteous Abel was shed for sins; and have not known wherein they are accountable before me. . . . And I will establish a covenant of circumcision with thee, and it shall be my covenant between me and thee, and thy seed after thee, in their generations; that thou mayest know for ever that children are not accountable before me until they are eight years old.

Thus, Restoration scripture reveals that circumcision was intended, at least in part, to supplant false rituals and incorrect concepts regarding infant culpability that had apparently gained acceptance in Abraham’s time. Circumcision at the age of eight days was a reminder that for the first eight years of life “little children are whole, for they are not capable of committing sin; wherefore the curse of Adam is taken from them [Christ]” (Moroni 8:8; see Mosiah 3:16). It seems that circumcision helped Abraham and his family understand their relationship with their children. When viewed through a Restoration lens, circumcision was a reminder, held in the place of the body most closely related to having children, that eight precious years were gifted to parents to prepare their next generation to be God’s covenant people.

**The Words of Circumcision**

An understanding of the words used to command circumcision can provide insight into what Jehovah was requiring of his people when he commanded circumcision. In Hebrew, the words used to command circumcision speak
of irreversibly removing something forbidden from the most intimate part of the body. This type of complete, intimate, and irreversible commitment becomes an inspiring example for the depth of commitment possible in all covenants God offers his people.

As recorded in Genesis 17:11, Jehovah commanded Abraham to "circumcise the flesh of your foreskin" or, in transliterated Hebrew, to "inomiletem et basar orlatkem." Ignoring conjugations and prepositions, there are three Hebrew words in this command that are immediately relevant: mul ("to cut, "to circumcise"), basar ("flesh," "man"), and orlah ("foreskin").

Mul is translated as "to circumcise" or "to cut off." Mul and the possibly related verb namal (both are used in Genesis 17:10–12 and translated as "circumcise" in the KJV) occur forty-one times in the Hebrew Old Testament. The Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, and Joshua usages refer to a physical circumcision. The Deuteronomy and Jeremiah references speak of a symbolic circumcision of the heart. Other possibly related usages in Psalms speak of cutting something in pieces or destroying it.

Basar can be rendered in English as "flesh" or "man." It is a common word, with 270 appearances in the Old Testament. It refers to meat, or the corporeal part of a living thing. This is the word used in the description of Noah's time when Jehovah laments that all flesh (basar) had become corrupted and is to be destroyed (Genesis 6:12–13). It is also used in the descriptions of cutting and burning the flesh of the bullock or ram during ritualistic sacrifice (Exodus 29:14, 32).

Orlah is most often translated as "foreskin," but is also translated as "uncircumcised" or "forbidden." Of the sixteen times this Hebrew word is used in the Old Testament, thirteen instances are translated in the KJV as "foreskin." In two places, Genesis 34:14 and Jeremiah 9:25, it is translated as "uncircumcised," describing a group of people that is unworthy or noncovenantal. Finally, in Leviticus 19:23 orlah is also translated as "uncircumcised" but is not a reference to the covenantal rite or to noncovenantal people. It is part of a prohibition on eating fruit from a young tree. Eating orlah-fruit, or uncircumcised fruit as the KJV calls it, is forbidden for the first three years of a tree's growth. Other English translations, such as the New International Version and the New Revised Standard Version, clarify this by using instead the English word "forbidden." In addition to these sixteen occurrences of the word orlah, the closely related noun arel occurs thirty-five times in the Old Testament, all of which are translated as "uncircumcised" in the KJV.

Without delving into a philological discussion of Hebraic nuances, the basic linguistic understanding presented here is perhaps enough to help students begin to draw symbolic gospel principles from Jehovah's original command. In one interpretation, Jehovah is asking Abraham, and all the covenant people of his family, to symbolically cut off the forbidden from the most private part of their flesh in a way that is complete, intimate, and irreversible. The foreskin is cut off and destroyed. Those who take this cut cannot turn back and become what they were before, and the foreskin is completely, intimately, and irreversibly abandoned.

Complete, intimate, and irreversible abandonment of wickedness, symbolized graphically yet effectively by circumcision, is part of the requirements of discipleship. In Luke 9:62, the Savior says, "No man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God." In Doctrine and Covenants 38:42 the Lord invites the Saints to "go ye out from among the wicked. Save yourselves. Be ye clean that bear the vessels of the Lord," a verse reminiscent of the Lord's command through Isaiah to "touch no unclean thing" (Isaiah 52:11). The Book of Mormon prophet Benjamin taught, "The natural man is an enemy to God, . . . and will be, forever and ever, unless he . . . putteth off the natural man" (Mosiah 3:19). In each of these cases, God's people are invited to permanently cut the ungodly out of their lives as an act of religious devotion.

Ideally, the modern person's choice to abandon wickedness and commit to God, symbolized in today's rites such as baptism, is made as completely, intimately, and irreversibly as the ancient man's circumcision cut. Modern religious commitments find conceptual antecedence in circumcision's linguistic message.

Continuity

Following its biblical beginnings with Abraham, the practice of religious circumcision in the Old Testament was passed down from generation to generation, almost continuously, for two thousand years. That continuity is an inspiring example of multigenerational religious observance.

After Isaac was born, Abraham circumcised him at the age of eight days (see Genesis 21:4). While not specifically mentioned in the scriptures, we can easily assume that Jacob was circumcised, as were each of his twelve sons. Simeon and Levi's own circumcisions are implied by their mention of the
Circumcision in the Old Testament

Circumcision in the Old Testament

Joshua reveals that during the Israelites’ bondage in Egypt the practice of circumcision continued (Joshua 5:4–5). When Moses was born in Egypt, his mother hid him three months (Exodus 2:2). It is arguable whether Moses was circumcised during this time, but he is certainly aware of the practice, as evidenced by his own son’s circumcision at the hands of his wife (see Exodus 4:25). Under the law of Moses, newborn males were circumcised at the age of eight days (Leviticus 12:3), and strangers who desired to keep the Passover were circumcised (Exodus 12:48). Joshua states that he brought a circumcised people into the promised land (Joshua 5:7).

After Joshua, the practice of circumcision is given little textual attention throughout the rest of the Old Testament. In the KJV the English word "circumcise" appears only twice after that time when Jeremiah makes symbolic reference to circumcision of the heart (see Jeremiah 4:4; 9:25). The English word "uncircumcised" is used more frequently but is still scarce in the rest of the Old Testament. The word appears eight times in the history chapters as a derogatory reference to people not of the covenant (see Judges 14:3; 15:8; 1 Samuel 14:6; 17:26; 36:31:4; 2 Samuel 1:20; 1 Chronicles 10:4). Isaiah uses it once, equating being uncircumcised with being unclean (Isaiah 52:1). Jeremiah uses the word on two occasions, speaking of having uncircumcised ears and hearts (see Jeremiah 6:10; 9:25–26). Finally, Ezekiel uses the word sixteen times in four different chapters, speaking of dying uncircumcised or dying with the uncircumcised and of bringing the uncircumcised into the sanctuary (see Ezekiel 28:10; 31:18; 32:19, 21, 24–30, 32:44:7, 9).

The lack of textual attention paid to the practice of circumcision, however, does not mean it was not happening. In fact, these references are chronologically spaced such that they create a continuous chain throughout Old Testament times. Abraham was circumcised in approximately 2000 BC, Samson mentions circumcision around 1150 BC, Jonathan around 1050 BC, Isaiah approximately 700 BC, and Jeremiah around 600 BC. The conjecture that the practice continued to the end of the Old Testament (Malachi prophesies around 400 BC) and through the intertestamental period is substantiated by New Testament statements on circumcision (see Luke 1:59, for example).

It is inspiring to realize that from generation to generation, with very few documented exceptions, the covenantal rite of circumcision had multigenerational staying power. One can imagine the personal commitments, family traditions, religious continuity, and societal mores that were required to keep this rite alive for two thousand years.

This is perhaps an example of the goal Elder Ronald A. Rasband of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles mentioned in the October 2015 general conference when he said: “Like Nephi of old, I was born of goodly parents in the gospel and they of goodly parents back six generations. . . . I am so grateful for a multigenerational Latter-day Saint family, and I know this is a worthy goal for all of us to strive for.” While six generations of faithfulness are a good start, one can imagine the personal commitments, family traditions, church teachings, and societal mores that will be required to keep the modern covenantal rites of baptism, priesthood ordination, and temple ordinances alive for two thousand years and beyond. The example of the ancients with circumcision shows us that such longevity is possible.

The Second Circumcision: A Collective Rededication

There are two recorded times where the rite of circumcision was not performed by covenant people of the Old Testament. First, it seems that Moses neglected the ordinance of circumcision while in Midian. Exodus 4 contains a somewhat cryptic story in which the Lord seeks to kill Moses, and then Moses’s wife, Zipporah, circumcises their son (Exodus 4:24–26). The Joseph Smith Translation of these verses clarifies the impetus of these events: “The Lord was angry with Moses, and his hand was about to fall upon him, to kill him; for he had not circumcised his son.” In Joseph Smith’s reading of the story, Zipporah saves Moses by attending to the previously neglected circumcision of their son.

Second, there is an intriguing break in the practice of circumcision during the Israelite forty years in the wilderness. As Israel wandered, they did not circumcise. Speaking of Egypt, Joshua records, “Now all the people that came out were circumcised: but all the people that were born in the wilderness by the way as they came forth out of Egypt, them they had not circumcised” (Joshua 5:5; emphasis added).

Commentators have suggested various reasons why Israel did not circumcise while wandering in the wilderness. There seems to be some consensus around the explanation that circumcision was temporarily discontinued as a mark of divine disfavor precipitated by their disbelief in God’s promise that they could oust the inhabitants of the promised land. Other explanations for
not circumcising while wandering include nonnecessity (there was no need to distinguish between Israel and other nations) and divine favor (circumcision would have been difficult while traveling). Ultimately the scriptures do not state directly why the practice was discontinued.

The practice, however, was not discontinued forever. After arriving at the promised land and crossing the Jordan, the Lord commanded Joshua to reinstate circumcision among the children of the generation that had come out of Egypt. “Make thee sharp knives,” Jehovah commanded, “and circumcise again the children of Israel the second time” (Joshua 5:2).

Why did the Lord call this circumcision the second time? It is certainly not the second time religious circumcision had happened in the Old Testament. Clearly, many young boys had been circumcised on many occasions between this episode and the beginnings in Abraham’s time. The text of Joshua 5:7 makes clear that this second circumcision is also not a reference to another cut on the already circumcised but is a first circumcision of those born in the wilderness. It states, “And their children, whom he raised up in their stead, them Joshua circumcised: for they were uncircumcised, because they had not circumcised them by the way” (Joshua 5:7). These are the children that had been explicitly exempted from the reproach of Egypt because of their young age (see Numbers 14:29), as well as the children born while wandering.14

It seems that this second circumcision is the second time God’s chosen people had been circumcised as a group, the first being when the rite was instituted with Abraham and his family. This episode is an example of collective rededication. In Joshua 5:9, when God “rolled away the reproach of Egypt from off you,” the “you” is plural in Hebrew. It seems that at Gilgal, God not only reaccepted the persons, he reaccepted the people and symbolized this group rededication by reinstating circumcision.

The idea of collective rededication is intriguing, and many other examples exist. When King Josiah realized the wicked ways of his people, “all the people stood to the covenant” and burned the idolatrous vessels in the temple (2 Kings 23:1–4). When King Anti-Nephi-Lehi spoke to his people, “all the people were assembled together” and buried their weapons of war (Alma 24:16–17). King Benjamin’s people “all cried with one voice” to attest to their repentance (Mosiah 5:2). In modern Church history, the communal rededication and rebaptisms of the Mormon Reformation of 1856–57 have this same flavor.15

Isaiah aptly described this possibility of collective rededication, “For a small moment have I forsaken thee; but with great mercies will I gather thee” (Isaiah 54:7; emphasis added). Note that in this text, the pronoun thee references a symbolically personified group Israel, and the verse’s popular application to an individual applies by extension of the principle.
What if today’s covenant people sought for not only individual repentance but also collective rededication in, say, a sacrament meeting? Elder L. Tom Perry of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles taught, “The purpose of partaking of the sacrament is, of course, to renew the covenants we have made with the Lord.”16 Certainly this refers to the experience of an individual, but it can also refer to the group? The history of Joshua’s second circumcision implies that this is possible.

A communal rededictory experience, like that experienced by Joshua’s people, might include a realization that unfaithful actions taken individually, such as Sabbath breaking or violation of the Word of Wisdom, have spill-over group effects. The group might commit to each other and to God to more fully create a safe space where individuals can seek to overcome personal problems in a nurturing environment. A ward might together acknowledge that many in the group suffer from similar spiritual maladies and communally seek God’s forgiveness. As wards or families collectively re dedicate themselves to God, collectively repent, collectively forgive, and collectively cut out the forbidden, the Lord can “[roll] away [their] reproach” as they covenant anew with God (Joshua 5:9).

The names of the locations where this second circumcision took place encapsulate the promise of God’s mercy to the group. The rite of circumcision is refreshed at Gibeath-haaraloth in a place called Gilgal (Joshua 5:3, 8). While some Bible translations use the Hebrew transliteration of both terms, the KJV translates Gibeath-haaraloth as “hill of the foreskins.” Gilgal means “circle of stones” or “rolling.” The significance of these names is given in Joshua 5. It reads, “And it came to pass, when they had done circumcising all the people, that they abode in their places in the camp, till they were whole. And the Lord said unto Joshua. This day have I rolled away the reproach of Egypt from off you. Wherefore the name of the place is called Gilgal unto this day” (Joshua 5:8–9; emphasis added). These names become reminders of what was left behind (Gibeath-haaraloth, or a “hill of the foreskins”) and what was gained (Gilgal, or “reproach rolled away”) during this second circumcision.

An Everlasting Covenant

The Lord told Abraham, “my covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant” (Genesis 17:13; emphasis added). If circumcision is referred to as an everlasting covenant, why does the modern Church not practice it religiously today? While this is a question possibly better answered in an essay dedicated to understanding the arguments surrounding circumcision in the New Testament, two Old Testament books, Jeremiah and Deuteronomy, give clues.

Addressing a numerous people who were a living fulfillment of the promises made to Abraham, the writer of Deuteronomy uses the concept of circumcision to invite them to internalize their commitment to God. “The Lord had a delight in thy fathers to love them, and he chose their seed after them, even you above all people, as it is this day,” he records. “Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no more stiffnecked” (Deuteronomy 10:15–16; emphasis added). Later in Deuteronomy, scattered Israel is promised that they will be gathered to “the land which thy fathers possessed, and thou shalt possess it; and he will do thee good, and multiply thee above thy fathers” (Deuteronomy 30:5). “And the Lord thy God will circumcise thine heart, and the heart of thy seed, to love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, that thou mayest live” (Deuteronomy 30:6; emphasis added). This reference to circumcision of the heart is clearly not a physical act but a symbolic invitation to internalize the commitments associated with circumcision.

Later, Jeremiah laments that Israel did not internalize these commitments. “Circumcise yourselves to the Lord, and take away the foreskins of your heart,” Jeremiah says (Jeremiah 4:4). And later, “Their ear is uncircumcised, and they cannot hearken:… for all these [other] nations are uncircumcised, and all the house of Israel are uncircumcised in the heart” (Jeremiah 6:10; 9:26).

Deuteronomy and Jeremiah seem to imply that the physical act of circumcision is wasted when unaccompanied by an internal commitment to God and his covenants. In this symbolic sense, God’s covenant people today still circumcise their hearts as an act of religious devotion. It seems, then, that when the Lord told Abraham, “my covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant” (Genesis 17:13), the covenant was everlasting, but the sign was not.

What can the modern covenant keeper learn from this example? While it is true that circumcision is not a religious rite that outwardly defines the Latter-day Saints, many other outward actions are visible signs of one’s devotion to God. Signs such as Sabbath observance, adherence to the strictures of the Word of Wisdom, or payment of tithes and offerings can be outward signs of religious devotion. History has demonstrated that the nature of these outward signs can be changed by modern prophets.17 What is everlasting
is the commitment to God that these signs represent. If these outward acts, whatever their prophet-defined contemporary flavor, are not accompanied by a “circumcision of the heart,” they fail to qualify the individual for God’s favor.

Conclusion
Much can be learned about modern covenants by studying the Old Testament rite of circumcision. First, the language used to command circumcision can be a model for the complete, intimate, and irreversible way in which modern people can “cut off” the “forbidden” from their lives. Second, the long history of near-continuous circumcision is a rousing example of what is possible when covenants are taught from generation to generation. Third, the episode of Joshua’s second circumcision is a testament to God’s redemptive nature, both to the individual and to the group. And finally, the teachings of symbolic circumcision of the heart can help an individual focus on the personal commitment to God that underlies outward religious acts. Perhaps discussing circumcision in a classroom will always be a bit awkward by the nature of the topic and the customs of current culture. However, when connected to the concepts of deep commitment, collective redemption, and internal devotion, the concept of circumcision in the Old Testament can become a powerful tool for teaching those in modern times how to better honor their own covenants.

Notes
1. See Genesis 17, Exodus 12, Joshua 5, and Jeremiah 4 for examples.
7. James Strong, The Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible (Cincinnati: Jennings & Graham, 1890). Strong’s Hebrew #4135 (mul) and #5243 (namal).
8. Strong’s Hebrew #1320.
9. Strong’s Hebrew #6190.
10. Strong’s Hebrew #6189.
14. If one takes as definite cutoffs the ages described in Numbers 14:29–33, men under forty years of age would have been circumcised during this second circumcision. This raises the possibility that there may have been a group of men present at the second circumcision who were already circumcised. Men forty to fifty-nine years old at the time of the second circumcision were considered too young to be barred from the promised land under the condemnation of wandering imposed forty years earlier (Numbers 14:29; 32:11). They would have been circumcised as babies in Egypt (see Numbers 26). If one assumes that this group was present for the second circumcision, there is no evidence suggesting that these people were somehow circumcised a second time.
17. Examples of changes include the duration of Church meetings on the Sabbath day, the interpretation of the phrase “not by commandment or constraint” in the Word of Wisdom (Doctrine and Covenants 89:2), or the definition of “surplus property” in calculating a full tithe (Doctrine and Covenants 119:1–4).
One of the major citations Moroni shared with Joseph was the entire chapter of Isaiah 11, and he then told him that "it was about to be fulfilled."

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The Stem of Salvation and the Rod of Restoration: Revisiting Biblical Exegesis and Latter-day Saint Interpretation of Isaiah 11:1

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And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots.

—Isaiah 11:1

Students of the Bible in the twenty-first century are like a Charles Dickens character living in the best and worst of times. Today we have the advantage of thousands of years of biblical studies on which to build our interpretations and understandings of the Bible. The formation of modern academic disciplines—such as textual, historical, source, and form criticisms, to name a few—for approaching ancient texts over the past 130 years has greatly enhanced our ability to draw meaning out of the text.1 Yet conversely, thousands of years separate us from when the sacred oracles were first conveyed. Hence, the transmission of intent and meaning to a modern-day student has been clouded through time, culture, language, and circumstances.2 In addition, challenges arise from the lack of original documents, the vast quantity of textual variance from copy to copy, and centuries of interpretive...
The Stem of Salvation and the Rod of Restoration

11:1 is a beloved passage of scripture for many different religious groups, yet the challenge is inherent in every manuscript of our day—namely, it is not a perfect transcript from its original form. One challenge a modern-day reader of Isaiah encounters often goes unnoticed. It is a known fact that the text of Isaiah 11 has not always been uniformly translated the same way, the interpretations of Isaiah’s passage have also varied. The text of Isaiah 11 has not always been uniformly translated the same way, the interpretations of Isaiah’s passage have also varied.

A Historical Survey of the Writings of Isaiah

One challenge a modern-day reader of Isaiah encounters often goes unnoticed. The challenge is inherent in every manuscript of our day—namely, it is not the original work of Isaiah. What we read on the pages of our modern Bibles has already had a long history of alteration in the form of translation from the original documents Isaiah wrote. The extent of such processes of redaction is unknown. Nevertheless, at each point of translation, the translator or the team of translators had to make interpretive choices about the words they chose to render from one language to another. Such choices have impacted the way readers have sought to understand Isaiah’s words in their day.

The following timeline of the translation history of Isaiah’s writings is not intended to be exhaustive or definitive. Rather, it is meant to be illustrative of how exegetical choices have been affected by translations. To that end, I have selected only a few of the more commonly known texts and manuscripts to highlight in this article. Through the tools of textual criticism, biblical scholars have been able to trace the lineage of texts through time. Because of the richness of such findings, we have a far clearer picture of how the manuscripts of today were formed and how they differ from earlier texts. Because the text of Isaiah 11 has not always been uniformly translated the same way, the interpretations of Isaiah’s passage have also varied.

The Textual Writings of Isaiah

Many textual critics feel that the entire book of Isaiah, as found in most modern Bibles, was not necessarily written by the prophet Isaiah, who lived in the eighth century BC. Rather, because of their close analysis of surviving ancient texts, such as the Hebrew texts—the Masoretic Text (MT)—and the Great Isaiah Scroll (1QIsa) from the Dead Sea Scrolls; the Septuagint (LXX), which is written in Greek; and the Aramaic writings known as the Targum, textual scholars claim Isaiah’s writings are the compilation of multiple authors over different time periods. These scholars assert that the principal author lived during the eighth century BC and that his oracles were only predicting the downfall of the Kingdom of Israel at the hands of the Assyrian Empire. These chapters are Isaiah 1–39. The second half of the book, known as Deutero-Isaiah, has been attributed to a writer or writers who lived much later than first Isaiah and seems to match historically better with events dealing with the period of the Jewish exile (605–537 BC; see Isaiah 40–55) and the restoration of the Jews to Jerusalem at the beginning of the Second Temple period (537–500 BC; see Isaiah 56–66).

According to Edward Young, Jewish textual scholars explain that the imagery employed in Isaiah 11:1 has reference to Hezekiah, king of Judah, who would repeal the advancing armies of Sennacherib, king of Assyria (705–681 BC). Although this verse is located in the first half of Isaiah, some see the influence of a Deutero-Isaiah writer in chapter 11. They posit that a much later author inserted restorative language to Isaiah’s oracle as a way of strengthening the association to Zerubbabel, whom Cyrus, the king of Persia,
appointed to be the representative of Jewish royalty (Ezra 1:8) and to restore
the temple in Jerusalem (537 BC). In either scenario, for these scholars, an
exegesis of Isaiah 11:1 is, at most, the prediction of a Jewish king who would
help secure or reestablish the Jewish nation several centuries before Christ.

An examination of Isaiah 11:1 from the MT and 1QIsa demonstrates
how the above point of view is not beyond reason. As it relates to Isaiah 11:1,
both the MT and 1QIsa render the verse as follows:

וְיָצָא חֹטֶר מׅגֵּזַע יׅשָׁי וְנֵצֶר מִשָּׁרָשָׁיו יִפְרֶה׃

One of the most recent English translations of this verse reads:

A shoot (ḥotèr) shall come forth (ṣāzā) out from the stump (mīqēzā) of Jesse
(Yīshāy), and a branch (vēnēṣēr) shall grow out of (yipēṣāh) his roots (mishārāshāv).

Three of the Hebrew nouns found in Isaiah 11:1—choter, geza', and
netser—are rarely used elsewhere in the MT, which may suggest they have
definitions specific to this oracle. The fourth noun, sheresh, is a far more com-
non noun within the MT.

The rarity of the previous three words is interesting to note and is not
always apparent to English readers today because translation choices tend
to link them to more frequently used English words in more modern manu-
scripts. For example, the King James Bible translators selected the English
word rod to translate choter. Although the English word rod appears over
eighty times throughout the KJV, choter is found only one other time in the
MT (see Proverbs 14:3). Likewise, the English word branch is used over fifty
times in the KJV, yet only three of those occurrences match the way netser
is used by Isaiah in the MT (see Isaiah 14:19; 60:21; and Daniel 11:7). For
those scholars seeking to understand as closely as possible what the original
text means, such exegetical details may come into play.

For example, by applying principles of historical linguistics to compare
how these words are used throughout the Masoretic Text or the Great Isaiah
Scroll, it seems plausible to support the conclusion that Isaiah 11:1 may
only be foretelling the liberation of a Jewish king. The Hebrew word choter
means "rod, switch; shoot, or twig" and, as previously mentioned, is found
in only one other place within the MT with no clear allusion to any future
figure (see Proverbs 14:3). Similarly, netser means "branch or shoot of a plant,
and when used figuratively means a descendant or "a sprout."
A Latter-day Saint Perspective on the Origins of the Writings of Isaiah

While textual and source criticism have provided compelling arguments for reading the MT a certain way, Latter-day Saint views on the book of Isaiah have been shaped by the inclusion of Isaiah's writing found in the Book of Mormon.22 The Book of Mormon text tells of a set of brass plates that came out of Jerusalem with the Lehetes prior to the main period of Jewish exile (587 BC). The brass plates included, among other things, the writings of Isaiah. Because entire chapters and smaller quotes from both the first half of Isaiah and Deutero-Isaiah are found within the Book of Mormon text, Latter-day Saint scholars feel this fact demonstrates a unified Isaiah text as early as 600 BC. Thus, many Latter-day Saints see this as evidence that Deutero-Isaiah could not be the work of a late sixth century BC anthology.23

Yet Latter-day Saint scholars have not ignored the most common tools of biblical exegesis. Instead, for many of them, the acceptance of other ancient texts and manuscripts provides more information with which to understand biblical writings. For example, the Book of Mormon prophet Nephi explained why he included the words of Isaiah in his record. He wrote, "But that I might more fully persuade [my people] to believe in the Lord their Redeemer I did read unto them that which was written by the prophet Isaiah" (1 Nephi 19:23).24 Latter-day Saints frequently cite Nephi's rationale as one reason for their own interpretations of Isaiah's writings, which expands Isaiah's prophecies to reach beyond his own time and declares the coming of the Son of God, the Savior of the world, Jesus Christ. Of course, Latter-day Saints are not the only ones to explicate Isaiah with a Christocentric lens. 25 Rather, they join a larger community of biblical readers who have been anticipating the fulfillment of Isaiah 11:1 for thousands of years.

Isaiah 11:1 and Christian Messianic Expectations

As Christianity spread throughout the ancient world, so too did the proliferation of biblical texts and manuscripts. As early Christians debated which texts should be included in their collection of sacred writings, they were essentially making theological statements as to what writings were deemed authoritative.26 With each translation and fresh copy of biblical text Christian scribes and priests made, exegetical interpretations were being either challenged or reinforced. For Christians, the figures represented in Isaiah 11:1 were not limited to a localized Jewish ruler; rather they were clearly being understood as a messianic prophecy of a new Davidic king whose reign would affect the entire world, namely Jesus Christ.27

It is widely believed the earliest Old Testament text Christians utilized in the first and second century AD was the Septuagint (LXX). Tradition holds that Ptolemy II Philadelphus directed a Greek version of the Hebrew Bible to be created in Koine Greek to add to the great library of Alexandria, since Greek was the lingua franca of the Eastern Mediterranean during the third century BC. Consequently, the use of the LXX was helpful in the spread of Christianity, as it gave early missionaries a common text to share with Jews and Gentiles alike.28

Rodrigo F. de Sousa, in his work *Eschatology and Messianism in LXX Isaiah 1–12*, argues that early Christians may have begun to interpret Isaiah 11:1 as messianic prophecy in part because of the Greek words chosen by the LXX translators for this particular verse.29 The LXX renders Isaiah 11:1 this way:

καὶ ἐξελεύσεται ῥάβδος ἐκ τῆς ῥίζης Ιεσσαι καὶ ἄνθος ἐκ τῆς ῥίζης ἀναβήσεται

De Sousa's English translation reads:

And a Sceptre will go out from the root of Jesse, and a flower will come up from the root.

If early Christians did in fact interpret the Greek word ῥάβδος to mean Sceptre, then it has a strong tie to an earlier Old Testament oracle found in Numbers 24:17–19, which John Collins argues was being viewed as a messianic text by Jews as early as the third century BC, as seen in the Dead Sea Scrolls.30 The ancient apostle Matthew may have been tying the new star seen at the birth of Jesus Christ (see Matthew 2:1–10) to this same prophecy in Numbers 24:17, which reads, "there shall come a Star out of Jacob, and a Sceptre shall rise out of Israel" (KJV).

By the fourth century AD, Christianity had become the state religion of the Roman Empire through the instrumentality of Constantine and his successors.31 Consequently, Christianity had become the exegetical lens of the Catholic Church, and any who chose to read the Bible differently were branded as heretics and persecuted. In AD 580, emperor Theodosius imposed the following command: "It is Our Will that all the peoples we rule shall practice that religion which the divine Peter the Apostle transmitted to the Romans. . . .We command that those persons who follow this rule
shall embrace the name of Catholic Christians. The rest, however, whom We adjudged demented and insane, shall sustain the infamy of heretical dogmas, their meeting places shall not receive the name of churches, and they shall be smitten first by divine vengeance and secondly by the retribution of Our own initiative, which We shall assume in accordance with divine judgement. It was under these state-sanctioned conditions that St. Jerome translated Old and New Testaments into Latin, which is known as the Vulgate (VUL).

Through the use of textual criticism, scholars have determined that Jerome’s translation of the Old Testament books were drawn from existing Hebrew texts that preceded the MT as well as the Greek text of the LXX. The Latin renders Isaiah 11:1 as follows:

et egredietur virga de radice Iesse et flos de radice eius ascendet

Several of the earliest English translations of the Bible were heavily influenced by the Vulgate. Their translations of the Latin are shown in table 1 below, which also demonstrates the way the interpretation of the Latin changed through time.

Table 1. Early English translations of Isaiah 11:1 from the Latin

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English Bible</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Isaiah 11:1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wycliffe Bible (WYC)</td>
<td>1395</td>
<td>And a yerde schal go out of the roote of Jesse, and a flour schal stie of the roote of it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geneva Bible (GNV)</td>
<td>1599</td>
<td>But there shall come a rodde foorth of the stocke of Ishai, and a grasse shall growe out of his rootes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Douay-Rheims Bible</td>
<td>1609</td>
<td>And there shall come forth a rod out of the root of Jesse, and a flower shall rise up out of his root.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>King James Version (KJV)</td>
<td>1611</td>
<td>And there shall come forth a rod out the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The most common English translation for Latter-day Saints is from the King James Version as it is the official Bible of the Church. Notably, the word *Branch* in the KJV is rendered with a capital letter, clearly identifying to the readers that the translators felt this word was to be understood messianically. Most English Bible translation after the KJV have retained this distinction. Nephi included Isaiah 11:1 in his writings (see 2 Nephi 2:11); yet, as it is rendered in the Book of Mormon, this verse has the notable exception of lacking a capital letter on the word *branch*. Consequently, some Latter-day Saint scholars have cited this difference between the manuscripts as a part of their rationale when explaining the meaning of this oracle.

The Poetic Form of Isaiah 11:1

Despite an increased uniformity of translating Isaiah 11:1 into English among Christian Bibles, because Isaiah is a multivalent text—one that is open to different interpretations—biblical scholars struggle to totally agree on Isaiah’s intended meanings. This has also been true in Latter-day Saint scholarship. The heart of the discussion seems to surround the four principal noun phrases—“a rod,” “the stem of Jesse,” “a Branch,” and “his roots”—in relation to the poetic form Isaiah was employing in his writing.

According to form criticism, a sound understanding of the poetic form employed in Isaiah 11:1 is an important aspect of gaining clarity as to the meaning of Isaiah’s oracle. This approach is echoed by Nephi as one reason why he understands the prophecies of Isaiah and his people do not: “For behold, Isaiah spake many things which were hard for many of my people to understand; for they know not concerning the manner of prophesying among the Jews” (2 Nephi 25:1; see 25:5). Thus, in less than two hundred years from the time Isaiah first uttered the prophecy in chapter 11 until the time of Nephi in the Americas, misunderstanding regarding the forms of Jewish prophecy had already arisen.

Scholars today have shown that Isaiah, in particular, was fond of several different literary forms. Each form was meant to draw the listener’s or reader’s attention to the fundamental message of the passage. The most common form employed by Isaiah is poetic parallelism, which itself has several different variations. Describing this form, Donald Parry writes, “In poetic parallelism, the prophet makes a statement in a line, a phrase, or a sentence and then restates it, so that the second line, phrase, or sentence echoes or mirrors the first. There are approximately eleven hundred of these short poetic units in the book of Isaiah.” Therefore, the majority of biblical scholars state there are only two figures represented by Isaiah in poetic parallelism—once in each line. To demonstrate this form, all capitals and italics are used below to show the two figures in their pairs:
And there shall come forth a ROD out of the stem of Jesse, and a BRANCH shall grow out of his roots.

The first figures in each line are paired together, or are parallel with one another, as are the last two figures in each line. Thus, according to a christological interpretation of this verse, set up by the form, the "rod" becomes synonymous with "Branch" and is referring to Jesus Christ, while the "stem of Jesse" is synonymous with "his root" and refers to the royal house of David.41 Furthermore, the parallel nature of these noun phrases is reinforced by the verb phrases of each line. It is the rod and the branch that "come forth . . . out of" and "grow out of" Jesse's stem and roots, like Christ would descend from Jesse.

Just as the addition of the Book of Mormon has shaped Latter-day Saint views on the compilation of the textual writings of Isaiah, modern revelation has shaped their views on the poetic form of Isaiah 11:1. While some Latter-day Saint scholars agree with a synonymous parallel approach to the verse, others posit that the poetic form of Isaiah 11:1 should be understood in the reverse, or antithetically.42 Thus, the pairing of the figures is as follows:

And there shall come forth a ROD out of the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots:

While some might argue that the verb phrases are not as strong in this poetic form, the interpretational choice of these scholars seems to be primarily influenced by Doctrine and Covenants 113:1–6. Additionally, because Latter-day Saints tend to reserve scriptural interpretive right-of-way to Church leadership, statements by them have reinforced the rationale for an antithetical parallel point of view. The following sections will examine these two influential interpretive sources for Latter-day Saint scholarship.

The Interpretive Impact of Doctrine and Covenants 113

In Doctrine and Covenants 113, Joseph Smith is given two definitive statements that shed light on how Latter-day Saints interpret the identities of the figures of Isaiah 11:1. In both cases, the interpretations differ from mainstream exegetical views of Isaiah's writings. From Doctrine and Covenants 113:1–2, Christ is identified as the Stem of Jesse, rather than its referring to the royal line of David. Likewise, Doctrine and Covenants 113:3–4 states that the rod is "a servant in the hands of Christ," rather than being understood as referring specifically to Jesus.

Now, because only the Stem of Jesse and the rod were defined in the Doctrine and Covenants verses, this has given rise to some variance among Latter-day Saint scholarship regarding the parallel poetic form Isaiah used. Proponents of a synonymous parallel view cite the rod and the branch as being equated to "the servant in the hands of Christ," while the Stem of Jesse and his roots are Christ. Those who support this view tend to cite the lack of a capital letter for branch in the Book of Mormon, which deflects the term from referring to Christ, while the capitalization of Stem of Jesse is clearly related to him by its given definition in the Doctrine and Covenants.43 Those in favor of a synonymous view also point to the stronger correlation of the verb phrases in a synonymous construction, arguing that if Christ is the Stem of Jesse and is parallel to the branch, then the poetic form makes it seem like Christ is coming out of himself, a visual that is difficult to explain. On the other hand, if the Stem of Jesse is parallel to his roots, then the "servant in the hands of Christ" is the rod and branch growing out of Christ, which seems like a more natural correlation.44 Hyrum Andrus states, "In the way the Saints now use a 'genealogical tree' to show the blood relationship of individuals and families who spring from a common stock, Isaiah made use of a plant as a symbol of the divine patriarchal order in ancient and modern times, with certain parts of the plant representing presiding figures within the chosen lineages in the flesh who have a right by promise to the keys and powers of the divine family order."45 Hence, since Christ is the Stem of Jesse, he cannot also be the branch growing out of himself; instead, it is a servant that comes forth in the last days to restore all things.

On the other hand, for those Latter-day Saint scholars who view Isaiah 11:1 as being antithetically paired, they might see Doctrine and Covenants 113:5–6 as strengthening their position. In these two verses, the root of Jesse spoken of in Isaiah 11:10 is defined in very similar terms to the servant figure defined as the rod in Isaiah 11:1. In their view, because Doctrine and Covenants 113:3–4 and 5–6 seem to connect the terms rod and root of Jesse in Isaiah 11, they take their exegetical cues from this pairing.

Furthermore, an antithetical parallel form is strengthened by the interpretative statements of two modern-day Church leaders.46 In 1978 Elder Bruce R. McConkie published the first volume of the Messiah Series, in which he referred to Isaiah 11:1: "As to the identity of the Stem of Jesse, the revealed word says: 'Verily thus saith the Lord: It is Christ.' (D&C 113:1–2.) This also means that the Branch is Christ, as we shall now see from other related.
scriptures.”47 Elder McConkie then proceeded to provide a scriptural defense of his declaration using the following scriptures to show how Christ is the branch: Jeremiah 23:3–6; Jeremiah 33:15; Zechariah 3:7–10; and Zechariah 6:12–13. Although the KJV uses the English word Branch in each of those verses, the Masoretic Text word netser found in Isaiah 11:1 is not used in any of them. Thus, strict source critics might disagree with Elder McConkie’s connecting of Isaiah 11:1 to the other four verses.

The second statement comes from Elder Jeffrey R. Holland, who acknowledges that Isaiah 11:1 is “one of the most important passages in all of Isaiah” for Latter-day Saints because it “is rich with nuances of the Restoration.”48 Linking the overall imagery of Isaiah 10 and 11 to the allegory of the olive tree in Jacob 5, he said: “So it is with the restoration of the gospel. It is like the new shoot out of the old stump, and we see the fruits of those labors in—and with—Zion.”49 He then reaffirms Elder McConkie’s assertion that Christ is the Branch spoken of by Isaiah, as well as in the other verses Elder McConkie cited.

Thus, by merging the definitions provided in the Doctrine and Covenants with the interpretive statements of two latter-day apostles, the majority of Latter-day Saints feel the rod and root are one and the same, a Latter-day servant who is aided by the Lord to bring about a millennial reign of peace for all mankind. They also declare that the Branch and the Stem of Jesse refer to the Savior, Jesus Christ, from whom the rod derives his power.

The Rod of Restoration—Latter-day Saint Views

Having shown that Latter-day Saints generally choose exegetical practices that differ in some ways from mainstream biblical analysis, it should come as no surprise that their conclusions are not always in agreement with the rest of the academic field. While both Latter-day Saint and other Christian biblical scholars agree that Isaiah 11:1 is messianic, none of the researchers outside the Latter-day Saint tradition explicate the verse to include Christ and a servant in his hands. This view appears to be uniquely held by members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. This section details the most common interpretation of who the rod, the servant in the hands of Christ, is assumed to be according to most Latter-day Saint scholars. It concludes with an expanded view of that interpretation.

A Restoration Backdrop

As one reads from early Hebrew texts, like the Great Isaiah Scroll, there are no breakdowns of chapter and verse. Such literary devices came about much later. Thus, an examination of the poetic imagery employed by Isaiah in chapter 10 suggests that Isaiah 11:1 may function as a continuation of that oracle rather than the beginning of an altogether new prophecy. This view is held by most biblical scholars.50 In Isaiah 10 we find a grove of trees that has been destroyed. The Lord, figuratively portrayed as a forester, thins the thickets, lops the tops off the proud and boastful boughs, and allows only the once-burdened stumps of a forsaken forest to remain (see Isaiah 10:5–34).51 With such imagery, Isaiah illustrates the Lord’s anger with both the proud and mighty Assyrian Empire and prefigures the apostate house of David as nothing more than a stump. The warning is clear: humble yourselves or be cut down. Destruction ultimately comes to both groups. Yet then comes the beautiful promise of restoration contained in Isaiah 11.

Addressing the imagery of Isaiah 11:1, Joseph Fielding McConkie writes, “The story is told in prophetic imagery. . . . The imagery is most excellent—the ‘slender twig shooting out from the trunk of an old tree, cut down, lopped to the very root, and decayed; which tender plant, so weak in appearance, should nevertheless become fruitful and prosperous.”52 Ann Madsen points out that such an occurrence is rather normal in the land of Israel. She says, “In Jerusalem it is common for such stumps to sprout and grow (one whole garden of such fruitful stumps is called Gethsemane).”53 Hence, the context of this metaphor is one of restoration, which naturally follows a period of apostasy. Thus, Isaiah’s oracle is a prophecy of restoring the power and authority of Christ to his chosen people through a new shoot, or servant in the hands of Christ, just as Doctrine and Covenants 113:3–4 teaches. Not only does the servant bring new life to the tree through the power of the Lord, such a restoration enables an ushering in of the redemptive, millennial reign of the servant’s Master, the Stem of Salvation, the Lord Jesus Christ, of which Isaiah 11:2–9 prefigures.

Joseph Smith as the Rod of Restoration: A Narrow Interpretation

In Doctrine and Covenants 113:3–4, a description is given of the rod who proceeds out of the Stem of Jesse: “Behold, thus saith the Lord: It is a servant in the hands of Christ, who is partly a descendant of Jesse as well as of Ephraim, or of the house of Joseph, on whom there is laid much power.” By
examing each characteristic of the servant outlined for us in verse 4, the evidence highlighted below provides a compelling argument that the servant spoken of is the Prophet Joseph Smith, a near-consensus view among Latter-day Saint scholars.\textsuperscript{54}

*It is a servant in the hands of Christ.* The Septuagint’s word for rod is *rabdos*, which connotes something handheld, hence the possible translation of a scepter discussed earlier. It has several interpretations that adequately describe how the Prophet of the Restoration acted as a rod in the hands of Christ. “The basic meaning of *rabdos* is ‘flexible twig.’”\textsuperscript{55} Like Samuel in the Old Testament, Joseph Smith was a young boy, the tender age of fourteen, when he first communed with God. Metaphorically speaking, the twig, Joseph, was grafted into the true vine, Christ, the day he entered the grove of trees to seek an answer to his prayer. Similarly, “Olive trees [are] grown by inserting a graft from a cultivated tree into a wild stock. . . . The tree takes about fifteen years to grow to maturity, and then it bears fruit for centuries.”\textsuperscript{56} Certainly, we are the partakers of the fruit that Joseph produced through the restored gospel of Jesus Christ.

A less common definition of *rabdos* is an oracle staff or divining rod. While admittedly it is not as common a definition, it does show an aspect of Joseph’s role as the *rabdos* in the hands of Christ. The simplest form of oracular staffs was by writing “yes” and “no” on two rods that were then drawn by the one seeking divine guidance or intervention. In this way revelation was obtained.\textsuperscript{57} We would refer to such a practice as drawing straws or as a form of “letting fate decide.” However, to the ancients it was a way of exercising faith in God to direct them.\textsuperscript{58} Certainly, no other prophet has given to mankind more of the revelations of God than has Joseph Smith. He was the Lord’s living oracle drawn out to direct an apostate world back to the roots of the gospel covenant.

Joseph Fielding McConkie adds another image of a handheld *rabdos* when he wrote, “The rod . . . grows as an offshoot from the stem or trunk of the tree. It is allowed to grow into a sturdy branch that, when cut from the tree, is used as a shepherd’s staff. The point of attachment to the tree is taken with the branch and worked into a thick knot on the head of the staff, which the shepherd uses both as a weapon against predators and to direct his flock. Isaiah’s imagery is a perfect description of a rod that ‘is a servant in the hands of Christ . . . the Good Shepherd.’”\textsuperscript{59} Joseph was called upon by the Lord both to expose the enemies of Christ and to open the great latter-day work of gathering together the Saints of God. Joseph Smith did not take this role of a rod upon himself; rather, ancient prophets restored the keys of gathering Israel to him (see Doctrine and Covenants 110:11).

*Who is partly a descendant of Jesse as well as of Ephraim, or of the house of Joseph.* While it is difficult to establish all of Joseph Smith’s bloodlines, one scholar noted: “With respect to Joseph’s lineage, Brigham Young declared he was ‘a pure Ephraimitic’ (JD 2:269). However, as Joseph Fielding Smith pointed out, ‘No one can lay claim to a perfect descent from father to son through just one lineage’ (AGQ 3:61).” Therefore, though Joseph’s lineage may be traceable directly back to Ephraim through a given line, of necessity there were intermarriages that took place, making it possible for his descent to have also come from Jesse through his forefather, Judah.\textsuperscript{60} Perhaps in a future day, when all the records of the human family have been pieced back together, we will see the intricate ways in which this description fits Joseph Smith.

*On whom there is laid much power.* What type of power? Priesthood power. As the rod, Joseph had the natural right because of his lineage and as a “lawful heir” to the priesthood (see Doctrine and Covenants 86:8–11; 113:7–8).\textsuperscript{61} On 15 May 1829, he received the power and keys associated with the Levitical Priesthood, under the hands of John the Baptist (see Doctrine and Covenants 13). Later that spring, he received the power and authority of the Melchizedek Priesthood under the hands of Peter, James, and John, who received it from Jesus Christ. Then on 3 April 1836, in the Kirtland Temple, Joseph was given additional keys of the priesthood from Moses and Elijah (see Doctrine and Covenants 110).

As has already been shown, the LXX’s *rabdos* has been translated into English as *scepter*, which invokes the imagery of authority and kingship. The rights, privileges, powers, authorities, and keys of the priesthood that were laid upon Joseph have been passed down to every prophet and every worthy male of this last dispensation. The Lord promised, “thy scepter [shall be] an unchanging scepter of righteousness and truth; and thy dominion shall be an everlasting dominion, and without compulsory means it shall flow unto thee forever and ever” (Doctrine and Covenants 121:46). Truly, the tree bough is once again full of beautiful branches because the roots of priesthood power have been restored by Joseph Smith in preparation of the Second Coming of Christ.
Moroni's initial visitation to Joseph Smith. In addition to the similarities of the definition of the rod in the Doctrine and Covenants to the Prophet Joseph Smith, there is another compelling argument that leads Latter-day Saints to see the Prophet in Isaiah's prophecy. On 21 September 1823, as a seventeen-year-old young man, Joseph was engaged in prayer and meditation when he was visited by the angelic being named Moroni. In about AD 421, Moroni deposited the records that would eventually become the Book of Mormon. Appearing as a resurrected being, Moroni heralded the boy prophet and immediately informed Joseph that his name would be had for good and evil throughout the world because of the work God was calling him to perform.

Over the course of that night, Moroni instructed Joseph on his foreordained mission through the use of biblical verses of scripture. One of the major citations Moroni shared with Joseph was the entire chapter of Isaiah 11, and he then told him that "it was about to be fulfilled" (Joseph Smith—History 1:40; see 1:27–54). It seems that the purpose of the citation, along with all the other verses Moroni shared, was intended to provide Joseph a brief overview of what the Lord was expecting him to do and to become. In this case, it is plausible he was being identified as a rod in the hands of Christ to restore the fullness of the gospel to the earth in preparation for a millennial reign of Christ.

The Rod as a Function of Restoration: A Broader Interpretation

While many of those phrases can be attributed to the same person (e.g., Joseph Smith is referred to as the Lord’s servant at least thirty times in the Doctrine and Covenants), other verses identify groups of people as the Lord’s servants, such as the house of Jacob/Israel (e.g., Isaiah 44:1–2), the Lord’s prophets (e.g., Jeremiah 26:5), and the followers of Christ (e.g., John 12:26). It would seem that keeping the identity of the servant undeclared in Doctrine and Covenants 113:4 allows for multiple fulfillments of this prophecy and shifts the focus of the verse onto the functionality and qualifications of the rod.

Additionally, the question posed about the rod in Doctrine and Covenants 113:3 begins with the word what rather than who, as was the case in Doctrine and Covenants 113:1, which is emphasizing the identity of the Stem of Jesse. Beginning the question with what in verse three seems to further suggest that the identity of the rod is not the focus of the answer. The first part of the response in Doctrine and Covenants 113:4 is the function of the rod, namely that it is to be a servant in the hands of Christ or directed by him. The rest of the verse qualifies the servant as being partially related to Jesse and partially a descendent from the house of Joseph through Ephraim. Furthermore, the servant will have had much power laid upon him.

Since the time of Isaiah, there have been many who have functioned as a rod in the hands of Christ. For each of the ways that Joseph Smith fits the identifying markers as the rod, as was discussed in the previous section, could not the same be said of Peter, James, John, and the rest of the twelve apostles of the Lamb? Like Joseph, their ministry followed a period of apostasy. Like Joseph, they had hands laid upon their heads and were given keys of the priesthood to administer with its power and authority. Like Joseph, they were grafted into the gospel of Jesus Christ and demonstrated the ability to submit to the will of the Savior in their efforts to gather his sheep. Could not the same also be said of the Book of Mormon prophets? How many of them were restoring their people back to the covenants of the Father through revelatory guidance? For example, both Abinadi and Samuel the Lamanite were declared to be the Lord’s servants as they preached to apostate groups (see Mosiah 26:15 and 1 Nephi 23:9).

At the conclusion of Nephi’s final prophecy of the scattering and gathering of Israel in the last day as it pertains to the Jews, the remnant Lamanites, and the Gentiles (see 2 Nephi 25–30), he restates the Isaiah oracle in Isaiah 11:4–9, which declares the conditions of the earth during the millennial reign of Christ (see 2 Nephi 30:9–15). Where Isaiah used poetic imagery to
prophesy of the role of the rod and branch to bring out restoration (see Isaiah 11:1), Nephi’s prophecy is much plainer. Putting the poetry aside, Nephi’s rod is the instrumentality of restoration efforts of latter-day servants who will declare the gospel of Jesus Christ to all the world (see 2 Nephi 30:4–8). Today, thousands of young missionaries and senior couples accept this prophetic charge to gather Israel from the four corners of the earth. The titles they wear on their badges of Elder or Sister designates them as duly called servants of the Lord.

Reinterpreting the verb phrases and poetic form of Isaiah 11:1. The knowledge gained from Doctrine and Covenants 113:1–4—namely, that the identity of the Branch and Stem of Jesse is Christ and the rod functions as a servant in the hands of Christ with priesthood power—can shape our understanding of the verb phrases and the poetic form of Isaiah 11:1.

The verb phrases, while initially appearing as synonymously paired, can also work in an antithetical poetic construction. In the first line, the servant (rod) is coming out of Christ (Stem of Jesse), or in other words, Christ comes first followed by his servant. Then, Christ (Branch) comes out of his servant (roots), or in other words, the servant comes first followed by Christ. If the servant is likened to the Church, this antithetical construction of the verb phrases makes sense. Christ’s first appearance would come in the meridian of time prior to establishing his servant, the Church, led by priesthood leadership. At the time of his first coming, Christ, the Stem of Jesse, established his Church (a rod) between two continents—first among the Jews in Jerusalem as recorded in the New Testament, and second among the remnant of Joseph in the Americas as recorded in the Book of Mormon. In this case, the Church was being led partially by priesthood leaders principally from the tribes of Judah (Peter and the other twelve apostles) and from the tribes of Joseph (the chosen twelve Nephite disciples). However, in both locations, a period of apostasy followed. Thus, in the last days, the Church and her covenants, led by priesthood keys (the roots), has been restored first through the instrumentality of Joseph Smith, which is preparing the world for the Second Coming of the Christ (the Branch) by sharing the gospel as found in the stick of Judah and the stick of Ephraim (see Ezekiel 37:15–17). Such a construct could be seen as fulfilling another biblical prophecy, “So the last shall be first, and the first last: for many be called, but few chosen” (Matthew 20:16).

Conclusion

In a time when so many tools of biblical exegesis are literally at our fingertips, there are still many different ways we can approach an ancient text today. The purpose of this paper has been to show that through time the meanings and interpretations of the oracles of Isaiah have been fluid for millennia of readers and scholars alike. Each of us has been influenced by the exegetical choices of prior generations. For Latter-day Saints, understanding the passage of Isaiah 11:1 has been primarily shaped by additional scripture and modern prophetic commentary.

While the majority of biblical scholars today view this verse as being messianic, Latter-day Saints see a broader scope of what this verse foretells. They not only see the poetic imagery of the Stem of Salvation figured in the Savior, Jesus Christ, but identify another millennial figure in the Prophet Joseph Smith, the rod of Restoration. When the rod is understood by way of function rather than identity, a multiplicity of restorative figures emerges, each one striving to lead the willing to the covenantal roots of Christ’s Church. Today, those actions are seen in the efforts of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as it strives to spread the message of the Restoration to all the earth in order to prepare all nations for the return of the King of kings and Lord of lords. Only then can we all rest in the shade of his glorious, millennial branches. 

Notes


5. The New Interpreter’s Bible: General Articles & Introduction, Commentary, & Reflections for Each Book of the Bible, including the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books in
The Stem of Salvation and the Rod of Restoration


23. See previous note for examples of those who feel that the Book of Mormon’s inclusion of Isaiah argues for a unified text as early as 600 BC. There are others who believe that the Book of Mormon is an ancient text but that it does not prevent a belief in the redactional influence of Deutero-Isaiah. See Blake T. Ostler, “The Book of Mormon as a Modern Expansion of an Ancient Source,” Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought 20, no. 1 (1987): 66–131.

24. Nephi unequivocally understood the Redeemer to be Jesus Christ, the Messiah; see 2 Nephi 1:12–4 and 2 Nephi 25:12–26.

25. Latter-day Saints are not unique in their view of the book of Isaiah being the works of one author, namely the eighth-century-BC prophet. See John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures by Dallas Seminary Faculty (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 1029–31, but they are unique in using the Book of Mormon text as part of their rationale.


27. Oswalt, Book of Isaiah, 277–78; New Interpreter’s Bible, 139; Walvoord and Zuck, Bible Knowledge Commentary, 1056; and Young, Book of Isaiah, 180.


31. Shelley, Church History in Plain Language, 96–97; capitalization follows the original.


33. For an understanding of Latter-day Saint views of the KJV, see Kent P. Jackson, ed., The King James Bible and the Restoration (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2011).

34. For an understanding of one author, namely the eighth-century-BC prophet. See John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures by Dallas Seminary Faculty (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 1029–31, but they are unique in using the Book of Mormon text as part of their rationale.

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37. Ben Witherington III, Isaiah Old and New: Exegesis, Intertextuality, and Hermeneutics (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), 100–116. See also Ann N. Madsen...
42. While some Latter-day Saint scholars agree on the form, they view the identities of the figures differently. Hyrum Andrus suggested: “There are four figures depicted in Isaiah’s statement, each constituting a distinct part of the plant, or a presiding person within the divine patriarchal order.” See Hyrum L. Andrus, *Doctrinal Commentary on the Pearl of Great Price* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1967), 464. Donald Parry and others, in the book *Understanding Isaiah*, determined that there are only two principal characters depicted by the primary images of the rod and the branch. See Parry, Parry, and Peterson, *Understanding Isaiah*, 116–17. Still, other scholars surmised that there are three characters portrayed in this prophecy: the rod, the stem, and the branch. See Rodney Turner, “The Two Davids,” in *A Witness of Jesus Christ: The 1989 Sperry Symposium on the Old Testament*, ed. Richard D. Draper (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1990), 148. To complicate the matter, the actual identities of these images differ from scholar to scholar even among those who agree upon the number of characters depicted within the verse. For instance, both Sidney Sperry and Victor Ludlow agreed that there are only two principal figures; however, Sperry claimed that those figures are Christ and his servant Joseph Smith, while Ludlow argues that the servant will be a great Jewish leader in the last days with the name of David. Sidney B. Sperry’s view is cited in Leuan G. Otten and C. Max Caldwell, *Sacred Truths of the Doctrine and Covenants* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1982–83), 2:264, while Victor L. Ludlow’s are found in his book *Isaiah: Prophet, Seer, and Poet* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1982), 169.
45. Andrus, *Doctrinal Commentary*, 464.
46. Interestingly, as of 31 March 2019, according to the Latter-day Saint Scripture Citation Index (see http://scriptures.byu.edu/), Isaiah 11:1 has never been cited in a general conference address of the Church. Second Nephi 1:1 has been referenced only in the footnotes of a talk by Elder Russell M. Nelson in October 1999. The verses in Doctrine and Covenants 1:13–14, which are directly related to Isaiah 11:1, have also never been cited.
58. Nephi and his brothers may have been doing something similar in 1 Nephi 3:14 when they “cast lots” to see which of them would go seek the plates of brass from Laban first. The lot fell on Laman, and he responded without complaint.
60. Hoyt W. Brewster Jr., *Doctrine and Covenants Encyclopedia* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1988), 479. For a fairly in-depth discussion of Joseph’s lineage from both Ephraim and Jesse, see Hyrum L. Andrus, *Doctrines of the Kingdom* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1975), 331–40.
61. Millet and Jackson, *Doctrine and Covenants*, 332; and Andrus, *Doctrinal Commentary*, 464.
The book of Jeremiah describes the turbulent times in Jerusalem prior to the Babylonian conquest of the city. Warring political factions bickered within the city while a looming enemy rapidly approached. Amid this complex political arena, Jeremiah arose as a divine spokesman. His preaching became extremely polarizing. These political factions could be categorized along a spectrum of support and hatred toward the prophet. Jeremiah’s imprisonment (Jeremiah 38) illustrates some of the various attitudes toward God’s emissary. This scene also demonstrates the political climate and spiritual atmosphere of Jerusalem at the verge of its collapse into the Babylonian exile and also gives insights into the beginning narrative of the Book of Mormon.

Setting the Stage: Political Background for Jeremiah’s Imprisonment

In the decades before the Babylonian exile in 587/586 BC, Jerusalem was the center of political and spiritual turmoil. True freedom and independence had not been enjoyed there for centuries. Subtle political factions maneuvered within the capital city and manipulated the king. Because these political
groups had a dramatic influence on the throne, they were instrumental in setting the political and spiritual stage of Jerusalem. The Assyrian Empire had ruled much of the ancient Near East for hundreds of years. Both Manasseh and Amon ruled Judah vassals under the Assyrians.\(^2\) Both kings were wicked according to the author of Kings (2 Kings 21:11, 16, 19–22).\(^3\) Amon’s reign ended abruptly after only two years, at which point his servants assassinated him (2 Kings 21:13). At the time of his death, Amon was only twenty-four years old (2 Kings 21:19; 2 Chronicles 33:21), leaving his eight-year-old son Josiah to rule (2 Kings 22:1; 2 Chronicles 34:1). This means that Amon was sixteen years old when his son was born. Securing a natural heir as early as possible was critical.\(^4\)

In 640 BC, King Josiah was placed on the throne by a profoundly influential group called “the people of the land” (2 Kings 21:24).\(^5\) Little is known about this group, but it is clear that its members wielded a tremendous amount of influence upon the young king and were able to manipulate the future of the kingdom in very significant ways. Josiah’s rule would prove to be a turning point in the religious history of Judah, and few kings would garner as much respect and admiration (2 Kings 22:2).

Josiah’s marriages would play a significant role in the future of Jerusalem and were probably arranged.\(^6\) In order to obtain an heir to secure the royal Davidic line, the woman who would become the mother of a future king would wield an enormous amount of power and so must be chosen carefully.\(^7\) These crucial decisions could not be left to a youth.\(^8\) Josiah’s first wife was Zebudah, the daughter of Pedaiah of Rumah (2 Kings 23:36).\(^9\) Their first-born son was named Jehoiakim and was probably born when Josiah was fourteen.\(^10\) By age sixteen, Josiah married a second wife, Hamutal of Libnah (2 Kings 23:31; 24:18).\(^11\) Hamutal’s firstborn son was named Jehoahaz. In the same year that Jehoahaz was born, sixteen-year-old Josiah began to “seek after the God of David” (2 Chronicles 34:3). Four years later, he began to purge the land of all alternative forms of worship, eliminating “high places,” “groves,” and “images” (2 Chronicles 34:3).

During the eighteenth year of his reign, he ordered the high priest Hilkiah to use state taxes to renovate the temple (2 Kings 22:3–4; 2 Chronicles 34:9). During this renovation “the book of the law” was discovered (2 Kings 22:3–10). These scriptures had a dramatic impact on Josiah (2 Kings 22:11; 2 Chronicles 34:19).\(^12\) As a result of this discovery and of hearing the text read aloud, a reform began in the city. Josiah purged the land of all pagan practices and closed all local shrines, centralizing the worship of Jehovah to the temple in Jerusalem.\(^13\) Because Josiah’s spiritual awakening was so closely associated with Jehoahaz’s birth, both Jehoahaz and his mother were identified as the catalyst for this reform movement.\(^14\)

Jeremiah entered the scene during Josiah’s reform. Jeremiah came Anathoth, the home of an exiled priestly family and had moved to Jerusalem to assist in Josiah’s temple renovations (Jeremiah 1:1).\(^15\) As a young man, Lehi too was a firsthand witness of Josiah’s reform.\(^16\) Later in his life, Lehi may have “stood as a second witness” to Jeremiah as they preached to the citizens of Jerusalem.\(^17\)

By 612 BC, the Assyrian Empire was clearly declining. The Babylonians and the Medes destroyed Nineveh, the Assyrian capital, and the end of Assyrian domination was imminent. Josiah took the opportunity to declare independence from the oppressive Assyrian regime, trying to take advantage of the declining Assyrian influence.\(^18\) He attempted to follow in the footsteps of his ancestor King David\(^19\) by making efforts to unify the remaining Israelites and to gather them under one unified monarchy to amass the strength of Israel.

In the spring of 609 BC, the Egyptian pharaoh Necho II\(^20\) led a sizable military force north to aid the Assyrian ruler Asshuruballit II in Carchemish in a frantic effort to retake Haran from the Babylonians. Josiah attempted to block the advance of Necho’s forces at the valley of Megiddo, some sixty miles north of Jerusalem. He hoped to eliminate Assyria’s support and to ensure the Assyrian defeat.\(^21\) Amid the conflict with the Egyptian army in June 609 BC, Josiah was killed (2 Kings 23:29–30; 2 Chronicles 35:23–24)\(^22\) and Necho pressed on toward Haran.

Necho ultimately failed at the battle at Haran and retreated to Egypt. On his return march, Necho found that Josiah’s second oldest son, Jehoahaz, sat on the throne in Jerusalem (2 Kings 23:31)—the second-born son was chosen over the firstborn.\(^23\) Curiously, it was the “people of the land” (2 Kings 23:30) who placed Jehoahaz on the throne, probably to help support the reforms Josiah had begun. Necho immediately removed Jehoahaz, who had ruled for only three months, and imprisoned him in Egypt, replacing him on the throne with his more compliant older brother, Jehoiakim (2 Kings 23:34; 2 Chronicles 36:3–4)\(^24\). It could be viewed that Necho restored the natural order of things by placing the firstborn on the throne. Jehoiakim ruled as a vassal of the pharaoh and would prove to be a supporter of Egypt.
Necho levied a high tax on Jerusalem. This tax was not paid with the royal coffers, but rather the penalty was passed along to the people of the land at the explicit command of Pharaoh Necho (2 Kings 23:35). The people who put Jehoahaz on the throne were ultimately punished.

Once Jehoiakim was placed on the throne, he became a ruthless tyrant who disregarded his subjects’ needs and reversed the recent religious reforms of his father, Josiah. Jehoiakim put down all opposition, and the moral status of the kingdom rapidly declined (2 Kings 24:3–4). Because of this, Jeremiah was quick to criticize the new king (Jeremiah 7, 22).

As Jehoiakim began to rule Judah, Babylon was beginning to expand its borders toward Egypt. The Babylonian forces came down on Jerusalem following the battle at Carchemish in 605 BC (Jeremiah 46:2, 13, 22; 2 Kings 24:7). Jehoiakim quickly buckled before Babylon and pledged allegiance to Nebuchadnezzar and became his vassal. Nebuchadnezzar’s forces returned to Babylon to regroup, and Jehoiakim saw this retreat as an opportunity to rebel against Babylon (2 Kings 24:1–2).

Jehoiakim’s revolt against Babylon in 598 BC indicates that Jehoiakim still acted as a loyal ally or vassal of the Egyptians who put him on the throne, and it resulted in a Babylonian siege of Jerusalem (2 Kings 24:10–11). It was toward the beginning of this three-month siege that Jehoiakim passed away. He was replaced by his eighteen-year-old son, Jehoiachin (2 Kings 24:6–9), who reigned in Jerusalem for just over three months before the siege ended. Jehoiachin’s speedy submission to Nebuchadnezzar saved his life but unfortunately lost him his crown and his freedom. Nebuchadnezzar took Jehoiachin captive along with his entire household, his royal court, and thousands of his citizens (2 Kings 24:11–16; 2 Chronicles 36:9–10). In the end, Zedekiah was placed on the throne at age twenty-one by Nebuchadnezzar after swearing an oath of allegiance to Babylon (2 Kings 24:17–18).

Zedekiah’s Pressures

Zedekiah came to the throne at a time of great spiritual, economic, and political turmoil. The previous kings had made "disastrous choices." The city was caught between two external political powers since both Egypt and Babylon vied for power. Over the past decades, loyalties had shifted and allegiances had waned as Jerusalem was continually controlled by one side or another. Egypt had heavily taxed the people (2 Kings 23:33), and Babylon had pillaged the temple and national coffers and had exiled a portion of the inhabitants, leaving the state in financial ruin (2 Kings 24:13). Zedekiah had witnessed the murder of his father, Josiah, and the exile of his brother Jehoahaz. He had seen his brother Jehoiakim mismanage Jerusalem, which had caused the might of Babylon to come down on the city for a three-month siege, resulting in the death of Jehoiakim and the exile of his son Jehoiachin. Thousands of people were deported, and both the city’s economy and defenses were in shambles. Civil unrest prevailed, and various political groups competed for power.

Zedekiah inherited a city in which the spiritual climate was deplorable. Adultery was rampant (Jeremiah 5:7–8; 9:2), corruption and dishonesty permeated almost every group (Jeremiah 5:1; 6:13; 9:2–4), and false and perverse religious practices began to reappear (Jeremiah 7:31; 11:13; 19:5; 32:35). Many divinely commissioned ministers began preaching in the holy city at this time (2 Chronicles 36:15–16; 1 Nephi 1:4). Prophets active during this era included Jeremiah (ca. 626–587 BC), Zephaniah (ca. 640–609 BC), Obadiah (ca. 587 BC), Nahum (ca. 612 BC), and Habakkuk (ca. 609–605 BC). The Book of Mormon reports that Lehi was called to the ministry at this time (1 Nephi 1:5–20). Lesser-known prophetic figures were also preaching repentance, including Urijah, Huldah the prophetess, Ben-Yohanan ben Igdaliah (LXX Jeremiah 15:4), and possibly many others. This increased number of prophets in the city was accompanied by an increasing wave of imitators (Jeremiah 23:13–32). While true prophets warned of the impending war and desolation, false prophets lulled the people with their messages of reassurance and idleness. As a result, the people rejected the true prophets and were often personally aggressive toward them (Jeremiah 5:31; 6:9–11; 14:1–15; 20:2; 23:11–17, 21, 25–38; 27:1–18; 1 Nephi 12:20).

For the next few years, Zedekiah maintained a quiet reign. The Babylonians had successfully cowed him. Few would have dared to question the might of Babylon after their armies had just sacked the city. Over his eleven-year reign, Zedekiah realized he needed to rebuild without provoking the ire of either Babylon or Egypt. Zedekiah was a well-intentioned leader (Jeremiah 38:14–16), but he was weak, vacillating, and fearful of public opinion (Jeremiah 38:5, 19).

Throughout Zedekiah’s reign, various political groups pressured Zedekiah to break his oath of allegiance to Nebuchadnezzar. Rumors began to arise that Egypt would assist in a rebellion against Babylon. News of civil unrest
in Babylon reached Jerusalem; Zedekiah gave in to the pressures and joined an alliance with Egypt to rebel against Babylon (2 Kings 24:20). And so the countdown to Jerusalem’s destruction began.

In January 588 BC Nebuchadnezzar caught wind of the rebellion and moved quickly against Jerusalem, laying siege to the city. The blockade ultimately lasted over eighteen months. In the spring or summer of 588 BC, Judah became hopeful when the Egyptians began to march toward Jerusalem (Jeremiah 37:5–7). Nebuchadnezzar briefly left the siege of Jerusalem to smash this Egyptian resistance, and then he quickly returned Jerusalem. Zedekiah was in a desperate situation.

The Imprisonment of Jeremiah

During the siege of the city, Jeremiah once again prophesied, “He that remaineth in this city shall die by the sword, by the famine, and by the pestilence: but he that goeth forth to the Chaldeans shall live; for he shall have his life for a prey and shall live” (Jeremiah 38:2). Jeremiah had frequently and repeatedly forewarned of the impending Babylonian victory (Jeremiah 37:6–10, 16–17; 38:1–3, 18, 22–23). He clearly outlined the three options left to the people: they could (1) leave the city by escaping the siege, (2) remain in the city and face the consequences of the terrible end of the siege, or (3) surrender and hope that becoming the “prey” of war would somehow result in survival. The implied message was that “the Babylonian invader is the Lord’s instrument. To resist him is to resist the Lord.” Jeremiah connected politics and faith, which led to a remarkable and predictably unpopular pronouncement: “obedience to God equaled surrender to Babylon.”

The message was too much for the leading councils of the city to accept. A group referred to as “the princes” (Jeremiah 38:4), officials or officers of the king, had the prophet arrested. Princes could refer to military officers, commanders of military units, or the whole army; or it could refer to civic officials or royal advisers (1 Kings 4:2–6; 20:14; see also the Hebrew text of 1 Kings 22:16; 2 Kings 23:8). The princes “and not the king appear to be the shapers of policy. They embody the bureaucracy which is impervious outside its own ideology.” They appear to have been able to influence the king so effectively that one wonders who was really running the state’s affairs.

The charges that the princes brought against Jeremiah appear to have been either of treason, claiming that he “weakeneth the hands of the men of war” (Jeremiah 37:4) by undermining the military, or of false prophecy (Deuteronomy 13:1–5) by predicting a false outcome of the conflict. The princes’ primary concern seems to be the morale of the soldiers, supporting the conclusion that the princes were indeed military commanders. Regardless of the charges, they wanted Jeremiah silenced! Their repeated efforts to silence him in the past had failed (compare Jeremiah 26:36), but this time these pro-Egyptian/anti-Babylonian courtiers planned to kill Jeremiah, silencing him permanently.

Zedekiah had already promised Jeremiah that he would spare his life, but because the king lacked “the power to resist [the princes’] designs,” Zedekiah was caught in a dilemma. According to Jeremiah 38, the king knew the difference between right and wrong but was too weak to make his private support of Jeremiah public. William McKane labels Zedekiah as guilty of “moral cowardice”; he is a “helpless tool” in the power of the princes, whom he calls “brutal terrorists.”

Although weak, Zedekiah still controlled Jeremiah’s fate. Charges—including a verdict against Jeremiah—were brought before the king for ratification. Zedekiah is framed as the final judge in the case. The exact role of the king’s judicial function is unknown but in the early monarchical period, the king functioned as a primary and final judge in all kinds of cases. During the seventh-century Deuteronomic reform, many of the day-to-day civil or criminal matters were delegated to other officials (Deuteronomy 16:18; 17:8–13). Ultimately, it was the king’s responsibility “to guarantee the true administration of justice throughout the land.” The king relinquished all responsibility in the case against Jeremiah, claiming that “he is in your hand; for the king is not he that can do any thing against you” (Jeremiah 38:5). The princes took Jeremiah and “cast him into the dungeon of Malchiah” (Jeremiah 38:6), believing that he “would not be supported by God and would die.” Empty cisterns were sometimes used as prisons, or holding cells (Jeremiah 38:6; Lamentations 3:53; Psalms 40:2; 69:15). Most “domestic cisterns were shaped like a bottle, with a small opening in the top, often covered by a stone.” Because it was in the month of July, presumably either the now-empty water cistern had only mud at the bottom (Jeremiah 18:6) or the cistern was cracked and could not hold significant amounts of water. Once again, Jeremiah was imprisoned; but this time instead of being under house arrest, as he had been before (Jeremiah 37:17), he sat in the “mud of hopelessness, a place of abandonment and death.” Leaving Jeremiah in those
conditions would ultimately kill him, while sparing the princes the task of actually charging him with a crime or personally killing him.  

Word of Jeremiah’s imprisonment was not kept secret and spread quickly. Ebed-Melech, the Ethiopian, one of the king’s officials, heard the news (Jeremiah 38:7). He found the king “sitting in the gate of Benjamin” (Jeremiah 38:7) and pleaded with him, saying, “These men have done evil in all that they have done to Jeremiah the prophet, whom they have cast into the pit; and he is like to die in the place where he is because of the famine; for there is no more bread in the city” (Jeremiah 38:9). Ebed-Melech could have acted independently and rescued Jeremiah on his own, but he sought the king’s permission and tried to spur Zedekiah on to action. He had his master’s true interests at heart, “helping him to reach relative levels of justice and spiritual perception he would otherwise not have attained.” However, the king remained passive, bending to the request of both the princes to condemn and Ebed-Melech to rescue. He granted Ebed-Melech an escort, declaring, “Take from hence thirty men with thee, and take up Jeremiah the prophet out of the dungeon, before he die” (Jeremiah 38:10). It would seem an excessive amount to get one man out of a pit, and “no reason is given for so many, perhaps the idea is some protection from those who resist the rescue.” Jeremiah was rescued but remained in a type of house arrest or in “the court of the prison” (Jeremiah 38:13). This house arrest might have been to ensure Jeremiah’s safety or to curb his message from being spread.

Zedekiah later met with the prophet in private. Jeremiah declared that the king’s feet too would sink in the mire (Jeremiah 38:22), and he compared his own imprisonment to the siege of Jerusalem. As Leslie Allen and Jennifer K. Cox wrote, these “two crises are linked as cause and effect. The rejection of the prophetic message that resulted in Jeremiah’s dire predicament, despite the partial amelioration granted by the king, was to land Zedekiah himself in a comparable predicament.” The imagery seems to mirror Jeremiah’s incarceration in a muddy cistern: “Zedekiah rescued Jeremiah from mud, but the king’s friends had abandoned him to it.”

Zedekiah was caught between different groups as he tried to appease everyone. The princes pushed him to oppose God’s messenger under the guise of national independence; Jeremiah commanded him to surrender and face the consequences of leading his people into peril; Ebed-Melech tried to inspire, with his own example, the need to make correct moral choices.

Book of Mormon Connections

The context of the situation in Jerusalem gives insight into the early events of the Book of Mormon. These connections shed greater light on the context of 1 Nephi, which can help the reader gain greater insight.

Josiah’s reform must have had an impact on Lehi and his family since it had some aspects that resonate with the teachings found in the Book of Mormon. Both emphasize a belief in central temple worship and devotion to religious law (see Deuteronomy 28:15, 45, 61; 30:10, 16; 2 Nephi 5:10; Mosiah 2:31) as well as a belief in opposing priestcrafts (see Deuteronomy 13; 16:16; 2 Nephi 10:15; 2 Nephi 26:29; Alma 1:16) and reunifying Israel (see 2 Chronicles 30:6–8, 18–19; 2 Nephi 3:13; Jacob 5). The scarcity of scripture within the first year of his reign, there is some debate as to when Lehi and his family left the city. Zedekiah ruled for approximately ten years. Did the small group of refugees depart early in the reign of King Zedekiah, perhaps within the first year of his reign (597–596 BC), or did they leave Jerusalem sometime later, possibly just before the final Babylonian siege and the fall of Jerusalem some ten years later? S. Kent Brown and David Rolph Seely argue that Lehi and his family left Jerusalem soon after he received his call as a prophet in the first year of Zedekiah’s reign. On the contrary, Randall Spackman argues that Lehi preached for almost a decade before the climate in Jerusalem became so violent that he was prompted to leave. Part of the argument hinges on Jeremiah’s imprisonment. Nephi acknowledged that he is aware of Jeremiah being cast into prison (1 Nephi 7:14). Brown and Seely show that Jeremiah was imprisoned or restrained several times (in one way or another) throughout his ministry (Jeremiah 20:2–3; 32:12; 36:5; 37:21). Of these instances in which Jeremiah was bound or incarcerated, only one describes Jeremiah as being cast into prison (compare Jeremiah 38:6; 1 Nephi 7:14). The Hebrew verb is not used to describe the stocks Jeremiah wore (Jeremiah 20:2) or the house arrest that he was forced to endure (Jeremiah 37:15, 18). Nephi must have had Jeremiah’s being cast into the dungeon (Jeremiah 38:6) in mind when he wrote that Jeremiah was cast into prison (1 Nephi 7:14).
Nephi also compared Jeremiah’s imprisonment to the fact that people sought his own father’s life. The imprisonment described in Jeremiah 38:6 was explicitly designed to kill Jeremiah (Jeremiah 38:9, 16). Nephi’s concern that people “sought to take away the life of [his] father” (1 Nephi 7:14) is parallel to Jeremiah’s imprisonment that was intended to result in Jeremiah’s death.80

Laban could have been one of the princes mentioned in Jeremiah 38:7 who were directly involved with Jeremiah’s imprisonment81 since Nephi mentioned that Laban had been meeting with “the elders of the Jews” (1 Nephi 4:22), and some Bible passages connect the elders with the princes (Judges 8:14; Lamentations 5:12; Ezra 10:8). As mentioned above, the term princes also refers to military captains and officials. The fact that Laban was meeting with this group “by night” suggests that this was some sort of conspiratorial meeting.82 Because the princes plotted to silence Jeremiah from repeatedly weakening the military with his prophetic message (Jeremiah 38:4),83 they could have been part of the group that Laban was meeting with late into the evening (1 Nephi 4:22). If Laban was working closely with “the elders” (1 Nephi 4:22), he must have been among the military leaders of Jerusalem. The fact that Laban was regaled in armor when Nephi found him supports this theory (1 Nephi 4:19). In further evidence, Laman and Lemuel described him as an influential leader in Jerusalem, “a mighty man” (1 Nephi 3:31; 4:1), a title that has military connotations.84 Laban was also shown commanding large groups of soldiers when Laman described him as being able to command at least fifty men, possibly even of tens of thousands of men (1 Nephi 3:31; 4:1). Referring back to the Jeremiah text, Zedekiah’s order for Ebed-Melech to take thirty men with him to rescue Jeremiah appears to be a reasonable rescue force (Jeremiah 38:10), especially if any of the princes mentioned in Jeremiah had the ability to command a military force of “fifty” like Laban (1 Nephi 3:31).

Summary and Conclusions

Understanding the social and political context of the biblical text helps illuminate the plight of the people described and the pressures they faced. Understanding the historical context of the political climate of Jerusalem and the social pressures the king of Judah was under adds greater insight into Jeremiah’s plight. The prophet was in a desperate situation as he preached to the inhabitants of a city who were set on the edge of exile. King Zedekiah is framed in a near hopeless position with a dominant military force at his gates and military advisers who strongly opposed the message of Jeremiah. The king tried to play both sides, and he gave in to requests to both execute and rescue the prophet. The narrative of the imprisonment of Jeremiah also gives us insights into the world of the Book of Mormon and of Lehi and his sons. The writings of Jeremiah illuminate the conflict from which Lehi was trying to escape, the climate in which he was commanded to send his four sons, and the dangers of having to face Laban to retrieve the brass plates. The political climate of Jerusalem over the previous decades prior to its fall sets the stage for a dramatic episode where Jeremiah was cast into a miry pit for foretelling the victory of the Babylonian siege.85

Notes

1. The nations of the Levant had become vassals to the Assyrians as early as during the reign of Ashurnasirpal II (883–859 BC).
3. In contrast to the book of Kings, Chronicles describes King Manasseh as repenting before his death (2 Chronicles 33:11–13).
The Imprisonment of Jeremiah in Its Historical Context

7. Bathsheba is the first to achieve this elevated status (1 Kings 1:19; see 2:12–20), but others also sat in this position, namely Maachah (1 Kings 15:9–13) and Athaliah the daughter (or granddaughter) of Ahab (2 Kings 11). 

8. Wilcoxen, “Political Background,” 154.


10. Josiah was ordained king at age eight and ruled for thirty-one years (2 Kings 22:1). Jehoiakim began to rule at age twenty-five (2 Kings 23:16), putting Jehoiakim’s birth when Josiah was fourteen.

11. Libnah was a small military outpost south of Jerusalem near Lachish (2 Kings 19:8).

12. The discovery of this text not only had an impact on Josiah personally but also on the way scriptural texts were viewed, redacted, and produced in the future. This event became a “fundamental linchpin” in the production of future scriptural text. Sweeney, King Josiah of Judah, 3–20.

13. Josiah’s reforms included the centralization of worship to the temple in Jerusalem. Second Kings 23:10–11 illustrates Josiah inviting the priests of the various high places in the countryside to come in from the countryside to serve in the temple in Jerusalem, but these priests declined the offer.


15. Anathoth was the place where the priestly line was exiled that supported Adoniiah instead of Solomon after the death of David (1 Kings 2:26–27).

16. John Welch places Lehi as being close to Jeremiah’s age, placing his birth at 650 BC. See John W. Welch, “They Came from Jerusalem,” Ensign, September 1976, 18. However, we cannot be sure of that because Lehi might have been born a little later than 650 BC. Depending on a number of variables, he could have been born as late as 625 BC. Regardless, Lehi was a witness of Josiah’s reform.


18. The nation of Israel and the subsequent nation of Judah had been overshadowed by stronger foreign entities for centuries. With the death of Ashurbanipal, the last powerful king of the Assyrian Empire, it appeared that the oppressive rule over Judah was over. Nadav Nā‘aman has argued that there was no political vacuum that gave Josiah opportunity to try to found a new Davidic empire. Rather, the declining Assyrian power in the west was matched by the growing power of Egypt; indeed, there may have been an orderly transfer of territorial control by mutual agreement. The nation of Judah was an Egyptian vassal during Josiah’s entire reign. See Nā‘aman, “The Kingdom of Judah under Josiah,” in Good Kings and Bad Kings, ed. Lester L. Grabbe and Marvin A. Sweeney (London: T & T Clark International, 2009), 210–17; James Maxwell Miller and John Haralson Hayes, A History of Ancient Israel and Judah (London: SCM Press, 1986), 383–90; Lester L. Grabbe, Ancient Israel: What Do We Know and How Do We Know It? (London: T & T Clark, 2007), 204–1.

19. Josiah is the only king described as one who “walked in all the way of David his father, and turned not aside to the right hand or to the left” (2 Kings 22:12). The Deuteronomic Historian singles Josiah out as one who best emulates King David.

20. Circa 667 BC the Assyrian ruler Assurbanipal had conquered Egypt and had taken a group of Egyptian princes to Assyria as prisoners. They were all executed except one, who returned to Egypt as a vassal of Assyria. This vassal was the grandfather of Necho. See Donald B. Redford, Egypt, Canaan, and Israel in Ancient Times (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 164, 410; Ian Shaw, Oxford History of Ancient Egypt (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 155.

21. Redford, Egypt, Canaan, and Israel, 448; Abraham Malamat, “Josiah’s Bid for Armageddon: The Background of the Judean–Egyptian Encounter in 609 B.C.” Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society of Columbia University 5 (1973): 274–75; John Bright, A History of Israel (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 314. Marvin A. Sweeney wrote that the opposition to the Egyptian movements might have been theologically and not just politically motivated. He writes, “According to 2 Kings 22–23, Josiah’s policies are based on a ‘book of Torah’ found during the renovation of the Temple; his major actions include the centralization of Temple worship; the prohibition of pagan worship; emphasis on the celebration of Passover with its anti-Egyptian viewpoint.” Sweeney, King Josiah of Judah, 168.

22. In contrast to the book of Kings, the chronicler attempts to blame Josiah for his own death by depicting him in opposition to God. When Josiah meets Necho in battle in 2 Chronicles 35:20–25, Necho tells him, “Forbear thee from meddling with God, who is with me, that he destroy thee not.”

23. Jehoahaz was twenty-three when he ascended to the throne in June 609 BC (2 Kings 23:1); Jehoiakim was twenty-five when he became king three months later (2 Kings 23:16).

24. Marvin A. Sweeney wrote that Jehoahaz was exiled and replaced by Jehoiakim, “who apparently was more compliant with Egyptian hegemony.” Sweeney, King Josiah of Judah, 309. Remember that Jehoahaz’s father was from the town of Libnah, a small military outpost south of Jerusalem near Lachish (2 Kings 19:8). The outpost was designed to thwart attacks from the south, specifically from Egypt. Considering that Jehoahaz’s father was killed by the Egyptians and his mother was from the decidedly anti-Egyptian town of Libnah, one would assume that Jehoahaz would have bitter feelings toward the Egyptians and would not make the best vassal for Egypt. In contrast, Jehoiakim’s mother was from the city of Rumah (2 Kings 23:16), a military outpost to the north that held specifically anti-Babylonian sentiment. See Tomoo Ishida, The Royal Dynasties in Ancient Israel: A Study on the Formation and Development of Royal-Dynastic Ideology (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1977), 168–69.

25. Jeremiah condemns Jehoiakim for expanding the royal palace just after he was put on the throne (Jeremiah 22:11–15). This project was done through forced labor, “which could have been another penalty imposed by Jehoiakim on his political opponents.” Wilcoxen, “Political Background,” 159.

26. Jehoiakim supported the Egyptians over the Babylonians, which leaning was oppositional of what his father Josiah had done. At the first opportunity, Jehoiakim rebelled against the Babylonians (2 Kings 24:1–2). Jehoiakim is described as evil by the Deuteronomic Historian (2 Kings 24:19), and the prophets strongly opposed him, framing him as an evil ruler who abused his own people (Jeremiah 22:13–14) and persecuted and murdered God’s servants (Jeremiah 26:20–23).

27. This might have been the setting for the execution of the prophet Uriah (see Jeremiah 16:20–24).


29. Sweeney, King Josiah of Judah, 509.

51. It was probably during this time that Ezekiel and Daniel were brought into exile.


53. Some have dated Habakkuk to the years 609–603 BC, contesting that Habakkuk views the Babylonians as an impending threat against the Egyptian-supported rule of Jehoiakim. Alternatively, others date Habakkuk to 605–597 BC, contending that the Babylonians are not a potential threat but an actual threat against the Judean kingdom. See Sweeney, *King Joashiah of Judah*, 107–8.

54. Urijah “prophesied against this city and against this land,” and as a result, Jehoiakim tried to kill him. This places Urijah’s ministry during the reign of King Jehoiakim, ca. 608–598 BC, Urijah fled to Egypt for safety, but the king had him extradited and then “slew him” (Jeremiah 26:20–23). Not long after the death of Urijah, Lehi was called to prophetic office (1 Nephi 1:15–20).

55. Elder Wilford Woodruff recorded in his journal his feelings that Huldah was an authentic prophetess: “May they influence the daughters of Zion to deeds of virtue, Holiness, Righteousness and truth. May thy Blessings of Sarah, Huldah, Hannah, Anna, & Mary the Ancient Prophetess and Holy women rest upon them.” See Wilford Woodruff’s Journal, ed. Scott G. Kenney (Midvale, UT: Signature Books, 1985), 71309.

56. This prophetic figure is mentioned in the Greek Septuagint but is absent from the Hebrew Masoretic text. Ben-Yehanan ben Igdaliah was a prophet who preached during the reign of Jehoiakim (ca. 608–598 BC).

57. Jeremiah warned against an alliance with Egypt (Jeremiah 2:13–18; 36; 37:5–10; 41:7–19; 43:2; 44:12–14, 30; see Ezekiel 17:12–21), knowing that Egypt was either too feeble to help or would have ulterior motives in assisting Judah.


61. This section is almost a direct quote from Jeremiah’s previous declaration found in Jeremiah 2:19. Linguistic parallels connect this to Deuteronomy 30:16, which states that whoever is faithful in “walking in the ways” of the Lord will obtain life. Geoffrey H. Parke-Taylor suggests that living in Jeremiah 38:3 appears “to imply more than mere survival.” Geoffrey H. Parke-Taylor, *The Formation of the Book of Jeremiah: Doubtlets and Recurring Phrases* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006), 201.


63. Douglas R. Jones, *Jeremiah* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), 460. This is a different situation and different message than the one given over a century earlier when the Assyrians, led by Sennacherib, encroached on Jerusalem.
60. The Hebrew version of this verse emphasizes the king's weakness, while the Greek version emphasizes the strength of the princes. Robert P. Carroll, *Jeremiah, Volume 1* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2006), 678.

61. Malchiah is identified as "the son of Hammelech" in Jeremiah 38:6. But Hammelech might reflect a translator's error since ben-hammekel means "son of the king" and is not a proper name—a fact confirmed by the Septuagint (LXX Jeremiah 41:6). William L. Holladay suggests, "If Malchiah was Zedekiah's son, he could be approximately fifteen years old, own a cistern and function as a guard; but, on the other hand, 'king's son' may simply mean 'of the royal family.'" Holladay, *Jeremiah* 2, 289.


67. The term Ebed-Melech simply means "servant of the King." This phrase could refer to a person or to a title.

68. The Hebrew term translated as *eunuch* (שָׂרִיס) does not necessarily refer to a physical eunuch, but to a court official (compare Jeremiah 19:15–18). See Keown, Scalise, and Smothers, *Jeremiah 26–52*, 221.

69. It is unknown what the king was doing there. It is possible that he "may well have been fulfilling his judicial function by sitting 'in the gate,' rendering decisions in cases of legal dispute." Keown, Scalise, and Smothers, *Jeremiah 26–52*, 224. See Lundbom, *Jeremiah among the Prophets*, 128. He might have been "inspecting the defenses." See also McKane, *Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, 964.

70. "If there is no bread left in the city, Jeremiah would find that situation no better out of the cistern than in it." Keown, Scalise, and Smothers, *Jeremiah 26–52*, 224. The danger must have been more dire than simply the lack of food. Lamentations 4 describes the famine. Robert P. Carroll suggests that "a curious explanation when Jeremiah's plight is more one of suffocation than lack of food. If the bread supplies in the city had been exhausted, hauling him from the cistern would not have had made him any less hungry." Carroll, *Jeremiah, Volume 1*, 682.


72. Keown, Scalise, and Smothers, *Jeremiah 26–52*, 224. Jack Lundbom writes, "some commentators and Bible translations (e.g., RSV) change the number 30 to the number 5, the argument being that it would only take three men to pull Jeremiah up from the pit. Maybe so, but the change has virtually no textual support (only one Hebrew manuscript reads 'three') and betrays a painfully unimaginative reconstruction of what was going on. Sending 30 men to rescue Jeremiah makes for a dramatic public event." Lundbom, *Jeremiah among the Prophets*, 129.


74. McKane, *Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, 960.


76. Josiah eliminated other forms of worship that were performed outside the temple in Jerusalem (2 Chronicles 34:15). This allowed him to maintain the orthodoxy and orthopraxy of the liturgy and maintained the centrality of the temple in religious rites. Although Lehi sacrificed a three-day journey from Jerusalem (1 Nephi 1:6–7), it appears that the temple remained the central focus of religious life among the Nephites (1 Nephi 5:16; Jacob 1:17; Mosiah 1:18; 3 Nephi 1:11).


80. Admittedly, this was not the first attempt to kill Jeremiah (see Jeremiah 18:8, 21).


84. The Hebrew term "יַעֲבֹר" is sometimes translated as "mighty man" (Judges 6:12; 11:1; 1 Samuel 9:1; 2 Samuel 10; 1 Kings 11:18; 2 Kings 5:12; Jeremiah 9:23; 14:9; etc.). This term has military connotations and can be translated as "warriors fit for war," "elite troop," or "bodyguard." See Ludwig Kochler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (New York: Brill, 1994–2000), 172.
We have been counseled to draw the power of Christ into our lives and to “begin by learning about him.” The Savior himself commands us, “Learn of me” (Doctrine and Covenants 19:23; Matthew 11:29). In fact, coming to know both God and Christ is a necessary part of receiving eternal life (John 17:3). Many of our students will naturally conclude that to learn about Jesus Christ they should study the Gospels. While this is necessary, it is not sufficient if we are to come to know who our Savior and Redeemer truly is and thus draw on his power. Because only some of his roles were fulfilled during his mortal ministry, our ability to come to know him will be limited if we study only that facet of his existence. Thus, if we focus exclusively—or even largely—on the Gospels, we cannot develop a well-rounded picture of the Son of God. Just as we would be foolish to try to understand his mortal ministry by limiting ourselves to reading only Mark, we are equally foolish if we do not turn to the Old Testament, the Book of Mormon, and the Doctrine and Covenants as we seek a more complete understanding of the Savior.

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are going to help our students take seriously the command to "learn of me" and to experience the powerful rewards that come from doing so, then we are obligated to help them learn to use all the standard works in their efforts to come to know their Savior and Redeemer.

This point demands further elaboration. If we focus too exclusively on the accounts of his mortal ministry, we do not allow Christ to present himself to us in the way he intended, and thus we limit the extent of his power that can come into our lives. This danger is exacerbated by a tendency I have noticed among students, both in and out of university settings. While we tend to focus on the Gospels to learn about Christ, I have observed that even within the Gospels, we are often selective in what we notice about Jesus: we tend to focus on a Jesus who forgives, who gently corrects, and who commands us to love, yet we simultaneously gloss over the episodes of the Savior condemning, warning, cursing, and prophesying of destruction. "Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more" (John 8:11), spoken to an accused woman resonates with us more strongly than telling Peter, "Get thee behind me, Satan" (Matthew 16:23). We often struggle with his decree to potential disciples that if they come unto him and "hate not [their] father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and [their] own life also, [they] cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:26) and that he was sent to bring see no deliverance. It can also allow for a better understanding of the New Testament texts they are already familiar with. While this larger view of the Savior can develop naturally in a well-planned course of "Jesus Christ and the Everlasting Gospel," it requires some conscious planning in Old Testament or New Testament courses if we want to help our students realize that there is more to learn about Christ than what they will come to know in the current course they are taking.

Jehovah of the Old Testament and Restoration Scripture

It is well beyond the scope of this essay to discuss all the roles the Son of God fills as the Jehovah of the Old Testament. Instead I will focus on one that, while teaching the Old Testament for a quarter of a century, I have witnessed students struggle with frequently. I have had students discuss being "bothered" or "disturbed" by language that describes Jehovah acting violently or that speaks of his wrath, anger, or fury. I have had others tell me that as they started reading the Old Testament, they soon closed the book, saying to themselves, "This is not the Jesus I know." Why do our students struggle so much with the phrases and images that the Great Jehovah chose to have his nature that are reserved for the divine. In other words, because some roles and characteristics are reserved for Deity, they are not traits that Christ showed us how to emulate during his mortal ministry. Thus if we focus only on those aspects of Christ that we can and should emulate, we will ignore much of his divine nature. We cannot strip away Christ's divinity in our mental image of him without also losing the ability to both understand him and partake of his divine power.

How much better to let the Messiah present himself to us throughout scripture in the way he has chosen. I have found that whether teaching the cornerstone course "Jesus Christ and the Everlasting Gospel" or courses on the Old or New Testament, if I take the time to help the students read, ponder, and interact with texts that present many facets of the Son of God, they often experience an initial sense of discomfort followed by one of relief and excitement. In fact, learning more of who Christ is as presented in other scriptural texts can help them trust him more and simultaneously helps them better appreciate and understand his mortal ministry. Greater familiarity with how the Redeemer is presented in other biblical texts and modern revelation will help our students increase their faith and confidence in him and can aid many as they fight their own personal plagues from which they can see no deliverance. It can also allow for a better understanding of the New Testament texts they are already familiar with. While this larger view of the Savior can develop naturally in a well-planned course of "Jesus Christ and the Everlasting Gospel," it requires some conscious planning in Old Testament or New Testament courses if we want to help our students realize that there is more to learn about Christ than what they will come to know in the current course they are taking.
prophets use to describe him? At least part of the answer must be that they have not been guided through these descriptions (see Acts 8:31). Additionally, they seem to have mistakenly assumed that if they are not supposed to seek vengeance or feel wrath, neither should their God. They apparently believe that the example he set for them in mortality represents the entirety of his divine character. Thus they may be creating God in their own image. By focusing almost exclusively on a Savior who forgives as opposed to one who can also mete out forceful justice or blazing deliverance, we may ask ourselves if our students are creating an image of the divine that has “a form of godliness, but denies the power thereof” (2 Timothy 3:5; Joseph Smith—History 1:19). How can they draw the power of Christ into their lives if they deny, or dismiss, his power?

Another problem stems from selectively looking at scriptural texts rather than studying their entirety. While I have written extensively elsewhere about the mercy and love of God as shown in the Old Testament, here only a few examples must suffice. Some people are shocked by the story of Miriam being struck with leprosy. Numbers 12 describes that as Israel struggled to understand the balance between personal revelation and having an inspired leader for all of Israel, Aaron and Miriam accused Moses of taking too much power upon himself and not sharing enough with them. They knew firsthand that God would indeed speak to all of them, but they didn’t yet understand that God would speak only to Moses when he wanted to reveal something to his people as a whole. Because they did not yet know this, Miriam and Aaron challenged Moses.

The Lord answered their challenge with a symbolic action—the most powerful teaching tool with which Israel was familiar. God showed all of Israel that Miriam and Aaron were wrong to make such a challenge by striking Miriam with leprosy; this made her ritually unclean and forced her to withdraw from the camp of Israel. For many readers this is disquieting. This kind of answer from God seems so dramatic, so overblown, so severe. Students seem to get mired in this first part of the story and often come away feeling that it is a depiction of a harsh, easily angered, unforgiving God. It hurts to think of God in this way. Doing so seems contradictory to how we usually picture him. It can even cause fear as we wonder how he may react to things we do.

This response stems from not looking at the whole story. What we forget is that Miriam was quickly healed; her suffering lasted for only a brief time and had no lasting consequences. Under the law of Moses, after being healed she still had to wait outside the camp of Israel during a period of purification (Leviticus 13:4–6). During this waiting period, Israel did not move on without Miriam. They stopped. They waited for her. The mercy of God is abundantly apparent when we realize that Miriam was immediately healed and that after a week she had been fully reintegrated into the house of Israel (Numbers 12:14), taking up her former position as if she had done nothing wrong. It was only then that the Israelites were prepared to continue their journey.

Now, think of that! When we look at the complete story, we don’t see a tale of an unpredictably angry God. Instead, we see a God of power coupled with a God of patience and mercy. We can remember that God’s first priority was the spiritual salvation of his children. Thus lessons that would affect Miriam, Aaron, and all of Israel spiritually were far more important than whether someone experienced physical or social discomfort for a time. Still, God quickly allayed the physical discomfort as well. Looking at the big picture of this story we see that when Miriam acted inappropriately, God punished her in a way that would teach her and all Israel, leading them to a better understanding. He then immediately accepted her repentance, healed her, and soon fully restored her as if she had never done anything wrong. He and his people did not move on without Miriam. They did not hold it against her. They waited for her and restored her.

This is the kind of God who can inspire hope in students as they make their own mistakes. The Old Testament is replete with stories like this, but we often fail to follow the full story. Such examples take place on the scale of personal stories and on the scale of the stories of tribes and nations. Perhaps the largest-scale example is in the scattering of Israel. The destruction of the Northern Kingdom and their subsequent scattering is a somber tale. When we include the gathering of Israel with it, the story encompasses patience, hope, and eventual triumph. The triumph is possible because of the earlier punishment combined with God’s patience. It is important to see both the small- and big-picture stories of the scriptures that teach us these lessons about Jehovah’s attributes. Students often need help to take a step back and see the whole big-picture story. They will grasp the seriousness of the scattering of Israel but do not always automatically put it together with the mercy of God in patiently gathering them thousands of years later.
We are fortunate that we have Restoration scripture to help us further understand Jehovah’s nature. Speaking of humankind in the days of Noah, Jehovah tells Enoch in vision that “the fire of mine indignation is kindled against them; and in my hot displeasure will I send in the floods upon them, for my fierce anger is kindled against them” (Moses 7:34). That language is about as wrathful as you can get! Yet Enoch has already seen that Jehovah weeps over this, and just a few verses later the Lord himself says, “Wherefore should not the heavens weep, seeing these shall suffer?” (Moses 7:37). Here we see a God who, for the good of his people, must come out in judgment against them; yet, at the same time, he weeps over it all.

This same image is painted of the great God whom Isaiah writes about. In chapter 25, Isaiah speaks of Jehovah destroying cities, of nations fearing him, of bringing down strangers and terrible ones, of his treading down Moab, and laying fortresses to the dust. Yet all these images are interspersed with contrasting pictures: he is a strength to the poor and needy who are in distress, a refuge from the storm, and he brings a feast for his people. Perhaps the interrelationship between Jehovah’s warrior traits and merciful nature is summed up best in verse 8: “He will swallow up death in victory; and the Lord God will wipe away tears from off all faces.” As a result those who have waited for Jehovah “will be glad and rejoice in his salvation” (Isaiah 25:9). While Jehovah will fight many battles for us, his battle with death is the greatest, and that victory is the most meaningful for us.

A few chapters later, this same interrelationship is highlighted again when Jehovah is described as the Divine Warrior, one who is mighty in war for his people in a battle with Leviathan, who serves as a symbol for Satan and hell. “In that day the Lord with his sore and great and strong sword shall punish leviathan the piercing serpent, even leviathan that crooked serpent; and he shall slay the dragon that is in the sea” (Isaiah 27:1). Then the Lord himself speaks of these attributes: “Fury is not in me: who would set the briars and thorns against me in battle? I would go through them, I would burn them together. Or let him take hold of my strength, that he may make peace with me; and he shall make peace with me. He shall cause them that come of Jacob to take root; Israel shall blossom and bud” (Isaiah 27:4–6). It is because he can conquer in any and every kind of battle that Jehovah has the ability to redeem us.10 It is the sword he holds in one hand that allows him to wipe away our tears with the other.

Having learned of God’s simultaneous wrath and weeping from these stories, we can assume that same character prevails in the being who in the latter days has said things like “mine anger is kindled against them” (Doctrine and Covenants 5:8) and that he would cause that “a desolating scourge shall go forth among the inhabitants of the earth, and shall continue to be poured out from time to time, if they repent not, until the earth is empty, and the inhabitants thereof are consumed away and utterly destroyed by the brightness of my coming” (Doctrine and Covenants 5:19).

The imagery of Jehovah as a divine warrior is prevalent in the Old Testament.11 In our current culture, the depiction of a warrior God can be jarring and disconcerting. It is incumbent upon us as teachers to help our students see past their initial reactions and recognize the comfort that can flow from these images. When the Israelites were faced with an army too great for them, they were told, “Fear ye not, stand still, and see the salvation of the Lord” (Exodus 14:13). They were also assured that “the Lord shall fight for you, and ye shall hold your peace” (Exodus 14:14). After their deliverance from the Egyptians, the Israelites described the Great Jehovah by saying, “The Lord is a man of war” (Exodus 15:3)—they praised him for having “triumphed gloriously” (Exodus 15:21) and extolled his ability to erase the great Egyptian army with “a blast of [his] nostrils” (Exodus 15:8). Having seen the power of their divine warrior, Israel could more easily trust in him in the future. Thus it was this knowledge of a mighty God who could triumph in battle that added power to his later command to “fear not, neither be discouraged” (Deuteronomy 1:21), or to “be still, and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10). Significantly, Jehovah’s warrior-like acts usually either teach his people or protect them from injustice and suffering at the hands of others. Thus his ability to extend mercy is created by his ability to conquer, ranging from deliverance from mortal armies to his triumph over the grave and hell. He can even conquer our fallen natures, a battle he will fight simultaneously for and with us that allows him to shower us with great mercy. The better our students recognize Christ’s past victories, the more fully they can trust that he can mercifully deliver them from every form of enemy that besets them, including themselves. Now, that is power to be drawn into our lives!

Our understanding of this point expands as the Old Testament teaches about the future Messiah. Students can be taken aback when they learn how to interpret Isaiah well enough to understand what Isaiah 63 discusses. While the treading of the winepress spoken of in that chapter surely refers in large
degree to his atoning sufferings in the meridian of time, it is also clear imagery about the wrathful judgment of the Second Coming, when he will "trample them [the wicked] in [his] fury, and their blood shall be sprinkled upon [his] garments" (Isaiah 63:3). In this case, the red on his garments is the blood of the wicked. He says he will "tread down the people in [his] anger, and make them drunk in [his] fury" (Isaiah 63:6). This is clearly a passage about the Savior destroying and killing the wicked when he comes again.12 Yet this language is juxtaposed with phrases such as those found in the verse immediately following: "I will mention the lovingkindnesses of the Lord, and the praises of the Lord, according to all that the Lord hath bestowed on us, and the great goodness toward the house of Israel, which he hath bestowed on them according to his mercies, and according to the multitude of his loving-kindnesses" (Isaiah 63:7).

A very consistent theme in Isaiah, especially in the latter chapters of the book,13 is the idea that God will save the righteous by punishing those who oppress them.14 This is part of what is conveyed in chapter 63 — that the mercy shown to those who follow God will at least partially take the form of destruction for those who oppress them. This same language that elicits images of a divine warrior who saves by trampling the winepress in fierce wrath is conveyed by the latter-day Jehovah as well (see Doctrine and Covenants 76:107; 88:106).

While there is likely some degree of literalness in this description—meaning that flesh-and-blood enemies will be conquered by the Lord—there is surely also a high degree of symbolic application to be drawn. In some ways, we are being assured that the Lord will conquer our great oppressors of death and hell (see 2 Nephi 9).15 Yet, in other ways, these passages can illustrate that no matter what is oppressing us in life—whether that be temptation, mental health issues, or spiritual plagues—we can find reassurance in knowing that at some point the Divine Warrior will conquer these oppressors for us, thus providing liberty to us even while in our captive states. The mercy we rightly love to see in our Savior is possible only because he has fought battles for us in Gethsemane and on the cross and thus has set us free. There could be no power or efficacy behind his mercy if there were not also power behind his ability to wage war for us.

The Savior is insistent that he is a divine warrior, even in the era of the Restoration. For example, in section 87 of the Doctrine and Covenants the Savior says that he wants the cries and blood of the Saints to "cease to come up into the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth, from the earth, to be avenged of their enemies" (Doctrine and Covenants 87:7). Because the Hebrew word Sabaoth comes from the word for “fighting” or “war” and literally means men “of war,” it is usually translated as “hosts,” or “armies.”16 The phrase has a very clear connection to warfare that is designed to elicit images of an army captain leading his troops into victorious battle. Because the use of the term in the Doctrine and Covenants is tied to imagery of avenging the wrongdoings of the Saints’ enemies, this seems a clear allusion to the Savior coming with a heavenly host, or army, to wage war on the wicked in order to avenge the Saints of their wrongs, similar to the imagery in Isaiah 63. This idea is also conveyed earlier in Restoration revelations, when the Savior refers to himself as the “Lord of Hosts” as he speaks of burning up the proud and wicked (Doctrine and Covenants 29:9). Two verses later, we read of the wicked not being able to stand when he reveals himself in power and great glory along with all the hosts (or armies) of heaven (Doctrine and Covenants 29:11). In fact, it seems that the Lord really wants us to perceive him in this light since seven other times in the Doctrine and Covenants he describes himself as the Lord of Hosts while detailing his intent to destroy the wicked (Doctrine and Covenants 64:24; 121:23; 127:2-4; 133:64; 135:7) and when speaking of the need to purify his church (Doctrine and Covenants 56:10; 85:5). Because this phrase is used in the Old Testament in connection with Jehovah being a man of war who fights for his people (e.g., Genesis 32:11; Joshua 5:14; 1 Samuel 4:4; 1 Samuel 15:22; 1 Samuel 17:45; 2 Kings 19:31; Psalm 59:3; Isaiah 8:13; Jeremiah 8:3), it seems clear that in these Restoration revelations, that same being intends for himself to be seen in the same way that he was in Old Testament times. We cannot help but conclude that the Jehovah of the Old Testament continues to want people in our day to see him, at least in some instances, as a man of war.

I have found that when I teach students that Jehovah is indeed the Divine Warrior, they come to find great comfort in the concept, despite some initial shock and a few growing pains as they gain greater understanding. In each class we teach, we almost certainly have someone who is struggling with pornography, other addictions, anxiety, depression, or some other overwhelming burden. These students can experience a great sense of relief—even an increase of faith—when they are taught that the Lord they worship is one who has conquered greater foes than those, and that he will do so again on their behalf. I have witnessed some who are brought to tears as they picture
a Savior who has conquered their own individual and personal leviathans and who then, with that defending and conquering sword still in one hand, reaches out with the other to gently wipe away their tears.

The Messiah of the New Testament

Understanding better who Jehovah is will help our students better appreciate his mortal ministry. This is true both in terms of recognizing the contrast between his majesty and his humble mortal beginnings and in regard to how he continues to function as the Divine Warrior even in mortality. In some ways the culmination of his role as warrior takes place in the New Testament, but that is not usually recognized without prior preparation to see it.

Still, in contrast to stories and descriptions that create images of a divine warrior, the Gospels (particularly Luke) present us with a story that creates an image of the humble beginnings of the Savior. In Nephi’s vision the angel speaks of the “condescension” of God (1 Nephi 11:16). While this phrase entails much more, one of the things it does is encapsulate so well the act of the mighty Jehovah coming to earth in such humble circumstances. Historical and archaeological evidence can round out our understanding even more because it paints a picture that we do not often examine but that can also help us understand our Savior more completely.

Christ grew up in Nazareth, a town of only a few hundred people. This was one of the smallest villages of the Galilee area (probably no larger than ten acres), which was the most rural and humble area of Jewry at the time. The vast majority of those who lived in the Galilee made their subsistence in some kind of agricultural endeavor, and their major economic goal was day-to-day survival. While there certainly was a group who were truly destitute, most were gliding just above the subsistence level: hard pressed but able—through substantial and unrelenting work—to feed themselves, barring unforeseen but not uncommon disasters. Builders such as Joseph of Nazareth would likely have fit into this category.

In Galilee, the towns along the lakeshores were probably the most prosperous. But even in these better-off towns like Capernaum, it is clear that the people possessed mostly modest housing. While it was in those lakeside towns that the Savior spent much of his ministry, he did not grow up there. As meager as Capernaum would have been, less prosperous towns, such as Nazareth, were even more simple. In the smaller villages, the streets were typically narrow and small and made of hard-packed dirt, as were the floors of houses in such circumstances (Capernaum would have been similar). There was no running water and no sewer system in these small communities as there could be in the prosperous Roman cities of the time. Bathing in the way we think of it was a luxury seldom seen in a tiny town like Nazareth, although it did have several springs that served as freshwater sources. The
Herodian-period winepress and terraced vineyard area found in Nazareth (along with several small granaries, oil presses, and places for storing oil and wine jars) make it clear that at least part—and probably most—of Nazareth’s economy was agrarian, with a much lower rate of agricultural production than we experience today. Homes were apparently mostly mud-mortared fieldstones with reed and palm–thatched roofs, but to create some of the structures in Nazareth, the builders carved into the limestone hills to form some of the walls. Joseph, and seemingly Jesus (Mark 6:3), were construction workers, probably working more with stone than wood since that was the primary building material of the area. Though Nazareth itself had limestone as the primary available material, most of the building done in the wider Galilee area was of basalt—a sharp and hard stone. Working the stone would have required difficult labor.

The Savior’s parables provide hints about the kinds of places he lived and the people he interacted with in the Galilee area. They are full of agricultural metaphors (Matthew 13:1–32), stories of people not able to pay their debts (Matthew 18:21–35), of being cast into prison for not meeting their obligations (Luke 12:58–59), of the need to divide land inheritances (Luke 12:13), of people who are hungry or naked or without a place to stay (Matthew 25:35–36). In other settings he counsels people to invite the poor to their feasts (Luke 14:12–14), and some express dismay when costly things are used rather than putting those resources toward feeding the poor (Mark 14:1–2).

To be sure, the Savior’s teachings also include examples of the rich. Yet because his teachings and parables typically drew upon experiences he and his listeners were familiar with, it appears that the Savior was well acquainted with the poor and struggling.

Furthermore, nutrition was not typically of the highest level, and overall health suffered. Diseases, often including dental diseases, were a contributing factor to a generally low life expectancy in that time period. The Savior clearly survived well into adulthood, and some of his apostles survived much beyond that. This means they were among the more healthy and robust of their population. Still, it is likely that they all suffered from some of the privations that naturally accompanied life in the Galilee at the time. Furthermore, Isaiah tells us that there was nothing about Christ’s physical appearance that would set him apart (Isaiah 53:2). This does not necessarily mean he was unattractive, but it probably indicates he was intentionally nondescript. This lack of being physically distinctive from others suggests that he was not spared from the deprivations of his fellow villagers, such as periods of hunger, disease, fatigue, and so on.

At least for much of his ministry, he was homeless (Matthew 8:20; Luke 9:58). He and his disciples sometimes had to glean food from the fields of others in order to eat (Matthew 12:1; Mark 2:23). The scriptures make it clear that during at least the years of his teaching ministry, he was often—if not always—dependent upon others for places to stay and food to eat (Luke 8:2–3; 10:38; John 12:1–2). He traveled hundreds and hundreds of miles in a region full of steep hills that were often blisteringly hot and, in the Galilee area, oppressively humid. From all scriptural indications, he traveled on foot, with the exception of one journey down the Mount of Olives to the Temple Mount on a donkey (Matthew 21:1–11). He came not just to take care of the commoners, the poor, and the struggling; he came to be one of them. In so many ways, he came to this earth to descend below all things in the flesh (Doctrine and Covenants 88:6; 122:8) so that he could succor us in our need, which is possible only through his intimate understanding of our mortal situation (Alma 7:12).

Studying the birth and life of the Savior along with all this context helps us better appreciate his condescension. Further, our understanding of his humility is heightened all the more when we remember the majesty and might of the Great Jehovah—the Divine Warrior—as depicted in the Old Testament and Doctrine and Covenants. When we willingly study the images of kingship, power, and might that those scriptural books paint of the Holy One of Israel, then his condescension becomes all the more poignant. He who conquered leviathan with his great sword was born in a stable and laid in a manger. The being who caused his enemies to tremble with fear grew up in a tiny village, sleeping in a home with dirt floors. The God who had destroyed the greatest army on earth with "a blast of his nostrils," that great "man of war" probably had to deal with disease, infection, and somewhat poor nutrition throughout his mortal life in a place and time that had little in the way of medical resources. The great Creator of heaven and earth spent much of his life hewing rugged, brittle basalt into shapes that could be used for building homes. He who laid wicked cities to waste groaned beneath the load of our sins. The same being who had judged the earth and administered necessary justice would be falsely accused and condemned by sham trials before tribunals of mere mortals, some of whom knew him to be innocent. The same God whose thoughts and ways are higher than ours was ridiculed for not
identifying those who smote him. The master of heaven and earth, who had opened up the earth in order to swallow rebels, was mocked for not coming down off the cross. He who destroyed the Assyrian army in order to relieve his people later pleaded for deliverance from his own suffering, and then willingly endured that suffering instead (Matthew 26:39; Luke 22:19–20). He who could assure his people to “be still” and “fear not” because he would fight their battles for them voluntarily died for us, choosing to fight a battle with death on our behalf rather than fight against his own persecutors. The dirt of the Mount of Olives soaked up the blood of the being who had created that mountain. It is only after we understand this contrast that we can really understand the words we often sing: “The Lord of glory died for men.”

Thus, recognizing that Jesus of Nazareth is also the Great Jehovah, who both “keep[s] anger” and is “merciful” (Jeremiah 5:12), allows us to better appreciate his mortal life and ministry. Further, understanding the varying facets of his many roles enables us to draw greater meaning from the New Testament. When we understand the aforementioned interrelationship between his sword-filled and his tear-wiping roles, we come to see Christ as a divine warrior in the New Testament. Thus we can gain a greater sense of his power and majesty and derive more meaning from the stories of healing the blind and lame, of casting out devils, and of raising the dead. We see it most poignantly in his meekest moments—at Gethsemane and Calvary. We can come to understand that his unfathomable suffering in Gethsemane and on the cross were in fact his greatest battles. Because he conquered there, he can be victorious in every other aspect of both mortal and immortal life. Understanding this allows our students to rejoice in Christ’s unique ability to conquer—an attribute he does not intend for us to emulate precisely because he has done the conquering for us.

My experience in the classroom has shown me that we need to help our students look more carefully at Christ’s majestic roles as portrayed predominantly in scripture outside of the Gospels. We need to help them view him as Jehovah, a divine being who displayed immense power and mercy. They need to avoid thinking solely of a Savior whose primary role was to walk around forgiving and healing, though that was certainly a crucial aspect of his ministry. Instead, our students need to study all of our Savior’s experiences in his mortal life—from those difficult challenges of mortality to the instances where he acted as both an exacting yet benevolent judge—not only the many beautiful examples of his crucial acts of healing, forgiving, and extending mercy. It is only when we put all of this together that we can come closer to understanding the true nature of the being whom we worship. This can unlock a great deal more power to draw into our lives.

There are many more of Christ’s roles that can and should be explored. The purpose of this essay is to take only a few representative examples that have helped my students. Whether we are teaching a course that is designed to cover more than one book of scripture, such as “Jesus Christ and the Everlasting Gospel,” or one that focuses on just a small portion of scripture, such as Old or New Testament courses, our students will be better served if we help them explore relevant portions of other books of scripture that can help them develop a more well-rounded view of their Savior and Redeemer. Their proclivities may be to focus on one aspect of Christ, and moving beyond that limited view can sometimes be initially uncomfortable for them. Despite this disquiet, they can and should find greater peace, faith, and power if they are guided through a quest to come to know Jesus Christ in a more complete way.

Notes
2. We see jarring language used in the Doctrine and Covenants as well, such as “the anger of the Lord is kindled, and his sword is bathed in heaven, and it shall fall on the inhabitants of the earth” (Doctrine and Covenants 1:13).
3. There is, of course, a complicated transmission and translation history behind the texts as we now have them. While the exact nuance of the words used may be slightly different than the original authors intended, it is also clear that the general tenor of what they were trying to convey is still preserved when we have so many authors saying the same kind of thing over such a long period of time.
8. It should be noted that students will typically wonder why Miriam was stricken and not Aaron, especially because in our era this tends to carry with it a gendered message. We do not know why only Miriam was chosen for this punishment. Perhaps Miriam played a greater part in the complaint, or Aaron would learn best as he saw that others would suffer if the priest went astray. We just don’t have enough information about the story to fully understand why Miriam was stricken and Aaron was not.


13. Many scholars argue that the section of Isaiah I speak of here was written by a different person than the Isaiah passages quoted above. This is a complicated issue, though in my opinion the Book of Mormon casts serious doubt on this idea. Either way, the authorship of this second half is irrelevant to the point I am making here.


15. See Belnap, “‘I Will Contend with Them That Contendeth with Thee,’” 20–39.


18. Reed, *Archaeology and the Galilean Jesus*, 82.

19. During the Savior’s lifetime the Galilee area was mostly rural and agricultural in nature, though the growth of the cities of Sepphoris and Tiberias induced some growth in the area and an increase in the economic possibilities of agriculture. See Reed, *Archaeology and the Galilean Jesus*, 81–89.


28. K. C. Hanson and Douglas E. Oakman, *Palestine in the Time of Jesus: Social Structures and Social Conflicts* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 98, who estimate that in the Savior’s day one could expect a yield of ten to fifteen times that which was sown, in contrast with today’s forty times yield. Gee, “Cares of This World,” 219, claims a sixfold harvest.


32. Much of this is apparent from my own excavations of contemporary burials in Egypt, but see also Roger S. Bagnall and Bruce W. Frier, *The Demography of Roman Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 75–90.

33. While this is a subject I have thought about and taught for a long time, my ideas have recently been aided by personal communications with Matthew and Mary Grey, whom I thank for these conversations. See, for example, Mary Grey, “The Divine Christ and the Human Jesus,” on the *Times and Seasons* blog at https://www.timesandseasons.org/index.php/2018/06/the-divine-christ-and-the-human-jesus/.

A colleague recently shared with me how, when teaching missionary preparation classes, he would role-play with students. When students pretending to be missionaries would ask him (acting as an investigator) if he knew about Christ’s Atonement, he would say, “Yes, I saw that Mel Gibson movie about Christ dying for our sins on the cross.” At least half of his students would correct him, stating that Christ atoned for our sins in Gethsemane, but not on the cross. This not only indicates a lack of the interpersonal skill of building on common beliefs but is also doctrinally incomplete. It also might explain why another colleague lamented the fact that in his extensive interfaith work, he frequently encounters Christians whose perception is that members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (herein referred to as “the Church”) do not believe Jesus died on the cross for the sins of the world.

Robert L. Millet once wrote, “It is probably the case that if one hundred Protestants were asked where the atonement of Christ took place, those one hundred persons would answer: At Golgotha, on the cross. It is also no doubt true that if one hundred Latter-day Saints were asked the same question, a
large percentage would respond: In Gethsemane, in the garden.7 While I am not aware of any scientific studies that address Millet’s hypothesis, a few informal classroom surveys indicate that, depending on how the question is asked, students at Brigham Young University tend to emphasize Gethsemane when discussing Christ’s Atonement.

One faculty member gave 110 students in a Book of Mormon class the following fill-in-the-blank question without any prior instruction on the Savior’s Atonement: “Where did the Atonement take place?” Of these students, 27 percent wrote only Gethsemane, and 73 percent wrote Gethsemane and the cross.8 But when the question was changed (in a separate Book of Mormon class) to be “Where did Christ atone for our sins?,” 51 percent of the students filled in the blank with Gethsemane only, with 49 percent writing in Gethsemane and the cross.9

To see which event students would emphasize, a separate BYU faculty member administered an online survey in which he asked students the following question: “Where would you say the Atonement mostly took place? A. In the Garden of Gethsemane. B. On the Cross at Calvary.” Across 752 students, 88 percent said, “In the Garden of Gethsemane,” and 12 percent said, “On the Cross at Calvary.”4 My anecdotal experiences with hundreds of students and others similarly suggest that when asked about Christ atoning for our sins, members of the Church tend to emphasize Christ’s suffering in Gethsemane more than his Crucifixion on the cross.5

Gethsemane and Christ’s Crucifixion are both part of the Savior’s Atonement; in fact, the Atonement is broader than these two events. The Bible Dictionary defines Christ’s Atonement as follows: “By [Jesus Christ’s] selection and foreordination in the Grand Council before the world was formed, His divine Sonship, His sinless life, the shedding of His blood in the garden of Gethsemane, His death on the cross and subsequent bodily resurrection from the grave, He made a perfect atonement for all mankind.”6

While there are many aspects of the Savior’s Atonement, this paper focuses on the events of Gethsemane and the Savior’s Crucifixion.

Many important questions could be asked with respect to Gethsemane and the Crucifixion of Christ, including how these topics have been treated in general conference7 and Church curricula8 and how the symbol of the cross has been perceived in the Church over time.7 The question this paper explores is, To what extent does the canonized scripture of the Church focus on the importance of Gethsemane and Golgotha with respect to Christ’s suffering for our sins and pains?

In this study I will identify scripture references that can be explicitly connected to either Gethsemane or Christ’s Crucifixion as pertaining to an expiation of sin or his suffering of our pains. For example, passages that speak of the Savior bleeding from every pore would relate to Gethsemane. Verses regarding the death or sacrifice of Jesus Christ would tie into the Crucifixion.10

Several important passages about Christ’s Atonement focus on resurrection, but not in relationship to his suffering for sin (for example, Alma 11:42). These are not included in the present study. In some cases, it is not clear whether a verse refers to Gethsemane, Christ’s Crucifixion, or both. For example, several passages teach principles such as “We have redemption through his blood” (Ephesians 1:7),11 or “Salvation was and is and is to come in and through the atoning blood of Christ” (Mosiah 3:18).12 These verses could allude to suffering in Gethsemane that caused Christ to “bleed at every pore” (Doctrine and Covenants 19:16–18; see Mosiah 3:7; Luke 22:44). Alternatively, they could refer to “the blood of his cross” (Colossians 1:20; see John 19:34; Hebrews 13:11–12; Alma 34:11–11; and 3 Nephi 9:19). Although passages about the atoning blood of Christ could refer to blood Christ shed at Gethsemane or on the cross (or both), for the purposes of this study, verses about the blood of Jesus Christ are not counted unless the verse is explicitly connected to either Gethsemane or Christ’s death.13

Understanding what the scriptures themselves emphasize is important. Elder Bruce R. McConkie taught, “If you want to know what emphasis should be given to gospel principles, you simply teach the whole standard works and, automatically, in the process, you will have given the Lord’s emphasis to every doctrine and every principle.”14 As will be demonstrated, the standard works focus heavily on Christ’s Crucifixion. There are fifty-two scriptural references to the salvific power of the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ and two references to Christ’s suffering our sins in Gethsemane.

Following an analysis of scriptural references to Christ suffering our sins and pains in Gethsemane and his Crucifixion, I will discuss how we can help our students understand and appreciate the scriptural emphasis on Christ’s Crucifixion. At the outset, I wish to clearly state that the purpose of this paper is not to diminish the importance of Gethsemane. Gethsemane and the Crucifixion are not in competition with each other; both are vital aspects of Christ’s Atonement.
References to Gethsemane and the Crucifixion in the Old Testament

There do not appear to be any direct references to either Gethsemane or the Crucifixion in the Old Testament. Although Isaiah 53:4–5 (“he hath borne our griefs . . . he was wounded for our transgressions”) is often quoted in association with the Atonement, a literal reading of these verses does not specify when or where this suffering takes place.15

References to Gethsemane in the New Testament

The accounts of Christ in Gethsemane appear in four passages: Matthew 26:36–56, Mark 14:32–52, Luke 22:39–53, and John 18:1–11. Both Matthew and Mark (the only two scriptural authors to use the word Gethsemane) describe Jesus as being deeply distressed (see Matthew 26:37–38; Mark 14:33–34). They, along with Luke, record Christ praying, “Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt” (Matthew 26:39). Luke adds the details that an angel came and strengthened Christ, and that Christ “being in an agony . . . prayed more earnestly: and his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground” (Luke 22:44).16 John does not record any of Christ’s suffering in Gethsemane.17 Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John all describe Christ’s capture in Gethsemane, although they differ in specific details.

The events of Gethsemane are not explicitly mentioned again in the New Testament.18 It is important to note that nothing in the text of the New Testament indicates that Christ’s suffering for our sins took place in Gethsemane. We read of his anguish, his prayer, his sweat being as blood, but the text does not say that he suffered for our sins or experienced our pains in this location.

References to the Crucifixion in the New Testament

The narrative descriptions of Christ’s Crucifixion are found in Matthew 27:31–56, Mark 15:20–41, Luke 23:26–49, and John 19:16–37. As with Gethsemane, there is nothing in these Crucifixion accounts that states Christ suffered for our sins while on the cross. However, unlike Gethsemane, New Testament authors make Christ’s death a salvific focal point.

At least twenty-one New Testament passages specifically link Christ’s death with our salvation (emphasis added throughout).19

- “Even so must the Son of man be lifted up: That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life” (John 3:14–15).
- “I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me” (John 12:32).
- “Christ died for the ungodly” (Romans 5:6).
- “While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8).
- “We were reconciled to God by the death of his Son” (Romans 5:10).
- “Christ our passover is sacrificed for us” (1 Corinthians 5:7).
- “Christ died for our sins” (1 Corinthians 15:3).
- “He died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him which died for them” (2 Corinthians 5:15).
- “Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree [cross]” (Galatians 3:13).
- “That he might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby” (Ephesians 2:16).
- “Having made peace through the blood of his cross, by him to reconcile all things unto himself” (Colossians 1:20).
- “Yet now hath he reconciled in the body of his flesh through death, to present you holy and unblameable” (Colossians 1:21–22).
- “Blotting out the handwriting of ordinances, that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross” (Colossians 2:14).20
- “Who died for us, that . . . we should live together with him” (1 Thessalonians 5:10).
- “For this cause he is the mediator of the new testament, that by means of death . . . they . . . might receive the promise of eternal inheritance” (Hebrews 9:15).
- “He . . . put away sin by the sacrifice of himself” (Hebrews 9:26).
- “We are sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ” (Hebrews 10:10).
- “This man, after he had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever, sat down on the right hand of God” (Hebrews 10:12).
- “Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree [cross], that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness” (1 Peter 2:24).


"Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit" (1 Peter 3:18).

"Four and twenty elders fell down before the Lamb, . . . saying, . . . Thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood" (Revelation 5:8–9).

In addition to these verses, in numerous instances New Testament authors emphasize the importance of the cross or the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Consider the following examples:

"The preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God. . . . We preach Christ crucified" (1 Corinthians 1:18, 23).

"I determined not to know any thing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified" (1 Corinthians 2:2).

"God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Galatians 6:14).

"Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross. . . and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God" (Hebrews 12:2).

From the foregoing, the New Testament clearly places a much stronger salvific emphasis on Christ's Crucifixion relative to his suffering in Gethsemane.

References to Gethsemane in the Book of Mormon

Only one Book of Mormon reference can be directly connected to the events of Gethsemane with relative certainty. In Mosiah 3:7 King Benjamin said Christ "shall suffer temptations, and pain of body, hunger, thirst, and fatigue, even more than man can suffer, except it be unto death; for behold, blood cometh from every pore, so great shall be his anguish for the wickedness and the abominations of his people." Although King Benjamin describes Christ's anguish because of sin, he does not explicitly state that Christ suffered for the sins of the world at that time. The relationship with Doctrine and Covenants 19:16–18 (discussed below) clarifies that this passage describes Christ's suffering for sin in Gethsemane.

Other references to Christ's sufferings do not provide enough context to connect them directly with a specific event or location. For example, while Alma 7:11–13 is often associated with Christ's experiencing our pains in Gethsemane, the verses make no clear reference to the events in the garden. In fact, Alma 7:12 speaks of the death of Christ in relation to taking upon him our infirmities. Other passages about Christ's suffering our pains do not specifically depict where this took place. Jacob taught, "He suffereth the pains of all . . . men, women, and children . . . that the resurrection might pass upon all men, that all might stand before him at the great and judgment day" (2 Nephi 9:21–22). While this passage is sometimes associated with Gethsemane, Jacob does not state when or where this suffering would occur and links Christ's suffering the pains of all people with suffering that allows the Resurrection to take place—perhaps an allusion to the death of Christ. Similarly, Doctrine and Covenants 18:11 describes Christ suffering our pains directly in connection with his death.

Four Book of Mormon verses speak of Christ's suffering in association with his Atonement without providing enough context to determine whether this refers to Christ's suffering in Gethsemane, on the cross, or both. For example, Aaron taught that "there could be no redemption for mankind save it were through the death and sufferings of Christ, and the atonement of his blood" (Alma 21:9, see Mosiah 18:2; Alma 22:14; 33:22). These verses certainly refer to the death or Crucifixion of Christ and are discussed below. Given that suffering is sometimes linked with Gethsemane in the Book of Mormon (see Mosiah 3:7), but also with his death (see 1 Nephi 19:10–12; Jacob 1:8; and Helaman 14:20), it cannot be textually established with certainty that passages about the sufferings of Christ refer to events in Gethsemane; therefore, they are not included in the present study.

References to Christ's Crucifixion in the Book of Mormon

In contrast to the one clear reference to Gethsemane, Book of Mormon authors make nineteen explicit references to Christ being "lifted up" or "crucified." Collectively Jacob, Nephi, and the brass plates prophesy of the Savior's Crucifixion ten times, and Jesus Christ himself makes five references to being crucified. King Benjamin, Abinadi, Nephi the son of Helaman, and Moroni also speak of Christ's Crucifixion.

At least eighteen Book of Mormon passages specifically associate Christ's death with our salvation. Consider the following verses:
Sarah Carabine Jenson, Jesus Christ, Crucifixion. © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

• “I, Nephi, saw that he was lifted up upon the cross and slain for the sins of the world” (1 Nephi 11:33).
• “He offereth himself a sacrifice for sin. . . . No flesh . . . can dwell in the presence of God, save it be through the merits, and mercy, and grace of the Holy Messiah, who layeth down his life” (2 Nephi 2:7–8).
• “It behooveth the great Creator that he suffereth himself to become subject unto man in the flesh, and die for all men, that all men might become subject unto him” (2 Nephi 9:5).
• “He layeth down his own life that he may draw all men unto him” (2 Nephi 26:24).
• “He hath poured out his soul unto death. . . . he bore the sins of many, and made intercession for the transgressors” (Mosiah 14:12).
• “He shall be led, crucified, and slain. . . . giving the Son power to make intercession for the children of men—having. . . . taken upon himself their iniquity and their transgressions” (Mosiah 15:7–9).
• “These are they whose sins he has borne; these are they for whom he has died, to redeem them from their transgressions” (Mosiah 15:12).
• “The redemption of the people. . . . was to be brought to pass through the. . . . death of Christ” (Mosiah 18:2).
• “There could be no redemption for mankind save it were through the death. . . . of Christ” (Alma 21:9).
• “The. . . . death of Christ atone[s] for their sins” (Alma 22:14).
• “Ye say also that [Christ] shall be slain for the sins of the world” (Alma 30:26).
• “The Son of God. . . . will come to redeem his people and. . . . shall. . . . die to atone for their sins” (Alma 33:22).
• “He shall bring salvation to all those who shall believe on his name; this being the intent of this last sacrifice” (Alma 34:15).
• “[Christ] surely must die, that salvation may come. . . . This death. . . . redeemeth all mankind” (Helaman 14:15–16).
• “I have come. . . . to save the world from sin. . . . Whoso repenteth. . . . I will receive. . . . Behold, for such I have laid down my life” (3 Nephi 9:21–22).
• “Come forth. . . . that ye may know that I. . . . have been slain for the sins of the world” (3 Nephi 11:14).
• “After that I had been lifted up upon the cross... I might draw all men unto me” (3 Nephi 27:14).
• “Thou hast loved the world, even unto the laying down of thy life for the world... to prepare a place for the children of men” (Ether 12:33).

These passages collectively demonstrate that the Book of Mormon, like the New Testament, strongly emphasizes the death of Christ in the expiation of sin relative to his bleeding from every pore in Gethsemane.

References to Gethsemane in the Doctrine and Covenants

Doctrine and Covenants 19:16–19 provides the clearest scriptural explanation of Christ suffering for our sins in Gethsemane. In this passage the Savior says, “I, God, have suffered these things for all, that they might not suffer if they would repent; But if they would not repent they must suffer even as I; Which suffering caused myself, even God, the greatest of all, to tremble because of pain, and to bleed at every pore, and to suffer both body and spirit— and would that I might not drink the bitter cup, and shrink— nevertheless, glory be to the Father, and I partook and finished my preparations unto the children of men.”

Although these verses do not specifically provide a location for these sufferings, its relationship with Luke 22:44 (“his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground”) and Matthew 26:39 (“if it be possible, let this cup pass from me”) indicate Christ is likely referring to Gethsemane. Because of his suffering in Gethsemane, those who repent will not need to suffer as Christ did.

References to Christ’s Crucifixion in the Doctrine and Covenants

At least seventeen passages in the Doctrine and Covenants refer to Christ’s Crucifixion or death. Of these, six do not reference its salvific power, such as, “Behold the wounds which pierced my side, and also the prints of the nails in my hands and feet” (Doctrine and Covenants 6:37; sec 45:52; 76:35; 110:4; 138:5, 27). The other eleven passages specifically link Christ’s death with our salvation:

• “The Lord your Redeemer suffered death in the flesh; wherefore he suffered the pain of all men, that all men might repent and come unto him” (Doctrine and Covenants 18:11).

As do the New Testament and the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants clearly emphasizes the importance of the Savior’s Crucifixion to a much stronger degree than it does the events of Gethsemane. Nevertheless, across canonized scripture, the Doctrine and Covenants provides the best scriptural support that Jesus Christ suffered for our sins in Gethsemane (see Doctrine and Covenants 19:16–19).

References to Gethsemane and Christ’s Crucifixion in the Pearl of Great Price

The events of Gethsemane are not explicitly mentioned in the Pearl of Great Price; however, there are two passages regarding Christ’s Crucifixion that relate to his expiation of sin. In Moses 7:45, “Enoch... cried unto the Lord, saying, ... When shall the blood of the Righteous be shed, that all they that mourn may be sanctified and have eternal life?” While this verse does not specify where the blood would be shed, the response to this question is, “Enoch
saw the day of the coming of the Son of Man, even in the flesh; and his soul rejoiced, saying: The Righteous is lifted up, and the Lamb is slain” (Moses 7:47).

In a second reference, a few verses later, Enoch “beheld the Son of Man lifted up on the cross, after the manner of men” (Moses 7:55).

An additional reference to the Crucifixion (although ambiguous with regard to its salvific power, and therefore not counted in the present study) is Moses 5:5, 7, in which Adam and Eve were commanded to “offer the firstlings of their flocks . . . [in] similitude of the sacrifice of the Only Begotten of the Father.”

Teaching Students about the Emphasis on the Crucifixion

The standard works emphasize Christ’s Crucifixion significantly more than the events of Gethsemane. Given this emphasis, religious educators may want to help their students (1) identify and understand the importance of the scriptural focus on the Savior’s Crucifixion, (2) better understand Christ’s Crucifixion, and (3) learn more about the historical realities of crucifixion.

The following suggestions, designed for adult learners, could also be adapted for teenagers. The first two are based on the idea that students will better retain information that they uncover, as opposed to things that they are told. As Elder David A. Bednar taught, “An answer we discover or obtain through the exercise of faith, typically, is retained for a lifetime. The most important learnings of life are caught—not taught.”33

Helping Students Identify the Scriptural Emphasis on Christ’s Crucifixion

Many approaches could be beneficial in helping students identify the scriptural emphasis on the cross. There are several opportunities to do so, particularly when teaching chapters that focus on the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ (for example, Matthew 27; Mark 15; Luke 23; John 19; 1 Corinthians 1–2; 2 Nephi 10; 3 Nephi 27; Doctrine and Covenants 20:21–31; or 45:2–5). Consider the following as one possible approach to helping students identify the frequency with which the scriptures connect Christ’s Crucifixion to our salvation.

A teacher might begin by asking students to write down every scripture they can think of that clearly states that Christ died for our sins, as well as verses that teach that Christ suffered for our sins or pains in Gethsemane. Students may respond with scriptures that do not directly relate to Gethsemane (for example, Isaiah 53:4–5; 2 Nephi 9:21; Alma 7:11–13) or suffering for our sins (for example, Luke 22:39–46). The teacher could carefully and gently show that these verses are not explicitly about Christ suffering for our sins in Gethsemane. Eventually (perhaps with guidance) students will identify Mosiah 3:8 and Doctrine and Covenants 19:16–19 as the only scriptural passages that specifically describe Christ suffering for sins in Gethsemane when used in conjunction with Luke 22:39–46. Throughout this process the teacher should be careful to preserve the dignity of learners and not overemphasize or draw out the activity. The purpose is to help students identify gaps in their knowledge to increase their motivation to learn more, not to make anybody feel self-conscious if they cannot think of relevant verses or provide passages that do not textually say what the students think they do.

At this point, the teacher could provide students with a list of verses from the New Testament, Book of Mormon, and Doctrine and Covenants that discuss the salvific power of Christ’s Crucifixion.34 Students could explore these verses in groups or individually and then share what they learn.35 Their own exploration will help them discover the scriptural emphasis on the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

The teacher can help students not only understand the numerical emphasis but also the doctrinal significance. For example, a teacher might ask, “Why do you think the scriptures describe how Christ “suffered death in the flesh” right after stating “the worth of souls is great in the sight of God” (Doctrine and Covenants 18:10–11). Alternatively, teachers might ask students to read John 12:32, 2 Nephi 26:24, and 3 Nephi 27:14 and look for why the Savior was crucified. How could understanding these passages motivate them to draw nearer to Christ? Aiding students in identifying and reflecting on passages about Christ’s Crucifixion will help them more deeply feel that Jesus Christ atoned for their sins on the cross because of his deep love for each of us.

Helping Students Understand Christ’s Crucifixion

One approach to assist students in deepening their own understanding of Christ’s Crucifixion is to provide them with the opportunity to study side by side what each Gospel account says about the Crucifixion. While most appropriate in studying the New Testament, this is a valuable activity when studying any book of scripture that emphasizes Christ’s Crucifixion. By carefully examining the text for both similarities and differences, students can uncover insights they had not previously noticed.36
The teacher could provide (either in writing or verbally) several questions that might help stimulate student thought and discussion. For example:

- What are the final seven statements that the Savior says while on the cross? Which of them are recorded in which Gospel accounts? Why is each of these significant?
- Who is at the cross supporting the Savior? Who is not mentioned as being present?
- Why might John’s detail about hyssop be important? (see John 19:29; compare Exodus 12:22). How else does John emphasize that Jesus is the Lamb of God?
- What detail about the temple is included by Matthew, Mark, and Luke? Why might this be significant?
- What scriptures were fulfilled by the Savior’s Crucifixion?

In addition to this student-centered approach, teachers naturally could share their own personal insights, as well as those they have learned from studying what others have taught about the Savior’s Crucifixion.37

Helping Students Understand the Historical Realities of Crucifixion
The historical realities of crucifixion are important and can help students better understand the Savior’s sacrifice. Although we cannot grasp the spiritual suffering Christ went through in atoning for our sins in Gethsemane and on the cross, we may be able to comprehend the physical suffering of crucifixion more than we currently do. Although the physical torment was only a small portion of the immense agony he felt, as we better recognize what Jesus Christ did, our appreciation for him will increase. President James E. Faust stated: “My reason for wanting to learn all I can about the Atonement is partly selfish: Our salvation depends on believing in and accepting the Atonement. Such acceptance requires a continual effort to understand it more fully. . . . Any increase in our understanding of His atoning sacrifice draws us closer to Him.”38 Thus, better understanding the physical realities of crucifixion will draw us closer to Christ.

To comprehensively review historical details related to crucifixion is beyond the scope of this article.39 For illustration purposes, I discuss just two aspects of historical crucifixion that can help students better understand Christ’s suffering on the cross. Because of the graphic nature of this topic, teachers should approach it in a manner best suited to individual sensitivities of their students.

First, many students may not be familiar with the process of scourging, which often preceded crucifixion. Describing the crucifixion of Jews in approximately 170 BC, the Jewish historian Josephus wrote, “They were whipped, their bodies were mutilated, and while still alive and breathing, they were crucified.”40 In the time of Christ this scourging was carried about by Roman soldiers and was a brutal process (see Matthew 27:26; Mark 15:15; John 19:1). As one commentator describes:

The lictors (Roman legionnaires assigned to this duty) used a whip made of leather cords to which small pieces of metal or bone had been fastened. Paintings of the scourging of Jesus always show him with a loincloth, but in fact the victim would have been naked, tied to a post in a position to expose the back and buttocks to maximum effect. With the first strokes of the scourge, skin would be pulled away and subcutaneous tissue exposed. As the process continued, the lacerations would begin to tear into the underlying skeletal muscles. This would result not only in great pain but also in appreciable blood loss. The idea was to weaken the victim to a state just short of collapse or death. It was common for taunting and ridicule to accompany the procedure. In the case of Jesus, the New Testament tells us that a crown of thorns, a purple robe, and a mock scepter were added to intensify the mockery.41

A second aspect of crucifixion that students may not have considered is the torment separate from the pain of being nailed to a cross. For example, crucifixions were done in public places,42 and everything about them was intended to shame the victims. The mental degradation of being mocked by multitudes is increased when we recognize that although we do not know for certain that Christ was crucified naked, ancient art and literature indicate that “individuals were often crucified nude.”43 Full or partial nudity would also have physical consequences, such as the raw, bloody backside of the victim constantly rubbing on the coarse wood of the cross.44 Moreover, “bodily functions uncontrolled, insects feasting on wounds and orifices, unspeakable thirst, [and] muscle cramps”45 would add to the excruciating pain.

While these are details that perhaps one does not wish to linger on, helping students understand the physical realities of crucifixion can deepen their appreciation for how much the Savior loves them. We can better understand passages such as, “He loveth the world, even that he layeth down his own life” (2 Nephi 26:24), “Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13), and “God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8).
Conclusion

The Atonement of Jesus Christ encompasses both the events in Gethsemane and the Savior’s Crucifixion, among other important elements (as described in the introduction). On at least ten different occasions, Jesus Christ has testified in the first person that these two events occurred, once regarding Gethsemane, and nine times regarding his Crucifixion. He has said:

- “I, God, have suffered these things for all . . . which suffering caused myself, even God, the greatest of all, to tremble because of pain, and to bleed at every pore, and to suffer both body and spirit” (Doctrine and Covenants 19:16, 18).
- “I have come . . . to save the world from sin. . . . For such I have laid down my life” (3 Nephi 9:21–22).
- “Come forth . . . that ye may know that I . . . have been slain for the sins of the world” (3 Nephi 11:14).
- “My Father sent me that I might be lifted up upon the cross” (3 Nephi 27:14).
- “I was lifted up” (3 Nephi 28:6).
- “Behold the wounds which pierced my side, and also the prints of the nails in my hands and feet” (Doctrine and Covenants 6:37).
- “I am Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who was crucified for the sins of the world” (Doctrine and Covenants 35:2).
- “I am he who was lifted up. I am Jesus that was crucified” (Doctrine and Covenants 45:52).
- “I, the Lord . . . was crucified for the sins of the world” (Doctrine and Covenants 53:2).
- “I am he who was slain; I am your advocate with the Father” (Doctrine and Covenants 110:4).

As stated previously, the purpose of this paper is not to minimize the vital nature of Gethsemane—modern prophets have clearly taught of its centrality in the Savior’s Atonement. With growing frequency, when Church leaders discuss Gethsemane, they also mention the Savior’s Crucifixion. For example, in 2018 President Henry B. Eyring declared, “Jesus Christ bore in Gethsemane and on the cross the weight of all our sins.” Since 2010 there have been more than forty similar statements made in general conference, linking the importance of Gethsemane and Christ’s Crucifixion in our salvation.

When we speak of canonized scriptures that clearly refer to Christ atoning for our sins or suffering our pains, at least two passages describe Gethsemane and fifty-two the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Many of our students will benefit from an increased understanding of what the scriptures teach about the Savior’s Crucifixion. Understanding this scriptural emphasis may help them build bridges with people of faith traditions that tend to focus on the cross. Learning about the scriptural emphasis on Christ’s Crucifixion is an important part of deepening our appreciation for his Atonement and understanding his love for us.

Notes

1. Robert L. Millet, “This Is My Gospel” in A Book of Mormon Treasury: Gospel Insights from General Authorities and Religious Educators (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2003), 389–411. While it is not common for Christians outside the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to speak of Christ suffering for our sins in Gethsemane, occasional references occur. For example, Alfred Edersheim wrote, “Alone [in the Garden of Gethsemane], as in His first conflict with the Evil One in the Temptation in the wilderness, must the Saviour enter on the last contest. With what agony of soul He took upon Him now and there the sins of the world, and in taking expiated them.” Edersheim, The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah (New York: Longmans, Green, 1907), 2:1539, at https://archive.org/details/lifetimesofjesusmessoreder/page/539.2. Some of those who wrote “Gethsemane and the cross” also included other events, such as the Resurrection. An additional eight students (not counted in these percentages) gave answers such as “on earth,” or “in the premortal life.” Approximately fifty class members chose not to provide an answer to this question. This missing data could potentially affect the overall results. This data was collected by Ryan Sharp in an in-class survey.
3. See previous note. In this case, an additional six students (not counted in these percentages) gave answers such as “on earth,” or “in the premortal life.” Again, about fifty students chose not to provide an answer. The percentages quoted come from a total of 109 students.
4. These data were collected by Anthony Sweat. The survey was administered online; this bonus question was part of a regular three-question reading quiz prior to class. Students were offered one extra-credit point for answering (any answer received the point). While the question Professor Sweat asked clearly had a very narrow frame of Christ’s Atonement and did not include other options (such as both Gethsemane and the cross), this was intentional in order to distinguish which aspect was most emphasized by students.
5. Some of this emphasis may come from a natural inclination to focus on what is unique about a particular person or faith. Part of the reason many members emphasize Gethsemane may be that some people have stated that what happened in Gethsemane was more important than what happened on the cross. For example, an entry in the Encyclopedia of Mormonism, which does not represent Church doctrine, states: “For Latter-day Saints, Gethsemane was the scene of Jesus’ greatest agony, even surpassing that which he suffered on the cross.” S. Kent Brown, “Gethsemane,” in Encyclopedia of Mormonism (New York:
MacMillan, 1992), 542. It is true that a few Church leaders between 1945 and 1982 stated that what happened in Gethsemane had more salvific importance than what happened on the cross. However, these same individuals, as well as many other Church leaders, on other occasions emphasized the importance of Christ's Crucifixion. See John Hilton III, "The Use of Gethsemane" by Church Leaders: 1859–2018. BYU Studies Quarterly (forthcoming).


8. For example, an initial analysis of images published in the *Ensign* between 1971 and 2018 indicates 207 pictures of Gethsemane and 97 of the Crucifixion (unpublished research by John Hilton III and Sarah Cox).


10. While we sometimes speak of Christ's sacrifice in broad terms, potentially encompassing multiple events, the scriptures make it clear that atoning sacrifices involve death (see Leviticus 16:11, 15; Alma 5:10–15; Moses 5:3–7).


12. For other Book of Mormon passages, see 1 Nephi 11:10–11; Mosiah 3:15–16; 4:12; Alma 5:27; 13:11; 21:10; 24:13; 34:36; Helaman 5:9; Mormon 9:6; Ether 11:10; and Moroni 1:33. Similar passages appear in the Doctrine and Covenants and Pearl of Great Price (e.g., Doctrine and Covenants 27:2; 76:69; Moses 5:69–62).

13. While not definitive, some passages of Restoration scripture suggest that Christ shedding his blood may specifically refer to his death. See Moses 7:45, 47 and Doctrine and Covenants 1:53; 1:36:6.


15. Even when this verse is applied to Jesus Christ, it could be fulfilled in ways other than through Christ's suffering in Gethsemane. For example, the Gospel of Matthew points to Isaiah 53:4 as being fulfilled when Christ physically healed others (see Matthew 8:16). Other passages that, when viewed in light of the New Testament or latter-day revelation, connect with Gethsemane or the Crucifixion (e.g., Psalm 22:1, 16; Isaiah 52:13; etc.) are not directly related with these events without this additional context.


17. John uses the word garden to describe Christ's location. The phrase *Garden of Gethsemane* never appears in scripture but rather combines *Gethsemane* (Matthew 26:36; Mark 14:32) and *garden* (John 18:1).

18. Some might argue that passages such as Acts 20:18 or Hebrews 5:7 describe the events of Gethsemane; however, these verses only ambiguously describe Christ's suffering. The Joseph Smith Translation for Hebrews 5:7–8 indicates that they allude to Melchizedek, not Christ. See Matthews, *Plainer Translation*, 383–84.

19. I have added emphasis in scriptures throughout this paper. Unless noted, the emphasis is mine, not part of the original. Many additional verses speak of Christ and his Atonement or our gaining salvation through Christ without directly mentioning his death (e.g., Acts 15:11). This list focuses solely on his death and redemption for sin. Other verses could be included but were not fully explicit about Christ dying for our sins (e.g., John 1:15; 18:14; Romans 8:3:4; 14:9, 15; 1 Corinthians 8:11; Hebrews 2:9).

20. The New Revised Standard Version translates this verse as follows: "Erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross."

21. The word *crucify* and its variants occur fifteen times in Acts–Revelation; the word *cross* (relating to Christ's Crucifixion) appears eleven times in these same books.

22. Interestingly, neither Mosiah 3:7 nor Doctrine and Covenants 19:18 (a clear cross-reference) makes it explicit that Christ bled from every pore in Gethsemane. However, these verses appear to be connected with Luke 22:44, which describes Christ bleeding in Gethsemane.

23. Another passage that could be associated with Gethsemane is 1 Nephi 11:11, in which Christ states, "I have drank out of that bitter cup which the Father hath given me and have glorified the Father in taking upon me the sins of the world, in the which I have suffered the will of the Father in all things from the beginning." This passage appears to connect with Matthew 26:42 and Doctrine and Covenants 19:19; however, it is possible that Christ alludes in this passage to the Crucifixion (see Mosiah 15:7).

24. Note that Alma 7:11 says, "He shall go forth, suffering pains and afflictions." The phrase "go forth" perhaps suggests not a one-time event but a continuing suffering throughout the experiences of life; compare Matthew 8:16–17.

25. Death and sufferings are also used together with Jesus Christ (but not in explicit connection with redemption) in Alma 16:19; 3 Nephi 6:20; and Moroni 8:24. This same logic suggests that verses such as Alma 7:13 ("the Son of God suffereth according to the flesh that he might take upon him the sins of his people") could refer to either Christ's death or Gethsemane, and as such are not included in the present study.

26. Death and sufferings are also used together with Jesus Christ (but not in explicit connection with redemption) in Alma 16:19; 3 Nephi 6:20; and Moroni 8:24. This same logic suggests that verses such as Alma 7:13 ("the Son of God suffereth according to the flesh that he might take upon him the sins of his people") could refer to either Christ's death or Gethsemane, and as such are not included in the present study.


28. See 3 Nephi 1:11; 7:14 (33); 2:8:6.

29. See Mosiah 1:9 (King Benjamin) 1:57 (Abinadi) Helaman 8:14 (Nephi, the son of Helaman) and Ether 4:1 (Moroni).

30. Isaiah 53:12 is similar but is not counted in this study, as it is the information specifically provided by Abinadi that makes it clear that this verse is a reference to Jesus Christ (see Mosiah 1:53–55).


32. A separate verse from the Doctrine and Covenants not included in this analysis is Doctrine and Covenants 1:8:7, which is a quotation of 1 Peter 3:18.
34. Handouts are available at www.johnhiltoniii.com/crucifixion.
35. It could be effective to have students split into groups of three and have one person study the New Testament, another the Book of Mormon, and another the Doctrine and Covenants and then compare what they learn.
36. A handout of these passages arranged side by side is found at www.johnhiltoniii.com/crucifixion.
40. There is a notable increase in this type of statement in the 2010s. For an extended analysis of how Church leaders have discussed Gethsemane, see Hilton, “Use of Gethsemane.”
41. As stated previously in this paper, the exact number could change depending on how one counts verses that refer to the “sufferings” or “blood” of Christ (e.g., Mosiah 3:18; Alma 2:19). Based on the methodology discussed in this paper, Mosiah 3:7 and Doctrine and Covenants 19:16–19 were counted as passages regarding Gethsemane and Christ’s Atonement. Passages counted as references to Christ suffering of our sins in his Crucifixion included the following: John 1:29; 12:32; Romans 5:2, 8, 10; 1 Corinthians 5:7; 15:3; 2 Corinthians 5:15; Galatians 3:13; Ephesians 2:16; Colossians 1:20, 21–22, 21:14; 1 Thessalonians 5:10; Hebrews 9:15, 26; 10:10, 12; 1 Peter 2:24; 3:18; Revelation 5:8–9; 1 Nephi 11:13; 2 Nephi 27:8–9; 3:26–24; Mosiah 14:12, 15:7–9, 12, 18:2; Alma 21:9; 22:14; 30:26; 33:22; 34:15; Helaman 14:15–16; 3 Nephi 9:23–22; 11:14; 27:14; Ether 12:33; Doctrine and Covenants 18:11; 20:23–25; 21:9; 35:2; 46:13; 53:2; 54:17; 76:41; 138:2, 35, 57; and Moses 7:47, 55.
Senior missionaries are especially needed because they can serve in areas where younger missionaries can’t.
baptisms, and the subsequent establishment of seminary and institute programs throughout Mongolia.

When another missionary couple from Utah received their mission call to serve in Asia, they had no idea they would be the first Church Educational System (CES) or Seminaries and Institutes (S&I) senior missionary couple to serve in Taiwan. Although they did not speak the language, they taught with the assistance of local translators, had a great love for the [seminary and institute] students, and were vital in supporting the growth of the S&I programs in central Taiwan until they completed their mission in 2002. Like other missionary couples serving around the world, these missionary couples in Mongolia and Taiwan were a blessing to those they served and helped to strengthen the youth and young adults of the Church around the world. This article examines the call, training, and experiences of CES senior missionary couples serving throughout the world.

Elder & Sister Sipherd were the first CES missionaries to serve in Taiwan. From left to right: Po Nien (Felipe) Chou (CES coordinator), Sister and Elder Sipherd, Kam Tim Kwok (CES area director) in Taiwan in April 2001. Courtesy of Po Nien (Felipe) Chou and Petra Chou.

Processing Mission Calls at the Church Office Building

An Area Presidency or an S&I area director may initiate a request for a CES missionary couple. These requests for missionary couples are sent to the Church Office Building in Salt Lake City, Utah. A former area director who has worked with several missionary couples assigned to various countries in Asia said that they regularly needed additional missionary couples to assist in his area. He indicated that these missionary couples brought a wealth of Church experience to their calling and assignment. In another continent, another past area director in the Africa Southeast area added that he could often use more missionary couples and that they were a blessing to the members in his area.

When prospective senior missionary couples complete their application, they indicate their experiences and abilities, as well as their preferred type of mission. When their missionary application arrives at Church headquarters in Salt Lake City, senior missionary coordinators from various departments help with the initial review and recommendation for a couple’s potential assignment based on their background and experience.

There are fourteen departments of the Church who have senior missionary coordinators. Once a senior missionary application is received, we (and senior missionary coordinators from other departments) review the application, tag it as necessary, and make recommendations. Each application may have three or four department recommendations, which are prioritized and then sent to a General Authority for review and assignment. For potential CES mission assignments, we look at those with strong educational backgrounds and who may work or connect well with the youth.

Requests for senior missionaries from all over the world are grouped into four categories: top, high, medium, or low priority. As the senior missionary coordinators review missionary applications, they make recommendations based on these priorities. However, since there are more requests than senior couples available, only about half the requests are filled (for example, top- and high-priority requests). The global operations manager for the Church-Service Missionary office explained in 2017 that “we receive requests daily from mission presidents and from all the Church departments and operations requesting more senior missionaries,” but only about 50 percent of the
requests for full-time senior missionaries and Church-service missionaries are filled.11

Once the senior missionary coordinators from the various departments submit their recommendations and priorities, they wait for the mission calls and assignments to be made, which may take a week or two. A former senior missionary coordinator said, “We make recommendations and then leave it up to the Brethren.”12

Elder David A. Bednar, of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, described the difference between mission calls and their accompanying assignments:

Every year tens of thousands of young men and young women, and many senior couples, eagerly anticipate receiving a special letter from Salt Lake City. . . .

Each mission call and assignment, or a later reassignment, is the result of revelation through the Lord’s servants. A call to the work comes from God through the President of the Church. An assignment to one of the more than 400 missions presently operating around the world comes from God through a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, acting with the authorization of the Lord’s living prophet. The spiritual gifts of prophecy and revelation attend all mission calls and assignments.13

Elder Ronald A. Rasband, then serving in the Presidency of the Seventy, shared his experience of observing the process of assigning missionaries with President Henry B. Eyring.14

I joined Elder Eyring early one morning in a room where several large computer screens had been prepared for the session [to make missionary assignments]. There was also a staff member from the Missionary Department who had been assigned to assist us that day.

First, we knelt together in prayer. I remember Elder Eyring using very sincere words, asking the Lord to bless him to know “perfectly” where the missionaries should be assigned. . . .

As the process began, a picture of the missionary to be assigned would come up on one of the computer screens. . . .

Elder Eyring would then study the comments from the bishops and stake presidents, medical notes, and other issues relating to each missionary.

He then referred to another screen which displayed areas and missions across the world. Finally, as he was prompted by the Spirit, he would assign the missionary to his or her field of labor. . . .

At the end of the meeting Elder Eyring bore his witness to me of the love of the Savior, which He has for each missionary assigned to go out into the world and preach the restored gospel. He said that it is by the great love of the Savior that His servants know where these wonderful young men and women, senior missionaries, and senior couple missionaries are to serve. I had a further witness that morning that every missionary called in this Church, and assigned or reassigned to a particular mission, is called by revelation from the Lord God Almighty through one of these, His servants.15

After the mission call has been accepted, letters are sent to welcome those called and to notify their mission president and area director. These senior missionary couples are added to the missionary training center list and begin to receive information and materials in preparation for their call.16

A picture and assignment of each new CES missionary couple are then added to a large whiteboard used to track these senior missionary couples around the world. A former senior missionary coordinator said, “We are responsible for all CES senior missionary couples going out to serve, and we do all we can to communicate with them and help ease any anxiety they may have in preparing for their missionary service.”17

Missionary white board at the Church Office Building in Salt Lake City, Utah, in 2018. Courtesy of Po Nien (Felipe) Chou.
Training at the Missionary Training Center

Senior missionary couples entering the Missionary Training Center (MTC) in Provo, Utah, come with diverse experiences and backgrounds. A survey conducted with senior missionary couples in the MTC in October 2011 by the S&I Office of Research found that 64 percent of senior missionaries going on a CES mission attended seminary as a youth and 36 percent taught early-morning seminary previously for an average of 1.2 years. Although most had heard of seminary and institute, only 26 percent were familiar with the CES section in the Church Handbook of Instructions.18

In addition, survey responses from senior missionary couples preparing to leave the MTC indicated that they had three main expectations with the training during their time at the MTC. First, couples anticipated learning seminary and institute organizational structure and core documents. One senior missionary couple leaving for Africa wondered, “What is CES?”, “How does CES work?,” and “Is there a set of CES manuals and handbooks?” Another missionary couple heading to Asia asked, “What is the structure of CES/S&I?” Second, couples expected to learn about their assignment and responsibility as part of their MTC training. A missionary couple going to South America said, “[W]e expected information about our assignment relating to our mission… What our responsibilities would be and how to effectively teach and how to help teachers.” A different couple called to serve in Europe said, “I expected to learn what we would need to know specific [for] our call… about the operation of Young Adults Centers.” Third, couples anticipated MTC training to cover teaching skills and available resources. A missionary couple preparing to go to the Pacific “expected to be given teaching aids.” Another couple assigned to Europe wanted to learn “how to teach and access materials for Albanian students, reporting criteria, teaching techniques… and become familiar with… resources available.”19

These senior missionary couples generally spend a week and a half at the MTC in Provo, Utah. Their first week is spent with trainers who review Preach My Gospel with them, followed by three days of training specific to their assignment. A team of seminary and institute teachers is sent from the Training Division to assist with this training. A former Training Division director explained that the training in Provo intends to assist with the following:

1. Introduce both the Objective of Seminaries and Institutes of Religion and the Teaching and Learning Emphasis (renamed the Fundamentals of Gospel Teaching and Learning).
2. Provide a broad overview of typical assignments and experiences, leaving details of the specific assignment to be covered once they reach their assigned area.
3. Help senior missionaries learn how to use the S&I curriculum to prepare and teach effectively in a seminary or institute setting.
4. Some administrative training, including accessing resources and materials online, working with priesthood leaders, and brief introduction to other administrative tasks.
5. The senior missionary coordinators share thoughts and experiences.
6. Others (for example, BYU–Pathway, Perpetual Education Fund, and so forth) may also provide training as needed.20

During a training in Provo, one trainer acknowledged the sacrifice that many of the senior missionary couples were making, while also promising...
them that they would see miracles during their mission, both in the mission field and at home. An oft-repeated message, “If you love them, leave them,” had a special meaning to these senior missionary couples who left children and grandchildren to serve a mission.21 Many who leave home and family to serve experience miracles for their families. A former senior missionary coordinator shared that a senior missionary couple in Hong Kong was able to do more for their children and grandchildren halfway around the world on a mission than if they had stayed home with them. He testified that “there are promised blessings for both [their] families on this side as well as the other side of the veil” as he shared the following story:

A missionary couple going to New Zealand received their call and then found out a daughter had a serious cancer. They counseled with their stake president to see if they should stay home and postpone their mission, . . . but soon after, the couple received a strong impression from the Lord that said, “I can do more for them than you can if you stay home.”

While at the MTC, their daughter’s platelet count dropped, and after sharing that with their MTC district, everyone prayed and fasted for their daughter. . . . On Monday, as they were attending their S&I training at the MTC, they got word that over the weekend their daughter’s platelet count had doubled. . . . Her mother said, “We could have stayed home to hold her hand, but we could not heal her unless we went out on our mission.”22

That same senior missionary coordinator said, “There is nothing that you [missionary couples] can do that is of more impact for your family than serving a mission.” His final story for the senior missionary couples during the training preparing for their assignment was about the inactive son of another missionary couple.

I knew another senior missionary couple with a son that was inactive. The couple got on Instagram, sharing MTC experiences with their family. One day they got a call from this son who is inactive, who was driving by the MTC and called his parents to ask if he could stop and get a blessing from his father who was in the MTC. The blessing was given, tears came, son and parents walked around the temple grounds. That night, they got a text message from their son, “Love you two beyond words, thanks for the imprint you left me all these years, not sure if I will ever feel direct connection with Heavenly Father, but I have felt Him through you. I feel like Pinocchio, almost a real boy!”23

President Thomas S. Monson reminded Latter-day Saints that “we continue to need many more senior couples. As your circumstances allow, as you are eligible for retirement, and as your health permits, I encourage you to make yourselves available for full-time missionary service. Both husband and wife will have a greater joy as they together serve our Father’s children.”24 The Lord is aware of the sacrifice and faith of senior missionaries who leave their families and their homes. President Gordon B. Hinckley said, “The sacrifices associated with serving the Lord full time will abundantly bless couples, their families, and the people they serve.”25

Although some senior missionary couples were overwhelmed and anxious about their calling and assignment, they generally valued and appreciated the training they received at the MTC. They expressed feelings like “The training was extremely valuable. . . . They [the instructors] taught and helped us learn valuable teaching skills,” “The material taught and modeled was very useful,” and “I enjoyed and was surprised to learn new ways to teach the doctrine . . . [and] appreciated how organized the lessons were.”26 Following their experience at the Missionary Training Center, they went forth with faith to their assigned field of labor.
CES Assignments and Experiences around the World

Senior missionary couples may experience a wide variety of CES assignments inside and outside the United States. About 38 percent of senior missionary couples are called to serve within the US compared to 62 percent sent outside the US.27 The various CES missionary assignments in 2018 included CES coordinators, stake young single adult program (SYSAP), international teacher education program (ITEP), or technical and vocational education and training (TVET), or others (for example, BYU–Hawaii, BYU–Idaho, Pathway, education specialists, and so forth).28

According to a sister missionary who works with the CES senior missionary coordinators at the Church Office Building, “the majority of our [senior missionary] couples are called to teach seminary and institute. . . . But there are other couples (ITEP, TVET, and BYU–H) who are not teaching seminary and institute, but who are teaching within the Church Education System.”29

The pre-field services group manager for the Missionary Department said that “senior missionaries are especially needed because they can serve in areas where younger missionaries can’t.”30 Although most of these senior missionary couples will teach institute, each assignment is unique and is adapted to the needs of the area and the missionary couple.

CES Missionary/Coordinator

As noted, there are many possible CES missionary assignments for a senior missionary couple. Of these assignments, most or nearly half are assigned as S&I missionaries or coordinators. In 2018, for example, S&I missionaries or coordinators accounted for 141 out of 306 CES missionary couples, or 46 percent of all CES senior missionary couples serving.31 They serve in many locations inside and outside the US teaching seminary, institute, or both and supporting and training stake-called seminary or institute teachers. They coordinate with local priesthood leaders and help to oversee the seminary and institute programs under their area of stewardship.

A former missionary couple in the Philippines who helped coordinate seminary and teach institute said, “[We] met wonderful local saints and developed eternal friendships and relationships.” They encouraged others to serve missions, enjoy wherever they serve, and love the people and the culture. They recounted hearing Elder Kent Watson, then Asia Area President and member of the Quorum of the Seventy, say in 2010, “As the Church has grown in Asia, I have come to love and appreciate a group of people who seek no reward, no honor, or other worldly things. They seek only to glorify our Father in Heaven. They are our senior missionaries, wonderful, seasoned brothers and sisters who are quietly and diligently helping to ‘lay the foundation of this Church.’”32

While serving in Virginia, one missionary couple helped teach and coordinate institute classes at Southern Virginia University (SVU), the Virginia Military Institute (VMI), and in the surrounding areas. They had all kinds of activities for the college students and young single adults, including quilting, lunches, family home evenings, games, temple excursions, visits to historical sites, and so forth. While in Virginia, they came to love the young single adults, as well as other senior couples they served with.33 The labor of these senior missionaries helped to further the work of salvation and to bring souls unto Christ.

Another missionary couple had received a call to serve their mission in Japan, so they were surprised to learn that their assignment had changed to Taiwan. When they arrived in Taiwan in 2001, they were greeted at the airport by the mission president and coordinator who would help to get them settled in their new apartment and orient them to their new assignment. They wondered how they would teach institute and help train new stake-called seminary and institute teachers from the various wards and branches without knowing the language. As they moved forward with faith (along with some anxiety, fear, and trepidation), they found out that the Lord had anticipated and prepared a way to help them fulfill their mission call. Their local stake president and other returned missionaries spoke English. Arrangements were made for them to teach institute classes with the help of local translators. The institute students especially enjoyed single adult dances, where this missionary couple taught them a variety of dances, including ballroom, swing, and country. They had not realized that they were the first CES senior missionary couple to serve in Taiwan, but they learned that their love for the students and their example of a gospel-centered marriage were more important than their ability to speak the language. When they concluded their mission, seminary and institute enrollment had increased, and a full-time coordinator replaced them to continue the program.34

A former assistant administrator over Asia explained the important function that these missionaries or coordinators serve as they assist the seminary and institute programs in various parts of the world, especially where the Church may be relatively new. In many developing countries, or areas in
Africa or Asia, for example, these missionaries or coordinators are often the first to introduce and teach seminary and institute classes, which are critical both to supporting weekday religious education and to strengthening the faith and testimony of new converts. In many of these countries where the Church may be relatively small, the Church sends a senior missionary couple to establish seminary and institute programs until there are enough seminary and institute students enrolled to justify hiring a part- or full-time coordinator or employee. A former S&I assistant administrator said, “We hope that after two or three missionary couples, the seminary and institute enrollment would have grown and our [seminary and institute] programs would have matured enough to allow S&I to hire a part-time or full-time coordinator.” He added, “Wherever the Church and missionaries goes, CES or S&I follows closely behind.”

**Stake Young Single Adult Program (SYSAP)**

The second most common CES senior missionary assignment is to serve as stake young single adult program (SYSAP) missionaries, serving at a center for young adults (CFYA). These gathering places were initially started in Europe and Africa and later added in parts of the USA. They were part of the collaborated efforts of the Priesthood Department, the Missionary Department, and the Department of Seminaries and Institutes of Religion. In 2018, there were eighty-eight senior missionary couples serving with stake single adult programs, accounting for about 29 percent of CES senior missionaries.

According to the 2011 Center for Young Adults—Supplemental Instructions and Guidelines published by the Church, the purpose of these sites (typically a shared-use Church meetinghouse or an institute building) is to provide “a place where young single adults can safely gather under priesthood direction for activation efforts, gospel learning, missionary work, help with education and employment goals, and social and service activities.” Senior missionary couples serving in stake young single adult programs assist by “(1) helping maintain the center’s operations and spiritual environment, (2) assisting leaders who are responsible for the center, (3) assisting with missionary work, and (4) teaching institute of religion classes.” These gathering places provide a place of refuge for young single adults to gather and socialize with their peers, participate in wholesome activities and develop friendships, and to strengthen their testimonies.

A past senior missionary couple began their service in the Accra Ghana Mission in 2016 before transferring back to the US to complete their mission because of health issues. They were first assigned to teach institute and work with the stake young single adult program in Ghana and then they were asked to assist with membership records before helping as maintenance missionaries. Although their mission was difficult and discouraging at times, they were blessed to help a young adult in Ghana enter the waters of baptism during their service with the stake young single adult program.

After arriving [in Ghana], . . . there really wasn’t a spot for us [and] it was a little hard and discouraging. . . . We just tried to fit in somewhere. . . .

It was pretty discouraging for my husband until he met Frances . . . [at the mall, who] offered assistance in helping my husband find a rug. . . . Frances talked with my husband about how the world needed more goodness and love, etc. Therin [my husband] offered to have missionaries come to teach him. . . . Therin would expound on what the missionaries taught him and give him more scriptures that they would read together on the phone (we lived two hours away). In March, Frances called and asked Therin to baptize him. . . . He baptized Frances on Palm Sunday 2016 and confirmed him the next week on Easter Sunday.

That was the highlight of our mission. A week before we returned home, we were able to take him to the temple and Therin was able to baptize him for the dead. It was a very spiritual experience. Frances . . . is preparing to receive his endowments currently and teaches family history. He has been sharing the gospel with others and helping in their baptisms. . . . We did have some great experiences while we were [in Ghana]. . . . Francis calls us mom and dad and we stay in contact often. . . .

We had some good experiences even though it wasn’t what we had [expected]. . . . We knew we were supposed to go [to Ghana] for [Frances’s] baptism. . . .

In July 2012, the First Presidency issued a letter regarding the CFYA, noting that the “use of the name ‘center for young adults’ has been discontinued, . . . [and] ‘stake young single adult program’ should be used instead.” It also instructed that existing “Church buildings such as chapels and institute facilities are to be used as gathering places for young single adult programs, activities, and institute classes.” SYSAP senior missionary couples continue to serve young single adults today following this updated instruction.

**International Teacher Education Program (ITEP) and Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET)**

Several CES senior missionary couples are also called and assigned to support the Church’s elementary and secondary schools across the various nations and kingdoms in the islands of the Pacific. These schools in the Pacific include
Fiji, Kiribati, Samoa, and Tonga. They are International Teacher Education Program (ITEP) and Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) missionary couples, who help support teacher education for the various Church schools and technical and vocational training for many students at these schools. In 2018 there were ten CES senior missionary couples, or about 3 percent of all CES missionary couples serving as ITEP/TVET missionaries.42

A missionary couple who served with the International Teacher Education Program from 1999 to 2000 trained teachers at Moroni High School, a Church school in Kiribati. They recalled a meeting at BYU–Hawaii with their coordinators to discuss possible courses before they arrived at Kiribati. These coordinators had visited Kiribati and had left some sample syllabi, as well as course textbooks used at BYU–Hawaii. However, when the new missionary couple arrived in Kiribati, “the course syllabi and textbooks could not be found, . . . [so they] started the class with 24 teachers and administrators flying by the seat of [their] pants.” They said it took almost seven weeks before the materials finally arrived, but going without them at first provided them with a faith-promoting experience, as she recounted below:

While we were still home preparing to leave and purchasing items, . . . Roy had indicated that he would really like to find the video The King and I to take to Kiribati. I asked him why he thought he needed it, and he answered, “I don’t know—I just feel it would be a good idea to have it. I’ve always liked the words to the song ‘Getting to Know You.’” . . . Then, one day when Roy was doing some shopping on his own, he found the video! . . . When we arrived in Kiribati, we discovered the much-needed textbooks that were supposed to be in our apartment weren’t there, and we were under pressure to start teaching our first class within a few weeks. During those initial weeks, Roy was truly blessed through the insights and inspiration he received in preparing for the pedagogy class without the aid of a textbook. . . . He used the highly sought-after video The King and I as an extremely effective and valuable part of his introduction. As quickly as he prepared lesson plans, I typed and prepared the handouts and other resource materials; . . . the much-needed textbook arrived nearly seven weeks after our arrival in Kiribati. We were absolutely astounded and humbled to the point of tears as we opened the recently arrived textbook to the table of contents only to find that it matched almost identically the lessons and presentations Roy had prepared and taught. Not only that, but the introduction included the words to the song “Getting to Know You” from The King and I! This was an incredibly humbling and spiritual experience! It confirmed to us even more that we were where the Lord wanted us to be.43

In another part of the Pacific, another missionary couple served as Technical and Vocational Education and Training missionaries in the Tonga Nuku’alofa Mission from 2015 to 2017. They were assigned to Liahona High School, a Church school on the main island in the Kingdom of Tonga. Their area supervisor in New Zealand assigned them the following responsibilities during their mission: strengthen teaching methods and practices, help teachers and departments develop inventories and curriculum-based plans, forge or strengthen relationships with certifying tertiary educational institutions, encourage and incorporate certification study and testing into their curriculum, help teachers apply classroom skills to real-world projects, and encourage support of vocational classes and projects.44

One mission experience from this missionary couple illustrates how their service helped students develop vocational skills while blessing a family in their community. While on their mission, someone asked them “if the Liahona High School vocational electricity class could help a poor family living in a fale [a traditional Tongan hut] to install electric lights so that the six children could study school lessons and read scriptures after sunset.” They explained that the power company could not run power to a hut due to the fire hazard. Accompanied by another missionary and the school electricity teacher, they used donated funds to buy a small solar power system and four LED bulbs. Their students were trained about solar energy and installation procedures, and together they installed the system for that family. They recalled going to visit the family one evening “to deliver children’s books and read with the children under their new lights.” They found that “several of the children are now honor students at their local schools and the entire family

Sister Bearce with a family in their fale, who benefited by the solar electricity project by the students at Liahona High School in Tonga in 2016. Courtesy of Elder and Sister Bearce.
is prospering." In addition, the seventeen students in the electricity class were humbled by the opportunity to participate in the project and to see its effect on the lives of a family in their community. These missionary couples are doing more than just teaching reading or technical skills, they are blessing the lives of those they serve.

**Other Senior Missionary Assignments**

Senior missionary couples have also received a variety of other CES assignments based on the needs of the program at the time. For example, some serve as Perpetual Education Fund (PEF) senior missionary couples while others continue to teach at BYU–Hawaii or serve as Education Specialist missionaries. Most recently, some have been called to serve with the Pathway program or BYU–Pathway Worldwide. Although these senior missionary couples are a smaller group compared to coordinators or missionaries serving with stake young single adult programs, their service is critical and a blessing to those they serve throughout the world.

A representative from BYU–Pathway Worldwide explained to senior missionary couples during their training in the Provo MTC that there are many members throughout the world who lack time, money, confidence, and resources to advance their education and economic situation. When the Pathway pilot program was launched in 2009, it included three sites with fifty students and has since grown to include thousands of students in multiple sites and countries. It was designed as a one-year course that included online modules and local meetings, with a simple application process and minimal cost to members of the Church. After an individual successfully completes the Pathway program, he or she may choose to take BYU–Idaho online courses and earn a certificate, associate’s degree, or bachelor’s degree. Missionary couples called to help with the Pathway program assist individuals with educational opportunities and provide them with hope for a better and brighter future.

A missionary couple that served as education specialist missionaries in French Polynesian Tahiti from 2015 to 2016 explained that they helped the mission president, assisted with educational needs, and helped to start the Church’s Pathway program in Tahiti. The husband was also the fleet manager while his wife organized and directed mission choirs, cared for sick missionaries, and helped with zone conferences and missionary transportation. However, their primary assignment and greatest challenge was helping the Tahitian people understand the value of education, as they explained with the following:

The greatest challenge was the culture of the Tahitian people, which was not a culture of higher education. In fact, it was just the opposite: almost half of the Tahitian teens dropped out of high school at age 16 because they could legally do so, and of those that graduated, there were few that went on to university because the economy was so bad that there were not many opportunities for jobs, even with an education. We eventually developed a program of meeting with the youth and their parents in a ward meeting where we talked to the parents first about the blessings of education for their children (without offending them about their lack of education), then tried to inspire the youth to have a vision for their future that included education. We even had the opportunity of meeting with wards from other islands. Whole families would come to spend a week going to the temple and we arranged to meet with the groups for our presentation on education.

They started one Pathway class in Tahiti, which expanded to three classes across the island during their mission. These Pathway classes were an onboarding or induction program to help individuals increase their English
language skills to prepare them to attend online college courses provided by BYU–Idaho. This missionary couple shared their experience as follows:

Pathway was such a joy to be a part of!

Our students included bishops and members of stake presidencies improving their English and strengthening their job skills; a woman trying to start her own business and her returned missionary granddaughter who was applying to BYU–Hawaii; a husband and wife beginning their own after-school program for children; a woman who wanted to improve her English to be able to study the many LDS doctrinal books not available in French; many men and women who had dropped out of high school and now knew the value of education, including one man who gained the learning skills and the self-confidence to go on to the university and become a math teacher; and many young people who understood that an education would improve the quality of their lives, like Ness, whom we met during one of the ward temple trips and who then moved from his home island to come to Tahiti so that he could attend Pathway.

Didier was a man in his thirties who had a career but knew that education could improve his life. He was a dedicated student and helped the others in his class who struggled a little. He completed Pathway, was accepted to BYU–Idaho, and when we left, was on his way to getting his degree in computer systems.

But perhaps the most tender experience for me was the sister who, after attending almost a year of Pathway, had the courage to watch the English broadcast of General Conference. “Oh, Sister Caldwell,” she said, with tears in her eyes, “that is the first time I ever hear the actual voice of the prophet, not the voice of the interpreter. I feel the Spirit so strong as I listen to the prophet in his own voice!”

We saw the blessings of education and the gospel change lives in Tahiti, but maybe the greatest blessings were those that came to us as we served in this great work.

**Conclusion**

Elder Robert D. Hales said, “We wish to express our appreciation for all those valiant couples who are currently serving, those who have served, and those who will yet serve.” He gave the following promise to these missionary couples, “If we are willing to leave our loved ones for service in the mission field, we will bless them with a heritage that will teach and inspire them for generations to come,” and “As we serve in the mission field, our children and grandchildren will be blessed in ways that would not have been possible had we stayed at home . . . : inactive children activated, family members baptized, and testimonies strengthened because of their service.”

Members of the Church throughout the world are blessed by the service of CES senior missionary couples. Although these senior missionary couples may be anxious and concerned about their families back home or the limited knowledge or uncertainty of their upcoming mission call and assignment, they display a tremendous amount of faith to answer the call to serve wherever they are needed. Regardless of their assignments, these senior missionary couples bring with them a wealth of knowledge and understanding of Church government and programs. More importantly, they are an example of faithful Latter-day Saints who have a deep conviction and testimony of the restored gospel. Their selfless sacrifice is an inspiration and blessing to those left back home as well as those they will interact within the mission field. They are a blessing to those they serve and play an important role in strengthening the youth and young adults of the Church throughout the world.

President Russell M. Nelson, then a member of the Quorum of the Twelve, taught that “along with [young missionaries] are marvelous senior missionaries who have answered the pleadings of prophets and apostles for more missionary couples.” He then said, “I express gratitude for our senior missionaries. They are young in spirit, wise, and willing to work. They even tolerate remarks from their fun-filled children who might change President...”
Spencer W. Kimball’s plea ‘Lengthen your stride’ to ‘Hasten your shuffle.’ These dear members are willing to serve and strengthen the lives of others. Even if these seniors don’t know the local language, their accomplishments are great and their spirit of sacrifice is precious.”50

Notes
1. R. Lanier Britsch, From the East: The History of Latter-day Saints in Asia, 1851–1996 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1998), 308–11; By Study and Also by Faith: One Hundred Years of Seminaries and Institutes of Religion (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2015), 415.
3. “News of the Church: Missionaries in Mongolia.”
4. S&I and all Church schools fall under the umbrella of CES. However, CES and S&I have been and are sometimes used interchangeably.
6. Kam Tim Kwok, interview by Po Nien (Felipe) Chou and Petra Chou, October 2016, Hong Kong, China.
9. Ayers and Ayers, interview.
10. Ayers and Ayers, interview.
12. Ayers and Ayers, interview.
16. Ayers and Ayers, interview.
17. Ayers and Ayers, interview.
22. Ayers and Ayers, interview.
23. Ayers and Ayers, interview.
25. Gordon B. Hinckley, “To the Bishops of the Church” (Worldwide Leadership Training Meeting, 19 June 2004), 27; see also “Excerpts from Recent Addresses of President Gordon B. Hinckley,” Ensign, April 1996, 72.
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Staff Spotlights

Dean of Religious Education/Director of the Religious Studies Center
Daniel K Judd is dean of Religious Education at Brigham Young University. He received an MS degree in family studies and a PhD in counseling psychology from Brigham Young University. He has taught at BYU for twenty-six years, and his research focuses on the relationships of religion, spirituality, and mental health. He has been a seminary and institute instructor in Utah and Arizona and a member of the Family Science faculty at BYU–Idaho. He has served in the Sunday School General Presidency and as president of the Ghana Accra Mission.

Associate Dean of Religious Education/Associate Director of the Religious Studies Center
J. B. Haws is an associate professor of Church history and doctrine at Brigham Young University and is an associate dean of Religious Education. Before coming to BYU, Haws taught seminary in northern Utah. He attended Weber State University, BYU, and the University of Utah. His PhD from the University of Utah is in American history. His areas of research are twentieth-century Latter-day Saint and American religious history and the public perception of Latter-day Saints.

Associate Dean of Religious Education
Andrew H. Hedges is a professor of Church history and doctrine at Brigham Young University and serves as an associate dean of Religious Education. He earned his BS in zoology at Weber State College, his MA in Near Eastern studies at BYU, and his PhD in American history at the University of Illinois, Urbana–Champaign. He served for a time as managing historian of The Joseph Smith Papers. He is currently researching Brigham Young and environmental history in the Salt Lake Valley.
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