

Studying the Scriptures

The medieval alchemist's motto was *lege, lege, lege, labore, ora, et relege*, "read, read, read, work (or experiment), pray, and reread." We would do well to adopt a similar motto for our scripture study. Though it did not help the alchemists turn lead into gold, it may help us turn leaden scripture study into gold. Consider each element of this motto, saving "work" for last.

Read, Read, Read

Reading is obviously where our scripture study must begin. We cannot study and come to understand what we are not already familiar with. We cannot study 1 Nephi thoroughly without knowing the rest of the Book of Mormon. The prophets have admonished us to go beyond reading to study, and though reading is different from careful study, it is an essential part of scripture study. It is not something that can be done once and then forgotten; it must be done over and over again. Thus the repetition of the advice: "Read, read, read."

There are three ways to read scripture: read one of the standard works from beginning to end; read topically, trying to understand what the scriptures say about particular ideas and issues; and read one book or passage of scripture closely to see what it may say to us. Each is important to scripture study; each has its own benefits.

Chronological Study

Consider setting time apart each year to read at least one standard work from beginning to end in chronological order, perhaps at the beginning of each year when we begin to study a new standard work in Sunday School. This kind of scripture study helps us keep the whole gospel picture before our eyes. It gives our other studies a context and gives us a sense of the history and tradition that make scripture what it is.

Topical Study

Using the Topical Guide, we can regularly investigate what the scriptures have to say about problems that we face, topics of current relevance, or topics we have heard discussed in a talk or lesson. This kind of study is particularly appropriate for those preparing a lesson or talk on an assigned topic.

Close Reading

The last of the three kinds of scripture study—choosing a particular book or passage of scripture and reading it closely—is that done least frequently by Latter-day Saints, that with which we are least familiar. Nevertheless, it pays great dividends. In scripture study, speed is never important. In fact, it often impedes understanding and can seriously hinder this kind of study. Close reading requires time and patience, but it rewards us with insights we would otherwise never have, for it allows the scriptures to teach us what they have to say to us, whatever our interests and problems may be. It allows us to go beyond the kind of learning that begins with our interests to a learning that allows the Lord to speak to us, sometimes about things we would never have otherwise imagined.

My experience with this kind of scripture study came as a surprise to me, but its effect was profound. When I was a graduate student in philosophy at Pennsylvania State University, one of my professors, Stephen Goldman, was a devout Jew who was also a lay leader in a nearby small Jewish congregation. Though his specialty in philosophy was the philosophy of science, knowing his background, I asked if he would allow me to study part of the Old

Testament with him. He agreed and asked me to propose a course of study for the next quarter. "Well, since I don't want to go too fast, why don't we just read the book of Genesis?" I said. He was amazed. Though I thought studying one book of scripture in eight weeks was a snail's pace, he thought it impossible to do that much reading in so short a time. He suggested that we read only chapter 1. Since that was equally amazing to me, we compromised on "as much as we can get through." He warned me that we might not get very far, and we didn't. We barely made it through chapter 3, and he obviously felt pushed.

The first day we met, I had read all of chapter 1 and at his request brought several questions with me. One of them was, How do you reconcile the account of creation in this chapter with what is taught in science class? He refused to discuss that question. He did not think it interesting; it was not worth the time. There were, he said, much more important things to discuss, things pertinent to our lives and salvation. Professor Goldman allowed me to ask my other questions, and he had no trouble answering them. In fact, he answered each so completely that at the end of the hour I still had questions that needed to be answered.

At our next meeting, he finished answering my list of questions and asked if I had more. "No," I said, "I'm ready to move to chapter 2." "Before we do so," he asked, "do you mind if I ask a few questions?" That was a trick question, for he began talking about and asking questions about the details of the scriptures, questions that, by focusing on those details, went on and on. He asked about words and patterns of words, pointing out things I had never seen or had thought inconsequential. In almost every case I had no answers for him or felt that the answers I had were shallow and inadequate. But he was patient with me. As I fumbled for answers, he began to explain what he thought some answers to his questions might be and how the things he noticed were important.

As he discussed the first verses of the first chapter of Genesis with me, I realized that I was visiting with a man who understood many aspects of the gospel that I thought only Latter-day Saints knew, things I had learned from latter-day prophets and the temple but had never seen in Genesis. Most of what he taught me was sound doctrine, and he could always back up his teaching with the words of the scriptures.

I am embarrassed to say that I was surprised. This man was teaching me things that, in my naive arrogance, I thought I would have to teach him. For his part, he was surprised that there were non-Jews who knew these things too, and he was even more surprised to learn that we claim to know them because a living prophet told them to us. That he could not believe, but he was continually amazed that Latter-day Saints know the truth, just as I was continually amazed that he did.

For me, that was a turning point in my scripture study. Though I thought I knew the importance of the scriptures, and though I had found them comforting and delightful and enlightening before, I had never experienced them like this. In Doctrine and Covenants 18:34-36, the Lord says, "These words are not of men nor of man, but of me; wherefore, you shall testify they are of me and not of man; For it is my voice which speaketh them unto you; for they are given by my Spirit unto you, and by my power you can read them one to another; and save it were by my power you could not have them; Wherefore, you can testify that you have heard my voice, and know my words." For the first time, I felt that I really knew what this scripture meant. I had experienced the voice of the Lord in the scriptures. Though I knew intellectually that the scriptures reveal all things, especially when coupled with direction from a living prophet, I had never before known this truth in my heart. With Professor Goldman's help, I learned that a careful reading of scripture shows that the gospel was revealed from the beginning. This man had less knowledge of the restoration than I, yet he expounded a great deal of the restored gospel from only three chapters of Genesis. In fact, I had learned things about the restored gospel from him. I began to understand that if a person were to study the scriptures as thoroughly as did my professor, but with the truth of the restoration as

background and the gift of the Holy Ghost as a guide, he or she would find that the scriptures teach the same truths repeatedly. The scriptures teach the same gospel from beginning to end, and even though they teach the same thing again and again, it is taught in a new way every time—a way that makes it always fresh, interesting, and applicable. (Perhaps that is one way in which the gospel is new and everlasting.) I began to see that the understanding of the gospel realized from such a study would be much deeper than my previous understanding.

Before studying with Professor Goldman, I memorized doctrines and scanned scriptures for evidence that would support the doctrines I believed. After studying with him I realized that although that kind of scripture study is essential, our learning is vastly improved if it is done against the background of close reading I learned from Professor Goldman. The irony is that I learned this from someone outside the church, even though the prophets and the scriptures had already told me that it was possible.

Most of the tools and methods described in this book are tools and methods for close reading, though they can also be used for topical study. The heart of these tools and techniques is asking questions—asking questions of the scriptures and letting them answer, asking questions about details rather than about abstractions and generalities. What does *dominion* mean? Why does Adam say what he does in the way that he does? What does the form of his answer to God suggest? Why is the story told in this order rather than another? Often Professor Goldman's questions had no single, correct answer. Even when he had a plausible answer to one of his questions, he never assumed that he knew everything he needed to know. He might ask the same questions today that he asked a year ago and criticize his previous answers. He focused on questioning in a productive way rather than on merely answering, but asking those questions naturally led us to ideas, often to ideas I had never considered. It surprised me how often such questions about details led to insights into my life.

As I imitated Professor Goldman, I began to wonder if my understanding of the gospel was adequate. That too became a source for questions. To see whether the scriptures would refine my understanding, I began to ask questions like, I have always heard that such and such is true and I have always believed that this passage of scripture teaches that doctrine. Does it? Such questioning often showed me that my knowledge of the scriptures was shallow, that the verses I had used as supports for doctrines I believed not only supported those doctrines but also had a great deal to teach me.

Since my experience with Professor Goldman almost thirty years ago, I have seen similar transformations repeated in others' lives. I have seen missionaries at the Missionary Training Center grow from closely reading passages, and I have seen students at Brigham Young University strengthen their testimonies. Just as I did, they discover that scripture study, especially close reading, creates a circular movement in our lives. Prayerful attention to the scriptures changes the ways we live, and living in new ways raises questions that return us to the scriptures.

Pray

Prayer is essential at every step of our scripture study. We should begin our private study with personal prayer. We should have a prayer in our hearts as we study, a prayer of thanksgiving that we have been given the scriptures and the prophets, that we will be open to what scripture has to teach us, that we will learn from the scriptures, that the Holy Spirit will guide us toward understanding. We should pray for help in knowing the questions we should ask. We should pray that the scriptures we read will question us and demand our thoughtful answers. We should pray that our consciences will be pricked by what we learn in study so that our lives might be changed and so that the Lord's kingdom may come. We should pray to know how to liken the scriptures to ourselves.

Unless we study with a mind and heart open to inspiration, we cannot profit from scripture study as the Lord would have us do. We must not rush through what we are studying to get in a certain number of pages each day. Perhaps as important, we must expect to find—in fact, look—for what we do not already know. We should pray to be surprised. Asking to find what we do not already know will help open the possibility of being inspired to new things.

Reread

After studying topically for some time, it is important to reread the standard works as a whole. Similarly, when we have devoted our study time to close reading, it is important to reread the scriptural context of the book, chapters, or verses that we have studied. Good scripture study teaches us doctrines and concentrates our attention on details, but it is also important to put those doctrines and details into the perspective given by the whole. For example, when I finish a detailed study of Romans 8, I should go back and reread at least the chapter and probably the whole book of Romans. Similarly, after carefully studying Alma 32–34, I should reread those chapters together and also in the context of the book of Alma. Rereading and recontextualizing helps me keep a gospel perspective on my studies.

Work or Experiment

Work is as important to scripture study as any other aspect of scripture study, but it is perhaps the most neglected aspect of scripture study. In the Old and the New Testaments, the word *study* means “mental endeavor.” Noah Webster’s 1828 *American Dictionary of the English Language* gives the same definition, “to apply the mind to,” as well as the more narrow “to read or examine for the purpose of learning and understanding.”¹ “Mental endeavor” was, however, the primary meaning in Joseph Smith’s day. Thus when Doctrine and Covenants 26:1 admonishes us to study the scriptures, it means that we must do more than just read them.

Study is itself work. As we study, we must ask questions of the things we read: To whom was the prophet speaking or writing? Why did he say what he did? What does this word mean? How is this passage of scripture organized? Perhaps more important than these are questions such as, What do I not understand about these verses? How does this differ from what I have assumed to be correct and how do I account for that difference? We should be willing to try out various understandings to see which one is most helpful, revealing, or in conformity with the revealed gospel. We must experiment in private before we are ready to discuss what we have learned in public.

This book focuses on the work involved in scripture study. We will learn a few of many techniques for focusing on what the scriptures can teach us and for helping us ask questions of the scriptures and be questioned by them. Scripture study is like any other labor. It requires time, concentration, the right tools, and the right attitude. It is work, joyful work.

A worker must have tools, and workers at scripture study are no exception. Obviously we must have the scriptures to study them, preferably the 1981 edition published by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Also necessary are a writing utensil and a notebook for making notes. Some of these notes will be temporary, such as references to look up, sketches of ideas, outlines, and reminders of items for further study. Others will be more permanent. I often have ideas I want to remember for future study or use in talks and lessons.

For me, the discipline required to write an essay about scripture has been very useful. I learn a lot more when I explain things to someone else, but I don’t always have the chance to do so in a talk or lesson. An essay gives me

that chance. I include such essays in a notebook with my more permanent material.

A Method for Scripture Study

During the last thirty years, the philosophy of science has shown that we are far from clear about what the scientific method is, but there is general agreement that science proceeds methodically. In other words, science proceeds by applying a standard procedure to problems, a procedure that helps scientists work effectively and accurately. As good as the scientific method is, however, it is not good for studying everything. Science works as effectively as it does by defining in advance an area of study and the objects it will consider, as well as the kinds of methods by which it will conduct its investigations. Because these factors define the limits of science, the scientific method cannot be used to study things that are not within the field of objects of study that are marked out in advance by the definition of the particular science or not amenable to its procedures. For example, it cannot be used to study things that are not measurable, such as ideas and books. Accordingly, there is no scientific method for scripture study, and some of the worst methods we can use are those that try to force scripture study into the mold of a scientific or similar inquiry. However, it does not follow that scripture study is a haphazard or subjective matter. Science and subjectivity are not the only options.

Following is one method for scripture study:

A. Remember that in addition to being continuing revelation, the words and sentences of the scriptures are the source of divine truth. That is why we call them the standard works. A manual, such as the manual for a computer or a car, is a description of the machine with directions for using it. However, a manual does not contain the truths of computing or cars. It merely describes what the user must do to make the mechanism in question work. In contrast, the scriptures are not just *about* the truths of God. They are not simply descriptions of those truths or directions for using them. With continuing revelation, they are the very source of those truths, and they are the standard by which we judge personal revelation. The scriptures are more accurately compared to the data the scientist analyzes rather than to the article, book, or manual that the scientist writes about the data. We must not read the scriptures as if they were manuals.

B. Assume that the scriptures mean exactly what they say and, more important, assume that we do not already know what they say. If we assume that we already know what the scriptures say, then they cannot continue to teach us. If we assume that they mean something other than what they say, then we run the risk of substituting our own thoughts for what we read rather than learning what they have to teach us.

C. As a rule, focus scripture study on questions rather than on particular doctrines. Of course, sometimes it is important to study a particular doctrine. However, when we start our study with doctrinal questions, we often have difficulty getting beyond what we think we already know—difficulty learning from the scriptures. What we have already learned can sometimes become the standard for what we will learn in the future, making it more difficult to learn something new. To better understand the scriptures themselves rather than a particular doctrine or set of doctrines, we can think in terms of the questions we can ask about the scriptures we are reading and, especially, *the questions they ask us*. Consider the following suggestions for focusing on questions:

1. Before addressing major doctrinal ideas, ask questions about the details of the passage. Often the big issues take care of themselves after the little ones are resolved. Most of the suggestions in this book are suggestions for thinking about the details of scripture.

2. Pay at least as much attention to the differences between scriptural passages as to the similarities. We can ask specific questions about those differences and their meanings. Looking at similarities tempts us to think in the same old ways, while looking at differences helps us focus on particular things that individual scriptures teach.

3. To avoid remaining locked in preconceived notions about the scriptures and their interpretation, assume that each aspect of whatever passage we are looking at is significant and ask about that significance. To assume that some things are significant and others are not is to assume, from the beginning, that we already know what scripture means. Some things may turn out to be irrelevant, but we cannot know that until we are done.

4. Think of alternative understandings of a passage of scripture, then test those alternatives against the scriptures as a whole to see how helpful they are.

Obviously, each of these suggestions presumes that we have the Holy Ghost when we study. Without it we are unlikely to learn what we need to learn; in fact, we are unlikely even to know what we should be studying.

Tools for Scripture Study

The chapters in this book are designed as aids for using various tools that will help us enhance our method of scripture study. Consider the following tools for achieving more meaningful scripture study:

A. Before we do anything else, we should think about what we do and do not understand about the passage we wish to study. One way I do this is by writing a coherent, accurate, and complete paraphrase of the passage. If I cannot put it lucidly in my own words, then I know there is probably more I can learn about the passage. I ask myself, what about it do I not understand? Is it the words? The concepts? The background? When writing the paraphrase, I try to explain the passage rather than state what I have always assumed that it means.

B. Make sure to know the context of the passage. What comes immediately before and after it in the scriptures? To whom was the passage addressed? Do we need to know something about customs or historical facts to understand the passage?

C. Ask what the words mean. How did prophets who lived before the passage we are reading was recorded use the word? For the Old and New Testaments, respectively, what did the Hebrew or Greek words mean when those books were written? For the Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, and Pearl of Great Price, what did the words mean in the early to middle nineteenth century? What dictionaries will best help us find those meanings?

D. Understand the grammar of the passage. Start by looking at the verbs. What are the main verbs of the passage? What do they tell us about the passage? Who or what is the subject of each sentence? Look at the pronouns. To whom or what do they refer? Think about the punctuation. What does it tell us about the meaning of the passage? How is each part of the sentence connected to the other parts?

E. Watch for patterns within sentences and between them (such a study is known as rhetoric). What do the patterns emphasize? How do they connect words, phrases, and verses to each other? What do those connections tell us?

F. Use the aids provided in the LDS edition of the scriptures. What are the various kinds of footnotes and what do they tell us? How can we make better use of the Topical Guide, Bible Dictionary, and gazetteer?

G. If possible, learn something about the culture and history of the people who wrote the passages. Where is such information found? How do we decide what sources are reliable?

H. Find out how prophets who lived after a passage was written understood it. Their understandings can reveal a variety of ways to understand a particular passage.

I. Finally, look at commentaries by reliable writers and, for the Old and New Testaments, at well-made alternate translations. We must use commentaries with caution, however, because it is tempting to let others think for us or allow the commentaries to replace the scriptures as our text. But if we use commentaries judiciously, as guides of which we can and should be critical, they can show us new ways to think about a passage and provide information about language or history that we might not otherwise learn.

Likening the Scriptures to Ourselves

Scripture study requires us to use these and any other techniques that we learn. It requires us to work by taking notes, writing down our ideas and thinking about them critically, looking up other sources, and discussing our ideas with others and taking their criticism. Our work, however, must go beyond teasing from scripture interesting or even revelatory ideas. Academic tools can be a great help, but scripture study must be more than an academic pursuit or a hobby.

If scripture study is to be more than mental exercise, we must also liken the scriptures to ourselves (see 1 Nephi 19:23). We must make the lessons they teach part of our everyday lives. Usually that application comes naturally as we spend time in prayerful study. As we regularly discover what the scriptures teach us, as scripture study becomes a daily habit and the scriptures become part of our understanding, our way of seeing the world changes. As that view changes, we change our lives: “The preaching of the word had a great tendency to lead the people to do that which was just—yea, it had had more powerful effect upon the minds of the people than the sword, or anything else, which had happened unto them—therefore Alma thought it was expedient that they should try the virtue of the word of God” (Alma 31:5). Although this passage refers to preaching, the same is true of scripture study. We sometimes need to think specifically about how the scriptures apply to our situations and questions, but careful, regular scripture study can, by itself, change our hearts and minds. It would be unusual to spend regular amounts of time in scripture study and not to find our lives changed, not to find ourselves thinking in new ways.

Note

1. *American Dictionary of the English Language* (1828), s.v. “study.”