

Context

It is not unusual for someone to use a scripture to back up a point but still leave another person doubting whether the scripture really deals with the topic. For example, someone encouraging us to be educated might quote Doctrine and Covenants 88:118: “Seek ye out of the best books words of wisdom; seek learning, even by study and also by faith.” In context, however, the Lord does not seem to be encouraging secular education. We ought to be educated in many things, from accounting to philosophy to auto mechanics, but this verse in the Doctrine and Covenants does not seem to tell us that.

We need not get too worked up about such uses of scripture. They are usually at least harmless, and they are often interesting and lead to good conclusions. Even scriptural authors quote other scriptures out of context. Among others, Paul frequently cites Old Testament scriptures (particularly Psalms), often with less regard for their original context than a purist might like.

Nevertheless, if, as we study, we want to better understand the scriptures, we should be sure we understand them in context. That can be a tall order. Deciding what the word *context* means is not easy. Sometimes a verse is part of a story within one book of scripture, and, of course, it is always part of that book as a whole. Each book also has a context within the scriptures. On top of that, we can always consider the historical and cultural context of a passage or book and the context of our study. Why are we interested in this question? What problems may we be dealing with? As some contemporary philosophers have pointed out, we can choose a context only from within another context that makes such a choice desirable or necessary. The conclusion: there is no such thing as *the* context of a passage of scripture.

Still, we need not worry too much about the complexity of context. If we ask ourselves which contexts are relevant to our study, we will usually be able to improve our understanding of the scriptures. This book includes several suggestions for thinking about context (see, for example, “Doing Bible Research without Knowing Hebrew or Greek,” “Cross-Referencing,” and “Outlining”) but includes little about cultural and historical context.

The LDS Bible Dictionary is a good place to start looking for answers to questions about biblical historical and cultural background. There are also a number of larger Bible dictionaries, such as the one-volume *Harper’s Bible Dictionary*¹ and the multivolume *Anchor Bible Dictionary*.² Many public libraries have sections of material on biblical background that include a variety of helpful materials, such as *Bible Manners and Customs*.³

Given the provenance of the Book of Mormon, having the same kind of material available about its history, culture, or geography is impossible. Much of what has been done is highly speculative. However, the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS) has a great deal of responsible material from which to draw. Information about early LDS history—background for the Doctrine and Covenants—is available from a variety of sources.

Notes

1. Madeline S. Miller and J. Lane Miller, *Harper’s Bible Dictionary* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973).

2. See David Noel Freedman, ed., *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 6 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1992).

3. Reverend G. M. Mackie, *Bible Manners and Customs* (New York: Revell Company, 1898).