

Asking Questions

Asking questions is an important part of scripture study. What does this word mean? Why did the writer say this rather than that? Why did he put things in this particular order? We should concentrate on asking fruitful questions, and it is important to remember that many questions have more than one answer. We sometimes do not know whether a question is fruitful until after we have asked it and thought about it. We often cannot tell in advance.

Though information is important, especially when we are young in the gospel, the point of these questions is not so much to provide us with information as it is to help us think about the scriptures, to focus on the connections made in the scriptures and the types or patterns we see. It is to open us to the possibility of revelation. We are not studying the scriptures just to have more information, though we will have more information when we are done. We study the scriptures because they speak to us about our lives and our relation to God. One way to understand this is that we ask questions of the scriptures to help us see what questions they have to ask of us. Our responses to their questions can change our lives; our questions prepare us to hear the questions that the Lord asks us through the scriptures.¹

There are many excellent examples of such questions from the Lord. For example, when the Lord asks Adam in the Garden of Eden, “Adam, where art thou?” (Genesis 3:9) he is not merely asking for Adam’s physical location. It seems that he wants Adam to consider thoughtfully where he is in his relationship with the Lord. Prophets and scripture can ask similar questions. For example, consider 2 Samuel 12:1–7, the story of the prophet Nathan’s rebuke of King David:

And the Lord sent Nathan unto David. And he came unto him, and said unto him, There were two men in one city; the one rich, and the other poor. The rich man had exceeding many flocks and herds: But the poor man had nothing, save one little ewe lamb, which he had bought and nourished up: and it grew up together with him, and with his children; it did eat of his own meat, and drank of his own cup, and lay in his bosom, and was unto him as a daughter. And there came a traveller unto the rich man, and he spared to take of his own flock and of his own herd, to dress for the wayfaring man that was come unto him; but took the poor man’s lamb, and dressed it for the man that was come to him. And David’s anger was greatly kindled against the man; and he said to Nathan, As the Lord liveth, the man that hath done this thing shall surely die: And he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity. And Nathan said to David, Thou art the man.

Nathan’s story provokes David to anger, but it was intended to make him ask himself, “Who has done such a thing? Is it I?” The stories, poems, sermons, letters, and histories of the scriptures ought to be as probing for us as Nathan’s story was for David; they should help us ask questions about ourselves and our lives. The questions we will learn to ask about words, grammar, rhetorical patterns, and so on, are useful only insofar as they help us hear the questions that the Lord puts to each of us through the scriptures and his prophets. We will first concentrate on learning to ask questions about details in the scriptures, but we will do so to help us learn to hear other, more important, questions.

Following is an example of the kinds of questions I might ask as part of an initial study of Genesis 22, the story of Abraham's trial. As I studied further, I would add to and delete from the list below, making notes of significant insights as I went along.

Notice that the questions are mostly about specific details in the verses. It is best not to ask about larger, more abstract questions until after I have a good understanding of the verses themselves. These kinds of questions are to help me gain that understanding and avoid the temptation of moving immediately to the broad "philosophical" questions. Those broader questions can be important, but the danger of moving too quickly to them is that because I may not yet really understand the scriptures, my response to those broad questions will be what I already know or what others say in response to those questions most of the time. That approach risks mingling the philosophies of men (what most people take to be true most of the time, otherwise known as common sense) with scripture rather than learning from the scriptures.

Verse 1. "After these things." After what things? The things in the immediately preceding chapter? Some other set of things? Why does the story begin by closely connecting this chapter to a previous chapter(s)? Is the author of this test the Father or the Son? What does the word *tempt* mean? Why would the Lord need to try Abraham? Is there any significance to Abraham's answer, "Behold, here I am"? Does the phrase occur in other scriptures? In what circumstances?

Verse 2. Why is Isaac said to be Abraham's only son? What about Ishmael? Similarly, why is the Savior said to be the Father's only Son (see D&C 20:21)? Are we not also children of our Father in Heaven? Does considering this question as it applies to Abraham help us understand the question as it applies to Heavenly Father? Why does the Lord refer to what Abraham must do as a burnt offering? Is it significant that the word *sacrifice* is not used in this chapter? Why does the Lord not tell Abraham which mountain he is to go to? Why wait to tell him?

Verse 3. Why does the writer tell us that Abraham rose "early in the morning"? Though this verse explains that he has at least two servants and earlier scriptures suggest that he has many servants, Abraham saddles the ass himself. Why? Does that tell us anything about Abraham? Is that an important part of the story of the sacrifice? Why does Abraham take two servants with him?

Verse 4. In this story, Abraham makes only three gestures, here and in verses 10 and 13. Why does this verse say that Abraham "lifted up his eyes"? He was looking at a mountain, but it was a long way off and, if the tradition is correct about it being the temple mount, it was not much more than a large hill. Thus it was not the physical geography that made him lift up his eyes. What is the writer telling us? Is there any significance to the fact that the trip takes three days? If so, what is it? If not, why did the writer include that information? Why are no details given about those three days? Are there any parallels to this that might be instructive? Does this information tell us anything about Abraham or about the sacrifice itself?

Verse 5. Why does Abraham leave the servants behind? Abraham may have unwittingly prophesied what is to come: "I and the lad will go yonder and worship, and come again to you." In effect, he tells them, "We will come again to you." What is the point of this possible prophecy? In other words, what does it tell us as readers? What does the word worship mean?

Verse 6. The writer gives details in verse 3, no details in verses 4 and 5, and details again in this verse. Why give details only sometimes? What purposes do the details serve? There seems to be a parallel between Christ carrying his own cross and Isaac carrying the wood for the sacrifice of his own life. Why might such a parallel be important to Moses, the writer? Why does the writer emphasize that Abraham and Isaac were together?

Verse 7. Why does the writer repeat the word *father* and then contrast it with the word *son*? What effect does this have on the reader? What does it teach us? Abraham answers his son in the same way he answered the Lord in verse 1. What might that show? What is Isaac's reaction to the situation? When did Isaac understand what was to happen? Why do I think what I think? How old was Isaac? (How could I find out?)

Verse 8. "God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering." What does this mean? This verse, like verse 6, ends with "they went both of them together." Verse 6 lists the implements of the sacrifice then ends with this phrase. This verse takes up the question of the victim of the sacrifice, then ends with the phrase. The parallel seems so deliberate—what is going on here?

Verse 9. The writer has previously given absolutely no details of the journey. Why does he give so many details here?

Verse 10. This verse describes Abraham's second gesture: "Abraham stretched forth his hand." What does this gesture show us? Does it say something about Abraham's attitude? Notice that this verse and verse 9 use very short phrases: "came to the place which God had told him of," "laid the wood in order," "bound Isaac his son," "laid him on the altar," "stretched forth his hand," "took the knife to slay his son." What is the effect of this staccato pattern? What is the point of that effect?

Verse 11. In verse 1 God himself commanded Abraham to make the sacrifice, but in this verse the commandment not to sacrifice Isaac is delivered by an angel. What might Abraham's reaction to this have been? What does this show us? Why does the angel call Abraham's name twice? What might that show? How many times did God call Abraham's name in verse 1? Why the difference? Why is the angel specifically said to be an angel of the Lord? To whom does the word *Lord* refer?

Verse 12. Why does the angel repeat the injunction not to hurt Isaac? What does it mean to fear God? Does this story help us understand what fearing God means through Abraham's example? What does *fear* mean in this story? How has Abraham not withheld his son from the Lord?

Verse 13. Here Abraham makes a third gesture, the same one he made in verse 4: "Abraham lifted up his eyes." What does lifting up his eyes indicate? Does the parallel to verse 4 help us understand either one of these better?

Verse 14. The footnote points out that *Jehovah-jireh* means "the Lord will see" or "the Lord will provide." What has the Lord seen? What has he provided?

Verse 15. Why does the angel divide his message into two parts? Does the division emphasize a particular aspect of each part? How are the messages different?

Verse 16. Why does the angel emphasize that Abraham has not withheld his *only* son? What does Abraham show by not withholding his son?

Verses 17–18. What might the Lord mean by "In blessing I will bless thee"? The blessing in these verses has already been given to Abraham (see Genesis 12:2–3; 13:14–16). Yet here it is said to be given "because thou hast done this thing." If it has already been given, how can it be the result of this test? Why is this blessing so desirable? Why is it a blessing to have innumerable posterity? What does it mean that Abraham's seed will "possess the gate of his enemies"? Who are the enemies? What is their gate? What does it mean that all the nations of the earth will be

blessed in Abraham's seed? Does the end of verse 18 perhaps explain what the Lord meant by "this thing" in verse 16?

Verse 19. Why is Isaac not mentioned in this verse? Abraham and the two servants are the only ones said to have returned. Why? Genesis 21:34 notes that Abraham lived in the land of the Philistines, and this verse says that he dwelt in Beer-sheba. Did Abraham move? Could the sacrifice have caused Abraham to move to a new location? If so, why?

Verse 20–24. Why is this genealogy inserted between the story of the sacrifice and the recounting of Sarah's death? Since much of the chapter is about Isaac, the birth of Rebekah, his wife to be, may be the point of the genealogy. How is that relevant to what we have just seen?

Mosiah 4

Following are similar questions for Mosiah 4:

Verse 1. In this verse and at the beginning of chapter 3, King Benjamin explains that the words of his speech were given to him by an angel. Why is this so important? What in King Benjamin's speech caused the fear of the Lord to come over the people?

Verse 2. What kind of people were King Benjamin's people? (see Mosiah 1:11: "they have been a diligent people in keeping the commandments of the Lord"). To what are King Benjamin's people responding when they cry out? In scripture, the phrase *carnal state* appears only in the Book of Mormon (see Mosiah 4:2; Alma 22:13; 41:11). Is this significant? Noah Webster's 1828 *American Dictionary of the English Language* says that *carnal* means "pertaining to flesh," "being in the natural state; unregenerative" and "lustful."² How does each definition fit the scriptural context? Which of these three definitions seems most likely in this case? What has happened to King Benjamin's people? What do they want?

Verse 3. How is what the people say in verse 2 related to what happens to them in this verse? What does "peace of conscience" mean? In what do we see the people's "exceeding faith"?

Verses 4–5. What does King Benjamin believe his people have learned?

Verse 6. What does King Benjamin say that his people have learned? Why does he say essentially the same things he said in verse 5? What does he add this time?

Verse 7. To whom does "this is the man" refer? What do verse 6 and 7 together tell us? Why does King Benjamin tell his people these things?

Verses 8–10. How are the requirements that King Benjamin mentions in verses 9 and 10 (believe in God, believe that he is, that he created everything, that he has all wisdom and power, and that he understands things that we do not) related to the requirements he lists in verses 5, 6, and 7?

Verse 11. What does King Benjamin say in this verse that he has said before? Why does he repeat it?

Verse 12. What does King Benjamin promise to those who follow the counsel he gave in verse 11?

Verse 13. To what does the first word of this verse (*and*) connect the verse?

Verse 14. This verse continues the promise begun in verse 12. Where does that promise end? Is it significant that this is called a promise rather than a commandment?

Verses 15–16. Why does King Benjamin’s sermon turn to the question of how we deal with beggars? What groups of people does King Benjamin seem concerned with in the last part of this chapter? What might that tell us?

Verses 17–18. What does the word *substance* mean? What does it mean to have an interest in the Kingdom of God? In other words, how is the word *interest* being used here?

Verses 19–23. Why does King Benjamin repeat, in an expanded version, what he has already said in verses 15 and 16?

Verses 24–25. What does King Benjamin mean when he says that the poor who are unwilling to give covet what they have not received? What does it mean to covet something? How is the word covet used in other scriptures? How does the covetousness that King Benjamin describes here justify the condemnation of those who covet?

Verse 26. King Benjamin mentioned retaining a remission of sins in verse 12. How are the requirements for retaining a remission of sins listed in verse 26 related to what is said in verse 12?

Verse 27. What does King Benjamin say we must do in this verse? How are those actions related to each other?

Verse 28. Why does King Benjamin turn, at the end of this powerful sermon, to the apparently mundane topic of returning borrowed items to a neighbor? Why end such an elevated sermon so prosaically?

Verses 29–30. Why does King Benjamin give warnings in verses 29 and 30? How do these warnings reflect the situation of the people of King Benjamin and what King Benjamin has preached to them?

The kinds of questions listed for Genesis 22 and Mosiah 4 focus more on details than on broader questions, but I often find that as I think about such details, I learn a great deal about more general topics, often issues I had not thought to ask about. Some questions may turn out to be useless; in other words, they may not help me gain any insights as I read *this* time. But I can never know which questions will help me learn.

Asking questions about scripture is a way to give it attention. It is also a way to open our minds to the influence of the Holy Ghost and prepare ourselves to hear new and sometimes surprising things. For example, noticing that the promise begun in Mosiah 4:12 is continued in verses 13 and 14 gave me a new understanding of the rest of the chapter. It helped me understand that to really keep the commandments given in the rest of the chapter, I must first receive a remission of sin, remember God’s greatness and my nothingness, pray, and remain steadfast in my faith in the atonement. Though I am commanded to teach my children, aid the poor, and live in harmony with my neighbors, my ability to keep those commandments is predicated on my repentance. That insight changed the way I understood the commandments. I think it also changed the way I live them.

Notes

1. For a marvelous example of how you can allow yourself to be questioned by the scriptures, see Dennis Rasmussen, *The Lord’s Question: Thoughts on the Life of Response* (Provo, Utah: Keter Foundation, 1985), The first

chapter (“Where Art Thou?”) has an especially helpful discussion of questions and being questioned.

2. American Dictionary of the English Language (1828), s.v. “carnal.”