George A. Horton, Jr., *Keys to Successful Scripture Study*

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Review of Books on the Book of Mormon
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Reviewed by Patricia Gunter Karamesines

Many readers of the Book of Mormon have undoubtedly been impressed with the results of careful reading manifest in work such as the reprints and working papers from the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (F.A.R.M.S.). Much of such materials relies on scholarly methods and materials not generally available, but much of it is also the result of careful study and thoughtfulness. Though few can expect to have the time necessary to become scholars of ancient cultures and languages, most members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints can read carefully and can use the insights of their reading to understand the Book of Mormon and other scriptures better. But most members don’t really know how to do that. Some have had relevant training for reading in literature classes, but few of them see how that training might help them read scripture. Most have not even had that training. We often tell each other that we must read the scriptures, particularly the Book of Mormon, more. We seldom have available the tools for doing any more than rereading in the same old way. As a result, though perhaps few will admit it publicly, most members have difficulty reading the Book of Mormon regularly and in a truly meaningful way. What is needed is a book or books to show the Saints the kinds of things they can do to improve their scripture study.

To judge by the title, George Horton’s book, *Keys to Successful Scripture Study*, is designed to help interested readers gain the skill in scripture study that most of us recognize we need. In fact, the word “Successful” in the title, combined with the metaphor of sure access that the term “Keys” implies, nearly guarantees mastery of the text. A glance at the Table of Contents might confirm one’s impression that the book is concerned with aiding the reader in appreciating the spiritual dimensions of scripture, since listed there are chapter titles such as “Effective Scripture Study,” “Key Concepts Underlying Scriptural Understanding,” and so forth.

However, other than an introduction printed on the inside flap of the dust jacket, no preface or other statement sets forth explicitly the author’s intent, and only a short, confusing bit of
HORTON, KEYS TO SUCCESSFUL SCRIPTURE STUDY (KARAMESINES) 87

instruction at the book’s beginning suggests how to manage the rather eclectic substance of the book to one’s benefit. In that bit of information, titled “How to Use This Book—Pick and Choose,” Horton almost whimsically tells his readers, “This book is like a smorgasbord—do not read from beginning to end,” and “This collection is a smorgasbord of keys to scripture study. Read the sections that appeal to you. Also ‘nibble’ at others to see if they are helpful.” Such informality appears to be at odds with the book’s intent as stated on the dust jacket: “Subject always to the reader’s seeking the Spirit in his studies, Keys to Successful Scripture Study will provide information, explanation, and techniques that will help the reader uncover the riches of the scriptures.” If such is true and if one takes seriously Horton’s comparison of his book as having a “wide variety of succulent meats, casseroles, salads, . . . and delicious desserts,” one may well experience the peculiar anxiety the variety of a smorgasbord evokes in some people: how is one to avoid missing something important? Furthermore, what in the book qualifies as “meat,” and what as “dessert”? If a well-intentioned reader follows Horton’s advice, might he possibly fill up on scriptural desserts (if such things exist) and miss the important nutrients that “meats” and “salads” provide?

I do not query Horton’s analogy in this manner to belittle it, but to demonstrate that his book should provide at its beginning more useful direction. To assert that the Spirit will provide a preface for each reader, so to speak, is not enough, because identifying the influence of the Spirit may be part of a reader’s quest as he approaches scripture or books about scripture. The usefulness of Keys to Successful Scripture Study would be increased with a thoughtful preface or foreword where the author states clearly his purpose in providing such a book for the Latter-day Saint audience. A reader would thus be better equipped to evaluate Horton’s materials in view of his own purposes. It is not unusual for the author himself to benefit from the introspection the writing of a preface requires. He may improve the book’s composition by forming a stronger thesis for his work; some flaw of organization may present itself for improvement. As it stands, the confusing tidbit of direction for use of the book leaves the reader wondering what sort of animal (or dinner) lies ahead.

That immediate handicap aside, there is no doubt that, compared to similar books available for public consumption, Keys to Successful Scripture Study is a welcome work in its
interdisciplinary approach to scriptural analysis. Besides making frequent references to the traditional tools of Latter-day Saint scripture study—prayer, personal insight, and illumination by modern prophets—Horton introduces other aids less familiar to the Latter-day Saint audience at large. Among these are concordances, dictionaries, and commentaries. He also discusses poetic language in the scriptures and emphasizes the importance of studying the context in attempting to understand any particular passage of scripture. While such tools and topics are not new to scholars in various fields of study, the level of discipline required to use such tools is nearly unheard of among the nonscholars the book appears to target. Nearly unheard of, but absolutely necessary, since lack of such discipline among Sunday School, Priesthood, and Relief Society teachers has contributed to a general scriptural illiteracy among Latter-day Saints. By introducing tools for scripture study borrowed from many areas, Horton also makes available to his Latter-day Saint audience a relatively new and extremely effective way by which they may garner understanding from sacred text. For making accessible to the often textually confused Latter-day Saint populace the many avenues for pursuit of scriptural understanding and for proclaiming the necessity of having a working knowledge of their many intricacies, Horton is to be praised.

However, teaching others to orchestrate the use of various resources for scriptural analysis is a complicated task requiring considerable experience with each instrument separately and also with combinations of instruments, since one must be able to generate and choose from possible courses of action for wresting meaning from a particular word, phrase, or passage. Such experience does more than merely acknowledge the existence of a path for scriptural enlightenment; through frequent, orderly, and difficult exploration, it recommends certain paths only because it knows those paths to be legitimate ones for reaching a goal (in this case) of scriptural literacy. In introducing such topics as poetic language in the scriptures, Horton has undertaken a tremendous task, one that he occasionally staggers beneath. Furthermore, he is often less than convincing in his own commitment to some of the avenues for scripture study he opens to his readers. Thus, Keys to Successful Scripture Study unfortunately falls short of the promise of its title, first, because the author exhibits a lack of experience in using some of the tools he offers to his readers,
and second, because he undermines the legitimacy of some of these tools even as he offers them.

For instance, in the section of the book titled “Scriptural Language,” Horton introduces his understanding of the Bible’s “colorful language” in this manner: “In the Western world, we tend to think and speak like architects, with concrete clarity and precision. Eastern peoples speak more like artists, with attention to the overall impression and not as much to details” (p. 172). He gives no argument to justify the distinctions he makes between Western and Eastern attitudes towards language, so it is difficult to know exactly what he means by “attention to the overall impression and not as much to details,” or, indeed, what he means by “artists.” However, this theory sounds like one adopted by many who are naive in matters of language, i.e., artistic language cannot be concretely clear and precise because it is artistic. While Horton makes the quoted statement in a section about idioms, it overshadows the entire chapter on scriptural language and surfaces in different forms throughout the book. Here it is again in the section titled, “Interpreting Symbolic Language”:

Since objects and symbols tend to remain constant, symbolic language may be more easily translated and transmitted than straightforward doctrinal statements. The exact wording of a parable, allegory, or analogy is not as important as the general idea, but losing or changing a shade of meaning in a statement of doctrine by translation from one language or culture to another may cause serious error. (p. 183)

This statement has several implications, one being that symbolic language is not straightforward. But this belief would seem to be only the shadow of another concept about poetic language, one commonly subscribed to by many people, i.e., if one has difficulty understanding poetic language, it must be because poetic language veils its own “true meaning.”

While artists of all kinds have done more than their share to deserve the frustration directed towards them that often accompanies this belief, and while some artists may have subscribed to the belief themselves, many cultures (artists included) use symbols and other “artistic” vehicles for meaning because they communicate clearly and precisely. They depend upon the straightforwardness of such language to reveal—not hide—important knowledge to members of their communities or
to others who wish to become members of their communities. In fact, the corrupting or veiling of vital cultural or religious symbols or metaphors often signals apostasy and loss of cohesive belief. Among Native Americans, for instance, various ceremonial symbols and other vehicles of language are used to restore meaning and balance to men and women who have suffered some fall from harmony and wish to return to it. The distortion, personalization, or isolation of such language from its context of healing and belief will provoke accusations of witchcraft. Also, many Native Americans lament the fact that the language of salvation in their culture has become esoteric not because its purpose is to somehow cloak true meaning and retard belief, but because no one wants to hear it; that is, in biblical language, the “heart [of this people] is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes they have closed” (Matthew 13:15).

To some degree, Horton acknowledges the ability of figurative language to provide quick and precise meaning when he says that “writers clarify as well as veil their messages by using comparisons” (p. 198) and “figurative language is based on truth; the message is literal, even when figures are used to express it” (p. 217), and when he makes other brief statements. But dominating these discussions of scriptural language in his book is the belief that metaphors, similes, symbols, and so forth are kinds of clever, delightful tricks a writer plays upon his audience, and that only those who are already initiated into the mystery the language protects will be able to appreciate it or approach its meaning.

Given (and giving forth) such a belief, Horton must shoulder the burden of providing an explanation for the presence of figurative and symbolic language in the scriptures, since it would seem paradoxical that works meant to provide pathways for salvation cover those trails with all manner of distracting and concealing devices. He accomplishes this difficult task in two ways.

First, he asserts a clear distinction between doctrine and the information borne forth by poetic scriptural language. For instance, in his discussion of symbols, he says, “Doctrinal truths must be fundamentally learned before symbols can be understood in their proper light. Only then do the symbols help us deepen or expand our concepts” (p. 190). This follows a statement that “Prior acquaintance with principles precedes understanding of the scriptures” (p. 190). While his assumption
that language transporting doctrinal information differs from language conveying information by symbols or the like is quite clear, Horton does not seem to provide any examples or arguments that would support this assumption. Do symbols never convey doctrinal knowledge? If not, then what is the relationship to doctrine of the kind of knowledge they do convey? If they do convey doctrinal knowledge, then why could one not approach the understanding of doctrine by initially wrestling with a symbol's nature? It seems that while Horton believes that "greater gospel understanding increases meaning conveyed by symbols" (p. 190), given his thinking about symbolic (metaphoric, allegorical, etc.) language, he would hesitate to suggest that symbols could increase one's understanding of doctrine, or that doctrinal understanding increases understanding of symbols, which increases doctrinal understanding, and so on. But if not, why not? Horton offers very little in the way of explaining his beliefs in these important matters.

Second, Horton's discussion of parables proceeds in a similar way, with an argument that the language of the parables is designed to conceal their meaning from the wicked. This assumption that certain kinds of common biblical language are veiling in nature and his belief that the opacity of their veils protects truth (as if truth needs protection) from the wicked and the wicked from truth, reveals an inexperience with such language that handicaps any instruction he gives on the subject. Horton's lack of supporting argument for his belief about language, beliefs long ago rejected by those who discuss the nature and function of language, often raises questions that will be troublesome to novices seeking direction in the study of scriptural language. More experienced students of the Bible may question vagaries in reasoning by which Horton makes some of his points. As an example, in his section on symbolic language, Horton assumes the point of view that "symbols deeply affect our emotions and attitudes" (p. 184). This statement is difficult to argue, but he supports his assertion by citing an example, Nathan's tale to David of the poor man with one sheep. Certainly, David's emotions are stirred by the tale, but that is because David took the tale literally, not because he recognized it as a "symbolic" story. Horton then says, "They [symbols] allow the reader to step out of his own shoes and assess the problems more objectively" (p. 184). Given the example he has provided, it is difficult to tell what he means by "step out of his
own shoes and assess the problems more objectively," since it seems that the reason Nathan told the story was to encourage David to step into his own shoes and take personal responsibility for what he had done. Labelling this or any other soul-wrenching insight acquired by allegorical, symbolical, or ironical experience as objective assessment of a problem is meaningless and, in the case of scriptural language, perhaps contrary to the purpose of such language.

Just as a reader will not fail to notice occasionally unschooled and incomplete thinking in the section on scriptural language, he or she will also sense the hesitant and sometimes contradictory manner in which Horton approaches other subjects, such as the value and use of scriptural commentaries. On the one hand is his opening statement that "commentaries have their place, but they are not to be the chief source of our learning. Study of the scriptures and of the teachings of the living prophets is paramount" (p. 51). On the other hand, the strength of the reservations he has concerning the use of non-Latter-day Saint commentaries, dictionaries, and the like will probably be enough to convince many readers to pass them by when looking for directional or clarifying materials. One would almost suspect he believes such commentaries have very little place at all in scriptural studies, especially since he closes the section with a typically impressive quote by Bruce McConkie:

Anything to be said under this heading [Bible dictionaries] is more of a warning than an endorsement. On historical and geographical matters, these uninspired writings rate as one or two; on doctrinal matters they drop off the scale to a minus ten, a minus one hundred, a minus one thousand, depending on the doctrine. The wise and the learned know so infinitesimally little about doctrine that it is almost a waste of time to read them. All their creeds are an abomination in the Lord's sight. They teach for doctrines the commandments of men. They twist and pervert the scriptures to conform to their traditions; and if they get anything right, it is an accident (quoted on p. 65).

This is the note on which the section ends. Whatever its original context, the quote's import and tone loudly outcries even the earlier brief and modest acknowledgment that "The best contributions of most Bible dictionaries are found in their
HORTON, *KEYS TO SUCCESSFUL SCRIPTURE STUDY* (KARAMESINES) 93

historical, archaeological, cultural, and linguistic information" (p. 59). By using this quote from McConkie in the way and place that he does, Horton would seem to take away a key he offered to us at the beginning of this section. Anyone sensitive to authoritarian language would henceforth shrink even from dreaming to ask what that particular key might open. And again, as in the section on scriptural language, Horton assumes a doctrine/nondoctrine dichotomy, though nowhere in the book is there a clear, convincing explanation of what the differences between the two kinds of knowledge are in the scriptures or any guidance on how readers might surely discern between the two for themselves. Obviously, this ability in itself is some sort of key and, thus, worthy of detailed discussion.

Another problem with this section is that Horton provides concrete examples showing how non-Latter-day Saint commentaries have gone wrong in attempting to illuminate scripture, but he does little to demonstrate how, when used in appropriate ways, non-Latter-day Saint commentaries can inspire a discriminating reader to go right. It seems that only Latter-day Saint commentaries and dictionaries do that, but even with this assumption, the reader will notice an unsatisfying lack of concrete examples. Horton lumps all non-Latter-day Saint sources of information together in an uncomplimentary way and describes them frequently as laboring without the "benefit of modern revelation" (p. 63). He also provides rather dishonor­able and occasionally extreme ("Without revelation, scholars have guessed wrongly that the 'sons of god' were extraterrestrial or superhuman beings," p. 63) examples of non-Latter-day Saint scholarship as being representative of the lot. Because of such deck-stacking and unsupported assertions, this part of the section taints a discussion that began well. Unfortunately, Horton undermines the usefulness of a key he himself has introduced by demonstrating his lack of confidence in what some people consider to be a useful kind of scriptural literature without offering a fair critique. But in doing so, especially so emphatically, he also demonstrates lack of confidence in his reader. A reader who has been taught to practice good scriptural study procedures ought to be able to determine what information enlightens and what does not. Or perhaps a reader is in the process of learning this discernment. In either case, one would expect that a certain confidence in the student is in order, or one should at least trust that the materials one provides students will teach them to take responsibility for their own lives. Perhaps
Latter-day Saint audiences deserve such distrust in their ability to interpret and apply scriptural wisdom, since the ways in which they commonly do so—quoting scriptures out of context, or sometimes quoting *The Reader’s Digest* in preference to scripture—leave much to be desired. Or perhaps they distrust themselves and require of their instructors such direct guidance. But in *Keys to Successful Scripture Study*, Horton not only removes the necessity for students of scripture to come to their own conclusions about external resources for scriptural study, but he frequently eliminates the struggle to develop good judgment by offering his assertions about the meaning of some scriptures or the worth of entire books of scripture. For instance, in the section called “Interpretation of Scripture,” Horton “rates” the usefulness of books in the Bible. The gospels

are worth their weight in gold. Acts is not far behind them. Paul’s epistles, Romans being the chief and Philemon the least, are treasure houses of doctrine and wise counsel. The writings of Peter and James, plus 1 John, rank as though written by angels; 2 and 3 John are of no special moment; Jude is worthwhile, at least, and for those with gospel understanding, Revelation is a foundation of divine wisdom that expands the mind and enlightens the soul.

In the Old Testament, Genesis is the book of books—a divine account whose worth cannot be measured. Exodus and Deuteronomy are also of surpassing worth. ... Leviticus has no special application to us [except for background perspective] and, except for a few passages, need not give us permanent concern. Ruth and Esther are lovely stories that are part of our heritage. ... Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Lamentations are interesting books; Job is for people who like the book of Job; and the Song of Solomon is biblical trash (pp. 77-78, citing McConkie).

Again, Horton offers no defense for his judgments, no argument for why we should adopt them ourselves. Apparently, we are to take them on some kind of implicit authority. At any rate, this kind of controlling instruction, unfortunately frequent in this book, ranges far outside the realm of helpful guidance. It tells
us what to think, often without giving us reasons why we should. It suggests lack of trust in the reader’s ability to think about these things for himself and to come to legitimate conclusions about scripture, commentaries on scripture, and so forth. In this way, Horton undermines the usefulness of certain keys he offers his readers, casting doubt upon their value and on the reader’s ability to use them even as he offers them. Such mixed signals will confuse rather than enlighten many sincere readers; others genuinely intent on learning to search the scriptures might dismiss his heavier-handed direction as dogmatic defensiveness.

Keys to Successful Scripture Study suffers from other lapses in presentation. Horton’s treatment of Genesis 38 (the story of Judah and Tamar) is less than satisfactory. His arguments, when they appear, are frequently circular, and thus, unconvincing. The arrangement of sections and chapters sometimes seems disheveled. The instructions at the beginning that counsel the reader not to read the book from beginning to end and to “nibble” at sections may be counter-productive. These problems combine with the ones already mentioned to create many unfortunate distractions.

Nevertheless, this kind of book, with its practical introduction of interdisciplinary scripture study techniques to the average Sunday School-teaching, talk-wielding Latter-day Saint, is a splash of brightness in the dark heavens of contemporary Latter-day Saint scripture study practices. While the book is hardly the last word on many of the categories of discipline it introduces, the insight Horton displays by matter-of-factly presenting those categories as legitimate and necessary tools for the task is valuable. Such works will help all Latter-day Saints to assume for themselves the responsibility for teaching and being taught sacred matter, rather than the teachings of men.