Scripture Study and the Living Prophets

Harold B. Lee, “Using the Scriptures in Our Church Assignments,” Improvement Era, January 1969, p. 13. (Scripture Study Fundamentals: Instructor’s Guide. Religion 315. SLC: Church Educational System, 1992, page 2.) All that we teach in this Church ought to be couched in the scriptures. It ought to be found in the scriptures. We ought to choose our texts from the scriptures. If we want to measure truth, we should measure it by the four standard works, regardless of who writes it. If it is not in the standard works, we may well assume that it is speculation, man’s own personal opinion; and if it contradicts what is in the scriptures, it is not true. This is the standard by which we measure all truth.

President Harold B. Lee, “The Place of the Living Prophet, Seer, and Revelator,” The Charge to Religious Educators, p. 141. It is not to be thought that every word spoken by the General Authorities is inspired, or that they are moved upon by the Holy Ghost in everything they speak and write. Now you keep that in mind. I don’t care what his position is, if he writes something or speaks something that goes beyond anything that you can find in the standard church works, unless that one be the prophet, seer and revelator—please note that one exception [when he is speaking as the prophet, from earlier in the paragraph]—you may immediately say, “Well, that is his own idea.” And if he says something that contradicts what is found in the standard works (I think that is why we call them “standard”—it is the standard measure of all that men teach), you may know by that same token that it is false, regardless of the position of the man who says it.

Harold B. Lee, “Viewpoint of a Giant,” (Address to religious educators, 18 July 1968, p. 6.) How do we measure whether or not one’s teachings are true or false? If anyone teaches beyond what the scriptures teach, we may put it down as speculation except one man who has the right to bring forth any new doctrine—that is the one man who holds the keys—the prophet, seer, and revelator who presides in that high place. And no one else. If anyone presumes to bring forth what he claims to be new doctrine you may know that it is purely his own opinion and you label it as such regardless of his position in the Church. If it contradicts something that is in the scriptures, you may label it immediately that it is false. That is why we call the scriptures, our four Standard Church Works. They are the standards by which we measure all doctrine and if anything is taught which is contrary to that which is in the scriptures, it is false. It is just that simple.

Brigham Young, Discourses of Brigham Young, pp. 429–430; Teachings of the Presidents of the Church: Brigham Young (SLC: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1997, Melchizedek Pr’d book for 1998-1999), p. 318. I do not want men to come to me or my brethren for testimony as to the truth of this work; but let them take the Scriptures of divine truth, and there the path is pointed out to them as plainly as ever a guideboard indicted the right path to the weary traveler. There they are directed to go, not to …any Apostle or Elder in Israel, but to the Father in the name of Jesus, and ask for the information they need. Can they who take this course in honesty and sincerity receive information? Will the Lord turn away from the honest heart seeking the truth? No, he will not; he will prove it to them, by the revelations of his Spirit, the facts in the case. And when the mind is open to the revelations of the Lord it comprehends them quicker and keener than anything that is seen by the natural eye. It is not what we see with our eyes—they may be deceived—but what is revealed by the Lord from heaven that is sure and steadfast, and abides forever.

Bruce R. McConkie, A New Witness for the Articles of Faith, pp. 71–72. The light and truth they receive from the spoken word and from the written record will depend on their own spiritual status. Each pronouncement in the holy scriptures, for instance, is so written as to reveal little or much, depending on the spiritual capacity of the student. To a carnal person, a passage of scripture may mean nothing; to an honest though uninformed truth seeker, it may shed forth only a few rays of heavenly light; but to one who has the mind of Christ, the same passage may blaze forth an effulgence of celestial light. That which is mystery to one is plain and simple to another. The things of the Spirit can be understood only by the power of the Spirit.

Bruce R. McConkie, The Promised Messiah, pp. 515–516. (Also quoted in Robert L. Millet, “Looking Beyond the Mark,” in The Joseph Smith Translation, Monte S. Nyman & Robert L. Millet, eds, p. 208.) Many great doctrinal revelations come to those who preach from the scriptures. When they are in tune with the Infinite, the Lord lets them know, first, the full and complete meaning of the scriptures they are expounding, and then he oftentimes expands their views so that new truths flood in upon them, and they learn added things that those who do not follow such a course can never know.

Bruce R. McConkie, Church News, 24 Jan 1976, p. 4. I think that people who study the scriptures get a dimension to their life that nobody else gets and that can’t be gained in any way except by studying the scriptures. There’s an increase in faith [revelation] and a desire to do what’s right and a feeling of inspiration and understanding that comes to people who study the gospel—meaning particularly the Standard Works—and who ponder the principles, that can’t come in any other way.

Elder Bruce R. McConkie, Mormon Doctrine, p. 765. The books, writings, explanations, expositions, views, and theories of even the wisest and greatest men, either in or out of the Church, do not rank with the standard works. Even the writings, teachings, and opinions of the prophets of God are acceptable only to the extent they are in harmony with what God has revealed and what is recorded in the standard works. When the living oracles speak in the name of the Lord or as moved upon by the Holy Ghost, however, their utterances are then binding upon all who hear, and whatever is said will without any exception be found to be in harmony with the standard works. The Lord’s house is a house of order, and one truth never contradicts another.

Elder Neal A. Maxwell, Conference Report, Ensign, May 1986, p. 34. Prior to meeting Joseph Smith, Brigham Young said he would have crawled around the earth on his hands and knees to meet some- one like Moses who could tell him anything “about God and heaven.” (In Journal of Discourses, 8:228.) Through Joseph Smith we have additional pages from
Moses about God and heaven. We have only to reach to the bookshelf or go to priesthood meeting. Perhaps the way is almost too easy, and too simple; we might be more appreciative if on hands and knees. (See 1 Ne. 17:41.) Only by searching the scriptures, not using them occasionally as quote books, can we begin to understand the implications as well as the declarations of the gospel.

... These truths] are not just theological niceties and philosophical footnotes. We need to ponder their implications as well as believe in their declarations regarding daily and eternal life. One cannot have adequate faith in a Christ whom he does not adequately know [Jn 17:3; D&C 132:20-25]...

The initial labor we have to perform with regard to these doctrines is only to look (see 1 Ne 17:41), firmly averting our gaze from the comparative slums of the secular world, with its grubbiness and grubbliness.

... do not be surprised when non-doers scoff. Do not be surprised, either, if these doctrines unsettle some... The only cure for doctrinal illiteracy of those who murmur will be to learn doctrines.

Boyd K. Packer, “The Mystery of Life,” Ensign, Nov, 1983, p. 17. For His own reasons, the Lord provides answers to some questions, with pieces placed here and there throughout the scriptures. We are to find them; we are to earn them. In that way sacred things are hidden from the insincere.

Boyd K. Packer, Ensign, May 1974, p. 95. There are those who have made a casual, even an insincere effort to test the scriptures and have come away having received nothing, which is precisely what they have earned and what they deserve. If you think it will yield to a casual inquiry, to idle curiosity, or even to well intentioned but temporary searching, you are mistaken. It likewise will not yield to the overzealous or to the fanatic.

Joseph Fielding Smith, Doctrines of Salvation, comp. Bruce R. McConkie, 3:203–204. (Italics in original.) It makes no difference what is written or what anyone has said, if what has been said is in conflict with what the Lord has revealed, we can set it aside. My words, and the teachings of any other member of the Church, high or low, if they do not square with the revelations, we need not accept them. Let us have this matter clear. We have accepted the four standard works as the measuring yardsticks, or balances, by which we measure every man’s doctrine.

You cannot accept the books written by the authorities of the Church as standards in doctrine, only in so far as they accord with the revealed word in the standard works.

Every man who writes is responsible, not the Church, for what he writes. If Joseph Fielding Smith writes something which is out of harmony with the revelations, then every member of the Church is duty bound to reject it. If he writes that which is in perfect harmony with the revealed word of the Lord, then it should be accepted.

President Ezra Taft Benson, “The Book of Mormon & the Doctrine & Covenants,” Ensign, May 1987, pp. 83–85. It is important that in our teaching we make use of the language of holy writ. Alma said, “... do command you in the language of him who hath commanded me” (Alma 5:61).

The words and the way they are used in the Book of Mormon by the Lord should become our source of understanding and should be used by us in teaching gospel principles.

God uses the power of the word of the Book of Mormon as an instrument to change people’s lives... [See Alma 31:5.]

I am deeply concerned about what we are doing to teach the Saints at all levels the gospel of Jesus Christ as completely and authoritatively as do the Book of Mormon and the Doctrine and Covenants. By this I mean teaching the “great plan of the Eternal God,” to use the words of Amulek (Alma 34:9).

Are we using the messages and the method of teaching found in the Book of Mormon and other scriptures of the Restoration to teach this great plan of the Eternal God?

... Are we accepting and teaching what the revelations tell us about the Creation, Adam and the fall of man, and redemption from that fall through the atonement of Christ?...

Now, what should be the source for teaching the great plan of the Eternal God? The scriptures, of course—particularly the Book of Mormon. This should also include the other modern-day revelations. These should be coupled with the words of the Apostles and prophets and the promptings of the Spirit.

Wilford Woodruff, quoted by Ezra Taft Benson in “14 Fundamentals in Following the Prophets,” from Conference Report, October, 1897, pp. 18–19. I will refer to a certain meeting I attended in the town of Kirtland in my early days. At that meeting some remarks were made that have been made here today, with regard to the living oracles and with regard to the written word of God. The same principle was presented, although not as extensively as it has been here, when a leading man in the Church got up and talked upon the subject, and said: “You have got the word of God before you here in the Bible, the Book of Mormon, and Doctrine and Covenants; you have the written word of God, and you who give revelations should give revelations according to those books, as what is written in those books is the word of God. We should confine ourselves to them.”

When he concluded, Brother Joseph turned to Brother Brigham Young and said, “Brother Brigham, I want you to take the stand and tell us your views with regard to the written oracles and the written word of God.”

Brother Brigham took the stand, and he took the Bible, and laid it down; he took the Book of Mormon, and laid it down; and he took the Book of Doctrine and Covenants, and laid it down before him, and he said: “There is the written word of God to us, concerning the work of God from the beginning of the world, almost to our day. And now,” he said, “when compared with the living oracles those books are nothing to me; those books do not convey the word of God direct to us now, as do the words of a Prophet or a man bearing the Holy Priesthood in our day and generation. I would rather have the living oracles than all the writing in the books.” That was the course he pursued. When he was through, Brother Joseph said to the congregation: “Brother Brigham has told you the word of the Lord, and he has told you the truth.”

Dallin H. Oaks of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, “Scripture Reading & Revelation,” Ensign, Jan 1985, pp. 7–9. Some Christians accept the Bible as the one true word, completely inspired of God in its entirety. At the opposite extreme, some other Christians consider the Bible as the writings of persons who may or may not have been inspired of God, which writings have little moral authority in our day. The Latter-day Saint belief that the Bible is “the word of God as far as it is translated correctly” (A of F 1:8) places us...
between these extremes, but this belief is not what makes us unique in Christianity.

We are different from most other Christians in the way we read and use the Bible and other scriptures are not the ultimate source of knowledge, but what precedes the ultimate source. The ultimate knowledge comes by revelation. With Moroni we affirm that he who denieth revelation “knoweth not the gospel of Christ” ( Morm 9:8).

The word of the Lord in the Scriptures is like a lamp to guide our feet (see Ps 119:105), and revelation is like a mighty force that increases the lamp’s illumination manifold. We encourage everyone to make careful study of the scriptures and of the prophetic teachings concerning them and to prayerfully seek personal revelation to know their meaning for themselves.

Because of our belief in continuing revelation, we Latter-day Saints maintain that the canon (the authoritative body) of scriptures is open. In fact, the scriptural canon is open in several ways, and continuing revelation is crucial to each of them.

First, we believe that God will guide his children by giving new additions to the existing body of scriptures through the prophet and the established procedures of his Church. The Book of Mormon is such an addition. So are the revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants, including sections 137 and 138, which were added in our lifetime.

Second, we believe that God will give new revelations on the meaning of scriptures previously canonized, meanings that were not evident in earlier times.

These new revelations are of two types: public and private.

Public revelations on the meaning of earlier scriptures come through those we sustain as prophets, seers, and revelators. Examples of public revelations are the numerous additions and clarifications in the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible and in the Doctrine and Covenants revelations on the meaning of Bible passages. (For example, see D&C section 77 on the book of Revelation and section 113 on some prophecies in Isaiah.) These public revelations usually illuminate scriptural passages that are doctrinal rather than those that are descriptive or directive.

Our belief in an open canon also includes private revelations to individual seekers of the meaning of existing scriptures. Such revelations are necessary because, as Elder Bruce R. McConkie of the Quorum of the Twelve observed, “Each pronouncement in the holy scriptures... is so written as to reveal little or much, depending on the spiritual capacity of the student” (A New Witness for the Articles of Faith, Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1985, p. 71).

Nephi attempted to teach his brothers that they could know the meaning of their father’s prophetic utterances, “which were hard to be understood, save a man should inquire of the Lord” (1 Ne 13:13). Nephi told them if they did not harden their hearts and would keep the commandments and inquire of the Lord in faith, “surely these things shall be made known unto you” (1 Ne 13:11).

If we harden our hearts, reject continuing revelation, and limit our learning to what we can obtain by study and reason on the precise language of the present canon of scriptures, our understanding will be limited to what Alma called “the lesser portion of the word” (Alma 12:11). If we seek and accept revelation and inspiration to enlarge our understanding of the scriptures, we will realize a fulfillment of Nephi’s inspired promise that those who diligently seek will have “the mysteries of God...unfolded unto them, by the power of the Holy Ghost” (1 Ne 10:19).

To illustrate this essential truth, consider the fact that the most important knowledge we can obtain is a testimony of the Father and the Son. This vital knowledge is received through the witness of the Holy Ghost (see D&C 20:27). Many of the other things mentioned in the scriptures can be comprehended only by the inspiration of the Holy Ghost. In the words of the Apostle Paul, “The things of God knoweth no man, except he has the Spirit of God” (JST 1 Cor 2:11).

We become receptive to inspiration and revelation by obedience to the commandments of God, by prayer, and by attention to the teachings of the living prophets. Their words serve as a guide for each of us, in scripture interpretation as in other matters.

The Lord promised Nephi: “Unto him that receiveth I will give more; and from them that shall say, We have enough, from them shall be taken away even that which they have” (2 Ne 28:30; see also Matt 13:12). That verse capsulizes the Latter-day Saint belief in the importance of continuing revelation as we read and interpret the scriptures. Even if there were no additional revelations to be added to the published canon, an open canon would still be an essential part of our belief and practice in scripture reading. We believe that the scriptures, which are the revelations of the past, cannot be understood without openness to the revelations of the present.

Just as continuing revelation enlarges and illuminates the scriptures, so also a study of the scriptures enables men and women to receive revelations. Elder Bruce R. McConkie said, “I sometimes think that one of the best-kept secrets of the kingdom is that the scriptures open the door to the receipt of revelation” (Doctrines of the Restoration, ed. Mark L. McConkie, Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1989, p. 243). This happens because scripture reading puts us in tune with the Spirit of the Lord.

The idea that scripture reading can lead to inspiration and revelation opens the door to the truth 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. Even more, scripture reading may also lead to current revelation on whatever else the Lord wishes to communicate to the reader at that time. We do not overstate the point when we say that the scriptures can be a Urim and Thummim to assist each of us to receive personal revelation.

Because we believe that scripture reading can help us receive revelation, we are encouraged to read the scriptures again and again. By this means, we obtain access to what our Heavenly Father would have us know and do in our personal lives today. That is one reason Latter-day Saints believe in daily scripture study.

Similarly, what a scripture in the Book of Mormon meant to me when I first read it at age sixteen is not conclusive upon me as I read it at age sixty. With the benefit of my life’s experiences and with my greater familiarity with revelation, I can learn things that were not available to me yesterday by reading the scriptures daily.

Another reason for repeated reading of the scriptures is that many of the prophecies and doctrinal passages in the scriptures have multiple meanings. The Savior affirmed that fact when he told his disciples that the reason he taught the multitude in parables was that this permitted him to teach them “the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 13:11) while not revealing those mysteries to the multitude. His parables had multiple meanings or applications according to the spiritual maturity of the listener. They had a message for
both children and gospel scholars.

Other illustrations of multiple meanings occur in the prophecies and visions recorded in the scriptures. Elder McConkie observed that “some of the [Savior’s] prophetic utterances [in 3 Ne 21] apply to both pre- and post-millennial events; some have an initial and partial fulfillment in our day and shall have a second and grander completion in the days ahead” (The Millennial Messiah, Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1982, p. 251). Similarly, in answer to his brothers’ questions about the meaning of Isaiah’s words in the brass plates, Nephi explained that these words spoke of “things both temporal and spiritual” (1 Ne 22:3).

The book of Isaiah contains numerous prophecies that seem to have multiple fulfillments. One seems to involve the people of Isaiah’s day or the circumstances of the next generation. Another meaning, often symbolic seems to refer to events in the meridian of time, when Jerusalem was destroyed and her people scattered after the crucifixion of the Son of God. Still another meaning or fulfillment of the same prophecy seems to relate to the events attending the Second Coming of the Savior. The fact that many of these prophecies can have multiple meanings underscores the importance of our seeking revelation from the Holy Ghost to help us interpret them.

As Nephi says, the words of Isaiah “are plain unto all those that are filled with the spirit of prophecy” (2 Ne 25:4).

Another illustration of multiple meanings concerns the prophecy in the book of Joel that in the last days the Lord will pour out his spirit upon all flesh and that our sons and our daughters will prophesy (see Joel 2:28). On the day of Pentecost, the Apostle Peter declared that the events they had witnessed were those “spoken by the prophet Joel” (Acts 2:16). Eighteen hundred years later, the angel Moroni quoted this same prophecy and said that “this was not yet fulfilled, but was soon to be” (JS-H 41).

The principle that scriptures can have multiple meanings also helps us appreciate the fact that a single scripture may be given to us in more than one set of words. For example, Moroni quoted the prophecy of Malachi quite differently than it appears in the Bible. (Compare Mal 4:5-6 with JS–H 1:38-39.) We believe that both accounts are scripturally and doctrinally correct and that the differences of expression are attributable to the different aspects of salvation for the dead being stressed in these two different circumstances (see D&C 128:17).

Those who believe the scriptural canon is closed typically approach the reading of scriptures by focusing on what was meant at the time the scriptural words were spoken or written. In this approach, a passage of scriptures may appear to have a single meaning and the reader typically relies on scholarship and historical methods to determine it.

The Latter-day Saint approach is different. Professor Hugh Nibley illuminates this in his essay “The Prophets and the Scripture.” He observes that “men fool themselves when they think for a moment that they can read the scripture without ever adding something to the text, or omitting something from it. For in the wise words of St. Hilary.... ‘Scripture consists not in what one reads, but in what one understands.’” Consequently, he continues, “in the reading of the scripture we must always have an interpreter” (The World and the Prophets, The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley, 12 vols., Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1987, 3:202). He concludes: The question is not whether or not one shall add to the word of the scripture—thousands of volumes of learned commentary have already done that—but whether such addition shall come by the wisdom of men or the revelation of God.” (Ibid., p.206).

Latter-day Saints know that true doctrine comes by revelation from God, not by scholarship or worldly wisdom (see Moses 5:58). Similarly, the Apostle Paul wrote that we are not “sufficient of ourselves to think any thing as of ourselves; but our sufficiency is of God” (2 Cor 3:5). Rather than trusting in our own interpretations of written texts, we rely on God and the glorious “ministration of the spirit” (2 Cor 3:8). Here we encounter a new meaning of Paul’s familiar teaching that true believers are “ministers... of the spirit: for the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life” (2 Cor. 3:6).

Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery set the example for this dispensation. After their baptism, they were filled with the Holy Ghost. Then, as Joseph explained in his personal history, “Our minds being now enlightened, we began to have the scriptures laid open to our understandings, and the true meaning and intention of their more mysterious passages revealed unto us in a manner which we never could attain to previously, nor ever before had thought of” (JS-H 1:74).

Latter-day Saints know that learned or authoritative commentaries can help us with scriptural interpretation, but we maintain that they must be used with caution.

Commentaries are not a substitute for the scriptures any more than a good cookbook is a substitute for food. (When I refer to “commentaries,” I refer to everything that interprets scripture, from the comprehensive book-length commentary to the brief interpretation embodied in a lesson or an article, such as this one.)

One trouble with commentaries is that their authors sometimes focus on only one meaning, to the exclusion of others. As a result, 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. Sometimes those other, less obvious meanings can be the ones most valuable and useful to us as we seek to understand our own dispensation and to obtain answers to our own questions. This is why the teaching of the Holy Ghost is a better guide to scriptural interpretation than even the best commentary.

As Paul told Timothy, “all scripture is given by inspiration of God” (2 Tim 3:16; also see 2 Pet 1:21). This means that in order to understand scripture, our minds need to be enlightened by the Spirit of the Lord. As we learn from the fiftieth section of the Doctrine and Covenants, “he that receiveth the word by the Spirit of truth receiveth it as it is preached by the Spirit of truth” (D&C 50:21). When this happens, the reader is edified by personal revelation.

President Spencer W. Kimball told the members of the Church that he was “convinced that each of us, at some time in our lives, must discover the scriptures for ourselves” (Ensign, Sept. 1976, p. 4). When we do that, we can obtain revelation. If we depend only upon our own reasoning or the scholarship or commentaries of others, we will never obtain the understanding that can come only by revelation. Persons in that circumstance will be left forever with what Alma calls “the lesser portion of the word” (Alma 12:11).