

# Scripture Reading & Revelation

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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.

What makes us 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. 15:3). 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. 15:11).

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 today.

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).

Because Scripture ought to be considered first and foremost as a word to those for whom it was written, from the Lord to give them much-needed guidance. I have found this approach lends itself far better to biblical preaching and to the difficult task of discerning the challenges facing Christians in their settings worldwide. Mistake #1: Reading Revelation as if it is all about us. Mistake #3: Reading Revelation as a mysterious code, one that we are in a better position to unlock than anyone else. On the contrary, we are in a far less privileged position than the Christians in Ephesus or Pergamum when it comes to reading Revelation. General revelation is a revelation of God through his works of creation and providence in a natural, continuous, universal, indirect and nonpropositional mode. Furthermore, he asserts that the message of general revelation, while general about the character and will of God, is quite specific when it comes to matters about creation. Clearly, Diehi's and Erickson's definitions represent a significant departure from the definition of general revelation traditionally used by theologians. Indeed, Calvin, long ago, suggested that the Scriptures are the spectacles with which to read the book of nature and that the illumination of the Spirit is needed to give us proper eyesight for the reading. As Graeme Goldsworthy points out, all reality depends upon the creative word of God. Sense of Scripture in which expresses the meaning of biblical texts when read under the influence of the Holy Spirit in light of the mystery of Christ. Literalism/Fundamentalism. Taking the words of Scripture as stated without taking into account context or literary techniques. Allegorical Sense. Sense of Scripture that looks back and recognizes the significance of events in the Bible as they relate to Christ (i.e. how the passage foreshadows Christ). Moral Sense. Sense of Scripture that conveys how to live a morally upright life (i.e. how it teaches us to act). Anagogical Sense. You might also like Religion I Jesus Christ God's Revelation to the World Chapter 2. 36 terms. Cotreseler.