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Teaching students to ask questions of the text will help them go beyond the surface to the real substance.

Photograph by Adrianne Gardner Malan.

Teaching through Exegesis: Helping Students Ask Questions of the Text

Eric D. Huntsman

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Good teachers know how to ask questions, and good students become quite capable of answering them. Religious educators, furthermore, should seek to become skilled at asking questions that help students learn and understand essential doctrine and then find ways to integrate the doctrine into their students' life experiences. The example of Jesus as teacher and the experiences of other successful teachers have demonstrated the value, indeed the necessity, of asking questions that invite the power of the Spirit into the learning process.[1]

Another tool in the teacher's arsenal, however, is teaching students how to ask basic questions of the scriptural *text* to help them appreciate the written word of the Lord in new ways. Whether the text being studied is the Old Testament, the New Testament, the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, or the Pearl of Great Price, the text is a historical artifact, and properly understanding both its historical formation and the literary means by which it conveys the principles it contains strengthens the reader's acceptance of both the text's historicity and truthfulness as well as his or her recognition of its power to teach and change its reader.

Although most teachers intuitively ask themselves basic historical, literary, and theological questions of a scriptural text and then incorporate the answers to these questions in their instruction, directly asking these questions of students can give added structure to teachers' treatment of scripture, keep a greater focus on the text itself, and provide a useful way to incorporate biblical and historical scholarship

appropriately while allowing "the ultimate interpretation of doctrinal matters [to rest] with Apostles and prophets."[2] Furthermore, teaching students to ask and answer these questions themselves trains them in how to study the scriptures more systematically than just looking broadly at the contents of the scriptures or quoting sometimes isolated passages from them.

The Exegetical Method

In biblical studies, the systematic process of asking questions of a text as a way of understanding its meaning is called *exegesis* (pronounced ek-sə-ˈjē-səs; from the Greek *exēgeomai*, meaning "to lead out of"). Usually seen as part of the wider field of hermeneutics (pronounced hər-mə-ˈnü-tiks; "interpreting" the meaning of the text in both its original context and in its effect on and application to the reader),[3] formal exegesis often employs a wide variety of critical tools to help readers understand the meaning and intent of the text.[4] Until

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the twentieth century, most exegesis associated with the Bible assumed that by asking and answering the right questions, readers could discover the original meaning of the text, free from presuppositions and biases. Such questioning and analysis, or *descriptive* exegesis, was seen as being reasonably objective until Rudolf Bultmann, among others, began to question whether anyone could approach any text without presuppositions.[5] In particular, confessional approaches to the study of the Bible—which accept it as an ancient text but overall emphasize that, as scripture, it is the word of God and is a standard for belief and practice[6]—are seen as being dominated by preexisting bias and are termed *prescriptive* exegesis.

A wide variety of exegetical methods and systems exist,[7] but often their technicalities are beyond, and indeed would detract from, the major purpose of religious education, which focuses on teaching doctrinal truths and leading to conversion. As a result, in most instances Latter-day Saint religious education should not seek to imitate secular religious studies programs. Likewise, the tools or criticisms often employed in exegesis can be taken to extremes and can result in undercutting the reliability of the text as scripture. Nevertheless, religious education has long recognized the value of setting scriptural texts in

their historical context and bringing enough cultural background to their study to make them more understandable, and there is a growing interest in understanding the impact that their literary effect has on their reading.[8] Indeed, Latter-day Saint scholars with both the interest and appropriate training are encouraged to engage historical and critical methodologies to varying degrees "to discover historical backgrounds, provide cultural and linguistic details, and explore new avenues of understanding."[9]

Simple exegesis: the careful historical, literary, and theological analysis of a text

- Establish careful reading strategies.
- Ask historical and literary questions, considering the input of scholarship.
- Ask theological questions, recognizing the sole authority of apostles and prophets to interpret doctrine.
- Read by pericopes (by sections), and set the parts in the context of the whole.

Accordingly, a simplified definition of exegesis, "the careful historical, literary, and theological analysis of a text,"[10] can be useful in studying not only the Bible but indeed all scripture. In its approach to scripture as a text, exegesis is akin to the philological approach taken by classicists to Greek and Latin literature or the contextualization, close reading, and *explication du texte* performed by students of comparative literature. When students learn careful reading strategies that help them respect the scriptures as texts as well as religious writings, they can better understand why their apostolic and prophetic authors were inspired to write them as they did. These strategies include asking basic historical and literary questions that allow consideration of material provided by both religious educators and outside scholarship. Through

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this questioning process, students can better "lead out" (*exegesis*) the original meaning without unduly "reading in" (the opposite, *eisegesis*) their own preconceived notions. Next, and more importantly, readers can then ask theological questions to identify the doctrines and principles in the scriptures; here, in a properly confessional and prescriptive approach, the teachings of ancient and modern apostles and prophets,

who alone can authoritatively interpret doctrinal matters, are conclusive.[11] In addition to asking such questions, readers can then employ another important strategy of reading by sections and then consciously relating those parts to the larger narrative or book, thereby preserving the integrity of the text and reducing the possibility of taking a passage out of context. Through such careful and methodical reading, students and teachers alike can, as one colleague once put it, correctly understand how a principle applied "to them, there, then" before applying it "to us, here, now."

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Historical Questions

Although sophisticated exegesis requires readers to ask many questions of a text, reducing the process to the simple formula of asking basic historical, literary, and theological questions is sufficient to have an enriched experience with the scriptures in most Religious Education settings. Indeed, as mentioned, these are questions that good teachers routinely ask themselves when preparing lectures and discussions, but more explicitly following the exegetical model in our classes and teaching students to do so in their own studies provides a useful way to structure classes, study, and discussion.

Some Historical Questions
- When and why was this text written?
- What occasioned the event or teaching recorded?
- Who was its author and original audience?
- How does its historical and cultural context affect its interpretation?
- How did the information in it—from the original source, to the author, through editors and translators—get to us?

Historical questions generally fall into the category of *diachronic* exegesis that sees the text as it developed "through time."[12] Generally, we begin by asking the questions of authorship, original audience, and date (when ascertainable). Although this questioning is often done in a perfunctory way at the beginning of a class or the start of the study of a book of scripture, students frequently do not know how these

assumptions have been reached. In regard to the authorship of the formally anonymous Gospels, for instance, explaining what kind of internal evidence (what the text itself says about who wrote it) and external evidence (what early outside sources, such as patristic authors, said about the authorship) leads to the traditional ascriptions and helps students when they come upon other arguments either in scholarship or from the popular media. A reader can then effectively marshal latter-day confirmations (such as 1 Nephi 14:18–27; Ether 4:16; D&C 7; D&C 77:1–15; D&C 88:141 confirming the identity of the Apostle John as the author of John, Revelation, and, by extension, at least for 1 John) in the discussion. Discussing the dating of Pauline texts, even when the best chronologies are only tentative and approximate, is very useful in seeing how Paul's thought and teaching developed with the growth of the Church and the changes in the problems that it faced.

Asking these basic questions of Book of Mormon texts may seem superfluous, but they allow, for instance, a detailed discussion of the person and mission of Nephi before a reader begins a study of 1 Nephi and allow teachers to point out to students how a book from the small plates differs from an abridged book in the plates of Mormon. Discussing dating, such as the fact that 1 Nephi was written about 570 BC, helps students understand that the events of 1 Nephi are being recorded long after the fact—when Nephi understood the eventual results of his brothers' rebelliousness and has experienced the warfare that arose between his descendants and the Lamanites. As always, discussions of Book of Mormon audiences rightly stress that ancient prophets were not only aware of their own people and descendants but also specifically wrote with the latter-day reader in mind.

Other important historical questions include asking what occasioned the event or teaching that a scripture records and then asking how the historical and cultural contexts affect the interpretation of the passage. Student manuals and the instructor's own training help provide useful background information about these areas. In certain settings, this is also the stage in the exegetical process where we can judiciously introduce some of the findings of outside scholarship—whereas confessional and prescriptive exegesis may often not accept the conclusions of secular scholarship, generally, these scholars have correctly observed features in the text that we, in turn, are called upon to explain in a faithful way. Students will, at some point, come upon many of these arguments, once again in reading outside of school or college or simply through the popular media, where newsmagazines and television documentaries frequently feature issues in religious and biblical

studies. As a result, helping our students know what the questions are and where to look for acceptable answers, both inside and outside the Latter-day Saint community, will help them discuss such issues intelligently and faithfully. As President Spencer W. Kimball taught, we should be "'bilingual' . . . in the language of scholarship, and . . . in the language of spiritual things."[13] President Gordon B. Hinckley has encouraged religious educators "to be reading secular history, the great literature that has survived the ages, and the contemporary thinkers and doers. In so doing we will find inspiration to pass on to our students who will need all the balanced strength they can get as they face the world into which they move."[14]

One such historical question concerns how the information in scripture came first from the original source, then to the author, and finally through editors and translators to the modern reader. Sometimes this process involves compositional issues that many confessional approaches to scripture can, at times, find problematic. For instance, studies of the Johannine corpus have not only questioned whether the Apostle John authored all five works attributed to him but also have postulated a complex compositional history that begins with the Beloved Disciple—possibly but not necessarily John—as a source, whose material was then worked into the Fourth Gospel by a later Evangelist, and whose school then produced an elder who authored the epistles and a final editor for the Gospel. Apparent differences in style have then suggested a completely different author for the Apocalypse.[15] As noted above, latter-day revelation confirms the Apostle John as the author of virtually all of the Johannine writings. Nevertheless, the final verses of the Gospel were clearly written by someone else (John 21:24–25), suggesting that the Johannine writings did have some kind of editorial history. Comparing the possible compositional history of the Gospel of John to the process involved in the composition and abridgment of the Book of Mormon can help students understand the evidence in a way that does not challenge apostolic authority for the Gospel of John. For instance, the great sermon on the infinite and eternal Atonement of Christ in Alma 34 was delivered by Amulek, apparently recorded by Alma^2, abridged by Mormon, and then translated and published by Joseph Smith, thus demonstrating that collecting and editing does, in fact, happen in scripture.

Literary Questions

Students are used to viewing the scriptures as scriptures—sources of religious truth and knowledge—and not as literature. Because

literature consists of writing in prose or poetry that is excellent in form and lasting in value, we could, and probably should, argue that scriptural texts are among the best literature. In antiquity, poets were seen as being inspired by the gods, and artists, composers, and writers continue to be viewed as "inspired" when their work transcends that which can be obtained by the average person. Can we have any doubt that inspired prophets and apostles were truly inspired not only in the content of what they spoke and wrote but also in the form in which it was delivered? In regard to the Book of Mormon, Rust has written that "the impact of *what* the Book of Mormon says often is created through *how* it is said. The interconnection of beauty with truth and goodness invites us to Christ. That is, literary elements such as form, imagery, poetry, and narrative help teach and motivate us in ways that touch the hearts and souls as well as our minds."[16] Indeed, questions of form, structure, and style all serve to reveal the power of the written word of God.

Some Literary Questions

- What kind of writing is the passage, and how does its genre affect how we read it?
- How does it fit into its larger context—particularly what comes before and after it?
- What was the author trying to teach or emphasize by relating it as he or she did?

Literary questions constitute much of what is termed *synchronic* exegesis—that is, analysis that considers the text in its finished form "taken all at once."[17] How a text says what it says—both through use of its original language (grammar and lexicography) and employment of language (in particular rhetoric)—is naturally an important part of the literary analysis of a text. Care must be exercised in a general religion class, however, since not only are most students not prepared with ancient languages but also few instructors can be expected to have a detailed knowledge of these languages or their grammar. As a result, slightly erroneous interpretations based on secondhand understanding of a passage, such as the use of the different Greek words for love (*agapaō* and *phileō*) in John 21:15–19, are sometimes perpetuated. Course manuals, commentaries, and other resources can provide teachers with some linguistic insights, but since students read all biblical texts in the approved translations, literary questions should focus on those that can be answered by our studying the translation that students are using.

A major literary concern when we read a passage of scripture is to identify what kind of writing the passage is and how this genre affects how we read it. Genre theory and its significance are continuously developing topics of discussion in biblical studies and elsewhere,[18] but the fundamental point for all readers of scriptural texts is the acknowledgment that we read different types, or genres, of writing differently. For instance, we read a newspaper much differently than we read a novel. Likewise, reading a love letter affects us differently than reading a textbook. Authors, including scriptural authors, use different kinds of writing to produce different effects on their reading audience.

For readers of the Book of Mormon, nowhere is this more evident than when Nephi moves from a narrative style to the moving poetry of the "Psalm of Nephi" in 2 Nephi 4:17–35. Poetic writing, which uses language in a deliberately chosen and arranged manner to evoke images and a specific emotional response, forces a reader to slow down and consider each word, its meaning, and its symbolism. Nephi and other Book of Mormon prophet-authors employed poetic forms of expression for specific purposes, such as portraying deep emotion, elevating their praise of God, or "enticing readers to come to Christ."[19] Likewise, the specific parallel constructs of Hebrew poetry appear in Book of Mormon Isaiah quotations to concentrate attention on their thought. Drawing attention to poetic passages, perhaps by laying them out in stanzas, helps students recognize the effort that Book of Mormon authors put into the composition of their texts.[20]

Benefits also accrue from asking students to distinguish between different kinds of prose in the Book of Mormon, beginning by differentiating between narrative, which effectively recounts events or simply tells a story, and discourse, such as quotations of sermons, written treatises, allegories, or letters (such as those between Helaman², Moroni¹, and Pahoran¹ and those of Mormon to Moroni²). Discourse in the Book of Mormon has a particularly powerful effect because, as Rust notes, "Sermons, letters, prophecies, and dialogues are presented as living voices. . . . Because so many discourses and dialogues are presented directly in the Book of Mormon, distances break down and time dissolves."[21]

This kind of genre study has long been an important part of biblical studies.[22] Although the details, and the extremes, of form criticism rarely have place in the average religion class, understanding what kind of text a section of a Gospel or a given New Testament book is helps the reader better understand its meaning and intent. Recognizing that the structure of the second Gospel is, in some ways, a "Marcan necklace," with different types of text units linked together by narra-

tive-like beads on a string, need not be taken to the extremes of some form criticism; we can, instead, focus attention on the importance of individual stories and Mark's own artistry. Likewise, understanding Paul's use and adaptation of the classical epistolary form can help in the understanding of his letters,[23] particularly when we realize that the many books in the New Testament simply broadly defined as "epistles" actually constitute several different types of writing, each with a slightly different intent and impact.

Another important, and often overlooked, literary question is how a given passage relates to the text before and after it. Just as a book or work must be set in a historical and cultural context, a passage, or *pericope* (pronounced pə-ˈri-kə-pē; from a Greek term meaning "to cut"

A Broad Overview of New Testament Genres

Gospels—proclamations of the "good news" about Jesus intended to establish or strengthen people's faith in Him

- quasibiographical, semihistorical portraits of the life, teachings, and actions of Jesus (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John)
- include a number of "forms" or subgenres, such as genealogies; healing/miracle stories; call stories; parables; sermons; and Infancy, Passion, and Resurrection narratives

Real letters—written to specific individuals or communities

- "occasional in nature," addressing practical and theological issues relevant to particular church communities (Paul's)

Church Orders or "Pastoral Epistles"

- regulatory letters, collections of instructions for the practical organization of religious communities (1 Timothy, Titus)

Testament

- a document that gives a dying person's last wishes and instructions for his/her successors (2 Timothy and 2 Peter)

Homily/Sermon

- an exegetical sermon that cites and interprets older biblical texts in reference to Jesus (Hebrews)

Wisdom collection

- a collection of general instructions on how to live an ethical Christian life well (James)

Epistles/encyclicals—more stylized literary works in letter format for a broad audience

- "circular letters" intended for broader audiences (1 and 2 Peter, Jude; perhaps Colossians and Ephesians foreshadow)

Acts—a narrative historical account about the beginnings and the growth of early Christianity
- not a complete history of the early Church, since it focuses only on the actions of a few missionary leaders (Acts)

Apocalypse—a vividly symbolic narrative that "reveals" God's views about a historical crisis
- provides encouragement for a difficult present and hope for a better future (Revelation)

out a passage or selection), needs to be put in its context of the rest of the work. For instance, the well-known story of Mary and Martha (Luke 10:38–42) raises questions regarding the respective values of service (Martha's serving) and hearing the word of the Lord (Mary's sitting at Jesus's feet). Rarely is this pericope considered in relation to what comes immediately before it, the parable of the good samaritan (vv. 29–37), an important example of service. Likewise, the pericope about the Samaritan follows the lawyer's question (vv. 25–28), which stresses the two great commandments: loving God and loving fellowmen, although loving God is the "first and the great" commandment and, in important ways, serves as a prerequisite to being able to serve others.

Another important literary question is "What was the author trying to teach or emphasize by including the passage and relating it as he did?" For instance, Matthew and Luke have the cleansing of the temple immediately after Jesus's triumphal entry, seemingly on Sunday (Matthew 21:12–17; Luke 19:45–46). Mark, however (11:15–19), moves it to Monday, allowing the episode to be framed by the encounter with the barren fig tree in the morning (11:12–14) and the discovery of the withered fig tree in the evening (11:20–21). Mark may well have adjusted the order to teach an important point beyond the one usually perceived of the necessity of cleansing the Lord's house: since Israel was likened to a fruitless fig tree by Old Testament prophets (for example, Jeremiah 8:13; Hosea 9:10), the temple—barren, defiled, and misused by some of the Jewish leadership of Jesus's time—was ripe for destruction, just as they were.[24]

Theological Questions

Because learning gospel truths and learning of the Savior and His Atonement are our primary purposes for studying the scriptures, this is the type of questioning of the text that is rightly the most instinctive for religious educators. Even among secular scholarship, the theological

purpose of a text is understood to be a fundamental part of exegesis, and the claims that a text makes on its readers—how it engages them and how it calls upon them to react in their lives—is what is sometimes referred to as *existential* exegesis.[25] In the context of religious education, we are naturally concerned primarily with what a text teaches us about God, His plan for His children, the doctrines of Christ and the Atonement, and those principles that allow us to apply this plan in our lives.

Some Theological Questions
- How does this passage affect and change the reader?
- What principles or doctrines does it illustrate or teach?
- What does it teach us about God and His plan?
- What does it teach us about the person and work of Jesus?
- What have latter-day apostles and prophets taught about this passage?

Theological questions can be framed as simply as "What gospel truth does this passage teach?" or can be focused according to principles and ordinances of the gospel or, for a Book of Mormon class, according to the title-page purposes of demonstrating that Jesus is the Christ, learning what great things the Lord has done for our fathers, and understanding what covenants He has made with His people. The New Testament Gospels focus on Christology—the person and work of Jesus Christ—so questions might appropriately begin with what a text teaches us about the nature of Jesus as the Son of God and what He did for us in His ministry, suffering, death, and Resurrection. Indeed, identifying specific thematic and doctrinal questions for a specific scriptural text at the beginning of a course and then returning to them throughout the semester is an effective way to focus students' attention on the text's own stated purposes.

Although seeking answers to historical and literary questions can involve scholarship from within and without the Church, finding answers to theological questions can and should safely rely upon insight from gospel authorities. The first source should be the scriptures themselves, followed by official statements, proclamations, and declarations of the First Presidency and the Twelve, and then the individual teachings of the latter-day prophets and Apostles.[26] Many teachers naturally move toward doctrine, latter-day interpretation, and individual application quickly. However, the pedagogical principle that "that which is taught last is remembered most" suggests that asking historical and literary questions first and then focusing on the doctrines

and official interpretations second can be an effective way to teach the scriptures both as a text and as a way to allow students to leave having had a spiritual focus.

Reading in Sections

Following scriptural and prophetic counsel, we enjoin students not just to read the scriptures but also to study and search them. Too often, however, teachers and students alike read the scriptures piecemeal—verse by verse or in chapters only—which disrupts the integrity of the overall text. Although learning scripture mastery lists serves an important purpose early in a student's study of the scriptures, religious instruction at institutions of higher learning provides opportunities for more in-depth reading and studying of the scriptures that will help avoid the tendency to "proof text," the process of using verses to prove one's own point rather than letting the text make its point. An important part of exegesis is reading a text in sections and relating them to the whole.

As suggested above, a literary treatment of the text encourages us to read it by sections or "pericopes." A pericope is generally a self-contained episode, story, or section of a larger unit, oftentimes discernable in the standard editions of the King James Version by paragraph markings. Delineating pericopes can be an important part of a teacher's or a student's class preparation, encouraging him or her to consider and reread passages just read to see how they fit together. Although a common approach to reading and analyzing text in biblical studies, dividing the text into pericopes can also be useful in studying the Book of Mormon, particularly in complex portions of text such as the Isaiah quotations, where identifying the topics of pericopes helps students better see how authors like Nephi are employing the prophecies they quote.

Another useful reading strategy is to outline a book to see how the pericopes and overall content fit together. Such outlines can, of course, be somewhat arbitrary and necessarily are imposing an outside structure upon a text. However, the process of creating or reviewing an outline allows a student to quickly master the overall content of a reading assignment, allowing class instruction to focus on particular pericopes, doctrines, or points.

Furthermore, when used appropriately, such "structural analysis" can help identify the author's own organization of material and illustrate how the author has attempted to emphasize or highlight certain points. For instance, Matthew divides the body of his Gospel into five sections, each with a narrative block followed by a sermon of discourse material. This organization seems to illustrate how the teachings of

Christ, the new Moses, have replaced the five books of the law of Moses, but it may also have required Matthew to move some material out of the expected chronological or geographical order. The body of the work is then framed by the infancy narratives at the beginning, answering the important Christological question of who Jesus is, and the passion and resurrection narratives at the end, answering the question of what Jesus did for us. Comparisons with the simpler overall structure of Mark, which has been described as "a drama in three acts" that charts a geographic progression to Jerusalem and the Atonement,[28] can then help us understand why Matthew and Mark at times organized material that they share differently.

Outline of Matthew

Genealogy and infancy narrative (1:1–2:23)
Part 1: Proclamation of the kingdom (3:1–7:29)
    Discourse: Sermon on the Mount (5:1–7:29)
Part 2: Galilean ministry (8:1–10:42)
    Discourse: Mission sermon (10:1–42)
Part 3: Opposition to Jesus (11:1–13:52)
    Discourse: Sermon in parables (13:1–52)
Part 4: Rejection by Israel (13:54–18:25)
    Discourse: Sermon on the Church—precedence in the kingdom, disciplining those who mislead, disciplining those who wrong (18:1–35)
Part 5: Journey to and ministry in Jerusalem (19:1–25:46)
    Discourse: Sermon on the last days—prophecies of destruction, necessity for watchfulness, parables of the Second Coming (24:1–25:46)
Climax: Suffering, Death, and Resurrection (26:1–28:20)

Outline of Mark

Heading (1:1)
Prologue (1:2–13)
Act I: Authoritative mission in Galilee (1:14–8:30)
Act II: On the road to Jerusalem (8:31–10:52)
    Act III: Climax in Jerusalem (11:1–16:8)
    Passion narrative (14:32–15:47)
    Resurrection narrative (16:1–8[20])

Likewise, the familiar order of events in 1 Nephi takes on new meaning when we analyze it structurally. Lehi's opening ministry (1:4–20) and Nephi's quotation and interpretation of Isaiah (19:1–22:18) frame the book, and the narrative of the journey through the wilderness (2:1–7:22 and 16:1–19:21) is interrupted by chapters recounting

Basic Structure of 1 Nephi
- Lehi's Jerusalem ministry (1:4–20)
- Journey into the wilderness (2:1–7:22)
- Lehi's dream and prophecy (8:1–10:22)
- The apocalypse of Nephi (11:1–15:19)
- The journey resumed (16:1–19:21)
- Nephi quotes and interprets Isaiah (19:22–22:18)

Lehi's vision of the tree of life (8:1–10:22) and Nephi's considerably longer view of the same, his inspired interpretation, and his subsequent visions (1 Nephi 11–14). Indeed, this "Apocalypse of Nephi" dominates the account of the book, focusing on a vision of the Condescension with its interpretive centerpiece that shows that Christ is the love of God, the tree of life, and the fountain of living waters (11:21–25). The importance of this central vision not only to 1 Nephi but also to the whole Book of Mormon has been stressed by President Boyd K. Packer, who has written, "After the people of Lehi left Jerusalem, Lehi had a vision of the Tree of Life, his son Nephi prayed to know its meaning. In answer, he was given a remarkable vision of Christ. That vision is the central message of the Book of Mormon. The Book of Mormon is another testament of Jesus Christ."[29] Such important themes are often lost when scriptures are read only in a verse-by-verse approach.

Linking Exegesis with Sound Course Objectives and Activities

Carefully organizing a course helps both teacher and student remain focused on the objectives of the class and, in the case of a religion class, focused on a particular volume of scripture. Such organization also presents a methodical way of treating the text.[30] Instructors all have individual course objectives, which should contribute to the overall goals of Religious Education at the BYU campus or the seminary and institute teaching emphasis. Explicitly listing these objectives in the syllabus, reviewing them with the students, and tailoring class discussions, quizzes, writing assignments, and exams to these stated objectives are beneficial aspects of students' learning experiences. Text boxes are included in this section to illustrate possible course objectives and activities, such as writing a simple exegetical paper.

By including basic exegetical aims in these course objectives, teachers can ensure that the text that is the focus of a class will be examined in a careful and methodical way, understanding it in its original context, gaining a greater appreciation for its power and beauty, and, ultimately, learning its doctrines and how to apply them more carefully.

Sample Course Objectives

1. Increase the student's knowledge of the New Testament. Familiarize him or her with the basic content, themes, and theological concepts of its constituent books.
2. Help the student read, discuss, and write about the New Testament as both a source of scriptural knowledge and as a collection of sacred texts. Ask basic historical, literary, and theological questions (a process known as "exegesis," from the Greek "to lead out" or explain).
3. Strengthen individual testimonies of sacred truths:
   a. Increase understanding of the person and work of Jesus Christ and the doctrines of the Restoration
   b. Learn what the New Testament Apostles taught about Christ
   c. Understand how latter-day apostles and prophets help us understand their writings

For instance, sample course objectives for a Religion 211 or 212 New Testament section could include the expected goals of first increasing the students' knowledge of the New Testament by familiarizing them with the basic content, themes, and theological concepts of its constituent books and, ultimately, strengthening individual testimonies of sacred truths by increasing students' understanding of the person and work of Jesus Christ and the doctrines of the Restoration. Exegetical procedures can help accomplish both of these objectives, but adding an additional objective—such as helping students read, discuss, and write about the New Testament as both a source of scriptural knowledge and as a collection of sacred texts—can provide a teacher an opportunity to teach simple exegetical methods directly by helping students ask basic historical, literary, and theological questions.

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Many teachers already include these basic questions in the planning of their lectures or lessons; for instance, before beginning a book, we can discuss basic issues of authorship, date, audience, original context, and the overall structure and themes of the book. Formatting quizzes and exams according to the course objectives—including exegetical

Types of Evaluation Geared to Course Objectives
- Identifications (scriptural knowledge)
- Scriptural commentary (understanding and analyzing scripture as text)
- Essay questions (understanding doctrine to strengthen testimony)

objectives—further helps students learn to read and study with these purposes in mind. Quizzes and exams, for example, can be geared to the previously introduced sample objectives if the teacher includes identifications to assess scriptural knowledge, scriptural commentary to assess understanding and analyzing of scripture as text, and short answers or essay questions to assess understanding of doctrine, which can strengthen testimony. Scripture commentary allows students to pursue basic exegesis the most directly. It consists of asking students to respond to important passages of text covered in class. Students are not necessarily required to identify the passage by chapter and verse but instead respond to basic historical questions (Who is speaking? Who recorded the passage? When was it written? What was the situation? and How does it affect our understanding of the passage?); literary questions (What kind of writing is this? What is its context in the larger narrative or book? What does the author emphasize or illustrate by how he wrote the passage?); and then, most importantly, theological questions (What principle is being taught in the passage? How did it apply to the original audience? How does it apply to us?).

Unfortunately, the large size of many classes in the Church effectively precludes extensive writing experiences, but writing about scripture is the most effective means for students to learn exegetical method. The ideal way to teach students how to methodically ask and answer questions about a text in a short paper is to have them treat a single pericope, or passage, rather than an entire book, author, or topic. In its simplest form, a paper simply has a student select a passage of interest and respond to basic historical, literary, and theological questions. In honors sections or smaller classes, teachers may be able to give students a chance to experience slightly more involved and systematic exegesis, following an outline such as the one presented here.[31] Because of the goals of a Religious Education class, the various sections of the paper can be weighted to reflect their importance; for instance, the final reflection section, where most theological questions can be treated and where application to the student is explored, can constitute 30 or 40 percent of the paper's grade.

Sample Exegetical Paper Outline

Survey or Introduction (for this short paper, 1 paragraph)

- Describe the passage and why it is significant; in a short pericope. You could include the passage as a block quote (single-spaced, double-indented).

Contextual Analysis (2 paragraphs, one on historical context and one on literary)

- The first paragraph should treat the *historical context*—that is, what event occasioned the teaching, parable, miracle, sermon, etc.
- The second paragraph should treat the passage's *literary context*. Among other things, it should explain why the author chose to include this event or story in his larger narrative. Why was it important to him and to his original audience? How does the larger context, the text before and after the passage, affect its reading? Look at an outline to see how your pericope fits into the larger narrative.

Formal Analysis (indicates *what type of writing* the passage is—how it fits into the larger narrative; 1–2 paragraphs)

- The formal analysis discusses what genre or form the passage is—a piece of narrative, a canticle or hymn, a controversy narrative, a parable, a sermon, a discourse, etc.
- How is the pericope structured?

Detailed Analysis (4–5 paragraphs, treating each verse or section of your text)

- Careful scrutiny of the word choice, imagery, allusions to other passages, etc. What are the main points of each part of the text, and how does the writer make these points?

Synthesis (1 paragraph)

- The synthesis is essentially a summation or conclusion before the reflection. Although we are accustomed to summarizing at the end of a paper, *what the synthesis at this point does is help keep the paper text-focused*: What does your passage say and how does it say it as a TEXT *before* you begin to discuss what claims it makes on the reader—that is, what does it call upon the reader to believe or do?

Reflection (1–3 good paragraphs; this is the place for your existential exegesis)

- The reflection section is where you can discuss how it engages the reader and what the importance of the passage is to you individually or to Latter-day Saints in general. What does this passage tell us about the Savior and His mission? What doctrines does it teach? How does it motivate us to exercise greater faith in the Lord Jesus Christ? How has it changed you?

We cannot, and should not, expect students in Religious Education to pursue exegesis in the rigid and technical way that a graduate student in religious studies would. However, incorporating basic exegetical tools and methodology into teaching, assessment, and writing can help our students gain a greater appreciation of the scriptures as ancient and literary texts and, in the process, gain a greater respect for the written word of the Lord. A simplified and confessionally prescriptive exegetical model consisting of asking historical, literary, and theological questions enables a student to read what the text says rather than what the student thinks it says—being guided in the final instance by what prophets and apostles teach about its doctrine. RE

Notes

1. See, for instance, Alan R. Maynes, "How to Ask Questions That Invite Revelation," *Religious Educator* 5, no. 3 (2004): 85–94.

2. "Religious Education Mission Statement," *Religious Education Handbook* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University, 2004–5), 3.

3. Stanley E. Porter and Kent D. Clarke, "What Is Exegesis? An Analysis of Various Definitions," in *Handbook to Exegesis of the New Testament*, ed. Stanley E. Porter (Boston: Brill, 2002), 6, describe the various fields as follows: "To begin with, the term *interpretation* is often used in a less technical and more general sense . . . [and] being the broadest of the three terms, incorporates both *hermeneutics* and *exegesis* as subcategories. . . . The next term to follow is *hermeneutics*, which refers to the over-arching theories or philosophies that guide exegesis. And finally, *exegesis*, the most specific of the three terms, refers to the actual practice, procedures, and methods one uses to understand a text" (emphasis added).

4. These include both "lower" or *textual criticism*, which consists of comparing and studying the many manuscripts of a text to establish what the autograph or original may have been, and "higher" criticisms, which seek to address questions of how the text was originally written and what it was trying to say. Some so-called higher criticisms include *historical criticism*, which seeks to establish the literal sense of a text (what the author meant to say) by establishing authorship, date of composition, and original audience while taking into account customs and historical context; *literary criticism*, which analyzes the vocabulary, grammar, and style of a text and considers the structure of a work as a whole (examining how the author employs and structures material to make his or her points); and *source, form*, and *redaction criticisms*, which examine respectively what sources an author used, how the pieces of the text functioned originally, and how the author edited, shaped, and formed his or her material.

5. Rudolf Bultmann, "Is Exegesis without Presuppositions Possible?" in *Existence and Faith: Shorter Writings of Rudolf Bultmann*, trans. S. M. Ogden (New York: Meridian Books, 1960), 289; see the discussion of Porter and Clark, "What Is Exegesis? An Analysis of Various Definitions," 13–15.

6. See, for instance, Delbert Burkett, *An Introduction to the New Testament and the Origins of Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002),

9–13.

7. In addition to *Handbook to Exegesis of the New Testament*, see, among others, *The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation*, ed. John Barton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), and Michael J. Gorman, *Elements of Biblical Exegesis* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Henrickson, 2001).

8. Notable among recent efforts is Richard Dilworth Rust, *Feasting on the Word: The Literary Testimony of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1997).

9. "Religious Education Mission Statement," 3.

10. Gorman, *Elements of Biblical Exegesis*, 8.

11. In a forthcoming piece with S. Kent Brown in *BYU Studies* (winter 2005), I have noted that Anthony A. Hutchinson, "LDS Approaches to the Holy Bible," *Dialogue* 15, no. 1 (1982): 99–124, has sought to divide Latter-day Saint writing on the New Testament into four categories, which he called Harmonizing Hermeneutic, Critically Modified Harmonized Hermeneutic, Critical Hermeneutic with Harmonizing, and Critical Hermeneutic. Although it is appropriate for LDS authors trained in history and languages to employ a purely critical hermeneutic for publications in scholarly venues and for presentations in professional organizations, our position there was that when writing for an LDS audience, LDS scholars and teachers understandably seek to employ a critical hermeneutic with some degree of "harmonization"—that is, one that seeks to employ the standard works, takes into account the teachings of LDS authorities, and supports rather than detracts from the doctrines of the Restoration.

12. Gorman, *Elements of Biblical Exegesis*, 15–17; Porter and Clark, 11–12.

13. Spencer W. Kimball, "Second Century Address and Dedication of Carillon Tower and Bells," www.byu.edu/fc/ee/w_swk75.htm (accessed January 3, 2005).

14. Gordon B. Hinckley, "Four Imperatives for Religious Educators," an address to Church Educational System teachers on September 15, 1978, reprinted in *Religious Educator* 5, no. 3 (2004): 5.

15. Rudolph Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, trans. G. R. Beasley-Murray (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1971); J. Louis Martyn, *The Gospel of John in Christian History* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978); See the discussion of Robert Kysar, s.v., "John, Epistles of" and "John, Gospel of," *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York City: Doubleday, 1992), 3:907–909, 917–922, hereafter ABD; Barnabas Lindars, Ruth B. Edwards, and John M. Court, *The Johannine Literature* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 9–27, 40–61, 144–52.

16. Rust, *Feasting on the Word: The Literary Testimony of the Book of Mormon*, 2–3.

17. Gorman, *Elements of Biblical Exegesis*, 12–14.

18. See Gorman, *Elements of Biblical Exegesis*, 76–78; Brook W. R. Pearson and Stanley E. Porter, "The Genres of the New Testament," in Handbook to Exegesis of the New Testament, 131–65.

19. For examples, see Rust, *Feasting on the Word: The Literary Testimony of the Book of Mormon*, 65–100.

20. See "Appendix 5: Book of Mormon Poetry," in *The Book of Mormon: A Reader's Edition*, ed. Grant Hardy (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 658–64.

21. Rust, *Feasting on the Word: The Literary Testimony of the Book of Mormon*, 10–11.

22. See John Barton, "Form Criticism (OT)," ABD, 2:838–41; Vernon K. Robbins, "Form Criticism (NT)," ABD, 2:841–44. The "Broad Overview of New

Testament Genres" in the text box is adapted from a list by Professor Felix Just of Loyola Marymount University, http://myweb.lmu.edu/fjust/Bible/Genres.htm (accessed December 21, 2004).

23. See the useful conservative studies of Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, Paul the *Letter-Writer: His world, His Options, His Skills*, Good News Studies 41 (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1995); and E. Randolph Richards, *Paul and First-Century Letter Writing: Secretaries, Composition, and Collection* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2004).

24. See R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 435–47.

25. Gorman, *Elements of Biblical Exegesis*, 17–22.

26. The course packets of Todd B. Parker, associate professor of Ancient Scripture at BYU, include the following helpful guidelines for using quotations from Church authorities in supporting the study of the scriptures:

1. Official statements of messages from Church Presidents or statements from the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles (these often appear in the *Ensign* magazine).

2. Conference Report talks by the First Presidency and the Twelve.

3. Statements by leaders printed in manuals approved by the Church Correlation Committee.

4. Talks given by the Brethren which have been approved by correlation. Be aware that talks given by the Brethren that have not been approved by correlation are left to the reader to decide whether or not they are scripture. D&C 68:2–4 states that when Apostles speak, "whatsoever they shall speak when moved upon by the Holy Ghost shall be scripture." D&C 1:37–38 states "whether by mine own voice or by the voice of my servants, it is the same." Therefore, if Elder Bruce R. McConkie is quoted from his *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary*, that quotation represents his opinion. If, however, a statement from his DNTC was quoted in a Church manual approved by correlation, it then has the stamp of approval of the Church. If he is quoted from a conference talk, that also is approved by the Church.

27. See Raymond E. Brown, *Introduction to the New Testament*, The Anchor Bible Reference Library (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 171–74.

28. France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 11–15.

29. Boyd K. Packer, in Conference Report, April 1986, 76.

30. Numerous resources and strategies exist for helping instructors organize successful courses. See, in particular, the suggestion for teaching and learning provided by the BYU Faculty Center at http://www.byu.edu/fc/pages/tchlrfr.html (accessed December 22, 2004).

31. Adapted from Gorman, *Elements of Biblical Exegesis*, 205–16.