

How to Ponder the Scriptures

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In 1994, James E. Faulconer, then the Associate Dean of General Honors Education and a professor of philosophy at Brigham Young University, recorded a video of a talk he entitled, "How to Study the Book of Mormon." As an introduction to his subject he tells of an experience as a graduate student at Penn State University. He was working for a professor Stephen Goldman, who taught the philosophies of science. Through this association he gained great respect for this professor and when he learned that Professor Goldman also served part-time as Rabbi Goldman, his interest was piqued. He records:

Professor Goldman and I became friends as I worked with him. I went to Professor Goldman at one point and said that I would like to take a readings class with him; that I would like to study the Old Testament with him.

We talked for a while and he proposed that I should come and propose a course of study for a readings course in the next quarter. I came and I brought a suggestion that he and I study Genesis together. He laughed a little bit and said, "Well, how much of Genesis did you want to do?" I suggested that we do all of it. He suggested that we do only the first chapter. I laughed and said, "Why don't we just do as much as we possibly can."

He said we could do that if I would come at lunch time. He would discuss it with me if I would bring my questions. So I made up a list of questions and brought them to Professor Goldman. We had lunch and as we were eating he asked me to read my questions. He was absolutely disgusted with my questions when I read them.

There were things like, How does the Bible correlate with evolution? What can we say about this, that, and the other aspect of some abstruse idea? He asked me why I didn't take my religion seriously and I was embarrassed. It was clear that he was thinking quite differently than I was. In turn he said, "Instead of your questions, let's ask mine." And he asked his questions, which were always about details of the text. What does this word mean? Why is this event before that event? What are we doing here? What is the Lord saying here? How is he saying what he says? I couldn't answer any of these questions.

I went away very humble. I had thought to come and have some sort of high level discussion with this Rabbi and instead I had been humiliated and shown I really didn't know very much about what I was talking about. I came back the next week, though, with different kinds of questions—questions about the text itself, about words, about the ideas, about how things related to each other; and I began to talk to Professor Goldman. As we talked I was shocked to discover that this man knew a great deal about the gospel that I thought only the Latter-day Saints knew. He was also shocked because he discovered that we knew many things that he thought only Jews knew. These things came out, however, by careful reading of this book. We made it through the quarter all the way to the end of chapter 3 of Genesis. He felt we had run at a breakneck speed. I thought it had gone very slowly, but I learned a great deal.

Upon reflection Brother Faulconer realized that while this experience had taught him a great deal about Genesis, he had been taught a great deal more about how to really study scripture. He goes on to speak of a medieval alchemist motto that for him represented the core of what he had learned from Rabbi Goldman: "Lege, lege, lege, labore, ora et relege." Read, read, read, work, pray, and reread. He explains:

Now, in the Church most of us are acquainted with some of the elements of this procedure. Most of us know how to read. Those of us who follow the admonition of the prophet, read, read, read. We also pray and presumably those who study pray over what they study. But I don't think that many of us, as many as should, do the work that is required. So I have written that alchemist motto in the front of my Bible to remind me of the things that I should do to turn the leaden things in my life into gold through the

scriptures, and I'd like to focus today for a few minutes on this issue of work—how to work at studying the scriptures.

Brother Faulconer's first point of emphasis is context. He begins by referencing a statement by Joseph Smith on how to understand scripture. The Prophet said, "I have a key by which I understand the scriptures. I enquire, what was the question which drew out the answer or caused Jesus to utter the parable?" While the Prophet's example is Christ's parables, the *key* is of general use and application. Remember, Jesus is the voice in all scriptural answers. I'm reminded of the attempts by some to teach the Doctrine and Covenants as a topic separate from LDS church history. Little beyond a surface familiarity is possible and the student is apt to view the great revelations contained in this sacred volume as dull, meaningless, and beyond their comprehension.

To use the Prophet's key we must do more than casually read. We must determine context; we may need to know a little or even a lot about culture, history, and language; and we must search to understand the connection between response and circumstance. Brother Faulconer says that we must simply ask, "What's going on?" He continues:

In addition to context, we need to know the meaning of the words we read. Now, that sounds quite obvious. We need to know the alternative meanings, which is, perhaps, less obvious. I think, however, in both cases we often think we know what we are reading and we don't.

Brother Faulconer's example is D&C 121:43. There we read the admonition that we should *reprove* "***betimes with sharpness, when moved upon by the Holy Ghost.***" I've heard the interpretation that we are here taught that the Lord might occasionally direct us to be rather harsh in our reprove. A similar interpretation suggests that we are justified in being *harsh* only when directed to do so by the Spirit. These views are based on a guess as to the meaning of *betimes* and the assumption that the "*sharp reprove*" reported in the modern media is representative of the Lord's meaning in this passage. A simple reference to a quality dictionary quickly makes clear the Lord's meaning. *Betimes*, we learn has the general meaning of "in good time" or "early." Webster adds, "before it is to late." The American Heritage Dictionary tells us that this word has an *archaic* meaning of *quickly*. This would be closest to the scriptural meaning of this word. As to *sharpness*, the dictionaries are clear that *abrupt* and *harsh* are proper synonyms. But, here the alternative meaning, "clearly and distinctly set forth," seems best to fit the Lord's use of this term in this and other verses in the Doctrine and Covenants. Isn't, then, the Lord saying that our reproof, when necessary, should not be delayed—it should be quick and clearly stated, using those words that the Spirit would give to us.

Brother Faulconer points out that we often overlook the little connecting words which are so important to meaning. Words like "and," "or," "then," "thus," and "therefore." These are words which connect thoughts and describe their relationship to one another. He uses a very significant example:

In Romans 12:1, in the Greek text, the very first of the words used is "therefore." It's not quite the first word in the English, but it's the word that connects chapter 12 to all the rest of those chapters, the first eleven chapters.

Many who are not Latter-day Saints find a number of [their] beliefs in Romans. . . . Namely, they find a belief in salvation by grace alone. We, too, believe in salvation by grace alone, but we also believe that this is connected to the necessity of works. And this word "therefore" at the beginning of chapter 12 helps us understand that. Paul, having explained in detail the necessity of relying upon grace for our salvation, then turns in chapter 12 to say, therefore you must present your bodies in acceptable sacrifice. You must obey the commandments. Your obedience is required of you because the Lord has sacrificed himself for you, so you must sacrifice yourself for him. And the sacrifice required is obedience. If we see that word, then we begin to understand much more clearly that grace and works are not opposed to each other the way we often think.

Our stated subject is *pondering the scriptures*. You might ask, "Doesn't that relate more to meditating and seeking spiritual guidance?" Returning again to the dictionary, the definition I find for *ponder* is: "*To weigh in the mind with thoroughness and care.*" This seems to me to be describing an intellectual process dependent upon accurate information and observation. Further, the Lord taught Oliver Cowdery, and all of us, an important lesson following Oliver's failure in his attempt to translate:

Behold, you have not understood; you have supposed that I would give it unto you, when you took no thought save it were to ask me. But, behold, I say unto you, that you must work it out in your mind; then you must ask me if it be right. . . (D&C 9:7-8).

Is the Lord speaking only here of the process of translating? I think not. I read this as the universal process of receiving direction, whether we call it inspiration or revelation, from the Lord. We must first do our home work. There is much we can do and we are expected to do all we can — then the Lord will, according to his purposes and in his time, provide the missing pieces.

As we "read, read, read, work, pray, and reread" we will put into our minds the necessary, the prerequisite, information and understanding that will enable us *to weigh in our minds with thoroughness and care* those significant messages of holy scripture which God would have us better understand.

This lesson and the two that follow will use the discourse of King Benjamin as a classroom in which to study and apply different aids and techniques of scripture study. I'm using these chapters recording Benjamin's speech because I know of no other English language scriptural text that has been laid open for the student study and scrutiny to the extent currently available with this text. As introduced in the last lesson, Jack Welch has done a masterful job of describing the structure of this text. With the aid of that structure even Benjamin's intent and thought processes can be the subject of serious and fruitful ponderings.

As befitting a classroom environment, Welch's structuring of Benjamin's text will make obvious some textual relationships and aids to meaning that will not be easily applied outside this "classroom." While not obvious in other texts, I suspect that much of what we see in Benjamin's structure is applicable to other scriptural passages; if not in exact correspondence at least in principle. For example, a form of Benjamin's parallelism is found in the poetic parallelism of Isaiah.

Let's now go and **Ponder King Benjamin's Discourse**.