



2. Studying and Interpreting the Book of Mormon

“ . . . They were men of sound understanding and they had searched the scriptures diligently that they might know the word of God.” (Alma 17:2)

“As I Search the Holy Scriptures” (Hymn 277)

As I search the holy scriptures,
Loving Father of mankind,
May my heart be blessed with
wisdom,
And may knowledge fill my mind.

As I search the holy scriptures,
Touch my spirit, Lord, I pray.
May life's myst'ries be unfolded
As I study day by day.

As I search the holy scriptures,
May thy mercy be revealed.
Soothe my troubled heart and
spirit;
May my unseen wounds be
healed.

As I search the holy scriptures,
Help me ponder and obey.
In thy word is life eternal;
May thy light show me the way.

Reading Strategies: Approaches to Scriptural Texts

- Establish the **context**
 - Who wrote this, who was the original audience, why was it written, how did the time period and culture affect how it was written?
- Careful **reading**
 - Ask questions—**what** is it saying and **why** was it written this way?
- Prayerful **pondering** of the text
 - **What did it mean** then, **what does it mean** to us now?
 - **Ask specific historical, literary, and theological questions** (more below)
- Consider scholarly contributions
 - From packet readings, commentaries, or reference works (or such material as summarized in class by the instructor)
- **Reread** and **prayerfully ponder** again!

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Read in Sections and Outline

- Avoid the tendency to take individual verses or passages out of context!
 - “**proof-texting**” is the process of using verses to prove **one's own** point rather than letting the text make **its** point
- **Divide chapters into sections** (*pericopes*, literally “a section cut around” or “cut out”)
 - Our verse and chapter divisions are late and not original to the texts
 - A **pericope** will usually describe one particular episode or addresses one theme or topic; often equivalent to a “paragraph” (¶)
- Delineate each section in your scriptures, perhaps dividing sections with a line
- Give each section a **title** or **identifying label**, perhaps writing the title in the margin
- **Use outlines** to see how the pericope fits into and relates to the entire book or epistle
 - Creating such outlines is called **structural analysis** and it provides a “road map” for your reading
 - See “Outlining Books of Scripture” (handout online)
 - (feel free to use my outlines: see the structural analyses in the packet or go to erichuntsman.com/Rel122/outlines.htm)

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Just an example . . .

2 NEPHI 16:1-17:3

2 NEPHI 17:4-25

9 And he said: Go and tell this people—Hear ye indeed, but they understood not; and see ye indeed, but they perceived not.

10 Make the heart of this people fat, and make their ears heavy, and shut their eyes;—lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and be converted and be healed.

11 Then said I: Lord, how long? And he said: Until the cities be wasted without inhabitant, and the towers without man, and the land be utterly desolate.

12 And the Lord have removed men far away, for there shall be a great forsaking in the midst of the land.

13 But yet there shall be a remnant, and they shall return, and shall be eaten, as a full tree, and as an oak whose substance is in them when they cast their leaves; so the holy seed shall be the substance thereof.

CHAPTER 17

Ephraim and Syria were war against Judah—Christ shall be born of a virgin—Compare Isaiah 7.

1 And it came to pass in the days of Ahaz the son of Jotham, the son of Uzriah, king of Judah, that Rezin, king of Syria, and Pekah the son of Remaliah, king of Israel, went up toward Jerusalem to war against it, but could not prevail against it.

2 And it was told the house of David, saying: There cometh a messenger unto thee with Ephraim. And his heart was moved, and the heart of the people, as the trees of the wood are moved with the wind.

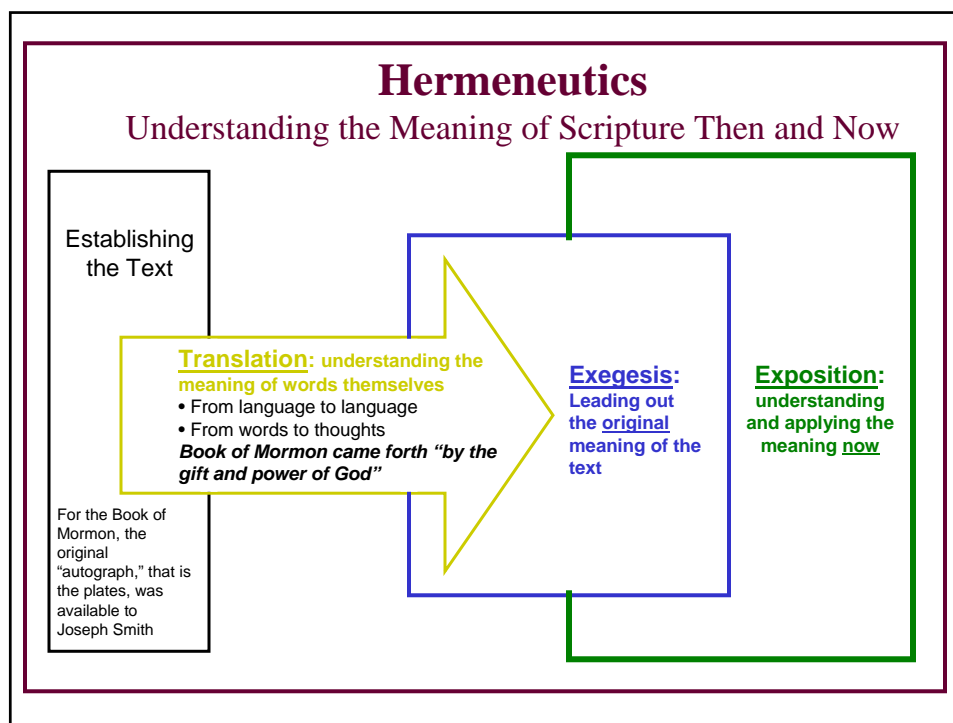
3 Then said the Lord unto Isaiah: 4 Go forth now to meet Ahaz, thou

16 In Isa. 6: 1 (3-13).
 2 In about 750 B.C.
 3 John 12: 41, 2 Ne. 11: 2.
 4 In Seraphim.
 5 In Isa. 1: 10 (14-18);
 6 In Isa. 1: 18, 20-26;
 7 In Isa. 1: 21, 24, 25;
 8 In Isa. 1: 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 45, 46, 47, 48, 49, 50, 51, 52, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 58, 59, 60, 61, 62, 63, 64, 65, 66, 67, 68, 69, 70, 71, 72, 73, 74, 75, 76, 77, 78, 79, 80, 81, 82, 83, 84, 85, 86, 87, 88, 89, 90, 91, 92, 93, 94, 95, 96, 97, 98, 99, 100.

17 In Isa. 7: 1 (1-25).
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 100 In Isa. 7: 1 (1-25).

“Interpreting” the Book of Mormon

- **Hermeneutics: how to interpret and understand texts**
 - From a Greek word meaning “translate” or “interpret”
 - “the science and art of biblical interpretation”
 - Includes **“translation”** in the broad sense (both from one language to another but also from words to thoughts) as well as **exegesis** and **exposition**
- **Exegesis: to understand better the original meaning . . .**
 - From the Greek “to lead out” or explain
 - **Definition: “the careful historical, literary, and theological analysis of a text” (Gorman, 8)**
 - A close reading and careful examination of a passage, section, or book
 - as opposed to “reading into” the text what we think it means—*eisegesis*!
 - **“Them, there, then . . .”**
 - What did the author intend when he wrote the text?
 - How did the first hearers or readers understand it?
 - Ask historical, literary, and theological questions to “lead out” the meaning of the text
 - Seeks to bridge historical, linguistic, cultural, and other gaps to our understanding of the original meaning
- **Exposition: application of the meaning to contemporary believers**
 - **“Us, here, now . . .”**
 - **What does it mean to us as readers?**
 - 1 Nephi 19:26, “likening” scripture to ourselves
 - Done more properly after exegesis!



Exegetical Questions

For more detail, see "Teaching through Exegesis: Helping Students Ask Questions of the Text" online

- **Historical Questions**
 - **Diachronic Exegesis** (through time): **when and why was this text written**, how did the information in it—from the original source, to the author, through editors and translators—get to us? **How did the culture and circumstances of the time affect it?**
- **Literary Questions**
 - **Synchronic Exegesis** (taken all at once): **What kind of writing is the passage** (genre or form); **how does it fit into its larger context** (effectively, how does it relate to the outline of its book); what are its literary aims (that is, what is the author trying to accomplish by including the passage); **what rhetorical devices, structures, and symbolism does the author use to make his point?**
- **Theological Questions**
 - **Existential Exegesis** (its effects on us, leading to **exposition**): **What principles or doctrines does this passage illustrate or teach**, and, just as importantly, **how does it engage and affect the reader?**
 - **Use the Title Page as a guide** for what Mormon and Moroni (and, ultimately, the Lord) thought were the most important questions

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Book of Mormon Sources

Historical Questions: How Did The Text Get to Us?

See packet: Welch & Welch chart 13; packet, 42; also *Reexploring the Book of Mormon* (1992), 17

- **Small Plates of Nephi** (1 Nephi—Omni; c. 600–130 B.C.)
 - Record of Lehi
 - Recollections and records of Nephi and subsequent prophet/record keepers
 - Plates of Brass
- **Words of Mormon** (c. A.D. 385)
- **Abridgment of the Large Plates of Nephi** (“Book of Lehi” or 116 lost pages; Mosiah—4 Nephi; c. 130 B.C.–c. A.D. 321)
 - Record of Lehi
 - Plates of Brass
 - Large Plates of Nephi
 - Speech of King Benjamin, record of Zeniff, records of Alma and sons of Mosiah, letters
- Mormon
- Abridgement of the Book of Ether
 - 24 Jaredite Plates
- Moroni
 - Letters from Mormon
- Title Page

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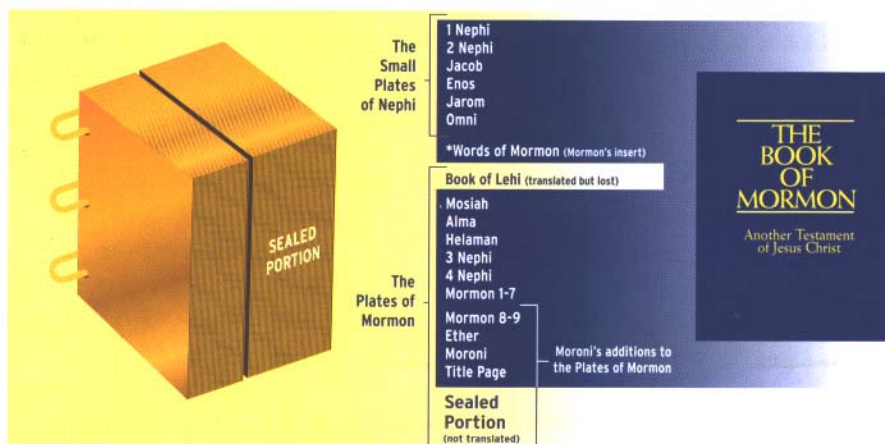
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Structure of the Book of Mormon

Book of Mormon plates delivered to Joseph Smith by the angel Moroni

Joseph Smith's translation of the plates—the Book of Mormon in its present form



* It is unclear whether Mormon inscribed Words of Mormon in space remaining on the small plates of Nephi or on an additional plate or plates he inserted into his record.

From *Book of Mormon Reference Companion*, 17.

Literary Aspects of the Book of Mormon

R.D. Rust, *Feasting on the Word* quotes on the beauty and significance of the literary aspects of the Book of Mormon

- “. . . **how the impact of *what the Book of Mormon says is created through how it is said.***” (2)
- “. . . a number of evidences suggest that much of its content was originally transmitted orally. **A ‘voice’ from the dust**, the book records what various prophets heard and taught.” (6)
- “Narrations, 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.” (10-11)

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Structure and Genre

Literary Questions

- How is it structured, and how does it fit into its larger context?
 - **Structural analysis**: outlining a book or section to see how pericopes fit together
- What kind of writing (**genre** or form) is the passage? See “What Kind of Writing Is this Passage” (packet, 33)
 - **Narrative**
 - telling a story
 - **Discourse**
 - connected speech or writing, extended thought on a subject “quoted” in the text
 - **Dramatic Episodes**
 - Combinations of narrative, discourse, and action to recreate a scene or event
 - **Poetry**
 - creative use of language in which words are chosen and arranged create a specific emotional response through meaning, sound, and rhythm

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Some Book of Mormon Genres

packet, 33

- **Narrative**
 - Introductions
 - Transition and Summary Reports
 - Editorial Digressions and Commentaries > e.g., “and thus we see” passages
 - Historical Narratives, often abridged summaries
 - Vision Reports
- **Discourse**
 - Parables and Allegories
 - Some Prayers
 - Exhortations, Sermons, Longer Speeches (oral treatments of principles or topics)
 - Treatises (longer, written discussions of a principle or topic)
 - Letters > e.g. Mormon's epistles to Moroni
- **Dramatic Episodes**
 - Apocalypse (e.g. 1 Nephi 1–14)
 - Historical Episodes (encounter with an antichrist, dialogues, battle scene)
- **Poetic Passages**
 - Psalms, hymns, prophecies (e.g. Isaiah quotes), some prayers

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Theological Questions

- **Theology**
 - Literally “the study of God”
 - Understanding who God is, what our relationship to him is, and what his plan for us is
- **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?
- For the Book of Mormon, use the Title Page to guide your study . . .

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Title Page Purposes Reviewed

- “Which is to show unto the remnant of the House of Israel *what great things the Lord hath done for their fathers . . .*”
- “*that they may know the covenants of the Lord, that they are not cast off forever . . .*”
- “And also to the convincing of the Jew and Gentile *that JESUS is the CHRIST, the ETERNAL GOD, manifesting himself unto all nations . . .*”

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Additional Materials

Review outside of class

Enrichment materials for further
background and clarification

Principles and Doctrine

- What is a Principle?
 - A comprehensive and fundamental law; gospel principles consist of eternal truths
 - Principles do not change, but practices and applications sometimes do
 - Principle of Sacrifice > Mosaic blood sacrifice, consecration, tithing
- What is Doctrine?
 - Teaching, something that is taught; an established principle, authoritative teaching
 - *In the Church today, the official doctrine of the Church are the teachings of the scriptures and the current apostles and prophets that we are directed to teach each other and take to the world*
 - **Gospel doctrines are the truths of salvation—the principles and teachings that make the Atonement effective in our lives**

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Interpretation and Understanding of Scripture

“Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation.”
(2 Peter 1:12)

- Interpretation
 - Understanding and applying doctrine and principles
 - “The ultimate interpretation of doctrinal matters rests with Apostles and prophets” (“Religious Education Mission Statement,” *Religious Education Handbook*, 3)
- As teachers, we teach
 - **The doctrines that the scriptures explicitly teach**
 - Remember that exegesis is only an attempt to understand what scripture mean “to them, there, then” before we apply it to “us, here, now”
 - The official doctrines of the Church
 - We follow the counsel of apostles and prophets
 - We consider and respect the writings and words of Church leaders
 - Note the difference between a private and official publication
 - We consider resources as just that, resources
 - Read the preface, for instance, to the Bible Dictionary!
 - **When we share our understanding or interpretation, we say that it is only that!**

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