

Teaching Objective

We understand the scriptures better when we study them in their context.

Themes

1. It is important to place scripture in proper context.
2. There are levels of context.
3. Avoid wresting the scriptures.

Teaching Ideas

1. It is important to place scripture in proper context.

- The word *context* comes from the Latin *contextus* or *contexere*, meaning “to weave together.” Therefore, words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs, and even larger works, such as chapters and books, can be part of a whole just as a fabric is composed of individual threads woven together. Therefore, the meaning of an individual portion of text must be understood in relation to the work as a whole, such as a word in its sentence, a sentence in its paragraph, and so on. The primary purpose of considering context, then, is to derive the correct meaning and intent of the author. By relying on isolated passages without giving due consideration to their context, misunderstandings and misinterpretations may result. In religion, using a passage of scripture irrespective of its context for the purpose of proving a preconceived idea is called proof-texting.

Provide students with a simple demonstration of scriptural context. An example of context influencing the meaning of a passage is the different situations in which Jesus used the simple proverb

“With what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you.” List the following three references on the chalkboard and have students determine the subject matter from the surrounding context of the passage:

1. Matthew 7:2 (judging)
2. Mark 4:24 (see vv. 21–25; heeding the teachings of Christ)
3. Luke 6:38 (giving)

2. There are levels of context.

- In written texts there are levels of context that should be considered. The three levels that are important in scripture study are the immediate setting, the context of a chapter or book, and the context within the gospel.

Immediate Setting. Consider the immediate setting of the word, phrase, sentence or passage. For example, have students read the definition of the word *hell* in the Bible Dictionary. Then discuss how understanding the historical significance of *Gehenna* helps them understand the meaning of the word *hell* in Matthew 5:22, 29–30 and other passages referred to.

It is important that students of the scriptures understand to whom the message is being directed. Statements that apply to one person or group often do not apply in the same way to others. The passages in the chart at the bottom of this page illustrate this concept. Note the misunderstanding that could result if everyone thought each passage applied universally.

Chapter or Book Content. Consider the broader context of a chapter within its own book.

Students of the scriptures must assume that individual books of scripture by authors inspired by the Holy Ghost not only have purpose but logical and coherent organization. Therefore, passages within the book should be studied and understood in the context of the complete book. For example,

Reference	Directed To	Incorrect Message	Intended Message
3 Nephi 13:25	The twelve Nephite disciples	No one should worry about providing for life’s necessities.	They should devote their full time to the Lord.
1 Corinthians 7:25–38; JST, 1 Corinthians 7:29	Those called to the ministry	It is better to be unmarried than to be married.	It is easier or better for missionaries if they are single.
Matthew 28:19	The eleven Apostles	Any follower of Christ may baptize.	Only those with authority can baptize.

Paul's statements in Romans 3:28 and Galatians 2:16 say that man is justified by faith, not by the "deeds" or "works" of "the law." Careful study of both books by the same author, however, indicates that when Paul used the phrase "the law," in many instances he was referring to the law of Moses, as contrasted with the gospel of Jesus Christ. He did not condemn obedience to the principles and ordinances of the gospel but he went to great length to explain that obedience to the statutes of the law of Moses or to the gospel in general was insufficient to gain salvation without the mediation and power of Jesus Christ. You may want to give examples of other concepts that can only be properly understood in the context of the complete book by a given author.

Gospel Content. Consider the context within the gospel as a whole.

Church leaders have repeatedly advised members to study all four standard works. Our leaders have implemented a four-year course of study of these volumes. One of the purposes of this program is to acquaint the Saints with the complete body of scripture. We are also encouraged to study in depth all of the relevant passages on a given subject so that we can have access to all the Lord has revealed on the subject. Many doctrines and passages of scripture can be correctly understood only in the context of the total gospel picture, much like a single piece of a picture puzzle takes on meaning only in the context of the completed puzzle. Elder Dallin H. Oaks, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, counseled seminary students:

"The scriptures do not set forth these doctrinal subjects in a comprehensive, organized list of rules, like the Internal Revenue Code or [Robert's] Rules of Order. For the most part, the scriptural teachings on the various doctrines of the gospel must be gleaned from a number of sources, each containing a less than complete account of the subject. . . .

"If we were left to gain a complete understanding of a gospel principle from what is mentioned in only one account, for example in the Old Testament, we could well misunderstand in part and stumble, even as many sincere followers of Christ did during the period we call the apostasy. This required the restoration of the gospel in our own dispensation. With that restoration came the Book of Mormon, another witness of Christ, and an outpouring of revelations addressed to the needs of our day. . . .

"An accurate and complete understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ requires us to use all of the scriptures available to us. This explains why the Lord has commanded us to 'search the scriptures' (John 5:39). It also helps us understand why it is dangerous to rest a firm conclusion as to a point of doctrine on a reading of only one passage of scripture" ("Studying the Scriptures," 5–6).

- Through scripture chaining, demonstrate how the following difficult scriptures can be properly interpreted in light of the gospel context as a whole:

Difficult Scripture	Scripture Chaining
Ephesians 2:8–9	2 Nephi 25:23; D&C 59:2; 93:11–14; 2 Nephi 10:24–25; Mosiah 4:8–10; John 15:1–11; Ephesians 2:8–9
John 1:18	JST, John 1:18–19; JST, 1 John 4:12; D&C 67:11–12; Daniel 10:5–10; Moses 1:11; D&C 84:21–22; John 1:18
Matthew 21:22	3 Nephi 18:20; Mormon 9:21; D&C 88:64; Matthew 21:21–22

Cross-references (provided in the footnotes and Topical Guide) are one of the best aids to putting given principles in context of the gospel as a whole. President Thomas S. Monson, a Counselor in the First Presidency, stressed the value of the Topical Guide and cross-references in a Churchwide satellite fireside in 1985:

"Let me illustrate how the new Topical Guide can be a blessing to each Latter-day Saint in his gospel study. Some years ago, President Harold B. Lee opened one of our auxiliary organization manuals and read to me a reference wherein the author had speculated concerning the meaning of a passage quoted from the New Testament. President Lee said, 'If only the author had known his Doctrine and Covenants, he would have known what the Lord had to say at a later time to clarify the biblical account.' Now there is no need for such confusion, for the cross-references in the Topical Guide are designed to solve such problems. Certainty has replaced doubt. Knowledge has overcome speculation" ("Come, Learn of Me," *Ensign*, Dec. 1985, 47–48).

3. Avoid wresting the scriptures.

- Dictionaries usually define the word *wrest* to mean to twist, force, or divert to an unnatural or improper use. To wrest the scriptures is to twist them or force an incorrect interpretation on them. In the following statement, Elder Marion G. Romney, then a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, pointed out the distinction between wresting and searching the scriptures:

"The word *search* [in the scriptures] means to inquire into, study, and examine for the purpose of discovering the meaning of. Searching implies more than just reading or even memorizing.

"When Jesus told the Jews to 'search the scriptures,' he was talking to men who prided

themselves on their acquaintance with the scriptures. They had spent their lives reading and memorizing them. They could and did quote reams and reams of scripture in support of their apostate rules and rituals. They had wholly failed, however, to discover the true message of the scriptures. . . .

"This incident from the life and teachings of Jesus [John 5:39] graphically distinguishes between searching and wresting the scriptures and reveals the awful consequences of wresting them. Searching them for the purpose of discovering what they teach as enjoined by Jesus is a far cry from hunting through them for the purpose of finding passages which can be pressed into service to support a predetermined conclusion. 'Behold,' said Alma, 'the scriptures are before you; if ye will wrest them it shall be to your own destruction.' (Alma 13:20)" ("Search the Scriptures," *Improvement Era*, Jan. 1958, 26).

Numerous passages of scripture warn us against false doctrine (sometimes spoken of as "leaven"), perverting the right way of the Lord, the traditions of men, the precepts of men, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men, private interpretation, trifling with the scriptures, and wresting the scriptures. Below are a few passages on this subject. You may want to select several to read, discuss, and mark with your class. You may locate additional references in the Topical Guide under the headings mentioned.

Wresting the scriptures

2 Peter 3:16
Alma 13:20–23
Alma 41:1, 9
Doctrine and Covenants 10:63

Perverting the right way of the Lord

2 Nephi 28:15
Alma 30:22, 60
Moroni 8:16

Teaching for doctrine the commandments of men

Matthew 15:9
Colossians 2:22
Titus 1:14

Within the scriptures themselves there are a number of examples of wresting or perverting the scriptures. Following are several passages you may

find helpful in illustrating how the scriptures have been wrested and the consequences that result:

1. *Jacob 2:22–3:5*. People justified immorality on the basis of practices in the Old Testament. Note that Jacob makes it clear in *Jacob 2:34; 3:1–5* that the commandment to practice monogamy was given to father Lehi; therefore they were ignoring the teachings of the living prophet in favor of the teachings of past prophets.
2. *Mosiah 12:20–21*. The priests of Noah used a quotation from *Isaiah 52:7–10* to justify rejection of Abinadi because, in their view, he did not fit *Isaiah's* description of a messenger of the Lord. Abinadi accused them of "perverting" the way of the Lord (see *Mosiah 12:25–27*).
3. *Alma 12:20–21*. Antionah used *Genesis 3:22–24* about cherubim and the flaming sword to question the Resurrection.
4. *Matthew 4:6*. Satan used *Psalms 91:11–12* to tempt Jesus.
5. *Matthew 15:5; Mark 7:11*. Pharisees encouraged the violation of the fifth commandment to honor parents by giving the support money to the temple and calling it a gift, or *Corban*.

■ Elder Boyd K. Packer, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, encouraged us to be involved in the breadth of the gospel in the following analogy:

"The gospel might be likened to the keyboard of a piano—a full keyboard with a selection of keys on which one who is trained can play a variety without limits; a ballad to express love, a march to rally, a melody to soothe, and a hymn to inspire; an endless variety to suit every mood and satisfy every need.

"How shortsighted it is, then, to choose a single key and endlessly tap out the monotony of a single note, or even two or three notes, when the full keyboard of limitless harmony can be played" (in *Conference Report*, Oct. 1971, 9; or *Ensign*, Dec. 1971, 41).

Supplementary Study Sources

- Bruce R. McConkie, "Ten Keys to Understanding *Isaiah*," *Ensign*, Oct. 1973, 78–83; a general pattern for studying scripture in context.

Suggested Student Study

None suggested.