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A NOTE IN FAVOR OF REREADING GREAT WORKS, INCLUDING THE SCRIPTURES

Daniel C. Peterson

Abstract: *When I was young, I learned an important lesson that has stayed with me through my life. This lesson has led me, on many occasions, to reread great works by great authors. The scriptures are no exceptions, and rereading them can be beneficial to any reader.*

When I was still quite young, perhaps around fourteen or so, the bishopric of my southern California ward asked the ward's home teachers to invite the families they visited to set goals for the coming year.

One night soon thereafter, my senior companion and I visited one of the homes to which we were assigned. It belonged to a couple in their fifties or early sixties, transplants from Utah (as many of the California Saints of that generation were), who had occasionally been active members of the ward but whose recent participation had been, at most, sporadic.

My senior companion told them of the challenge from the bishop and asked if there were any goals that they might like to set. The husband thought for a while and then, quite seriously, said he would like to have a million dollars in the bank.

My companion chuckled and replied that, while that might be a good ambition, he imagined that the bishop probably had goals in mind of a more spiritual nature, goals with which home teachers might be able to help.

The man and his wife could think of none.

After a couple of minutes, my companion suggested the goal of, say, reading the Book of Mormon or the New Testament during the coming months.

"Oh," the husband immediately responded, "but I've already *read* the scriptures."

It's a small thing but, for some reason, that little experience has stuck in my memory ever since. I can still remember the name of my senior

companion and of the married couple — though I think that I was only assigned to him and to them for a very short time — and in my mind's eye I can still see that scene in their living room.

Even then, as a young boy, it seemed odd to me to think of the scriptures as books you read through once and then are done with.

That's the way one reads escapist literature, pulp fiction. When, having completed a none-too-good detective novel, you know that the butler did it — in the kitchen, with a wrench — there's usually not too much reason to go back and read the book again. And certainly there would be little point in rereading it very carefully, lingering over each line, weighing each word, seeking to plumb the depths of the writer's mind.

For very good books, though, and especially for truly great ones, there is enormous value to be gained from reading them again and again, poring over them, reflecting upon them, reading them in different ways.

They can be read rapidly (say, the Book of Mormon or the New Testament in a month or a week or a long weekend) or slowly, lingering over every word and phrase or tracking down every cross reference. They can be read thematically, working through the Topical Guide. The Bible can be read in a fresh translation, or even in the original languages. The scriptures can be read in a language different from one's own or heard in an audio version. Read silently or aloud. Read alone or with a group.

I can confidently guarantee, based on at least some experience with every one of those approaches, that each of them will yield new insights and unexpected discoveries. Permit me to share a simple example from my own life.

For many years, I regarded the opening rhetorical salvo by Samuel the Lamanite as an example of bad, repetitious prose:

And he said unto them: Behold, I, Samuel, a Lamanite, do speak the words of the Lord which he doth put into my heart; and behold he hath put it into my heart to say unto this people that the sword of justice hangeth over this people; and four hundred years pass not away save the sword of justice falleth upon this people.

Yea, heavy destruction awaiteth this people, and it surely cometh unto this people, and nothing can save this people save it be repentance and faith on the Lord Jesus Christ, who surely shall come into the world, and shall suffer many things and shall be slain for his people. (Helaman 13:5–6)

Repeating the phrase *this people* six times in two sentences was, I thought, boring, even embarrassing, and definitely very poor style.

Reading the passage aloud one day, however, trying to place vocal emphases in what seemed the most appropriate places, I realized I was wrong.

Samuel, who deliberately stresses that he's "a Lamanite," is speaking from the wall of the city of Zarahemla to a violently hostile Nephite audience. They're wicked, but they're also inclined to think themselves superior because of their lineage.¹

In the preceding chapter (Helaman 12:4–7), the prophet Mormon had inserted an editorial comment, drawing not only upon the materials he was editing but also upon his own experience: "O how foolish," he exclaimed, "and how vain, and how evil, and devilish, and how quick to do iniquity, and how slow to do good, are the children of men. . . . Yea, how quick to be lifted up in pride; yea, how quick to boast" (Helaman 12:4, 5).²

His own view? "O," he exclaimed, reflecting on human resistance to God's authority, "how great is the nothingness of the children of men; yea, even they are less than the dust of the earth" (Helaman 12:7).

When I read Samuel's denunciation of the people of Zarahemla aloud, I understood it. The repeated condemnations of "this people" were followed by a promise that the divine Savior would enter into our world in order to "suffer" and "be slain for *his* people." Samuel was contrasting "this people" (the Nephites) with *God's* people. He was telling his prideful audience that merely being Nephites would not save them. Being faithful to their covenants and, thus, enrolled among the Lord's covenant people was their only hope of salvation.

The passage's repetitive drumbeat of *this people* was designed, I think, to emphasize the concluding *his people*. It's rather like what music theorists call "resolution," which is the move from a dissonant or unstable sound, either a single note or a chord, to a consonant or stable one. The irritating *this people* yields to the serene and comforting *his people*.

I learned from this little experience with reading the scriptures aloud that it's very helpful to hear them with our ears as well as in our minds.

As I say, very good books, and particularly truly great ones, are worth reading and rereading. They reward different *ways* of reading.

This isn't true only of the scriptures, of course. It's true for Plato and Dante, Milton and Goethe, Lewis and Tolkien, Hemingway and Fitzgerald, the works of Shakespeare, and many others. To view *Hamlet* or *King Lear* or *Othello* in different productions and with different actors is to see them differently and to notice things one had not noticed before.

1. Samuel's acute awareness of the ethnic issue is obvious at Helaman 14:10 and in Helaman 15:3–17.

2. For Moroni's own experience in regard to boasting, see Mormon 3:9; 4:8.

The novels of Jane Austen can be read over and over again not only with enjoyment but also with increasing insight and understanding.

Moreover, we are different readers at thirty, fifty, and seventy than we were at fifteen or twenty. We've had different experiences, for good and for ill. We've lived life. We've married, perhaps, had children, lost loved ones, experienced triumphs and failures, suffered betrayal, rejoiced at redemptions. Perhaps we were even clever readers in high school or as college freshmen. But cleverness is not enough. There is reason behind Plato's requirement that the philosopher-kings in his *Republic* must be not only rational, intelligent, self-controlled, simple in lifestyle, lovers of wisdom, and capable of making prudent decisions on behalf of their community but also, minimally, fifty years of age.³ Constitutionally, the minimum age for a president of the United States of America is thirty-five.⁴

I own a "quadruple combination" — a single volume containing the King James translation of the Old and New Testaments, the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price — that I brought with me as an incoming freshman at Brigham Young University. It has long since passed into decay and decrepitude and is falling apart. But I keep it — partly for sentimental reasons and partly because it's very instructive to me about the person I once was. I myself have also moved solidly into decrepitude and decay. I, too, have begun to fall apart. Looking into that book, though, I'm reminded of ways in which I've changed and, I hope, improved.

I was an ambitious marker of scripture in those days, and my old "quad" is extensively marked. There are marginal annotations about thoughts that had occurred to me, linguistic notes about underlying Greek and Hebrew terms, and insights I had picked up at lectures. And there are many passages that are underlined or highlighted because, obviously, they had particularly caught my attention or had seemed especially significant.

What amazes me, though, is to notice the passages I had *not* underlined or colored. These include many verses that are now enormously important to me. And sometimes they're right there in the neighborhood of the passages I had marked, though seemingly unnoticed. In fact, for more than a few cases, I can no longer remember why I highlighted the passages that I did.

3. Plato, *Republic*, VI–VII; https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1497/1497-h/1497-h.htm#link2H_4_0009

4. U.S. Constitution, Article II, Section I, Clause 5; <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/constitution-transcript#toc-section-1--2>.

It's not the scriptures that have changed, I have. My interests, my needs, and my perceptions have been altered over the years. (It would be tragically sad — wouldn't it? — if they hadn't.) Seeing and understanding this strengthens my conviction that the wisdom to be gained from the scriptures is mortally inexhaustible, their depths unfathomable.

And that virtually infinite richness is one of the principal reasons for the very existence of *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* and, indeed, for the Interpreter Foundation itself.

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