

SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES FOR DOCTRINAL UNDERSTANDING

(revised 2021-07-31)

- The focus here is on tools that you can use for the rest of your life, not on specific examples.
 - Give someone a fish and feed them for a day; teach them how to fish and feed them for a lifetime.
 - Education is what you still know (how to fish) after you forget all the stuff you learned (ate your fish).
- This handout does not comprehensively cover every scripture study tool out there. But it does provide a conceptual framework for thinking about scripture study tools, and it covers enough to make you effective.
- Also see: LDS Gospel Library App > Lessons > Institute > [Scripture Study: The Power of the Word](#).

1. SEARCHING IS PART OF STUDYING THE SCRIPTURES

1.1. One of the Reasons for Scripture Reading is to Obtain Doctrinal Understanding

- Three things should happen as we spend time in the scriptures, either in class or at home. In class we should additionally learn *how* to make these three things happen when we go back home.
 1. Testimony: *Read* to get a 15-30 minute daily dose of the Holy Ghost, like eating, exercising, or shaving;
 2. Doctrinal Understanding: *Study* to learn doctrines of general application as taught by the prophets; and
 3. Personal Application: *Read or study* to trigger promptings that apply to our personal lives.
- Lesson: There is a difference between a doctrine of general application, and on the other hand a prompting that may apply to your personal life but is not what the prophet was teaching.
 - Doctrines of General Application: Moses tells us in Genesis that Jacob worked for seven years as agreed but was then tricked into marrying the wrong bride. Perchik (Fiddler on the Roof) says the moral is “Never trust an employer.” This is a laugh line because we know this is not what Moses intended to teach.
 - Promptings for Personal Application: The story of Jacob might nevertheless trigger inspiration to Perchik about something that is true and important in his personal life, such as not trusting his current employer.
- Strategy: In addition to whatever I might read into a passage for myself (personal application), I consciously look for what the author actually intended to teach (doctrinal understanding) ([2 Pet 1:20-21](#); [3:16](#)).

1.2. Doctrinal Understanding Requires Searching and Pondering

- The general toolset for seeking understanding is: (1) search; (2) ponder; and (3) pray ([3 Ne 23:1](#); [17:2-3](#)).
 1. **Searching** is lower order thinking that gets external information created by others into your head.
 2. **Pondering** is higher order thinking that analyzes and synthesizes things you know in order to create new information or understanding of your own.
 3. **Praying**, and having your heart drawn out in prayer, seek to supplement your natural abilities.
- Thinking occurs in two modes. We switch back and forth between these two modes.
 1. **Focused Mode** is being highly attentive to something, such as playing a video game, working a math problem, or driving downtown in an unfamiliar city at rush hour. Searching happens in focused mode.
 2. **Diffuse Mode** is letting your brain draw connections without close control. The extreme example is dreaming while you sleep, but you are also often in diffuse mode while wide awake. Although pondering happens in both modes, it may be helpful to think of pondering as making connections in diffuse mode.
- Always learn well enough to teach. Who says you have to wait for a teaching assignment to scare you into learning something well enough to teach it? Search, ponder, and pray – even when learning only for yourself.

1.2.1. Searching

- Searching requires diligence ([3 Ne 23:1](#); [D&C 88:118](#)). It often takes thirty minutes of putting ideas into my head before I start to draw new connections. And if you want to become proficient at something, there is no substitute for accumulated hours on task over an extended period of calendar time.
- General Strategy: For decades I have spent 5-10% of my scripture study time not studying the scriptures, but thinking about *how* I study the scriptures and seeking smarter ways of searching. This is like stopping to sharpen my axe while chopping down a tree, and it likewise makes the remainder of my study time much more efficient.
- Strategy: Use your brain and make notes when you study any important subject – including the scriptures. Make notes on paper or a computer, and look at resources, just like studying a novel before a college exam. In the October 2017 General Conference, [Elder Nelson](#) (then President of the Quorum of Twelve Apostles) said that he writes out notes when seeking to understand the scriptures. I occasionally spend scripture study time reviewing several notebooks and a computer subdirectory full of my old notes. I find that I can relearn what I have forgotten much more quickly than I can figure out something new, and I am often pleasantly surprised at things I used to know.
- A major purpose of searching is to just get things into your head so you can ponder them. Do not try to memorize. Just become familiar with a passage in the same way that you are familiar with the story of The Three Little Pigs. Or with any other story that you could tell in your own words in a thirty second condensed version, or a ten minute embellished version, or anything else in between.
- Lesson: It is much easier to recognize a relationship between concepts when those concepts are in fact actually related. It is both harder and less useful to make up connections that the author never intended.
 - Strategies: [Parts 2.1](#) and [3.3](#) below explain specific strategies that can be used to identify chunks of text that the author likely intended to connect in a significant way.

1.2.2. Pondering

- Much of pondering is looking for connections between the ideas in your head while the Holy Ghost guides and confirms. Brainstorm and reason until you finally stumble onto something the Holy Ghost can confirm.
 - Step back from the trees and look at the entire forest until you can see it as a well planned orchard.
 - My best pondering often occurs while driving down the highway or mowing the lawn. *Not* while staring at the page with my brain in focused mode, but with my brain relaxed in diffuse mode.
- Lesson: I recognize the relations between concepts much more quickly when I already know the answer.
 - Strategy: Once I identify a group of concepts that are likely related to each other, I see if I can explain those relations in terms of a framework that I already know. When this works, it increases the efficiency with which I can recognize the relations between concepts. It also helps me to understand that group of concepts in broader or more generalized terms.
 - For example, a generalized relational framework I often use in my topical study is Head (beliefs), Heart (desires), and Hands (abilities). I first recognized this framework one evening as I went to bed with my brain in diffuse mode. Over the next two hours, about every fifteen minutes or so, I recognized how this framework also explained the relations among yet another group of concepts, including:
 - Deliberate Action: Lectures on Faith says faith is a principle of action because you would not act to plant in the spring unless you believed you would harvest in the fall. I see three principles or preconditions to deliberate action. You will not mow someone's lawn: (1) if your Head does not believe that you will get paid; or (2) if your Heart does not desire the offered payment more than it desires to go swimming; or (3) if your Hands lack the ability to mow because your arm is broken.

- Agency: When (1) your Head has accurate information about the choices available to you; and (3) your Hands are at liberty to act upon those choices; then (2) you are free to pursue the desires of your Heart.
- Good Social Institutions: The Book of Mormon discusses two social institutions that protect agency: (1) the church provides your Head with accurate information about the nature of your choices; and (3) the state protects the liberty of your Hands to act upon those choices.
- Bad Social Institutions: Good institutions are opposed by: (1) anti-Christ's that seek to fill your Head with false information; and (3) secret combinations that seek to tie your Hands.
- Devil: Satan largely tries to: (1) fool the Head; (2) entice the Heart; and (3) force the Hands.
- Fruits and Gifts of the Spirit: (1) Fruits of the Spirit provide your Head with information by confirming truth, teaching, and bringing things to your remembrance; and (2) sanctify the desires of your Heart and provide it with motivation and comfort; while (3) Gifts of the Spirit, or miracles such as healings, supplement the natural abilities of your Hands.
- Faith, Hope, and Charity: (1) Faith is the Head's belief in the reality of the path that Lehi saw leading to the tree of life; and (1) Hope is the Head's belief that you are actually on that path and moving forward; while (2) Charity is the Heart's desire to reach out and help others join you on that path.
- God's Characteristics: (2) God's Heart is fully constrained by traits such as truth, justice, and mercy; while (3) his Hands are unconstrained and omnipotent; and (1) his Head is unconstrained and omniscient.

2. STRATEGIES FOR SEARCHING BASED ON THE FORM OF COMMUNICATION: UNIVERSAL FORMS OF COMMUNICATION BASED ON BIOLOGY

2.1. Chunking, Relation, and Importance

- There are several tools we can use to understand a text that are based on how the brain works. This may be the single most important concept described here, and it is the foundation for Part 3.3 below.
- The conscious memory system is often modeled to consist of three parts:
 - **Sensory Memory (SM)** takes in new information from our senses. But the capacity of SM is limited to only a few seconds. Information is quickly lost unless we move it into WM by paying attention.
 - **Working Memory (WM)** makes sense of information. WM is very smart. But its capacity is limited to only a few seconds, and to only a few items at a time. Adding a new item to WM usually pushes out an old item. And information is quickly lost unless we move it into LTM by understanding it.
 - **Long Term Memory (LTM)** stores information. The capacity of LTM is vast. It can hold a large amount of information for a very long time, even after we stop paying attention to it. But LTM is dumb. It is incapable of actually doing anything useful with all the information it holds.
- Without consciously thinking about it, we learn to use three strategies that work around the limitations of WM to get information stored away in LTM for future recall:
 1. **Chunking.** We acquire information in small chunks and combine them into larger meta-chunks. We identify chunks and meta-chunks by looking for cohesion. In a narrative story or movie, a new chunk begins where there is a break in cohesion, or a break in the unities of time, place, character, and action.
 2. **Relation.** We relate new chunks to old information that is already in LTM. This allows the new information to be retrieved from LTM. WM quickly chunks and indexes new information before storing it away in LTM.
 3. **Importance.** Information that is perceived as important is held longer in WM, is processed more times while in WM, and is related to more concepts for better retrieval out of LTM.

- Without consciously thinking about it, we also learn to use three corresponding strategies when speaking that make it easier for our listeners to understand:
 1. **Cohesion.** We give a chunk of information cohesion (or stick-togetherness) to indicate where it begins and ends. We drop the pitch of our voice at the end of a chunk. We pause at the end of a chunk. Within a chunk we use pronouns, and we maintain unity of time, place, character, and action.
 2. **Linking.** We begin a sentence with old information that our listener already understands and then use a verb to attach some new information to that understanding. We introduce a larger chunk with a transition explaining how it relates to old information (The final reason this idea makes sense is that ...).
 3. **Prominence.** We perceive things that are different as being unusually important. When telling a story, we often change the pitch and speed of our voice at the most important points to indicate that these chunks are unusually important. In writing we often use bold and italics to draw attention to a word.
- These three tools are used well in the story of **The Three Little Pigs**. There are four top level chunks: an introduction plus three episodes in which the wolf tries to blow down three houses made of straw, sticks, and bricks. Repetition of the same pattern in each episode provides cohesion that helps us to recognize each episode as a separate chunk. This pattern also relates these three episodes to each other in a way that excludes the introduction. This tells us to think about a larger meta-chunk that includes these three episodes, and only these three episodes in order to understand the main point. And when the house of brick does not fall down, we know this difference is important to the story. Even a young child can figure out how to chunk, find relations, and recognize what is most important.
- A well written essay likewise makes it easy for WM to comprehend new information. An essay uses periods and paragraph breaks to indicate cohesion, uses transitions to link and explain the relations between paragraphs, and uses a thesis sentence and topic sentences that state key points in prominent locations. Once I began to think of the five paragraph essay as a way to work around the limitations of WM, my writing immediately improved. I wish I had known this back in high school.
- Lesson: You can understand every sentence in a book, and still miss the author’s main point, unless you understand how the train of thought develops from one chapter to the next. You cannot understand the story of the Three Little Pigs until you understand how the three episodes are related.
- Strategy: I look for an author’s use of cohesion to identify chunks, use of linking to indicate how the chunks are related to each other, and use of prominence to indicate what is most important. **If people communicate this way, because people understand this way, then why would I not read this way?**
- Strategy: In the scriptures, verse and chapter breaks often occur in the middle of a cohesive chunk. So I cut and paste the text into my word processor where can I re-chunk the text, and then I add my own headings to indicate how I think the chunks are related and what I think are the main points.
- Strategy: Once I recognize a meta-chunk and the smaller chunks that comprise it, I get them into my head and ponder the relations between them as I drive, mow the lawn, or go to bed (for example, the three episodes in The Three Little Pigs, or the paragraphs of an essay). Until I understand the relations between the largest chunks in a text, I do not claim to understand the author’s overall message.

3. STRATEGIES FOR SEARCHING BASED ON THE FORM OF COMMUNICATION: FORMS OF COMMUNICATION BASED ON ANCIENT ISRAELITE CULTURE

Lesson: Nephi says that, in order to fully understand ancient Jewish scripture, we must learn “the manner of prophesying of the Jews” ([2 Ne 25:1, 5](#)). I am aware of three culturally-based communication strategies in ancient Israel that are often not learned in western society: (1) symbolism; (2) historical parallelism; and (3) literary parallelism. In each case we must first recognize *how* something is said in order to understand *what* is said.

3.1. Symbolism

- Lesson: The Israelites frequently used symbols, metaphors, and allegories.
- In church we usually learn to recognize some major symbols: atonement and cleansing; shepherd, sheep, and lambs; vineyard and fruit; mountain and temple; marriage supper of the bridegroom.
- Less familiar symbols common to the ancient Near East include:
 - Oceans and other large untamed bodies of water: death, evil, chaos ([Rom 6:3-5](#); [Acts 27](#); [Ether 6:5-11](#)).
 - Air or wind: life, spirit, Holy Ghost ([Gen 2:7](#); [Acts 2:2-4](#); [Ether 6:5-11](#)).
 - Horses, chariots, and sometimes locusts: armies, war, invasion ([Isa 2:7](#); [Joel 1:4-6](#); [Rev 9:7](#)).
- Numbers
 - 3: presidency or presiding
 - 4: all, as in the four winds, four corners of the earth, or four directions of the compass
 - 7, 70: completion, fulfillment, or perfection
 - 8: accountability
 - 40: preparation
- I usually interpret symbols in broad and non-specific terms. For example, in Revelation the number 6 stands for imperfection, and 3 often represents presidency. So I just interpret the number 666 to stand for being in charge of evil. I then look for anyone who fits that type or pattern. I do not try to make the numerical values of the Hebrew letters in someone's name add up to 666.

3.2. Historical Patterns or Parallelism

- Lesson: The Israelites often used past historical events as types or patterns for future historical events.
- Exodus Pattern: (1) leave a home of plenty and comfort but limited opportunities for growth; (2) mature through adversity; until (3) qualify for a promised inheritance. Examples: Moses, Lehi, LDS Pioneers, Adam & Eve leaving garden, all of us coming to mortality, children going off to college.
- The Book of Mormon was written by four authors who each used a different device for teaching historical prophecy: Nephi (Isaiah), Jacob (Zenos), Mormon (Nephite history), Moroni (Jaredite history).
 - Nephi quoted Isaiah, who described (1) the Israelite world of: (a) Egypt; (b) Assyria; (c) Israel; and (d) Babylon.
 - Mormon described a similar (2) Nephite world of: (a) Nephites; (b) Lamanites; (c) church; and (d) worldliness.
 - The Book of Mormon was written to the last days ([Morm 8:34-35](#)), and Isaiah's words "have been and shall be" ([3 Ne 23:2-3](#)), so we should also look for parallels in (3) the last days: (a) rich liberal democracies; (b) expansionist authoritarian states; (c) God's church; and (d) worldliness.
 - Nephi delighted in Isaiah ([2 Ne 11:2, 4-6](#)). He recognized the historical parallels because was familiar with (1) Isaiah's day ([2 Ne 25:5-6](#)), and he saw in vision (2) Nephite days and (3) last days ([1 Ne 12-14](#)).
 - In the last days we can likewise understand Isaiah ([2 Ne 25:7-8](#)). We have records of (1) Isaiah's day and (2) Nephite days, and we are familiar with (3) the last days, so we can likewise recognize the historical parallels to understand Isaiah.
 - Strategy: It may be easier to understand Isaiah by replacing every appearance of (1) (a) "Egypt" and (b) "Assyria" with their historical parallels (2) (a) "Nephites" and (b) "Lamanites."
- Strategy: Again, I focus broadly on *what* a historical symbol is rather than on *who* it is. Iraq today is not Babylon. Japan a hundred years ago was an Assyria, but today it is an Egypt.

3.3. Literary Patterns or Parallelism

3.3.1. How Literary Parallelism Works

- While the communication strategies of cohesion, linking, and prominence are universal (See [Part 2.1](#) above), these global strategies are often implemented with tools that are specific to a particular culture.
- **Lesson:** The author’s outline in ancient Israelite scripture is often a patterned repetition of concepts, frequently in the form of assertions and analogies that modern readers would not call logical proofs. This is the least familiar concept in this handout, and it will require repeated practice to become proficient.
- **Strategy:** When reading two passages as a pair, you can read them like an impressionist painting, focusing on the overall image rather than individual brush strokes or words (see [Isa 3:18-23](#) where you can understand the message without understanding every word). This is not always the best way to read, but often it is.
- There are four generalized patterns of repetition:
 1. a-a' – b-b' – c-c' – d-d' (**parallel lines** that rhyme content in the way that couplets rhyme sound) – [Isa 2](#)
 2. a – b-c-d – a' (**inclusion** or *inclusio*) – [D&C 121:34-40](#); [3 Ne 27:13-21](#); [Joshua 19:17-23](#)
 3. a-b-c-d – a'-b'-c'-d' (**parallel lists**) – [Amos 1-2](#) (eight times); Luke-Acts (twice, [see p. 8 below](#))
 4. a-b-c-d – d'-c'-b'-a' (inverted parallelism “>” or **chiasmus** “X”) – [Alma 36](#); Daniel 1-9 ([see p. 8 below](#))
- Chiasmus is the ancient Jewish equivalent of the modern five paragraph essay. Both forms of writing employ cohesion, linking, and prominence to indicate chunks, relations, and importance. But chiasmus implements these strategies with a set of cultural conventions that are unfamiliar to the modern West.
 - **Cohesion to indicate chunking.** The beginning and endpoints of a chiasm (a ... a') indicate where the large meta-chunk begins and ends, thus providing the entire chiasm with cohesion (or stick-togetherness). The pattern of inverse repetition within a chiasm also identifies each of the smaller chunks (a-b-c-d – d'-c'-b'-a') contained within that larger meta-chunk.
 - **Linking to indicate relations.** The pattern of inverse repetition also links certain chunks to certain other chunks (a to a', b to b', c to c', and d to d').
 - We are used to comparing and contrasting stories and main characters. In chiasmus, blocks of text that are opposite each other in parallel positions should likewise be read as a pair. In [Daniel 3](#) the king is *unable to harm* the three friends who *refuse to pray* to an idol. In the parallel story of [Daniel 6](#), the king is *unable to preserve* Daniel who *insists on praying* to God. In both cases God preserves the faithful, and God is shown to be more powerful than even the king.
 - Location within a chiasm matters. Ask not only: Why did the author say *this*? But ask also: Why did the author say this *here*? The visions of four beasts in [Daniel 7-8](#) are placed out of chronological sequence in order to place them opposite, and to indicate a relation to, the vision in [Daniel 2](#) of the statute with four parts. Location often matters in ancient Jewish writing.
 - **Prominence to indicate importance.** The most prominent location in a chiasm is at the very center. That turning point is where the main lesson or point of the entire chiasm or meta-chunk will be found. Often there is a location of next greatest importance at the very edges, or at the beginning and end of the chiasm. And often the concepts found at the middle and at the edges reinforce each other, thus making the most important message even clearer.
- The point of using literary tools is to understand the author’s message, not to force square pegs into round holes. These patterns are only useful to the extent they help us understand what the author intended to say.
- Highlighting and cross-referencing are often sufficient to understand a verse or a short passage. But to understand an entire chapter or book, you have to follow the author’s train of thought from one passage or chapter to the next. You must understand the outline (or “literary structure”) of what the author has written.

At the level of a chapter or book, you must often understand *how* or *where* an ancient Israelite author says something in order to understand *what* they are saying.

- Literary structure often reveals hidden questions that then become easy to answer. In 1 Ne 3-4 (>[4:24-25](#)), at the very center and climax of this trip to the treasury, Nephi takes the plates. This is not a surprise since the entire story has been building to this moment. But at this central point Nephi also takes Zoram. This did surprise me. But once I recognized the prominent position in which this is stated, I quickly recognized a lesson in the parallel stories about how the Lord will treat wicked leaders like Laban (3x to destroy) differently than followers like Zoram who are unable to see past the trappings of authority and are therefore misled in sincere ignorance (3x to preserve).
- Literary structure often shows me *where* the main point is before I understand *what* the main point is. In Gen 37-50 (>[44:6-17](#)), I recognized, years before it finally clicked in my head why, that the cup in Benjamin's sack is the center of the entire Joseph cycle. At the beginning Joseph has a vision of his brothers bowing to him, in the cup incident at the middle they agree to be his servants, and at the end Joseph establishes the House of Israel by caring for his servant-brothers. This established the House of Israel by ending the pattern of descendants all going off in different directions as occurred in the previous three generations. And the brothers' willing submission was a key part of this event.
- [Leviticus 16:7-10](#) (the scapegoat on the Day of Atonement). The books of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers literally point to Christ's atonement like a ">". This does not instantly make every passage in those books easy, but it does tell you to read them as supporting, or in light of, this central concept.
- Do not be constrained by punctuation or by chapter and verse divisions. These were all added much later. Also, while English punctuation is now based on the logic of grammar, it used to be based instead on the need that public speakers had for clues about where to pause for breath, and how long to pause for best effect (wherever you see colons used like periods, commas, and semicolons, you are seeing that older system).
- "I know it when I see it." You are qualified to make your own subjective judgments about literary structure. Yes, like beauty, it is often found "in the eye of the beholder," and others may disagree with what you see. Some scholars, understandably, want to reach academic consensus by applying objective statistical analysis, and that approach may have some merit. But in my opinion, patterned repetition was intended to assist understanding and memory, not to hide meaning until the invention of higher math. People in ancient Israel were expected to recognize literary structure as the scriptures were read aloud, even without doing calculus-based statistics in their heads in real time. You were better fed as a child than the average Israelite peasant, you are better educated, you have greater access to the scriptural text, and you will probably live longer. So if Israelite peasants could be expected to understand a passage, then so can you – once you likewise become proficient in the manner of prophesying of the Jews.

3.3.2. Examples of Literary Parallelism

[D&C 111](#) (chiasmus: a-b-c-d – d'-c'-b'-a')

- a. I forgive your follies (1)
- b. Much treasure (2)
- c. People in city, promptings (3-4)
- d. Concern not yourselves about ... (5)
- d'. Concern not yourselves about ... (6)
- c'. People in city, promptings (7-9)
- b'. More treasures than one (10)
- a'. Be wise (11)

Daniel (chiasmus: a-b-c-d – d'-c'-b'-a')

- A. The king's food, personal purity (1)
- B. Vision of the statue in four parts, last one with ten toes (2)
 - C. Three friends in the fiery furnace (3)
 - D. King Nebuchadnezzar's pride and insanity (4)
 - D'. King Belshazzar's disrespect of God at feast and his destruction (5)
 - C'. Daniel in the den of lions (6)
- B'. Vision of the four beasts, last one with ten horns (7); also the vision of two beasts (8)
- A'. When will Jerusalem be purified (9)
- B''. Vision of the two warring kingdoms (10-12)

Revelation (chiasmus: a-b-c-d – d'-c'-b'-a') - you can get the main point without understanding every detail

- A. John's commission (1)
- B. The imperfect church as it exists in the world today (2-3)
 - C. God and Christ praised by the righteous; the imperfect first six seals in which man rules (4-7)
 - D. Transition to seventh seal: Seven trumpets sound (8-11)
 - E. The real underlying conflict between the dragon and the Lamb (12-14)
 - D'. Transition to seventh seal: Seven bowls poured out (15-16)
 - C'. Fallen Babylon lamented by the wicked; the perfect seventh seal in which Christ conquers the dragon and reigns on earth (17-20)
- B'. The perfected church as it will exist at the end of time (21-22a)
- A'. John's commission (22b)

Luke-Acts (parallel lists: a-b-c-d – a'-b'-c'-d')

What happened to Paul at the [end of Acts](#)? If Acts is read by itself, then we don't know. Paul appealed to be tried before Caesar in Rome, but we do not know how the trial turned out. But if Acts is read in parallel with Luke, then everything that happened in Luke in the life and ministry of Christ is repeated in Acts in the life and ministry of his followers. Now we understand that – like Christ – Paul and everyone on the boat symbolically died and was resurrected, and that this will happen to everyone. Now the ending is both satisfying and profound.

- | | |
|--|---|
| A. <i>Luke 1-4a</i>
Four pairs of episodes mostly with John / Jesus
(merged pair when Mary visits Elizabeth) | A'. <i>Acts 1-5</i>
Four pairs of episodes with Peter & John /
full body of apostles |
| B. <i>Luke 4b-9</i> | B'. <i>Acts 6-12</i> |
| C. <i>Luke 10-19a</i>
Christ's Judean ministry
Three times: I must go to Jerusalem
> In Jerusalem: Jews rejected (13:34-35) | C'. <i>Acts 13-21a</i>
Paul's missionary journeys
Three times: I must go to Jerusalem
> In Athens: Gentiles invited (17:26-27) |
| D. <i>Luke 19b-24</i>
Christ's four trials, death, resurrection,
seen of many | D'. <i>Acts 21b-28</i>
Paul's four trials, shipwreck, seen of many at
Rome, no fifth trial recounted |

3.3.3. Examples of Light Bulb Moments: I See a Repetition. Is It Intentionally Patterned?

These repetitions each caught my eye and caused me to search the larger passage for other repeated elements. This is what patterned repetition looks like to me when I first start to see it but have not yet worked it out.

- D&C 6: – a gift, another gift ([10-13](#), [25-28](#)); a witness, another witness ([14-17](#), [22-24](#))
- First Nephi – each half has three stories, a hard steel object that does not save, and a soft brass one that does
 - edited to be silent about the tools used to build the boat since that would confuse the parallel symbols
 - “brass and steel” can teach the concepts of symbolism and literary parallelism even to a young child
- Mosiah – compares Benjamin at the beginning and Noah in the middle to draw a lesson at the end
 - and in between groups go down to the land of Nephi, and then two groups return to Zarahemla
- Third Nephi 11-30 – Christ settles doctrines about which there is to be no more contention ([11](#), [27](#))
 - Old World scriptures given to Nephites ([12-14](#), [24-25](#))
 - discourses on the scattering and gathering of Israel ([15b-16](#), [20b-23a](#))
- Ether – two great faith speeches ([3-5](#), [11](#))
 - two sets of main characters: Jared and his brother ([1-6](#)), Coriantumr and Ether ([12-15](#))
 - camp four years before crossing water ([2:13-14](#)) and before final destruction in battle ([15:14](#))
 - Jaredites arrive in eight boats ([3:1](#)) and are wiped out in an eight day battle ([15:15-31](#))
 - Jared’s four sons decline the throne ([6:14](#), [27](#)), Coriantumr’s four challengers ([13:23](#); [14:3](#), [11](#), [16](#))
 - Coriantumr twice fights battles involving both Moron and Akish ([14:4-6](#), [11-14](#))
 - two periods of great prosperity ([9:16-20](#); [10:19-28](#))
- Matthew has five major speeches – parables of apostasy and restoration ([13](#))
 - instructions on growing the church through missionary work ([10](#)) and on administering the church ([18](#))
 - Sermon on the Mount ([5-7](#)) and Olivet Discourse (or sermon on the mount of olives) ([24-25](#))

3.3.4. Practice Exercises to Develop Proficiency with Literary Parallelism

1. Without looking at any resources, work through and diagram [Alma 36](#). Then read [Daniel 1-9](#) and diagram the relationships between the chapters (don’t worry about the vision in Daniel 10-12). You can do your diagram in a word processor or on a sheet of paper. It may take multiple drafts.
 2. Then read [Esther](#) and [D&C 1](#) while referring to the outlines ([Esther](#), [D&C 1](#)) on the LDS-oriented scripture wiki at [FeastUponTheWord.Org](#).
 3. Then read [Ether](#) and [Amos](#) while again referring to the outlines ([Ether](#), [Amos](#)) on the same site, or printing or reading the oversized pages of newspaper-formatted text ([Ether](#), [Amos](#)) that I have posted online. After reading Ether, tackle the [Question in Part 6](#) below for [Ether 8:20-26](#). The point of answering the question this time is not to test content mastery, but rather to demonstrate to yourself how you can better understand Moroni’s train of thought by thinking in terms of this question and searching for cohesion, links, and prominence.
- It will take time to get comfortable with Ether or Amos. This is study, not just reading. Fluency in any form of communication takes practice, and there is no substitute for time on task. You will get better as you practice thinking in terms of symbolism and patterned repetition of chunks. Working through these exercises can help you to become proficient much more quickly than I did through trial and error.
 - Working through these exercises will also teach you how to evaluate for yourself, when someone else points out a repeated pattern, whether the repetition is intentional, and if so, what it means.

4. STRATEGIES FOR SEARCHING BASED ON THE CONTENT OF COMMUNICATION

This Part 4 finally gets past *how* something is said to instead focus on *what* is being said.

4.1. Starting Out

- Just read. Before you start searching out the meaning of a book of scripture, you have to be somewhat familiar with its content. At some point you will want to move from just reading what is said to thinking about what it means. But the first step is just to read and become familiar with a book of scripture.
- Skim through chapter headings to quickly remind yourself of the big picture of what you have previously read.
- You can memorize passages if you want. But do not let memorization turn into blindly sequential recall. Understanding is more likely to flow from hierarchical recall based on relations of meaning. People who instead memorize sequentially can freeze up without any sense of where they were headed conceptually.

4.2. Reading Individual Authors

- Strategy: Take each author on their own terms. For example, different author's sometimes use the same word in different ways. Alma uses the word "hope" in [Alm 32](#) to mean you would like for something to be true, but you do not yet have any confirmation. But when Moroni uses the word "hope" in [Moroni 7](#) in the middle of "faith, hope, and charity," it means an expectation of personal salvation that, like faith, is based on a confirmation by the Holy Ghost. So do not automatically assume that all of the associations one author has attached to a word or idea will automatically attach to another author's use of the same word or idea. They often do, but not always.
- I think the debate is overblown regarding Paul's emphasis on grace and James's emphasis on works. I think it is easy to reconcile the two if that is your goal. But the debate does at least highlight the importance of reading each author on their own terms.
- Strategy: Think about the situations in which characters find themselves, how they see those situations, and how they respond.
- Strategy: Think about the message being taught at each level of writing or editing. Ask: What message is Alma trying to communicate to his original audience? Then ask: What message is Mormon trying to communicate to his modern audience by including that speech in his account of Nephite history?
- Strategy: Look for statements by the author of the reason for writing. This is more frequently provided in the Gospels and the Book of Mormon. "Now this is written to you so that ..." "And thus we see ..."

4.3. Topical Study Across Multiple Authors

- Topical study is about synthesizing doctrinal concepts across multiple authors rather than analyzing an individual author's message. This is a big part of why we read, but it is different than reading to understand the points an author is trying to make in a chapter or book.
- Strategy: Highlight and cross reference significant passages. Follow the footnotes at the bottom of the page in the LDS edition of the scriptures. Build scripture chains. Follow the scripture chains in books (Articles of Faith, A Marvelous Work and a Wonder) and in talks by church leaders. If you cannot figure out how to do this when reading electronic scriptures, then you need to either read a paper copy you can mark on, or else organize your scripture chains in notebooks or computer files.
- Strategy: Use the [Topical Guide](#) to study a word, a subject, or a symbol. Or use the ability to search for words in the online scriptures at churchofjesuschrist.org or in the LDS Gospel Library app.

5. STRATEGIES FOR SEARCHING THAT LOOK OUTSIDE THE WRITTEN TEXT

- Linguistics (discourse analysis) seeks to understand a passage in light of its **context**, **text**, and **co-text**. When I study a book of scripture, I look for a “bookshelf” of resources that collectively address all three of these approaches. Some of these resources do not exist for some passages, but this is the ideal.
- This Part 5 adds two more ideas to what has already been covered:
 - Read the text and co-text in light of their situational context; and
 - Read commentaries to learn what others already know. But remember that scholars are fallible, often disagree, and have an incentive to publish new ideas even if the old ideas are already correct. So read them as food for thought, evaluate their conclusions for yourself, and feel free to disagree.
- **Context (or Setting)**. A text is often intended to address a specific situation. Understanding that situation can help you better understand the text. Yelling “Fire!” means different things in different settings (frosty campsite, crowded theater, target practice, etc.). It is worth pondering a text, not only in light of related chunks and symbolism as discussed above in Parts 2-3, but also in the context of its situation. For the Old Testament prophets, the New Testament epistles, and the Doctrine & Covenants, that situational context is largely missing and must be obtained from outside resources. Situational context can be found in:
 - Historical setting (including the situation of the story and of the author and original audience);
 - Doctrinal setting, or the religious beliefs and understanding (correct or incorrect) of the audience;
 - Cultural setting, or the cultural literacy and customs of the author and original audience;
 - Geographic setting, including climate and political neighbors (pictures, videos, maps); and
 - Biographical sketches of main characters when none is provided in the story (Doctrine & Covenants).
- **Text**. Text refers to the actual words you are studying.
 - The original text, or a critical text showing textual changes over time (such as Royal Skousen’s work on the text of the Book of Mormon).
 - For those like me who do not read Greek or Hebrew, compare alternate Bible translations. I like and trust the [NRSV](#), [NIV](#), [NASB](#), [Amplified](#), JPS (1985 print edition), [Gileadi/IIT](#). Also refer to [Strong’s Greek](#) and [Hebrew Lexicons](#) ([BibleGateway.com](#), [Biblia.com](#), [Blueletterbible.org](#), and [BibleHub.com](#)).
 - Identify passages in the text that quote from other earlier scriptures.
 - Linguistic analysis (discourse analysis) of the text, outline of the text, and reformatted text with headings. These should be based on the communication strategies discussed in Parts 2-3 above. You can do much of this yourself, and it will force you to engage with cohesion, linking, and prominence.
- **Co-Text**. Chunks of text should be understood in light of their larger meta-chunks, or the surrounding co-text. I look for commentaries that treat chunks of text as parts of a larger whole, or as contributing to the main points of the entire book. I find it unproductive to try, or to read commentaries that try, to extract every ounce of meaning from a verse. My experience is that people usually communicate to clearly make one or two main points, not to simultaneously make several subtle points and see how many you can get.
- **Interpretative Commentary**. Interpretation of the text, or telling what the text means, can be based on: (1) the reasonableness of logic applied to the context, text, and co-text; and/or (2) the authority of inspiration. The following types of interpretive commentary occupy different points along that continuum:
 - Scholarly commentaries and LDS course manuals.
 - Uncanonized statements about the text by church leaders ([BYU Citation Index](#)).
 - Subsequent scriptures that quote or interpret portions of the text, and the Joseph Smith Translation.

6. COMPREHENSION SELF-TEST QUESTION

- Lesson: Learning is faster (but sometimes blindered) when given focus by good questions. A good question (a fishing tool) is thus often more valuable than a good answer (a fish).
- In Lectures on Faith the overall structure is a series of three questions: (1) What is it? (2) How do you get it? and (3) What are its effects? I have expanded upon and reused that set of questions with regard to hope, charity, meekness, humility, etc. The set of questions I found in Lectures on Faith is at least as valuable as its answers about faith.
- Strategy: I seek out and develop sets of questions that I can use over and over again. I have developed the following self-test question for use when I study a chunk of scriptural text:

Discuss the following passage: _____ by:

- (a) Identifying the principal message(s) the author attempts to convey in this passage;
 - (b) Explaining why you believe this is the author's principal message, including:
 - (i) describing the situation that gave rise to the events or statements recorded in this passage, the situation of the audience for whom it was recorded, etc.; and
 - (ii) outlining the author's train of thought in developing this message throughout the passage;
 - (c) Identifying any larger units of thought to which this passage belongs (group of chapters, book, etc.) and explaining how this passage supports and develops the principal message(s) of those larger units; and
 - (d) Identifying any significant applications or doctrinal contributions of this passage, either alone or in conjunction with other specific passages.
- To fully answer this question, I have to address all of the approaches described in this handout.
 - I have to account for hierarchically organized chunks, the relations between those chunks, and relative importance. When applicable, I should also account for symbolism, historical parallelism, and any other tool for understanding a text that I learned from literature or linguistics (Parts 2-3).
 - I have to address the context, the text, and the co-text (Part 5).
 - I have to cross reference across authors throughout the scriptures (Part 4).
 - I have to decide what doctrines of general application are being taught and what personal applications I should draw from the text (Part 1.1).
 - This question is open book, open note, and can be answered in bits and pieces while in the car, mowing the lawn, or falling asleep. I just have to say the answer. This is a great way to ponder a passage out loud.
 - Strategy: When I am unable to answer part of this question, then I have identified a question that can focus my study on something that is likely to yield a significant new insight. Hooray for another efficient learning strategy!

7. Three Final Thoughts

- **Do not be intimidated.** Nobody with a day job has yet satisfied this ideal for the entire scriptures.
- **Do not lose focus.** The ultimate goal in mortality is sanctification, not intellectual understanding. Scripture study is intended to support personal development and good works, not to replace them.
- **Do talk with family or friends** about what you learn regarding how to study and about the new insights you have. You will likely learn more by occasionally brainstorming with someone than either of you would learn on your own. And if the Holy Ghost is bearing witness and someone else happens to wander into the room, then you just scored an additional bonus.