

## How Shall We View the Scriptures?

This morning, I would like to begin a discussion of the scriptures with reference to the Old Testament, the Jewish portion of the Bible. For the Jewish people, the bible – what we call the Old testament – is composed of three sets of writings, known as the Torah (or the Law), the Prophets, and the Writings.

Authorship of the first five books of the Bible, the “Law,” is credited to Moses, although modern study has revealed variations in style, and repetitions and contradictions, that make it unlikely that this body of literature was the work of a single author. For the Jewish people, the “people of the book” as Mohammad referred to them, these books form the basis of their religion. They contain their covenant with God, “the Master of the Universe,” and may not be changed. It is only their meaning that may be debated, as Jewish scholars have done since time immemorial.

The books known as the “Prophets” include Joshua, Judges, I and II Samuel, I and II Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the twelve minor prophets (which are treated as one book). The “Writings” include Psalms, Proverbs, Job, the Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Daniel, Nehemiah, and Chronicles.

In addition to the written scriptures, there is what is known as “Oral Law.” Orthodox Jews believe that G-d taught the oral law to Moses, who passed it down through successive generations to the present day. This tradition was maintained only in oral form until about the second century C.E., when the oral law was compiled and written down in a document called the Mishnah. The Mishnah is divided into six sedarim or orders, and each seder contains one or more sections known, in English, as tractates (63 tractates in all).

Ever since the Mishnah was published, it has been studied exhaustively by generation after generation of rabbis. Discussions by rabbis in Babylon and Israel, concerning the written scriptures and how to interpret or understand them and apply the Law, were written down in a series of books that became known as the Gemora, which when combined with the Mishnah (the written compilation of the oral law) constituted the Talmud.

As you know, Jesus was a Jewish rabbi. Before being ordained to the office of rabbi, he would have had to have memorized not only the entire Old

Testament but the oral law as well (since the oral law still hadn't been committed to writing while he was alive). Fortunately for him, he would not have had to memorize the Gemora, since most of those discussions and debates didn't happen until long after he was dead.

I cannot emphasize enough (1) the inviolability of the Torah and (2) the centuries of debate that have gone into its interpretation and application – the Jewish people have wanted to understand the Law that God has given them and have gone to great lengths to do so.

As a church, we have been counselled to study the scriptures, just as our Jewish friends do; and so, this morning, I would like to consider with you the origin and meaning of the scriptures, beginning with a few verses from the Gospel according to St. Luke:

[Luke 10:25] And, behold, a certain lawyer stood up, and tempted him, saying, Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?

[Luke 10:26] He said unto him, What is written in the law? how readest thou?

[Luke 10:27] And he answering said, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbour as thyself.

[Luke 10:28] And he said unto him, Thou hast answered right: this do, and thou shalt live.

[Luke 10:29] But he, willing to justify himself, said unto Jesus, And who is my neighbour?

[Luke 10:30] And Jesus answering said, A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves, which stripped him of his raiment, and wounded him, and departed, leaving him half dead.

[Luke 10:31] And by chance there came down a certain priest that way: and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side.

[Luke 10:32] And likewise a Levite, when he was at the place, came and looked on him, and passed by on the other side.

[Luke 10:33] But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was: and when he saw him, he had compassion on him,

[Luke 10:34] And went to him, and bound up his wounds, pouring in oil and wine, and set him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him.

[Luke 10:35] And on the morrow when he departed, he took out two pence, and gave them to the host, and said unto him, Take care of him;

and whatsoever thou spendest more, when I come again, I will repay thee.

[Luke 10:36] Which now of these three, thinkest thou, was neighbour unto him that fell among the thieves?

[Luke 10:37] And he said, He that shewed mercy on him. Then said Jesus unto him, Go, and do thou likewise.

So, I ask you, was the story of the Good Samaritan a true story? Was it historically accurate? Did that Samaritan really take care of that injured traveller? Or could it be that Jesus made up that story to illustrate a point? [Allow time for responses] And if so, was he, in fact, lying? [Allow time for responses]

My Concise Oxford Dictionary defines “parable” as “Fictional narrative used to typify moral or spiritual relations.” Jesus used many of these little stories-with-a-moral. In fact, in the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew, we read:

[Mat 13:31] Another parable put he forth unto them, saying, The kingdom of heaven is like to a grain of mustard seed, which a man took, and sowed in his field:

[Mat 13:32] Which indeed is the least of all seeds: but when it is grown, it is the greatest among herbs, and becometh a tree, so that the birds of the air come and lodge in the branches thereof.

[Mat 13:33] Another parable spake he unto them; The kingdom of heaven is like unto leaven, which a woman took, and hid in three measures of meal, till the whole was leavened.

[Mat 13:34] All these things spake Jesus unto the multitude in parables; and without a parable spake he not unto them.

If Jesus spoke in parables, can it be so wrong to do so? Which brings us back to “How shall we view the scriptures,” these sacred writings – writings that are made holy by their association with or acceptance by some religion – that are regarded as authoritative and, according to some people, not to be questioned. [Allow time for responses]

Many Christians believe that the Bible is the literal Word of God – that it was, in fact, dictated by God word for word. I have even heard it said, in favour of the King James version of the Bible, that “If Medieval English was good enough for Jesus and his disciples, it’s good enough for me.” But what do

you believe about scripture, and what does our own church teach about it?  
[Allow time for responses]

The great Hindu epics, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana are regarded as scripture even though their stories, containing as they do references to Hanuman, the monkey-headed general, and Ganesha, the elephant-headed god, are even more fanciful than the story of Balaam's ass, which is found in the 22<sup>nd</sup> chapter of Numbers. You remember that story, don't you:

[Num 22:21] And Balaam rose up in the morning, and saddled his ass, and went with the princes of Moab.

[Num 22:22] And God's anger was kindled because he went: and the angel of the Lord stood in the way for an adversary against him. Now he was riding upon his ass, and his two servants were with him.

[Num 22:23] And the ass saw the angel of the Lord standing in the way, and his sword drawn in his hand: and the ass turned aside out of the way, and went into the field: and Balaam smote the ass, to turn her into the way.

[Num 22:24] But the angel of the Lord stood in a path of the vineyards, a wall being on this side, and a wall on that side.

[Num 22:25] And when the ass saw the angel of the Lord, she thrust herself unto the wall, and crushed Balaam's foot against the wall: and he smote her again.

[Num 22:26] And the angel of the Lord went further, and stood in a narrow place, where was no way to turn either to the right hand or to the left.

[Num 22:27] And when the ass saw the angel of the Lord, she fell down under Balaam: and Balaam's anger was kindled, and he smote the ass with a staff.

[Num 22:28] And the Lord opened the mouth of the ass, and she said unto Balaam, What have I done unto thee, that thou hast smitten me these three times?

[Num 22:29] And Balaam said unto the ass, Because thou hast mocked me: I would there were a sword in mine hand, for now would I kill thee.

[Num 22:30] And the ass said unto Balaam, Am not I thine ass, upon which thou hast ridden ever since I was thine unto this day? was I ever wont to do so unto thee? And he said, Nay.

[Num 22:31] Then the Lord opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel of the Lord standing in the way, and his sword drawn in his hand: and he bowed down his head, and fell flat on his face.

As a church, we tend to think of scripture as writings which teach about God and His relationship with His creation; and we teach that the scriptures provide divine guidance and inspired insight for life when responsibly interpreted and faithfully applied.

We believe in an open canon of scripture. We believe that God continues to reveal Himself to humankind and, as a result, we have a mechanism through which we continue to add to our scriptures. The process through which God reveals divine will and love is called revelation. God continues to reveal today as in the past. God is revealed to us through scripture, the faith community, prayer, nature, and in human history.

(The Bible is the central book of scripture for the church. The Book of Mormon and the Book of Doctrine and Covenants are thought of as additional witnesses of the love of God and the ministry of Christ.)

Although we espouse three books of scripture we do not limit the truth of God to either (1) previous revelation, or (2) future revelation given only through the prophet of the church; neither do we limit the truth of God to past understandings. As we read in Section 147 of Doctrine and Covenants: "Instruction which has been given in former years is applicable in principle to the needs of today and should be so regarded by those who are seeking ways to accomplish the will of their heavenly Father. But the demands of a growing church require that these principles shall be evaluated and subjected to further interpretation. This requisite has always been present. In meeting it under the guidance of my spirit, my servants have learned the intent of these principles more truly."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See also Section 149 of the D & C: Revelation given through W. Wallace Smith, prophet and seer to the church, April 1, 1968.

[Sec 149:4] Some of you have sought security in the words and phrases by which the faithful of earlier days have expressed their knowledge of me. My ways are still the ways of my Son. My servants of the holy priesthood will need to be alert as never before to see that my work is not vitiated by the designs of the adversary. They must also bring to their

Furthermore, to the extent that we accept the instruction given to the church and recorded in our book of Doctrine and Covenants, we believe in finding wisdom wherever it can be found (and, I might add, in my opinion much of it can be found in scriptures of faiths other than our own). In Section 85 (known as "The Olive Leaf"), for example, the church is admonished:

[Sec 85:36a] ...Call your solemn assembly, as I have commanded you; and as all have not faith, seek ye diligently and teach one another words of wisdom; yea, seek ye out of the best books words of wisdom; seek learning even by study, and also by faith.

In fact, to the extent that we believe our own scriptures, we believe that God has spoken to people throughout the ages, and not only to the Jews, the early Christian church, and the Church of Jesus Christ restored; and it is probably safe to say that the RLDS church believes that God has revealed Himself to people throughout the world throughout the ages, in ways appropriate to their cultural development and understanding, and that He is the "one God" of love that is responsible for the diverse manifestations of the Golden Rule. The Book of Mormon, for example, admonishes:

"Thou fool, that shall say, A bible, we have got a bible, and we need no more bible. ...because that I have spoken one word, ye need not suppose that I can not speak another; for my work is not yet finished; neither shall it be, until the end of man.... Wherefore, because that ye have a bible, ye need not suppose that it contains all my words; neither need ye suppose that I have not caused more to be written: For I command all men, both in the east, and in the west, and in the north, and in the south, and in the islands of the sea, that they shall write the words which I speak unto them: ..For behold, I shall speak unto the Jews, and they shall write it: And I shall also speak unto the Nephites,

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searching for truth and their service to my people all the treasures of understanding I have opened for them elsewhere. It is necessary for all to promote unity so that my blessings can be yours as you willingly bend your strength to kingdom-building enterprises.

[Sec 149:5] My servants of the leading quorums are commended for their diligence in seeking more light and truth from all available sources. For have I not told you that my glory is intelligence and he that seeketh learning by study and by faith will be rewarded in this life and the life to come?

and they shall write it; And I shall also speak unto the other tribes of the house of Israel, which I have led away, and they shall write it; And I shall also speak unto all nations of the earth, and they shall write it.”

Then there are the stories that form the major part of the New Testament, stories of the Virgin Birth, Christ’s miracles, the resurrection, and so on. Spong and Pagels are the names that come to mind as having argued that these and many of our other favourite Bible stories are literally beyond belief. I would argue, in contrast, that they are only beyond belief if taken literally; and beliefs such as this don’t have to be taken literally. In fact, not all of the church’s teaching, either through scripture or tradition, were even intended to be either taken as either literally or historically correct.

It is said that the meaning of a communication lies in the response that it evokes. Personally, I think that was and continues to be the purpose of the Bible and its many fanciful stories: The Bible was constructed to instruct, and it is our job to determine just what we can learn from it.