



Chris Tunnicliffe

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# What the Author Had in Mind

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## Text vs. Context in Mormon Scripture

By Kira Pratt Davis

**M**y husband and I were sitting in our Sunday School class listening to our teacher, a Ph.D. candidate in New Testament studies at Catholic University, explicate John 5:39: "Search the scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life."

"This does not mean what you think," he said. "Here Jesus is pointing out that the Jews are putting all their hopes for eternal life in outward performances. They think reading the scriptures is enough, while Jesus is actually . . ."

I elbowed my husband and whispered, "But if enough people *think* that this means Jesus wants us to study the scriptures, doesn't it eventually come to mean that?"

He smiled. "Do you really think it's all as relative as that?" I didn't know. I still don't.

This Sunday School teacher of ours (who also happens to be our good friend) insists that meaning is a stable and constant thing; the meaning of a text is the intention of the person who wrote it, refracted through that person like light through mottled glass, quirky and individual because of the writer's culture and personal idiosyncrasies. To discover the real meaning, our friend maintains, you have to look at the author's background, what was being said and done at the time the work was written. The real meaning, because it is the author's original intention, cannot change; it is permanent, inflexible, and "out there somewhere."

But looking at an author's intention, or at the author's personality, and in some way anchoring the meaning to the person who wrote the work, is just one of three general ways that people find meaning in a text. One can also look at texts themselves as the primary authority on what they have to say, or one can look at the readers of a text and take their conclusions as the real meaning of a text.

### WHAT DID THE AUTHOR INTEND?

For a long time people studied and deciphered literature by looking at authors. They read

Shakespeare's will and wondered about his "second best bed"; they tried to guess who the "dark woman" of the sonnets might be, and the identity of the mysterious young man. Wordsworth's letters and diaries were carefully searched for clues to his private system of symbols and for events in his personal life that gave greater significance to certain of his poems than they would otherwise have deserved. The scribblings that Blake made in the margins of his Bible have been published and dissected, as if the real meaning of Blake's or of anyone's works lay not in the poetry, but was still somehow locked up in the author and had to be pried loose. With the advent of Freudian analysis an author's neuroses became part of the "meaning" of his works, and authors like Eliot, Pound, and Yeats began writing an intensely personal, obscure kind of poetry that counted on being solved almost as much as on being read. Poetry itself became almost a side issue, a vehicle for entering the life or the psyche of the poet.

But this type of criticism, this method of getting at the meaning of a work put quite a strain on readers. One had to study much more than the text in order to find its meaning. This approach is further limited by the fact that a poem can mean a great deal more than its author says it means; Coleridge, for example, claimed that the poem "Kubla Khan" was the artifact of a senseless opium dream.

We face many of the same problems when we try to base all the meaning in our scriptures on the person(s) who wrote them. We want the scriptures to be accessible, not requiring knowledge of ancient burial customs or Roman law in order to make sense of Sarah's death or Jesus' parables. And, just as in literature, we sometimes discover more meaning in a passage than its author likely intended. For example, we read Isaiah talking about the desert "blossoming as a rose" as if he not only saw the little band of pioneers setting up camp in Utah, but saw ZCMI and the Central Utah Water Project as well. Granted, it may be that God saw those things and inspired Isaiah to frame his thought in those

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particular words so that we could understand it in our own way; but this brings up a whole new author and a whole new intention.

We Mormons have still other problems with anchoring the meaning of our scriptures to their human authors. Many of the passages in our sacred texts are identical (or nearly identical) but are cited in different contexts as the words of different people. Must we try to figure out what Isaiah had in mind in those Isaiah passages quoted in the Book of Mormon? Or must we try to work out the understanding Nephi had of those words, what *he* and not necessarily Isaiah thought they meant? Or must we look at Joseph Smith as the mind through which the Book of Mormon had to filter, perhaps collecting Joseph's own personal associations and ideas along the way? The same problem arises with the quotations from Paul in the Book of Mormon: does the "meaning" change from what Paul had in mind to what Mormon and Moroni were thinking there, on the brink of destruction, about faith, hope, and charity? A change in the perceived author can drastically alter the meaning of a text.

This point was vividly illustrated for me once when our Sunday School teacher passed around some survey sheets in class. The survey contained five rather thought-provoking quotes, attributed on half the surveys to General Authorities and on the other half to non-Mormons, anti-Mormons, sociologists, and psychologists. There was a space by each statement to respond *yes* or *no* to show whether we agreed or not. The teacher gently chided me for disagreeing with this statement, attributed to Mark Leone, "non-Mormon anthropologist and student of Mormonism":

*Though general authorities are authorities in the sense of having power to administer church affairs, they may or may not be authorities in the sense of doctrinal knowledge, the intricacies of church procedures, or the receipt of the promptings of the Spirit. A call to an administrative position of itself adds little knowledge or power of discernment to an individual.*

The statement was actually made by Bruce R. McConkie. The teacher said that we shouldn't let the authorship of a statement interfere with our judgment: "If a statement is true, it's true no matter who said it."

I felt uncomfortable with this approach as well, and eventually I figured out why I disagreed with the statement when it was made by Mark Leone and more or less agreed with it when Elder McConkie said it. When the statement came from an outsider who obviously didn't believe that the Church leaders got any "promptings of the Spirit" in the first place, it seemed to me a bit condescending and ironic, as if Mr. Leone was sure his audience would agree that these "authorities" were no authorities at all, and that the Mormons blundered along after them as best they could. Yet when I knew Bruce R. McConkie

had said it, I knew that he meant added knowledge and inspiration don't come naturally to a newly called Church leader and that every leader has the responsibility of going out and earning that knowledge and inspiration. Changing who said it greatly affected what I thought was said. Yet the teacher insisted that we should be able to take these statements on their own merits, without the advantage (or the disadvantage) of a "historical" context.

Our teacher had changed his stance here. In the case of John 5:39 he insisted on an interpretation centered on the author's background and intention. I think he may have been stressing such a historical approach in order to counterbalance the popular interpretation of that scripture. He was educating the class, giving them a more academic look at an ancient text. He's probably right—a fact or two is cleansing once in a while. His approach with this little survey, on the other hand, was very text-oriented. There he was trying to pry the class opinion of these statements loose from the church-standings of the persons who made them—trying to get us to agree or not with them with our own minds, uninfluenced by Church authority. He changed his stance to fit what he wanted to teach, maintaining that it was important to know where ancient texts come from, but that it was important, also, to be able to make up our minds, independently, about what's true and what isn't. Both stances seem reasonable, but they imply very different assumptions about what is best to consider in deciphering meaning.

#### **WHAT DOES THE WORK SAY?**

There was a movement in literary criticism, a reaction against author and context-fixated criticism, which tried to take works of literature the way our teacher wanted us to take those statements (and *not* the way he wanted us to take John 5:39). This school, known as the New Critics, thought that a text should be its own best authority, that searching for "what porridge had John Keats" for example, was not the right way to arrive at the meaning of "Ode on a Grecian Urn." They wanted meaning to come directly from the text. These critics analyzed poetry as if the clues necessary to work out the meaning were all right there in the text. This was, at least, a democratic approach. Meaning was accessible, in theory, to any moderately well-informed reader. All anyone had to do was read carefully, and he or she would find the meaning, which lay in the words themselves, and not in the author's hidden intention or underlying neuroses.

This might also have been a nice way to look at scripture. It would be comforting to believe that everyone who reads the scriptures carefully will arrive at the same Real Meaning. Unfortunately, this isn't the case. It seems that readers bring along their own private associations and prejudices, their varying degrees of skill and imagina-

tion, and their own motives when they interpret a passage of scripture. Consequently, they arrive at different Real Meanings.

Another problem with simply studying the text is that it can take us very far from the author's original intention and whatever claim that intention has on the meaning. Quirky changes in customs and in language from time to time and from place to place can totally transform meaning. One of my favorite examples of this comes from an essay called "Shakespeare in the Bush" by Laura Bohannon, a woman who spent some time living with the Tiv tribes in West Africa. To pass the time one rainy day, she told them the story of *Hamlet*. The story made perfect sense to the tribesmen, but it was a sense that included general approval of Claudius's marrying Gertrude (mourning wasn't sensible—who would till the woman's fields?); bewitchment of Hamlet by one of his male relatives, most likely Claudius; Laertes's killing Ophelia to sell her body to the witches to get money for fines imposed on him for fighting; and Hamlet issuing a proper hunter's warning in his mother's room when he called out "a rat!" before stabbing Polonius. It is not hard to imagine a similar cultural gap existing between us and the writers of the Old Testament. I dare say Isaiah would be as taken aback by our understanding of the desert blossoming as the rose as Shakespeare would be by the Tiv understanding of *Hamlet*.

Gaps between cultures and times are not the only problems we face when we attempt to understand the scriptures through their words alone. Some texts inherently provoke our distrust. With the Bible we envision shadowy middlemen, scribes who miscopied or even purposely changed the text given by God. This seems to give us license to rearrange and reinterpret parts of the text according to our convictions of God's real intentions, as guided by latter-day revelation. Thus we read God's rebuke to Job not as a taunt at Job's foolishness and presumption, but as a hint of our premortal existence: "Where was thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? declare, if thou hast understanding. . . . When the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy?" (Job 38:4-7.) In the same way, because we are sure Jesus wanted to tell us to read the scriptures, we read "Search the scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life" as an admonition and not as a rebuke or a step in a logical argument.

#### WHAT DO THE READERS BELIEVE?

Even when we're sure we have a "pure" text, such as the Book of Mormon or Doctrine and Covenants, we do not make our interpretation based solely on the text. For example, the Book of Mormon warns against polygamy; it spends several pages talking about how harmful it is and includes only a verse or two of loophole for those special cases where God might command it. Yet

our interpretation concentrates on that little loophole, and we see the passage as a general sanction of the principle. Obviously, we are consulting something else to find the meaning of our scriptures; namely, the interpretation our community as a whole makes of a piece of scripture. This is the third of the three ways of making sense of something written—going to informed readers, the "interpretive community," to find out what a text means.

The term *interpretive community* comes from Stanley Fish, a modern critic who says that the opinions of the educated make up the meaning of a text. These opinions exclude from the text's meaning things the reading community sees as ridiculous, far-fetched, or uninformed. Correct interpretation, according to this view, is simply an interpretation that a group of people in the know agree upon. This seems like a very relative, secular, and humanistic definition of true meaning, and yet this is our most common method for deciding what our scriptures mean.

Critics like Fish say that the meaning of a text is the reader's own invention—a thought that can be at once both obvious and shocking: It's obvious that texts are human inventions made up of language, which is itself an invention, a set of tentative agreements about meaning that survives only because we all keep on agreeing, yet shocking to think that there is no absolute meaning apart from our agreement, no actual innate sense to a text. The only sense is the sense we make; it's all in the subtle contract between author and readers, and in the sense and order-loving faculties of our minds. We the readers build a sense to go with a passage, and the only thing that limits the meanings a passage can have is the agreement of the community.

Yet there are problems with this approach to meaning, both in literature and in scripture. The meaning attributed to a work by a group of readers may be very far from what the author originally intended. We must decide whether that matters. And the portion of "real meaning" agreed upon by all the members of a large reading community may be so small that it becomes trivial: Wordsworth enjoyed the daffodils on the hillside, and Jesus wants us to be good and love each other; but beyond these basic points, there is very little reader agreement on the meaning of Wordsworth's poem or Jesus' words. In addition, a reader may feel very well informed and skillful, yet still reach entirely different conclusions from the rest of the community.

The Mormon interpretive community is very strong. It announces its opinions in dictionaries and commentaries and sneaks them in through cross-references. So thorough is this effort that it becomes difficult to get past the official opinions to read the texts themselves without bias or to examine historical backgrounds with no preconceptions of what took place. Our interpretive community tells us what the scriptures mean,

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and the meaning our community espouses becomes the meaning that acts in our minds. That's why I nudged my husband in Sunday School: "If enough people say this, doesn't it come to mean this?" The scriptures are, in a very practical way, not for private interpretation. They are for interpretation by our parents, primary teachers, seminary teachers, sacrament meeting speakers, mission presidents, General Authorities, and correlation committees. Our inspired texts are not left to be interpreted according to the whims of every reader; the play of meaning is limited by an official and, we hope, inspired paraphrase.

However, this relative, reader-based way of making sense tends to leave the text itself and the author's intention dangling. After all, one feels just a bit strange going to a source outside of both the text and the author for the "true meaning" of a work. Perhaps we don't mind it so much because we feel that the real author of our scriptures is God, and that he will tell us by inspiration through the proper authorities what his words are supposed to mean. The peculiarities of context, history, and personality will slough off along with the author's original intent, as the Word assumes a new shape appropriate to our new needs. This view, of course, requires a great deal of faith; faith that God knew all of Joseph Smith's and our little idiosyncrasies and prefigured his turns of speech and accidental cultural baggage into our spiritual needs and our way of understanding. It seems to me a faith bordering on a belief in predestination.

In *The Silver Chair* C. S. Lewis has written a children's parable that illustrates the justification for this almost egocentric interpretation of random events as signs. The heroes of the story, two children and a Marshwiggle, are looking for the prince of Narnia, who has been kidnapped. Aslan, the Lion-God of Narnia, tells the children that when they reach the place where the prince is hidden they will see their instructions written there. They travel to a ruined city of the giants and find the words *UNDER ME* chiseled in huge letters on the street. They find an opening and enter a giant underground city. Later they argue with a young man (in reality the enchanted prince) about the significance of their sign:

*"Those words meant nothing to your purpose. Had you but asked my Lady, she could have given you better counsel. For those words are all that is left of a longer script, which in ancient times, as she well remembers, expressed this verse:*

*Though under earth and throneless now I be,  
Yet while I lived, all earth was under me.*

*From which it is plain that some great king of the ancient giants who lies buried there, caused this boast to be cut in the stone over his sepulchre; though the breaking up of some stones, and the carrying away of others for new buildings, and the filling up of the cuts with rubble has left only two words that can still be read. Is it not the merriest jest in the world that you should have thought they were written to you?"*

*This was like cold water down the back to Scrubb and Jill; for it seemed to them very likely that the words had nothing to do with their quest at all, and that they had been taken in by a mere accident.*

*"Don't you mind," said Puddleglum. "There are no accidents. Our guide is Aslan; and he was there when the giant king caused the letters to be cut, and he knew already all things that would come of them; including this."*

It was an act of faith for Puddleglum to assume Aslan's involvement in the maneuvering of the words on the stones; it is even more an act of faith for us to assume God's involvement in the maneuvering of language and culture and history in our scriptures and the ways they become significant to us. Aslan, after all, told the children clearly, straightforwardly, and in person what to look for; the most we can hope for is a burning in the bosom. Lewis's story is a simple one and leaves out all the hard parts, the difficulties we find when we try to separate God's intentions from our own desires and our own natural tendencies to impute an order to things. When it comes down to it, we on earth can only *feel* that we have hit on God's intention; we can never overcome the limitations of "making sense."

#### CONCLUSION

In discussing John 5:39, my Sunday School teacher asserted that Jesus intended "to show the Jews that the point of all their scripture study was to learn of him, that scripture study by itself was getting them nowhere."

I wondered: did the scriptures testify of him then in the same strange ways that our scriptures testify now? Did the early disciples read with as much an ahistorical eye of faith as we do? Perhaps the quotes they chose to show that the prophets spoke of Christ were as coincidental and out of context as the quotes we love so well. Perhaps God has always meant us to read that way, likening all things to ourselves and using the scriptures like a Urim and Thummim floating down the ages, showing us different things at different times according to what we need. Can it all be that relative? Our teacher is sure it's not; for him, what the earthly author of an ancient text meant is the true meaning. My husband smiles at the idea of such fluidity in the scriptures; he finds the idea interesting, but a little mystical. As for me, it seems that relying on the community of informed readers for interpretation of scriptures takes a great, blind, trusting faith that God knows us very well and that our seemingly random ways of making sense of the scriptures were included in his intention when he caused the text to be written. Can we trust our own chance opinions so much? Perhaps we should recognize what our current approach to the scriptures says about our faith—or our egocentrism.

KIRA PRATT DAVIS is a mother of two and an M.A. candidate at the University of Maryland.