

## TURNING THE TIME OVER TO . . .

“BUILD FAITH” AND “BE INTERESTING”—  
CAN A GOSPEL DOCTRINE TEACHER DO BOTH?

By Kathleen Petty

**A**LTHOUGH THE PREFACE to the Gospel Doctrine manual states that through the class, members' testimonies and their commitment to living the gospel should be strengthened, I think most of those attending would settle for not being bored. From all age groups, the complaint is that Sunday School is “the same old thing.” That is true. It is always the same old thing: the same old standard works, the same old first principles.

I doubt it is much different for Sunday School teachers of other Christian denominations. At least we Latter-day Saints have more scriptures to cycle through.

Ideally, repeating a course of study every four years should make the theological well deeper, bringing up more and more living water. Instead the Sunday School well is often dry, or maybe just a little damp. I have a friend who says she plans lots of redecorating projects during class. Looking around, I have observed deep scrutiny of fingernails, and I know of people who regularly assess the hair, shoes, and jewelry of the teacher.

The atmosphere is a little foggy. The room is a little too warm. Someone reads aloud in a halting voice. There is a pause between the question and the answer that everyone already knows will be forthcoming. Thank heavens someone is ready to say the obvious! And finally, class is over.

Church curriculum writers prepare the Gospel Doctrine manual for the entire Church, and it therefore must be sufficient for all levels of sophistication and Church maturity. It is also supposed to be appropriate for both teenagers and adults. Had I been asked to write a manual to meet that kind of description, I would have deemed the task impossible. Another challenge for Gospel Doctrine curriculum writers is the directive to create lessons that can be prepared with the materials “on hand,” so to speak:

just the scriptures and the manual. We teachers are counseled to “be judicious” in the use of commentaries and non-scriptural sources, and to emphasize the scriptures and “words of the latter-day prophets.” By asking teachers to restrict our use of outside sources, I suppose Church leaders hope to keep heresy from creeping in and to make sure new members are not confused and submerged in details before their foundation of gospel essentials is secure. And I suppose for teachers who don't have a lot of time for preparation, this approach might relieve some guilt.

Left unnamed is the assumption curriculum writers undoubtedly have that teachers can and will adjust the material for their audience but still emphasize the key points from the lesson outline. Sticking to the manual, however—with its rhetorical and simple-minded questions—guarantees the lesson will be a snooze. But aren't we who accept the call somewhat obligated to teach what the Church has outlined? (Would it be whining to point out that the Church once had a different approach that I much prefer? I have a 1958 Melchizedek Priesthood manual written by President J. Reuben Clark that is a thorough comparison of the synoptic gospels that includes pertinent Book of Mormon scriptures about the mission of the Savior but no pre-cooked questions for the teacher to ask.)

**T**HE 2002 course of study, the Old Testament, provides a clear example of the problems a Gospel Doctrine teacher encounters. The first thing to note is that the class is not actually to study the Old Testament. The course is designed for members to study *gospel topics* with Old Testament illustrations. (Each year it is the *same* gospel topics, but illustrated by a different standard work.) Large portions of the Old Testament

are not covered in any lesson, nor is there an attempt to understand the Old Testament as a whole.

This approach does not necessarily lend itself to a very satisfying teaching experience. As a teacher, I yearn to provide a larger context for these lessons by including more history and scholarship. Which brings up, inevitably, the question of using outside sources . . . and its rub. For instance, the 1972 Church-prepared student guide for BYU Old Testament courses is still readily available and includes annotations, essays, and chapter-by-chapter commentaries for the entire Old Testament. (Similar study guides are available for each of the other standard works.) The guide is often interesting and enlightening, but many of the secondary sources it quotes are century-old commentaries. By itself, age doesn't make them unhelpful or incorrect, necessarily, but it does make them uncontroversial.

Now, to be sure, some current Biblical scholarship isn't faith-promoting. The most radical new theories propose that everything purported to have happened before 700 B.C. is pretty much a fiction composed within a short time span from local stories and legends to satisfy a political need to present a glorious monotheistic history. According to this hypothesis, one may forget about patriarchs, judges, Moses, Joshua's conquest, the Exodus, David, and Solomon. (Little has been dug from the ground, either in Israel or in its neighboring countries, to support the geography or history the Old Testament presents until the reign of Josiah.)<sup>1</sup> It is legitimate to wonder if a Sunday School class really is the place to bring up ideas that are essentially theories and therefore, by definition, subject to revision, especially if they rattle the cage of faith. But it is equally legitimate to wonder if it is a good idea to teach as if there are no questions about such matters, no advances in biblical scholarship during the past century.

If the history in the Old Testament is unreliable, or at least shaky, are the stories in the Old Testament to be taken literally or figuratively? That's another problem for us teachers. My mother, who is in her eighties, told me recently she thinks the story of Jonah is stupid—what man could be swallowed by a fish and live to tell about it?—and the story of Adam and Eve is “sappy.” (My mother considers herself “active,” by the way.) “But Mom,” I said, “what about *figuratively* or *symbolically* true?” “Well,” she said, “maybe symbolically.”

Most Latter-day Saints would be hesitant to say Bible stories didn't actually happen,

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even though some of those stories certainly “make reason stare.” The flood covered the *whole* earth, and, if so, where did all that water drain to? Did God and Satan *really* plot Job’s troubles? Did or did not God command Hosea to marry a harlot? The Bible, it seems to me, contains a mix of the literal and fictional just as it contains a mix of the sacred and the profane. But many Saints fear once they let loose from the moorings of literalism, they will be setting sail into the ocean of heresy, because they might start looking at the other standard works the same way. Catholic scholar Raymond E. Brown recognizes this fear, common among all Christians, but warns against its dangers:

Sometimes, because they fear scandal, some would say that it is better to treat a nonhistorical narrative as history and thus cause no problem. That is a dangerous misconception. God’s truth should be served by nothing less than the best of human perception, and we endanger acceptance of divine truth when we teach anybody something that by our best scholarly standards is thought to be false. Sooner or later, those who hear the preacher treating Jonah as if it were history, or the first chapters of Genesis as if they were science, will come to realize the falsity of that presumption and, as a consequence, may reject the divine truth contained in those chapters.<sup>2</sup>

These same sorts of questions about the history of the Old Testament apply to other scriptures as well. Although there is widespread agreement at least that Jesus actually existed, there is plenty of disagreement about the books of the New Testament—who wrote them, how and why each book became canonized, and whether the histories, stories, and theology presented are consistent with one another.

The Doctrine and Covenants is the only Mormon scripture with a verifiable historical context. Yet the course of study is emphatically Doctrine and Covenants, *not* Church history—although it is impossible to separate the two, and without historical context, most sections would be unteachable. The few fragments of historical context we teachers are supposed to present are of the canonized, faith-promoting variety, not pieces gleaned from the kinds of closer examination and recognition of complex factors that have characterized most Mormon history studies for the past quarter century.

Maybe the emphasis on the scriptural text

is a recognition that other Saints, those in South America or Eastern Europe, may not be as fascinated by the pioneer heritage as are North American Saints (especially ones who have that genealogical link to the early times and who never hesitate to make that fact known, and known, and known.)

As the foregoing demonstrates, using outside history and scholarship to expand Gospel Doctrine lessons to make them more interesting leaves the teacher with difficult choices. After all, Gospel Doctrine lessons are not supposed to be about controversy; they are supposed to be about building faith. Church lessons, magazines, and talks are all supposed to come from the sunny side of the street.

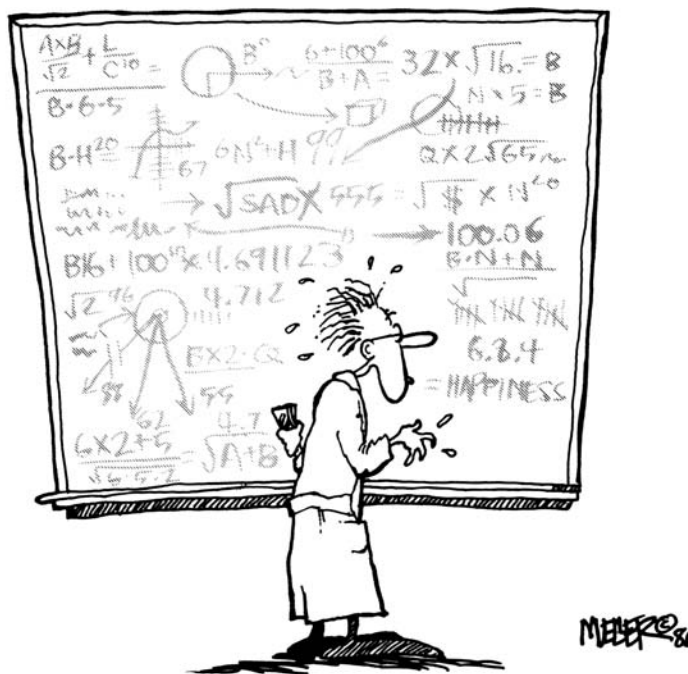
WITH the Book of Mormon, there isn’t much history or archeology to consult, even if a teacher wants to. So perhaps the Book of Mormon year holds a clue for a way to teach the other scriptures in the Sunday School cycle. The book has a plot. It is internally consistent. It sticks to its stated purpose of being another witness for Christ. It has interesting characters and some good stories, and, except for the Isaiah passages, straightforward language and imagery. In many ways, it can be taught like a novel, with the teacher exploring plot, setting, structure, themes, characters, and symbols. As with a work of fiction, it is possible to get personally absorbed in the story. Could this be a model for the other Sunday

School courses of study? Should all works of scripture perhaps be released from the need to answer to history?

I recently listened to an Arthur Bassett talk recorded in 1990 as part of the “Sunstone Old Testament Lectures” series. In his presentation, “The Aesthetics of History: Egypt, Babylon, and Christ,” Bassett approaches the Old Testament like a giant symphony with themes recurring in new guises, seeing an overarching and basic literary pattern. His method necessarily chooses some elements of the Old Testament and leaves others out, but it is a legitimate and faith-promoting approach. Maybe we should give all scriptures a reprieve from what we call “historical reality,” and we should concentrate on finding the metaphorical and human truth in them.

A discussion during my Gospel Doctrine class last year provides a good illustration of what I mean. The manual suggests the teacher compare Abraham, who dwelt on the plains of Mamre, with Lot who lived “in the cities of the plain” and pitched his tent toward Sodom. The implication of the suggested comparison is that the Lord was confident Abraham would “command his children and his household after him,” whereas Lot couldn’t get his sons-in-law to leave Sodom nor keep his wife from looking back once the destruction had begun. The contrast suggested is of Abraham, “Father of Faith,” and Lot, the nudge.

As I taught this lesson, one brother sug-



Wendell wondered what he would do about his Sunday School lesson as he discovered money can buy happiness!

gested it isn't fair to blame Lot for what happened to his family and for the later shocking behavior of his daughters as they lay with him, trying to get pregnant. He inveighed against Lot's wife: "What kind of woman must she have been for even wanting to go back to Sodom? What kind of training must she have given her daughters that they would even dream of sleeping with their father!"

His way of taking the story seriously took me aback. I had been caught up in noting that the story of Lot's wife had likely been invented to explain a geographical feature and how the story of the two daughters' tryst with their father was a bit of etymological folklore about the names of the Moabites and Amorites. And I was also musing to myself how in Genesis, begetting children and having a favored lineage justified almost any sexual arrangement. This brother was unaware that he was imposing our modern-day attitudes and aspirations on a far distant and far different culture. He was, however, "likening the scripture to himself," and in that sense, his way of seeing the story was perhaps more truthful than mine.

In today's world, the scientific method and its model for pursuing fact have proven so fruitful that we have a tendency to apply them to all other fields of endeavor. Thus, for the Bible to be "true," we feel we must be able to dig up evidence that corroborates its descriptions of these ancient lands and peoples. These methods, however, can only tell us if the Bible is "true" or "not true" in a very narrow sense. Scientific and historical conclusions change, but the truth of the human heart, the truth of human seeking for God, for understanding, for purpose and meaning, is perhaps far more constant over time. A story from the Bible can speak truth to the heart even if it is "not true" in the sense of having historical reality.

Now, saying that a book which is "not true" is actually "true" forces a distinction most Latter-day Saints probably can't accept. I recently heard from the pulpit the warning that Charlton Heston is not Moses, so we must go to the Bible for the "facts." But I wonder if this is really the case. Maybe the movie *The Ten Commandments* is as true as is Exodus.

Certainly there is wisdom in not basing our faith on anything as flimsy and fickle as the conclusions of human beings and our sciences. But as one of my Gospel Doctrine students said, it surely would be comforting if science and faith concluded the same thing. I have wondered if our discovery of the "non-historicity" of the scriptures is a test of faith for our times. Presumably God knows and

always has known it would be hard to "prove" the Bible and the Book of Mormon in the way science and history demand. Perhaps his plan includes our being led to re-examine the meaning of truth, faith, and the purpose of holy scripture?


**B**ACK to the Gospel Doctrine teacher, who has her manual, who by now is perhaps relieved not to feel compelled to consult outside sources, but who is left with the problem of trying to inspire, or at least not bore, her class. She can find current parallels for scriptural situations, assuming that, except for the costumes, people and their troubles are always the same. She can examine the text, probing the meaning of each word or phrase. She can treat the scripture much like a novel. But she may still have a nagging feeling: Should she point out that the story told in the Book of Esther is not corroborated independently anywhere? Should she wonder out loud why this book, in which God is never mentioned, should be included as one of only forty-eight lessons comprising the entire Old Testament? Or should she just focus on Esther as a courageous figure and not pop any bubbles?

In a book about color, I read that in the Middle Ages, a recipe for dying cloth might state that the cloth should be left in the vat for "three or seven" days. Most of us today would conclude that those directions would not be helpful. Yet the author explains that for people in the Middle Ages, those numbers were symbolic, signifying the completion of a process: seven days to create the world, three days in the tomb (for Jesus or Lazarus). So these cloth-dyeing instructions really mean something like "cook until done."

In today's world, we are no longer used to such inexactness. We want to cook our caramels to 240 degrees, not to have to test and judge "soft ball stage." We are no longer attuned to process; we want measurements to relieve us of the necessity of experience and observation. So, too, in our religious life. We would prefer that scripture not present us with any trouble or contradiction. We want to be able to take it "at its word" instead of strug-

gling with the process of understanding what God might be trying to get us to see.

I have decided that I—or any other teacher—can only teach Gospel Doctrine as I see the gospel. While I feel obligated to teach in faith, I don't feel my faith has to present itself just like anyone else's. Sprinkling in a little controversy sometimes gets people thinking. And, as I have often thought to myself, "What's the worst that could happen? Maybe they would release me?"

Eugene England frequently quoted a line attributed to Sir Thomas More in *A Man for All Seasons* that speaks of serving God in the "tangle of our minds." I believe the scriptures are sacred writing and a conduit for a connection with God, and that we will find the connection only if we are willing to sort through the tangle. 



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#### NOTES

1. These ideas can be found in Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed: Archaeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origin of Its Sacred Texts* (New York: Free Press, 2001)

2. Raymond E. Brown, *Responses to 101 Questions on the Bible* (Paulist Press: New York, 1990), 33.



## DESERT CRY

At the sere apex of her song  
The wind rebuffed by walls of cliffs  
A winged shape circles the limit of sight

She stabs the sky with a wail like grief  
Geckos in their sundance pause  
Rabbits quiver dark in holes

Pressed on ragged red rock buttes  
The sun spreads like broken yolk  
Light leaches from the day.

—SPENCER SMITH