

In Praise of Scholars!

by Thomas B. Griffith (Humanities '78)



Thomas B. Griffith is a BYU College of Humanities graduate and former judge on the US Court of Appeals for the DC Circuit. He served as BYU general counsel and as the nonpartisan legal counsel to the US Senate. Currently, he serves as a fellow at the Wheatley Institute.

It was not my finest moment as a teacher. A late-night email from a frustrated student complained about my approach to the Book of Mormon class I was teaching. Her roommate was having what my student thought was a much better experience in her religion class. That teacher asked the students to share with the class passages from the assigned reading that moved them. Why, my student asked, couldn't our class be more like her roommate's?

My approach was different. We studied scholarly commentary that analyzed the historical context of the text, its structure, and the meaning of its words and phrases.

My student asked a fair question that deserved a kinder and gentler response than my late-night reply: "I am less interested in what you feel about what Nephi wrote," hard-hearted me wrote, "than I am in trying to understand what Nephi is trying to tell us." Ouch! Surely I could have found a better way to explain my approach. More empathy is always better.

There are various ways to read scripture, and I won't criticize the approach my student was urging. Any teacher who can inspire students to spend time in the scriptures is to be applauded.

But I was trying to teach my class a particular approach that focused on understanding what the author is trying to say: studying scripture not to confirm our own sensibilities but as an act of humility that opens us to the likelihood that the writer will change our understanding and our lives.

I wanted my students to understand that there was a historical figure named Mormon who went to great lengths to weave together a collection of sacred writings that will teach us particular and sometimes surprising lessons he had learned in his efforts to follow Christ. We pay him and the other authors of scripture a high compliment when we take the time and expend the effort to try and understand what they are trying to say, but that turns out to be hard work that can't be done by reading scriptures 10 minutes a day or only looking for passages that sound appealing. To the contrary, this approach to scripture study takes time and effort and, for most of us, much help because we lack the analytical skills needed to understand what a person writing from a foreign culture in a different time is trying to say.

Fortunately, there are people who have those skills. We call them scholars, and some of them even write in a way that the rest of us can understand. Here are three examples to make the point:

N. T. Wright's work excavates the first-century AD Jewish roots of the New Testament and shows that much of what has been taught

about the Gospels and the letters of Paul misses the mark because it misunderstands the world in which the authors were writing. As it turns out, the authors of the Gospels and Paul were less interested in what happened to us after death than they were in trying to help the Lord work a new creation on Earth, right here, right now. That shift in emphasis makes a huge difference in the focus on Christian discipleship. We are to be partners with the Lord in transforming the Earth right here, right now.

Joseph Spencer's work on how Isaiah is used in the Book of Mormon strips away my excuse for not paying careful attention to that difficult feature. No longer can I avoid the hard work of wrestling with Isaiah in the Book of Mormon by dismissing it as an odd favorite of Nephi that I don't happen to find inspiring. As it turns out, Nephi is trying to teach me something vitally important to him that he thinks will become important to me. I cannot claim to understand what Nephi is trying to teach me if I disregard what he is doing with Isaiah.

Speaking of Nephi, Grant Hardy's close read of the Book of Mormon uncovers a Nephi far different from the video cartoons that we showed our children. Hardy's close read shows Nephi to be complex and fascinating in surprising ways. This is not your father's Nephi.

Some, like my student, will bristle at the thought that understanding scripture might take more than sincerity of purpose, that it might also require the help of scholars. What about Tyndale's plowboy, they say? My response: of course a plowboy can understand what the author of the Gospel of John is saying . . . if he has read the scholars. This shouldn't be surprising. Who among us can really understand Homer or Shakespeare or Dostoevsky without the help of scholars? If we use scholars to help us understand the secular canon, why wouldn't we use them to help us understand the sacred canon?

As it turns out, through the eyes of the scholar, scripture is much different and much better than we may have thought. Its authors are more careful and challenging than we have supposed. That will be unsettling to some, but that, it seems to me, is the highest and best use of scripture: to learn what inspired people in the past are telling us about how to more fully follow Christ in a way that may surprise us and will motivate us to change. 