

DO WE HAVE TO BELIEVE THAT? CANON AND EXTRA-CANONICAL SOURCES OF LDS BELIEF

Christian N. K. Anderson

Introduction

For two days in October 2010, “The Family: A Proclamation to the World” was part of the LDS canon. Maybe.

In his October general conference address, “Cleansing the Inner Vessel,” Elder Boyd K. Packer referred to the Proclamation as divinely inspired revelation. “It fits the definition of a revelation” he stated, and “members of the Church would do well to read and to follow.”¹ Elder Packer did not specify which “definition of revelation” he was considering.² He might have meant that the Proclamation was revelation because it was signed by revelators.³ Alternatively, he might have

1. Boyd K. Packer, “Cleansing the Inner Vessel,” Oct. 2010, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2010/10/cleansing-the-inner-vessel?lang=eng&r=1>.

2. “The Family: A Proclamation to the World” was itself presented in 1995 by President Gordon B. Hinckley. Though signed by the fifteen “revelators,” none of them have ever claimed authorship, and some Mormon observers speculate that it was written by the Church’s legal department, possibly in preparation for a gay marriage court case in Hawaii and not primarily by apostles and prophets. E.g., in a post by Ziff at <http://zelophehadsdaughters.com/2013/02/19/who-wrote-the-proclamation-on-the-family/>, and comments thereon.

3. A definition apparently endorsed by L. Aldin Porter in his last conference talk in October 1994, “When you see any document, any address, any letter, any instruction that is issued by the Council of the First Presidency and the

meant that it was revelation because it was delivered by a prophet at a general conference of the Church, albeit in an auxiliary session that was not then officially considered part of conference. Nevertheless, the claim was sufficiently problematic that within seventy-two hours it had been changed on the Church website, and it was later published in the *Ensign* to read, the Proclamation “is a *guide* that members of the Church would do well to read and to follow.” Church Public Affairs spokesman Scott Trotter issued a statement suggesting that Elder Packer made the changes himself, but he stopped short of suggesting that Elder Packer recognized the need for the change on his own.⁴

This incident highlights the complicated and sometimes contested nature of LDS scripture. With its acceptance of additional canonical books—the Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, and Pearl of Great Price—as well as its belief in modern prophets, seers, and revelators, Mormonism’s canon is open and mutable. New revelation can be added to the canon when received by prophets, presented to the Church membership, and accepted by common consent of the Church’s general assembly. However, “scripture” is not understood to be only that which is contained within the pages of the standard works. The Doctrine and Covenants allows that “whatsoever [Church elders] shall speak when moved upon by the Holy Ghost shall be scripture, shall be the will of the Lord, shall be the mind of the Lord, shall be the word of the Lord, shall

Quorum of the Twelve, it should be recognized for what it surely is—the mind and the will of the Lord to his people in this day” (“The Revelations of Heaven,” Oct. 1994, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/1994/10/the-revelations-of-heaven?lang=eng&r=1>).

4. Scott Taylor stated: “The Monday following every general conference, each speaker has the opportunity to make any edits necessary to clarify differences between what was written and what was delivered or to clarify the speaker’s intent. President Packer has simply clarified his intent” (“Mormon Church Clarifies Intent of President Boyd K. Packer’s Talk,” *Deseret News*, Oct. 8, 2010, <http://www.deseretnews.com/article/700072230/Mormon-church-clarifies-intent-of-President-Boyd-K-Packers-talk.html?pg=all>).

be the voice of the Lord, and the power of God unto salvation” (D&C 68:4). Thus, Church members grant considerable authority to the words of Church leaders, which creates a sort of extra-canonical scripture. Despite the oft-repeated claim that pronouncements from the general conference pulpit are not infallible,⁵ conference talks have profound influence on Mormon culture and day-to-day religious experience. And in a culture of increasing authoritarianism, the status of Church leaders’ words is ever rising.⁶

5. For example, “What a pity it would be, if we were led by one man to utter destruction! Are you afraid of this? I am more afraid that this people have so much confidence in their leaders that they will not inquire for themselves of God whether they are led by him. I am fearful they settle down in a state of blind self-security, trusting their eternal destiny in the hands of their leaders with a reckless confidence that in itself would thwart the purposes of God in their salvation” (Brigham Young, *Journal of Discourses*, 9:150). “The First Presidency cannot claim, individually or collectively, infallibility” (*Gospel Truth: Discourses and Writings of President George Q. Cannon*, 2 vols. [Salt Lake: Deseret, 1957], 1:206). “I make no claim of infallibility” (Spencer W. Kimball, *Improvement Era*, Jun. 1970, 93). “We make no claim of infallibility or perfection in the prophets, seers, and revelators” (James E. Faust, *Ensign*, Nov. 1989, 11). “So be kind regarding human frailty—your own as well as that of those who serve with you in a Church led by volunteer, mortal men and women. Except in the case of His only perfect Begotten Son, imperfect people are all God has ever had to work with. That must be terribly frustrating to Him, but He deals with it. So should we. And when you see imperfection, remember that the limitation is not in the divinity of the work” (Jeffrey R. Holland, “Lord, I Believe,” *Ensign*, Apr. 2012, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2013/04/lord-i-believe?lang=eng&r=1>). “There have been times when members or leaders in the Church have simply made mistakes. There may have been things said or done that were not in harmony with our values, principles, or doctrine” (Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “Come Join With Us,” Oct. 2013, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2013/10/come-join-with-us?lang=eng&r=1>).

6. For book-length treatment of this complex general trend, see Gregory Prince and W. Robert Wright, *David O. McKay and the Rise of Modern Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2005), 40–59; and Alexander Scott Thompson, “‘Follow the Prophet’: The Rise of the Mormon Right, 1960–1980” (senior thesis, Harvard University, 2012).

This essay will attempt to clarify the process by which extra-canonical texts gain the status of “scripture” in contemporary Mormonism. First, I examine the meaning of “formative” and “normative” scripture. Second, I examine in detail the use of scripture in general conference addresses. Third, I examine institutional efforts to teach scripture to LDS youth, with particular emphasis on the scripture mastery program. Finally, I examine the status of “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” which generated the dominant doctrinal theme of the last two decades, as well as the more recent gay exclusion policy. Ultimately, the nature of what constitutes scripture for Latter-day Saints resists facile explication, but I hope this discussion will bring into sharper focus the chaos out of which “Mormon scripture” emerges.

Formative and Normative Scripture

In the context of world religion, scripture has been defined as any text that is seen within a religious community as speaking authoritatively about things transcendent.⁷ It is incumbent upon believers to learn what scripture says and live by its precepts. However, core beliefs often come from extra-canonical literature. Jewish scholar Moshe Halbertal distinguishes between what he calls normative and formative scripture.⁸ Formative scripture are texts that give a religion its cultural heft: they transmit the stories, histories, and vocabulary that form the common heritage of the believers. Normative scripture are those writings that describe the rituals, practices, and commandments that are binding on believers as members of that faith community. Halbertal regards

7. See Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *What is Scripture?* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Books, 2000) and Todd Compton, Paul Edwards, Steve Epperson, Mark D. Thomas, Margaret Toscano, and David P. Wright, “Scripture, History, and Faith: A Round Table Discussion,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 29, no. 4 (Winter 1996): 89–117.

8. See Moshe Halbertal, *People of the Book: Canon, Meaning and Authority* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

the Torah as normative—providing Judaism’s laws, rituals, and traditions—and the Midrash as formative—providing its culture and heritage. However, several scholars have pointed out that the situation is actually reversed. Every Jewish child knows the formative stories of Noah and Daniel, but a Hassid who wants to know norms—like what kind of materials are permissible in a kosher cooking pot, or the maximum number of steps one is allowed to take on the Sabbath—turns not to the Tanakh but to the Midrash or Halakhah.

In Mormonism, we have the same dynamic with the standard works and general conference addresses. There is, with the aforementioned exception of the Proclamation on the Family, no doubt about what is and what is not part of the canon. However, conference addresses have a non-binding-but-official exegetical function for the culture. Halbertal would call our canon normative and the stories and interpretations of general conference formative; however, just as in Judaism, the two are often reversed in practice. For example, clear normative prohibitions against tattoos, piercings, and even consumption of alcohol and coffee come not from canonized scripture, but from interpretations of scripture presented in conference addresses.⁹ In contrast, formative elements from general conference such as the iconic phrases “tender mercies” and “the work and the glory” are actually quotations from scripture.

Arguing that general conference functions as scripture is startling and distasteful to many progressive Mormons. Nevertheless, one need only reflect on the radically different ways Jewish and Christian churches approach the first five books of the Bible to see that extra-canonical

9. D&C 89 clearly states that counsel against consuming these substances is not a commandment. It was not until 1902 that Joseph F. Smith adopted a policy of withholding temple recommends to “flagrant” violators, though the First Presidency continued to serve wine in the temple at sacrament meetings until July 1906. Heber J. Grant made complete abstinence a requirement in 1921. See Thomas G. Alexander, “The Word of Wisdom: From Principle to Requirement,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 14, no. 3 (1981): 80–88.

influence is often stronger than the canon itself. Indeed, Benjamin Sommer argues that “one can rightly say that the books in question are not the same books at all but entirely different works that happen to have the same words.”¹⁰ (This is particularly true in Mormonism, where the words of the Pentateuch are not the same as those in other faith traditions, thanks to the Joseph Smith Translation, and the books of Abraham and Moses in the Pearl of Great Price.) Generally, “lived scripture” derives from emphasizing some parts of the scriptural text and ignoring others. Steve Epperson has suggested that such shaping of canon is unavoidable: “Every scripture, every law, prohibition, and narrative cannot be equally authoritative. There’s a ‘canon within the canon.’”¹¹ General conference addresses, therefore, can be described as “normative scripture,” a sort of meta-scriptural Mormon Midrash that shapes the way we read the canon itself.

Shaping the Canon

Like the Jewish Midrashim, normative conference talks derive their authority from the formative scripture they interpret, and in the process shape how Mormon culture reads scripture. General Authorities emphasize some scriptural passages, ignore others, and, in some cases, tear them out of the original context. This misappropriation of the original text is generally done so subtly and/or repeatedly that it *becomes* more authoritative than the text itself. However, at least in an LDS context, outright doctrinal innovation would theoretically be permissible only in the form of a new revelation, presented by a prophet (D&C 43:3) and by a sustaining vote

10. Benjamin D. Sommer, “Scriptures in Jewish Tradition, and Traditions as Jewish Scripture,” in *Jewish Concepts of Scripture: A Comparative Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 3–34.

11. Compton, et al., “Scripture, History, and Faith,” 102.

of the church body.¹² As a result, general conference speakers are generally reluctant to stray too far from scriptural texts, even as they unwittingly bring their own preconceptions and understanding to bear upon them. Elder Boyd K. Packer once remarked that his goal as a speaker and teacher was “to say nothing that has not been said before,”¹³ yet he is arguably among the most influential of the twenty-first century apostles. If we accept this statement at face value, Elder Packer was unaware of his own

12. Ironically, this “rule” itself appears to derive from interpretation by leaders, not canon. Authoritative statements of this position include: “The only way I know of by which the teachings of any person or group may become binding upon the church is if the teachings have been reviewed by all the brethren, submitted to the highest councils of the church, and then approved by the whole body of the church. . . . Again, we are only bound by the four standard works and are not required to defend what any man or woman says outside of them” (Hugh B. Brown, *An Abundant Life: The Memoirs of Hugh B. Brown* [Salt Lake: Signature Books, 1999], 124) and “The only one authorized to bring forth any new doctrine is the President of the Church, who, when he does, will declare it as revelation from God, and it will be so accepted by the Council of the Twelve and sustained by the body of the Church” (Harold B. Lee, *The First Area General conference for Germany, Austria, Holland, Italy, Switzerland, France, Belgium, and Spain of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, held in Munich Germany, August 24–26, 1973, with Reports and Discourses*, 69). These statements notwithstanding, the practice has not been rigorously adhered to in church history. D&C 132 was read in conference in 1852, and added to the D&C without a vote in 1876. Sections of the D&C now found in the Pearl of Great Price were canonized by a vote at general conference in 1880. OD1 was accepted by a minority of supporting voters, at least one vote against, and most abstaining including B.H. Roberts (Ronald H. Walker, “B. H. Roberts and the Woodruff Manifesto,” *BYU Studies* 22, no. 3 [1982]:1–4). It was not canonized until 1914, again without a vote. The “Lectures on Faith” were removed from the D&C without vote in 1921 (see Richard S. Van Wagoner, Steven C. Walker, Allen D. Roberts, “The ‘Lectures on Faith’: A Case Study in Decanonization,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 20, no. 3 [1987]: 71–77). While OD2 and D&C 137–8 were canonized by vote in 1981, minor revisions to the 2013 edition of the scriptures were made without a vote.

13. Personal communication with Paul L. Anderson.

role as a shaper of doctrine and practice. This sort of ironic contradiction is only possible in situations where robust theology is actively discouraged. Margaret Toscano explains, “various Mormon hermeneutics have emerged because people use scripture in different ways in different contexts. Nevertheless, we do not have avenues for understanding and discussing what we are doing in interpretation.”¹⁴ In fact, the word “hermeneutics” occurs only twice on the official LDS.org web domain, and both times in the context of disparaging secular scholarship.

Perhaps the most obvious way our culture constructs its “scripture” is by continually repeating some verses and altogether ignoring the rest. This method can be examined analytically by mining the text of general conference addresses. In the analyses below, I use citations from talks delivered between 1974 and 2016, because 1974 forms a useful lower limit on institutional memory as the earliest talks available on LDS.org.¹⁵

The most cited verses during this time period reflect a commitment to what almost all members would regard as the key components of LDS theology (see table 1). The most cited scripture is Moses 1:39 where God reveals the purpose of creation: “to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man.” The second most cited scripture is Mosiah 18:9, which can be thought of as the purpose of the LDS Church: Alma the Elder founds his church by the Waters of Mormon,¹⁶ telling his congregants they will be obligated to “mourn with those that mourn; yea, and comfort those that stand in need of comfort.” Many verses in the top ten emphasize the importance of cultivating loving interpersonal relationships and providing service (e.g., Mosiah 18:9, Matthew 22:39, Matthew 25:40), and the peace to be found by loving and serving Heavenly Father (e.g., Mosiah 3:19, Matthew 22:37, Matthew 11:28, 2 Nephi 31:20, D&C 20:77).

14. Compton, et al., “Scripture, History, and Faith,” 104.

15. Text for Conferences from 1971-1973 have recently been made available on lds.org, from 1941 at scriptures.byu.edu, and can be searched (but not viewed) back to 1851 at <http://www.lds-general-conference.org/>.

16. This is the first time the word “Mormon” occurs in our canon.

Rank	Verse	Cites	Summary	Scrip. Mast.
1	Moses 1:39	169	work and glory	1963, 1986, 2013, 2016
2	Mosiah 18:9	124	baptismal covenant	2016
3	Mosiah 3:19	108	natural man is enemy to God	1963, 1986, 2013, 2016
4	D&C 20:77	105	sacramental prayer	-
5	2 Ne. 31:20	98	ye must endure to the end, steadfast	1963, 2013
6	JS-H 1:17	98	first vision	1963, 1986, 2013, 2016
7	Matt. 22:37	93	love God and neighbor as thyself	2013, 2016
8	Matt. 11:28	92	yoke is easy and burden is light	1963, 2013, 2016
9	Matt. 22:39	90	love God and neighbor as thyself	2013, 2016
10	Matt. 25:40	89	inasmuch unto least of these, unto me	1986
11	Moro. 10:32	89	deny ungodliness	-
12	Moro. 10:4	87	Holy Ghost reveals truth	1963, 1986, 2013, 2016
13	D&C 121:45	85	doctrines distil upon soul	-
14	D&C 84:38	84	oath and covenant of priesthood	1963, 1986
15	Abr. 3:25	82	prove premortal spirits	-
16	2 Ne. 2:25	81	Adam fell that men might be	1963, 1986, 2013, 2016
17	Moro. 7:47	81	charity purifies	2013, 2016
18	2 Ne. 2:27	78	free to choose	1963, 1986, 2013, 2016
19	John 17:3	75	life eternal=know God and Jesus Christ	1986, 2013, 2016

Rank	Verse	Cites	Summary	Scrip. Mast.
20	D&C 19:18	73	suffered these things for all	1963, 1986, 2013, 2016
21	3 Ne. 27:27	72	be even as I am	1986
22	D&C 14:7	72	endure —> eternal life	1963, 1986
23	Moro. 10:5	70	Holy Ghost reveals truth	1986, 2013, 2016
24	Alma 7:12	69	Jesus Christ overcame sin and death	2013, 2016
25	Matt. 11:29	69	yoke is easy and burden is light	2013, 2016

Table 1

The most cited scriptures, 1974–2016.

The “scriptural vocabulary” of conference speakers is extremely broad (see figure 1). The Gini-Simpson measure of diversity never dropped below 0.995 in any conference session; i.e., 0.5% of citations were to verses of scripture cited elsewhere in the conference session. It might be expected that the widespread use of digital scriptures beginning in the twenty-first century would tend to increase the diversity of scriptures by facilitating the ease with which speakers could find obscure passages. This appears to not be the case; any trend through time is mathematically insignificant and equivocal.

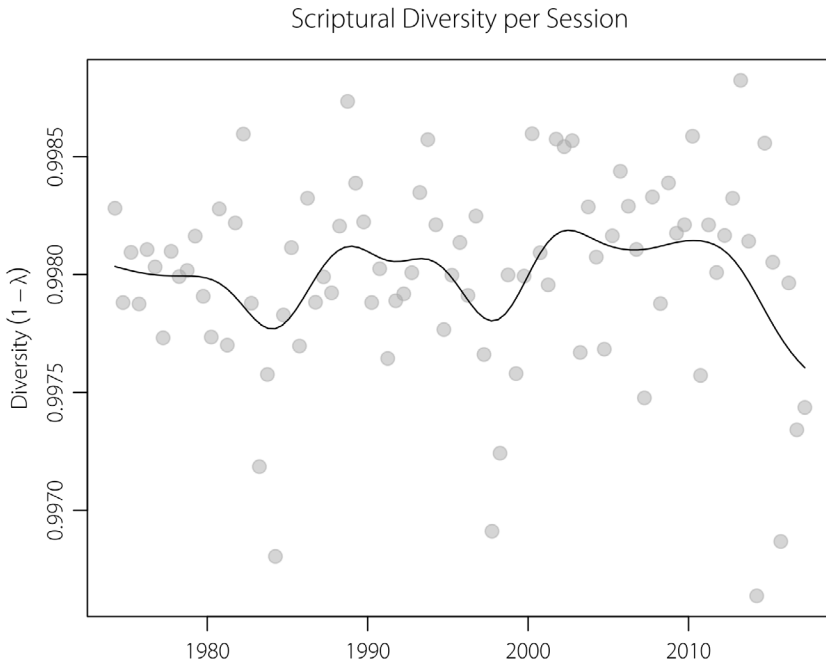


Figure 1

The diversity of scriptural citations is drifting upwards at a non-significant 0.00024% per session ($p=.52$, $r^2=0.5\%$). The trend is equivocal even with temporal binning: diversity per year (Apr+Oct sessions combined) increases at 0.00016% per year ($p=.47$, $r^2=1.3\%$), and a 5-year bin increases at 0.0019%/yr ($p=.15$, $r^2=17\%$).

This implies that scriptural emphasis is actually quite diffuse, which begs the question, are the top verses in table 1 surprisingly common? To answer this question, we need some idea of what the “expected” distribution of scriptural citations would be. A great many linguistic phenomena obey Zipf’s law, which states that as the rank of a datum

increases, its value decreases by a factor of $1/\text{rank}$.¹⁷ For example, in a large corpus of English text, the most common word (“the”) occurs roughly twice as often as the second most common word (“of”), and three times as often as the third most common word (“and”), and so forth.¹⁸ This relationship holds for not only written English, but also Latin and Chinese,¹⁹ spoken American English,²⁰ and two- and three-word phrases,²¹ but interestingly does not apply to random or computer-generated text.²² In other words, it is a startlingly powerful null model for data of this kind.

17. Harvard linguist George K. Zipf most fully explained his eponymous law in *Human Behavior and the Principle of Least Effort* (Boston: Addison-Wesley, 1949) and *The Psychobiology of Language* (New York: Houghton-Mifflin, 1935).

18. The formal expression of this is where r is the rank, $x(r)$ is the r th ranked variable, C is a constant usually close $x(1)$ and α is the rate at which x decreases with rank, usually close to 1 in the case of written languages. Taking the logarithm of both sides, it becomes clear that this implies a straight-line relationship on a log-log plot of rank vs. value. Mathematically, this law is equivalent to a Pareto distribution or a power law relationship.

19. G.K. Zipf, *Selected Studies of the Principle of Relative Frequency in Language* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1932) and R. Rousseau and Qiaoqiao Zhang, “Zipf’s Data on the Frequency of Chinese Words Revisited,” *Scientometrics* 24, no. 2 (1992): 201–20.

20. Hartvig Dahl, *Word Frequencies of Spoken American English* (Essex, Conn.: Verbatim, 1979).

21. Leo Egghe, “On the Law of Zipf-Mandelbrot for Multi-Word Phrases,” *Journal of the American Society for Information Science* 50, no. 3 (Mar. 1999): 233–41.

22. Ramon Ferrer-i-Cancho and Brita Elvevåg, “Random Texts Do Not Exhibit the Real Zipf’s Law-Like Rank Distribution,” *PLoS ONE* 5, no. 3 (2010): 1–10. Zipf’s law has been demonstrated to apply to non-linguistic phenomena as well, such as the population of the world’s largest cities, webpage visits, the net worth and number of employees of the largest companies, the income distribution of the United States, the number of citations scientific papers

Yet scriptural citations in general conference do not conform to Zipf's law (see figure 2). The most-frequently used verses receive far fewer citations than we would expect if scriptures were used like words and phrases.²³ This suggests that there is a conscious tendency among speakers to avoid repetition of the same verses, which may be explained as an attempt to reduce audience boredom, to establish the *bona fides* of the speaker as one familiar with the even the obscure passages of scripture, or to avoid promulgating an "official" interpretation of a passage through focused consideration. [Figure 2 available on next page.]

receive, the frequency of earthquakes of various magnitude (this relationship was discovered independently by seismologists, who called it the Gutenberg-Richter law and based the most common scale of earthquake severity on it). It can be found in book sales in the US, the number of telephone calls received in a year by AT&T customers, the diameter of craters on the moon, the intensity of solar flares, number of deaths in the last 500 years of war, and the number of people with the same last name in the United States. See the reviews and references within Wentian Li, "Zipf's Law Everywhere," *Glottometrics*, 5 (2002):14–21; and M.E.J. Newman, "Power Laws, Pareto Distributions and Zipf's Law," *Contemporary Physics* 46, no. 5 (2005): 323–51.

23. The most common cause of the *opposite* phenomenon, i.e. an excess in the highest ranked data, is discussed in the scientific literature under the appellation "The Matthew Effect" in reference to Matthew 25:29: "For unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but from him that hath not shall be taken even that which he hath." These "rich-get-richer" dynamics produce a concave-up curve on the Zipf plot, not the concave-down curve seen in figure 2.

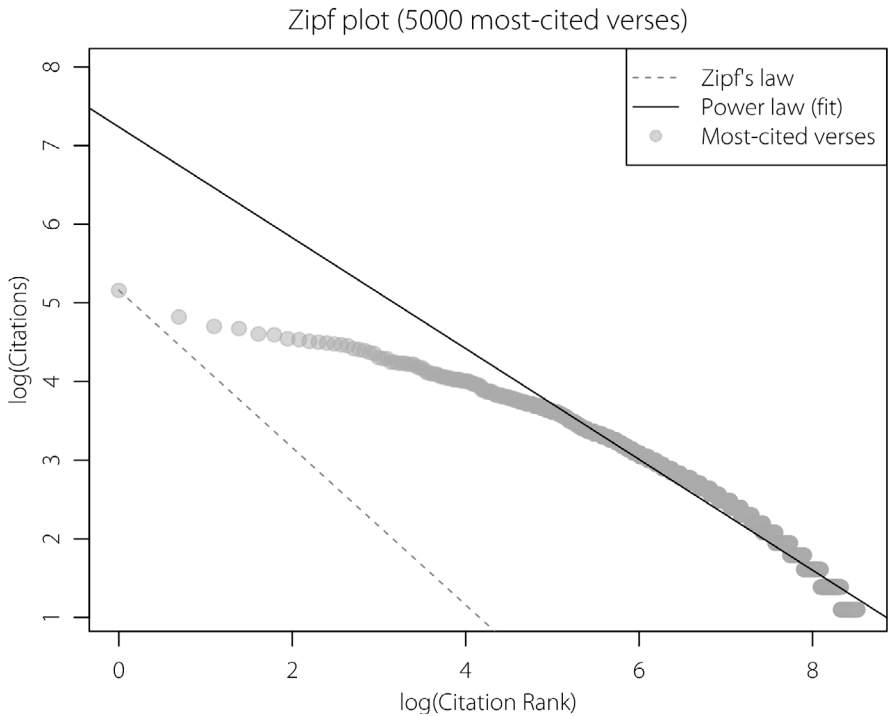


Figure 2

General conference scripture citations appear not to follow Zipf's law of rank-frequency relationships. This is true for both the strict form (slope = -1, intercept = $\log[\text{most-cited}]$), and the "relaxed" power-law form (log-linear). The 5000 most-cited verses describe a convex curve on the Zipf plot, not the expected straight line, indicating that the very most-cited scriptures are used far less frequently than expected if scriptures were used the same way words and phrases are used in natural languages. The relationship remains non-linear when considering smaller or larger numbers of verses.

The number of verses cited per conference has been drifting generally upward, with April 2013 representing a peak of just over 1,100 verses, a value expected only once every two centuries based on the previous seventy-eight conferences (see figure 3). This general trend may represent

a relaxation in the “defensiveness” of speakers, who feel that the canonical text and their personal beliefs align so closely that no explanation of the text is needed. Alternatively, this may represent an increasing reliance on the authority of scripture to support points in the talk. In any case, the trend is fairly weak; this peak was followed in April 2014 by the lowest verse count (353) of the time period, compromising the strength of the relationship. While still significant ($p=.026$), approximately 95 percent of the variability in the number of citations per conference session *cannot* be explained by a simple increase through time.

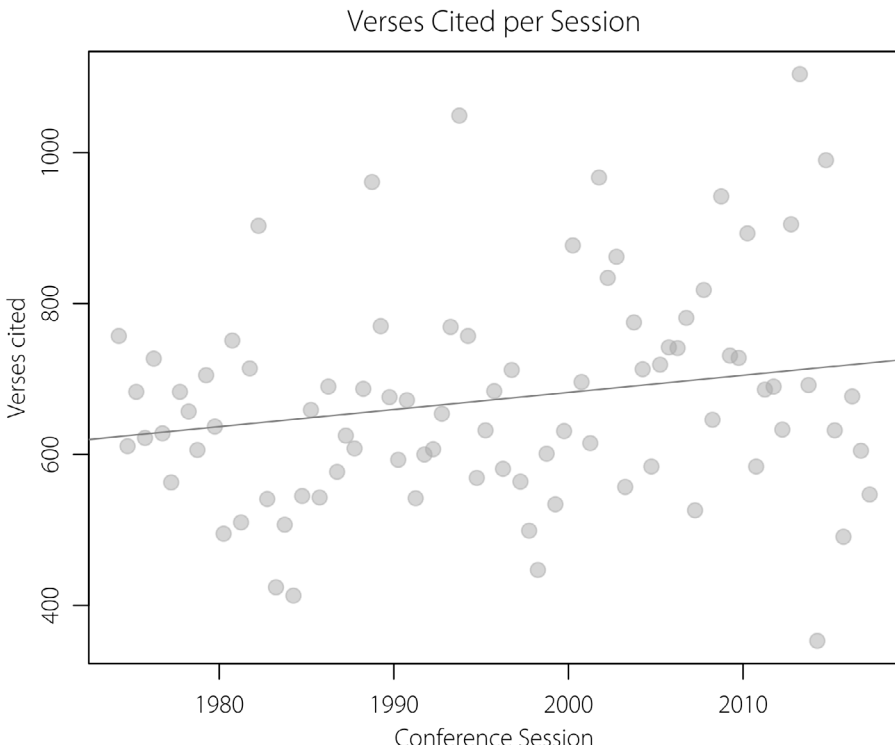


Figure 3

The number of verses cited per session of general conference has been drifting gradually upward at the modest, but statistically significant

($p=.026$), rate of about 2.9 / year. This trend accounts for 5.9% of the variability in the number of verses cited. The 1,102 citations in April 2013 was a particularly notable outlier at the time, expected to occur once approximately every 400 conferences ($z\text{-score}=3.333$, $\text{percentile}=99.96\%$ assuming normality).

The books of the scriptures, indeed the standard works themselves, receive very different amounts of attention (see figures 4 and 5). By any measure, the Old Testament receives far fewer citations than the other standard works. This is somewhat in conflict with divine instruction. For example, in the Book of Mormon Jesus asks the Nephites to “search the words of Isaiah” (3 Nephi 20:11) and later affirms that “great are the words of Isaiah” (3 Nephi 23:1). Despite these injunctions, verses of Isaiah comprise an insignificantly small fraction of the scriptural references in general conference talks, especially for a book of such length. Since 1974, it has been cited 737 times; for a book with sixty-six chapters, one would expect 2,260 citations ($p=1e-319$); for 1,292 verses and 150,958 characters, 1,666 citations ($p=7e-152$) and 1,664 citations ($p=2e-151$) respectively. Yet Isaiah is relatively citation-dense relative to the rest of the Old Testament. Only the short book of Malachi receives more citations per page²⁴ than the Book of Mormon, and all receive fewer than the New Testament, Doctrine and Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price. Perhaps this shift in attention away from the Old Testament can most clearly be seen in the fifteen citations per page received by Genesis, in contrast to the forty per page of Abraham and fifty-three per page of Moses, books of purportedly overlapping material.

24. Everywhere the metric “per page” occurs in this article, it refers to an average per 2,000 alphanumeric characters (not including punctuation or spaces), which is the average number of characters per page in the 2013 edition of the LDS standard works.

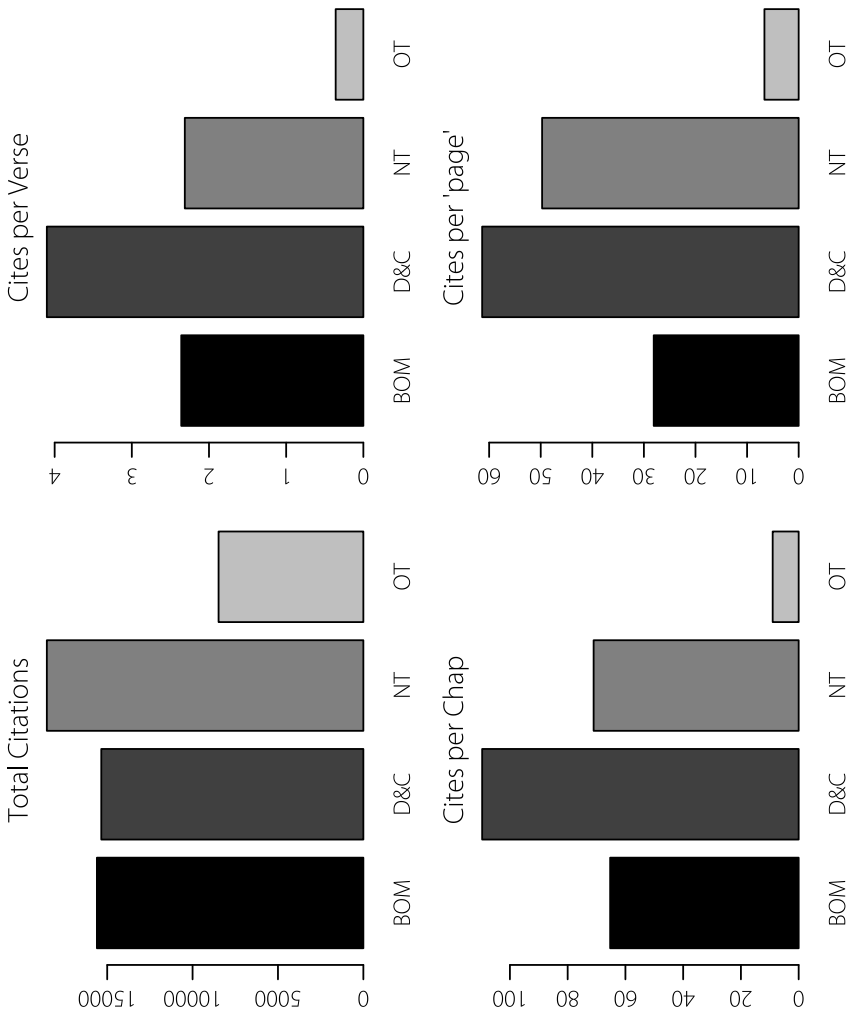


Figure 4

The number of citations each standard work has received in the study period.

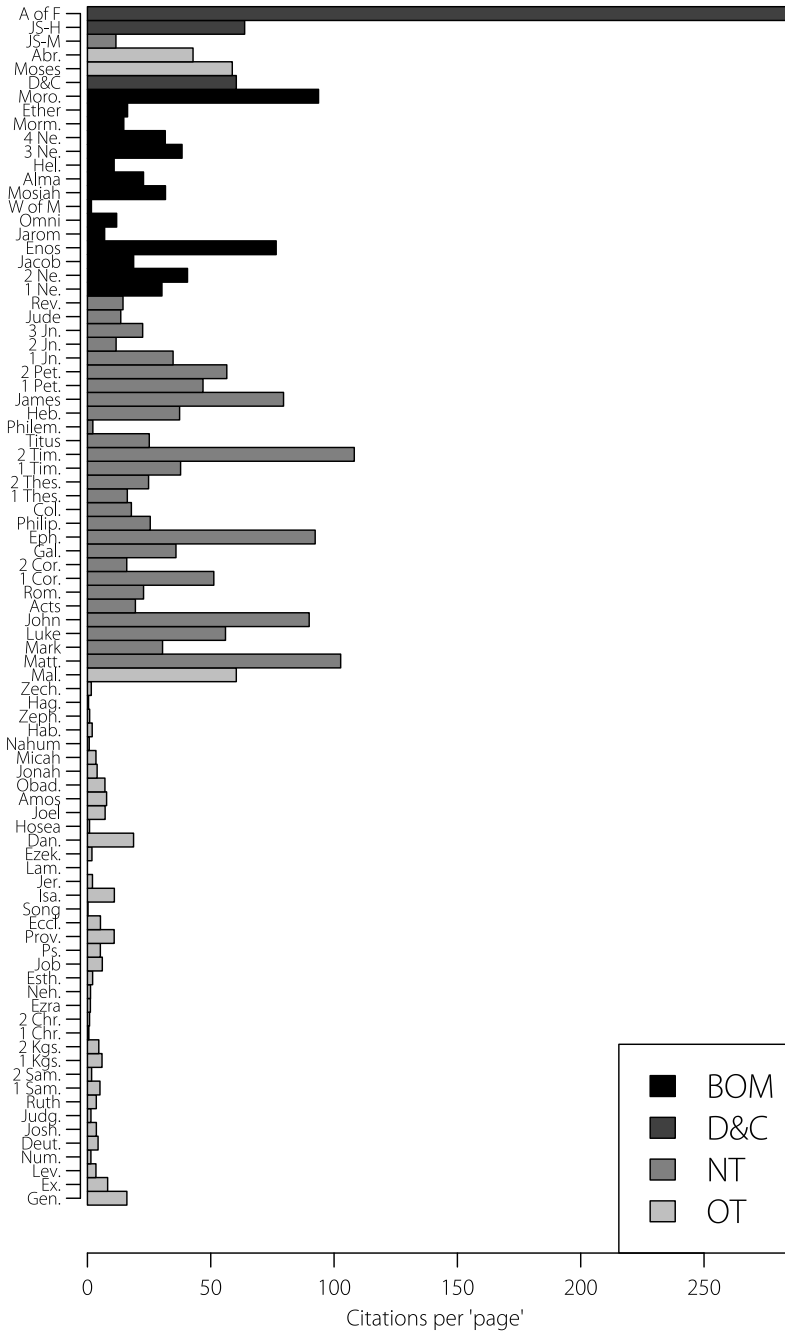


Figure 5

The number of times books in the canon are cited varies greatly. The figure demonstrates citation density, correcting for the length of the text in the LDS authorized version.

Ignoring the Old Testament is even clearer when considering the fraction of verses that have been cited at least once, as opposed to the total number of citations (figure 6). Only Genesis and the short books of Daniel and Malachi have had 20 percent of their verses referred to by general conference speakers. By contrast, not a single book in any other standard work falls below this cutoff value. Lamentations remains the only book never cited by any speaker during the time period. [Figure 6 available on next page.]

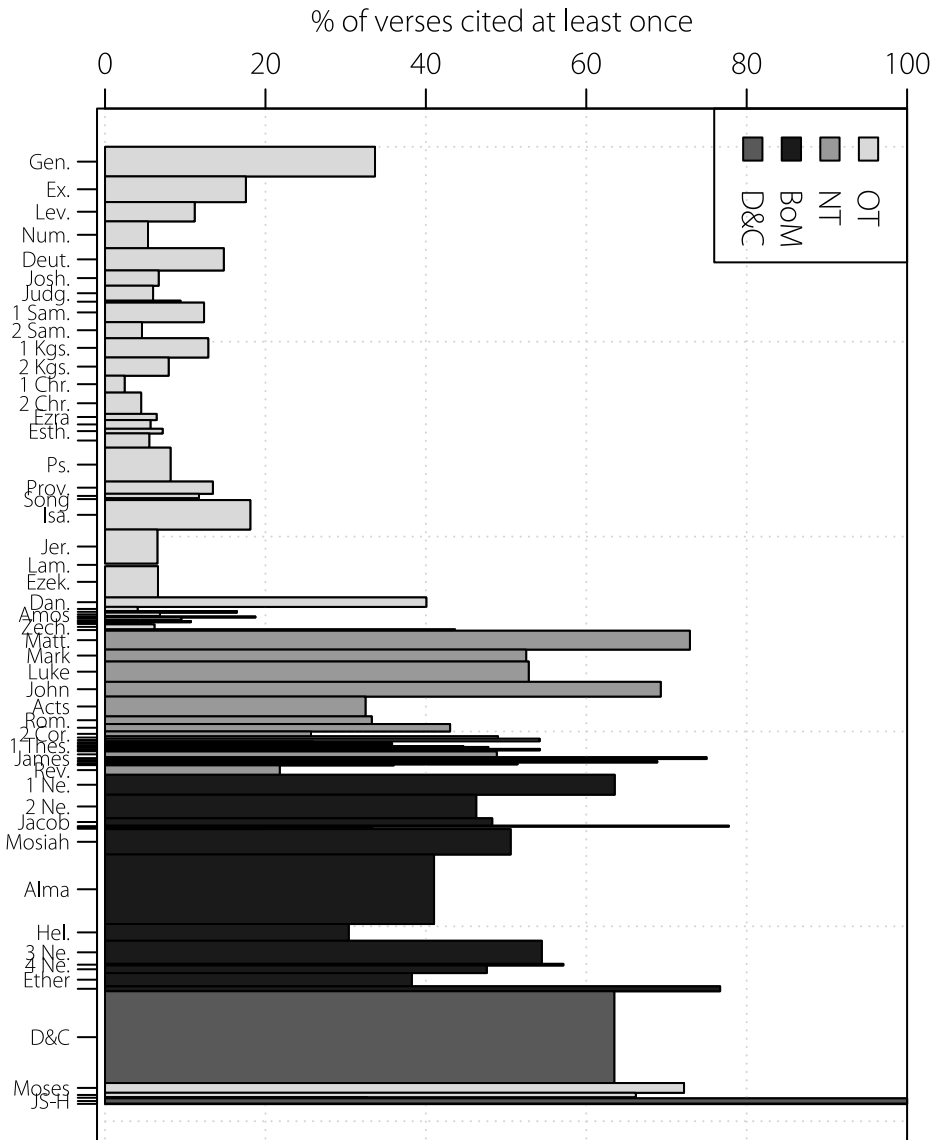


Figure 6

The fraction of verses in each book of the standard works that have been cited at least one time. The width of the bars is proportional to

the length of each book in number of characters, and as a result some of the shorter books could not be labeled on the x-axis.

Some of the change in attention has been influenced by prophetic mandate. In 1985, Ezra Taft Benson challenged the Church to spend more time and effort reading and studying the Book of Mormon, and emphasized its centrality many times thereafter.²⁵ The fraction of citations that referenced the Book of Mormon had been holding steady at approximately 15 percent, but after 1985 increased rapidly to ~30 percent, and has remained at, or slightly above, that level ever since (figure 7). The difference between the pre-Benson citation rate and that thereafter is highly significant ($t=11.4$, $p<.0001$). Despite this increase, the number of citations per Book of Mormon page remains approximately half that of the New Testament, Doctrine and Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price. Indeed, Benson himself supported his refocusing on the Book of Mormon mostly with references to the Old Testament and Doctrine and Covenants. Across his career, Benson's general conference speeches show roughly twice the citation density to the Doctrine and Covenants as to the Book of Mormon. [Figure 7 available on next page.]

25. E.g., Ezra Taft Benson, "The Book of Mormon—Keystone of Our Religion," Oct. 1986, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/1986/10/the-book-of-mormon-keystone-of-our-religion?lang=eng>.

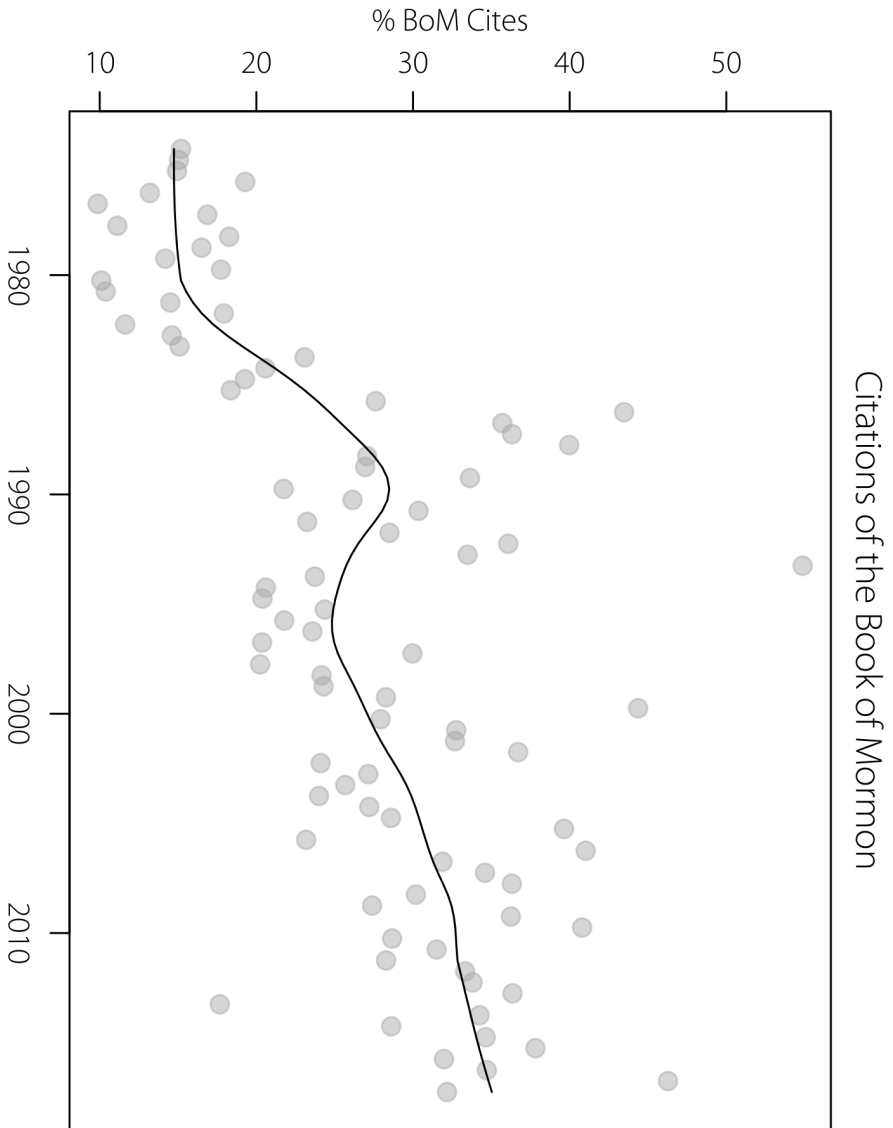


Figure 7

The fraction of verses cited per conference that come from the Book of Mormon increased rapidly in the mid-1980s. This is most likely due

to the vigorous promotion of the Book of Mormon as a missionary tool and core of Mormonism by Ezra Taft Benson, who became prophet in 1985.

Distinct Voices: Variability among Speakers

Speakers exhibit a wide variety of styles in their use of scripture. Elder Russell M. Nelson quotes scripture more often than other conference speakers, citing 5,499 verses in general conference, outpacing second place Elder Neal A. Maxwell at 2,969 by 85 percent (table 2). Even adjusting for the amount of Conference material delivered, Nelson remains atop the leaderboard for the number of references per page of text among apostles (see table 3) due to his tendency to paraphrase a scriptural story, but to cite the entire section of scripture in his footnotes. In a different mode, Elder Maxwell's rhetorical style involved weaving together numerous quotations from scripture and other sources in a sort of word-collage that was beautiful, erudite, and occasionally opaque in meaning.

Rank	Speaker	Verses	Talks	Total Pages	Sex	Ordained
1	Russell M. Nelson	5,538	68	353	m	12 Apr 1984
2	Neal A. Maxwell	2,969	53	244	m	23 Jul 1981
3	Dallin H. Oaks	2,494	66	359	m	3 May 1984
4	Boyd K. Packer	2,402	84	414	m	9 Apr 1970
5	Marion G. Romney	2,170	51	239	m	11 Oct 1951
6	Thomas S. Monson	2,112	200	895	m	10 Oct 1963
7	Gordon B. Hinckley	1,845	208	936	m	5 Oct 1961
8	Robert D. Hales	1,798	57	270	m	7 Apr 1994

Rank	Speaker	Verses	Talks	Total Pages	Sex	Ordained
9	James E. Faust	1,778	97	496	m	1 Oct 1978
10	Ezra Taft Benson	1,583	57	277	m	7 Oct 1943

Table 2

The speakers who cited the most scripture verses during the study period. As can be seen by the date of ordination, many of the speakers began delivering talks well before the study period begins, and therefore this table does not necessarily reflect "career totals," but output since 1974.

Rank	Speaker	Ordained	Died	VPP
1	Russell M. Nelson	12 Apr 1984	NA	15.68
2	Neal A. Maxwell	23 Jul 1981	21 Jul 2004	12.19
3	Marion G. Romney	11 Oct 1951	20 May 1988	9.06
4	Delbert L. Stapley	5 Oct 1950	19 Aug 1978	8.41
5	D. Todd Christofferson	5 Apr 2008	—	8.17
6	Dale G. Renlund	3 Oct 2015	—	7.58
7	Neil L. Andersen	4 Apr 2009	—	7.09
8	Dallin H. Oaks	3 May 1984	—	6.94
9	Robert D. Hales	7 Apr 1994	—	6.65
10	LeGrand Richards	10 Apr 1952	11 Jan 1983	6.15
11	Mark E. Petersen	20 Apr 1944	11 Jan 1984	5.96
12	Boyd K. Packer	9 Apr 1970	02 Jul 2015	5.81
13	Ezra Taft Benson*	7 Oct 1943	30 May 1994	5.72
14	David A. Bednar	2 Oct 2004	—	5.53

Rank	Speaker	Ordained	Died	VPP
15	Jeffrey R. Holland	23 Jun 1994	—	4.82
16	Joseph B. Wirthlin	9 Oct 1986	01 Dec 2008	4.8
17	Quentin L. Cook	6 Oct 2007	—	4.65
18	Dieter F. Uchtdorf	2 Oct 2004	—	4.15
19	Howard W. Hunter*	15 Oct 1959	03 Mar 1995	3.9
20	Bruce R. McConkie	12 Oct 1972	19 Apr 1985	3.74
21	James E. Faust	1 Oct 1978	10 Aug 2007	3.58
22	David B. Haight	8 Jan 1976	31 Jul 2004	3.18
23	Richard G. Scott	6 Oct 1988	22 Sep 2015	3.17
24	N. Eldon Tanner	11 Oct 1962	27 Nov 1982	3.03
25	Spencer W. Kimball*	7 Oct 1943	05 Nov 1985	2.66
26	L. Tom Perry	11 Apr 1974	30 May 2015	2.56
27	Thomas S. Monson*	10 Oct 1963	—	2.36
28	Ronald A. Rasband	3 Oct 2015	—	2.26
29	Henry B. Eyring	6 Apr 1995	—	2.13
30	Marvin J. Ashton	2 Dec 1971	25 Feb 1994	2.13
31	M. Russell Ballard	10 Oct 1985	—	2.01
32	Gordon B. Hinckley*	5 Oct 1961	27 Jan 2008	1.97
33	Gary E. Stevenson	3 Oct 2015	—	1.23

Table 3

The apostles span an order of magnitude in the number of verses cited per page of text during the study period. (* = this speaker was also Church president during the study period)

Apostles generally cite scriptures more often than other speakers, though not significantly more (5.4 per page versus 4.3 per page). It is remarkable that the five prophets during this study's period had low citation densities. Ignoring newcomers Elders Rasband and Stevenson,²⁶ President Hinckley has the lowest citation density of all apostles, President Monson is fifth lowest, President Kimball is seventh, and President Hunter is thirteenth; President Benson, at nineteenth, is the only prophet with a citation density above the apostolic, or the global, average. The rankings are even lower when based on verses per talk, because prophets typically deliver a very short, and hence scripture-poor, introduction and farewell at each conference. As the ultimate earthly authority for Latter-day Saints, prophets may feel more liberty to depart from canonical sources when interpreting the gospel and establishing policy for the Church.

Women and Scripture

There have been times in history when women were not only forbidden to read from scripture in public meetings, but not even permitted to read scripture in the privacy of their own homes. First-century AD Rabbi Eliezer taught that "If any man gives his daughter a knowledge of the law [Torah], it is as though he taught her lechery."²⁷ The apostle Paul, in a hotly contested passage, supports such silencing, at least if we take his words at face value:

26. Because they have delivered so few conference addresses, their low averages cannot yet be analyzed with much confidence.

27. Sotah Mishnah 3.4. See Herbert Danby, trans., *The Mishnah* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), 296; Jeni Broberg Holzapfel and Richard Neitzel Holzapfel, *Sisters at the Well: Women and the Life and Teachings of Jesus* (Salt Lake: Bookcraft, 1993), 17. This was not true for all of Jewish history. Many scholars see the reference to Jael as "most blessed of the women of the tents" (Judges 5:24) as meaning she was the most learned of the women in the place where the Torah was studied. Authorship of that particular chapter of scripture is attributed to Deborah, also female. Elsewhere in the Mishnah, women and children are specifically permitted among the seven readers on the Sabbath day (Megillah 23a), though this practice was repressed by later Sages.

The women should keep silence in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as even the law says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church. (1 Cor. 14:34–35)

Later, in 1 Timothy 2:12, he wrote “I permit no woman to teach or have authority over a man; she is to keep silent.”²⁸ Nevertheless, based on these passages some neo-Calvinist and Baptist churches today still do not allow women to give sermons or even read scriptures in public.

Given this pattern of silencing women, I find it somewhat chilling that women conference speakers appear to self-repress their use of scripture, citing fewer than half the number of scriptures men do (5.00 per page versus 2.38 per page, $p < .0001$; 16.8 per talk vs. 8.1 per talk, $p < .0001$). This reluctance to use scripture is even more problematic given the under-representation of women in general conference addresses generally (figure 8). Of the sixty-four female speakers, only Barbara Thompson has a citation density higher than that of the average man’s, and she is also the only female in the top fifty among all speakers who have delivered at least three talks (at #39).²⁹ Even correcting for the small number of women participating in general conference, the probability that so few women would be represented in the top fifty is less than 1 in 10,000 (91 hits in 1,000,000 bootstrap resamplings) if the citation rate were distributed randomly.

28. Shmuel Safrai argues that women in first-century Judaism were allowed to interrupt the speaker while he interpreted scripture, and Paul was putting an end to this custom to maintain order, but not prohibiting women from speaking at all, and certainly not from reading scriptures. See Shmuel Safrai, “Were Women Segregated in the Ancient Synagogue?” www.bibleheadquarters.org/WereWomenSegregatedintheAncientSynagogue.html, and Shmuel Safrai, *Haggadah of the Sages* (Jerusalem: Carta, 2007); Tim Hegg, “The Public Reading of the Scriptures in the First Century Synagogue,” *TorahResource*, <http://www.torahresource.com/EnglishArticles/TriennialCycle.pdf>.

29. With Sheri Dew, Thompson is one of only two unmarried women to serve on the Relief Society general board.

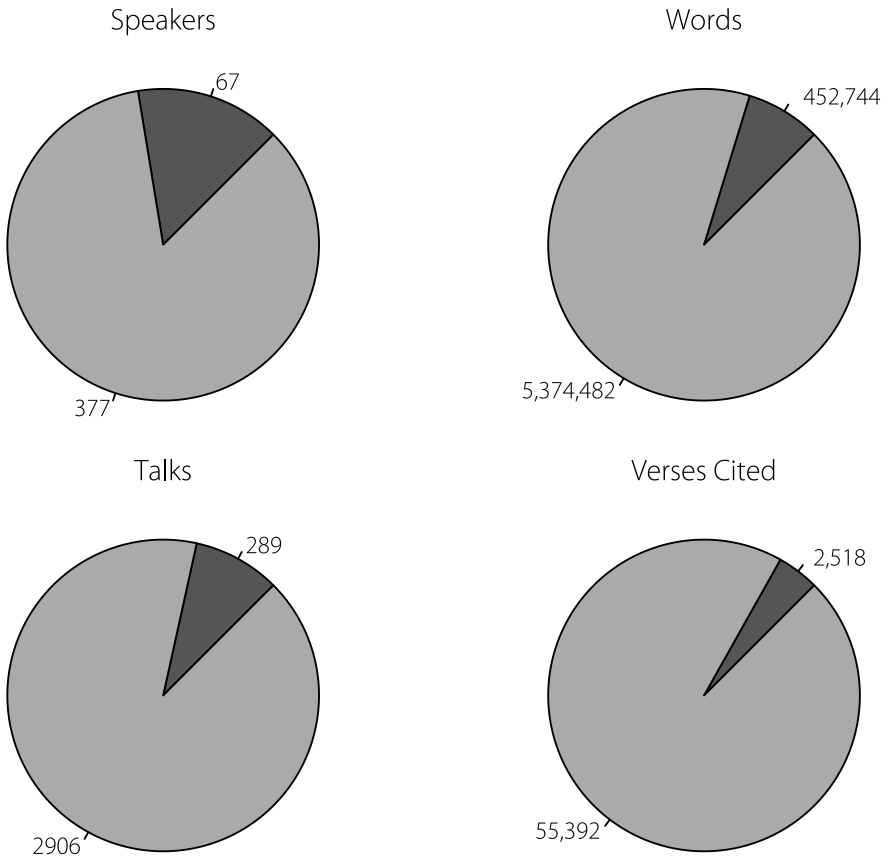


Figure 8

Women generate little of the content of general conference, and proportionally even less of the scriptural citation total. Note that these totals include Young Women and Relief Society meetings as sessions of general conference.

Learning Scripture and Memorization

Official discourse frequently encourages Church members to read the scriptures daily and for adults to teach them to their children. Since 1980, Gospel Doctrine manuals for Sunday School classes have been structured to focus on one standard work every year.³⁰ However, the sorts of things Mormons are supposed to learn about scripture are fairly rigidly prescribed.

During the study period there were frequent challenges issued to Church membership to read the entire Book of Mormon in a year or some part of the year, but General Authorities issued no such challenge to read the other standard works even though they cited the New Testament at a much higher rate. It could be argued that this is an attempt to channel the developing relationship with deity into an exclusively Mormon context.

General conference speakers typically urge members to study the scriptures in rather vague and unambitious ways. President Spencer W. Kimball declared enthusiastically if rather unspecifically, “We want our homes to be blessed with sister scriptorians—whether you are single or married, young or old, widowed or living in a family Become scholars of the scriptures!”³¹ In 1959, then-Elder Hinckley suggested that children should memorize references to scriptures, but not necessarily the verses themselves: “May I suggest that in our family night gatherings we make it a project to memorize one scripture citation a week pertinent to this work. At the conclusion of a year our children will have on their lips a

30. Benson purportedly thought eight years was too long to wait for the Book of Mormon to come back in the cycle, and cut the time spent on each standard work in half.

31. Spencer W. Kimball, “The Role of Righteous Women,” *Ensign*, Nov. 1979, 102.

fund of scripture which will remain with them throughout their lives.”³² More recently, Elder Richard G. Scott “suggest[ed] that you memorize scriptures that touch your heart and fill your soul with understanding. When scriptures are used as the Lord has caused them to be recorded, they have intrinsic power that is not communicated when paraphrased.”³³ Even more narrowly, Elder L. Tom Perry argued, “What a great blessing it would be if every member of the Church memorized the Articles of Faith and became knowledgeable about the principles contained in each. We would be better prepared to share the gospel with others.”³⁴

Given their complex history, silence on some key doctrinal topics, and extensive descriptions of other de-emphasized beliefs, memorizing the Articles of Faith seems like a rather low bar to clear in order to qualify as an informed proselytizer.³⁵ Nevertheless, they are usually the only scripture verses that children are expected and actively encouraged to memorize in Primary. They have been set to music in the English *Children’s Songbook* (though no other languages officially), and being able to recite them is required for several Primary and youth awards.

32. Gordon B. Hinckley, *Conference Report*, Apr. 1959, 119–21.

33. Richard G. Scott, “He Lives,” Oct. 1999, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/1999/10/he-lives?lang=eng>.

34. L. Tom Perry, “The Articles of Faith,” Apr. 1998, https://www.lds.org/general-conference/1998/04/the-articles-of-faith?lang=eng&_r=1.

35. The Articles of Faith were written as a letter to a wealthy non-member, John Wentworth, editor of the *Chicago Democrat*, not as a revelation to the Church, and were frequently elaborated upon by other Church authorities until being canonized in 1880 by vote of the congregation at general conference. See John W. Welch and David J. Whittaker, “We Believe . . . : Development of the Articles of Faith,” *Ensign*, Sep. 1979, <https://www.lds.org/ensign/1979/09/we-believe-development-of-the-articles-of-faith?lang=eng>. One published version in South Africa included thirty-three articles, and Orson Hyde pugnaciously expanded the last Article of Faith to read “Everything virtuous, lovely, praiseworthy, and of good report we seek after, looking forward to the recompense of reward; but an idle or lazy person cannot be a Christian, neither have salvation. He is a drone, and destined to be stung to death and tumbled out of the hive.”

This project of memorization has apparently had an effect as these children grow up to become the leadership. The Articles of Faith have the highest per verse and per character citation rate of any book in the standard works, and it is the only standard work whose every verse has been cited at least once. They are one of only five of the 1,422 chapters with ten or more verses in the standard works for which every verse has been cited at least three times. Clearly, there is a correlation between the verses children memorize and the verses General Authorities cite.

The Articles of Faith also provide a microcosmic view of global trends toward mainstream culture and authoritarianism noted by numerous other scholars. The tenth article of faith, which implies that Mormons will all relocate to the Midwest when Jesus builds his capital in Missouri, has been cited only eight times, and the gap between citations is increasing. Elder Cook cited this verse in October 2013 with the qualification that the gathering should be thought of as a metaphor, and, statistically the next reference to this verse would not be expected until April 2025. By contrast, the thirteenth article of faith, with its vague but palatable endorsement of moral qualities and good works, has been cited fifty-seven times. The authoritarian fifth article of faith (“a man must be called of God by . . . those who are in authority”) receives the second most citations, while the anti-hierarchical gifts of the spirit enumerated in the seventh article of faith are the least cited of all with just three references.

Scripture Mastery

The most visible form of scriptural memorization is the scripture mastery program for teenage LDS seminary students. The program began when a seminary teacher created a list of 160 significant scriptures in 1963, and it was implemented Church-wide by the early 1970s.³⁶ The list was reduced to 100 in 1986, then changed again in 2013, according

36. Richard C. Russell, personal communication.

to a Church spokesman, to “align the references to the basic doctrines.”³⁷ These nine basic doctrines had recently been defined for the Young Men’s and Young Women’s Sunday School programs as:

- The Godhead
- Plan of Salvation
- Atonement of Jesus Christ
- Dispensation, Apostasy, and Restoration
- Prophets and Revelation
- Priesthood and Priesthood Keys
- Ordinances and Covenants
- Marriage and Family
- Commandments

The program was rebranded as Doctrinal Mastery in 2016, a tenth goal (“acquire spiritual knowledge”) was added, and the list of scriptures was again changed.³⁸

Analyzing the three changes can reveal interesting details about how scripture is being shaped by Church leaders. First, despite there being only 160 (in 1963) and 100 (on subsequent lists) “passages” on the official lists, most included more than one verse, for a total of 332 (in 1963), 203 (in 1985), 200 (in 2013), and 213 (in 2016) verses

37. Quotation from Chad Webb, administrator of Seminaries and Institutes of Religion, in Suzanne Young, “New Scripture Mastery Better Aligns with Basic Doctrines,” *LDS Church News*, Sep. 24 2013, https://www.lds.org/church/news/new-scripture-mastery-better-aligns-with-basic-doctrines?lang=eng&_r=1.

38. Marianne Holman Prescott, “Seminaries to Implement New Doctrinal Mastery Initiative,” *Church News*, Jun. 8, 2016, <http://lds.org/church/news/seminaries-to-implement-new-doctrinal-mastery-initiative>. See also Marianne Holman Prescott, “Doctrinal Mastery Brings Relevant Experiences to Seminary Students,” *LDS Church News*, Jun. 23, 2016, <http://deseretnews.com/article/865656767/>

respectively. Of the 455 distinct verses used across the four time periods, 108 (24 percent) were retained on all four lists, while 214 (47 percent) appear on only one; both values are much higher than expected by chance ($p < .0001$). The first change in 1986 removed 158 verses, retained 174 verses, and added twenty-nine; the second change in 2013 removed sixty-eight verses, retained 135 verses, and added sixty-five (which included reinstating twelve from the original 1963 Scripture Chase list); and the most recent change in 2016 removed thirty-five verses, retained 165, and added forty-eight (seven of which appeared on the 1963 and/or 1986 lists).

Despite equal numbers of passages from each standard work, there are differences between them. The total number of unique verses is different across works ($p = .0018$), with nearly twice as many verses from the Doctrine and Covenants (141) as Book of Mormon (83) on the four lists, even though only 14.5 percent ($n = 12$) of the Book of Mormon verses appear on all four lists. This is the lowest. The Old Testament has the highest retention rate ($n = 35$, 30 percent), though the differences are not quite significant ($p = .08$), and neither is the rate of turnover ($p = .17$).

Is it true, as stated in the news releases regarding the 2013 reforms, that these substantial changes reflect a move toward more equal representation of the nine fundamental doctrines? To answer this question, I assigned every verse to one of the nine doctrines where at all possible, though I was unable to categorize fifty-six verses (table 4). Uncategorizable examples include “for the earth is full, there is enough and to spare” (D&C 104:17), “stupor of thought” (D&C 9:9), and “go and teach all nations” (Matt. 28:19). A fairly large number deal with proper treatment of other people (e.g., “inasmuch as ye have done it unto on of the least of these” [Matt. 25:40]), and another segment deals with scripture study (e.g., God’s word is “a lamp unto my feet” [Ps. 119:105]).

Doctrine	1963	1986	2013	2016
Godhead	20	13	13	14
Plan	50	28	28	30
Atonement	16	11	19	17
Dispensation	71	28	20	27
Prophets	15	6	5	13
Priesthood	27	20	14	16
Ordinances	4	1	1	4
Family	7	3	5	9
Commandments	86	68	65	57
Study (2016 only)	5	5	4	4
OTHER	31	20	26	22
- Community	6	10	15	18
- Uncategorized	25	10	11	4
EXPECTED	36.9	22.6	22.2	21.3
Difference	25.4	15.3	14.1	12.2

Table 4

The distribution of scripture mastery verses as applicable to the nine fundamental doctrines. The doctrines have never been very close to having equal representation, and despite press releases claiming the purpose of the revisions is to move that direction, little movement in that direction was observed.

In order to be even, there should have been thirty-seven, twenty-three, and twenty-two verses assigned to each of the nine doctrines on the first three lists, and twenty-one verses assigned to each of the ten categories on the 2016 list. If verses were assigned to categories randomly, we expect the final distribution of verses to categories to be off by an average of 4.5, 3.5, 3.5, and 3.4; furthermore, if the final distributions are off by more than 6.7, 5.3, 5.1, and 5.0 respectively, that constitutes statistical evidence the assignment was *worse* than blind. A human

committee, non-randomly trying to distribute verses evenly, should be able to do substantially better than this. However, the actual observed deviations are very high: 25.4, 15.3, 14.1, and 12.2. Again, the average deviation for a list deliberately constructed with evenness as a goal should be *lower* than lists made randomly; instead, all four actual lists deviate from evenness so far that the probability of making such an uneven list randomly is less than one in a quadrillion.

Could it be that the lists are not evenly distributed because the original Scripture Chase list was so uneven that little improvement was possible given the number of changes on the new lists? The short answer, at least for the first three lists, is also “definitely no.” While it is true that each iteration of the scripture mastery lists moved closer to an even distribution, they did not move by very much. There is no statistical evidence that doctrinal distribution of verses changed at all on the first three lists ($p=0.12$). Given the suboptimal distribution of the original Scripture Chase list, by judiciously dropping 158 verses and adding twenty-nine (as actually happened), the 1986 list could have been only 5.1 verses from even. And given the actual 1986 list, dropping sixty-eight verses and adding sixty-five judiciously could have reduced the average deviation to 3.3 for the 2013 list. In fact, choosing categories at random for deletions and additions create more even distributions than observed 97.6 percent of the time for the 1986 reform, and 99.99 percent of the time for the 2013 reform.

The 2016 reform is another story. Of the forty-eight verses added, thirty-eight were added to categories underrepresented on the 2013 list, and nineteen of the thirty-five removed verses were from overrepresented categories. Only four verses on the list could not readily be assigned to one of the ten gospel topics, nor to the central gospel concept of community. While representation is still statistically different from even, there was clearly an attempt made to approach balance. It is almost as if the 2013 list was determined before the education goals were set, and the two were merely announced concurrently. Perhaps the aim of

bringing the scripture list into accord with goals is why the 2013 list was changed after just three years, compared to the twenty-three- and twenty-seven-year tenures of its predecessors.

Alternative Explanations for 2013 Reforms

If a move toward more equal representation of the nine fundamental doctrines was not behind the 2013 changes, what was? Direct involvement by the leadership is reportedly not the cause, as the suggestions of the Church Board of Education (which included Elders Nelson, Oaks, Ballard, and “members of the First Presidency”) resulted in only two changed references according to Chad Webb.³⁹ President Thomas S. Monson’s involvement is particularly interesting, since out of the six leaders potentially involved in this decision, he has given the most talks and has a large number of citations to added scriptures (second only to Nelson), but had never cited forty-one of the sixty-five added verses in 2013, far more than one would expect by chance. By contrast, Elder Nelson and President Uchtdorf have both cited the added scriptures more than four times per year (though Elder Nelson has so many citations this is not by itself conclusive), a disproportionately large number of President Uchtdorf’s citations were to added verses, and a remarkably small number of verses were added that he hadn’t cited. Sisters Linda Burton and Bonnie Oscarson were also on the committee, but were very recent appointments and probably had minimal involvement. Curriculum director Thomas Valletta perhaps unwittingly revealed how much female involvement was supplied and/or valued when he praised the Board of Education as demonstrating that “the Lord is taking care of the seminaries and institutes through very well prepared and inspired *men*.”⁴⁰

Reading between the lines, as one often must in Church news releases, there appears to be more conflict between Church Educational System

39. Quoted in Young, “New Scripture Mastery.”

40. *Ibid.*, emphasis added.

administration and Church leadership than the changes would suggest. Valletta refers to dozens of meetings over several months, cites input from auxiliaries and teachers, and admits that “not all of his favorites made the cut.” Similarly, Webb says, “There are a lot of wonderful verses, and you can’t put them all in there.” Even if we accept the claim that changes were not made directly by apostles on the Board of Education, it is still likely that changes were influenced indirectly by their importance to the leaders, as indicated by their use in general conference addresses.

It is, of course, very difficult to demonstrate what mechanism causes a pattern, since more than one process can result in the same pattern, and a failure to reject a hypothesis is not the same thing as confirmation. However, we can challenge the hypothesis that the Board of Education was influenced by the rate at which verses are cited in general conference by assuming it is true, and seeing if the logical consequences of such a statement are supported by data. Specifically, if the hypothesis is true, then:

1. The most cited verses in general conference should appear on the scripture mastery lists.
2. Conversely, verses on the scripture mastery lists should be often-cited in general conference.
3. The average number of citations per verse should increase from list to list.
4. Verses that have been added to the lists should be cited more frequently than those that have been dropped.
5. Verses appearing on all lists should have more citations than those appearing on only one.

1. Do the most-cited verses in general conference appear on the scripture mastery lists?

Because each standard work is limited to a constant number of passages on each list, comparisons are done separately for each of the standard

works. In the Old Testament, of the twenty-seven verses cited twenty-five or more times, eighteen of them appear on at least one scripture mastery list. However, all nine omissions are from Genesis, Moses, or Abraham, and may represent an attempt to avoid stacking all the passages into the first few weeks of the curriculum. The sixteen most frequently cited verses from the thirty-eight later books of the Old Testament are all included in scripture mastery. There may also have been some attempt to limit the length of passages memorized. For example, all six verses in Abraham 3:22–27 (the council in heaven) are among the most cited verses in general conference, but students are only required to memorize the first two.

Eight of the ten most-cited verses in the New Testament appear on the scripture mastery lists, including the top six. The two exceptions are John 14:27 (“Peace I leave with you,” sixty-four citations, #7), which was possibly omitted because two other verses from John 14 are already on the list, and John 3:16 (“God so loved the world,” sixty-three citations, #8), possibly omitted because of its association with evangelical churches.

Fourteen of the fifteen most-cited Book of Mormon verses appear on at least one scripture mastery list, eleven of them on the 2013 list. Alma’s baptismal covenant, Mosiah 18:9 (112 citations, #1 in the Book of Mormon and #2 overall), was inexplicably omitted until 2016. This is particularly perplexing considering how few verses fit the “ordinances” doctrinal category. Moroni 10:32 (“by his grace ye may be perfect in Christ,” seventy-five citations, #5) is also omitted, possibly because the cultural touchstone Moroni 10:4–5 (pray to have the Holy Ghost manifest the truth of the Book of Mormon, seventy-six and sixty-four citations, #4 and #10) is already in that chapter.

The Doctrine and Covenants scripture mastery lists include seven of the ten most cited verses. The editors omitted the sacrament prayer on the bread (D&C 20:77, eighty-three citations, #2) and Article of Faith 13 (fifty-seven citations, #9.5), probably because they are expected to be memorized elsewhere. Also, Joseph Smith’s plea to be full of charity and

let virtue garnish thy thoughts (D&C 121:45, seventy-seven citations #3) has been left off all four lists, perhaps because nine other verses from that section have been included. The sentiment is echoed, perhaps deliberately, in the similar-but-obscure D&C 46:33 (“ye must practice virtue and holiness before me continually,” two citations, #1576), which was added in 2013, but removed in 2016.

Overall, the probability of ever being included on a scripture mastery list increases by approximately 1.15% for each general conference citation, a trend that is highly significant using both linear and logistic regression models ($p < .0001$ for both).

2. Are verses on the scripture mastery lists often-cited in general conference?

The average scripture mastery verse has been cited 22.8 times in general conference, nearly five times more than the 4.6 citations the average verse from the pool of ~12,000 cited in general conference has received. Exceptions to this general rule are so rare as to be illuminating by themselves. There are a total of nineteen verses on at least one scripture mastery list that have never been cited; fifteen of these were *only* on the original 1963 list, and none were on the 2013 list. Curiously, the 2016 list reinstated D&C 130:23 (“A man may receive the Holy Ghost, and it may descend upon him and not tarry with him”), absent from the two previous lists, and added Ezekiel 12:16 (God speaks to Ezekiel after a fast of seven days). Both these verses reinforce the reality and difficulty of personal revelation; the next verse in Ezekiel, included despite just two general conference citations, establishes the hierarchical pattern of God teaching a prophet, who passes the teaching on to the people. Other seldom-cited scripture mastery verses have been used out-of-context to support LDS-specific doctrines, such as Ezekiel 37:15–17 (the stick of Joseph and Judah; one, eight, and seven citations); Jeremiah 1:4–5 (“Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee”; three and fourteen

citations); 1 Corinthians 15:42 (three degrees of glory; seven citations) and 2 Tim. 3:17 (scripture comes by revelation to prophets; seven citations). Most other exceptions are neighbors of high-citation verses, included to provide context.

The number of seldom-cited verses is not evenly spread across gospel topics (chi squared test $p=.009$). The fraction of verses cited fewer than ten times is high for prophets (65 percent), the restoration (47 percent), and family (36 percent), but low for the unofficial topics of community (5 percent) and study (8 percent).

3. Does the average number of citations per scripture mastery verse increase from list to list?

The mean number of citations increased significantly from the 1963 to the 1986 list (21.3 and 28.1, $p=.0004$), but did not significantly change on the two subsequent lists (29.8 and 29.4, $p=.48$ and $p=.88$). This pattern was duplicated when considering the four standard works individually. However, the fraction of top-cited scriptures on each list has gone up by an average of 4.9% per list (based on the top five, ten, twenty-five, fifty, 100, and 250 scriptures, $p=.0004$).

4. Do added verses have more citations than dropped verses?

This is true in all three cases. In 1986, the twenty-nine added verses had been cited an average of 4.7 times up to that point, while the 158 dropped verses had only been cited 2.6. In 2013, the sixty-five added verses had 27.0 citations to the 23.2 of the dropped verses. And in 2016, the forty-eight added verses averaged 23.0 citations, while the thirty-five dropped verses averaged 22.9. None of these changes was significant individually (uncorrected $p=0.046, 0.28, \text{ and } 0.99$), but collectively they were highly significant (24.2 vs 14.75 citations, corrected for length of study period, $p<.0001$). It is worth noting that the only Old Testament

scripture mastery verse that has seen a significant increase in citation rate over the study period, Psalms 127:3 (“Children are an heritage of the Lord”), was added in 2013. It is also the only verse cited in the Proclamation on the Family.

5. Do verses appearing on all lists have more citations than verses appearing on only one?

Overall, this is strongly confirmed with the 108 verses appearing on all lists cited an average of 30.9 times, nearly twice as often as the 15.6 citation average of the 214 one-timers ($p < .0001$). This difference is significant at the Bonferroni-corrected alpha level of .0125 for all standard works except the New Testament ($p = .15$), because the 1963 list omitted a large number of highly-cited scriptures, so very few appear on all four lists.

Summary of scripture mastery analysis

Despite recent press releases, it is clear that the changes to the scripture mastery list do not reflect a commitment to providing equal support for each of the nine (now ten) fundamental doctrines. They do, however, represent a reasonably accurate reflection of the most frequently used scriptures in general conference, and are becoming more closely allied with conference citations in all four standard works. However, this general trend is complicated by many externalities, so simple predictions based on this rule are usually, but not always, statistically significant.

I would argue that given the two alternatives—following general conference rather than finding an equal number of verses for each fundamental doctrine—the former is preferable for at least two reasons. First, the “fundamental doctrines” do not include key gospel principles such as charity, service, missionary work, human relationships, nor (until 2016) the importance of study and knowledge; it is important that these topics receive attention anyway. Second, the most cited conference scriptures generally *are* Christ-centered, meaningful, and eloquent; therefore, they provide a better model for spiritual development than attempts to score

a limited set of theological points. This is most noticeable in the 1986 revision of the Old Testament verses, which dropped many verses that are often taken out of context to support “restoration of the One True Church” rhetoric (e.g., Genesis 14:20, 49:22; Exodus 28:1; Deuteronomy 18:18; Isaiah 24:5–6; Jeremiah 16:17–21).

However, there are some disturbing trends noticeable as well. First, the majority of scriptures on all four lists reinforce the importance of obeying commandments and leadership, often in extremely austere tones. This privileging of authority for its own sake is unlikely to resonate with teenagers, and the absolutist tone is particularly troubling given the “crisis of confidence” currently being experienced by a large section of Church membership.⁴¹ Second, given that these teens spend most of their time in school and this scripture memorization is occurring within the Church Education System, one would hope for scriptures that emphasize the value of learning. However, pro-education verses like D&C 88:78–79 (“be instructed in theory, principle, and doctrine”), 93:24 (“truth is knowledge of things as they are”), D&C 130:18–19 (intelligence rises with us in the resurrection), 1 Nephi 19:23 (liken scriptures for better understanding), and Joshua 1:8 (meditate on the Law day and night) have been dropped from the current list, and many others commonly cited in conference like D&C 25:8 (Emma should give her time “to writing, and to learning much”), D&C 88:118, 109:14 (“seek learning, even by study and also by faith”) or D&C 88:19 and 109:8 (a house of learning is a house of God) have never been included at all. Although the 2016 reform explicitly addressed this deficit by adding “Acquire spiritual knowledge” to the nine fundamental doctrines, it added just one verse from this obvious list (D&C 88:118). Together, these two trends represent a profound commitment to conformity at odds with the message of the glorious, soaring gospel exemplified by Jesus and conveyed by

41. Boyd Petersen, “Landing Instructions: How to Navigate (or Help Someone Navigating) a Faith Crisis,” *Rational Faiths* (blog), Aug. 15, 2016, <http://rationalfaiths.com/landing-instructions-navigate-help-someone-navigating-faith-crisis/>.

Joseph Smith. Finally, with the exception of Ruth's promise to Naomi (Ruth 1:16–17) and a passing reference to daughters and handmaids in Joel 2:28–29—both of which appear only on the 1963 Scripture Chase list—not a single verse is written by, to, about, or even mentions a woman. The addition of the explicitly egalitarian 2 Nephi 26:33 (“male and female...all are alike unto God”) in 2016 is such a small step in the right direction; it serves mainly to highlight the distance between the scriptural ideal and the curricular reality.

The Family Proclamation

Perhaps the distinction between revelation and informal corporate policy is nowhere more confused than in “The Family: A Proclamation to the World.” The document is labelled a “Proclamation,” a tag given to at least four previous documents that, even in aggregate, had a negligible impact on Church history.⁴² It is likely that the document was drafted by a team of LDS attorneys as a way to join anti-gay marriage court cases; it was indeed used for that purpose within months of publication, and

42. These were issued in 1841, 1845, 1865, and 1980. A fifth statement in 1901 regarding the importance of vaccination is sometimes counted as a proclamation (e.g., Duane Jeffery, “Natural Law in LDS Theology—Prospects For The 21st Century,” *Sunstone* 2014, Salt Lake City, SL14254) though its importance is so limited I was unable to find a copy, or even an official reference to it, anywhere on the LDS family of websites. (The statement itself, signed by Presidents Snow and Cannon, can be found in “To the Latter-day Saints,” *Deseret News*, Nov. 17, 1900). Like the other four, it was frequently ignored, including by LDS missionary Richard Shumway, who in 1913 began a smallpox epidemic in New Zealand that killed fifty-five Maori including many converts (see Alison Day, “Chastising its People with Scorpions’: Maori and the 1913 Smallpox Epidemic,” *New Zealand Journal of History* 33, no.2), and Apostle Abraham O. Woodruff, who died of smallpox at age thirty-one after failing to get vaccinated before a lengthy trip to Mexico.

six times subsequent to that.⁴³ Despite being drafted without the input or knowledge of the women's auxiliaries,⁴⁴ it was read at the General Relief Society Meeting (then not considered part of general conference). It has never been accepted through a vote of common consent, but it is difficult to argue that the document is any less influential, or treated as having any less authority, than canonical scripture.

As noted in the introduction, Elder Packer's 2010 labelling the Proclamation as "revelation" was quickly withdrawn,⁴⁵ yet three similar statements by earlier general conference speakers have been allowed to stand,⁴⁶ and Elder Packer again called it "another revelation" in April 2011.⁴⁷ Sentences from the document are often excerpted to be repeated

43. See appendix to Boyd J. Petersen, "The Greatest Glory of True Womanhood: Eve and the Construction of Mormon Gender Identity," in *Voices for Equality: Ordain Women and Resurgent Mormon Feminism*, edited by Gordon Shepherd, Lavina Fielding Anderson, and Gary Shepherd (Salt Lake City: Kofford Books: 2015), 75–76.

44. Gregory A. Prince, "'There Is Always a Struggle': An Interview with Chieko N. Okazaki," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 45, no. 1 (2012): 112–40.

45. Presumably under considerable pressure, as Packer is not noted for his accommodating style. Apostle Dallin H. Oaks famously referred to decision-making involving Packer as "stage manag[ing] a grizzly bear" ("Disciplinary Actions Generate More Heat," *Sunstone* [Dec. 1993]: 68).

46. Eran Call, Second Quorum of the Seventy, said "I challenge each of you to read, study, and live by this inspired proclamation" ("The Home: A Refuge and Sanctuary," Oct. 1997, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/1997/10/the-home-a-refuge-and-sanctuary?lang=ara&r=3>); W. Eugene Hansen, a president of the First Quorum of the Seventy, referred to the proclamation three times in one address as "modern-day revelation" ("Children and the Family," Apr. 1998, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/1998/04/children-and-the-family?lang=eng&r=1>); M. Russell Ballard claimed, "The proclamation is a prophetic document" ("What Matters Most is What Lasts Longest," Oct. 2005, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2005/10/what-matters-most-is-what-lasts-longest?lang=eng&r=1>).

47. "In another revelation, the Lord's standard of morality commands that the sacred powers to beget life be protected and employed only between man

by Primary children every week for a month during “Sharing Time” in lieu of a verse from the standard works in official Church curricula (including three of the twelve “verses” for 2014, and inspiring the song for the annual children’s program called “The Family is of God”⁴⁸). Members are frequently encouraged to frame copies of the document and hang them in their homes. Sacrament meeting talks are often assigned based on the document. Perhaps most telling of all, general conference speakers have cited the document by name an astonishing 213 times since October 1995; by contrast, the most cited verse of scripture (Moses 1:39) has received only 80 citations in that time period. Furthermore, in the missionary manual *Preach My Gospel*, the Proclamation is listed under “scripture study” in a section on eternal marriage.⁴⁹

In addition to influencing citations, and in contrast to previous proclamations, the Proclamation on the Family breaks new theological ground by asserting in its first sentence that “The family is central to the Creator’s plan,” and “gender is an essential characteristic of individual premortal, mortal, and eternal identity,” establishing post-World War II Western gender roles as theologically and eternally correct, and foretelling an apocalypse if “traditional” families are not vigorously protected

and woman, husband and wife.” The footnote to this statement refers readers to “The Family: A Proclamation to the World” (Boyd K. Packer, “Guided by the Holy Spirit,” Apr. 2011, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2011/04/guided-by-the-holy-spirit?lang=tam&r=3>).

48. “2014 Outline for Sharing Time: Families Are Forever,” <https://www.lds.org/manual/2014-outline-for-sharing-time-families-are-forever?lang=eng>. The song, written specifically for that year’s program, features the lyrics (astonishing in a twenty-first century context): “A father’s place is to provide, preside A father leads in family prayer” while “A mother’s purpose is to care, prepare, to nurture and to strengthen all her children. She teaches children to obey, to pray”

49. *Preach My Gospel: A Guide to Missionary Service* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2004), 85.

legally. These points have been roundly criticized by scholars,⁵⁰ but adopted enthusiastically by conference speakers. The single verse of scripture used in the Proclamation on the Family itself (Ps. 127:3) had been cited just twice prior to 1990,⁵¹ but eighteen times thereafter ($p=.02$) and was added to the 2013 scripture mastery list. The ratio of the word frequency of “home” to “family” has gone from 7:10 in the mid-1970s to 3:10 today, possibly reflecting a distinction between homosexual homes and “counterfeit” homosexual families that persists in the rhetoric of some leaders despite a rapidly changing legal landscape.⁵² Despite the Proclamation’s advocacy for severely restricted women’s roles, female speakers comprise fourteen of the top forty speakers to cite the Proclamation in conference (but zero of the top thirty-eight to cite the standard works) led by Bonnie Oscarson, whose 0.68 citations per page is 135 percent higher than the most enthusiastic man’s citation rate. Overall, the citation density of female speakers is 2.3 times higher than that of male speakers ($p<.0001$), implying active collusion in the unequal ideation of gender roles. Interestingly, though the Proclamation has been cited in nearly half (10/22) of the post-1995 conference talks that use the word “homosexual” or a synonym, the vast majority of references to the Proclamation are not in talks regarding homosexuality (114). Rather, those aspects of the document regarding traditional gender roles seem to have more thoroughly captivated conference speakers. During the time period, discussions of “family” have continued to accelerate (increasing from just over 500 references in the 1930s to well over 3,000 references

50. One of the finest examples being Janice M. Allred, “LDS Gender Theology: A Feminist Perspective,” in *Voices for Equality: Ordain Women and Resurgent Mormon Feminism*, edited by Gordon Shepherd, Lavina Fielding Anderson, and Gary Shepherd (Salt Lake City: Kofford Books, 2015), 75–76.

51. Both times by Boyd K. Packer.

52. L. Tom Perry, “Why Marriage and Family Matter—Everywhere in the World,” Apr. 2015, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2015/04/why-marriage-and-family-matter-everywhere-in-the-world?lang=eng>.

in just the first half of the 2010s), and an 800 percent increase in the use of the word “complementary” when referring to the responsibilities of men and women.⁵³ Using Craig’s Zeta to analyze distinctive word use in the corpus of general conference talks before and after October 1995 reveals that assertions of the authority of Church leaders are also on the increase, with words like “authority,” “lead,” “obedience,” and “testify” all in the seventy most increased (“Proclamation” comes in at #12; the names of leaders “Monson,” “Gordon,” “B.,” and “Hinckley” all also make the top fifteen).

Not all the shifts have been regressive, however. By the same metric, the most distinctive word in the Proclamation on the Family is “adaptation,” in a cursory acknowledgement that not all fifteen million LDS members live in two-parent nuclear families. This word had been used only twice before in general conference, neither time in reference to family circumstances, but has been used seven times in reference to families since then. Similarly, references to “women” and “daughters” have increased while “man,” and “man’s” have decreased. References to “heavenly parents,” though uncommon through most of LDS history (0.22 references per year from 1851–1994) have increased ten-fold since the phrase appeared in the Proclamation on the Family (2.37 references per year from 1995–2015).

Thus, although collectively there appears to be unwillingness to declare in writing that the Proclamation “fits the definition of a revelation” even when asserted by the President of the Quorum of the Twelve, there is no such hesitation to treat it as such. This demonstrates just how much like normative scripture even ostensibly non-obligatory policy statements can function in the modern LDS Church.

53. This parallels a wider rise of the concept of “complementarianism” in conservative American religions. See “Complementarity or Equality Gender and Justice in the Body of the Church,” *Sunstone* 2013, SL13371, and Kaimipono Wenger’s “The Rise of Mormon Complementarianism,” *Sunstone* 2013, SL13211 for discussions.

The Gay Exclusion Policy

While this paper was under review, the question of what aspects of Church government are decided by leaders acting on their own, and which are directed by God, was further confused by changes to the Church Handbook of Instructions. Although the handbook is ostensibly available only to members of the LDS all-male hierarchy, these changes were noted and discussed online and in the press in early November 2015, before the hard-copy version had been distributed. These changes mandated a disciplinary council for any member in a legal same-sex marriage,⁵⁴ refused baptism to the children of gay parents until age eighteen, and allowed baptism thereafter only if the child “specifically disavow[ed] the practice of same-gendered cohabitation and marriage [and did] not live with a [gay] parent.”⁵⁵

The press response to this action was strongly negative. The day after Church spokesman Spencer Hall confirmed the reports, University of Utah professor Jonathan Park blasted the changes in the campus newspaper as “a pestilent, homophobic plot to alienate and embarrass the children of same-sex couples.”⁵⁶ Jana Riess, in a “livid” blog post quoted by the *New York Times*, called it a “heartbreaking . . . impossible choice: . . . be excluded from lifelong love and companionship, or excluded from the blessings of the church.”⁵⁷ An organized mass resignation event attracted fifteen hundred participants in downtown Salt Lake City on

54. Church Handbook of Instruction 1, Section 6.7.3

55. Church Handbook of Instruction 1, Section 16.13

56. Jonathan Park, “LDS Church’s Stance on Children of Same-Sex Couples Is Homophobic and Hypocritical,” *Daily Utah Chronicle* [University of Utah], Nov. 6, 2015, <http://dailyutahchronicle.com/2015/11/06/lds-churchs-stance-on-children-of-same-sex-couples-is-homophobic-and-hypocritical/>.

57. Laurie Goodstein, “Mormons Sharpen Stand Against Same-Sex Marriage,” *New York Times*, Nov. 6, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/07/us/mormons-gay-marriage.html>.

November 14th, some waiting in line more than an hour-and-a-half to officially remove themselves from the institution.⁵⁸

The LDS Church responded with a carefully scripted interview between the managing director of LDS Public Affairs, Michael Otterson, and Elder D. Todd Christofferson, where Christofferson claimed the policy was designed to avoid “difficulties, challenges, conflicts that can injure development in very tender years” of homosexual couples’ children.⁵⁹ Negative reactions continued, suggesting that this explanation was not universally convincing. On an international podcast, attorney James Ord speculated that the motivation for the policy change was primarily limiting legal liability.⁶⁰ In a podcast that received approximately five times more downloads than usual for *Rational Faiths*, Elder Christofferson’s own brother Tom described the situation as “dreary,” but encouraged “all of us who have had our hearts broken by this to reach out much more in love and acceptance to those who are affected by this.”⁶¹

Then, in January 2016 quorum president Russell M. Nelson declared at an internationally broadcast fireside that:

58. Susanna Capelouto and Ralph Ellis, “1,500 Mormons Leaving Church to Protest Same-Sex Policy, Lawyer Says,” *CNN*, Nov. 15, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/11/14/us/mormon-mass-resignation/>.

59. LDS Newsroom, “Church Provides Context on Handbook Changes Affecting Same-Sex Marriages,” video, Nov. 6, 2015, <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/handbook-changes-same-sex-marriages-elder-christofferson>.

60. Gina Colvin, “Church Policy Changes and their Legal Contexts: James Ord,” *A Thoughtful Faith* [Podcast], Nov. 8, 2015, <http://athoughtfulfaith.org/church-policy-changes-and-their-legal-contexts-james-ord/>.

61. Brian Dillman, Jerilyn Hassell Pool, and Tom Christofferson, “The Policy Amendment (That Never Should Have Happened),” *Rational Faiths* [podcast], Episode 82. Transcript available at <http://www.wheatandtares.org/19470/tom-christofferson-transcript/>, where it has 110,000 hits; the second-most viewed post on Wheat and Tares has 30,000. Statistics via from personal communication with Brian Dillman, Aug. 18, 2016.

The First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve Apostles counsel together and share all the Lord has directed us to understand and to feel individually and collectively . . . This prophetic process was followed in 2012 with the change in minimum age for missionaries and again with the recent additions to the Church's handbook . . . We met repeatedly in the temple in fasting and prayer and sought further direction and inspiration. And then, when the Lord inspired His prophet, President Thomas S. Monson, to declare the mind of the Lord and the will of the Lord, each of us during that sacred moment felt a spiritual confirmation. It was our privilege as Apostles to sustain what had been revealed to President Monson.⁶²

At this point, Elder Nelson had asserted unilaterally that the change in missionary age policy and the gay exclusion policy—despite referring to them as *policies*—were nevertheless arrived at by divine “inspiration,” “revealed” to a prophet, and confirmed by the Holy Ghost to Church authorities. This effectively erased the line between policy and revelation. Even the language Elder Nelson used seems to deliberately parallel the only other unquestioned revelation in living memory, Official Declaration 2, which ended the racial priesthood and temple ban: “we have pleaded long and earnestly in behalf of these, our faithful brethren, spending many hours in the Upper Room of the Temple supplicating the Lord for divine guidance. He has heard our prayers, and by revelation has confirmed that the long-promised day has come. . . . It was then presented to the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, who unanimously approved it. . . .”⁶³ Nevertheless, Elder Nelson's talk was

62. Russell M. Nelson, “Becoming True Millennials: An Evening with President Russell M. Nelson,” Worldwide Devotional for Young Adults, Jan. 10, 2016, Brigham Young University–Hawaii, <https://www.lds.org/broadcasts/article/worldwide-devotionals/2016/01/becoming-true-millennials>.

63. Official Declaration 2, found at the end of the Doctrine and Covenants, canonized by common consent at general conference, Sep. 30, 1978. Note the elements of repeated meetings, prayers in the temple, inspiration given by God to a prophet, and then confirmed by the Quorum of the Twelve. The spiritual confirmation that each of the Twelve allegedly received mirrors oft-quoted

given in an unofficial setting (albeit widely seen and reported), and in the following months and general conferences, the assertion was never corroborated by President Monson or any other apostles.

However, in June 2016 the Church released the new curriculum for their seminary program, *Doctrinal Mastery New Testament Teacher Material*.⁶⁴ The lesson on “Prophets and Revelation” distinguishes between policy and doctrine, but suggests that both are revealed by God, and students are marked wrong if they did not recognize the uncanonized Proclamation on the Family as “Eternal Truth.” The lesson also quoted from Elder Nelson’s talk that called the gay exclusion policy revelation, and it repudiated the idea that this “revelation” might change due to social pressure.

In the space of twenty-four hours in early September 2016, the online version of the manual went through at least three revisions and the idea that Church policies are revealed from God and the quote from Elder Nelson’s talk were excised, reinstated, then excised again.⁶⁵ The quick tempo of all these drafts, which somehow were made public while still being edited, indicates that the confusion about which revelations are binding on Church members is widespread even among employees with decision-making authority over the curriculum. However, the fact that the assertion of “eternal truth” was ultimately retracted for both the Family Proclamation and gay exclusion policy suggests that the impulse to authoritarianism is being, barely and belatedly, held in check. Nevertheless, Elder Nelson’s talk that sug-

statements from many participants in the Official Declaration 2 prayer (see Edward L. Kimball, “Spencer W. Kimball and the Revelation on Priesthood” *BYU Studies* 47, no. 2 [2008]: 53–59).

64. “Prophets and Revelation,” *Doctrinal Mastery*.

65. Jana Riess, “Watch the Mormon Seminary Curriculum Transform before Your Very Eyes!” *Religion News Service*, Sep. 3, 2016, [www.religionnews.com/2016/09/03/watch-the-mormon-seminary-curriculum-transform-before-your-very-eyes/..](http://www.religionnews.com/2016/09/03/watch-the-mormon-seminary-curriculum-transform-before-your-very-eyes/)

gested that the gay exclusion policy is revelation was published in the October 2016 *Ensign*.⁶⁶

Conclusions

Joseph Smith's descendant Paul Edwards once stated: "How do Mormons use scripture? They don't. It is my observation that very few Mormon ministers use scripture at all. When they do, they use it to give legitimacy to what they have already decided to do."⁶⁷ This strategy is hardly unique to Mormonism, and was pithily captured in a quote attributed to Andrew Lang, as the way "a drunken man uses lamp-posts, for support rather than for illumination."⁶⁸ In recent decades leaders have put remarkable emphasis on uncanonized texts, claiming divine inspiration in language remarkably similar to previous descriptions of now-canonized texts.

Attempts to create constructive, friendly, and robust theological discourse have often been suppressed by Church leaders. One poignant example is the excommunication of Paul and Margaret Toscano for their generous and thoughtful book *Strangers in Paradox*.⁶⁹ Unfortunately, additional examples abound. However, it is not impossible for scholars to shape Church discourse in a broader perspective, though they almost uniformly pay a high price for doing so. Lester Bush's *Dialogue* article on

66. Russell M. Nelson, "Stand as True Millennials," *Ensign*, Oct. 2016, 29.

67. Compton, et al., "Scripture, History, and Faith," 104.

68. Attributed to Lang by several sources, including Francis Yeats-Brown, *Lancer at Large* (New York: The Viking Press, 1936), 9; and G.A.N. Lowndes, *The Silent Social Revolution: An Account of the Expansion of Public Education in England and Wales 1895–1935* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1937), vi. The original author of the quote is most likely A.E. Housman, who had written in 1903, "gentlemen who use MSS as drunkards use lamp-posts,—not to light them on their way but to dissimulate their instability" in *M. Manilii: Astronomicon*, translation and analysis by A. E. Housman, vol. 1., (London: Grand Richards Co., 1928), liii.

69. See *Sunstone* 2010, #375: "No More Fellow Citizens But Still Strangers."

the history of blacks and the priesthood is a prime example.⁷⁰ Then-editor Robert A. Rees commented “The effect of our publishing this exchange was to clarify many points of misunderstanding and dispel much of the myth that has circulated in the Church regarding the Negro doctrine, and, further, to put the discussion of this subject on a more rational (and hopefully more spiritual) level.”⁷¹ Several General Authorities are reported to have read the essay, even before it was published, and it is widely seen as contributing to the 1978 revelation. Nevertheless, Bush faced remarkable pressure and obstruction at every level in his research, publication, and post-publication life, and was made unwelcome in, then left, the Church.⁷²

Similarly, Linda King Newell and Valeen Tippetts Avery published *Mormon Enigma: Emma Hale Smith* in 1984, and since then the generally hostile attitude toward Emma Smith has shifted dramatically. In the very next general conference, President Hinckley broke with prior tradition and praised Emma by name a total of twelve times.⁷³ From 1974 up to the publication of *Mormon Enigma*, Emma was mentioned only sixteen times in general conference, and 62.5 percent of them were in an unflattering way. Since then, she has been mentioned on average more than once per conference and 74.6 percent of those in a positive way (Fisher: OR=4.7, p=.008). However, both Newell and Avery faced

70. Lester Bush, “Mormonism’s Negro Doctrine: An Historical Overview,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 8, no. 1 (1973): 11–68.

71. Robert Rees, “The Possibilities of Dialogue,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 9, no. 3 (1974): 4–5.

72. Lester Bush, “Writing ‘Mormonism’s Negro Doctrine: An Historical Overview’ (1973): Context and Reflections, 1998,” *Journal of Mormon History* 25, no. 1 (Spring 1999): 229–71.

73. Even apologists have suggested that Brigham Young may have deliberately misled the saints about her. See, for example, Susan Easton Black, *Setting the Record Straight: Emma Smith: An Elect Lady* (Orem, Ut.: Millennial Press, 2007).

significant backlash from the Church at several levels, and they and their children have become disaffected from the Church.

In the aftermath of the Ordain Women event at the October 2013 general conference, the internet came alive with people loudly arguing about the movement's merits, and both sides spent a good deal of time quoting speakers from that very general conference, and less time quoting canonized scripture. This clearly indicates that conference addresses play the primary normative role in the modern Church. While Church leaders have resisted commenting on the Ordain Women movement, several people involved in it have faced disciplinary action, including the excommunication of Ordain Women's organizer Kate Kelly in June 2014.

The hardline retrenchment witnessed in the gay exclusion policy and reinforcement of rigid gender roles appears to have triggered a wave of resignations from the LDS Church. While statistics from the institution are not available, some circumstantial evidence exists nonetheless. For one, there have been mass resignation events. A broader view comes from an analysis of official membership statistics (see table 5). Every April general conference, a secretary to the leadership presents a list of statistics to the Church, including the total membership, number of new children joining the Church, and number of converts. By comparing totals from year to year, it is possible to calculate the number of people leaving the Church, whether by death, excommunication, or resignation. It should be noted that these totals appear to not be complete at the time they are presented, as the growth and loss figures show a great deal more instability than seems reasonable, so the results for any one year should be viewed with some skepticism. However, inferences based on long-term trends are more likely to be valid. To show how much resignation has increased in the last few years, I generously assume that no members left the Church due to excommunication or resignation prior to 2013, and all losses were therefore due to death or the removal of unbaptized children of record. This establishes a reasonable death and/or removal rate of 4.558 per 1000, consistent with a membership

primarily in the developed world. Holding that rate constant indicates that 123,688 members resigned or were excommunicated in the last three years.

Year	Membership	New Children of Record	Converts Baptized	Growth
1995	9,340,898	71,139	304,330	
1996	9,694,549	81,017	321,385	353,651
1997	10,070,524	75,214	317,798	375,975
1998	10,354,241	76,829	299,134	283,717
1999	10,752,986	84,118	306,171	398,745
2000	11,068,861	81,450	273,973	315,875
2001	11,394,522	69,522	292,612	325,661
2002	11,721,548	81,132	283,138	327,026
2003	11,985,254	99,457	242,923	263,706
2004	12,275,822	98,870	241,239	290,568
2005	12,560,869	93,150	243,108	285,047
2006	12,868,606	94,006	272,845	307,737
2007	13,193,999	93,698	279,218	325,393
2008	13,508,509	123,502	265,593	314,510
2009	13,824,854	119,722	280,106	316,345
2010	14,131,467	120,528	272,814	306,613
2011	14,441,346	119,917	281,312	309,879
2012	14,782,473	122,273	272,330	341,127
2013	15,082,028	115,486	282,945	299,555
2014	15,372,337	116,409	296,803	290,309
2015	15,634,199	114,500	257,402	261,862

Table 5, Part 1

Year	Total Losses	Attributable to death (4.558 per 1,000)	Defection	Average Annual Defec-tion
1995				
1996	48,751	43,382	5,369	5,369
1997	17,037	45,045	-28,008	-11,319
1998	92,246	46,548	45,698	7,687
1999	-8,456	48,103	-56,559	-8,375
2000	39,548	49,732	-10,184	-8,737
2001	36,473	51,194	-14,721	-9,734
2002	37,244	52,682	-15,438	-10,549
2003	78,674	54,028	24,646	-6,150
2004	49,541	55,291	-5,750	-6,105
2005	51,211	56,603	-5,392	-6,034
2006	59,114	57,954	1,160	-5,380
2007	47,523	59,397	-11,874	-5,921
2008	74,585	60,855	13,730	-4,409
2009	83,483	62,293	21,190	-2,581
2010	86,729	63,712	23,017	-874
2011	91,350	65,117	26,233	820
2012	53,476	66,601	-13,125	0
2013	98,876	68,061	30,815	30,815
2014	122,903	69,405	53,498	84,312
2015	110,040	70,664	39,376	123,688

Table 5, Part 2

Defections from the LDS Church, inferred from official statistics presented at general conference (first three columns). Growth = New Children of Record + Converts Baptized. Losses = Annual difference in Membership - Growth. Attributable to Death = Membership * 4.558 / 1000 (a rate set so that the total defections between 1995 and 2012 equals 0, an assumption made to arrive at a minimum plausible estimate of defection totals since 2013). Defection (that is, Resignations

+ Excommunications) = Losses - Deaths. While estimates for any one year should be treated with some skepticism (for example, the official statistics suggest over 8,000 members joined the Church who were neither children of record nor new converts; most likely many 1999 deaths were mistakenly reported in the unusually high 1997 total), long term trends can be considered with more confidence. The last three values for defection reflect cumulative totals since 2013, not averages.

While this value is only a rough approximation based on reasonable assumptions, it strongly suggests there has been a sharp change in retention, and Church leaders apparently have contradictory ideas about how to respond. Nevertheless, one thing we can count on: whatever General Authorities decide to do, we will hear about it at conference, with selective quotes from the canon, that will form our new, unique, and ever-evolving Mormon scripture.

Appendix

Methodology

Data-mining code written in the R statistical language, available upon request from CNKA christiannkanderson@hotmail.com. Citations were pulled from both the body of the talk and footnotes. References to entire chapters or multiple chapters were ignored (e.g. “see Alma 32-34”). However, single references that contained more than one verse were counted as a reference to each verse. For example, a footnote saying “Ex. 20:4–5, 8–9; 24:5” would be counted as citing five verses, as opposed to citing each of the five verses 0.2 times each, for example.

The number of characters in each book was determined by counting alphanumeric characters only. The total ignores spaces, punctuation marks, verse numbers, and alphabet characters used to denote footnotes. Verse, character, and chapter totals ignore header information and prefatory material.

Diversity was calculated using the Gini-Simpson index for ease of interpretation (the probability that two scriptures chosen at random are different).

$$1 - \Lambda = 1 - \sum_{i=1}^n p_i^2$$

Where p_i is the number of times scripture i is cited divided by the total number of citations. Results are qualitatively similar using Shannon information and Rényi entropy.

The original 160 Scripture Chase passages can be found at <https://theboard.byu.edu/questions/23421/>, and the three more recent lists of 100 are widely available. To analyze departures from an even distribution across nine fundamental doctrines, expectation distributions were determined by randomly assigning the number of verses from each list to one of the nine (or ten) doctrines in 10,000 bootstrap sets. Because the probability of the observed datum was $\ll .0001$ in each case, a chi-squared distribution was fit to each expectation distribution using Nelder-Mead optimization, and probabilities were computed from the fit distributions.