

# PERFORMATIVE THEOLOGY: NOT SUCH A NEW THING

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A movement called “scriptural theology” has been part of academic theology for some time now, since the 1980s or earlier.<sup>1</sup> In spite of that, with some exceptions I will note, it has had little impact on Latter-day Saint scholars, much less on Latter-day Saint readers. We see little theology among the Saints, but what we do see tends to be dogmatic.<sup>2</sup> In other words, most of our theology consists of statements of doctrines (or assumed doctrines)—traditionally called dogmas—accompanied by rational justifications. Scripture has its place in dogmatic theologies as proof texts, or sources for the doctrine, but we seldom do theology by studying scripture. If we engage scripture itself in a scholarly rather than a devotional way, whether we do so as theological liberals or conservatives (whatever we take those terms to mean), we tend to do so historically, using some version of the canons of history developed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to examine the history that the scriptures reflect or portray. The assumption is that understanding

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1. For a representative cross-section of those in this movement, see Stephen E. Fowl, ed., *The Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Classic and Contemporary Readings* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1997); Ellen F. Davis and Richard B. Hays, *The Art of Reading Scripture* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 2003); Hans Boersma, *Scripture as Real Presence: Sacramental Exegesis in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2017).

2. See, for example, Blake T. Ostler, *Exploring Mormon Thought: The Attributes of God* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2001); Blake T. Ostler, *Exploring Mormon Thought: The Problems of Theism and the Love of God* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books 2006); Blake T. Ostler, *Exploring Mormon Thought: Of God and Gods* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2008).

the history of or behind the texts will give us an understanding of their meaning. So, when we do theology, we usually do dogmatic theology, and when we engage scripture, we usually do so historically.

However, one exception to each of these alternatives, among others, is in the movement represented by the Latter-day Saint Theology Seminar.<sup>3</sup> It seeks to do non-dogmatic theology, and it doesn't assume that scriptural scholarship is necessarily historical. The Theology Seminar does theology by reflecting on scripture in a scholarly way that is different than what we usually expect. In this paper I give some brief historical background by which I hope to show how the Seminar's version of scriptural theology fits into the Christian tradition as theology.<sup>4</sup> I also briefly explain why one way to describe what the Seminar does is "performative theology."

Today most Latter-day Saints who read scripture, for whatever reason, do so using implicit assumptions about what scripture is and does and about how it ought to be read that were developed beginning in the seventeenth century and culminating in the nineteenth. We read scripture as historical documents that we understand by applying the canons of history, even if we don't know what those canons are and even when the texts in question are not themselves about history (for example, the Psalms). Devotional reading might be an exception, wherein we proof text beliefs that we already hold and understand, an interpretive practice known as eisegesis. But even that, I believe, is an effect of modernism's assumptions misused: eisegesis appears to be the only possibility that remains if we harbor modernist assumptions about scripture and, at the same time, think as many do that we can avoid the historical questions. For many, our emotional or psychological responses seem to be the only source of scriptural meaning if either

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3. Formerly, Mormon Theology Seminar.

4. It is important to recognize, however, that though what the Theology Seminar is doing is related to scriptural theology in the mainstream Christian tradition, the two are not the same.

we don't know how to deal with scripture as history or we are unable to find meaning in it as scripture using historical methods.

The division between exegesis, or finding the meaning of the text from the text itself, and eisegesis, or reading into the text what we believe it says, is not as clean as we might hope. There is no neutral background of truths, untouched by preexisting conceptual frameworks and contemporaneous social and political arrangements, that we can use to determine the meaning of a text. But, equally, the meaning of a text cannot be reduced merely to the meanings that we impute to it because we always interpret out of a historical background and from a social and political situation. As always, things are more complicated than either of those alternatives recognizes.<sup>5</sup> The goal of the Theology Seminar is to recognize that complication and to offer a way of reading that can replace psychological and emotional—in other words Rorschach-like—eisegesis with something that has a stronger claim to truth, something that avoids mere subjectivism.

At the same time, the Seminar also rejects what many scholars perceive to be the only alternative, namely the idea that scriptural meaning can only be ascertained through some version of the historical-critical method. Such methods are often helpful and even necessary, but they are never enough. As readers and scholars, the organizers of the Theology Seminar want to contest modernism's understanding of scriptural meaning, retaining its insights into historical and social context, philology, and so on without allowing themselves to be seduced into thinking that those insights are sufficient for theological understanding. They argue that scripture gives us genuine non-subjective truth, though that truth is also not merely the product of rational critique. The claim is that the Seminar's approach to scriptural exegesis is not eisegesis, but

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5. The work of Hans-Georg Gadamer is directly relevant to the question of how exegesis and eisegesis are intertwined. In particular, see Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed., translated by J. Weinsheimer and D. G. Marshall (New York: Crossroads, 1989).

neither is it objective. And, I argue, the Seminar's alternative is not particularly new.

To see that alternative, start by thinking about modernism's assumptions, the assumptions that undid early Christian and medieval methods of scripture interpretation, making them seem laughable. The Renaissance and the Reformation brought considerable attention to the texts of the Bible: How are they best translated? What are their provenances? What do we make of the differences between them as well as between different manuscripts of the same text? How do we determine the authenticity of a manuscript? Brilliant thinkers put their minds to questions like these and initiated what came to be the discipline of textual scholarship, a part of which is biblical scholarship. Though this approach to the Bible did not drop full-blown from heaven—the work of thinkers for several hundred years before the Renaissance had a great deal to do with the birth of this new way of thinking—the birth of the science of texts inaugurated an important way of understanding history and a new way of thinking about scripture.

That development of textual criticism has been incredibly important, not only to biblical studies but to the whole discipline of history. The work of the Theology Seminar does not contest critical history or the discipline of biblical and scriptural studies. Rather, it argues that an important way of reading scripture, perhaps (for believers) the most important way of reading it, was inadvertently lost with this new development and deserves to be recovered. The discipline of history as it relates to scripture was conflated with disciplined thought about the meaning of scripture, and that conflation has made it difficult for scholars of religion to see that the earlier Jewish and Christian forms of scriptural theology were more than just fancy forms of eisegesis. Further, that conflation not only causes us to misunderstand past interpretation, it closes off possibilities in the present.

Though there were certainly differences in the ways that Jews and Christians interpreted scripture anciently, and Christian scriptural exegesis developed in a variety of ways over the 1,500 years after Christ,

broadly speaking, there was continuity of scriptural interpretation from the first century until about the time of the Reformation. However, in the sixteenth century a change began to occur in the understanding of what scripture is and how one interprets it, and that change eventually marked a radical departure from earlier approaches. With the Reformation and the Renaissance, the question of scriptural truth became a positive question: what do the scriptures *posit about* reality. As obvious as this seems to us—that narrative texts refer to an independently existing reality that can be examined in order to judge the text’s accuracy—this was a new idea about the relationship between narratives and the world. Making the question of scriptural truth a positive question—a question about posits—reflected a wholesale change that had happened in Western Europe. That invention of modern representational history and the assumption that there is a reality to be examined independently, apart from any text and independent of any author/re-presenter, led to scripture being understood in those new terms. Previously the story had been inseparable from the event and, so, was studied as that *through* which we know what is real—the story was the way in which the real reveals itself. Now “real events and real people about which Scripture reported . . . moved to the fore and began to be studied for their own sake,”<sup>6</sup> apart from the texts that speak of them.

Perhaps no one serves as a touchstone of modern thinking about questions of scripture better than the seventeenth-century thinker Spinoza. In his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* we see two assumptions that are new to the study of the Bible: (1) We determine what is real and true by the critical use of reason rather than by revelation, and (2) every text should be approached in the same way.<sup>7</sup>

The import of the first is clear: ultimately reason is the only tool we have for understanding any of the things we encounter; a God-given

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6. James L. Kugel, *How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture, Then and Now* (New York: Free Press, 2007), 686.

7. Baruch Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, edited by Jan Rieuwertsz (Amsterdam, 1670), ch. 6.

gift, reason is that by which we decide and understand what is real. In itself, that assumption was not new. But with Spinoza it was coupled with the notion that if we are examining texts that purport to be historical in some sense, reason's function is ultimately to compare them, as best we can, to independently existing reality. A rational comparison of the text and the independently existing world allows us to decide the veracity or validity of the texts. Too simply put, this is the modern view of what it means to do biblical scholarship, whether one is talking about the meaning of a Hebrew word in the eighth century BCE, the date of composition of the letter to the Hebrews, or the events surrounding the destruction of the temple in 70 CE. Equally, of course, this is also the modern understanding of what it means to do scholarly work on the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, or the Pearl of Great Price—whether one is, at one end of the interpretive spectrum, a person interested in the ideological critique of Latter-day Saint scripture or, at the other end of the spectrum, a person trying to reconstruct Book of Mormon geography. Texts are about events or objects that exist independently, and we judge the validity of those texts by comparing them to the things they purport to describe. That is what Spinoza's first assumption comes down to for modern readers like us.<sup>8</sup>

The second of Spinoza's assumptions, perhaps the one least often talked about, means that scriptural books should be understood no differently than any other books. All texts are to be understood by the

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8. I ignore here another question that Spinoza's assumptions raise, namely "What do we mean by 'reason'?" As one might expect, I believe that question too needs to be raised and that Spinoza's modern understanding of reason is too narrow. See my discussion of that question in James E. Faulconer, "An Alternative (to) Theology: The Privilege of Scripture Study," chap. 4 in *Thinking Otherwise: Theological Explorations of Joseph Smith's Revelations* (Provo: Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, forthcoming). I also recognize that there is a more nuanced interpretation of Spinoza's understanding of scripture (see Gilles Hanus, *Sans images ni paroles: Spinoza face à la révélation* [Lagrasse: Verdier, 2018]), but I am less interested in the best interpretation of Spinoza than in the interpretation that has been most influential.

methods of rational critique, the method I have just roughly described. These two Spinozist assumptions are not easily teased apart. Perhaps they cannot be. The problem is that, for a modern interpreter, beginning from them, particularly the second one, works of scripture should have no more authority than any other, similar books. But if no book has more authority than another, it is difficult to know why so many of us would care about these old books. And if a book *does* have more authority than others, we need to be able to explain that authority without explaining it away.

If we use nothing but Spinoza's assumptions—which have become commonsense and, so, are often invisible to us—the scriptures are, at best, a set of obliquely written moral maxims. We see the extreme to which that view can go in Thomas Jefferson's (1743–1826) redaction of the New Testament, *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*, one of the best-known examples of the naturalistic, rational approach to scripture using Spinoza's assumptions. Speaking of his small book, Jefferson says he has “strip[ped] off the artificial vestments in which [Jesus' teachings] have been muffled by priests” and “par[ed] off the amphibologisms into which [the Evangelists] have been led . . . by giving their own misconceptions of [Jesus'] dicta, . . . expressing unintelligibly for others what they had not understood themselves.”<sup>9</sup> His book, he says, separates the diamonds of the New Testament—“the most sublime and benevolent code of morals which has ever been offered to man”—from the dunghill of Jesus' disciples' writings and, in particular, from what he described as the “wretched depravity” of the Hebrew Bible.<sup>10</sup>

Few Christians would explicitly agree with Jefferson's description of either of the Testaments. I hope few would agree with his reduction of

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9. An amphibologism is an amphiboly, an ambiguity of language created by syntax: “I am writing on my couch.”

10. Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, Oct. 12, 1813, in *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson: Retirement Series* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2010), 6:549, transcription available at <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/03-06-02-0431>.

Christianity to only a set of moral principles, or with his understanding of Judaism as founded in depravity. Yet in spite of that, many of us implicitly read scripture as Jefferson did, stripping off the supposedly irrelevant figural, rhetorical, and syntactic vestments in which the diamonds of divine principles and moral teachings have been “draped and muffled,” putting into supposedly plain English what, for some reason, the prophets, apostles, and other writers of scripture seem to have failed to express clearly themselves. Unlike Jefferson, Latter-day Saints may believe in miracles. Or they may believe in modern prophets. But many of us read scripture using the same assumptions he held, assumptions that deny both miracles and prophets. We use those assumptions whether or not we have explicitly reflected on them. But if we use them, then we implicitly make a good deal of scripture, probably most of it, redundant or superfluous *as scripture*.

If the modernist assumptions are correct, what is the point of having so many pages of scripture when the scriptures can be reduced to a few principles? And why continue to reread our scriptures after we know the principles that are in them? Lawyers do not reread the basic law codes if they know the laws. Physicists do not return to their textbooks on fundamentals after they have learned them. Why should scripture be any different? I am not likely to forget that I should not commit murder,<sup>11</sup> nor that I ought to lead by gentleness, meekness, and love unfeigned.<sup>12</sup> I may not lead that way, but I will probably know and remember that I should. So why reread the books from which I have already imbibed the principles?

There is an answer with historical precedent, namely, the assumption that all books should be read in the same way is incorrect; different kinds of texts work in different ways, so they must be read differently, according to the norms and standards of their type. Specifically, traditional Wisdom literature and modern history cannot be understood in the same way.

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11. Exodus 20:13.

12. Doctrine and Covenants 121:41.



Before the hegemony of Spinoza's assumptions, scripture was construed as Wisdom literature (usually implicitly) rather than what we think of as history in modern terms, so it must be read as Wisdom literature. We have much to gain by approaching the scriptures as Wisdom rather than anachronistically taking them as texts describing an independent reality.

As an undergraduate, I first came across the idea that texts can function in different ways in Erich Auerbach's (1892–1957) famous book, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*. There he points out that the Hebrew Bible and Homer differ in that whereas Homer's work is recited so that we will forget our own reality for a while, the Hebrew Bible is read "to overcome our [individual] reality: we are to fit our own life into its world, feel ourselves to be elements in its structure of . . . history."<sup>13</sup> Neither Homer nor the Bible is history in post-Reformation (i.e., modern) terms, but they each function differently than the other. Homer is closer to what we now call fiction, and the Bible is in another category altogether, one our culture is no longer familiar with. It is in the category of teachings meant to bring us to a new way of living, namely Wisdom. Ancient Wisdom literature has been supplanted by contemporary self-help literature.<sup>14</sup>

Auerbach's description of the Hebrew Bible as Wisdom (חכמה; σοφία) applies equally to the New Testament.<sup>15</sup> It is an explicit theme in

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13. Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, translated by Willard R. Trask. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1953), 12, italics added.

14. What that replacement says about Western culture is an important story, one for another paper. Suffice it to say that the replacement has everything to do with the nominalists' focus on will rather than love as the distinguishing feature of divinity and the consequent understanding of human beings primarily in terms of will rather than love.

15. Pierre Hadot argues that ancient Greek philosophical texts were also understood as like biblical Wisdom. See Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, edited by Arnold Davidson, translated by Michael Chase (Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 1995).

the Book of Mormon. There Nephi and Jacob all but explicitly say that scripture teaches Wisdom when they distinguish between the record they keep on the gold plates (“things of my soul”<sup>16</sup>) and the record on the other plates (“a more history part”<sup>17</sup>). More directly, Jesus tells us that all of scripture—“the Law and the Prophets” in the terms of first-century Judaism—comes down to Wisdom: love God with all your heart and love your neighbor as you love yourself.<sup>18</sup> Both of those are things we must learn how to *do* rather than emotions we should have, principles we must learn, or beliefs we must hold. Scripture teaches us how to love God, in other words serve him,<sup>19</sup> and how to serve him by serving our fellows<sup>20</sup>—which James and King Benjamin agree are the same.<sup>21</sup> The two great commandments summarize Wisdom.<sup>22</sup>

Since learning Wisdom is learning how to live a particular kind of life, it is not the same as learning principles or dogmas. One can live wisely without being a specialist in philosophical ethics or the theology of ethics, and knowing more theory doesn’t in itself make one wiser. Rather than learning theory (in its modern sense), learning Wisdom means putting oneself in a relationship of discipleship to it: Wisdom is my master. More accurately, she is my “mistress” in both Hebrew and Greek, and I put myself at her feet, not to learn particular principles, though those may be relevant, but to learn a skill, the skill of understanding the divine order of the world so that I can serve God and our fellows. That skill begins with hearing,<sup>23</sup> which means not just listen-

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16. 2 Nephi 14:15.

17. 2 Nephi 14:14. For other references to this difference, see 1 Nephi 9:2–4; 2 Nephi 4:14–16; 5:33; Jacob 1:2–4.

18. Matthew 22:37–40.

19. Exodus 19:6.

20. Mosiah 2:17.

21. James 1:27; 2:27; Mosiah 2:17.

22. See Kugel, *How to Read the Bible*, esp. 662–89.

23. See Proverbs 1:8, 22; 4:10; 12:15, and so on.

ing, but obeying. Understanding scripture as Wisdom is behind what we find in 2 Timothy 3:16: “All scripture is given by inspiration of God [*theopneustos*; θεόπνευστος], and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction [*paideia*; παιδεία] in righteousness.” If we use the literal translation of the word translated as the phrase “inspiration of God,” we would say that all scripture is God-breathed. It is the breath breathed into Adam by God to give him life. As such it can be our breath of life, the Wisdom that makes godly life possible.

James Kugel discusses several traits of Wisdom literature, two of which are relevant here:<sup>24</sup> First, even when a text recounts past events, as Wisdom, historical narratives are instruction rather than simply representations of events. According to this understanding, the point of the history or any other kind of text that we find in scripture is to show us God at work in the world so that we can know how we ought to live. Thus, scriptural history isn’t judged by how accurately it represents events of the past but by how well it teaches the truth or meaning of what it means to be a human being in a divinely given world.<sup>25</sup> Often it can do the latter well only at the expense of the former.

Second, like gnomic proverbs, in the Wisdom tradition the writings of scripture are likely to contain more than one meaning, and even the surface or literal meaning may require some digging. Perhaps nothing is so obviously gnomic as Proverbs 30:18–23:

There be three things which are too wonderful for me, yea, four which I know not:

The way of an eagle in the air; the way of a serpent upon a rock; the way of a ship in the midst of the sea; and the way of a man with a maid.

Such is the way of an adulterous woman; she eateth, and wipeth her mouth, and saith, I have done no wickedness.

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24. Kugel, *How to Read the Bible*, 671.

25. I have dealt with this at length, perhaps too much length, in James E. Faulconer, “Scripture as Incarnation,” in *Faith, Philosophy, Scripture* (Provo: Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2010), 151–202.

For three things the earth is disquieted, and for four which it cannot bear:  
 For a servant when he reigneth; and a fool when he is filled with meat;  
 For an odious woman when she is married; and an handmaid that is  
 heir to her mistress.

Seldom is scripture as gnomic as those verses, but the book of Proverbs seems to explicitly enjoin us to seek out things that God has concealed: “The glory of God conceals things, / but the glory of kings searches out things.”<sup>26</sup> The enigma of the gnomic is meant to provoke us to thought and action rather than simply to confuse us.

Especially before the Reformation, though not ending with it,<sup>27</sup> scripture readers have been encouraged to assume that there is an understanding of the text that they have yet to discover. But if history is supposed to be an accurate representation of events, then, as John Locke and his disciple Anthony Collins pointed out in the eighteenth century,<sup>28</sup> it makes no sense to believe that historical accounts can have more than one meaning: there was only one event, so ultimately it has only one truthful representation. By this reasoning, biblical narrative texts, like any texts describing events, can have only one meaning, a meaning to be discerned by critical inquiry. But if, instead, the texts of biblical history are not fundamentally representations of what happened but instructions for wise living then, like a riddle, they may be understood—solved—in more than one way.<sup>29</sup> Texts that are, at

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26. Proverbs 25:2. See W. Hall Harris, ed., *The Lexham English Bible* (Bellingham, Wash.: Lexham Press, 2012).

27. It is important to recognize that scriptural theology has been an important movement in contemporary Protestantism.

28. Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1974), 66–85.

29. For a contemporary approach to scripture as gnomic utterance, see Stephen Mulhall, *The Great Riddle: Wittgenstein and Nonsense, Theology and Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

least on the surface, historical may have more than one meaning; they may teach us more than one thing. Theology remains kataphatic. It is not reduced to negative theology, but more than one truthful posit is possible for any given event.

The notion that the Bible has more than one sense is an ancient idea. The point of figural reading, for example, was to show its multiplicity of senses. But that ancient idea “has been obscured by . . . the disrespect that it has received from the hands of historical critics convinced that only they know what the Bible *really* means.”<sup>30</sup> For ancient and medieval readers, the meanings of scripture are the multiplicity of things taught through the text by divine Wisdom rather than merely the particular intention of the text’s original human author (an author who, we must remember, is a reconstruction by the modern historian). The author’s intention, if we can figure out what it is, isn’t irrelevant, but it also isn’t decisive.

At least in the beginning of Jewish and Christian scriptural exegesis, to understand scripture as scripture—in other words, as a text that has religious authority over the one who recognizes it<sup>31</sup>—meant keeping Kugel’s points in mind. Ancient narrative claimed to *tell us* what is real, to teach us the real rather than to *represent* it. On that view, a narrative is the revelation (small “r”) of the reality of the event it narrates, not a description of that event that we could match independently to a reality established by other means. (That difference is what gets lost in much modern biblical criticism.) But ancient scriptural narrative is not only revelation with a small “r,” it is also Revelation with a capital, though

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30. Jon D. Levenson, “Historical Criticism and the Father of the Enlightenment Project,” in *The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism: Jews and Christians in Biblical Studies* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 106–26, 124.

31. For an excellent analysis of the authority of scripture, see Paul Ricoeur, “The Canon between the Text and the Community,” translated by Peter Stephens, in *Philosophical Hermeneutics and Biblical Exegesis*, edited by Petr Pokorný and Jan Roskovec (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), 7–26.

the two are not at odds: in scripture, the revelation of the meaning of the event, a revelation that any full recounting of history should give us, is also divine Revelation, a revelation of God and his purposes and our place in those purposes.

Origen (184–253) is an excellent example of someone who understands scripture as showing us Wisdom in the premodern way, and for Origen it does that by means of patterns or figures in the world that imitate divine things.<sup>32</sup> For him, to read scripture properly is to understand it in terms of antitypes and types or, in the language of the Book of Mormon, “types and shadows.”<sup>33</sup> Scripture is not only a way of seeing God’s grace among us, it is a way of apprehending God himself by apprehending his revelation of himself in the patterns of the world as divine patterns that manifest themselves in earthly patterns that are imitated in scriptural texts.

As Origen and other early Christians understand scripture, figural or typological readings are not at odds with literal ones. For them *literal* means “by the letter,” in other words according to the primary or usual meaning of the words and grammar; *literal* does not mean “faithfully representing independent reality.” The literal and the figural are not even especially different, for the figural is a function of the literal since it is a way of structuring the historical narratives—the letters and words that make them up—into the single history of the world,<sup>34</sup> a history in which God reveals himself. Since the figural reading shows us what is real in

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32. Origen, *On First Principles*, §4.

33. Mosiah 3:15.

34. Frei, *Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, 2. Ricoeur complicates the question of whether the unity of scripture is the unity of a single history. See Paul Ricoeur, “Experience and Language in Religious Discourse,” in *Phenomenology and the “Theological Turn”: The French Debate*, by Dominique Janicaud, Jean-François Courtine, Jean-Louis Chrétien, Jean-Luc Marion, Michel Henry, and Paul Ricoeur, translated by Bernard G. Prusak, Jeffrey L. Kosky, and Thomas A. Carlson (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 127–46.

history, it coincides with the literal reading, though that coincidence may not be obvious at first. It may require careful consideration.

For a reader like Origen, to find the treasure hidden in a field of Matthew 13:44 is to find Christ; and to buy the field and make it one's own at the price of all that one has is to be changed, to be a new person.<sup>35</sup> The reader should be changed by her reading, and for Origen that change occurs when the reader repeats the patterns that she has learned from scripture—Origen's understanding of the Platonic term *participation*. As a reader, I participate in the divine patterns that I discover revealed in scripture by making those patterns part of my life. The parable of the treasure buried in a field and the experience of repentance have the same pattern, so the meaning of one informs the meaning of the other. Readers are transformed when the figures revealed in scripture become patterns in their lives. To be renewed is to participate in the divine order rather than in the old chaos of the world, and seeing the figural in scripture is one way that participation can occur. We could say, as Hans Boersma does, that this kind of reading is sacramental.<sup>36</sup> Sacramental reading takes up scripture as a means by which God reveals his grace to human beings not only conceptually but—more importantly—in what his grace gives to us.

It is important to recognize that Origen's understanding of the divine and the world does not divide what-is into the natural and the supernatural. That division comes much later. Instead Origen divides what-is into the visible and the invisible, that which one can readily see and that which one must learn to discern in what one sees. *Invisible* doesn't mean "not at all available to sight." Rather, it means "what one must learn to see; what one doesn't see at first glance." The color of the green grass reflected in the girl's white dress is something I do not see,

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35. Origen, *Matthew*, vol. 2, book 10, ¶¶4–6.

36. Boersma, *Scripture as Real Presence*. Sacramental reading is one via which we receive God's grace.

but the painter does. Not that I cannot possibly see it, but that doing so requires training. I can learn to see what is otherwise invisible.

The distinction between the visible and the invisible doesn't become the natural/supernatural distinction until the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, with nominalist thinkers like William of Ockham (1287–1347) and Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464).<sup>37</sup> Before that, the relationship of the natural to the divine is understood to be imitative and participatory rather than oppositional or mutually exclusive. Instead of the divine and the natural being two radically different realities—one that is changeable and subject to causal law and the other that is neither, with an absolute gulf between them—for premoderns, the natural is real to the degree that it imitates or, to use Platonic language, “participates in” the divine. That means that some things that are indisputably real to a modern are not real for most premodern Europeans. Evil is an example: the premodern person understands evil as the failure to participate in the divine, as a deficiency rather than itself actual. Thus, the two eras equivocate on what is real, and the premodern goal of scriptural exegesis is to see, through the texts of scripture, the revelation of the otherwise invisible divine—and ultimately real—world showing itself in our natural world.

That is, more or less, the understanding of scriptural interpretation that holds for approximately the first 1,300 years of Christianity. With Ockham and nominalism, though, a tremendous shift occurs. Thinking that he will protect theology from the untrained speculations of natural philosophers, Ockham argues that one can learn nothing about eternal things by looking at natural ones. He and subsequent theorists of interpretation fail to understand, as Boersma points out, that if we deny the presence of divine exemplaria in visible things, then we trivialize those visible things; if visible things do not imitate invisible ones, then they are *no more than* what is observable rather than what is observable

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37. For detail on this shift, see Louis Dupré, *Passage to Modernity: An Essay in the Hermeneutics of Nature and Culture* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1993).



manifesting what is divine.<sup>38</sup> After Ockham, worldly things no longer bode forth, in their very being, divine things, as they previously did. The window for the Reformation and modernism is opened while the possibility of understanding scripture as revealing the divine world in which God has placed human beings is closed.

In the new way of understanding that modernism brings, scholarship tells us about the world and then compares scriptural texts to the independent world that scholarship shows us; in the old way, scholarship helps us see God's self-manifestation in the world that is revealed in scripture. That old way of understanding things has often been criticized and even derided. It is frequently caricatured. But the Latter-day Saint Theology Seminar seeks to reconsider that old form of scholarly interpretation. Of course, we cannot just leave modern learning behind and return to premodern methods of interpretation. We are historical beings; we cannot ignore the history that has brought us about in our present context, even if by some sleight of hand we could pretend to do so conceptually. But knowing that history also means that we can see alternatives. We cannot *be* ancients or medievals, nor should we desire to, but we can learn from them, and one thing to learn is that reading scripture is not like doing either natural science or scholarly history. When we read scripture as scripture, we are not looking for causes and their effects or explanations—or at least if we are reading it *as* scripture, rather than as simply an ancient text, we are not.

If we are reading scripture in a sacramental way, then we are reading it for the effect that reading brings about, the grace it brings into the world. That effect, that grace, is not something I create as an individual reader, whatever contribution I may make to the effect I experience. The grace given by the sacramental reading of scripture is also, and more importantly, something that happens to me in reading. According to this understanding, reading scripture is middle-voiced, if you

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38. Boersma, *Scripture as Real Presence*, 12.

will—not quite active, not quite passive.<sup>39</sup> Think of the verb *cooks* in the sentence, “The soup cooks in the pot.” It is not active. The soup is not doing what the chef is. But neither is *cooks* simply passive. It isn’t only that the chef is making soup; there is a sense in which the soup in the pot *is* doing something. It is cooking. We might even say, a bit strangely, that it is cooking itself. *Cooks* is in the middle between passive and active. The Theology Seminar takes reading scripture to be middle-voiced in that, like the soup, the reader does something, but at the same time something is happening to her.

It is not difficult to imagine the objection: this way of reading robs scripture of universalizable truth; it becomes *just* a text that is meaningful to those whose scripture it is, but not to those who do not share the text. This is the problem of, as I may seem to be doing, reducing truth to Wittgensteinian language games (or, at least, to a common understanding of Wittgenstein’s language games). But it is clear that neither the writers of the Hebrew Bible and the Christian New Testament nor, perhaps especially, the Book of Mormon are making that mistake. The text of a Gospel is a depiction of Jesus’ life that shows us the *actual* possible world in which the mystery of the kingdom of God is revealed, and that actual possible world is publicly intelligible, even if disputed.<sup>40</sup> The text makes universalizable truth and normative claims, so it cannot be only one language game among a possible infinity of others without self-contradiction.

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39. Sometimes reflexive verbs are understood to be in the middle voice: “The cat licks itself.” In that sentence, *licks* is either both active and passive, or it is neither.

40. Gary Comstock, “Truth or Meaning: Ricoeur versus Frei on Biblical Narrative,” *Journal of Religion* 66, no. 2 (1986): 117–40. For a fuller exposition of the way of reading recommended here, see Paul Ricoeur, “Toward a Narrative Theology: Its Necessity, Its Resources, Its Difficulties,” in *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, translated by David Pellauer, edited by Mark I. Wallace (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 236–48.

Thus, those who understand interpretation in a more or less premodern way don't claim that there is no historical truth to which scripture corresponds. There may or may not be, depending on the passage in question. Instead, they claim that since the intent of scripture is not to depict events that can be verified independently but to show us the divine reality of the human world, we will not be able to understand scripture *as scripture* by means of only modern historical methods. Those methods may help us in ancillary ways. Understanding the meaning of ancient or nineteenth-century words or grammar may help us understand better what the text we are reading says. Knowing about textual variants may give us insight into how interpreters before us saw things. Understanding the powers at work in the sociopolitical context of a particular revelation may remind us of powers at work in our own lives and perhaps make us more careful about what we infer from the text.<sup>41</sup> Understanding the original context in which a work appeared may expose some of the prejudices that have guided our interpretations heretofore and, by doing so, open us to new insights.

Nevertheless, we understand scripture—as a text that has religious authority for us rather than as one more text among others—when it makes real for us what it says. But “what it says” does not here mean “the historical facts (or authorial intention) that it is putatively about.” To Boersma's principles for understanding wisdom literature we add another: like wisdom literature, the purpose of scripture is to invite the reader to repent, to change her life. For a Christian, ultimately that is what scripture makes real, the possibility of new life. The reader's job, then, is to be open to that happening, to be open to scripture's call to repentance. Jesus says: “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest”<sup>42</sup> and “I say unto you, if ye will come

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41. But for a cogent criticism of ideological critique, see Levenson, “Historical Criticism,” 111–15. See also James E. Faulconer, “Response to Taylor Petrey's ‘Theorizing Critical Mormon Biblical Studies,’” *Element: The Journal of the Society of Mormon Philosophy and Theology* 8, no. 1 (2019): 29–34.

42. Matthew 11:28.

unto me ye shall have eternal life.”<sup>43</sup> A reader of scripture as scripture is someone who reads in response to that call to come to Christ and who listens, while reading, for new expressions of the call. The ears of the scripture reader are open to the invitation to repent.

But, of course, that way of reading is not in itself a way of doing theology. Not all responsive reading is theology because theology must go further. It must explain. A theology of this kind must show us *how* scripture reveals an actual possible world, how it makes universalizable truth claims. A theology of scripture should show how the invitation to middle-voiced repentance and love comes about, and it begins to do that by looking closely at the details and relations of the texts of scripture.

Paying attention to those details and relations could mean looking for the figures in scripture that so interested premodern readers.<sup>44</sup> Until about the seventeenth century, that was a major part of reading scripture theologically. It is likely to involve the kind of careful attention to words, grammar, and rhetorical patterns that was part of the close reading movement of literary criticism in the 1940s (think Cleanth Brooks, John Crowe Ransom, and Allen Tate). The British writer and thinker Arthur Henry King<sup>45</sup> taught many Brigham Young University students a version of close reading from the early 70s through the late 90s. Close reading of scripture may involve many of the kinds of insights that the rhetorical analyses of John W. Welch and others have shown us.<sup>46</sup>

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43. 3 Nephi 9:14.

44. For a contemporary example, see Joseph M. Spencer, *An Other Testament: On Typology*, 2nd ed. (Provo: Neal A. Maxwell Institute, 2016).

45. Kathy Riordan, “Arthur Henry King,” *In My Life* (blog), Apr. 1, 2009, <http://famouspeopleihaveknown.blogspot.com/2009/04/arthur-henry-king.html>.

46. Most notably, Welch created interest in chiasms (and to a lesser degree other rhetorical figures) in the Book of Mormon. The initial publication of his ongoing work was John W. Welch, “Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon,” *BYU Studies* 10, no. 1 (1969): 69–84.

Whatever the particulars of its methodology, the initial approach of close reading is something similar to what Paul de Man describes at Harvard in the 1950s:

Students, as they began to write on the writings of others, were not to say anything that was not derived from the text they were considering. They were not to make any statements that they could not support by a specific use of language that actually occurred in the text. They were asked, in other words, to begin by reading texts closely as texts and not to move at once into the general context of human experience or history.<sup>47</sup>

Students were to start out from “the bafflement that such singular turns of tone, phrase, and figure were bound to produce” in attentive readers,<sup>48</sup> a common theme among those who advocate close reading of whatever kind. Finding oneself baffled by the text is where this kind of interpretation begins, whether scriptural or not. According to de Man, this approach to interpretation was philosophically sophisticated, but the sophistication stayed in the background, putting the pragmatic questions of reading and meaning at the fore.<sup>49</sup> Presumably something similar ought to be able to be said of an analogous kind of theological reading, that it is theologically sophisticated, though that sophistication is in the background with questions about close reading in front.

Of course, as I said earlier, the point of this kind of reading is not merely to know what baffles one or what kinds of language games can be seen in the text (intended by the author or not). Nor—especially—is the point to know how a reader feels about a text, how her experience intersects with the text and produces an emotion. Of course, such things as personal experience are relevant, but only to the degree that

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47. Paul de Man, “The Return to Philology,” in *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 21–26, 23. See also Jonathan Culler, “The Closeness of Close Reading,” *ADE Bulletin* 149 (2010): 20–25.

48. de Man, “The Return to Philology,” 23.

49. de Man, “The Return to Philology,” 24.

they help us be baffled by a text and then respond to it in a meaningful way. And in the case of performative theology, the way of responding is to demonstrate how the passage in question performs its call to repentance.

If we understand theologizing this way, then theology, like probably all scholarly disciplines, requires the exercise of imagination of a certain type: how do this text or these texts reconfigure the world for readers? How does scripture issue its call for our response—not a response to abstract theological questions but a response to scripture’s call to repent?<sup>50</sup> The scriptural theologian’s job is to show the ways in which that call-and-response are performed, so we call her work “performative theology.” The Theology Seminar tries to do performative theology.

To say that this theology is performative is to say that it brings about something in the doing of it. Most of all, then, performative theology would enact God’s loving invitation to come to him. It would enact the reality of that love. Thus, performative theology—attentive to the details of the text and paying attention to relevant historical and philological scholarship—will think more in terms of invitation than of explanation. Explanation will be important, but secondary, to making the invitation heard and the response possible.

We assume that performative theology can be an answer to a common problem, namely that of no longer hearing anything new in scripture as one studies. It is not an uncommon experience for Latter-day Saints, having read the scriptures numerous times, especially the Book of Mormon, to say that they no longer learn anything as they read. Coming to the text with a settled idea of what it says, they are no longer baffled by it because they now read only their own ideas. They appear to read the words on the page, but in fact do not. Instead, they read what they already think those words say. That kind of reading makes it all but impossible for them to hear the invitation of scripture. Our

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50. See Paul Ricoeur, *Amour et justice*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Éditions Points, 2008), 45–46.

interpretations of scripture can express little more than our personal preferences if we read them so that they say what we have always known they say. Only if they challenge us, if they make things difficult, can they help us make that distinction. The point of performative theology is to reorient our attitude by making the scriptures once again baffling, once again a source of wonder, once again a text from which the reader can hear God's invitation.<sup>51</sup>

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51. For examples of theological readings (many of them as yet in embryo), see the archives and podcasts of the Latter-day Saint Theology Seminar (formerly Mormon Theology Seminar).

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