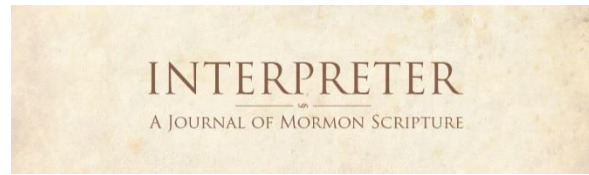




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## Latter-day Saint Youths' Construction of Sacred Texts

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**Abstract:** The texts that religious youth negotiate are often deeply embedded in their sociocultural practices, which can have profound influences on their religious literacy development, construction and manifestation of religious identities, and the development of their faith. Yet, although 85% of American youth claim a specific religious tradition, literacy research has not explored how these youth construct their views of sacred texts. In this two-year qualitative study of the literacy practices of nine Latter-day Saint youth, interviews and observations were used to explore what texts these youth considered sacred and how their views of these texts were informed by their religiocultural beliefs, values, and practices. Analyses indicate that views of sacred texts were informed by the regularity with which the youth engaged with these texts and their specific personal experiences with them. This work breaks new ground in the study of religion as social practice by exploring how religiocultural ways of doing and being influenced the development of young people's construction of sacred texts. Implications for religious instruction are provided.



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## Latter-day Saint Youths' Construction of Sacred Texts

Eric D. Rackley

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# LATTER-DAY SAINT YOUTHS' CONSTRUCTION OF SACRED TEXTS

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Eric D. Rackley

*Abstract: The texts that religious youth negotiate are often deeply embedded in their sociocultural practices, which can have profound influences on their religious literacy development, construction and manifestation of religious identities, and the development of their faith. Yet, although 85% of American youth claim a specific religious tradition, literacy research has not explored how these youth construct their views of sacred texts. In this two-year qualitative study of the literacy practices of nine Latter-day Saint youth, interviews and observations were used to explore what texts these youth considered sacred and how their views of these texts were informed by their religiocultural beliefs, values, and practices. Analyses indicate that views of sacred texts were informed by the regularity with which the youth engaged with these texts and their specific personal experiences with them. This work breaks new ground in the study of religion as social practice by exploring how religiocultural ways of doing and being influenced the development of young people's construction of sacred texts. Implications for religious instruction are provided.*

Religion has influenced — and continues to influence — politics,<sup>1</sup> popular culture,<sup>2</sup> the speech of public figures,<sup>3</sup> educational policy

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1 See Jeff Sharlet, *The Family: The Secret Fundamentalism at the Heart of American Power* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008).

2 See R. Laurence Moore, *Touchdown Jesus: The Mixing of Sacred and Secular in American History* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003); and Diane Winton, *Small Screen, Big Picture: Television and Lived Religion* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2009).

3 See Koichi Mori, "President Bush's Discourse on War against "Terrorism,"" *Journal of Interdisciplinary Study of Monotheistic Religions* [Special issue, *Discourse on Violence and War in the Islamic and Christian World, The 19th World Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions (IAHR)*], <http://www.cismor.jp/uploads-images/sites/3/2006/02/President-Bushs-Discourse-on-War-Against-Terrorism.pdf>; and Barak Obama, "A New Beginning," speech presented

and practice,<sup>4</sup> and nearly every aspect of American life.<sup>5</sup> As Manseau and Sharlet put it, “the Bible is always there . . . [It’s] in your bones before you crack its binding.”<sup>6</sup> Given that a majority of youth in the United States participate in religious organizations<sup>7</sup> and that the predominant faiths around the world have strong text-based traditions, it stands to reason that millions of young people in the USA are engaging in religious literacy practices with the texts that are integral to their faiths. The muscle of these texts and their accompanying practices are seen in the manner in which young people employ them in the construction of their identities; use them to find meaning in their lives; and negotiate social, cultural, and religious spaces.<sup>8</sup>

Given the importance of religion and religious texts as well as the sizable population of religious youth, attention to the place of religious texts in youths’ lives may be warranted. To date, however, precious little research has explored how religious youths’ views of sacred texts are formed by their religiocultural experiences. In the Church we often assume that youth consider certain texts sacred, such as scripture, but we have no empirical evidence about *how* they develop those views. This study attends to that gap by examining how Latter-day Saint youth develop their conceptions of scripture as sacred text.

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at Cairo University, Giza, Egypt, June 4, 2009, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-cairo-university-6-04-09>.

4 See Nila Banton-Smith, *American Reading Instruction* (Newark, DE: International Reading Association, 2002); and Douglas Jacobsen and Rhonda Hustedt Jacobsen, *The American University in a Postsecular Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

5 See Peter Manseau and Jeff Sharlet, *Killing the Buddha: A Heretic’s Bible* (New York: Free Press, 2004); Moore, *Touchdown Jesus*.

6 *Ibid.*, 4.

7 See Christian Smith and Melinda L. Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

8 See A. Jonathan Eakle, “Literacy Spaces of a Christian Faith-based School,” *Reading Research Quarterly* 42/4 (2007): 472–510; Shirley Brice Heath, *Ways with Words: Language, Life, and Work in Communities and Classrooms* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983); David Poveda, Ana Cano, and Manuel Palomares-Valera, “Religious Genres, Entextualization and Literacy in Gitano Children,” *Language in Society*, 34, no. 1 (2005): 87–115; Eric D. Rackley, “Motivation for Religious Literacy Practices of Religious Youth: Examining the Practices of Latter-day Saint and Methodist Youth in One Community” (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2010); Eric D. Rackley, “Scripture-Based Discourses of Latter-day Saint and Methodist Youths,” *Reading Research Quarterly* 49, no. 4 (2014): 417–35; and Loukia K. Sarroub, “In-Betweenness: Religion and Conflicting Visions of Literacy,” *Reading Research Quarterly* 37/2 (2002): 130–48.

Informed by social and cultural theories, this study sheds light from a new angle on how Latter-day Saint youths' social and cultural values, practices, beliefs, and experiences influence their views of scripture. The knowledge produced from this study may be a precursor to developing more effective religious literacy practices that are more responsive to youths' histories with scripture. Moreover, knowing how Latter-day Saint youth construct their views of sacred texts may offer additional lines of inquiry into young peoples' reading practices, the motivations that drive them, and how texts are used in the Church and the home to help youth develop gospel knowledge and testimony. Failing to develop a more robust understanding of the issues addressed in this paper may seriously undermine parents' and religious educators' efforts to draw upon the important social and cultural values, beliefs, and practices that can be important in effectively and responsibly educating today's youth.<sup>9</sup>

To address this study's purpose, I draw from relevant research to discuss (a) the importance of texts in youths' experiences; (b) the critical place of religious literacies — including religious texts — in young peoples' lives; (c) a sociocultural perspective of texts, and (d) my theorization of the sacred in relationship to the social and cultural practices of the participants of this study. The research methods section provides details on the site, participants, processes of data collection, and data analysis procedures. Following this, the findings identify the importance of scripture in Latter-day Saint youths' lives and how the youth constructed their notions of sacred texts. I then provide implications of this work for religious instruction, and end with some concluding remarks about the importance of understanding youths' constructions of sacred texts.

## Theoretical Framework and Relevant Literature

### A Sociocultural Construction of Texts

In this study, I approach texts as social and cultural constructs, which include closely connected views of what counts as texts and how texts are created. As social constructs, texts are tools created in social contexts and used for social purposes, such as developing and maintaining group connections, making sense of one's environment, producing knowledge,

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<sup>9</sup> See Gloria Ladson-Billings, *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1994); and Elizabeth Birr Moje and Kathleen Hinchman, "Culturally Responsive Practices for Youth Literacy Learning," in *Adolescent Literacy Research and Practice*, ed. Tamara L. Jetton and Janet A. Dole (New York: Guilford Press, 2004), 321–50.

and enacting one's sense of self.<sup>10</sup> Texts, from social and cultural perspectives, are created in specific contexts for specific purposes and must be agreed upon and negotiated by individuals familiar with and invested in those contexts. For example, within the Church the importance of the Book of Mormon as a sacred text has been socially constructed over time as prophets proclaim its value, as we read from it in church and at home, use it to solve problems, find peace, draw closer to God, and share these experiences with others. These and other experiences with the Book of Mormon influence how the Book of Mormon is understood as a specific kind of sacred text within the Church.

A social and cultural view of texts highlights the manner in which youth in this study constructed their views of what counts as sacred texts. Although they privileged print texts, they developed what counted as sacred, print texts in terms of their experiences with them and how they cohered with their religiocultural beliefs, histories, and practices. It is naive to assume that Latter-day Saint youth consider scripture sacred simply because it is important to the Church as a religious institution. This study interrogates this assumption, drawing upon the youths' own experiences with scripture as set within their religiocultural contexts to explore *how* scripture became sacred for them. To help frame the exploration of these youths' social and cultural construction of texts, the next section looks more closely at the literacy research that focuses on the place of texts in youths' everyday lives.

### **Texts in Young Peoples' Lives**

Texts play a critical role in students' experiences inside and outside of school.<sup>11</sup> In their everyday, out-of-school experiences, young people often

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10 See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Translated by Gayatri C. Spivak) (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976); Heath, *Ways with Words*; Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole, *The Psychology of Literacy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981); Brian V. Street, *Literacy in Theory and Practice* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1984); and Brian V. Street, *Social Literacies: Critical Approaches to Literacy in Development, Ethnography and Education* (London: Longman, 1995).

11 See Patricia A. Alexander and Tamara L. Jetton, "Learning from Text: A Multidimensional and Developmental Perspective," in *Handbook of Reading Research*, Vol. 3, ed. Michael L. Kamil (Mahwah, NJ: L. Erlbaum Associates, 2000), 285–310; Donna E. Alvermann and Elizabeth Birr Moje, "Adolescent Literacy Instruction and the Discourse of 'Every Teacher a Teacher of Reading,'" in *Theoretical Models and Processes of Reading*, ed. Donna E. Alvermann, Norman Unrau, and Robert B. Ruddell, 6th ed., (Newark, DE: International



engage with texts on their own terms, in their own ways, for their own purposes.<sup>12</sup> This can have a positive influence on youths' motivations for reading<sup>13</sup> and give them access to knowledge and ways of thinking and doing not available elsewhere. Moreover, the texts that young people read and write on their own terms are often deeply embedded in their social and cultural practices, values, and experiences.<sup>14</sup> This means that the

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Reading Association, 2013), 1072–103; Glynda A. Hull and James G. Greeno, “Identity and Agency in Nonschool and School Worlds,” in *Learning in Places: The Informal Education Reader*, ed. Zvi Bekerman, Nicholas Burbules, and Diana Silberman-Keller (New York: Peter Lang, 2006), 77–98; Elizabeth Birr Moje, Darin Stockdill, Kathryn Kim, and Hyun-Ju Kim, “The Role of Texts in Disciplinary Learning,” in *Handbook of Reading Research*, Vol. 4, ed. Michael L. Kamil, P. David Pearson, Elizabeth Birr Moje, and Peter P. Afflerbach (New York: Routledge, 2011), 453–86; Darin Stockdill and Elizabeth Birr Moje, “Adolescents as Readers of Social Studies: Examining the Relationship between Youth’s Everyday and Social Studies Literacies and Learning,” *Berkeley Review of Education* 4/1 (2013): 35–68; and Suzanne E. Wade and Elizabeth Birr Moje, “The Role of Text in Classroom Learning,” in *Handbook of Reading Research*, Vol. 3, ed. Michael L. Kamil, Peter B. Mosenthal, P. David Pearson, and Rebecca Barr (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2000), 609–27.

12 See Glynda A. Hull and Katherine Schultz, *School’s Out! Bridging Out-of-School Literacies with Classroom Practice* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2002); David E. Kirkland and Glynda A. Hull, “Literacy Out of School: A Review of Research on Programs and Practices,” in *Handbook of Reading Research: Vol. 4*, ed. Michael L. Kamil, P. David Pearson, Elizabeth Birr Moje and Peter Afflerbach (New York: Routledge, 2011), 711–725; Elizabeth Birr Moje, “Powerful Spaces: Tracing the Out-of-School Literacy Spaces of Latino/a Youth,” in *Spatializing Literacy Research and Practice*, ed. Kevin M. Leander and Margaret Sheehy (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), 15–38; Elizabeth Birr Moje, “‘To be Part of the Story’: The Literacy Practices of Gansta Adolescents,” *Teachers College Record* 102/3 (June 2000): 651–90; and Jennifer C. Stone, “Popular Websites in Adolescents’ Out-Of-School Lives: Critical Lessons on Literacy,” in *A New Literacies Sampler*, ed. Michele Knobel and Colin Lankshear (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), 49–66.

13 See Elizabeth Birr Moje, Melanie Overby, Nicole Tysvaer, and Karen Morris, “The Complex World of Adolescent Literacy: Myths, Motivations, and Mysteries,” *Harvard Educational Review* 78/1 (Spring 2008): 107–54; and Eric D. Rackley, “Religious Youths’ Motivation for Reading Complex, Religious Texts,” *Teachers College Record* (in press).

14 See David Barton and Margaret Hamilton, “Literacy Practices,” in *Situated Literacies: Reading and Writing in Context*, ed. David Barton, Margaret Hamilton, and Roz Ivanic (London: Routledge, 2000), 7–15; Barbara J. Guzzetti, and Margaret Gamboa, “Zines for Social Justice: Adolescent Girls Writing on their Own,” *Reading Research Quarterly* 39/4 (2004): 408–36; Cynthia Lewis and Bettina Fabos, “Instant Messaging, Literacies, and Social Identities,” *Reading Research Quarterly* 40/ 4 (2005): 470–501.



way young people conceptualize, use, and produce texts are influenced by where and how they live and the circumstances surrounding their experiences in the world. Elizabeth Moje, for example, demonstrated how gang-affiliated youth enacted sophisticated literacy practices by writing poetry in order to “‘take hold’ of their lives,” express their fears and frustrations, and create and position themselves in specific ways.<sup>15</sup>

Young peoples’ negotiation of texts can also shape their identities and give them the tools to navigate their social and cultural experiences<sup>16</sup> as well as help them obtain and hold on to social power. Scholars have demonstrated how youth use and produce texts in their lives as a way of highlighting the value of these texts and the accompany literacy practices for specific groups of young people, such as adolescent girls,<sup>17</sup> ethnic minorities,<sup>18</sup> tech-savvy teens,<sup>19</sup> and gang members or gang-affiliated

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15 Moje, “To be Part of the Story,” 662; Rackley, “Motivation for Religious Literacy Practices of Religious Youth;” and Rackley, “Scripture-Based Discourses of Latter-day Saint and Methodist Youths.”

16 See Alfred W. Tatum, “Toward a More Anatomically Complete Model of Literacy Instruction: A Focus on African American Male Adolescents and Texts,” in *Theoretical Models and Processes of Reading*, 6th edition, ed. Donna E. Alvermann, Norman J. Unrau, and Robert B. Ruddell (Newark, NJ: International Reading Association, 2008/2013), 611–35.

17 See Margaret J. Finders, *Just Girls: Hidden Literacies and Life in Junior High* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997); Margaret J. Finders, “Queens and Teen Zines: Early Adolescent Females Reading their Way toward Adulthood,” *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* 27/1 (March 1996): 71–89; Barbara J. Guzzetti, “Lessons on Literacy Learning and Teaching: Listening to Adolescent Girls,” in *Handbook of Adolescent Literacy Research*, ed. Leila Christenbury, Randy Bomer, and Peter Smagorinsky (New York: Guilford, 2009), 372–85; and Josephine P. Marsh and Elizabeth P. Stolle, “Re/constructing Identities: A Tale of Two Adolescents,” in *Reconceptualizing the Literacies in Adolescents’ Lives*, ed. Donna E. Alvermann, Kathleen A. Hinchman, David W. Moore, Stephen F. Phelps, and Diane R. Waff (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2006), 47–63.

18 See Carmen M. Martínez-Roldán and María E. Fránquiz, “Latina/o Youth Literacies: Hidden Funds of Knowledge,” in *Handbook of Adolescent Literacy Research*, ed. Leila Christenbury, Randy Bomer, and Peter Smagorinsky (New York: Guilford, 2009), 323–42; and Na’ilah S. Nasir, “‘Points ain’t Everything’: Emergent Goals and Average and Percent Understandings in the Play of Basketball among African American Students,” *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 31/3 (2000): 283–305.

19 See Rebecca W. Black, “Digital Design: English Language Learners and Reader Reviews in Online Fiction,” in *A New Literacies sampler*, ed. Michele Knobel and Colin Lankshear (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), 115–36); Lewis and Fabos, “Instant Messaging”; Stone, “Popular Websites”; and Phillip Wilder

youth.<sup>20</sup> These studies demonstrate the ubiquity and power of texts in the lives of diverse groups of young people. But what about the place of sacred texts in the lives of religious youth?

### Religious Literacies and Religious Texts

A growing body of research indicates that youths' religious reading and writing practices — their religious literacies — can be powerful forces in their lives. In her classic work, *Ways with Words*, Heath demonstrated the importance of religious texts such as the Bible in raising children, developing conceptions of good parenting, directing oral storytelling, and affecting social interactions across generations. Heath's work suggests the centrality of religion, religious practices, and religious texts in the lives of individuals and communities. Religious literacies can also facilitate youths' learning of religious discourses, clarify the differences between sacred and secular texts, and demonstrate the authority of religious texts, even at a young age.<sup>21</sup> For some youth, religious oral and print discourses influence the way they talk and write for academic purposes.<sup>22</sup> For other youth, religious literacies influence identity development<sup>23</sup> and the way they negotiate their place in the world. In a 26-month study, Sarroub identified how Muslim youth negotiated their places in and out of school through their use of religious texts.<sup>24</sup>

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and Mark Dressman, "New Literacies, Enduring Challenges? The Influence of Capital on Adolescent Readers' Internet Practices," in *Reconceptualizing the Literacies in Adolescents' Lives*, ed. Donna E. Alvermann, Kathleen A. Hinchman, David W. Moore, Stephen F. Phelps, and Diane R. Waff (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 2006), 205–29.

20 See Jill A. Aguilar, "Chicano Street Signs: Graffiti as Public Literacy Practice," paper presentation at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association (New Orleans, 2000), <http://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED441891>; Laurie MacGillivray and Margaret Curwen, "Tagging as a Social Literacy Practice," *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 50/5 (February 2007): 354–69; and Moje, "To Be Part of the Story."

21 See Caroline Zinsser, "For the Bible Tells Me So: Teaching Children in a Fundamentalist Church," in *The Acquisition of Literacy: Ethnographic Perspectives*, ed. Bambi Schieffelin and Perry Gilmore (Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1986), 55–71.

22 See Poveda, Cano, and Palomares-Valera, "Literacy in Gitano Children"; and Alison Skerrett, "Religious Literacies in a Secular Literacy Classroom," *Reading Research Quarterly* 49/2 (2013): 233–50.

23 See Patricia Baquedano-López, "Narrating Community in *Doctrina* Classes," *Narrative Inquiry* 10/2 (2000): 429–52.

24 See Sarroub, "In-Betweeness."

The youth organized their overall behaviors and speech into categories derived from the Qur'an. For these youth, religious texts and religious literacies were profound and important means of making sense of their experiences in and out of school. By living their lives in accordance with their religious traditions, as derived from religious texts, the youth were "endowed [with] a state of spiritual grace."<sup>25</sup>

A recent comparative study of Methodist and Latter-day Saint youths' literacy practices found important differences in the ways in which these groups of youth read religious texts, as influenced by their social and cultural experiences, traditions, beliefs, and commitments.<sup>26</sup> The religious literacies of the Methodist youths, for example, were informed by a culture of interpretation, which was characterized by active participation in the construction of meaning of scripture. These youth actively engaged in extended discussions about scripture with their peers and the adult leaders in their congregation. Their discussions focused on constructing possible meanings of scripture. The Latter-day Saint youths' literacy practices were informed by a culture of listening that privileged limited and infrequent involvement during literacy events, such as reading and talking about scripture. The Latter-day Saint youth sought to find "right answers" in scripture, repeat what scripture said, read with the intention of believing what they read, and memorize scripture. As one of very few published studies of Latter-day Saint youths' literacy practices, this research suggests that Latter-day Saint youths' interaction with sacred text was primarily passive and limited.

A recent study seeks to extend this work by investigating how Latter-day Saint youth read self-selected scripture passages.<sup>27</sup> This research identified five ways that Latter-day Saint youth read scripture. One of the participants primarily summarized what he read by translating each phrase into a modern-day English equivalent. Another participant privileged fact-based comments as she read. A third made numerous connections between his prior knowledge and what he was reading, essentially focusing on the similarities between scripture and other things that he had read. Another youth's reading of scripture was characterized by inferences or logical interpretations based on textual evidence and his own thinking. This young man was

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25 Ibid., 145.

26 See Rackley, "Scripture-Based Discourses of Latter-day Saint and Methodist Youths,"

27 See Eric D. Rackley, "How Young Latter-day Saints Read the Scriptures: Five Profiles," *The Religious Educator*, 16, no. 2 (2015): 129-148.

attempting to draw life lessons from his reading. The final participant engaged in a problem-solving relationship with scripture by seeking to solve text-based or personal problems as she read. This required her to construct on-going, conditional knowledge about what scripture might mean.

The existing literature on youths' religious literacy practices suggests the importance of young people's faiths and the work they do to make sense of their worlds. It also highlights the importance of religious texts in the lives of religious youth. But with the exception of the last two studies, we know very little about Latter-day Saint youths' literacy practices and nothing about how they construct their views of sacred texts.

### **Construction of the Sacred**

In his historic work with the Australian Arunta aborigines, Emile Durkheim did not equate the sacred with divinity as represented by gods or supernatural powers; rather, the sacred was sacred because it was set apart from the ordinary, what Durkheim called the profane.<sup>28</sup> To understand what is sacred, then, is to understand what is profane, and vice versa. In *The Idea of the Holy*, Rudolf Otto used the Latin *numinous* to describe the power, presence, and majesty of the holy, or sacred.<sup>29</sup> The numinous is not understood, nor can be understood, in terms of other experiences. It is truly "out of this world." For Otto, experiencing the numinous produces feelings of profound unworthiness and a sense of the insignificance of everyday life. He called this the "feeling of absolute profaneness."<sup>30</sup> Mircea Eliade argued for the existence of sacred space, time, nature, and self.<sup>31</sup> Using religious man and non-religious man to demonstrate how individuals might understand the sacred and profane, Eliade discussed such sacred spaces as home, temple, and cosmos, and the sacred time invoked during religious rituals.

For Eliade, Otto, and Durkheim, the sacred exists in opposition to the ordinary. Indeed, the sacred-profane polarity may be a common

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28 See Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (New York: Free Press, 1957).

29 See Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational* (London: Oxford University Press, 1923).

30 Ibid., 51.

31 See Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1959).

religious construct,<sup>32</sup> yet what counts as sacred and profane can vary from one person and context to another. For some, the body, as a temple, is sacred. For others the body, as impure, is profane. For some, their responsibilities as spouses or parents are sacred as well as relationships with God and others, global issues such as climate change or food shortage, and even reading and writing.<sup>33</sup> If the sacred is understood in opposition to the profane, then, as Durkheim states, “anything can be sacred” that is set apart from the ordinary.<sup>34</sup> For this study, I conceptualize the sacred as that which stands in contrast to the profane. Because this may differ from one culture or individual to another, conceptions of the sacred come from the participants themselves; specifically, their conceptions of sacred texts, as influenced by their social and cultural values, experiences, and practices.

### **Summary of Background Literature**

Together, these perspectives suggest that texts and the sociocultural construction of texts may be an important part of young peoples’ lives and that religious texts can have powerful influences on youths’ experiences in the world. Yet, the extant research has yet to address important questions about the intersection of youth, religion, and the construction of sacred texts. How, for example, do religious youth conceptualize sacred texts, and what influences do social and cultural experiences and commitments play in their conceptualizations of these texts? This study addresses these questions in the hope of opening a dialogue among religious educators about how youth construct their views of sacred texts, which might inform their literacy practices, including their use of scripture.

## **Research Design and Methodology**

### **Participants and Sites**

Nine Latter-day Saint youth participated in this study. I selected Latter-day Saint participants because Mormonism has identifiable

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32 See Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 37.

33 See Brian J. Zinnbauer and Kenneth I. Pargament, “Religiousness and Spirituality,” in *Handbook of the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, ed. Raymond F. Paloutzian and Crystal L. Park (New York: Guilford Press, 2005), 21–42.

34 Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 52.

texts as part of their faith and because Latter-day Saint youth typically demonstrate moderate to high levels of religious involvement and use of texts;<sup>35</sup> therefore, they met the key criteria of this study. Also, the limited research base on Latter-day Saint youth and their literacy practices, including how they construct their views of sacred texts, warrants additional attention.

Each participant was between 12–17 years old at the beginning of the two-year study, and all of them attended local public middle or high schools. Participants had been involved in the Church for their entire lives. During the study they regularly participated in worship services and youth-oriented activities throughout the week. All of the participants indicated that their faith was an important part of their lives and that it influenced much of what they did on any given day. A central part of their religious experiences was reading scripture. All of the participants stated that they had scripture in their homes and that it was an essential part of their lives.

This study was located in a mid-sized college town in the Midwestern United States. After receiving written informed consent from parents and religious leaders, I began observing and interacting with the youth at church and during their early morning seminary classes. In each site youth engaged with scripture in the company of their religious peers and under the direction of local religious leaders. Youth and adults interacted warmly in these environments, often talking casually before and after scheduled events. All of the youth indicated that they attended religious services voluntarily.

### **Data Collection**

Data consisted of five interviews with each participant over a two-year period and one academic year of observations.

**Semi-structured interviews.** The questions in the five interviews developed over the course of the study and were informed by observations and conversations with the participants. The first interview gathered critical background information about the youth, such as their views of religion, their religious literacy practices, and the religious and academic activities in which they participated. The second interview explored participants' motivations for academic and religious literacies. Throughout the interviews and observations, discourse appeared to play an important role in the youths' experiences; therefore, the purpose of

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35 See Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*.



the third interview was to explore the role of discourse and participants' views of what constituted the sacred in their experiences. The fourth interview focused on youths' views of sacred texts and how they read them. In the final interview I explored participants' views of non-religious texts, and as with the fourth interview, how youth actually read them. I made an audio recording of the interviews and transcribed them prior to analysis. Each interview lasted 45–60 minutes.

**Table 1. Description of Individual Participants**

Name	Age	Religious Affiliation	Grade in School	Interests <sup>36</sup> or Hobbies
Jonah <sup>36</sup>	13	Mormon	8th	skateboarding video games
Jonathan	13	Mormon	8th	basketball, video games
Paul	14	Mormon	9th	reading, sports, music
Priscilla	17	Mormon	12th	reading, playing guitar
Samantha <sup>37</sup>	13	Mormon	8th	science fiction, blogging
Sophia	16	Mormon	11th	karate, volunteering
Stephen	12	Mormon	8th	basketball, music
Timothy	12	Mormon	7th	science fiction, fantasy
Vincent	15	Mormon	10 <sup>th</sup>	Acting, playing drums

**Observations.** I observed the youth during their Sunday worship services, their early morning and Sunday evening classes, and church-related activities for an academic year. I used narrative description in the form of detailed field notes drawn from direct observations as the

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36. Jonah and Sophia are siblings. They grew up in the same home and at the time of the study lived together with their parents and younger sibling.

principle data of the observations. I took descriptive notes<sup>38</sup> about what individuals did and said during the course of each class, meeting, or event. I made particular note of the talk, texts, and religious practices youth engaged in as part of their activities. I tried to document interactions verbatim, while also noting physical gestures, facial expressions, and to whom participants were speaking. Together, interviews and observations challenged emerging findings and helped develop a view of the youths' notions of sacred texts and how they constructed them.

### **Analytic Procedures**

The following questions guided the analysis of the interviews and observations: What counts as sacred texts for Latter-day Saint youth and how do Latter-day Saint youth develop their conceptions of sacred texts? To address these questions, I analyzed the data iteratively as it was collected. This back and forth process informed subsequent data collection because it allowed me to quickly follow up on participants' responses and explore potentially promising leads as they related to the construction of sacred texts. After all of the data were collected, the most intensive data analysis occurred, informed by methods of constant comparative analysis.<sup>39</sup>

During the first round of coding after data collection was complete, I coded interviews and observational field notes by marking lines and events that related to sacred texts or how they were constructed. These codes tended to focus on why scripture was important to the youth, primarily manifest through specific personal experiences with scripture. Through microanalysis, or line-by-line analysis,<sup>40</sup> I was able to establish the critical nature of scripture in the youths' experiences. It was, in their words, "freaking awesome," "a cool book," "a holy text," "important, for sure," and the means through which some youth formed their opinions of the world.<sup>41</sup>

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37. Samantha and Timothy are siblings. They grew up in the same home and at the time of the study lived together with their parents and younger sibling.

38 See Robert M. Emerson, Rachel I. Fretz, and Linda L. Shaw, *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

39 See Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin, *Basics of Qualitative Research* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2008); and Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin, *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1998).

40 See Strauss and Corbin, *Basics of Qualitative Research*.

41 See Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of our Teenagers is Telling the American Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

Closely analyzing the youths' responses revealed that their views of scripture were often embedded within specific experiences, or stories, that helped to illustrate the value of scripture in their lives. Identification of these contextual stories and experiences was facilitated by utilizing the basic components of the "paradigm."<sup>42</sup> Corbin and Strauss explain the paradigm as an analytic strategy or tool for exploring the relationships between context, the conditions that influence the nature of situations, and process, the interactions that occur in response to situations.<sup>43</sup> Specifically, the paradigm focuses attention on the sets of conditions that influence participants' responses, the actions and emotions of the participants themselves, and the consequences of the participants' responses to events or conditions. Using the paradigm as an analytic tool allowed me to draw out and more clearly explore the stories and experiences that the youth used to convey and contextualize their views of what made scripture sacred.

Additionally, creating relational statements<sup>44</sup> among the developing codes helped demonstrate how the codes fit together into larger, more integrated categories across the data. I created the following relational statements, using previously identified concepts (in quotation marks below), drawn from the codes:

- Because youth had specific "important (religious) experiences" with "religious texts" that were situated within their "religious practices and values," the "construction of sacred texts" seemed to be influenced by these "religious practices and values."
- When youth "read scripture" as part of "family scripture study" and "individual scripture study" they were more likely to see the "value of scripture" in their own lives and "construct notions of sacred texts"<sup>45</sup> based on those "interpersonal experiences."

Writing relational statements about what I was observing helped me see how some of the concepts fit together, which provided clarification

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42 See Strauss and Corbin, *Basics of Qualitative Research*.

43 See *ibid.*

44 See *ibid.*

45 This concept, "construct notions of sacred texts," contains the following nested concepts: "construction of sacred texts," "notions of sacred texts," and "sacred texts."

about the relationships among the data. Relational statements helped explain the what, why, where, and how of the data.

On the face of it, the data analysis process may appear to have progressed in a linear fashion; in practice, it was disjointed as subsequent analyses of the data influenced the development of existing codes and new data informed developing insights. Over time, the continual revisions of the constant comparison codes helped me identify themes that I believe explained Latter-day Saint youths' views of sacred texts and how they constructed them, as influenced by their social and cultural experiences.

### **Exploratory Qualitative Research**

Because “thinking statistically about qualitative research”<sup>46</sup> privileges one way of seeing how the world works without sufficient attention to the different foci and applications of different research paradigms, it may be theoretically and methodologically suspect. Judging one research method in terms of another can be like trying to fit a square peg into a round hole. For its part, qualitative research grows out of an interpretive tradition which focuses on understanding, or interpreting, actions in social contexts by attending to “how” and “why” questions rather than “how many” or “how much” questions.<sup>47</sup> The goal of qualitative forms of research is to provide in-depth understanding of the meaning of human action through non-numeric forms of data such as interviews, observations, and the collection and analysis of relevant artifacts.<sup>48</sup> Because qualitative forms of research are designed to produce hypotheses rather than test them, they do not demand large numbers of participants nor is there is an attempt to generalize findings beyond the target population of the study. Hypothesis-generating, qualitative research is particularly appropriate for gaining critical insights into important phenomena about which little is known, such as the manner in which youth develop their views of sacred texts.

As an exploratory qualitative study, this paper identifies and describes the processes by which nine Latter-day Saint youth constructed

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46 Jim Vander Putten, “In Peer Review, It’s Time to Stop Thinking Statistically about Qualitative Research,” *Teachers College Record* (July 24, 2006), [www.tcrecord.org](http://www.tcrecord.org).

47 See Erin Horvat and Mary Lou Heron, *The Beginner’s Guide to Doing Qualitative Research: How to Get into the Field, Collect Data, and Write Up Your Project* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2013).

48 See Thomas A. Schwandt, *Dictionary of Qualitative Inquiry* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2001).

their views of scripture as sacred text through their social and cultural experiences in one Latter-day Saint community. It does not suggest that this is the only way for youth to understand scripture as sacred or even that this way represents the way other Latter-day Saint youth construct their views of scripture as sacred text. However, as one of the only empirical studies to examine this phenomenon, this study is significant because it opens up an important area in need of further research, refocuses attention on youths' sociocultural relationship with scripture, and explores how youth can actually come to believe scripture is sacred to them. Moreover, this small-scale, qualitative study can spark conversation about the nature of LDS youths' experiences with scripture, including how their religiocultural beliefs and practices can influence how they feel about scripture. Given the exploratory nature of the current study and the unique question that it addresses at the intersection of youth, scripture, and the sacred, this study is consistent with the focus and intent of exploratory qualitative research. Additional research may seek to verify or generalize this study's findings, which may require a larger sample size, several research contexts, and a testable hypothesis.

### **A Regular and Important Part of My Life: Constructing Sacred Texts**

Scripture was a foundational element in the youths' lives. All of them stated that they read scripture every day and valued it as a critical part of their social and cultural religious literacy practices.<sup>49</sup> The major assertion of this study is that Latter-day Saint youth constructed their views of sacred texts in terms of the regularity and importance of these texts in their lives. This section explores the nature of youths' experiences with scripture and how these experiences informed their construction of it as sacred texts.

#### **A Regular Part of My Life**

The youth in this study had grown up reading scripture. It was in their blood. Samantha said that she and her family have "always read scriptures." Vincent stated that he had been reading scripture "as long as I can remember." Paul said that he had been reading scripture, "probably, my whole life." Stephen stated that scriptures were important to him because "I've been using them for — I guess ever since [I was]

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<sup>49</sup> See Rackley, "Scripture-Based Discourses of Latter-day Saint and Methodist Youths."

eight when I was baptized.” He added, “And [scripture] will probably be even more important next year because of seminary, and studying it even further.” Jonathan remembered his mother telling him that she used scripture to help him learn to read. For as long as these youth could remember, scripture was a regular part of their lives as Latter-day Saints. Scripture seemed to always be around them. During the interviews they talked about seeing scripture lying around their houses; hearing it read at home and church by peers, siblings, parents, and leaders; and reading it themselves individually and as families.

But how does scripture as a regular part of their lives inform their construction of it as a sacred text? In a word, the youth in this study had been socialized into the sacredness of scripture by being around it regularly in ways that reinforced its religious, social, and personal value to them, their family, and their faith. Scripture became sacred to these young people as they experienced it regularly in their lives. The connection between youths’ social and cultural construction of sacred texts and their experiences with scripture as Latter-day Saints is represented in Timothy’s response to a question about the place of scripture in his life:

**Timothy:** [Scriptures] are a pretty big part of my life, mostly once again because I was raised in the Church, with the Church in my life.

**Interviewer:** Are there other books that are as or more important to you than the scriptures?

**Timothy:** I don’t know why any single book or even a series could be something as big as the scriptures in my life. Especially when ... I was raised with the Church, with the Church in my life.

**Interviewer:** So you’re saying that the scriptures would be the most important books in your life. Did I hear that correctly?

**Timothy:** Yes.

**Interviewer:** Why is that?

**Timothy:** Didn’t we just go over the whole “raised with the Church”?



**Interviewer:** I'd like more details on that. You mentioned that quite a few times, "because you were raised in the Church," which is important . . .

**Timothy:** It just kind of became a regular part of my life. And the other principles I was taught as a kid were kind of based with the Church.

In his response, Timothy stated five times that being raised in the Church or having the Church part of his life explained why scripture was so important to him. Yet he struggled to tease this apart. Even when pressed, Timothy explained that scripture was important because it had always been part of his experience as a Latter-day Saint. He could not even comprehend why, for him, "any single book or even a series [of books] could be something as big as the scriptures." He did hesitate a moment, however, as he tried to explain this point but then returned to his "raised in the Church" response.

When I asked for clarification about why scripture was the most important set of texts for him, he raised his voice and with some frustration reminded me that we just covered that: "Didn't we just go over the whole 'raised in the Church'?" Careful attention to Timothy's words suggests that although they may have sounded repetitive, he may have been making a larger point that became more salient through repeated analyses. Timothy's words represent how being raised in the Church made scripture an important part of his life. That is, Timothy explained that as a result of being raised as a Latter-day Saint scripture became important to him *because* it "became a regular part of [his] life." Scripture may not have started out as important to Timothy; in fact he said that it did not but over time and through repeated experiences with it, it had become sacred because it began to stand out from every other text in his life. Over time, the distance between sacred texts and profane texts may have become more apparent for Timothy.

It makes sense that Timothy's experiences with scripture influenced how he viewed it because learning, from a sociocultural perspective, is a social process through which we make sense of the world around us, including what to value and why, as we interact with our environments.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> See Lev Vygotsky, "The Genesis of Higher Mental Functions," in *The Concept of Activity in Soviet Psychology*, ed. James V. Wertsch (Armonk, New York: Sharpe, 1981), 44–188; and James V. Wertsch, "The Need for Action in Sociocultural Research," in *Sociocultural Studies of Mind*, ed. James V. Wertsch, Pablo Del Rio, Amelia Alvarez (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 56–74.

Christian writer and youth pastor, Kenda Creasy Dean, articulated the notion of learning as a sociocultural process for Latter-day Saints by arguing that “Mormons rigorously and unapologetically plunge teenagers into [their faith] and surround them with religiously articulate adults who demonstrate how to . . . enact a Mormon way of life.”<sup>51</sup> And as most Mormons know, Mormonism is “a way of life.”<sup>52</sup> For Timothy, his interactions with scripture at home and at church, and on his own and with family and friends over the course of his life, may have influenced how he felt about scripture as sacred texts.

Timothy did not learn about scripture or the value of scripture in a vacuum. He experienced day-by-day what it meant to his family and his faith to understand scripture as sacred. As demonstrated in his interview, Timothy struggled to articulate the details of how that happened. The best he could do was try to convey that there was something important about the relationship between being raised in the Church and scripture being a regular part of his life. From a sociocultural perspective, scripture as sacred text seemed to be part of Timothy’s religious wallpaper. Because it was all around him, he may have struggled to see how it became sacred to him because it may have happened slowly, seemingly naturally, and without his being aware of it as he grew up in the Church.

Vincent helped to address the specific social and cultural practices and influences that seemed to make scripture a normal and frequent part of Timothy’s and his peers’ lives when he stated, “I mean it is encouraged — to read your scriptures every night and . . . I think that’s a big reason why I [read] them — because [we’ve] been encouraged to.” Recognizing the influence of parental and church leader encouragements, Vincent identified one of the ways scripture became a regular and important part of his life. Yet, it seems to run a little deeper than mere encouragement. Vincent’s simple — and single — reference to being encouraged to read scripture may belie the frequency with which he heard and observed religiocultural messages about reading scripture and the importance of scripture. Consider that he and his peers:

- Brought personal copies of scripture to church each Sunday and to seminary each school day,
- Read scripture every Sunday at church, each weekday at seminary, and most days on their own at home,

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51 Dean, *Almost Christian*, 60.

52 *Ibid.*, 52.

- Observed each other reading scripture and using scripture in talks and lessons,
- Heard General Authorities of the Church, local leaders, and parents talk about the importance of scripture and the importance of reading and studying scripture daily,
- Heard these same individuals share their personal witnesses of the importance of scripture and scripture study, and
- Observed these same individuals use scripture in their talks and lessons.

Although Vincent and his peers may have been “encouraged to read [their] scriptures,” these encouragements were bolstered by repeated experiences with and examples of scripture reading by numerous individuals at church, seminary, and home. As Paul stated, “Reading the scriptures and stuff is a big thing in our church. Our leaders taught us to read the scriptures and to ponder them.” Given the frequent formal and informal attention to scripture in this congregation, these youth were literally surrounded by a scripture-reading culture from an early age, which helped to create the impression of scripture reading as a normal part of their experiences in church and at home. Reading scripture was simply what one did as a believing Mormon youth in this congregation. It was an important way of being “one of us” in this religious community. As Timothy said, “I just [read scripture] because I was raised a Mormon.”

Moving closer to home, Timothy’s sister, Samantha, provided some insight into what scripture study looked like in practice in one Latter-day Saint family:

**Samantha:** We’ve always read scriptures as a family. And we used to just read them chapter by chapter, but now my parents have us ask gospel questions because when we read them chapter by chapter we weren’t really paying attention.

**Interviewer:** Now your parents have you ask gospel questions?

**Samantha:** Mh-hm.

**Interviewer:** So, how does that work?

**Samantha:** Timothy made a box, so we write a gospel question down and then we draw a question out of the box each night

and we talk about them and sometimes we look up scriptures for them.

Samantha stated that as a family they approached scripture study in different ways to try to keep everyone interested and attentive during this critical religiocultural practice. Although the question box may have been a novel approach to family scripture study, daily scripture reading was a common practice for Samantha, and Timothy, as well as the other Latter-day Saint youth in the study. It marked familial and individual adherence to an institutionally and personally important cultural experience. Because of the consistent social and institutional support of and attention to scripture study, being raised in the Church could make scripture a regular part of the youths' lives; therefore, cultural beliefs, values, and practices could help explain these Latter-day Saint youths' conception of sacred texts as those texts that they had grown up reading in the context of their religious traditions.

### **An Important Part of My Life**

In addition to youths' regular experiences with scripture at home, church, and seminary, they identified certain personally important experiences with scripture that helped them construct their views of it as sacred text. Their personal experiences with scripture served as evidence of the significant place scripture could have in their lives as they read it, thought about it, and tried to live what they were learning from it. Specifically, the youth said that they knew scripture was important to them because it made them feel good and helped them perform better in school.

When I asked Vincent about the place of scripture in his life, he explained the academic value of scripture, sandwiching it between the work he had to do to receive that benefit. He said, "I've really taken a concerted effort to read them more frequently. And I definitely think that's helped me a lot more this year with school. Just taking the time to read the scriptures and to try and understand them better." One reason that scripture was important to Vincent was because reading it — putting forth a "concerted effort to read" it — improved his academic performance. I was curious how this worked, so I asked him how reading scripture helped him in school. He said simply, "the Lord's blessings." Wanting to know more, I asked for an example of how reading scripture helped him progress academically. He responded energetically:

I mean, I'll take fifteen minutes, and oh man! I mean, I could just take ten, fifteen minutes, maybe even a half-hour depending on how much [time] I can [read my scriptures] that night. And I know that the next day I'm able to concentrate more. And understand the concepts that are being taught in school better. I can focus on doing my homework a lot quicker and so then I have time the next night to do my homework.

The importance of scripture in Vincent's experience seemed clear. He was almost effusive explaining how he felt the Lord blessed him for reading scripture: He could concentrate better the next day in school, was able to understand academic concepts better, developed an improved focus on his homework that helped him complete it faster, and felt that he had more time to do his homework the day after he read scripture. Vincent said that these blessings became more apparent when he began attending seminary and reading scripture more regularly.

Likewise, Jonathan identified the blessings of reading scripture when he said that he read scripture because "I know that I'll be blessed if I do it." I asked him to say more about those blessings. He explained, "I've been doing better in school, like ever since I started reading my scriptures regularly, and so, that's just one kind of big thing." Jonathan said that one evidence of the importance of scripture in his life was the role it played in his academic achievement; namely, reading scripture improved his grades. This, he said, was one of the blessings of regular scripture study or "one kind of big thing" that let him know that scripture was sacred to him and different than other things that he read.

For Vincent and Jonathan scripture did things that other texts did not do by improving their school work. They both called it a blessing that the efforts they put forth to read scripture translated into academic achievement. Both young men were willing to entertain the idea that reading scripture may have improved their ability to do better in school because scripture reading was developing their reading and thinking skills; however, they still called it a blessing and gave credit to the Lord for the academic benefits they received. Both young men stated that other texts did not help them like this and that there was no other text that they would consider as or more important than scripture. It may be the case, then, that for these young people scripture's ability to "bless" them in personal and important ways, such as academic learning, helped them see scripture as sacred text in their lives.

Jonah and Sophia identified another aspect of the sacred nature of scripture when they characterized the importance of scripture in their

lives by how it made them feel. Jonah stated that he read scripture every day and that “you just kind of feel great” when you do. I asked him to say more:

Well, when I decide to read I get my scriptures. I open them. I read and then the feeling comes. Not only while I'm reading, but afterwards [too]. It feels like you —. You just feel better. You feel better after you read the scriptures.

For Jonah, scripture was an essential part of his life because of the way it made him feel. When he read he felt “great.” And when he read, he felt “better” than he did before he read. These feelings were affective evidence for Jonah that scripture was sacred. No other text, Jonah said, made him feel this way. Later in the interview, Jonah explained that when he would get home from school, he would do his homework as quickly as possible so that he could read scripture. As he read, he tried to capture that “great” feeling as a way of renewing his faith and his belief that scripture was sacred text.

Jonah's sister Sophia said that scriptures were “hugely important [and] a big, guiding factor in [her] life. They kind of, how can I say this? They're like a daily reminder to me ... that I'm loved.” Similar to her brother, Sophia's evidence of the importance of scripture in her life was informed by how it made her feel. Scripture reminded Sophia that she was loved. It was a daily reminder that she was important and that she meant something to someone. Sophia's feelings of love were one reason that she believed scripture was sacred and quite different than other things that she might read. “If I didn't have scripture in my life,” she said, “I wouldn't believe in [the gospel] the same way. I wouldn't believe a lot of the things that I do.”

For Jonah and Sophia, scripture was sacred because it made them feel different than other texts. It made Jonah “feel great” and it made Sophia “feel loved.” For these youth, feeling great and loved as they read appeared to be unique to scripture and one indicator of the sacred nature of scripture. Neither of these two young people stated that other texts made them feel like this. Scripture was distinctive in this regard. For Jonah and Sophia, feeling loved and feeling great by engaging with scripture represented affective evidence that they were reading sacred texts.

The youth in this study developed their conceptions of sacred texts by how they functioned in their lives. They not only had frequent experiences with scripture that reinforced its special place in their lives and their faith, they also had deeply personal experiences with scripture



that led them to believe that it was more than words on a page. Through these experiences, the youth in this study constructed a view of scripture as sacred text. Surprisingly, youth did not indicate that they developed their conceptions of sacred texts according to theological principles of scripture or tenets of Mormonism. For them, scripture was sacred because their regular experiences with it helped them see and feel its importance in their lives and how it was different — and did different things to them — than other texts.

Clearly, doctrinal evidence for the sacredness of scripture is important, but for these youth the heart and soul of their belief in the sacredness of scripture rested on how they interacted with it, what it did for them, and what it did for those around them. The youth talked about scripture experientially, explaining that believed that it was sacred because they had personal evidence of it in their lives.

### Implications and Conclusion

Recent research suggests that young people's faith may act as a "constant lens" through which they see the world and their place in it<sup>53</sup> and "serves as a reference point for everyday life."<sup>54</sup> As such, religious youth not only carry their faiths with them; their faiths may influence how they see the world, what they see in the world, and how they choose to interact with the world. Therefore, the manner in which religious beliefs, traditions, values, and experiences influence young peoples' selection and use of texts, interpretation of texts, and construction of texts may require renewed attention by religious educators. The current study attends to the nature of Latter-day Saint youths' construct of scripture as sacred texts, which can inform how we think about youths' relationship with scripture and how it might be developed. Moreover, if religious educators seek to engage youth with institutionally sacred texts, which are a critical part of learning and teaching in the Church, then they may need to understand *youths'* views of these texts, which can — and should — mediate textual practices. In drawing out the implications that follow, I have carefully considered the primary assertion of this study, the current state of scripture literacy instruction, and where and how I believe scripture literacy instruction can contribute to the development of students' gospel knowledge and the development of their faith.

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53 See Jenny L. Small, "College Student Religious Affiliation and Spiritual Identities: A Qualitative Study," (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2008).

54 Linda D. Pearce and Melinda L. Denton, *A Faith of their Own: Stability and Change in the Religiosity of America's Adolescents* (New York: Oxford, 2011), 127.

## Youths' Scripture Reading Processes

Scripture-based instructional practices are important because they can influence the degree to which youth feel connected to the institutional practices surrounding sacred texts, which may have consequences for how youth take up these texts, textual practices, and perhaps the content of these texts. Currently, we know that youth in seminary are reading scripture,<sup>55</sup> but the research base on the processes that Latter-day Saint youth use to navigate scripture is very small, consisting of two published studies.<sup>56</sup> Clearly, greater understanding of how youth read and understand scripture would be valuable for teachers and parents who seek to improve youths' scripture reading practices. Therefore, it may not be enough to focus on *what* youth in the Church are taught. More attention may need to be paid to *how* it is taught and *how* youth learn it. And that means focusing on the processes that youth use to read and construct knowledge and testimony of the truths in scripture. The textual practices that parents and teachers in the Church model for youth, give them time to practice in class, and encourage them to use on their own may matter just as much as the doctrine itself because the doctrines of the gospel can only do their work on youths' hearts and minds when youth understand them, embrace them, and live them. And that happens in part through the manner in which youth are taught to read scripture. As a Church, we cannot get away from the methods of scripture literacy instruction if we hope to foster youths' deep and transformative learning of gospel truths.

## Youths' Experiences with Scripture

For those who seek to develop youths' commitments to specific religious beliefs and practices as contained within scripture, first understanding youths' views of these texts may have tremendous consequences for

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<sup>55</sup> Jenny Poffenbarger, "Seminary Students Rise to Challenge to Elevate Learning," *Church News*, September 18, 2015, [www.lds.org/church/news/print/seminary-students-rise-to-challenge-to-elevate-learning](http://www.lds.org/church/news/print/seminary-students-rise-to-challenge-to-elevate-learning).

<sup>56</sup> See Rackley, "Scripture-Based Discourses of Latter-day Saint and Methodist Youths," and Rackley, "How Young Latter-day Saints Read the Scriptures: Five Profiles."

the development of their faith. For example, knowing that youth value scripture for what it has done — and can do — in their lives, may make religious educators in the Church more sensitive to the experiences that youth are having with scripture in religious classrooms. This can change the focus from telling youth what scripture means — which often puts the intellectual, emotional, and spiritual responsibility for learning on the teacher — to helping youth develop the tools to discover personally important truths in scripture for themselves — which helps youth take on more of the responsibility for developing their gospel knowledge and their faith. When we understand that youth construct their views of scripture as sacred text through repeated and important experiences with it, then we may be more attentive to the nature of the experiences that they have with scripture, especially those experiences that they have in our classrooms. Failure to understand and attend to youths' experiences with scripture and their views of scripture may leave them feeling alienated from the very religiocultural practices and experiences that appear to mean so much to them.

Given that this study demonstrates the sociocultural development of Latter-day Saint youths' conceptions of scripture as sacred texts, religious educators may seek to help youth see how their experiences with scripture are influencing their understanding of it as sacred text. This can occur as religious educators encourage youth to be more attentive to their experiences with scripture: namely, how they read it, why they read it, where they read it, what they get out of it, what it does to them, how they feel about it, what they say about it, what role it plays in their lives, and so forth. Regularly devoting a few minutes each class period for students to share their experiences with scripture, not just what they learned from it, may help attune students' hearts and minds to the role of scripture in their lives and the experiences that they are having with it as they read it, ponder it, and talk about it. This can be a small, but effective way to help youth begin to see that they are developing a view of scripture as sacred text as they interact with it.

### **Scripture vs. Non-Scripture**

Drawing on the conception of the sacred as that which stands in opposition to the profane,<sup>57</sup> another way to help youth understand the sacredness of scripture is to draw their attention to the differences between scripture and other texts. This can be done, for example, by helping youth see how

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<sup>57</sup> See Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*; Eliade, *Sacred and Profane*; and Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*.

reading scripture does things to their hearts and minds that other texts do not; helping them see how thinking about scripture draws them to Heavenly Father, connects them to the Savior, and invites the Holy Ghost into their lives in a way that other texts do not; and helping them see how scripture, unlike other texts, contains “principles of truth that will resolve every confusion and every problem and every dilemma that will face the human family or any individual in it.”<sup>58</sup> The differences between scripture and other texts may act as evidence for youth of the sacredness of scripture because they can highlight the difference between what scripture can do to them, and what other texts, by comparison, cannot.

The current study contributes to a finer-grained understanding of how social and cultural factors influence young peoples' notions of texts. For the Latter-day Saint youth in this study, scripture was not necessarily sacred because it was written by prophets, spoken by God, or because reading it would get them to heaven. For them, scripture was sacred because of how it functioned in their lives and how well it aligned with important religiocultural values, such as the experiential quality of religious truth. In the end, we may be able to do a better job of developing youths' religious literate practices, such as reading scripture, if we have a clearer understanding of how their lived experiences help them construct their notions of scripture as sacred text.

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58 Boyd K. Packer, “Teach the Scriptures,” in *Charge to Religious Educators* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1994), 89.







