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## THE YARDSTICK FOR MEASURING LITERATURE

By Katherine Padilla

*This text comes from a literary spotlight that was presented at Homemaking Night in the Mt. Airy Ward, Frederick Maryland Stake in May 1996.*

With the multitudes of conflicting information surrounding us, how do we decide what to read? How do we know which of the many books available will help us progress? How do we know which ones will hurt us or, if nothing else, waste our time?

We can find help in our quest to evaluate books in the story of Hiram Page, a member of the Church in its early days. Several months after the Church was organized, this man somehow acquired a stone that he claimed had given him revelations about the government of the Church and the building up of Zion. Even though these revelations contradicted teachings of the New Testament and Joseph Smith, they deceived many members, including Oliver Cowdery and the Whitmer family.

Hiram Page's preaching troubled Joseph Smith, so he went to the Lord and asked Him what to do. The Lord answered the prophet's inquiry concerning Hiram Page with these scriptures from D&C 28: 2,6-7,12-13:

2 But, behold, verily, verily, I say unto thee, no one shall be appointed to receive commandments and revelations in this church excepting my servant Joseph Smith, Jun., for he receiveth them even as Moses.

6 And thou shalt not command him who is at thy head, and at the head of the church;

7 For I have given him the keys of the mysteries, and the revelations which are sealed, until I shall appoint unto them another in his stead.

11 And again, thou shalt take thy brother, Hiram Page, between him and thee alone, and tell him that those things which he hath written from that stone are not of me and that Satan deceiveth him;

12 For, behold, these things have not been appointed unto him, neither shall anything be appointed unto any of this church contrary to the church covenants.

13 For all things must be done in order, and by common consent in the church, by the prayer of faith.

From these verses, we learn several important truths:

1. Members of the church can be false prophets.
2. Faithful members of the Church can be deceived by false prophets.
3. Jesus Christ stands at the head of the Church.
4. Christ appointed the prophet—and only the prophet—to receive revelation for the Church.
5. In “commanding” the prophet, we are really “commanding” Jesus Christ.
6. The prophet holds the keys of the mysteries.
7. Everything in the Church is done in order.

Alma, speaking on the same subject, said in chapter 12, verse 9:

And now Alma began to expound these things unto him, saying: It is given unto many to know the mysteries of God; nevertheless they are laid under a strict command that they shall not impart only according to the portion of his word which he doth grant unto the children of men, according to the heed and diligence which they give unto him.

These verses tell us that:

1. God gives many diligent members of the Church the mysteries.
2. Those who know the mysteries are restricted in what they can share.
3. God grants knowledge to His children according to heed and diligence they give to Him.

We are surrounded by “experts” who, like Hiram Page, are, to one degree or another, false prophets. Like Hiram Page, these “experts” seem to have some special knowledge or “seer stone” that the rest of us don’t have. We often look to these people to tell us what to think, what to feel, and what to do. I have some books written by some of these people. Maybe you’ll recognize some of the titles.

1. *Bring in Big Bucks*, by Brother Billionaire.
2. *Making the Most of Your Marriage*, by Ms. Modern Model Mom.
3. *What I Learned about the New Testament by Sleeping in a Bed Belonging to the Prophet’s Brother*, by Brother Toocool.
4. *Using Alcohol to Improve Your Digestion*, by Dr. Bud Wiserthanyou.
5. *Religion on the Goal Line*, by Victor Rees.
6. *Cain’s Sandle Size and Other Vital Gospel Doctrines*, by Big Foot, Ph.D., AbC., XyZ., DoReMe.
7. *A New Age in Gospel Scholarship: Using Crystals to Enhance Your Study of the Scriptures*, by Sister Wee! G. Bored.

And my favorite!

8. *I Saw Jesus*, by Sister I. Died.

Elder Joseph Fielding Smith Jr., who later became president of the Church, said this:

It makes no difference what is written or what anyone has said, if what has been said is in conflict with what the Lord has revealed, we can set it aside. My words, and the teaching of any other member of the Church, high or low, if they do not square with the revelations, we need not accept them. Let us have this matter clear. We have accepted the four standard works as the measuring yardsticks, or balances, by which we measure every man's doctrine.

You cannot accept the books written by the authorities of the Church as standards in doctrine, only in so far as they accord with the revealed word in the standard works.

Every man who writes is responsible, not the Church, for what he writes. If Joseph Fielding Smith writes something which is out of harmony with the revelations, then every member of the Church is duty bound to reject it. If he writes that which is in perfect harmony with the revealed word of the Lord, then it should be accepted. (*Doctrines of Salvation, Vol.3, pp. 203 - 204.*)

My husband and I put this tool to the test not long ago when one of our children came home from school telling us what an evil man Christopher Columbus had been. We immediately pulled out a copy of the Book of Mormon and read this from 1 Nephi 13:12:

And I looked and beheld a man among the Gentiles, who was separated from the seed of my brethren by the many waters; and I beheld the Spirit of God, that it came down and wrought upon the man; and he went forth upon the many waters, even unto the seed of my brethren, who were in the promised land.

We explained to our son that this scripture referred to Christopher Columbus. We asked whether a person who had the "Spirit of God" could be an evil man. He agreed that he could not be. We explained that Christopher Columbus had lived at a time very different than ours and that his standards of behavior probably hadn't been the same as ours in every way. He certainly hadn't been perfect—no one is, after all. He had, undoubtedly, made some mistakes, but because the Spirit was with him, he could not have been the monster many people now claim he was.

Because I have the Book of Mormon and know what it teaches about Christopher Columbus, I don't need to waste my time chasing after all of the information available that discredits him. Because I have the Word of Wisdom, I reject any nutritional information that tells me I shouldn't eat wheat. Because I have learned from the Book of Mormon that those members of the Church who have been given the "mysteries" from God are restricted in what they can share, I know that I should avoid publications of so-called spiritual experiences that claim to reveal information that cannot already be found in the scriptures and in the writings of the prophets.

A yardstick won't help us much unless we know how to use it. By the same token, the scriptures won't help us if we don't know what's in them. Had I not been familiar with Nephi's vision of a future America, I wouldn't have known that he had mentioned Christopher Columbus. In that case, my son might still think Christopher Columbus was an evil man, and I might also. Furthermore, when we use a yardstick, it helps to have related skills. We need to know what the numbers on the instrument mean, and we need to know what to do with the measurements once we get them, which requires skills in math. For the scriptures to be effective tools, we must also be skilled in related areas, such as prayer, living the commandments, and understanding how the Holy Ghost works in our lives.

As we study the scriptures and use the knowledge we glean to help us choose books (and in many cases write them), the Holy Ghost will guide us. We won't inadvertently become false prophets as Hiram Page did, nor will we be among the "very elect" referred to in Matthew 24:24 who will be deceived by false Christs and false prophets in the Last Days. Instead, we will fulfill the scripture in D&C 93:28, which says: "He that keepeth his commandments receiveth truth and light, until he is glorified in truth and knoweth all things."