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Religious Youths' Textual Ideologies of Sacred Texts

Eric Rackley

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Aller au sommaire du numéro

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Résumé de l'article

This study examines six Latter-day Saint youths' textual ideologies of sacred texts. Inductive analyses point to three shared textual ideologies related to youths' expectations about (a) the educative nature of sacred texts, (b) the relevance sacred texts had in their lives, and (c) the amount of time they should spend reading them. Findings support and extend existing language and literacy research by providing insights into the social and cultural forces that shape how religious youth engage with and use sacred texts. Implications of this work offer paths for future literacy research and practice.

"Not Reading Just Seems Crazy to Me": Religious Youths' Textual Ideologies of Sacred Texts

ERIC RACKLEY
Brigham Young University-Hawaii

Introduction

Religious motives, materials, and methods no longer drive reading instruction in public education classrooms (Smith, 2002), yet the influence of religion, religious participation, and religious literacies persist with many young people devoting enormous attention to the sacred texts that mean so much to them. Sixteen-year-old Jack, for example, had been reading the Bible and Book of Mormon for as long as he could remember. "Not reading [them]," he said, "just seems crazy to me." Jack's words suggest how difficult it was to imagine a world in which sacred texts were not a central part of his life as a Latter-day Saint. Jack is not alone. My decades-long experiences as a Latter-day Saint suggest the essential nature of sacred texts at every level and in every organization within the faith. Sacred texts have been ever-present in my religious experiences and have informed my interest in the place these texts occupy in youths' religious and academic lives, the material consequences of these texts for religious young people, and the practices youth use to navigate them.

A growing body of research is increasing our awareness of young people's religious literacies by helping us understand their faith-based meaning-making practices, why they are important to them, and how they inform and are informed by other areas of youths' lives (e.g., Dávila, 2022; Juzwik & McKenzie, 2015; LeBlanc, 2015; Rackley, 2023; Skerrett, 2017). Despite this research, little is known about a foundational aspect of religious literacies. As "a formative mechanism of social life" (Bielo, 2009, p. 51) that mediates social structures and practices, textual ideologies represent the shared assumptions, attitudes, and beliefs that guide how and why young people, like Jack, read sacred texts. The scant body of research on textual ideologies of sacred texts has constrained our understanding of the forces that shape young people's engagement with some of the texts essential to their lives and learning.

Guided by the following questions, this study investigates an especially underexamined and undertheorized but critical dimension of youths' literate lives by seeking a clearer understanding of Latter-day Saints' textual ideologies of sacred texts: 1) What are participating youths' ideologies of sacred texts? 2) How are these ideologies informed by participants' religiosocial experiences? Findings that emerged from an ethnographic study of six Latter-day Saint youth in the United States revealed three textual ideologies of sacred texts the youth identified, demonstrated, and experienced as part of their personal involvement in their faith community. These textual ideologies include (a) the *educational* nature of sacred texts, (b) the *relevance* of sacred texts in their lives, and (c) the great deal of *time* youth spent reading them. Naming and examining these shared ideologies of sacred texts can develop a more robust understanding of the guiding forces

in young people's literate lives, inform literacy research and practice in a variety of institutional contexts, and open new lines of literacy inquiry.

Theoretical Framework and Related Literature

To develop a framework for addressing the guiding questions of this study, contemporary youth religious literacies research is put into conversation with textual ideologies scholarship.

Contemporary Youth Religious Literacies

Understanding literacy from an ideological perspective means understanding where it comes from and the purposes, language patterns, contexts, relationships, and ideologies that shape it. Street (1984) conceptualized the ideological model of literacy as a function of the social and cultural spaces in which it occurs. Its name signals that literacy, as a social process, is "already embedded in an ideology" that is inseparable from its environmental development and use (p.1). First-generation ideological literacy ethnographies (Heath, 1983; Scribner, 1984; Scribner and Cole, 1981; Street, 1984) sought to understand the social nature of reading and writing in people's everyday experiences, many of which were religious in nature. Religion, like literacy, is culturally inscribed -- written, often deeply, in our hearts, minds, and bodies -- and manifests in the ways we live our lives. Religion influences, often profoundly, our ways of being, understanding, and engaging the world and can provide singular insight into our individual and collective human experience. For many, religion occupies a vast amount of cultural real estate: "It's there in the movies you like and the books you don't. It's on our money and in our courts and in our classrooms, everywhere at once, whether you want it or not" (Manseau and Sharlet, 2004, p. 4). Some of the current research at the intersection of religion, literacy, and young people examines the often deep connections among religious meaning-making, young people's faith-based ideologies, and the social and cultural contexts that surround them.

Much of this work has focused on religion's influence on young people's school-based learning and literacies. One landmark study documented how Muslim high-school girls used religious and other texts to negotiate their academic and social worlds (Sarroub, 2002). They did this, in part, by "arranging school life into religiously motivated textual categories" (p. 138) derived from the Qur'an: *halal* (lawful), *haram* (forbidden), and *makhru* (condemned, but not forbidden). Some students prefer to limit representations of their faith in academic environments. Cope (2020) explored three evangelical Christian undergraduates' compartmentalization of their religious identities as a way to draw bright lines between "impersonal" academic writing and "personalized" faith. Compartmentalization was an adaptive strategy used "to maintain and enact multiple social identities" (p. 386) – such as college student and evangelical Christian – that were important to the participants but which they believed were not always compatible in academic contexts. Juzwik and McKenzie (2015) studied an evangelical high-school student's faith-based ideologies, literate practices, and how they influenced his interaction with an academic writing assignment. Believing he should honour God in his writing and that God had directed him to write about specific things, Charlie approached an English writing assignment as an opportunity to testify of God's faithfulness, and by doing so "liv[ed] out his activist evangelical faith" (p. 141) in a public-school classroom.

Relatedly, Skerrett (2014) documented how students employed religious knowledge, practices, ideologies, and literacies to read academic texts and produce academic compositions. Skerrett demonstrated how the teacher – sensitive to her students' cultural, historical, and religious backgrounds and experiences – employed religious literacies as part of a pedagogy of multiliteracies (New London Group, 1996) to develop students' academic knowledge. Stepping out of school-based environments, Rackley (2014) studied Latter-day Saint and Methodist youths' religious literacies within their respective congregations. He found clear distinctions between the faith communities: Methodist youth engaged in a culture of interpretation that privileged discussion of scriptural narratives and rich participative experiences with fellow congregants; Latter-day Saint youths' literate practices were situated in a culture of listening that valued "a passive reception of meaning" (p. 417) through reading long passages and memorizing scripture. Informed by social practice theories of literacy and religious literacy, Rackley (2023) also documented the mediating influences of people, programs, and practices in Latter-day Saint young adults' meaning-making work with sacred texts. Cumulatively, contemporary youth religious literacies research has made valuable contributions to our understanding of the richness and complexity of young people's faith-based meaning-making practices and how they are manifest and function primarily in non-religious spaces. Rarely, however, has this work sought to directly examine essential issues related to textual ideologies of sacred texts, such as identifying what they look like, how they develop, and how they function in young people's literate lives.

Textual Ideologies (of Sacred Texts)

Ideology is a critical construct representing collectively held assumptions about society and how it works (Cash, 2021). Geertz (1973) conceptualized ideologies as "matrices for the creation of collective consciousness" (p.220) that provide clues and motivation for meaningful social action. Ideology helps us understand how things work and how societies reproduce themselves within everyday social structures, such as family arrangements and educational and religious institutions (Althusser, 2001). With its explanatory power, ideology permeates individual and community life in ways that can create cohesion and build shared understandings that contribute to the utility of social systems (Cash, 2021). We use ideologies, in part, to tell us what matters (and why) and help us determine and organize social engagement and practice, including how we interact with texts. Although ideologies have been described "as a kind of social glue, binding us all together" (McCormick & Waller, 1987, p. 196), they can also be a source of inequity. The cohesion ideologies create can be racialized and tenuous and the social systems they support can be unequally distributed (LeBlanc, 2018; Rosa & Flores, 2017). Ideology, like literacy, is never neutral; it has a strong social process dimension and tends to serve the interests of certain groups over others (Kroskrity, 2000).

Relatedly, *textual* ideologies can be understood as shared "expectations that guide how individuals and groups read specific texts" (Bielo, 2009, p.52). Bielo thought of them as genres that structure our text-based interactions, informing what we read, where we read, and who gets to read. Like other ideologies, textual ideologies are multiple; they exist in readers in batches, influencing how we approach a wide range of texts, what we expect from them, and what we get out of them. McCormick and Waller (1987) invite us to "imagine [literary] ideology as a powerful force hovering over us as we write or read a

text: as we read, it reminds us of what is correct, commonsensical, or 'natural'" (p. 197). As the authors suggest, textual ideologies affect the way we do things with texts. I conceptualize textual ideologies of *sacred texts* as a special collection of expectations, beliefs, and habits that individuals and groups share about sacred texts. As mediators of social, textual, and religious structures and practices, textual ideologies of sacred texts inform and are informed by the various contexts of our lives and guide how we do things with these texts. Like other ideologies, textual ideologies of sacred texts can go unnoticed because they are often embedded in our ordinary patterns of life (Althusser, 2001; Geertz, 1973). It can feel as if they are calling through time as disembodied but authoritative voices "reminding us of what is correct, commonsensical, or 'natural'" about the way we read, why we read, and how we come to know faith-based texts. Indeed, textual ideologies of sacred texts can shape individuals' beliefs and values from an early age, leading them to internalize the ideologies as natural and inevitable (Althusser, 2001). To be sure, any view of sacred texts is ideological because it represents a particular perspective and is grounded in a particular religiosocial context. Why should I read the Qur'an? How does the Torah fit into my life? Is the Holy Bible literally the word of God? What do the Vedas mean to me? Responses to these questions go beyond personal opinion and are often guided by ideologies that represent different expectations, values, and assumptions of sacred texts from diverse perspectives.

The literature guiding this study is expanding our understanding of the faith-based meaning-making practices of young people and demonstrating the rich literate experiences of religious youth; yet, gaps remain. Research aimed at identifying and exploring young peoples' textual ideologies of sacred texts is rare. If they are addressed, they tend to serve as background rather than receiving direct examination as a central feature of religious literacies research; that is, textual ideologies often act as cultural wallpaper. These gaps limit our knowledge of an aspect of literacy research necessary for a healthy understanding of young people's literate lives and experiences. This study addresses these gaps by identifying and examining youths' textual ideologies of sacred texts directly. By putting youth religious literacies research into conversation with textual ideologies scholarship, this study accesses a critical yet understudied area of inquiry that has important implications for literacy research and practice across institutional contexts.

Research Design and Methodology

Ethnography aims to understand the social world and how it works (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw, 2011), which aligns with the ideological and socially situated nature of this study. Street (1995) argued that research into ideological models of literacy is facilitated by ethnographic approaches because they can generate "closely detailed accounts of the whole cultural context in which [literate] practices have meaning" (p. 29). This study employs the core principles and practices of ethnography by studying the experiences of a small group of people, spending extended time with participants in everyday contexts, drawing data from multiple sources, and attending to participants' perspectives of the phenomenon under study (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019; Heath & Street, 2008).

Context, Participants, and Researcher Positionality

The focal context of this study was a Latter-day Saint early-morning seminary class in a U.S. city with a large Protestant and Catholic population, in which less than 1% of city residents are Latter-day Saints. Worldwide, approximately 400,000 Latter-day Saint youth attend seminary, which is the church's four-year, religious curriculum for youth between the ages of 14-18 (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *The purpose of seminary,* n.d.a.). Each of the four years focuses on learning one of the faith's standard works: Old Testament (including the Pearl of Great Price), New Testament, Book of Mormon, or Doctrine and Covenants. This study coincided with participating youths' study of the New Testament. In areas with large concentrations of Latter-day Saints, seminary is often attended alongside academic courses during school hours and taught by full-time Latter-day Saint seminary teachers. In areas with limited Latter-day Saint populations, such as the location of this study, seminary is typically held in a Latter-day Saint church immediately prior to the beginning of the local high school. Although religion in U.S. public schools is not prohibited by law, the U.S. Supreme Court has indicated that religion should be navigated judiciously in public education contexts (Abington v. Schempp, 1963). Although one may not teach, promote, or denigrate religion, one may teach *about* religion as part of curricular studies that, for example, identify key influences on architectural design, foster an understanding of motifs in literature, and clarify the impetus for historical interactions/conflicts. Religion must be situated academically in U.S. public schools; it may not be sponsored by its institutions.

In this study, seminary attendance was voluntary but highly encouraged by most parents and congregational leaders. Based on records provided by the teacher, Brother Jones, participants' seminary attendance rates were at least 95% during the study (Table 1). Brother Jones taught seminary by invitation of a local ecclesiastical leader; he was not paid for his service. Brother Jones and the participating youth attended the same congregation and appeared to have a warm relationship. They talked easily before the start of each seminary class, often sharing experiences large and small as Latter-day Saint hymns played softly in the background. Brother Jones and his wife tried to have all 21 seminary students for dinner at their home – one or two at a time – at least once during the school year.

Table 1
Participant Profiles

Pseudonym	Ethnicity	Age	Gender	Seminary Attendance	Interviews Completed
Abigail	European American	17	Female	100%	1, 2, 3
Emma	European American	16	Female	98%	1, 2, 3
Jack	European American	16	Male	98%	1, 2, 3
Mark	Peruvian American	15	Male	95%	1, 2
Naomi	European American	16	Female	100%	1, 2, 3

Spencer	European American	17	Male	98%	1, 2, 3

Given the focus of this study, I purposely selected (Patton, 2015) Latter-day Saint youth because they are often highly involved in their faith, tend to have rich scripture-based histories and experiences, and exhibit deeply interconnected religious and social lives (Chadwick, Top, & McClendon, 2010; Dean, 2010; Pearce & Denton, 2011). To recruit, I contacted the youth and their parents to explain the study and invite the youth to participate. I began working with six youth after receiving consent from them and their parents. Three participants were male and three were female. Five were European American and one was Peruvian American. All were aged 15-17 and were actively involved in their congregational life. In addition to seminary, youth regularly attended Sunday worship services, weekly youth activities, occasional service projects on weekends, and when available summer religious activities akin to Bible Camp. They all attended the same high school and appeared to spend time together as fellow congregants, classmates, and friends. Mark described their relationship as "a big family of brothers and sisters," indicating their close personal bonds and perhaps alluding to the common greeting of "Brother" and "Sister" among members of the faith. All participants had been raised as Latter-day Saints and talked favorably and at times affectionately about their faith-based and scripture-based experiences. Without exception, youth believed their faith and sacred texts were central and influential parts of their lives. Jack's sentiment was shared by his peers: "I think [being a Latter-day Saint] influences pretty much everything I do… It's really a driving force in my life that just kind of leads my personality or me as a person."

By design, the researcher is an integral part of the ethnographic process, having responsibility for collecting, analyzing, and reporting data. To do this well, social science researchers must be "part of the social world they study" (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019, p. 16). As a lifelong Latter-day Saint, I shared many of the religiosocial experiences of the participants. Like them, I attended Sunday worship services as a youth, gave talks in church, prayed in public and private, read scripture in public and private, and attended various youth activities, including four years of early-morning seminary. As a member of the participants' congregation, I also knew all the youth before the study began and interacted regularly with them and their families. This inside knowledge of the youth, their religious lives, and our shared faith – while advantageous – could have also been a liability by reducing my willingness to consider findings that might reflect unfavorably on the youth or our faith and failing to interrogate foundational assumptions about how and why youth engaged with sacred texts. Throughout the study I carefully observed accepted practices for designing and conducing social science research (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019; Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Patton, 2015) and standards for reporting this research (American Educational Research Association, 2006). These tools helped me navigate the push and pull of potentially competing forces as a Latter-day Saint and ethnographic researcher studying the textual ideologies of Latter-day Saint youth.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data consisted primarily of interviews and participant observations. The general contours of the semi-structured interviews preceded the observations, but over the course of the study observations and interviews – and in-process data analysis – informed each

other (Corbin & Strauss, 2015) and were used as the primary means of understanding participants' ideologies of sacred texts. The three sets of interviews were designed to more fully understand the youths' religiosocial backgrounds and experiences, the nature of their religious participation, and their attitudes about, experiences with, and uses of sacred texts. Each interview lasted 45-60 minutes and was transcribed prior to analysis. I also observed the youths' early-morning seminary class 2-3 times a week for four months. Early in the process I learned more about the local community (Heath & Street, 2008) by driving and walking the surrounding streets and collecting descriptions of what I saw, heard, and experienced (Erickson, 1986). I arrived early and stayed late most days to informally observe and interact with the youth. I took detailed field notes in the form of narrative descriptions (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011) of what youth said and did, my personal experiences as an observer, and the conversations I had with the youth and Brother Jones about what was happening in seminary and what it meant for them. I was particularly attentive to capturing concrete descriptions (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019) of participants' use of sacred texts and the nature of the relationship among talk, meaning-making practices, and textual ideologies. Together, the 17 interviews and 42 observations provided multiple perspectives on the youths' textual ideologies of sacred texts and allowed me to verify and contest developing insights on the nature and function of the ideologies at the center of this paper.

Data analysis focused on identifying and examining youths' textual ideologies of sacred texts as informed by their religiosocial experiences. Methods of constant comparative analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2015) informed this process. I began In Vivo coding (Charmaz, 2014) by making numerous passes through a sample of the interviews looking for participants' own words and experiences related to the expectations, beliefs, assumptions, and practices that guided their interactions with and understanding of sacred texts in their lives. Initial codes included "I learn a lot," "they're written for me," "I spend a lot of time reading," and "it's expected of me." These and other In Vivo codes grew out of the data and helped identify places of interest for further examination. As codes started to emerge, I began examining the language around the focal responses as well as relevant responses to other questions in the interviews to shed light on the codes and provide some context for understanding them and how they worked ideologically in this faith community. I then used structural coding (Saldaña, 2016) to impose a degree of order on the initial codes. Structural coding helped identify relevant contours across the codes and provided larger categories in the form of conceptual words/phrases for organizing the developing ideologies. At this stage of analysis, relational statements, diagrams, a tentative coding scheme, and analytic memos (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Horvat, 2014) helped flesh-out the textual ideologies and revealed how they fit together and how they related to youths' religiosocial experiences.

To continue refining the initial ideologies, I turned to the observational field notes, looking for examples and evidence that could confirm and contest the ideologies. Analysis of the field notes provided a strong confirmation of the textual ideologies identified in the interviews, numerous details to enrich them, and more paths to explore. Importantly, it also moved the coding scheme forward by providing additional exemplars of the ideologies, more precise definitions of them, and related literacy practices not as clearly represented in the interviews. Analysis of the field notes also revealed that one of the focal ideologies of sacred texts (*relevance*) was associated with a larger meaning-making instructional

process. Through the identification of goal-oriented actions over time, process coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Saldaña, 2016) helped to articulate the stages of this routine and clarify their relationship to each other and immediate situational forces. The identified literacy instructional process was the primary method used to teach youth how to read sacred texts in seminary (Table 3).

Iteratively, analysis of the field notes and interviews allowed clarification and sharpening of the developing ideologies by identifying additional properties and dimensions, and on occasion, tensions. Theoretical comparisons (Corbin & Strauss, 2015) between the textual ideologies of sacred texts, ideological perspectives of literacy (Heath, 1983; Street, 1984, 1995), and contemporary youth religious literacies research (Cope, 2020; LeBlanc, 2015; Skerrett, 2014) helped further refine the textual ideologies at work in this faith community. Analyses of relevant data provided multiple opportunities to identify, contest, confirm, and eventually articulate key textual ideologies of sacred texts demonstrated and experienced by the youth participating in this study (Table 2). These ideologies represent key expectations, assumptions, and beliefs youth had about constructing meaning of sacred texts in their faith community. In actuality, coding and constantly comparing developing findings with emerging data was much more disjointed than represented here. The principles, practices, and tools of ethnographic (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019; Heath & Street, 2008) and social science research (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Patton, 2015) employed helped manage this complex process.

Table 2
Textual Ideologies and Related Literacy Practices

Textual Ideology	**Definition**	**Data Exemplar**	**Related Literacy Practices**
Educational	Participants anticipate learning new – and often specific pieces of – information when reading sacred texts.	"Please help us get everything out of the scriptures. . . . And help us understand the lesson" (Naomi, in prayer).	Identifying details Looking for lessons Rehearsing narratives
Relevance	Participants value how sacred texts can help them understand and shape their lives.	"In seminary we study the scriptures and we talk about the important things that go on in there – that is going on in the scriptures – like things that could help us now" (Emma).	Applying scripture
Time	Participants believe they should read and think about sacred texts regularly, ideally every day.	"I try to read them every night. It's kind of an important part of my life, like	Reading long passages Daily reading

		reading them" (Mark).	

Textual Ideologies of Sacred Texts

Youths' textual ideologies of sacred texts developed through their extensive experiences as members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Analyses indicated the three textual ideologies – educational, relevance, and time – were common and important parts of participants' personal and institutional religious experiences. Each ideology is presented separately for clarity; in the youths' experiences however, they were very much interconnected.

"Help us get everything out of the scriptures": Educational Ideology

Youth were ever attentive to learning from sacred texts. They valued the knowledge they gained from these texts and anticipated learning more whenever they read. What these texts said and what the youth could learn from them were a foundational part of their religiosocial lives. It was common for youth to describe their scripture-reading experiences by focusing on what they learned:

> Interviewer: When you're reading, say, The Book of Mormon, what are you thinking about?
>
> Abigail: At first, I'll think about the story – what is actually going on – so, I can understand the context and stuff. Then, I'll try and see what the principle being taught is or what is trying to be conveyed because everything in it is written for a purpose, for us to take something out of it.
>
> Interviewer: What happens when you "take something out of" scripture?
>
> Abigail: It depends. I mean, if it's something that really struck me for some reason, I might think about it a lot longer than other things. If something jumps out to me maybe I'll go write it in my journal so that I can go back and think about it.

In two sentences, Abigail explained what she learned or hoped to learn from sacred texts by using six phrases related to her scripture-reading experience: "the story," "what is actually going on," "understand the context," "the principle being taught," "what is trying to be conveyed," and "take something out of it." For Abigail and her peers, learning from sacred texts often meant identifying the specific events of a passage or locating a principle or big idea represented – but not explicitly stated – in a passage. When Abigail could "take something" from scripture, she continued to work with it mentally. She kept it with her by thinking about it more often and writing in her scripture journal as a way to revisit what she learned. Elsewhere, Abigail said, "I learn something from the scriptures all the time. I read it more to understand better, not just for a good read." Abigail's scripture-reading experiences draw attention to the educative focus of her reading. She did not read sacred texts casually – "just for a good read." She believed reading carried a responsibility to learn. She not only anticipated learning from sacred texts, she made it a habit to read with the intention of learning; that is, she expected to learn and also made learning a goal. This suggests the depth of an educative ideology of sacred texts for Abigail and her peers.

Abigail's attention to learning from sacred texts was part of a broader focus the faith placed on education. Instructionally, Brother Jones usually followed the curriculum guide supplied by the church for use by seminary teachers. On one occasion, he was provided with a two-day lesson for teaching students about the importance of continuing

their education beyond high school. It included videos, scripts, teaching suggestions, and scripture focused on learning and education. Although seminary was a decidedly religious education experience – what Brother Jones called "education for eternity" – this two-day lesson demonstrated that that was part of a broader focus on continued learning. Indeed, the President of the Church (Nelson, 2011) said, "In the Church, obtaining an education and getting knowledge are a religious responsibility" (n.p.a.). His words indicate the centrality of an educative ideology in the faith, one that placed a responsibility upon members to learn and seek knowledge *as part of their faith.*

Jack and his friends from church decided to read the same chapter from the Book of Mormon together. After some conversation, they chose 3 Nephi 11 because "that's when Jesus appeared in the Americas; it's a really big chapter in the scriptures." I asked Jack why he was doing this. His response focused on what he hoped to learn:

> Just to get a really good understanding of just everything that's in it because there's just a lot that can be taken from it. I think it's really cool, I don't know. Just like some other things that I've heard other people getting out of it. I'm hoping to get a lot out of it too.

Driven by what he could learn, Jack was excited to begin reading this chapter with his friends. Importantly, it appeared that Jack knew what others had learned from the chapter, which incited his interest in learning from it as well. He was eager to learn in part because he had been privy to the important lessons of others. He hoped to be part of this religiosocial scripture-learning community that was clearly valuable to him and those with whom he worshipped. We see in Jack's experience an interest in and an expectation of learning from sacred texts that informed his own motivations and practices and seemed to permeate many aspects of his faith community.

In their own way, Jack and Abagail indicated the important role an educative ideology played in their scripture-reading experiences. As Latter-day Saints, participating youth demonstrated their religious and social devotion to a core tenant of the faith by working hard to learn important narratives and key principles from sacred texts. Youth heard messages about an educative ideology from their seminary teacher, parents, faith leaders, and scripture. Latter-day Saints teach that "the glory of God is intelligence" (Doctrine & Covenants 93:36), suggesting that learning is an essential characteristic of the God they worship and by extension, it should be an important part of their lives as well. For Latter-day Saints, learning also has profound implications after this life:

> Whatever principle of intelligence we attain unto in this life, it will rise with us in the resurrection. And if a person gains more knowledge and intelligence in this life … he will have so much the advantage in the world to come (Doctrine & Covenants 130:18-19).

Imbued with divine and eternal significance, an educative ideology permeated this faith community, informing participants' expectations for reading sacred texts in ways that privileged knowing the people, events, and ideas in them. Latter-day Saints believe that learning now provides advantage in the life to come. For the youth in this study, "education for eternity" was a material reality that had immediate and enduring consequences.

"Apply it to our lives so we can actually use it": Relevance Ideology

In addition to valuing the specific content of sacred texts, youth also valued how these texts could inform their lives. As a guiding ideology of sacred texts, relevance drove

much of the youths' interactions with scripture and each other. A relevance ideology suggests that scripture was meant to guide readers by helping them live better lives and "actually use" what they learned from their reading. Jack explained the relationship between learning about his faith and living it: "I've just stuck by the scriptures' teachings for so long that it's just kind of shaped who I am."
For Jack and his peers, being "shaped" into a certain type of Latter-day Saint involved relating sacred text to one's life.

Often, relating scripture to one's life appeared to be the purpose of reading. When asked what she got out of personal scripture-reading Naomi focused on its relevance: "I'll find something in it that I can directly apply to my life." Having heard similar responses from her peers, I was curious what happened after she applied something from scripture. Her response was telling: "You just apply it [laughs]. Um, you just make sure you do it." Relating sacred texts to her life was such an integral and ordinary part of Naomi's scripture-reading expectations that she seemed unable to see beyond it. If there was something after application, Naomi was not familiar with it. For her and her peers, relating a passage or principle to their personal lives often marked the endpoint of a scripture-reading experience. Once they applied, they moved on to the next passage or stopped reading altogether.

As the culmination of their experiences with sacred texts, application indicated the faith's decidedly relevance orientation. Living what one learned was a guiding principle of seminary. "We live the gospel of Jesus Christ" was the first tenet of religious education for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *The objective of seminaries and institutes of religion*, n.d.a.). In this faith community, application was the religiosocial manifestation of "liv[ing] the gospel." It represented the critical relationship between an educative ideology and relevance ideology. Understanding was a precursor to acting; knowing preceded doing. Although they worked together, of the two ideologies, relevance was seen as more important. Brother Jones stated that his goal as a seminary teacher was to help the youth "understand that living the principles of the gospel – applying them to their lives – is the most important thing they can do." Brother Jones was intentional about the place of application in seminary. In nearly every lesson youth were encouraged to apply principles from scripture to their lives.

Table 3
Common Literacy Instructional Process

Process	Description	Example
Read	Students or teacher read aloud the target passage.	"Let's just read for a little while." "Why don't we read two verses a piece."
Recall	As invited by teacher, students summarize events or identify the central idea of the target passage.	"Mark, what did Christ just say right there and who was he talking to?" "Spencer, what do you think he's trying to tell us in that verse?"
Elaborate	Teacher extends, clarifies, explains, or comments on a part of the target passage.	After reading Acts 27:27-28: "What does 'sounded' mean in this verse? 'Sounding' means dropping down something in the

		water to measure how deep it is and marking the rope." After reading Luke 24:27: "I find it wonderful that [Jesus] had the opportunity to walk five-seven miles with them. He is telling them about the scriptures. If we had all the time in the world, I'd like to read and talk to him about the Old Testament prophecies of Christ."
Apply	Teacher invites students to relate a specific idea from the target passage to their personal lives.	"How does this apply to us? Does it really matter in our lives?" "Why did Paul write this to the Romans and why does it matter to us today? Why does it matter that we have this knowledge in our lives?"

The primary instructional process I observed in seminary included four sequential steps, ending in application (Table 3). First, the teacher *read* or invited youth to read verse(s) in a focal passage. Second, using phrases such as "What does this say?" or "What does this tell us?" the teacher invited youth to *recall* the events, main idea, or central focus of the passage. Then, the teacher extended or *elaborated* on an idea from the passage by sharing a personal story, comparing it with other passages, or reading a statement from a church leader. Finally, the teacher helped youth relate the passage or idea to their lives by inviting them to *apply* it. During a lesson on Luke 22, for example, the class read about the faith's sacramental prayers from the Doctrine and Covenants (D&C). The following fieldnote excerpt, annotated for clarity, documents the read-recall-elaborate-apply process that occurred with this and many other passages:

> The teacher reads D&C 20:77. The students follow along [**Read**]. The teacher asks, "What are the three things that we promise [when we partake of the bread]?" The students review the passage and call out, "Remember him," "Take upon us the name of Christ," and "Keep his commandments" [**Recall**]. The teacher says, "This is similar to the water prayer. We take the sacrament to remember him. We don't believe that when we take the bread it becomes something else. The same with the water. We don't drink alcohol. We use water. Do you guys have any tips for focusing on the sacrament? What do you guys do?" [**Elaborate/Apply**]. The teacher says, "The sacrament is a powerful reminder and if we use it as such we can remember the sacrifices that Christ made for us so that we can return to our Heavenly Father" [**Apply**].

In this example, application was the culmination of the instructional process. Reading, recalling, and elaborating served as preparation for an informed application of a specific idea. This process gave youth time and opportunity to understand key concepts and consider their importance and place in their faith before thinking about what they meant – or could mean – for them individually. In addition to most lessons ending with an application, this instructional process occurred repeatedly during each lesson as the youth worked with individual sections of a larger block of scripture, which meant that youth were often invited to relate scripture to their lives many times in a lesson. Most youth struggled

remembering all the invitations. When asked what she was invited to apply in seminary, Emma laughed and said, "Everything! We're supposed to apply it all." The relevance ideology in this community was partially bound up in the faith's ever-present attention to personal development. As stated by the church, in seminary, "We continually seek to improve our performance, knowledge, attitude, and character" (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *The objective of seminaries and institutes of religion,* n.d.a.). Relating sacred texts to their lives demonstrated youths' interest in and commitment to "continually seek[ing] to improve" themselves in ways that aligned with the faith's devotion to canonical texts. These texts had important lessons to teach that were represented in youths' lives in intentional and on-going ways. For the youth, a relevance ideology provided a clear and consistent expectation for reading sacred texts that, to borrow Jack's word, "shaped" them into the types of Latter-day Saints who continually sought to improve their lives.

"I just read them a lot": Time Ideology

Learning from and finding relevance in sacred texts required spending time in them. Interviews and observations suggest that youth spent a great deal of time reading, talking, and thinking about sacred texts, particularly the Bible and the Book of Mormon. A time ideology captures the expectation that youth read sacred texts regularly on their own, with others, at home, and in religious settings. Church leaders at every level and in every organization urged youth to make scripture-reading a habit. This was a "major focus of seminary" for the faith (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *The purpose of seminary,* n.d.a.):

> A major focus of seminary is that students read daily from the scriptures and read each book of study for that year. Daily personal study of the word of God provides opportunities to learn the gospel, develop testimony, and hear the Lord's voice.

Reading scripture every day was the expectation. Youth received a daily reading schedule for seminary so they knew what to read and when. It also served as a reminder to make scripture reading a habit. When asked how often adults encouraged them to read, youths' responses indicated it occurred with a high level of frequency: "I can't remember not being asked to read scriptures," "We're asked to read every day," "Always," "All the time," "You kind of have to; it's expected of you." Youths' responses suggest that they may have understood the question as asking about the frequency of adults' encouragement to read scripture (which was intended) and how often adults expected them to read scripture (which was not intended). Importantly, responses to the intended and unintended question appear to bear important similarities, namely, that youth were expected to read sacred texts often and that adults often encouraged them to read them. Being asked to read "every day" and being expected to read "all the time" suggest the regularity with which and the degree to which time in scripture was valued in this faith community.

Mark indicated that he was "pretty good" at reading sacred texts. I asked him how he developed his confidence. He said, "I just read them a lot." For Mark, this meant reading sacred texts mostly every day, church-related books (mostly historical and historical fiction) several times a week, and church magazines on Sundays. The other youth shared similar scripture-reading habits, indicating they read – or attempted to read – sacred texts and other church-related material every day on their own, with family, in the morning, or before going to bed. Jack read in the mornings on his own and often in the evenings with at least one parent. On one occasion, a friend from church was spending the night at Jack's

house. As usual, Jack and his mother read together but this time he invited his friend to join them. Jack spoke warmly about their shared reading experience. These and other indications from the youth reveal a clear and consistent attitude about the importance of spending time in sacred texts by themselves and/or with others every day. Youth appeared to be trying in good faith to uphold this religiosocial ideology by reading (almost) daily.

In a typical 50-minute seminary class, youth spent most of their time *in* scripture. When they entered the room, youth retrieved their personal copies of the Bible stored in the classroom and had them ready to go when class started. After the initial prayer, the teacher invited youth to open to a specific chapter and verse, often using the phrase, "Let's turn to . . . ." Typically, all but a few minutes at the beginning and end of class were spent reading and talking about the focal passage. I found Mark's observation that in seminary they tended to "spend the whole class" working with scripture largely accurate. Once their Bibles were out, they stayed open until it was clear that the lesson was ending. The aforementioned four-step instructional process (Table 3) represents how they spent their time in scripture during seminary. On average, roughly equal amounts of time were spent on the first three steps: Read, recall, and elaborate. The last step occupied the least amount of time.

Although youth spent large amounts of time in sacred texts during seminary, this time appeared to come at a cost. Youth seemed unable or unwilling to maintain a continuous high-level of involvement with sacred texts for an entire lesson. In every seminary class I observed, almost every youth was otherwise engaged at some point. At times, over half the class was not actively participating in the scripture-based lesson. Common diversions included putting their heads on the table, slouching in their chairs and closing their eyes, doing their nails, scrolling through their phones, drawing elaborate images/doodles in their seminary notebooks, and reading books unrelated to the lesson. In class and in private conversation with me, Brother Jones commented on how "tired" or "low-energy" the students appeared, often attributing it to the early morning hour or staying up late the night before. Never during seminary or in my conversations with Brother Jones were the demands placed upon youth to spend large amounts of time continually engaged with sacred texts implicated in their inattentiveness. Some of the youth, however, indicated that the expectations to regularly read scripture could be burdensome. In an uncharacteristically assertive response, Jack said, "People won't get off your back if you didn't read the scriptures today." Mark and others were more circumspect: "It's kind of hard to be forced to read [scripture] all the time." Much attention was given to the amount of time youth read sacred texts and how they read them. Much less attention, it seemed, was given to the possible constraints of the expectations of the amount of time *in* scripture on youth as readers and learners.

Discussion and Implications

Contemporary youth religious literacies research is expanding our understanding of the meaning-making work young people do with sacred texts in particular places for particular purposes; however, it has paid less attention to the ideologies that mediate the social, sacred, and textual structures and practices that are often essential to religious youths' literate lives. This study contributes to literacy research by identifying and examining the textual ideologies of sacred texts important to participating youth. This work

supports and extends existing language and literacy research and offers paths for future study and practice.

First-generation literacy ethnographies opened theoretical space to examine social constructs such as textual ideologies (Heath, 1983; Scribner & Cole, 1981; Street, 1984). Street (1995), for example, conceptualized the ideological model of literacy as a way to acknowledge and represent the "deep levels of cultural meaning and belief" (p. 111) inscribed in people's lives and literacies. To date, however, little attention has been paid to young people's textual ideologies generally or textual ideologies of sacred texts specifically. This area is ripe for further study, especially given the power of ideology in our shared, social experiences (Althusser, 2001; Cash, 2021; Geertz, 1973; Rosa & Flores, 2017) and the influence of religion, religious texts, and religious ideology throughout the world (Moore, 2003; Prothero, 2007; Rosowsky, 2015; Sharlet, 2008; Winston, 2009). Future research could further articulate and define textual ideologies of sacred texts, more carefully examine their nature and influence and the influences upon them and situate them within/against current literacy theories and constructs. A richer theorization of textual ideologies of sacred texts could provide new avenues of literacy research to examine not only the guiding forces in youths' and others' literate lives within and across communities of faith but also in association with academic textual ideologies, learning, and literacies. What do textual ideologies of sacred texts do for youth in their faith communities? How do they develop and when are they most salient? What is the nature of their relationship with religious literacy development and practice? How do textual ideologies of sacred texts inform school-based literacies and other meaning-making work in academic contexts? How do young people navigate sacred and academic textual ideologies?

Understanding the broader world of students' everyday experiences, cultures, and meaning-making processes is a critical part of informed language and literacy instruction (Gay, 2002; Moll & González, 1994; Mosley Wetzel, et al., 2019; Paris & Alim, 2014). Lee (2001) argued that students arrive in classrooms with "a rich array of knowledge that is useful for learning generative concepts and strategies in reading and writing" (p. 100). Given the ubiquity of religion and religious texts and the way they are "woven into the fabric of cultures and civilizations" (Moore, 2007, p. 5), there is likely a sizable population of young people for whom ideologies of sacred texts play a central role. For literacy educators, understanding the expectations, beliefs, and habits that inform young people's work with texts that are critical in their religious and social experiences can be an essential part of learning about their out-of-school lives and the forces that shape them. Understanding, for example, the place of relevance in youths' experiences with sacred texts and the great deal of effort put into applying passages of scripture to their lives can reveal much about what young people value in their home communities, how they engage with important texts, the commitments they hold to "do something" with what they learn, and perhaps the types of people they are trying to become. A richer understanding of youths' textual ideologies of sacred and other texts can be an invaluable tool for sensitizing literacy educators to young people's everyday ways of knowing, doing, and being and afford us insights that can lead to improvements in the language and literacy instruction we prepare for and provide in the classroom.

Limitations

This study's findings should be understood within the context of some of its limitations. First, this study sought to explore an emerging area of scholarly interest, namely Latter-day Saints' textual ideologies of sacred texts. As an ethnographic study, it cannot claim generalizability beyond the participating youth; however, as explained above, it may have implications and raise questions for stakeholders and future researchers. Second, although this study was situated within a specific religiosocial instructional context, it attended primarily to the youth participants. Data analysis revealed that as the seminary teacher, Brother Jones, played an important role in reinforcing and providing youth opportunities to experience some of the key textual ideologies of sacred texts in this faith community. More attention to Brother Jones' role as it related to the thrust of this study may have provided a more robust understanding of the focal ideologies and how they were developed. Third, only active and self-proclaimed devout Latter-day Saint youth participated in this study. Broadening the scope to include youth with varying degrees of commitment to or participation in their faith may have provided a fuller conceptualization of the textual ideologies at work in this community or surfaced others.

Conclusion

What counts as literacy and how literacy happens are social acts informed by the expectations, values, and assumptions about how and why one reads. As Street (1984) argued, literacy is "embedded in an ideology that cannot be isolated" from the environment in which it occurs (p.1). Building on current literacy and religious literacy research, this study sought to identify and understand the role of textual ideologies of sacred texts in youths' religiosocial lives. As one of the first empirical investigations of this phenomenon, it offers new insights and new lines of inquiry in ideologically oriented literacy research. Through the identification of educational, relevance, and time ideologies this study is beginning to scratch the surface of youths' textual ideologies of sacred texts and give voice to the experiences of young people like Jack for whom not reading sacred texts "seems crazy." Given that literacy scholars see "religious questions kind of lurking behind literacy education research" (Whitney & Canagarajah, 2022, p. 321), there is clearly much more to understand about textual ideologies of sacred texts and other issues at the intersection of youth, religion, and literacy. I am optimistic about the future of this work as a way to inform literacy research and instruction and stimulate discussion about the place of religion, religious texts, and religious ideologies – including their development and use – in young people's literate lives across a wide range of personal and institutional contexts.

Ethics

Research for this article was approved by Brigham Young University-Hawaii and was conducted in compliance with ethical and legal guidelines for social science research with human participants.

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Author Biography

Eric D. Rackley is an associate professor of education in the Faculty of Teacher Education at Brigham Young University-Hawaii. He is a former secondary English teacher in the United States. His research into disciplinary literacies and religious literacies attends to the work we do to construct meaning for academic and religious purposes.