

Outlining Books of Scripture

Outlining the books of the New Testament is a common study tool that allows readers to see the content of a biblical book at a glance. This tool can easily be applied to the Book of Mormon or other scriptural books.

The process of producing an outline begins by identifying sections or “pericopes” (from the Greek “to cut around”). A pericope is generally a self-contained episode, story, or section of a larger unit, oftentimes discernable in the LDS edition of the King James Version by paragraph markings (¶). Although editions of the Book of Mormon do not have such paragraph markers, other clues—in particular the use of “it came to pass,” especially in the writings of Nephi—can help indicate divisions. In some study Bibles and commentaries, these pericopes are given titles or labels, making a quick review of the entire book easy.

Since reading the scriptures piecemeal—verse by verse or in chapters only—can harm the integrity of the overall text and allows readers to take an important passage out of context, reading the scriptures in sections provides a ready way of seeing how a verse or group of verses fits into the text before and after it. This helps avoid misinterpretation and the tendency to “proof text,” the process of using verses to prove one’s own point rather than letting the text make its point.

Because the chapter and verse divisions are not original to the author of each book, sometimes pericopes overlap these later divisions. Occasionally, for instance, a pericope may bridge chapters and include only the first part of a verse while the next pericope begins in the second part of the same verse. Such divided verses are sometimes identified with letters—for instance, The Roman Trial of Jesus is found in John 18:12–19:17a, while the next pericope, The Crucifixion, constitutes John 19:17b–37.

Outlines can also reveal something about the structure of the book by organizing pericopes into larger groups, graphically representing possible structures that highlight the author’s purposes or themes. A notable example of this is seen in an outline of Matthew, which divides into five major sections reminiscent of the Five Books of the Torah; since Matthew depicts Jesus as the New Moses, these divisions may reflect that the gospel of Jesus Christ is the New Law. While such structural analysis of a book *may* illustrate the plan of the original writer, one must remember that outlines are *later* impositions of the text and are tools for study, not definitive interpretations.

The Example of Matthew

Matthew’s gospel can be divided into five parts, which are framed with the story of Jesus’ descent and birth at the beginning and his death and resurrection at the end. These frames answer the basic Christological question of who Jesus was and what he did. The five sections of the body of the gospel may have been conceived by analogy to the five books of the Torah, showing Jesus as the New Moses giving the new law. Each division consists of a narrative section and then a discourse or sermon.

At the end of each discourse, Matthew employs a phrase such as “When Jesus had ended these sayings” to mark off the text block. While details of the outline are modern

observations, Matthew's use of this device indicates that the five-fold overall structure was intended by Matthew and not a modern invention.

Frame, Who Jesus Is: Genealogy and Infancy Narrative (1:1–2:23)

Part 1: Proclamation of the Kingdom (3:1–7:29)

Narrative (3:1–4:25)

Proclamation of John the Baptist (3:1–12)

Baptism of Jesus (3:13–17)

Temptations of Jesus (4:1–11)

Jesus Begins his Galilean Ministry (4:12–17)

Jesus Calls His First Disciples (4:18–22)

Jesus Ministers to Crowds (4:23–25)

Discourse: Sermon on the Mount (5:1–7:29)

Part 2: Galilean Ministry (8:1–10:42)

Narrative (8:1–9:38)

Miracle Stories (8:2–9:8)

Call of Matthew (9:9)

Controversies (9:10–17)

Miracle Stories (9:18–35)

The Need for Laborers (9:36–38)

Discourse: Mission Sermon (10:1–42)

Part 3: Opposition to Jesus (11:1–13:52)

Narrative (11:1–12:50)

John the Baptist as a Precursor in Rejection (11:1–19)

Denunciations or “Woes” (11:20–24)

Jesus' Prayer (11:25–30)

Controversies (12:1–42)

Parable of the Return of the Unclean Spirit (12:42–45)

Jesus' True Family (12:46–50)

Discourse: Sermon in Parables (13:1–52)

Part 4: Rejection by Israel (13:53–18:35)

Narrative (13:53–17:27)

Rejection at Nazareth (13:53–58)

Death of John the Baptist (14:1–12)

Miracle Stories (14:13–36)

Conflict with Authorities: Christ on Pharisaic Traditions (15:1–9)

Miracle Stories (15:21–39)

Rejection by Authorities: Demand for a Sign (16:1–4)

Peter's Declaration (16:13–20)

First Passion Prediction (16:21–23)

Transfiguration (17:1–13)

Lesson about Faith: the Healing of the Young Demonic (17:14–20)

Second Passion Prediction (17:22–23)

Question about the Temple Tax/members of the Kingdom as Children of God (17:24–27)

Discourse: Sermon on the Church—precedence in the Kingdom, Disciplining Those Who Mislead, Disciplining Those Who Wrong (18:1–35)

Part 5: Journey to and Ministry in Jerusalem (19:1–25:46)

Narrative (19:1–23:39)

On the Road to Jerusalem (19:1–20:34)

Third Passion Prediction (20:17–19)

Jerusalem Ministry (21:1–23:39)

Triumphal Entry (21:1–11)

Jesus Cleanses the Temple (21:12–17)

Authority of Jesus Questioned (21:23–27)

Parables: Old Israel Rejected (21:28–22:14)

Attempts to Trap Jesus in His Words (22:15–46)

Denunciation of the Leaders of Old Israel (23:1–36)

Lament over Jerusalem (23:37–39)

Discourse: Sermon on the Last Days—prophecies of Destruction, Necessity for Watchfulness, Parables of the Second Coming (24:1–25:46)

Frame, What Jesus Did: Passion and Resurrection Narratives (26:1–28:20)

Setting the Scene for the Passion (26:1–16)

Last Supper (26:17–35)

Gethsemane (26:36–47)

Betrayal and Arrest of Jesus (26:47–56)

Jewish Hearing and Roman Trial (26:57–27:31a)

The Crucifixion and Burial (27:31b–66)

Resurrection (28:1–15)

Apostolic Commission (28:16–20)

A Briefer Example from 1 Nephi

*The overall structure of 1 Nephi is chiasmic—Lehi’s ministry followed by travels in the wilderness, visions, further travels, and Nephi’s teaching ministry as exhibited in his exposition of Isaiah. Note that the **Apocalypse of Nephi** (11–14) dominates the account of the book, focusing on the vision of the *Condescension with its interpretive centerpiece that shows that Christ is the Love of God, the Tree of Life and the Fountain of Living Waters* (11:21–25). **Isaiah is quoted** towards the end and then cited in the final verse as the authority for the contents of the book.*

- *Superscription*
- Lehi’s Jerusalem Ministry (1:4–20)
 - Journey Into the Wilderness (2:1–7:22)
 - Lehi’s Dream and Prophecy (8:1–10:22)
 - The Apocalypse of Nephi (11:1–15:19)
 - The Journey Resumed (16:1–18:25)
- Nephi Quotes and Interprets Isaiah (19:1–22:28)
- *Witnesses of the Brass Plates (esp. Isaiah), Lehi, and Nephi* (22:29–31)