

Nephi's Vision and the Loss and Restoration of Plain and Precious Truths

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In the great vision of the ancient American prophet Nephi, he describes the coming forth of a record of the Jews, the Bible, which contains “the covenants of the Lord” and “many of the prophecies of the holy prophets” (1 Nephi 13:23). Of this book Nephi declares, “When it proceeded forth from the mouth of a Jew it contained the fulness of the gospel of the Lord,” but “there are many plain and precious things taken away from the book” (vv. 24, 28). How were the plain and precious truths lost from the Bible? What factors may have influenced or brought about the loss of these truths? Which plain and precious truths were brought forth to us again through the record of Nephi? This study will examine (1) factors that may have caused truth to be lost from the Bible, (2) truths Nephi considered plain and precious enough to include in the Book of Mormon, and (3) the significance of the loss and restoration of plain and precious truth for us today. Much of the discussion regarding the Bible will center on the texts of the New Testament, focusing on textual changes made before approximately fifth century AD.

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As we begin our discussion, let us first consider some of the teachings set forth by Nephi in his vision regarding this topic. It is clear from Nephi's vision that the book—the Bible—initially “proceeded forth from the mouth of a Jew” and that when “these things [went] forth from the Jews” they went forth “in purity” (vv. 24–25). He further announces that the truths originally “go forth by the hand of the twelve apostles of the Lamb, from the Jews unto the Gentiles.” After the truths are disseminated by the hand of the twelve Apostles, a “great and abominable church, which is most abominable above all other churches,” is formed, which takes “away from the gospel of the Lamb many parts which are plain and most precious, and also many covenants of the Lord” (v. 26).¹

It is interesting to note Nephi's wording about how the plain and precious truths were lost from the Jewish record, known to us as the Bible. He says, “Thou seest that after the book hath gone forth *through the hands* of the great and abominable church, that there are many plain and precious things taken away from the book, which is the book of the Lamb of God” (v. 28; emphasis added). This seems to imply a passage of time, through the hands of many people and influences.²

The Loss of Plain and Precious Truth Defined

It may be helpful, before we launch into a discussion of factors contributing to the loss of truth in the Bible, to be clear about how truth may be lost. What exactly does it mean to “lose” truth from the Bible? The first and most obvious way is to have truth removed—in whole or in part—or changed in the biblical text. Nephi provides us with a second definition of how truth may be lost from the Bible when, at the end of his vision, he says that the truths originally proceeding forth from the mouth of a Jew “were plain and pure, and most precious and easy to the understanding of all men” (1 Nephi 14:23). We may understand from this, as it relates to the loss of plain and precious truth, that unless truths are written plainly and purely in a clear and understandable way, important gospel truths may be lost because they may not be recognized or readily comprehended. In some cases, precious truth may still be found in the Bible, at least in part, but they are no longer plain to our understanding without the Book of Mormon and other revelation brought to us by the Lord's prophets. Examples of such doctrines include the Fall, the Atonement, the Resurrection, the scattering and gathering of Israel, agency, justice, mercy, and baptism for the dead, to name a few.

In 2 Nephi 25:4, after Nephi has recorded several chapters from the book of Isaiah, Nephi makes the following statement before he begins to clarify for us the doctrines Isaiah has just taught us. Nephi says, “I shall prophesy according to the plainness which hath been with me from the time that I came out from Jerusalem with my father; for behold, my soul delighteth in plainness unto my people, that they may learn.” Why had “plainness” been with Nephi since the time he came out from Jerusalem? The answer seems obvious. It was at that time Nephi received his great vision and saw how many people would stumble because of the plain and precious truths lost from the Bible. After seeing this happen to the Bible and after being taught the significance of the restoration of plain and precious truth, is it any wonder that Nephi’s soul “delighteth in plainness”? (2 Nephi 31:3).

Something more may be said here of the import of plainness in the word of God. The word of God is of immeasurable worth in bringing us to Christ. In their visions, both Lehi and Nephi saw a rod of iron leading to the tree of life, or Christ. It was by clinging to this rod that multitudes were enabled to come to Christ. Nephi tells us the rod of iron “was the word of God; and whoso would hearken unto the word of God, and would hold fast unto it, they would never perish; neither could the temptations and the fiery darts of the adversary overpower them unto blindness, to lead them away to destruction” (1 Nephi 15:24). In very deed, we will not and cannot come to Christ without his word.

After all the things Nephi saw and was taught by the Spirit of the Lord, Nephi’s soul delighted in plainness in the word of God, “for after this manner doth the Lord God work among the children of men. For the Lord God giveth light unto the understanding; for he speaketh unto men according to their language, unto their understanding” (2 Nephi 31:3).

Factors Influencing or Causing the Loss of Plain and Precious Truths

With greater clarity regarding what it means to lose truth from the Bible, we may now begin to examine what caused it to be lost. As mentioned before, this occurred over time, and the causes were multifaceted. Although it is not possible to consider everything here that caused the loss of plain and precious truth from the Bible, we can at least briefly discuss some factors that were particularly influential. Only four areas will be covered in this paper: early

manuscripts, copyists and scribes, theological differences within Christianity, and translation.

Early manuscripts. A foundational concept to consider is the nature of ancient texts. In the first century, manuscripts were very different than those we have today. The biblical canon had not yet been established, and individual books of the Bible were written on separate scrolls made of papyrus or parchment (that is, the book of Luke would be on one scroll and 1 Peter on another, and so forth). It was not until the end of the first century or the beginning of the second century that the codex, an early version of today's page, began to be used.³ Finally, by the fourth century, the production of codices was sufficiently developed to contain a complete collection of Christian scripture.⁴ This development at long last provided a stable and tangible means by which a Christian canon could be established, an event that occurred in about fifth century AD.⁵ Thus the lack of an authoritative canon and the manner in which records were kept facilitated the loss of plain and precious truth from the Bible. This should become more clear as we continue our discussion.

Early copyists and scribes. Ancient copyists exerted an enormous influence over the integrity of the biblical texts. In early centuries, copies of the scriptures could only be painstakingly reproduced by hand, since the printing press had not yet been invented.⁶ This automatically guaranteed inaccuracy in the biblical text, because human error is a likely companion of any human endeavor.

According to Bruce M. Metzger and Bart D. Ehrman, the earliest biblical manuscripts were more likely to contain a greater number of variations than texts made later, because the copyists were members of assorted congregations who were literate but untrained. Textual errors were then easily perpetuated, they continue, when additional copies were made from an already erroneous manuscript.⁷ Furthermore, copies of biblical texts were often made quickly and with little revision in those early centuries, especially during early periods when the Christian Church was a persecuted, poor, and uneducated body.⁸

In the third and fourth centuries, professionally trained scribes began to emerge within the Christian Church.⁹ By the fourth century, too, Christianity became the church officially recognized by the government, and biblical texts began to be reproduced in places called scriptoriums.¹⁰ Metzger and Ehrman describe the scriptorium as a workroom where several trained scribes copied

a biblical text slowly while a lector or reader read it aloud. In a place such as this, they say, errors easily occurred through momentary inattention caused by fatigue or noise, distraction from dipping one's pen in the inkwell, or not hearing the reader clearly. Moreover, they tell us, textual inaccuracies resulted from words that were pronounced the same but spelled differently, as in the English *there* and *their*.¹¹ In subsequent years, trained monks began to replicate biblical texts.

Errors of the mind, hand, eye, and hearing all contributed to the degeneration of textual accuracy. These types of mistakes include carelessly repeating words, confusing similar letters, misunderstanding abbreviations or contractions, and not distinguishing correctly between a spoken vowel or a diphthong.¹² The arduous and fatiguing nature of copying a text, the cramped body position, and the drudgery of the task would also have made errors more likely.¹³

When we consider the foregoing research, it is not hard to imagine the changes that could evolve in ancient biblical manuscripts over centuries of transmission by the hand of copyists prone to human error. At this point we may consider another significant reason for the loss of truth in a once pure and plain Jewish record. It may be found in the controversies raging within Christianity during the early centuries of the Christian era.

Theological differences within Christianity. We would do well to first return to the Book of Mormon record to begin our discussion of theological differences within Christianity. In Nephi's great vision, he saw that after the crucifixion of the Son of God "the multitudes of the earth . . . were gathered together to fight against the apostles of the Lamb" and that "the house of Israel hath gathered together to fight against the twelve apostles of the Lamb" (1 Nephi 11:34–35). The Apostles had been chosen by Jesus and given authority to act in his name. Nephi describes the receipt of apostolic authority in his vision, saying, "I also saw and bear record that the Holy Ghost fell upon twelve . . . ; and they were ordained of God, and chosen" (1 Nephi 12:7; see also Luke 6:13; Acts 1:15–26).¹⁴ The fight against the Apostles continued until all of them were gone. With the demise of the Apostles, the authority given them by Jesus to act in his name was lost as well.

In addition to the loss of authorized leadership, revelation from God ceased, because the multitudes of the earth and the house of Israel had rejected Christ and his Apostles. In the preface to his great vision, Nephi

provides us with important information regarding some qualifying factors for receiving revelation. After hearing his father's vision and the words his father spoke by the power of the Holy Ghost, Nephi observes that his father received "the power of the Holy Ghost . . . by faith on the Son of God" (1 Nephi 10:17). Nephi then declares that he (Nephi) likewise "was desirous also that I might see, and hear, and know of these things, by the power of the Holy Ghost, which is the gift of God unto all those who diligently seek him, as well in times of old as in the time that he should manifest himself unto the children of men. For he is the same yesterday, to-day, and forever. . . . For he that diligently seeketh shall find; and the mysteries of God shall be unfolded unto them, by the power of the Holy Ghost, . . . as well in times of old as in times to come" (1 Nephi 10:17–19). In these verses Nephi identifies essential elements in the receipt of revelation: faith in Jesus Christ, the gift and power of the Holy Ghost, desire to know truth, and diligence in seeking Christ.

Unfortunately, ancient peoples lacked these necessary precursors for revelation, as evidenced by their willful rejection of Christ and his Apostles. Revelation, therefore, was lost. As a result, many of those professing Christianity began to embrace or incorporate other philosophies and ideologies into their belief systems, thus seeking to effect a compromise between Christianity and their sometimes hostile environment. Such an occurrence was a concern of Church leaders even during the time of the original twelve Apostles (see Colossians 2:8; Hebrews 13:9; 2 Corinthians 11:3). This led to tremendous diversity among the theological beliefs of Christians themselves. The stability of core doctrines began to disintegrate, and single ideas or doctrines came to be interpreted very differently. This in turn caused divisiveness and controversy among Christians, resulting in the rise of various factions within Christianity, each determined that they were correct in their views. To make matters worse, with the lack of an established and authoritative biblical canon and the means by which to regulate it, when these diverse groups obtained a scroll of biblical text, they could intentionally or unintentionally modify or adapt it to their own beliefs. Plain and precious truths could thus easily be altered, made unclear, or be taken completely from a given text.¹⁵

One very significant theological issue, which caused a great deal of disputation among Christians of the first five centuries, had to do with views about

Jesus Christ, also known as Christology. We get a sense of the diversities and contentions raging within Christianity when we read Ehrman's summary of the Christological differences existing during this early period:

In the second and third centuries there were, of course, Christians who believed in only one God; others, however, claimed that there were two Gods; yet others subscribed to 30, or 365, or more. Some Christians accepted the Hebrew Scriptures as a revelation of the one true God, the sacred possession of all believers; others claimed that the Scriptures had been inspired by an evil deity. Some Christians believed that God had created the world and was soon going to redeem it; others said that God neither had created the world nor had ever had any dealings with it. Some Christians believed that Christ was somehow both a man and God; others said that he was a man, but not God; others claimed that he was God, but not a man; others insisted that he was a man who had been temporarily inhabited by God. Some Christians believed that Christ's death had brought about the salvation of the world; others claimed that his death had no bearing on salvation; yet others alleged that he had never even died.¹⁶

Factions within Christianity struggled for centuries for supremacy over the others. Eventually, orthodox Christians won and established a biblical canon they considered authoritative.¹⁷ Until then, however, biblical texts were more subject to alteration, whether intentional or unintentional.

Translation. Last, but certainly not least, we need to examine the effect of translation in the loss of truth from the Bible. A translator's skill directly impacted the quality of the resulting text. This is evident in the Septuagint, where a close examination of the different books reveals that some of the translators were not as competent as others.¹⁸ Augustine, a theologian born in the mid-fourth century, complained about copies made by those not knowing Greek well: "In the early times of the faith when anyone found a Greek codex, and he thought that he had some facility in both languages, he attempted to translate it."¹⁹ He further grieved that "many translators are deceived by ambiguity in the original language which they do not understand, so that they transfer meaning to something completely alien to the writer's intention."²⁰

When one considers translation, it is important to keep in mind that a translator's own cultural and theological views are likely to influence the

resulting translation. Indeed, passages of ancient biblical texts could only be translated as the translators themselves understood them.²¹ One modern scholar observes that theology may advise and sway the interpretation of a language, and the lexicon and syntax of a given text may be adjusted to favor a particular theological view.²² One can imagine the impact this could have on the translation of a given text, especially during a time of apostasy, contention, and controversy.

Summary and reflections. It is easy to see from the foregoing discussion that anciently the field was ripe for a loss of truth that was plain and precious to our understanding of God and his ways. Truths were lost from the Bible through human frailty, disparity among Christians, and by poor or hurriedly made translations. In addition, people were left without the Lord's authorized leadership and revelation because they had willfully rejected Christ and his Apostles. They no longer received divine guidance to help them deal with their ever-changing society and environment, and to help them combat worldly philosophies and ideologies. Furthermore, there was no standardized biblical text until about fifth century AD, which facilitated the changing of biblical texts to reflect particular religious preferences.

In contrast to the Bible's development is the coming forth of the Book of Mormon. It, too, came forth in a day when religious controversy raged (see Joseph Smith—History 1:5–9). In the case of the Book of Mormon, however, the Lord's protection, guidance, and power were very involved. It was "written . . . by the spirit of prophecy and of revelation—written and sealed up, and hid up unto the Lord, that [it] might not be destroyed" or tampered with over the centuries (title page of the Book of Mormon; see also 1 Nephi 13:35). The Lord prepared "means for the interpretation thereof" (Mormon 9:34), and limited his translators to one person: Joseph Smith, the prophet called of God to restore the Church of Jesus Christ once again upon the earth. The effect of human frailty on the Book of Mormon was and is minimized because the Lord's grace "is sufficient for the meek, that [the Gentiles] shall take no advantage of [the writers'] weakness" in writing (Ether 12:26). The Book of Mormon truly "[came] forth unto the Gentiles, by the gift and power of the Lamb," and contains "[the Lord's] gospel . . . and [his] rock and [his] salvation" (1 Nephi 13:35–36).

Variations in Early Biblical Texts Influencing the Loss of Plain and Precious Truths

A consideration of the types of variations that have been found in early biblical texts can also be instructive in understanding plain and precious truths taken from the Bible. Several types of variants have been found in ancient biblical texts, but only three will be considered here in any depth: omission, theological changes, and ancient punctuation and writing style. These three are chosen because they are considered to be more theologically significant for the purposes of this study.

Omission. As heretofore mentioned, many corruptions of biblical manuscripts were due to the frailties of human nature, as was the case with many textual omissions. Frequently words, phrases, and even paragraphs were unintentionally omitted from ancient manuscripts. This could occur, for example, when words having similar spellings caused the scribe's eye to skip from one place to another in the text. When this happened, all the words in between were omitted.²³ An example of how this could affect a text is found in John 17:15 of one manuscript, when the scribe wrote, "I do not pray that you take them from the [world, but that you keep them from the] evil one."²⁴ Omissions in manuscripts also came about when portions of a text were intentionally shortened because early Christians found them objectionable.²⁵

Latter-day Saints understand, for example, that material was removed from the writings of Moses. The Lord explained to him, "And in a day when the children of men shall esteem my words as naught and take many of them from the book which thou shalt write, behold, I will raise up another like unto thee; and they shall be had again among the children of men—among as many as shall believe" (Moses 1:41). One possible omission from the Bible may be a prophecy of Joseph of Egypt found in Joseph Smith Translation, Genesis 50:24–38 and 2 Nephi 3.²⁶ This prophecy contains important truths regarding the raising up of a Messiah, the scattering and gathering of Israel, and the coming forth of a great work of salvation in the latter days through a seer called Joseph. This seer, according to the prophecy, would be given power to bring forth the word of the Lord "unto the confounding of false doctrines, and laying down of contentions, and establishing peace" among Joseph of Egypt's seed (Joseph Smith Translation, Genesis 50:31). Fortunately for us, the Lord restored this plain and precious truth through the great latter day seer named Joseph Smith.

Theological changes. As previously discussed, in early centuries there was considerable diversity and disputation among those professing Christianity. In contemplating how this could affect the transmission and translation of ancient biblical manuscripts, we should remember that scribes working with these documents were human beings with thoughts and feelings of their own with regard to religious dogma and controversies of their day. Ehrman notes that theological changes in the text are to be expected from this period, when both the text and theology were constantly changing and when the church lacked an authoritative and fixed biblical canon.²⁷

In Nephi's vision, he saw that plain and precious truths were taken from the Jewish record by some who did it "that they might pervert the right ways of the Lord, that they might blind the eyes and harden the hearts of the children of men" (1 Nephi 13:27). Other plain and precious truths may have been lost simply by having passed "through the hands of the great and abominable church" (v. 28). As a result, "an exceedingly great many do stumble, yea, inso-much that Satan hath great power over them" (v. 29).

Modern scholars agree that changes were deliberately made to ancient biblical texts. Ehrman claims that scribes altered passages so they would be less vulnerable to abuse by those with opposing theological views. He proposes that this was particularly true of orthodox Christians regarding Christological passages.²⁸ Keith Elliott and Ian Moir agree that ancient scribes were instructed by ecclesiastical personnel, especially within orthodoxy, to change the texts to hinder opponents from using them to their ends.²⁹ They further note that in certain passages referring to Christology, the manuscripts are obscure and susceptible to textual variants.³⁰ Indeed, ancient biblical manuscripts frequently show the greatest variations in those passages referring specifically to the words, actions, and statements of Jesus.³¹ According to Ehrman, however, despite some deliberate changes occurring in the biblical texts for theological reasons, most changes were not motivated by theology but were instead the result of human error.³²

Ancient punctuation and writing style. The last reason that will be discussed here regarding the loss of plain and precious truth in the Bible is that of ancient writing style and punctuation. The earliest biblical manuscripts were different from modern manuscripts, in that there were no spaces between words, and no distinctions made between small and capital letters. Furthermore, until about the eighth century, very little punctuation was used.

Metzger and Ehrman provide an example of how this could affect the reading of a text. If we were to read GODISNOWHERE, those of us who believe in God would likely read it very differently than one who is an atheist. An atheist would likely read, “God is nowhere,” and a believer in God would be more inclined to read, “God is now here.”³³ While the nature of the Greek language does not often allow for obscurity of this kind because of word ending requirements, occasional misrepresentations could still have occurred from this style of writing.³⁴

We may see how punctuation affects the clarity of written truth in the King James Version of the Bible by using an illustration supplied by Elder James E. Talmage. In John 8:58 we read, “Verily, verily, I say unto you, Before Abraham was, I am.” Elder Talmage explains that the Hebrew *Ehyeh*, meaning *I Am*, is related by definition and derivation to the term *Yahveh* or *Jehovah*.³⁵ He then tells us that a more correct rendering of this declaration would be, “Before Abraham, was I AM.” In other words, it would be the same as though Christ had said, “Before Abraham, was I, Jehovah.”³⁶

Summary and reflections. As these variations suggest, many corruptions of the biblical text were likely the result of human frailty. This is to be expected, given the lack of technology and the methods for record keeping during this era. Such changes were inevitable.

Some alterations, on the other hand, were deliberate. Although we cannot know the motivations of all those who calculated such modifications, evidence suggests that some did so to support their own views and foil those of the opposition. Nephi saw in his vision that the desires of the great and abominable church were riches, harlots, and “the praise of the world” (see 1 Nephi 13:6–9). In addition, they sought to “pervert the right ways of the Lord” to lead others astray (v. 27). Contrast this with countless prophets and peoples of the Book of Mormon, exemplified by Nephi. He affirms that “the fulness of mine intent [in keeping this record] is that I may persuade men to come unto the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, and be saved. Wherefore, the things which are pleasing unto the world I do not write, but the things which are pleasing unto God and unto those who are not of the world” (1 Nephi 6:4–5).

With regard to Christology, we may thank the Book of Mormon for providing us with greater clarification regarding Jesus Christ, and we may be assured that the Lord has not left us with a deficit on this topic. In his vision,

Nephi saw and bore testimony of Jesus, the Lamb of God and Son of the Eternal Father, and recorded Jesus' great ministries on two continents (see 1 Nephi 11–13). The Book of Mormon contains several other accounts of those who actually saw Jesus.³⁷ Indeed, the entire Book of Mormon is an amazing witness for Jesus Christ and is replete with teachings about his nature, his character, his Atonement, his gospel, and his plan for the salvation of the human race.

Truths Nephi Considered Plain and Precious

We now come to one of the most important reasons for this study: the truths Nephi considered plain and precious. Nephi saw many great things in vision and received much instruction at the Lord's hand (see 1 Nephi 18:3; 2 Nephi 4:23–25). Nevertheless, he was limited in what he could preserve for us. What were truths Nephi considered plain and precious enough to write on the few pages allotted to him in the Book of Mormon? While some of Nephi's chapters are faith-promoting narrative accounts of his own experiences and those of his family, the majority contain an elaboration of the truths described in overview form through his great vision.³⁸ These plain and precious truths Nephi saw fit to include in the Book of Mormon may be categorized into three areas in which his "soul delighteth." In 2 Nephi 11, he states that (1) "my soul delighteth in proving unto my people the truth of the coming of Christ," (2) "my soul delighteth in the covenants of the Lord which he hath made to our fathers," and (3) "my soul delighteth in his grace, and in his justice, and power, and mercy in the great and eternal plan of deliverance from death" and "in proving unto my people that save Christ should come all men must perish" (2 Nephi 11:4–6). While the plain and precious truths Nephi included in the Book of Mormon will be discussed as separate areas for ease of presentation, the truths in these areas are inseparably connected and overlap each other. In expounding these truths, Nephi uses the teachings and prophecies of four different witnesses: Lehi, Jacob, Isaiah, and himself.

Area 1. The truth of the coming of Christ. Nephi devotes the first chapter of his great vision to his witness of the coming of Christ (see 1 Nephi 11). In it, he saw a virgin, "the mother of the Son of God," who was "bearing a child in her arms," even the "Lamb of God, . . . the Son of the Eternal Father" (1 Nephi 11:18, 20–21). Nephi beheld "that he went forth ministering unto the people, in power and great glory," and that in the course of his ministry "angels

[descended] upon the children of men; and they did minister unto them” (1 Nephi 11:28, 30). Multitudes of people “were healed by the power of the Lamb of God; and the devils and unclean spirits were cast out” (1 Nephi 11:28, 31). Nephi further saw that “the Son of the everlasting God was judged of the world” and “was lifted up upon the cross and slain for the sins of the world” (1 Nephi 11:32–33). Later, Nephi “saw the heavens open, and the Lamb of God descending out of heaven; and he came down and showed himself” in resurrected form unto the people of the Americas (1 Nephi 12:6). At least two of these events in this portion of Nephi’s vision are not recorded in the Bible: (1) the ministering of angels among children of men during the Savior’s mortal ministry (see 1 Nephi 12:5–11), seemingly similar to what occurred among the Nephites (see 3 Nephi 17:24; 19:14–15), and (2) Christ’s ministry on the American continent (see 1 Nephi 12:5–11).

Nephi determined to send forth in his writings the words of three other witnesses “to prove . . . that my words are true. Wherefore, by the words of three, God hath said, I will establish my word. Nevertheless, God sendeth more witnesses, and he proveth all his words” (2 Nephi 11:3).³⁹ Although there are witnesses of Christ’s coming in the Bible, Nephi surely added the precious words of these witnesses to the Book of Mormon because God commanded him to provide further proof of the reality of Christ and his ministry (see 2 Nephi 33:11). These additional witnesses also attest to the divinity of Jesus Christ, a fact which some question in our day.

One witness Nephi provides us is through a vision of his father, Lehi, who saw the Lord “descending out of the midst of heaven” and said his “luster was above that of the sun at noon-day” (1 Nephi 1:9). The second witness Nephi imparts is that of his brother Jacob, who “beheld that in the fulness of time [the Redeemer] cometh to bring salvation unto men” (2 Nephi 2:3). Nephi’s third witness is Isaiah, the great prophet, who saw “the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up” (2 Nephi 16:1).

Area 2. The covenants of the Lord. In his vision, Nephi was told that “many covenants” were taken away from the Jewish record by the great and abominable church (1 Nephi 13:26). His explanations of the covenants of the Lord and their fulfillment are extensive in his writings, and may be touched on only summarily here. Within this category we may include prophecies of the coming of the Messiah and his great ministries, the establishment of a great nation on the land of promise, the restoration of the gospel of the Lamb to the

Gentiles, the state of wickedness and apostasy and the workings of the devil in the latter days when knowledge of the Lord and his gospel is restored, the scattering and gathering of the house of Israel in general, the scattering and gathering of the Jews, the scattering and gathering of the seed of Nephi and his brethren, the coming forth of the Book of Mormon and other books containing the words of Christ, the second coming and restoration of the house of Israel to the lands of their inheritance, and the millennial day of peace and rejoicing when the Lord will dwell with his people. While many of these truths are found scattered throughout the Bible, nowhere in holy writ are they found as plainly and fully expounded as in Nephi's writings.

Before Nephi even records his vision, he says that "to proceed with mine account, I must speak somewhat of the things of my father" (1 Nephi 10:1). He does so to prepare our minds and hearts, to make his account more clear to us. One thing he speaks "somewhat" of is the coming of the Savior and his forerunner, John the Baptist. This readies us for his discussion of seeing in vision the Messiah and his ministry in mortality and in the Americas. Another preparatory prophecy he provides us is an abbreviated version of the scattering of the house of Israel and their gathering through coming to "the knowledge of the true Messiah, their Lord and their Redeemer" (1 Nephi 10:14). By providing us with this information, Nephi can be assured that when the angel asks him in vision, "Rememberest thou the covenants of the Father unto the house of Israel?" (1 Nephi 14:8), Nephi can know that not only does he know, but also that we, his readers, know "somewhat" of the covenants of the Lord. Before this point in his record, Nephi had not spoken much of these things. He does so now to increase the plainness of his writing, to prepare us for that which is to come in his vision.

To further augment the plainness with which he records his plain and precious truths, his vision then becomes a framework by which we may organize the truths he shares with us in subsequent pages of his record. This enables us to more fully comprehend the Lord and his great work among the children of men. In like manner, Lehi's dream does the same for Nephi's vision. Moreover, Nephi provides us with examples in his vision of how we may organize the details of his (Nephi's) vision in accordance with what Lehi saw in his dream.

Area 3. The great and eternal plan of deliverance. The truths discussed in the two previous areas may also be included here, of course, because all the

doings of the Lord are according to his great and eternal plan of deliverance. For ease of discussion, however, in this section we will discuss what Nephi has included of the teachings and prophecies of Lehi and Jacob regarding the grace, justice, power, and mercy of the Holy Messiah. As mentioned earlier, one of Nephi's delights is in "proving . . . that save Christ should come all men must perish" (2 Nephi 11:6).

This Christ, our Savior, "offereth himself a sacrifice for sin, to answer the ends of the law, unto all those who have a broken heart and a contrite spirit," on an earth with opposition and "things to act and things to be acted upon" (2 Nephi 2:7, 14). He thus enables us to overcome the effects of the Fall and achieve a state of righteousness, holiness, and joy through our choices (see 2 Nephi 2:11, 16, 25–26). Because Christ has redeemed "the children of men from the fall, . . . they have become free forever, knowing good from evil; to act for themselves and not to be acted upon. . . . And they are free to choose liberty and eternal life, through the great Mediator of all men, or to choose captivity and death, according to the captivity and power of the devil" (2 Nephi 2:26–27). Through the infinite Atonement of the Holy Messiah, the way has been prepared for our deliverance from "the death of the body, and also the death of the spirit" (2 Nephi 9:10). "For behold," we are told, "[the Holy Messiah] offereth himself a sacrifice for sin, to answer the ends of the law, unto all those who have a broken heart and a contrite spirit; and unto none else can the ends of the law be answered. Wherefore, how great the importance to make these things known unto the inhabitants of the earth, that they may know that there is no flesh that can dwell in the presence of God, save it be through the merits, and mercy, and grace of the Holy Messiah, who layeth down his life according to the flesh, and taketh it again by the power of the Spirit, that he may bring to pass the resurrection of the dead" (2 Nephi 2:7–8). While the Bible may contain a smattering of these precious truths, it does not explain them as plainly and as beautifully as does the record of Nephi and subsequent pages of the Book of Mormon.

Summary and reflections: The plain and precious truths Nephi includes in the Book of Mormon, then, instruct us about three things touching on his vision. The first attests to the coming of the Messiah, his ministries, and his crucifixion. Secondly, we are provided with instruction regarding the covenants of the Lord with his people, and their ancient, modern, and future fulfillment. And last, but certainly not least, he provides us with enlightenment

about the grace, justice, and mercy of the Lord, and of his power to deliver us from spiritual and physical death.

Key messages found in the plain and precious truths Nephi recorded may best be described by passages he has chosen to include in his writings. He tells us “for we labor diligently to write, and to persuade our children, and also our brethren, to believe in Christ, and to be reconciled to God; for we know that it is by grace that we are saved, after all we can do” (2 Nephi 25:23). We are told, through the words of Jacob recorded in Nephi’s writings, “And now . . . seeing that our merciful God has given us so great knowledge concerning these things, let us remember him, and lay aside our sins, and not hang down our heads, for we are not cast off,” individually or collectively, spiritually or physically (2 Nephi 10:20). Therefore, “come. . . every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters; and he that hath no money, come buy and eat; yea, come buy wine and milk without money and without price. . . oh then. . . come unto the Lord, the Holy One. Remember that. . . the way for man is narrow, but it lieth in a straight course before him, and the keeper of the gate is the Holy One of Israel. . . and there is none other way save it be by the gate; for he cannot be deceived, for the Lord God is his name. And whoso knocketh, to him will he open” (2 Nephi 9:50, 41–42).

The Lord Hath All Power unto the Fulfilling of All His Words

We are now in a position to examine the significance of the loss and restoration of plain and precious truth. We know that many plain and precious truths have been lost from the Bible, just as Nephi saw in his vision hundreds of years before it actually happened. So what place should the Bible have in our lives? With the alterations it has suffered over the centuries, is its study still worth our time and effort? The answer is a resounding “Of course!” It is still one of the greatest witnesses we have of the Lord and his truths. The Prophet Joseph Smith taught, “We believe the Bible to be the word of God as far as it is translated correctly” (Articles of Faith 1:8). Nephi proclaims that the “covenants of the Lord” and the “prophecies of the holy prophets” contained in the Bible “are of great worth unto the Gentiles” (1 Nephi 13:23). And so they are.

In spite of plain and precious truth lost from the Bible, it has still been a tremendous instrument in the hands of the Lord. It paved the way for the First Vision and the restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ in its fullness,

complete with authority, revelation, and authorized leadership. It has blessed millions of lives all over the world.

The Bible is not enough, however, because it lacks truths we need to know for our salvation. The Lord in his wisdom knew that plain and precious truths would be lost from the Bible through translation, transmission, and deliberate alteration of the text, and he had already prepared a means to restore the truths. Before Nephi records his great vision, he testifies, “The Lord knoweth all things from the beginning; wherefore, he prepareth a way to accomplish all his works among the children of men; for behold, he hath all power unto the fulfilling of all his words” (1 Nephi 9:6). In his vision, Nephi declares, “Neither will the Lord God suffer that the Gentiles shall forever remain in that awful state of blindness, which thou beholdest they are in, because of the plain and most precious parts of the gospel of the Lamb which have been kept back by that abominable church” (1 Nephi 13:32). Eventually, “after the Gentiles do stumble exceedingly, because of the most plain and precious parts of the gospel of the Lamb which have been kept back by that abominable church,” the Lord “will be merciful unto the Gentiles” and “bring forth unto them, in [his] power, much of [his] gospel, which shall be plain and precious” (1 Nephi 13:34). Nephi continues, “For, behold, saith the Lamb: I will manifest myself unto thy seed, that they shall write many things which I shall minister unto them, which shall be plain and precious” (1 Nephi 13:35). Those things would then “be hid up, to come forth unto the Gentiles, by the gift and power of the Lamb” (1 Nephi 13:35).

Nephi’s writings provide for us many plain and precious truths we need to have in our day, ones that are either not available, are not fully clear, or are not complete in our surviving biblical record. His record supplies us with plain and pure instruction of invaluable truth, and goes a long way in fulfilling the purpose of the Book of Mormon, “which is to show unto the remnant of the House of Israel what great things the Lord hath done for their fathers; and that they may know the covenants of the Lord, that they are not cast off forever—And also to [convince] the Jew and the Gentile that JESUS is the CHRIST, the ETERNAL GOD, manifesting himself unto all nations” (title page).

In his great vision, Nephi sees both the Book of Mormon and the Bible, as we already know. He tells us that “these last records, which thou hast seen among the Gentiles, shall establish the truth of the first, which are of the twelve apostles of the Lamb, and shall make known the plain and precious

things which have been taken away from them" (1 Nephi 13:40).⁴⁰ Then "the words of the Lamb shall be made known in the records of [Nephi's] seed, as well as in the records of the twelve apostles of the Lamb; wherefore they both shall be established in one; for there is one God and one Shepherd over all the earth" (1 Nephi 13:41).

Through the Lord's wisdom, foreknowledge, and power, the fact that plain and precious truths have been lost from the Bible is now largely inconsequential for sincere seekers of truth (see Moroni 10:3–5). Why? Because the Lord has once again provided us with those plain and precious truths through Nephi, and through the entire Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ, in an unadulterated and magnificent and saving form. Today is the day when the record of the Jews (the Bible) and the record of Nephi's seed (the Book of Mormon) have grown together, established as one, "unto the confounding of false doctrines and laying down of contentions, and establishing peace" (2 Nephi 3:12).

Notes

1. For the purposes of this paper, the "great and abominable church" will not be defined as any one organization or entity. In Nephi's vision, an angel described the "great and abominable church" as the "church of the devil" (1 Nephi 14:10), and may include (1) those who fight against the Lord and his servants, and (2) those that bind, yoke, or lead others into captivity (see 1 Nephi 13:5). Binding, yoking, and captivity may be defined as being either physical or spiritual in nature. I take full responsibility for this definition; it is not considered to be an official declaration of doctrine for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. It is also not intended to be a personal crimination against any person, group, or entity but rather an expression that the definition of "great and abominable church" must not be too narrow in scope. For a discussion on this topic, see Stephen E. Robinson, "Nephi's 'Great and Abominable Church,'" *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 7, no. 1 (1998): 32–39.

2. By definition the word *through* means "in one side and out the other side of; from end to end," "in the midst of; among," or "completely to an end; to a conclusion." *Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1980). Through the definition we can better see that the loss of plain and precious truths from the Bible happened over process of time and through the hands of many people and influences.

3. Bruce M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 108–9.

4. Harry Y. Gamble, *The New Testament Canon: Its Making and Meaning* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 67.

5. Gamble, *New Testament Canon*, 67; see also Metzger, *Canon of the New Testament*, 238.

6. The printing press was not developed until approximately 1450 by Johannes Gutenberg. See Bruce M. Metzger and Bart D. Ehrman, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 137; see also Sir Frederic Kenyon, *Our Bible and the Ancient Manuscripts* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1958), 50.

7. Metzger and Ehrman, *Text of the New Testament*, 275.

8. Kenyon, *Our Bible and the Ancient Manuscripts*, 50.

9. Bart D. Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 51. In his endnotes, Ehrman expands on this by saying, "By professional I mean scribes who were specially trained and/or paid to copy texts as part of their vocation. At a later period, monks in monasteries were typically trained, but not paid; I would include them among the ranks of professional scribes."

10. Metzger and Ehrman, *Text of the New Testament*, 25.

11. Metzger and Ehrman, *Text of the New Testament*, 25, 27.

12. Kenyon, *Our Bible and the Ancient Manuscripts*, 50–51; also Metzger and Ehrman, *The Text of the New Testament*, 255, 257. A diphthong may be defined as a complex vowel sound made by moving from one vowel sound to another within one syllable. Examples include (ai) as in *guide*, (ou) as in *round*, and (oi) as in *noise*.

13. Metzger and Ehrman, *Text of the New Testament*, 27. The Septuagint, an influential Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures highly valued by early Christians, is a great example of human error in the transmission of a text. Origen, a scholar born late in the second century, was aware that by his time the Septuagint text had become substantially corrupted through scribal transmission, and varied substantially from the Hebrew and other Greek texts of his time. In an attempt to rectify this situation, he created a text called the Hexapla. The Hexapla was the Old Testament text arranged in six columns. It contained a Hebrew text, a Greek transliteration of the Hebrew text, and four distinct Greek versions (see Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, vol. 1: *The Early Church to the Dawn of the Reformation* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1984, 78). To the Hexapla, Origen added a system of markings to indicate omissions, additions, and other variations within the texts. Gonzalez, *Story of Christianity*, 78. Unfortunately, in creating the Hexapla, Origen unknowingly only added to the chaos of the original Septuagint text, because when portions of the Hexapla were later copied by scribes, they misunderstood the many critical symbols used by Origen, and other texts were confused with the original Septuagint text. Bruce M. Metzger, "Versions, Ancient," in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), 4:751. Note: A transliteration is to write or spell words using the corresponding letters of another alphabet.

14. This refers to the disciples chosen by Jesus Christ during his ministry in the Americas, but because God is "the same yesterday, today, and forever" the same would have been true of the Apostles chosen during Christ's mortal ministry, as well as today (1 Nephi 10:18).

15. Marcion, an early Christian leader labeled a heretic by those of the orthodox persuasion, can provide an example of this. He created his own biblical canon and adapted it to his own beliefs. He believed that Jehovah of the Old Testament was a god

different from and inferior to the Supreme God the Father of the New Testament, for whom Christ was messenger. Whereas Jehovah was a revengeful and capricious God of justice, the Supreme God of the New Testament was a loving, forgiving, and good God. Therefore, in creating his canon he discarded the entire Old Testament, vehemently believing that it was incompatible with the New Testament, and that their teachings contradicted each other. He was convinced that the twelve Apostles misinterpreted and misrepresented Christ's teachings, and that Paul was the only one who truly understood Christ. Because of these beliefs, he included the epistles of Paul and the book of Luke in his canon, but only after purging them of all references to the Old Testament. He removed from the book of Luke and the epistles anything that was not in agreement with his views, including most of Luke 1–4 and numerous portions of Luke's final chapters (among which were the nativity, Jesus' genealogy, his temptation and baptism, and his resurrection). According to Metzger, Marcion's canon was the most prevalent and well-received New Testament text in the second century, and it influenced even non-Marcionite copies of Luke and Paul, at least to some degree. The information from this endnote is taken from Metzger, *Canon of the New Testament*, 91–94, 97.

16. Bart D. Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 3.

17. For a discussion of some of these issues, see Gaye Strathearn, "Sōma Sēma: The Influence of 'The Body Is a Tomb' in Early Christian Debates and the New Testament," in *The Life and Teachings of the New Testament Apostles: From the Day of Pentecost through the Apocalypse*, ed. Richard Neitzel Holzapfel and Thomas A. Wayment (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2010), 276–98.

18. Sir Lancelot C. L. Brenton, *The Septuagint Version: Greek and English* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1980), iii. According to the LDS Bible Dictionary, most of the Old Testament quotations used in the New Testament are taken from the Septuagint (see "Septuagint," 771).

19. Saint Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. D. W. Robertson Jr. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1997), 44.

20. Saint Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, 45.

21. Brenton, *Septuagint Version*, iii.

22. Chrys C. Caragounis, *The Development of Greek and the New Testament: Morphology, Syntax, Phonology, and Textual Transmission* (Tubingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 234. By understanding this about the translation process, one can more easily comprehend the need for God's involvement in the translation of his word. The Book of Mormon prophet Jacob has this to say: "Behold, great and marvelous are the works of the Lord. How unsearchable are the depths of the mysteries of him; and it is impossible that man should find out all his ways. And no man knoweth of his ways save it be revealed unto him; wherefore, brethren, despise not the revelations of God. . . . Wherefore, . . . seek not to counsel the Lord, but to take counsel from his hand" (Jacob 4:8, 10). In other words (as this pertains to the translation process), for a translation to say what the Lord truly would have it say requires God's help through revelation.

23. Keith Elliott and Ian Moir, *Manuscripts and the Text of the New Testament: An Introduction for English Readers* (Edinburgh, Scotland: T & T Clark, 1995), 2, 46.

24. Metzger and Ehrman, *Text of the New Testament*, 253. The bracketed section indicates words omitted from the verse by the scribe.

25. Elliott and Moir, *Manuscripts and the Text of the New Testament*, 39.

26. For a discussion of the types of changes found in the Joseph Smith Translation, see Scott H. Faulring, Kent P. Jackson, and Robert J. Matthews, eds., *Joseph Smith's New Translation of the Bible: Original Manuscripts* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2004), 8–11.

27. Ehrman, *Orthodox Corruption of Scripture*, 277.

28. Ehrman, *Orthodox Corruption of Scripture*, 4.

29. Biblical texts were also altered by those not of the orthodox persuasion. One such example is the Hebrew text. With the destruction of the Jewish State in AD 70, the scriptures became *the* means by which Jews could retain their sense of national and religious awareness, and defend themselves against Christians who charged them with doctoring the texts. Kenyon, *Our Bible and the Ancient Manuscripts*, 74–75. Jews were compelled to renew their studies of the text in every detail, Kenyon proposes, and felt a vital need to interpret the text according to their own traditions. As Jews sought to explain and interpret every nuance of meaning, he continues, gradually over the centuries a semblance of an authorized text began to emerge, which eventually culminated in the formation of a fixed and standardized text called the Masoretic Text. Kenyon, *Our Bible and the Ancient Manuscripts*, 75–76. The Masoretes, the Jews who created the Masoretic Text, accumulated vast amounts of traditional learning, which they embellished and arranged in the margins on all sides of the manuscripts and devised a system of symbols to transmit the pronunciation of the text. Kenyon, *Our Bible and the Ancient Manuscripts*, 76–77; see also Gary D. Pratico and Miles V. Van Pelt, *Basics of Biblical Hebrew Grammar* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 402. Underlying the system of pronunciation was a very complicated set of grammatical rules, portions of which were developed by them, which made the Hebrew grammar significantly different from the Hebrew of the first century, or from the time the Septuagint or Old Testament books were written. Kenyon, *Our Bible and the Ancient Manuscripts*, 77–78. Early Jewish scribes were also skilled in interpreting and explaining the law, and in places they changed the wording of the scriptures to be more reverential and doctrinal, as they saw it. Kenyon, *Our Bible and the Ancient Manuscripts*, 76. Note: Both ancient and modern scholars consider(ed) the Masoretic Text to be authoritative.

30. Elliott and Moir, *Manuscripts and the Text of the New Testament*, 3, 73. John 1:1–17 is a great example of a Christological passage made more obscure, and therefore less plain, through textual changes (compare the passage in the Joseph Smith Translation, LDS Bible appendix).

31. Elliott and Moir, *Manuscripts and the Text of the New Testament*, 3.

32. Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus*, 55.

33. Metzger and Ehrman, *Text of the New Testament*, 22.

34. Metzger and Ehrman, *Text of the New Testament*, 22–23.

35. James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1974), 36.

36. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ*, 37.

37. Other actual eyewitnesses of Jesus Christ, as recorded in the Book of Mormon, include—but are not limited to—Mormon (see Mormon 1:15); Moroni (see Ether 12:39); Lehi (see 1 Nephi 1:8–9); Jacob (see 2 Nephi 2:3–4); the brother of Jared (see

Ether 3:6–13, 17); Lamoni (see Alma 19:13); and 2500-plus people in the land Bountiful (see 3 Nephi 11–28).

38. These faith-promoting narratives Nephi included are also plain and precious truths Nephi was commanded to write in his record (see 1 Nephi 19:3), but since our focus at this time is primarily on Nephi's great vision, the narratives will not be included in this discussion.

39. It seems likely this is also the reason Nephi included multiple witnesses in the rest of his writings. These witnesses include, other than the ones already mentioned, Joseph of Egypt, Zenock, Neum, and Zenos (see 1 Nephi 19:10; 2 Nephi 3:3–24).

40. Nephi includes in "these last records" (1 Nephi 13:40) both the Book of Mormon and "other books" which "came forth by the power of the Lamb" (see 1 Nephi 13:39).