

"PLAIN AND PRECIOUS THINGS": THE WRITING OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

Elder Alexander B. Morrison

I must make it clear that the views presented in this chapter are my own and do not represent the official position of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. If there are errors of omission, commission, or interpretation, they are mine, and I accept full responsibility for them.

It has been nearly two millennia since the bits and pieces of what would become the most influential book in history were written, over a period of perhaps fifty to seventy years, by obscure and, in some instances, perhaps unknown authors. At first glance, the New Testament tells a fantastic tale. A child is born to a virgin mother and is laid in a manger "because there was no room for them in the inn" (Luke 2:7). He grows to resplendent manhood, the only sinless, perfect soul ever to grace this earth; preaches His message of love, mercy, and forgiveness for three short years; garners a few supporters, though rejected by most of His hearers; and then, condemned to death as a common criminal, dies on a cross suspended between two thieves.

Elder Alexander B. Morrison is an emeritus member of the First Quorum of the Seventy.

And then, wonder of wonders and miracle of miracles, He rises from the dead to become “the firstfruits of them that slept” (1 Corinthians 15:20) and brings universal resurrection to all mankind and the promise of eternal exaltation to those who are faithful to His teachings. His message of love and redemption then is carried by faithful disciples to much of the Roman Empire and ultimately to the whole world.

The story of the life and teachings of Jesus and His Apostles—the “good news” that they bring—is the most oft-told tale in human history. It has had more influence on the thoughts of men and women than any other book, inspiring reverential awe and devotion in untold millions for two millennia. It kept light and truth alive during a long night of spiritual darkness and enlightens, edifies, and lifts up the souls of all who read it with pure intent. It brings its readers to a knowledge of God and His Only Begotten Son. It has permeated the thought, culture, literature, government, and art of the Western world as has nothing else. Yet the story of how it came to be lies squarely in the realm of uncertainty, its details largely covered over by the sands of time, tradition, and the lack of reliable evidence.

It hardly needs repeating that the New Testament did not just appear one day in the form and content so familiar to us today. However, within a few years of Jesus’ death and Resurrection, His followers began to write down their accounts of His life and teachings and to record or comment on them in their worship services. Thus, the second-century Christian apologist Justin Martyr, killed at Rome about AD 165, wrote of church services in Rome in his day: “On the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles, or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits.”¹

The motives of those who wrote what came to be considered authoritative and binding on all Christians were, of course, many and varied. Many were motivated by pure love and reverence for their divine Master, filled with sincere desire to tell others about Him and to have His teachings considered authoritative and binding on all who believed in Him. Others wished to be certain that *their* views of what had happened, and what Jesus had taught, were clearly understood by all. The

intent to protect a particular political or theological position, while denigrating those of opponents, a wish to defend the truth (as understood by the writer) against heretical views held by others, must have been important motivators, along with a desire to meet the perceived needs of an intended audience.

AGE AND AUTHORSHIP

Well-established techniques of textual criticism are commonly used to estimate the age and authorship of New Testament manuscripts. Experts ask whether the literary style, content, and philosophy of the written material are consistent with other manuscripts generally accepted as having been authored by the individual in question. Are the literary style and substantive content uniform or disjointed? Are historical issues (dates, personalities, and events) mentioned in the manuscript corroborated or denied by independent outside sources? Does the work refer to events that occurred long after the death of the purported author? Is the theology in the manuscript consistent with that presented in other manuscripts generally accepted as having been written by the purported author? These and other related questions tell much about who probably authored a given text, or who did not.

It must be pointed out, however, that textual criticism does not prove anything in the sense that a math or physics problem can be proven. At best, it increases the *probability* that someone wrote or did not write something at a certain time, but that stops short of conclusive proof, as I understand it.

THE FOUR GOSPELS

Whatever the reasons they were written, the four Gospels are, by no means, the unchanged and unadulterated words of biographers or stenographers who followed Jesus around and recorded His utterances verbatim. They probably began, in common with other ancient scriptures, as oral traditions—collections of reminiscences, stories, proverbs, and anecdotes.

Most scholars agree that the first of the three so-called synoptic ("see-alike") Gospels to be written is Mark,² composed within a few decades of Jesus' death (c. AD 65–70) at a time when some who knew

Him personally were probably still alive (see Mark 9:1). The author is likely John Mark, the sometime missionary companion of Paul and Barnabas and a reputed acolyte of Peter. Tradition tells us that Mark wrote his Gospel under the direction of Peter, perhaps in Antioch, or even Rome. No one knows for certain. Mark's Gospel, apparently written primarily for a Gentile audience, emphasizes Jesus' activities more than His sayings. It appears to have been cited less often by early Christians than were the Gospels of Matthew and Luke.

Matthew, who was perhaps not the Apostle of the same name who had been a tax collector before his call, is believed to have utilized much source material from Mark in writing his Gospel,³ the longest and most eloquent of the three synoptic Gospels. Some scholars suggest that the book was written ten to fifteen years later than Mark's Gospel, about AD 80–85. Matthew's Gospel contains many of the same accounts found in the book of Mark but adds, *inter alia*, a detailed genealogy of Jesus, the story of the wise men, the flight to Egypt, and (most importantly) the Sermon on the Mount. It was written, so tradition says, in various places around the Mediterranean basin.

Luke, the biographer of Paul's missionary journeys, was, so tradition avers, a Gentile physician who wrote his Gospel in idiomatic Greek, perhaps about the same time as the Gospel of Matthew may have been written (AD 80–85).⁴ Luke emphasizes Jesus' loving-kindness and human understanding (see Luke 15), while underlining His role as the Savior of all humankind. He gives Gentiles a significant place in Christ's ministry, leading some scholars to believe that Luke's Gospel was written for an audience of predominately Greek-speaking Gentile Christians. Luke tells many stories of faithful women about whom nothing is said in the other Gospels, including Mary's cousin Elisabeth, mother of John the Baptist (see Luke 1:5–66); the widow of Nain (see Luke 7:11–17); and the woman (reportedly a sinner) who washed Jesus' feet with her tears (see Luke 7:37–50). In Luke's account, Mary the mother of Jesus, and not Joseph, plays the principal role in the story of Jesus' birth.

Though many modern scholars disagree, Latter-day Saints aver that the Gospel of John, his epistles, and the book of Revelation were written by the Apostle "whom Jesus loved" (John 13:23), perhaps towards

the end of the first Christian century (about AD 90–95).⁵ John differs from the other Gospels. It was written for a different audience, addressed to middle-class, literate, Hellenistic members of the new Christian community. It contains numerous accounts not found in the other Gospels, including Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus, the story of the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well, and the raising of Lazarus from the dead. John emphasizes Jesus' divinity and His Resurrection, affirming that He is the Only Begotten Son of the Father. More abstract than the three synoptic Gospels, the Gospel of John begins with a profoundly beautiful statement of Christ's status in the premortal life: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). Some modern scholars believe John wrote those words, at least in part, to counteract the Gnostic heresy that the spirit of God had descended on a mortal man (Jesus) at his baptism.⁶ John testified that Jesus Christ is real, both fully human and fully divine, not a phantom, as the Docetics falsely claimed. John had seen, heard, touched, and broken bread with Him.

Latter-day revelation confirms the greatness of John, not only in the meridian of time but also in the last days (see 1 Nephi 14:18–27). Perhaps the greatest clarification of John's role is the modern declaration that he did not die but was allowed by Jesus to "tarry until I come in my glory, and . . . prophesy before nations, kindreds, tongues and people" (D&C 7:3; see also 3 Nephi 28:6).

THE REST OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

It generally is agreed that the Acts of the Apostles also was written by Luke. It describes the adventures and tumultuous lives of the earliest Christian missionaries, most notably Peter, the chief Apostle, and Paul, the great missionary to the Gentiles, and provides insights into the struggling branches of the Church established by Paul and others throughout Greece and Asia Minor.

Much of the rest of the New Testament tells the story of the Apostle Paul's struggles to maintain the doctrinal purity of the infant churches he established or was otherwise involved with throughout the various provinces of the Roman Empire, in Corinth, Galatia, Philippi,

Rome, and Thessalonica. Thus, Paul's epistles are not primarily evangelistic but regulatory and doctrinal in nature.

Among scholars, there is general, though not universal, agreement about Paul's authorship of the letters to the Saints at Corinth, Rome, Galatia, Philippi, and Thessalonica.⁷ Many scholars believe, however, that 2 Corinthians was cobbled together from two, or perhaps three other letters, now lost, which Paul wrote to the Corinthian Saints.⁸ It must be emphasized that Paul's letters were not intended for private use but, in a world where most people were illiterate, were to be read aloud to the congregation. The major portions of Paul's letters apparently were written with secretarial help, with a concluding salutation in the Apostle's own hand. This complicates attribution of authorship, on stylistic grounds if nothing else. Many scholars now believe that the letter to the Ephesians is non-Pauline, its author perhaps being Onesimus,⁹ the runaway slave mentioned in Paul's short letter to Philemon of Colossae.

The authorship of other letters commonly attributed to Paul, including Hebrews and the "pastoral" letters to Timothy and Titus, is disputed, as is that of Colossians, upon which Ephesians draws extensively.¹⁰ This uncertainty probably never will be cleared up to everyone's satisfaction. Some scholars (ancient as well as modern) have conjectured, for example, that Hebrews may have been written by Barnabas or Apollos, both of whom were powerful exponents of the gospel and well known to Paul. Similarly, many scholars believe that 1 and 2 Peter, James, and Jude also were written pseudonymously by faithful and admiring disciples and attributed out of respect to the great leaders in the early Church whose names they bear.¹¹ However, it must be noted the Prophet Joseph Smith said that "Peter penned the most sublime language of any of the apostles."¹² So we should be slow to judge that Peter did not write one or both of the epistles which bear his name. Whether James was actually written by the Lord's brother (see Galatians 1:19) is uncertain. But the admonition that those who lack wisdom should ask God for enlightenment (see James 1:5-6) was instrumental in Joseph Smith's inquiring of the Lord, which ushered in the dispensation of the fulness of times.

To me, at least, the authorship of James, and for that matter the

other books of the New Testament as well, is of far less importance than the messages and testimonies of the Holy Messiah which they bear. I honor them as holy scripture, the word of God given for our edification and instruction, "as far as [they are] translated correctly" (Article of Faith 8). The testimony of the Holy Ghost, which teaches us "all things" (John 14:26) and testifies that Jesus is the Only Begotten Son of the Father (John 15:26), is independent of who the author of a particular book was.

Paul's letters to the Saints in Thessalonica¹³ are considered to be the earliest of his epistles, dating from late in the fifth decade of the Christian era, and thus are the oldest known Christian texts of the New Testament. They probably were written about AD 49, some twenty years before any of the Gospel accounts of Jesus' life and teachings. The spirit of iniquity was already abroad in the Church: "The mystery of iniquity doth already work," Paul lamented (2 Thessalonians 2:7). By Paul's time—only a few decades after Christ's death and Resurrection—the Church was sliding into apostasy, as many members of the infant Church of Christ were being seduced by heretical movements which pretended to give their adherents access to "special" knowledge restricted to only a few, but which ended up dissembling, deceiving, and destroying the unwary.

It must be acknowledged that in addition to the biblical record as we have it today, there undoubtedly are many lost yet authentic manuscripts which did not survive the tumultuous early years of the Christian Church. We know, for example, that Luke indicates he had consulted the writings of many others before declaring his witness of Jesus (see Luke 1:1–3). And in 1 Corinthians 5:9, which it is agreed was written by Paul, the Apostle mentions another letter written previously which he had sent to the Corinthian Saints. So it is at least possible that there are other authentic Acts of the Apostles, even Gospels, which have been lost, perhaps forever. To speculate as to their possible content would be fruitless.

Many scholars believe that in preparing their Gospels, both Matthew and Luke drew upon an earlier document which no longer exists (or at least has not been found) for many of their distinctive teachings about Jesus. This hypothetical source has been designated as

“Q” from the German word *Quelle*, meaning “source.” Thus, “Q” is believed by some scholars to have been the non-Markan “source” for many of the sayings of Jesus found in Matthew and Luke.

It must also be noted, however, that all noncanonical early manuscripts attributed to New Testament characters are, in the views of nearly every scholar, out and out forgeries. The Gospel of Peter, for example, probably written early in the second century AD, and thus clearly not authored by the chief Apostle, contains a fragmentary account of Jesus’ trial, death, and Resurrection. It presents vitriolic anti-Jewish views, as well as those which can be considered Gnostic. Indeed, of forty-four apocryphal works cited by Ehrman,¹⁴ most are clearly heretical forgeries, many written by Gnostics, or those seeking to counteract Gnostic influences. Only a handful of these works (most notably the Didache, Epistle of Barnabas, and the Shepherd of Hermas) are proto-orthodox in content, in that they represent what became the dominant mainstream of Christianity. It is noteworthy that even in this latter group none survived to become part of the canon of sacred scripture eventually accepted by most Christians, including Latter-day Saints.

I must not fail to mention the great treasure trove of ancient “Christian” writings found near the village of Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt in 1945. Many scholars believe that this ancient collection of books—found in an earthenware jar sealed with bitumen—represents the most important group of lost “Christian” writings to be found in modern times. There are twelve leather-bound volumes, and pages of a thirteenth, containing some forty-six papyrus documents. The writing is in ancient Coptic, but many believe the books originally were written in Greek and may have been in existence by the second Christian century. They deal with a vast array of topics relating to doctrine, purported revelations, and mystical speculations.

Perhaps the most well known of the Nag Hammadi texts is the Gospel of Thomas, which consists of 114 purported sayings of Jesus. More than half of these sayings are similar to those found in the Synoptic Gospels, but some are very difficult to understand, to say the least. For example, how does one make sense of the following: “This heaven will pass away, and the one above it will pass away. The dead are

not alive and the living will not die. In the days when you ate what is dead you made it alive. When you are in the light what will you do? On the day when you were one you became two. But when you become two, what will you do?"¹⁵

The author, whoever he was, clearly was not the Apostle Thomas. The Gospel of Thomas is widely believed to be some kind of Gnostic work. At the very least, if one reads the book with a Gnostic mindset and orientation, the probable meaning of some of the purported sayings of Jesus in it becomes clearer. Whatever else it is, the Gospel of Thomas must be considered a heretical forgery.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CANON

In addition to concerns and uncertainties about who is the author of the various books of the New Testament, there is not full agreement among the various "branches" of Christianity as to which books belong in the canon of accepted scripture. The authors of early Christian writings probably were little interested in contributing to a collection of "orthodox" books of doctrine. They were intent on proclaiming the "good news" of Jesus as the redeeming Savior and Son of God, and in strengthening, edifying, and regulating the infant, struggling Christian communities throughout the Roman Empire. But it is believed that by the middle of the second century (and perhaps even earlier), the written Gospels, and other sayings attributed to Jesus, began to circulate among Christians and to be used in their religious meetings. The earliest written Christian document available today is only a tiny snippet, written on papyrus and called the Rylands Fragment.¹⁶ It was found nearly a century ago in Egypt. The fragment is a tiny portion of the Gospel of John, dealing with Jesus' trial before the Jewish Council, and includes Pilate's cynical question, "What is truth?" (John 18:38). Authorities believe it was written about AD 130 and probably came from a Christian meetinghouse. It dates a full century before the oldest known, *relatively* complete texts of books of the New Testament, as we know them, were prepared. For example, the Chester Beatty papyri are a group of manuscripts found in Egypt and acquired by Mr. Chester Beatty, an English industrialist, in 1931.¹⁷ All are incomplete, though several are of substantial size. In addition to portions of numerous Old

Testament books, they include parts of the Gospels, Acts, the Pauline epistles, and Revelation. Eleven chapters of the apocryphal book of Enoch also are included. Many of the Beatty papyri are of third-century origin, a century older than the earliest vellum manuscript.

The oldest vellum manuscript of the New Testament is the famous *Codex Sinaiticus*,¹⁸ perhaps commissioned by the Emperor Constantine early in the fourth century. This codex, found in 1859 in St. Catherine's Monastery at Mount Sinai by Constantin von Tischendorf, a German professor, eventually ended up in Britain, having passed through the hands of the Russian czar. (A codex, unlike a papyrus roll, is put together much like a modern book, with the pages written on both sides and sewn together such that they can be opened and read.) This codex contains the Old Testament as we know it, and the New Testament with the addition of the Epistle of Barnabas and part of the Shepherd of Hermas. These latter books are not found in the King James Bible.

Of roughly contemporary age is the *Codex Vaticanus*,¹⁹ a fourth-century manuscript of the Greek Bible now in the Vatican Library. In the New Testament, all after Hebrews 9:14 has been lost. The *Codex Vaticanus* is made of fine vellum, said to be antelope skin, each page being composed of three columns of over forty lines, and is the work of two unknown copyists. It perhaps was written in Alexandria, supposedly under the direction of Hesychius,²⁰ purportedly an Egyptian bishop martyred in the Diocletianic persecution, at the beginning of the fourth century AD.

The current Christian canon, in a sense, came into existence as a response to Marcion, a mid-second-century bishop's son and a clever heretic.²¹ Marcion believed that of all the early Christian leaders, only Paul got it right. Marcion claimed there were two different Gods: the harsh, demanding God of the Jews, whom he rejected, and the loving God of Jesus. Marcion denied any Jewish connections with Jesus and so, in his list of what he considered to be the authentic writings of the Christian faith, included some, but not all, of Paul's letters and a revision of Luke's Gospel, with careful deletion of all mention of the Jews. Orthodoxy began to be defined, in part, by listing those sacred texts considered acceptable to Christians and excluding all others, including

those of heretical sects, such as the Gnostics. And, as always, the winners decided what was orthodox and what was not.

But there still were differences of opinion over the books which should be contained in the canon of scripture. About AD 170, someone in Rome wrote, in Greek, a list of books considered canonical by the Roman church of the day. That list provides the earliest record of canonical books available. Seventy lines of this list, written in very rough Latin probably copied from a Greek version in the eighth century, were found in the Ambrosian library in Milan in 1840. The list is called the Muratorian Canon,²² since it was found by a man named Lodovico Muratori. The Muratorian Canon lists the four Gospels and the other books currently in our New Testament, except Hebrews, James, and 1 and 2 Peter. It also includes two other books not currently in the New Testament—the Apocalypse of Peter and the Wisdom of Solomon. The Shepherd of Hermas, the Marcionite epistles of Paul to Laodicia and Alexandria, and various other Gnostic and “heretical” writings were rejected. The Marcionite epistles were clearly forgeries: the Shepherd of Hermas, though “orthodox” in terms of doctrine, evidently was rejected because it was not of apostolic origin.

Writing about AD 300, Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea and revered “Father of Church History,” considered Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude, and Revelation to be of questionable status.²³ Agreement on the contents of the New Testament canon, insofar as the Eastern church was concerned, was solidified when Athanasius,²⁴ then metropolitan (bishop) of Alexandria, recommended a canonical list in a letter sent in AD 367 to church members in North Africa. This list contained all of the books of the current New Testament. A papal decree of AD 403 confirmed the canon of Athanasius for use in the Western church, but it took until the Council of Trent in the sixteenth century for Roman Catholics to decide formally on their canon of scripture, though there had been general agreement among Catholics for centuries.²⁵

There is, however, no universally agreed upon canon of New Testament scripture, nor has there ever been one. Some churches, notably the Syrian Orthodox and Chaldean Syrian, continue to reject 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude, and the Revelation of John. The Greek Orthodox Church has always excluded the Revelation of John, and, at

the other extreme, the Ethiopian church includes more than thirty books on its official list of New Testament scriptures. In addition to the twenty-seven books in the King James Version of the Bible, the Ethiopian church includes the Shepherd of Hermas, two epistles of Clement, and a collection of ecclesiastical law called the Apostolic Constitutions.²⁶ (The Apostolic Constitutions, though written in the names of the Twelve Apostles, dates only from the fourth century and is considered to be a forgery.²⁷)

The Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century brought new challenges to the matter of what should be considered in the “orthodox” canon. Martin Luther believed that Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation could not be counted among the “true and noblest” books of the New Testament.²⁸ Some Protestants had considered these books to be apocryphal for nearly a century. In short, the idea that there is one canon of New Testament scriptures acceptable to all Christians simply is not supported by the facts.

COPIES OF COPIES OF COPIES

The problems of deciding who wrote the various books of the New Testament, when they wrote them, and what should be included in the “orthodox” canon of scripture are made much more difficult because we do not have the original manuscripts. They have been lost, without exception, and all we have are “copies of copies of copies,” as Professor Bart Ehrman has pointed out.²⁹ For example, the earliest reasonable, though fragmentary, copy we have of Paul’s letter to the Galatians dates to about AD 200—nearly fifteen decades after Paul wrote it.³⁰ We have no way of knowing how accurately the copy available to us reflects the content or the actual wording of the original, although the two probably are in general agreement. With the exception of the smallest fragments, no two of the over 5,700 New Testament manuscripts in the Greek language alone are exactly alike in all their particulars. No one knows how many variant readings occur among the surviving copies, but, in Ehrman’s view, they “must number in the hundreds of thousands.”³¹

Most of the changes, as one might expect, are the result of human error, carelessness, or fatigue on the part of the scribe or copyist.

Misspellings and the inadvertent omission or duplication of a word or a line clearly fall into that category. Most copyists in the early centuries of the Christian era were not trained to do the work but were simply the literate members of a congregation. Origen, a third-century Christian Father, complained about the copies of the Gospels to which he had access: "The differences among the manuscripts have become great, either through the negligence of some copyists or through the perverse audacity of others; they either neglect to check over what they have transcribed, or, in the process of checking, they make additions or deletions as they please."³²

But, Ehrman notes, some changes made by both "orthodox" and "heretical" scribes in the second and third centuries were intentional and deliberate. They were, in the main, intended to make absolutely clear in the printed text what the scribe thought he *knew* the original writer had meant, or *should* have meant. In other words, changes were introduced to defend a particular theological position, while denigrating those in opposition to it. For example, "orthodox" scribes felt it was necessary to defend the "orthodox" position that Jesus was both fully mortal and fully divine against charges that He was not divine but merely a man (as taught by the Ebionites),³³ or that He was inherently divided in Himself, at one and the same time the mortal Jesus and the immortal Christ (as taught by the Valentinian Gnostics).³⁴ These changes, Ehrman believes, were generally not made maliciously, in that those who altered the text did not change it to say what they knew it did not. But they were anxious to eliminate the possibility that heretics would "misuse" the scriptures. In saying this, we must always keep in mind that in the early centuries of the Christian church there were no printing presses, regulatory agencies to rein in irresponsible authors, or copyright laws to protect against the modification of texts. Furthermore, prophetic guidance from the Lord's Apostles soon disappeared.

Other changes probably occurred when a scribe came across a passage, or even a word, which clearly had been a mistake and needed correcting. But once the change had been made, for whatever reason, it became permanent, unless another copyist "corrected" it again in turn. Ehrman notes that in the *Codex Vaticanus* there occurred in Hebrews 1:3 two different translations. The earliest version reads, as

Christ “*manifests* all things by the word of His power,” but a subsequent scribe several centuries later changed the word *manifests* to the word *bears*, thus altering the meaning of the text.³⁵ Later still, a third scribe erased the word *bears* and rewrote the word *manifests*. Then he added in the margin a stinging rebuke to the earlier scribe: “Fool and knave! Leave the old reading, don’t change it!”

In a recent book, *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why*,³⁶ Ehrman expands his contention that mistakes and changes shaped the Bible we read today into a very human document. I think Ehrman goes too far in his critique of the New Testament. He brings undoubted intellectual strength to problems of biblical exegesis, but to me at least, he lacks the full light of the Spirit. The fact that there are no existing original New Testament manuscripts, and many variant readings among those available to us, clearly contributed to what became, for Ehrman, a deep and shattering challenge to his personal religious faith. By his own admission, he now has changed from a fervent evangelical Christian, of the from-God’s-lips-to-my-ears school of believers in the inerrancy of the Bible, to an agnostic, who does not know exactly what he does believe.

To Latter-day Saints, the Bible is much more than a “human document.” We revere and respect it. We honor it. We recognize that it is not complete nor entirely accurate, but hopefully we never forget that latter-day revelation sustains, supports, and verifies the biblical account of God’s dealings with His children.

Ehrman cites numerous examples of changes which apparently have occurred in the biblical text over the years. As an example of many, consider the famous story of the woman taken in adultery, found in John 8:1–12 in the King James Version. The story is well known to all who are familiar with John’s Gospel. I have used it many times myself, perhaps most notably in my book, *His Name Be Praised*.³⁷

It is an engaging, brilliant story, both captivately clever and loving, portraying Jesus as both wise and compassionate. But Ehrman contends it suffers from one enormous problem: it was, he says, not originally in the Gospel of John or in any other of the Gospels.³⁸ It was added by later scribes. Many scholars do indeed believe that the story was a well-known part of the oral tradition about Jesus and at some point was

added to the text of John's Gospel. But it is not found in what Ehrman calls "the oldest and best" manuscripts of the Gospel of John, including all the earliest Greek manuscripts.

The fact that the story does not seem to have been included in "the oldest and best" manuscripts of John's Gospel does not, in and of itself, prove the account is made out of whole cloth, so to speak, that it is false and should be omitted. Any decision about what is "oldest and best" is inherently subjective, given that we have no original manuscripts at all. Further, oral traditions based on eyewitness observations have their legitimate places, and whoever added the story to the printed record may, in fact, have done so under inspiration, thereby not only enriching the record with good intent, but also reflecting an actual event and a solid truth which, though it had not yet been written down, had long been a factual part of the oral tradition widely accepted by Christians. This view is further strengthened by the Joseph Smith Translation of John 8:11, to which the Prophet added this sentence: "And the woman glorified God from that hour, and believed on his name."³⁹ Surely, if the whole story had been sheer fabrication, Joseph Smith would, under inspiration, have discerned that and thrown it out.

There is yet another possibility which must be considered, though neither it nor any other theory can definitively be proven. It is based firmly on the truthfulness of Nephi's statement that plain and precious truths were maliciously removed from the biblical records by agents of the devil intent on confusing and misleading its readers (see 1 Nephi 13). It is possible, though perhaps not probable (and certainly unprovable), that the story of the woman taken in adultery may have been in the *original* manuscript of John's Gospel, as it fell from the pen of the Apostle. Possibly it was removed by one or more malicious tamperers and *reinserted* at some later date by an unknown copyist acting (whether he knew it or not) under divine inspiration. Many may disagree with this contention in favor of a "rational" approach which does not involve Deity. To those so inclined, my counsel is simple. Be careful: the ability of the Father to protect the record of His Son and to thwart the work of the devil cannot be taken lightly.

As noted, most scholars believe it is more probable that the story of the woman taken in adultery, though true, was *not* in the original

Gospel of John and was inserted by an unknown scribe perhaps as late as the fourth or fifth century AD.⁴⁰ We know that divinely approved additions to holy writ have occurred on other occasions. For example, during His ministry to the Nephites, the resurrected Christ discovered that parts of a prophecy by Samuel the Lamanite had not been included in the original Nephite record. He commanded Nephi to amend the record, inserting the missing information (see 3 Nephi 23:7–13). Further, Luke included a sentence in Acts, attributed to Paul, which had been omitted from Luke's Gospel ("Remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he said, It is more blessed to give than to receive" [Acts 20:35]). Thus, true statements, not originally in sacred records, have indeed been added later, under inspiration, or even divine commandment. In other words, the content of the Christian canon has been influenced by oral tradition, as well as by the written word.

Another example of changes in the biblical record will suffice to make Ehrman's point.⁴¹ In 1515, the Dutch humanist Erasmus produced the first printed (as compared to handcopied) edition of the Greek New Testament. In doing so, he relied heavily on manuscripts which had been produced well over a thousand years after the originals. He did not include an account given in 1 John 5:7–8, because it is not found in any Greek manuscripts prior to the sixteenth century, though it is found in the manuscripts of the Latin Vulgate. (The Vulgate was translated by Jerome at the command of Pope Damasus in the late fourth and early fifth centuries. It was "the Bible" of the Western church for a thousand years.) In the Vulgate, 1 John 5:7–8 reads: "For there are three that bear record in heaven, the father, the word and the spirit; and these three are one; and there are three that bear witness on earth, the spirit, the water, and the blood, and these three are one." Almost exactly the same wording is found in the King James Bible. This is the only passage in the Bible which explicitly presents the doctrine of the Trinity, that there are three personages in the Godhead but they constitute one God. As such, it is dear to the heart of those who believe in the triune God, and was an obvious candidate for inclusion in a version "corrected" by a scribe who wished to make certain readers would have the truth as he saw it. The earliest evidence of a change in the original wording of 1 John apparently comes from a manuscript of Priscillianist

provenance, originating in North Africa or Spain.⁴² (The Priscillianists were fourth- and fifth-century heretics, condemned by the Council of Braga in 563.) But Erasmus did not find this wording in his Greek manuscripts, which read differently: "There are three that bear witness: the spirit, the water, and the blood, and these three are one." There is no reference in the Greek manuscripts to "the father, the word, and the spirit." Erasmus, of course, did not include "the father, the word, and the spirit" in his Greek text.

As Ehrman recounts the story, a fury broke out among theologians. Erasmus was denounced, accused of tampering with the doctrine of the Trinity. He replied that if the text found in the Vulgate could be found in any Greek manuscript he would be glad to include it in the next edition of his Greek New Testament. Evidently, so Ehrman proclaims, someone manufactured such a text by copying out the Greek text and substituting the Latin text found in the Vulgate for the passage in question, translating it into Greek, of course. This was presented to Erasmus, who dutifully included what scholars call the Johannine Comma in his subsequent editions.⁴³ Interestingly enough, these Greek texts provided the form of the text used in producing the King James Bible so familiar to us today, even though the Johannine Comma is *not* found in what Ehrman considers to be "the oldest and best" manuscripts of the Greek New Testament.

Of course, it can be argued, as scholars such as Richard Simon, the eighteenth-century French scholar, have done, that the Latin Vulgate text produced by Jerome was, in fact, the better text, and that the Greek texts are inherently inaccurate because they are inherently degenerate. As Simon concluded: "St. Jerome has done the Church no small Service, in Correcting and Reviewing the ancient Latin Copies, according to the strictest Rules of Criticism. This we endeavor to demonstrate in this work, and that the most ancient Greek Exemplars of the New Testament are not the best, since they are suited to those Latin Copies, which St. Jerome found so deleterious as to need an Alteration."⁴⁴

It seems possible, even perhaps probable, that an unknown scribe, attempting to provide proof for the false doctrine of the oneness of the Trinity, altered 1 John 5:7–8 as support for the apostate notion that the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are one in substance, not separate beings.

It would take the Prophet Joseph Smith to provide restoration of the plain and precious doctrine that the members of the Godhead are separate beings but perfectly one in purpose (see D&C 130:22).

These examples of changes in the New Testament scriptures over the years—and many more could be mentioned—underline what to me is an important issue: scripture itself is not sufficient authority for one's Christian faith. To that must be added at least two things: the whisperings of the Spirit—that Spirit which teaches the truth and testifies of it—and the traditions and teachings of modern-day prophets and Apostles. Perhaps some Latter-day Saints do not accord enough weight to the importance of long-established apostolic teachings, though our Catholic friends certainly do.

THE GREAT AND ABOMINABLE CHURCH⁴⁵

I must part company with Ehrman when he claims that “orthodox” scribes, though they clearly made errors and made some changes deliberately, did not do so out of malice.⁴⁶ Nephi wrote that someone, or more likely a group of people, “have taken away from the gospel of the Lamb many parts which are plain and most precious” (1 Nephi 13:26) and that this was done so “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). It seems certain that most of the changes that have significantly corrupted the scriptures came early in the Christian era, before the end of the first century, when many variations on the Christian message were widespread. There are, indeed, many allegations by second-century Christian writers that others were corrupting the scriptures, and with malice aforethought. Tertullian, the first Christian Father who wrote in Latin and who lived and worked during the last half of the second and early third centuries, wrote extensively about a number of heretic Christian sects, including that of Marcion. Of Marcion, Tertullian wrote: “[He] expressly and openly used the knife, not the pen, since he made such an excision of the scriptures as suited his own subject matter.” “[He],” continued Tertullian, “mutilated the Gospel according to Luke, removing all the narrative of the Lord’s birth, and also removing much of the teachings of the discourses of the Lord.”⁴⁷

Irenaeus, the bishop of Lyon at the end of the second century AD, claimed that the followers of Valentinus (perhaps the most influential of the Gnostics) changed the scriptures “by transferring passages, and dressing them up anew, and making one thing out of another.”⁴⁸ Clement of Alexandria (AD 150–215)—the teacher of Origen, a professor at Alexandria, and a man thoroughly infused with Greek philosophy—railed similarly against the Carpocratians, another Gnostic sect.⁴⁹ Charges of deliberate falsification of the scriptures flew thick and fast. Dionysius, bishop of Corinth in the late second century, complained that his own epistles had been tampered with and added ruefully, “Small wonder then if some have dared to tamper even with the word of the Lord Himself, when they have conspired to mutilate my own humble efforts.”⁵⁰

Without going into more detail, it is clear that allegations of scriptural tampering and downright forgery were common in the second century of the Christian era. No individual or group was immune; not only heretical sects like the Gnostics were implicated, since the group that eventually morphed into “orthodox” Christianity was as well.

How then could the malicious corruption have proceeded? What methods would have been used? They include the following:

Misinterpretation and subsequent wresting of the scriptures. The writer of 2 Peter seems to be alluding to this occurring even in his time: “And account that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation; even as our beloved brother Paul also according to the wisdom given unto him hath written unto you; as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things; in which are some things hard to be understood, which they that are unlearned and unstable wrest, as they do also the other scriptures, unto their own destruction” (2 Peter 3:15–16). Those who do so “have gone far astray,” as Alma said to his son Corianton (Alma 41:1).

Reinterpretation of the scriptures, considering them in an allegorical framework rather than as literal truths, was another common fault amongst early Christian writers. It was a manifestation of the internal corrosion that was a real threat to the church and, at least by the third century, of the effects of Greek philosophy on Christian doctrines. Such wresting of the scriptures leads inevitably to the rise of men “speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them” (Acts 20:30).

Yet another way to reinterpret scriptural texts is to change the meaning of the words. Professor John Gee points out that this topic has not received the treatment it deserves, but he notes that an example would be the change in the word *mysterion* from “(initiation) rite” to “secret.”⁵¹

Deletion or substitution of words or ideas. This is the fault ascribed by Tertullian to Marcion mentioned above. I have already noted the stinging rebuke from one scribe to another, who had altered the text of Hebrews 1:3: “Fool and knave! Leave the old reading, don’t change it!”

Forgery of text. Tertullian discusses forged documents, falsely attributed to Paul, which circulated in his day. This practice seems to have been widespread. It is clear that many heretical groups, striving for credibility, used the name of a revered Christian leader to promulgate false ideas. So perhaps did others, writing pseudonymously, though with doctrinal correctness and out of respect, in the name of Peter, Paul, or some other major leader. Indeed, as noted previously, some scholars believe some such writings (such as Paul’s pastoral letters and 2 Peter) have found their way into the New Testament as we know it today in the King James Version of the Bible.

The Nephite record testifies of the nefarious role of a “great and abominable church” in taking away many plain and precious things from the sacred scripture (1 Nephi 13:26). Professor Stephen E. Robinson has discussed the nature of the great and abominable church, the spiritual Babylon, which wars against the Saints of God.⁵² It is the church of the devil, the “whore of all the earth” (2 Nephi 10:16), which “seek[s] the lusts of the flesh and the things of the world” (1 Nephi 22:23). Professor Robinson points out that the great and abominable church is “an immense assembly or association of people bound together by their loyalty to that which God hates. Most likely this ‘church’ is involved specifically in sexual immorality, idolatry (that is false worship), or both.” The “great and abominable church” did its dirty work after the Jews had transmitted the Bible in its purity to the Gentiles (1 Nephi 13:24). Furthermore, its darkest deeds probably occurred right after the Apostles had “fallen asleep”—by the end of the first century (D&C 86:3). But make no mistake, whether completed by then or not, its work was well under way in the first century. One of the

most significant ways the great and abominable church corrupted the scriptures was to withhold plain and precious parts of the gospel of the Lamb, such that important truths were lost (see 1 Nephi 13:32–34).

Historically, what could be the identity of the great and abominable church which corrupted the scriptures? Could it have been the Jews? That seems highly unlikely. Though the Jews and Christians squabbled and fought often during the first three centuries of the Christian era (and have many times since), it simply does not make sense that the Jews, whose record was taken forth "in purity unto the Gentiles" (1 Nephi 13:25), would tamper with their own record. Furthermore, to even suggest that Judaism has the odious characteristics of the great and abominable church is to indulge in the foulest of calumnies against a great people who have been maligned and persecuted by far too many, Christians included. Well, then, what about the Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox churches? Even though these churches have been guilty of many errors over the centuries, the answer must again be a most emphatic "no." The Roman Catholic Church, as we know it, did not even exist in the first two centuries of the Christian era, when the great and abominable church was especially active in corrupting the scriptures. Even if we consider as "Catholic" (that is, universal) the church Constantine sponsored early in the fourth century AD as part of a larger political strategy to bring unity to his troubled empire,⁵³ it is plain that the changes to the scripture had long since been perpetrated. The church was, by then, already apostate. The injury was already done, long before the "universal" church can be identified as such.

In passing, let us also lay to rest the common misperception that the scriptures were corrupted by malicious medieval monks. During the long centuries before the invention of movable-type printing in the fifteenth century AD, in the days when the Bible was copied by hand in monasteries throughout Europe, mistakes certainly were made by the copyists, as already noted. But those mistakes were, in general at least, accidents, the results of carelessness or ineptitude, often the result, one imagines, from working long hours in cold and fatigue, bent over vellum pages, in the scriptorium of a monastery. We actually owe a great debt to those anonymous copyists, who preserved the Bible for subsequent

generations and in the process helped ensure the continuance of Christian culture.

We cannot clearly identify the leaders and members of the great and abominable church, though we understand much of its nature. But that does not mean it was not real. It still exists. Its members are bound by one great loyalty—to Satan and his devilish work. As Stephen Robinson has said: “Membership [in the great and abominable church] is based more on who has your heart than on who has your records.”⁵⁴ By that reasoning, as Robinson has noted, undoubtedly there are people who call themselves Latter-day Saints who belong to the great and abominable church and there are members of other churches who do not belong, because they strive to follow the Lamb of God and aspire to become like Him.

It is most probable, I believe, that the great and abominable church, which maliciously corrupted the scriptures early in the Christian era, was actually not a single entity but a coalition or at least a conglomerate of people who rebelled against God. Those who called themselves Christian but rebelled against the leaders and quarreled with their fellows, who practiced idolatry, who wallowed in mysticism, who could not fully leave Judaism, who betrayed other Christians (as occurred many times and may have resulted in the death of Peter and Paul⁵⁵), and who responded to persecution by craven recanting of their testimony of Christ—those and others like them ensured that the infant church would receive a fatal blow, such that the “mystery of iniquity” would prevail. The deliberate corrupters of the scriptures surely are found among this group.

CONCLUSION

I finish where I began. Study of the creation of the New Testament is seriously hampered by the passage of nearly two millennia of time, the complete lack of any original manuscripts, our inadequate understandings of the realities of life in the ancient world (including that of early Christians) uncertainties inherent in textual criticism, and considerable evidence that the scriptures have undergone significant changes over the years. Serious doubts exist as to the age and authenticity of many New Testament books. Few scholars believe that the Bible

as available to us today is inerrant. Disputes continue about the contents of the canon of scripture.

I believe that for too long Latter-day Saint scholars have not, perhaps, paid as much attention to examining the New Testament as they have to their brilliant analysis and defense of the Nephite record and other aspects of this great latter-day work. We have, I submit, been too content to leave biblical exegesis largely in the hands of others, who however academically brilliant, have not, for a number of reasons, brought the full light of the Spirit to their labors. This must be remedied by Latter-day Saint scholars who combine intellectual rigor and spiritual strength. I believe Brigham Young University has a vital role to play in this endeavor, in providing both the rigorous training needed to prepare scholars and an environment which fosters and encourages Spirit-based scholarship.

As Latter-day Saint scholars accept this challenge, they will be following in the steps of and building on the foundation laid by Professor Sidney B. Sperry, who had both the scholarly credentials and the courage to address questions previous Latter-day Saint scholars had not considered fully. He understood that both our faith and our doctrine encourage us to search for the truth. Truth need never be feared: it is our friend and ally, not our enemy.

I cannot leave this sacred topic without expressing my own deep love for the New Testament. I first read it many years ago as a boy at my mother's knee, and have loved it ever since. In good times and bad, it has been as a lamp unto my stumbling feet, a beacon of hope and love which lights my path, a standard against which I strive to measure all that I do. When sorrow comes, it binds up my broken heart and encourages me to forget my own problems and reach out to raise others to higher ground. My soul is stirred by the soaring majesty of its prose and the glory of its portrayals of the Good Shepherd and those who follow Him.

Above all else, from the New Testament I learn of the wondrous Son of God, who died that I might live and who rose triumphant from the tomb to bring resurrection to all and celestial joy to those who keep

His commandments. He will return again, in power and glory, with healing in His wings, to set His people free. Of that I testify.

NOTES

1. Justin Martyr, in Bart D. Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 32.

2. See Bart D. Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*, 3d ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), chap. 6; see Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan, eds., *The Oxford Companion to the Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 493.

3. Metzger and Coogan, *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, 502–3. See also Bible Dictionary, s.v. “Gospels,” 683. Many scholars believe that the author of Matthew probably was an unknown Jewish Christian of the second generation, rather than the first.

4. Metzger and Coogan, *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, 469–74.

5. See Bible Dictionary, “John, Gospel of,” 715–16.

6. Elaine Pagels, *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas* (New York: Random House, 2003), 72–73.

7. See Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Apostle Paul* (Chantilly, VA: Teaching Company, 2005), audiotape.

8. Johnson, *The Apostle Paul*.

9. Metzger and Coogan, *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, 186.

10. Metzger and Coogan, *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, 275, 574.

11. Metzger and Coogan, *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, 584, 586, 340, 397.

12. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2d ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1980), 5:392.

13. F. L. Cross, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), 1346–47.

14. Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faith We Never Knew* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), xi–xv. For further information on the Gospel of Thomas, see Pagels, *Beyond Belief*.

15. Marvin Meyer, *The Gospel of Thomas: The Hidden Sayings of Jesus* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 25.

16. John Romer, *Testament: The Bible and History* (New York: Henry Holt, 1988), 183–84. The official name of this particular fragment is P⁵².

17. Cross, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 270.

18. Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus*, 119–20.

19. Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus*, 56.

20. Cross, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 948.

21. Alexander B. Morrison, *Turning from Truth: A New Look at the Great Apostasy* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005), 50–151; see also Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*, 104–9.

22. Cross, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 934; see also Morrison, *Turning from Truth*, 81–82.
23. Morrison, *Turning from Truth*, 82.
24. Morrison, *Turning from Truth*, 82.
25. Cross, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 1373–75.
26. Stephen E. Robinson, *Are Mormons Christians?* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1991), 53.
27. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*, 10.
28. Robinson, *Are Mormons Christians?* 53.
29. Bart D. Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 27.
30. The manuscript, contained in what is referred to elsewhere as the Chester Beatty Papyri (P⁴⁶), is dated to about AD 200 (see Metzger and Coogan, *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, 488).
31. Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture*, 27.
32. Quoted by Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus*, 52.
33. Morrison, *Turning from Truth*, 154–56.
34. Morrison, *Turning from Truth*, 156–57.
35. Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus*, 56.
36. Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus*, 32.
37. Alexander B. Morrison, *His Name Be Praised* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2002), 34–37.
38. Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus*, 63–65.
39. New Testament Manuscript 2, folio 4, 116; Scott H. Faulring, Kent P. Jackson, and Robert J. Matthews, *Joseph Smith's New Translation of the Bible: Original Manuscripts* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2004), 459; see Morrison, *His Name Be Praised*, 38.
40. See for example, Thomas A. Wayment: "The Woman Taken in Adultery and the History of the New Testament Canon," in *The Life and Teachings of Jesus Christ: From the Transfiguration Through the Triumphal Entry*, ed. Richard Neitzel Holzapfel and Thomas A. Wayment (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2006), 372–99. Professor Wayment is a faithful and well-trained Latter-day Saint scholar.
41. Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus*, 80–82.
42. Cross, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 729.
43. Cross, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 729.
44. Richard Simon, *A Critical History of the Text of the New Testament* (London: R. Taylor, 1689), preface.
45. Much of the material in this section is taken from my book, *Turning from Truth*.
46. Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture*, 27–30. The Prophet Joseph Smith allowed for both accidental and intentional changes (*History of the Church*, 1:245).
47. Tertullian, *On Prescription Against Heretics*, in *The Ante-Nicean Fathers*, 3:262; see also *Documents of the Christian Church*, ed. Henry Bettenson, 2d ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963), 37.

48. Irenaeus, *Contra Haereses*, in *The Ante-Nicean Fathers*, 326.
49. See Morrison, *Turning from Truth*, 72.
50. Eusebius, *History of the Church*, 132, in Morrison, *Turning from Truth*, 72.
51. John Gee, "The Corruption of Scripture in Early Christianity," in *Early Christians in Disarray: Contemporary LDS Perspectives on the Christian Apostasy*, ed. Noel B. Reynolds (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, Brigham Young University Press, 2005), 179.
52. Stephen E. Robinson, "Warring Against the Saints of God," *Ensign*, January 1988, 34–39.
53. Morrison, *Turning from Truth*, 109–30.
54. Robinson, "Warring Against the Saints of God," 34–39.
55. Gary Wills, *Papal Sin: Structures of Deceit* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 280. Wills quotes Clement of Rome, writing near the end of the first century AD, who claimed that Peter and Paul were killed out of a "rivalrous grudge."