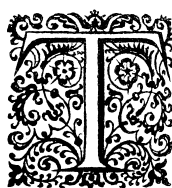




Chap. i.

# What the Bible Means to Latter-day Saints

*Robert L. Millet*

he story of the Latter-day Saints begins with a person reading a passage from the Bible. Young Joseph Smith was led to a verse from the King James Version, James 1:5, that promises wisdom to those who seek. Subsequently he read for himself that simple promise whose fulfillment began the Restoration of the fulness of the gospel (see Joseph Smith—History 1:11–20).

## THE WORD OF GOD

Because the Latter-day Saints are bold enough in today's world to announce an open canon of scripture, some traditional Christians are quick to suggest that the Bible does not occupy a prominent place among us. They could not, of course, be more wrong. Elder M. Russell Ballard stated:

Brothers and sisters, I am sure many of you have had the experience of hearing people say that “Mormons are not Christians because they have their own Bible, the Book of Mormon.” To anyone harboring this misconception, we say that we believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as our Savior and the author of our salvation and that we believe, revere, and love the Holy Bible. We do have additional sacred scripture, including the Book of Mormon, but it supports the Bible, never substituting for it. . . .

## Robert L. Millet

Members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints believe that “all scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable” (2 Timothy 3:16). We love the Bible and other scriptures. That may be surprising to some who may not be aware of our belief in the Bible as the revealed word of God. It is one of the pillars of our faith, a powerful witness of the Savior and of Christ’s ongoing influence in the lives of those who worship and follow Him. The more we read and study the Bible and its teachings, the more clearly we see the doctrinal underpinnings of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ. We tend to love the scriptures that we spend time with. We may need to balance our study in order to love and understand all scripture.

You young people especially, do not discount or devalue the Holy Bible. It is the sacred, holy record of the Lord’s life. The Bible contains hundreds of pages more than all of our other scripture combined. It is the bedrock of all Christianity. We do not criticize or belittle anyone’s beliefs. Our great responsibility as Christians is to share all that God has revealed with all of His sons and daughters.

Those who join this Church do not give up their faith in the Bible—they strengthen it. The Book of Mormon does not dilute nor diminish nor de-emphasize the Bible. On the contrary, it expands, extends, and exalts it. The Book of Mormon testifies of the Bible, and both testify of Christ.<sup>1</sup>

Careful observers of Mormonism are quick to point out that the Book of Mormon itself explains that “plain and precious” truths were taken away or kept back from the Bible before it was compiled (see 1 Nephi 13:20–40). In addition, one of our articles of faith states, “We believe the Bible to be the word of God as far as it is translated correctly” (Articles of Faith 1:8). The question is not whether there have been scribal errors through the centuries—there have been. The question is not whether the Bible is the word of God—it is. The question is not whether the Bible can be relied upon with confidence if in fact there have been errors in the text—it can. One Christian scholar, Timothy Paul Jones, has written: “Supposing that God did inspire the original New Testament writings and that he protected those writings from error—are the available copies of the New Testament manuscripts sufficiently accurate for us to grasp the truth that God intended in the first century? I believe that the answer

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to this question is yes. The ancient manuscripts were not copied perfectly. Yet they *were* copied with enough accuracy for us to comprehend what the original authors intended.”<sup>2</sup>

Jones’s position is not unlike the one held by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. We do not believe the Bible must be transmitted perfectly to be spiritually normative and eternally valuable. Errors in the Bible should not tarnish its image for Latter-day Saints. For that matter, while we accept the Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, and Pearl of Great Price as holy scripture, we would not rush to proclaim their inerrancy. The greater marvel is that an infinite and perfect God can work through finite and imperfect humans to deliver his word to his children.

Joseph Smith believed that the message of the Bible was true and from God, that the Bible was “God’s word.” I am not so certain he or modern Church leaders would be convinced that every sentence recorded in the testaments necessarily contains “God’s words,” meaning a direct quotation or a transcription of divine utterance. It is the spirit of revelation within and resting upon the one called of God that is the energizing force, and in most instances God places the thought into the mind or heart of the revelator, who then clothes the oracle in language. Certainly there are times when a prophet records the words of God directly, but very often the “still small voice” (1 Kings 19:12) whispers to the prophet, who then speaks for God. In short, when God chooses to speak through an individual, that person does not become a mindless ventriloquist, an earthly sound system through which the Almighty can voice himself. Rather, the person becomes enlightened and filled with intelligence or truth. “What makes us different from most other Christians in the way we read and use the Bible and other scriptures,” Elder Dallin H. Oaks explained, “is our belief in continuing revelation. For us, the scriptures are not the ultimate source of knowledge, but what precedes the ultimate source. The ultimate knowledge comes by revelation.”<sup>3</sup>

Clearly many factors impacted the prophetic message—personality, experience, vocabulary, literary talent, and so forth. The word of the Lord as spoken through Isaiah is quite different from the word of the Lord as spoken through Luke, and both are different from that spoken by Jeremiah or Mark. Further, it is worth noting that stone, bark, animal skins, wood, metals, baked clay, and papyrus were all used anciently to record inspired

messages. The Latter-day Saint concern with the ancients is not the perfection with which such messages were recorded but with the inspiration of the message. More specifically, Latter-day Saints are interested in the fact that the heavens were opened to the ancients, that these prophets had messages to record. In other words, knowing that God is the same yesterday, today, and forever and that he spoke to them at all (however well or poorly it may have been recorded) attests that he can speak to men and women in the here and now. After all, the Bible is only black ink on white paper until the Spirit of God illuminates its true meaning to us; if we have obtained that true meaning, there is little need to quibble over the Bible's suitability as a history or science text.

The fact that Joseph Smith did not believe that the Bible had come down to us in perfect condition did not seem to deter him from reading it, reflecting on its principles and doctrines, memorizing it, and quoting or paraphrasing scores of passages in sermons he delivered. He did not assume an attitude of "Well, since the Bible has been so terribly tampered with and has so many scribal errors, we might as well turn instead to the Book of Mormon or Doctrine and Covenants for scriptural authority." While the Prophet loved the Book of Mormon all his life, considered it to be "the keystone of our religion" and "the most correct of any book on earth"<sup>4</sup> and bore testimony of its truthfulness to his guards in the Carthage Jail the night before his death,<sup>5</sup> he seldom read from it or quoted it in his sermons. (This is to me a solid indication that the Book of Mormon came *through* him, not from him.) Instead, his messages to the Saints in Ohio, Missouri, and Illinois are laced with biblical passages or paraphrases. He taught repeatedly from the Bible and called upon the oldest commentary in the world, the Holy Ghost,<sup>6</sup> to bring ancient words to light in modern times.

That the Prophet Joseph Smith was directed by God to undertake an inspired translation of the Bible, that this endeavor occupied a great deal of his time and energy from June 1830 to July 1833, that the work of Bible translation proved to be an important part of his spiritual education, that he felt driven to get the translation published up until his death in 1844, and that he considered this labor to be a significant "branch of [his] calling"<sup>7</sup> all attest to the Bible's importance and affirm that God wanted his Latter-day Saints to read, study, and be properly instructed by it. President Joseph Fielding Smith explained, "We are all aware that there are

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errors in the Bible, . . . but the hand of the Lord has been over this volume of scripture nevertheless, and it is remarkable that it has come down to us in the excellent condition in which we find it.”<sup>8</sup>

### ANCIENT COMMENTARY ON MODERN SCRIPTURE

As members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, we rejoice in all of the scriptural records we possess. Because we value greatly the scriptures of the Restoration, we have generally spoken of the need to view the Bible through the lens of modern revelation, much as Roman Catholics and Protestants interpret the Bible through the lens of what is sometimes called the “Great Tradition” of Christian thought, including the post–New Testament councils and creeds. At the same time, we need to be just as attentive to those occasions when Bible passages serve as a hermeneutical lens through which we can expand our understanding of teachings contained in the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price.

Let me illustrate with three examples of how the New Testament clarifies Restoration scripture. In the marvelously instructive chapter in the Book of Mormon we know as 2 Nephi 9, Jacob, son of Lehi, is speaking of the resurrection. He explains that “if the flesh should rise no more”—that is, if there were no resurrection—“our spirits must become subject to that angel who fell from before the presence of the eternal God, and became the devil, to rise no more. And our spirits must have become like unto him, and we become devils, angels to a devil, to be shut out from the presence of our God, and to remain with the father of lies, in misery, like unto himself” (2 Nephi 9:8–9). Now the simple question that follows is, Why, if there were no resurrection, would we all be subject to the devil? Why, if there were no resurrection, would all people at the time of death be subject to Satan forever?

Paul taught basically the same doctrine in the fifteenth chapter of his first epistle to the Corinthians. Because there were those within the Corinthian branch of the Church who seem to have doubted the reality of the resurrection, Paul wrote, “Now if Christ be preached that he rose from the dead, how say some among you that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there be no resurrection of the dead, then is Christ not risen: and if Christ be not risen, then is our preaching vain, and your faith is also vain.”

Paul is explaining how foolish it is to believe in the redemption of Jesus Christ but at the same time to question or doubt the doctrine of the resurrection. He continues, "For if the dead rise not, then is not Christ raised: and if Christ be not raised, your faith is vain." Why is their faith vain? Note what follows: "Ye are yet in your sins" (1 Corinthians 15:12–14, 16–17). In short, if Christ does not have power to raise the dead, then why should we suppose he has the power to forgive our sins? If there is no resurrection, there is no atonement. Here the Bible clarifies the Book of Mormon.

A second example: early Latter-day Saint missionaries were instructed to declare the restored gospel, "saying none other things than that which the prophets and apostles have written" (D&C 52:9). What exactly does this mean? What are the things that they, and we, are to proclaim? The Apostle Paul explained to Herod Agrippa II what he taught, "Having therefore obtained help of God, I continue unto this day, witnessing both to small and great, saying none other things than those which the prophets and Moses did say should come: that Christ should suffer, and that he should be the first that should rise from the dead, and should shew light unto the people, and to the Gentiles" (Acts 26:22–23). Yes, of course we should teach what the apostles and prophets of our day teach, and that which they have chosen to address ought, to a large extent, to dictate that "portion of the word" (Alma 12:9–11) on which we choose to focus. In a more expansive sense, however, we should always teach what the apostles and prophets have taught, that Jesus is the Christ, that he suffered and died for our sins, and that he rose from the dead in glorious immortality.

A final example: the risen Lord examined the Nephite records and gave instructions that the fulfillment of Samuel the Lamanite's prophecy concerning the resurrection should be recorded. Mormon then wrote, "And now it came to pass that when Jesus had expounded all the scriptures in one, which they had written, he commanded them that they should teach the things which he had expounded unto them" (3 Nephi 23:14). What does it mean that our Lord "expounded all the scriptures in one"? It sounds important. I have found a verse in the Gospel of Luke to be especially enlightening regarding this. In speaking of the resurrected Christ walking with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, Luke quotes the Savior's words to the two disciples who cannot yet reconcile the messianic



## CHAP. VI.

1 Wee may not liue in sinne, 2 for wee are dead vnto it, 3 as appeareth by our baptisme. 12 Let not sinne reigne any more, 18 because wee haue yecledd our selues to the seruice of righteoufnesse, 23 and for that death is the wages of sinne.



hat shal we say then: shal wee continue in sinne: that grace may abound:

2 God forbid: how shal wee that are dead to sinne, liue any longer therein:

†Or, etc.

3 Know ye not, that so many of vs as were baptized into Iesus Christ, were baptized into his death:

4 Therefore wee are buried with him by baptisme into death, that like as Christ was raised vp from the dead by the glory of the Father: euen so wee also should walke in newnesse of life.

5 For if we haue been plantet together in the likenesse of his death: we shall be also in the likenesse of his resurrection:

6 Knowing this, that our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sinne might bee destroyed, that henceforth we should not serue sinne.

†Gr. justified

7 For he that is dead, is freed from sinne.

8 Now if we be dead with Christ, we beleuee that we shal also liue with him:

9 Knowing that Christ being raised from the dead, dieth no more, death hath no more dominion ouer him.

10 For in that hee died, he died vnto sinne once: but in that hee liueth, he liueth vnto God.

11 Likewise reckon yee also your selues to be dead indeed vnto sinne: but aliuie vnto God, through Iesus Christ our Lord.

12 Let not sinne reigne therefore in your mortall body, that ye should obey it in the lusts thereof.

†Gr. armes or weapons.

13 Neither yeeld yee your members as instruments of vnrigheteousnes vnto sinne: but yeelde your selues vnto God, as those that are aliuie from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteoufnesse vnto God.

14 For sinne shall not haue dominion ouer you, for yee are not vnder the Law, but vnder Grace.

15 What then: shal we sinne, because we are not vnder the Law, but vnder Grace: God forbid.

16 Know ye not, that to whom yee yeeld your selues seruants to obey, his seruants ye are to whom ye obey: whether of sinne vnto death, or of obedience vnto righteoufnesse:

17 But God be thanked, that yee were the seruants of sinne: but ye haue obeyed from the heart that fourme of doctrine, which was deliuered you.

†Gr. whereto ye were deliuered.

18 Being then made free from sinne, yee became the seruants of righteoufnesse.

19 I speake after the manner of men because of the infirmite of your flesh: for as yee haue yeilded your members seruants to vncleannesse and to iniquitie, vnto iniquitie: euen so now yeelde your members seruants to righteoufnesse, vnto holinesse.

20 For when yee were the seruants of sinne ye were free from righteoufnesse.

†Gr. to righteoufnesse.

21 What fruit had you then in those things, whereof ye are now ashamed: for the end of those things is death.

22 But now being made free from sinne, and become seruants to God, yee haue your fruit vnto holinesse, and the end euerlasting life.

23 For the wages of sinne is death: but the gift of God is eternall life, through Iesus Christ our Lord.

## CHAP. VII.

1 No law hath power ouer a man, longer then he liueth. 4 But we are dead to the Lawe.

7 Yet is not the law sinne, 12 but holy, iust, good, 16 as I acknowledge, who am grieved because I cannot keepe it.



Now ye not, brethren (for I speake to them that knowe the Lawe) how that the Lawe hath dominion ouer a man, as long as hee liueth:

2 For the woman which hath an husband, is bound by the law to her husband, so long as he liueth: but if the husband be dead, she is loosed from the law of the husband.

3 So then if while her husband liueth, shee be married to another man, shee shall be called an adulteresse: but if her husband be dead, shee is free from that law, so that she is no adulteresse, though she be married to another man.

prophecies with current events: “O fools, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken: Ought not Christ to have suffered these things, and to enter into his glory?” The words that follow are instructive: “And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself” (Luke 24:25–27). That is to say, the master teacher drew upon a wide range of prophetic utterances to demonstrate powerfully how all of the scriptures bear a united testimony of him.

### A BELOVED MEMBER OF THE FAMILY

“The Holy Bible—as of now—is the most influential book ever written in the entire history of the world,” Elder Bruce R. McConkie has written. “As presently constituted, it contains those portions of the sacred writings of Judaism and of Christianity which have come down to us in relative purity. . . . The King James Version of the Bible, as published in the English tongue, is probably the best Bible ever prepared and preserved by the scholars among men. It is the version brought into being for use in the restoration processes that brought forth the fulness of the gospel among men.”<sup>9</sup>

Joseph Smith remarked once that those who are in tune with the Spirit will not only recognize the handiwork of God in the cosmos but will also see “God’s own handwriting in the sacred volume: and he who reads it oftenest will like it best.”<sup>10</sup> The Prophet Joseph’s successors felt much the same way. “In the Bible are the words of life and salvation,” President Brigham Young declared. He also said,

I believe the words of the Bible are just what they are; but aside from that I believe the doctrines concerning salvation contained in that book are true, and that their observance will elevate any people, nation or family that dwells on the face of the earth. The doctrines contained in the Bible will lift to a superior condition all who observe them; they will impart to them knowledge, wisdom, charity, fill them with compassion and cause them to feel after the wants of those who are in distress, or in painful or degraded circumstances. . . .

We take this book, the Bible . . . for our guide, for our rule of action; we take it as the foundation of our faith. It points the way to salvation. . . .



## What the Bible Means to Latter-day Saints

... If you will follow the doctrines, and be guided by the precepts of [the Bible], it will direct you where you may see as you are seen, where you may converse with Jesus Christ, have the visitation of angels, have dreams, visions, and revelations, and understand and know God for yourselves.<sup>11</sup>

President Wilford Woodruff likewise pointed out that the Bible “gives unto us the law whereby we may be exalted and go back again into the presence of God and dwell with Him forever and ever. It gives unto us the course we should pursue in order to receive a part in the first resurrection, that we may come forth clothed with glory, immortality and eternal life.”<sup>12</sup> On another occasion, President Woodruff stated: “Does the Book of Mormon contain a different gospel to that contained in the Bible? It does not. ... Both books contain the same gospel. There was never but one gospel and there never will be any other revealed to the human family.”<sup>13</sup>

The “royal family of scripture”<sup>14</sup> has been provided for us in these troubled times so that we might receive doctrinal understanding, inspiration, correction, and reproof (see 2 Timothy 3:16; compare Alma 37:8). The Bible is an important member of that royal family, and we do not love one member of the family more than another. Nor do we rank them in terms of importance. There is power in the word of God, power to heal the wounded soul (see Jacob 2:8) and power to lead people to enduring faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and to repentance, a power that brings about a change of heart and thereby constructs a house of faith that is firmly and steadfastly built on the rock of our Redeemer (see Helaman 15:7–8). This consummate power comes to us as we read and reflect on the deeds of faith and wonder performed by Noah and Abraham and Moses; as we seek to emulate the courageous examples of Joshua and Gideon and Samuel; as we ponder the ministry and mission of the only perfect being to walk this earth; as we find strength to endure and surrender our will to God, just as Jesus, the prototype of all saved beings, did in Gethsemane and at Golgotha; and as we study the pattern and follow the path of those marvelous apostolic witnesses we know as Simon Peter, James, and Saul of Tarsus, who gave everything they had—including their own lives—to spread the message of salvation to all the world.

## Robert L. Millet

These stories, teachings, and examples, along with scores of others, are found within the Bible. It is truly the book of books. And God be praised that it is available to us in our day.

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