

The Plain and Precious Parts

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1 Nephi 13:26 "They have taken away from the gospel of the Lamb many parts which are plain and most precious."

What does the Book of Mormon say about the Bible? Most people generally familiar with Nephi's prophecy understand that the Bible, as it "proceeded forth from the mouth of a Jew [the Lord]," originally came forth in purity (1 Nephi 13:24-25). Yet as it was handed down, important parts were lost, removed, or obscured. A more detailed and more informative picture than this, however, can be gleaned from the words of 1 Nephi 13:24-32, given by an angel to Nephi. Close reading shows that Nephi saw other, more fundamental factors first at work.

These words of the angel seem to identify *three* stages in this process—not just one. First, the Gentiles would take "away from the gospel of the Lamb many parts which are plain and most precious" (1 Nephi 13:26). This stage possibly could have occurred more by altering the meaning or understanding of the things taught by the Lord than by changing the words themselves. This changing of understanding was a fundamental problem seen by Nephi. What would cause many to stumble were those things "taken away out of the gospel" (1 Nephi 13:29, 32).

Second, the Gentiles would take away "many covenants of the Lord" (1 Nephi 13:26). This step, too, could be taken without deleting any words from the Bible as such. The knowledge and benefit of the covenants of God could become lost simply by neglecting the performance of ordinances, or priesthood functions, or individual covenants as the Lord had taught.

Third, Nephi beheld that there were "many plain and precious things taken away from the book" (1 Nephi 13:28). This step was apparently a consequence of the first two, since 13:28 begins with the word "wherefore." Thus, the eventual physical loss of things from the Bible was perhaps less a cause than a result of the fact that, first, the gospel, and second, the covenants had been lost or taken away.

Understanding this process helps us to see how the Book of Mormon corrects this situation. First, it contains the fulness of the gospel (see D&C 20:9). Its correct explanations of the divinity, the mission, and the atonement of Christ, along with the principles of faith, repentance, and the other plain and precious parts of the gospel, are taught with unmistakable clarity. By reading the texts of the Bible in light of the knowledge afforded by the Book of Mormon, many plain and precious parts of the gospel can be clearly understood; that is, "they are all plain to him that understandeth" (Proverbs 8:9; compare John 16:25, 29). Without that understanding, many biblical passages (although perhaps even textually sound) remain a source of stumbling for many.

Next, the Book of Mormon restores many covenants of the Lord. It provides us with the words of the baptismal prayer, along with instructions concerning the meaning and proper mode of baptism (Mosiah 18; 3 Nephi 11; Moroni 6) and of confirmation (Moroni 2). It preserves from ancient times the very words of the sacrament prayers (Moroni 4-5) and makes the Lord's covenants to the House of Israel understood. It also teaches the necessity of priesthood authority and the manner of ordination (see, e.g., Moroni 3).

Finally, while corroborating several biblical texts, the Book of Mormon also contains many additional words that the Lord spoke on earth. It also affirms that the Lord has spoken unto all men "in the east and in the west, and in

the north, and in the south,” and that they have been commanded to write (2 Nephi 29:11).

Recent scholarly developments may help us understand further these three stages seen by Nephi. A volume of Gnostic writings from early Christianity, newly translated by Bentley Layton, was published in 1987 by Doubleday. It gives many texts analyzed several years ago by Hugh Nibley in *The World and the Prophets* and *Since Cumorah*, showing ways in which early Christian doctrines changed under the influences of Hellenistic philosophy and mystic religion.¹ Today there is considerable evidence that secret and sacred covenants of early Christianity were lost early. Baptism for the dead, the use of prayer circles, and the sacrament itself underwent transformation, if not elimination. Similarly, asceticism and celibacy entered Christianity at an early stage to distort the meaning of the covenant of marriage and many passages in the Bible.

Likewise, one can now see that there were significant losses of text, and even of whole books, from the Bible.² A significant stir of criticism is now afoot in Christian theology, asking why certain books were excluded from the Bible and wondering what makes a text scriptural. Thomas Hoffman writes of the theoretical possibility “that a lost epistle of an apostle could still be accepted into the canon.” He remarks that the reasons why “such books as the Shepherd of Hermas, the First Epistle of Clement, or the Epistle of Barnabas . . . were eventually dropped from the canon are not that clear.”³ Robert Detweiler sees it as “entirely conceivable” that if the Latter-day Saints become more influential, people will “come to view the Book of Mormon with something of the same regard [as Christians now] give to the Pentateuch.”⁴ The old cry, “A Bible! A Bible! We have got a Bible, and there cannot be any more Bible” (2 Nephi 29:3), is giving way in some circles like scarcely before.

These developments bear out Nephi’s prophetic words. The Book of Mormon was written “for the intent that [we] may believe [the Bible]” (Mormon 7:9). This is indeed achieved by restoring our understanding of the gospel and its covenants and by making people respectfully receptive to the knowledge that all the Lord’s words are not found in the Bible.

Written by John W. Welch in January 1987. Further information on the general topic of this Update can be found in Stephen E. Robinson, “Early Christianity and 1 Nephi 13-14,” in Monte Nyman and Charles Tate, eds., First Nephi, The Doctrinal Foundation (Provo: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1988), 177-91; W. D. Davies, “Reflections on the Mormon ‘Canon,’” Harvard Theological Review 79 (1986): 44-66; and John W. Welch and David J. Whittaker, “Mormonism’s Open Canon: Some Historical Perspectives on Its Religious Limits and Potentials,” presented at meetings of the Society of Biblical Literature and American Academy of Religion, Atlanta, 1986, available from F.A.R.M.S.

Footnotes

1. Reprinted as vols. 3 and 7 of *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1987 and 1988).

2. See Hugh W. Nibley, *Since Cumorah* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1988), 26; Frank Moore Cross, “New Directions in Dead Sea Scroll Research II: Original Biblical Texts Reconstructed from Newly Found Fragments,” *Bible Review* (Summer and Fall 1985): 12-35.

3. Thomas Hoffman, “Inspiration, Normativeness, Canonicity, and the Unique Sacred Character of the Bible,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 44 (1982): 463.

4. Robert Detweiler, "What Is a Sacred Text?" *Semeia* 31 (1985): 218.