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The Missing Scripture

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Abstract  During his visit to the Nephites, the Savior instructed Nephi to add to their records a missing scripture concerning the resurrection of many of the dead immediately following his own resurrection, as well as their appearance to many people. Good evidence suggests that it was Samuel the Lamanite’s prophecy of this resurrection that was missing. Aspects of the manner of recording, abridgment, and translation of the text of the Book of Mormon are elucidated through this missing scripture as it appears in the English text.
The Missing Scripture

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Abstract: During his visit to the Nephites, the Savior instructed Nephi to add to their records a missing scripture concerning the resurrection of many of the dead immediately following his own resurrection, and their appearance to many people. There is good evidence that it was Samuel the Lamanite's prophecy of this resurrection that was missing. Aspects of the manner of recording, abridgment, and translation of the text of the Book of Mormon are elucidated through this missing scripture as it appears in the English text.

During the second day of his visit to the Nephites, the Savior quoted and discussed the writings of Isaiah and Micah, and expounded to them all the scriptures they had received (3 Nephi 23:6). He then stated there were other scriptures they should write, which they had not. The Lord asked Nephi to bring forth the records which had been kept. He reminded Nephi he had commanded Samuel to testify that many would arise from the dead and appear to many at the time of his resurrection and noted this had not been recorded (3 Nephi 23:7–13). Accordingly, the missing scripture was added to the record.

On the surface, this account seems straightforward enough. The Savior shows his concern that the scriptures be complete, and a prior omission is rectified. But what was omitted? Was it a record of the prophecy, or a record of the fulfillment of the prophecy? And we are led to ask why Mormon selected this tiny dialogue, out of what must have been an extensive and interesting discussion, for inclusion in his abridgment.

Some Latter-day Saint authors believe that it was the fulfillment of the prophecy, rather than the prophecy itself, that had not
been recorded; these include Sperry\(^1\) and McConkie, Millet, and Top.\(^2\) Indeed, the recorded words of the Savior, “How be it that ye have not written this thing, that many saints did arise and appear unto many and did minister unto them?” seem to say this. On the other hand, others have said it was the prophecy that was missing, including Ludlow\(^3\) and the authors of the Book of Mormon Student Manual published by the Church.\(^4\) Each of these authors has simply stated his opinion without discussion or justification. The chapter heading for 3 Nephi 23 for the last several editions seems to agree with the latter interpretation: “The words of Samuel the Lamanite concerning the resurrection are added to their records.”

It is curious that there is no record in the Book of Mormon of the fulfillment of the prophecy in the description of the events following the death of the Savior. Perhaps Mormon thought it unnecessary to mention the fulfillment in his abridgment since he would include the Savior’s discussion of the missing scripture. He chose his words to teach more than simply the fulfillment of a prophecy, as we shall see.

There are several indications that the prophecy was missing in their records. The Savior’s question in verse 9 appears to support this interpretation. If the prophecy had been written in the records he had before him, it is doubtful he would have reminded them of it. More than likely he simply would have reminded them that they hadn’t recorded the fulfillment. Their response, “Yea, Lord, Samuel did prophesy according to thy words” (3 Nephi 23:10), is consistent with a missing record of the prophecy. Such a statement would not have been called for if they were looking at the written prophecy.

Two aspects of the structure of the text in the record of Samuel’s prophecy provide strong evidence that it was the

\(^1\) Sidney B. Sperry, *Book of Mormon Compendium* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1968), 417.

\(^2\) Joseph Fielding McConkie, Robert L. Millet, and Brent L. Top, *Doctrinal Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, 4 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1992), 4:159.


\(^4\) *Book of Mormon Study Manual: Religion 121-122* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1979), 376.
prophecy that had been left out. First, the prophecy of the resurrection of the saints (Helaman 14:25) is out of chronological order in the reiteration of the events connected with the death of the Savior. It is placed in the midst of the description of the natural violence of that time, rather than after the darkness lifted, which is when it would have occurred. Indeed, McConkie and Millet point out the problem by noting, "The rise of many Saints from the graves was not, strictly speaking, a sign of his death, but rather took place at the time of the Lord's resurrection." Placing verse 25 after verse 27 would restore the proper order. The inconsistency can be explained by assuming that verse 25 was inserted years later in response to the Savior's reminder.

An even more compelling argument that the prophecy was inserted later lies in the literary structure of verses 20–27. Substantial portions of the recorded words of Samuel from the city wall are in an inverse parallel order known as chiasmus that pervades the Book of Mormon. Verse 25 disrupts the symmetry of a chiasm concerning the signs of the death of the Savior. The structure can be represented as follows, leaving out verse 25 for the time being (capital letters and indenting have been added to indicate the elements of the chiasm; a more detailed rendition of the structure is shown in the appendix):

A 20 But behold, as I said unto you concerning another sign, a sign of his death, behold, in that day that he shall suffer death the sun shall be darkened and refuse to give his light unto you; and also the moon and the stars; and there shall be no light upon the face of this land, even from the time that he shall suffer death, for the space of three days, to the time that he shall rise again from the dead.


B 21 Yea, at the time that he shall yield up the ghost there shall be thunderings and lightnings for the space of many hours,

C and the earth shall shake and tremble; and the rocks which are upon the face of this earth, which are both above the earth and beneath, which ye know at this time are solid, or the more part of it is one solid mass, shall be broken up; 22 yea, they shall be rent in twain, and shall ever after be found in seams and in cracks, and in broken fragments upon the face of the whole earth, yea, both above the earth and beneath. 23 And behold, there shall be great tempests,

D and there shall be many mountains laid low,

E like unto a valley,

E' and there shall be many places which are now called valleys

D' which shall become mountains, whose height is great.

C' 24 And many highways shall be broken up, and many cities shall become desolate.

B' 26 And behold, thus hath the angel spoken unto me; for he said unto me that there should be thunderings and lightnings for the space of many hours. 27 And he said unto me that while the thunder and the lightning lasted, and the tempest, that these things should be,

A' and that darkness should cover the face of the whole earth for the space of three days.

Note the close comparisons between the various pairs of elements. For instance, both A and A' tell of darkness for three days, B and B' mention thunderings and lightnings that would last for
many hours. The great upheaval of the earth and break up of the rocks both on and beneath the surface of the earth is described in C, while C' tells of the effects of this destruction on the highways and cities. While satisfying most of Welch's criteria for chiasmus, there is one "maverick" ("tempests" appears in both C and B'), and both A and C are more massive than A' and C' respectively, resulting in a degree of imbalance. However, there is no mistaking the parallelism of the thought pattern. Adding verse 25 to this text, between C' and B', clearly disrupts the pattern and symmetry.

Broken symmetry, as it occurs in Helaman 14:20–27 as the text reads today, is unusual in scripture. In particular, careful analysis reveals that the balance of the record of Samuel's discourse is highly patterned, primarily in the inverse order of chiasmus, with no other similar instances of out-of-place elements. The present text could easily have resulted from a later insertion, at the general behest of the Savior, with Nephi writing in the margin or between the lines of the previously written record. It is interesting to note that symmetry can be restored to the passage quite easily by switching the places of verses 25 and 26.

A 20 But behold, as I said unto you concerning another sign, a sign of his death ... sun shall be darkened ... even from the time that he shall suffer death, for the space of three days,

B to the time that he shall rise again from the dead.

C 21 Yea, at the time that he shall yield up the ghost there shall be thunderings and lightnings for the space of many hours, ...

C' 26 And behold, thus hath the angel spoken unto me; for he said unto me that there should be thunderings and lightnings for the space of many hours.

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B' 25 And many graves shall be opened, and shall yield up many of their dead; and many saints shall appear unto many.

A' 27 And he said unto me that while the thunder and the lightning lasted, and the tempest, that these things should be, and that darkness should cover the face of the whole earth for the space of three days."

Both the message and the symmetry are preserved by this arrangement, with the prophecy of the resurrection of many of the dead (B') nicely matched with the statement about the resurrection of the Lord (B). Although this arrangement satisfies the criteria of symmetry for chiasmus, the chronological inconsistency described above is retained. The following alternative arrangement, placing verse 25 after verse 27, is preferred because it not only restores the symmetry, but it also simultaneously correctly states the chronology of the death of the Savior and the subsequent resurrection:

A₁ 20 But behold, as I said unto you concerning another sign, a sign of his death . . . sun shall be darkened . . . even from the time that he shall suffer death, for the space of three days,

A₂ to the time that he shall rise again from the dead.

B 21 Yea, at the time that he shall yield up the ghost there shall be thunderings and lightnings for the space of many hours, . . .

B' 26 And behold, thus hath the angel spoken unto me; for he said unto me that there should be thunderings and lightnings for the space of many hours. 27 And he said unto me that while the thunder and the lightning lasted, and the tempest, that these things should be,

A₁' and that darkness should cover the face of the whole earth for the space of three days.
A2 25 And many graves shall be opened, and shall yield up many of their dead; and many saints shall appear unto many.

That neither of these easy solutions—placing verse 25 after verse 26 or after verse 27—was chosen, leaving a weakened chiasm in the midst of so many clear and carefully constructed chiastic forms, is a strong argument that verse 25 was added later. The chiastic forms found so profusely throughout scripture rarely, if ever, show such a blatant break in symmetry and order as is in the passage in question—particularly a break that could have been "fixed" so easily, as shown above. 8

In light of the discussion above, we gain insight into the writing, abridging, and translation of the Book of Mormon. Among other things, we know Samuel did not write the record, for he jumped from the wall, fled, and was never seen again among the Nephites (Helaman 16:8). Moreover, he would not have omitted the prophecy. Whether the passage was spoken in chiastic form or not, whoever wrote the account took great pains to write it so, but he forgot the one prophecy. The younger Nephi did not rewrite the account, but simply wrote in the margin or between the lines. He probably was constrained by the availability of space on the plates. Even if he understood the literary structure of the passage, he may not have been able to find room to preserve it when inserting the missing scripture.

Furthermore, this finding helps us understand how Mormon abridged the records in writing the Book of Mormon. In at least this case he obviously copied the corrected account verbatim into his abridgment for, if he had paraphrased or otherwise written the text himself, he could have balanced the passage quite simply as shown above. Mormon apparently was quite familiar with chiastic style, since much of his abridgment is so written, including the record of the dialogue in question (3 Nephi 23:6–14). Joseph Smith followed the original language in his translation, preserving

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8 I have noted several hundred possible chiasms and a lesser number of other parallel forms in all four of the Standard Works. There are very few instances in which a break in symmetry could be rectified by shifting the position of the out-of-place element.
the modified structure. Moreover, when he translated Helaman 14 he could not have yet known that the Savior would later direct Nephi to insert the missing scripture. Finally, it can be concluded that Helaman 14:20–27 was not the product of a single author of any age.

9 I wish to thank the refereeing reviewer for this comment, 1994.
Appendix

Detailed Structure of
Helaman 14:20–27

Parallelism is shown by labeled elements or similar levels of indentation.

A1 20 But behold, as I said unto you concerning another sign, a sign of his death, behold, in that day that he shall suffer death the sun shall be darkened and refuse to give his light unto you; and also the moon and the stars; and there shall be no light upon the face of this land, even from the time that he shall suffer death, for the space of three days,

A2 to the time that he shall rise again from the dead.

B 21 Yea, at the time that he shall yield up the ghost there shall be thunderings and lightnings for the space of many hours,

C a and the earth shall shake and tremble;

b and the rocks which are upon the face of this earth,

which are both above the earth and beneath,

c which ye know at this time are solid, or the more part of it is one solid mass,

d shall be broken up;

d 22 Yea, they shall be rent in twain,

c and shall ever after be found in seams and in cracks, and in broken fragments

b upon the face of the whole earth,
yea, both above the earth and beneath.

a 23 And behold, there shall be great tempests,

D and there shall be many mountains laid low,

E like unto a valley,

E and there shall be many places which are now called valleys

D which shall become mountains, whose height is great.

C 24 And many highways shall be broken up, and many cities shall become desolate.

A₂ 25 And many graves shall be opened, and shall yield up many of their dead; and many saints shall appear unto many.

B 26 And behold, thus hath the angel spoken unto me; for he said unto me that there should be thunderings and lightnings for the space of many hours. 27 And he said unto me that while the thunder and the lightning lasted, and the tempest, that these things should be,

A₁ and that darkness should cover the face of the whole earth for the space of three days.