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"Make Plain the Old Paths": The Restoration of Plain and Precious Truths

Author(s): Clyde J. Williams

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Editor(s): Camille Fronk Olson, Brian M. Hauglid, Patty Smith, and Thomas A. Wayment

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“MAKE PLAIN THE OLD PATHS”

THE RESTORATION OF PLAIN AND PRECIOUS TRUTHS

Clyde J. Williams

IN NOVEMBER 1843 THE PROPHET JOSEPH SMITH wrote the following to a new member of the Church: “The fact is, that by the power of God I translated the Book of Mormon from hieroglyphics, the knowledge of which was lost to the world, in which wonderful event I stood alone, an unlearned youth, to combat the worldly wisdom and multiplied ignorance of eighteen centuries, with a new revelation, which (if they would receive the everlasting Gospel,) would open the eyes of [the world], and make ‘plain the old paths,’ wherein if a man walk in all the ordinances of God blameless, he shall inherit eternal life.”¹

In the spring of 1820, Joseph had learned from his First Vision that the churches of his day were teaching creeds and doctrines that were wrong (see Joseph Smith—History 1:18–19). However, it would not be until several years later while Joseph was translating the Book of Mormon that he would more clearly come to understand why the doctrine of the churches was corrupt. From a vision

Clyde J. Williams is an associate professor of ancient scripture at Brigham Young University.

given to the prophet Nephi, Joseph learned that when the ancient prophets and apostles had written their books, they came forth “in purity” (1 Nephi 13:25). As their writings went forth, parts of the gospel that were “plain and most precious” and “covenants of the Lord” were “taken away” (1 Nephi 13:26). Nephi saw that these changes and omissions would cause “an exceedingly great many [to] stumble” (1 Nephi 13:29). Because Satan would gain great power through all of this, the Lord promised Nephi He would counter these efforts by bringing forth “much of my gospel, which shall be plain and precious” (1 Nephi 13:34).

Many who are unfamiliar with the Book of Mormon have had the mistaken notion that it was written to somehow supplant the Bible. The Book of Mormon itself declares otherwise. The Nephite record was written in part, according to the angel of the Lord, to “establish the truth of the [Bible]” and to “make known the plain and precious things which have been taken away” (1 Nephi 13:40). Moreover, the prophet Mormon, in his final words, reaffirmed that the Book of Mormon was “written for the intent that ye may believe” the Bible (Mormon 7:9).²

The purpose of this brief study is to illuminate many of the plain and precious truths that have been brought forth through the Book of Mormon. Not all of these truths were necessarily a part of the original Old or New Testament record. In some cases it is impossible to know if such information was in the original manuscripts. However, the key is to see many of the great insights that the Book of Mormon brought forth: insights concerning people and events in ancient history, prophetic insights, and doctrinal insights.

PEOPLE AND EVENTS

The Book of Mormon preserves accounts of at least three groups of people that are not mentioned in any detail in the Bible. The first of these groups is the Jaredites. From the portion of their records preserved for us in the Book of Mormon, we learn details about this group of people who were scattered at the time of the Tower of Babel. One important piece of information we learn from

their writings is that they possessed a record containing an account of the creation of the world and other important events from Adam down to the time of the tower (see Ether 1:3). This account predates the time of Moses (the author of Genesis), and thus we learn that there were other accounts of the Genesis material before Moses wrote about them.

The second group consists of Lehi’s family and their associates. This account, which makes up the major portion of the Book of Mormon text, gives us a personal glimpse into the workings of the Lord with a particular family, beginning with their prophetic father, Lehi, around 600 B.C. The likelihood that these events occurred is enhanced by a significant passage found in 2 Chronicles 36, where during the short reign of Zedekiah, the priests and people are described in their wickedness as having “mocked the messengers of God, and despised his words, and misused his prophets” (vv. 11–16). Lehi was surely one of these prophet messengers.

The Mulekites are the third group in the Book of Mormon. It is not known how large this group was when they left Jerusalem about eleven years after Lehi and his group. The Old Testament tells us that the sons of King Zedekiah were slain; however, the Book of Mormon records that one of his sons, Mulek, escaped with others and was brought to this hemisphere by the hand of the Lord (see Helaman 6:10).

We know from the Book of Mormon that Lehi’s sons obtained the brass plates, which contained a more complete account of the ancient Israelite writings up to the time of Jeremiah than is found in the Bible (see 1 Nephi 13:23; 5:12–13). From this record and possibly the Jaredite record, the Book of Mormon records additional information about many Old Testament characters that is not recorded in our present Bible. We learn that Satan plotted with Cain in the secret murder of his brother Abel (see Helaman 6:27) and that he handed down secret oaths to others (see Ether 8:15). While mentioned in the Bible, details of Melchizedek’s ministry are clearer in the Book of Mormon. We learn that his people were “full of all manner of wickedness,” but through “mighty faith” he preached repentance and established peace in his day (Alma

13:17–18). It was said of Melchizedek that “none were greater” (Alma 13:19).

We also learn that Abraham saw Christ’s coming, as did many prophets both before and after his day (see Helaman 8:16–19). In a remarkable vision to the brother of Jared, Jesus Christ appeared long before His birth, indicating that His spirit body was in the likeness of how He would appear in the flesh (see Ether 3:14–17). Zenos, Zenock, and Ezias, Old Testament prophets who lived after the time of Abraham, testified of Christ, but their records are not yet available (see Helaman 8:19–20). We learn that the ancient Israelite prophet Moses specifically testified that as he lifted up the brass serpent in the wilderness “even so shall [the Son of God] be lifted up who should come” (Helaman 8:15). All of these accounts add new information not found in the Bible.

PROPHECIES AND VISIONS

One can separate the prophecies in the Book of Mormon into those given to Nephite or Jaredite prophets and those recorded on the brass plates. The prophetic vision of the brother of Jared (hereafter Moriancumer) is perhaps the most notable mentioned in the book. Nephi, in his great vision recorded in 1 Nephi 11–14, likely saw most of what Moriancumer saw, as did the New Testament Apostle John (see 1 Nephi 14:24–27). Moriancumer was shown “all the inhabitants of the earth which had been, and also all that would be; . . . the Lord could not withhold anything from him” (Ether 3:25–26). Moroni, who read and transcribed this wondrous vision, declared, “Never were greater things made manifest” (Ether 4:4). While the particulars of this vision have not yet been brought forth, the details of Nephi’s prophetic vision, dating to nearly 600 B.C., have been preserved. He beheld the birth, baptism, and ministry of the Son of God, including His miracles, persecution, and crucifixion (see 1 Nephi 11:13–33). Next, Nephi beheld the history of his people from his day until their destruction near A.D. 400, including the appearance of the resurrected Lord on the American continent (see 1 Nephi 12). He saw the influence of the devil bring corruption and

apostasy among the gentile nations, the subsequent departure of Columbus (see 1 Nephi 13:12), and then the travels of other Gentiles who fled captivity and settled the Americas (see 1 Nephi 13:12–13). He witnessed the establishment of the United States and its subsequent deliverance “out of the hands of all other nations” (1 Nephi 13:19). He saw the Bible brought forth among the early Gentiles. Unfortunately, plain and precious truths had been taken from it, and this led many to stumble and falter in their beliefs (see 1 Nephi 13:23–30). Nephi witnessed the coming forth of the Book of Mormon and other latter-day records that were designed to bring people to Christ and restore many plain and precious truths (see 1 Nephi 13:34, 39–40). The polarization of the wicked and the righteous, the church of the devil, and the church of the Lamb was foreseen (see 1 Nephi 14:10). He saw the church of the Lamb spread over the earth, and yet, relatively speaking, its dominions were small (see 1 Nephi 14:10–12). The great and abominable church would gather multitudes to “fight against the Lamb”; nevertheless, Nephi saw the church of the Lamb triumph because “they were armed with righteousness and with the power of God” (1 Nephi 14:13–14).

When Nephi prophesied about the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, it appears his sources were the book of Isaiah and the visions he had received from the Lord. In very clear language he prophesied of the “three witnesses” and a few others who would see the Book of Mormon plates, and he spoke of the way the “learned,” in this case Charles Anthon, would respond to the record (see 2 Nephi 27:12–18). He also prophesied of the day when the Book of Mormon and the Bible would “run together” and become, as it were, one book (2 Nephi 29:8).

The brass plates contained many important prophecies lost from our present-day Bible; however, some of them are found in the Book of Mormon. We are indebted to Lehi, who quoted from a lost prophecy of Joseph of Egypt. Joseph prophesied of a “choice seer” who would be raised up in the latter days. This seer would be like unto Moses; he would bring forth new scripture, arise from humble circumstances, and his name and his father’s would be Joseph (see 2 Nephi 3:6–18). Joseph Smith rose to fulfill this prophecy in every

detail. Another remarkable prophecy concerning Joseph of Egypt was also preserved from the brass plates by Captain Moroni, a first-century B.C. Nephite military leader. While striving to spur his people on to greater faithfulness to God and their family, he referred to an account of the miraculous preservation of a piece of the coat of Joseph who was sold into Egypt. He quoted the words of Jacob, or Israel: "Even as this remnant of garment of my son hath been preserved, so shall a remnant of the seed of my son be preserved by the hand of God" (Alma 46:24). Moroni knew that his people were a part of the preserved seed of Joseph.

The allegory of Zenos (see Jacob 5) comprises the longest chapter in the Book of Mormon. This powerful allegory is a masterful treatment of the prophetic future of the house of Israel and the Lord's untiring and yearning effort to help them bring forth fruits of righteousness. It covers the history of Israel from its beginning days down to the millennial day. Its continued fulfillment is impressive. While we do not know exactly how early the allegory was written and recorded on the brass plates, we surmise that it was well before Nephi's day and sometime after Abraham's day (see Helaman 8:19–20).³

Perhaps the most important Book of Mormon prophecies are those pertaining to the coming of Christ. It is important to note that the coming of Christ was clearly and more specifically known in Old Testament times than one could ever imagine from reading our present Bible. As one writer put it, "Unlike the messianic Psalms and Isaiah passages, Book of Mormon prophecies of Christ are unmistakably specific."⁴ For example, from the brass plates Nephi learned that Zenock, Neum, and Zenos prophesied collectively that the Messiah would "yieldeth himself . . . into the hands of wicked men, to be lifted up," "crucified," and "buried in a sepulchre" (1 Nephi 19:10). Zenos also prophesied that three days of darkness would be a sign of the Messiah's death given to "those who should inhabit the isles of the sea" (1 Nephi 19:10).

The Book of Mormon also reveals that it was known from ancient times that secret combinations would be a major problem leading to much sorrow and destruction (see 2 Nephi 26:22; Ether

8:18–25). However, in a more positive vein, the Jaredite prophet Ether saw the day when a “New Jerusalem” would be established upon this land (Ether 13:4, 6–8). This prophecy was reaffirmed by the Savior during His ministry among the Nephites (see 3 Nephi 21:22–25).

DOCTRINAL RESTORATION

The Book of Mormon is a doctrinal gem. A major part of its purpose was to help in the “confounding of false doctrines” (2 Nephi 3:12). The book lays out in greater clarity than the Bible the doctrines and principles of the gospel. What follows is an overview of principles that have been omitted from or are unclear in the Bible. They were not the prevailing doctrines of the day when the Nephite record came forth in 1830.

The Book of Mormon records that the “plan of redemption” was laid out in premortal life (Alma 12:25), that all of the spirit children of God were on the “same standing” there, and that some were foreordained to priesthood callings “on account of their faith, while others would reject the Spirit of God” (Alma 13:2–5). This “high priesthood being after the order of” the Son of God is eternal and comes to one by ordination and by worthiness (Alma 13:7–10).

The Fall of Adam was not an accident but a purposeful and necessary fall (see 2 Nephi 2:22–25). With profound insight the Book of Mormon teaches us why we have natural weaknesses and how they are designed to turn us to Christ (see Ether 12:27). Agency and opposition are essential to the eternal growth and development of humankind (see 2 Nephi 2:11–16). Thus, this life became a “state of probation” (2 Nephi 2:21) in which our days are prolonged so that we can be “free to choose liberty and eternal life, through the great Mediator of all men, or to choose captivity and death, according to the captivity and power of the devil” (2 Nephi 2:27). The principle of man’s right to act according to his own will or desires is a major theme throughout the Book of Mormon.⁵ Elder Dallin H. Oaks affirmed that the Book of Mormon “provides some of our most

important doctrinal insights on the significance of free agency in the gospel plan.”⁶ In fact, the necessity for and effects of agency ultimately required that there be an atonement (see Alma 42:9–15). In connection with agency, Lehi records that all of God’s creations are divided into two categories, “things to act and things to be acted upon” (2 Nephi 2:14). This leaves mankind with the open opportunity to “act for himself” (2 Nephi 2:16). To assist mankind in the use of his moral agency, the Book of Mormon revealed that the “Spirit of Christ” or “light of Christ” is “given to every man, that he may know good from evil” (Moroni 7:16–19). Its purpose and function are made clear in the Nephite record beyond anything in the biblical text.

Like the Fall and the agency of man, the Atonement was also known before the world began. In teaching about the eternal nature of the priesthood, Alma declared that those who were called and prepared for the priesthood before the “foundation of the world” were called “with that holy calling which was prepared with, and according to, a preparatory redemption” (Alma 13:3). That is to say, “they could preach redemption; they could foretell its coming; but their work was preparatory only. Redemption itself would come through the ministry of Him of whom they were but types and shadows.”⁷

Concerning the importance of the new light the Book of Mormon shed on the atoning mission of Christ, Elder Jeffrey R. Holland declared: “Surely the most plain and precious of all truths lost from the Bible, particularly the Old Testament, are the clear and unequivocal declarations of the mission of Jesus Christ, his foreordained role as Messiah and Savior of the world, and the covenantal elements of his gospel, which have been taught from Adam down through each succeeding dispensation. Thus the Book of Mormon’s highest purpose is to restore to the universal family of God that crucial knowledge of Christ’s role in the salvation of every man, woman, and child who now lives, has ever lived, or will yet live upon the earth.”⁸

In addition to the ancient prophecies of Christ’s mortal ministry which were mentioned earlier, there are clear examples of the “doctrine of Christ” being taught before the meridian of time (see

2 Nephi 31:1–21). Nephi declared, “We talk of Christ, we rejoice in Christ, we preach of Christ, we prophesy of Christ, and we write according to our prophecies, that our children . . . may look forward unto that life which is in Christ” (2 Nephi 25:26–27). Jacob taught that “none of the prophets have written, nor prophesied, save they have spoken concerning this Christ” (Jacob 7:11). Nowhere in scripture are the breadth and depth and scope of the Atonement so clearly explained as in the Book of Mormon. The word *atonement* or a form thereof is found no less than thirty-five times in the Book of Mormon while it is found only once in the King James Version of the New Testament and not at all in the Revised Standard Version.

From the Book of Mormon we learn that the Savior took upon Himself not only our sins but also our pains, sicknesses, and infirmities, that He might “know according to the flesh how to succor his people” (Alma 7:12). The doctrine of the redemptive power of Christ over little children, while absent from the Bible, was taught with unmatched clarity in the revelatory epistle of Mormon to his son Moroni (see Moroni 8:4–20). The prospect of becoming “children of Christ,” as well as the profound understanding of who are “his seed,” is explained more clearly by the prophet Abinadi than anyone else (see Mosiah 5:7; Isaiah 53:10). He taught that those who “heard” and “hearkened” unto the prophets and “believed” and “looked forward” to the redemptive day of Christ would be His seed (Mosiah 15:11).

Elder B. H. Roberts explained how the unconditional nature of the Atonement in regard to Adam’s sin and the conditional nature in regard to men’s personal sins is a doctrine “peculiar to ‘Mormonism’ . . . and is derived almost wholly from the teachings of the Book of Mormon. In that distinction the beauty and glory of the Atonement, the balanced claims of justice and mercy shine forth as no where else, even in holy writ—much less in the uninspired writings of men. It may be regarded as the ‘Mormon’ contribution to views of the Atonement of Christ, for it is to be found no where else except in Mormon literature.”⁹ The perfect relationship between the atoning grace of Christ and the obedient efforts of mankind is powerfully stated in the following words: “We know that

it is by grace that we are saved, after all we can do” (2 Nephi 25:23). Furthermore, we are invited to “come unto Christ, and be perfected in him” (Moroni 10:32). When we “deny [ourselves] of all ungodliness,” then and only “then is his grace sufficient” for us (Moroni 10:32).

GUIDANCE FOR THE MODERN CHURCH

The principles of faith, repentance, baptism, and the gift of the Holy Ghost and their interrelationship are not clearly taught in the Old Testament. However, the Book of Mormon prophets Nephi, Jacob, Alma the Elder, and Alma the Younger all taught the importance of these principles prior to the coming of Christ.¹⁰ The Book of Mormon became to Joseph and Oliver like a general handbook of instructions for the organization of the Church. Much of the procedural information in Doctrine and Covenants 20 was already outlined in the Book of Mormon. The specific manner of bestowing the Holy Ghost and the necessity of authority to do so are explained (see Moroni 2:2). The proper way to ordain one to a priesthood office was given (see Moroni 3:1–3), as well as the specific prayers to be used in administering the sacrament (see Moroni 4; 5). Furthermore, the requirements for one receiving baptism, the purpose for keeping membership records, and meeting regularly are explained in detail by Moroni (see Moroni 6:1–6). The need for confessing serious sins before a priesthood leader, as well the Lord, and the eventual forgiveness that comes are explained in greater clarity by the Lord as He spoke to Alma than in any other place in sacred writ (see Mosiah 26:29). It is also from the Book of Mormon that we first learn the importance of the Church following an approved or correlated curriculum (see Mosiah 18:19; 25:21–22).

The Book of Mormon demonstrates and teaches the importance of personal revelation to all.¹¹ Speaking of this principle, Terryl Givens wrote, “That may well be the Book of Mormon’s most significant and revolutionary—as well as controversial—contribution to religious thinking. The particularity and specificity, the vividness, the concreteness, and the accessibility of revelatory experience—those

realities both underlie and overshadow the narrated history and doctrine."¹² The Book of Mormon is the classic example that the heavens are still open and that God does indeed still speak to men on earth. In addition to personal revelation, the Book of Mormon reveals the role and ministry of angels in detail found nowhere in the Bible (see Moroni 7:29–32). Moreover, the greatest description of the nature and ministry of translated beings found anywhere in religious literature is recorded in 3 Nephi 28.

UNDERSTANDING OF SATAN

The knowledge of Satan and his influence is virtually absent from the Old Testament. One scholar wrote, "Nowhere in the OT [Old Testament] does Satan appear as a distinctive demonic figure, opposed to God and responsible for all evil."¹³ Another acknowledged, "Admittedly we have not yet the fully developed doctrine" concerning Satan.¹⁴ However, Lehi learned from the brass plates that Satan was originally an angel of God who fell from heaven by seeking "that which was evil before God" (2 Nephi 2:17). From the Book of Mormon we learn various ways he seeks to gain power over individuals, such as teaching men not to pray and revealing his secret plans to men to lead them down to destruction (see 2 Nephi 32:8; Helaman 6:26).¹⁵ Fortunately, the Book of Mormon also reveals that the key to binding Satan is ultimately the righteousness of the people (see 1 Nephi 22:26).¹⁶

CONCLUSION

After an intense study of all that the Book of Mormon reveals that is not found in the Bible, Elder Roberts concluded: "Beyond controversy neither the native intelligence nor learning of Joseph Smith can possibly be regarded as equal to such a performance as bringing forth the knowledge which the Book of Mormon imparts upon these profound subjects; nor can the intelligence or learning of those who assisted him in translating the book be regarded as sufficient for such a task. Nor was the intelligence and learning of any one to whom the origin of the book has ever been ascribed equal to

such an achievement. Indeed the book sounds depths on these subjects not only beyond the intelligence and learning of this small group of men referred to, but beyond the intelligence and learning of the age itself in which it came forth.”¹⁷

The great truth of the matter is that the more carefully one studies the doctrine and teachings of this book, the more powerful the evidence becomes that Joseph Smith was not merely reflecting the learning of his time nor of his own personal study. He was the instrument through whom God had chosen to reveal so many lost truths and once again “make plain the old paths,” which, if followed, will lead one to exaltation and eternal life.

NOTES

1. 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, 1971), 6:74.

2. In Mormon 7:8, Mormon speaks of “*this* record,” meaning the Book of Mormon, and the record which would come unto the Gentiles from the Jews, meaning the Bible. Thus, in Mormon 7:9, “*this* [the Book of Mormon] is written for the intent that ye may believe *that* [the Bible]; and if ye believe *that* [the Bible] ye will believe *this* [the Book of Mormon] also” (emphasis added).

3. If we take the list of names in Helaman 8 to be in chronological order, which they appear to be, given the order of Isaiah and Jeremiah, then it would seem logical that Zenos was the earliest of these prophets and likely lived much closer to the days of Abraham.

4. Terryl L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture That Launched a New World Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 199.

5. Examples of this principle are manifold; for instance, see Mosiah 2:21; Alma 29:4–5; 41:3, 5; 42:27; Helaman 3:28–29; 7:5; 12:3–6; 14:30–31.

6. Dallin H. Oaks, “Free Agency and Freedom,” in *Second Nephi: The Doctrinal Structure*, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1989), 1.

7. Bruce R. McConkie, *The Promised Messiah: The First Coming of Christ* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1978), 451.

8. Jeffrey R. Holland, *Christ and the New Covenant: The Messianic Message of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1997), 6–7.

9. B. H. Roberts, *Seventy’s Course in Theology* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1907–12), 4:113–14.

10. See 2 Nephi 9:23; 31:4–11; Mosiah 18:8–10; 25:17–18, 22; Alma 5:62; 9:27.

11. For example, see 1 Nephi 4:6; 15:8–11; Alma 58:10–11; Moroni 10:4–5.

12. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon*, 221.

13. Theodore H. Gastor, in *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. George A. Buttrick (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990), 4:224.

14. L. L. Morris, in *New Bible Dictionary*, 2d ed., ed. J. D. Douglas (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House, 1982), 1074.

15. Additional ways the Book of Mormon discloses that Satan will use to gain power are found in the following verses: 2 Nephi 9:28; 15:20; 28:20–22; Helaman 16:22; 3 Nephi 6:15–16; 11:29.

16. Additional detail about ways to overcome Satan are also unveiled in the Book of Mormon; see 1 Nephi 15:23–24; 2 Nephi 1:13, 23; Alma 13:28; and Helaman 3:29–30.

17. B. H. Roberts, *New Witnesses for God* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1909), 3:230.