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Restoring Lost Scriptures

Author(s): John A. Tvedtnes

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Restoring Lost Scriptures

Come unto me, O ye Gentiles, and I will show unto you the greater things, the knowledge which is hid up because of unbelief. Come unto me, O ye house of Israel, and it shall be made manifest unto you how great things the Father hath laid up for you, from the foundation of the world; and it hath not come unto you, because of unbelief. Behold, when ye shall rend that veil of unbelief which doth cause you to remain in your awful state of wickedness, and hardness of heart, and blindness of mind, then shall the great and marvelous things which have been hid up from the foundation of the world from you. . . . And then shall my revelations which I have caused to be written by my servant John be unfolded in the eyes of all the people. Remember, when ye see these things, ye shall know that the time is at hand that they shall be made manifest in very deed. Therefore, when ye shall receive this record ye may know that the work of the Father has commenced upon all the face of the land. (Ether 4:13–17)

In translating the Book of Mormon, Joseph Smith restored a corpus of scripture lost to the world for fourteen centuries. But his work did not stop there. In connection with his revision

of the King James Bible, the prophet restored information missing from either the Bible or ancient texts that were never part of the Bible despite their antiquity. Among the latter is the chapter he added to the beginning of the book of Genesis, known to us from the Pearl of Great Price as Moses 1, a revelation given to Moses on the mount but not included in the Bible (see Moses 1:1, 42).

Anticipating the mission of Joseph Smith, the Lord told Moses, “When the children of men shall esteem my words as naught and take many of them from the book which thou shalt write, behold, I will raise up another like unto thee; and they shall be had again among the children of men—among as many as shall believe” (Moses 1:41). According to *2 Enoch* 35:2, God made a similar promise to Enoch: “And I shall raise up for that generation someone who will reveal to them the books in your handwriting and those of your fathers.”¹ Joseph Smith restored some of the writings of Moses and Enoch in the book of Moses.

The story of Enoch, found in Moses 6:26–7:69, is also unattested in the book of Genesis, though as Hugh Nibley has shown, it has many parallels with other ancient books attributed to Enoch.² But the Pearl of Great Price does not contain all of the writings of Enoch. The details in Doctrine and Covenants 107:41–56, which are not in the book of Moses, are said to have been “all written in the book of Enoch, and are to be testified of in due time” (D&C 107:57). Some of this information is confirmed in the medieval book of *Jasher*, which contains a number of early Jewish traditions about Old Testament personalities and stories.³

Information restored from antiquity (and sometimes suggested in other ancient Jewish and Christian texts)⁴ by the Prophet Joseph contained additional details about

Melchizedek, including the fact that he and his people were translated (see Genesis 14:25–40 JST). Similarly, Joseph provided details about why God instituted the practice of circumcision in Abraham’s family (see Genesis 17:3–12 JST).

Joseph Smith’s revision of the Bible led to a number of other revelations, both of new information and of long-lost ancient texts.⁵ For example, Doctrine and Covenants 45 is a variant of the material found in Matthew 24, which Joseph Smith also revised (Joseph Smith—Matthew in the Pearl of Great Price).⁶ Doctrine and Covenants 7 is said to be a translation of a portion of a parchment hidden up by the apostle John that indicated that Jesus promised John he would not taste of death. While the text parallels the one found in John 21:20–23, it is more detailed and is a first-person account. The importance of Doctrine and Covenants 7 to our study is that it speaks of a hidden parchment and of a text that Joseph Smith partially restored (using the term “translated”),⁷ despite the fact that there is no evidence that he ever saw the original.⁸

Not long before the Lord revealed Doctrine and Covenants 7 to the Prophet, he told Oliver Cowdery through the Prophet, “There are records which contain much of my gospel, which have been kept back because of the wickedness of the people; . . . if you have good desires . . . then shall you assist in bringing to light, with your gift, those parts of my scriptures which have been hidden because of iniquity” (D&C 6:26–27). Soon after giving Doctrine and Covenants 7, he again told Oliver, “Ask that you may know the mysteries of God, and that you may translate and receive knowledge from all those ancient records which have been hid up, that are sacred” (D&C 8:11). The word “all” suggests that the Lord was going to reveal more than just the text of the Book of Mormon. Later that same month, the Lord told Oliver that after the work on the Nephite record,

“other records have I, that I will give unto you power that you may assist to translate” (D&C 9:2). He was undoubtedly referring to Joseph Smith’s revision of the Bible and revelations related to it.

Ancient Precedents for Restoring Lost Records

There is biblical precedent for the restoration of lost scriptures. In Jeremiah we read that when the king had burned a scroll containing Jeremiah’s prophecies, the Lord instructed him, “Take thee again another roll, and write in it all the former words that were in the first roll, which Jehoiakim the king of Judah hath burned. . . . Then took Jeremiah another roll, and gave it to Baruch the scribe, the son of Neriah; who wrote therein from the mouth of Jeremiah all the words of the book which Jehoiakim king of Judah had burned in the fire: and there were added besides unto them many like words” (Jeremiah 36:28, 32; see 28:21–32).

A similar story is found in an early Christian tradition of how our current Old Testament came to be. It is said that “the books of the Jews were burned three times” during their history, including when they “were taken captive to Babylon, at which time Simeon the priest asked of Abumirdan the store of the books and received them” (*Conflict of Adam and Eve* IV, 12.12–13; see *Book of the Rolls* f.139b).

According to the Christian Arabic *Book of the Rolls* f.137a–138a, at the time Nebuchadnezzar took Jerusalem, Simeon the high priest asked permission to take “the old writings,” which he carried into captivity with him. En route, “he saw a well in his way among the borders of the West; and he laid the writings in it, and put with them a bronze vase, filled with glowing coals, and in it sweet smelling incense; he covered

up this well, and went to Babylon.” Later, the priest/scribe Ezra recovered the vase full of fire and incense and the writings, but he found the writings faded and had to restore them by revelation.⁹

In an Ethiopian variant on the story, “Simeon the priest, found favour and grace with the captain of the king’s army, and requested him to give him the house [the Ethiopic word can also mean “repository, ark, chest”] of records; and he gave him a command accordingly. Then Simeon the priest came in and gathered together the ashes of the books, and laid them in a pot in a vault, and he took a censer of brass, and put fire therein, and threw pure incense upon it, and hung it in the vault over the place in which the ashes of the books lay” (*Conflict of Adam and Eve* IV, 10.16–17).¹⁰ When the children of Israel returned from Babylon, they did not have any books. They settled in Jerusalem, and “Ezra the scribe came to the vault in which Simeon the priest had placed the ashes of the books, which Simeon the priest, had gathered together. . . . Then Ezra prayed to God, wept abundantly, and spread his hand towards the ashes of the books of the law, and of the prophets, and all of them three times. Then came the Spirit of God upon him, and the [same] Spirit spake through him that had spoken through the prophets. And he wrote the law and the prophets, new a second time” (*Conflict of Adam and Eve* IV, 11.8–13).¹¹

The Syriac version of the story is told in *Cave of Treasures* 36b.1: “Now when the people had gone up [to Jerusalem] they had no Books of the Prophets. And Ezra the scribe went down into that pit [wherein Simeon had cast the Books], and he found a censer full of fire, and the perfume of the incense which rose up from it. And thrice he took some of the dust of

those Books, and cast it into his mouth, and straightway God made to abide in him the spirit of prophecy, and he renewed all the Books of the Prophets.”¹²

In the book of *4 Ezra*, which was included in some early Christian Bibles, Ezra told the Lord, “Your Law has been burned, and so no one knows the things which have been done or will be done by you. If then I have found favor before you, send the Holy Spirit to me, and I will write everything that has happened in the world from the beginning, the things which were written in your Law.” The Lord then told Ezra to “prepare for yourself many writing tablets” and to take five men scribes with him, “and I will light in your heart the lamp of understanding, which shall not be put out until what you are about to write is finished. And when you have finished, some things you shall make public, and some you shall deliver in secret to the wise” (*4 Ezra* 14:21–26).¹³

Samaritan tradition reflects the same story, though it claims that Ezra “altered many things in the text of the Holy Torah out of hatred for the community of the children of Israel,” meaning the Samaritans. “Moreover many errors were made by him in the book of the Torah; which neither he nor his people [the Jews] perceived or understood. In addition to this he gathered many sayings and writings composed by former authors and prophets, such as suited his aims and desires, and he and his colleague Nehemiah commanded his community to keep them all.”¹⁴

Summary

When answering a question prompted by Joseph Smith’s study of the Book of Mormon, the Lord told the prophet, “I gave unto thee, my servant Joseph, an appointment, and restore all things. Ask what ye will, and it shall be given unto you

according to my word” (D&C 132:40). This gift enabled Joseph to restore long-forgotten scriptures and the truths found therein. It was part of his role as translator (see D&C 21:1), which in nineteenth-century parlance referred not just to one who rendered a text from one language into another, but to one who preserved and transmitted records that already existed before his time. As we have seen in this book, the practice was very ancient and involved a long chain of prophets and scribes who wrote and preserved sacred texts, often by hiding them to be uncovered by future generations. We are fortunate indeed to live in the day when the Lord is restoring these long-lost texts.

Notes

1. James H. Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1983), 1:158.

2. See Hugh Nibley, *Enoch the Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1986).

3. For example, Cainan’s call from God (see D&C 107:45) is also mentioned in *Jasher* 2:11. Enoch’s blessing at age sixty-five (see D&C 107:48) parallels his anointing as king in *Jasher* 3:12, 17. For Enoch’s translation, see Genesis 5:22–24; D&C 107:49; Moses 7:69; 8:1; *Jasher* 3:27–38.

4. Several forthcoming FARMS publications will detail information given to us by the Prophet Joseph Smith that is confirmed in ancient Jewish and Christian sources.

5. See Robert J. Matthew, “The ‘New Translation’ of the Bible, 1830–1833: Doctrinal Development During the Kirtland Era,” *BYU Studies* 11/4 (1971): 400–422.

6. I have done a rather extensive comparison of the accounts in Matthew 24; Joseph Smith—Matthew; D&C 45; Mark 13; and Luke 12–13, 17, 21, which I hope to publish elsewhere.

7. See Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1980), 1:36.

8. Only in the cases of the Book of Mormon and the Book of Abraham did Joseph actually possess ancient documents. In the case of the Abraham material, some LDS scholars believe that it, too, came by direct revelation rather than by normal translation methods.

9. Margaret Dunlop Wilson, “Kitâb al Magâll, or The Book of the Rolls,” in *Apocrypha Arabica* (London: C. J. Clay, 1901), 53–54.

10. S. C. Malan, *The Book of Adam and Eve, also called The Conflict of Adam and Eve with Satan* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1882), 196.

11. *Ibid.*, 198. The restoration of text that was lost when documents were burned has its modern parallel in a project begun by the FARMS Center for the Preservation of Ancient Religious Texts in 1998. At the request of the Jordanian government, Gene Ware and Steven Booras went to Jordan to make multispectral computer scans of early Christian documents that were destroyed by fire at Petra. The process has enabled them to read formerly illegible text on the charred remains.

12. Ernest A. Wallis Budge, *The Book of the Cave of Treasures* (London: Religious Tract Society, 1927), 192.

13. Charlesworth, *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 1:554.

14. John Bowman, *Samaritan Documents Relating to Their History, Religion and Life* (Pittsburgh: Pickwick Press, 1977), 102.