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The Key of Knowledge

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Christ decried the intellectual class of his society – the scribes and Pharisees – because they had “taken away the key of knowledge” (Luke 11:52). This warning is vague, though, especially as to what “the key of knowledge” is. Through the Book of Mormon and the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible, it becomes clear that the “key of knowledge” is revelation, and a warning is given to those who ignore revelation and to those who hinder the people trying to heed it. This warning has additional significance to the learned who are proud and will not humbly listen to the words of revelation spoken through the Lord’s servants.

Luke 11:52 reads “Woe unto you, lawyers! for ye have taken away the key of knowledge: ye entered not in yourselves, and them that were entering in ye hindered.” This passage is portrayed in Bible commentaries as one of the Seven Woes that Jesus leveled at the scribes and Pharisees.¹ It is obvious from the context that Jesus’ message was directed at his culture’s intellectual establishment. His accusation implied that something in the mindset of the learned community obstructed the spiritual welfare of the people. Exactly what the “key of knowledge” was in this particular passage is somewhat evident but less than clear in the Bible. Fortunately, knowledge obtained by the Prophet Joseph Smith while translating the Book of Mormon and correcting the Bible enabled him to clarify this biblical verse, as well as many others.²

We now know that the “key of knowledge” is revelation, contained in the fullness of the scriptures. The condemnation Jesus directed toward these leaders was twofold: (1) they rejected the revelation that would lead them into the kingdom of God, and

(2) they exercised an influence that prevented other people from entering therein. The Joseph Smith Translation of this verse reads: “Woe unto you, lawyers! for ye have taken away the key of knowledge, *the fulness of the scriptures*; ye enter not in yourselves *into the kingdom*; and those who were entering in, ye hindered” (JST Luke 11:53; emphasis added). Luke 1:77 indicates that what was being blocked was a “knowledge of salvation unto his people by the remission of their sins,” which only comes by acting upon a revealed testimony (Matt. 16:16–17; 1 Cor. 12:3). Because the plan of salvation and the role of the Atonement were not accurately understood, the avenue to the saving ordinances was being blocked. The condemnation was indeed serious: many of those who would have believed and accepted the ordinances were being prevented from acting because of those who would not believe. This is often a consequence when man distorts what God has said. Consider the context for the Prophet’s changes that is offered in the Book of Mormon; the rationale is clear and simple.

A Prophetic Overview

The Book of Mormon clearly identifies what some have called the central issue in intellectual history – the tension line between solitary human reason and the voice of divine revelation. History is replete with examples of the perennial conflict between those who believe and accept divine revelation and those who want to invoke an alternative tradition in place of the divine plan. The Book of Mormon defines the causes and describes the solution to this age-old enigma. Nephi, for example, vividly portrays the plight of the people in his account of the instructions he received from an angel of God: “[H]e said unto me: Look! And I looked, and I beheld the Son of God going forth among the children of men; and *I saw many fall down at his feet and worship him*. And it came to pass that I beheld that the rod of iron, which my father had seen, was the word of God, which led to the fountain of living waters, or to the tree of life; . . . And I beheld that he went forth ministering unto the people, in power and great glory; and the multitudes were gathered together to hear him; *and I beheld that they cast him out from among them*” (1 Ne. 11:24–25, 28; emphasis added). God came and spoke. Some who listened did so with humility and reverence, falling down at his feet and worshipping

him. Others who listened did so with pride and disdain, ultimately casting him out and rejecting his teachings. And as Jesus observed in his day, some who otherwise would have heard and acted did not do so because they were blinded by the sophistry of the system in which they were enveloped.

In another place Jesus warned those who would destroy the belief of others, "Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven." He continued to explain that if anyone "shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea" (Matt. 18:3-6). The Book of Mormon clarifies the gravity of teaching others not to believe because of one's own intellectual error. Korihor, a highly educated student in an early educational system, was guilty of "go[ing] about, leading away the hearts of this people" by teaching them there was no God or revelation. The judgment of God on Korihor was that it was "better that thy soul should be lost than that thou shouldst be the means of bringing many souls down to destruction, by thy lying and by thy flattering words" (Alma 30:6-60).

Nephi's record of his own visionary instruction continues with observations on the calling of the twelve apostles, Christ's crucifixion, a description of the work of Twelve, and the image of the house of Israel "gathered together to fight against the twelve apostles of the Lamb" (1 Ne. 11:34-35). Nephi bears testimony that he saw "that the great and spacious building [of his father's vision] was the pride of the world; and it fell, and the fall thereof was exceedingly great." At this point, his angelic instructor announces: "Thus shall be the destruction of all nations, kindreds, tongues, and people, that shall fight against the twelve apostles" (1 Ne. 11:36). The pride described as characterizing the inhabitants of the "great and spacious building" is pervasive, personal, and universal.

The issue of accepting or rejecting divine instruction has been with the human family from the very beginning. Both Enoch and Moses note that after Adam and Eve were driven from the Garden of Eden, an angel appeared to them and explained the mission and message of "the Only Begotten of the Father." The heavenly messenger and the Lord himself instructed Adam and Eve "to teach these things freely unto your children." They were to make

“all things known unto their sons and their daughters.” Our first parents did indeed teach their children. Some listened and obeyed, while others listened and rejected (Moses 5–6). As Nephi foresaw, the Savior himself encountered this dichotomy when he lived on the earth and wept over the negative responses (Luke 19:41–42; Matt. 23:37). His encounter with the lawyers, described in Luke 11:52, is typical of the lifelong challenge he faced.

A Historical Snapshot

Jesus was born in a time of deep intellectual crises. The Israelite culture had experienced a severe apostasy from the Abrahamic covenant. The Judaism of his day had long been divided over the *vertical* (revelatory) heritage of the prophets and a *horizontal* (rational) religious perspective that succeeded in dominating the local power structure.³ The record indicates that the intellectual community had forsaken the “key of knowledge” and replaced it with their own reasoning. Thus the learned were “astonished” and “marvelled” at what Jesus, who really knew and understood both earth and heaven, was able to say and do. His presence filled them with questions and intense frustrations. Jesus recognized that forces were in motion that suppressed or “hindered” those who would have listened and “entered in” to the kingdom of God. (In this last dispensation, he explained to the Prophet Joseph Smith that the primary cause of such spiritual darkness was the “wicked one,” who comes and takes away light and truth from the children of men through “disobedience” and “the tradition of their fathers” [D&C 93:39]). It is an ideological dilemma.

The difficulties in Jesus’ day had been smoldering for a long time. Six centuries earlier, Lehi and his family had been forced to flee into exile over a similar conflict; its shadows seemed to stretch throughout the known world (1 Ne. 1:18–20). For example, across the Mediterranean, the Greek Enlightenment was about to dawn, shine, and fall into a secular confusion destined to complicate the spiritual plight of humankind through many centuries of a darkened age.⁴ This was to be a time during which the Prophet Joseph Smith proclaimed that “the creeds of the fathers, who have inherited lies,” would be “riveted” on the “hearts of the children” and subsequently fill the world with confusion until the earth would

groan under “the weight of its iniquity” (D&C 123:7). Nephi saw the turbulent conditions that would emerge—perilous times—that could only be settled when the Lord would do “a marvelous work and a wonder among the children of men” (2 Ne. 25:17). Issues surrounding the “key of knowledge” are not new, nor have they been fully resolved. Jesus offered a straightforward explanation in Luke 11:52 (JST Luke 11:53). His statement is clearly enhanced by the teachings brought forth in the Book of Mormon.

The Savior Chastises the Lawyers, Scribes, and Pharisees

The description in the Gospel of Luke of the confrontation between Jesus and a prominent segment of the literate and learned of his day—lawyers, scribes, and Pharisees—is not unlike the challenge in our own day regarding a prophet’s voice. Jesus rebuked this privileged group because they had forsaken “the key of knowledge” and persecuted those who sought intelligence through that key (Luke 11:52; see also JST Luke 11:53). In this setting, the Savior was calling attention to the same issue that Nephi had foreseen in his vision. The Joseph Smith Translation of the text reveals that a major failing of the academe of the day was a rejection of the revelation associated with the fullness of the scriptures: “Ye enter not in yourselves into the kingdom; and those who were entering in, ye hindered” (JST Luke 11:53). The infraction was the rejection of the power of revelation—the complete revealed word of God, including its spiritual affirmation⁵—and the substitution of something less in its place. It was the denunciation of the legitimacy of the revealed message and the disregard or demeaning of the action that should follow that message. The result was a cultural blindness.

Jacob (Nephi’s brother) observed in one of his discourses: “The Jews were a stiff-necked people; and they despised the words of plainness, and killed the prophets, and sought for things that they could not understand” (Jacob 4:14). The stumbling that resulted at that time was the same type of stumbling that Nephi saw would befall many people in the latter days who would “suffer pride” because of “false teachers, and false doctrine” (2 Ne. 28:12). Losing the spiritual safety of the “precepts of God” and being left at the mercy of the “precepts of men” is the common

difficulty (2 Ne. 27:25; 28:14–15). The Book of Mormon makes it clear that “to be learned is good” if we “hearken unto the counsels of God”; otherwise being learned can turn to our detriment (2 Ne. 9:29, 42).

With the translation of the Book of Mormon came a parting of the heavens. The priesthood and its keys were restored to humankind, and the Church was organized once more on the earth. God spoke again through living prophets. Light and truth were brought to bear upon matters that had resisted comprehension by the powers of human reason. Reason is a necessary but insufficient power; it is a fine copilot but an unreliable pilot in eternal matters. The latter-day revelations, in tandem with the clear and simple message of the Book of Mormon prophets, make plain the message associated with Jesus’ statement regarding the “key of knowledge.” Human reason without divine light is a dangerous guide. A search for truth without a search for light is a vain expedition – no matter how popular or convenient it seems.

The key to knowledge is intelligence. Intelligence is light and truth – not truth alone but also the light God gives that makes it possible for us to properly understand and apply truth (D&C 93:36–37). “He that keepeth his commandments receiveth truth and light, until he is glorified in truth and knoweth all things” (D&C 93:28). Joseph Smith was explicit on this point: men will be judged by the light they receive, not by the volume of truth that surrounds them. “God judgeth men according to the light he gives them,”⁶ he said. And “he that will not receive the greater light, must have taken away from him all the light which he hath; and if the light which is in you becomes darkness, behold how great is the darkness.”⁷ In such is “fulfilled the prophecy of Esaias, which saith, By hearing ye shall hear, and shall not understand; and seeing ye shall see, and shall not perceive” (Matt. 13:14). As Nephi warned, to seek the truth is folly if one does not also seek the light to know what to do with the truth when one obtains it. The error is rejecting divine truth that is plainly manifest and substituting one’s own conjectures – “seeking their own counsel in the dark.” Prophets have taught that this is a curse worldly men have brought upon themselves from the earliest ages (see Moses 5:25; 6:28, 43, 49). Prophets have also made it clear that men of great temporal learning may be spiritual, but it is not their great learning that makes them so. President John Taylor observed

more than a century ago: "One great reason why men have stumbled so frequently in many of their researches after philosophical truth is, that they have sought them with their own wisdom, and gloried in their own intelligence, and have not sought unto God for that wisdom that fills and governs the universe and regulates all things. That is one great difficulty with the philosophers of the world; . . . any new law and principle which he happens to discover he claims to himself instead of giving glory to God."⁸

The Book of Mormon teaches that those who enter the covenant are under command to acknowledge God's hand "at all times and in all things, and in all places" (Mosiah 18:8-9; See also D&C 59:21). To create a secularized curriculum that leaves God out of one's worldview or to develop a secularized life-style – one that presumes that the more humankind learns about the temporal, the less need there is for the spiritual – has been a temptation from the days of Cain and Abel. Such secularization has dominated western culture in the twentieth century, and it is repeatedly described as the philosophy of those who live in this day by prophets who saw the cycles of history as portrayed in the Book of Mormon. President Ezra Taft Benson makes this observation: "It seems fashionable today for historians to 'secularize' our history. . . . All events are explained from a 'humanistic' frame of reference. This removes the need for faith in God or a belief that He is interested in the affairs of men." He explains further that "today, students are subjected in their textbooks and classroom lectures to a subtle propaganda that there is a 'natural' or rational explanation to all causes and events. Such a position removes the need for faith in God, or belief in His interposition in the affairs of men."⁹ Apparently, we face a temptation similar to the temptation of the Jewish teachers of Jesus' day.

Part of the storyline in the Book of Mormon portrays the development of a secularized (horizontal) curriculum in the lives of the priests of wicked King Noah.¹⁰ In brief, Amulon and the others who sat on King Noah's advisory council claimed to teach morality and uphold the laws of Moses, but they did not live those laws themselves (Mosiah 12:28-30). Challenged by Abinadi, the council and the king became irate – all except Alma. The king and his council threatened Alma's life, and he fled from their midst; they then put Abinadi to death. Subsequent attacks on King

Noah's community by Lamanites, who governed the surrounding territory, resulted in King Noah's death and put his counselors in exile. While hiding from their enemies, the corrupt priests kidnapped a number of young Lamanite women. Subsequently, this group fell captive to the king of the Lamanites. The king was persuaded by the Lamanite women, who now had borne children to the priests, to spare the lives of these men who were now the fathers of their children. The Lamanite king agreed to do so on the condition that these learned individuals establish an educational system among his people in the hopes it would improve the circumstances of his own nation.

The implications of these events become more meaningful when we follow Nephi's counsel and "liken all scriptures unto us" (1 Ne. 19:23-24). When perceived in terms of modern educational terminology and practice, Mormon's brief but poignant description of the curricular content reveals the nature of the educational program designed by these dissident priests. He specifically calls attention to the three elements Amulon and his colleagues omitted: They did not make provision to (1) "teach them anything concerning the Lord their God," (2) "neither the law of Moses," (3) "nor did they teach them the words of Abinadi" (Mosiah 24:1-7). They did include fundamentals such as reading, writing, and arithmetic, which are beneficial skills but are insufficient without moral and spiritual application. Their school system was noteworthy for deleting those things which are most vital. The lack of balance is reminiscent of the chastisement Jesus leveled at the scribes and Pharisees who became preoccupied with lesser matters to the neglect of weightier matters: "These ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone" (Matt. 23:23). Perhaps this is why Alma, Abinadi's sole convert from King Noah's council, bluntly informed the people he taught that they should "trust no one to be [their] teacher . . . except he be a man of God, walking in his ways and keeping his commandments" (Mosiah 23:14).

When one learns to read and write without learning that God exists, that moral laws and principles should govern human conduct, and that Christ has performed a mission in behalf of fallen man, one's education is totally secularized – it is spiritually incomplete and potentially dangerous. Mormon specifically describes the strengths and weaknesses and the ultimate conse-

quences of this type of horizontal literacy: “They taught them that they should keep their record, and that they might write one to another. And thus the Lamanites began to increase in riches, and began to trade one with another and wax great, and began to be a cunning and a wise people . . . delighting in all manner of wickedness and plunder, except it were among their own brethren” (Mosiah 24:6-7).

The full story in the Book of Mormon suggests a connection between this educational system and the rise of the order of Nehor, an alternative source of authority to the Holy Order of the Son of God (Alma 13:1, 6-11; 21:4; 24:28-29; Hel. 8:18). It is evident that a social order developed from these secular schools; Mormon identifies it as the order of Nehor. It is also apparent that those who staffed and administered this special society and its unique curriculum were primarily dissidents who left the Nephite communities and went to live among the Lamanites. The professionals who belonged to this order were well educated according to the standards of the school system—much like the lawyers, scribes, and Pharisees whom Jesus confronted. The Book of Mormon descriptions indicate that these individuals apparently studied a number of disciplines and became influential lawyers, priests, and teachers. Mormon describes the teachers and students in this system as those “who loved the vain things of the world” and sought after “riches and honors” (Alma 1:16). He identifies the basic beliefs, policies, and practices of these professionals; their general strategies are also described in several instances that involved Alma and his associates as they interacted with these people.

Amlici, a prominent member of the order of Nehor, is mentioned by name as “a very cunning man, yea, a wise man as to the wisdom of the world” (Alma 2:1). He had both professional reputation and credentials. When Alma and Amulek were confronted by Zeezrom—also a product of this educational order (a lawyer by specialization)—it is apparent that the general society was still conversing in theistic terms, as ours does today. There was a nominal acknowledgment of a God—whatever meaning that term might have had for different individuals. (The Lamanites, for example, spoke of a Great Spirit. And the questions posed by Zeezrom [82 B. C.] were still in the quasi-religious context used by Nehor a decade earlier.) But the growing conflict between the

doctrine of the Holy Order of the Son of God and the philosophical premises of the order of Nehor is evident. There were vital disagreements over the fundamental doctrines of life and salvation. Those different schools of thought had different aims and purposes. They fostered different types of societies. They were headed in opposite directions.

On the one hand there was the community driven by teachings like those of Alma that espoused a responsibility to suffer with, sacrifice for, and serve one another (Mosiah 18). On the other hand, there was the community driven by a secularized philosophy that pursued personal power, pleasure, and possessions. Those who Mormon says condemned the righteous because of their righteousness sought offices at the head of government to “rule . . . according to their wills, that they might get gain and glory of the world, and, moreover, that they might the more easily commit adultery, and steal, and kill, and do according to their own wills” (Hel. 7:5-9, 21). Here we see polar positions, the opposition of which Lehi spoke, what might be called the twin trinities of governance: power, pleasure, and possessions versus sacrifice, suffering, and service. The priorities that arise in the field of tension created by these competing aims is critical. The tension was present when Lucifer tempted Jesus in the wilderness, it was present among the Nephites, and it is present in each of our lives today. Alma, like many others, was warned of the negative consequences that follow when one embraces a secular, selfish perspective.

The significance of the difference between these two views of life is evident in the instructions given to Alma by an angel sent from God when Alma visited the great city of Ammonihah. He was told by the messenger that the ideological trend in the professional circles of the day was negative. Based on the philosophy of their learning, it is evident they were intent on perverting the laws of the land to serve their selfish purposes. Alma was told to return to Ammonihah – a popular center for those of the order of Nehor – after he had already been cast out of the city. The angel told Alma of a project underway among this group that would “destroy the liberty of thy people.” They were designing a system “which is contrary to the statutes, and judgments, and commandments” which God had given to his people (Alma 8:17).

Amulek, Alma's companion, explained these conditions in his testimony to the people of Ammonihah, but they were not interested (Alma 10:1-32). They, too, had been "hindered" and were prevented from "entering in." They preferred the contemporary lifestyle, philosophy, and evidence presented by the other school of thought; they later reaped the self-destructive consequences of their choices in a manner reminiscent of Sodom and Gomorrah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem who rejected Jesus and his message. This narrative is sobering when one considers that in our own day book after book is being written that reflects this same debate: why and how is it possible for people who once believed in God to disbelieve? We are immersed in recent titles like *Culture Wars*; *Profscam: Professors and the Demise of Higher Education*; *Without God, Without Creed*; *Killing the Spirit*; *Impostors in the Temple*; and *Slouching Towards Gomorrah*.¹¹

By the time another decade passed in the Book of Mormon account (74 B.C.), an educated man named Korihor emerged, flaunting distortions of religious doctrines and publicizing a full-blown denial of the supernatural worldview. Korihor used a polished rational approach to knowledge – a thoroughly naturalistic argument – as a basis for denying the existence of God and the validity of religious doctrine as taught by the believers. He followed the age-old pattern by rejecting the "key of knowledge" and substituted in its place his own rhetoric and his own understanding. Then he set about seeking others to follow him and reject their religious heritage. The principles and purposes of life as revealed by God to man, he claimed, were superstitious notions and evidence of "frenzied" and "deranged" minds (Alma 30:6-60). He maintained that whatever cannot be demonstrated and confirmed through the physical senses does not exist.

Alma challenged Korihor's conclusions by pointing out that they were based on the use of an empirical method in areas where that method could not properly apply. In a different setting with a more open and honest audience, Alma explained another approach to gaining knowledge that went beyond Korihor's limited technique, adding balance to the learning process that can protect as well as expand man's efforts to understand and grow. Alma taught that knowledge could also be acquired by exercising faith as well as by reason. He acknowledged both the natural and supernatural paths to learning and used experimentation, reason,

and revelation. His invitation to those who desired to obtain the “key of knowledge” was to “experiment” with an idea and to “exercise” faith as part of that experiment. He favored an inclusionary rather than an exclusionary path to learning; reason had its role, but revelation was also a necessary component (Alma 32:17–43).

Conclusion

The implications of the Savior’s chastisement of the lawyers, priests, and Pharisees runs deep in the lives of every generation, as the Book of Mormon testifies. Rejecting the “key of knowledge” and “hindering” others who are seeking the plan of salvation is a serious transgression. The evidence presented in the Book of Mormon illustrates that to deny that human beings have a soul – a spiritual dimension – is no trifling matter. Nor is it a wise strategy to reject the reality of a Supreme Being in order to become a law unto ourselves so that we will have no one to answer to except ourselves (D&C 1:15–17). We may be unable to escape choosing between the twin trinities of governance – power, pleasure, and possessions versus sacrifice, suffering, and service. But if we embrace the “key of knowledge,” we can certainly enhance the quality of our choices and avoid the consequences of blocking others from choosing the blessings that flow from divine revelation.

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Notes

1. E.g., *Dummelow's One Volume Bible Commentary* (New York: Macmillan, 1960), 700; Matt. 23:13–36; Mark 12:38–40; Luke 11:37–54. A lawyer was a scribe or a professional teacher of the law. See “Scribe” and “Lawyer” in the Bible Dictionary.

2. See Robert J. Matthews, *“A Plainer Translation”: Joseph Smith's Translation of the Bible – A History and Commentary* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1975), chapter 2, for a detailed account of how the Prophet’s

knowledge of the scriptures was enhanced by revelation as he worked with these two sacred texts – the Book of Mormon and the Bible – during the early years of the Restoration.

3. E. R. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), vols. 1, 4, 13; see also 1:1, 6, 12; 2:4–6; 12:74–77.

4. The following sources provide an introduction, help identify issues, and illustrate the pervasive nature of the conflict between the vertical and horizontal perspectives: H. Curtis Wright, “The Central Problem of Intellectual History,” *Scholar and Educator* 12, no. 1 (fall 1988): 52–67; W. H. C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984); James L. Barker, *Apostasy from the Divine Church* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1960).

5. See Matt. 16:17 (13–20) wherein Jesus acknowledges Peter’s experience with this power.

6. Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, eds., *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1980), 204; see also Acts 17:30; Rom. 2:12; D&C 45:43; 76:72; 88:99.

7. Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1938), 94–95.

8. *Journal of Discourses* (London: Latter-day Saints’ Book Depot, 1854–86): 11:74.

9. Ezra Taft Benson, *Teachings of Ezra Taft Benson* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1988), 319–20.

10. A more complete account would include the establishment of a distant colony (Mosiah 9–22) during the reign of the kings (Mosiah 7) and continuing down to its impact on the period of the judges (Mosiah 29).

11. James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars* (New York: Basic Books, 1991); Charles J. Sykes, *ProfScam: Professors and the Demise of Higher Education* (New York: St. Martins Press, 1988); James Turner, *Without God, Without Creed* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985); Page Smith, *Killing the Spirit* (New York: Viking, Penguin Books, 1990); Martin Anderson, *Imposters in the Temple* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992); Robert H. Bork, *Slouching Towards Gomorrah* (New York: Harper Collins, 1996).