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Author(s): Robert J. Matthews

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A Doctrinal Framework for the New Testament

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Robert J. Matthews

While biblical revelation originally had the same doctrinal clarity and unity as modern revelation, many important passages regarding the plan of salvation have been lost or removed over time. Consequently, the Bible currently tells us WHAT things happened, but it rarely tells us WHY they happened. The doctrine of the Fall of Adam is one key doctrine that has been confused in the Bible. Without a full understanding of this doctrine, the necessity of Christ's mission is less clear. The Book of Mormon, however, contains the full doctrinal framework of the plan of salvation, with emphasis on the Fall, making several New Testament scriptures more clear.

The Book of Mormon is especially helpful in establishing a doctrinal framework in which to position the Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—so that they will properly project the fundamental mission of the Lord Jesus Christ. Without clear teachings on the Fall and the Atonement, these New Testament books often fail to radiate their full and original meaning. The Book of Mormon, adding greatly to the message of the New Testament, is also a witness to its truth.

We are warned in 1 Ne. 13:20–34 that the Bible has suffered deletions and intentional editing by unholy hands, with the result that many plain and precious parts have been removed from the text of both the Old and the New Testaments. This condition is confirmed in Morm. 8:33 and in Moses 1:40–41, and it is further declared in the eighth article of faith. Such loss of sacred scripture

is not merely the result of the difficulties of translation, nor does it consist of the misplacing of a few words or phrases. The problem with the present text of the Bible involves many passages and consists of the depletion and dilution of fundamental doctrinal concepts that were literally removed from the manuscripts thousands of years ago. Thus all known manuscripts today lack these passages and hence do not contain the doctrinal clarity that was once the hallmark of the message. In consequence we not only lose the material, but as a result many passages that remain are deprived of their original vitality and doctrinal strength because the necessary background is gone. Although the Book of Mormon tells of alterations throughout the Bible, the emphasis in this discussion will be on the New Testament.

The Loss of Doctrinal Clarity

I have frequently noted that the Bible in its present form generally tells us *what* things occurred, but it falls to latter-day revelation to tell us *why* they occurred. Originally the books of the Bible contained the same clarity and unity that is characteristic of latter-day revelation, but now in many instances they do not. The Prophet Joseph Smith explained why this loss occurred: "From sundry revelations which had been received, it was apparent that many important points touching the salvation of men, had been taken from the Bible, or lost before it was compiled."¹ "I believe the Bible as it read when it came from the pen of the original writers. Ignorant translators, careless transcribers, or designing and corrupt priests have committed many errors."²

It is a cardinal principle that the most severe deletions from the Bible have been intentional. They were deliberately and cunningly devised so as to weaken the doctrine of Jesus Christ. An angel told Nephi: "And all this have they done that they might pervert the right ways of the Lord, that they might blind the eyes and harden the hearts of the children of men" (1 Ne. 13:27). The angel said that because of the loss of important material from the Bible, many who would willingly be humble believers are in an "awful state of blindness . . . because of the plain and most precious parts of the gospel" that have been removed (1 Ne. 13:32; see also 2 Ne. 28:14).

Perhaps no doctrinal topic has been dealt a more debilitating and crippling blow than the doctrine of the Fall of Adam in the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Without an understanding of the nature and power of the Fall and its effect upon all humankind (and even upon the whole earth), we cannot grasp the absolute necessity for the mission of Jesus Christ. Jesus' miraculous divine birth and the infinite nature of his atoning sacrifice as a ransom and redemption for fallen man should be seen as God's special remedy for the Fall. As persons familiar with the Gospels are aware, these books do not in their present form offer a clear doctrinal platform on which to position the birth and ministry of Jesus the Messiah. Fortunately, the Book of Mormon, which is another testament of Jesus Christ, contains the doctrinal framework that, if applied, will enable readers of the New Testament to more completely perceive the testimony of Jesus Christ that is recorded there.

Items of doctrinal importance that are necessary to form a base structure include: (1) God has a purpose in man's creation; (2) Adam's fall brought physical and spiritual death to all the world; (3) because the Fall introduced death, the Redeemer needed to be the divinely begotten Son of God in the flesh so that he had power over death; (4) the shedding of Jesus' blood was in payment for the broken law of both Adam's and man's transgressions; and (5) a resurrection of the physical bodies of humankind is needed for future progress and happiness. These items are not absent from the New Testament, but it is my perception that they are more clearly defined in latter-day revelation than in the Bible. Since an understanding of these concepts is necessary in order to appreciate who Jesus is and what he has done for us, I am proposing that we would benefit more fully if we read the New Testament with these concepts in mind.

In 2 Ne. 29:8-14 the Lord states that he speaks "the same words to one nation like unto another," and that eventually each nation shall have the records of other nations in addition to their own records—for their edification and also as a witness of God's existence and truthfulness. Because the Book of Mormon has the same doctrines that the Bible once had, it is able to testify to the truth of the Bible, and also to supply many points of doctrine that are no longer clearly enunciated in the Bible. An angel explained to Nephi that "other books" would come forth by the power of

God, to convince the Gentiles, the Lamanites, and the Jews “that the records of the prophets [Old Testament] and of the twelve apostles of the Lamb [New Testament] are true” (1 Ne. 13:39). The angel further explained that these other books would “make known the plain and precious things which have been taken away from” the Jewish records (1 Ne. 13:40). Surely these other books include the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, the Pearl of Great Price, the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible, and any future records the Lord may choose to give to the Church.

Although the Book of Mormon does not specifically state that the doctrine of the Fall was one of the doctrines removed from the Bible, this conclusion can be made for two reasons. First, its importance is so fundamental to an understanding of the Atonement of Christ, and second, the Fall is not clearly elucidated in the present records of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

The Plan of Salvation

Prophets of the Book of Mormon speak of a plan that originated with God from the foundation of the world and has been revealed by him for the direction of humankind. This is called variously the plan of the great Creator (2 Ne. 9:6), the plan of redemption (Jacob 6:8; Alma 12:25, 30), the plan of salvation (Jarom 1:2; Alma 24:14), the great plan of the Eternal God (Alma 34:9), the plan of restoration (Alma 41:2), the great plan of happiness (Alma 42:8), and the plan of mercy (Alma 42:15). The holy priesthood is also included in the plan (see Alma 13:1–16). There is only one plan, and it is in active operation whenever true prophets are on the earth. The plan sets forth the order of the kingdom of God. A knowledge of this plan gives direction and focus to the ministry of each of the prophets and to the ministry of Jesus Christ. The plan was made known “in plain terms” so that man can understand and not err (Alma 13:23). God has revealed the plan so that “the people might know in what manner to look forward to his Son for redemption” (Alma 13:2). The devil also has a cunning plan to destroy man, in opposition to the plan of God (2 Ne. 9:28; Alma 28:13).

Stated in the most elementary terms, the plan of salvation as taught in the Book of Mormon connects the Creation, the Fall, the Atonement, and the Judgment as four great phases in God’s

eternal purposes for man. It is upon this backdrop, plan, or context that Jesus is born to earth as the Son of God. Since Jesus is Jehovah, the creator of worlds, the great I AM, and God of the Old Testament prophets from Adam to Malachi, we understand that as he matured and ministered on earth he was fully aware of his own identity, knew what his mission was, and understood exactly what was needed to redeem the world.

The Book of Mormon provides pertinent doctrinal statements that lay a proper groundwork for recognizing the sacredness of Jesus Christ's mortal mission. It is our perspective that Jesus and the Twelve knew these very same doctrines and taught the gospel in that context, though many of these concepts have not survived in the biblical record. When once we know the plan of salvation, we see many evidences and traces of it in the biblical writings. Yet the phrase *plan of salvation* does not occur in the Bible, and it is nowhere clearly explained as a unified plan. As a consequence, it would be difficult to learn the plan from the Bible alone. We note these basic provisions of the plan as presented in the Book of Mormon:

- The Lord created the earth to be inhabited, and he created his children to possess it (see 1 Ne. 17:36).
- The devil rebelled against God in the premortal life and seeks the misery of humankind (see 2 Ne. 2:17-18).
- "Adam fell that men might be; and men are, that they might have joy" (2 Ne. 2:25).
- The Fall brought spiritual and physical death upon all humankind so extensively and severely that without an infinite atonement we would be helpless, and there would be no resurrection of the body. The spirits of all humans would become devils (see 2 Ne. 9:6-9).
- The Atonement of Jesus Christ provides the only escape from the awful monster, death and hell, brought on by the Fall (see 2 Ne. 9:10-13).
- Jesus was born of the virgin Mary, and he was literally in the flesh the Son of the Eternal Father. He alone of all humankind has this inheritance (see 1 Ne. 11:13-21; Mosiah 3:8; Alma 7:10).

- The effects of the Fall of Adam are so extensive and universal that no mortal or human being can pay the debt. Such payment can be made only by a God (see Alma 34:9–12).
- “For the natural man is an enemy to God, and has been from the fall of Adam, and will be, forever and ever, unless he yields to the enticings of the Holy Spirit, putteth off the natural man and becometh a saint through the atonement of Christ” (Mosiah 3:19).
- The Fall of Adam has brought two kinds of death upon all humankind, and the Atonement of Christ will rescue all from both deaths, which means it will bring them out of their graves and also bring them into the presence of God for judgment of their own sins (see Hel. 14:14–18).
- Little children are innocent before God, and if they die as children they are saved by the Atonement of Christ. The “curse of Adam” is taken away from them by Christ (see Moro. 8:8–24).
- The Messiah’s literal, physical resurrection from the dead will bring to pass the literal, physical resurrection from the dead for all, Jesus himself being the first (see 2 Ne. 2:8; Mosiah 15:20; 16:3–12).
- The physical resurrection is permanent, and resurrected beings never die again; their spirits and bodies are joined together, never to be divided or separated (see Alma 11:42–45).
- Man is absolutely in need of the Savior’s power of redemption; there is no other Savior than Jesus Christ, and there is no other way, nor name, nor any other conditions for salvation than those that are brought to pass by Jesus Christ (see 2 Ne. 25:20; 31:21; Mosiah 3:17; 4:8; 5:8; 16:13; Alma 38:9; Hel. 5:9).
- The same gospel and plan of salvation with all of its provisions was known and taught by all of the true prophets from the beginning (see Jacob 7:11; Mosiah 13:33–35).

These are only a portion of the many statements in the Book of Mormon that tell of the doctrinal framework and the plan that points to the reality of Christ’s earthly mission. With that direction, the testimonies of Christ given by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and

John shine forth in their intended brilliance and full color. Using the Book of Mormon to understand the New Testament is like putting on prescription eyeglasses to improve and enlarge our vision. With my personal eyeglasses I have nearly 20/20 vision; without them I could not read this page, nor could I see anything clearly. The difference is focus. The Book of Mormon enables us to see the message of the New Testament in focus as it was originally intended.

Emphasis on the Fall

President Ezra Taft Benson explained why an emphasis on the Fall is necessary: "Just as a man does not really desire food until he is hungry, so he does not desire the salvation of Christ until he knows why he needs Christ. No one adequately and properly knows why he needs Christ until he understands and accepts the doctrine of the Fall and its effect upon all mankind. And no other book in the world explains this vital doctrine nearly as well as the Book of Mormon."³

Since the doctrine of the Fall is vital to an understanding and realization of why the mission of Jesus Christ is absolutely necessary, it will be informative to examine to what extent the Book of Mormon teaches the doctrine of the Fall of Adam. This can be illustrated by citing the most notable references and also listing thirteen prophets in the Book of Mormon who teach the doctrine of the Fall and who explain its impact on the world. The same passages also declare that it is because of the Fall that we need the Redeemer. The list is arranged in the order of occurrence in the Book of Mormon:

- Lehi: 1 Ne. 10:6; 2 Ne. 2:4, 19, 25
- Jacob: 2 Ne. 9:4-10; Jacob 7:12
- Nephi: 2 Ne. 11:6. Furthermore, the teachings of Lehi and Jacob on the Fall are recorded and presented in the books of 1 and 2 Nephi, showing Nephi's approval.
- King Benjamin: Mosiah 3:11, 16, 19; 4:5, 7.
- Abinadi: Mosiah 16:3-4
- Alma: Alma 12:22; 42:6-7
- Ammon: Alma 18:36

- Aaron: Alma 22:13-14
- Amulek: Alma 34:9-12
- Samuel the Lamanite: Hel. 14:14-18
- Moroni: Morm. 9:12-13
- Brother of Jared: Ether 3:2, 13
- Mormon: Moro. 8:8, 24

It can hardly be overstated that the doctrine of the Fall and its effect upon humankind is a central teaching of the Book of Mormon. The purpose of dwelling so much on the Fall is to illustrate that the Fall makes the Savior necessary. Without a knowledge of the heavy domination that the Fall has on the earth, we could never begin to know why we so desperately need Jesus. Those who do not have this doctrinal foundation often see Jesus as only a social reformer, not a divine Redeemer. For examples of the doctrinal view presented in the Book of Mormon, we find these expressions:

Nephi writes: "I glory in my Jesus, for he hath redeemed my soul from hell" (2 Ne. 33:6). This redemption from hell was not because Nephi had committed any great sins in life for which he would have gone to hell, but because all – every man, woman, and child – by virtue of the Fall would go to an endless hell if it were not for the redemptive mission of Christ (see 2 Ne. 9:6-9).

Lehi says: "There is no flesh that can dwell in the presence of God, save it be through the merits, and mercy, and grace of the Holy Messiah" (2 Ne. 2:8). This concept is not directed just to those who commit the great sins of mortality, but it applies to all human beings, children and everyone else. None could ever be saved in the presence of God if it were not for the ransom by the Messiah (compare 1 Ne. 10:6).

Aaron declares the same doctrine: "And since man had fallen he could not merit anything of himself; but the sufferings and death of Christ atone for their sins, through faith and repentance" (Alma 22:14).

Jacob taught the forceful doctrine that the universal nature of the Fall made an infinite atonement necessary, and if there were not such an atonement, "this flesh must have laid down to rot and to crumble to its mother earth, to rise no more," and the spirits of

all people would become subject to the devil, and, even worse, “our spirits must have become like unto him, and we become devils, angels to a devil, to be shut out from the presence of our God . . . in misery” (2 Ne. 9:7-9). This condition applies to all humankind. Both the Fall and the Atonement are universal in their power.

Amulek clearly defines the Savior’s unique role as the literal Son of God, performing a sacrifice beyond what any human could do: “According to the great plan of the Eternal God there must be an atonement made, or else all mankind must unavoidably perish; yea, all are hardened; yea, all are fallen and are lost. . . . For it is expedient that there should be a great and last sacrifice; yea, not a sacrifice of man, neither of beast, neither of any manner of fowl; For it shall not be a human sacrifice; but it must be an infinite and eternal sacrifice. . . . And that great and last sacrifice will be the Son of God, yea, infinite and eternal” (Alma 34:9, 10, 14). The reason only a God could atone for sin and conquer death is that all others, being dominated by death, are powerless to escape or to conquer it. Jesus was born as the Only Begotten of the Father in this mortal flesh so that he would have power over death.

And finally, Moroni explains: “Behold he [God] created Adam, and by Adam came the fall of man. And because of the fall of man came Jesus Christ; . . . and because of Jesus Christ came the redemption of man” (Morm. 9:12).

If these pointed and clarifying doctrines were in the New Testament, especially in the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, all readers would have a much better appreciation for *why* the world needs a Savior and why only Jesus Christ can be that Savior. Today we often find, even among sincere professing Christians, serious doubt about Jesus’ divinity, his miracles, his blood being a payment for sin, and the reality of his corporeal resurrection. Those who want to believe would have no cause to doubt if they saw Christ through the focus of the Book of Mormon, because it testifies of the truth of the New Testament. And those who do not want to believe will be left without excuse. Without this focus, the doctrines of the divine Sonship, the sacrifice of Jesus, his death, and his literal resurrection are seriously undermined and viciously robbed of their significance. Truly we can sense that it has been Satan’s cunning plan to dilute and even remove the doctrine of the Fall from the first four books of the New Testament and

hence weaken the message, thus denying readers for eighteen centuries the faith and knowledge they had a right to receive. Truly we can behold the wisdom and mercy of God in providing the means, through the Book of Mormon, to restore the mission of the Redeemer in its brightest light.

Having accepted the basic foundation and doctrinal framework of the Fall and the Atonement, we are better prepared to read the biblical record of Jesus in its true perspective. Such will increase our enthusiasm and understanding and enable us to see that only a God could do what needed to be done, and that only Jesus was that God.

It is true that Paul's writings help to achieve a proper perspective about the Fall of Adam (see Romans 4-5; 1 Corinthians 15). The Book of Mormon scriptures confirm and support Paul's words, yet they are also plainer and more extensive than Paul's writings, and they offer many concepts beyond what we can get from Paul, great as he and his writings are. The Book of Mormon is the Lord's prescribed instrument in the last days, precisely tooled and machined to testify of the truths in the New Testament, sharpen the focus, and thereby give us the divine dimension about Jesus that is so urgently needed.

A Key to New Testament Passages

With the doctrinal perspective of the Book of Mormon, we are able to observe greater depth in certain New Testament passages. This increased meaning is possible because we can see the doctrinal foundation out of which each passage was uttered.

John 3:16-17

"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved." The doctrine of the Fall is evident in this favorite passage, even though the words "Fall" and "Adam" are not mentioned. We ask, why would the world "perish" if it were not for the Son of God? The answer must be that the world is fallen through the transgression of Adam—so completely fallen that a merciful God sent his

Son to rescue and save it. The doctrinal framework out of which this popular passage was spoken becomes apparent when one knows the doctrine of the Fall, as Jesus surely did when he spoke these words.

Matthew 18:10–11

In this passage Jesus extolls the virtues and innocence of little children. As recorded in the King James Version, Jesus declares: “Take heed that ye despise not one of these little ones; for I say unto you, That in heaven their angels do always behold the face of my Father which is in heaven. For the Son of man is come to save that which was lost.” This positive statement prompts the question, why were they *lost*? Once again, it is the doctrine of the Fall that explains why humankind is lost without a Redeemer. The JST adds a further clarification as to the particular status of children: Christ said that he came “to call sinners to repentance; but these little ones have no need of repentance, and I will save them” (JST Matt. 18:11).

Luke 4:16–19

This passage deals with Jesus’ discourse in the synagogue at Nazareth, in which he proclaims his divinity and sacred mission by quoting from the sixty-first chapter of Isaiah. Precisely stated among the dimensions of his ministry is “to preach deliverance to the captives.” We ask, why are the people captives, and to what have they been made captive? Again, the doctrine of the Fall supplies the answer. Jesus’ statement that he has come to free the captives from physical death and sin shows the doctrine of the Fall.

John 5:24–29

In this passage, Jesus declares his power over death and even claims the power to raise others from their graves: “Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life. Verily, verily, I say unto you, the hour is coming, and now is, when the dead shall

hear the voice of the Son of God: and they that hear shall live. For as the Father hath life in himself; so hath he given to the Son to have life in himself; and hath given him authority to execute judgment also, because he is the Son of man. Marvel not at this: for the hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, and shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation."

John 10:17-18

Jesus taught: "Therefore doth my Father love me, because I lay down my life, that I might take it again. No man taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This commandment have I received of my Father." As with the other passages we have cited, these questions arise: Why do men die, why should they rise from the grave, and why is Jesus able to bring them forth? In the New Testament, death is spoken of on almost every page, is everywhere acknowledged, and is accepted as a fact of life. The doctrine of the Fall explains why death is so universal. Furthermore, the doctrine of the Sonship of Jesus in the flesh gives us the insight as to why he alone has power over death. In the passages above, Christ says that he received that power from his Father (compare Hel. 5:11). That he received such power over death must be that he received it in his body by virtue of being the Father's own literal Son in the flesh.

The doctrine of Christ is in the New Testament, but it is often presented in an incomplete manner, rather than in a systematic doctrinal form as the eternal plan of happiness designed by the Father and revealed in great plainness to man on the earth. As a consequence of the weakened doctrinal pronouncement in the Gospels, made weak because of the mischief of evil men, many Christian philosophers today regard the divine Sonship of Jesus, his many miracles, and his bodily resurrection only as myths that grew out of the hopes and superstitions of Jesus' followers. However, the Lord knew this loss would occur and provided the remedy. With his prescriptive "eyeglasses," called the Book of Mormon, we can read the New Testament account of the Messiah

through the lenses of the eternal plan of salvation, giving us almost a 20/20 view of the original doctrines.

That Jesus showed the people the relationship between his divine mission and the Fall is strengthened by the fact that when Jesus opened the mission in the spirit world, he taught the spirits concerning the Fall and the Atonement (D&C 138:18–19). Knowing the importance of the plan of salvation, we would be surprised if it were any other way, whether it be among the Jews, the Nephites, or in the world of spirits.

Robert J. Matthews is professor emeritus of ancient scripture, Brigham Young University.

Notes

1. Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1938), 9–11.
2. *Ibid.*, 327.
3. *Conference Report*, April 1987, 106.