

# Remnant or Replacement? Outlining a Possible Apostasy Narrative

*Nicholas J. Frederick and Joseph M. Spencer*

Since early in the twentieth century, it has been common for Latter-day Saints to speak of a “Great Apostasy” that occurred in the centuries following the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Such a general apostasy has been viewed as providing the basic motivation for the Restoration, begun in earnest with Joseph Smith’s First Vision in 1820. The traditional apostasy narrative has centered on the argument that the church founded by Jesus Christ once possessed the same organization, doctrine, and authority restored in the nineteenth century but that, over time, these crucial components were either lost or corrupted. It has been maintained that the development of new rituals or changes to already-existing ordinances led to a decay in doctrine and practice, while the death of the original twelve Apostles left the church without authority or revelation to guide it. Further, the persecution of Christians (by both pagans and Jews) and the incorporation of Greek philosophy have also been taken to have played a role in diminishing the authenticity of the early church. This well-known way of narrating early Christian apostasy owes its origins and developments to the efforts of, primarily, three authors: B. H. Roberts (in *Outlines of Ecclesiastical History* and *The Falling Away*), James E. Talmage (in *The Great Apostasy*), and Joseph Fielding Smith (in *Essentials in Church History*). In the words of historian Eric Dursteler, these three authors have “unquestionably . . . provided the foundation for all subsequent discussions of the apostasy.”

In many ways, this trio's conceptualizations still inform how Mormons think about the apostasy.”<sup>1</sup>

This traditional narrative has been recently and productively challenged, however. In March 2012, a group of scholars gathered at Brigham Young University to discuss ways of “Exploring Mormon Conceptions of the Apostasy.” Papers presented on that occasion appeared in print two years later when Oxford University Press published *Standing Apart: Mormon Historical Consciousness and the Concept of Apostasy*.<sup>2</sup> As the subtitle of the published volume suggests, its contributors explore how increasing historical consciousness among Latter-day Saints has generated a need to reformulate traditional narratives about apostasy.<sup>3</sup> Recognizing that different ways of telling the story of apostasy have served diverse institutional needs at distinct moments in Latter-day Saint history, emphasizing that traditional narratives have problems at both ethical and historiographical levels, editors Miranda Wilcox and John Young ask “what narrative reformulations will facilitate the *next* phase of institutional development.”<sup>4</sup> If it is true—and we believe it is—that *some* kind of story about apostasy must motivate the need for the Restoration, how might Latter-day Saints narrate their faith’s departure from other religious traditions in a fashion that is both intellectually defensible and pastorally productive?<sup>5</sup>

*Standing Apart* contains essays explicitly meant to contribute “new approaches” to the task of “renarrating the apostasy,”<sup>6</sup> but the book does more to deconstruct than to reconstruct apostasy narratives. In many ways, this is as it should be. Critical analysis of past narratives must precede serious efforts at reconstruction. Nonetheless, readers may finish the book wishing that the contributors had made stronger

1. Eric Dursteler, “Inheriting the ‘Great Apostasy’: The Evolution of Mormon Views on the Middle Ages and the Renaissance,” *Journal of Mormon History* 28, no. 2 (Fall 2002): 30.

2. See Miranda Wilcox and John D. Young, eds., *Standing Apart: Mormon Historical Consciousness and the Concept of Apostasy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

3. In many ways, this effort began with an earlier volume: Noel B. Reynolds, ed., *Early Christians in Disarray: Contemporary LDS Perspectives on the Christian Apostasy* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press and FARMS, 2005).

4. Wilcox and Young, *Standing Apart*, 6, emphasis added. Ethical concerns arise from intimations of wickedness and deliberate deception on the part of well-meaning Christians, while historiographical concerns arise from reliance on dated secondary treatments rather than reliable primary sources.

5. See Wilcox and Young, *Standing Apart*, 17.

6. See Wilcox and Young, *Standing Apart*, 127–334.

recommendations for a new apostasy narrative—even without consensus among proposals. Those outlining “new approaches” in the volume generally limit themselves to offering vague prescriptions (such as that new narrators should cultivate an ecumenical spirit and emphasize complexity over simplicity).<sup>7</sup> These are helpful signposts, delimiting boundaries within which work on narrating the apostasy might occur, but they give no real sense of what a new apostasy narrative might look like. The inventive work of providing a potentially useful apostasy narrative remains undone. Accordingly, we aim here to outline one possible approach to constructing a new apostasy narrative. We insist on deriving our basic commitments from scripture, with an eye especially to the Book of Mormon. Several authors—including a contributor to *Standing Apart*—have suggested that the apocalyptic vision in 1 Nephi 11–14 provides resources for an adequate apostasy narrative.<sup>8</sup> In effect, we attempt here to sort out the implications of Nephi’s vision for interpreting apostasy in the history of Christianity. We propose that Nephi’s vision as the root of apostasy is the moment when Christians began to perceive themselves as replacing Jews as covenantal Israel. The Book of Mormon and other aspects of the Restoration correct the prevalent anti-Jewish *replacement* theology in Christianity by recentering the Christian message on covenantal Israelite foundations through the rehabilitation of a *remnant* theology (along with the restoration of priesthoods necessary for gathering and binding the human family in fulfillment of the Abrahamic promises).<sup>9</sup>

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7. The only real exception is Terryl Givens, providing the volume’s epilogue. See Terryl Givens, “We Have Only the Old Thing: Rethinking Mormon Restoration,” in *Standing Apart*, 338.

8. See John D. Young, “Long Narratives: Toward a New Mormon Understanding of Apostasy,” in *Standing Apart*, 310–17; as well as, especially, John W. Welch, “Modern Revelation: A Guide to Research about the Apostasy,” in Reynolds, *Early Christians in Disarray*, 105–11. Also crucial in this regard is Noel B. Reynolds, “What Went Wrong for the Early Christians?” in Reynolds, *Early Christians in Disarray*, 5–6, 15–19; and Noel B. Reynolds, “The Decline of Covenant in Early Christian Thought,” in Reynolds, *Early Christians in Disarray*, 297, 319–24; see also Bryson Bachman and Noel B. Reynolds, “Traditional Christian Sacraments and Covenants,” in Steven C. Harper and others, eds., *Prelude to the Restoration: From Apostasy to the Restored Church* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 2004), 24–39. Reynolds focuses on many of the same passages we will address, although he comes to different conclusions. We will address these differences in the course of our argument.

9. We will explain the terms “replacement theology” and “remnant theology” later in this paper.

In a word, in this essay we will attempt to show how Nephi calls for an understanding of apostasy focused primarily on how Christians understand their relationship to the covenants given anciently to Israel. Our treatment of this issue falls into two parts. In the first, we consider Nephi's vision directly, spelling out the way it (schematically) narrates the beginnings of Christian apostasy. In the second part, we then look more broadly at how Book of Mormon prophets—with Jesus Christ among them—spell out a proper understanding of Christianity's relationship to Israel's covenants. A brief conclusion draws out some general reflections. We might note that this essay is, for us, just the beginning of a larger project. Here we outline the scriptural warrant for and basic shape of a responsible apostasy narrative for early Christianity. In future publications, we aim to turn from the Book of Mormon to a direct considering of the texts of earliest Christianity to show how Nephi's vision might be corroborated by history.

### Nephi's Vision and the Apostasy

Readers might naturally turn to the first verses of 1 Nephi 13 to reflect on the apostasy—the passage in which Nephi first sees the great and abominable church. As John W. Welch has pointed out, though, this passage actually “mentions very little” about the nature and identity of the great and abominable church.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, we wish instead to privilege the second half of 1 Nephi 13, where Nephi witnesses what the “church” in question does at the very beginning of its historical entrance. The key passage concerns the existence, the history, and the ultimate destiny of a book, the Christian Bible. The passage comes after Nephi has prophetically viewed the European discovery of the New World and some of its aftermath. At this point in the vision, Nephi describes seeing peoples of European descent (identified in the text simply as “Gentiles”) occupying the New World after gaining political independence. Nephi's focus comes then to rest on “a book” he sees “carried forth among them” (1 Ne. 13:20). Amy Easton-Flake has underscored the way the literary organization of Nephi's vision helps to lay particular emphasis on this moment.<sup>11</sup> It deserves the closest attention.

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10. Welch, “Modern Revelation,” 106–7. For important warnings about misidentifying the church in question, see Stephen E. Robinson, “Nephi's ‘Great and Abominable Church,’” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 7, no. 1 (1998): 32–39, 70.

11. See Amy Easton-Flake, “Lehi's Dream as a Template for Understanding Each Act of Nephi's Vision,” in *The Things Which My Father Saw: Approaches to Lehi's Dream and*

When Nephi confess that he does not know “the meaning of the book,” an angel explains this meaning to Nephi and therefore to his readers (1 Ne. 13:21). The explanation makes clear that the book of Nephi’s vision is the Christian Bible. But the explanation does much more than that. The angel’s words divide readily into three sequences: (1) verse 23 outlines the actual contents of the book; (2) verses 24–33 explain the complex provenance of the book; and (3) verses 34–37 announce a divine plan to address problems with the book. All three sequences deserve reflection because together they dramatically clarify the notion of early Christian apostasy contained in the Book of Mormon—in particular, the notion that apostasy concerns the status of Christianity’s relationship to Israel’s covenants.

### *Sequence One: 1 Nephi 13:23*

The first sequence of the angel’s explanation provides a sense for the Bible’s contents, but it neither enumerates the volume’s several books (Genesis, Isaiah, Job, Mark, Romans, and so on) nor names the volume’s two testaments (Old, New).<sup>12</sup> Instead, the angel describes the Bible’s contents in terms of what makes the book “of great worth unto the Gentiles” (1 Ne. 13:23). Peculiarly, what makes the book so valuable is what it has to say about *covenants*. Moreover, in view here are clearly not covenants associated with particular ordinances—for example, the baptismal covenant or covenants made during the temple endowment.<sup>13</sup>

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*Nephi’s Vision, The 40th Annual Brigham Young University Sidney B. Sperry Symposium*, ed. Daniel L. Belnap, Gaye Strathearn, and Stanley A. Johnson (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 2011), 190–91.

12. It is worth noting that the Greek word translated as “testament” literally means “covenant.”

13. Reynolds, “What Went Wrong for the Early Christians?” 5–6, interprets the angel’s subsequent reference in verse 26 to “many covenants of the Lord” as indicating “ordinances such as baptism, priesthood ordination, and marriage.” The proximity between verses 23 and 26 makes such an interpretation unlikely, since in context the phrase “covenants of the Lord” has primarily to do with the covenants made historically to Israel. To be sure, Reynolds also suggests—in “The Decline of Covenants in Early Christian Thought,” 321—that “Nephi radicalizes the traditional notions of Israel’s covenant with God by extending the covenant invitation to all peoples and making it an individual choice for each person.” The idea here would be that the historical covenants given to Israel were, through Jesus Christ’s messianic fulfillment of the law of Moses, redirected from historically particular Israel to the whole of the human family and reconfigured to be made with individuals rather than with a whole people. We concede that such an approach to Israel’s covenants has often been made, but it makes

Rather, in question are explicitly “the covenants of the Lord, which he hath made unto the house of Israel” (v. 23). Nephi’s angelic guide thus makes the core of the Christian Bible what it says about the covenant by which God has bound himself to the family of Abraham and Sarah. Signaling this, the angel twice refers in verse 23 to “the covenants of the Lord, which he hath made unto the house of Israel.” The phrase appears at the outset of the verse, ostensibly to introduce the book’s meaning; and then it appears again at the verse’s end, apparently to underscore the book’s covenantal bearings. From start to finish, the angel presents the basic makeup of the Christian Bible as covenantal, in the specific sense of the covenants historically given by God to Israel. For this reason, it seems important that the angel describes the volume both as “a record of the Jews” and as “proceed[ing] out of the mouth of a Jew” (1 Ne. 13:23). According to Nephi’s vision, the Bible is a Jewish book, and its chief contribution is to recount and explain the reception and implications of Israel’s covenant. It is for these reasons (“wherefore,” says verse 23) that the Bible is “of great worth unto the Gentiles.”<sup>14</sup>

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little sense of the strong emphasis that the Book of Mormon (like the New Testament and the Doctrine and Covenants) lies on promises made to Israel regarding eventual national redemption through gentile assistance. In support of his interpretation, Reynolds cites 2 Nephi 30:2 and 2 Nephi 6:13. Unfortunately, neither passage helps his case. 2 Nephi 30:2 suggests neither a redirection nor an individualization of Israel’s covenant. Instead, it underscores the need for “Gentiles” and “Jews” to, respectively, join themselves to or remain within “the covenant people of the Lord.” When the passage goes on to say that “the Lord covenanteth with none save it be with them that repent and believe in his Son,” the plural pronoun “them” should be emphasized; a whole people seems clearly in view. 2 Nephi 6:13 is still more problematic as a proof-text. When Jacob says there that “the covenant people of the Lord . . . are they who wait for him,” the context makes clear that he does not mean (as Reynolds intimates) that all who repently trust in God receive individual covenants from him. Jacob means to claim, rather, that Isaiah’s talk of “waiting for the Lord” straightforwardly refers to Jews, “the covenant people of the Lord,” who, even after Christ’s advent, “still wait for the coming of the Messiah.” This passage too thus assumes that “the covenant people of the Lord” is in fact historical Israel, and there is neither redirection nor reconfiguration of the covenant in view.

14. There is ambiguity in the angel’s statement about the Bible’s “great worth unto the Gentiles.” It could indicate that Gentiles in the early American Republic consciously attributed value to the Bible because of its covenantal content, or it could indicate that, unbeknownst to Gentiles in the early American Republic, the Bible is covenantal in orientation and only so will eventually be of real worth to them. For reasons that will become clear, we prefer the second of these interpretations.

### Sequence Two: 1 Nephi 13:24–33

After describing the Bible’s contents, the angel further explains the book’s meaning by tracing its provenance. This second sequence of the text opens by returning to the moment when “the book proceeded forth from the mouth of a Jew,” chiefly to note its inclusion of “the fulness of the gospel of the Lord” at the time of its original production (1 Ne. 13:24). The angel then claims that “these things go forth from the Jews in purity unto the Gentiles, according to the truth which is in God” (v. 25). The exact referent of “these things” is unclear. It might refer to the book under discussion—a possibility made likely by the fact that Book of Mormon authors, Nephi included, often refer to their own written records with the phrase “these things.”<sup>15</sup> It might alternatively refer to “the fulness of the gospel” (v. 24)—a possibility made likely by the fact that the object whose purity is compromised in a following verse is “the gospel of the Lamb” (v. 26).<sup>16</sup> The possibility should not be excluded that in fact *both* the book and the fulness of the gospel are included in “these things”; subsequent verses speak of things “taken away” both “from the gospel of the Lamb” (v. 26) and “from the book, which is the book of the Lamb of God” (v. 28). Whether accomplished solely *through* “the book,” then, or somehow independent of “the book,” what Nephi’s angelic guide reports is the arrival “in purity” of a “fulness of the gospel” among “the Gentiles” soon after Christ’s resurrection. The text presents this as having occurred before any real apostasy; it is only “after they [these things] go forth by the hand of the twelve apostles of the Lamb, from the Jews unto the Gentiles,” that problems arise (v. 26).

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15. For examples from Nephi’s record, see 1 Nephi 13:35; 19:19; 2 Nephi 25:3, 16, 21, 22; 26:14; 33:11.

16. Further strengthening this second possibility is the simple fact that, given all we know today regarding the processes by which the Christian Bible assumed its final form, it seems inappropriate to describe the Bible as ever having circulated in “purity.” On the other hand, one certainly might understand the text of the Book of Mormon at this point as registering a polemical disagreement with modern critical reconstructions of the processes of redaction and canonization. At least one author has argued against any pursuit of “purity” in constructing apostasy narratives (see Taylor G. Petrey, “Purity and Parallels: Constructing the Apostasy Narrative of Early Christianity,” in *Standing Apart*, 174–95), but while endorsements of hybridity and warnings against historical “purity” are welcome, *some* role is to be played by purity in any construction of an apostasy narrative taking its orientation from 1 Nephi 13–14. The question will be exactly *what* is pure at Christianity’s origins.

Problems arise, of course, principally with “the formation of that great and abominable church” (1 Ne. 13:26), but the angel never makes exactly clear *when* this formation takes place. It clearly occurs only “after” the Lamb’s gospel arrives among non-Israelites—hence, no earlier than the mid-first century. It is also clear that the great and abominable church’s formation is fully accomplished before the Bible “goeth forth unto all the nations of the Gentiles” (v. 29), but it is difficult to know when it can rightly be said that the Bible does this. At the latest, the angel would be referring to the early modern period (the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries), since he goes on to speak of the Bible traveling “across the many waters . . . with the Gentiles which have gone forth out of captivity” (v. 29). Before this late development in Christian history, the great and abominable church is fully formed. These details thus do little to nail down historical referents, since they situate the rise of the great and abominable church between the middle of the first century and the end of the fifteenth century. Does the text, then, provide other details that might allow for more historical specificity?

Answers arguably lie in what *makes* the abominable church abominable. It “is the most abominable of all other churches” (1 Ne. 13:5) precisely because (“for behold,” the angel says) “they have taken away from the gospel of the Lamb many parts which are plain and most precious; and also many covenants of the Lord have they taken away” (1 Ne. 13:26). The “gospel of the Lord,” originally present in its “fulness” in the book (v. 24), is here the principal victim of the great and abominable church. The impoverishment of this fulness through acts of “taking away” is deliberate, according to the angel: “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” (v. 27). The angel’s language suggests a deliberate gentile program of altered interpretation (“pervert”), ultimately aimed at making it impossible to see what should be immediately obvious (“blind”) and building up popular resistance to what should speak to the heart (“harden”).<sup>17</sup> Crucially, as John Young points out, the text here “makes a vital distinction between those who commit the initial act of rebellion, with their eyes wide open, so to speak, and those who are taught the apostate traditions put into place

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17. Use of the word “pervert” in connection with “the right ways of the Lord” suggests, in Book of Mormon parlance, a deliberate shift in interpretive approach. See, for instance, the use of similar language in Jacob 7:7.

by those who rebelled willfully.”<sup>18</sup> The angel describes a programmatic effort by certain influential Gentiles, an effort to alter the basic world-view of other Gentiles who profess the full gospel of the Lamb. Consequently, many innocent persons, “because of these things which are taken away out of the gospel of the Lamb,” ultimately “stumble” (v. 29).<sup>19</sup>

The problem for Gentiles who profess the full gospel, it seems, is that the replacement of one interpretive frame with another makes it difficult or impossible to understand the Bible or the gospel they receive from “the twelve apostles of the Lamb” (1 Ne. 13:26). In fact, Nephi’s angelic guide explicitly connects the loss of the gospel’s fulness to impoverished readings of the Bible. “Wherefore,” he says, “thou seest that after the book hath gone forth through the hands of the great and abominable church, that there are many plain and precious things taken away from the book, which is the book of the Lamb of God” (v. 28). This passage seems on its surface to indicate that portions of the Bible were excised or otherwise altered by corrupt persons, and many commentators have interpreted the text this way, even amassing evidence for direct manipulation of biblical texts.<sup>20</sup> Certainly, the passage can be read in this way. But it is crucial to recognize that the angel presents any direct tampering with the actual text of the Bible as occurring only after *and because of* the transformation of the general understanding of the Lamb’s gospel. It is a *consequence of* the gospel’s dilution, which, as John Welch notes, “could have occurred more by altering the meaning or understanding of the concepts taught by the Lord than by changing the words themselves.”<sup>21</sup> It is not difficult to see how an early conceptual transformation of the gospel would later lead to a situation where “writings that no longer made sense, or no longer sounded right, or spoke of things no longer practiced would naturally fall into disfavor and out of use.”<sup>22</sup> At any rate, Stephen Robinson is certainly right that “the notion of shifty-eyed medieval monks rewriting the scriptures is unfair and bigoted.” We would further argue, parallel to Robinson, that the culprits are rather to be found “in the second half

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18. Young, “Long Narratives,” 313.

19. More sinisterly, some in the great and abominable church apparently (but maybe only at a later period) “destroy” and “bring . . . down into captivity” the few “saints of God” who see through the deception (1 Ne. 13:9).

20. See, for instance, John Gee, “The Corruption of Scripture in Early Christianity,” in Reynolds, *Early Christians in Disarray*, 163–204.

21. Welch, “Modern Revelation,” 108.

22. Welch, “Modern Revelation,” 110–11.

of the first century and would have done much of [their] work by the middle of the second century.”<sup>23</sup> Anything amiss in medieval Christianity was more the innocent product of a problematic foundation laid centuries earlier than anything else.

The key to becoming still more specific about the meaning of the angel’s words in 1 Nephi 13 is to focus on what exactly the great and abominable church “takes away” from the gospel—and eventually, perhaps only indirectly, from the Bible also. According to the text, Gentiles associated with founding the great and abominable church take two sorts of things from the gospel and the text: first, “they have taken away . . . many parts which are plain and most precious”; second, “many covenants of the Lord have they taken away” (1 Ne. 13:26). Of these two categories, the first receives stronger emphasis in the text, mentioned four more times in this second sequence (see vv. 28, 29 [twice], and 32) and three times in the third sequence (see vv. 34 [twice] and 35). Even so, the *previous* double mention in verse 23 of “the covenants of the Lord, which he hath made unto the house of Israel” helps to underscore the importance of the reference to “many covenants” in verse 26. Further, later in Nephi’s vision, the angel introduces history’s end by reminding Nephi of “the covenants of the Father unto the house of Israel” (1 Ne. 14:8). The vision then concludes when the angel predicts the commencement of “the work of the Father,” accomplished in “preparing the way for the fulfilling of his covenants, which he hath made to his people who are of the house of Israel” (1 Ne. 14:17). Although the “plain and precious” things receive focused attention in the angel’s direct exposition of the Bible’s role in history, it is unmistakably the “covenants of the Lord” that organize the larger history within which the Bible plays its role. It seems crucial to attend to *both* sorts of things said to be “taken away” from the gospel and the book—both the “plain and precious” *and* “many covenants.”

### *Sequence Three: 1 Nephi 13:34–37*

As it turns out, there is reason to think that the “plain and precious things” are in fact closely tied to the covenants mentioned. This becomes clear in the third sequence as the angel explains the Bible’s meaning. Although the Gentiles “stumble” because of “the most plain and precious

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23. Robinson, “Nephi’s ‘Great and Abominable Church,’” 39. As we have noted, we will attempt to address the details of documentary evidence for this historical reconstruction in other publications.

parts” that “have been kept back by that abominable church,” nonetheless the Lamb promises to “bring forth” his gospel, “which shall be plain and precious” (1 Ne. 13:34). This is to occur through a determinate set of events. The angel explains, quoting the Lamb himself, “I will manifest myself unto thy [that is, Nephi’s] seed, that they shall write many things which I shall minister unto them, which shall be plain and precious; and after that thy seed shall be destroyed, and dwindle in unbelief, and also the seed of thy brethren, behold, these things shall be hid up, to come forth unto the Gentiles, by the gift and power of the Lamb” (v. 35). These lines tell a simple story. First, the Lamb predicts his own much-later visit to Nephi’s descendants (“I will manifest myself unto thy seed”), later recorded in 3 Nephi 11–28. Second, the Lamb says that this six-centuries-later ministry will be recorded (“that they shall write many things which I shall minister unto them”), a record found either in the sources lying behind 3 Nephi or directly in 3 Nephi itself. Third, the Lamb explains that the record of his New World ministry will be preserved for the last days, to come forth through Joseph Smith’s instrumentality (“these things shall be hid up, to come forth unto the Gentiles, by the gift and power of the Lamb”). What the angel tells Nephi in just these few words, then, is this: It is the teachings found specifically in 3 Nephi that are preserved to supplement the problematic interpretations of the Christian Bible on offer in historical Christianity. *These* are the “plain and precious parts.”

What does this have to do with the theme of the covenants historically given to Israel? As most careful readers of 3 Nephi recognize, the chief emphasis of Christ’s sermons among Lehi’s descendants is Israelite history. Although some passages in 3 Nephi (especially chapters 11–14, 18–19, and 27) make efforts at clarifying the basics of Christian discipleship, the majority of Christ’s teachings in 3 Nephi focus exclusively and in detail on covenantal history and its larger significance (see especially chapters 15–17, 20–26, 28). As Grant Hardy notes, in 3 Nephi “it’s not all about [Christ]; he [himself] explains how he fits into the Father’s plans and the historical covenants made with Israel,” rather than focusing on atonement and individual redemption.<sup>24</sup> When Nephi’s angelic

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24. Grant Hardy, “3 Nephi Conference Panel Discussion,” in *Third Nephi: An Incomparable Scripture*, ed. Andrew C. Skinner and Gaye Strathearn (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Neal A. Maxwell Institute, 2012), 385–86. See also Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader’s Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 180–83.

guide lays particular emphasis on the “things” Christ would “minister” to Nephi’s seed, identifying these with the “plain and precious” (1 Ne. 13:35), he indicates that the plain and precious things referred to in Nephi’s vision primarily concern the covenants given to Israel.<sup>25</sup> While “many covenants” of the Lord—particular covenantal encounters with Israel, perhaps—may have been directly removed, the “many parts [of the gospel] which are plain and most precious” seem to have been lost through the disappearance of a proper understanding of the whole set of Israel’s historical covenants, many of which *do* appear in the Christian Bible (1 Ne. 13:26). At any rate, if it is in fact 3 Nephi that principally restores an understanding of the “plain and precious,” it is arguably *covenantal* theology that is the chief focus of what Nephi sees being “taken away” from the gospel and the Bible. That the “plain and precious” concerns Israel’s covenant is further confirmed when Nephi later describes the second half of his record—that is, 2 Nephi—as focused on “the more plain and precious parts” of his own ministry and prophecies (1 Ne. 19:3). As careful readers of 2 Nephi know, covenantal history is a key focus of that book.<sup>26</sup>

We might, then, briefly revisit in this context the use of the phrase “plain and most precious” from sequence two of the angel’s explanation of the Bible and its significance. It seems that, at its heart, the angel’s message has been that the key founding event of the apostasy was the historical transformation of Christianity’s understanding of Israel’s covenant. Of course, to understand 1 Nephi 13:26 and its talk of the “plain and most precious” parts of “the gospel of the Lamb” in this way, it is necessary to shift away from a commonly held opinion. It is often assumed that the “plain and precious” parts taken from the gospel and the Bible are doctrines commonly recognized as unique to The Church

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25. Traditional Latter-day Saint readings of 3 Nephi tend to downplay the importance of the covenantal sermons making up the bulk of the book, but see Victor L. Ludlow, “The Father’s Covenant People Sermon: 3 Nephi 20:10–23:5,” in *Third Nephi: An Incomparable Scripture*, 147–74. For an example of downplaying the importance of the covenant, see Andrew C. Skinner, *Third Nephi: The Fifth Gospel* (Springville, Utah: Cedar Fort, 2012).

26. For more on the literary implications of 1 Nephi 19:1–6, see Frederick W. Axergard, “1 and 2 Nephi: An Inspiring Whole,” *BYU Studies* 26, no. 4 (1986): 53–66; and Joseph M. Spencer, *An Other Testament: On Typology*, 2d ed. (Provo, Utah: Neal A. Maxwell Institute, 2016), 33–68. For an important but, in our view, unconvincing critique of these approaches, see Noel B. Reynolds, “On Doubting Nephi’s Break between 1 and 2 Nephi: A Critique of Joseph Spencer’s *An Other Testament: On Typology*,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 25 (2017): 85–102.

of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.<sup>27</sup> But while the Restoration unmistakably includes the emergence or reemergence of ideas foreign to most of modern Christianity, it must be said—as Terryl Givens notes—that “those beliefs most commonly associated with Mormonism are nowhere to be found” in the Book of Mormon. It “contains no explicit mention of exaltation (the eventual deification of man), the degrees of glory, tithing, the Word of Wisdom, baptism for the dead, premortal existence, or eternal marriage.”<sup>28</sup> Givens suggests elsewhere that if the Book of Mormon altered anything of obvious significance in mainline Christian theology at the time of its appearance, the change lies principally or even solely in the way it “served to radically reconstitute covenant theology.”<sup>29</sup> For this reason, it makes good sense to claim that the Book of Mormon—3 Nephi especially—does its most innovative work by redrafting the meaning of Israel’s historical covenant rather than by introducing long-lost doctrines about the nature of God, the salvation of families, the premortal existence, or the tiered nature of the afterlife. Thus, although many Latter-day Saints have understood Nephi’s talk of the “plain and precious” as referring to doctrines removed or altered under the influence of especially Greek thought and culture, it seems best to understand the phrase as focusing principally or exclusively on the understanding of Israel’s covenant.<sup>30</sup>

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27. A second opinion about Nephi’s meaning, less frequently heard but in our view equally problematic in the context of interpreting 1 Nephi 13, is the idea that Nephi’s reference to “many covenants” in verse 26 concerns specific ordinances once discussed in the Bible but eventually removed. We discuss this interpretation in an earlier note. It might be added at this point, though, that Noel Reynolds’s frequent emphasis in recent work on the Book of Mormon’s definition of the “gospel,” combined with verse 26’s attachment of “parts . . . plain and most precious” to “the gospel of the Lamb,” strengthens his interpretation. This is, in fact, possible, but we are more inclined to assume that what the angel calls “the *fulness* of the gospel” (1 Ne. 13:24, emphasis added) is the whole covenantal picture within which the more narrowly construed six-part gospel (of faith, repentance, baptism, the gift of the Holy Ghost, endurance, and salvation) plays a key but inexhaustive role. We assume that the *fulness* of the gospel is, precisely, what the Book of Mormon restores (see D&C 20:9) through its clarification of the gospel *and* of the latter’s relationship to the larger Israelite covenant.

28. Terryl L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture That Launched a New World Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 186.

29. Terryl L. Givens, *Feeding the Flock: The Foundations of Mormon Thought; Church and Praxis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 13.

30. For a helpful critique of standard accusations against ancient Greek philosophy as a source of apostasy, see Daniel W. Graham and James L. Siebach, “The Introduction of Philosophy into Early Christianity,” in Reynolds, *Early Christians in Disarray*, 205–37.

In our argument, then, the point of 1 Nephi 13:26 and its description of the initial process of apostasy is to claim that Christianity went astray when it developed a problematic understanding of historical Israel's role in God's larger covenantal purposes. From the Book of Mormon's perspective, the "Great Apostasy," whatever else it includes, concerns first and foremost *the transformation of the self-understanding of Jesus's followers through a reconceptualization of Israel's covenants as exclusively pertaining to themselves*. It concerns, in other words, a misappropriation of Israel's identity. Certainly, the Book of Mormon claims to restore a peculiar understanding of Israel's covenants, an understanding outlined most forcefully in Jesus Christ's sermons in 3 Nephi (closely related to Nephi's teachings in 2 Nephi). If we are to give a historiographically responsible account of the events prophesied by Nephi, it seems we must seek a set of events in Christian history through which the historical importance of Israel's covenants—as well as of Israel itself—was deeply and drastically reformulated.

In our view, it is not difficult to identify such a series of events in Christian history—specifically in early Christian history. The transformation in question arguably occurred in preliminary form between the late first century and the end of the second century. As we have already noted, we must leave the details of such an argument for another occasion. For now it must be sufficient just to clarify the lens through which we might look at early Christian historical records, as it is first necessary to become clearer about exactly what the Book of Mormon presents as the *right* covenant theology, the theological vision abandoned in apostasy.<sup>31</sup>

### **The Book of Mormon and Covenant Theology**

The basic problem with traditional Christian approaches to the relationship between Judaism and Christianity is summed up nicely in a passage in 2 Nephi. In direct response to "Gentiles"—Christians of European descent—who say, "A Bible! A Bible! We have got a Bible," Nephi quotes the Lord's rebuke: "O ye Gentiles! Have ye remembered the Jews, mine ancient covenant people? Nay; but ye have cursed them, and have hated

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31. Terryl Givens has recently outlined what he takes to be the Book of Mormon's unique covenant theology, taking a broadly comparative approach. See Givens, *Feeding the Flock*, 14–21.

them, and have not sought to recover them" (2 Ne. 29:3, 5).<sup>32</sup> Here, in an imagined conversation with modern Christianity, Nephi has God claim "the Jews" as his "ancient covenant people" and expects modern Christians to understand that claim. But the history of Christianity has been one of cursing, hatred, and neglect toward Jews. The text presents this attitude as bewildering, leading God himself to ask, "What do the Gentiles mean?" (2 Ne. 29:4). Christianity, the Book of Mormon indicates, bears a problematic relationship to its roots.<sup>33</sup> In scholarly terms, the theological crime of which God accuses Christianity in 2 Nephi is supersessionism.<sup>34</sup> In effect, Christianity supplants the biblical texts' *remnant* theology with *replacement* theology—terms that will require clarification. It will be necessary here, therefore, to trace the contours of the remnant theologies found in the Book of Mormon. This theoretical work establishes the path from clarifying Nephi's view of apostasy to actually studying the apostasy historically. However, before turning directly to the scriptural texts that form the focus of this section of the paper, it should prove useful to provide at least preliminary definitions of replacement theology (or supersessionism) and remnant theology. These will function in the remainder of our argument.

### *Replacement Theology*

Replacement theology, or supersessionism, in its simplest form, is unsurprisingly defined by its commitment to the idea that Christianity *replaces* or *supersedes* Judaism. This idea, as Walter Brueggemann notes, relies on the traditional "absolutist claims of Christian theology."<sup>35</sup> Supersessionism trades on the idea that Christianity, to the exclusion of Judaism (as well as every other religious tradition), represents the only

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32. It is possible—but in our view, a mistake—to interpret "ancient" in the phrase "ancient covenant people" to indicate that the people in question were only the "covenant people" anciently.

33. The metaphor of the root, combined with that of problematic (over)growth, appears in the Book of Mormon in the allegory of the olive tree, attributed to Zenos, an Old World prophet (see Jacob 5:8, 11, 18, 34–37, 48, 53–54, 59–60, 65–66, 73). It seems most likely that the image of the roots in the allegory is meant to signal, principally, the covenantal origins of both Judaism and Christianity.

34. See the similar conclusion in Steven Epperson, *Mormons and Jews: Early Mormon Theologies of Israel* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), 19–41.

35. Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 112.

true or correct understanding of and approach to God. Of course, religious absolutism does not directly entail supersessionism. But because historical Christianity binds itself to the Old Testament and the New Testament, taking into its own scriptural canon the holy book (and associated history) of another religious tradition, its religious absolutism requires some account of its relationship to Judaism. Most frequently, this relationship has been historically conceived in terms of replacement, promoting some form of the idea that Christianity *takes over* Judaism's former heritage. The advent of the New Testament does not eliminate the Old Testament, according to most supersessionist views, but it subjects the Hebrew Scriptures to a radical reinterpretation.

Such reinterpretation can take several (sometimes overlapping) shapes. Scholars helpfully distinguish among three sorts of supersessionism, all traceable to early Christian writers but also visible in much of twenty-first-century Christianity.<sup>36</sup> First and most ethically troubling is “punitive supersessionism,” the view that God has punished Jews for failing to recognize Jesus as the Messiah. This sort of supersessionism reads the Old Testament to find promises of divine judgment against Israel and then traces their supposed fulfillment in the appalling history of Jewish persecution. Second is “economic supersessionism,” which has reference not to markets but to the theological notion of the divine economy; the basic idea in this form of replacement theology is that the Christian church effectively supplants historical Israel as the referent in all the divine promises in the Hebrew Scriptures. Consequently, this sort of supersessionism reads the Old Testament with the aim to reapply all promises of Israelite redemption to Christ’s salvation of Christian believers. Finally and somewhat more complexly, there is “structural supersessionism,” which assumes that the Israelite background of the New Testament is irrelevant to its interpretation—this because Christianity should be regarded as a timeless moral philosophy. This final form of supersessionism essentially dismisses the task of reading the Old Testament (except where it confirms Christian ethics). Of course, all three forms of supersessionism have contributed to the long and terrible history of Jewish persecution.

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36. See, for example, Steven D. Aguzzi, *Israel, the Church, and Millenarianism: A Way beyond Replacement Theology* (New York: Routledge, 2018). For a much more fine-grained typology, see Terence L. Donaldson, “Supersessionism and Early Christian Self-Definition,” *Journal of the Jesus Movement in Its Jewish Setting* 3 (2016): 1–32.

For its part, as we will show in the next subsection, the Book of Mormon emphatically rejects the last two of these forms of supersessionism. It also rejects, though less forthrightly, the first form. That is to say, some Book of Mormon passages do in fact indicate antipathy toward (at least certain) Jews and certainly suggest (without explicitly stating) that divine will is involved in the history of Jewish persecution.<sup>37</sup> But the volume seldom, if ever, uses these occasional potentially anti-Jewish moments as an interpretive lens for reading the Hebrew scriptures. Instead, it emphatically interprets the words of the Israelite prophets to underscore its anticipation of redemption for historical Israel, literally and completely.<sup>38</sup> The Book of Mormon thus appears to espouse supersessionism's polar opposite, exchanging the Christian tradition's dominant replacement theologies with a remnant theology. Of course, the Book of Mormon is in no way unique in embracing some form of remnant theology—especially after the Nazi extermination of millions of Jews, which has turned many Christian theologians away from certain supersessionist readings. And it must be said that there is no *one* shape of remnant theology in the larger Christian tradition (in the earliest Christian sources or in the theological traditions of both mainline and heterodox Christianity). Even within the New Testament, there are different conceptions of the Israelite remnant, and the theme of the remnant has taken distinct shapes at different times when it has emerged in Christian history.<sup>39</sup> What the Book of Mormon offers, then,

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37. See especially 2 Nephi 10:3–6; 25:2, where it is implied that Jewish persecution is a consequence of certain Jews' involvement in the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. It is, however, surprisingly difficult to find arguments in print that these passages are actually anti-Jewish. For a somewhat fuller treatment of the texts in question along such lines, see Epperson, *Mormons and Jews*, 25.

38. See, again, Epperson, *Mormons and Jews*, 19–41.

39. The most significant replacement-theological development within the history of remnant theology deserves notice because it has its origins in the same historical milieu as the Restoration, and because the religious tradition from which it hails has produced some of the most significant historical-critical work on the remnant theme in biblical sources. William Miller, the famous millenarian of nineteenth-century America, utilized a traditional supersessionist interpretation of the Hebrew scriptures to apply their prophecies to spiritual (rather than literal) Israel. Claiming, against the larger millenarian tradition, that “the theory of the return of the Jews was not sustained by the Word,” Miller essentially produced an “anti-Jewish Adventism,” as Steven Epperson calls it. George L. Berlin, *Defending the Faith: Nineteenth-Century American Jewish Writing on Christianity and Jesus* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1989), 4; and Epperson, *Mormons and Jews*, 20. When Ellen G. White subsequently spoke as an Adventist prophet about

is only *a* remnant theology, *one possible* remnant theology, but it unmistakably proffers this as an alternative to Christianity's dominant replacement theologies, be they of whatever sort they might.

### *Remnant Theology*

The basic idea animating remnant theologies has its origins in a Hebrew (and, more generally, ancient Near Eastern) tradition that reflected theologically on the significance of the survivors of major disasters.<sup>40</sup> Following the Babylonian deportation, for example, some Hebrew prophets identified surviving deportees as having returned through God's providence and so bearing responsibility for announcing God's goodness to the world. Seeing such survivors as saved for the fulfillment of a sacred task, this tradition then generally regarded the delivered remnant as responsible to perpetuate the people favored by God. In the Israelite context, this idea comprised several aspects, concisely summarized by Mark Elliot: "The idea of the remnant in Israel through history expressed [a] sense of continuing, or conserving, the true Israelite religion; it expressed a minority consciousness; and it certainly lent itself to developments in a corporate or community direction."<sup>41</sup> The theme appears throughout the prophetic writings of the Hebrew Bible, and it played a central role for many Jewish groups between the late sixth century BC and the late first century AD. The earliest forms of remnant theology among those professing the name of Jesus were thus part of widespread Jewish interest in the remnant theme. The idea of the remnant effectively provided a dissenting movement like nascent Christianity with a concept that not only granted continuity with the larger Hebrew tradition but also provided the opportunity to depart from the tradition through theological innovations on the remnant theme. In other words, the remnant idea maintained the movement's proximity to the remainder of Judaism while allowing for the articulation of novel development in God's work with human beings.

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the remnant people of God, with reference to Adventists themselves, a replacement-theological concept of the remnant was effectively born.

40. For an overview, see Gerhard F. Hasel, *The Remnant: The History and Theology of the Remnant Idea from Genesis to Isaiah* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Press, 1972).

41. Mark A. Elliott, *The Survivors of Israel: A Reconsideration of the Theology of Pre-Christian Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 242.

As we have noted, we will address uses of the remnant idea in first-century Christianity on another occasion. Here, we wish to outline the use of the concept in the Book of Mormon, where another line of development appears. It can be shown that certain voices in the New Testament view themselves as members of the remnant of Israel, a select portion of the covenant people with a task to spur (or even “provoke,” as Paul puts it) all of Israel’s redemption. *Nephite* voices in the Book of Mormon, however, do not so much themselves *constitute* as *address themselves to* a remnant of Israel destined to play a role in spurring Israel’s redemption in the last days. This is clear from the Book of Mormon’s title page, which identifies as the volume’s intended audience “the Lamanites, which are a remnant of the house of Israel.” The point of the volume, it explains, “is to shew unto the remnant of the house of Israel” something about its relationship to the promises given to Abraham. The Book of Mormon thus outlines a remnant theology, but with an emphasis on what, from the Book of Mormon’s perspective, was the distant future of the remnant and its role in covenant history.

Given the frequent appearance of remnant language in the Book of Mormon’s Isaiah quotations—especially in the long quotation of Isaiah 2–14 in 2 Nephi—the source for all Nephite theologizing on the theme is clear.<sup>42</sup> But beginning already with Nephi, Isaiah’s remnant theme is “likened” in the Book of Mormon to a history of Israel witnessed in vision by uniquely New World prophets (outlined in detail in 1 Nephi 11–14 and 2 Nephi 25–30). Due to historical Christianity’s inability to discern covenantal themes in the Bible, God arranges for a Nephite record of “plain and precious” things to come forth in the last days (1 Ne. 13:35), reconstructing for Gentiles “the fulness of the gospel of the Lord” (1 Ne. 13:24). Gentiles benefit enormously from the fact that it is “unto” them that the Nephite record first comes (v. 35), since this provides them with an opportunity—in the ambiguous phrasing of the text—to “be numbered among the seed of [Lehi]” or “among the house

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42. The word “remnant” does not appear in other Isaiah quotations included in the Book of Mormon, but the idea of the remnant is present in those quotations as well. Isaiah 48–54, most all of which appears in scattered places in the Book of Mormon, is implicitly understood in the larger framework of the book of Isaiah as addressed to the remnant, even if such language is not used directly. For a much-expanded treatment of these ideas, see Joseph M. Spencer, *The Vision of All: Twenty-five Lectures on Isaiah in Nephi’s Record* (Draper: Greg Kofford Books, 2016).

of Israel" (1 Ne. 14:2).<sup>43</sup> Gentiles thus receive a chance to set Christianity straight. But the promises are realized only inasmuch as "the Gentiles" take the Book of Mormon to its original addressees, "the remnant of the seed of [Nephi's] brethren" (1 Ne. 13:38; see also 1 Ne. 15:13–14; 2 Ne. 30:3–4). The Gentiles are the deeply benefitted middlemen in a literary transaction between ancient Nephite prophets and latter-day Lamanite survivors (see 2 Ne. 28:2). With Gentiles openly being converted and the remnant of Israel newly aware of its covenantal roots, the book goes "also [to] the Jews" (1 Ne. 13:39) and "to all kindreds, tongues, and people" (1 Ne. 13:40) to spur the final events of covenantal history. The "great and abominable church" falls, and "the work of the Father" finally "commence[s] in preparing the way for the fulfilling of [the Father's] covenants, which he hath made to his people who are of the house of Israel" (1 Ne. 14:17).

Nephi is the first to sketch this picture in the Book of Mormon. Christ, visiting Lehi's children after his resurrection, confirms it. He too speaks of a Nephite record to "be kept" so that it can "be manifested unto the Gentiles," who might then achieve a "fulness" as they take the record to Lehi's children (3 Ne. 16:4).<sup>44</sup> As Christ puts this point later, the record is to be "made known" to Gentiles by "the Father" and then "come forth of the Father from them" to latter-day Lamanites (3 Ne. 21:3). He further specifies that God involves the Gentiles in this to "show forth his power unto the Gentiles, for this cause that the Gentiles . . . may be numbered among [Christ's] people," the "house of Israel" (3 Ne. 21:6). Christ designates this coming forth of the Book of Mormon as "a sign . . . that the work of the Father hath already commenced unto the fulfilling of the covenant which he hath made unto the people which are of the house of Israel" (3 Ne. 21:7). Like Nephi, Christ also issues warnings to unrepentant Gentiles, but he does so in ways far more frightening than

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43. It must be said that the exact meaning of "being numbered among" Israel remains unclear. Does this mean that Gentiles *become* Israelites in some fashion? Does it mean that they come to dwell *alongside* Israel without a direct change of identity? Does it suggest any kind of change on the part of Israelites in a kind of gentile direction, perhaps with a slight supersessionist air? Obviously, we prefer to understand the metaphor to imply a kind of covenantal primacy for Israel, to whom Gentiles are then joined—whatever that looks like in practical terms.

44. The use of the word "fulness" here, slightly awkward in its context in 3 Nephi 16, mirrors the language of Paul in Romans 11:25: "Blindness in part is happened to Israel, until the fulness of the Gentiles be come in." For representative recent commentary on the meaning of the phrase "the fulness of the Gentiles" in Paul's letter, see James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9–16* (Dallas: Word Books, 1988), 679–80.

Nephi's record. Despite the Gentiles' privileges, if they "sin" and "reject the fulness of [Christ's] gospel," they will lose "the fulness" (3 Ne. 16:10). And the Father will turn his attention to the covenant people: "And then will I remember my covenant which I have made unto my people," Christ quotes the Father as saying, "and I will bring my gospel unto them" (3 Ne. 16:11). Meanwhile, the prospects for unbelieving Gentiles are bleak: "If they will not turn unto me, and hearken unto my voice, I will suffer . . . my people, O house of Israel, that they shall go through among them, and shall tread them down" (3 Ne. 16:15). Twice Christ illustrates this gentile destruction with frightening language borrowed from Micah, speaking of the "remnant of the house of Jacob, . . . as a young lion among the flocks of sheep, who, if he goeth through both treadeth down and teareth in pieces, and none can deliver" (3 Ne. 20:16; see also 3 Ne. 21:12).

For Christ as for Nephi, Israel's story concludes with the redemption of Israel's remnants in the plural.<sup>45</sup> Lehi's children as well as "the remnant" of "other tribes" are to be "brought to a knowledge" of Christ and then "gather[ed] . . . in from the four quarters of the earth" (3 Ne. 16:4–5). Christ thus equates the time of the "fulfilling of the covenant which the Father hath made unto his people" with the time when "the remnants, which shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the earth" will be "gathered in from the east and from the west, and from the south and from the north" (3 Ne. 20:12–13). These remnants come to "the knowledge of the Lord their God" and to the appropriate "land[s] for [their] inheritance" (3 Ne. 20:13–14). More particularly—on this point Christ goes further than Nephi—repentant Gentiles numbered among Israel are to "assist . . . the remnant of Jacob, and also as many of the house of Israel as shall come, that they may build a city, which shall be called the New Jerusalem" (3 Ne. 21:23).

In all these prophecies and sermons, the Book of Mormon outlines a consistent remnant theology whose overall picture must not be lost in the details. Lehi's children eventually face apocalyptic destruction—first at their own hands in the wars that end Nephite history and then at the hands of Gentiles arriving in the New World in the early modern period. But the remnant of Lehi's seed that survives these devastations then plays a vital role in the history of the covenant, poised to receive the

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45. This is the focus, too, of the covenantal history in Zenos's allegory of the olive tree (in Jacob 5), which has obvious connections with both Lehi's prophecy in 1 Nephi 10 and Paul's discussion of remnant theology in Romans 9–11.

writings of their long-dead kin. These writings come to them through gentile intermediaries, giving the latter an opportunity to involve themselves in Israel's promises, and the Gentiles' involvement opens the way for the redemption of the Israelite remnant in the New World (as well as of various Israelite remnants scattered across the earth). All this the Lehites—and especially Nephi—tie to prophecies from Isaiah, finding there an outline of the history that interests them.

## Conclusion

When Joseph Smith decided to dictate his history in 1838, he told his scribes that the angelic visit first alerting him to the existence of the Nephite gold plates included a recitation of passages from the book of Malachi. Famously, however, he said that the angel quoted these passages “with a little variation” from known renderings of the biblical text (JS-H 1:36). Too seldom is it noted that the variant text quoted by the angel replaced Malachi’s talk of parents’ and children’s hearts turning to each other in mutual reconciliation (see Mal. 4:5–6) with a rather different sort of talk. God would, through an appropriate messenger, “plant in the hearts of the children the promises made to the fathers, and the hearts of the children shall turn to their fathers” (JS-H 1:39). This variant text speaks only of a turning in *one* direction, describing latter-day “children” coming to know of and then be oriented by promises made to the patriarchs—“the fathers.” As the Prophet told the story in 1838, he first learned of the Book of Mormon’s existence while simultaneously learning that God intended to call the world’s attention anew to Israel’s ancient covenants. In this paper, we have argued that such a call to return to the Abrahamic covenant forms a major—if not the chief—foundation of the project of the Restoration. The Book of Mormon describes its own coming forth as restoring Christianity’s covenantal focus, lost early in Christian history through the imposition of an anti-Jewish interpretive framework, one (as we have said) that we plan to explain in more detail in later publications.

To be sure, we fully recognize that the picture of the apostasy we have drawn up here is different from traditional ways of imagining what occurred. Where the latter have attempted to trace corruption in traditional theological categories (like the nature of God or the understanding of the sacraments), we have argued that theological problems associated with the apostasy concerned conceptions of Israel’s role in God’s world-historical intentions—what theologians often call salvation history. Further, where traditional accounts have largely attached

blame to maturing Christian theology in the fourth and fifth centuries (principally in and around the writings of Saint Augustine), we view the relevant problems within Christian self-understanding as being apparent as soon as the Christian message began attracting gentile converts (already in the mid-first century, but especially at the end of the first century and during the second century). We are convinced that our account makes far better sense of Latter-day Saint scripture. At the same time, we wish to underscore that we have here provided only a *first sketch* of an apostasy narrative that is ethically responsible (because it is nonsupersessionist) and historiographically defensible (as we will have to show elsewhere). In other words, we have aimed here only to show what a response to the call implicitly issued in Miranda Wilcox and John Young's *Standing Apart* might look like. At the least, though, we hope this presentation serves to clarify the Book of Mormon's provocation regarding the nature of Christian history—and to strengthen our collective resolve to seek out every remnant of Israel as we work within the context of the Restoration.

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Nicholas J. Frederick holds a Ph.D. in the history of Christianity from Claremont Graduate University and is currently an associate professor of ancient scripture at Brigham Young University. His enjoys researching and writing on the Book of Mormon, especially its relationship with the King James Bible. He lives with his wife, Julie, and their four children in Spanish Fork, Utah.

Joseph M. Spencer is a philosopher and an assistant professor of ancient scripture at Brigham Young University. He is the author or editor of eight books and dozens of articles. Professor Spencer serves as the editor of the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*, the associate director of the Latter-day Saint Theology Seminar, and a series editor for *Introductions to Mormon Thought*. He and his wife, Karen, live in Provo, Utah, with their five children.