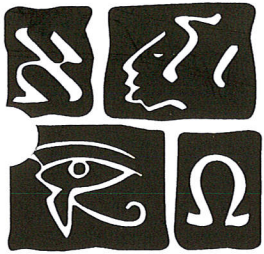




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FOUNDATION FOR ANCIENT RESEARCH AND MORMON STUDIES

D. Kelly Ogden

# As Plain as Words Can Be

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## Summary:

The Book of Mormon prophets were intentionally plain in their language even when using figurative language; they generally avoided using obscure figures with hidden meanings. In this paper, Kelly Ogden lists metaphors used in the Book of Mormon along with the plain definitions the prophets gave to explain the figurative language they used. Ogden notes that when teaching doctrine the prophets would often repeat concepts using different words so the people could not misunderstand.

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## ***"As Plain As Word Can Be" (2 Nephi 32:7)***

***A Study of Intentional Plainness while using Figurative Language  
in the Book of Mormon***

**D. Kelly Ogden**

Prophets in Bible Lands sometimes spoke and wrote using obscure figurative language, with hidden meanings, because the people hardened their hearts and rejected the many plain and precious things . . . which were plain, and pure, and easy to the understanding of all men (1 Nephi 13:29; 14:23).

"Behold, the Jews were a stiffnecked people; and they despised the words of plainness, and killed the prophets, and sought for things that they could not understand. Wherefore, because of their blindness, which blindness came by looking beyond the mark, they must needs fall; for God hath taken away his plainness from them, and delivered unto them many things which they cannot understand, because they desired it . . ." (Jacob 4:14).

Prophecies were manifested plainly, "for the salvation of our souls," but some Jews despised plainness, sought complexity, and God took away the plainness. Satan has always tried to corrupt our minds "from the simplicity that is in Christ" (2 Corinthians 11:3).

Figurative language is poetic; it is a unique use of language, an expression using certain words which, if we understood them literally, we would miss the actual intent of the expression. Figurative language is saying one thing



and meaning another. The rib of Adam used in creating a woman (Gen. 2:22), the burning coal used in cleansing Isaiah (Isa. 6:6-7), and the scrolls or books that Ezekiel and John were to eat (Ezek. 3:1; Rev. 10:9) were all symbolic expressions. The woman was formed, but not necessarily from the rib of Adam. Isaiah's cleansing was literal, but the process was symbolic. Ezekiel and John ingested and performed their missions to the people of Israel, but not literally by eating written words.

The Book of Mormon features some of the world's most beautiful and powerful poetic writings, replete with figurative expressions. From deep in the sensitive heart of the Prophet Nephi we feel these words rich with meaning:

"By day have I waxed bold in mighty prayer before him; yea, my voice have I sent up on high"

"And upon the wings of his Spirit hath my body been carried away upon exceedingly high mountains.

". . . if the Lord in his condescension unto the children of men hath visited men in so much mercy, why should my heart weep and my soul linger in the valley of sorrow, and my flesh waste away, and my strength slacken . . .

". . . why should I give way to temptations, that the evil one have place in my heart to destroy my peace and afflict my soul?

"May the gates of hell be shut continually before me, because that my heart is broken and my spirit is contrite! O Lord, wilt thou not shut the gates of righteousness before me, that I may walk in the path of the low valley, that I may be strict in the plain road!

"O Lord, wilt thou encircle me around in the robe of thy righteousness!"  
(excerpted from 2 Nephi 4:24-33).

And Jacob, Nephi's brother, was not one whit behind him in strength of poetic expression:

". . . our lives passed away like as it were unto us a dream, we being a lonesome and a solemn people, wanderers, cast out from Jerusalem, born in tribulation, in a wilderness, and hated of our brethren, which caused wars and contentions; wherefore, we did mourn out our days" (Jacob 7:26).

Centuries later, Mormon, the general, prophet, and historian, described the value of studying the Scriptures, or, as he put it, laying hold on the word of God:

"We see that whosoever will may lay hold upon the word of God, which is quick and powerful, which shall divide asunder all the cunning and the snares and the wiles of the devil, and lead the man of Christ in a strait and narrow course across that everlasting gulf of misery which is prepared to engulf the wicked —

"And land their souls, yea, their immortal souls, at the right hand of God in the kingdom of heaven, to sit down with Abraham, and Isaac, and with Jacob, and with all our holy fathers, to go no more out" (Helaman 3:29-30).

If we read these words with minds open and anxious for understanding, we ask a series of questions:

How is the word of God *quick*?

How does the word *divide asunder* the devil's *cunning and snares and wiles*?

In fact, what are *wiles*?

What is a "*man of Christ*"?

What is meant by a *strait and narrow course*?

What is the *gulf of misery*?

Why is it preferred to *land our souls at the right hand* of God?

And what does it mean to "*go no more out*"?

Prophets used figurative language prolifically. And sometimes it is essential to understand the figures in order to understand the doctrine. Consider Alma 34:36.

"The Lord hath said he dwelleth not in unholy temples, but in the hearts of the righteous doth he dwell; yea, and he has also said that the righteous shall sit down in his kingdom, to go no more out; but their garments should be made white through the blood of the Lamb."

It is true that the Lord will not enter and reside in temples [i.e., temple buildings built to His honor] which are unholy, but we also understand the Scripture to mean that His Spirit will not reside in human bodies which are unholy. Why would the Scripture suggest that God dwells in the hearts of righteous people, when Doctrine and Covenants 130:3 specifically says that "the idea that the Father and the Son dwell in a man's heart is an old sectarian notion, and is false"? There are two answers to the question: first, "*the Spirit of the Lord* doth not dwell in unholy temples" (Helaman 4:24), and second, a series of figures of speech is here employed and understanding of the doctrine comes only by understanding the figures. We are not to presume that the Lord literally dwells in the mortal hearts of men and women, but that His Spirit and influence can be present in our heart, the center of human feeling, if our heart is holy and righteous. The heart figuratively represents the whole human personality. If we are holy we shall "sit down" or reside in his kingdom permanently, "to go no more out." We are holy because our "garments," our clothed spirits, are made white, or pure, through the *blood of the Lamb*. The Lamb, symbolic of One who went calmly to the slaughter, provides the cleansing whiteness through blood. Though in a sense incongruous, blood, which is normally

capable of staining garments to a deep crimson color, is the agent for purifying to perfect whiteness. As Isaiah wrote, using similar imagery, "though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool" (Isaiah 1:18).

A favorite literary and oratorical device among the ancient prophets was to compare something in nature with something in the human experience. They delighted in making comparisons between principles of human behavior and the objects and processes they saw occurring in the fields, and among the flora and fauna, the meteorological phenomena, life in the royal and legal courts, and especially comparisons related to the human body. These figures, also called similitudes, shadows, or types, were simple, plain, and powerful.

Following are more examples of the use of figurative or symbolic language in the Book of Mormon. Surface images are used, but the messages are only understood by correctly interpreting the deep meaning of the figures. For example, when we read about the Lamb of God we immediately understand that no reference is made to a young sheep in some heavenly pasture, but that a symbolic title for the Son of God is employed. In fact, most of these figures of speech would be ridiculous or absurd or unintelligible if taken literally. Those who regularly study the Scriptures become accustomed to figurative language and acquire greater and greater aptitude for deciphering the simple but deep meaning of figures used.

From flora and fauna, meteorological phenomena, and land formations

"the *Lamb* was baptized" (1 Nephi 11:27)

"God, their *rock* and . . . *the true vine*" (1 Nephi 15:15)

"he shall rise from the dead, with healing in his *wings*" (2 Nephi 25:13)

"*the good shepherd* doth call after you; and if you will hearken unto his voice he will bring you into his *fold*, and ye are his *sheep*; and he commandeth you that ye suffer no *ravenous wolf* to enter among you" (Alma 5:60)

"*bridle* all your passions, that ye may be filled with love" (Alma 38:12)

"they are *flocking* to us daily, to their arms, in the defence of their country" (Alma 61:6)

"when the devil shall send forth his mighty *winds*, yea, his *shafts in the whirlwind*, yea, when all his *hail* and his *mighty storm* shall beat upon you, it shall have no power over you to drag you down to the *gulf of misery* and endless wo, because of the *rock* upon which ye are built, which is a sure foundation" (Helaman 5:12)

Figures from the human body

"his *whole heart* was filled" (1 Nephi 1:15)

"delivered out of the *hands of nations*" (1 Nephi 13:19)

"by the *hand of the twelve apostles* of the Lamb" (1 Nephi 13:26)

"God will . . . *make bare his arm* in the eyes of the nations" (1 Nephi 22:10)

"my *heart* must leave this world with gladness" (2 Nephi 1:21)

"the *spokesman of thy loins*" (2 Nephi 3:18)

"*maketh flesh his arm*" (2 Nephi 4:34)

"he *leadeth them by the neck with a flaxen cord*" (2 Nephi 26:22)

"I shall *lengthen out mine arm* unto them" (2 Nephi 28:32)

"speak with a *new tongue*" (2 Nephi 31:14)

"the *hand of providence hath smiled upon you*" (Jacob 2:13)

"much should be done among this people, because of the *hardness of their hearts*, and the *deafness of their ears*, and the *blindness of their minds*, and the *stiffness of their necks*" (Jarom 1:3)

"he *cast his eyes round about on the multitude*" (Mosiah 4:1)

"ye have . . . *tasted of his love*" (Mosiah 4:11)

"he *placed his heart upon his riches*" (Mosiah 11:14)

"having their *hearts knit together*" (Mosiah 18:21)

"[Alma was] *stealing away the hearts* of the people" (Mosiah 27:9)

"[God] *changed their hearts*" and "*their souls did expand*" (Alma 5:7, 9)

"I have also acquired much riches by the *hand of my industry*" (Alma 10:4)

"his *bowels of mercy* are over all the earth" (Alma 26:37)

"he *lifted up his voice to heaven*" (Alma 31:26)

"they *fought on both hands* with exceeding fury" (Alma 52:35)

"O ye fools, ye *uncircumcised of heart*, ye *blind*, and ye *stiffnecked*"  
(Helaman 9:21)

"[they] saw Nephi as he was *pouring out his soul* unto God" (Helaman 7:11)

As is apparent from the preceding passages, ancient prophets in the western hemisphere did use figurative language, and figurative language can be simple and plain. However, they generally avoided using obscure figures with hidden meanings. They delighted in things "plain and precious." Beginning with Nephi, the Book of Mormon prophets carefully and intentionally explained many of their revelations and their doctrines in plain language. Nephi, Jacob, Benjamin, and Alma all gave reasons for this approach:

"my soul delighteth in plainness unto my people, *that they may learn*" (2 Nephi 25:4).

"I proceed with mine own prophecy, according to my plainness; in the which I know *that no man can err . . .* I have spoken plainly *that ye cannot err*" (2 Nephi 25:7, 20).

"my soul delighteth in plainness; for *after this manner doth the Lord God work* among the children of men . . . *unto their understanding*" (2 Nephi 31:3).

"these things are manifested unto us plainly, *for the salvation of our souls*" (Jacob 4:13).

"I have spoken plainly unto you *that ye might understand*" (Mosiah 2:40).

"I have spoken unto you plainly *that ye cannot err*, or have spoken according to the commandments of God" (Alma 5:43).

"they are made known unto us in plain terms, *that we may understand, that we cannot err*" (Alma 13:23).

Nephi taught that the Lord operates *with plainness* among His people: "he doeth nothing save it be plain unto the children of men" (2 Nephi 26:33).

Writings on the brass plates, and later on the Liahona, where plain and simple (1 Nephi 1:19; 16:29). Further testimonials of the Lord's manner of speaking in plainness have come forth in our own day:

"Behold, here is the agency of man, and here is the condemnation of man; because that which was from the beginning is *plainly* manifest unto them" (D&C 93:31).

"For this cause, that men might be made partakers of the glories which were to be revealed, the Lord sent forth the fulness of his gospel, his everlasting covenant, reasoning in *plainness and simplicity*" (D&C 133:57).

#### Plainness when using figurative language

When teaching and prophesying, Book of Mormon prophets did, on occasion, use figurative language. Often when they used it they would immediately explain what they meant so there would be no confusion or misunderstanding. Nephi, who gloried in plainness and truth (2 Nephi 9:47; 33:6), gave us a classic illustration, as recorded in 1 Nephi 10:14. Note how, after each phrase of his father's prophecy, Nephi immediately followed it with plain explanation (the italicized words signal the plainer rendering):

"And after the house of Israel should be scattered they should be gathered together again; *or, in fine*, after the Gentiles had received the fulness of the Gospel, the natural branches of the olive-tree, *or* the remnants of the house of Israel, should be grafted in, *or* come to the knowledge of the true Messiah."

As if those internal explanations were not sufficient, Nephi later went on to expound in yet greater detail the meaning of the figures his father had introduced. (Rather than being discouraged by the lengthiness of Nephi's explanation, we are *impressed* at his devotion to plainness, so that no one of us can misunderstand.)

"Behold, I say unto you, that the house of Israel was compared unto an olive-tree, by the Spirit of the Lord which was in our father; and behold are we not broken off from the house of Israel, and are we not a branch of the house of Israel?

"And now, the thing which our father meaneth concerning the grafting in



of the natural branches through the fulness of the Gentiles, is, that in the latter days, when our seed shall have dwindled in unbelief, yea, for the space of many years, and many generations after the Messiah shall be manifested in body unto the children of men, then shall the fulness of the gospel of the Messiah come unto the Gentiles, and from the Gentiles unto the remnant of our seed—

"And at that day shall the remnant of our seed know that they are of the house of Israel, and that they are the covenant people of the Lord; and then shall they know and come to the knowledge of their forefathers, and also to the knowledge of the gospel of their Redeemer, which was ministered unto their fathers by him; wherefore, they shall come to the knowledge of their Redeemer and the very points of his doctrine, that they may know how to come unto him and be saved.

"And then at that day will they not rejoice and give praise unto their everlasting God, their rock and their salvation? Yea, at that day, will they not receive the strength and nourishment from the true vine? Yea, will they not come unto the true fold of God?

"Behold, I say unto you, Yea; they shall be remembered again among the house of Israel; they shall be grafted in, being a natural branch of the olive-tree, into the true olive-tree.

"And this is what our father meaneth; and he meaneth that it will not come to pass until after they are scattered by the Gentiles; and he meaneth that it shall come by way of the Gentiles, that the Lord may show his power unto the Gentiles, for the very cause that he shall be rejected *of the Jews, or of the house of Israel*.

"Wherefore, our father hath not spoken of our seed alone, but also of all the house of Israel, pointing to the covenant which should be fulfilled in the latter days; which covenant the Lord made to our father Abraham, saying: In thy seed shall all the kindreds of the earth be blessed.

"And it came to pass that I, Nephi, spake much unto them concerning these things; yea, I spake unto them concerning the restoration of the Jews in the latter days.

"And I did rehearse unto them the words of Isaiah, who spake concerning the restoration *of the Jews, or of the house of Israel*; and after they were restored they should no more be confounded, neither should they be scattered again." (1 Nephi 15:12-20).

Following are other examples of figures of speech with immediate and plain definition or explanation:

1. *Jew* = Israelite

In the above passage from Nephi, "Jews," by a figure called *synecdoche*, are twice put for the whole house of Israel (1 Nephi 15:20; cf. also 2 Nephi 33:8).

2. *trampling under feet* = setting at naught or hearkening not to counsel.

"The things which some men esteem to be of great worth, both to the body and soul, others set at naught and trample under their feet. Yea, even the very God of Israel do men trample under their feet; I say, trample under their feet but I would speak in other words — they set him at naught, and hearken not to the voice of his counsels" (1 Nephi 19:7).

3. *kingdom of the devil* = includes churches with various evil practices

"The time speedily shall come that all churches which are built up to get gain, and all those who are built up to get power over the flesh, and those who are built up to become popular in the eyes of the world, and those who seek the lusts of the flesh and the things of the world, and to do all manner of iniquity; yea, in fine, all those who belong to the kingdom of the devil are they who need fear . . ." (1 Nephi 22:23).

4. *making flesh his arm* = trusting in man

"I will not put my trust in the arm of flesh; for I know that cursed is he that putteth his trust in the arm of flesh. Yea, cursed is he that putteth his trust in man or maketh flesh his arm." "Cursed is he that putteth his trust in man, or maketh flesh his arm, or shall hearken unto the precepts of men" (2 Nephi 4:34; 28:31).

5. *monster* = death and hell, meaning death of body and death of spirit  
"[God] prepareth a way for our escape from the grasp of this awful monster; yea, that monster, death and hell, which I call the death of the body, and also the death of the spirit" (2 Nephi 9:10).
6. *chains* = death and hell, captivity by the devil  
"he grasps them with his awful chains, from whence there is no deliverance. Yea, they are grasped with death, and hell" (2 Nephi 28:22-23).  
"they are taken captive by the devil, and led by his will down to destruction. Now this is what is meant by the chains of hell" (Alma 12:11).
7. *lake of fire and brimstone* = endless torment  
"ye must go away into that lake of fire and brimstone, whose flames are unquenchable, and whose smoke ascendeth up forever and ever, which lake of fire and brimstone is endless torment" (Jacob 6:10; 2 Nephi 28:23; cf. Jacob 3:11).
8. *seed* = heirs of the kingdom of God  
"Whosoever has heard the words of the prophets, yea, all the holy prophets who have prophesied concerning the coming of the Lord — I say unto you, that all those who have hearkened unto their words, and believed that the Lord would redeem his people, and have looked forward to that day for a remission of their sins, I say unto you, that these are his seed, or they are the heirs of the kingdom of God" (Mosiah 15:11).  
  
*seed* = the word [of God] and *planting seed* = exercising faith  
after Alma had compared the word unto a seed and encouraged it to be planted in the heart, to swell and sprout and bring forth fruit, the people "sent forth unto him desiring to know . . . [how] they might obtain this fruit of which he had spoken, or how they should plant the seed, or the word of which he had spoken, which he said must be

planted in their hearts; or in what manner they should begin to exercise their faith" (Alma 33:1).

9. *good fruit* = works of righteousness

"Whosoever bringeth forth not good fruit, or whosoever doeth not the works of righteousness, the same have cause to wail and mourn" (Alma 5:36).

*fruits of their labors* = their unrighteous works

"they are cast out, and consigned to partake of the fruits of their labors or their works, which have been evil" (Alma 40:26).

10. *turning from right to left* = turning from right to wrong

"[God] cannot walk in crooked paths; neither doth he vary from that which he hath said; neither hath he a shadow of turning from the right to the left, or from that which is right to that which is wrong" (Alma 7:20).

11. *the last day* = the day we stand before God to be judged

". . . as a testimony to our God at the last day, or at the day that we shall be brought to stand before him to be judged" (Alma 24:15).

12. *murdered children* = led them away to destruction

"Yea, and I had murdered many of his children, or rather led them away unto destruction" (Alma 36:14).

13. *inward vessel* = head of the government

"we contend no more . . . until we have first cleansed our inward vessel, yea, even the great head of our government" (Alma 60:24).

### Plainness when teaching doctrine

Nephi did not want anyone to mistake the identity of the Messiah. When speaking of the coming Messiah, in the space of only a few verses he defined and described Him with several other role-titles: Savior (1 Nephi 10:4), Redeemer (10:5), Lamb of God (10:10; 12:18), Lord (10:14), and Son of God (10:17). Mormon later supplemented the identification with the following sentence: "remember, remember that it is upon the rock of our Redeemer, who is Christ, the Son of God, that ye must build your foundation" (Helaman 5:12). Still later, the Redeemer appeared to His people in the western world and clarified further His identity: "Behold, I am Jesus Christ the Son of God. I created the heavens and the earth . . . I am the God of Israel [i.e., the great Jehovah], and the God of the whole earth, and have been slain for the sins of the world" (3 Nephi 9:15; 11:14). In light of the confusion prevalent even among modern-day Christians, it was wise for ancient writers to specify in plain written language, using titles and descriptions, just who our God is.

Some Christian sects have taught that children are born into this world with the "original sin" of Father Adam weighing upon them and are thus consigned to eternal misery and damnation until they are baptized in the name of Christ to remove that sin. Later Biblical words came down to us in the following form: "as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive" (1 Corinthians 15:22). King Benjamin clarified the doctrine with additional explanation: "for behold, as in Adam, *or by nature*, they fall, even so the blood of Christ atoneth for their sins" (Mosiah 3:16, emphasis added). The Hebrew noun *adam* occurs over five hundred times in the Old Testament with the generic meaning "man" or "mortal man" or "natural

man." The king plainly taught that by birth into this world we become "natural man," an enemy to God and all righteousness, and must overcome that nature by submission to the Holy Ghost and the atonement of Jesus Christ. Indeed, children are not born in sin (i.e., with sin hanging over them because of that original transgression), but are born into a natural or fallen or sinful world. We are fallen not because of Father Adam's personal act, but because we chose to take on a mortal or natural body. It is, as King Benjamin's words indicate, "in Adam, *or by nature*" that we fall.

Another doctrinal concept was clarified by the Prophet Alma. The Apostle Paul, writing over a century after Alma (but possibly quoting an older document), penned a general doctrinal epistle to the "Hebrews," and in that epistle (7:3) something is described as "having neither beginning of days, nor end of life." The context as preserved in our modern Bible would identify "Melchisedec, king of Salem, priest of the most high God" as the antecedent to which the description refers. Alma, however, clarified the meaning of the words in a great discourse on the priesthood of God: "This high priesthood being after the order of his Son, which order was from the foundation of the world; *or in other words, being without beginning of days or end of years, being prepared from eternity to all eternity . . .*" (Alma 13:7).

On another occasion Alma defined in plain terms what is meant by resurrection from the dead: "Behold, I say unto you, that there is no resurrection — *or, I would say, in other words, that this mortal does not put on immortality, this corruption does not put on incorruption* — until after the coming of Christ" (Alma 40:2).

### Plainness when using cultural or theological terms

In our English translation of the Book of Mormon a Greek word is used to describe places of worship. When Joseph Smith came to the passage we now identify as 2 Nephi 26:26, he inserted the familiar word "synagogues," which means places of assembly, or meetinghouses. While carving his teachings on the plates, Nephi likely employed a Hebrew or cognate word and, to avoid anyone misunderstanding what he meant, he also provided a simple description : "Behold, hath he commanded any that they should depart out of the synagogues, *or out of the houses of worship?*"

The term "day" is often used in Scripture, not to refer to a 24-hour period, but to a general time or period. We speak of Abraham's day or Lehi's day. We refer to the "days" of Jesus. "Day" simply means a period of time, as Jacob noted in his prophesying about the future of Israel: "And the day that he shall set his hand again the second time to recover his people, is the day, *yea, even the last time*, that the servants of the Lord shall go forth in his power, to nourish and prune his vineyard" (Jacob 6:2).

Most readers of Scripture in the ancient and modern worlds have probably wondered how to define the concept of "devils." King Benjamin taught that the mortal Messiah would "cast out devils, *or the evil spirits which dwell in the hearts of the children of men*" (Mosiah 3:6). That definition is in itself figurative, for no spirits literally "dwell in the hearts" of others, though devils, or evil spirits, can and do influence the hearts (i.e., the feelings and thoughts) of humankind.

Several prophets in the Book of Mormon endured the barbs of hecklers and revilers while they preached the word of God. There seemed always to be someone who would harass and refute. At least three times those who recorded the discourses mentioned the antagonists' attempts to "cross" the prophet in his words (Mosiah 12:19; Alma 10:16; and Helaman 9:19). To insure that no one misunderstand the image of ~~one~~ "crossing," one chronicler added a definitive explanation of the word: "it came to pass that they began to question Amulek, that thereby they might make him cross his words, *or contradict the words which he should speak*" (Alma 10:16).

Some of the prophets' antagonists suffered the condemnation of having their names "blotted out," which is an interesting label for the process otherwise called in agricultural terms, being "cut off." So no one could mistake the meaning of the figure here employed, the writer quickly added the customary definition and explanation . . . "*that the names of the wicked shall not be numbered among the names of the righteous*" (Alma 5:57; 6:3).

### Summary

And thus we see from these few examples the remarkable propensity of Book of Mormon writers to delight in plainness, the manner in which the Lord Himself works among the children of men. All of this is done, as the prophets explained, to the end that we may understand and learn and not err. They intentionally wrote in this "most correct of any book on earth" with a plainness and simplicity that invites a man to "get nearer to God by abiding by its precepts, than by any other book" (Joseph Smith, *History of the Church* 4:461). The Book of Mormon was given "in plainness, even as plain as word can be" (2 Nephi 32:7).