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## The Concept of Hell

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What is taught in the Book of Mormon about hell? How is the word *hell* used, and what other terms or phrases are employed to describe or mean the same thing? Is hell a temporary or a permanent condition? When is “that awful crisis,” spoken of by Amulek, “the night of darkness wherein there can be no labor performed,” when the devil “doth seal” as his those who have procrastinated their repentance? (see Alma 34:33–35). What is meant by the phrases “die in their sins” (Moroni 10:26) and “die in their wickedness” (1 Nephi 15:33), and what does that portend for the future? Is the hell or “outer darkness” described by Alma to which the “wicked” are assigned at mortal death permanent or temporary? (see Alma 40:13). These last three questions really become one question: Is mortal death the great watershed of spiritual opportunity, or can one receive the gospel, repent, and improve while in the postmortal spirit world between death and the resurrection? This paper will examine the contents of the Book of Mormon relating to these queries. I acknowledge that the interpretation of Alma 34:32 herein differs somewhat from the traditional explanation, but I believe the interpretation derives from the text itself and is consistent with all else taught on the subject in the Book of Mormon.

## Use of Words and Terms Meaning Hell

The word *hell* appears sixty-two times in the text of the Book of Mormon. Thirty-three times it stands alone, without modifiers or explanation of what it means, as in, “And thus we see the end of him who perverteth the ways of the Lord; and thus we see that the devil will not support his children at the last day, but doth speedily drag them down to hell” (Alma 30:60). Twenty-nine times the word *hell* is used with descriptive modifiers, for example, “depths of hell” (1 Nephi 12:16), “hell which hath no end” (1 Nephi 14:3), “awful hell” (1 Nephi 15:29, 35; Alma 19:29; 54:7), “sleep of hell” (2 Nephi 1:13), “gates of hell” (2 Nephi 4:32; 3 Nephi 11:39–40; 18:13), “pains of hell” (Jacob 3:11; Alma 14:6; 26:13; 36:13), “chains of hell” (Alma 5:7, 9–10; 12:11; 13:30; 26:14), “child of hell” (Alma 11:23; 54:11), “powers of hell” (Alma 48:17), “everlasting hell” (Helaman 6:28), “hell fire” (3 Nephi 12:22; Mormon 8:17), and “endless hell” (Moroni 8:13).

Numerous times in the Book of Mormon other terms or phrases are used to mean *hell*, and these terms add to our understanding of what hell really is. For example, note Nephi’s explanation, which he received from an angel, of the river of filthy water in his and his father’s visions of the tree of life:

“And they said unto me: What meaneth the river of water which our father saw?”

“And I said unto them that the water which my father saw was filthiness; and so much was his mind swallowed up in other things that he beheld not the filthiness of the water.

“And I said unto them that it was an awful gulf, which separated the wicked from the tree of life, and also from the saints of God.

“And I said unto them that it was a representation of that awful hell, which the angel said unto me was prepared for the wicked.

“And I said unto them that our father also saw that the justice of God did also divide the wicked from the righteous; and the brightness thereof was like unto the brightness of a flaming fire, which ascendeth up unto God forever and ever, and hath no end” (1 Nephi 15:26–30; see also 12:16–18).

Hell is equated here with the “river,” “an awful gulf,” and the “justice of God,” which separated the wicked from the righteous and from the tree of life. This equation can help us better understand the Savior’s parable of the rich man and Lazarus, recorded in Luke 16:19–31. What was the “great gulf fixed” that separated the rich man from Abraham and Lazarus? Nephi’s explanation of “an awful gulf” or “the justice of God” seems to fit well. Why couldn’t Abraham or Lazarus go and relieve the rich man’s suffering? Probably for the same reason the five wise virgins couldn’t share their oil with the five foolish virgins in another parable Jesus told. One person simply cannot endow another with spiritual maturity nor erase the inevitable consequences of an errant life. Only God can make a person spiritually whole, and His justice requires that it be done in a prescribed way. Each person creates his own “awful gulf,” and each person must traverse the path to wholeness himself, voluntarily and completely yielding to the will of God and exercising faith in Jesus Christ and in His infinite atonement. Neither Abraham nor Lazarus nor wise virgins can do it for others.

Other terms or phrases used in the Book of Mormon to refer to hell are “eternal gulf of misery and woe” (2 Nephi 1:13), “kingdom of the devil” (2 Nephi 2:29; 28:19; Alma 41:4), “spiritual death” (2 Nephi 9:12), “awful monster” (2 Nephi 9:10), “lake of fire and brimstone” (2 Nephi 9:19, 26; 28:23), “misery and endless torment” (Mosiah 3:25; Moroni 8:21), “awful chains” (2 Nephi 28:22), “everlasting chains of death” (Alma 36:18), “slumber of death” (Jacob 3:11), “deep sleep” (Alma 5:7), “second death” (Alma 13:30), “place of filthiness” (1 Nephi 15:34), “endless night of darkness” (Alma 41:7), “misery which never dies” (Mormon 8:38), and “dregs of a bitter cup” (Alma 40:26).

### **Hell is Permanent for Some**

Several of these terms appear to say that hell is a permanent condition. And for some people it is. Jacob, Nephi, King Benjamin, an angel speaking to Benjamin, Amulek, Alma, and Samuel the Lamanite all testified of a permanent hell and the qualifications for being consigned to it. In the following Book of Mormon quotations from these seven individuals, three points stand out: the permanency of the hell spoken of, the thoughts and feelings of those in hell, and the thoughts, feelings, and actions that bring us to hell, or bring hell to us. The testimonies of these prophets (and an angel) are foundational in understanding what the Book of Mormon teaches about hell and are important as a context for interpreting Alma 34 and 40, where some of the key doctrines relating to hell are found.

Jacob explained that at the Resurrection and Final Judgment, “we shall have a perfect knowledge of all our guilt, and our uncleanness, and our nakedness; and the righteous shall have a perfect knowledge of their enjoyment, and their righteousness, being clothed with purity, yea, even with the robe of righteousness. . . . They who are righteous shall be righteous still, and they who are filthy shall be filthy still; wherefore, they who are filthy are the devil and his angels; and they shall go away into everlasting fire, prepared for them; and their torment is as a lake of fire and brimstone, whose flame ascendeth up forever and ever and has no end” (2 Nephi 9:14, 16).

Nephi warned that anger against the truth and also carnal security inspired of the devil can lead to an endless hell:

“For behold, at that day shall he rage in the hearts of the children of men, and stir them up to anger against that which is good.

“And others will he pacify, and lull them away into carnal security, that they will say: All is well in Zion; yea, Zion prospereth, all is well—and thus the devil cheateth their souls, and leadeth them away carefully down to hell.

“And behold, others he flattereth away, and telleth them there is no hell; and he saith unto them: I am no devil, for there is none—and thus he whispereth in their ears, until he grasps them with his awful chains, from whence there is no deliverance.

“ . . . And all that have been seized therewith must stand before the throne of God, and be judged according to their works, from whence they must go into the place prepared for them, even a lake of fire and brimstone, which is endless torment” (2 Nephi 28:20–23).

King Benjamin explained that open rebellion against God after we have known the truth brings “never-ending torment”:

“And now, I say unto you, my brethren, that after ye have known and have been taught all these things, if ye should transgress and go contrary to that which has been spoken, that ye do withdraw yourselves from the Spirit of the Lord, that it may have no place in you to guide you in wisdom’s paths that ye may be blessed, prospered, and preserved

—  
“I say unto you, that the man that doeth this, the same cometh out in open rebellion against God; therefore he listeth to obey the evil spirit, and becometh an enemy to all righteousness; therefore, the Lord has no place in him, for he dwelleth not in unholy temples.

“Therefore if that man repenteth not, and remaineth and dieth an enemy to God, the demands of divine justice do awaken his immortal soul to a lively sense of his own guilt, which doth cause him to shrink from the presence of the Lord, and doth fill his breast with guilt, and pain, and anguish, which is like an unquenchable fire, whose flame ascendeth up forever and ever.

“And now I say unto you, that mercy hath no claim on that man; therefore his final doom is to endure a never-ending torment” (Mosiah 2:36–39).

An angel further instructed King Benjamin that mercy can have no claim on those who are found to still be “evil” at the final judgment day:

“And now I have spoken the words which the Lord God hath commanded me.

“And thus saith the Lord: They shall stand as a bright testimony against this people, at the judgment day; whereof they shall be judged, every man according to his works, whether they be good, or whether they be evil.

“And if they be evil they are consigned to an awful view of their own guilt and abominations, which doth cause

them to shrink from the presence of the Lord into a state of misery and endless torment, from whence they can no more return; therefore they have drunk damnation to their own souls.

“Therefore, they have drunk out of the cup of the wrath of God, which justice could no more deny unto them than it could deny that Adam should fall because of his partaking of the forbidden fruit; therefore, mercy could have claim on them no more forever.

“And their torment is as a lake of fire and brimstone, whose flames are unquenchable, and whose smoke ascendeth up forever and ever. Thus hath the Lord commanded me” (Mosiah 3:23–27).

Amulek testified that Christ will redeem “those who believe on his name; and . . . none else. “Therefore the wicked remain as though there had been no redemption made, except it be the loosing of the bands of death; for behold, the day cometh that all shall rise from the dead and stand before God, and be judged according to their works” (Alma 11:40–41).

Those found still classed among the wicked are redeemed from death but not from hell.

Alma echoed Amulek’s teaching on the matter and explained what constitutes the second death pronounced upon the wicked at the bar of God:

“And Amulek hath spoken plainly concerning death, and being raised from this mortality to a state of immortality, and being brought before the bar of God, to be judged according to our works.

“Then if our hearts have been hardened, yea, if we have hardened our hearts against the word, insomuch that it has not been found in us, then will our state be awful, for then we shall be condemned.

“For our words will condemn us, yea, all our works will condemn us; we shall not be found spotless; and our thoughts will also condemn us; and in this awful state we shall not dare to look up to our God; and we would fain be glad if we could command the rocks and the mountains to fall upon us to hide us from his presence.

“But this cannot be; we must come forth and stand before him in his glory, and in his power, and in his might, majesty, and dominion, and acknowledge to our everlasting shame that all his judgments are just; that he is just in all his works, and that he is merciful unto the children of men, and that he has all power to save every man that believeth on his name and bringeth forth fruit meet for repentance.

“And now behold, I say unto you then cometh a death, even a second death, which is a spiritual death; then is a time that whosoever dieth in his sins, as to a temporal death, shall also die a spiritual death; yea, he shall die as to things pertaining unto righteousness.

“Then is the time when their torments shall be as a lake of fire and brimstone, whose flame ascendeth up forever and ever; and then is the time that they shall be chained down to an everlasting destruction, according to the power and captivity of Satan, he having subjected them according to his will.

“Then, I say unto you, they shall be as though there had been no redemption made; for they cannot be redeemed according to God’s justice; and they cannot die, seeing there is no more corruption” (Alma 12:12–18).

Samuel, the Lamanite prophet, added his witness that those who are found unrepentant at the bar of God suffer a second death, a spiritual death:

“But behold, the resurrection of Christ redeemeth mankind, yea, even all mankind, and bringeth them back into the presence of the Lord.

“Yea, and it bringeth to pass the condition of repentance, that whosoever repenteth the same is not hewn down and cast into the fire; but whosoever repenteth not is hewn down and cast into the fire; and there cometh upon them again a spiritual death, yea, a second death, for they are cut off again as to things pertaining to righteousness” (Helaman 14:17–18).

## **Hell is Temporary for Most**

Clearly the Book of Mormon teaches of a permanent hell for the devil and his angels and for those who, at the final judgment day, are found to be “wicked” or “filthy still”—rebellious, defiant, incorrigible enemies of God, having chosen to follow Satan rather than Christ. Just as clearly, however, the Book of Mormon affirms that for all the rest of mankind who suffer the pains, chains, or sleep of hell, it is a temporary sojourn. The possibility of escaping hell is inherent in Father Lehi’s plea to his sons, “Awake; awake from a deep sleep, yea, even from the sleep of hell, and shake off the awful chains by which ye are bound, which are the chains which bind the children of men, that they are carried away captive down to the eternal gulf of misery and woe” (2 Nephi 1:13). Similarly, Jacob encouraged his brethren to “shake off the chains of him that would bind [them] fast” (2 Nephi 9:45). Just how can one “awake” from the “sleep of hell” and “shake off” binding chains? Alma explained that it can be done through faith in the Atonement of Jesus Christ, repentance, and spiritual rebirth. Speaking to members of the Church at Zarahemla concerning their fathers who were liberated from spiritual captivity, Alma declared:

“And moreover, have ye sufficiently retained in remembrance that he has delivered their souls from hell?

“Behold, he changed their hearts; yea, he awakened them out of a deep sleep, and they awoke unto God. Behold, they were in the midst of darkness; nevertheless, their souls were illuminated by the light of the everlasting word; yea, they were encircled about by the bands of death, and the chains of hell, and an everlasting destruction did await them.

“And now I ask of you, my brethren, were they destroyed? Behold, I say unto you, Nay, they were not.

“And again I ask, were the bands of death broken, and the chains of hell which encircled them about, were they loosed? I say unto you, Yea, they were loosed, and their souls did expand, and they did sing redeeming love. And I say unto you that they are saved.

“And now I ask of you on what conditions are they saved? Yea, what grounds had they to hope for salvation? What is the cause of their being loosed from the bands of death, yea, and also the chains of hell?

“Behold, I can tell you—did not my father Alma believe in the words which were delivered by the mouth of Abinadi? And was he not a holy prophet? Did he not speak the words of God, and my father Alma believe them?

“And according to his faith there was a mighty change wrought in his heart. Behold I say unto you that this is all true.

“And behold, he preached the word unto your fathers, and a mighty change was also wrought in their hearts, and they humbled themselves and put their trust in the true and living God. And behold, they were faithful until the end; therefore they were saved.

“And now behold, I ask of you, my brethren of the church, have ye spiritually been born of God? Have ye received his image in your countenances? Have ye experienced this mighty change in your hearts?

“Do ye exercise faith in the redemption of him who created you? . . .

“ . . . For there can no man be saved except his garments are washed white; yea, his garments must be purified until they are cleansed from all stain, through the blood of him of whom it has been spoken by our fathers, who should come to redeem his people from their sins” (Alma 5:6–15, 21).

Alma was probably as well qualified as any mortal to explain the awfulness of hell and the process and joy of being released therefrom. He vividly recounted his escape from hell to his son Helaman:

“I was racked with eternal torment, for my soul was harrowed up to the greatest degree and racked with all my sins.

“Yea, I did remember all my sins and iniquities, for which I was tormented with the pains of hell; yea, I saw that I had rebelled against my God, and that I had not kept his holy commandments.

“Yea, and I had murdered many of his children, or rather led them away unto destruction; yea, and in fine so great had been my iniquities, that the very thought of coming into the presence of my God did rack my soul with inexpressible horror.

“Oh, thought I, that I could be banished and become extinct both soul and body, that I might not be brought to stand in the presence of my God, to be judged of my deeds.

“And now, for three days and for three nights was I racked, even with the pains of a damned soul.

“And it came to pass that as I was thus racked with torment, while I was harrowed up by the memory of my many sins, behold, I remembered also to have heard my father prophesy unto the people concerning the coming of one Jesus Christ, a Son of God, to atone for the sins of the world.

“Now, as my mind caught hold upon this thought, I cried within my heart: O Jesus, thou Son of God, have mercy on me, who am in the gall of bitterness, and am encircled about by the everlasting chains of death.

“And now, behold, when I thought this, I could remember my pains no more; yea, I was harrowed up by the memory of my sins no more.

“And oh, what joy, and what marvelous light I did behold; yea, my soul was filled with joy as exceeding as was my pain!

“Yea, I say unto you, my son, that there could be nothing so exquisite and so bitter as were my pains. Yea, and again I say unto you, my son, that on the other hand, there can be nothing so exquisite and sweet as was my joy” (Alma 36:12–21).

## **The Postmortal Spirit World**

Plainly, then, those living on the earth who are chained and tormented with the pains of hell can escape their current and future suffering by yielding their hearts and lives to the Savior. But what about those who die and go into the spirit world not yet reconciled to God, not yet righteous, not yet spiritually reborn, not yet having their garments washed white in the blood of the Lamb? And what about those who have been born again, cleansed, and numbered among the righteous but who later falter and are yet struggling through spiritual adolescence or even spiritual indolence?

Does hell await them in the spirit world? If so, can they, like those on earth, shake loose from the chains of hell, or must they be forever damned with the devil and his angels? What does the Book of Mormon say about this issue?

The Book of Mormon contains little information about what happens in the spirit world between death and the Resurrection. And what information is provided leaves many questions unanswered. Alma “inquired diligently of God” (Alma 40:3) concerning the matter and shared with his son Corianton what he learned:

“Now, concerning the state of the soul between death and the resurrection—Behold, it has been made known unto me by an angel, that the spirits of all men, as soon as they are departed from this mortal body, yea, the spirits of all men, whether they be good or evil, are taken home to that God who gave them life.

“And then shall it come to pass, that the spirits of those who are righteous are received into a state of happiness, which is called paradise, a state of rest, a state of peace, where they shall rest from all their troubles and from all care, and sorrow.

“And then shall it come to pass, that the spirits of the wicked, yea, who are evil—for behold, they have no part nor portion of the Spirit of the Lord; for behold, they chose evil works rather than good; therefore the spirit of the devil did enter into them, and take possession of their house—and these shall be cast out into outer darkness; there shall be weeping, and wailing, and gnashing of teeth, and this because of their own iniquity, being led captive by the will of the devil.

“Now this is the state of the souls of the wicked, yea, in darkness, and a state of awful, fearful looking for the fiery indignation of the wrath of God upon them; thus they remain in this state, as well as the righteous in paradise, until the time of their resurrection” (Alma 40:11–14).

Alma spoke of only two groups: the “righteous” and the “wicked.” We are left to wonder what level of righteousness is required for “paradise” and what level of wickedness consigns one to “outer darkness.” Alma did not talk about any change in the status of either group as they await the Resurrection. He did say that at the Resurrection the principle of “restoration” will be realized with each group—the “righteous shin[ing] forth in the kingdom of God,” and the wicked being “cast out,” experiencing “an awful death, . . . for they die as to things pertaining to things of righteousness” (Alma 40:24–26). He explained that the wicked cannot inherit the kingdom of God, “for they are unclean, and no unclean thing can inherit the kingdom of God” (Alma 40:26).

If Alma was being consistent in his use of the word *wicked* throughout the chapter, then it appears that those designated wicked, both in the spirit world awaiting resurrection and at the time of the Resurrection, are sons of perdition. They qualified for that designation in mortality by choosing “evil works rather than good,” thereby separating themselves from the Spirit of the Lord, and permitting “the spirit of the devil [to] enter into them, and take possession of their house [i.e., body]” (Alma 40:13). The righteous, on the other hand, experience happiness, peace, and rest in the spirit world, and at the Resurrection they will “shine forth in the kingdom of God” (Alma 40:25). Because there is such a wide variation in the works of individuals, a natural question is whether they all receive the same level of happiness and rest in the spirit world and the same level of blessings in the kingdom of God after the Resurrection. On this matter the Book of Mormon is silent, except for the concept that at the Resurrection all people will be “judged of their works” (1 Nephi 15:32; 2 Nephi 9:44; see also Mosiah 3:24; Alma 41:3). It might be argued on that basis that in “paradise” and in the “kingdom of God,” as opposed to “outer darkness” and the “kingdom of the devil,” there are rewards commensurate with various levels of works or righteousness. But again, the Book of Mormon is not explicit on the matter.

## **The Night of Darkness**

Amulek also spoke of things pertaining to death, repentance, and the final state of the wicked. He taught:

“For behold, this life is the time for men to prepare to meet God; yea, behold the day of this life is the day for men to perform their labors.

“And now, as I said unto you before, as ye have had so many witnesses, therefore, I beseech of you that ye do not procrastinate the day of your repentance until the end; for after this day of life, which is given us to prepare for eternity, behold, if we do not improve our time while in this life, then cometh the night of darkness wherein there can be no labor performed.

“Ye cannot say, when ye are brought to that awful crisis, that I will repent, that I will return to my God. Nay, ye cannot say this; for that same spirit which doth possess your bodies at the time that ye go out of this life, that same spirit will have power to possess your body in that eternal world.

“For behold, if ye have procrastinated the day of your repentance even until death, behold, ye have become subjected to the spirit of the devil, and he doth seal you his; therefore, the Spirit of the Lord hath withdrawn from you, and hath no place in you, and the devil hath all power over you; and this is the final state of the wicked” (Alma 34:32–

35).

These verses are often interpreted to mean that we must repent before mortal death or we face a “night of darkness wherein there can be no labor performed,” leaving little hope for change in the postmortal spirit world. Verse 34—which talks about the “same spirit” that possesses our bodies at death having power to possess our bodies “in that eternal world,” or in the Resurrection—is advanced as added evidence that changes in our nature will not likely occur between death and resurrection. Why? Because, the reasoning goes, although we receive, lay down, and receive again our physical bodies, our spirits are “us” (attitudes, desires, habits, our very nature) through premortal life, mortality, the postmortal spirit world, and on into the Resurrection. If we are not interested in the gospel in one phase of our existence, changing arenas will not necessarily change our nature. We are basically the “same spirit” passing from one phase of eternity to another. The *possibility* of change is allowed; the *probability* of change is not so sure.

Undoubtedly, we ought to repent now and not procrastinate, because indeed ultimately there comes a “night of darkness wherein there can be no labor performed” (Alma 34:33). But was Amulek saying that the night of darkness for everyone is mortal death? If we accept the proposition that the night of darkness for all mankind is indeed mortal death, then the sense of Alma 34:34–35 seems to be that anyone who has procrastinated repentance until then becomes sealed to the devil in eternity. That idea is not in harmony with what we know from Doctrine and Covenants 76 and 138, which allows for even the telestially wicked and rebellious on earth to be redeemed from hell and the devil at the end of the Millennium.

Simply changing our residence from mortality to the spirit world will not change our nature. That is good doctrine. But is that what Amulek was trying to convey in these verses? A careful examination of Amulek’s sermon, comparing it with Alma’s discourse in Alma 40 discussed above, suggests another possible view of Amulek’s intent. First, consider the matter in verse 34 of “that same spirit” (singular) possessing “bodies” (plural) at the time of death and again in the Resurrection. What is “that same spirit”? Does it mean an individual’s spirit, or does it refer to the “spirit of the devil,” which is the thrust of verse 35? With that question in mind, consider those two verses again:

“Ye cannot say, when ye are brought to that awful crisis, that I will repent, that I will return to my God. Nay, ye cannot say this; for *that same spirit* which doth possess your bodies at the time that ye go out of this life, *that same spirit will have power* to possess your body in that eternal world.

“For behold, if ye have procrastinated the day of your repentance even until death, behold, ye have become subjected to *the spirit of the devil*, and he doth seal you his; therefore, the Spirit of the Lord hath withdrawn from you, and hath no place in you, and *the devil hath all power over you*, and this is the final state of the wicked” (Alma 34:34–35; emphasis added).

If Amulek was indeed referring to the “spirit of the devil” as “that same spirit” which has power to possess the same bodies in the Resurrection that it possessed at mortal death, we understand better the meaning of “awful crisis”

and “the night of darkness wherein there can be no labor performed.” It would mean the devil has sealed them as his, and there is no labor that they can perform to escape. Alma later used almost the same words as Amulek to describe the condition of the “wicked” who are cast into outer darkness in the spirit world and are later resurrected to a second or spiritual death. He explained, “And then shall it come to pass, that the spirits of the wicked, yea, who are evil—for behold, they have no part nor portion of the Spirit of the Lord; for behold, they chose evil works rather than good; therefore the spirit of the devil did enter into them, and take possession of their house—and these shall be cast out into outer darkness; there shall be weeping, and wailing, and gnashing of teeth, and this because of their own iniquity, being led captive by the will of the devil” (Alma 40:13). It seems clear that Alma and Amulek were “reading from the same page” on this matter. And that should not surprise us, inasmuch as Amulek was tutored for “many days” by Alma and by an angel before he “began to preach and to prophesy unto the people” (Alma 8:27, 32; 10:10).

I have suggested that the Book of Mormon does not address the issue of a temporary hell in the postmortal spirit world from which one can escape at the Resurrection and Final Judgment. Why, it may be asked, is such a doctrine not made clear in the Book of Mormon, when it is made clear in the Doctrine and Covenants (see D&C 76:81–89, 100–112; 138) and alluded to in the Pearl of Great Price (see Moses 7:36–39)? We do not know why. Neither the Lord nor His prophets have given an explanation. What are the possibilities?

Some argue that the Book of Mormon reflects Joseph Smith’s early notions of things and that he only later came to a more complete understanding. I do not accept this argument because it rejects considerable evidence of the Book of Mormon’s veracity as well as the Prophet’s testimony that the Book of Mormon is a translation of an ancient document and was translated by the gift and power of God. There may be some merit, however, in the following ideas:

First, there is ample evidence that the Lord took an active interest and role in what was recorded and what was selected to be preserved for our day (see 1 Nephi 9:1–6; Words of Mormon 1:1–11; 3 Nephi 23:1–14). Not even a

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hundredth part of what was said and done was recorded, and we have only a brief abridgment of that (see Jacob 3:13; Words of Mormon 1:5; Helaman 3:14; 3 Nephi 5:8; 26:6; Ether 15:33).

Second, some “greater things” were deliberately withheld as a trial of faith, with the promise that if people would believe what was written, “greater things [would] be made manifest unto them” (3 Nephi 26:9–12).

Third, it may be that in their public preaching<sup>[2]</sup> the Lord forbade the Book of Mormon prophets from spelling out the particulars of escaping hell in the spirit world and the promise of various levels of rewards for those who are redeemed from hell and the devil. Perhaps the spiritual maturity (or lack thereof) of their audiences (see 1 Nephi 18:20; Enos 1:23; Helaman 12:1–6) called for the either-or approach that is so common in the Book of Mormon—people are designated either righteous or wicked (see Alma 40:12–13); they are either saved or damned (see 2 Nephi 9:23–24); they can choose Christ or Satan, liberty and eternal life or captivity and death (see 2 Nephi 2:27); they are raised to endless happiness or endless misery (see Alma 41:4–5). Preaching in such terms may be expedient to get people’s attention, to get them thinking about the consequences of their choices. That possibility is supported by the Lord’s explanation of why the terms “endless torment” and “eternal damnation” are used. He said, “wherefore it is more express than other scriptures, that it might work upon the hearts of the children of men, altogether for my name’s glory” (D&C 19:7). Once a person begins his spiritual journey by receiving milk, he is gradually prepared to receive and digest meat.

Fourth, Nephi learned that assignments to record different portions of the Lord’s message for mankind are given to various prophets, the entire message to come forth in the Lord’s due time. Nephi was not to write some of the things that were reserved for John to write (see 1 Nephi 14:18–30). For the complete answer we may well have to wait until “that day when the Lord shall come” and “he shall reveal all things” (D&C 101:32).

## Conclusion

The Book of Mormon teaches that hell is real. It is guilt and pain and anguish and torment, an inexpressible horror, which is like an unquenchable fire. It is despair. It is weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth. Sadly, for some that condition is forever. For most, however, hell is a temporary condition. By virtue of Christ’s atonement mankind can be freed from hell by yielding their hearts to God and coming unto Christ. Eventually, all except the devil and his angels and those who have dwelt in mortality and become sons of perdition will be redeemed from hell.

The Book of Mormon speaks of only two groups who inhabit the postmortal spirit world: the righteous, who exist in a state of happiness called paradise; and the wicked, who are consigned to outer darkness—the wicked being those who have been captivated by the devil and who will be resurrected to an endless hell. The Book of Mormon does not speak of levels in paradise or in the postresurrection kingdom of God, but it does say that each will be resurrected and returned to the presence of God to be judged “according to his works.” If individuals are to be judged according to their works, of necessity there will be levels of rewards, because their works are so varied.

The Book of Mormon warns against procrastinating the day of repentance, affirming that there will come an “awful crisis” (Alma 34:34), a “night of darkness wherein there can be no labor performed” (Alma 34:33). Another possible approach to the “awful crisis,” a “night of darkness wherein there can be no labor performed,” is that when death comes, nothing can be done *in mortality* to change the attitudes and behavior exhibited before death; we cannot change what we have done, and now, in the spirit world, must face the inevitable consequences of that behavior. We must experience hell at the appropriate level and for as long as it takes to make things right. Justice cannot be robbed nor destroyed, but it can be appeased, satisfied, even overpowered, by mercy through the Atonement of Jesus Christ and an individual’s repentance and obedience (see Alma 34; 42). The Book of Mormon teaches that for sons of perdition that night of darkness comes at mortal death. It does not say that mortal death is the night of darkness for *everyone*.

Although its teachings about hell are not as complete as those set forth in latter-day revelation, what the Book of Mormon teaches is in harmony with those revelations. The Book of Mormon, carefully read, inspires a longing to avoid the pains of hell, even temporarily, and teaches its readers how to do that.

It seems fitting to conclude with a typical Book of Mormon exhortation that mankind choose liberty and eternal life rather than captivity and death. This plea is part of Father Lehi’s farewell testimony:

“Wherefore, men are free according to the flesh; and all things are given them which are expedient unto man. And they are free to choose liberty and eternal life, through the great Mediator of all men, or to choose captivity and death, according to the captivity and power of the devil; for he seeketh that all men might be miserable like unto himself.

“And now, my sons, I would that ye should look to the great Mediator, and hearken unto his great commandments; and be faithful unto his words, and choose eternal life, according to the will of his Holy Spirit;

“And not choose eternal death, according to the will of the flesh and the evil which is therein, which giveth the spirit of the devil power to captivate, to bring you down to hell, that he may reign over you in his own kingdom” (2 Nephi 2:27–29).

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[1] This also seems to be the sense of those passages in the Book of Mormon that speak of people who “die in their sins” (see 2 Nephi 9:38–39; Jacob 6:6–10; Mosiah 2:38–39; Mosiah 15:26; Alma 12:16; Moroni 10:26).

[2] I suggest that the prophets themselves understood the Plan of Salvation and the redemptive opportunities in the postmortal spirit world. These men saw the Savior (see 2 Nephi 11:3; Mormon 1:15; Ether 9:21–22; 12:39). They were instructed by both the Father and the Son (see 2 Nephi 31:10–12, 14–15), which is interesting in light of what the Prophet Joseph Smith taught about the privileges of those who make their calling and election sure, and receive the Second Comforter (see Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1938], 150–51). The gospel has been the same from the beginning, and those who come unto Christ according to the pattern Nephi calls the “doctrine of Christ” (2 Nephi 31:21) are taught that gospel by the Holy Ghost. Surely the Book of Mormon prophets knew the gospel Plan of Salvation. In all dispensations, however, prophets may only dispense to others that which is expedient, that which the Lord “seeth fit that they should have” (Alma 29:8), “according to the heed and diligence which they give unto him” (Alma 12:9).