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AGENCY—IT'S OUR CHOICE:
BOOK OF MORMON INSIGHTS*Victor L. Ludlow*

One enduring precept governing our relationship to God is the issue of free will, including why and how we submit our will to His. Agency is the key word Latter-day Saints use to describe this free-will nature of our beings. Readers of the Book of Mormon are aware of the lasting effects of agency in the pervasive struggles between the Nephite and Lamanite descendants of Lehi. Some readers may wonder, what if Laman and Lemuel had chosen not to come with their family to the promised land? Would a much more peaceful society have developed? Actually, the two rebellious brothers had such a choice when they could have returned to Jerusalem rather than staying with their family (see 1 Nephi 7:6–21, especially v. 15). However, they exercised their agency and made choices that forever affected Book of Mormon history.

The choices we make may not affect the future history of our nation, but they do impact our personal destiny and influence those in our families and other circles of influence. Indeed, the cause-effect

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relationship of our choices is a major message of the Book of Mormon. In its pages, we learn about the nature of human agency and the enduring consequences of our choices. This chapter will discuss what agency is; how, where, and by whom various principles of agency are taught; and how understanding and applying the basic elements of agency will bring us nearer to God.

The English word *agency* derives from the Latin root *agere*, meaning “to act” and the Greek root *agein*, meaning “to drive.” These linguistic roots emphasize the *action* of actually using our opportunity to exercise our free will. This emphasis on action is also found in dictionary definitions of *agency*. Agency, as it applies to the moral dimensions of our lives, is defined as:

An active force, action, or power
That by which something is done; a means or instrumentality¹
An action or intervention to produce a particular result²

The word *agency* does not appear in the King James Bible, and many Latter-day Saints would be surprised to note that the word *agency* also is not in the Book of Mormon. Rather, it is a philosophical-doctrinal term found in the Restoration scriptures.³ However, valuable teachings and clear examples of agency are found throughout the Book of Mormon.

SCRIPTURE PASSAGES ON AGENCY

Synonyms of *agency* and the principles and applications of agency are found throughout the Book of Mormon. An easy way to locate these passages is to refer to scripture aids, particularly the Topical Guide to the LDS scriptures. Under the term *agency*, eighteen Book of Mormon references are shown.⁴ The common Topical Guide synonyms for *agency* are words such as *will*, *choose*, *free*, and *act*.⁵ The scripture passages highlight the use of our *will* to follow God or the devil, our opportunity to *choose* spiritual life or death as we either serve the Lord or pursue works of wickedness; and they emphasize our being *free* to *act* for ourselves. Often two of the key words are combined in phrases like “free to choose,” “free to act,” “do according to your will,” or “act according to their wills.”

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A second helpful reference resource is the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*.⁶ The *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* entry on agency shows eight citations from the Book of Mormon.⁷ The focus of this chapter is to highlight essential insights about agency as found in the Book of Mormon passages highlighted in these two resources. As a starting point, the twenty-four particular references associated with agency are listed in the following chart:

PASSAGE	REF.*	AGENCY-RELATED INSIGHTS
2 Nephi 2:11	TG	There is an opposition (or different choices) in all things.
2 Nephi 2:11–13	EM	There must be things (beings) to act and not just be acted upon.
2 Nephi 2:16	TG	God gave unto man that he should act for himself.
2 Nephi 2:23	EM	Joy is impossible without opposite choices.
2 Nephi 2:26	EM (2X)	Individuals are free to act for themselves.
2 Nephi 2:27	TG	People are free to choose liberty/eternal life or captivity/death.
2 Nephi 2:27–29	EM	We choose eternal life by following the will of God's Holy Spirit.
2 Nephi 10:23	TG, EM	We can act for ourselves and choose the way of death or life.
2 Nephi 26:10	TG	Those who choose works of darkness must go down to hell.
Mosiah 2:21	TG	God gives us life that we can do according to our own will.
Mosiah 2:33	TG	Woe is pronounced upon him who chooses to obey the evil spirit.
Mosiah 5:2	EM	We can have a disposition to do good continually.
Mosiah 5:8	TG	We are made free as covenant children of Christ.
Mosiah 16:4	EM	Sin limits the agency of sinners as they become lost and fallen.

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Mosiah 28:4	TG	God's mercy can spare us from the consequences of our evil acts.
Alma 3:26	TG	We are rewarded according to the good or evil spirit that we obey.
Alma 12:31	TG	God places us in a state to act according to our wills.
Alma 13:3	TG	Men who choose good over evil can receive the priesthood.
Alma 13:10	TG	Men can choose to repent and work righteousness.
Alma 29:4	TG	God decrees, according to people's wills, salvation or destruction.
Alma 30:8	TG	People can choose whom they will serve.
Alma 41:7	TG	People stand or fall according to whether they do good or do evil.
Helaman 14:30	TG	God made us free; we are permitted to act for ourselves.
Moroni 7:15	TG	We can judge, with perfect knowledge, to know good from evil.

* TG = Topical Guide; EM = *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*

KEY INSIGHTS ABOUT AGENCY

These two dozen key passages provide valuable insights into some essential elements about agency. They can be summarized into seven statements:

1. There are two types of entities—those that can make choices and act and those that are acted upon; God would that we should act for ourselves.

2. Those who choose to act for themselves need to know good from evil because various opposing forces seek to influence and act upon them.

3. People should appreciate that there are natural opposites in the many choices they confront and that opposition is a necessary part of existence.

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4. God has given us the opportunity and gift to exercise our own wills and He encourages us to act and to use our agency in righteousness, which leads to greater growth and opportunity.

5. There are natural consequences to our choices, some good and others bad, and one must learn to act wisely if one wants to enjoy the blessings of God and ongoing freedom of choices.

6. Even though we may choose to act in wickedness or ignorance, the merciful and redemptive acts of God can redeem us from the negative consequences of our actions.

7. The challenges and opportunities of agency define our eternal existence, and our choices determine our relationship with God and others.

In turn, these seven statements can be condensed into seven key terms that describe agency:

Identity—each entity or being is either one who acts or one who is acted upon.

Knowledge—one should learn to identify truth and to distinguish right from wrong.

Choices—many influences act upon us and many decisions lay before us.

Actions—one needs to do something to gain further experience and understanding.

Consequences—a variety of positive and/or negative results follow any action.

Efficacy—one can learn and grow from these consequences, especially with God's help.

Unity—one should become a child of God who lives in harmony with His will.

Let us first describe some essential precepts associated with each of these seven elements, and then we will review how some Book of Mormon prophets teach and testify about these terms.

Identity defines the human capacity to think and choose. Referred to in the scriptures and by philosophers as our “will” and by social scientists as our “personality,” identity is the core element that makes each

person original, unique, and distinct. Before we can act as “free agents,” we must first “be,” or exist as independent beings. The Prophet Joseph Smith revealed that the essential unique element of our being is our *intelligence*, which is coeternal with God. This “light of truth” within each of us cannot be created or destroyed, but it can be strengthened by obedience to God’s laws until one “is glorified in truth and knoweth all things.” Indeed, there is no existence without all intelligence being free to act for itself (see D&C 93:27–30).

Knowledge, both its acquisition and its application, is one of the primary purposes of this earth life. We, as spirit children of God, came to earth to receive physical bodies, to develop our ability to choose good from evil, and to grow in knowledge and understanding. Greater knowledge expands the range of our potential choices. Eventually our knowledge should encompass all physical, moral, and spiritual truths. Then, as Jesus promised His disciples, we can “know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:32).

Choices, especially those in opposition to each other, provide multiple opportunities to exercise agency. Opposition is a natural part of life in God’s universe. Different forces and entities work for and against each other and us. Various influences motivate us toward a great variety of choices and decision-making patterns. Freedom of discernment is a divine gift that God expects us to apply in righteousness. As we make internal decisions to obey spiritual, moral, and physical laws, we choose a path that allows us to maintain and expand our freedom to make future choices.

Action is the central focal point and function of agency. Agency, as defined in its linguistic roots (“to act” and “to drive”), is an active force or power by which something is done. Having the gift of moral agency but not using it is like having a spiritual toolbox but not opening it—eventually the gift “rusts away” and becomes stagnant and useless. Additionally, action is the means by which we transform our dreams, hopes, and expectations into reality. Through action, our agency remains vibrant and fulfilling.

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Consequences follow every action. We may choose the actions, but we cannot control all the consequences. When we exercise our freedom to act, the results of our actions are based upon eternal laws governing our existence. Because the consequences of all actions are based on unalterable and dependable laws, we can confidently move forward toward our chosen goals with less fear of failure. Consequences also lead to feelings and experiences ranging from joy and happiness to sorrow and misery. God's will is that we experience the joy that follows actions of righteousness.

Efficacy is a formal term describing our ultimate effectiveness to produce intended results. Since no human is completely powerful and free, each of us must learn to do the best with our available resources. Efficacy is the capacity, with the divine help of God's grace and Christ's Atonement, to produce continuous and lasting righteous results that will bless the lives of others and ourselves. We produce success best when we choose the right. But we can also learn from our mistakes and be redeemed from our sins if we access the mercy and powers of God.

Unity is the essential element of agency that unites those entities and forces that want to work together to preserve agency. Since there are forces and beings that seek to limit or destroy agency, the wise and righteous who want to preserve it must work in unison and harmony to guarantee the blessings of agency throughout eternity. God Himself acts as the ultimate preserver of our agency, promising that the consequences of our actions will be fair, consistent, and eternal. He solicits that our will becomes united with His, furthering His works of righteousness.

The Book of Mormon prophets place these philosophical precepts into practical examples of agency. They emphasize that in the moral realm of our free will, just as in the physical world for our bodies, God has provided a wonderful environment for us to learn and grow as His children. Thus, we can learn how to apply these principles of agency in our lives, using the Book of Mormon as a helpful resource. Several Book of Mormon prophets enrich and amplify our insights into agency's seven key words and elements.

PERSPECTIVES ON AGENCY

The selected Book of Mormon passages highlighted earlier also help identify the Book of Mormon spokesmen who teach the precepts associated with agency, as seen in the following chart:

PASSAGE	SPOKESMAN
2 Nephi 2:11	Lehi
2 Nephi 2:11–13	Lehi
2 Nephi 2:16	Lehi
2 Nephi 2:23	Lehi
2 Nephi 2:26	Lehi
2 Nephi 2:27	Lehi
2 Nephi 2:27–29	Lehi
2 Nephi 10:23	Jacob
2 Nephi 26:10	Nephi
Mosiah 2:21	Benjamin
Mosiah 2:33	Benjamin
Mosiah 5:2	People
Mosiah 5:8	Benjamin
Mosiah 16:4	Abinadi
Mosiah 28:4	Mormon (editor)
Alma 3:26	Mormon (editor)
Alma 12:31	Alma, the Younger
Alma 13:3	Alma, the Younger
Alma 13:10	Alma, the Younger
Alma 29:4	Alma, the Younger
Alma 30:8	Mormon (editor)
Alma 41:7	Alma, the Younger
Helaman 14:30	Samuel
Moroni 7:15	Moroni

The nine prophets who provide insights about agency range from Lehi, the founder of the main Book of Mormon community, to Moroni, the last Nephite prophet. In 2 Nephi 2, we can find almost one-third of the key Book of Mormon insights about agency. In this single, profound chapter, Lehi teaches his family (and us) about eternal principles of agency, especially the need and consequences of opposition in all things.

The primary spokesman in the Mosiah passages is Benjamin, the

prophet and king, as he gives his farewell address to the multitudes assembled at Zarahemla.

Forty to fifty years later, Alma, the son of Alma, provides some precepts of agency as he teaches various Nephite audiences as recorded in the book of Alma.

About a half-century later, another famous Book of Mormon prophet, Samuel, gives powerful teachings about agency to the citizens of Zarahemla (see Helaman 14:30–31).

Lastly, Moroni gives us, the future readers of his exhortations, important incentives and promises for properly applying our agency, as found in the last chapters of the Book of Mormon.

We will carefully review the Lehi passages to model how we can locate and personalize the precepts of agency. Then we will highlight the words and witnesses of Samuel and Moroni about agency.

LEHI'S DOCTRINAL TEACHINGS

We will both review a sequential summary of Lehi's teachings and also answer some key topical questions about agency. Beginning in 2 Nephi 2:5, Lehi teaches his son Jacob some foundational doctrines about agency. He reminds Jacob that men are instructed to know good from evil and that they have received temporal and spiritual laws that cut them off from God (because they choose to break them).

Lehi testifies that the Messiah, being full of grace and truth, brings redemption and offers Himself as a sacrifice for their sins to answer the demands of the law. He promises that they who believe in Him shall be saved (see vv. 6–9).

Lehi then addresses all his sons as he highlights the necessity of opposites in all things, giving examples of righteousness and wickedness, life and death, and happiness and misery. He categorizes all entities of the universe into two great opposites—the active (things or beings to act) and the passive (things or beings to be acted upon). And unto mankind, Lehi continues, God gave to them that they should act for themselves, being enticed by good or evil (see vv. 10–16). Lehi reviews, on one hand, how the devil enticed Adam and Eve and brought about the Fall and, as an opposite, how God provided repentance to rescue mankind from their fallen state (see vv. 17–21).

With profound insight, Lehi teaches that the resulting benefits of the Fall are of great value because mankind moved out of a state of innocence and stagnancy into one of wisdom and progression. After the Fall, humans could now experience joy, having known misery; they could do good, having known sin. All this was done in the wisdom of God (see vv. 22–24).

Lehi then delivers his famous quote that “Adam fell that men might be; and men are, that they might have joy” (v. 25). This joy and the accompanying freedoms are brought about through the redemptive acts of the Messiah, which moves mankind to a new level of lasting freedom where they can “act for themselves and not be acted upon”! (v. 26). They are now “free according to the flesh” and “free to choose liberty and eternal life” (v. 27). Lehi concludes with an exhortation to his sons to hearken to the great Mediator and to choose eternal life according to His divine will (see v. 28).

These two dozen verses, more than any other block of scripture, provide profound insight, deep meaning, and eternal context into mankind’s free-will relationship with God. The prophet Lehi truly helps us understand the divine gift, nature, and purpose of agency.

INSIGHTS FROM LEHI

Next, by asking ourselves some key questions about what we have learned about agency from the words of Lehi, we can discover ways that we can apply these precepts in our lives. We particularly want to know how these agency precepts will enhance our relationship with God. We will use the seven key words and elements of agency as our reference points.

Identity

Who are the essential free-will persons involved in our relationship with God?

God the Father grants us freedom to act for ourselves. He encourages us to exercise our agency in righteousness. He also has provided a Savior for us to recover from our misuse of agency.

Jesus the Christ, as the great Mediator, redeems us from our errors and sins. He restores and helps maintain our freedoms. He has shown us the way to eternal life if we choose to follow Him.

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We, the children of God on earth, are free to choose eternal life or lasting captivity. We, as eternal intelligent beings, can follow light and truth as we obey God's will.

Knowledge

What critical truths do we need to know as we develop our relationship with God?

God has given us the gift of agency; we are not to be forced either to sin or to do good.

We can gain knowledge of eternal truths and learn to distinguish good from evil.

The Holy Spirit will help us to discern truth from error and to make wise and righteous choices.

Choices

What key influences and opportunities affect our relationship with God?

Opposing forces of good (God) and evil (Satan) constantly act upon us.

We, as accountable children of God, ultimately have to decide what we think, say, and do.

The extremes of eternal life with God or spiritual death with Satan await our choices.

Action

What significant acts must we do as we build our relationship with God?

We need to come to God with faith in Him, His goodness, His plan, and His Son.

We need to repent of our sins and failures.

We need to come unto Christ in a covenant relationship.⁸

Consequences

What eternal laws and consequences apply to our relationship with God?

Obedience to God's eternal laws brings blessings that result in joy and happiness.

Disobedience to God's eternal laws brings punishments that result in misery and sorrow.

God's mercy has provided a means of redemption, *if* we meet His conditions.

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Efficacy

How can our relationship with God be improved and enhanced?

We need to *know*, recognizing truth and learning to discern good from evil.

We need to *do*, following the Master in acts of faithfulness and righteousness.

We need to *be*, becoming more like the Father and Son in love, testimony, and service.

Unity

What could and should be our ultimate relationship with God and His will?

We should return to God the Father with wisdom, integrity, and virtue like that of God's Son.

Ultimately, we should be in harmony and unison with God, His Son, and the celestial hosts.

Surely each of us, as we study and ponder the above list of questions and answers, will find a number of areas in our personal lives that need to be strengthened so that we can improve our relationship with God.

SAMUEL'S POWERFUL INSIGHTS AND WITNESS

To reinforce our understanding about agency and to add a second prophetic witness to the teachings of Lehi, we will highlight the words of the great Lamanite prophet, Samuel. After foretelling the signs of Jesus's birth, Samuel testifies that whosoever will believe might be saved and whosoever will not believe will bring upon themselves their own condemnation (see Helaman 14:28–29). Then in two concise, powerful verses, the prophet reviews the basic elements of agency and accountability in the following words:

And now remember, remember, my brethren, that whosoever perisheth, perisheth unto himself; and whosoever doeth iniquity, doeth it unto himself; for behold, ye are free; ye are permitted to act for yourselves; for behold, God hath given unto you a knowledge and he hath made you free.

He hath given unto you that ye might know good from evil, and he hath given unto you that ye might choose life or death;

and ye can do good and be restored unto that which is good, or have that which is good restored unto you; or ye can do evil, and have that which is evil restored unto you. (Helaman 14:30–31)

We could easily have inserted the key words describing agency in this passage. Samuel testifies to his audience of their *identity* as free individuals and that God has given them *knowledge* of good from evil. They are free to make their own *choices*, and he encourages them in their *action* to do good. Samuel reminds them of the opposite life-or-death *consequences* of their choices and how, in a process of *efficacy*, they can have either good or evil restored unto them. He continues in the following verses and admonishes them toward repentance as they follow the righteous examples of those, especially the Lamanites, among them. All are invited to come to their Redeemer and, in *unity*, to be numbered among His sheep. As in other Book of Mormon passages, the word agency or even the key words describing agency are often not in the text of the prophetic messages. However, the essential precepts, principles, and practices of agency are taught by the Book of Mormon prophets.

MORONI'S FINAL EXHORTATION

As a third and final witness, the concluding words of the last prophet in the Book of Mormon provide insightful and encouraging instruction that applies to agency. Moroni, as recorded in Moroni 10, reminds us that every good gift (such as agency) comes from God (see v. 18). He encourages us to act in faith (as we apply our agency) to “do all things which are expedient” for our salvation (v. 23). He exhorts us to “lay hold upon” the good gifts of God and to “touch not the evil gift, nor the unclean thing”—using our agency wisely and always choosing the right and good (v. 30). Finally, the great prophet Moroni invites us to exercise our agency to “come unto Christ, and be perfected in him.” As we deny ourselves of ungodliness and love God with all our hearts, then by the grace of God we become perfect in Christ (v. 32). The ultimate reward of the wise use of our agency is to be sanctified in Christ by the grace of God so we may become “holy, without spot” (v. 33).

IT IS OUR CHOICE

Wise use of agency helps fulfill the two key purposes of the Book of Mormon, as cited on its title page—first, to teach the house of Israel about God’s works, covenants, and prophecies, and second, to testify of Jesus as the Christ. As we learn of God’s gift of agency and enter into and maintain a covenant relationship with Him, we receive the great blessings promised in divine prophecy. Central to our covenants is the exercise of our agency as we choose to make a commitment to Christ and as we seek to follow His path of eternal life to become united with Him and the Father.

The Book of Mormon explains that our freedom to choose is a wonderful gift from God, associated with marvelous opportunities and responsibility. The promises associated with agency are, however, double-sided: the positive use of agency results in joy and liberty culminating in the kind of peace that only Christ and righteousness can bring; the negative use of agency results in misery and captivity degenerating into the perpetual warfare that only Satan and wickedness can bring. Wickedly applied agency carries us on a satanic path toward selfish conflict and misery, while wisely applied agency follows the Master’s path toward shared peace and joy. Agency, as understood and practiced in righteousness, will bring us nearer to God.

Just as Laman and Lemuel made significant choices during challenging and difficult times, we often face unpleasant circumstances where we must make difficult decisions. Like Laman and Lemuel, we may even feel as if we have been forced onto a certain path in our life and have reaped consequences we did not deserve. Although Laman and Lemuel used their agency in a way that fostered hatred and wars, we can use our agency to build understanding and peace. Their choices affected the race, culture, and history of the Book of Mormon peoples in America. Our choices will extend beyond our lifetime and affect many others, especially our posterity.

Agency is our choice! But, considering the opposing consequences highlighted in the Book of Mormon—to exercise our agency in righteousness is our only wise choice.

NOTES

1. *Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary of the English Dictionary*, unabridged (William Collins Publishers, 1979), s.v. "agency."

2. Corel WordPerfect II Dictionary, s.v. "agency."

3. Agency appears only six times in the standard works: four times in the Doctrine and Covenants (29:36; 64:18; 93:31; 101:78) and twice in the Pearl of Great Price (Moses 4:3; 7:32). Passages about being free or moral "agents" are also found six times in the same works of scripture: Doctrine and Covenants 29:35, 39; 58:28; 64:29; 104:17 and Moses 6:56.

4. Fewer listings are in the other standard works: thirteen are in the Doctrine and Covenants, twelve in the Bible, and seven in the Pearl of Great Price.

5. In the Topical Guide, the word "will" (or "wills," "wilt") appears five times; "choose" is shown nine times; "free" (or "freely") is listed eight times; and "act" (or "do," "doest") is found seven times.

6. See C. Terry Warner, "Agency," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 1:26–27.

7. Fewer references were cited in the other standard works with six from the Doctrine and Covenants, two from the Bible, and one from the Pearl of Great Price (see *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 1:26–27).

8. This covenant relationship of baptism was the culminating element of agency that King Benjamin desired of his people; see Mosiah 2–5.