

Law of God/God of Law

The Law of Moses in Alma's Teachings to Corianton

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In his teachings to his son, Corianton, Alma addresses a concern his son had “concerning the justice of God in the punishment of the sinner; for ye do try to suppose that it is injustice that the sinner should be consigned to a state of misery” (Alma 42:1). The relationship between God’s mercy and justice has exercised many authors, both ancient and modern.¹ Corianton takes concerns and discussions about the relationship between God’s justice and mercy even further by accusing God of injustice. This seems to be an attempt on the part of Corianton to excuse his own behavior by accusing God of unjust behavior.

Alma’s explanation to his son is heavily rooted in the scriptures to which he had access, and especially in Alma’s understanding of the law of Moses and what it taught about the character of the God of Israel. In the law and the other scriptures the Nephites inherited from their Israelite and Judahite ancestors, God’s uprightness is an

inherent part of his identity. Accusing God of injustice is tantamount to rejecting the entire character of God.

God's justice and mercy are key elements in how the scriptural authors describe him. The various Book of Mormon authors, including Alma, are coming from law of Moses and Old Testament perspectives about the nature of God. Intriguingly, however, the Book of Mormon presents God's justice more strongly than the Bible does. For the biblical authors, God's justice is a positive thing that works alongside his mercy because both are important parts of his covenant loyalty. His justice and mercy are two sides of the same coin. On the other hand, the Book of Mormon authors often present justice as a negative force that needs to be "overpowered" by mercy (Alma 34:15). This perspective on justice as negative is part of the well-developed Nephite doctrine of humanity's fallen state and the guilt incurred by that fallen state. Alma's response to Corianton's accusation of injustice draws together both the biblical and Mosaic tradition of God's covenant loyalty and the Book of Mormon notion of fallen humanity. This allows Alma to explain to Corianton how God is both merciful and just.

In this paper I explore Alma's teachings to Corianton in order to show how he brings together the two strands of traditions concerning justice, mercy, and humanity's fallen nature. I first investigate the ideas of justice in the law of Moses and the Old Testament. In the second part I start with Lehi's teachings and show how the Nephite teachings of justice as something that needs to be overcome derive naturally from their teachings of the fall of Adam and Eve. Finally I describe in depth Alma's teachings to his son in Alma 42, showing how he reconciles notions of justice and mercy to show that the apparent contradiction is solved through reliance on Jesus Christ.

Justice and Mercy in the Old Testament

Methodological considerations

In order to understand justice and mercy in Alma's teachings, it is important to first understand how these ideas are presented in the law of Moses. As modern readers of the scriptures, we have a tendency to characterize the law of Moses as primarily a law of stern justice, which is characterized by its fierce and arbitrary punishments. This is something of an unfair characterization and derives from the many difficulties inherent in thinking in terms of ancient law.² It is important when thinking about ancient law, and especially ancient penalties, not to frame justice and mercy from our twenty-first-century perspective. In a world where long-term incarceration was usually not an option for punishment, penalties for crimes would need to be limited to assessing monetary or physical damages.³ Thus, we should be aware that within the thought-world of the ancient Israelites and the ancient Nephites, what qualifies as just or merciful may not directly correspond to our modern notions.

This difficulty is compounded by the challenges associated with the translation of both the Bible and the Book of Mormon.⁴ We do not know what language the Nephites spoke at Alma's time or the specific language of composition for the Book of Mormon.⁵ Because of this, it is impossible to know what connotative sense of the words that Alma used are translated as "justice" and "mercy." We do know, however, that justice and mercy are concepts from the law of Moses and are specifically attributes of God in the law (Deuteronomy 32:4). Because the Nephites had some access to the law of Moses (1 Nephi 5:11) and because the Book of Mormon was translated into King James-like language, we can with some caution consider concepts from the Hebrew Bible to underlie the corresponding words in the Book of Mormon.

Hebrew concepts of justice

It is therefore useful at the outset to understand the Hebrew concepts of justice and judgment in the Hebrew Bible. Examining these ideas illustrates some of the likely cultural ideas underlying the Book of Mormon.

The Hebrew words used in the scriptures to refer to justice and judgment are *tzedqah* and *mishpat*.⁶ The word *tzedeqah* and its variants⁷ is intriguing because although the King James translators often translated this term as “justice” (Deuteronomy 33:21), it is more commonly translated as “righteousness” (see, for example, Genesis 15:6; Deuteronomy 9:4).⁸ Thus, when dealing with the ancient Israelite worldview, it is useful to note that righteousness and justice are actually closely related concepts, or perhaps even identical constructs. Both refer to being right before God.⁹ For the ancient Israelites, the law was just because it was righteous. God’s justice was the same as his righteousness. Helmer Ringgren and Bo Johnson note that this term “above all . . . refers to Yahweh’s positive and beneficent intervention.”¹⁰

Mishpat has a similar positive valence. It is often translated as “judgment” in the KJV but can also refer to the commandments of God themselves. This is evident in Exodus 21:1, which begins a series of commandments in the law of Moses with the statement, “Now these are the judgments which thou shalt set before them.” This may be fruitfully compared with the NIV, which reads, “These are the laws you are to set before them.” For the biblical authors, the law of Moses was an expression of God’s character and his judgment.

The biblical connection between God’s character and his ability to judge righteously is well illustrated by a rhetorical question asked by Abraham when he is asking the Lord not to destroy the city of Sodom. There Abraham says, “That be far from thee to do after this manner, to slay the righteous [*tzadiq*] with the wicked: and that the righteous [*tzadiq*] should be as the wicked, that be far from thee: Shall not the Judge [*shopet*] of all the earth do right [*mishpat*]?”

(Genesis 18:25). This story illustrates how closely God’s justice and mercy are within the biblical framework—they are not set up as opposing forces. Abraham is here pleading for mercy on the city of Sodom and is doing so by appealing to the Lord’s justice and righteous judgment.¹¹

This idea is found not just in the law of Moses but is also part of the prophetic writings. In fact, Isaiah 51, quoted by Jacob in the Book of Mormon at 2 Nephi 8, actually identifies the God of Israel with justice through poetic parallelism.¹² Isaiah 51:1 states, “Hearken to me, ye that follow after righteousness, ye that seek the Lord.” The word translated here as “righteousness” is Hebrew *tzedeq*, which, as already noted, refers to God’s justice. The prophet here creates a parallel connection: “follow after” is parallel with “seek,” while “justice” or “righteousness” is parallel with Lord.¹³ In other words, in this passage, looking for justice is the same thing as looking for God. God’s justice is an inherent element of his character and being.

Hebrew concepts of mercy

Like justice, within the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament), mercy is a series of related concepts. One of the words so translated is *hesed*, a word that is actually quite difficult to translate into English.¹⁴ It is often translated as “mercy” by the KJV translators, as in Genesis 19:19 or Exodus 20:6, but is often expressed as “kindness” (Joshua 2:12), “goodness” (Exodus 34:3), or “lovingkindness” (Psalm 25:6). The key idea behind this word in Hebrew is the fulfillment of the covenant obligation, and so translations besides the KJV often translate this word as “covenant faithfulness.”¹⁵ God is merciful to his children because of the covenant relationship that he has to them. Mercy, as understood through this Hebrew word, is not about the Lord’s compassion outside the bounds of law and covenant—it is instead precisely the bounds of law and covenant that give form and structure to this biblical construction of God’s goodness and mercy. In fact, God’s *hesed* (mercy or covenant faithfulness) and his *tzedeq* (justice, righteousness) are both positive terms for how he acts within his covenant.¹⁶

The other Hebrew word primarily translated as “mercy” in the Bible is *rahum*. This adjective is used exclusively to describe God’s mercy and compassion in the Hebrew Bible.¹⁷ Jared Ludlow notes that as this word is expressed in Deuteronomy in the law of Moses, “The context always includes the Israelites turning away from wicked behavior and the Lord suspending his anger . . . and allowing his mercy to be shown, specifically because of the promises to the fathers.”¹⁸ Here we see again that the Lord’s justice and his mercy are closely connected to his covenant relationship with his children.

This mercy is an integral part of how the Old Testament authors understood who God was. Indeed, the law of Moses continuously reminds its reader of the Lord’s compassion and mercy. Exodus 34:6–7 is a long litany of the Lord’s merciful traits: “merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness [this is Hebrew *hesed* or covenant mercy] and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin.”

The Ten Commandments also contain a discussion of God’s compassion and his justice. As part of the initial commandments, the Lord states that he is “a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me; and showing mercy unto thousands of generations that love me and keep my commandments” (Exodus 20:5–6).¹⁹ Although God’s justice is certainly on display here in Exodus and in the law generally, it is his mercy that is presented as the overcoming factor—showing mercy unto thousands of generations that love God and keep his commandments.

This demonstrates that justice and mercy are not opposite notions in the law of Moses or the Old Testament. They are both integral aspects of God’s character and represent essentially the same thing—God’s adherence to the covenant means that he is slow to wrath and quick to remember the covenant. Indeed, his justice is his righteousness—his rightness with the universe and humanity. God is, in effect, merciful because of his justice, and this works to Israel’s good.

The Fall and Justice in the Book of Mormon

Book of Mormon teachings on the fall

The fact that the Old Testament frames God's justice in such positive ways leads one to question why the Book of Mormon presents a stricter view of that justice. Although the Book of Mormon derives originally from an Old Testament milieu, the Nephite prophets and teachers sometimes developed Old Testament ideas in new ways.

Thus, an examination of the Book of Mormon shows that it presents ideas of fallen humanity that set up a situation where the ideals of justice and mercy are opposing laws that must be mediated. This view of fallen human nature and its relationship to the law of Moses is not unique to Alma. In fact, Alma's teachings to his sons are part of the core theological and doctrinal teachings in the Book of Mormon that stretch all the way back to Father Lehi.²⁰ President Russell M. Nelson notes, "The Book of Mormon provides the fullest and most authoritative understanding of the Atonement of Jesus Christ to be found anywhere. It teaches what it really means to be born again."²¹ Book of Mormon teachings are highly focused on redemption, and those teachings extensively explore humanity's fallen nature. It will be useful to explore how these teachings of fall and redemption are developed within the text of the Book of Mormon, starting with Lehi and moving forward to Alma's teachings to Coriantion.

In 2 Nephi 2, Lehi speaks to his son Jacob, prefiguring Jacob's future responsibilities as a priest by telling him that his "days shall be spent in the service of thy God" (2 Nephi 2:3).²² As part of his teachings to Jacob, Lehi clarifies the law that informs the rest of Nephite discourse on the law, on justice, and on mercy. According to Lehi, "The law is given unto men. And by the law no flesh is justified; or, by the law men are cut off. Yea, by the temporal law they were cut off; and also, by the spiritual law they perish from that which is good, and become miserable forever" (2:5). For Lehi, law and commandments do not have power to declare an individual justified. The word

justify, at its core, means to be declared just or righteous. Within a courtroom or legal sense, it means to declare someone not guilty. So, in Lehi's working out of these ideas, the law does not have the power to declare a person not guilty. All the law can do is condemn.

This is the core teaching behind the Book of Mormon doctrine of the dichotomy between justice and mercy. Although the biblical book of Genesis describes the Garden of Eden, with the attendant fall of Adam and Eve, it describes the consequences of the fall in largely physical terms—the man Adam is cursed that the ground will no longer yield produce spontaneously and so must be worked (Genesis 3:17), the woman is cursed with sorrowful pregnancies (3:16), while the snake who was the start of the whole difficulty is cursed that it will crawl on its belly and eat dust (3:14). The man and the woman are also driven out of the garden (3:23–24), with the implication that this is part of the original promise of death for eating the fruit (Genesis 2:16–17; 3:3). The idea of the fall bringing about spiritual degeneration is not an idea strongly represented in the Old Testament.²³ This doctrine, however, appears again and again in the Book of Mormon, beginning as early as 1 Nephi 10:6. The fallen nature of humanity continues in Nephite discourse from Lehi through Alma and beyond and undergirds Alma's teachings on law and justice to Corianton.

Thus, essential to Lehi's teachings is the idea that humanity is guilty, and so the ability to be declared not guilty is crucial (2 Nephi 2:8–10). Lehi's statement on the need of humanity to be justified and the inability of the law to do so is the beginning of a long strand of Nephite theological and doctrinal discussion. The Nephite answers to these questions, while clearly based on ideas also found in the Bible, developed in distinctive ways from Old Testament modes of thinking.

For Lehi, God set up the world with "an opposition in all things" (2 Nephi 2:11). This opposition creates the ability to make decisions and discern differences. Without the various forms of opposition laid out by Lehi, the world "must needs have been created for a thing of naught; wherefore there would have been no purpose in the end of

its creation. Wherefore, this thing must needs destroy the wisdom of God and his eternal purposes, and also the power, and the mercy, and the justice of God” (2:12). Lehi suggests here that one of the purposes of creation is to allow humans to make choices, and that the opposition in all things allows humans to discern between two different things and to make choices. Taking away the ability to make choices “must needs destroy” both the justice and the mercy of God. For Lehi, the law brings sin, the existence of sin implies the existence of righteousness, and righteousness brings happiness. Without all of these things, “there is no God” (2:13). Although Lehi’s argument is not quite the same as Alma’s to Corianton, the contours of it are very similar.

One of the key notions in Lehi’s preachings that is carried throughout the Book of Mormon is the emphasis on the fall of humanity. After describing the narrative of the fall from Genesis, Lehi elaborates:

And the days of the children of men were prolonged, according to the will of God, that they might repent while in the flesh; wherefore, their state became a state of probation, and their time was lengthened, according to the commandments which the Lord God gave unto the children of men. For he gave commandment that all men must repent; for he showed unto all men that they were lost, because of the transgression of their parents. And now, behold, if Adam had not transgressed he would not have fallen, but he would have remained in the garden of Eden. And all things which were created must have remained in the same state in which they were after they were created; and they must have remained forever, and had no end. And they would have had no children; wherefore they would have remained in a state of innocence, having no joy, for they knew no misery; doing no good, for they knew no sin. But behold, all things have been done in the wisdom of him who knoweth all things. Adam fell that men might be; and men are, that they might have joy. (2 Nephi 2:21–25)

For Lehi, it is the fall of humanity that brings them to the place where they are able to actually exist and know things, but also that “all men must repent” because “all men . . . were lost, because of the transgression of their parents” (2:21). Because of the choices of Adam and Eve, humanity was guilty without the intervening power of the “great Mediator of all men” (2:27).

Jacob’s teachings on justice and the fall

After Lehi’s death, his son Jacob continues his father’s strand in his own teachings in 2 Nephi 9. This chapter is Jacob’s commentary on a passage in Isaiah that develops concepts of God’s justice and righteousness. As noted previously, Isaiah equates the Lord directly with justice in 51:1. In addition to that mention, the Lord refers to his law and his judgment (*mishpat*) in Isaiah 51:4 and promises that he will never abolish his righteousness (*tzedeqah*) in verse 6, because the people themselves know that righteousness (51:7). By reading this Isaianic passage, Jacob presents his Nephite hearers with a message of the Lord’s rectitude but also of his mercy, since the theme of being saved is vital to this part of Isaiah’s teachings (51:22).

Jacob begins his own teaching by asserting that his purpose in reading these Isaiah passages is “that [his people] might know concerning the covenants of the Lord that he has covenanted with the house of Israel” (2 Nephi 9:1). This is a reference to the ancient Sinai covenant and the law of Moses, a connection further suggested by Jacob’s role as a priest. Jacob praises God in a number of places for his mercy, in particular for preparing a way to overcome humanity’s fallen nature (9:8, 9:13, etc.). For Jacob, like Lehi, the understanding of God’s plan, his law, and the relationship between justice and mercy derive from their perception of humanity’s fallen nature. Thus Jacob says, “For as death hath passed upon all men, to fulfil the merciful plan of the great Creator, there must needs be a power of resurrection, and the resurrection must needs come unto man by reason of the fall; and the fall came by reason of transgression; and because man became fallen, they were cut off from the presence of the Lord”

(9:6). This Nephite doctrinal development builds upon the law of Moses but expands it further.

As part of his discussion on the fall and the subsequent need for redemption, Jacob introduces an idea that undergirds Alma's later teachings to his son Corianton. When speaking about those who do not have the law, Jacob asserts that there can be no condemnation or punishment "because of the atonement" (2 Nephi 9:25), "for the atonement satisfieth the demands of his justice upon all those who have not the law given to them" (9:26). Jacob introduces into the Book of Mormon the idea that justice is something that makes demands that must be satisfied.

The demands of justice: King Benjamin to Amulek

The concept of justice being something that makes demands that must be met continues throughout the Book of Mormon. Where for Jacob the demands of justice are met for those who do not have the law, other Book of Mormon authors talk about the demands of justice on those who do not repent. King Benjamin asserts that "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" (Mosiah 2:38).

Abinadi places the demands of justice in stark contrast to God's mercy and compassion: "Having ascended into heaven, having the bowels of mercy; being filled with compassion towards the children of men; standing betwixt them and justice; having broken the bands of death, taken upon himself their iniquity and their transgressions, having redeemed them, and satisfied the demands of justice" (Mosiah 15:9). Like Jacob, Abinadi is interpreting Isaiah. He begins his interpretation by reading Isaiah 53, which claims that the Suffering Servant, whom Abinadi understands as Jesus, will "justify many; for he shall bear their iniquities" (Mosiah 14:11//Isaiah 53:11).²⁴ For Abinadi, justice for "many" will come only because the righteous

servant, Jesus, is able to justify them by bearing their iniquities. Declaring humanity not guilty requires a being filled with compassion “standing betwixt them and justice.” In Abinadi’s teaching here, humanity is rendered guilty by “their iniquity and transgression” and so need a figure to stand “betwixt them and justice” and “satisf[y] the demands of justice.”

Abinadi’s teachings form the core of the teachings of the church established by the elder Alma, as Mormon makes clear in Alma 18:1. This idea of justice being something that makes demands that must be met appears, therefore, in the teachings of Amulek to the Zoramites.²⁵ As with Abinadi’s teachings, mercy, specifically the mercy of the Son of God, is a force that brings about “the bowels of mercy, which overpowereth justice, . . . and thus mercy can satisfy the demands of justice” (Alma 34:15–16). Note Amulek’s language here—justice is not only something that makes demands that must be satisfied, but it is something that must be “overpowered” by mercy. Amulek also explicitly connects these ideas to notions of law, as he notes that mercy overpowers justice for the penitent, but “he that exercises no faith unto repentance is exposed to the whole law of the demands of justice” (Alma 34:16). Following in the tradition of Lehi, Jacob, Benjamin and Abinadi, Amulek sketches a version of the relationship between the law and justice in which justice is a largely negative force, administered by an unfeeling law that needs to be mitigated and overcome by a compassionate mercy.

Alma’s Teachings to Corianton

Restoration among the Nephites

It is into this theological and doctrinal discussion about fallen humanity and the demands of justice that we must place Alma’s teachings to his son Corianton. In fact, not only do Alma’s teachings about justice and mercy come from a distinctive context in Nephite thinking, they are also responding to immediate issues in his life.

Corianton was part of the mission to the Zoramites (Alma 31:7), and it seems that many of his difficulties arose because of that Zoramite mission (Alma 39:1–5).²⁶ Thus, Amulek's teachings to the Zoramites are directly significant to Corianton's questions and concerns.

As part of responding to Corianton's concerns from this mission, Alma uses the concept of restoration. In this context, restoration refers to a distinctively Book of Mormon notion of resurrection that has a long pedigree in Nephite discourse. It appears in 2 Nephi 9:12–13, 26 (Jacob); Mosiah 15:24 (Abinadi); and Alma 11:43–44 (Amulek), as well as here in Alma's teachings to Corianton in Alma 41 and 42.²⁷ In his teachings to Corianton, the doctrinal concept of restoration helps Alma explain the equity of God's law. Alma teaches his son that this restoration gives back what the individual has already given:

O, my son, this is not the case; but the meaning of the word restoration is to bring back again evil for evil, or carnal for carnal, or devilish for devilish—good for that which is good; righteous for that which is righteous; just for that which is just; merciful for that which is merciful.

Therefore, my son, see that you are merciful unto your brethren; deal justly, judge righteously, and do good continually; and if ye do all these things then shall ye receive your reward; yea, ye shall have mercy restored unto you again; ye shall have justice restored unto you again; ye shall have a righteous judgment restored unto you again; and ye shall have good rewarded unto you again.

For that which ye do send out shall return unto you again, and be restored; therefore, the word restoration more fully condemneth the sinner, and justifieth him not at all.
(Alma 41:13–15)

Alma deploys this law of restoration to encourage his son to keep the commandments. In fact, Alma's teachings in 40:14 are some of the most reflective of Old Testament notions of justice and mercy in the Book of Mormon. Alma instructs Corianton that if he deals

justly and judges righteously, then he will have mercy, justice, and a righteous judgment restored back to him. In other words, for Alma, restoration, as it connects to resurrection and judgment, means that there is a connection between one's actions and what one gets back—just for that which is just, merciful for that which is merciful. The implication in Alma 41:15 is that while the word *restoration* condemns and does not justify the sinner, restoration does have some role in justifying the penitent.

Corianton's question

Alma's addressing of his son's concerns about restoration feeds into his final discussion about justice and mercy. Alma says to his son, "And now, my son, I perceive there is somewhat more which doth worry your mind, which ye cannot understand—which is concerning the justice of God in the punishment of the sinner; for ye do try to suppose that it is injustice that the sinner should be consigned to a state of misery" (Alma 42:1). In other words, Corianton seems to view the justice of God as arbitrary and unjust because it causes sinners to "be consigned to a state of misery." Alma's teaching about God's justice to Corianton in Alma 42 hinges on an accusation of injustice made against God by Corianton. Corianton is asking about how God can punish people and still be just.

This presents an interesting conundrum in the Nephite system that, as we have seen, often describes justice as a force, almost separate from God, which must be controlled and overcome. Indeed, according to Alma's later teaching in this passage, the law of justice is the force that keeps us from the presence of God: "And thus we see that all mankind were fallen, and they were in the grasp of justice; yea the justice of God, which consigned them forever to be cut off from his presence" (Alma 42:14). The justice of God is, for Alma, explicitly what keeps us out of God's presence because of our fallen nature.

For Alma, justice and mercy are two opposing laws or principles that must be reconciled through Jesus Christ and his atonement. In Alma 42:13, he states, "Therefore, according to justice the plan of

redemption could not be brought about, only on conditions of repentance of men in this probationary state, yea this preparatory state; for except it were for these conditions, mercy could not take effect except it should destroy the work of justice. Now, the work of justice could not be destroyed; if so God would cease to be God.” Note the strong dichotomy that Alma lays out here—if mercy were to take effect without the specific conditions laid out by Alma, it would *destroy* the work of justice. In 42:15, Alma discusses the conditions (which we will discuss further in this paper) by which God is able to “bring about the plan of mercy, to appease the demands of justice.” As Alma explains it in this passage, justice is a force that makes demands that must be appeased. Only after the demands of justice are appeased can God be a “perfect, just God, and a merciful God also.”

The fall in Alma’s teachings

As with Lehi, Alma’s answer to his son ultimately derives from his teachings about humanity’s fallen nature. Because of this, Alma also begins with the story of Adam and Eve. He tells Corianton that after God drove Adam and Eve out the garden, “he placed at the east end of the garden of Eden, cherubim, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the tree of life” (Alma 42:2).²⁸ Alma teaches that this was necessary because humanity had become like God in their knowledge of good and evil, and if they ate of the tree of life they would live forever (Alma 42:3). Alma gives further detail in his parallel version of this teaching to the people of Ammonihah—he tells Antionah that having eaten of the fruit “our first parents . . . would have been forever miserable” (Alma 12:26). In both his teachings at Ammonihah and his instructions to Corianton, Alma makes it clear that humanity was given space to “repent and serve God” (Alma 42:4).

In continuity with Lehi’s teachings in 2 Nephi 2, Alma views agency as a key result of the fall. Indeed, as a result of the fall, Adam and Eve “became subjects to follow after their own will” (Alma 42:7).²⁹ Alma also continues the Nephite teachings that humanity is cut off spiritually and temporally from God, becoming “carnal, sensual,

and devilish, by nature” (42:10). Humanity’s agency means that they brought this state upon themselves through disobedience (42:11).

It is only after having established humanity’s fallen state because of the experience of the garden and this life as probationary time that Alma reintroduces the ideas of justice and mercy. In Alma 42:13, he says, “Therefore, according to justice, the plan of redemption could not be brought about, only on conditions of repentance of men in this probationary state.” Because of humanity’s fallen state, only proper repentance (which Alma implies is not possible solely under the law of justice) could fulfill God’s plan. He continues that without this, “mercy could not take effect except it should destroy the work of justice. Now the work of justice could not be destroyed; if so, God would cease to be God” (42:13).

God’s honesty and trustworthiness

This controversial statement that God would cease to be God seems best understood in connection with parallel teachings from Alma’s teachings at Ammonihah and statements about God found in the law of Moses. In his disputation with Antionah, Alma states that without the preparatory or probationary state “the plan of redemption would have been frustrated, and the word of God would have been void, taking none effect” (Alma 12:26). For Alma, the intersection of God’s justice and his mercy is expressed through giving a probationary period to humanity. Without this chance, everything God said about returning to his presence³⁰ is void.

As noted earlier, according to the law of Moses, one of the primary characteristics of God is covenant trustworthiness, a point that expresses both his justice and his mercy. The rogue prophet Balaam expressed it in these terms, “God is not a man, that he should lie; neither the son of man, that he should repent:³¹ hath he said, and shall he not do it? Or hath he spoken, and shall he not make it good?” (Numbers 23:19). Balaam contrasts humanity unfavorably with God, noting that although humans will lie about things, God will not—he is, to use the old phrase, as good as his word. God’s trustworthiness

is explicitly connected to both his justice and mercy in the recitation of his attributes in Deuteronomy 7:9–10: “Know therefore that the Lord thy God, he is God, the faithful God, which keepeth covenant and mercy with them that love him and keep his commandments to a thousand generations; and repayeth them that hate him to their face, to destroy them.” Deuteronomy explicitly connects God’s trustworthiness with his covenant keeping, his mercy, and his repayment and punishment of those who do not observe his covenants and commandments.

Thus, when Alma says that God would cease to be God if justice and mercy did not have their divine interplay, he is not making an absolute statement about God’s being.³² As in Ammonihah, he is instead stating here that without this rapprochement, God would not be true to the statements that he has previously made and so would not be the God that he presents himself to be in the law. He would not be acting in accord with the statements about himself and his character and about his plans for humanity that he has already stated.

Law of Moses and atonement

At this point, Alma has laid out for Corianton the conundrum, drawing on both strands of his scriptural heritage: the law of Moses and the teachings of previous Nephite prophets. From the law, he inherited a notion of God who is just and trustworthy, restoring justice for justice. From the Nephite tradition, he inherited the notion of a fallen humanity who is subject to an inexorable justice that must be overcome and has been overcome through Jesus Christ. It seems that this is the sticking point for Corianton—how right it is for someone to be punished if mercy has already paid the price.

To answer Corianton’s question, Alma brings in a Nephite theological construction that is heavily rooted in the law of Moses—that of atonement. Like many of the ideas that we have seen in this paper, the ideas of atonement are first found in Lehi’s teachings and then continued by Jacob. Although in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints today we use *atonement* as our regular word for

Jesus Christ's saving work, it is actually relatively uncommon in our current Book of Mormon, appearing only thirty-nine times.³³ In King James idiom, *atonement* appears primarily within the confines of the temple cult, appearing more times in Leviticus than anywhere else in the scriptures.³⁴

Alma's use of this word is an appeal to traditions about Jesus Christ's salvation that are built around the law. Alma asserts that "the plan of mercy could not be brought about except an atonement should be made; therefore God himself atoneth for the sins of the world, to bring about the plan of mercy, to appease the demands of justice, that God might be a perfect, just God, and a merciful God also" (Alma 42:15). It is God's own atonement that makes it possible for God to be both just and merciful. Although Alma 42 discusses mediation between humans and God, here it is almost as though God's atonement mediates between the two divine impulses of justice and mercy, correcting a perceived imbalance between these two principles.

At this point, Alma moves into discussing the relationship between sin and the law—this introduces one of the Book of Mormon's more difficult logic chains: "Now, how could a man repent except he should sin? How could he sin if there was no law? How could there be a law save there was a punishment?" (Alma 42:17). Repentance derives from sin and punishment, and both of those are connected to the law, which Alma specifies is a "just law" (42:18). One of the purposes of the law is to make people "afraid to sin" (42:20). Without the law, neither justice nor mercy would be possible because there is no identified sin to punish or repent of (42:21).³⁵

Alma's solution

In the end, however, Alma weaves together the two strands of tradition, reconnecting God's mercy and his justice: "But God ceaseth not to be God, and mercy claimeth the penitent, and mercy cometh because of the atonement . . . and thus they are restored into his presence, to be judged according to their works, according to the law and justice" (Alma 42:23). Mercy brings humanity to a place where they

can once again qualify for God's justice. In other words, as in the law of Moses, justice and mercy are two sides of the same coin in his understanding of God's own nature and being. The notion of atonement and reparation solves the problem of justice and mercy that arise from the Nephite teachings of humanity's universal guilt inherited from Adam and Eve.

This then is Alma's answer to Corianton's accusation that it is unjust for sinners to be punished—Alma builds upon his teachings about restoration expressed earlier in his instruction to his son. Alma inherits from the law of Moses a legal and religious tradition where God cannot be unjust. As noted above, Isaiah equates God with justice, something that makes its way into Nephite discourse from Jacob forward. This also explains Alma's continued insistence that if things do not work according to the system that he has laid out "God would cease to be God." Alma is not talking about eternal laws so much as reminding Corianton that he has defined God by his justice. Corianton's accusation of injustice was not just the struggles of a person with issues of fairness or wondering about punishment—it was an attack on the very being of God himself. In the legal and religious tradition inherited from the law and the prophets, God *could not* be unjust, because the entire Israelite (and so Nephite) system of law and covenant depended on divine justice and trustworthiness. Mercy cannot rob justice, as Corianton's suggestion seems to suggest, because they are both part of who God is. The law of God exists because he is a God of law.

For Alma—as for his ancient ancestor Lehi—God's justice and mercy come together to create space for humans to choose; the punishments that come upon humanity are not unjust because humans have a choice. According to the scheme laid out by the Book of Mormon authors, the fall of humanity sets up a dichotomy between justice and mercy, which is bridged by Jesus's atonement. This in turn sets up the option that humans can choose to follow God and to have both justice and mercy come into play. As Alma tells Corianton, "And thus God bringeth about his great and eternal purposes,

which were prepared from the foundation of the world. And thus cometh about the salvation and the redemption of men, and also their destruction and misery. Therefore, O my son, whosoever will come may come and partake of the waters of life freely; and whosoever will not come the same is not compelled to come; but in the last day it shall be restored unto him according to his deeds" (Alma 42:26–27). Because of the atonement, the "salvation and redemption of men" comes because they "come and partake of the waters of life freely." Likewise, "destruction and misery" come to those who choose not to come. Neither, however, are compelled. Corianton's question about punishment, with its backhanded accusation of injustice from God, is answered with an appeal to human agency.

Alma finally encourages Corianton that he "should let these things trouble [him] no more" and focus on his personal repentance and choices (Alma 42:29). He indicates that his son was attempting to excuse himself in his own sins by calling God's justice into question. Corianton's attempts to justify himself by denying the justice of the great lawgiver (3 Nephi 15:4) could not work because, ultimately, mercy and justice were the same thing, and God's mercy and his justice were both an outgrowth of his divine being.

Conclusion

Alma's teachings to his son Corianton are not the result of abstract difficulties but of Corianton's own very real problems and concerns. As part of this he attempts to excuse himself and his actions, especially his boasting and interactions with Isabel during the Zoramite mission, by suggesting that for God to punish those who break the commandments in the law is unjust.

Alma's response to his son is part of a long Nephite tradition of interpreting the law through a well-developed doctrine of the fall of humanity. Lehi, Jacob, Benjamin, Abinadi, and Amulek all frame the question of how we interact with God and his justice through an understanding of humanity's fallen nature and of our subsequent guilt

before God. Because of the fall of humanity, the Book of Mormon authors generally present God's justice as a fearsome thing that must be overcome through Jesus Christ's atonement.

This is in contradistinction to the general picture of justice in the law and the Old Testament. There, the God of Israel was characterized by his loyalty and faithfulness. The common word translated as "justice" in the Old Testament also indicates righteousness—a connection that underscores both God's justice and mercy. In fact, these attributes are elements that are bound up in who he is and what he does. Abraham asks God to mercifully spare the city of Sodom by appealing to his justice and his sense of right. Prophets such as Isaiah and Balaam describe God's justice and rectitude in connection with his nature.

The connection between the concepts of justice inherited by Alma is well expressed by Jeffrey R. Holland in a speech just before he became dean of Religious Instruction at BYU: "However frightening it may be that all of us have sinned, however frightening it may be to contemplate a just God, it is infinitely more frightening to me to contemplate an unjust God."³⁶ Our sins make us see God's justice as a source of terror and struggle, but one of the important truths of this gospel is that God is a trustworthy being.

In response to Corianton's accusation of injustice on the part of God, Alma talks about the intersection of justice and mercy, bringing together the Nephite idea of justice as a negative force and the Mosaic and Old Testament idea of justice being part of God's inherent character. Because the law portrays God's justice as inherent to his character, an accusation of injustice against God is an affront against his divine being. This is the reason for Alma's constant refrain that God would cease to be God—not necessarily that his divine existence would end, but that it would not be consistent with the way he presented himself in the law and revealed himself through the scriptures. He would, in effect, no longer be the trustworthy covenant God who revealed himself on Mount Sinai and told Israel that he "keepeth covenant and mercy with them that love him and keep his

commandments to a thousand generations; and repayeth them that hate him to their face, to destroy them” (Deuteronomy 7:9–10).

This is the final message to Corianton—he could not accuse God of injustice without realizing the connection that God himself made between justice and mercy, and Corianton was in a position where he did have a choice. In the end, it all comes down to God’s covenant faithfulness to us, whether expressed in the law of Moses, the great plan of redemption, or the laws of justice and mercy. The same God who gave the law of Moses also performed his infinite atonement so that all humanity could be saved, showing his covenant loyalty to us in justice *and* mercy. In the great words of Zion’s poetess, Eliza R. Snow, ultimately through Jesus Christ “justice, love, and mercy meet in harmony divine.”³⁷

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Notes

1. The ancient Jewish rabbis spoke about God having both the attribute of mercy and the attribute of justice and taught that both of these needed to exist in order for the universe to exist (Genesis Rabbah 12:15). English translation at H. Freedman, *Genesis*, vol. 1 in *Midrash Rabbah: Translated into English with Notes, Glossary and Indices*, ed. H. Freedman and Isidore Epstein (London: Soncino Press, 1939), 99.
2. For a discussion of some of these difficulties, see John W. Welch, *The Legal Cases in the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University and Neal A. Maxwell Institute, 2008), 5–16.
3. Ze’ev Falk, *Hebrew Law in Biblical Times*, 2nd ed. (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute, 2001), 73–74; Welch, *Legal Cases*, 167n71.

4. On some of the difficulties inherent here, see T. Benjamin Spackman, "The Israelite Roots of Atonement Terminology," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 55, no. 1 (2016): 41–46. Spackman addresses the Book of Mormon specifically on pages 57–60.
5. Royal Skousen, "The Original Language of the Book of Mormon: Upstate New York Dialect, King James English, or Hebrew?" *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 3, no. 1 (1994): 28–38.
6. Timothy D. Lytton suggests that these two terms are the basis for the notion of social justice in the Bible. See Lytton, "Shall Not the Judge of the Earth Deal Justly?: Accountability, Compassion, and Judicial Authority in the Biblical Story of Sodom and Gomorrah," *Journal of Law and Religion* 18, no. 1 (2002–2003): 36.
7. These include *tzedeq* and *tzadiq*. All have the same basic referent of "just" or "righteous."
8. The word *justice* appears only twenty-eight times in the entire KJV Old Testament. Compare this with the 411 appearances of *righteousness* in the same book. Within the Greek of the New Testament, the Greek words *dikaïosynē* ("justification, righteousness") and *dikaïōō* ("to justify, to make right") have a similar range of meaning to that of the Hebrew. This suggests that this is an idea firmly rooted in the entire biblical text.
9. Helmer Ringgren and Bo Johnson, "𐤒𐤕𐤔," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, Heinz-Josef Fabry (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 12:254. The literature on the meaning of this word is immense; see the first note in *TDOT* cited above.
10. Ringgren and Johnson, "𐤒𐤕𐤔," *TDOT* 12:253.
11. Lytton sees in this story a model for just jurisprudence based on accountability and compassion. See Lytton, "Accountability, Compassion, and Judicial Authority," 31–55.
12. Parallelism is the primary form of Hebrew poetry. It is, therefore, very common in the Bible and is often found in the Book of Mormon. The best description of how this works is probably James Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry: Parallelism and Its History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998). For a discussion of how these ideas play out in the Book of

Mormon, see Donald W. Parry, *Poetic Parallelisms in the Book of Mormon: The Complete Text Reformatted* (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute, 2007). Parry has an overview of parallelism, with a description of the various kinds and types scholars have adduced at xii–xxxiv.

13. This is the divine name, Yahweh or Jehovah.
14. Jared W. Ludlow, “Justice and Mercy in the Book of Deuteronomy (Is There Mercy in the Old Testament?),” *Occasional Papers* 4 (2003): 17–18.
15. “דסד,” in Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 336–37.
16. Ringgren and Johnson, “צדק,” *TDOT* 12:260.
17. “רזום,” in Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), 933.
18. Ludlow, “Justice and Mercy,” 18.
19. KJV has specified that it is third and fourth *generations* but lacks the specification that it is thousands of generations. The Hebrew text does not specify “generations” in either case.
20. Robert L. Millet, “Fall of Adam and Eve,” in *Book of Mormon Reference Companion*, ed. Dennis L. Largey (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003), 264–66; LaMar E. Garrard, “Creation, Fall, and Atonement (2 Nephi 1, 2),” in *Studies in Scripture: The Book of Mormon*, ed. Kent P. Jackson (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988), 86–102.
21. Russell M. Nelson, “The Book of Mormon: What Would Your Life Be Like without It?” *Ensign*, November 2017, 62.
22. David Bokovoy, “Holiness to the Lord: Biblical Temple Imagery in the Sermons of Jacob,” in *Temple Insights: Proceedings of the Interpreter Matthew B. Brown Memorial Conference (The Temple on Mount Zion, 22 September 2012)*, ed. William J. Hamblin and David Rolph Seely (Orem, UT: The Interpreter Foundation; Salt Lake City: Eborn Books, 2014), 171–86.
23. Marvin H. Pope, Elimelech Epstein Halevy, David Kadosh, Adela Wolfe, Bernard Heller, and Helen Rosenau, “Adam,” in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik, vol. 1, 2nd ed. (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), 371–76.

24. For a comparison between Isaiah 53 and its parallel in Alma 14, see Shon D. Hopkin, "Isaiah 52–53 and Mosiah 13–14: A Textual Comparison," in *Abinadi: He Came among Them in Disguise*, ed. Shon D. Hopkin (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2018), 139–68.
25. The connection between Amulek's words and the words of Abinadi has already been shown by John Hilton III, "Abinadi's Legacy: Tracing His Influence through the Book of Mormon," in Hopkin, *Abinadi: He Came among Them in Disguise*, 93–116.
26. There is a close study of the Zoramite mission in Michael F. Perry, "The Supremacy of the Word: Alma's Mission to the Zoramites and the Conversion of the Lamanites," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 24 (2015): 119–37.
27. Note that with the exception of Mosiah, these teachings are taught by the exact same individuals as the notions of the "demands of justice" discussed above.
28. For a discussion of cherubim and their place in Israelite thought, see Avram R. Shannon, "'Come Near unto Me': Guarded Space and Its Mediators in the Jerusalem Temple," in *Ascending the Mountain of the Lord: Temple, Praise, and Worship in the Old Testament*, ed. Jeffrey R. Chadwick, Matthew J. Grey, and David Rolph Seely (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2013), 66–84.
29. Compare with 2 Nephi 2:27–30.
30. Alma calls this returning to God's rest, drawing on language from Psalm 95.
31. "Repent" here is Hebrew *hitnaḥem*, a word that means to rue or regret a decision.
32. Terryl L. Givens has argued that the idea that God's existence is dependent on his conformity with law is a peculiarly Latter-day Saint construction, from the days of Joseph Smith forward. See Givens, *Wrestling the Angel: The Foundations of Mormon Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 61–69. Although it is a somewhat less-argued position, it is possible that Alma is not making a strict ontological statement about God's nature. See Givens, *Wrestling the Angel*, 64.

33. Compare *to redeem* and *redemption*, which appear 117 times in the Book of Mormon.
34. Indeed, the English word *atonement* with its variations appears more times in the biblical book of Leviticus than in the New Testament, Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, and Pearl of Great Price combined. For a discussion of *atonement* in its Hebrew context with an eye toward the theological development of the term, see Spackman, "Atonement Terminology," 47–49.
35. This may be fruitfully connected with Lehi's teachings in 2 Nephi 2:5.
36. Jeffrey R. Holland, "Borne upon Eagles' Wings," BYU devotional, 2 June 1974, https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/jeffrey-r-holland_borne-upon-eagles-wings/.
37. Eliza R. Snow, "How Great the Wisdom and the Love," *Hymns* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), no. 195.