



The Lord's efforts to bring salvation to his people in all times are grounded in the covenants that he offers them.

The Plan of Salvation and the Book of Mormon

NOEL B. REYNOLDS

Noel B. Reynolds (noel_reynolds@byu.edu) is a professor emeritus of political science at BYU.

Students of American religious history have not usually appreciated the extent to which the 1830 publication of the Book of Mormon introduced explicit presentations of the gospel of Jesus Christ and his plan of salvation into Judeo-Christian biblical discourse. This paper will feature a textual and structural exposition of the scripturally unique plan of salvation as taught in the Nephite scriptures. This exposition in turn will provide the necessary grounding for (1) distinguishing this plan from the gospel of Jesus Christ, (2) an examination of the Nephite prophets' predominant focus on the redeeming functions of the plan, and (3) some reflections on the differences between the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith's revelations related to this topic.

Book of Mormon as a Unique Source for the Plan of Salvation

In this essay, I will present an initial analysis of the Nephite teaching about the plan of salvation or redemption, together with a proposed summary and assessment of its principal elements. I see this interpretive task as preliminary

to any meaningful engagement with the work of other scholars that may overlap with this topic.¹ In previous writings, I have documented at length the Nephite understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ as presented in different rhetorical and parenetic formulations throughout that text.²

It may surprise some readers to learn that the Christian world has never achieved a consensus on either of these topics. When Professor C. H. Dodd of the University of Cambridge published his own understanding of the basic Christian message, or *kerygma*, in 1936, he and many others assumed it would be effective as a unifying statement for Christian scholars.³ To their surprise, the little volume provoked a broad and long-lasting reaction through scores of answering books and articles defending a wide variety of competing interpretations of New Testament teaching. While there is broad agreement among New Testament scholars that both Christ and his disciples taught the *good news*, that teaching is nowhere clearly and authoritatively articulated in the Bible in a compelling way, so the New Testament continues to invite a wide range of competing interpretations. The same can be said for *the plan of salvation*, which is never explained as a coherent, divine plan in the Bible and which is only rarely mentioned in Christian writings.

In contrast, the Book of Mormon writers referred hundreds of times to *the gospel of Jesus Christ* and its principal elements in their teachings to the Nephite and Lamanite peoples. And there are thirty explicit references to *the plan of salvation* by this or one of its other names. The plan of salvation is spelled out first by the prophet Jacob and then in less detail by numerous others throughout the text.⁴

The Bible itself never mentions a plan of salvation as such, nor presents a developed explanation of it. While all the elements of the plan presented in the Book of Mormon may be familiar to Bible readers, the idea of bringing them all together as part of God's plan is never explicitly developed in the Old Testament or the New Testament. This fact might lead Book of Mormon readers to attribute the origin of this teaching to the early Nephite prophets, but as I have shown in a previous study, there is good reason to believe that the version of the book of Genesis available to the Nephites in the plates of brass was similar to the version of Genesis revealed to Joseph Smith, which does include an explicit and developed account of *the plan of salvation*: "And now, behold, I say unto you: This is *the plan of salvation* unto all men, through the blood of mine Only Begotten, who shall come in the meridian of time" (Moses 6:62; emphasis added).⁵ If that is the case, the Nephite prophets

would have understood themselves to be drawing on the record of Moses and not innovating this term.

The concept that God had a plan for all these things from the beginning was clearly taught by the first generation of Nephite prophets in the sixth century BC as it provided both them and their successors over the next thousand years with the background or context they could use to preach and explain the gospel of Jesus Christ to their people. The plan of salvation they taught made perfectly clear the relevance of the gospel of Jesus Christ for every individual born into this world. It explained the great blessings that would come to those who would repent and embrace all elements of the gospel. And it warned of the punishments that would await the wicked at the judgment of all humankind. While the concept of such a divine plan is perfectly compatible with Jewish and Christian scriptures and teaching, it is not generally recognized as part of biblical teaching and receives only occasional mention in the reference works compiled by Bible scholars.⁶ The Book of Mormon phrasing does not occur at all in the Bible, though it does show up occasionally in the writings of some Christians.

Both the word *plan* and the noun phrase *plan of x* would have been available to the translators of the King James and later English Bible versions. While the syntax *x of y*, where both *x* and *y* are nouns was established earlier in Middle English usage, the word *plan* first appears in Early Modern English with published examples now being found in the seventeenth-century transition period to modern English. While very rare, examples of the distinctive Book of Mormon phrasings have been found in late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century writings: *plan of redemption* (1,697), *plan of salvation* (1,720), *plan of happiness* (1,728), *plan of mercy* (1,746), and *plan of restoration* (1,724)—suggesting that such usage may have been known to English speakers in earlier decades.⁷

Joseph Smith's Revelations

It is interesting to note that the numerous revelations recorded in the Doctrine and Covenants do not duplicate either of these Book of Mormon teachings. While this gospel and its main principles are mentioned repeatedly in those revelations, they are not presented anywhere as a developed teaching or explained in any detail. In Doctrine and Covenants 65:25, parents are warned of their responsibility to teach the gospel to their children. And Doctrine and Covenants 10 does include scattered mentions of several gospel

principles in the context of what will be found in the Book of Mormon as it will be translated.⁸ Rather, the consistent stance of the revelations of the Restoration is to defer and point instead to the Book of Mormon, which “contains the fulness of the gospel.”⁹

The same thing can be said regarding *the plan of salvation*. While the revelations to Joseph Smith include many revelations that expand any previous understanding of the plan of salvation, that term and its synonyms do not occur in the revelations. Nor do they contain any comprehensive explanation of the plan of salvation under this or any other rubric. But the Book of Mormon does include thirty explicit references to the plan of salvation by one or another of its labels. Several Nephite discourses discuss this plan in the aggregate, while others develop specific elements of the plan.

Nephite Distinguishing of the Plan of Salvation from the Gospel of Jesus Christ

Following the general tendency of other Christian writers, some Latter-day Saint authors merge the gospel of Jesus Christ with the teachings of the plan of salvation in their discourse, preferring not to draw a distinction between the two. But the Book of Mormon writers kept the distinction clearly in mind. Nephite prophets consistently referred to the means by which men and women in this mortal existence could qualify for eternal life as the gospel or doctrine of Christ, the way, the path, or the word.¹⁰ On multiple occasions, they explicitly cited Christ’s gospel teaching to them that any person who would (1) trust in Christ, (2) sincerely repent of their sins by covenanting to follow his straight and narrow path, and (3) witness to the Father that they had so covenanted by being baptized in water, would (4) receive the baptism of fire and the Holy Ghost, which would bring with it the remission of sins, a testimony of the Father and the Son, and daily direction as to what they should do. All who would (5) endure to the end of their lives in following these commands of the Lord would (6) receive eternal life at the Judgment Day. In these presentations, they typically referred to key elements of the plan of salvation as context, to explain what the Father and the Son have done and will do to make salvation possible for all those who will embrace their gospel.

The Book of Mormon provides multiple passages in which the same clear and multifaceted doctrine is presented as an invitation to all who wish to be saved. It begins with Nephi in the first generation when he reports a vision given at different times both to him and to his father, Lehi—in which he was

taught the gospel by the Father and the Son—each of whom he quotes three times.¹¹ The same gospel was taught twice centuries later by the resurrected Jesus Christ when he appeared to the Nephite people.¹² This gospel enumerates specific things a convert can do that will lead to eternal life.

The plan of salvation, on the other hand, describes the works of the Father and the Son that make eternal life possible and available to all humankind. In contrast with the more formulaic presentation of the gospel of Jesus Christ that is repeated throughout the Book of Mormon text, the Nephite prophets tended to have their own approaches and even vocabulary for explaining different features of the plan of salvation. The following sections of this paper will offer an examination of the principal passages on the plan of salvation while emphasizing elements of the Nephite teaching that may be unique.

Nephite Labels for the Plan of Salvation

While this plan of salvation is never named explicitly in the Bible, the Apostle Paul may have had a similar concept in mind in passages like Ephesians 3:10 when he referred to God’s “eternal purpose” or Acts 20:27, in which he reminded his readers of his prior preaching of the whole purpose, counsel, or will (*boule*) of God. The Book of Mormon prophets expanded these same teachings as they drew on “the plan of salvation” for humankind—made known unto them by “the great God” in his mercy (Alma 24:14), a plan “which was prepared from the foundation of the world” (Alma 22:13). And Book of Mormon writers do refer to it repeatedly as a *plan* with the following variations:¹³

1. The merciful plan of the great Creator (1): 2 Nephi 9:6
2. The plan of our God (1): 2 Nephi 9:13
3. The great and eternal plan of deliverance from death (1): 2 Nephi 11:5
4. The great plan of redemption (2): Jacob 6:8, Alma 34:31
5. The plan of salvation (2): Jarom 1:2, Alma 24:14
6. The plan of redemption (14): Alma 12:25, 26, 30, 32, 33; 17:16; 18:39; 22:13; 29:2; 34:16; 39:18; 42:11, 13
7. The great plans of the Eternal God (1): Alma 34:9
8. The great and eternal plan of redemption (1): Alma 34:16
9. The plan of restoration (1): Alma 41:2
10. The great plan of salvation (1): Alma 42:5

11. The great plan of happiness (1): Alma 42:8
12. The plan of mercy (2): Alma 42:15
13. The plan of happiness (1): Alma 42:16
14. The great plan of mercy (1): Alma 42:31

Obviously, this variety of descriptive names features characteristics or benefits of the plan of salvation that might have been important in different contexts. Most striking is the fact that seventeen of these thirty references focus on the *redemption* of men as the plan's central purpose. While Lehi himself twice used the term "his eternal purposes" to refer to this same plan (2 Nephi 2:12 and 15), his sons Jacob and Nephi use the "plan" labels four times in their discourses, and Jacob goes so far as to contrast God's plan with "the cunning plan of the evil one" (2 Nephi 9:6 and 13; Jacob 6:8; 2 Nephi 11:5; and 2 Nephi 9:8).¹⁴

While this terminology is clearly introduced by the first generation of Nephite prophets, it was used later by a broad spectrum of Nephites throughout Nephite history, including especially Alma and Mormon but also Jarom, Amulek, Ammon, Aaron, and the Lamanite convert king Anti-Nephi-Lehi. Because of the highly selective nature of Mormon's abridgment of the Nephite records, we can never use the absence of a particular topic in the teachings linked to particular prophets as evidence that they did not preach on those topics in their own times.¹⁵ But we can see that explicit teaching of the plan of salvation or redemption was established in the first generation of Nephite prophets, enjoyed significant emphasis in the generation of Alma the Younger and the sons of Mosiah, and appeared repeatedly in passages written by the editor Mormon in his abridgment.

Plan of Salvation as Understood by the Nephite Prophets

Below, I gather up their various insights about significant elements of the plan of salvation. But in so doing, I have found it necessary to impose an analytical structure that is nowhere offered as authoritative in the text. In other words, I do not claim that the following analysis is the only correct way of organizing the Nephites' teachings about the plan of salvation. While the dependence of later prophets on the teachings of the earlier ones is evident, distinctive accounts of some elements of the plan of salvation are introduced by many of these prophets, even in the very last chapters of the book. My hope is that the following outline of principal topics and supporting subtopics will make my

collection of Nephite teachings on the plan of salvation easier to understand in their full scope. The outline provides a preview and guide for the comprehensive analysis of these teachings that follows.

Outline of the Plan of Salvation as Taught in the Book of Mormon

1. Creation and agency
 - A. The gods created this world, placed man and woman in it, and gave them their agency to choose whether or not they would obey divinely given commandments.
 - B. The gods allowed the devil to tempt Adam and Eve, which led to their fall and separation from the presence of God and to the introduction of death into the world.
 - C. This life provides humankind with a time of *probation*, during which men and women can freely choose to obey or reject God's law (the gospel of Jesus Christ).
2. Covenant and salvation history
 - A. The gospel and the plan of salvation were taught to Adam and Eve and their descendants.
 - B. The Lord gave covenants to Abraham and to his posterity to provide an exemplar of "the people of God" to all nations throughout human history.
 - C. The earliest Nephite prophets were given a renewed version of these teachings and covenants.
 - D. The Lord taught the Nephites that their record (the Book of Mormon) would become the principal instrument by which both the gentile nations and the house of Israel would come to faith in Christ in the last days.
3. Preaching the gospel
 - A. The Father and the Son sent angels and prophets to teach humankind the gospel and the commandments.
 - B. Jesus himself was sent to present his gospel personally and authoritatively to the Jews first, then to the Nephites and to others.
4. The ministry and Atonement of Christ
 - A. The Father sent his Son to minister unto men and to establish his church and priesthood authority.

- B. Jesus was also sent to suffer and to die in the performance of an atonement that would make possible the forgiveness of sins and the resurrection.
- 5. Resurrection, judgment, and afterlife
 - A. The Father and the Son provided a “spirit state” between death and judgment.
 - B. They prepared a heaven wherein the righteous can enjoy eternal life with them.
 - C. They prepared a hell to which the devil, his angels, and the wicked will finally be consigned.
 - D. The Father and the Son will raise humankind to be judged according to their works at the last day.

Creation and Agency

The Nephite prophets shared an understanding of the Creation of the world that was very similar to the biblical account. When Jesus came to the Nephites immediately after his Crucifixion, he spoke to them from heaven and confirmed the fundamental fact of his role as creator of the earth: “Behold, I am Jesus Christ the Son of God. I created the heavens and the earth, and all things that in them is. I was with the Father from the beginning” (3 Nephi 9:15). The Lord told Nephi that he “created all men” (2 Nephi 29:7) and explained to the brother of Jared that “all men were created in the beginning after mine own image” (Ether 3:15). The Book of Mormon text does not include a Creation account as such, though we have clear evidence that the Nephite prophets did use such an account in their teaching.¹⁶ Most references to the Nephites’ scriptural account tend to focus on the human part of the story. As “first parents” (1 Nephi 5:11), Adam and Eve “brought forth children,” which produced the “family of all the earth” (2 Nephi 2:20), which in turn can be labeled “the family of Adam” (2 Nephi 9:21).

Through his explanations of God’s “eternal purposes” (2 Nephi 2:12), Lehi set the pattern for later Nephite prophets by focusing on two issues that are grounded in the Creation account—issues that do not surface explicitly in Genesis. Both are related to his teachings about the Fall and the need it created for an atonement. The first, as explained by Lehi, was the general principle that there must be “opposition in all things”; without this, there could be no righteousness nor wickedness, happiness nor misery, good nor bad (2 Nephi 2:11). “Wherefore the Lord God gave unto man that he should

act for himself” (2 Nephi 2:16). But this agency could be activated only when humans were enticed to choose between good and evil. This opened an important role for the devil, “an angel of God” that “had fallen from heaven . . . , having sought that which was evil before God” (2 Nephi 2:17). So Adam and Eve yielded to temptation and were driven out of the garden “to bring about *his eternal purposes* in the end of man” (2 Nephi 2:15; emphasis added). “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” (2 Nephi 2:21).

Much later, Alma would use Lehi’s terminology to explain that “there was a space granted unto man in which he might repent. Therefore this life became a *probationary state*, a time to prepare to meet God” (Alma 12:24; emphasis added). As Lehi went on to explain, “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 which they were after that 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” (2 Nephi 2:22–23).

It is quite clear that Lehi saw the Fall of Adam and Eve as a necessary step according to “the wisdom of him who knoweth all things;” so, in the Nephite understanding of the Creation, “Adam fell that men might be, and men are that they might have joy” (2 Nephi 2:24–25).¹⁷

This understanding of the Creation conveys the essential premises for an understanding of the Atonement to come: “The Messiah cometh in the fullness of time that he might redeem the children of men from the fall” (2 Nephi 2:26). This Nephite take on the Creation is unique as it focuses on the importance of human freedom and responsibility—all of which point to a future judgment of all men and women:

And because that they are redeemed from the fall, they have become *free* forever, knowing good from evil, *to act for themselves* and not to be acted upon, save it be by the punishment of the law at the great and last day, according to the commandments which God hath given.

Wherefore men are *free* according to the flesh, and all things are given them which is 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 2:26–29; emphasis added)

Covenant and Salvation History

The explicit presentation of the plan of salvation by the Nephite prophets is closely linked to the history and prophecies of the dealings of God with his children on the earth as he prepares and enables them to receive the blessings of salvation to the extent they are willing. These histories and prophecies may be termed a “salvation history,” as they provide the Nephite prophets with a recurring focus and unifying theme for their writings across ten centuries. The Lord’s efforts to bring salvation to his people in all times are grounded in the covenants that he offers them, commitments of binding relationships that make them his people, distinguished by their determination to keep his commandments.

The numerous pages of covenant discourse in the Book of Mormon can be confusing until the reader realizes that there are actually three streams of covenant discourse in the prophecies and teachings of the Nephite prophets and of Jesus Christ when he teaches the Nephites personally. As I have explained in a more detailed study,

The first of these streams of covenant discourse is the Lord’s promise to Lehi and his successors that, depending on their obedience, he will give them a chosen land of liberty in which they will be prospered as a people. The second is a version of the Abrahamic covenant—focused on Jacob’s son Joseph as the ancestor of Lehi—which emphasizes (1) the promise to the house of Israel that they will ultimately be gathered home in peace and righteousness to their promised homeland and (2) the promise received originally by Abraham and not much repeated in the Bible that in his seed all the kindreds of the earth would be blessed. The third is the universal covenant the Father has offered to all his children as individuals, without respect to Abrahamic descent, that if they would accept his gospel and come unto him, they would receive eternal life.¹⁸

What ties these three streams of covenant discourse together in a single unified perspective is the prophecy that the Book of Mormon itself—a prophetic record written by the descendants of Lehi (and Joseph) and containing the fullness of the gospel—would, in the last days, become the primary means



Matt Reier, © 2007 Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

For men and women to exercise their God-given agency as described in the plan of salvation, it is necessary that they be informed about the Atonement of Christ and about his gospel.

by which Christ's gospel would come first to the Gentiles, and then to the lost and scattered tribes of Israel, becoming in that process a blessing to all nations.¹⁹

Preaching the Gospel

For men and women to exercise their God-given agency as described in the plan of salvation, it was necessary that they be informed about the Atonement of Christ and about his gospel or doctrine that would teach them what they must do if they would take full advantage of that atonement. Mormon understood that these teachings had been given to men by angels sent from God, as well as by prophets to whom God had spoken, and he was careful to include both kinds of examples in the Book of Mormon.²⁰ “For behold, God knowing all things, being from everlasting to everlasting, behold, he sent angels to minister unto the children of men, to make manifest concerning the coming of Christ; and in Christ there should come every good thing. And God also declared unto prophets by his own mouth that Christ should come” (Moroni 7:22–23).

Here he has echoed Alma’s teaching to apostate Nephites before Christ’s coming: “And now we only wait to hear the joyful news, declared unto us by the mouth of angels, of his coming. . . . And it shall be made known unto just and holy men by the mouth of angels at the time of his coming” (Alma 13:25–26).

And so, while the plan of salvation details the many things the Father and the Son have done to provide for human salvation, the gospel provides the universal guideline that men and women can follow to receive those great blessings. As Alma explained, “Now the decrees of God are unalterable. Therefore *the way* is prepared that whosoever will may walk therein and be saved” (Alma 41:8; emphasis added).

The Earthly Ministry of Christ

Whatever visions of the future ministry of Christ on the earth might have been given to the Old Testament prophets, clear accounts of such prophecies have not survived in our modern version of their writings. Abinadi does quote Isaiah 53 with the clear understanding that it was a prophecy of Christ. And Nephi explicitly incorporated chapters of Isaiah into his second book because Isaiah “verily saw my Redeemer, even as I have seen him” (2 Nephi 11:2). But it was the great vision of Christ’s future ministry given to Lehi and Nephi in the earliest days of the Book of Mormon account that provided the perspective and understanding that informed all later Nephite prophets.

The vision began with Nephi seeing a virgin, “the mother of God after the manner of the flesh,” who was bearing a child in her arms, even “the Lamb

of God, yea, even the Eternal Father” (1 Nephi 11:18, 20–21). As the vision unfolded, Nephi saw “the Son of God a going forth among the children of men” (11:24). He saw a prophet preparing the way for him by baptizing, and “the Lamb of God went forth and was baptized of him,” after which the heavens opened and “the Holy Ghost came down out of heaven and abode upon him in the form of a dove” (11:27). He also saw “twelve others following him” and “angels descending upon the children of men” to “minister unto them,” as did the Lamb of God when those who were afflicted with “all manner of diseases and with devils and unclean spirits . . . were healed by the power of the Lamb of God” (11:29–31). This vision would have provided Nephi and his people with a far better perspective on the earthly ministry of Christ than most people in Jesus’s Judea would have centuries later.

But the happy events of the ministry of Jesus Christ and the preaching of his gospel would inevitably lead to his suffering and death at the hands of the very people he had come to serve. For Nephi then “saw that he was lifted up upon the cross and slain for the sins of the world” (1 Nephi 11:33). And the vision did not end there, as Nephi was shown the subsequent gathering of “the multitudes of the earth . . . to fight against the apostles of the Lamb” (11:34), beginning a process of apostasy that would dominate the world for a long time before the promised final restoration of the gospel would come to pass.

The Atonement of Jesus Christ

While the variety of metaphors used by New Testament writers to explicate and testify of the Atonement of Jesus Christ gave rise over the centuries to a variety of competing theories of what the Atonement was or how it worked, the Book of Mormon prophets emphasized this topic even more while maintaining a consistent and unitary atonement teaching.²¹ The English words *atone/atonement* were coined by the famous Bible translator William Tyndale in the sixteenth century and were used by the King James translators almost exclusively in the Old Testament context of the law of Moses with the meaning “to cover.” It was used only once in the New Testament translation for a Greek word meaning “reconcile/reconciliation” or “change.” In other passages, English forms of *reconcile* were used without resorting to Tyndale’s neologism.

In contrast, the English Book of Mormon uses *atone/atonement* thirty-nine times in reference to the Atonement of Jesus Christ. More frequently

used in both books of scripture are forms of *redeem/redemption*. Several of these occurrences in the New Testament invoke the cultural notion of paying a ransom to liberate enslaved persons.²² This is clearly the preferred term for the Nephite writers, who use it 117 times compared to the twenty-two times it is used in the New Testament. As shown above, over half of their thirty-one references to the plan of salvation use *redemption* as the defining term in their phraseology—the *plan of redemption*.

This analysis is further complicated by the fact that seventeen different words in the Hebrew Bible are translated by the English words *redeem* or *redemption*. While only a fraction of these have *ransom* or *redeem* as a principal meaning, almost all of them feature *deliver* or *save* as a principal meaning, including the name Joshua (*yeshuw'ah*), which was the name the angel prescribed to Joseph and Mary for their son Jesus. “She will bear a son, and you are to name him JESUS, for he will *save* his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21 NSRV; compare Luke 1:31). Many of these same terms can be used to mean *rescue* or *free/liberate*.

Jesus Christ as Kinsman-Redeemer

One of the Hebrew terms for *redeem/redemption* (*gā'al*) may be especially significant for the Book of Mormon because of its close linkage with Isaiah. All of Isaiah's references to the Redeemer or his redeeming work use this particular term, which refers to a specific kind of redemption in Hebrew culture—the kinsman-redeemer who redeems or saves a relative or his property because of the covenant responsibility that relatives have to one another. The classic example in the Bible is the case of Boaz, who marries Ruth because of his rather attenuated kinship responsibility to her widowed mother-in-law Naomi, who had married his relative. All the Book of Mormon usages of *redeem/redemption* would seem to fit this context easily.²³

For ancient Israel, as with other tribally organized peoples, the obligations of kinsmen to protect, nurture, and redeem were incurred through birth (parents, children, siblings, and so forth) or through covenants (husbands, wives, adopted children, servants, allies, and Deity). And so, just as Jehovah fulfilled his covenant obligations with Abraham's descendants by redeeming them from Egypt, so also he redeems all those who have accepted his gospel covenant through repentance and obedience: “As many of the Gentiles as will repent are the covenant people of the Lord; and as many of the Jews as will not repent shall be cast off. For the Lord covenanteth with none save it be

with them that repent and believe in his Son, which is the Holy One of Israel” (2 Nephi 30:2).

The Book of Mormon teaches that redemption comes to those who repent, embracing the gospel and coming to Christ. These are the people who receive the remission of sins by fire and by the Holy Ghost and are then sons and daughters of Christ, having taken his name upon themselves and being born again. They have chosen to leave the forbidden paths of the devil to follow the one true way laid out for them by Jesus Christ. And so the redeemed are brought into the family of God by covenant: “I have repented of my sins and have been *redeemed* of the Lord. Behold, I am born of the Spirit. And the Lord said unto me: Marvel not that all mankind, yea, men and women—all nations, kindreds, tongues, and people—must be born again, yea, born of God, changed from their carnal and fallen state to a state of righteousness, being *redeemed* of God, becoming his sons and daughters” (Mosiah 27:24–25; emphasis added). Through his Atonement, Christ gained the power to resurrect the dead and to forgive sins, thereby enabling him to take on responsibility as a Kinsman-Redeemer for all men and women who would repent with a covenant to take his name upon them, to keep his commandments, and to always remember him as they engage his gospel to the end of their lives.

Resurrection, Judgment, and Afterlife

As Jacob and his successors understood it, Christ obtained the power to be resurrected and to bring the souls of all to stand before him at the Judgment by suffering the pains of humankind: “For behold, he suffereth the pains of all men, yea, the pains of every living creature, both men women and children, which belong to the family of Adam. And he suffereth this that the resurrection might pass upon all men, that all might stand before him at the great and judgment day” (2 Nephi 9:21–22).

While the New Testament does speak of heaven, hell, and paradise and the postmortal prospects for the children of men, nothing in the Bible approaches the detail and clarification that Alma received from an angel, and used as he explained “the state of the soul between death and the resurrection” during a private teaching to his questioning son Corianton (Alma 40:1 ff). Through that angelic revelation, Alma had learned that “there is a space between the time of death and the resurrection” and Judgment (Alma 40:9). After they die, “the spirits of those which 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” (40:12). But at the same time, the spirits of the wicked “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” (40:13). However, it is also clear that the Nephite prophets did not have the expansive and detailed views of the eternal kingdoms of glory had by Joseph Smith in the nineteenth century.²⁴ Nor did the Nephite prophets receive the Restoration insight that the spirit world will be a vast scene of missionary activity by means of which the gospel will be preached to the billions of souls that had no chance to receive it during their mortal lives.

Grace and Works

Much has been said by Christian theologians about the roles of grace and works in the Final Judgment, and the relative paucity of New Testament statements requiring good works has led to an influential view that works will be of little or no consequence in that day. Among the more striking examples of the difference between the New Testament and the Book of Mormon are the thirty direct statements by Nephite prophets and Christ himself that at the last day humankind will be judged “according to their works”—most of which are linked directly to the Atonement or Resurrection, through which Christ will become the judge.²⁵ But the New Testament mentions only once that “the Father . . . judgeth according to every man’s work” (1 Peter 1:17).

The more basic versions of the Book of Mormon teaching contain phrases linking the Atonement, the Resurrection, and bringing of humankind to stand in God’s presence to be judged “according to their works.” Most of these passages are abbreviated in some ways, but are consistent in all details with the standard examples, such as Alma’s teaching to the Zoramite poor: “Cast about your eyes and begin to believe in the Son of God, that he will come to redeem his people and that he shall suffer and die to atone for their sins and that he shall rise again from the dead, which shall bring to pass the resurrection, that all men shall stand before him to be judged at the last and judgment day *according to their works*” (Alma 33:22; emphasis added).

Alma provides one of the most complete and graphic portrayals of this scene in his preaching to the people of Ammonihah:

And Amulek hath spoken plainly concerning . . . being brought before the bar of God to be judged *according to our works*.

Then if . . . we have hardened our hearts against the word, . . . our state be awful, for then we shall be condemned.

For . . . 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 durst 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 their 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 hath all power to save every man that believeth on his name and bringeth forth fruit meet for repentance. (Alma 12:12–15)

The Final Judgment

Beginning with Nephi, the Book of Mormon prophets referred repeatedly to a judgment scene that in most instances calls to mind a court of law. Nephi ends his writings by emphasizing the importance of the words of Christ that he and others have taught, which “teach all men that they should do good,” for when he stands with his readers “face to face before his [Christ’s] bar,” these words will condemn those “that will not partake of the goodness of God and respect the words of the Jews and also my words and the words . . . of the Lamb of God” (2 Nephi 33:10–11, 14). While Jacob once places this judgment scene at “the throne of God” (Jacob 3:8), at least eight other references style it as the bar of Christ, of God, or of the Great Jehovah.²⁶

The Judgment Standard: The Law of the Gospel

From the beginning, Jacob was teaching that because of the Atonement and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, all the spirits of men would be released from spirit prison and their bodies would be released from their graves that they may be reunited incorruptibly to appear before the Lord’s Final Judgment: “The paradise of God must deliver up the spirits of the righteous, and the grave deliver up the bodies of the righteous. And the spirit and the body is restored to itself again, and all men become incorruptible and immortal; and they are living souls” (2 Nephi 9:13). For, “when all men shall have passed from this first death unto life, insomuch as they have become immortal, . . . then must they be judged according to the holy judgment of God” (2 Nephi 9:15). And “they which are righteous shall be righteous still and they which are filthy shall be filthy still” (2 Nephi 9:16).

Jacob does understand that the judgment can only apply the law that men have been given in their mortal lives. The law that the Father and the Son have given for humankind is the same gospel of Jesus Christ discussed above: “And he commandeth all men that they must repent and be baptized in his name, having perfect faith in the Holy One of Israel, or they cannot be saved in the kingdom of God. And if they will not repent and believe in his name and be baptized in his name and endure to the end, they must be damned” (2 Nephi 9:23–24).

But he recognizes, as do his successors, that this does not reach to little children or to those nations who have not received the gospel in their mortal lives:

Wherefore he hath given a law. And where there is no law given there is no punishment, and where there is no punishment there is no condemnation, and where there is no condemnation the mercies of the Holy One of Israel hath claim upon them because of the atonement, for they are delivered by the power of him.

For the atonement satisfieth the demands of his justice upon all those who hath not the law given to them. . . .

But woe unto him that hath the law given, yea, that hath all the commandments of God, like unto us, and that transgresseth them and that wasteth the days of his probation, for awful is his state. . . .

And in fine, woe unto all they that die in their sins, for they shall return to God and behold his face and remain in their sins. (2 Nephi 9:25–27, 38)

The Second Death or Eternal Life

At this point, the righteous and the wicked would be separated and assigned to their eternal rewards according to their works. Jacob provides a graphic depiction of the fate of the wicked: “Wherefore they which are filthy are the devil and his angels, and they shall go away into everlasting fire prepared for them; and their torment is a lake of fire and brimstone, whose flames ascendeth up forever and ever and hath no end” (2 Nephi 9:16).

Alma may have understood the lake and fire less literally, explaining it as the captivity of the devil:

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 the 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 flames 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, having subjected them according to his will. (Alma 12:16–17)

While the Nephite prophets understood that those who believed in Jesus Christ would “be saved in the kingdom of God” (2 Nephi 25:13), there is no comparably detailed description of that blessed state to be found in their writings. Benjamin taught that those who embrace the gospel and are “faithful to the end” will be “received into heaven,” where “they may dwell with God in a state of never-ending happiness” (Mosiah 2:41). Similarly, Christ promised the three Nephite disciples that the time would come that they would “be received into the kingdom of the Father, to go no more out but to dwell with God eternally in the heavens” (3 Nephi 28:40; compare Moroni 8:26). And Ammon taught the Lamanites that “the heavens is a place where God dwells and all his holy angels” (Alma 18:30). And Alma contrasted the fates of the wicked and the righteous who will be “raised to endless happiness to inherit the kingdom of God, or to endless misery to inherit the kingdom of the devil” (Alma 41:4). He further asked his people rhetorically if they thought sinners could “have a place to sit down in the kingdom of God with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob, and also all the holy prophets, whose garments are cleansed and are spotless, pure, and white” (Alma 5:24; compare Helaman 3:30). Abinadi taught that those who have believed and “have kept the commandments of God” will be “raised to dwell with God, who hath redeemed them. Thus they have eternal life through Christ” (Mosiah 15:23). Two prophets claimed to have seen “God sitting upon his throne, surrounded with numberless concourses of angels in the attitude of singing and praising their God” (Alma 36:22, citing 1 Nephi 1:8). The most descriptive account comes from Mormon and his final teachings on Christ to the Nephites: “And he hath brought to pass the redemption of the world, whereby he that is found guiltless before him at the judgment day hath it given unto them to dwell in the presence of God in his kingdom, to sing ceaseless praises with the choirs above unto the Father and unto the Son and unto the Holy Ghost, which is one God, in a state of happiness which hath no end” (Mormon 7:7).

Conclusions

The Book of Mormon prophets taught a comprehensive account of the great things the Father and the Son have done to make the salvation of mortal men and women possible—an account they referred to explicitly as the plan of salvation, of mercy, or, most frequently, of redemption. While contemporary Latter-day Saint discourse often conflates the plan of salvation with the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Book of Mormon writers clearly separated the two

and saw the plan as the context that gave the gospel message its meaning. God's plan began with the Creation of this earth and included the Fall, the Atonement, the preaching of the gospel, and the Final Judgment, including the various preparations for appropriate rewards thereafter. This plan provided the context for the gospel they also taught—the means or way by which men and women could take advantage of the plan of salvation—the specific things they must do to receive eternal life. The plan of salvation spells out the things that the Father and the Son have done for all humankind. The gospel of Jesus Christ tells men and women individually what they must do if they would receive those blessings in their fullness.

As presented in the Book of Mormon, the plan of salvation portrays this world as a probationary state where the children of God have the opportunity to prepare themselves for eternal life with God. But they have their agency, and the choice is theirs. They can follow the path of evil, or they can choose the path established by Jesus Christ as their Kinsman-Redeemer through his Atonement. And if they will endure to the end in righteous obedience, it will lead them back into the presence of the Father and the Son. The probationary state is so designed that it will accurately sort and separate those who love evil from those who love the good as they make their daily life choices. They will be judged “according to their works” and according to the law that they were given in this life. While this highly detailed plan is nowhere named or spelled out as such in the Bible or in the revelations given to Joseph Smith, its various elements show up in both scriptural texts and are significantly expanded in the latter. **RE**

Notes

1. Given the frequency with which Latter-day Saint writers have focused on the plan of salvation, it may be surprising that almost none of these have attempted a systematic or comprehensive exposition of that teaching as it occurs in the Book of Mormon, its primary scriptural source. Joseph F. McConkie offered a brief summary in his article, “A Comparison of Book of Mormon, Bible, and Traditional Teachings on the Doctrines of Salvation,” in *The Book of Mormon: The Keystone Scripture*, ed. Paul R. Cheesman (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1988), 78–79. And Daniel K. Judd published an article on the plan of salvation as it relates to competing philosophies of life in his “Hedonism, Asceticism, and the Great Plan of Happiness,” in *The Fulness of Gospel: Foundational Teachings from the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003), 194–209. The most detailed and comprehensive analysis I have found is in the 15 February 2016 online *KnoWhy* #33, produced by the staff of Book of Mormon Central. See “When Does the Book of

Mormon First Talk about the Plan of Salvation,” Book of Mormon Central, <https://knowhy.bookofmormoncentral.org/knowhy/when-does-the-book-of-mormon-first-talk-about-the-plan-of-salvation>. Compare the complementary 8 February 2017 KnowWhy #272, “Where Can You Best Learn about God’s Plan of Salvation?,” Book of Mormon Central, <https://knowhy.bookofmormoncentral.org/knowhy/where-can-you-best-learn-about-gods-plan-of-salvation>. Most of the other treatments of the topic feature the teachings of modern Church leaders or other Restoration scriptures.

2. From the time I began teaching political and legal philosophy at Brigham Young University in 1970, my duties included teaching an honors Book of Mormon course that allocated a full academic year to the study of this volume of ancient scripture. Going through that text repeatedly with my students, I soon realized that most scholarly interpretations of the text done by both outside scholars and by members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints tended to approach the text from the perspective of traditional Protestantism, assuming that the religious language in the text could be best understood in that way. My own training in the study of ancient political philosophy made me very uneasy with that approach, and I soon felt the necessity of starting over with the kind of analysis that would let the Nephite writers tell me how to understand their religious language and terminology. The most significant insight I gained from those early years was the discovery that the book contained multiple presentations of a basic doctrine or gospel that were not being recognized by modern readers for what they truly were. Three separate passages quoting Jesus Christ were featured as rhetorical *inclusios* in the text, and when analyzed with a method of accumulation, could be shown to include multiple repetitions of the same six-part gospel message. That basic insight has now been developed in a series of published articles. The initial paper did not appear in print until 1991, and was followed over the next three decades by others that extended the analysis in different ways: (1) Noel B. Reynolds, “The Gospel of Jesus Christ as Taught by the Nephite Prophets,” *BYU Studies* 31, no. 3 (Summer 1991): 31–50; (2) “The True Points of My Doctrine,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 5, no. 2 (Fall 1996): 26–56; (3) “This Is the Way,” *Religious Educator* 14, no. 3 (2013): 79–91; (4) “The Gospel According to Nephi: An Essay on 2 Nephi 31,” *Religious Educator* 16, no. 2 (2015): 51–75; (5) “The Gospel According to Mormon,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 68, no. 2 (2015): 218–34, revised and updated for *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 29 (2018): 65–103; (6) “Biblical Merismus in Book of Mormon Gospel References,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 26 (2017): 106–34; (7) “How ‘Come unto Me’ Fits into the Nephite Gospel,” *Religious Educator* 18, no. 2 (2017): 15–29; and (8) “‘Come unto Me’ as a Technical Gospel Term,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 31 (2019): 1–22.

3. C. H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and Its Developments* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1936).

4. See Jacob’s discussion in 2 Nephi 9 and 10. This paper also takes up most of the subsequent discussions of all or part of the plan.

5. See Noel B. Reynolds, “The Brass Plates Version of Genesis,” in *By Study and Also by Faith: Essays in Honor of Hugh W. Nibley on the Occasion of His Eightieth Birthday*, ed. John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks (Provo, UT: FARMS; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1990), 2:136–73.

6. While the articles on *salvation* in standard reference works sometimes refer to God’s purposes or intentions for humankind, the idea that God had a *plan of salvation* is never developed. Perhaps the closest thing would be the sometimes controversial discussions of the *salvation history* often perceived in the Bible that could include the Creation and Fall,

the Flood, God's covenant with Abraham and with Israel, the deliverance from Egypt under Moses, and, for Christians, the ministry and Atonement of Christ. See, for example, Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III, "Salvation," in *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downer's Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1998), 752–56, and Gerald G. O'Collins, "Salvation," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 5:907–14.

7. See the documentation and discussion in Royal Skousen, *The Critical Text of the Book of Mormon*, vol. 3, *The History of the Text of the Book of Mormon*, part 3, *The Nature of the Original Language*, with the collaboration of Stanford Carmack (Provo, UT: FARMS and BYU Studies, 2018), 3:202–4.

8. See Doctrine and Covenants 10:50, 67, and 69.

9. See Doctrine and Covenants 10:45–46; 20:9; 27:5; 42:12; 135:3.

10. For a discussion of these alternative labels for the gospel of Jesus Christ as they occur in the Book of Mormon, see Reynolds, "This Is the Way," 82–86. In the interest of brevity in this paper, I will refer as needed to my more detailed studies of specific topics related to the plan of salvation—as will be made evident in the notes.

11. See 2 Nephi 31:4–21.

12. See 3 Nephi 11:31–38 and 27:13–21. For a more detailed account of these three scriptures and the gospel they teach, see the publications listed in note 1.

13. All Book of Mormon quotations are taken from the Yale critical text: Royal Skousen, ed., *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009). I have added italics to help readers focus on critical terminology. The number of occurrences for each of these phrasings is indicated in parentheses.

14. Additional discussion of this variety of names for the plan can be found in M. Catherine Thomas, "Plan," in *Book of Mormon Reference Companion*, ed. Dennis L. Largey (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003), 642–43, and in the KnowWhy #312, "Why Are There So Many Different Names for the Plan of Salvation?" Book of Mormon Central, 12 May 2017, <https://knowwhy.bookofmormoncentral.org/knowwhy/why-are-there-so-many-different-names-for-the-plan-of-salvation>.

15. Following Jacob's example, Mormon and Moroni warn their readers repeatedly that this abridgment will not include more than "a hundredth part" of the history of the Lamanite and Nephite peoples or of the teachings of Christ to the Nephites. Compare Jacob 3:13; Words of Mormon 1:5; Helaman 3:14; 3 Nephi 5:8; 26:6; and Ether 1:5:33.

16. See Ammon's teaching of Lamoni in Alma 18 and especially verse 36.

17. See the analysis of Douglas E. Brinley in his entry "Life, purpose of," in *Book of Mormon Reference Companion*, ed. Dennis L. Largey (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003), 520–21.

18. Noel B. Reynolds, "Understanding the Abrahamic Covenant through the Book of Mormon," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 57, no. 3 (2018): 44.

19. "Understanding the Abrahamic Covenant," 61–66.

20. See the brief discussion of the gospel above and the publications listed in note 1. It may be of interest to note that 47 of the 310 references to the gospel in the Doctrine and Covenants are framed in terms of the Restoration responsibility to "preach my/the gospel."

21. For a more complete survey of these various Christian atonement theories and an analysis of how they are integrated in Book of Mormon teaching, see Noel B. Reynolds, "The Atonement," in *New Testament History, Culture, and Society*, ed. Lincoln Blumell (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book,

2019), 336–52. See also the classic essay by Robert J. Matthews, “The Atonement of Jesus Christ: 2 Nephi 9,” in *The Book of Mormon: Second Nephi, The Doctrinal Structure*, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1989), 177–206.

22. Paul taught believers that they “were bought with a price,” and Mark tells us Jesus’s death was “a ransom for many” (Corinthians 6:20; 7:23; and Mark 10:45).

23. My approach here is similar to that of Jennifer Clark Lane, “The Lord Will Redeem His People: Adoptive Covenant and Redemption in the Old Testament and Book of Mormon,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2, no. 2 (1993): 39–62.

24. For example, Doctrine and Covenants 76.

25. Two statements in Revelation 2:23 and 20:12–13 could be read as echoes of 1 Peter. The thirty Book of Mormon statements referred to here are found in 1 Nephi 15:32, 33; 2 Nephi 2:10; 9:14–22; 28:23; 29:11; Mosiah 3:10, 18, 24; 16:10–11; 27:31; Alma 3:26; 9:28; 11:41, 44; 12:8, 12; 33:22; 36:15; 40:21; 41:3; 42:23; Helaman 12:23–26; 14:15–19; 3 Nephi 27:14–15; Mormon 3:18, 20; 6:21; 7:6.

26. See also Jacob 6:13; Mosiah 16:10; Alma 5:22; 11:44; 12:12; Mormon 9:13; Moroni 10:27 and 34. In two instances where the 1830 edition calls it “the pleasing bar,” Royal Skousen has argued persuasively that it should read “the pleading bar,” in accordance with the terminology of early English law. See the discussion in Royal Skousen, “The Pleading Bar of God,” in *To Seek the Law of the Lord: Essays in Honor of John W. Welch*, ed. Paul Y. Hoskisson and Daniel C. Peterson (Orem, UT: The Interpreter Foundation, 2017), 413–28, which expands and updates his explanations in *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon: Part Two; 2 Nephi 11–Mosiah 16*, 1087–92.