

INTERPRETER

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A JOURNAL OF MORMON SCRIPTURE

Volume 15 · 2015 · Pages 239-266

A Mormon Theodicy: Jacob and the Problem of Evil

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Offprint Series

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ISSN 2372-1227 (print)

ISSN 2372-126X (online)

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A MORMON THEODICY: JACOB AND THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

Val Larsen

Abstract: Lehi's son Jacob was troubled by a great theological mystery of his and our day — the problem of evil. If God is both all good and all-powerful, how is it possible for the world to be so full of human and natural evils? Jacob was able to elicit from the Lord responses to the question of why He permits evil to flourish in this world. The Lord elucidates the perennial problem of evil for Jacob and us in three distinct genres and at three different levels of abstraction: at a metaphysical level in a philosophical patriarchal blessing, at a concrete level in the history of the emerging Nephite political economy, and in the Allegory of the Olive Tree.

In the Gospel, as in all human existence, there are mysteries, unresolved conundrums that puzzle the mind and trouble the spirit. These conundrums, Joseph Smith taught, lead to revelation. Thus, among the many legacies Joseph bequeathed to humanity is a hermeneutical principle that has great utility for interpreting scripture. “I have a key,” he wrote, “by which I understand the scriptures. I enquire, what was the question which drew out the answer?”¹ Being himself a prophet who received many revelations, Joseph understood that revelation generally comes as the answer to a question in the mind of the prophet who writes it. The more profound the question posed by the prophet, the more consequential the revelation he receives.

This hermeneutical principle can help us understand Lehi's son Jacob. Throughout his life Jacob was troubled by a great theological mystery of his and our day — *the problem of evil*. If God is both all good and all-powerful, how is it possible for the world to be so full of human and natural evils? Why has God not exercised his power to alleviate, or better yet, eliminate the suffering that everywhere surrounds us?²

1 *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1980), 5:261.

2 For a recent summary of the problem and efforts to address it, see Michael Tooley, "The Problem of Evil", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring

While the problem of evil troubled Jacob, he did not formulate it precisely as a modern skeptic would. For Jacob, the goodness of God was an indubitable first premise because he had a profound personal knowledge of God's goodness that was rooted in his personal salvation (2 Nephi 2:2–4). Thus, the problem of evil was for him the problem of *apostasy*, the decision to stand aloof from or rebel against the Lord Jesus Christ — which is the true root of all evil.

Because his experiences and character primed him to seek answers, Jacob was able to elicit from the Lord both explicit and implicit responses to the question of why God permits evil to flourish in this world. Through Jacob, the Lord elucidates the perennial problem of evil in three distinct genres and at three different levels of abstraction: at a metaphysical level in a philosophical patriarchal blessing, at a concrete level in the history of the unfolding Nephite political economy and Jacob's response to it, and in the Allegory of the Olive Tree.

Modern Christian and Latter-day Saint Dimensions of the Problem

In addition to addressing Jacob's own concerns in the material that comes to us through Jacob, the Lord also addresses the problem of evil as it presents itself to Mormons and other Christians in our time. For the believing Christian, the problem of evil has an extra dimension: more terrible than the specter of human sin or natural disaster is the ultimate evil — to live without God and Christ. Since the core purpose of this life is to know and be redeemed by Christ and thus return to live with God, why has God permitted the majority of human beings through the majority of human history to live their lives having never heard of Christ, their Redeemer? This mystery is less acute for Latter-day Saints than for other Christians because they have temples in which the dead who never heard of Christ may be baptized by proxy and receive all ordinances necessary to return to God's presence. But precisely because they themselves so richly enjoy the blessings of the fullness of the gospel, thoughtful Mormons must remain troubled to think that so many fellow sons and daughters of God have had to live their earthly lives without hearing of and knowing the Savior and the fullness of his gospel.

For the believing Mormon, this first mystery poses a second question. Latter-day Saints live with the assurance that the fullness of

the gospel will never again be taken from the earth.³ This assurance deepens the mystery of so many people living their lives without hearing of Christ. Absent the divine guarantee that humanity will never again lose the gospel, one might more plausibly argue that people have not known Christ because, for one reason or another, God is unable to keep the fullness of the gospel on the earth. But if he was not able to do so in the past, why is he able to do so now? Through Jacob, we receive answers to these questions.

Biographical Foundations

Jacob's intense interest in this theme flowed out of his experience and his character, and it was focused by the evolving political economy of the emerging Nephite nation in his day. The foundation of Jacob's concern with the problem of evil was probably his personal biography. It is possible that the timing of Jacob's birth may have predisposed him to take a special interest in apostasy and the problem of evil. Lehi tells Jacob and Joseph that they were born "in the days of my tribulation in the wilderness," "yea, in the days of my greatest sorrow did thy mother bear thee" (2 Nephi 2:1, 3:1). If Lehi is speaking about a specific time rather than generically about his eight years in Arabia, the moment he alludes to is probably when Nephi broke his bow, and all whom Lehi had led out of Jerusalem were on the verge of starvation. In that moment, Lehi "was truly chastened because of his murmuring against the Lord, insomuch that he was brought down into the depths of sorrow" (1 Nephi 16:25). Lehi's uncharacteristic and temporary lapse into murmuring against the Lord might be more easily understood if among those who were starving was his pregnant wife Sariah or young, possibly newborn sons. Jacob might have been predisposed to take a special interest in the problem of apostasy if he grew up understanding that the one faithless moment of his father's life was occasioned by his own birth.

What we know for certain is that Jacob "suffered afflictions and much sorrow because of the rudeness" of his apostate brothers, Laman and Lemuel (2 Nephi 2:1). Nephi specifically mentions Jacob's suffering while he, Nephi, was cruelly bound by ropes on the high seas (1 Nephi 18:19). And years later, the breach within the family caused by the apostasy of Laman and Lemuel still deeply troubles Jacob. He sorrowfully reports that while "many means were devised to reclaim and restore the Lamanites,"

3 D&C 13:1; Henry B. Eyring, "The True and Living Church," *Ensign*, May 2008, 20 - 24.

all were met with “an eternal hatred against us, their brethren” (Jacob 7:24). Though he is writing at the end of his long life,⁴ their hatred still stings. He continues to mourn the loss of family ties that apostasy and violence imposed upon him in his youth (Jacob 7:26–27).

Jacob’s preoccupation with the problem of evil was rooted not only in his experiences but also in his character. His character was marked by a strong tendency to perceive clearly the sinfulness of acts committed by others and then to suffer pangs of conscience for those sins. He bore in some measure the burden not only of his own but of others’ sins as well (2 Nephi 6:3; Jacob 1:5; 2:2; 4:18). This partly explains why he was so keenly troubled by the problem of evil.

Patriarchal Blessing

The first of the three genres that provide insight into the problem of evil is a patriarchal blessing. Although he died while Jacob was young, Lehi nevertheless seems to have understood how Jacob’s character and experiences had affected him, especially how deeply troubled his son was by the problem of evil and its specific manifestation, apostasy. It is surely no accident that the greatest philosophical discussion in all scripture on the nature and necessity of evil comes as a patriarchal blessing, as a doctrinal legacy and gift from his earthly and divine fathers to young Jacob whose “soul abhorreth sin” (2 Nephi 9:49).⁵

In this blessing, Lehi posits the metaphysical primacy of agency. At the core of his or her being, each person is an agent who is fundamentally constituted by the capacity to choose. From this premise, it follows that there must be “opposition in all things,” live alternatives for the agents to choose, because an agent without choices “must needs remain as dead, having no life neither death, nor corruption nor incorruption, happiness nor misery, neither sense nor insensibility” (2 Nephi 2:11). And from the premise of agents without choices, without law and sin, righteousness and happiness, punishment and misery, Lehi proceeds with a *reductio ad absurdum* argument to a consequent: “if these things are not there is no God. And if there is no God we are not, neither the earth; for there

4 Enos 1:25 suggests that Jacob was probably at least 90 years old when he died and that Enos, born when Jacob was an old man, also lived a long life.

5 Pritchett demonstrates that in pronouncing his blessing on Jacob, Lehi drew together various ideas about the fall and freedom and War in Heaven that were part of preexilic Hebrew thought (Bruce M. Pritchett, Jr, “Lehi’s Theology of the Fall in Its Preexilic/Exilic Context,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*, 3 (2) [1994], 49–83.)

could have been no creation of things, neither to act nor to be acted upon; wherefore, all things must have vanished away” (2 Nephi 2:13).

*Quod est demonstratum.*⁶ Since all things have not vanished away, human agents must be able to choose between good and evil. Through philosophical reasoning, Lehi shows young Jacob that, for anything to exist, the evil that so troubles him must also exist. Thus, analyzed metaphysically, the absolute non-existence of the *evil* that makes choice possible is the ultimate *EVIL*. A good God must make evil an option for humanity. If that evil is then chosen, moral blame must be imputed, not to God but, rather, to the human agent who chooses it.

Having posited the metaphysical primacy of agency as a first principle, Lehi adds another critically important dimension of a valid theodicy by laying foundations of a second doctrine — the co-creation of the world — that is implicit in the principle of agency and in his teachings. He suggests that while God himself played the essential and primary role in the creation, he did not play the only role. Being independent agents who would act for themselves, human beings would inevitably shape the world in which they lived. The experiences each person would have in a world full of agents would necessarily be affected by the choices that person and those other agents freely made. Thus, what Jacob experienced would be determined not just by God but also by Nephi, Lehi and Sariah, and many others, including Laman and Lemuel.

Lehi implicitly develops this idea by discussing Adam and Eve. God underscored humanity’s role as co-creators by making Adam and Eve decide whether they would continue to live in his presence as innocent, immortal beings or leave and enter “a state of probation” as mortals in a lonesome and dreary world, a world where they could grow emotionally and spiritually and experience depths of sorrow and joy they could not experience in the garden. Lehi expressed this idea to Jacob as follows:

And now, behold, if Adam had not transgressed he would not have fallen, but he would have remained in the Garden of

6 Though deeply insightful and doctrinally illuminating, Lehi’s argument is not logically valid by modern standards. It has unstated and unproven premises, e.g., that God is a certain kind of being — a loving father who is just and seeks to optimize the happiness of his children. But the canon of self-evident truths was different in Lehi’s time than it is in ours and the standards of logical proof less rigorous. When Lehi formulated it, the argument probably was valid. As Welch notes, life without the law was unthinkable, and the existence of the law was inherently bound up with the existence of God (John W. Welch, *The Legal Cases in the Book of Mormon*, Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, [2008], 12–13).

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 ... Adam fell that men might be; and men are, that they might have joy. (2 Nephi 2:22–25)

Lehi implies that when Eve chose to leave the Garden of Eden and when Adam chose to go with her, they created by their choice a new world for themselves that would test and develop their capacities, permitting them to “be as God, knowing good and evil” (2 Nephi 2:18).⁷

To make more fully explicit the implications of the blessing Lehi gave Jacob, it is helpful to supplement what he said with modern revelation. While Lehi knew something of the War in Heaven and its importance (2 Nephi 2:1–18) and while he fully understood that “all [intelligence] is independent in that sphere in which God has placed it, to act for itself ... otherwise there is no existence,” he may or may not have understood that the essence of each human being is uncreated and coeval with God (D&C 93:29–30).⁸ He may or may not have known that all God’s children dwelt with him as preexistent beings or understood the full magnitude of the role Adam had played in the creation and still plays in the governance of

7 Adam was so deeply devoted to the Lord that he was determined to keep all of God’s commandments. While this kind of perfect obedience is desirable and consistent with the exercise of agency, it can obscure the fact that the human and divine wills are distinct. It is, perhaps, a tribute to Adam’s faithfulness that the Lord placed him in a situation where he could not simply act as God had commanded but would, rather, be compelled to make a critically important independent judgment about what course his life would take. Thus, God commanded Adam that he should not partake of the forbidden fruit and that he should remain with Eve (Moses 4:18) and multiply and replenish the earth (Moses 2:28). Adam logically chose to keep the first commandment and to leave the second not yet kept but also not rejected. God had not commanded that he multiply and replenish *now*. Once Eve wisely partook of the forbidden fruit (Moses 5:11) — and thus ensured her ejection from the garden — Adam was forced to choose which commandment he would violate. He could not avoid violating one of the two, and God had given him no guidance on which he should transgress. He was, therefore, compelled to choose as he judged best.

8 The doctrine had been understood and taught by Abraham (Abraham 3:18–22), but there is no clear evidence that Lehi understood it.

the world. But these doctrines, which are now known are fully consistent with and reinforce the arguments that constitute Lehi's theodicy.

Adam and Eve's voluntary co-creation of a fallen world where they would experience and suffer from moral and natural evils absolved God not only of their sins and sufferings but of the sins and sufferings of all his other children as well. This is true because the decision Adam and Eve made to leave the Garden of Eden was emblematic of the decision we all made to leave our garden-like preexistent state and enter a state of probation in this lone and dreary world.⁹

The condition of Adam and Eve in the Garden was very much like their condition in the preexistence where they were also innocent, unable to have children, and walked and talked with God. As by partaking of the forbidden fruit in the garden they created a new fallen world for themselves that would be critically shaped by their subsequent choices, so we all likewise chose to leave our preexistent garden-like state and, thus, likewise had a hand in placing ourselves amid the moral and natural evils that now surround us. It was not an original sin of Adam and Eve but rather a considered decision to leave the garden that made it possible for us to come to earth. And our fate was determined not by their well-considered decision but by the well-considered decision we each made that mirrored and reaffirmed theirs.

Lehi's implication that humanity has a role as co-creators of the fallen world is further developed not only by our understanding of the life we lived and decisions we made in the preexistence but also by our understanding of the magnitude of the role Adam was assigned in creating and governing the world. Though God surely had the power to do the job himself, he directed Adam to lead his angels, namely us, and to join the battle that drove Satan from heaven (Revelation 12:7). Under the direction of God, Adam joined with Christ to create the universe and world in which we dwell. And it is Adam who, at the end of days, will again marshal the hosts of heaven (those who have kept their second estate) to drive Satan from this world and reestablish Christ upon his rightful throne (D&C 88:112–115). In short, to signify his desire that other intelligences participate with him in the creation of this world, God visibly enlisted Adam — who as the first man embodies or leads the rest of humanity — to carry out many of the tasks incident to the execution of the divine plan. In doing this, he makes it clear that he wants us to add

9 Terry L. Givens, *When Souls Had Wings: Pre-Mortal Existence in Western Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 94, 107.

to his glory by voluntarily offering up our own distinctive will, insight, and talents to support and mark the great project he has set before us.¹⁰

With respect to Lehi's insight that human agency is a metaphysical first principle that binds even God, this is true precisely because the essence of each being, the locus of choice, is uncreated and coeval with God (D&C 93:29). What he did not and cannot create, God cannot completely control or fully change. He is, therefore, not morally responsible for the choices we make and the evil we do.¹¹ And since he

10 Lehi indicates that God created opposition, choice, "to bring about his eternal purposes in the end of man" (2 Nephi 2:15). Those purposes are defined by Moses: "this is my work and my glory — to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man" (Moses 1:39).

11 The doctrine, understood by Abraham and revealed by Joseph Smith, that the essence of human beings, the locus of agency, is uncreated by God is an essential element in an adequate theodicy. The principle of free agency alone is not sufficient. The God of the philosophers, which became the God of orthodox Christianity, is a being outside of time and space who foreknows all and creates all *ex nihilo*. See Paul Copan and William Lane Craig, "Craftsman or Creator? An Examination of Creation and a Defense of *Creatio ex nihilo*," in *New Mormon Challenge*, ed. Francis Beckwith, Carl Mosser, and Paul Owen, 95–152, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002. This orthodox Christian God necessarily knows what every being will freely choose before he creates it. It is in his power to create only that subset of beings who will freely choose to do what is right. If he creates beings who he foreknows will freely choose to do monstrously evil acts, he cannot escape responsibility for those acts. He had the option of not creating these entirely contingent evil beings. For a detailed discussion of these issues, see David L. Paulsen and Blake T. Ostler, "Sin, Suffering, and Soul-Making: Joseph Smith on the Problem of Evil," in *Revelation, Reason, and Faith: Essays in Honor of Truman G. Madsen*, ed. Donald W. Parry, Daniel C. Peterson, and Stephen D. Ricks, 237–284, Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2002.

There are some indications that the LDS God, though in time, also foreknows what his children will freely choose (Isaiah 46:10; Abraham 2:8). But his choices are more constrained than those of the orthodox God of the philosophers. The existence of other beings is not contingent on the LDS God. His only choice is to give other pre-existing beings an opportunity to develop their capacities or to not give them that opportunity. The moral issue thus becomes whether it is better to leave a being who will choose to do evil undeveloped or enable it to progress to the point where its substantially evil nature will become apparent. We know little about the precise condition of intelligences that God has not yet clothed with spirit bodies. But it is entirely possible that, on balance, these beings are better off after experiencing earth life than they were before, even if they do not keep their second estate. If that is true, God should facilitate their further development in spite of the fact that he knows they will choose to do much evil. Leaving them and the evil they will do entirely unactualized may be a morally inferior option.

cannot directly affect our will, he must affect us — if we will respond — by changing the context in which we make decisions, by transforming the sphere in which we are placed to act for ourselves.¹²

And that brings us to the final pillar of Lehi's theodicy. In their sole, self-determining essence, all of God's children who chose to enter the fallen world — save one — were destined to be cut off from God because of their inherent weaknesses. All but Christ would sin, bringing evil into their own and others' lives and, thus, would disqualify themselves to reenter God's presence (2 Nephi 2:5). Justice would claim them — the natural law that evil consequences follow from evil acts, that we are what our actions have made or manifested us to be. As Jacob would later say, the natural law that is justice dictates “that they who are righteous shall be righteous still and they who are filthy shall be filthy still” (2 Nephi 9:16), a statement that loses all its cheer when one adds what Jacob knew and the Psalmist said, “there is none that doeth good, no, not one” (Psalms 14:3). Left unto themselves, all those autonomous, uncreated intelligences shall be filthy still and, thus, justly damned.

There is only one escape from the hell we have created for ourselves by our choices — the God whom some try to blame for the world's evils. Thus Lehi tells Jacob, “Wherefore, redemption cometh in and through the Holy Messiah; for he is full of grace and truth. Behold, he offereth himself a sacrifice for sin to answer the ends of the law, unto all those who have a broken heart and a contrite spirit; and unto none else can the ends of the law be answered” (2 Nephi 2:6–7). Christ changes the sphere in which humanity acts by loving them enough to suffer the pains of their just punishment. Those who are able to respond to this new fact, this act of extraordinary love, with a broken heart and contrite spirit are born again as new, better beings, as beings who have “no more disposition to do evil, but to do good continually” (Mosiah 5:2) and who are, thus, worthy to reenter God's presence. So far from being responsible for the world's evils, Jehovah is the one, the only one, who makes it possible for his fellow uncreated intelligences to purge evil from their souls.

The Emergence of the Nephite Natural State

But let us turn now from a metaphysical discussion of the problem of evil in general to a discussion of the more specific evil that is apparent to thoughtful Christians. If Christ alone can save us and if the core purpose

12 Val Larsen, “Restoration: A Theological Poem in the Book of Mormon,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture*, 10, 239–256.

of this life is to know and be redeemed by him, why has God permitted most of humanity to live their lives having never heard of Christ, their Redeemer? Jacob answers this question with a history of the emergence of the natural state among the Nephites and with the Allegory of the Olive Tree.

That God does intervene in human affairs to create a people who know him is apparent in the account of the Lehiite exodus from Jerusalem and from his explicit statement: “thus saith the Lord, I have led this people forth out of the land of Jerusalem, by the power of mine arm, that I might raise up unto me a righteous branch from the fruit of the loins of Joseph” (Jacob 2:25). Through miracles, God led this people, and through Lehi and Nephi’s dreams and visions, he established a clear understanding of the essential saving role of Christ. It is difficult to imagine a more forceful intervention that would leave space for the doubt and faith that agency requires. And yet, by the end of the journey, half of this blessed people have utterly rejected the doctrine of Christ and the prophetic leadership established by God. Jacob then shows us that the other half is only slightly more faithful to the revelation that they have received.

While Nephi still led them, the people who took his name seem to have remained religiously observant. But the death of Nephi confronts Jacob with a personally and politically difficult problem because the new king brings the nation to the brink of apostasy. The king, probably Nephi’s oldest son,¹³ would have been for Jacob more brother than nephew. Raised together by Nephi, they would have been intimately acquainted with each other. And both were consecrated by Nephi and given authority to lead the people in their respective sacred and secular spheres.¹⁴

But as Jacob and the king seek to fulfill their charges to lead the people in matters sacred and secular, a conflict arises. Jacob, who

13 Brant Gardner, “Jacob 1,” *Book of Mormon: Multi-Dimensional Commentary*, <http://frontpage2000.nmia.com/~nahualli/LDStopics/Jacob/Jacob1.htm> (accessed 24 September 2008).

14 Nephi foresaw the dangers of monarchy (the natural state) and tried to convince his people to have no king, but he quickly gave up when he saw they were unprepared to accept an alternative mode of governance (2 Nephi 5:18–19). He gave his people the king they demanded (2 Nephi 5: 18); however, he protected them, at least temporarily, by splitting his spiritual and secular power through the consecration of both a successor king and independent priests. In the episode here discussed, Jacob uses social power derived from his consecration by Nephi to check the wanton power of the king.

seems to have a low opinion of the new king, diplomatically tries to depersonalize the conflict by not explicitly condemning the monarch, by calling his intimate acquaintance simply “a man” (Jacob 1:9) and “the second king” (Jacob 1:15).¹⁵ But he incorporates in his narrative a strong implicit statement of his own faithfulness to the charge Nephi had given him and implicit criticism of the new king’s dereliction of duty.

Just before he mentions Nephi’s death (Jacob 1:12), Jacob affirms that he stands in Nephi’s place and implies that the good Nephi has done is in danger of being undone by his successor. He connects himself with Nephi by echoing Nephi’s words. Nephi had written, “For we labor diligently to write, to persuade our children, and also our brethren, to believe in Christ and be reconciled to God” (2 Nephi 25:23). Jacob echoes, “Wherefore we labored diligently among our people, that we might persuade them to come unto Christ, and partake of the goodness of God” but then, hinting at danger, continues, “lest by any means he should swear in his wrath they should not enter in, as in the provocation in the days of temptation while the children of Israel were in the wilderness. Wherefore, we would to God that we could persuade all men not to rebel against God” (Jacob 1:7–8). This allusion to apostasy during Moses’ great exodus suggests that the new Nephite exodus is likewise in danger.¹⁶ Jacob then again affirms his own faithfulness, “wherefore, I

15 As Welch notes in discussing the trial of Abinadi, law and custom made it dangerous to accuse the king of doing evil. Welch, *Legal Cases*, 159–160.

16 The Promised Land has a dual reference. The ultimate Promised Land is Heaven. Earthly promised lands remain promised only to the extent that we live in them as nearly as possible according to a celestial law. Nephi has brought his people to a promised land, the Land of Nephi, where they have lived under his direction “after the manner of happiness” (2 Nephi 5:27). If Jacob were thinking only about a geographical location, his people are already in the Promised Land and won’t be forced out of it until 400 years later in the time of Mosiah. The Land of Nephi remains in their minds the Promised Land even after they are forced out of it. That is why Zeniff tries to return and it is why people always “go up” to the Land of Nephi just as people always “go up” to Jerusalem in the Bible. Jacob makes a double point when he likens his people to the Hebrews “in the provocation in the days of temptation.” Because they are indulging in wickedness, Jacob’s people cast into doubt whether they will ever enter the archetypal Promised Land, Heaven. Their wickedness also raises questions about whether they will remain in the Land of Nephi and/or whether the Land of Nephi will remain a blessed land. A number of scholars have commented on the exodus motif in the Book of Mormon. See Bruce J. Boehm, “Wanderers in the Promised Land: A Study of the Exodus Motif in the Book of Mormon and Holy Bible,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*, 3 (1) [1994], 187–203, one of many works that treat this theme.

Jacob, take it upon me to fulfill the commandment of my brother Nephi.” Turning to his secular counterpart, Jacob notes in 1:9 that the new king was anointed by Nephi and, as the narrative resumes in 1:15, that the people began to be wicked under his leadership.

Jacob clearly indicates that the new king has not magnified his office as Jacob and Joseph have. The king, who is at its pinnacle, allows a malignant status hierarchy to develop in which some Nephites dominate others and seize the usual worldly rewards of illicit sex, money, and power. Noting repeatedly and portentously that previous kings created similar problems, Jacob reports, “the people of Nephi, under the reign of the second king, began to grow hard in their hearts, and indulge themselves somewhat in wicked practices, such as like unto David of old desiring many wives and concubines, and also Solomon, his son. Yea, and they also began to search much gold and silver, and began to be lifted up somewhat in pride” (Jacob 1:15–16; cf. Jacob 2:23–24; Mosiah 11:1–2).

In the sermon that follows, Jacob notes that the wealthy exploit and persecute the poor because they think they are better than their poor brethren (Jacob 2:13–20). He again mentions the sexual incontinence of kings David and Solomon (Jacob 2:24) and then condemns his own people, “for ye have done these things which ye ought not to have done. . . . Ye have broken the hearts of your tender wives and lost the confidence of your children” (Jacob 2:34–35). He commends the Lamanites who, unlike the Nephites, “have not forgotten the commandment of the Lord, which was given unto our fathers — that they should have save it were one wife, and concubines they should have none” (Jacob 3:5).¹⁷

17 Jacob seems to base his critique of the king on the Kingship Code in Deuteronomy (17:14–20), a text the Nephites had (1 Nephi 5:11). Ironically, Sherem — perhaps at the instigation of the resentful second king — later uses Deuteronomy to challenge Jacob and to critique the doctrine of Christ (John W. Welch, “Sherem’s Accusations Against Jacob,” *Insights*, 11/1 [1999]). A. Keith Thompson persuasively argues that Sherem was a son or grandson of Zoram, a scribe who knew the Brass Plates well but who may have rejected the doctrine of Christ (“Who was Sherem?” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture*, 14 (2015), 1–15. On the anti-Christian aspects of Deuteronomy, see Kevin Christensen (2004), “The Deuteronomist De-Christianizing of the Old Testament,” *The FARMS Review* 16 (2). While Jacob seems to triumph in his encounter with Sherem (Jacob 7:15–20), textual evidence suggests that it was Sherem’s teachings, not Jacob’s, that the Nephites adopted during the subsequent four hundred years. After Enos, Christ disappears from the text until the time when King Benjamin and Abinadi separately restore the knowledge of the Savior that seems to have been lost. (See John L. Clark, “Painting Out the Messiah: The Theology of Dissidents,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*,

Combining considerable textual evidence with some limited reading between the lines, Brant Gardner plausibly suggests that the Nephite nation has grown by intermingling with surrounding populations and that the king seeks to cement his position through dynastic plural marriages and concubinage.¹⁸ Thus, the king and his principal supporters permit surrounding pagan allies to “lead away captive the daughters of [the Nephites]” (Jacob 2:33) while they themselves take plural wives and concubines from among the daughters of the surrounding pagan peoples.

Whether other peoples are involved or only the Nephites themselves, marriage and concubinage are governed by law, so in this small population, polygynous marriages could not occur without the consent and probably not without the participation of the king, the sovereign who is charged to establish and enforce law. It is, thus, apparent that the king has wrongly permitted himself and powerful friends to violate God’s laws by engaging in an illicit accumulation of wealth, wives, and concubines. He has facilitated the emergence of invidious social strata based on wealth, power, and inappropriate sexual unions.

Were he not already temperamentally depressed, the Sisyphean task Jacob has undertaken in speaking against these malignant practices might well depress him. For in his effort to combat among his people the rise of sexual privilege and pride rooted in economic differences and class-consciousness, Jacob has set himself against a nearly universal pattern in human social development. As Nobel Prize winning economist Douglass North and his colleagues have demonstrated, when populations increase, virtually all human societies transition from being a *primitive*

4/2 (2002): 16–27; Gary L. Sturgess, “The Book of Mosiah: Thoughts about Its Structure, Purposes, Themes, and Authorship,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*, 4/2 (1995): 107–35.) Thus, Noah and his priests know nothing of Christ and, like Sherem, deny that there are any grounds for believing in him. The conflict between Jacob and the second king may help explain the embrace of Sherem’s theological conservatism. Like Deuteronomy (13:1–5), Sherem was suspicious of prophecy and prophets (Jacob 7:7). His views thus eliminated an independent source of power that could challenge the authority of the king as Jacob did. Jacob’s appointment by Nephi gave him independent status. Subsequent kings, like Noah, appear to have appointed priests who were, in their view, properly subordinate to royal authority.

18 Brant Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon, Volume 2, Second Nephi – Jacob*, (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 484–499. See also John L. Sorenson, “When Lehi’s Party Arrived in the Land, Did They Find Others There?” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*, 1 (1) [1992], 1–34.

state to being a *natural state*.¹⁹ Jacob's Nephite civilization appears to be undergoing the usual transition with the usual attendant economic gains and social evils. In their transition from a small, egalitarian group with a righteous first king to a larger, socially stratified group with a wicked second king, the Nephites seem to be anticipating the pattern that will be replicated and more fully described in the subsequent reigns of Zeniff and Noah who establish a similar community in similar circumstances (Mosiah 9–11).

North's primitive state is characterized by limited group size that facilitates personal connections between all group members and by a lack of economic specialization. With loose ties among some individuals, primitive states may govern groups as large as 500, but this comparatively intimate and non-hierarchical form of social organization will rarely be found among groups larger than that number. Usually when the group size exceeds 150 and almost inevitably when it exceeds 500, a natural state will emerge.²⁰

19 Douglass, C. North, John Joseph Wallis, and Barry R. Weingast, *Violence and Social Orders: Conceptual Framework for Understanding Recorded Human History*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Douglass C. North, John Joseph Wallis, and Barry R. Weingast, "The Natural State and the Political Economy of Non-Development," (<http://www.international.ucla.edu/cms/files/PERG.North.pdf>), 2005. North et al. define the natural state as follows: "A *natural state* is a specific way of structuring political and economic systems so that the economic rents created by limited entry are available to secure credible commitments among politically powerful groups. Potential rivals in a natural state stop fighting (or fight less) when the economic rents they enjoy depend on the continued existence of the state and of social order. Natural states limit economic entry to create rents and then use those rents to credibly commit powerful groups to support the state. In other words, natural states use the economic system as a tool to solidify the stability of the ruling coalition" (pp. 3–4). Such a state is typically led by a king or dictator who is supported by nobles or elite apparatchiks who are permitted to exploit the common people in exchange for supporting the leader.

20 The magnitude of the primitive state seems to be a function of the size of the neocortex. Thus, primates with larger brains have larger social circles than those with smaller brains. A regression that uses the neocortex size of various primates as an independent variable and normal social group size as a dependent variable yields a group size value for humans of 148, usually rounded to 150 and known as *Dunbar's number*. Much social science research supports Dunbar's prediction that fully integrated social networks in which all group members know well and are well known by other group members will rarely exceed 150 members. Robert Ian McDonald Dunbar, "Neocortex Size as a Constraint on Group Size in Primates," *Journal of Human Evolution*, 22 (1992): 469–493; R. A. Hill and R. I. M. Dunbar, "Social Network Size in Humans," *Human Nature*, 14/1 (2003): 53–72.

Nephi (and Zeniff) appear to have governed in the mode of the primitive state, fostering a rough equality among group members, although very clearly being themselves the loved and admired first among equals.²¹ But by the time their successors are anointed, both Nephite groups have evidently become too large to be governed as a primitive state. Jacob says that his people “began to be numerous” (Jacob 3:13). A transition in one form or another to the natural state is probably inevitable. The economic and social changes that Jacob focuses on in his sermon indicate that the transition to the natural state has begun. For the Zeniff group, these changes, which occur at the accession of Noah, the second king, are well documented and explicitly described (Mosiah 11:1–6).

The natural state has the same foundation as the primitive state — intimate personal relationships. But the relationships pertinent to maintaining power are confined to those between a small group of power elites: e.g., the king and key supporters who are usually skilled at using violence. To preserve loyalty among these key supporters, the king confers upon them special social status and economic rights that others lack (Mosiah 11:3–4). The outsized financial returns that the privileged elites receive make them loyal to the king. All others are reduced to subsistence because the elites expropriate any excess wealth ordinary people produce. Having so much to lose if violence breaks out among them, the elites preserve peace through social exchange and, in particular, through intermarriage. The social changes that Jacob reprehends and that Noah exhibits are precisely those that undergird the emergence of a natural state: the social and economic stratification of the populace that pairs a proud elite with pronounced suffering among the poor who are reduced to subsistence, and the coupling of sex with power that leads to the instrumental use of women and children.

The ubiquitous rise of the natural state may substantially explain the mysterious fact that most human beings have lived their lives without having or even hearing of the true gospel of Jesus Christ. As is indicated by Jacob (and later Abinadi’s) obvious discomfort with the ideology and practices that sustain the Nephites’ emerging natural state, Christ’s true gospel meshes poorly with this mode of social organization. A natural state is scarcely conceivable if it is widely believed that “the one being is as precious in [God’s] sight as the other” (Jacob 2:21) and that it is the

21 Val Larsen, “Killing Laban: The Birth of Sovereignty in the Nephite Constitutional Order,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*, 16/1 (2007): 38–39.

obligation of the well-off not to expropriate but to increase the wealth of the poor (Jacob 2:17).

The king and other elites are the moral Achilles heel of the natural state. Adulation being poison, even the purest (David) and wisest (Solomon) of kings are apt to be corrupted by unconstrained power. Then, using their power to control what is said and done within the kingdom, corrupt kings (e.g., Noah) will generally suppress the teaching of the true gospel of Christ that plainly “speaketh of things as they really are, and of things as they really will be” (Jacob 4:13). They promote in its place a sophisticated false gospel that looks “beyond the mark,” that has been co-opted by and supports the actions of the king and the authority of the state and that must be farmed out to religious specialists who can better understand its subtle complexities (Jacob 4:14; Mosiah 11:4–7, 11, 14). Thus, the apostasy of the morally vulnerable few who head the state can lead to the truth being lost to all who dwell in the kingdom.²²

This social dynamic makes it difficult to recover a people who are slipping into apostasy and makes it impossible to carry out an enduring restoration of the gospel. To recover the people of the natural state for God, one must first recover its king — as Mosiah₂'s son Ammon demonstrated, not an impossible task, but an extraordinarily difficult one. An enduring restoration where the natural state governs is impossible because it would require that successive generations of kings and associated elites consistently resist the outsized temptations inherent in their high social positions. That requirement cannot be met by fallen humanity. Alma₁ who saw the problem up close in the court of Noah (and in the life of Alma₂ and the sons of Mosiah) concluded that a natural state headed by a king is incompatible with the gospel (Mosiah 23:6–13). He therefore refused to be king and helped persuade Mosiah₂ to end the Nephite monarchy in the land of Zarahemla.

22 If the natural state is incompatible with Christianity, how does one account for Christendom? Clearly, conflict with the state put early Christianity on the ropes. Persecution made it impossible to maintain a normal leadership structure. Christianity may not have survived and certainly would not have flourished if it had not been adopted by Constantine as the state religion. But once adopted, it was put in a different kind of peril as the emperor forced the creation of a new orthodoxy in the great councils — the very point at which, in the Latter-day Saint understanding, the ancient Church became officially apostate.

The Allegory of the Olive Tree

In addition to his metaphysical patriarchal blessing and his concrete account of the rise of the natural state among his people, we receive through Jacob Zenos' Allegory of the Olive Tree. This narrative is an allegorical history of the house of Israel, but it is also a theodicy. And Jacob's high estimation of this allegory probably derives from the facts that it speaks to his moral concern — the problem of evil — and that the central, most poignant evil it focuses on is the apostasy of his own Nephite people.

Jacob sets up the allegory by asking the question about God's power that is the key to the problem of evil. However, he frames it not as a skeptic would but as a believer would: "By the power of [God's] word man came upon the face of the earth. . . . Wherefore, if God being able to speak . . . and man was created, O then, why not able to command . . . the workmanship of his hands upon the face of the [earth], according to his will and pleasure?" (Jacob 4:9). Given God's great knowledge and power, how is it possible for human beings to disobey his commands and do evil?

The immediate answer — previously touched upon by Lehi — is that human beings are independent agents who can freely choose to act contrary to God's will and, thus, as co-creators, introduce evil and suffering into the world. But that is not a sufficient answer for Jacob. The fact that opposition exists and humanity can disobey God does not mean that they should or will. Logic, prudence, and self-interest all dictate that humanity obey God's commands. For redeemed and sin-abhorring Jacob, their failure to do so is a profound mystery.

That mystery is highlighted in the Allegory of the Olive Tree. In effect, Jacob (using Zenos) gives us the obverse of and, perhaps, a rejoinder to the Book of Job, which is a biblical treatment of the problem of evil. In Job, the reality of human suffering is dramatized in exquisite detail. Why God permits this suffering remains a mystery. God, rather than answering Job's question about why he must suffer, poses from the midst of a tornado his own questions: Do you know how the world was created? Can you control the weather? Can you create a whale? Intimidated by Jehovah's overwhelming power and unanswerable questions, Job humbly accepts the implicit message that God's doings and humanity's sufferings are an unfathomable mystery for man.

The Allegory of the Olive Tree takes the opposite tack. It describes at almost tedious length and in great detail how God repeatedly strives to save humanity and how he suffers greatly when they will not be saved.

Instead of being the purposes and acts of God and suffering of man, as in Job, here the unanswerable mystery is why humanity so consistently refuses to be saved.

The principal figures or elements in the allegory are the vineyard, the Lord of the vineyard, his chief servant, other servants, an olive root, tame and wild branches, tame and wild fruit, pruning, grafting, digging, and dunging. These figures and elements sometimes have multiple meanings. The vineyard appears to represent the world and the different parts of the vineyard represent various historical periods in various geographical locations. The Lord of the vineyard sometimes seems to be God the Father, sometimes Christ. The chief servant sometimes seems to be Christ, sometimes a human servant of God. The root of the tree is probably the richest symbol, representing Christ and the atonement (as Madsen has argued),²³ the scriptural tradition (as Riddle and Hoskisson have argued),²⁴ the Holy Ghost (as Parry has argued),²⁵ or more broadly, all divine/gospel influences and powers that operate in the world.²⁶ The branches are human cultures, the tame ones being human cultures that have (or have had) the gospel, and the wild ones being Gentile cultures that don't. The tops of the branches are the social and political elites within those cultures. The fruit is human souls. The pruning, grafting, digging, and dunging are the painful and messy things that God must do to give human cultures their best chance of flourishing and producing good fruit or saved souls.²⁷

23 Truman G. Madsen, "The Olive Press: A Symbol of Christ," in *The Allegory of the Olive Tree: The Olive, the Bible, and Jacob 5*, eds. Stephen D. Ricks and John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1994), 1–10.

24 Paul Y. Hoskisson, "The Allegory of the Olive in Jacob," in *The Allegory of the Olive Tree: The Olive, the Bible, and Jacob 5*, eds. Stephen D. Ricks and John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1994), 70–104.

25 Donald W. Parry, "Ritual Anointing with Olive Oil in Ancient Israelite Religion," in *The Allegory of the Olive Tree: The Olive, the Bible, and Jacob 5*, eds. Stephen D. Ricks and John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1994), 262–289.

26 There is also an intriguing possibility that the root might represent Mother in Heaven. See Daniel C. Peterson, "Nephi and His Asherah," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*, 9/2 (2000): 16–25, 80–81 and Margaret Barker, *The Mother of the Lord*, Volume 1, *The Lady of the Temple*, (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2012).

27 In developing an adequate theodicy, accounting for natural evil is a more difficult challenge than accounting for moral evil. While moral evils may be laid to the account of the free agents who choose them (with the caveat in footnote 11), human beings do not control storms, earthquakes, and other damaging natural events. Only God has the power to minimize or eliminate the suffering these events cause. It is nevertheless arguable that the existence of natural evil is a function of

Dead center in the allegory²⁸ and immediately following a statement that all the Lord's efforts have failed ("the first and the second and also the last ... had all become corrupt" [Jacob 5:39]), Zenos writes his most important verse, "And it came to pass that the Lord of the vineyard wept, and said unto the servant: 'What could I have done more for my vineyard?'" (Jacob 5:41).²⁹ It is God, not humanity, the allegory tells us, who is both the principal champion of good and the principal victim of evil. The great length of the allegory is essential to its argument: the magnitude of God's effort to save his children is extensively and redundantly illustrated and yet, time after time, they turn from him and are lost, to their and, more poignantly, his great sorrow.

Following verse 41, the allegory gives more detail on the "last" and most disappointing failure mentioned in verse 39. It is the Nephite civilization that has been planted in the part of the vineyard "which was choice unto me above all other parts of the land" (Jacob 5:42–46). Having emphasized at the crucial midpoint that it is the Nephites who have most disappointed him (and having thus explained Jacob's keen interest in the allegory), the Lord reiterates: "But what could I have done more in my vineyard? Have I slackened my hand, that I have not nourished it? Nay, I have nourished it, and I have digged about it, and I have pruned it, and I have dunged it; and I have stretched forth mine hand almost all the day long. ... I have done all. What could I have done more for my vineyard?" (Jacob 5:47, 49).

These verses at the heart of the allegory are by themselves an adequate theodicy. They absolve God of any responsibility for evil in the world by forcefully stating that he has done all that he could possibly do to bring

the existence of human moral evil. Natural evil seems to be an essential disruptor of the pride cycle. Absent the ever-looming threat of natural disaster and other misfortunes, human beings would be less humbly mindful of God and more contumaciously wicked. The increase in human suffering caused by moral evil that would occur were there no natural evils to keep human beings mindful of God and their own mortality is probably greater than the suffering natural evils cause. Thus, natural evil — the pruning, digging, and dunging in the Allegory of the Olive Tree — may be necessary in order to minimize the overall level of suffering that will occur in a fallen world. And it must be somewhat randomly distributed to preserve agency.

28 In this very long chapter, 9,942 characters precede and 9,986 characters follow verse 41, so the length of the sections before and after the verse differs by less than one tenth of one percent. Verse 41 is, effectively, dead center in the middle of the allegory.

29 Terry and Fiona Givens provide an extended reflection on the importance of God weeping in *The God Who Weeps*, (Salt Lake City: Ensign Peak, 2012).

good into the lives of his children. Whatever the cause of evil may be, it is not a failure of God to fully exercise his powers to prevent it.³⁰

But this central section does more than just absolve God. It also explains who is responsible for the existence of evil in the world. In verse 47, the Lord of the vineyard asks,

Who is it that has corrupted my vineyard? And it came to pass that the servant said unto his master: Is it not the loftiness of thy vineyard—have not the branches thereof overcome the roots which are good? And because the branches have overcome the roots thereof, behold they grew faster than the strength of the roots, taking strength unto themselves. Behold, I say, is not this the cause that the trees of thy vineyard have become corrupted? (Jacob 5:47–48)

It is humanity, not God, which is the source of evil in the world. The Lord asks *who*; the servant replies with a *what* that symbolizes *who*, for the branches of the tree represent human cultures. The more human cultures grow, the further removed the tops of the branches are from the gospel root. The more the branches take strength unto themselves, the more they influence the quality of the fruit, independent of the gospel root. And as Jacob has well illustrated and as King Noah will still more explicitly illustrate, the elites of the society — the loftiest parts of the branches — are those who most take strength to themselves and inevitably corrupt all the fruit of the tree.

Toward the end of the allegory, a passage offers further insight into why God cannot do more to save his children. The Lord of the vineyard commands: “ye shall not clear away the bad thereof all at once, lest the roots thereof should be too strong for the graft, and the [branches and root] shall perish. . . . Wherefore ye shall clear away the bad according as the good shall grow, that the root and the top may be equal in strength” (Jacob 5:65–66). The mystery in this passage is how the root — which symbolizes the full array of gospel influences in the world — can be too strong. The answer to this mystery is found in the doctrine of co-creation.

The good fruit that God wants — properly saved souls — must be the combined product of the gospel and of human cultures that express and reflect the distinctive individuality and group preferences

³⁰ Terry and Fiona Givens aptly describe this Mormon God as one who “will extend the maximum mercy He can, and impose the minimum justice He must,” “who prevents all the pain He can, assumes all the suffering He can, and weeps over the misery He can neither prevent nor assume.” *The God Who Weeps*, 18, 25.

of the intelligences who pass through this world. The richness of God's universe can be added upon only if the intelligences God has organized are permitted to participate as co-creators of the world in which they live and of the beings they become. If constraints on the expression of the human will were to become too powerful — even constraints which forced behavior into channels less damaging in the short run to self or others — the exaltation of souls would cease and the glory of God would be diminished.

God's scope for action extends only to the point where it impinges negatively upon the agency of the autonomous beings who are his spirit children. Human beings cannot be sanctified without the atonement that God has provided, but neither can God save them against their will. Thus, he cannot permit his gospel root to wholly determine the worth of the fruit.³¹

As he sets up the Allegory of the Olive Tree in chapter 4, Jacob includes anticipatory echoes of phrases that Zenos will use in the allegory, e.g., “according to his will and pleasure” (Jacob 4:9; 5:14), “first fruits” (Jacob 4:11), and “seek not to counsel the Lord” (Jacob 4:10; 5:22). Jacob here anticipates the corrupting effects of the lofty branches in his discussion of how the Jewish elites look beyond the mark, equating themselves with God by supplanting his plain truth with unsearchable mysteries of their own device (Jacob 4:8, 14). In mentioning these phrases and parallels, Jacob frames and comments upon the action in the allegory.

Especially ironic is Jacob's injunction: “Brethren, seek not to counsel the Lord, but to take counsel from his hand” (Jacob 4:10). This passage anticipates and highlights the following passage in the allegory: “And

31 The great flaw in the plan Satan offered in the pre-existence was that it did not permit the full flowering of the human will and, therefore, could not facilitate the exaltation of the human soul. In the traditional interpretation of the plan, Satan would have ensured righteous behavior by creating a perfect correlation between pleasure and righteousness, pain and wickedness. He would, thus, have made human beings the equivalent of rats in a maze. He would have stripped all moral content from human choices and actions. To avoid the rat in the maze problem, the natural evils discussed in footnote 27 must be, in some measure, random, falling alike on the righteous and the wicked (Matthew 5:45). An alternative and probably more persuasive reading of Satan's plan suggests that he would have destroyed agency with Nehor's popular doctrine (Alma 1:4), by guaranteeing that all human beings returned to heaven regardless of what they chose to do. If all choices lead to the same end, agency is destroyed. See Greg Wright, *Satan's War on Free Agency*, Orem, UT: Granite Publishing, 2003, and Terryl Givens, “Agency and Atonement,” *Meridian Magazine*, Wednesday, March 9, 2011.

it came to pass that the servant said unto his master: How comest thou hither to plant this ... tree? For behold, it was the poorest spot in all the land of thy vineyard. And the Lord of the vineyard said unto him: Counsel me not” (Jacob 5:21–22).

In these verses, the servant poses the problem of evil in the traditional way, indicating, as Job did, that God has done less than he could or should have done to limit human suffering. In the Allegory of the Olive Tree as in the Book of Job, the Lord’s reply — “counsel me not” — indicates that this question or charge is not legitimate. The mirrored phrase Jacob gives us in his setup for the allegory — “seek not to counsel the Lord, but to take counsel from his hand” — implicitly tells us why. Human beings should not counsel the Lord (invalidly accuse God of being responsible for the world’s evil) as the servant does in the allegory but rather should receive counsel from him (keep his commandments, recognizing that they themselves are responsible for the existence of evil in the world because it arises when they don’t do God’s will). The great mystery that is the problem of evil lies not in the failure of God to exercise his power to eliminate evil but in humanity’s inexplicable misuse of its decisive power to choose. The mystery is why human beings willfully choose to make themselves and others miserable.

The Mystery of the Enduring Restoration

While the problem of evil in general and the specifically Christian formulation of the problem may be substantially resolved by the principles discussed above, these limits on God’s power would seem to deepen the Mormon mystery of the enduring restoration. If the agency inherent in human ontology and the consequent principle of co-creation limit the scope of divine action, making it impossible for God to prevent apostasy from the fullness of the gospel, how is it possible for God to give his modern church the assurance that the gospel will never again be taken from the earth? Or expressed otherwise, how is it possible for the Church to survive in this extended historical period when it has not been able to do so in former times? Through Jacob, we receive an answer to these questions as well.

And the answer is that in our day, something new has emerged: an enduring, fruitful equilibrium between the gospel root and the human cultural branches in their power to shape souls. The emergence of that equilibrium is reflected in the Allegory of the Olive Tree by the repeated occurrence of the word *equal* in the section that treats our day. This word does not appear earlier in the allegory, but as attention turns to the last

days it becomes a prominent theme. The first mention is connected with verse 65, where, as previously discussed, the Lord takes care to preserve strength in the branches that they not be overcome by the root. He does this so “that the root and the top may be equal in strength” (Jacob 5:66). The theme of equilibrium between branches and root is mentioned again in verse 73: “and they did keep the root and the top thereof equal.” Verse 74 then indicates that not only the roots and branches, but also “the fruits were equal.” Thus, this final dispensation is characterized by a new emphasis on equality between fruits, equality between individual human souls.

Since God is always active and does not change as history unfolds, the emergence of this new equilibrium between root and branch and new equality between individuals must be attributed to a change in human consciousness and social practice. Through hard historical experience, large numbers of human beings appear at long last to have discovered for themselves the truth Jacob taught, that “one being is as precious ... as the other” (Jacob 2:21). And having in some measure embraced this truth in their economic and political lives, humanity has begun to reap the benefits that always follow when one of God’s truths is accepted and lived.

In his sweeping analysis of the development of the state, North discusses this historical transition from the *natural state*, with its rigid political and economic status hierarchies, to the *open access state* that more fully embodies the principle of equality. This transition requires the emergence of the rule of law, the creation of perpetual organizations (preeminently the impersonal state) which can make commitments that extend beyond the life of any individual, and the existence of many autonomous and competing organizations — James Madison’s factions³² — that have a shared interest in limiting the use of state power.

As these and other conditions are met, open political and economic competition among groups and individuals ensues. Power is temporarily acquired in the political or economic marketplace but is not secure. Unlike kings within the natural state, the factions that temporarily

32 James Madison, “Federalist 10,” “[Having a great] number of citizens and extent of territory ... renders factious combinations less to be dreaded.... Extend the sphere, and you take in a greater variety of parties and interests; you make it less probable that a majority of the whole will have a common motive to invade the rights of other citizens; or if such a common motive exists, it will be more difficult for all who feel it to discover their own strength, and to act in unison with each other.”

seize power in the open access state cannot suppress competing ideas and beliefs because custom and law forbid it and because suppression threatens the interests of a broad base of competing factions. Thus, incompatible ideologies and lifestyles can peacefully coexist and seek adherents. Good can flourish alongside evil, as they do, for example, on the prototypically open access Internet, where vile pornography is separated by a mere mouse click from familysearch.org.

The political and economic gains that arise when a society transitions from being a natural state to being an open access state are extraordinarily large. These gains arise for a variety of reasons but are primarily attributable to domestic peace and the more efficient use of human and natural resources that occurs when all are permitted to participate equally in economic life, as they are not in the natural state. These gains are so large that they create a powerful disincentive for any society to abandon open access and return to the straightened, cramped mode of living that characterizes closed access systems such as the natural state.

The magnitude of these gains makes plausible Francis Fukuyama's claim that with the rise of democratic capitalism, we have come to "the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution."³³ Democratic capitalism, in Fukuyama's reading, is a capacious concept, encompassing everything from anarcho-capitalism to mild forms of socialism, societies even more widely separated on the political and economic spectrum than Hong Kong and Sweden. But while the elasticity of the concept is substantial, it is not infinite. So history may have ended, not in the sense that there is no succession of events, even very important events, but in the sense that no new social system outside that broad spectrum may viably compete with democratic capitalism to be an alternative *telos* or ideal type that can inspire a revolution in the forms of national, social, and economic life. Democratic capitalism may gradually but inexorably spread. For an indefinite period — the extent of which is known only by God (Matthew 24:36) — the "last man"³⁴ may mark time through the "last days" until

33 Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?" *The National Interest*, Summer (1989): 3–18; *The End of History and the Last Man*, New York, NY: The Free Press, 1992. Fukuyama does not imply that all political and economic systems will be identical. As noted in the text, the capacious term "democratic capitalism" includes a wide spectrum of possible social systems.

34 Fukuyama describes the "last man" as an "individual, free and cognizant of his own self-worth, [who] recognizes every other individual for those same qualities" (*The End of History and the Last Man*, 300). The advent of the "last man"

the Savior returns and inaugurates under his divine governance a new, more perfect social order.

If history has indeed come to an end in Fukuyama's sense, the Lord may be able to give an assurance that the gospel will never again be taken from the earth, an assurance he could not give when natural states were everywhere regnant. No matter how free a reign evil may have in the world, the Church may continue to flourish, gathering the elect out of a fallen world, protected by a firm societal commitment to mutual recognition and toleration of even unpopular beliefs and practices that is rooted in the economic gains and social dynamics of the open access state.

A Final Formulation of the Problem of Evil

From the Allegory of the Olive Tree, where God seems to take care to nurture the balance and equality that characterize the open access state, and from revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants that indicate God took a hand in establishing the open access Constitution of the United States "that every man may act in doctrine and principle pertaining to futurity, according to the moral agency which I have given unto him" (D&C 101:77–80), we may conclude that God views the open access state as a desirable setting for developing the capacities and revealing the preferences of his children. Thus, channeling Job and the servant in the Allegory of the Olive Tree, we may ask why God has not fostered an earlier emergence of the open access state.

While Jacob does not answer this question, the Book of Mormon does. And the answer it gives is that an open access state cannot be successfully created if its human co-creators have not yet had the requisite historical experiences and have not yet developed the requisite worldview. The importance of meeting preconditions is apparent in Mosiah₂'s failed effort to reorganize his kingdom on open access principles.

Mosiah₂ fully understood the problems inherent in the natural state. In King Noah, he had a fresh and clear example of how a wicked king can cause his people to be wicked (Mosiah 29:16–18). And in the lives of his own sons, he had a fresh and clear example of how adulation and high status can corrupt even the best of souls (Mosiah 27:8). Finally, in the

may bring history to an end, for *history* in the sense Hegel, Kojève, and Fukuyama use the term is driven by the struggle to achieve recognition from others. When the equal dignity of all human beings becomes an element of common sense, the struggle to achieve recognition can no longer drive the major changes in society that constitute *history*.

account he had just translated of the endless apostasies and conspiracies of the Jaredite kings, he could clearly see that the fullness of the gospel cannot endure upon the earth when people are governed by kings in a natural state (Mosiah 28:11–18).

So Mosiah₂ attempted to organize an open access state among his people “that every man should have an *equal* chance throughout the land” (Mosiah 29:38, emphasis added). But while the people accepted and rejoiced in their king’s counsel, they did not have the habits of mind necessary for establishing a successful open access state.³⁵ Mosiah₂ had earlier dispersed power by recognizing Alma₁ as the people’s High Priest. When allowed to pick their own ruler, the people again concentrate power by appointing Alma₂, their new High Priest (and son of Alma₁, the previous High Priest) to be head of both church and state.³⁶ The advocates of royal rule soon rebel and attempt to reestablish the monarchy.³⁷ Those who do not rebel give Nephiah life tenure as Chief Judge, then support the hereditary succession of Nephiah’s son Pahoran and of Pahoran’s sons to the judgeship. As Pahoran’s sons contend for the now hereditary judgeship and begin to kill each other with the aid of clients who specialize in violence, the natural state is once again fully established among the Nephites.

The evidence is clear that kings and prophets and God himself cannot establish an open access state among a people if the people themselves, the co-creators of that state, have not developed through historical experience the worldview and social practices that permit the state to flourish. It is evident, too, that God ushered in the last dispensation, the enduring restoration, at the earliest possible moment in human history, indeed, so early in the nascent unfolding of the American open access

35 Daniel C. Peterson, “Authority in the Book of Mosiah,” *FARMS Review*, 18/1 (2006): 183–84.

36 While the appointment of Alma as head of both church and state was not consistent with the dispersal of power that characterizes open access states, Alma, like other Book of Mormon prophets, practices open access governance, allowing other religious and political views to be expressed if the expression is peaceful. Jacob is an especially good example. His encounter with Sherem is a case study in the kind of ideological conflict we can expect to encounter in our open access society. Given free reign among the saints that open access governance ensures, Satan leads people astray using religious conservatives such as Sherem who deny the possibility of continuing revelation and professors of naturalistic hedonism such as Korihor.

37 Val Larsen, “In His Footsteps: Ammon₁ and Ammon₂,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture*, 3 (2012), 85 – 113.

state that it cost Joseph Smith his life at the hands of an intolerant, not yet fully American mob.³⁸

Conclusion

Jacob was an exceptionally Christlike person. While still young,³⁹ he apparently saw the Savior face to face and had his calling and election made sure (2 Nephi 2:3–4). During the remainder of his life, he vicariously suffered the sins of others, feeling their spiritual peril much more deeply than they themselves did and striving with all the energy of his soul to redeem them from their sins by bringing them to the Savior. Bearing this burden of others' sins, he suffered sorrow throughout his life, sorrow that may have been deepened by foreknowledge that in the near term the practices of the king and theology of Sherem would prevail⁴⁰ and that in the longer term, as the Allegory of the Olive Tree quite clearly indicates, the Nephites would reject the gospel and be destroyed (Jacob 5:42–46). The overwhelmingly negative valence of Jacob's words as he concludes his sermon — “will ye reject these words ... and make a mock of the great plan of redemption ... [and] stand with shame and awful guilt before the bar of God ... which bar striketh the wicked with awful dread and fear. Amen.” (Jacob 6:8–13) — suggest he has limited hope that his people will turn from their evil ways and avoid being “hewn down and cast into the fire” (Jacob 5:46).

Though they may have alleviated his suffering, the profound patriarchal blessing, the Allegory of the Olive Tree, and other revelations Jacob received could not fully relieve his anguish. At the end of his long life, he penned one of the most poignant sentences in all scripture:

38 Citizens of Missouri and Illinois felt justified in taking lives and violently expelling the Mormons from their states as an act of popular sovereignty. Protection of minority rights — an essential characteristic of an open access state — was not yet fully established in culture and law. See Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*, New York: NY: Vintage Books, 2007, 222–225, 551–552.

39 See Sorenson on Jacob's likely age. Jacob. John L. Sorenson, “The Composition of Lehi's Family,” in John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks, eds., *By Study and Also by Faith: Essays in Honor of Hugh W. Nibley*, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Bok and FARMS, 1990), 2:174–96.

40 John L. Clark, “Painting Out the Messiah: The Theology of Dissidents,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*, 4/2 (2002): 16–27; Gary L. Sturgess, “The Book of Mosiah: Thoughts about Its Structure, Purposes, Themes, and Authorship,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*, 4/2 (1995): 107–35.

“I conclude this record ... by saying that the time passed away with us, and also our lives passed away like as it were unto us a dream, we being a lonesome and solemn people, wanderers, cast out from Jerusalem, born in tribulation, in a wilderness, and hated of our brethren, which caused wars and contentions; wherefore, we did mourn out our days. (Jacob 7:26)⁴¹

But perhaps because he himself suffered so much sorrow, Jacob was able to leave, as his legacy to us, profound insights into the nature and causes of evil and a profound testament to the goodness of the God who has done or will do all that can be done to save us from the sorrow of sin.

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41 In part, Jacob's bleak assessment must represent temperamental anhedonia, not just a negative objective reality. His bleakness distinguishes him from his father and brother. Thus, he has none of Lehi's joy in having "obtained a land of promise" (1 Nephi 5:5) or Nephi's pleasure in creating a place where his people might live "after the manner of happiness" (2 Nephi 5:27).

