

“Moral, Responsible, and Free”
Mormon Conceptions of Divine Justice

Let me start with four tough questions. They are actually four versions of the same question. In the Book of Job, we track the travails of a good, righteous man. Job loses his flocks, his health, even his family, through no fault of his own. His relentless efforts to make logical sense of the relationship between his righteous conduct and his deplorable circumstances drive him to the point of spiritual implosion. Finally, a stranger intrudes upon the scene, and asks a question of thunderous import: “If thou sinnest, what doest thou against [God]?” In other words, why should God care how we conduct our lives. What could make him want to punish me for what I do with my agency?

Now to the Book of Mormon. Alma has been struggling with a rebellious son. With fatherly insight, he goes straight to the crux of the problem. “My son, I perceive there is somewhat more which doth worry your mind, which ye cannot understand—which is concerning the justice of God in the punishment of the sinner, for ye do try to suppose that it is injustice that the sinner should be consigned to a state of misery.” Its essentially the same question. Why can’t God just overlook our sins. Why his insistence on retribution for our wrongs?

Third, a young couple of differing religions were asking me about the LDS concept of temple marriage. Mormons believe that only a temple sealing, I explained, can establish a sealing bond that will survive death. “So you mean,” one of them asked, that if we die and are resurrected, but haven’t been sealed, God won’t let us live together eternally? Why would God do that to us?”

And the fourth question, which I will read at greater length. It comes from Dostoevsky’s masterpiece, the Brothers Karamazov. The nihilist Ivan has just related to his brother Alyosha, the tender-hearted young priest-in-training, the harrowing true story of a young child torn to pieces by hunting dogs in front of his mother, at the command of a sadistic landowner, and another about the torture of a little girl thrown into a cesspool.

When the mother embraces the fiend who threw her child to the dogs, and all three cry aloud with tears, 'Thou art just, O Lord!' then, of course, the crown of knowledge will be reached and all will be made clear. But what pulls me up here is that I can't accept that harmony. And while I am on earth, I make haste to take my own measures.

You see, Alyosha, perhaps it really may happen that if I live to that moment, or rise again to see it, I, too, perhaps, may cry aloud with the rest, looking at the mother embracing the child's torturer, 'Thou art just, O Lord!' but I don't want to cry aloud then. While there is still time, I hasten to protect myself, and so I renounce the higher harmony altogether.

It's not worth the tears of that one tortured child who beat itself on the breast with its little fist and prayed in its stinking outhouse, with its unexpiated tears to 'dear, kind God!' It's not worth it, because those tears are

unatoned for. They must be atoned for, or there can be no harmony. But how? How are you going to atone for them? Is it possible? By their being avenged? But what do I care for avenging them? What do I care for a hell for oppressors? What good can hell do, since those children have already been tortured? And what becomes of harmony, if there is hell?

I want to forgive. I want to embrace. I don't want more suffering. . . . And so I hasten to give back my entrance ticket, and if I am an honest man I am bound to give it back as soon as possible. And that I am doing. It's not God that I don't accept, Alyosha, only I most respectfully return him the ticket.

These examples from scripture, from literature, and from personal experience, all suggest a failure of the religious understanding that has been catastrophic. The Christian world may have been worshipping the wrong God.

Some weeks ago, a young man came to talk to me in a personal capacity. He had been profoundly moved by some religiously themed literature he had been reading. He had no previous religious affiliation, but felt something stirring deep within, and had come to see me with a most unusual request. Perhaps sensing my own faith commitment, he said this: "I am embarking on a quest to find God. What questions should I be asking along my way?" I said to him, "The first question you must ask is, 'What kind of a God do you seek?'" ... He thought that was a most curious response. But it's exactly the right question, I believe. Not all Gods are worthy of our allegiance. Even the God imagined by many Christians is not one deserving of adoration. Listen to Augustine's defense of a God who blithely consigns to hell untold numbers of unbaptized children. , "if another soul, not merely before it sins but at the very outset of its life, is placed under a punishment . . . it has a great good for which to thank its Creator, for the merest beginning of a soul is better than the most perfect material object."¹ In fact, he considered any complaint on the subject "slandrous": some ask, he wrote, "if it was Adam and Eve who sinned, what did we poor wretches do? How do we deserve to be born in blindness of ignorance and the torture of difficulty? . . . My response is brief: let them be silent and stop murmuring."²

Or listen to Luther, writing more than a thousand years later on the subject of election by grace. God "ordains whom, and such as He will, to be receivers and partakers of his preached and offered mercy." And that will, he continues, we have no right to try and understand, because it is "the most profound secret of the divine majesty, which he reserves unto himself and keeps hidden from us." Exactly why God does not save those it is clearly in his power to save, but rather blames man for what, in Luther's words, we have no power to avoid, "it is not lawful to inquire." This clearly perverse will, he concludes, is not to be understood. "It is only to be feared and adored!"³

Let me give one more example from literature, of a boy who refused to worship one of the Christian gods of 19th c. Christendom. His name was Huck Finn, and he went through soul agony in his decision to help a slave, Jim, escape his bondage. "It would get all around," he fretted, "that Huck Finn helped a [slave] to get his freedom....The more I

studied about this the more my conscience went to grinding me, and the more wicked and low-down and ornery I got to feeling. And at last, when it hit me all of a sudden that here was the plain hand of Providence slapping me in the face and letting me know my wickedness was being watched all the time from up there in heaven. . . . Well, I tried the best I could to kinder soften it up somehow for myself by saying I was brung up wicked, and so I wasn't so much to blame." At last, he decides to do the Christian thing, and turn the slave in. He writes a note betraying him, but then has one last page of remorse. "It was a close place. I took [the note] up, and held it in my hand. I was a-trembling, because I'd got to decide, forever, betwixt two things, and I knowd it. I studied a minute, sort of holding my breath, and then says to myself: 'All right, then, I'll go to hell'—and tore it up."⁴

So where does all this leave us? I am trying to suggest that the thorniest dilemma in the history of the world is the problem of God's justice, and it has led to theological atrocities on the one hand, and atheism on the other. Gods not worth believing in, or no God at all. In between, are legions of the confused like Job, the perplexed like Corianton, the conflicted like Huck, or the rebellious like Ivan. More commonly, and of more direct interest to me at the moment, are Latter-day Saints who sometimes veer one way and sometimes the other.

Obviously, we cannot just create a God that makes us comfortable. I am reminded of the marquee outside a little country church I saw in rural Massachusetts. Come worship with us, the sign invited. "Soft Pews; No Hell." So where do we go to find the True God, and having found him, how do we then make sense of the pain, the trauma, and the horror in the world? Today I want to make some suggestions as to how we might proceed, in order to make a beginning, in solving these questions.

The Weeping God of Enoch

One of the most massive transformations in theological understanding in recent centuries is the Christian world's turn toward a passible God. Passibilism is the theological term for the notion that God suffers. That he experiences emotions. The official position of most of Christendom, according to the creeds, is that God is "without body, parts, or passions." There are many reasons to believe God cannot experience emotion. Emotion and passion suggest a change of state, and the God of classical Christianity is changeless. Emotion and passion suggest a humanizing of the divine nature, and God is not anthropomorphic, or human-like. And finally, emotion suggests weakness and susceptibility. As Sigmund Freud wrote, we are never so vulnerable as when we love. C. S. Lewis added the concern that, if God grieved over the wicked, we could hold his happiness hostage. So God was defined as outside or above or beyond such feelings. One theologian writes that the idea was so uncontroversial, that no one rose to challenge it until the late nineteenth-century.⁵ But that isn't exactly true.

In 1830, Joseph Smith published in the Times and Seasons a translation which I could consider one of his two greatest contributions to religious understanding. It was published in 1832 as “the prophecy of Enoch.”

And it came to pass that the God of heaven looked upon the residue of the people, and he wept, and Enoch bore record of it, saying, How is it the heavens weep and shed forth her tears as the rain upon the mountains? And Enoch said unto the Lord, How is it that thou canst weep seeing thou art holy and from all eternity from all eternity? and were it possible that man could number the particles of the earth, yea, and millions of earths like this, it would not be a beginning to the number of thy creations; . . ., and naught but peace, justice and truth is the habitation of thy throne; and mercy shall go before thy face and have no end: how is it that thou canst weep? The Lord said unto Enoch, Behold these thy brethren; they are the workmanship of mine own hands, and I gave unto them their knowledge, in the day I created them; and in the garden of Eden gave I unto man his agency; and unto thy brethren have I said, and also, gave commandment, That they should love one another; and that they should choose me their father, but behold they are without affection; and they hate their own blood; . . .Satan shall be their father, and misery shall be their doom; and the whole heavens shall weep over them, even all the workmanship of mine hands: Wherefore, should not the heavens weep, seeing these shall suffer?⁶

Joseph Smith later taught that to exercise faith in God, the first requirement is a “correct idea of his character, perfections, and attributes.”⁷ And the most fundamental truth in this regard, is not the knowledge that God has a glorified body of flesh and bones. It is, as I have written elsewhere, the knowledge that God has a heart that beats in sympathy with his children. That he feels real sorrow, rejoices with real gladness, and weeps real tears. This, as Enoch learned, is an awful, terrible, yet infinitely comforting truth.

No other God ever has been, or ever will be, worthy of human worship. A God whose love is not metaphorical, whose fatherhood is literal, whose sacrifice of his son was emotionally costly beyond imagining, and whose concern for our lives is personal, intimate, and real. That is the only basis for true religion. Joseph Smith was virtually alone in saying that in 1830.

Now, that still leaves us with the greatest of dilemmas: how to reconcile the understanding of a God who weeps over pain but does not prevent the pain how to reconcile that understanding with the reality of a world drenched in pain and suffering. How do we answer those questions with which I began my remarks?

I believe what will provide greater clarity on this issue, as well as greater clarity about LDS conceptions of the **war in heaven**, the **purpose of mortal life**, and the **nature of the atonement**, is a more coherent account of the meaning and role of moral agency. So in what follows, I want to make some very tentative efforts in that regard.

I. War in Heaven

If any myth can make a claim to near universality among the cultures and religions of the world, it is probably the primeval conflict between good and evil. But in Mormon cosmology, the first conflict gave birth to evil, but did not itself involve evil. It was, rather, a conflict over how to secure humanity's destiny. Christianity has long contended with scattered, cryptic, biblical allusions to a conflict in the celestial realms that antedated even the creation of the earth. "And there was war in heaven," says the writer of Revelation in the most prominent example, "Michael and his angels fought against the dragon; and the dragon fought and his angels, and prevailed not, neither was their place found any more in heaven" (12:7-8). But a war is just the latter stage of a conflict unresolved by other means. What was the conflict itself about?

In Joseph's version, God stands in the midst of many "noble and great" spirits, and declares his intentions with regard to these future inhabitants of the earth. "We will go down, . . . and we will make an earth whereon these may dwell; and we will prove them herewith, to see if they will do all things whatsoever the Lord their God shall command them." In response, "one among them that was like unto God" offers himself as executor and instrument of the Father's plan, apparently indicating a willingness to expiate the sins that will inevitably accrue to all mankind in the wake of such a probationary scheme (Abraham 3, PGP).

It is at this point, according to a revelation Joseph had published five years earlier, that a second figure steps forward with a competing proposal. Referring to Satan, God tells the prophet Moses that

He came before me, saying—Behold here am I, send me, I will be thy Son, and I will redeem all mankind, that one soul shall not be lost, and surely I will do it; wherefore, give me thine honor. But, behold, my Beloved Son, which was my Beloved and Chosen from the beginning, said unto me—Father, thy will be done, and the glory be thine forever. Wherefore, because that Satan rebelled against me, and **sought to destroy the agency of man**, which I, the Lord God, had given him; and also, that I should give unto him mine own power; by the power of mine Only Begotten, I caused that he should be cast down; and he became Satan, yea, even the devil, the father of all lies, to deceive, and to blind men, and to lead them captive at his will. (Moses 4:1-4, PGP)

Notice that the critical action in this scene unfolds while Satan is yet Lucifer, an angel of "authority in the presence of God," the Bearer of Light, as his name signifies. The contest is not about light and dark, good and evil. Something more subtle is in play. It is only after the Father says, "I will send the first," that Lucifer becomes angry and rebellious, and is cast out, becoming Satan. If the LDS scriptures were portraying him as evil from the beginning, they would not note in Section 76 that "the heavens wept over him" (76:26). So in the logic of the scriptural narrative, his proposal was not obviously

and self-evidently evil. Egregious affronts to one's moral sensibility are not effective, until our consciences have been duly dulled.

One problem with making Satan out to be some kind of dull-witted heavenly thug is that it leads to simplistic assumptions about how evil operates. Mormons have long assumed, evident in a pervasive cultural grammar, that Lucifer's plan involved coercion. That he would simply "force" people to be righteous, or to keep the commandments. There are several problems with such a reading: In brief: 1. If Mormons read this myth literally, it is hard to see how an appeal to force could be persuasive with a substantial proportion of the heavenly hosts. 2. In the verse succeeding the reference to destroying agency, the newly christened Satan seeks "to lead [mankind] captive at his will." Failing to get official sanction for his plan, in other words, he prosecutes it as an unsanctioned renegade. And in today's moral climate, few would characterize the greatest threats to human agency as involving coercion, compulsion, or physical force. 3. Most importantly, this simplistic view of how agency works—and how it is thwarted—makes Lucifer into a caricature of evil. Brutish, unsubtle, unsophisticated, and transparent as glass. This is dangerous, because underestimating the power and appeal of evil, and the failure to recognize its operations in the world we inhabit, can be catastrophic.

In Mormon doctrine, as more generally, a distinction can be drawn between agency, the power to make a choice between alternatives, which is an eternal endowment to humans, and freedom, which is the power to put into execution that choice, and can be circumscribed or abrogated altogether. As Dallin Oaks has suggested, moral agency or free will is a given and is guaranteed to us from our creation. However, freedom is always circumscribed. He adds this important caveat: moral agency cannot be taken from us, but neither is it absolutely inalienable.⁸ Humans may and do surrender their moral agency piecemeal, if they are not vigilant.

But there is another crucial ingredient to moral agency and freedom alike, without which both are meaningless terms. And that ingredient is consequence. A cardinal insight of the Book of Mormon is its teaching that to choose is always to choose a consequence. And the tendency of a decadent culture is always to obscure or deny the connection between choice and consequence. Here is what I mean:

In any set of alternatives we are presented with, we find two choices attached to two sets of consequences. To simplify, we can imagine presenting a child with two options. Do your homework and you get to watch a movie. Do not do your homework and go to bed without supper. Now if the child does his homework and is summarily sent to bed without supper, he would protest this was not fair. What he would mean, is that he made a choice that was linked to a consequence. And something intervened to disrupt the expected connection. He was operating under the assumption that he possessed a certain freedom of self-determination, and that freedom proved to be a sham. If every choice we made resulted in totally unforeseen and unpredictable consequences, we would be inhabiting a realm of chaos. Agency would be meaningless and freedom effectively non-existent if no reliable principles existed by which to make choices that were attached to the particular ends we desire. What kind of freedom would it be, if there was no predictable result attached to any deliberate choice? We order pizza and get a dozen roses. We turn on our computer and the toaster heats up. We go to law school and receive a degree in plumbing. We love and honor God, but he sends us to Outer Darkness. Yes, we

live in an imperfect world. Electricians have their agency to wire our appliances wrong. And secretaries have their agency to mix up diplomas. Spiritual second hand smoke of a thousand types complicates the picture. But even allowing for the white noise, Moral agency, clearly, requires a stable framework within which choices are rendered meaningful and purposeful. This, I believe, is the meaning of Lehi in his great sermon on freedom, when he says that “men are instructed sufficiently,” “and the law is given to men,” and that as a result they are “free forever, . . . to act for themselves and not to be acted upon, save it be by the punishment . . . according to the law.” In our prior example, the boy is free, to act for himself, subject to the natural unfolding of the reward or punishment he chose at the time he executed his choice.

Now here is where my exposition takes perhaps an unexpected turn. We are, I hope, agreed that if a boy chooses to earn a reward, and is denied that promised reward, to that extent his agency has been compromised. But what if the boy does not do his homework, and as a result, he gets to stay up and watch the movie? By the logic laid down above, such a consequence would also be tantamount to a denial of his freedom. The realization that giving someone a reward he did not choose is tantamount to a denial of agency, provides a powerful and coherent alternative reading of the mythic war in heaven. The Luciferian proposal may very well have hinged on the promise that regardless of human choices in a mortal probation, salvation would be assured. Humans wouldn't be forced to make the right choices. Any choices they made would suffice. Which is the same thing as saying, no choice that they made would have mattered. And if choice doesn't matter, then moral agency is an empty cliché. That would offer a plausible scenario by which he sought to destroy the agency of man, in a strategy as tempting then as it is now. Eat, drink, and be merry, and tomorrow you repose in paradise.

II. The purpose of Life

A more pertinent concern than the particulars of the war in heaven, is the moral climate in which we find ourselves today. Joseph Smith said, “I believe man is a moral, responsible, free agent.”⁹ If Mormons also believe, as stated in Moses, that the program of earthly evil involves the destruction of agency, then anything that enhances the individual's ability to function as an independent agent counters that agenda. The purpose of life, in this framework, would seem to be the maximization of moral agency, the attainment of that degree of liberty and independence that characterize divinity itself. In fact, Brigham Young said exactly that. God intends humans to act with the same independence in this sphere, that he does in heaven.¹⁰ In this tangled labyrinth of life, we are generally a long way from acting with a will that is pure and uncompromised. We often choose in ignorance, or out of fear, or under the pressures of this weak and flawed fleshly tabernacle. We may not always see the consequence, or fully understand it. But it will unfold in accordance with the choice that we made, with greater or lesser degree of light. And for those at least who have the gospel law given, it is the certainty of such punishment and reward, defined and differentiated by law and freely chosen by man, that establishes his moral agency: “Wherefore,” Lehi concludes, “men are free according to the flesh; and all things are given them which are expedient unto man. And they are free to choose liberty and eternal life, . . . or to choose captivity and death” (2 Nephi 2:27).

III. Atonement

The Book of Mormon is a revolutionary document insofar as it reinterprets the fall of man as the moment when moral agency was validated, rather than obliterated. The fall of man was fortunate, the Book of Mormon explains, not because in some Miltonic sense it called forth a triumphal act of supernal grace, but because its presence in the world is the sign—and price—of the moral freedom that precedes it. Freedom, in turn, is the precondition for human happiness. As Lehi explains,

And if ye shall say there is no law, ye shall also say there is no sin. If ye shall say there is no sin, ye shall also say there is no righteousness. And if there be no righteousness there be no happiness.

Against this backdrop, then, the Book of Mormon develops a doctrine of the Atonement in such a way as to reclaim the principle of Justice from a kind of Platonic abstraction or equivalence with God himself, and situate it in the context of human agency. This may well be one of its greatest theological contributions. One Christian doctrine of Atonement, with which we may compare the Book of Mormon's teaching, has it that "sin, being an infinite offence against God, required a satisfaction equally infinite. As no finite being . . . could offer satisfaction, it was necessary that an infinite being, i.e. God Himself, should take the place of man and, by His death, make complete satisfaction to Divine Justice."¹¹ The Book of Mormon (which uses various forms of "atone" 36 times as compared to the New Testament's one reference) similarly connects atonement to Justice, explaining that vicarious expiation notwithstanding, "the work of Justice could not be destroyed; if so, God would cease to be God" (Alma 42:13).

The theological rub seems to be, why cannot God simply pardon fault? To explain the necessity for Atonement in terms of an inflexible principle of Eternal Justice—as in a conventional soteriology—is to defer the problem, it is not to solve it. We have, in this case, merely elevated one of God's attributes to the status of a universal, and then endowed that universal with highly peculiar features. Peculiar, first, because Justice manifests itself here as a mathematical rather than moral principle. Since punishment—but not punishment of the guilty—is required, the impersonal demand is in accordance with some abstract calculus that has no earthly counterpart. No terrestrial magistrate would allow an innocent person to die for a guilty one and consider justice to be served. Peculiar, second, because Justice here usurps the place of God, as a principle before which he himself seems to bow. A wise father, given appropriate extenuating circumstances, or the timely and efficacious exercise of mercy, may remit altogether the punishment of a guilty son. God, apparently, cannot. Explanation of atonement in terms of a Platonic absolute called Justice, in other words, begs as many questions as it answers.). The fact is, as we have seen, genuine moral agency must entail necessary consequences. If choice is to be more than an empty gesture of the will, more than a mere pantomime of decision-making, there must be immutable guarantee that any given choice will eventuate in the natural consequence of that choice. This point is explicated by one of the most profound revelations of Joseph Smith's career. In explaining why God does not simply bestow eternal bliss upon all who die, the revelation explains:

“they who remain shall also be quickened; nevertheless, they shall return again to their own place, to enjoy that which they are willing to receive, because they were not willing to enjoy that which they might have received” (88:32). Imposing a heavenly reward on those who did not choose heaven, in other words, is just that: an imposition on the “unwilling,” and an abrogation of the moral agency on which all human life and earthly existence is predicated.

Hell does not exist because of some inflexible ultimatum decreed by an impersonal Justice. Reward and punishment is entailed not simply because that is the “fair” or “just” thing for God to do. For God is also merciful, and if humans can remit a penalty out of compassion or mercy, why cannot God? Because, as Alma continues, such apparent generosity would undermine the essence of that agency on which moral freedom depends. Consequences are chosen at the time actions are freely committed. To choose to indulge a desire is to choose its fruit—bitter or sweet—assuming, as Lehi did, that “men are instructed sufficiently” to understand what they are choosing (2 Nephi 2:5). So following the exercise of such agency, “the one [must be] raised to happiness according to his desires of happiness, or good according to his desires of good; and the other to evil according to his desires of evil” (Alma 41:5). It is a truth that harks back to Dante’s grim vision of hell, in which God is not present as Judge or dispenser of punishments, because choices are allowed, inexorably, to bear their own fruit. In Alma’s Inferno as well, future states are chosen, not assigned: “For behold,” says Alma, “they are their own judges” (Alma 41:7).

And what is the role of Christ in this conception? One might posit in this scheme of things that Christ bears the consequences of all the wrong choices that have ever been made, to assure, to guarantee, the principle of moral agency, maintaining the law of restoration and the equilibrium of choice and consequence, thereby permitting an errant human kind to repent, or as the word signifies, to re-decide, to choose afresh. The law of agency requires that choices of moral moment eventuate in their decreed consequences. But so many of our choices, made in our frailty, entail catastrophic pain and suffering. Christ is willing to bear that pain and suffering in our stead, that we may re-employ our agency to better ends.

In conclusion, let me return to two of the characters I described above. Ivan Dostoevsky, who rejected the God of classical Christianity because, as he said to Alyosha, “I love little children,” and he could not countenance a universe in which God had the power to prevent their suffering, but did not. And Huck Finn, who seeing only a God of classical Christianity, one who in the logic of the day sanctioned human trafficking and brutality toward an oppressed race, rejected that God. Those two great men of fiction worshipped the God of Enoch, though they knew it not. They illustrate the truth that we do not come to know God, and then learn his attributes. We must come to know his attributes, and only thereby do we come to know God. And that is why I said to the young man who came to see me, you must first ask, what kind of a God are you seeking? And having found him, and only after having found him, can we hope to make sense out of his universe. Joseph Smith made the claim, unique in all the theological world, that there are three independent principles in the universe: God, man, and the devil. Within that framework, God’s purposes, and Christ’s sacrifice, revolve around the

great and terrible truth that if this independence which attaches to the human soul is voided, then in the words of scripture, “there *is* no existence” (93:30).

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¹ Augustine, On Free Choice of the Will iii.20, trans. Thomas Williams (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993), 109.

² Augustine, On Free Choice, 107.

³ Martin Luther, On the Bondage of the Will, trans. Henry Cole (np: Feather Trail Press, 2009), 67-68.

⁴ Mark Twain, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1918), 296-97.

⁵ Marcel Sarot, God, Passibility, and Corporeality (Kampen, Netherlands: Pharos, 1992), 1-2. Sarot gives more than a half dozen examples of defenses of impassibilism by contemporary theologians.

⁶ “Extract from the Prophecy of Enoch,” Evening and Morning Star 1.3 (August 1832): 18.

⁷ Lectures on Faith

⁸ Dallin H. Oaks, “Free Agency and Freedom.” Address given at Brigham Young University, 11 October 1987.

⁹ HC 4:78-80 or Words of JS 33.

¹⁰ A Discourse by President Brigham Young, Delivered in the Tabernacle, Great Salt Lake City, Dec., 3, 1854

¹¹ “Atonement,” in Cross and Livingstone, Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church, 123.