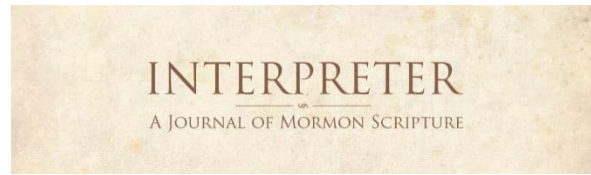




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Restoration: A Theological Poem in the Book of Mormon

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RESTORATION: A THEOLOGICAL POEM IN THE BOOK OF MORMON

Val Larsen

Abstract: The distinctive Mormon conception of God makes possible a logically coherent reconciliation of the facially incompatible laws of justice and mercy. The Book of Mormon prophet Alma clearly explains how these two great laws may be reconciled through the atonement and repentance that the atonement makes possible. Alma artfully illustrates the relationship between justice and mercy in a carefully crafted theological poem.

An important distinctive feature of Mormon theology is its conception of God as a being who is finite and subject to natural law.¹ Among other things, this distinctive understanding makes it possible to give a logically coherent account of what *justice* and *mercy* are and of how these facially incompatible laws can be reconciled. It provides a framework for fully understanding why both grace and works are necessary for salvation. Though it is sometimes suggested that this finite

¹ Eugene England, "The Weeping God of Mormonism," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 35/1 (2002): 63–80; Sterling M. McMurrin, *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1965); Max Nolan, "Materialism and the Mormon Faith," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, 22/4 (1989): 62–75; Blake T. Ostler, *Of God and Gods, Exploring Mormon Thought* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2008); B. H. Roberts, *Joseph Smith the Prophet–Teacher: A Discourse* (Salt Lake City: The Deseret News, 1908); Garland E. Tickemyer, "Joseph Smith and Process Theology," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, 17/3 (1984): 75–85.

conception of God was not part of early Mormonism,² it was actually present from the beginning of the Restoration as an important element in the teachings of Alma in the Book of Mormon.

Understanding as he did that God was subject to natural law, Alma also deeply understood the nature of justice and mercy and beautifully illustrated their relationship in an artful theological poem. Justice and mercy are reconciled, he taught, when human agents choose to respond to the atonement by repenting of their sins and becoming perfect in Christ. These agents then justly receive the natural consequences of their state of being — exaltation. While other Mormon scripture provides supplementary information that clarifies aspects of the relationship between God and man and justice and mercy, these key concepts in Mormon theology are nowhere more thoughtfully and artfully discussed than in the writings of Alma.

Justice as Natural Law

Alma's thoughts on these topics are expressed in a theologically profound message to his wayward son Corianton. The meaning of *justice*, in particular, is more thoroughly discussed by Alma than by any other ancient prophet. Almost one-fourth of all occurrences of the word *justice* in the standard works appear in Alma's relatively brief message to his son.³ In this teaching, Alma responds to Corianton's belief "that it is injustice that the sinner should be consigned to a state of misery" (Alma 42:1). Alma helps Corianton understand that the punishment of sins

2 Thomas G. Alexander, "The Reconstruction of Mormon Doctrine: From Joseph Smith to Progressive Theology," *Sunstone*, July–August 1980, 24–33; Mark Thomas, "Scholarship and the Book of Mormon" in *The Word of God: Essays on Mormon Scripture*, ed. Dan Vogel (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1990), 72–73.

3 Alma chapters 41 and 42 contain 24 percent of all occurrences of the word *justice* while being just .13 percent of the chapters in the standard works.

is inevitable. It is required by justice, the most fundamental, inescapable law of the universe.

To illustrate the importance of justice, Alma emphasizes that it is prior to and more basic even than the existence of God. Three times Alma mentions that if God were to abrogate justice, he would cease to be God (Alma 42:13, 22, 25), a statement that has profound theological implications. The most important implication is that justice is a kind of natural law (cf. Alma 42:12, 13) and that God is God because he is in full harmony with that natural law. He has no discretion in the application of justice.⁴ The universe is not his *ex nihilo* creation and creature that he can change at will. His power flows from his complete acceptance of and harmony with antecedent reality, not from ontological priority to all other existing things. Thus, God does not have the ability to save his children by violating justice. Nor does he have the desire to do so. Though he weeps when we willfully sin (Moses 7:28-40), he honors both our agency and justice by letting us experience the consequences of our actions.

So what, exactly, is justice? The short answer is that it is causation. Reality is substantially defined by a set of inescapable causal relationships. Causes have inevitable effects. Acts have inevitable consequences. Alma repeatedly emphasizes this point. Justice dictates that our actions determine our destiny: “evil for evil, or carnal for carnal, or devilish for devilish — good for that which is good; righteous for that which is righteous;

4 The atonement paradox of Trinitarian Christianity inheres in the fact that God is the ground for all that exists and thus has complete discretion on whether suffering will be demanded. It is He who requires punishment for sin and He who — contravening all ordinary notions of justice — chooses to bear the punishment in the place of those who have earned it. The atonement thus appears to be an exercise in masochism. If, as in Mormonism, the just requirement that punishment follow sin is grounded outside of God, this paradox and the masochism disappear. For a good summary of traditional theories of the atonement, see Gustaf Aulen, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement*, trans. by A. G. Herbert ((London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1937).

just for that which is just; merciful for that which is merciful” (Alma 41:13). We cannot blame God if bad consequences are visited upon us. What we get is what we have chosen to receive by acting as we do. The only way we can have different consequences is to act differently.

In addition to being unable to change the network of causes and effects that we call justice, God is unable to change the *intelligence* or choosing essence of each human being. Like justice, intelligence is uncreated: “intelligence ... was not created or made, neither indeed can be” (D&C 93:29). This locus of choice at the heart of each of us is coeternal with God. He can expand the scope of our choices and our capacity to choose by clothing our intelligence in a spiritual and then a physical body. But he has neither the desire nor the ability to dictate what we choose. Our innate, uncreated, eternal intelligence is the wellspring of all our choices. We thus play an important role as co-creators of the world in which we and others live. The natural consequence of righteous choices is an expansion of the range of options open to us and others; the natural consequence of wickedness is a contraction of the set of choices available to us and others around us.

This doctrine also has great theological importance. It provides the only fully satisfactory explanation for the problem of evil.⁵ And it further defines the ontological context, the set of constraints, within which God must work as he labors to save his spirit children. He cannot directly affect our *nature*. The only option open to him is to somehow change our *nurture*. And a change is desperately needed. In combination, justice and uncreated human nature put all of us, through an inexorable chain of cause and effect, on a course that leads to our inevitable

5 Truman G. Madsen, *Eternal Man*, (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 1966); David L. Paulsen, “Joseph Smith and the Problem of Evil,” *BYU Studies*, 39/1 (2000): 53–65. Terryl Givens and Fiona Givens, *The God Who Weeps*, (Salt Lake City: Ensign Peak, 2012), 52–54.

damnation. Defects in our character ensure that we will sin, and our love for and fear of God ensures that we cannot bear to be in his presence as sinners and must, therefore, be separated from him forever to minimize our pain (Alma 12:13-15).

The Original Lie

Ironically, Corianton, like many others, seems to have been influenced by his father's most important theological opponent, Nehor, who taught "that all mankind should be saved at the last day, and that they need not fear nor tremble, but that they might lift up their heads and rejoice; for the Lord had created all men, and had also redeemed all men; and, in the end, all men should have eternal life" (Alma 1:4). This claim that all will be saved is not new. It is the original plan of Satan that we rejected in the preexistence. There Satan promised, "I will redeem all mankind, that one soul shall not be lost" (Moses 4:1). Nehor and Corianton are belatedly embracing what they did not accept in their first estate — Satan's plan for the salvation of humanity.

This plan shows up repeatedly in the Book of Mormon. It is the "eat, drink, and be merry" doctrine mentioned earlier by Nephi: "God will beat us with a few stripes, and at last we shall be saved in the kingdom of God" (2 Nephi 28:8). It is the view of Lamoni and his people, who "believed in a Great Spirit [but] supposed that whatsoever they did was right" (Alma 18:5). It is the false gospel the masses embrace in the time of Samuel the Lamanite: "But behold, if a man shall come among you and shall say: Do this, and there is no iniquity; do that and ye shall not suffer; yea, he will say: Walk after the pride of your own hearts; yea, walk after the pride of your eyes, and do whatsoever your heart desireth, . . . ye will receive him, and say that he is a prophet" (Helaman 13:27).

Unsurprisingly, this idea has many seductive modern variants as well that Mormon may have foreseen and sought

to address through Alma's message to Corianton, e.g., the doctrine Dietrick Bonhoeffer has called "cheap grace" — the popular Christian belief that a single act of confessing Christ saves one regardless of what one subsequently chooses to do.⁶ Or the teachings of sophisticated pastors (e.g., Richard John Neuhaus), popular pastors (e.g., Rob Bell), and Christian philosophers (e.g., John Hick), who suggest that God's infinite love ultimately guarantees all will be saved.⁷ There is an atheist variant of the idea: no matter what people choose to do in this life, all end up exactly the same — dead; so do as you please (Alma 30:18). There is even a Mormon variant: progression from the telestial to the celestial kingdom is possible, and all God's children will ultimately be saved in the celestial kingdom regardless of what choices they have made during probation in their "second estate," the period that extends from birth to final judgment, resurrection, and assignment to a kingdom of glory.⁸

6 Dietrick Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, trans. Barbara Green and Reinhard Krauss, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 4 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 43–56.

7 Richard John Neuhaus, "Will All Be Saved," *First Things* (August/September 2001); Rob Bell, *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2011); John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 326.

8 The idea of progression between post-mortal kingdoms is a common theme of some Mormon speculative theologians. It is sometimes coupled with the logically related idea of universal salvation. (Cf. supportive opinions of Dan Wotherspoon, Jared Anderson, and Danielle Moody in *Mormon Matters*, "LDS Salvation Theology and Practices," podcast 108, <http://mormonmatters.org/2012/06/28/107-109-lds-salvation-theology-and-practices/>). Terryl and Fiona Givens also entertain the idea of universal or near universal salvation in a chapter titled "None of Them Is Lost" in *The God Who Weeps*, 77–102. While D&C 138 makes it clear that repentance may continue in the post mortal Spirit World, scripture suggests that exaltation requires faithfulness during one's second estate (e.g., Abraham 3: 26). This probationary period extends beyond this life but, nevertheless, has a finite duration. Like the first estate (which revealed that Satan and his followers were eternally unwilling to do what one must do to be exalted), the second estate adequately reveals the eternal preferences of all who qualified to experience it through faithfulness in their pre-mortal first estate.

The perverse consequences of these ideas are apparent if we follow the logic of the Mormon variant. If murderers and adulterers and all who engage in the most vile of sins are guaranteed salvation, these sinners might seem to be the most wise of human beings, for it is they who have chosen to have the full spectrum of possible human experiences. They will plumb the deepest depths of hell, suffering even as the Savior did both body and spirit (D&C 19: 16-18) and yet, nevertheless, ultimately taste the exquisite joy of the celestial kingdom. The sweetness of heaven will be for them all the more sweet for having also, like Christ, fully experienced eternal damnation (2 Nephi 2:11; Alma 36:21). By contrast, the experience of the righteous who quickly and fully repented of their sins on earth will be stunted and incomplete, their joy less exquisite for being less starkly framed by the misery of eternal damnation. Of course, it is hard to imagine that any doctrine could be more damnable than this, more out of harmony with the spirit and letter of all scripture or more akin to the plan of Satan in the preexistence.

God rejects all the variants of this Satanic plan because they would “destroy the agency of man” (Moses 4:3). The way in which these plans would destroy human agency is often misunderstood. It is sometimes suggested that Satan would have deprived humanity of agency by depriving them of choice. He would have compelled every action and assured that it was good, thus guaranteeing the return of all humanity to heaven. Much more seductive and clearly popular is the false doctrine Nephi and Samuel mention and that Nehor peddles — that one can do as one pleases and still be guaranteed salvation in the kingdom of God.

Greg Wright and Terryl Givens⁹ demonstrate that this doctrine which flatters and indulges also destroys agency,

⁹ Greg Wright, *Satan's War on Free Agency* (Orem, UT: Granite Publishing, 2003); Terryl Givens, “Agency and Atonement,” *Meridian Magazine*,

because all actions ultimately produce the same consequences. If all of our choices lead to the same end, we no longer determine our own destiny. We have agency, power to choose meaningfully for ourselves, only if our actions have important consequences. Alma profoundly understood this principle and clearly taught it to Corianton. The eternal reward we ultimately get, he insisted, will be determined by our own desires and actions (Alma 41:3-5).

So agency and justice are linked. We cannot choose for ourselves unless our actions have important and differentiated consequences. Satan, who is the father of all the false gospels mentioned above, would abrogate the justice that delivers these consequences. He is a romantic who lives in a fantasy world¹⁰ in which his personal will is sovereign, in which actions can be severed from consequences if he wills it so.¹¹ His impossible plan was rejected by God, who is, by contrast, the ultimate realist. It was also rejected by the two-thirds of God's spirit children who understood that they could never comfortably return to their Father's presence as a sinner (Alma 12:14-15). These God-fearing spirits accepted the alternative plan, which fully acknowledged the claims of justice and the inherent

Wednesday, March 9, 2011; <http://www.lds.org/magazine/article/7616>; Givens and Givens, *The God Who Weeps*, 91–92.

10 Adam S. Miller sagely observes that when we escape into fantasy, we replicate Satan's error and sin:

"Something is given that I do not want.... A sinful response to what is given would involve my withdrawal from this difficult present moment. As a natural man, I would naturally take refuge from the difficulty in fantasy, memories, distractions.... However, to withdraw in this way would be sinful. Whatever my preferences, the present is imposed unconditionally, absolutely, and to flee its givenness ... is to choose the path of the undead rather than the path of life." Adam S. Miller, *Rube Goldberg Machines: Essays in Mormon Theology* (Draper, UT: Greg Kofford Books, 2012), p. 15.

11 Blake, Shelley, Byron, and various less prominent Romantic poets admired Milton's Satan and thought him preferable to Milton's God. See Adriana Craciun, "Romantic Satanism and the Rise of Nineteenth-Century Women's Poetry," *New Literary History* 34/4 (2003): 699–721.

weaknesses of the two-thirds — weaknesses that would justly condemn them — but provided a merciful way for them to repent, keep commandments that prescribe God’s manner of living, and thus justly deserve to live like God in the beloved presence of God (Abraham 3:23-28). But Satan has not given up and continues to persuade many people, including Corianton for a time, to believe on earth the doctrine that they rejected in heaven.

Mercy Catalyzes New Choices and Consequences

While the defining characteristic of the universe is causal justice, God’s defining characteristic is infinite love and the mercy that is its fruit. Love we may instinctively understand, but what is mercy? Mercy exists when one person provides for another to receive an outcome that is better than the just result the person him or herself deserves. Thus mercy seems to be logically incompatible with justice.

Fortunately, justice and mercy can be reconciled by *atonement* and *repentance*, which are, in turn, facilitated by a certain temporal slippage that separates act and consequence in the natural execution of justice. While the justice that constitutes natural law ensures that in the long run “wickedness never was happiness” (Alma 41:10) and righteousness is never misery, it is a matter of commonplace observation that in the short run the wicked are sometimes happy and the righteous sometimes miserable.¹² Consequence doesn’t always immediately follow act.

This temporal lag between act and consequence is critically important for the full flowering of agency. Without it, we would be like rats in a maze which are controlled by operant

¹² While the wicked are probably not *happy* in the most profound sense of that word, even in the short run, they are at least happy in the ordinary senses of the word, just as the righteous are sometimes unhappy in the ordinary sense of that word.

conditioning, with instant punishment for bad and instant rewards for good behavior. This lag is also critically important for the possibility of atonement and repentance, for it creates what Alma calls in his teaching of Corianton “a probationary time, a time to repent and serve God” (Alma 42:4). The catalyst for that repentance is the *event* we call the atonement.

As Adam S. Miller notes in an implicit discussion of justice and mercy, we are all embedded in a temporal configuration in which there is “an inexorable movement from cause to effect to effect. Time appears flat, two-dimensional, and determined.... Both the present and the future groan under the fully decisive weight of the past.” But God mercifully intervenes to disrupt this homogeneous flow of cause and effect with an event, the atonement, which reconfigures history to include “not only those actualized possibilities ... but the unrepresented wealth of possibilities that have failed to be actualized in the past and that appear to be unactualizable in the present or future. An event marks the moment in which these present but unrepresented possibilities break up a situation’s apparently smooth chain of cause and effect, and reveal the possibility of the previously impossible.... As a result of this recovery, an event can momentarily shock time and arrest the chain of causality, making room for something new.”¹³

Our choices and the causal process called justice lead inexorably to damnation. While temporal lag has delayed that consequence, our final destination has been determined and is sure. But God mercifully intervenes and shocks time. He interrupts the inexorable causal sequence by interposing an uncaused event. Using the temporal lag between act and consequence, he redirects the suffering that will be caused by our sins from us to our Savior, Jesus Christ, who voluntarily receives it. Christ’s suffering has no just cause. It is motivated

13 Miller, *Rube Goldberg Machines*, pp. 77-78.

by love. It is commensurate with our sins but is not their just consequence, because Christ himself is sinless. The existence of this event makes the universe a different place and, as Miller suggests, opens up new pathways and destinies for any who are affected by it. Thus, with the nurture of the atonement, some who by nature would have been lost may be mercifully saved.

To be saved, one must respond to this new fact which God and Christ have created. The hardhearted do not respond.¹⁴ When they hear about or contemplate the suffering of Christ on their behalf, they are unmoved and are thus unsaved by Christ's act of love. For them, the causal chain is undisrupted, so they must suffer for their own sins. But some are deeply touched. As they contemplate what their Savior was willing to do for them, their heart is broken and their spirit is contrite (2 Nephi 2:7). The enabling power of the atonement that is rooted in their deep spiritual and emotional response to Christ's generous act enlarges their capacity to keep God's commandments.¹⁵ They are born again as a child of Christ who has "no more disposition to do evil, but to do good continually" (Mosiah 5:2). They repent of past behavior. They give up their sins and, as they remain engaged with Christ, shine "more and more unto the perfect day" (Proverbs 4:18). Repentance, Alma stresses in his teaching of Corianton, reconciles justice and mercy (Alma 42:13). Made perfect by their response to the atonement — this merciful new fact created by the love of God and Christ — they escape the just consequences they, of themselves, would have received

14 All human beings are touched by Christ's generous act at least to the extent of coming into the world with the light of Christ (Moroni 7:16-18). But the hardhearted do not fully receive the atonement and are thus not fully saved by it (D&C 88:33).

15 The theory proposed here on how the atonement works is called the "moral influence theory." It is the atonement theory that was most widely, indeed, almost exclusively believed by early Christians. See A. J. Wallace and R. D. Rusk, *Moral Transformation: The Original Christian Paradigm of Salvation* (New Zealand: Bridgehead, 2011), 250–271.

and receive the just reward of the perfect person they have now become through grace-enabled repentance — exaltation in the kingdom of God. Through mercy, they become a mirror image of God and Christ.

Alma's Theological Poem

Alma expresses these ideas about justice and mercy succinctly and beautifully in a chiasmic poem that is embedded in his message to Corianton. The beauties of modern poems tend to be found in their imagery. The beauties of this poem are architectural and theological. The structure of the poem is artful, and the poem constitutes a kind of extended theological metaphor.

A The meaning of *the word restoration* is to bring back again
 B evil for evil, or carnal for carnal, or devilish for devilish —
 C good for that which is good;
 D righteous for that which is righteous
 E Just for that which is just;
 F merciful for that which is merciful.
 F' Therefore, my son, see that you are merciful unto your brethren;
 E' deal justly,
 D' judge righteously,
 C' and do good continually;
 B' and if ye do all these things
 A' then shall ye receive your *reward*;
 F'' yea, ye shall have mercy *restored* unto you again;
 E'' ye shall have justice *restored* unto you again;
 D'' ye shall have a righteous judgment *restored* unto you again;
 C'' and ye shall have good *rewarded* unto you again.
 B'' For that which ye do send out shall return unto you again, and be *restored*;
 A'' therefore, *the word restoration* more fully condemneth the sinner, and justifieth him not at all.

Alma 41:12-15¹⁶

The most important structural and theological elements of this poem are the A lines and the F lines, the outer and inner boundaries of the poem. The A lines articulate the principle of cosmic justice, the eternal, natural, causal law of the universe that Alma calls *restoration*. This law bounds and encompasses all that exists. The F lines are where we find God, whose defining characteristic is mercy, which is inseparably linked to the atonement. As Alma tells Corianton in 42:15, “mercy could not be brought about except an atonement should be made.” God, mercy, and atonement, like all other things, must exist and act within the bounds of cosmic justice. Nothing exists outside those bounds but empty fantasy. This truth is reflected in the structure of the poem.

The cosmic justice and divine mercy that bound the poem are both associated with three contrasting moral attributes. Associated with cosmic justice and mentioned twice in line B are evil, carnality, and devilishness. Associated with mercy and mentioned twice in lines C through E are goodness, righteousness, and personal justice. Each good attribute associated with mercy is a kind of opposite of its corresponding bad attribute associated with cosmic justice. Thus good and evil are opposites, as are righteousness and carnality. Devilishness and personal justice also stand as opposites if we remember that the devil, Satan, is defined primarily by his desire to abrogate justice by separating acts from consequences.

16 Other readers have construed the structure of this poem essentially as I do here but have not discussed in detail how the structure communicates meaning. See for example John W. Welch, “Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon,” in *Chiasmus in Antiquity: Structure, Analyses, Exegesis*, ed. John W. Welch (Hildesheim: Gerstenberg Verlag, 1981), 207; H. Clay Gorton, *A New Witness for Christ: Chiastic Structures in the Book of Mormon*, (Bountiful, UT: Horizon Publishers, 1997), 209; Jeff Lindsay at <http://www.jefflindsay.com/chiasmus.shtml>.

The antichrist figures who have influenced Corianton — Nehor and perhaps Korihor — deny that any merciful atonement will later occur. Alma’s poem reveals what would happen if they were right, if there were only justice without mercy. Thus the poem contains an alternative inner boundary and pivot point, the B lines, which show the behavior and destiny of any human being who ignores or rejects the atonement. In this ABBABA poem where there is justice but no mercy, all are condemned and lost.

A The meaning of the word restoration is to bring back again

B evil for evil, or carnal for carnal, or devilish for devilish —

B’ and if ye do all these things

A’ then shall ye receive your reward;

B” For that which ye do send out shall return unto you again, and be restored;

A” therefore, the word restoration more fully condemneth the sinner, and justifieth him not at all.

Fallen humanity is “carnal, sensual, and devilish,” Alma tells Corianton (Alma 42:10). If they are left to themselves, if there is no merciful atonement, cosmic justice restores to them what they send out, evil for evil, carnal for carnal, devilish for devilish. Their own nature and behavior are their destiny. Restoration condemns them and justifies them not at all.

But if the atonement is not denied, if the C through F lines are not excised, an alternative destiny is open for humanity. Line B’, “if ye do all these things,” has dual reference. It can refer either to its structural equivalent in line B, “evil for evil, or carnal for carnal, or devilish for devilish” or to the lines that immediately precede it, F’ through C’: “you are merciful unto your brethren, deal justly, judge righteously, and do good continually.” We all get to choose which of those two patterns of

behavior will characterize us. This choice is open to us because of the merciful atonement.

John Welch notes the special importance of the center lines in a chiasm: “An emphatic focus on the center can be employed by a skillful composer to elevate the importance of a central concept or to dramatize a radical shift of events as the turning point.”¹⁷ Thus it is no accident that *mercy* lies at the heart of this poem. Mercy, as embodied in the love of God and the atonement of Christ, is the turning point, the event that radically changes the universe and shifts the course of any life that is open to it. The importance of mercy is reflected in the poem’s structure. All good things human beings experience or do flow from it.

The three sets of lines that mention good things each present a different aspect of the attributes they mention. In lines C, D, E, and F, each attribute is mentioned twice and is presented as a kind of Platonic abstraction: goodness, righteousness, justice, and mercy as such, the attributes as they are fully, perfectly, and eternally embodied by God. The sequence of those lines may suggest that mercy is the product of the Goodness, Righteousness, and the personal Justice of God, which all precede it.

In lines F’, E’, D’, and C’ the perfect, divine attributes mentioned in F, E, D, and C are mirrored in the life of the redeemed disciple of Christ that Alma is urging Corianton to become. But this time, they begin with mercy and flow out of it. Thus the perfect mercy of line F makes possible and requires of Christ’s followers concrete acts of mercy for fellow human beings.¹⁸ Through the enabling power of the atonement, the

17 Welch, “Introduction,” in *Chiasmus in Antiquity*, 10.

18 Christ breaks the causal chain of just retribution by voluntarily suffering the injury that is the consequence of our sins without resenting us or seeking retribution against us, though we caused his suffering. The dominant theme of Christ’s Sermon on the Mount is that to be redeemed, we must likewise forgive the trespasses of others against us. In the Celestial Kingdom, we will

disciple must deal justly, judge righteously, and do good continually, thus becoming a mirror image of his Savior.

Alma's artistic skill is most manifest in how he handles the temporal lag between act and consequence that is so essential to the exercise of agency, to the existence of a probationary state, and to the disruption by the atonement of the inexorable movement from cause to effect that ends in damnation. This lag and the associated reconciliation of justice and mercy are signified by the dual returns in the poem.

As noted above, each admirable attribute is mentioned twice in its initial Platonic or divine presentation. But as it is mirrored in the lives of individual human beings, the dual appearances of goodness, righteousness, justice, and mercy split. Each appears one time in lines F' through C', which describe acts of a once carnal and devilish person who has been touched by Christ's atonement and born again. Corianton, "my son," is a stand in for all who now imitate the example of their Redeemer. The mercy, justice, righteousness, and goodness mentioned here are acts of faith, uncoupled with any immediate reward. The enabling power of the atonement has created a new person on this new path that leads to perfection. The word *continually* in line C' may signify the completion of the process of sanctification that makes the disciple, through grace, a perfect copy of his or her master.

Cosmic justice is inescapable and asserts itself in the lagged second return of lines F" through C", where each of the divine attributes is again mentioned one time. In this second return, justice and mercy are reconciled. The person who has been made merciful, just, righteous, and good through the atonement now receives the just consequences of his or her actions. The word

be surrounded by former sinners who have repented. We must join Christ in mercifully breaking the causal chain that is justice by voluntarily and joyfully forgoing retribution against those who have injured us but then have repented and been born again as one who no longer commits such sins.

restored (*rewarded* in C”), which signifies cosmic justice, is coupled with each divine attribute. Perfected in Christ, being one who now sends out only that which is good, the disciple now has mercy, justice, righteousness, and goodness restored to him again as the just consequence of his actions and being. The lag makes it possible for us who were once sinners to receive the just consequences of our new, redeemed, perfected selves.

Line B” also makes this point. It initially echoes B’ both in substance and in function. The first half of the line, “that which ye do send out,” has a dual reference to the wicked behaviors in line B and to the alternative righteous behaviors in lines F” through C”. But the second half of B” contains the word *restored*, just as lines F” through C” do. For the unrighteous, this *restored* invokes the justice visited in line B, and for the righteous, it caps the reconciliation of justice and mercy in F” through C”. If “that which ye do send out” is the righteous behavior of lines F” through C”, then mercy, justice, righteousness, and goodness “shall return unto you again, and be restored.” If “that which you do send out” is the evil, carnality, and devilishness of line B, then that is what will be restored to you.

If we think of justice as an abstract principle that requires balance in a kind of cosmic accounting ledger, the balance is achieved because the punishment of Christ is commensurate with our sin. But justice doesn’t seem to be an abstract principle. It describes, rather, the concrete causal linkages between real acts and real consequences of those acts. Christ makes us concretely worthy of exaltation rather than damnation by enabling us to repent, and thus justly merit exaltation.

It is worth noting that in the poem, mercy is doubly framed by justice. As discussed above, the A lines make cosmic justice, *restoration*, the overarching context within which all things occur. But mercy is more intimately framed by the personal justice of God in E and of humanity in E’ and E”. In our interactions with the strong and good, we must be

just to be worthy of heaven. Justice is a personal attribute of exalted beings. In our interactions with the weak and sinful, we must be merciful and hope that as the mirror image of our Redeemer, we may help catalyze a new capacity for strength and righteousness in our fellow fallen children of God.

Conclusion

In his teaching of his son Corianton, Alma offers the most profound theological reflections in scripture on the nature of justice and mercy. In his carefully crafted chiastic poem, he succinctly and beautifully expresses the essence of the gospel. In the commentary that immediately follows the poem, Alma calls the gospel “the plan of mercy” (Alma 42: 15), then in the next verse “the plan of happiness” (Alma 42: 16). The structural equation of *mercy* and *happiness* suggests, as does the poem, that the merciful atonement of Christ is the font of all human happiness.

Insightful comments of Dr. Peter Eubanks improved this article.

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