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The Great Plans of the Eternal God

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The “Great Plans of the Eternal God”

Noel B. Reynolds

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The writings of the Old Testament are grounded in the belief that the Lord was positively disposed to save his chosen people collectively and individually from the evils of this world, from their own sins, and even from death. The New Testament focused that saving power and mission in the person of Jesus Christ, emphasized how his atonement made salvation from both sin and death a real possibility, and invited all the Earth to qualify for these blessings. The Book of Mormon prophets expanded these same teachings as they drew on “the plan of salvation” for all mankind—made known unto them by “the great God” in his mercy (Alma 24:14), a plan “which was prepared from the foundation of the world” (Alma 22:13).

The concept that God had a plan for all these things from the beginning was clearly taught by the first generation of Nephite prophets in the sixth century BCE as it provided both them and their successors over the next thousand years with the background or context they could use to preach and explain the gospel of Jesus Christ to their people. The plan of salvation they taught made the relevance of the gospel of Jesus Christ for every individual born into this world perfectly clear. It

explained the great blessings that would come to those who would repent and embrace all elements of the gospel. And it warned of the punishments that would await the wicked at the judgment of all men. While the concept of such a divine plan is perfectly compatible with Jewish and Christian scriptures and teaching, it is not generally recognized as part of biblical teaching, and only receives occasional mention in the reference works compiled by Bible scholars.¹ The Book of Mormon phrasing does not occur at all in the Bible, though it does show up in the writings of Christian writers after 1830 and down to the present day.

Following the general tendency of other Christian writers, some LDS authors merge the gospel of Jesus Christ with the teachings of the plan of salvation in their discourse, preferring not to draw a distinction between the two. But the Book of Mormon writers kept the distinction clearly in mind. Nephite prophets consistently referred to the means by which men and women in this mortal existence could qualify for eternal life as the gospel or doctrine of Christ, the way,

¹ While the articles on *salvation* in standard reference works sometimes refer to God's purposes or intentions for mankind, the idea that God had a *plan of salvation* is never developed. Perhaps the closest thing would be the sometimes controversial discussions of the *salvation history* often perceived in the Bible that could include the creation and fall, the flood, God's covenant with Abraham and with Israel, the deliverance from Egypt under Moses, and, for Christians, the ministry and atonement of Christ. See, e.g., Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III, *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, "Salvation," IVP Academic, 1998, 752–56 or Gerald G. O'Collins, "Salvation," *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, David Noel Freedman (editor-in-chief), Doubleday, 1992, 5:907–14.

the path, or the word.² They typically referred to key elements of the plan of salvation as context, to explain what the Father and the Son have done and will do to make salvation possible for all those who will embrace their gospel. The clearest examples of this are in the writings of Nephi and the teachings of Jesus when he visited the Nephites. The simplest example occurs in Christ’s visit to his twelve Nephite disciples sometime after his visitation with the large assembly of Nephites. They had been praying for direction about the name of his church, and Jesus appeared to them, answered that question, and proceeded to present his gospel to them once again in a passage bounded by the repetition of the declaration that “this is my gospel.” But before going into his triple repetition of the basic gospel principles (3 Nephi 27:16–22), he set the stage by reminding his disciples of the context from the plan of salvation:

I came into the world to do the will of my Father, because my Father sent me. And my Father sent me that I might be lifted up upon the cross—and after that I had been lifted up upon the cross, I might draw all men unto me—that as I have been lifted up by men, even so should men be lifted up

² For a discussion of these alternative labels for the gospel of Jesus Christ as they occur in the Book of Mormon, see Noel B. Reynolds, “This is the Way,” *Religious Educator* 14, no. 3 (2013), pp. 82–86. In the interest of brevity in this paper, I will refer to my more detailed studies of specific topics related to the plan of salvation—as will be made evident in the footnotes.

by the Father to stand before me to be judged of their works, whether they be good or whether they be evil. And for this cause have I been lifted up. Therefore, according to the power of the Father, I will draw all men unto me that they may be judged according to their works.³ 3 Ne. 27:13–15

Less obvious, but in some ways even more impressive is the Savior’s deliberate mixing of gospel and plan of salvation elements when he spoke to the Nephites from heaven at the time of the great destructions. Those speeches intersperse ten abbreviated statements of the gospel with ten references to elements of the plan of salvation that provide the context.⁴ Jacob’s great sermon reverses the emphasis by including one paragraph stating the gospel in the middle of his comprehensive account of the plan of salvation, making it perfectly clear how the gospel fits into the great plan.⁵

Nephi provides the largest and most fully developed example in the way he has constructed his second book. The entire book of Second Nephi has been organized chiastically to focus on the prophecies of Christ’s coming, the teaching

³ All quotations are taken from the Yale critical text: Royal Skousen (editor), *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text*, Yale University Press, 2009. I have added italics in some quotations to call attention to key words.

⁴ These two speeches occur in 3 Nephi 9:13–22 and 10:3–7. The explanation of how the two types of statements work together in these passages can be found in Noel B. Reynolds, “‘Come unto me’ as a technical gospel term,” working paper, 2017, 27–37.

⁵ The longer sermon presented in 2 Nephi 9 and 10 includes a straightforward summary

of the plan of salvation by Lehi, Jacob, Isaiah and Nephi, and the gospel of Jesus Christ, as it was taught to Lehi and Nephi separately when they received their great visions at the first camp in the wilderness. In that concentric structure, Nephi presents Lehi's detailed account of the plan of salvation in parallel position with his most detailed account of the doctrine or gospel of Jesus Christ. The structure calls our attention forcibly to the intimate relation between the two, and all the teachings compiled and arranged in his second book reinforce and elaborate both teachings.⁶

This plan of salvation is never named explicitly in the Bible, though Paul may have a similar concept in mind in passages like Ephesians 3:10 when he refers to God's "eternal purpose" or Acts 20:27 in which he reminds his readers of his prior preaching of the whole purpose, counsel, or will (*boule*) of God. But Book of Mormon writers do refer to it thirty different times explicitly as a *plan* with the following terminological variations:

1. The great and eternal plan of deliverance from death (1). 2 Nephi 11:5

of the gospel in 2 Nephi 9:23–24.

⁶ For a detailed explanation of the way Nephi has used the principles of 7th century Hebrew rhetoric in the design of Second Nephi see my "Chiastic Structuring of Large Texts: Second Nephi as a Case Study," forthcoming in John W. Welch and Donald L. Parry (editors), conference proceedings of the 2017 Chiasmus Jubilee Conference at Brigham Young University.

2. The merciful plan of the great Creator (1). 2 Nephi 9:6
3. The plan of our God (1). 2 Nephi 9:13
4. The great plans of the Eternal God (1). Alma 34:9
5. The plan of restoration (1). Alma 41:2
6. The plan of mercy (2). Alma 42:15
7. The great plan of mercy (1). Alma 42:31
8. The plan of happiness (1). Alma 42:16
9. The great plan of happiness (1). Alma 42:8
10. The plan of salvation (2). Jarom 1:2, Alma 24:14
11. The great plan of salvation (1). Alma 42:5
12. The plan of redemption (14). Alma 12:25, 26, 30, 32, 33; 17:16;
18:39; 22:13; 29:2; 31; 39:18; 42:11, 13
13. The great plan of redemption (2). Jacob 6:8, Alma 34:31
14. The great and eternal plan of redemption (1). Alma 34:16

Obviously, this variety of descriptive names features characteristics or benefits of the plan of salvation that might have been important in different contexts. Most striking is the fact that 17 of these 30 references focus on the *redemption* of men as the plan's central purpose. While Lehi himself twice used the term "his eternal purposes" to refer to this same plan (2 Nephi 2:12 and 15), his sons Jacob and

Nephi use the “plan” labels four times in their discourses, and Jacob goes so far as to contrast God’s plan with “the cunning plan of the evil one” (2 Nephi 9:6 and 13, Jacob 6:8, 2 Nephi 11:5, and 2 Nephi 9:8). While this terminology is clearly introduced by the first generation of Nephite prophets, it was used later by a broad spectrum of Nephites throughout Nephite history, including especially Alma and Mormon, but also Jarom, Amulek, Ammon, Aaron, and by the Lamanite convert king Anti-Nephi-Lehi.

Historically, the specific content of the gospel of Jesus Christ has also been a controversial matter, leading to the eventual establishment of thousands of Christian denominations and the filling of countless shelves in theological libraries. By contrast, the Book of Mormon provides several passages in which the same clear and multi-featured doctrine is presented as an invitation to all who wish to be saved. It begins with Nephi in the first generation when he reports a vision given at different times both to him and to his father Lehi—in which he was taught the gospel by the Father and the Son—each of whom he quotes three times.⁷ The same gospel was taught twice centuries later by the resurrected Jesus Christ when he appeared to the Nephite people.⁸ From these and other passages, the Nephites

⁷ See 2 Nephi 31:4–21.

⁸ For a more detailed account of these scriptures and the gospel they teach, see Noel B.

learned that eternal life would come to all who would (1) trust in Christ, (2) repent of all their sins, (3) be baptized in water as a witness to the Father of their sincere repentance and covenant to obey his Son, (4) receive the remission of sins by fire and by the Holy Ghost, and (5) endure in faithfulness to the end of their lives. This gospel enumerates specific things a convert can do that will lead to eternal life.

The plan of salvation, on the other hand, describes the works of the Father and the Son that make this proffered salvation available to all mankind. In contrast with this formulaic presentation of the gospel of Jesus Christ that is repeated throughout the Book of Mormon text, the Nephite prophets tended to have their own approaches and even vocabulary for explaining different features of the plan of salvation. In the following analysis, I will gather up their various insights about different elements of the plan of salvation. But in so doing, I have found it necessary to impose an analytical structure that is nowhere offered as authoritative in the text. In other words, I do not claim that the following analysis is the only correct way of organizing the Nephites' teachings about the plan of salvation.

While the dependence of later prophets on the teachings of the earlier ones is

Reynolds, "The Gospel of Jesus Christ as Taught by the Nephite Prophets," *BYU Studies*, 31 (No. 3, Summer 1991): 31–50., "Gospel of Jesus Christ," *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* 2:556–560 (1992), or "The Gospel according to Mormon," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 68 (2015, 2): 218–234. A revised and updated version of that paper has now been published in *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 28 (2018), xx–xx.

evident, distinctive accounts of some elements of the plan of salvation are introduced by many of these prophets, even in the very last chapters of the book. My hope is that the following outline of principal topics and supporting sub-topics will make my collection of Nephite teachings on the plan of salvation easier to understand in their full scope. The outline provides a preview and guide for the comprehensive analysis of these teachings that follows.

1. Creation and Agency.
 - a. They created this world, placed man in it, and gave him his agency to choose whether or not he would obey their commandments.
 - b. They allowed the devil to tempt man, which led to the fall of Adam, his separation from the presence of God, and the introduction of death into the world.
2. Covenant and Salvation History.
 - a. The gospel and plan of salvation were taught to Adam and his descendants including the Jaredites.
 - b. They gave covenants to Abraham and to his posterity to provide an exemplar of “the people of God” to all nations throughout human history.
 - c. The earliest Nephite prophets were give a renewed version of these

teachings and covenants.

3. Preaching the Gospel.
 - a. They sent angels and prophets to teach men the gospel and the commandments.
 - b. Jesus himself was sent to present his gospel personally and authoritatively to the Jews first, but subsequently to the Nephites, and to others.
4. The Ministry and Atonement of Christ.
 - a. The Father sent his Son to minister unto men and to establish his church and priesthood authority.
 - b. Jesus was also sent to suffer and to die in the performance of an atonement that would make possible the forgiveness of sins and the resurrection.
5. Spirit World, Resurrection, and Judgment.
 - a. They provided a spirit world between death and judgment to ensure that all God's spirit children would have the opportunity to embrace his gospel before the judgment.
 - b. They prepared a heaven wherein the righteous can enjoy eternal life with them.

- c. They prepared a hell to which the devil and his angels and the wicked will finally be consigned.
- d. They will raise all men to be judged “according to their works,” at the last day.

Creation and agency

The Nephite prophets shared an understanding of the creation of the world that was very similar to the biblical account. They did have the five books of Moses, but there is good reason to believe their version of the creation was more like that revealed to Joseph Smith than our book of Genesis.⁹ When Jesus came to the Nephites immediately after his crucifixion, he spoke to them from heaven and confirmed the fundamental fact of his role as creator of the earth: “Behold, I am Jesus Christ the Son of God. I created the heavens and the earth and all things that in them is. I was with the Father from the beginning” (3 Nephi 9:15). The Lord told Nephi that he “had created all men” (2 Nephi 19:7), and explained further to the brother of Jared that “all men were created in the beginning after mine own

⁹ See Noel B. Reynolds, “The Brass Plates Version of Genesis,” in *By Study and Also by Faith: Essays in Honor of Hugh Nibley on the Occasion of his Eightieth Birthday*, 27 March 1990, II: 136-73. John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks, editors, FARMS and Deseret Book Co., 1990.

image” (Ether 3:15). The Book of Mormon text does not include a creation account as such, though we have clear evidence that the Nephite prophets did use such an account in their teaching.¹⁰ Most references to the Nephites’ scriptural account tend to focus on the human part of the story. As “first parents,” Adam and Eve “brought forth children” which produced the “family of all the earth,” which in turn can be labeled “the family of Adam.”¹¹

Lehi set the pattern for later Nephite prophets by focusing on two issues that are grounded in the Creation account—issues that do not surface explicitly in Genesis. Both are related to his teachings about the fall and the need it created for an atonement. The first, as explained by Lehi, was the general principle that there must be “opposition in all things.” Without this, there could be no righteousness nor wickedness, happiness nor misery, good nor bad (2 Nephi 2:11). “Wherefore the Lord God gave unto man that he should act for himself” (2 Nephi 2:16). But this agency could only be activated when men were enticed to choose between good and evil. This opened an important role for the devil, “an angel of God” that “had fallen from heaven . . . having sought that which was evil before God” (2 Nephi 2:17). And so

¹⁰ See Ammon’s teaching of Lamoni in Alma 18 and especially verse 36.

¹¹ 1 Nephi 5:11, 2 Nephi 2:20, 2 Nephi 9:21.

Adam and Eve yielded to temptation and were driven out of the garden “to bring about *the eternal purposes* in the end of man” (2 Nephi 2:15). And the days of the children of men were prolonged, according to the will of God, that they might repent while in the flesh. Wherefore their state became a state of probation, and their time was lengthened according to the commandments which the Lord God gave unto the children of men. 2 Nephi 2:21

Much later, Alma would use Lehi’s terminology to explain that “there was a space granted unto man in which he might repent. Therefore this life became a probationary state, a time to prepare to meet God” (Alma 12:24). As Lehi went on to explain,

And now behold, if Adam had not transgressed, he would not have fallen, but he would have remained in the garden of Eden; and all things which were created must have remained in the same state which they were after that they were created. And they must have remained forever and had no end, and they would have had no children. Wherefore they would have remained in a state of innocence, having no joy, for they knew no misery, doing no good, for they knew no sin. 2 Nephi 2:22–23

It is quite clear that Lehi saw the fall of Adam as a necessary step according to “the

wisdom of him who knoweth all things.” So in the Nephite understanding of the creation, “Adam fell that men might be, and men are that they might have joy” (2 Nephi 2:24–25).

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

And because that they are redeemed from the fall, they have become free forever, knowing good from evil, to act for themselves and not to be acted upon, save it be by the punishment of the law at the great and last day, according to the commandments which God hath given. Wherefore men are free according to the flesh, and all things are given them which is expedient unto man. And they are free to choose liberty and eternal life through the great Mediator of all men, or to choose captivity and death according to the captivity and power of the devil, for he seeketh that all men might be miserable like unto himself.

And now my sons, I would that ye should look to the great Mediator

and hearken unto his great commandments and be faithful unto his words and choose eternal life according to the will of his Holy Spirit, and not choose eternal death according to the will of the flesh and the evil which is therein, which giveth the spirit of the devil power to captivate, to bring you down to hell, that he may reign over you in his own kingdom. 2 Nephi 2:26–29

Covenant and Salvation History

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

The numerous pages of covenant discourse in the Book of Mormon can be confusing until the reader realizes that there are actually three streams of covenant

discourse in the prophecies and teachings of the Nephite prophets and of Jesus Christ when he teaches the Nephites personally. As I have explained in a more detailed study,

The first of these streams of covenant discourse is the Lord's promise to Lehi and his successors that, depending on their obedience, he will give them a chosen land of liberty in which they will be prospered as a people.

The second is a version of the Abrahamic covenant—focused on Jacob's son Joseph as the ancestor of Lehi—which emphasizes (1) the promise to the house of Israel that they will ultimately be gathered home in peace and righteousness to their promised homeland and (2) the promise received originally by Abraham and not much repeated in the Bible that in his seed all the kindreds of the earth would be blessed. The third is the universal covenant the Father has offered to all his children as individuals, without respect to Abrahamic descent, that if they would accept his gospel and come unto him, they would receive eternal life.¹²

What ties these three together in a single unified perspective was the prophecy that

¹² For a comprehensive analysis of the three principal streams of covenant discourse in the Book of Mormon—God's covenant with Lehi, with Abraham, and with all men and women who accept his gospel—see Noel B. Reynolds, "Understanding the Abrahamic Covenant through the Book of Mormon," *BYU Studies Quarterly*, 2018, forthcoming. Ms p. 7.

the Book of Mormon itself—a prophetic record written by the descendants of Lehi (and Joseph) and containing the fullness of the gospel—would, in the last days, become the primary means by which Christ’s gospel would come first to the Gentiles, and then to the lost and scattered tribes of Israel, becoming in that process a blessing to all nations.¹³

Preaching the gospel

In order for men and women to exercise their God-given agency as described in the plan of salvation, it was necessary that they be informed about the atonement of Christ and about his gospel or doctrine that would teach them what they must do if they would take full advantage of that atonement. Mormon understood that these teachings had been given to men by angels sent by God, as well as by prophets to whom God had spoken, and he was careful to include both kinds of examples in the Book of Mormon.¹⁴

For behold, God knowing all things, being from everlasting to everlasting, behold, he sent angels to minister unto the children of men, to make manifest concerning the coming of Christ; and in Christ there should

¹³ See “Understanding the Abrahamic Covenant,” pp. xx–xx.

¹⁴ See the brief discussion of the gospel above and the publications listed in Note 2.

come every good thing. And God also declared unto prophets by his own mouth that Christ should come. Moroni 7:22–23

Here he has echoed Alma’s teaching to apostate Nephites before Christ’s coming:

And now we only wait to hear the joyful news, declared unto us by the mouth of angels, of his coming. . . . And it shall be made known unto just and holy men by the mouth of angels at the time of his coming. Alma 13:25–26

While the gospel as such was never explained in any detail to Joseph Smith in the voluminous revelations he received, he was instructed many times that the Book of Mormon contains “the fullness of the gospel of Jesus Christ.”¹⁵ This was the featured point of the Lord’s revelation to Joseph Smith after the loss of the 116 manuscript pages of his initial translation. The small plates of Nephi would make a good substitute for those lost pages because they “contain *all those parts of my gospel* which my holy prophets, yea, and also my disciples, desired in their prayers should come forth unto this people” (D&C 10:46). The same revelation ends with an abbreviated restatement of the gospel message that would be developed most

¹⁵ Doctrine and Covenants 20:9. Cf. 27:5, 42:12, 135:3. While some basic gospel principles are mentioned in the revelations, there are no explanations of the individual principles or of their role in the larger gospel message (See *e. g.*, D&C 10:67–69, 18:22 and 41–42, 20:37, 33:10–12, 35:5–6, 42:6–7, 49:11–14).

completely in the closing chapters of the same small plates (2 Nephi 31):

Behold, this is my doctrine—whosoever repenteth and cometh unto me, the same is my church.

And now, behold, whosoever is of my church, and endureth of my church to the end, him will I establish upon my rock.” D&C 10:67, 69.

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

The Ministry and Atonement of Christ

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

The vision began for Nephi with a virgin, “the mother of God after the manner of the flesh,” who was bearing a child in her arms, even “the Lamb of God, . . . even the Eternal Father” (1 Nephi 11:18, 20–21). As the vision unfolded, Nephi saw “the Son of God a going forth among the children of men.” He saw a prophet

preparing the way for him by baptizing, and “the Lamb of God went forth and was baptized of him,” after which the heavens opened and “the Holy Ghost came down out of heaven and abode upon him in the form of a dove” (1 Nephi 11:27). He also saw “twelve others following him” and “angels descending upon the children of men” to “minister unto them,” as did the Lamb of God when the those who were afflicted with “all manner of diseases and with devils and unclean spirits . . . were healed by the power of the Lamb of God” (1 Nephi 11:29–31).

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

While the variety of metaphors used by New Testament writers to explicate and testify of the atonement of Jesus Christ gave rise over the centuries to at least a half dozen competing theories of what the atonement was or how it worked, the Book of Mormon prophets emphasized this topic even more while maintaining a consistent and unitary atonement teaching.¹⁶ The English words *atone/atonement* were coined by the famous Bible translator William Tyndale in the sixteenth century and were used by the King James translators almost exclusively in the Old Testament context of the law of Moses with the meaning “to cover.” It was used only once in the New Testament translation for a Greek word meaning “reconcile/reconciliation” or “change.” In other passages, English forms of *reconcile* were used without resorting to Tyndale’s neologism.

In contrast, the English Book of Mormon uses *atone/atonement* 39 times in reference to the atonement of Jesus Christ. More frequently used in both books of scripture are forms of *redeem/redemption*. Several of these occurrences in the New Testament invoke the cultural notion of paying a ransom in order to liberate enslaved persons.¹⁷ This is clearly the preferred term for the Nephite writers, who

¹⁶ For a more complete survey of these various Christian atonement theories and an analysis of how they are integrated in Book of Mormon teaching, see Noel B. Reynolds, “Atonement and the New Testament,” in Lincoln Blumell (editor), *New Testament History, Culture, and Society*, forthcoming.

¹⁷ Paul taught believers that they “were bought with a price,” and Mark tells us Jesus’s death was “a ransom for many” (Corinthians 6:20, 7:23, and Mark 10:45).

use it 117 times compared to the 22 times it is used in the New Testament. As shown above, over half of their 31 references to the plan of salvation use *redemption* as the defining term in their phraseology—the “plan of redemption.” This analysis is further complicated by the fact that 17 different words in the Hebrew bible are translated by the English words *redeem* or *redemption*. While only a fraction of these have *ransom* or *redeem* as a principal meaning, almost all of them feature *deliver* or *save* as a principal meaning, including the name Joshua (*yeshuw’ah*) which was the name the angel prescribed to Joseph and Mary for their son Jesus. “She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will *save* his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21, NSRV. Cf. Luke 1:31). Many of these same terms can be used to mean *rescue* or *free/liberate*.

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

For ancient Israel, as with other tribally organized peoples, the obligations of kinsmen to protect, nurture, and redeem were incurred through birth (parents, children, siblings, etc.) or through covenants (husbands, wives, adopted children, servants, allies). And so, just as Jehovah fulfilled his covenant obligations with Abraham’s descendants by redeeming them from Egypt, so also he redeems all those who have accepted his gospel covenant through repentance and obedience:

As many of the Gentiles as will repent are the covenant people of the Lord; and as many of the Jews as will not repent shall be cast off. For the Lord covenanteth with none save it be with them that repent and believe in his Son, which is the Holy One of Israel. (2 Nephi 30:2)

The Book of Mormon teaches that redemption comes to those who repent, embracing the gospel and coming to Christ. These are the people who receive the remission of sins by fire and by the Holy Ghost and are then “sons and daughters” of Christ, having taken his name upon themselves and being born again. They have chosen to leave the forbidden paths of the devil to follow the one true way laid out for them by Jesus Christ. And so the redeemed are brought into the family

of God by covenant.

I have repented of my sins and have been *redeemed* of the Lord. Behold, I am born of the Spirit. And the Lord said unto me: Marvel not that all mankind, yea, men and women—all nations, kindreds, tongues, and people—must be born again, yea, born of God, changed from their carnal and fallen state to a state of righteousness, being *redeemed* of God, becoming his sons and daughters. Mosiah 27:24–25

Through his atonement, Christ gained the power to resurrect the dead and to forgive sins, thereby enabling him to take on responsibility as a Kinsman Redeemer for all men and women who would repent with a covenant to take his name upon them, to keep his commandments, and to always remember him as they engage his gospel to the end of their lives.

Spirit world, resurrection, and judgment

While the New Testament does speak of heaven, hell, and paradise and the post-mortal prospects for the children of men, nothing in the Bible approaches the detail and clarification that Alma received from an angel, and used as he explained “the state of the soul between death and the resurrection” during a private teaching to his questioning son Corianton (Alma 40:11ff.). Through that angelic revelation, Alma had learned that “there is a space between the time of death and the resurrection” and judgment (40:9). After they die, “the spirits of those which are righteous are received into a state of happiness, which is called paradise, a state of rest, a state of peace, where they shall rest from all their troubles and from all care and sorrow” (12). But at the same time, the spirits of the wicked “shall be cast out into outer darkness. There shall be weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth—and this because of their own iniquity, being led captive by the will of the devil” (13). However, it is also clear that the Nephite prophets were not given the expansive and detailed views of the eternal kingdoms of glory that were given to Joseph Smith in the nineteenth century.¹⁸

Nor did the Nephite prophets receive the Restoration insight that the spirit world will be a vast scene of missionary activity by means of which the gospel will be preached to the billions of souls that had no chance to receive it during their mortal lives. From the beginning, Jacob was teaching that because of the atonement and resurrection of Jesus Christ, all the spirits of men would be released from their spirit prison, and their bodies would be released from their graves that

¹⁸ *E.g.*, Doctrine and Covenants 76.

they may be reunited incorruptibly to appear before the Lord's final judgment. the paradise of God must deliver up the spirits of the righteous, and the grave deliver up the bodies of the righteous. And the spirit and the body is restored to itself again, and all men become incorruptible and immortal; and they are living souls. (2 Ne. 9:13)

For, "when all men shall have passed from this first death unto life, insomuch as they have become immortal, . . . then must they be judged according to the holy judgment of God" (2 Ne. 9:15). And "they which are righteous shall be righteous still and they which are filthy shall be filthy still" (2 Nephi 9:16).

Much has been said by Christian theologians about the roles of grace and works in the final judgment of man, and the relative paucity of New Testament statements requiring good works has led to an influential view that works will be of little or no consequence in that day. Among the more striking examples of the difference between the New Testament and the Book of Mormon are the thirty direct statements by Nephite prophets and Christ himself that at the last day all mankind will be judged "according to their works"—most of which are linked directly to the atonement or resurrection through which Christ will become the judge.¹⁹ But the New Testament only mentions once "that the Father . . . judgeth according to every man's work" (1 Peter 1:17).

The more basic versions of the Book of Mormon teaching contain phrases linking the atonement, the resurrection, and bringing all men to stand in God's presence to be judged "according to their works." Most of these passages are abbreviated in some ways, but are consistent in all details with the standard examples, such as Alma's teaching to the Zoramite poor:

Cast about your eyes and begin to believe in the Son of God, that he will come to redeem his people and that he shall suffer and die to atone for their sins and that he shall rise again from the dead, which shall bring to pass the resurrection, that all men shall stand before him to be judged at the last and judgment day *according to their works*. (Alma 33:22)

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

¹⁹ Two statements in Revelation 2:23 and 20:12–13 could be read as echoes of 1 Peter. The thirty Book of Mormon statements referred to here are found in 1 Nephi 15:32, 33, 2 Nephi 2:10, 2 Nephi 9:14–22, 2 Nephi 28:23, 29:11, Mosiah 3:10, 18, 24, 16:10, 16:10–11, 27:31, Alma 3:26, 9:28, 11:41, 44, 12:8, 12, 33:22, 36:15, 40:21, 41:3, 42:23, Helaman 12:23–26, 14:115–19, 3 Nephi 27:14–15, Mormon 3:18, 20, 6:21, and 7:6.

And Amulek hath spoken plainly concerning . . . being brought before the bar of God to be judged *according to our works*. Then if . . . we have hardened our hearts against the word . . . our state be awful, for then we shall be condemned. For . . . all our works will condemn us; we shall not be found spotless—and our thoughts will also condemn us—and in this awful state we shall not durst look up to our God. And we would fain be glad if we could command the rocks and the mountains to fall upon us, to hide us from his presence.

But this cannot be. We must come forth and stand before him in his glory and in his power and in his might, majesty, and dominion, and acknowledge to their everlasting shame that all his judgments are just, that he is just in all his works and that he is merciful unto the children of men and that he hath all power to save every man that believeth on his name and bringeth forth fruit meet for repentance. Alma 12:12–15

Beginning with Nephi, the Book of Mormon prophets referred repeatedly to a judgment scene, that in most instances calls to mind a court of law. Nephi ends his writings by emphasizing the importance of the words of Christ that he and others have taught which “teach all men that they should do good,” for when he stands with his readers “face to face before his [Christ’s] bar,” these words will condemn those “that will not partake of the goodness of God and respect the words of the Jews and also my words and the words . . . of the Lamb of God” (2 Nephi 33:11 and 14). While Jacob once places this judgment scene at “the throne of God” (Jacob 3:8), at least eight other references style it as the bar of Christ, of God, or of the Great Jehovah.²⁰ In two instances where the 1830 edition calls it “the pleasing bar,” Royal Skousen has argued in his critical text that it should read “the pleading bar,” in accordance with the terminology of early English law.²¹

As Jacob and his successors understood it, it was by suffering the pains of all mankind that Christ obtained the power to be resurrected and to bring the souls of all to stand before him at the judgment.

For behold, he suffereth the pains of all men, yea, the pains of every living

²⁰ See also Jacob 6:13, Mosiah 16:10, Alma 5:22, 11:44, 12:12, Mormon 9:13, Moroni 10:27 and 34.

²¹ See the discussion in Royal Skousen, “The Pleading Bar of God,” in *“To Seek the Law of the Lord:” Essays in Honor of John W. Welch*, edited by Paul Y. Hoskisson and Daniel C. Peterson, 2017, The Interpreter Foundation, pp. 413–428, which expands and updates his explanations in *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon, Part Two* (2017), 1087–1092.

creature, both men women and children, which belong to the family of Adam. And he suffereth this that the resurrection might pass upon all men, that all might stand before him at the great and judgment day. 2 Nephi 9:21–22

Jacob does understand that the judgment can only apply the law that men have been given in their mortal lives. The law that the Father and the Son have given for all mankind is the gospel:

And he commandeth all men that they must repent and be baptized in his name, having perfect faith in the Holy One of Israel, or they cannot be saved in the kingdom of God. And if they will not repent and believe in his name and be baptized in his name and endure to the end, they must be damned. 2 Nephi 9:21–24

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

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

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

But woe unto him that hath the law given, yea, that hath all the commandments of God, like unto us, and that transgresseth them and that wasteth the days of his probation, for awful is his state. 2 Ne. 9:25–27

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

At this point, the righteous and the wicked would be separated and assigned to their eternal rewards according to their works. Jacob provides a graphic depiction of the fate of the wicked.

Wherefore they which are filthy are the devil and his angels, and they shall go away into everlasting fire prepared for them; and their torment is a lake of fire and brimstone, whose flames ascendeth up forever and ever and hath no end. 2 Ne. 9:16

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

And now behold, I say unto you: Then cometh a death, even a second death, which is a spiritual death. Then is a time that whosoever dieth in his

sins as to the temporal death shall also die a spiritual death; yea, he shall die as to things pertaining unto righteousness. Then is the time when their torments shall be as a lake of fire and brimstone whose flames ascendeth up forever and ever. And then is the time that they shall be chained down to an everlasting destruction according to the power and captivity of Satan, having subjected them according to his will. Alma 12:16–17

While the Nephite prophets understood that those who believed in Jesus Christ would “be saved in the kingdom of God” (2 Nephi 25:13)—would receive eternal life and “dwell with God” (1 Nephi 10:21, cf. Alma 24:22), there is no comparably detailed description of that blessed state to be found in their writings. Benjamin taught that those who embrace the gospel and are “faithful to the end” will be “received into heaven” where “they may dwell with God in a state of never-ending happiness” (Mosiah 2:41). Similarly, Christ promised the three Nephite disciples that the time would come that they would “be received into the kingdom of the Father, to go no more out but to dwell with God eternally in the heavens” (3 Nephi 28:40, cf. Moroni 8:26). And Ammon taught the Lamanites that “the heavens is a place where God dwells and all his holy angels” (Alma 18:30). The righteous are promised that they will “be raised unto life eternal” (Moroni 7:41). And Alma contrasts the fates of the wicked and the righteous who will be “raised to endless happiness to inherit the kingdom of God, or to endless misery to inherit the kingdom of the devil” (Alma 41:4). He further asked his people if they thought sinners could “have a place to sit down in the kingdom of God with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob, and also all the holy prophets, whose garments are cleansed and are spotless, pure, and white” (Alma 5:24, cf. Helaman 3:30)? Abinadi taught that those who have believed and “have kept the commandments of God” will be “raised to dwell with God, who hath redeemed them. Thus they have eternal life through Christ” (Mosiah 15:23). Two prophets claimed to have seen “God sitting upon his throne, surrounded with numberless concourses of angels in the attitude of singing and praising their God” (Alma 36:22, citing 1 Nephi 1:8). The most descriptive account comes from Mormon and his final teachings on Christ to the Nephites:

And he hath brought to pass the redemption of the world, whereby he that is found guiltless before him at the judgment day hath it given unto them to dwell in the presence of God in his kingdom, to sing ceaseless praises with the choirs above unto the Father and unto the Son and unto the Holy Ghost, which is one God, in a state of happiness which hath no end. Mormon 7:7

Conclusion

The Book of Mormon prophets taught a comprehensive account of the great things the Father and the Son have done to make the salvation of mortal men and women possible—an account they referred to explicitly as the plan of salvation, of mercy, or most frequently, of redemption. This plan of salvation as such is not named or identified in biblical discourse, but its principal elements as taught in the Book of Mormon are recognizable in biblical teachings. While contemporary LDS discourse often conflates the plan of salvation with the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Book of Mormon writers clearly separated the two and saw the plan as the context that gave the gospel, a very specific message itself, its meaning. God's plan began with the creation of this earth and included the fall, the atonement, the preaching of the gospel, and the final judgment, including the various preparations for appropriate rewards thereafter. This plan provided the context for the gospel they also taught—the means or way by which men and women could take advantage of the plan of salvation—the specific things they must do to receive eternal life. The plan of salvation spells out the things that the Father and the Son have done for all mankind. The gospel of Jesus Christ tells men and women individually what they must do if they would receive those blessings in their fullness.