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2018-02-19

Atonement in the Book of Mormon and in the New Testament

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Atonement in the New Testament

Third Version (2018) 8500 words

February 19, 2018

Jesus Christ came into a world already well supplied with a rich variety of beliefs and practices related to atonement, redemption, and sacrifice. His exit three decades later established a dramatically new set of beliefs and practices that would inspire billions of his followers throughout the entire planet over the next two millennia. While the rich cultural context of the ancient Near East provided New Testament and other early Christian writers with a variety of metaphors they could use to explain Christ's atonement, the resulting texts do not give us a clear, unitary view. Almost six centuries earlier and a hemisphere away, the Nephite prophets recorded visions and revelations that foretold Christ's coming and atonement in detail and that now provide us with a much richer and more consistent understanding. Finally, the revelations given to Joseph Smith in the early nineteenth century add considerable detail about the afterlife made possible by the atonement. Because the prophetic motivation has always been to promote the salvation of souls, the scriptural accounts of atonement tend to mix explanations of how the atonement works with explanations of how men and women can pursue its blessings in their lives.

Biblical accounts of the atonement

New Testament writers consistently and vigorously testify that Jesus Christ has atoned for the sins of all mankind and has provided for their resurrection from the dead. In so doing they point to historical facts, the things he did to accomplish this—to his sufferings in Gethsemane and to his crucifixion and resurrection. Some of these writers also offer explanations or characterizations of that atonement intended to illuminate how it was possible or how it works. The various explanations offered are not identical or even always consistent with each other as they vary somewhat between writers, or sometimes even within the pages written by the same person. The overall impression we get from reading these testimonies of the atonement is the deep conviction of the writers and their desires to help their readers understand and appreciate all dimensions of its contributions—even though they themselves may not understand it fully or believe that their readers will be able to comprehend its full implications. Book of Mormon writers had the same motivation and faced the same challenges while contributing an even richer collection of testimonies and explanations than what we find in the Bible.

In comparison with the English New Testament which only uses any form of the words *atone/atonement* once, the Book of Mormon features 39, which

accurately portends its much more frequent direct discussion of the topic. These discussions are distributed throughout the book from the teachings of Lehi and Nephi in the beginning to the concluding comments of Mormon and Moroni at the end.

The long and rich tradition of biblical interpretation has produced quite a number of competing explanations for the atonement. For convenience, I will follow the helpful division of these into five categories that has been provided by the Anchor Bible Dictionary—though in a changed order. In this dictionary article, C. M. Tuckett provides a balanced and critical overview of the enormous literature that explores and defends the numerous Christian efforts to understand the atonement—an overview that will provide a reliable framework for comparisons with the atonement explanations we have received from the Nephite prophets.¹ The most personal of these for the individual Christian is the teaching that sinners can be reconciled eternally to Christ and the Father through his *at-one-ment*. A second way of understanding the atonement focuses on Christ's mission to bring light and knowledge to men in their ignorance, revealing himself and the Father to them, and teaching them how they can receive eternal life. Other more general theories of atonement have received greater attention in the

¹ See C. M. Tuckett, "Atonement in the New Testament," *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 1992, vol. 1, 518–522.

interpretive literature. The teaching of early Christian leaders that the atonement was the result of Christ's victory over Satan and the powers of evil was given new life and cut a very wide swath among twentieth-century interpreters. Equally prominent is the theory that the atonement was a sacrifice of the sinless son of God for the sins of the world—as sacrificial language recurs in numerous references. The fifth and possibly most prominent theory portrays the atonement in terms of redemption understood as a ransom paid—or, more figuratively, of a rescue or deliverance from sin and the power of evil. There is scriptural language to support each of these interpretations, and most writers have tried to merge all of these scriptural references together in theories dominated by one or another of these particular explanations. But over the last half century there has been a growing realization among Christian writers that all five explanations may have some basis in truth, even though they may not be able to reduce them to one intellectually satisfying theory of atonement. The following discussion will emphasize the elements of these theories that have received the most reinforcement from Restoration scriptures and will identify corresponding teachings that are present in the Book of Mormon specifically.

1. Reconciliation

In Romans, Paul explains that reconciliation with God was made possible when “Christ died for us,” that we may be “justified by his blood” and “saved from wrath through him.” We are in this way “saved by his life.” By his death, we “are reconciled to God,” which atonement (reconciliation) enables us to “joy in God” (Romans 5:8–10). The family of Greek terms translated as *reconcile* and *reconciliation* (*katalássō*) indicates a complete or thorough change, reminding us of Christ’s teaching to Nicodemus that a man must “be born again” before he can “see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3,7). The letters of John extend the same theme teaching that “Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God,” “overcomes the world,” and does “not continue to sin.” Even though “the whole world is under the control of the evil one,” he “cannot harm him” (1 John 5:1, 4, 18–19, 3:9). Peter expands this teaching when he says the saints “have purified (their) souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit . . . being born again . . . by the word of God” (1 Peter 1:22–23). Paul’s focus on reconciliation continues in his second letter to the Corinthians as he describes “the ministry of reconciliation” given to the Christians by Christ and “the word of reconciliation” committed to them (2 Corinthians 5:18–20). He emphasized the universality of the atonement of Christ to the Ephesians, explaining that—unlike the law of Moses, the atonement reconciles both Jews and Gentiles unto God, so that “both have access by one

Spirit unto the Father” (Ephesians 2:15–16). By this act of reconciliation, God can bring former enemies into his fold.

The Nephite prophet Jacob ended his landmark sermon on the atonement with a direct appeal to the language of reconciliation, calling upon his people to leave “the way of everlasting death” and to take up “the way of eternal life.”

Therefore cheer up your hearts and remember that ye are free to act for yourselves, to choose the way of everlasting death or the way of eternal life. Wherefore, my beloved brethren, *reconcile yourselves* to the will of God and not to the will of the devil and the flesh. And remember that after ye are *reconciled unto God* that it is only in and through the grace of God that ye are saved. Wherefore may God raise you from death by the power of the resurrection, and also from everlasting death by *the power of the atonement*, that ye may be received into the eternal kingdom of God, that ye may praise him through grace divine. (2 Ne. 10:23–25)²

In this passage, Jacob powerfully links the ancient doctrine of the two ways³ to the doctrine of the atonement that underlies “the way of eternal life.” This

² Jacob returns to this theme twice after the passing of Lehi and Nephi. Cf. Jacob 4:11 and 6:9.

³ For a detailed treatment of the ancient doctrine of the two ways see Noel B. Reynolds, “The Ancient Doctrine of the Two Ways and the Book of Mormon,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* Vol. 56, No. 3 (2017), pp. 49–78.

understanding of the atonement is presented even more clearly in King Benjamin's explanation to the assembled Nephite people that "the law of Moses availeth nothing except it were through the atonement of [Christ's] blood" (Mosiah 3:15). Further, "the blood of Christ atoneth for their sins," and "there shall be no other name given nor no other way nor means whereby salvation can come unto the children of men." As he further explains:

the natural man is an enemy to God and has been from the fall of Adam and will be forever and ever but if he yieldeth to the enticings of the Holy Spirit and *putteth off the natural man and becometh a saint through the atonement of Christ the Lord and becometh as a child, submissive, meek, humble, patient, full of love, willing to submit to all things which the Lord seeth fit to inflict upon him, even as a child doth submit to his father.* Mosiah 3:15–19

Mosiah's people responded unanimously that they did believe his words "because of the Spirit of the Lord Omnipotent, which hath wrought *a mighty change* in us or in our hearts, that we have no more disposition to do evil but to do good continually" and expressed their desire "to enter into a covenant with our God to do his will and to be obedient to his commandments . . . all the remainder of our days" (Mosiah 5:2, 5). The gratified king then went on to explain that because of

this covenant that they had made,

ye shall be called the children of Christ, his sons and his daughters; for behold, this day he hath spiritually begotten you, for ye say that your hearts are changed through faith on his name; therefore ye are *born of him* and have become *his sons and his daughters*. Mosiah 5:7

Benjamin credits this “mighty change” in the hearts of the people to a transformation worked by “the Spirit of the Lord” and to their willingness to make a covenant to take his name upon them and to obey him to the end of their lives. No longer enemies, but “spiritually begotten” sons and daughters of Christ, his people are promised “everlasting salvation and eternal life,” conditional only upon their continued obedience to the Lord.

From this we learn that the “mighty change” described by Benjamin follows repentance that is grounded in a covenant of obedience, that it is a transformation effected by the Spirit, and that it is characterized as a new birth through which recipients become his sons and daughters. We further learn that it is a process made available to all men and women and that is the only means by which sinners can be redeemed individually “from the gall of bitterness and bonds of iniquity” and so reconciled become heirs of the kingdom of God (Mosiah 27: 26, 29). In a subsequent and more detailed recounting of this same experience, Alma said the

experience came after he repented and called upon Jesus Christ, who would “atone for the sins of the world” and that he had subsequently labored unceasingly to “bring souls unto repentance, . . . that they might also be born of God and be filled with the Holy Ghost” (Alma 36: 17–18, 24).

Alma made this personal experience the foundation of his signature sermon to the people of Zarahemla and tied it back to the experiences and teachings of his own father Alma and to Abinadi through whom Alma had been converted.

And now I ask of you: On what conditions are they saved? Yea, what grounds had they to hope for salvation? What is the cause of their being loosed from the bands of death, yea, and also the chains of hell? Behold, I can tell you: Did not my father Alma believe in the words which was delivered by the mouth of Abinadi? And was he not a holy prophet? Did he not speak the word of God and my father Alma believed them? And according to his faith there was *a mighty change* wrought in his heart. Behold, I say unto you that this is all true. And behold, he preached the word unto your fathers; and *a mighty change* was also wrought in their hearts, and they *humbled themselves* and *put their trust in the true and living God*. And behold, they were *faithful until the end*; therefore they were saved. And now behold, I ask of you, my brethren of the church:

Have ye spiritually been born of God? Have ye received his image in your own countenances? Have ye experienced *this mighty change* in your hearts? Do ye *exercise faith in the redemption* of him who created you? Do you look forward with an eye of faith and view this mortal body raised in immortality and this corruption raised in incorruption, to stand before God to be judged according to the deeds which hath been done in the mortal body? Alma 5:10–15

These detailed accounts of the experience of the effects of the atonement in the lives of repentant Nephites are consistent with the language of other prophets as reported throughout the Book of Mormon. The atonement is consistently portrayed as the means by which this mighty change is made available to all who will repent—that they might be spiritually reborn and filled with joy in this life and prepared to be found worthy of eternal life when they meet the Lord at the final judgment.

2. Revelation

Although not widely recognized as a theory of atonement, there are significant interpretations of the New Testament that see Christ's accomplishments primarily focused on bringing mankind to a knowledge of God

and of man's relationship to him. Jesus is repeatedly characterized by John as the bearer of light and knowledge, the one who reveals God's true nature and glory (John 1:14, 18). Through Jesus, light has come into the world, and by coming into that light, men can live by truth (John 3:16–21). Eternal life can be understood in terms of coming to know both Jesus and the Father, where *knowing* is understood in the more personal biblical sense of being acquainted with someone—and not in the abstract sense of theological definitions.

It is striking that the same Book of Mormon passages cited above for their explanations of the process by which repentant men and women can be reconciled to God through a spiritual rebirth include the assurance that knowledge of God is gained through that same process. For Alma, that divine knowing is so intimate that the spiritually reborn sons and daughters of God will have “received his image” in their countenances (Alma 5:14). Alma was given a vision of God in his heaven as part of the experience, but the personal experience in which he received the blessings of the atonement gave him his understanding of the atonement. Because of the things which he had tasted and seen, he claimed to know of the atonement and testified that “the knowledge which I have is of God” (Alma 36:26). In the same spirit, Benjamin foresaw a future day “when the knowledge of a Savior shall spread throughout every nation, kindred, tongue, and people” at

which time “none shall be found blameless before God . . . only through repentance and faith on the name of the Lord God Omnipotent” (Mosiah 3:20–21). Similarly, Benjamin’s people rejoiced because their king “hath brought us to this great knowledge” and because they knew of the “surety and truth” of his words “because of the Spirit of the Lord Omnipotent which hath wrought a mighty change in us” (Mosiah 3:4, 2).

The Nephite prophets oriented much of their teaching and prophesying to the Abrahamic covenant, and especially to the promise that through his seed all the nations of the earth would be blessed.⁴ Setting out an explanation that would be repeated in many forms by his successors, Nephi taught his brothers that the knowledge of the gospel of their Redeemer would be the means by which the Lord would gather Abraham’s seed in the last days and bring them back into his fold:

And at that day shall the remnant of our seed *know* that they are of the house of Israel and that they are the covenant people of the Lord. And then shall they *know* and come to the *knowledge* of their forefathers, and also to the *knowledge* of the gospel of their Redeemer, which was ministered unto their fathers by him. Wherefore they shall come to the *knowledge* of their Redeemer and the very points of his doctrine, that they may *know* how to

⁴ See Noel B. Reynolds, “Understanding the Abrahamic Covenant through the Book of Mormon,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* (2018), forthcoming.

come unto him and be saved. 1 Nephi 15:14.

It is even more clear in Book of Mormon teaching that the knowledge of the Redeemer and his gospel are essential in the actualization of atonement in the lives of men and women on the earth.

3. Victory over Satan

A significant share of twentieth century atonement studies emphasized the teachings of the early Christian fathers and scriptural passages that characterized mortal life in terms of a military struggle between the forces of good and evil.⁵

Paul used this metaphor repeatedly and saw Christ's victory over Satan's armies in his death and resurrection as illustrated in this key passage:

And when you were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive together with him, when he forgave us all our trespasses, erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands.

He set this aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, *triumphing over them* in it.

Colossians 2:13–15, NSRV

⁵ This approach was launched by the 1931 publication of Swedish theologian Gustaf Aulen's *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main types of the Idea of the Atonement*. The American edition was translated by A. G. Hebert and published by Macmillan.

The author of Hebrews explicitly points to Christ's death as the key to that victory: "that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil" (Hebrews 2:14, NSRV). This corresponds closely to Jesus's saying that "Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out" (John 12:31, NSRV).

While this is not the most prominent Book of Mormon atonement theme, it is clearly stated by three Nephite prophets, Abinadi, Alma, and Mormon, and is often implicit in the teachings of others. From the time of Lehi, Nephites had understood the fallen and sinful state of mankind as the "captivity of the devil," and had understood the plan of salvation as the means by which men could be liberated from that captivity.⁶ In the words of Abinadi,

He that persists in his own carnal nature and goes on in the ways of sin and rebellion against God, he remaineth in his fallen state, and the devil hath all power over him. Therefore he is as though there was no redemption made, being an enemy to God; and also is the devil an enemy to God. And now if Christ had not come into the world—speaking of things to come as though they had already come—there could have been no redemption. And if Christ had not risen from the dead or broken the bands of death—that the

⁶ 2 Nephi 2:27.

grave should have no *victory* and that death should have no sting—there could have been no resurrection. But there is a resurrection. Therefore the grave hath no *victory*, and the sting of death⁷ is swallowed up in Christ.

Mosiah 16:5–8

Centuries later, Mormon reiterates this teaching—echoing Abinadi’s own words and phrases:

Know ye that ye must come to the knowledge of your fathers and repent of all your sins and iniquities and believe in Jesus Christ, that he is the Son of God . . . and by the power of the Father he hath risen again, whereby he hath gained the *victory over the grave*. And also in him is the sting of death swallowed up. And he bringeth to pass the resurrection of the dead, whereby man must be raised to stand before his judgment seat. And he hath brought to pass the redemption of the world. Mormon 7:5–7

Aaron may have been drawing on the same tradition when he taught the Lamanites that “the grave shall have no victory” inasmuch as “the sufferings and death of Christ atoneth for their sins” (Alma 22:14).

⁷ Abinadi’s phrase *sting of death* occurs in the same context here as in Paul’s discussion of the atonement in 1 Corinthians 15:55, but has its own twist. Paul equates the sting with sin, which loses its painful effects through Christ’s victory over death. Abinadi specifies the endless “captivity of the devil” as the negative consequence of death that Christ’s victory eliminates for the redeemed.

4. Sacrifice

Although the language of sacrifice permeates many of the New Testament passages and earliest Christian writings that relate to atonement, these do not present a unitary view of how Christ's sacrifice would accomplish an atonement. Paul's writings are the prime example. While he refers to the idea of sacrifice more than any other writer, he uses such a variety of different metaphors in the process that many scholars advise against looking for a unified theory in Paul's teachings on the atonement. References to the "blood" of Christ are too easily linked to the idea of sacrifice as scholars now recognize that *blood* was another term for *death*, and need have no direct connection to sacrifice per se, thus reducing the number of New Testament writings that should be read as references to sacrifice.

Another major problem with interpreting the references to Christ's sacrifice arises from the variety of understandings of sacrifice that Paul and his contemporaries inherited from their own Jewish traditions and from surrounding cultures. In Judaism and other ancient cultures, sacrifices were used in rituals establishing covenants between nations and between men and gods. Sacrifices could also be employed to express thanks to a deity for great blessings, or as a means of commemorating great blessings of the past (*i.e.*, Passover). Most

attempts to understand the atonement as a sacrifice invoke the Old Testament practice of sin-offerings, but even this connection turns out to be problematic. Part of the problem is that Jewish scriptures and traditions include no rationale for sacrifice that would clarify what it means to say Christ sacrificed his life for the sins of others. Many ancient cultures understood sacrifices to be “propitiation,” designed to allay the anger of an offended deity. Linking the atonement to that tradition has seemed too problematic for many Christians. What sense could it make to see Jesus sacrificing himself to allay his own or the Father’s anger for the sins of men?

A popular alternative has been to interpret the biblical terminology of sacrifice to mean that sacrifices can nullify or “expiate” past sins, implying that Jesus’s life was sacrificed as a substitute for the lives of sinners. But this approach has its own problems. There appears to be no precedent in Jewish thought for the idea that one person’s life might be sacrificed to expiate the sins of another. Some have pointed to the scapegoat tradition by which the sins of the people were ritually conferred on the head of one goat that would be then driven into the wilderness, while a second goat would actually be sacrificed. But the analogy breaks down when we note the obvious fact that the goat bearing sins as a substitute is not the one sacrificed. Still, the idea that Christ’s sacrifice was

expiation for sin seems to fit better with the scriptural language that consistently presents God as the actor and not the recipient of the sacrificial action.

The epistle to the Hebrews presents the most developed and extensive explanation of Jesus as the sacrifice prefigured in the Jewish Day of Atonement. Here Jesus is portrayed as both the high priest and the sacrificial victim and the fulfillment of the prophetic dimension of the ancient ritual. But even here, our search for an explanation of Jesus's atonement for our sins comes up empty handed. For the arguments of the author of Hebrews are actually focused on a different objective. His argument is designed primarily to prove to his Jewish Christian audience that the sacrifice of Jesus Christ brings the ancient tradition of sacrifices inaugurated through the Law of Moses to a final conclusion. No more will God's people be expected to make sacrifices of animal lives. Rather, they should understand the sacrifice of Christ in covenantal terms as it provides the sacrificial launch of the new covenant as the Law of Moses with its blood sacrifices is officially terminated. He assumes, as do other writers, that the shedding of blood is required to expiate sins, but he does not explain sacrifice or substitution.

In his linguistic analysis of biblical sacrifice for the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Johannes Behm found the basis for the spiritualized

concepts of sacrifice in the New Testament in the presuppositions of Old Testament writers.⁸

The concept of sacrifice in the OT is rooted in the reality of the covenant order into which God's historical revelation has integrated the people of Israel. . . . In the sacrificial order of the old covenant God wills to have personal and active dealings with his people. Sacrifice, whether it be the gift of man to God, the expression of spiritual fellowship between God and man, or a means of atonement, is always orientated to the presence of God in grace and judgment.⁹

The prophets proclaimed against the materialistic sacrificial practices of their day because they betrayed the original purpose which was to produce a "personal, spiritual encounter with the God of salvation."¹⁰ As Paul and the author of Hebrews teach, the true meaning of sacrifice is displayed in the total self-giving of Christ which enables his people to give their own lives back to him. "To bring oneself, one's will, one's action, wholly to God, is the new meaning which the

⁸ See his article in Gerhard Kittel (editor), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 3:180–190.

⁹ Behm, 183.

¹⁰ Behm, 183.

concept of sacrifice acquires” in the New Testament.¹¹

The characterization of Christ’s atonement as a sacrifice is introduced into the Book of Mormon first in the teachings of Lehi to his family:

Wherefore redemption cometh in and through the Holy Messiah, for he is full of grace and truth. Behold, he offereth himself a sacrifice for sin, to answer the ends of the law unto all those which have a broken heart and a contrite spirit. And unto none else can the ends of the law be answered. 2 Nephi 2:6–7

Amulek, who was taught by Alma, gives perhaps the clearest and most complete explanation:

Behold, I say unto you that I do know that Christ shall come among the children of men to take upon him the transgressions of his people and that he shall atone for the sins of the world, for the Lord God hath spoken it. For it is expedient that an atonement should be made, for according to the great plans of the Eternal God there must be an atonement made or else all mankind must unavoidably perish. Yea, all are hardened; yea, all are fallen and are lost and must perish except it be through the atonement, which it is expedient should be made.

¹¹ Behm, 185–86.

For it is expedient that there should be *a great and last sacrifice*—yea, not a sacrifice of man, neither of beasts, neither of any manner of fowl—for it shall not be a human sacrifice, but it must be *an infinite and an eternal sacrifice*. . . .

And then shall there be—or it is expedient there should be—a stop to the shedding of blood; then shall the law of Moses be fulfilled. Yea, it shall all be fulfilled, every jot and tittle, and none shall have passed away. And behold, this is the whole meaning of the law, every whit a pointing to that great and last sacrifice; and that great and last sacrifice will be the Son of God, yea, infinite and eternal. And thus he shall bring salvation to all those who shall believe on his name, this being the intent of this last sacrifice, to bring about the bowels of mercy, which overpowereth justice and bringeth about means unto men that they may have faith unto repentance. Alma 34:8–10, 13–15

Like the author of Hebrews, both Lehi and Amulek see Christ's atonement as "a great and last sacrifice" that was sufficient to fulfill the demands of justice inherent in the law of Moses. Going further, the Nephite prophets saw the atonement making possible the forgiveness of sins through the mercy of Christ's gospel, which required faith and repentance, and not Mosaic sacrifices. Even

when Jesus comes to the Nephites after his resurrection, he does not refer to himself as the sacrifice, but instead instructs them that they are to replace the blood sacrifices they had been making under the law of Moses with sacrifices of their own broken hearts and contrite spirits:

And as many as have received me, to them have I given to become the sons of God. . . . For behold, by me redemption cometh, and in me is the law of Moses fulfilled. . . . And ye shall offer up unto me no more the shedding of blood. . . . And ye shall offer for a sacrifice unto me a broken heart and a contrite spirit. And whoso cometh unto me with a broken heart and a contrite spirit, him will I baptize with fire and with the Holy Ghost. 3 Nephi 9:17–20

The new gospel covenant instituted by Christ, through his atonement, would seem to focus on the same purpose as ancient sacrifice if we understand that being to recover an intimate relationship between God and his fallen children—bringing them back into his presence, or at least into a process that can lead to a full recovery of his presence.

5. Redemption

Less prominent in the New Testament than in either the Old Testament or

the Book of Mormon is the notion that through his atonement, Jesus redeemed all people from physical death and all those who would repent from their sins. One of the more common meanings for the New Testament language of redemption comes from the idea of ransoms paid to liberate enslaved peoples. This is reflected in English translations where Paul tells believers that they “were bought with a price” or where Mark tells us that Jesus’s death was “a ransom for many” (1 Cor 6:20; 7:23, and Mark 10:45). While some interpreters believe strongly that Jesus’s suffering and death are to be understood literally as a price paid to redeem us from hell, there are linguistic reasons to doubt this, and it has not been easy to identify to whom this price was paid. Characterizing it as a payment to God or to Satan leads to other difficult theological questions which have not been answered persuasively. Others have argued that a more reasonable interpretation of the New Testament language of redemption would focus on its more universal meanings of rescue or liberation, as exemplified historically in God’s redemption of Israel from Egyptian slavery. This would seem to accord better with the larger range of statements in both the Old Testament and the Book of Mormon.

The Hebrew bible boasts as many as 17 different terms that have been translated with some derivative of the English word *redeem*. 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 terms can be used to mean *rescue* or *free/liberate*.

Scholars have recognized that one of the main Old Testament terms for *redeem* or *ransom* (*gā'al*) carries a special meaning in the familial contexts that pervade the Bible. As Laird Harris has explained,

the primary meaning of this root is to *do the part of a kinsman* and thus to redeem his kin from difficulty or danger. It is used with its derivatives 118 times. One difference between this root and the very similar root *pādā* “redeem,” is that there is usually an emphasis in *gā'al* on the redemption being the privilege or duty of a near relative.¹²

The classic example would be the story of Boaz, who steps up as kinsman of Naomi’s deceased husband—to redeem the impoverished woman’s property and to marry her widowed daughter-in-law Ruth and raise up children for her posterity. The term *gā'al* is used seven times in the negotiation between Naomi and Boaz as he accepts her request that he become the redeemer kinsman.

¹² See the full discussion in R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, and Bruce K. Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, Moody Bible Institute, 1980, pp. 144–145.

It may not be obvious to modern readers that ancient Israelites would also have seen themselves as God’s kin and the Lord as their Divine Kinsman. Frank Moore Cross has forcefully reminded Bible readers that ancient Israel was a typical West Semitic tribal group in that its social organization was “grounded in kinship.”¹³ This kinship relationship entailed a number of obligations, including protecting one’s kinfolk, looking out for their welfare, and *playing the role of redeemer* to those in needy circumstances—“to love one’s kinsman as himself, as his own soul.”¹⁴

Like all such tribal societies, the Israelites saw their god Yahweh as their Divine Kinsman,

who fulfills the mutual obligations and receives the privileges of kinship. He leads in battle, redeems from slavery, loves his family, shares the land of his heritage . . . , provides and protects. He blesses those who bless his kindred, curses those who curse his kindred. The family of the deity rallies to his call to holy war, “the wars of Yahweh,” keeps his cultus, obeys his patriarchal commands, maintains familial loyalty (*hesed*), loves him with all

¹³ See Frank Moore Cross, “Kinship and Covenant in Ancient Israel,” first published as chapter 1 in his collected essays, *From Epic to Canon*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998, pp. 3–21 at p. 3. T. Benjamin Spackman has provided a helpful discussion of Cross’s essay for LDS readers in “The Israelite Roots of Atonement Terminology,” *BYU Studies Quarterly*, vol. 55:1 (2016), pp. 39–64.

¹⁴ Cross, 4.

their soul, calls on his name.¹⁵

This kinship relationship of Israelites with the Lord was further assured for all who would be part of Israel by the establishment of Yahweh's covenant with them. Non-kin were incorporated into Israel as kin through the covenants and rites of marriage and adoption. Periodic covenant renewal ceremonies refreshed this relationship to Yahweh for all the tribes and their members. In this way, all were reconfirmed as "the people of Yahweh."

The God of Israel adopts Israel as a "son" and is called "father," enters a marriage contract with Israel and is designated "husband," swears fealty oaths together with Israel and enters into covenant, assuming the mutual obligations of kinship, taking vengeance on Israel's enemies, going to war at the head of Israel's militia.

In Israel marriage may be described as entry into a mutual covenant of love, loyalty (*hesed*), and fidelity (*'emet*).¹⁶ In Ezekiel 16, Jerusalem is addressed as a beautiful woman of mixed ancestry. Yahweh came upon her and said, "I looked upon thee, and behold thy time was a time of love, and I spread my skirt over thee and covered thy nakedness, and I made oaths to

¹⁵ Cross, 7.

¹⁶ See the extended defense of this interpretation in Gordon P. Hugenberger, *Marriage as a Covenant: Biblical Law and Ethics as Developed from Malachi*, WIPF & STOCK, 1994.

thee and entered into a covenant with thee . . . and thou becamest mine.”¹⁷

The strong sense of Yahweh as the Divine Kinsman helps us understand the redemption talk in these passages as Yahweh doing his duty as a kinsman—employing all his powers and resources to protect and bless—and to redeem his people. The iconic story of his redemption of Israel in Egypt is paired with his redemption of all peoples from the powers of Satan and from death.

Isaiah stands out in the Old Testament for the numerous references to the Lord as the Redeemer of Israel. He repeatedly quotes the Lord calling himself “the Redeemer of Israel,” or otherwise refers to him in those terms. Every one of these 23 references uses *gā’al*, the Hebrew term for a kinsman redeemer.¹⁸ Psalms follows the same pattern. This emphasis on various forms of *redeem* in the atonement language of the Old Testament is magnified even more in the Book of Mormon which features 118 instances, some of which occur in quotations of Isaiah. We only have the English translation of the Book of Mormon, and we can only speculate what the underlying language might have been. But all of these occurrences could fit comfortably with the implication of a kinsman redeemer and the associated phraseology of Isaiah that comes from his exclusive use of *gā’al*.

¹⁷ Cross, 13, citing Ezekiel 16:8, cf. Malachi 2:14 (“wife of my covenant”).

¹⁸ Cf. Isaiah 35:9, 41:14, 43:1 and 14, 44:6, 22, 23, and 24, 47:4, 48:17 and 20, 49: 7 and 26, 52:3 and 9, 54:5 and 8, 59:20, 60:16, 62:12, 63:4, 9, and 16.

While, as is demonstrated above, the four other atonement concepts invoked in the New Testament do also show up in some clear ways in the Book of Mormon, the language of redemption turns out to provide the most common atonement terminology. Of the 31 references to the plan of salvation, 17 label it “the plan of redemption,” and no other label occurs more than three times.

The Book of Mormon makes clear in two different ways that mankind’s kinship relationship to the Lord is an essential dimension of his redeeming work, and that we can understand that redemption as the Lord’s performance of his duties and privileges as a kinsman redeemer. Much of this language in the Old Testament refers to the corporate redemption of Israel from time to time historically, and even more importantly, to the eventual gathering and redemption of all of Israel in the last days—as promised in numerous prophetic interpretations of the covenant of Abraham.¹⁹ But as the Nephite prophets explain from the beginning, God’s promises to Abraham serve as instructive surrogates of the promises of salvation that he offers universally—to all men and women whether they be Israelites or Gentiles. And all face the same requirements for redemption—they must repent and covenant with the Lord to take his name upon them and to obey his commandments. As Nephi explained:

¹⁹ See “Understanding the Abrahamic Covenant” publication pending.

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 Ne. 30:2

The second way the Lord emphasizes his kinship relationship to the redeemed arises from the covenant they make with him when they accept his gospel by repenting of their sins and being baptized as a witness of that covenant. Those who do so “with full purpose of heart” receive a remission of sins when the Father baptizes them “with fire and with the Holy Ghost,” thereby redeeming them and making them his sons and daughters, as they are spiritually reborn.²⁰ In the words of Alma at the time he experienced this personally:

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

²⁰ 2 Nephi 31:13–14.

The Nephite Synthesis

Whereas scholars find multiple competing understandings of the atonement in the New Testament, the Book of Mormon advances them all as integral aspects of “the great plans of our God.” Book of Mormon atonement explanations feature much of the same basic language seen in the New Testament. But rather than seeing these as competing explanations, the Nephite prophets seem to have understood each of these as one part of the larger story. This is most obvious in the lengthy atonement discourse of Jacob as preserved by Nephi in 2 Nephi 9–10—which may well have served as the model for all his successors.

Jacob begins with the plan of salvation or “the merciful plan of the great Creator.” “For as death hath passed upon all men . . . there must needs be a power of resurrection” (2 Nephi 9:6). Because of the fall, “our flesh must waste away and die,” which makes the resurrection necessary. But there was also a fundamental spiritual consequence; for “the fall came by reason of transgression”—which in turn cut men “off from the presence of the Lord.” Because physical death would be of “endless duration,” Jacob saw that “an infinite atonement” would be required.²¹ Without this “our spirits must become subject to

²¹ Jacob’s language reminds us that in the linguistic context of the Book of Mormon we should not be thinking of modern mathematical notions of infinity, but rather the earlier English usage which suggests enormous size or being limitless, or as Jacob says, “endless duration.” It also applies without limits to all the peoples of the earth across all time.

that angel which fell from before the presence of the Eternal God and became the devil, and rise no more.”

Jacob here emphasizes the role of the devil whose domination over fallen men is undermined by the resurrection:

For behold, if the flesh should rise no more, our spirits must become subject to that angel which fell from before the presence of the Eternal God and became the devil, to rise no more. And our spirits must have become like unto him, and we become devils, angels to a devil—to be shut out from the presence of our God and to remain with the father of lies, in misery like unto himself. (2 Ne. 9:8–9)

But because the Messiah will come to “redeem the children of men from the fall,” they have become free forever . . . 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” (2 Nephi 2:26–27).

Jacob characterizes this latter possibility as an “awful monster,” which is “death and hell . . . the death of the body and . . . the death of the spirit.” But God has prepared “the way of deliverance,” whereby “the bodies and the spirits of men will be restored one to the other” by “the power of the resurrection of the Holy One of Israel.” This “power of the resurrection” causes that “hell must deliver up

its captive spirits and the grave must deliver up its captive bodies.” With “the spirit and the body . . . restored to itself again, . . . all men become incorruptible and immortal; and . . . they must appear before the judgment seat of the Holy One of Israel” to “be judged according to the holy judgment of God” (2 Nephi 9:12–15).

Jacob’s explication of the atonement of Jesus Christ draws heavily on the broader context of the plan of salvation as it was understood by the first generation of Nephite prophets. As an essential step in their progress towards eternal life in the presence of the Father, his spirit children were given physical bodies in a physical world. The fall of Adam and Eve brought both physical and spiritual death into the world—deaths from which there was no escape. Their corrupted bodies would die and rot back into the dust, and they had no way to overcome the separation from the presence of the Father that resulted from the fall. But God had foreseen all this and his plan included a grand rescue or redemption by which those men and women who would choose to turn back from the way of the devil to follow the way of the Lord might be saved. The key was to overcome the finality of physical death. Jacob does not tell us how the sufferings and crucifixion of Jesus Christ could accomplish his resurrection. But when the Father raised him up from the grave, he instituted the resurrection by which the spirits and bodies of all men and women would be reunited incorruptibly and would be brought before the

judgment bar of Christ—at which time they would be rewarded according to the way they had chosen—according to their works.

Both the language and the logic of Jacob’s explanations provide the model for all later Nephite prophets. Centuries later, we find Abinadi adopting Jacob’s distinctive phrasing in his own detailed teaching of the atonement to the wicked priests of King Noah (Mosiah 15–16). Alma₁ taught the words of Abinadi to his first converts “concerning the resurrection of the dead, and the redemption of the people which was to be brought to pass through the power and sufferings and death of Christ and his resurrection and ascension into heaven” (Mosiah 18:2). His son Alma₂ continued with the same language teaching the Nephites in Zarahemla of the great joy that comes “because of the resurrection of the dead, according to the will and power and deliverance of Jesus Christ from the bands of death” (Alma 4:14, cf 41:2). Later, his missionary companion Amulek presented one of the more complete discussions of the atonement to the Zoramites, in which he also draws repeatedly on Jacob’s formulations (Alma 34). And another four centuries later in his final comments, Mormon explains that “all men are redeemed, because the death of Christ bringeth to pass the resurrection, which bringeth to pass a redemption from an endless sleep, from which sleep all men shall be awoke by the power of God” (Mormon 9:13). So it is that the followers

of Christ can “have hope through the atonement of Christ and the power of his resurrection, to be raised unto life eternal” (Moroni 7:41).

Just as the resurrection of Christ breaks the bands of death and raises all men to judgment before him, so has he given them a law or a commandment or “his words” by which they shall be judged (2 Nephi 9:18). Throughout the Book of Mormon, this law is referred to as “the way” or as the doctrine or the gospel of Jesus Christ. Just as “the plan of our God” describes all that the Father and the Son have done and will do to make eternal life possible for the children of men, the gospel spells out what men and women must do individually to receive this great blessing. As Jacob explains;

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, for the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel, hath spoken it. (2 Ne. 9:23–24)²²

The recognition of Christ’s sufferings as an essential dimension of his atonement is central to the teachings of all these Nephite prophets. Yet they offer

²² For a brief discussion of the gospel of Jesus Christ and its relationship to the plan of salvation as these are taught in the Book of Mormon, see Noel B. Reynolds, “This is the Way,” *Religious Educator*, Vol 14, No. 3, 2013, 79–91.

a surprising variety of reasons why his suffering was necessary, reasons that can illuminate their understanding of the atonement itself. Jacob explains that he saw Christ's suffering and death leading to his resurrection and his role as judge of all men (2 Nephi 9:22). Benjamin thought Christ's suffering arose from "his anguish for the wickedness and abominations of his people" (Mosiah 3:9). Abinadi quoted Isaiah 53 to teach that Jesus bore our sorrows and was wounded and bruised for our iniquities. Abinadi saw God as the agent who used Christ's death and resurrection to gain the victory over death. He then gave the Son "power to make intercession for the children of men" because his experience would enable his "bowels of mercy," and fill him "with compassion toward the children of men." Abinadi explains that because Christ has broken the bands of death and taken men's transgressions upon himself, he can stand between them and justice, satisfying the demands of justice, and redeeming his people (Mosiah 15:8–9). Alma₂ later invokes this same phrasing and adds the insight that by taking upon himself the infirmities of his people, Christ's bowels are "filled with mercy, according to the flesh, that he may know according to the flesh how to succor his people according to their infirmities" (Alma 7:12).

Conclusions.

Like the New Testament writers, the Nephite prophets affirm repeatedly the facts of Christ's atonement and how through that atonement the Father and the Son have provided for the resurrection of all and the salvation and exaltation of all who will accept the invitation to repent and come unto Christ through obedience to his commandments—by enduring to the end. The Nephite sermons reference the power of the Father, the victory over death, the sufferings of Christ, and the notion of a Divine Kinsman redeeming his people from the captivity of the devil. Whereas these various features of the atonement have been developed in Christian tradition as competing theories of atonement, the Nephite prophets understood them all as compatible pieces of one coherent explanation as most fully elaborated by Jacob. But even then, many of the questions that can be asked about the inner workings of the atonement remain unanswered. But as individuals who respond to the gospel invitation, we can each learn through our own experience how Jesus Christ is able to work with great power in our lives—refining our spirits and enabling us to bear the same testimony these prophets have provided.