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The *Goodness of God* and His Children as a Fundamental Theological Concept in the Book of Mormon

Working paper, November 1, 2019

The phrase *goodness of God* does occur occasionally in the Hebrew Bible, but has not been considered to be a fundamental theological concept by Old Testament scholars. Rather, it has been interpreted as just another way of talking about God's acts of *hesed* or loving kindness for his covenant people. It is usually interpreted in the context of the covenants Israel received through Abraham and Moses. The Book of Mormon, on the other hand, presents an explicit divine plan that existed before Abraham—even before the creation of the earth—which had as its purpose making eternal life possible for God's human children universally—not just the descendants of Abraham. The *goodness of God* is frequently invoked by the Nephite prophets as a basic theological concept which can explain why God advanced his plan of salvation for men, including the covenants. They also used the phrase in the Old Testament pattern to explain the acts of God in delivering, blessing, and preserving his covenant people. This paper will demonstrate the strong and recurring reliance of Nephite prophets on this theological concept while simultaneously showing its application to both the covenantal context of the

Abrahamic covenant and the pre-covenantal context of the plan of salvation.

In a 2016 article,¹ Matthew L. Bowen shared his discovery that Nephi had demarcated his writings in the small plates as a single rhetorical unit with an inclusio by referring to *the goodness of God* at the beginning and again at the end.² Nephi invokes different versions of the same phrase another seven times in his writings. Benjamin uses it five times in his final sermon, and it occurs another

¹ See Matthew L. Bowen, “Nephi’s Good Inclusio,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 17, 2016, pp. 181–195 and now reprinted as the lead chapter in a collection of his related papers: Matthew L. Bowen, *Name as Key Word*, Interpreter Foundation, 2019, pp. 1–15. This article expands and updates Bowen’s earlier article: “Internal textual evidence for the Egyptian Origin of Nephi’s Name,” *Insights* 22, No. 11 (2002), p. 1, which in turn relies on John Gee’s earlier articles “A Note on the Name Nephi,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 1/1 (1992): 189–91, and “Four Suggestions on the Name *Nephi*,” in *Pressing Forward with the Book of Mormon*, edited by John W. Welch and Melvin J. Thorne (Provo: FARMS, 1999), 1–5.

² Cf. 1 Nephi 1:1 and 2 Nephi 33:14. Nephi’s familiarity with and inclination to use this common biblical rhetorical figure is on full display in Second Nephi where he used it repeatedly to demarcate the principal thirteen sections of that book that anchor its overall chiasmic structure. See Noel B. Reynolds, “Chiastic Structuring of Large Texts: Second Nephi as a Case Study,” in “*To Seek the Law of the Lord:*” *Essays in Honor of John W. Welch*, edited by Paul Y. Hoskisson and Daniel C. Peterson, The Interpreter Foundation, 2017, 333–349.

eleven times in the writings of Jacob, Mormon, and Alma. Some Old Testament scholars have identified *the goodness of God* as one dimension of his *hesed*, the covenant love that he displays to his people when delivering them from their enemies and blessing them in their times of need.

The phrase has received limited focused attention from Old Testament theologians and none that I have been able to find from Book of Mormon scholars. This paper will show that Book of Mormon prophets used the phrase in the same Old Testament way as an explanation for the blessings given to his covenant people but also in a second way as an explanation for his plan of salvation, the creation of the earth, the atonement performed by Jesus Christ, and the provision of a way (the gospel) for all men and women to become good like him and return to his presence. Had you asked Lehi and Nephi about this before they received their great visions, they would have given the standard Israelite definition for the goodness of God. After those visions, they only use the phrase in this second way. Those visions had expanded their perspective to see that the Lord loves all people equally and that Christ was coming to conquer both sin and death and to reveal his gospel through which all his creations might come unto him, becoming *good* themselves in the process, that they might receive eternal life. They saw the *goodness of God* as a pattern to which righteous men and women should aspire.

The *goodness of God* in the Old Testament and the Book of Mormon

The Book of Mormon itself begins and ends with a focus on *the goodness of God*. In his second sentence, Nephi explains his motivation for writing his book: he has been “highly favored of the Lord” and has “had a great knowledge of *the goodness and the mysteries of God*” (1 Nephi 1:1).³ At some point in the final decline of the Nephite nation, Mormon wrote to his son Moroni expressing his continual prayer “unto God the Father . . . that he through *his infinite goodness* and his grace” would “keep [Moroni] through the endurance of faith on his name to the end” (Moroni 8:3). In the final verse, Moroni warns his readers that at the last day, they will meet “the great Jehovah, the Eternal Judge of both quick and dead” (Moroni 10:34), who will judge them according to whether or not they have used

³ In the same sentence, Nephi has described his own parents as “goodly.” While this English term has attracted some commentary in scholarly discourse, perhaps the most obvious candidate for a Hebrew equivalent would be *tob* (to be or do good—the same root used for *goodness* in the Hebrew Bible) as applied to Moses in Exodus 2:2 where it is taken to signal “quality or nobility in human character.” See Andrew Bowling’s article on *tob*: “793 טוב (*tôb*) in R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke (editors), *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament (TWOT)*, Moody Bible Institute, 1980, 346.

this mortal life to become good like him.⁴ He uses *good* seven times in his final summary statement of the ways in which the Lord helps those who will accept his guidance to become good, even “holy without spot”.⁵

The same shift from the initial focus on the goodness of God to the potential goodness of men is foreshadowed by Nephi in his opening chapter when he announces as his thesis that he will show his readers “that the *tender mercies* of the Lord is over all them whom he hath chosen because of their faith to make them mighty, even unto the power of deliverance” (1 Nephi 1:20).⁶ While this thesis is supported throughout Nephi’s first book in the traditional Israelite way by reporting six accounts of God’s powerful intervention to save the covenant faithful

⁴ Cf. Moroni 7:48 where Moroni expresses the hope that true followers of Christ “may become the sons of God” and that “when he shall appear, we shall be like him” and “be purified as he is pure.”

⁵ Cf. Moroni 10:1, 6, 18, 25, 30, and 33.

⁶ All quotations from the Book of Mormon are taken from the Yale critical text. Royal Skousen (editor), *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text*, Yale University Press, 2009. Italics have sometimes been added for emphasis to ensure that readers will understand which words in a passage are important for the argument of the paper.

from threatened destruction,⁷ his second book makes it clear that he is ultimately referring to the deliverance of all men and women from death and the covenant faithful (those who become good) from sin and the captivity of the devil.

This opening chapter provides even more clues about this theme, which will in turn guide the reader through the entire book. The story of the opening chapter focuses on Lehi, who had been deeply troubled by the prophecies of some contemporaries who were warning the people that Jerusalem and its inhabitants would soon be destroyed and taken captive because of their wickedness. As he cried to the Lord “with all his heart, in behalf of his people,” he was shown a theophany of “God sitting upon his throne” and was given to know that the calamitous prophecies that he had heard would in fact be fulfilled. Lehi’s startling response to this negative news reveals that he had been given the big picture and now understood these pending destructions in terms of God’s “goodness and mercy,” as he exclaimed:

Great and marvelous are thy works, O Lord God Almighty. Thy throne is high in the heavens, and thy *power* and *goodness* and *mercy* is over all the

⁷ See the rhetorical analysis of First Nephi that shows the detailed and structured way in which Nephi defends his thesis in Noel B. Reynolds, “Nephi’s Outline,” *BYU Studies* 20, (no. 2, 1980, 1–18).

inhabitants of the earth. And because thou art merciful, thou will not suffer *those who come unto thee* that they shall perish. (1 Nephi 1:5–14)

In this paper, I will explore the possibility that *power* and *goodness* are used here to describe eternal attributes of God which in turn explain his decision to create this earth and its human population and to prepare a plan of salvation. That plan includes the atonement of Jesus Christ and his gospel as the way by which men and women can, with the benefit of his covenantal *mercy*, come unto him and attain goodness as well. In so doing, they may be delivered from the devil’s captivity and dwell in the presence of the Lord eternally.

The goodness of God in the Old Testament

While both *mercy* and *goodness* do have directly equivalent terms in the Hebrew Bible (*rahamim, tub*), both have also been used as translations for the more complex and theologically prominent Hebrew term *hesed*.⁸ For example,

⁸ See my working paper “Biblical *Hesed* and Nephite Covenant Culture,” August 28, 2019, for a detailed discussion of the term. Daniel Belnap first called the attention of LDS readers to Old Testament *hesed* in his essay “‘How Excellent is thy Lovingkindness’: The Gospel Principle of *Hesed*,” in *The Gospel of Jesus Christ in the Old Testament*, edited by D. Kelly Ogden, Jared W. Ludlow, and Kerry Muhlestein, BYU Religious Studies Center, 2009, 170–186.

mercy is the most frequently used translation for *hesed* in the King James Version of the Old Testament. And most linguistic studies of God's *goodness (tub)* in the Hebrew Bible have concluded that it is just one of the many dimensions of Yahweh's *hesed* as demonstrated in his care for his covenant people as he blesses them with peace, land, or delivers them from their enemies: "For the Lord is *good*

The Hebrew words used in this article have been transliterated, or Romanized, meaning they have been converted from the original Hebrew letters into the Roman (Latin) letters used in the English alphabet. Scholars have devised, over the years, various systems of transliteration of the Biblical Hebrew script, in order to preserve distinctive characteristics of ancient Hebrew pronunciation. The level of precision used when transliterating often depends on the purposes of the given article, what is needed for argumentation, and the intended audience. This article will use a more basic phonetic system of transliteration so that the converted Hebrew words will be accessible to the widest audience possible. So, for example, the Hebrew word רַחֲמִים (compassion, mercy), could be rendered more precisely as *raḥamim*, *rachamim*, or *rakhamim* to preserve the pharyngeal fricative *ḥet*. Because this "h" sound is somewhat foreign to English speakers, it is sometimes represented by "ch" or "kh." For the sake of accessibility and simplicity, we will represent the word as simply *rahamim*. Similarly, the transliteration *hesed* is based on the Hebrew original חֶסֶד (favor/grace, lovingkindness, mercy), which can also be transliterated as *ḥesed*, *chesed*, *checed*, or *khesed*.

(*tub*), for his *steadfast love* (*hesed*) endures for ever” (Jeremiah 33:11, RSV).⁹ As Stachowiak points out, “all the biblical texts refer to God’s goodness, either directly or by implication.” But that goodness is focused on the people of the covenant: “Yahweh is the good, kind and benign one who shows his favour and benevolence to his people and does this by virtue of their election and of the covenant.”¹⁰

While “the idea of essential goodness underlies” all the different shades of meaning of *good* in the Old Testament, “the Hebrew word *hesed* expresses goodness in a more concrete form, in the sense of divine favour and God’s loyal readiness to give help, particularly in connection with the covenant made on Mount Sinai.”¹¹ The Psalms contain numerous passages praising the goodness of God, the proofs of which are the various examples of his fulfilling his responsibilities to bless and deliver his covenant people as part of his *hesed*. Only occasionally do these express a more universal view—as in Psalm 100:1–5, where “all the earth is

⁹ Cf. Jeremiah 31:12–14. The most thorough dictionary treatment is found in Ingeborg Höver-Jorhag, “טוב *tôb*; טוב *tûb*; טוב *yṯb*,” *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament (TDOT)* 5:296–317. The transliteration *tub* is based on the Hebrew original טוב (goodness, good things), which can also be transliterated as *tûb*, *ṭub*, *ṭuv*, or *tuv*.

¹⁰ F. L. R. Stachowiak, “Goodness,” s.v. in Johannes B. Bauer (editor), *Encyclopedia of Biblical Theology: The Complete Sacramentum Verbi*, Crossroad, NY, 1981, p. 322.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

called upon to praise God for his goodness.”¹²

Scholarly opinion about the necessity of a prior relationship of obligation for *hesed* to be in play between men and God or just between men has been mixed. When Nelson Glueck wrote his seminal work on *hesed*, he clearly took the position that the Lord’s *hesed* was always grounded in a pre-existing covenant or other relationship of obligation.¹³ It could not be equated to God’s goodness generally or with spontaneous acts of kindness or friendship that were not so grounded.

God’s goodness, which is mentioned in these passages in connection with His *hesed*, in no way influences the established meaning of *hesed* and does not lead to a meaning of *hesed* as favor, as one might expect. For the pious, it was an act of Yahweh’s grace that he had entered into a covenant with them and showed them *hesed* in accordance with his promise. His *hesed*-

¹² Ibid., 324.

¹³ American archaeologist Nelson Glueck first published his University of Jena doctoral dissertation in 1927. As it gained classic status among Bible scholars, Hebrew Union College sponsored an English translation by Alfred Gottschalk and an introductory essay, “Recent Studies in *Hesed*,” pp. 1–32, by Gerald A. Larue under the editorial direction of Elias L. Epstein for its 1967 publication entitled *Hesed in the Bible*. This volume is now available in a 2011 paperback edition from Wipf & Stock. See page 102.

deeds were miracles to them.¹⁴ While the *hesed* relationship between Yahweh and his people was regarded as having originated through his goodness, *hesed* itself remained the mutual relationship of rights and duties which Yahweh had obligated himself to show.¹⁵ In this sense only is *hesed* to be understood. . . . The reason for Yahweh's . . . demonstrating all his power for the sake of his people throughout the course of history, must not be sought in his favor, grace, or goodness. . . . He stood by the people of his covenant, faithfully executing the *hesed* to which they were entitled by virtue of that relationship. . . . *Hesed* is best translated in these stereotyped passages as "covenantal loyalty"¹⁶ or "faithful assistance."¹⁷

Glueck here makes it clear that even though God's goodness can be seen as manifest in particular acts of *hesed*, he believes the Israelites attributed the origins of their covenant with the Lord as a product of his pre-existing goodness, a distinction that has not been generally acknowledged in the literature. As he clarifies further, relating God's goodness and grace:

¹⁴ Psalms 138:2, 8; 25:10; 119:41, 76; 103:17–18.

¹⁵ Psalms 106:7; 107:8, 15, 21, 31; 136:4; 4:4; 17:7; 31:22.

¹⁶ Psalms 100:5.

¹⁷ Glueck, 81.

Hesed is not identical with God's favor. However, since the relationship between God and His people was established by the grace of its election, *hesed* is based upon the grace of God . . . It could be held that the origin of the God-people (man) relationship stems from God's favor; and that the structuring of these relationships emanates from His ethical will . . .¹⁸

Eichrodt interpreted the earlier prophets' differently. Rather than seeing their use of *hesed* transforming into an ethical doctrine, he saw it as "a unique exaltation of the God with whom nothing on earth can be compared," and in this way providing "an expression adequate both to the all-surpassing greatness and to the goodness of God."¹⁹

In her first monograph on *hesed* Katherine Sakenfeld supported the claims of scholars who did not find biblical usage of the term that restrictive, pointing to evidence from the Peshitta. "The Peshitta normally uses *twybt*' ("goodness, kindness; a favor or benefit") as the translational equivalent of *hesed*."²⁰ However, Emanuel Tov has determined that the translational evidence for this less restrictive

¹⁸ Glueck, p. 87.

¹⁹ Eichrodt, I:363.

²⁰ Katherine Doob Sakenfeld, *The Meaning of Hesed in the Hebrew Bible: A New Inquiry*, Scholars Press, 1978, p. 16.

interpretation is late, dating to the Common Era.²¹ And in his exhaustive application of modern linguistic methodologies to this question, Gordon Clark came down solidly in support of Glueck's older view:

The methodology adopted in the present study has shown that a deep, enduring, personal commitment to each other is an essential feature of situations in which one human party extends *hesed* [הסד] to another. This is a mutual, bilateral commitment, unlike the unilateral commitment proposed by . . . Sakenfeld.²²

Glueck was thus vindicated in his general conclusion that

the *hesed* of God, while it is not to be identified with his grace, is still based upon the latter, insofar as the relationship between God and people,

²¹ Emanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*, second revised edition, Fortress Press, 2001, 151–153.

²² Gordon R. Clark, *The Word "Hesed" in the Hebrew Bible*, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015, 260–261. It should be noted that in her second monograph on this topic, Sakenfeld found *loyalty* to be the best translation for *hesed* and did recognize the presence of "existing commitment" which emphasizing the "situation of need" for recipients of *hesed*. Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, *Faithfulness in Action*, Fortress Press, 1985, 131.

structured by Him as a covenantal relationship, was effected by electing Israel through an act of grace.²³

The seminal texts in Exodus 33:19 and 34:4–7, when read together, also seem to identify God’s *goodness* (*tub*) with elements of his *hesed*:

And he [the Lord] said, ‘I will make all *my goodness* pass before you . . .

The Lord, the Lord, a God *merciful* and *gracious*, slow to anger, and abounding in *steadfast love* (*hesed*) and *faithfulness* (*’emet*), keeping *steadfast love* (*hesed*) for thousands” (RSV).²⁴

Dictionary treatments and linguistic studies of *hesed* and *tob* (to be or do good) and its derivatives tend to be consistent with one another in this approach.²⁵ But they sometimes articulate some uneasiness about passages where *tub* would seem to signal that the *goodness* of the Lord may predate the establishment of his covenants with Israel. While these passages do undergird God’s *hesed* toward his covenant people, they may also apply universally to his attitudes toward all

²³ Glueck, *Hesed in the Bible*, p. 102.

²⁴ See Robert P. Gordon’s discussion in “3201 טוב,” *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* (NIDOTTE) 2:355.

²⁵ The transliteration *tob* is based on the Hebrew original טוב (to be pleasing or good), which can also be transliterated as *ṭōb*, *ṭob*, *ṭov*, or *tov*.

humankind.²⁶ Glueck saw a similar universal ethic implicit in some of the minor prophets and wisdom literature.²⁷ As will be shown below, that distinction appears to be more pronounced and intentional in numerous Book of Mormon passages.

Three decades ago in a festschrift honoring Hugh W. Nibley, I argued that there is strong and extensive evidence that the version of Genesis available to the Nephite prophets in the plates of brass must have been practically identical to the revised early chapters attached to Genesis in the *Joseph Smith Translation*.²⁸ One key passage in establishing that connection is Moses 1:39: “For this is my work and my glory to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man.”²⁹ This straightforward statement of God’s boundless good intentions toward his human

²⁶ See, *e.g.*, the summaries of studies by Felix Asensio and Hans Joachim Stoebe in Gerald A. LaRue, “Recent Studies in Heseb,” which serves as an introduction to the English translation and publication of Nelson Glueck, *Heseb in the Bible*, Hebrew Union College, 1967, pp. 10–17, and reprinted by Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2011.

²⁷ Glueck, pp. 56–66.

²⁸ “The Brass Plates Version of Genesis,” in *By Study and Also by Faith: Essays in Honor of Hugh W. Nibley on the Occasion of his Eightieth Birthday*, 27 March 1990, II: 136–173. Edited by John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks, FARMS and Deseret Book Co., 1990.

²⁹ In other Moses passages the same concept is restated in the same terms (Moses 5:11; 6:59; 7:45).

children has no parallel in the current Old Testament, but does inform the teachings of the Nephite prophets repeatedly. The language describing the possibilities of eternal life for men

begins in 2 Nephi 2, the chapter that reminds us most strongly of the Moses texts, and is echoed thirty times by Nephi and every major writer of the book.³⁰ The companion concept of *immortality* or *immortal glory* shows up three times in Moses, twice in conjunction with *eternal life* (Moses 1:39; 6:59, 61).³¹

Modern scholars do find a few possible allusions in the Old Testament to Yahweh's concern for the immortality or even eternal life of all people, but these are not even noticed by most readers.³² But the Lord's eternal focus on these possibilities for all humankind as articulated repeatedly in the Nephite teachings

³⁰ See 2 Nephi 2:27–28; 10:23; 31:18, 20; Jacob 6:11; Enos 1:3; Mosiah 5:15; 15:23–25; 18:9, 13; 26:20; 28:7; Alma 1:4; 5:28; 7:16; 11:40; 13:29; 22:15; Helaman 5:8; 3 Nephi 9:14; 15:9; Moroni 9:25. For sample New Testament parallels see John 6:54; 6:68.

³¹ “The Brass Plates Version,” 150.

³² One good example can be found in Edmond Jacob, *Theology of the Old Testament*, translated by Arthur W. Heathcote and Philip J. Allcock, New York, Harper and Brothers, 1958, pages 107 and 148–149.

testifies to his *goodness* preexisting his covenant with Abraham or others, and therefore preexisting his covenant *hesed*.

The Book of Mormon expansion of the Old Testament discourse about the goodness of God

What may only have been implicit in the Hebrew Bible as a background for the covenant God gave to Abraham is made explicit and prominent in the discourse of the Nephite prophets. While they also use God's goodness to explain the faithfulness, justice, mercy and deliverances of God in his dealings with his covenant people, the Israelites and the Nephites, they also invoke their visionary understanding of that goodness to explain God's love and salvation proffered to all humankind. The visions given to Lehi, Nephi, and possibly others expanded their grasp of God's goodness in two directions. They were given an understanding of "the great plans of the eternal God," which preceded Abraham and even the existence of the earth. They refer explicitly to "the plan of salvation/ redemption" by one or another of its labels thirty times, and implicitly much more.³³ They marveled at "*the great goodness of our God*" who had created and populated the

³³ See Noel B. Reynolds, "The Plan of Salvation and the Book of Mormon," *Religious Educator* 20 (2020), forthcoming.

earth and had prepared an atonement and a way by which all of his human children could repent and qualify to return to his divine presence.³⁴

The Nephite prophets also clearly believed that the Lord had blessed Abraham and his descendants with a covenant relationship that would tie them to him with the expectations of *hesed* being shown on all sides. They were also able to accommodate that vision to their revelation of the gospel of Jesus Christ which would be extended not only to the descendants of Abraham, but to all men and women throughout the earth as the means by which they could escape the captivity of the devil and receive eternal life.

In so doing, they expanded the explanatory power of the Old Testament concept of *the goodness of God* far beyond what is explicit anywhere in the text of the Hebrew Bible. For the Nephites, *the goodness of God* provides the explanatory background for their very existence, for the existence of the earth and its peoples, for the nature of the probationary state in which men find themselves, and for the efforts of the Lord and his servants to bring all men and women to repentance that they might become holy like him and return to his presence. As Moroni was

³⁴ Jacob repeatedly exclaims in this manner as he presents the first comprehensive account of the plan of salvation in 2 Nephi 9–10. The quote is from 9:10.

taught by Jesus Christ directly:

A But he *that believeth these things* which I have spoken,

B him will I visit with the manifestations of *my Spirit*.

C And he shall know and bear record;

B* for because of *my Spirit*

A* he shall *know that these things* are true,

A for it *persuadeth men to do good*.

B And whatsoever thing persuadeth men to do *good is of me*,

B* for *good* cometh of none save it be *of me*.

A* I am the same that *leadeth men to all good*. (Ether 4:11–12)

By contrast, the Old Testament is usually understood to tell the story of Abraham and his descendants, to whom God gave a covenant that if they would obey him in all things, he would prosper and protect them, delivering them from their enemies and even provoking them to repentance when they strayed.³⁵ While it is sometimes interpreted to promise salvation universally, that is not explicit or

³⁵ Christian and Jewish interpretations of the Abrahamic covenant are compared with the Nephite interpretation in Noel B. Reynolds, “All Kindreds shall be Blessed: Nephite, Jewish, and Christian Interpretations of the Abrahamic Covenant,” in Gaye Strathearn (editor), Stephen Ricks festschrift, forthcoming.

self-evident in the text itself. The Nephites saw themselves as descendants and beneficiaries of the Abrahamic covenant, but with this major interpretive expansion derived from their founding visions in which they had learned of the coming of Jesus Christ and his teachings as explained above.³⁶

Nephite understandings of *hesed* and *the goodness of God*

The goodness of God experienced by covenant keepers

Eight of the 25 references to *the goodness of God* in the Book of Mormon can readily be understood as explanations for the blessings God gives to his covenant people when they are obedient—with the Nephite clarification that the covenant at issue is the gospel covenant they have made as individuals to repent and endure to the end in obedience to Jesus Christ.

Benjamin refers directly to that covenant when he reminds his hearers that they “have known of *his goodness* and tasted of his love” when they received a remission of their sins, “which causeth such exceeding great joy in [their] souls” (Mosiah 4:11). The same understanding is evoked when Mormon speaks of tasting and knowing “of *the goodness of Jesus*” (Mormon 1:15) in his youth and when he

³⁶ See Noel B. Reynolds, “Understanding the Abrahamic Covenant through the Book of Mormon,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 57 (No. 3, 2018), pp. 39–74.

prays that “through *his infinite goodness* and grace” the Lord “will keep [his son Moroni] through the endurance of faith on his name to the end” (Moroni 8:3).³⁷

Mormon sounds just like an Old Testament prophet when he comments as editor:

“We can see that the Lord in *his great infinite goodness* doth bless and prosper those who put their trust in him” (Helaman 12:1). In similar Old Testament style, three additional passages link the goodness of God to his deliverance of his faithful people from captivity or from destruction in perilous conflicts: “When they thought of *the immediate goodness of God* and his power in delivering Alma and his brethren out of the hands of the Lamanites and of bondage, they did raise their voices and gave thanks to God” (Mosiah 25:10. Cf. Alma 57:25 and 36).

God’s pre-covenant goodness

Most of the other references to the goodness of God either explicitly or

³⁷ Mormon uses the same gospel understanding to explain “the sorrowing of the damned” negatively because they are not moved to repentance “because of *the goodness of God*” (Mormon 2:13). That basic gospel understanding is spelled out several times in the Book of Mormon by Christ in his own voice. See Noel B. Reynolds, “The Gospel According to Mormon,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 68 (2:2015): 218–234, revised and updated for *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 29 (2018), 65–103, and “How ‘Come unto Me’ Fits into the Nephite Gospel,” *Religious Educator* 18 (No. 2, 2017), pp. 15–29.

implicitly appeal to the broader perspective given to Lehi and Nephi in their early visions rather than to the Old Testament perspective as defined by the Abrahamic covenant. Lehi had responded to those first visions by declaring his new universalistic understanding that “thy power and *goodness* and mercy is over *all the inhabitants of the earth*” (1 Nephi 1:14). Lehi later cites “the creation of the earth” twice as context for his understanding of God’s “*infinite goodness*” in bringing his people “into this precious land of promise” (2 Nephi 1:10). Benjamin also saw God’s salvation applying to *all “the children of men”* because of “the atonement which hath been prepared from *the foundation of the world*” (Mosiah 4:6). Nephi refers to that same expanded vision when he praises “*the great goodness of the Lord* in shewing me his great and marvelous works” (2 Nephi 4:17). Jacob is in the middle of his explanation of the universal plan of salvation when he exclaims, “O how great *the goodness of our God* who *prepareth a way* for our escape” (2 Nephi 9:10).³⁸

It may be that when the Nephite prophets describe *the goodness of God* as

³⁸ *The way* is one of the principal alternative labels for the gospel of Jesus Christ in the Book of Mormon text and occurs in that role 82 times. See Noel B. Reynolds, “Rethinking Alma 36,” in *Give Ear To My Words: Text and Context of Alma 36–42*, edited by Kerry M. Hull, Nicholas J. Frederick, and Hank R. Smith, RSC, 2019, p. 457..

“great” or “infinite” they are in fact referring to the pre-covenantal reality.

Benjamin refers directly to “*the infinite goodness of God*” as made manifest in the Nephite visions and “their great views of that which is to come” (Mosiah 5:3)—without any trace of a reference to the Abrahamic covenant. Alma explained the plan of redemption to the apostate people of Ammonihah “according to *the supreme goodness of God*” (Alma 12:32). In the course of their 25 references to *the goodness of God*, the Nephite writers refer four times to his goodness as “infinite,” which also seems to signal their broader perspective.³⁹ In the same sense, it is called “great” three times. It is also described as “supreme” and “exceeding,” which would seem to have the same expansive implications as “infinite.”

Less explicit, but more likely based in the expanded vision of Lehi and Nephi than in the traditional perspective are prophetic appeals to recognize God’s goodness in its fullness as motivation to enter into or return to his covenant. Both Lehi and Nephi appear to be referring to those visions as the source of their “knowledge of *the goodness . . . of God*” (1 Nephi 1:1, 1:14, and 5:4). In his final

³⁹ I have already indicated above that Mormon may be an exception. He twice seems to use *infinite goodness of God* in the Old Testament covenantal pattern (Moroni 8:3 and Helaman 12:1).

address to his people, Benjamin urges them to “remember and always retain in remembrance the greatness of God and your own nothingness and *his goodness* and *long-suffering* [*hesed?*] towards you unworthy creatures, and humble yourselves even in the depths of humility” (Mosiah 4:11. Cf. v. 5). After Alma was converted in a visionary experience in which he saw the same heavenly things Lehi had been shown centuries previously (cf. 1 Nephi 1:8 and Alma 36:22) , his father assembled the priests to hear Alma’s words “that the eyes of the people might be opened, to see and know of *the goodness and glory of God*” (Mosiah 27:22).

The invitation to experience the goodness of God personally

Drawing on the great vision of the tree of life where Lehi and Nephi had been shown how the Lord’s straight and narrow path leads people to the opportunity “to partake of the fruit” of the tree of life which is “most sweet above all,”⁴⁰ Nephi uniquely characterizes the process of accepting and following the gospel of Jesus Christ as “*partaking of the goodness of God.*” In preparation for his foundational presentation of the doctrine or gospel of Christ, Nephi asks rhetorically: “Hath the Lord commanded any that they should not *partake of his*

⁴⁰ See 1 Nephi 8:10–18, 24–35.

goodness?” He then answers his own question by assuring his readers that the Lord “inviteth them all to come unto him and *partake of his goodness*” (2 Nephi 26:28). For

he inviteth them all to come unto him and *partake of his goodness*. And he denieth none that come unto him, black and white, bond and free, male and female; and he remembereth the heathen. And all are alike unto God, both Jew and Gentile. (2 Nephi 26:33)

After presenting the gospel as taught to him by the Father and the Son in vision,⁴¹ Nephi looks to his readers in the distant future and warns those who will not accept his message and “*partake of the goodness of God*,” that “these words shall condemn you at the last day” (2 Nephi 33:14). His brother Jacob then takes up the pen and begins his brief record by linking Nephi’s phrase to the gospel of Christ explicitly: “Wherefore we labored diligently among our people that we might persuade them to come unto Christ and *partake of the goodness of God*” (Jacob 1:7).⁴²

⁴¹ See 2 Nephi 31 and the analysis provided in Noel B. Reynolds, “The Gospel According to Nephi: An Essay on 2 Nephi 31,” *Religious Educator* 16, no. 2 (2015), 51–75.

⁴² Jennifer C. Lane has convincingly linked this “partaking” in the vision of the tree of life to Alma’s account of Christians being “born of God.” See her “Born of God—Partaking of

Alma later invokes the same image and connects it to the same gospel message: “Come and be baptized unto repentance, that ye also may be *partakers of the fruit of the tree of life*” (Alma 5:62. Cf. verses 34–35). Expanding the same image for his wayward son Corianton, Alma tells him, “I would that ye should come unto Christ, which is the Holy One of Israel, and *partake of his salvation* and the power of his redemption; whosoever will come may come and *partake of the waters of life* freely” (Alma 42:27).⁴³

Closely related to the metaphor of “partaking,” Nephi and Lehi also spoke of *knowing* the goodness of God (1 Nephi 1:1 and 5:4), and later prophets fashioned their own variations on this phrasing, including Mormon who spoke of his own experience at age fifteen when he “was visited of the Lord and *tasted and knew of the goodness* of Jesus” (Mormon 1:15). Here Mormon may be echoing his own record of Benjamin who used the verbs of tasting, remembering, and knowing.⁴⁴

And again I say unto you, . . . that as ye have come to the *knowledge of the*

the Fruit,” in Kerry M. Hull, Nicholas J. Frederick, and Hank R. Smith (eds.), *Give Ear To My Words: Text and Context of Alma 36–42*, RSC, 2019, 109–128.

⁴³ Mormon and Moroni may have modified the same image from Nephi when they spoke of “partaking of the heavenly gift.” See 4 Nephi 13, Ether 12:8–9, and 13:11.

⁴⁴ Cf. Mosiah 4:5 and 6, 27:22 and 32, and Mormon 2:15–16.

glory of God or if ye have *known of his goodness* and have *tasted of his love* and have received a remission of your sins, which causeth such exceeding great joy in your souls, even so I would that ye should remember and always *retain in remembrance the greatness of God* and your own nothingness *and his goodness and long-suffering* towards you unworthy creatures. (Mosiah 5:11)

One reference speaks of the goodness of God as being “immediate” (Mosiah 25:10). As the Oxford English Dictionary warns us, we should not assume that this reference is to time.⁴⁵ Recognizing that the modern Book of Mormon translation is in Early Modern English, we should understand *immediate* to mean “unmediated.”⁴⁶ Recipients experience and feel God’s goodness directly and

⁴⁵ The general definition given for *immediate* as an adjective: “Said of a person or thing in its relation to another. That has no intermediary or intervening member, medium, or agent; that is in actual contact or direct personal relation.” *OED*, s.v. “Immediate.”

⁴⁶ With the collaboration of Stanford Carmack, Skousen has determined that the “words, phrases, expressions, grammatical forms, and syntactic patterns” of the original Book of Mormon “are archaic English” and conform well with Early Modern English (approx. 1450–1720). See Royal Skousen, *The History of the Text of the Book of Mormon: Part Three, The Nature of the Original Language*, The Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies

without secondary intervention. This passage refers to the experience in which Alma's people were miraculously delivered in one day from the Lamanites. Others speak of knowing, partaking of, or tasting his goodness as they experience the remission of sins or are born of God. In these 25 mentions of God's goodness, we can recognize that it is frequently characterized as personally relevant to each person—that every human being is invited to partake of his goodness by repenting and taking up the covenant path the gospel describes for them as individuals.

The power and goodness and mercy of God

Goodness is not the only attribute of God that the Nephite prophets invoked to explain his plan of salvation. Nephi also referred to the Lord's knowledge and power: "But the Lord *knoweth all things* from the beginning. Wherefore he *prepareth a way* to accomplish all his works among the children of men. For

and Brigham Young University Studies, Provo, Utah, 2018, p. 3. Carmack has kindly provided me with the following mid-seventeenth century example: "Upon a serious perpension of the irresistible pressure or weight of this plain and genuine inference, I once resolved to supersede all other Arguments of the Creation of the World out of nothing, by the sole and *immediate Goodnesse*, Wisdome, and Power of the Supreme, because most perfect Being." Walter Charleton, *The Darknes of atheism dispelled by the light of nature: a physico-theologicall treatise*, London, 1652, pp. 39–40.

behold, he hath *all power* unto the fulfilling of all his words” (1 Nephi 9:6).

In the very earliest mention of *the goodness of God* chronologically, Lehi also cites his *power* and *mercy*. While *mercy* is one of the English terms translators invoke most frequently for *hesed*, it also is the standard translation for *rahamim* for which it seems most adequate.⁴⁷ In either case, God’s mercy is connected to his covenantal *hesed*. But the divine power that Lehi refers to is clearly needed in this and other passages to explain God’s ability to make and execute his plan of salvation, the creation of the world, the defeat of death and the devil, the resurrection, and the judgment with its consequent rewards of eternal life or eternal

⁴⁷ Horacio Simian-Yofre sees *rahamim* as “a fundamental element of Yahweh’s nature” and resists the tendency of translators to equate it with *hesed*, with which it sometimes occurs in a parallel structure. He sees this parallelism suggesting that the combination be treated “as a compound of complementary expressions: *hesed* expresses the fundamental goodness of God, *rhim* the special favor shown by God in the situation of sin and affliction” (cf. Isa. 54:8: ‘Because of [my] everlasting goodness I have had compassion on you’). See his dictionary article on mercy in the Hebrew Bible: “רַחֵם *rhim*,” *TDOT* 13:437–452 at 452. This seems to contradict the view of Glueck and others who saw God’s mercy as one of the chief elements or manifestations of his *hesed*, but is more in line with the Nephite view that God’s mercy was also evident as one dimension of his pre-Abraham goodness.

punishment.

Benjamin later echoed this same connection, citing the “wisdom and *power* and justice and mercy of him *who created all things in heaven and in earth*, who is *God above all*” (Mosiah 5:15). And God also wields his power throughout salvation history to bring new peoples such as the Gentiles into covenant relationships with him. Nephi was shown in vision how the future Gentile nations would be “delivered by *the power of God* out of the hands of all other nations” and “*lifted up by the power of God* above all other nations upon the face of the land” (1 Nephi 13:19, 30). His divine purpose would be to “bring forth unto them *in mine own power* much of my gospel” (1 Nephi 13:34). Those who would choose to receive that gospel and “seek to bring forth my Zion at that day,” would be blessed with “the gift and *the power* of the Holy Ghost. And if they endure unto the end, they *shall be lifted up* at the last day and shall be saved in the everlasting kingdom of the Lamb” (1 Nephi 13:37).

However, the vast majority of over 300 mentions of *the power of God* in the Book of Mormon occur in texts describing how God can bless, protect, or deliver his covenant people *after* they have received the gospel. God’s dependable *hesed* is clearly a function of both his goodness, his mercy, his knowledge, and his power. Nephi’s thesis as quoted above states this clearly: “But behold, I Nephi

will shew unto you that the *tender mercies* of the Lord is over all them whom he hath chosen because of their faith to make them mighty, even unto the power of deliverance” (1 Nephi 1:20b). While most of the references to *the power of God* do refer to his deliverance of his people from captivity and other major dangers, many others are explicitly spiritual and refer to their being rescued from the powers of the devil. In his closing sentences, Moroni makes explicit this principal blessing that comes through *the power of God*:

And if by the grace of God ye are perfect in Christ, ye can in no wise deny *the power of God*. And again, if ye by the grace of God are perfect in Christ and deny not *his power*, then are ye sanctified in Christ by the grace of God through the shedding of the blood of Christ, which is in the covenant of the Father, unto the remission of your sins, that ye become holy, without spot.

(Moroni 10:32–33)

Knowledge of the goodness of God

It should also be noted that eight of the 25 references to *the goodness of God* reviewed above explicitly mention it as something that is “known” or “remembered.”⁴⁸ These recognitions of God’s infinite power and goodness

⁴⁸ Cf. 1 Nephi 1:1, 5:4, Mosiah 4:5, 6, 11, 25:10, 27:22, Mormon 1:15.

motivated people repeatedly to praise God and to enter into the covenant relationship proffered by his gospel. Those who chose to do so and obeyed his commandments as they walked day by day up that covenant path could testify that they were blessed, protected, and guided from all evil by his power which was often described as “the power of the Holy Ghost.”⁴⁹ In every case, as Nephi explains, it is “coming to the *knowledge* of the true Messiah, their Lord and their Redeemer” which is an essential first step.⁵⁰

Nephi makes this point emphatically by using some form of *know* or *knowledge* six times in the same summary statement:

A 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.

B And then shall they *know* and *come to the knowledge of their*

⁴⁹ See Noel B. Reynolds, “The Language of the Spirit in the Book of Mormon,” *Interpreter*, 33 (2019), pp. 209–214 for a detailed discussion of the ways in which the Nephites saw God using the power of the Holy Ghost to accomplish his purposes.

⁵⁰ 1 Nephi 10:14. The essential role of knowledge in this process for those who will enter a covenant relationship with the Lord is documented in Noel B. Reynolds, “Understanding the Abrahamic Covenant through the Book of Mormon,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 57, no. 3 (2018), pp. 69–71.

forefathers

C and also to *the knowledge of the gospel of their Redeemer*,
 which was ministered unto their fathers by him.

B* Wherefore they shall come to *the knowledge of their Redeemer* and
 the very points of his doctrine,

A* that they may *know* how to come unto him and be saved. (1 Nephi 15:14)

The chiasmic structure of Nephi’s explanation to his brothers starts off with two elements that refer to the understanding of the Abrahamic covenant (A and B), which they already recognize, before linking and transitioning to and focusing on (C) the prophesied “gospel of their Redeemer” and (B*) “the very points of his doctrine” that will become the means by which (A*) all future peoples “may *know* how to come unto him and be saved”—the message that they will repeatedly reject.

The goodness—and the depravity—of the people

The Book of Mormon also emphasizes the high contrast between the goodness of God and the potential goodness of men on the one hand and the wickedness of so many men on the other. Mormon’s selections of stories from Nephite history feature this theme throughout. And then Moroni features this contrast dramatically in his penultimate chapter by inserting an epistle from his father in which the unimaginable depravity of the Nephites is described.

O the depravity of my people! They are without order and without mercy. . . . And they have become strong in their perversion. And they are alike brutal, sparing none, neither old nor young. And they delight in every thing *save that which is good*. And the sufferings of our women and our children upon all the face of this land doth exceed every thing. Yea, tongue cannot tell, neither can it be written. (Moroni 9:18–19)

This potential for evil was also shared by all men. Abinadi taught the Nephites that the devil had beguiled their “first parents” which was the cause of all mankind’s becoming carnal, sensual, devilish, knowing evil from good, subjecting themselves to the devil. . . . But remember that 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 . . . an enemy to God. (Mosiah 16:2–5)

And as Alma explained to his son Corianton:

And thus we see that all mankind were fallen, and they were in the grasp of justice, yea, the justice of God which consigned them forever to be cut off from his presence.

And now the plan of mercy could not be brought about except an atonement should be made. Therefore God himself atoneth for the sins of

the world, to bring about the plan of mercy to appease the demands of justice, that God might be *a perfect just God* and *a merciful God* also.

(Alma 42:14–15)

God’s great plan was grounded in his ability and desire to overcome all evil through his mercy, power, knowledge, and *goodness*.

Conclusions

In all their teachings, the Nephite prophets recognized the human potential for both goodness and evil. Because of his infinite goodness, God prepared a plan of salvation, including the atonement of Jesus Christ, so that in this state of probation, all humankind could choose the covenant path of his gospel by repenting and coming to him. This path would prepare them as they follow him and endure to the end to become good like him that they might enter into his presence and into eternal life. Or they could choose to follow their own desires and be led captive by the devil, who desires “that all men might be miserable like unto himself” (2 Nephi 2:27).

In Nephite discourse, *the goodness of God* was a phrase that was used in two different ways—to explain God’s provision for the possibility of eternal life for all men and women and to explain his miraculous support and deliverances, day by

day, for those who are enduring to the end on the covenant path. While traces of that first way have been noticed by some Bible scholars, the general pattern of scholarly interpretation of the Old Testament has been to identify *the goodness of God* as one part of the covenantal *hesed* that he shows to his people as he protects, delivers, and reclaims them through their cycles of obedience and disobedience.