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Shards of Combat

How Did Satan Seek to Destroy the Agency of Man?

Philip L. Barlow

Human beings in other guise lived before the creation of our world. This belief is at once controversial and durable, pervading the history of Western thought and bearing analogues elsewhere.¹ That gods, angels, or other celestial beings rebelled against their superiors or engaged in cosmic conflict prior to earth's creation is a related concept, widespread in the ancient world. Depictions or allusions to such contests appear in the myths, lore, art, literature, and sacred texts of Babylon, Egypt, Israel, Persia, Greece, Rome, far-flung tribal religions, and elsewhere. In certain cases, the older traditions endure even to the present, as in Sufi (Muslim) expressions of Iblis's rebellion against Allah.

No coherent account of a war in heaven has descended to us in the biblical record, though entwined imagery and hints from Genesis, Isaiah, Luke, 2 Peter, Jude, and the book of Revelation have sustained narrative, visual, musical, theatrical, and theological presentations across the centuries. In Christianity, these traditions achieved salience, transmitted by the early Christian fathers and medieval mystery plays, among other avenues. The literary tradition culminated in Milton, informed as much by Hesiod, Homer, and Virgil as by the Bible. *Paradise Lost* exerted colossal influence on subsequent generations, including those in the United States.

1. Terryl L. Givens gives the most probing and only systematic history of the idea in Western thought: *When Souls Had Wings: Pre-mortal Existence in Western Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

Ancient accounts of extraterrestrial battles variously pitted light against darkness, order against chaos, pride toward one's betters, power against power, or good against evil (not necessarily in modern terms). The notion that heavenly war hinged on the proposed creation of earth and the prospect of a deepened agency granted to its future human inhabitants was untaught until Joseph Smith's revelations in the antebellum United States recast the war from cosmic military engagement to a clash of ideas concerning "salvation."² In this framing, expanded in the minds of disciples from scant filaments of scripture, a pre-earthly Lucifer aspired to redeem an envisioned humankind without exception and to usurp the honor and power of God, who rejected Satan's hubris. Satan rebelled, incited war, and, before and perhaps after being cast out, "sought to destroy the agency of man" (Moses 4:3), who was to be sent to earth to experience, to learn, to choose, to be tested, and to achieve his and her divine potential.³ In Joseph Smith's panorama of what existence is about, not even love, grace, intelligence, or relationships eclipse agency as prime values; their very nature and meaning depend on it. To inhibit agency is demonic.

In what sense and by what means did Satan seek to extinguish this agency? This remains an open question; no response reigns official in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Yet examining assumptions and possibilities amounts to more than elaborating the unknown. The effort and the additional questions it spawns lay bare something of the nature of agency itself, along with threats to it. Whether to believers who take the War in Heaven as actual pre-earth trauma or to skeptics sensitive to the potency of mythos, exploring the story's contours may affect our maps of historical, existential, and spiritual reality. Hence it may condition how we choose to live.

Before turning to theories of Satan's methods in working to negate the agency of God's children, we note that key phrasings in Latter-day Saint scripture concerning agency and even specifically the War in Heaven have histories preceding Joseph Smith's restoration and are independent of that war. For example, "sought to destroy the agency of man"

2. *Paradise Lost* seems at first glance to be an exception because liberty (compare agency) is pertinent in Milton's account of heavenly war. However, it arises there as an issue not because Satan objected to a widened agency proposed for prospective humans, but due to Satan's sense that his own liberty had been infringed upon by God's choice of Christ to reign above others and his choice of humans for special honor.

3. Isaiah 14:12–20; Luke 10:16–18; Jude 1:6, 9; Revelation 12:4–17; Moses 1:39; 4:1–4; Abraham 3:22–28; Doctrine and Covenants 29:35–41; 76:25–26.

(Moses 4:3) and “to act . . . and not to be acted upon” (2 Ne. 2:26) were linguistic formulas embedded in the Arminian/Reformed debates of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Whether knowingly or unconsciously, the Prophet Joseph adopted certain phrases from Arminian critics who accused Calvinists of an exaggerated effort to protect the sovereignty of God, sacrificing human agency in the process. As New York’s prominent Calvinist (and Presbyterian) David Low Dodge characterized one such critique of his own position in 1808, “If we are totally depraved, I think it must destroy moral agency; from which it will follow, that we do not act, but are acted upon like machines.”⁴ The language of “acting” and “being acted upon” traces further back through John Locke and well beyond to the ancient Epicurean poet, Lucretius.⁵ In translating or crafting new revelation, Joseph Smith’s words resembled known but disparate vocabulary units, frequently of biblical but also Masonic, theological, and political origins. In many cases the Prophet would not likely have known their original meanings, but in any event he frequently transposed these phrasings from their original setting to a fresh context, weaving them into new and coherent forms, as a mother or father bird integrates vagrant twigs and debris into a new nest for their young. This was not plagiarism in any modern sense but rather was intrinsic to his prophetic mode.⁶

4. David Low Dodge, *A Religious Conference, in Four Dialogues, between Lorenzo and Evander, by a Layman, to Which Is Added, Leslie’s Short Method with Deists* (New York: Collins and Perkins, 1808), 15. The quotation is actually attributable to Dodge’s dialogue character “Lorenzo” (possibly referencing Lorenzo Dow), who represents the Arminian critique of Reformed theology.

5. Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, trans. H. A. J. Munro (Cambridge: George Bell and Sons, 1908), 155.

6. I call this process *barauification*, after Joseph Smith’s spelling (*barau*) of the Hebrew word (*bārā*) that rests behind the English “created” in Genesis 1:1. Joseph Smith learned, while studying Hebrew in Kirtland, Ohio, in 1835, that the word means “to fashion” or “to organize” rather than to conjure into existence *ex nihilo*, as per traditional Christian belief. Just as God forged the world from pre-existent, chaotic materials, so the Prophet Joseph fashioned translation or new revelation partly from scattered sources. The result created *order* from *chaos*, an order possessing independent coherence, power, and new meaning in a fresh context. In the process of verbal “barauifying” that sketched the War in Heaven, Smith intentionally or incidentally resolved a centuries-old debate about free will in Protestant circles. He also broadened the discourse on free will from causation (God) to ontology (human nature) and cosmology (the divine course of salvation) planned in the pre-earth heavens. (Thanks to Stephen Betts for the last of these insights.)

Vestiges of a similar process may be seen in hundreds of disparate phrases comprising the Doctrine and Covenants, the Book of Mormon, and the Pearl of Great Price

History of the Predominant Understanding

Whether or not readers were attuned to such processes in the formation of Restoration scripture, two theories eventually coalesced to dominate Latter-day Saint understanding of how Satan conspired to negate agency. Each of them possesses a history—they were not evident in Joseph Smith’s lifetime—a fact that lays grounds for noticing other possibilities latent in the tradition.

Orson Pratt planted the seeds of what became the prevailing theories as early as 1853. “If Satan had been permitted to carry out his plan,” wrote Pratt, “it would either have destroyed the agency of man, so that he could not commit sin; or it would have redeemed him in his sins and wickedness without any repentance or reformation of life. If the agency of man were destroyed, he would only act as he is acted upon, and consequently he would merely be a machine.”⁷ The alternatives Pratt discerned, then, would have obliterated agency or rendered it moot. However, neither he nor his contemporaries nor Joseph Smith before them proffered much in the way of a Satanic *method* for either possibility. What did it mean to say Satan intended to annihilate agency? How would he attempt it?

If Church members in the twenty-first century were polled to respond to the question, an outsized majority would probably explain that Satan hoped to *coerce* the human will. He would force human beings to be good. If a questioner were to wonder aloud why “a third part of the hosts of heaven” (D&C 29:36) would be lured to a scheme where morally good souls were imagined as the product of coercion, some Church members might refine their thought: perhaps Satan planned to force every person *to obey his commandments*. This too would seem to yield conformity rather than goodness, but the presumption in this model is that this was precisely why God rejected Satan’s plan. Because scripture and Joseph Smith are silent on the matter of Satan’s mode, however, tracing how the idea of Satanic coercion rose to dominance among the Saints seems useful.

From perhaps as early as the 1830–31 reception of the book of Moses, Joseph Smith and others were aware of a pre-earthly conflict in which

that have been appropriated from secular and religious sources and woven into the expression of the revelations, which in turn have their own independent meaning and coherence. These phrasings became natural units in Joseph’s vocabulary as he gave written form to his revelations. Samples include “opposition in all things” (2 Ne. 2:11) and “true and living church” (D&C 1:30). For other examples and wider context, see Philip L. Barlow, *Mormons and the Bible: The Place of the Latter-day Saints in American Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 22–25, 28–32.

7. Orson Pratt, *The Seer* 1, no. 4 (1853): 52.

Satan sought to suppress human agency.⁸ Similarly, leaders from the Church's earliest days exuded a distaste for ideological, religious, or political coercion.⁹ Although the tether between these distinct ideas seems obvious and inevitable to many twenty-first-century disciples, it was not until 1882 that a Church leader, John Taylor, explicitly asserted that Satan's premortal attempt to eliminate agency consisted of coercion.¹⁰ The context for this new linkage was the coercion leaders perceived in the increasingly harsh legal and public relations measures that federal authorities imposed upon the Saints, pressure intended to dismantle their practices of plural marriage and de facto theocracy. Said President Taylor, "Satan sought to rob man of his free agency, as many of his agents [congress, the

8. The books of Moses and Abraham were not published until 1851, after which at least some church leaders, such as Orson Pratt, treated them virtually as scripture—decades before their canonization in 1880.

9. Joseph Smith taught that all people have the capacity to resist the devil and championed the sanctity of religious conscience. See "History, 1838–1856, Volume C-1 [2 November 1838–31 July 1842]," 1202, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed March 20, 2019, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-c-1-2-november-1838-31-july-1842/374>. Brigham Young avowed that neither God nor the Church will control the exercise of agency. *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. Liverpool: F. D. Richards, 1855–86), 6:345–46 (July 31, 1859); see also George Q. Cannon, in *Journal of Discourses*, 15:369–70 (March 23, 1873); John Taylor, in *Journal of Discourses*, 19:158 (November 14, 1877); Erastus Snow, in *Journal of Discourses*, 20:184 (April 6, 1879); and Charles Penrose, in *Journal of Discourses*, 22:86 (May 1, 1880). Many others spoke in similar veins.

10. Previous to John Taylor's statement, leaders and the Saints more broadly did marshal traditional language concerning the devil's capacity to deceive, tempt, and try to control humans and, if people did not take care, to overwhelm them. The devils were taken to oppose the Saints' every effort to do good. Many felt that all illnesses of the Saints come from the devils. Satan has control over the wicked, they believed, but followers of Jesus Christ are free from his control. In a representative urging from March 1857, as tensions that would eventuate in the Utah War grew, First Presidency member Daniel H. Wells lamented the corruption that had beset generations for thousands of years, with the result that "the devil has power over us through this cause in a measure that he otherwise would not have; and were it not for the multiplicity of the blessings of the Almighty that gives us power and strength, we would most likely be overcome of the devil." *Journal of Discourses*, 4:254 (March 1, 1857). Later that month, Apostle and future Church President Wilford Woodruff noted the imminent spring and cautioned, "As we turn our attention to the plough and to cultivating the earth, if we forget our prayers, the Devil will take double the advantage of us." *Journal of Discourses*, 5:51 (March 22, 1857). That autumn, after the outbreak of violence, Apostle Erastus Snow declared, "There is but one alternative for this people: it is our religion, our God, our liberty, or slavery, the Devil, and death." *Journal of Discourses*, 6:92 (November 29, 1857). So, in the mid-nineteenth century, Satan was perceived as a threat to liberty, but, again, it was not until the 1880s that this trait was named a cause for his premortal exile from heaven.

courts, territorial marshals] are seeking to do today; and for this cause Satan was cast out of heaven.”¹¹ Beyond the novelty of linking federal action with the cosmic origins of evil, one wonders if Taylor consciously or unconsciously implied that, as with the pre-earthly Satan, God could overthrow coercive politicians in this world. Subsequent leaders seem to allude more to the devil’s pervasive influence in human history rather than specifically to the pre-earth casting out of Satan or his this-worldly human counterparts.

Church rhetoric decrying the government’s heavy hand and linking it to the forces of evil (not yet Satan’s pre-earthly plan) had spiked before and during the Utah War of 1857–58 and rose anew after the Civil War, building through the 1870s. Once President Taylor publicly declared such compulsion akin to Satan’s rejected scheme in the pre-existent world, other Church leaders followed suit. Satan’s plan to destroy agency became his plan to destroy it by *compulsion*. Apostle Moses Thatcher, for one, spoke repeatedly of Lucifer’s “coercive, agency destroying plan” in the mid-1880s.¹²

This line of thought subsequently took a crucial though subtle turn amid a seismic shift in power relations between the United States and the Latter-day Saint Zion. The new détente was enabled in part by Church President Wilford Woodruff’s 1890 manifesto directing his followers against future plural marriages, an accommodation essential to Utah’s entrance to statehood in 1896. Three years later, soon-to-be Apostle James Talmage published *The Articles of Faith*, the first of his two books that during the twentieth century would attain quasi-canonical status among the tiny handful of nonscriptural works approved by Church leadership for use by full-time missionaries. Talmage wrote that, before creation, Lucifer’s “uncontrolled ambition prompted . . . [his] unjust proposition to redeem the human family by compulsion.”¹³ In this new era of attempted rapprochement with the United States in which Talmage

11. John Taylor, in *Journal of Discourses*, 23:239 (August 20, 1882). Compare with John Taylor, in *Journal of Discourses*, 24:352–53 (December 9, 1883); 24:194 (June 18, 1883); and John Taylor, *An Examination into and an Elucidation of the Great Principle of the Mediation and Atonement of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Publishing Co., 1882), 93.

12. Moses Thatcher, in *Journal of Discourses*, 26:305 (August 28, 1885), 327 (October 8, 1885).

13. James E. Talmage, *The Articles of Faith: A Series of Lectures on the Principal Doctrines of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Deseret News, 1899), 65.

wrote, his doctrinal work makes no mention of Satanic compulsion by the federal government. The effect of this absence was to etch Satan's coercive pre-existent plan more deeply as theological tenet than as political joust.

Reiterated in his even more influential *Jesus the Christ* (1915)—published a decade after a second manifesto on plural marriage gave the teeth of enforcement to the first one—Talmage's explanation of Satan's agency-destroying mode gradually became axiomatic among widening circles of Latter-day Saints. The idea was proclaimed in general conference for the remainder of the century and into contemporary times and was reinforced in popular musical and theatrical productions.¹⁴ Similarly, whenever the issue of Satan's premortal plan arises in the Church's

14. Talmage, *Articles of Faith*, 57; compare James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ: A Study of the Messiah and His Mission according to Holy Scriptures Both Ancient and Modern* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1916), 8–9. Similar instruction has occurred over the general conference pulpit in every decade from Talmage to the present. See, for example, Charles W. Nibley, in *Eighty-Seventh Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, [1917]), 144; Rulon S. Wells, in *Ninety-Sixth Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, [1926]), 77; Joseph F. Merrill, *One Hundred Nineteenth Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, [1949]), 27; David O. McKay, *One Hundred Thirty-First Semi-annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, [1961]), 5–9; O. Leslie Stone, "Commandments to Live By," *Ensign* 9, no. 11 (November 1979): 72–73; James E. Faust, "The Great Imitator," *Ensign* 17, no. 11 (November 1987): 33–36; Richard G. Scott, "To Heal the Shattering Consequences of Abuse," *Ensign* 38, no. 5 (May 2008): 40–43; Dieter F. Uchtdorf, "Perfect Love Casteth Out Fear," *Ensign* 47, no. 4 (April 2017): 104–7.

The idea of Satanic coercion in the preexistence has been taught by educators in Brigham Young University's school of Religious Education as well. See, for example, Brent L. Top, *The Life Before: How Our Premortal Existence Affects Our Mortal Life* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1988), 119–20. See also the work of LDS philosophers such as Chauncey C. Riddle, "Devils," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow, 4 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 1:379; and James McLachlan, "A Dialogue on Process Theology," in *Mormonism in Dialogue with Contemporary Christian Theologies*, ed. David Lamont Paulsen (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 2007), 198. "The popular 1977 production *My Turn on Earth*, written by Carol Lynn Pearson with music by Lex de Azevedo, has two musical numbers that focus on the War in Heaven. . . . Lucifer sings, 'I have a plan. It will save every man. I will force them to live righteously. They won't have to choose. Not one we'll lose. And give all the glory to me.'" Boyd Petersen, "Mormon Literary Treatments of the War in Heaven," *Dawning of a Brighter Day* (blog), February 7, 2011, <http://associationmormonletters.org/blog/2011/02/mormon-literary-treatments-of-the-war-in-heaven/>.

Primary, Sunday School, seminary, institute, Relief Society, and priesthood courses, the teaching manuals published in recent decades overwhelmingly assert the coercion theory. A manual for Primary children, ages 8–11, illustrates how this understanding might be instilled across generations. The manual invites teachers to help children imagine conditions under Lucifer’s plan by, for several minutes, doing exactly and only as the teacher instructs. For instance, they might be told to remain standing perfectly still, then told where to sit, apart from their friends. Then to sit erect, feet flat to the floor, looking straight ahead, neither moving or speaking, and to hold their positions. Upon their being released from this regimen, the manual suggests students discuss how they would feel if made to do exactly what they were told to do all day, every day. Teachers are prompted to express gratitude for the blessing of agency.¹⁵

Another View

Although coercion evolved more than a century ago into the dominant gene in the Latter-day Saint theological chromosome concerning Satan’s primordial threat to agency, an enduring recessive gene presented another theory bearing a history at least as long as the first. The coercion theory tended to imply too *much* law and control, but Brigham Young had concerns also about too little, which might lull errant minds to conclude they could be “saved in their sins.”¹⁶ Orson Pratt’s suppositions, noted earlier, had gestured to this concern back in 1853: If Satan’s designs did not “destroy the agency of man,” it would have “redeemed him in his sins and wickedness without any repentance or reformation of life.”¹⁷ Even earlier, in 1845, W. W. Phelps asserted that Lucifer lost his heavenly station “by offering to save men in their sins.”¹⁸ Alarm at this prospect derived at least in part from the Book of Mormon, which does not mention the War in Heaven but does portray the BC prophet Amulek contesting the sophistry of one Zeezrom. Against him, Amulek emphasizes that the Lord surely will come to redeem his people not *in*

15. “Jesus Christ Was Chosen to Be Our Savior,” Lesson 2 in *Primary 6: Old Testament* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1996), 6–8. The 1999 Old Testament seminary manual is an exception to the pattern of privileging the coercion theory; it notes that coercion is only one possibility among others for Satan’s original plan to undo agency.

16. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 14:280–81 (July 3, 1870).

17. Pratt, *Seer*, 52.

18. W. W. Phelps, “The Answer,” *Times and Seasons* 5, no. 24 (January 1, 1845): 758.

their sins but *from* them (Alma 11:34; Hel. 5:10). Lurking antinomianism was an ancient Christian concern, but expressed in just such phrases as these (“in sins,” “from sins”), it thrived in the centuries prior to Joseph Smith, who used similar language to render the Book of Mormon translation.¹⁹ Phelps, Young, Pratt, and others further demonized antinomianism of any era: to argue that one could be saved “in their sins” was akin to arguing Satan’s original preexistent cause.

The occasionally unpacked logic of this concern, when linked to the War in Heaven, is that from the pre-earth era when Lucifer became Satan, his stratagem has been to buffer actors from assuming responsibility for their actions. This theme has periodically found expression in general conference and other forums across the Church’s history and, like the coercion theory, has been called on to target diverse perceived maladies. In 1982, Elder Bruce R. McConkie offered a succinct summary of this line of thought:

When the Eternal Father announced his plan of salvation—a plan that called for a mortal probation for all his spirit children; a plan that required a Redeemer to ransom men from the coming fall; a plan that could only operate if mortal men had agency—when the Father announced his plan, when he chose Christ as the Redeemer and rejected Lucifer, then there was war in heaven. That war was a war of words; it was a conflict of ideologies; it was a rebellion against God and his laws. Lucifer sought to dethrone God, to sit himself on the divine throne, and to save all men without reference to their works. He sought to deny men their agency so they could not sin. He offered a mortal life of carnality and sensuality, of evil and crime and murder, following which all men would be saved. His offer was a philosophical impossibility. There must needs be an opposition in all things.²⁰

Using analogous reasoning in his condemnation of intimate same-sex relations, Elder Dallin H. Oaks raised the ante from traditional

19. The peril of antinomianism is as old as the biblical Paul, but the specific language of being redeemed “in” or “from” one’s sins seems to be post-Reformation. For example, in 1700, William Burkett wrote, “Though Christ be able to save to the uttermost, yet he is not able to save them in their sins, but only from their sins.” *Expository Notes, with Practical Observations, upon the New Testament of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Wherein the Whole of the Sacred Text Is Recited, the Sense Explained, and the Instructive Example of the Blessed Jesus and His Apostles to Our Imitation Recommended* (London: J. and G. Offor [orig. 1700]), notes, 10. Smith’s prophetic linguistic process is distinct from our modern notions of plagiarism. For an explanation of the process, see note 6.

20. Bruce R. McConkie, *The Millennial Messiah: The Second Coming of the Son of Man* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1982), 666–67.

judgments of error or sin to a charge of Satanic marketing: “Satan would like us to believe that we are not responsible in this life.” “That is the result he tried to achieve by his contest in the pre-existence. A person who insists that he is not responsible for the exercise of his free agency because he was ‘born that way’ is trying to ignore the outcome of the War in Heaven. We *are* responsible, and if we argue otherwise, our efforts become part of the propaganda effort of the Adversary.”²¹

The insistence on personal responsibility for one’s actions is historically ubiquitous in Latter-day Saint theology and practice, but the diluting or obscuring of responsibility as an explanation for Satan’s pre-earth plan for humanity remains a minority report among both leaders and followers. However, when scholars or popular writers from within the tradition have considered the matter at length, arguments against the illogic of the dominant coercion theory and for the virtues and scriptural basis of the recessive theory are not rare.²² Of these writers, the scholar best equipped to weigh his arguments amid Christian, literary, and Latter-day Saint intellectual history is Terryl Givens, who notes that there are manifestly more subtle and sophisticated ways to attempt to destroy agency than through force. Principal among these is “the simple tampering with the consequences of choice.

21. Dallin H. Oaks, “Free Agency and Freedom,” in *The Book of Mormon: Second Nephi, the Doctrinal Structure*, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1989), 1–17, emphasis in original.

22. For example, Top, *Life Before*, 105, 113–15, especially 117 and 119ff; Gary C. Lawrence, *The War in in Heaven Continues* (Santa Ana, Calif.: Parameter Publishing, 2014), 7, 8, 14, 117, and 192, among others; and Greg Wright, *Satan’s War on Free Agency* (Lindon, Utah: Granite Publishing and Distribution, 2009), 15, 36, 47, 51, 52, 54, 62, and *passim*. Joseph Fielding McConkie gives a particularly clear argument in this current: “In the telling of the story of the Grand Council, it is sometimes said that Lucifer sought to force all men to do good or to live right. Such a notion finds justification neither in the scriptural text nor in logic. The only text that bears on the matter quotes Satan saying, ‘Behold, here am I, send me, I will be thy son, and I will redeem all mankind, that one soul shall not be lost, and surely I will do it; wherefore give me thine honor’ (Moses 4:1).

“In that expression we find Lucifer promising to redeem, or save, all mankind, but there is no mention of any need to have them live in any particular way. Indeed, if people are forced to do something, the very fact that they have been forced to do it robs the action of any meaning. What meaning could there be in an expression of love given under duress? What meaning is there in the reelection of a tyrant when he runs unopposed on a ballot that has no place for a negative vote and everyone of voting age are forced to vote? What purpose would be served in making a covenant to live a particular standard when there was no choice to do otherwise?” Joseph Fielding McConkie, *Understanding the Power God Gives Us: What Agency Really Means* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2004), 54–55.

If every choice a person made resulted in totally unforeseen and unpredictable consequences, one would be inhabiting a realm of chaos. Agency would be meaningless and freedom effectively nonexistent if no reliable principles existed by which to make choices that were attached to the particular ends desired. . . . By this logic, an undeserved punishment *or an unqualified reward* is an equal threat to the idea of moral agency.”²³ For Givens, the lure behind this forfeiture of agency among the pre-earth heavenly hosts would have been escape from the high perils of mortality, a mortality that would require the discipline of suffering.

Other Options

Comprehending that both of the predominant theories accounting for Satan’s assault on agency are reasoned and expanded from cryptic strands of scripture, as well as historical (shown to emerge and evolve over time), makes room for one to notice other possible explanations, historical or imagined, that have gained less public traction. Awareness of these alternate conceptions may in turn broaden how believing Latter-day Saints or their observers choose to conceive and protect their agency.

Might the core of the Satanic challenge to agency, for instance, lie in valuing security more than freedom, as with Dostoevsky’s famous Grand Inquisitor? Or might the challenge be grounded in fear, ignorance, deceit, or manipulation more than in force (Moses 4:4)? Might such deceit take the form not only of delusion about responsibility, but of confusion over sheer facts—a profound problem reflected in the modern world’s discounting of a free, independent, and competent press, for example, and of professional expertise generally? “What better way has history taught us to control the actions of men and women than to limit the information available to them so that the need to choose never enters their minds, or in the event that it does, [proceeds] so as to obscure all but the desired option?”²⁴

Might well-meaning people in either secular or religious contexts be complicit in eroding agency when their efforts toward coordination devolve into micromanagement and censorship? Or when a culture

23. Terry L. Givens, *Wrestling the Angel: The Foundations of Mormon Thought: Cosmos, God, Humanity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 132–33, emphasis in original.

24. Jerald R. Izatt, “Lucifer’s Legacy,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 27, no. 4 (Winter 1994): 104.

spawns gratuitous complexity and an ongoing multiplication of rules and laws rather than, as Joseph Smith preferred, a people who govern themselves after embracing correct principles?²⁵

Might the Satanic reach to destroy agency have included a design to preempt full evolutionary development of life on earth—thereby purchasing freedom from higher-order suffering, deliberate evil, and existential angst at the expense of constricting to prehuman levels the dimensions of intelligence, self-consciousness, reason, imagination, agency, and growth?

Or might Lucifer have agitated for a world where the “veil” over human consciousness and memory, to which Joseph Smith alluded, was rendered indefinitely transparent?²⁶ Perhaps with God and the divine realm irrefutably before us, such a world would allow a constricted “agency” analogous merely to that of a teenager out on the town with friends and a date—with his or her parents in tow.²⁷

Implications

This historicizing of the two dominant understandings of Satan’s attempt to destroy agency, coupled with a sampling of alternatives to them, suggests that a *constellation* of historical or potential strategies might be proposed as candidates for the erosion of human agency. This matters because the ways in which believers conceive the mode of Satanic opposition dictate the threats they envision for purposes of defense and prevention. The popular Latter-day Saint deductive models of Satan’s pre-existent plan often lack historical context, are scarcely aware of being speculative, and may bring unintended consequences. This is particularly true of the overwhelming focus on perceived coercion that intensified in Western countries and among Church members during the Second World War and the anticommunist rage that followed.²⁸

25. John Taylor cited Joseph Smith to this effect. See Taylor, “The Organization of the Church,” *Millennial Star*, November 15, 1851, 339.

26. For example, see Doctrine and Covenants 101:23–24; Larry E. Dahl and Donald Q. Cannon, eds., *The Teachings of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1997), 644.

27. First Presidency member George Q. Cannon put the problem more loftily in 1873: “If, when [God] sends forth his Prophets, he were to manifest his power, so that all the earth would be compelled to receive their words, there would be no room then for men to exercise their agency.” George Q. Cannon, in *Journal of Discourses*, 15:369 (March 23, 1873).

28. Within The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Elder Ezra Taft Benson was the most influential voice preoccupied with the very real threat of Communism

In the twenty-first century, this legacy has evolved, prompting some citizen-Saints, especially in the American West, to equate communism with evil, to equate evil communism with socialism, and to construe any governmental initiative for the public good as socialism—therefore as coercive (Satanic). Many American Church members selectively retain this mindset even as they cash their social security checks or send their children to public schools. Resistance to some forms of compulsion may be reasonable, necessary, and even noble in certain circumstances. But exaggerating and demonizing one sort of threat (as did McCarthyism and the John Birch Society, to choose examples at a safe historical remove) risks transmogrifying right into wrong, while ignoring more immediate and plausible threats. As the embodiment of evil, a Satan imagined as obvious and hell-bent solely on tyranny presents a naïve and dangerous image. It is wise to understand one's enemies.

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during the middle decades of the twentieth century. Like others, he linked this preoccupation with Satan's original designs in the pre-existence. His university-wide devotional address at Brigham Young University (September 16, 1986) typified his perspective: "The central issue in that pre-mortal council was: Shall the children of God have untrammelled agency to choose the course they should follow, whether good or evil, or shall they be coerced and forced to be obedient? Christ and all who followed him stood for the former proposition—freedom of choice; Satan stood for the latter—coercion and force. The war that began in heaven over this issue is not yet over. The conflict continues on the battlefield of mortality. And one of Lucifer's primary strategies has been to restrict our agency through the power of earthly governments." Ezra Taft Benson, "The Constitution—a Heavenly Banner," *BYU Devotional*, September 16, 1986, 1, <https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/ezra-taft-benson/constitution-heavenly-banner/>.