

Feature Article: JAM525

WAS THE FALL NECESSARY?: SECOND NEPHI 2 IN THE BOOK OF MORMON

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This article first appeared in the *Christian Research Journal*, volume 27, number 3 (2004). For further information or to subscribe to the *Christian Research Journal* go to: <http://www.equip.org>

SYNOPSIS

Joseph Smith, the founder of Mormonism, emerged on the scene in the early nineteenth century claiming that God had spoken to him, giving him a new revelation. The Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, and Pearl of Great Price eventually materialized as scripture for what became the numerically largest sect of Mormonism, the Latter-day Saints. In response, Christians have spent much time arguing for a closed canon in opposition to this claim of new scripture. In this article, however, we take the Mormon claim at face value and examine a small portion of this alleged scripture. The passage under investigation, 2 Nephi 2 in the Book of Mormon, presents a unique philosophy pertaining to the role of the Adamic fall, sin in the cosmos, and the role of sin in relation to God. It teaches that the Adamic fall was a good event necessary for the progress of humanity, that moral opposites are necessary for certain of God's attributes to exist, and that evil is a necessary precondition for the existence of God. On all three counts, this teaching is found to be morally, logically, and biblically lacking.

Latter-day Saints (Mormons) consider it a point of pride that they possess scriptures beyond the Old and New Testaments. It is also a point of Mormon apologetic emphasis: if God is alive in the present, they argue, why would he have ceased talking to humankind nearly two thousand years ago with the completion of the New Testament?

I believe there are good reasons for holding that the 66 books of the Bible are the totality of written Scripture that God intended for His church, but the question of a closed canon is not the concern of this article. It is my intention rather to take the Mormon claim at face value and see whether the Mormon scriptures, as represented by the case study of 2 Nephi 2 in the Book of Mormon, pass the tests of logical and biblical consistency that should be expected of any new revelation.

THE PURPOSE OF THE FALL

Mormons assert that 2 Nephi 2 refers to events that took place on the American continent in approximately 588–570 BC.¹ The narrative in this chapter is roughly parallel to the Genesis account of Creation; however, unlike the Genesis account, this passage contains significant discussion of the purpose of evil in the world. It also teaches, unlike the Bible, that the fall of humanity and subsequent introduction of evil into the world were actually positive events that were necessary for the progression of humanity. Mormon concepts concerning the fall are closely tied with their doctrines of salvation and the end times. According to Mormon teaching, the fall was a necessary, positive event that facilitated the restorative atonement, the progress of humanity, and the final fulfillment of God's purpose. An official Mormon source explains that this was part of God's optimistic plan: "When Adam was sent into this world, it was

with the understanding that he would violate a law, transgress a law, in order to bring to pass this mortal condition we find ourselves in today....[The Lord] designed that they should do [this]....The fall of man...was the means of furthering the purposes of the Lord in the progress of man, rather than as a means of hindering them.”² According to the Book of Mormon, because the chief end of humanity is personal happiness, the purpose of Christ’s atonement was happiness for benevolent recipients.³ The celebrated Mormon scripture declares, “Adam fell that men might be; and men are, that they might have joy” (2 Nephi 2:25).

Mormon scripture elsewhere says, “For behold, this is my [i.e., God’s] work and my glory — to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man” (Moses 1:39). Joseph F. Smith, past Mormon president, comments, “Indeed, the whole purpose of God in bringing to pass the earth life of man is to inure to the welfare and enlargement of man as urged in the teaching of the Prophet.”⁴ This humanistic purpose is in sharp contrast with biblical writings that state that humans were created for the pleasure and glory of God (e.g., Isa. 43:7, 21).⁵

THE NECESSITY OF OPPOSITES

The Book of Mormon strongly affirms the necessity of opposites. Second Nephi 2:11 states, “For it must needs be, that there is an opposition in all things. If not so [that there is opposition in all things]...righteousness could not be brought to pass, neither wickedness, neither holiness nor misery, neither good nor bad.” This passage asserts that without opposition in all things, neither righteousness, holiness, and good (positively) nor wickedness, misery, and bad (negatively) could exist. In other words, righteousness must have its corresponding opposite — wickedness — in order to exist; holiness must have misery;⁶ and good, bad. Everything must have an opposite. The passage then brings God into the scheme:

Wherefore, all things must needs be a compound in one; wherefore, if it should be one body it must needs remain as dead, having no life neither death, nor corruption nor incorruption, happiness nor misery, neither sense nor insensibility. Wherefore, it must needs have been created for a thing of naught; wherefore there would have been no purpose in the end of its creation. Wherefore, *this thing must needs destroy the wisdom of God and his eternal purposes, and also the power, and the mercy, and the justice of God.* (2 Nephi 2:11–12, emphasis added)

This passage is saying that without opposites a body would be “as dead,” for it would have neither life nor death, corruption nor incorruption, happiness nor misery, sense nor insensibility. It is arguing that a body cannot have life without also having death. Likewise, the first humans could not have had happiness without also having its opposite, misery. Without opposites, the passage says, there would have been no purpose for the creation of humans.

Second Nephi 2 asserts, furthermore, that without opposites, such a purposeless creation would destroy the wisdom, purpose, power, mercy, and justice of God. The nonexistence of opposites, therefore, would nullify the attributes of God, including His omniscience (infinite knowledge) and omnipotence (infinite power). Taken to its logical extreme, this means that God’s very existence, not just His essential attributes, hinges on the existence of opposites. This teaching is affirmed in 2 Nephi 2:13: “And if ye shall say there is no law, ye shall also say there is no sin. If ye shall say there is no sin, ye shall also say there is no righteousness. And if there be no righteousness there be no happiness. And if there be no righteousness nor happiness there be no punishment nor misery. And if these things are not there is no God.”

These propositions are in sequential order of necessity: law must exist for sin to exist, sin must exist for righteousness to exist, and so forth. The very existence of God is thus dependent on the existence of the other six factors. This is problematic when one examines each specific factor. Law, for instance, must exist in order for God to exist; but how could law exist prior to the Lawgiver? Punishment likewise must exist in order for God to exist; but how can punishment exist prior to the One who exercises the punishment? This is placing the cart before the horse!

This passage also says sin must exist in order for God to exist. This idea certainly solves the problem of whether God, who created everything, is ultimately the author of evil; for if sin predates God, then God

cannot be the author of evil. (*Theodicy* is the technical term for the vindication of God's goodness despite the existence of evil.) Commenting on this passage, Mormon leader B. H. Roberts says, "We can be assured from the Book of Mormon doctrine that evil as well as good is among the eternal things... Evil is not a created quality. It has always existed as the background of good. It is as eternal as goodness; it is as eternal as law."⁷ Mormon apologist Bruce McConkie affirms, "[This] is an argument so persuasive in nature that it is an end to all contention."⁸ It is not the end of all contention, however, for the notion that anything, much less evil, is required for God's existence contradicts the historic Christian understanding that God is an eternal, necessary, and self-existent being (see, e.g., Exod. 3:14). Furthermore, even if God is not self-existent, as Mormon theology maintains, the idea that a good God is dependent on the existence of evil, sin, and misery is morally revolting.

Roberts, moreover, claims that the Mormon God is not able to destroy evil or even prevent it.⁹ If evil exists independently and *necessarily*, which means it cannot *not* exist, then it is not possible to destroy it; it is possible only to restrain it, which, according to Mormon theology, God was not able to do.

Many Mormon leaders and apologists have recognized the qualitative difference between the God of Mormonism and the God of historic Christianity.¹⁰ The God of Mormonism is not eternal, is dependent on at least six factors (including sin) in order to exist according to this passage, and is not able to restrain evil. The God of historic Christianity, on the other hand, is eternal, self-existent, and will ultimately eradicate evil, which He has only temporarily allowed.

DID GOD SECRETLY WANT ADAM TO FALL?

The Nephi account continues with the opposition theme in verses 2:17 and following by reexplaining Satan's downfall and conflict with God. Satan fell, opposed God, and sought to bring others into this fallen state, which he successfully accomplished with Adam and his descendents. The account, however, introduces novel concepts as to the original state of humanity and the actual purpose of the fall:

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

According to this passage, Adam was incomplete in his original state and needed to progress beyond the moral and geographical constraints of the garden in order to mature. Neutral innocence characterized the garden state; that is, neither anything good nor anything bad was present. The verb "knew" in this passage could imply either experiential or intellectual knowledge. The experiential sense would be more consistent with the other verbs ("having/doing") used in the example, as well as with the context of this passage with its emphasis on experiential conditions, such as misery, righteousness, and happiness. The experiential sense would also be consistent with the Genesis account, which this chapter clearly mimics, where the *knowledge* of good and evil came about only as a result of the actual experience of sin. The Nephi passage is saying, in other words, that the first humans had to experience the negative in order to experience the positive. They had to experience misery in order to experience joy, and they had to experience sin in order to experience good. All this was necessary if humanity was to mature.

This presents a serious moral problem. If sin is an essential ingredient of human moral growth, then why would God command Adam and Eve not to eat the fruit from one particular tree that would bring sin to humanity? Did God secretly want them to sin by eating this fruit for the betterment of themselves and humanity? In short, this doctrine implies that God deceptively commanded the first parents *not* to do something that He really wanted them to do, but then severely punished them when they did it!

WAS THE FALL NECESSARY FOR HUMAN PROGRESSION?

Second Nephi 2 asserts that the fall was crucial to God's plan in order to work out his eternal purposes (v. 15) in a wise manner (v. 24). If Adam had not fallen, verse 23 says, everything would have remained

the same, and Adam and Eve would not have had any children. Verse 25 reveals the purposes of Adam's transgression: "Adam fell that men might be; and men are, that they might have joy." In other words, Adam's transgression was necessary both for the birth of the human race and so humans can enjoy life. Mormon theology also teaches that humans must progress through three stages of existence in order to attain perfection. Prior to the fall, all humans existed ("pre-existed" in Mormon terminology) in the *premortal* state in which they were the offspring of a spiritual Father and Mother, and they had spiritual bodies. As the result of the fall, humans can now enter the *mortal* state ("that men might be") in which they obtain their physical bodies and in which their obedience is tested. In the *postmortal* state, obedient humans will attain perfection — the ultimate state of being — and obtain their glorified spirit bodies. In other words, without mortality it is not possible for a human to be tested and progress to perfection, that is, godhood. McConkie states, "Adam was to introduce mortality and all that attends it, so that the opportunity for eternal progression and perfection might be offered to all the spirit children of the Father."¹¹

This notion creates problems for Mormon theology, for in Mormon scriptures Jesus claimed to have been God even before the world was made: "Thus saith the Lord your God, even Jesus Christ, the Great I AM, Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the same which looked upon the wide expanse of eternity, and all the seraphic hosts of heaven, before the world was made" (Doctrine and Covenants 38:1). Jesus, therefore, was the divine "I AM," the ultimate existence, *before* Adam's transgression. This means that Jesus somehow had progressed to the postmortal state of ultimate being without having experienced the mortality that was the result of Adam's transgression. If mortality is a necessary step in the progression to godhood and ultimate being, however, then how could Jesus have attained this state before the fall? If Jesus did attain this state before the fall, as Mormon scriptures say, then Adam's fall was not necessary for eternal progression as 2 Nephi 2:25 indicates. Furthermore, if Mormon theologians also grant the person of the Holy Ghost the title and state of "I Am," then the same objection could be raised with regard to this entity, for He also had not come to earth to experience mortality and overcome the effects of Adam's fall.

WAS THE FALL NECESSARY FOR FREE WILL?

Second Nephi 2 declares that Christ's redemption has accomplished free will for all humanity: "And the Messiah cometh in the fulness of time, that he may redeem the children of men from the fall. And because that they are redeemed from the fall they have become free forever, *knowing good from evil*; to act for themselves and not to be acted upon..." (v. 26, emphasis added). The teaching that free will came about as a product of the redemption appears to contradict other Mormon scriptures that teach that the first parents, prior to the redemption, had unrestricted free will (e.g., Moses 3:17; 7:32.). Mormons believe in a premortal existence where the pure inhabitants had free will just as they would on earth.¹² The word "pure" is significant because at the time of the premortal existence and before the existence of any conflict, there would have been no need for Christ's redemption. It appears, therefore, that Christ's work actually has nothing to do with human acquisition of free will as spoken of in the 2 Nephi 2 passage.

WHO MUST SIN?

Mormon scriptures affirm that sin is necessary for progress and eventual unity with God; however, few Mormon authors have discussed whether it is necessary for each person to sin in order to bring this about or whether a person can gain these benefits through the sins of others. In other words, is *personal* sin necessary or is *vicarious* sin sufficient?

According to Mormon scriptures, the *personal* performance of sin is necessary for human moral advancement. Moses 5:11 in the Pearl of Great Price says, "And Eve...said, Were it not for our transgression...we never should have known good and evil." Moses 6:11 also states, "And the Lord spake unto Adam, saying: Inasmuch as thy children are conceived in sin, even so when they begin to grow up, sin conceiveth in their hearts, and they taste the bitter, that they may know to prize the good." In this passage, the children (not just the first parents) *taste* the bitter so they may know and benefit from good. It

is not enough that each person know sin simply in the sense of knowing *about* sin, or specific sins rather, each person from the first parents onward must personally *experience* sin.

Mormon author D. L. Paulsen notes, "If, in the nature of things, allowing an experience of evil were a necessary condition of achieving the greatest good, a perfectly good being would allow it."¹³ Mormon apologist B. H. Roberts says, "The 'joy' contemplated in The Book of Mormon passage is to arise out of *man's rough and thorough knowledge of evil, of sin; through knowing misery, sorrow, pain and suffering; through seeing good and evil locked in awful conflict*"¹⁴ (emphases added). Mormon leadership later advised Roberts to edit this passage to make this process sound less experiential.¹⁵ In both instances, Roberts used the verb *knowing* rather than the verbs *experiencing* or *doing*. In his first draft of *The Truth, The Way, The Life*, however, he stated persons must "experience" evil.¹⁶

Some Mormons limit the extent of this experience of evil to mere temptation, that is, being presented with good and evil as options from which to choose without the need to commit evil. C. T. Warner, for example, points out that "Without awareness of alternatives an individual could not choose, and that is why being tempted by evil is as essential to agency as being enticed by the Spirit of God."¹⁷

The Mormon concept that the experience of sin is necessary for human progress can logically lead to the idea that in order to experience any particular good, one needs to perform the corresponding opposite sin. In order to experience more good, therefore, one would need to experience more sin. Few Mormons, however, would agree with this in theory or in practice. Mormon leader Neil Maxwell, for example, comments that consecutive sinning leads to greater bondage and not to freedom.¹⁸ Most Mormons would likely agree with Maxwell. The theology in Nephi and Moses, however, indicates that freedom ultimately comes through sinning. Mormons assume that *they* need not sin personally to bring freedom; rather, they can benefit vicariously from the evil committed by someone *else* (without also suffering vicariously the consequences that the one committing the evil must bear).

Mormons admit that Jesus did not need to sin in order to grow — that is, to "become a god."¹⁹ If, however, *personal* sin is necessary for *personal* advancement, then this is problematic. Someone may say Jesus Himself did not need to sin; rather, He experienced sin vicariously as described above. He was tempted by sin, evil, and difficulty, but He Himself did not sin. The obvious response to this is that if Jesus (who according to Mormon theology was like us)²⁰ did not need to sin *personally* in order to progress to His complete potential as Mormon theology indicates, then the need to sin personally is not universal; nor did Jesus need to personally experience the negative sphere of opposites. If this is true, then is it really necessary for anyone to personally experience sin or the negative sphere of opposites for eternal progression? Moreover, if, as Mormon theology says, it was necessary for *someone* to personally experience sin so that others might benefit vicariously, then which unfortunate human(s) must bear this responsibility? Somehow, in unofficial Mormon thought, Adam and Eve have been placed in the unwitting role of the sinning "sacrificial victims" by which all subsequent humanity can vicariously benefit.

NECESSARY OPPOSITES?

The experience of opposites is not necessary for progress in any form. Nearly all illustrations for the necessity of opposites break down under even cursory examination, including those in 2 Nephi 2. A person need not experience the evil of a beating to know the corresponding good of a soft caress; nor must a person eat a sour lemon to appreciate the taste of a sweet, ripe peach; nor experience darkness to see light. In certain cases, the experience of one side of an opposite can *enhance* the enjoyment of the other side, but that this is a necessary function begs the question and in most instances is simply absurd. If the first human pair were perfect (though changeably so), then any experience of evil would have detracted from this state and not enhanced it. A clean person at the brink of a pig pen knows exactly what "clean" means *by experience* without having to wallow in the muck, climb out, clean off, and somehow become a cleaner, more complete person through the experience.

Mormon apologist Roberts proudly asks, "Whoever either in ancient or modern times ever carried the daring thought to the height of making existences of the universe and the universe itself, and even the existence of God, depend upon the existence of things in duality — in a necessary opposition in all

things?”²¹ The answer is many persons taught this concept prior to Joseph Smith in the 1820s. Greek philosophers and several Greek philosophical schools taught essential dualism (necessary opposites) thousands of years ago.²² These various dualisms, however, did not assert that God’s existence was dependent on the existence of evil. Such a notion of a personal, omnipotent being (God) being dependent on the existence of an abstract principle (evil) is historically unparalleled. Ancient dualisms tended to pit principles against principles (good vs. evil, physical vs. nonphysical, light vs. darkness, etc.) and personal entities against like entities (good god vs. bad god, etc.).

Many ancient Hellenists taught the necessity of experiencing evil or having a negative experience in order to advance to a higher moral plane. Mormon academics and apologists are fond of negatively linking orthodox Christian theology with Hellenistic philosophy, but they choose not to see the plentiful and often close parallels between aspects of their own theology and Hellenistic philosophy. Roberts assumes that the concept of necessary opposites in 2 Nephi 2 is self-evidently true and that it solves the profound problem of theodicy. As we have seen, however, opposites are *not* necessary, nor is the experience of opposites necessary. No theodicy is offered by 2 Nephi 2, for it simply pushes the origin and existence of evil back to timeless perpetuity and beyond the existence of God. It does nothing to solve the problem of the ultimate origin and purpose of evil. Finally, the God of 2 Nephi 2 is an impotent being who cannot destroy evil, but instead depends on evil for his very existence. This is quite unlike the God of the Bible who is truly omnipotent and one day will destroy evil.

NOTES

1. As shown by the timeline in contemporary editions of the Book of Mormon.
2. *Doctrines of the Gospel Student Manual* (Salt Lake City: Church Educational System, 1986), 21.
3. See 2 Nephi 2:10; cf. Alma 42:16. See also H. Nibley, *Teachings of the Book of Mormon*, Semester 1 (Provo, UT: F.A.R.M.S., 1988–90), 266.
4. Joseph F. Smith, ed., *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1938), 354.
5. See also Ps. 100:3–4; Eph. 1:5–6; and 1 Pet. 2:9. Even “vessels of wrath” (Pharaoh) were created for God’s glory: Exod. 10:1; Rom. 9:17–24.
6. The antithesis of holiness, however, is not *misery* but *unholiness*.
7. B. H. Roberts, *The Truth, The Way, The Life: An Elementary Treatise on Theology*, ed. Stan Larson (San Francisco: Smith Research Associates, 1994), 377.
8. Bruce R. McConkie, *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary*, vol. 3 (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1973), 261–62.
9. Roberts, 382.
10. Smith, 181; LeGrand Richards, *A Marvelous Work and a Wonder* (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 1976), 12–13; Dallin H. Oaks, “Apostasy and Restoration,” *Ensign* (May 1995), 85; E. L. Kimball, ed., *The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1982), 425–26.
11. Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 268; cf. Moses 5:11.
12. See A. L. Baugh, *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* (New York: Macmillan, 1992), s.v. “First Estate”; Moses 6:56.
13. D. L. Paulsen, *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, s.v. “Evil.”
14. B. H. Roberts, *New Witnesses for God*, vol. 3 (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 1911), 201.
15. B. H. Roberts, *The Seventy’s Course in Theology, Fourth Year* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1911), 22.
16. Roberts, *The Truth*, 659, 661.
17. C. T. Warner, *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, s.v. “Agency.”
18. Neil A. Maxwell, *Things As They Really Are* (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 1980), 34.
19. Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet*, 370, where Jesus is described as a distinct God, that is, a separate God from the Father and the Spirit.
20. In Christian theology, Jesus is unlike us in that He is God as well as man; therefore, some things can be said about Him that cannot be said about us. For example, Jesus did not need redemption, but we do need redemption.
21. Roberts, *The Truth*, 377.
22. See PHEME PERKINS, *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, 2nd ed. (New York: Garland, 1998), s.v. “Dualism.”