

Lehi on the Great Issues: Book of Mormon Theology in Early Nineteenth-Century Perspective

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Introduction

Among its many interesting features, the Book of Mormon decides controversies in a number of areas, including those argued among early nineteenth-century American theologians. Indeed, the Book of Mormon itself predicts that when it shall come forth it “shall be of great worth unto the children of men” because it will reveal the false and true teachings of “the churches” and their “priests” that “contend one with another” (2 Ne. 28:2-4). And those outside and inside the Church immediately recognized that the Book of Mormon fulfilled these predictions. For example, Book of Mormon adversary Alexander Campbell famously noted in 1831 that the Book of Mormon resolves “every error and almost every truth discussed in New York for the last ten years.”¹ LDS missionary Sylvester Smith in referring to the disputes he engaged in, pointed out that the Book of Mormon “speaks against unconditional election . . . teaches immersion for baptism . . . discards the baptism of infants . . . [and] reproaches the

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1. Alexander Campbell, “The Mormonites,” *Millennial Harbinger* 2 (January 1831): 93.

creed [of Universalism].”² Thus, regardless of how one chooses to resolve the issues surrounding its origins, one must conclude that the Book of Mormon’s theological arguments should be seen as designed to be read and understood by its early nineteenth-century audience.

But despite agreement that elements of Book of Mormon teachings are at home in the early nineteenth-century,³ there has been sharp dispute about which early nineteenth-century theological persuasions the Book of Mormon seems to side with. Thus, Book of Mormon theology has been classified as “wholeheartedly and completely Arminian,” as containing “elements of Calvinism and Arminianism,” as “a volume of Disciple [of Christ] theology . . . beyond any reasonable question,” or as emphasizing both “Methodist [Arminian] and Disciples” theology.⁴

Such disagreement, especially in the context of Campbell’s observations, leads directly to several interesting questions: Which groups were arguing theological issues during the 1820s in New York? What specific issues were being disputed? In which of these issues does the Book of Mormon take an interest? How does the Book of Mormon resolve these issues? In its resolutions, does the Book of Mormon consistently adopt an existing theology?

Obviously, a great many issues were discussed among early nineteenth-century American theologians and a comprehensive review is beyond the scope of this work. Nevertheless, this brief study aims to shed additional light on the questions posed above by examining four selected controversies in greater depth. In doing so, this work neither addresses

2. Sylvester Smith, Letter to the editor, Pleasant Grove, Illinois, May 25, 1833, *The Evening and the Morning Star* 2 (July 1833): 108.

3. See, for example, Mark Thomas, “Scholarship and the Future of the Book of Mormon,” *Sunstone* 5, no. 3 (May–June 1980): 24–29; his “Revival Language in the Book of Mormon,” *Sunstone* 8 (May–June 1983): 19–25; and Timothy L. Smith, “The Book of Mormon in a Biblical Culture,” *Journal of Mormon History* 7 (1980): 3–21.

4. Thomas F. O’Dea, *The Mormons* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1957), 28; Sterling M. McMurrin, *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah, 1965), 81; Marvin S. Hill, “The Role of Christian Primitivism in the Origin and Development of the Mormon Kingdom, 1830–1844” (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1968), 104; William Alexander Linn, *The Story of the Mormons* (London: Macmillan, 1923), 93; Timothy Smith, “Book of Mormon,” 10.

nor presupposes answers to questions best left to personal faith such as Book of Mormon authorship, date of composition, and divine inspiration but rather asks how the Book of Mormon would most likely have been interpreted by its initial, informed readers.

The four early nineteenth-century controversies I have chosen were influenced, in part, by the observation of Alan Heimert that, concomitant with the ideas surrounding the American Revolution, American religions gave “new prominence” to “God’s moral government and the propriety of His vindictive justice”⁵ and by the Book of Mormon’s obvious interest in divine justice. I shall argue that the Book of Mormon (1) agrees with the Calvinists/Arminians in their disputes with Universalism/Unitarianism, (2) resolves some disputes that arose between early nineteenth-century Methodists and Calvinists, (3) agrees with certain tenets of Arminianism but, overall, consistently reflects the theology of none of its suggested origins, but rather (4) presents a complex early nineteenth-century theology that integrates doctrines from a variety of preexisting theological perspectives and some apparently unique teachings, and (5) has a theological sophistication that has generally been underappreciated.

Some Old World Background

Until the sixteenth century, the Roman Catholic Church dominated Western Christendom. Catholicism affirmed the need of ecclesiastical ordinances for salvation; scripture, tradition, and Church leadership as authorities; and priesthood only for the ordained few. Thereafter, Protestant traditions emerged including Lutheran, Anglican, Calvinistic, and Anabaptist movements. Many Protestant reformers shared a belief in the doctrines of “salvation by grace through faith alone,” the Bible as principal authority, and the priesthood of all believers.⁶

John Calvin’s (1509–1564) successor, Theodore Beza (1519–1605), extended Calvin’s teachings regarding the sovereignty of God into what has been called “high Calvinism.” Some of the more important of these became popularly known as “the five points”: (1) unconditional predesti-

5. Alan Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind from the Great Awakening to the Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985), 336.

6. Roger E. Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 370.

nation (some humans, the elect, are selected by God's apparently arbitrary decree to receive grace and salvation while the remaining, the reprobates, are damned), (2) total human depravity, the inability to do any good unless influenced by God's grace, (3) limited atonement (Christ died only for the elect), (4) irresistible grace (the elect cannot chose to do evil), and (5) unconditional perseverance.

Not surprisingly, many Protestants had problems with the five points on scriptural, philosophical, and practical grounds. Opponents complained that the high-Calvinistic scheme made God the author of sin and "the most partial of all judges" and encouraged humans to break God's laws (antinomianism) by teaching that the elect who transgress "in the most flagrant instances, are richly *blessed with all heavenly benedictions.*"⁷ In the Netherlands, the reaction against high Calvinism is most associated with Jacob Arminius (1559-1609) who taught that, through Christ's atonement, God's prevenient (literally, "coming before") grace, that allows the totally depraved to turn from sin, is available to all, although only those choosing to accept it would be saved.

Henry VIII (1491-1547) was no theological innovator when he broke with Roman Catholicism in 1534, so the new Church of England retained many features of Catholicism in polity, theology, and ceremonialism. Subsequent Lutheran and then Calvinistic influences resulted in the compromise *Thirty-Nine Articles* (1571), that described a more moderate Calvinism. It affirmed the doctrines of predestination and human depravity but not of limited atonement and perseverance. English Calvinists, the "low" church or Puritans, opposed the *Articles* and produced the *Westminster Confession* (1643) that was largely accepted by Presbyterians, Congregationalists, and Baptists. In the 1600s, some Puritans embraced the practice of baptism by immersion, becoming "Particular" Baptists. Others, the "General" Baptists, adopted an Arminian theology.

As for Methodism, John Wesley (1703-1791), an Anglican priest, did not intend to found a separatist faith when he organized his "societies." "What distinguished Wesleyan Methodism from the ordinary worship of the Church of England was its emphasis on personal spiritual growth [as opposed to ceremonialism] in the context of a small group of

7. John Fletcher, *Checks to Antinomianism*, 2 vols. (3rd American edition; New York: J. Soule and T. Mason, 1819), 1:137; emphasis his.

like-minded folk under the supervision of a layman.”⁸ Wesley and his close associate, John Fletcher (1729–1785), taught an Arminian theology but with the new wrinkle of possible human “entire sanctification” through a continuing process of personal struggle. Following Wesley’s death, his followers formulated Methodist teaching and practice in *The Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (1784) that reproduced many of the *Thirty-nine Articles*. Wesleyan Methodism’s “first systematic theologian” was Richard Watson (1781–1833) whose *Theological Institutes* was “the standard textbook for Wesleyan ministers, in Britain and North America, for most of the nineteenth-century.”⁹

Some New World Background

A remarkable diversity of Christian beliefs existed in the United States during the early nineteenth century. Keith Hardman has observed that “three distinct groups . . . emerged[:] . . . The Arminians . . . the Old Calvinists . . . and . . . New Divinity men.”¹⁰ According to Jesse Fonda, a New York Calvinistic pastor, the “Christian” theologies consisted of “Calvinists, Arminians, Universalists, and Socinians [Unitarians].”¹¹ In the Palmyra neighborhood of the young Joseph Smith, Calvinism, with a doctrine of total human depravity and limited atonement, was primarily represented

8. Peter W. Williams, *America’s Religions from Their Origins to the Twenty-First Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 2002), 137.

9. Richard Watson’s *Theological Institutes* was “the first systemization of the theology of Methodism” and Watson was “the most distinguished of Methodist authors” in his day. The *Institutes* was published in Great Britain in six parts between 1823 and 1829 and was first published in New York in 1826. The *Institutes* rapidly became “the standard theological source in American Methodism.” See W. J. Townsend, H. B. Workman, and George Eayrs, eds., *A New History of Methodism*, 2 vols. (London: Hadder and Stoughton, 1909), 1:398; and Emory Stevens Bucke, ed., *The History of American Methodism*, 3 vols. (New York: Abingdon Press, 1964), 2:381.

10. Keith J. Hardman, *Charles Grandison Finney, 1792–1875: Revivalist and Reformer* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1987), 14.

11. Jesse Fonda, *Familiar Letters on Sacraments* (Newburgh, N.Y.: Ward M. Gazlay, 1824), 283. Calvinists preferred the term “Socinianism” (after the heretical Italian theologian Faustus Socinus, 1539–1604) to “Unitarianism” since the latter term implied belief in one God and “trinitarians profess also to be Unitarians.” See Andrew Fuller, *The Calvinistic and Socinian Systems* (Boston: Lincoln & Edmands, 1815), ix.

by the Presbyterians and Particular Baptists, and Arminianism, with a doctrine of prevenient grace allowing the totally depraved to turn from sin, was primarily represented by the Methodists.¹² In early nineteenth-century America, the fundamental problem giving rise to these differing theologies was “the most pressing question within Calvinism,”¹³ namely, the apparently incompatible doctrines of the total divine sovereignty of the Calvinists, which did not include human participation in salvation, and the Arminians’ insistence on human free will and accountability. Indeed, “during the 1820s . . . religious controversies” in upstate New York “revolved primarily around the issue of [human] free will” and “turned mainly upon the points at issue between the Calvinistic and Arminian theology.”¹⁴

In the United States, the two major formulations of Calvinism (hereafter referred to as “Old Calvinism”) were Congregationalism and Presbyterianism. The two were differentiated by church government (independent congregations versus presbyteries) and some doctrines. For example, Congregationalism had descended from Puritanism, that had adopted its own form of “Covenant theology” that committed its members to a personal “mission” in furthering the church, nation, and ordinary affairs. Those whom God had selected for election through “the covenant of grace” had a responsibility to incorporate the “means of grace” (church attendance, scripture reading, and prayer). Although fading by the early nineteenth century, “the covenant ideal, with its teaching about mutual obligation and communal responsibility, continued to influence American life.”¹⁵ A prominent, early nineteenth-century Congregationalist was Timothy Dwight (1752–1817), president of Yale University.

An even more rigorous derivation of late eighteenth-century Congregationalism was the New Divinity movement, whose adherents, also called

12. Milton V. Backman Jr., *Joseph Smith's First Vision* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1980), 6.

13. “Calvinism,” in *Dictionary of Christianity in America*, edited by Daniel G. Reid, Robert D. Linder, Bruce L. Shelley, and Harry S. Stout (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 211.

14. Curtis D. Johnson, *Islands of Holiness: Rural Religion in Upstate New York, 1790–1860* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989), 45–47.

15. Keith L. Sprunger, “Covenant Theology,” in *Dictionary of Christianity in America*, 324.

Hopkinsians,¹⁶ traced their origin back to Jonathan Edwards (1703–58). Historian Allen Guelzo maintains that the New Divinity represented “the most vital and fecund intellectual movement in the early republic” differing from Congregational moderate Calvinism in a greater degree of moral absolutism, rejection of the means of grace for the unregenerate, fellowship only to the elect, and the governmental theory of the atonement.¹⁷ Old Calvinists lamented the fact that Hopkins’s text, *The System of Doctrines* (1793), which contained “many tenets which differ widely from the received faith” had become “the basis of the popular theology of New England.”¹⁸

The second major formulation of Calvinism in America was Presbyterianism. Arriving in the English colonies in 1684, “Old School” Presbyterianism was the direct descendent of Beza’s high Calvinism through the Scots churchman John Knox (1513–1572), and was championed in the early nineteenth century by Archibald Alexander (1772–1851), theology professor at Princeton, and his colleagues. As Old School theology had little changed, new editions of the works of past prominent Presbyterians like Thomas Boston (1677–1732) remained popular. But by the early nineteenth century, a large number of Presbyterian clergy, the “New School,” had adopted a theology that was “substantially

16. Named for Samuel Hopkins (1721–1803), one of the movement’s most prominent theologians.

17. Allen C. Guelzo, *Edwards on the Will: A Century of American Theological Debate* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1989), 208, 112–39. See also Joseph A. Conforti, *Jonathan Edwards: Religious Tradition and American Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1995), and his *Samuel Hopkins and the New Divinity Movement* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Christian University Press, 1981). The governmental theory (probably derived from the moral influence theory of Peter Abelard, 1079–1142) opposed the substitutionary theory (the idea that Christ died for our sins to satisfy the demands of the law) by characterizing the atonement as “merely an exhibition of the wrath of God against sin.” See Zebulon Crocker, *The Catastrophe of the Presbyterian Church in 1837, Including a Full View of the Recent Theological Controversies in New England* (New Haven, Conn.: B&W Noyes, 1838), 93–95, and Frank Hugh Foster, *A Genetic History of New England Theology* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1963), 249–50.

18. William Bentley, *The Diary of William Bentley* (Salem, Mass.: Essex Institute, 1905–14), 1:160, as quoted in Guelzo, *Jonathan Edwards*, 93; “Review: A Warning against Hopkinsianism, and Other Allied Errors, Addressed by the Associate Reformed Synod of the West,” *Hopkinsian Magazine* 3, no. 5 (May 1828): 110.

that of . . . the New England divines" (New Divinity Calvinism or Hopkinsianism).¹⁹ By the 1820s, the more rigorous New School Presbyterians outnumbered the Old in central upstate New York.

Another group that emerged within Calvinism, the Universalists, resolved the conflict between God's sovereignty and justice by teaching that everyone would eventually be saved. Universalists criticized both the Old Calvinists for teaching that "God is a respecter of persons" for consigning reprobates to eternal misery and the Arminians for teaching a doctrine of human free will which presents a God who is "unable to control events" and which leaves humans "a prey to fatality."²⁰ The Universalist adaptation of Calvinism is clearly opposed by the Book of Mormon, as evidenced by its polemics against the Universalist doctrines of limited punishment (2 Ne. 28:7-9), universal salvation (Alma 1:4), and "restoration" of the evil person to a good afterlife (Alma 41).²¹

Turning now to Arminianism, we encounter challenges in definition because "this label [included] multiple tendencies" and became a generic term "for a wide variety of moral thinkers who objected to strict Calvinism."²² If there is a common theme, it would be an emphasis on human free will and the resulting personal responsibility and accountability for ethical conduct. Three groups of American "Arminians" are especially notable in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The first group of American Arminians consisted of liberal Congregational preachers like Charles Chauncy (1705-1787), whom some have labeled "rationalistic Arminians." A major trajectory from eighteenth-century rationalistic Arminianism was what we may term "rationalistic Unitarianism." Influ-

19. Crocker, *The Catastrophe of the Presbyterian Church*, 80.

20. Henry Fitz, "Sermon XXX," *New York Gospel Herald and Universalist Review* 2 (December 4, 1830): 397. See also Elhanan Winchester, *The Universal Restoration Exhibited in Four Dialogues between a Minister and His Friend* (Bellows Falls, Vt.: Bill Blake, 1819).

21. Dan Vogel, "Anti-Universalist Rhetoric in the Book of Mormon," in *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon*, edited by Brent Lee Metcalfe (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1993): 21-52; and Thomas, "Revival Language in the Book of Mormon," 21.

22. H. Shelton Smith, Robert T. Handy, and Lefferts A. Loetscher, *American Christianity: An Historical Interpretation with Representative Documents*, 2 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1960), 1:374; *Dictionary of Christianity in America*, 78.

enced by "reason," persons of this persuasion rejected the entire Christian scheme of original sin, human depravity, and the infinite atonement as "irrational" and of the nature of [constituting a] "fallacy;" and placed Christ "upon a level with other inspired men."²³ These beliefs are clearly refuted throughout the Book of Mormon which affirms original sin (2 Ne. 2), human depravity (Mosiah 16:3), the infinite atonement (2 Ne. 9:7), and the divinity of Christ (Mosiah 15).

A second group of American Arminians was the Methodists, whose faith might be termed conservative, evangelical, or pessimistic (because of their acceptance of human depravity). Methodist Arminianism was introduced into the English colonies in the 1760s and grew rapidly²⁴ through the efforts of Francis Asbury (1745–1816) and his itinerant horseback preachers, the "circuit riders." Some of these largely self-educated preachers, including Fletcher Harris (1790–1818) from North Carolina and Nathan Bangs (1778–1862) from New York, have left us their works.

A third group of American "Arminians" included some Calvinists, most notably the Congregationalist, Nathaniel William Taylor (1786–1858), founder of the New Haven Theology, and New School Presbyterian Charles Grandison Finney (1792–1875), the foremost American evangelist of the early nineteenth century. Both proposed theologies that moved in an optimistic and "Arminian" direction. Both emphasized human free will, rejected a physically inherited irresistible human depravity, insisted that only free moral agents who actually sin can justly be held accountable, and accepted a governmental theory of the atonement.

Another influential development in early nineteenth-century America was the "Restoration" movement, whose goal was to restore primitive Christianity through the study of the Bible. The Restoration movement

23. William E. Channing, "Unitarian Christianity" (1819) and "Christianity a Rational Religion" in his *The Works of William E. Channing, D.D.* (Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1882), 245, 375; Nathaniel Emmons, *Sermons on Some of the First Principles and Doctrines of True Religion* (Boston: Samuel T. Armstrong, 1815), 127. See also Conrad Wright, *The Beginnings of Unitarianism in America* (Boston: Starr King, 1955).

24. By the 1820s, Methodists were the predominant Arminians in America with a third of a million members. In contrast, the Arminian Freewill Baptist churches had an estimated 16,000. See "Literary and Philosophical Intelligence," *Christian Spectator* 6 (December 1, 1824): 656; William F. Davidson, *The Free Will Baptists in America, 1727–1984* (Nashville, Tenn.: Randall House, 1985), 205.

consisted of two major groups: the “Christians” (or Christian Connection) and the followers of Alexander Campbell (1788–1866), founder of the Disciples of Christ.²⁵ The former rejected the Christian creeds, including Trinitarianism, although, unlike the “rationalistic Unitarians,” the “Christian” Unitarians elevated Christ above humanity. Campbell also rejected the Christian confessions, with their “speculative theology,” “metaphysical” doctrines, and “Babylonish terms and phrases” in favor of the Bible which “contains a full and perfect revelation of God and his will” and sought to free Christianity of “all corrupt baggage added during nearly two thousand years of Catholic and Protestant domination.”²⁶

A final aspect of the background to the religious environment in which the Book of Mormon appeared was the political legacy of the American Revolution, which, as noted earlier, gave “new prominence” to “God’s moral government and the propriety of His vindictive justice.”²⁷ Even the Calvinists agreed that, although completely sovereign, God should be viewed as a moral governor. As Timothy Dwight put it, God is “infinitely just” and did all “on the ground of law.”²⁸ Likewise, Methodist Fletcher Harris noted that “God is the moral, as well as the physical Governor of the universe.”²⁹ And the Book of Mormon agrees. For example, in 2 Nephi 2:13–14 the Book of Mormon presents a logical proof that

25. Informative histories of the movement are contained in James DeForest Murch, *Christians Only: A History of the Restoration Movement* (1962; reprinted Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 2004); and Michael W. Casey and Douglas A. Foster, eds., *The Stone-Campbell Movement* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee, 2002).

26. Alexander Campbell, *The Christian System in Reference to the Union of Christians, and a Restoration of Primitive Christianity as Pleaded in the Current Reformation* (1866; reprinted Salem, N.H.: Ayer, 1988), 4–5, 15; Alexander Campbell, “A Restoration of the Ancient Order of Things,” No. IV, *The Christian Baptist* 2, no. 11 (June 6, 1825): 223; Mont Whitson, “Campbell’s Post-Protestantism and Civil Religion” in Casey and Foster, *The Stone-Campbell Movement*, 180.

27. Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind*, 336.

28. Timothy Dwight, *Theology: Explained and Defended in a Series of Sermons*, 4 vols. (New Haven, Conn.: S. Converse, 1825), 1:194–5.

29. Fletcher Harris, *Sermons on Important Subjects* (Granville County, N.C.: Abraham Paul, 1825), 149.

God's moral government must operate according to law. The basic argument is in the form of *modus tollens*:³⁰

If there is no law, there is no creation.

There is a creation.

Therefore, there is law.

2 Nephi 2:13 then demonstrates the validity of the first assertion by a chain of hypothetical syllogisms. Better educated early nineteenth-century individuals would have recognized these formal arguments.³¹

Some Early Nineteenth-Century Disputes

The foregoing review of the Book of Mormon's background implies a great deal of religious ferment and controversy. Not surprisingly, Arminians pressed the Calvinists to show how their sovereign Deity, who controlled everything including human behavior, could justly hold humans accountable for their sins, while the Calvinists responded that the Arminians disrespected and robbed God of his sovereignty. Such disputes led to many discussions on the nature of human freedom and moral agency. As the New Divinity's Asa Burton (1752-1836) noted: "Very different opinions concerning [human] moral agency . . . have prevailed among the learned. This has occasioned very warm disputes, and numerous treatises."³² This article has already noted several of the controversies on which the Book of Mormon speaks. It will move now to a more detailed consideration of four major disputes in which the Book of Mormon clearly takes an interest.

Issue 1: Are Humans Free to Act according to Their Own Wills?

Faculty psychology, the division of the mind into the understanding, the will, and the affections (or inclinations) was frequently utilized by

30. *Modus tollens* is a form of valid inference as follows: "If proposition P is true, then proposition Q is true. / Proposition Q is false. / Therefore, proposition P is false."

31. See, for example, Isaac Watts, *Logic or the Use of Reason in the Inquiry after Truth* (London: T. Purday & Son, 1809).

32. Asa Burton, *Essays on Some of the First Principles of Metaphysics, Ethics, and Theology* (Portland, Maine: Arthur Shirley, 1824), 94.

early nineteenth-century theologians.³³ On the one hand, for Old Calvinists, the will of humans had been corrupted by the Fall so that evil choices were inevitable. Thus Timothy Dwight attributed sin to “the corruption of that Energy of the Mind, whence volitions flow”³⁴ and the Presbyterians to the loss of “all ability of will to any spiritual good.”³⁵

On the other hand, for New Divinity, Methodists, Nathaniel William Taylor, and Charles Grandison Finney, any doctrine that compromised the ability of humans to be free and independent moral agents would be incompatible with a just God. However, even among this school, there were major disagreements over the nature of human freedom. New Divinity David Haskel and Methodist Nathan Bangs argued over such issues in an interesting exchange of books in New York a decade before the Book of Mormon. The strategy of the New Divinity was to make humans accountable for sin by proposing that only human inclinations were affected by the Fall. New Divinity men then ingeniously argued that, despite the fact that humans continuously sin because of their inborn inclinations (preserving the Calvinistic doctrine of total depravity), because the will is unaffected, because there is no external coercion to sin, and because the ability to distinguish between right and wrong (a function of the understanding) was retained, humans should be regarded as accountable moral agents subject to a just punishment. Moral agency, argued Haskel, requires only that a human be a “free agent,” i.e., “one that acts according to his inclination” and has the ability “to distinguish between right and wrong.”³⁶

The Methodists also accepted total human depravity resulting in “no power to do good works” but argued that, because of the atonement, “free preventing grace . . . visit[s] all men” restoring “a measure of

33. For a brief review of the application of faculty psychology by early nineteenth-century theologians, see “Faculty Psychology” in Herbert W. Schneider, *A History of American Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University, 1963), 202–9.

34. Dwight, *Theology*, 1:488.

35. *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church* (Elizabeth-Town, N.J.: Mervin Hale, 1822), 47.

36. Nathan Bangs, *An Examination of the Doctrine of Predestination as Contained in a Sermon Preached in Burlington, Vermont by Daniel Haskel, Minister of the Congregation* (New York: J.C. Tatten, 1817), 87–88.

free-will"³⁷ to choose good. Thus, Bangs replied to Haskel that, if humans are acting under the determining influence of evil inclinations, they could not be true moral agents because moral agents must have "the power to *choose* between right and wrong."³⁸ Key to the dispute is defining the terms "act" and "acted upon." As the New Divinity's Asa Burton had noted: "All things which exist either act, or are acted upon."³⁹ The Methodists and other opponents had charged that, under the Calvinistic scheme, humans could be seen only as acted upon. Wesley had argued that "every *unfree* being is purely passive, not active in any degree" and Fletcher insisted that the Calvinists made God "the only *free agent*."⁴⁰ The New Divinity answered that humans who are free to respond to their inclinations, are "agents" who "act, and produce effects."⁴¹ This argument failed to impress Bangs, who charged that "it would seem then, that [according to New Divinity teaching] it is utterly impossible for man to will, or to act."⁴²

The Book of Mormon can be seen as dividing the mind according to faculty psychology. It speaks of the understanding (1 Ne. 13:29; 2 Ne. 31:3; Alma 32:28, 34; Eth. 3:5), the will (Mosiah 2:21, 16:11-12; Alma 12:31, 42:7) and the "affections of the heart" (Alma 37:36; 2 Ne. 4:12) which would have been interpreted according to faculty psychology. As for issues relating to human free will, the Book of Mormon resolved them by noting that a human becomes a moral agent only when he becomes "free" to "act for himself" rather than be "acted upon" (2 Ne. 2:16, 26). As we have seen, however, the dispute was not about whether men are free but about the definition of freedom; nor was it about whether men can act but with the definition of action. Therefore, the Book of Mormon further

37. *The Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, Article VIII; Harris, *Sermons on Important Subjects*, 285, 75; Fletcher, *Checks to Antinomianism*, 169; John Wesley, "Predestination Calmly Considered" (1752) reprinted in Albert C. Outler, ed., *John Wesley* (New York: Oxford, 1964), 447.

38. Bangs, *An Examination of the Doctrine of Predestination*, 87-88; emphasis his.

39. Burton, *Essays on Some of the First Principles*, 95.

40. Albert C. Outler, ed., *The Works of John Wesley*, 24 vols. (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1985), 2:475; Fletcher, *Checks to Antinomianism*, 1:113; emphasis theirs.

41. Burton, *Essays on Some of the First Principles*, 95.

42. Bangs, *An Examination of the Doctrine of Predestination*, 101.

clarifies its position: "And they [i.e., humans after the Fall] are free [or have the power] to *choose* liberty and eternal life . . . or to *choose* captivity and death" (2 Ne. 2:27; emphasis mine). The Book of Mormon's teachings are strikingly similar to Bangs's: "Life and death are set before them . . . all who choose life . . . shall live, and . . . all who choose death . . . shall die" and to Campbell's: "Therefore, life and death, good and evil . . . are placed before man . . . and he is commanded to . . . take his choice."⁴³

The Book of Mormon teaches that because totally depraved humans "are redeemed from the fall, they have become free . . . to act for themselves . . . to choose liberty and eternal life" (2 Ne. 2:26-27). In this, the Book of Mormon supports the Arminian theology of the Methodists. But unlike the Methodists, the fundamental idea of prevenient grace is absent, although rare passages in the Book of Mormon may imply such a doctrine. An example is Alma 16:16: "The Lord did pour out his Spirit . . . to prepare the minds of the children of men, or to prepare their hearts to receive the word." Thus, in the debate over human freedom, the Book of Mormon tends to resolve the issues similarly but not identically to the Methodist brand of Arminianism.

Issue 2: Is Moral Evil Desirable?

As noted in an early nineteenth-century theological dictionary: "Evil is distinguished into natural and moral. . . . Moral evil is . . . acting contrary to the . . . revealed laws of the Deity, it is termed wickedness or sin."⁴⁴ Theologians agreed that the creation must be good because God is good, but there was disagreement over the necessity and origin of moral evil. Timothy Dwight summarized the three prevailing views: either God (1) "permitted" evil for his own unknown purpose(s), or (2) does not desire evil but "could not, without destroying the free agency of his creatures, prevent them from sinning," or (3) desires evil and "creates . . . sinful volitions."⁴⁵ For the Old Calvinists like Dwight, who preferred the

43. Bangs, *An Examination of the Doctrine of Predestination*, 62; Campbell, *The Christian System*, 33.

44. Charles Buck, *A Theological Dictionary* (Philadelphia: James Kay Jr., 1831), 135.

45. Dwight, *Theology*, 1:412.

first option, God's reasons are unknowable but "necessary" to His purposes and contributing to His "own glory."⁴⁶

The New Divinity men chose the third option and proceeded to various speculations over how and why God created sinful volitions. Nathaniel Emmons (1745-1840) argued: "Were there no such distinction . . . between virtue and vice, there could be no real harm in calling good evil, and evil good," and God could not "justly punish";⁴⁷ and Joseph Bellamy (1719-90) suggested that God had willed evil because the total amount of happiness in the creation would be heightened due to an increased appreciation by God's creatures for God's grace and justice.⁴⁸

The Methodists adopted Dwight's second option. John Wesley had noted that the God-given free will of humans had resulted in "numberless irregularities in God's government" and the resulting "sin and pain" of the world.⁴⁹ Nathan Bangs denied "that God brings good out of moral evil" and also denied "that God primarily willed that sin should exist at all . . . that it [moral evil] was any way necessary for the perfection of man's happiness, or for unfolding the glory of God."⁵⁰ Likewise, Fletcher noted: "It is nowhere promised, that *sin* shall do us good."⁵¹ Interestingly, Nathaniel Taylor seemed to agree with the Methodists. He criticized the New Divinity for accepting the "groundless" assumption that "*sin is the necessary means of the greatest good*" and rejected the notion "*that God could in a moral system have prevented all sin.*"⁵²

The Book of Mormon resolves this dispute in a complicated and unique way that incorporates some positions from both the Calvinists

46. *Constitution of the Presbyterian Church*, 30; Dwight, *Theology*, 1:415.

47. Nathaniel Emmons, *Sermons on Some of the First Principles and Doctrines of True Religion* (Boston: Samuel T. Armstrong, 1815), 49-50.

48. Mark Valeri, *Law and Providence in Joseph Bellamy's New England: The Origins of the New Divinity in Revolutionary America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 110-39.

49. William Ragsdale Cannon, *The Theology of John Wesley* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1974), 172; Wesley, *Works*, 2:434.

50. Nathan Bangs, *The Reformer Reformed or a Second Part of the Errors of Hopkinsianism Detected and Refuted* (New York: John C. Totten, 1818), 37; Bangs, *An Examination of the Doctrine of Predestination*, 35-36, 118, 125-26.

51. Fletcher, *Checks to Antinomianism*, 1:231; emphasis his.

52. Nathaniel William Taylor, *Concio ad Clerum: A Sermon on Human Nature, Sin, and Freedom* (1828), reproduced in Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *Theology in America:*

and Arminians. Like the Calvinist belief, evil in the Book of Mormon serves a useful purpose and is desired in God's creation. Thus, God permitted moral evil to enter the creation in order "to bring about his eternal purposes" (2 Ne. 2:15). The Book of Mormon suggests two purposes. First, moral evil is necessary in the world for human moral agency to exist. Thus, a human cannot "act for himself" unless he could be "enticed by the one or the other [good or evil] (2 Ne. 2:15). Second, humans cannot truly experience good if they have not experienced evil. Had it not been for the introduction of evil, humans would be "doing no good, for they knew no sin" (2 Ne. 2:23). Conversely and more characteristic of the Arminians, the Book of Mormon emphasizes that the important purpose of God in the creation and atonement is promoting human freedom and moral agency (2 Ne. 2:26-27).

In agreeing with the New Divinity regarding the desirability of moral evil in the creation, the Book of Mormon shares a theological difficulty with these Calvinists. How can a just God give laws to moral agents that prohibit moral evil and yet desire moral evil to occur? Nathaniel Taylor recognized this paradox in New Divinity teaching: "If sin be the necessary means of the greatest good, who can reasonably regard the commission of it with sorrow or even regret?"⁵³ In the Book of Mormon, God desires the first humans to partake of the "forbidden [by God]" fruit "to bring about his [God's] eternal purposes" (2 Ne. 2:15). And while humans cannot experience good without sinning (2 Ne. 2:23), they are also encouraged not to sin (2 Ne. 2:27-29).

Issue 3: Do Infants Commit Sin?

The deaths of infants and the common practice of baptizing infants presented special challenges to early nineteenth-century theologians who defended the concept of God's moral government. For on the one hand, Paul had declared all humans to be guilty of sin and, for that reason, susceptible to death (Rom. 5:12), but on the other, the moral culpability of infants seemed in question. Heated arguments ensued over whether infants are sinful and how to interpret their deaths.

For high Calvinists who accepted the imputation of Adam's sin

The Major Protestant Voices from Puritanism to Neo-orthodoxy (Indianapolis, Ind.: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967), 243; emphasis Taylor's.

53. Taylor, *Concio ad Clerum*, 244.

(Adam's descendants share equally in his guilt), the culpability of infants was clear and the question of moral agency was moot. The Book of Mormon condemns this view on the grounds that it makes God unjust (Moro. 8:12). Thus, as Eleazar Fitch (1791–1871) explained: “most Calvinistic writers . . . have denied that moral agency commences in infancy.”⁵⁴

However, by the 1820s, as Nathaniel Taylor pointed out, “most Calvinistic divines, not to say all in New-England, have long since, rejected this tenet [imputation].”⁵⁵ The New Divinity's Seth Williston noted: “We do not hold . . . that any of them [infants] shall be finally and eternally miserable, *merely* because Adam sinned.”⁵⁶ For these theologians, two alternatives could rescue God's moral government from the charge of injustice: Either infants are moral agents capable of sinning, or they are innocent of personal sin and the death of infants is explainable through another mechanism. Calvinists chose the former and Methodists the latter solution. Timothy Dwight declared that “it is with the highest probability” that humans “are also sinful beings in their infancy”⁵⁷ and the New Divinity's Leonard Woods (1774–1854) that “the various declarations of Scripture as to the universality of sin . . . must . . . be understood as in some sense including little children. . . . Children are . . . moral agents from the first.”⁵⁸

In contrast, Methodists rejected the idea that little children are accountable moral agents and, thus, sinners. According to Richard Watson, the only thing that could be said of infants is that “they inherit a corrupt and depraved nature from Adam.”⁵⁹ For Watson, infants are “innocent as to all actual sin” but still suffer from a “corrupt nature or spiritual death”

54. Eleazar T. Fitch, *Two Discourses on the Nature of Sin* (New Haven, Conn.: Treadway and Adams, 1826), 47.

55. Taylor, “Review: Views of Calvinism, by Professor [Andrews] Norton,” *Christian Spectator* 5, no. 4 (April 1, 1823): 218.

56. Seth Williston, *A Vindication of Some of the Most Essential Doctrines of the Reformation* (Hudson, N.Y.: Ashbel Stoddard, 1817), 61; emphasis his.

57. Dwight, *Theology*, 1:177.

58. Leonard Woods, *An Essay on Native Depravity* (Boston: William Peirce, 1835), 21, 169, 171.

59. Richard Watson, *Theological Institutes* (1823; reprinted New York: Lane & Scott, 1850), 2:230–31.

as a result of "original sin." But, through the "merits of Christ . . . God . . . will ultimately save them all."⁶⁰

Alexander Campbell, Nathaniel Taylor, and Charles Finney seemed to move toward a similar solution. For example, Campbell explained that infants had "never violated any law" but inherit, through Adam's sin, "a sin of our nature."⁶¹ Nathaniel Taylor hypothesized that "infants were depraved but not sinful" and "may be saved . . . through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus."⁶² For Finney: "All that can be justly said . . . is, that if infants are saved at all, which I suppose they are, they are rescued by the benevolence of God."⁶³ Rationalistic Unitarians rejected all these notions by refusing to characterize infants as depraved by nature.⁶⁴

To summarize, early nineteenth-century opinion regarding the possibility of guilt, sin, and moral accountability of infants included these positions: (1) Infants justifiably die and deserve damnation because of the imputed sin of Adam; (2) Infants are moral agents and justifiably die and deserve damnation because they have personally sinned; (3) Infants are not moral agents and have no personal sin but have inherited a moral corruption because of the Fall that renders them ineligible for salvation apart from the Atonement; (4) Infants have no sin or moral corruption and no redemption is necessary.

The Book of Mormon resolves this dispute in favor of the third option, arguing that "little children . . . are not capable of committing sin" (Moro. 8:8); and because of the atonement, "little children" are automatically pardoned under God's moral government (Mosiah 3:16). Yet the Book of Mormon acknowledges that little children are still under the "curse of Adam" and, thus, "fall" because of Adam or "by [receiving a depraved] nature" (Mosiah 3:16).

As an interesting aside, it may be noticed that understanding how the Book of Mormon resolves early nineteenth-century controversies can be useful in hypothesizing how the early Church might have interpreted difficult Book of Mormon passages such as the incomprehensible verse in

60. *Ibid.*, 2:57, 345.

61. Campbell, *The Christian System*, 28.

62. Taylor, *Concio ad Clerum*, 233.

63. J. H. Fairchild, ed., *Finney's Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Bethany Fellowship, 1976), 185.

64. *The Works of William E. Channing, D.D.*, 377.

Mosiah 3:16: "And even if it were possible that little children could sin, they could not be saved; but I say unto you they are blessed; for behold, as in Adam, or by nature, they fall, even so the blood of Christ atoneth for their sins." This passage likely would have been interpreted as follows: "And even though little children cannot commit personal sin, they are still not automatically saved from death and damnation without the Atonement because they have inherited a corrupted nature due to the Fall; but, I say unto you they are blessed; for, behold, because of Adam's sin they have a corrupted nature that renders them ineligible for salvation; even so, the blood of Christ atoneth for Adam's sin, reverses the effects of their corrupted nature on their salvation, and saves them all."

Issue 4: Are Those Who Have Never Been Exposed to Christian Teachings Accountable?

There was general agreement in the early nineteenth century that essential features of God's moral government are the establishment of divine laws, consistent administration of the laws, and the revelation of the laws to humans, views with which the Book of Mormon agrees (2 Ne. 2:5; Alma 42:17-22). But acceptance of the idea that the law must be understood in order for a moral government to hold a moral agent accountable results in a problem: How does one reconcile the doctrine that all have sinned and are accountable (Rom. 5:12) with the observation that a great many individuals have not been exposed to the teachings of the Bible? To rescue God's moral government from the charge of injustice, several solutions are possible including: (1) Humans not exposed to the Bible's teachings are still individually accountable because they have learned of the laws through other mechanisms; (2) Humans not exposed to the Bible are not accountable and are not punished; or (3) Humans not exposed to the Bible are accountable but are rescued from punishment.

With the exception of the rationalistic Unitarians, almost all early nineteenth-century theologians included in this study adopted the first solution, although the specifics varied. Thus, the New Divinity's Nathaniel Emmons proposed that the accountability of humans arises from a natural ability "of discerning the difference between moral good and evil" even by "those who never heard of the Bible."⁶⁵ Similarly Presbyterian Archibald Alexander declared that the ability to understand God's law is intrinsic to man since God's "own righteous law . . . is written on the heart of man, or

65. Emmons, *Sermons on Some of the First Principles*, 52.

interwoven with the principles of his constitution, as a moral agent."⁶⁶ For the Methodists, Wesley taught that "every child of God has had, at some time, 'life and death set before him,' eternal life and eternal death; and has in himself the casting voice."⁶⁷ And Richard Watson insisted that those who "had received no revealed law" were considered to have the law "written in their hearts" and "consciences." Through this mechanism, it is "possible" that obedience could lead to salvation for all.⁶⁸ John Fletcher argued that because "grace" or "light" is given to all humans, a "heathen" who "never heard of Christ" would still be saved if he "feareth God, and worketh righteousness, according to the light he has."⁶⁹ Finney considered the heathen subject to God's law and punishment and encouraged his listeners to "send them [heathens] the gospel . . . for their salvation."⁷⁰ New Haven theologian Eleazar Fitch suggested that ignorance of the law is no excuse since each person is under the obligation of "acquainting himself with the law"⁷¹ and sins by not doing so.

But while all these groups sought ways to justify the accountability and guilt of all humans, the Book of Mormon resolves the issue by the relatively novel adoption of the third alternative: that those not exposed to the Bible or Christian teaching are accountable but are rescued from punishment. Like the other theologies, the Book of Mormon teaches that God has given laws, the violation of which places all humans under condemnation (Alma 42:17-22). But unlike the others, the Book of Mormon teaches that those who are ignorant of the teachings of the law cannot in fairness be held accountable by a just moral governor; such persons, like infants, are automatically rescued by the Atonement. Thus, all humans "who have died not knowing the will of God concerning them, or who have ignorantly sinned" will receive no punishment. This is because "the atonement satisfieth the demands of his [God's] justice upon all those who have not the law given to them" (Mosiah 3:11; 2 Ne. 9:26).

66. Archibald Alexander, *A Treatise on Justification by Faith* (Philadelphia: Wm. S. Martien, 1837), 11.

67. Wesley, *Works*, 2:490.

68. Watson, *Institutes*, 2:446.

69. Fletcher, *Checks to Antinomianism*, 1:50-1.

70. Charles Grandison Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion* (1835; reprinted, Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1960), 43.

71. Fitch, *Two Discourses on the Nature of Sin*, 8.

Some Conclusions

This study has examined only a small number of the many theological issues addressed in the Book of Mormon and in early nineteenth-century America. More in-depth studies of specific Book of Mormon teachings in contemporary context, such as attempted here, are challenging for several reasons, especially because the Book of Mormon does not present an organized systematic theology; thus, interpretation of scriptural passages may be ambiguous. Missing and fundamental concepts must often be hypothesized.

Although the Book of Mormon contains teachings that are similar to those to various early nineteenth-century groups, clearly Book of Mormon theology does not consistently reproduce any existing early nineteenth-century theological perspective. Indeed, I would suggest that previous scholars who have attempted to “pigeonhole” Book of Mormon theology create a methodological problem for themselves as they are forced to emphasize the similarities and minimize the differences between Book of Mormon teachings and their presumed early nineteenth-century source. As this study shows, it is often a close examination of the differences that can provide some of the more interesting insights. Thus, the Book of Mormon presents neither a completely early nineteenth-century Arminian nor Calvinistic theology but sometimes offers, as its resolution of the problem of moral evil shows, a compromise between the two and at other times, a unique perspective, such as the question of accountability for those not exposed to Christian teaching. In its approach to contemporary problems, the Book of Mormon was not out of step with other early nineteenth-century strivings. For example, as we have seen, compromise approaches were proposed by Taylor and Finney, who were viewed by their more orthodox Calvinistic peers as “slipping over into Arminianism,”⁷² while the Restorationists rejected the orthodox received religion altogether.

There are other relatively novel theological ideas in the Book of Mormon. One example is the notion that the creation was entirely static prior to the Fall. A corollary of this concept is that the first humans could not have children (2 Ne. 2:23). Contrarily, moderate Calvinist Timothy Dwight taught that if Adam had been obedient, his “posterity . . . would, like him, have lived forever;” high Calvinist Thomas Boston, that without

72. Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe, *Charles G. Finney and the Spirit of American Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1996), 31–32.

the Fall, Adam's original "blessing" would have been "diffused into all the branches" (of his posterity); the New Divinity's Nathaniel Emmons that, prior to the Fall, "God presented him (Adam) with the delightful prospect of a numerous and happy posterity;" and Methodist Richard Watson that had Adam not sinned, "the felicity and glory of his (original) condition must . . . have descended to his posterity for ever."⁷³

Thus, when viewed in larger context, Book of Mormon theology, as interpreted against the background of the early nineteenth century, appears to contribute an addition to the theological spectrum of the period. Given the interest of many scholars in the considerable theological diversity of early nineteenth-century America, one may wonder why more attention has not been paid to the Book of Mormon. Undoubtedly, an important reason is that, in the early nineteenth century, "the theologians who staffed the seminaries and produced the quarterlies were the country's most respected intellectuals."⁷⁴ Conversely, as Alexander Campbell and Jan Shipps have suggested, Joseph Smith, the presumed author of the Book of Mormon, has not been considered scholastically worthy since he was "very ignorant" and delivered "the theology of the Latter-day Saints . . . through found scripture and prophetic voice."⁷⁵ I suggest that the analysis presented in this study calls into question the conclusion that Book of Mormon theology is uninteresting and not up to par scholastically. Rather, additional studies will likely produce further valuable insights for students of both early Mormon history and early nineteenth-century American theological diversity.

73. See Dwight, *Theology*, 1:398; Thomas Boston, *Human Nature in Its Fourfold State* (Philadelphia: Ambrose Walker, 1814), 30; Emmons, *Sermons on Some of the First Principles*, 222; Watson, *Institutes*, 2:19.

74. Mark A. Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1992), 232.

75. Campbell, "The Mormonites," 93; Jan Shipps, "Joseph Smith," in *Makers of Christian Theology in America*, edited by Mark G. Toulouse and James O. Duke (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1997), 212.