The "Moral" Atonement as a Mormon Interpretation

Lorin K. Hansen

COMPARING RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS IS AN EFFECTIVE tool for developing insight and appreciation. And there is no more important Christian concept to which this approach can be applied than the doctrine of the atonement of Jesus Christ. The Atonement, according to the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, is "the central fact, the crucial foundation, the chief doctrine . . . in the plan of salvation."[1] Comparing how Mormons and Christians in general understand the Atonement should, therefore, bring us to the essence of Christian faith and provide valuable insight into an important Mormon doctrine.

Such a comparison, however, is complicated by the difference in the way Mormons and other Christian groups approach this doctrine. Christians in general have been inclined to explore the doctrine of the Atonement by developing rationale for the mechanism of the Atonement. They have contemplated and discussed that mechanism for centuries and, in the process, have suggested a variety of interpretations. Mormons, by contrast, generally have avoided that approach.

The Mormon doctrine of the Atonement consists mostly of simple definitions and statements about general purpose, conditions of application, and eternal consequences. Attempts to explain the actual mechanism of the Atonement are limited mostly to the use of metaphors and parables. According to typical metaphors, the Atonement is like a court of law, like the settling of a commercial debt, like a ladder dropped into a pit, like a stick held out to a drowning person, like a corporate merger, and so on.[2]

---

1. Jeffrey R. Holland, "Atonement of Jesus Christ," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism,* Daniel H. Ludlow, ed., 5 vols. (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1992), 1:83.

2. See, for example, J. Clair Batty, "The Atonement: Do Traditional Explanations Make Sense?" *Sunstone* 8 (Nov.-Dec. 1983): 11-16; Stephen E. Robinson, "Believing

These metaphors convey the essential truths that the consequences of sin are dire, that overcoming these consequences requires great "sacrifice" on our behalf by the Savior, and that we must repent to qualify for the benefits of that gift. If we search Mormon literature to discover some deeper mechanism or rationale behind the metaphors, in the final analysis we are brought up short with such phrases as "in some mysterious way" or "though to man incomprehensible."[3] As Bruce R. McConkie reminded us, the Atonement is the "least understood of all our revealed truths."[4] In short, the church has a clear "doctrine" of the Atonement but no official "interpretation" for the process or mechanism of the Atonement.

Despite the lack of an accepted Mormon rationale, I can proceed with a comparison by focusing first—not on rationale—but on the fundamental theological positions that must underlie the rationale. Atonement theories of the past can be characterized and distinguished from each other by fundamental theological assumptions or positions on just a few key issues. So I note these issues and assumptions and then turn to the Mormon scriptural canon, particularly the Book of Mormon, to determine Mormon positions on those same issues.[5] In this essay, making such a comparison, I find that Mormonism has a significant and unique position on issues basic to the Atonement. And once I define the Mormon position relative to others, I am able to suggest an Atonement interpretation or rationale that is consistent with Mormon sources. So although I cannot begin this comparison with the help of a Mormon rationale, I arrive at one through the discussion.

As Mormons, we may feel that if the Atonement is truly "incomprehensible" we will never understand it, so why speculate about rationale? After all, one may argue, it is the Atonement—not some theory of the Atonement—that saves. But surely because of the importance of the Atonement we should make the effort to understand and not settle so quickly and completely for "in some mysterious way." Acceptance of the Atonement must ultimately rest on faith, and that faith is an essential element for bringing the influence of the Atonement into our lives. However, a rationale—even a tentative rationale—can affirm and add meaning to that faith.

Christ," *Ensign* 22 (Apr. 1992): 5-9.

3. See, for example, John Taylor, *Mediation and Atonement* (Salt Lake City: Stevens & Wallis, Inc., 1950), 145; James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ*, 17th ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1948), 613.

4. Bruce R. McConkie, "The Purifying Power of Gethsemane," *Ensign* 15 (May 1985): 10.

5. I accept traditional Mormon claims for the historicity of sources such as the Book of Mormon and try to draw out from them their basic implications for understanding the Atonement.

ATONEMENT THEORIES OF THE PAST

Whether we accept any of the many Christian theories for the mechanism of the Atonement, it is instructive to note the types of explanations that have been proposed. To arrive at the fundamental issues for comparison and to develop a vocabulary for discussion, I first summarize five interpretations that have been widely accepted in Western Christianity.

1) The *Ransom theory* became a common interpretation soon after the New Testament period, particularly after Origin (in the third century) and Gregory of Nyssa (in the fourth century). That theory was an elaboration upon Jesus' prophetic metaphor that he would give his life as "a ransom for many" (Matt. 20:28; Mark 10:45). Early theologians claimed that Jesus delivered himself at Jerusalem into the power of the devil to satisfy the devil's rights over the souls of men and women, rights purportedly obtained because of their sins. And the devil, according to further developments of the theory, was deceived into believing he had "bargained" away the souls of men and women to obtain power over the soul of Jesus through his death. But death could not hold Jesus. So in the end Christ became victorious over evil and the devil had power over neither Christ nor humanity. This biblical metaphor, thus elaborated into crude theory, was a common Atonement interpretation for nearly a thousand years.

2) The *Satisfaction theory* was proposed by St. Anselm toward the end of the eleventh century for apologetics and to refute the idea that Christ's atonement served to satisfy some imagined rights of the devil. He proposed instead that Christ died to provide satisfaction to the offended honor and justice (or sense of rightness) of God, an offense that occurred through human sin. Even the smallest sin was an "infinite" sin because it dishonored an "infinite" being, and only the supererogative self-sacrifice of Christ could satisfy the "infinite" offense to God's justice and honor. This was an interpretation argued from metaphysical necessity (necessity within the nature of God) and presupposing medieval values—not drawn from scriptural insight. As Anselm put it in his great classic *Cur Deus Homo:* none but God could make satisfaction and none but man ought to make satisfaction, so it was necessary for Christ—as God and man—to make satisfaction. Most subsequent Atonement theories have been either influenced by this theory or have been reactions against it. Reactions against have usually faulted the theory because of its inherent medieval characterization of God. As one critic explained, the Ransom theory made the devil a god, but the Satisfaction theory made God a devil.[6] Critics have also denounced the theory for being unethical and superficial, because the problem of sin was

---

6. Robert S. Paul, *The Atonement and the Sacraments* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1960), 79.

made to be—not the effect of sin on the human soul—but its offense to the honor of God.

3) Early in the twelfth century Peter Abelard introduced the *Moral-Influence theory* as a reaction against both the Ransom theory and Anselm's Satisfaction theory. In the Moral-Influence theory, the death of Christ served as Atonement (or at-one-ment) in that it softened hearts and inspired men and women with God's love. Men and women were then inspired to reciprocate that love, to repent, and to turn to moral living. Christians had always known that the life, suffering, and death of Christ inspired love and devotion. What was new with Abelard was that this "moral influence" now became the primary mechanism and significance of the Atonement. The Catholic church condemned Abelard's theory in his lifetime, but his ideas—as a supplement to Anselm's concept of "satisfaction"—continued to influence views of the Atonement in Roman Catholicism. In Protestantism, the concept of the Atonement as moral-influence was adopted by the Socinians, the Unitarians, and by the theologians of the German Aufklarung. It has also been a common belief in modern Protestant Liberalism in America. The theory became especially popular with those (the Socinians, for example) who regarded Christ as an inspired teacher rather than the incarnation of God. The Moral-Influence theory (like the Satisfaction theory) has been criticized for treating sin superficially, in this case, by making forgiveness too easy. According to this theory, as men and women become aware of proper conduct (through Christ's teachings and example), and are motivated to repent (through the realization of God's love), forgiveness is automatic, inherent in God's loving nature. Those who believed that Christ literally died to pay our debt claimed the theory trivialized redemption, because there was no accounting for the consequences of past sins, no "clearing of accounts." And those who believed in the total moral depravity of humanity criticized it because it assumed humanity was even capable of breaking free from the power of sin without direct intervention from some outside power.

4) The *Penal Substitution theory* became widely accepted in the Reformation through the influence of Calvin and, to some extent, Luther. Both Reformers accepted Anselm's "satisfaction" interpretation of the Atonement but then extended the meaning of "satisfaction." Between Anselm's era and the Reformation, there were extensive changes in the way people viewed their obligations to government and society. They began to conceive rights and obligations not so much in terms of feudal relationships as in terms of abstract law. Judgments would come, not from personal offenses to a medieval sovereign, but from the infraction of public law. When laws were broken, "justice" required punishment. This maturing respect for law affected the Reformation concept of the Atonement so that Christ's suffering and death became a satisfaction to the "law" by serving

as substitute punishment for sins. (By contrast, Anselm never considered Christ's suffering and death to be punishment.) Now the "wrong" of the innocent suffering of Christ somehow canceled the "wrong" of human sin and allowed the redemption of humankind. Again, theologians had extended biblical metaphors (in this case, judicial metaphors, primarily in the writings of Paul) into a new theory of the Atonement. Atonement as penal substitution became the dominant view of Protestant Orthodoxy. And so it became the dominant view of early America within the Calvinist tradition (such as with Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Huguenots, and Dutch and German Reformed Christians) and among German and Dutch Lutherans.

5) The *Governmental theory* arose in the branch of the Reformed tradition known as Arminianism. According to this theory, first proposed by Hugo Grotius, Jesus was crucified, not as a substitute punishment for sin, but as God's object lesson to humanity, a demonstration of God's justice to secure order in his kingdom. That is, Christ was crucified as a deterrent to sin, crucified so that it was "safe" to forgive sin. Some early Methodists accepted this interpretation, and it became prominent in New England theology toward the end of the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth century, as the influence there of Calvinism began to wane.

In modern times, Christians have become increasingly uneasy with these medieval and Reformation theories, sensitized no doubt by the extensive criticism over the centuries leveled back and forth between proponents of competing interpretations. Theologians have tried to reconstruct these traditional theories, sometimes by softening offensive features, sometimes by combining desirable features of different theories, and sometimes by radically altering fundamental assumptions. And in all of this there has been a trend toward what has been called a "moral" interpretation of the Atonement.[7]

Past attempts to compare Mormon views of the Atonement to these medieval and Reformation theories, I feel, have been inadequate, and even point in opposite directions. For example, Sterling McMurrin[8] and Eugene England[9] have claimed similarities between Abelard's Moral-Influence theory and general Mormon views and—by contrast—Blake Ostler[10] and

---

7. For example, see L. W. Grensted, *A Short History of the Doctrine of the Atonement* (Manchester, Eng.: Manchester University Press, 1920), 308, 364.

8. Sterling M. McMurrin, *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1965), 89.

9. Eugene England, "That They Might Not Suffer: The Gift of Atonement," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 1 (Autumn 1966): 152.

10. Blake T. Ostler, "The Book of Mormon as a Modern Expansion of an Ancient Source," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 20 (Spring 1987): 82.

Mark Thomas[11] have claimed similarities between Anselm's Satisfaction theory and various entries in the Book of Mormon. Keith Norman, however, has suggested the possibility for a unique Mormon synthesis for the Atonement.[12] In the present essay, I suggest that the mechanism of the Atonement appropriate for interpreting Mormon sources is a unique and thoroughgoing "moral" interpretation. And I suggest that this appropriate interpretation is more like recent developments in Atonement interpretation than the old medieval and Reformation theories.

What Is a "Moral" Theory of the Atonement?

In modern times there has been a growing belief among Christians that the Atonement is not a matter of metaphysical necessity in the nature of God (as in the Satisfaction theory) or legal manipulation (as in the Penal Substitution and Governmental theories). These external, *metaphysical, and transactional* interpretations may provide some insight as collateral or figurative concepts, but if pressed too far (and accepted as fundamental) they lead to moral incongruities. For example, how could God be "satisfied" by an innocent person suffering? Or how can moral obligations be transferred from one person to another? And if *someone* (the Savior if necessary) must be punished for every sin, is there such a thing as true forgiveness?

In recent times, Christians have increasingly interpreted the Atonement as a matter of the spiritual dynamics of interpersonal relations between God and man or woman and as a matter of personal, internal transformation. The Atonement then becomes a matter of love and sorrow, of sympathy and anguish, of exemplar appeal and inspiration by the Spirit, of regret and change of heart, and of forgiveness, reconciliation, and recovery of self worth. The Atonement, understood *fundamentally* in these spiritual and personal terms, and operating through moral force and response, is referred to as a "moral" atonement.

The appeal of such interpretations is that they avoid the moral dilemmas involved in understanding the Atonement as metaphysical necessity or legal transaction. The position of an interpretation (ancient or modern) between the poles of this *moral* versus *metaphysical-transactional* characterization is our first key measure for distinguishing various Atonement interpretations.

---

11. Mark Thomas, "Revival Language in the Book of Mormon," *Sunstone* 8 (May-June 1983): 22.

12. Keith Norman, "Toward a Mormon Christology," *Sunstone* 10 (Apr. 1985): 18.

OBJECTIVE ATONEMENT VERSUS SUBJECTIVE ATONEMENT

Through the centuries Christians have viewed the word "Atonement" basically in two different ways. On the one hand, there is the "Atonement" that is an act of Jesus Christ, an event at a "moment" of history—separate from human participation or contribution—that atones for men's and women's sins independent of whether they accept it. Christians in general refer to this as an *objective atonement* (that is, an atonement that occurs *external* to humans). On the other hand, Christians have also referred to "Atonement" as an at-one-ment between God and mortals (or a process to at-one-ment), the reconciliation between God and man or woman—accomplished by human transformation. And this they call *subjective atonement* (that is, an atonement that is *internal* to humans). The first use of the term emphasizes *God* as the focus of the Atonement; the second emphasizes *humankind.*

Actually, the Atonement as a complete event is an *act of God* introduced to achieve a *transformation in people*, so every interpretation of the Atonement should have within it both objective and subjective elements. Yet through most of Christian history theologians have placed their emphasis predominantly on one side of the interpretation or the other. For example, the Satisfaction and Penal Substitution theories of Christian Orthodoxy were predominantly objective interpretations: man and woman, according to these views, are redeemed by God's works, not their own works, for they are morally incapable of contributing to that redemption. And the Moral-Influence theory (the predominant example of a "moral" theory of the Atonement) was a subjective interpretation; that is, man and woman are morally autonomous and are redeemed through their own initiative, responding to the moral example of Jesus Christ. So the polarization in Christian theology has been primarily one of *moral-subjective* interpretations versus *transactional-objective* interpretations.

It is important to note, however, that this particular pairing of concepts is not fundamental. The Moral-Influence theory is only a special case of a moral theory. In modern times, beginning in the nineteenth century, theologians have tried to do justice to both the objective and subjective elements of Atonement interpretation, and (as we will see) some have tried to present the objective as well as the subjective Atonement in "moral" terms.

For my purposes here, I acknowledge this distinction in the meanings of the word "Atonement" and use the terms "objective Atonement" and "subjective Atonement." Even though Mormons do not ordinarily use these terms, we are in the habit of using the word Atonement in just those two ways. When Bruce McConkie states, "His [Christ's] Atonement is the most transcendent event that ever has or ever will occur from Creation's

dawn through all the ages of a never-ending eternity,"[13] he is referring to objective Atonement. And when Hugh Nibley writes, "the at-*one*-ment takes place when we get there . . . Everything we do here is to prepare for the Atonement,"[14] he is referring to subjective Atonement. So introducing the terminology here is useful, not only for relating the Mormon view to general Christian views, but also for adding clarity into some discussions of the Atonement found in Mormon literature. And this objective-versus-subjective component, the relative role of God and humans in the Atonement process, is our second key measure or category of classification for distinguishing various Atonement theories.

I now compare Atonement theories and Mormon views, using these two simple but revealing measures: moral-versus-transactional Atonement (with regard to the mode of operation) and objective versus subjective Atonement (with regard to the God-versus-human focus of the event).

THE ATONEMENT AND THE LOVE AND HOLINESS OF A PERSONAL GOD

I begin by first examining basic beliefs about the nature and character of God. The Atonement is first of all an act of God, and the extent to which an atonement interpretation is *moral* or *transactional* correlates with the basic understanding of God found in the corresponding theologies.

Christians in general believe in a *personal God of love and holiness*. But even on such a fundamental concept there are differences. Early Christian theologians, from the Mormon point of view, altered the Christian concept of "God as a personal being" when they drew on Greek philosophy to answer the heresies and resolve the conceptual dilemmas of their day. Using vocabulary borrowed from Platonism and Stoicism, the classical, Trinitarian creeds portrayed God as a philosophical absolute.[15] Those creeds actually introduced the word "person" (the Latin *persona*) into Christian theology, but originators and later professors of those creeds believed God to be an omnipresent spirit, not "a person." From the third century until modern times, the majority of Christians held that it is more appropriate to speak of personality *in* God rather than the personality *of*

---

13. McConkie, "The Purifying Power of Gethsemane," 9.

14. Hugh W. Nibley, "The Atonement of Jesus Christ," *Ensign* 20 (1990, in 4 parts: July 18-23; Aug. 30-34; Sept. 22-26; Oct. 26-31): part 3, 22.

15. See, for example, Sterling M. McMurrin, "Comments on the Theological and Philosophical Foundations of Christianity," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 25 (Spring 1992): 42; or Robert M. Grant, *The Early Christian Doctrine of God* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1966), 14-36.

God.[16] Even in recent times, Christians (for example, Karl Barth, Paul Tillich, and Jurgen Moltmann) have claimed that God is "the ground of all that is personal," but not actually a personal being, that the idea of God as a person is just a symbol or model to help us think of God in terms of relationships.

Furthermore, although all Christians accept that in some sense "God is love" (1 John 4:8, 16), it does not follow that all Christian theories of the Atonement are adequate portrayals of that love. Hastings Rashdall for example, a proponent of the Moral-Influence theory (and thus a critic of the Satisfaction theory), refers to Anselm's notions of God's "justice"—acceptance of Christ's death as satisfying God's offended honor—as "the barbaric ideas of an ancient Lombard king or the technicalities of a Lombard lawyer."[17] It seemed to be a form of justice that hardly made room for love. In Anselm's theological works, God (as the Father) was a metaphysical absolute—remote, enigmatic, unapproachable, and without passion—not the loving father of the Savior's parables. Anselm's view of God was typical of classical, medieval theology. Given the pervasive influence of that tradition, it is not surprising that some later creeds spoke of the Atonement as a means for reconciling God to humankind rather than reconciling wayward humans to God (for example, the Augsburg Confession [Art. XX] and the Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England [Art. II]). Since many theologians of the past believed God to be without passion, it is not surprising that some (such as Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin) also interpreted the love of God to be "good will" rather than deep feelings of affection.

These classical concepts of God as non-"person," apathetic, and unmoved, I suggest, diminish the view of God as a loving, personal God and leaves a discrepancy between the character of the Father and the character of the Son as seen in the New Testament. This has no doubt contributed to forming the philosophical and transactional character of orthodox theories of the Atonement. If God is conceived as unapproachable and without passion, that disposition can seem the main obstacle to redemption. And the Atonement can then seem to be the necessary means for changing that disposition. It is not surprising that those who rejected Trinitarian creeds were usually those who also preferred the Moral-Influence theory.

Mormons believe that God is literally a *personal being*. Clear references to his person, like the so-called "anthropomorphism" of the Old Testament,

---

16. C. C. J. Webb, *God and Personality* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1919), 61-88.

17. Hastings Rashdall, *The Idea of Atonement in Christian Theology* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1925), 355.

204 Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought

are frequent in the Book of Mormon.[18] The supreme being worshipped as God by the Jaredites appeared to the brother of Jared as a personage of spirit and revealed himself as the pre-existent Christ (Ether 3:14-16). Nephites worshipped God as a spiritual being—"Father," yet to be born as "Son." As the church has explained in retrospect, the pre-existent Jesus, by investiture from the Father, was acting and being worshipped as representative of the Father but was to be born in mortality as the Son, then to be *generally* recognized as truly the Son, a personal being distinct from the Father.

The Book of Mormon also speaks of the loving concern of God for humankind. At the beginning of the book we find an account of a vision about God's love that sets the theme for the rest of the book. First Lehi and then his son Nephi see in vision a tree, pure white, beautiful, and precious, that is interpreted as "the love of God, which sheddeth itself abroad in the hearts of the children of men; wherefore, it is the most desirable above all things . . . and the most joyous to the soul" (1 Ne. 11:22-23). Nephi then saw, in specific acts, how this great love was to be expressed. He saw, some six centuries into the future, a vision of the birth, the ministry, the suffering, and the death of the Savior, "slain for the sins of the world" (v. 33). Thus the Book of Mormon begins with a concept of the Atonement as the way to human joy and salvation, and the most significant expression of the love of God. To Lehi, redemption was equivalent to being "encircled about eternally in the arms of his [God's] love" (2 Ne. 1:15). God, according to the Book of Mormon, is a personal being of love and affection.

This view—of God as a person and of our personal relationship to him—strengthened as Mormonism developed. Joseph Smith described his first vision as a vision of God as a personal being. Later, he added to this concept of God as a personal being the concept of men and women pre-existing with Jesus as spirit children of God the Father, adding new insight into the loving, personal relationship between God and ourselves. That relationship is portrayed as so intimate that it is God's work and glory "to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man" (Moses 1:39). Joseph Smith's account of the vision of the "three degrees of glory" defined the eternal destinies of men and women in terms of eternal, interpersonal relationships with Christ and the Father (D&C 76:62, 77, 86-88). As judged by one outside observer, "No denomination holds more staunchly to this conception of God as Person than do the Mormons."[19] And, I might add,

---

18. See, for example, Susan W. Easton, "The Book of Mormon Bears Witness of the Father through the Son," in *The Sixth Annual Church Educational System Religious Educator's Symposium on the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University, 1982), 20-23.

19. Edmond L. Cherbonnier, "In Defense of Anthropomorphism," in *Reflections on Mormonism, Judaeo Christian Parallels*, Truman G. Madsen, ed. (Provo, UT: Religious

no denomination I know of conceives of a more intimate, personal, loving relationship between God and his children in mortality.

Thus there is a fundamental "personalism"[20] in Mormon sources. And this provides a simple and direct basis for understanding the Atonement in terms of our spiritual, familial, interpersonal relationships with God. It seems to me that whatever use may be made of the concepts of "satisfaction" and "substitution," an interpretation of the Atonement more in character with Mormon theology (particularly the Mormon concept of God) is an interpretation understood *fundamentally* in spiritual, interpersonal terms, that is, as *moral Atonement*.

THE ATONEMENT AND THE NATURE AND PREDICAMENT OF HUMANKIND

Specific views on the nature of God lead to associated views about humankind. Abraham Heschel, for example (concerning ancient Israel), asserted that the prophetic affirmation that man and woman were created by a personal God, in God's image, and that God is a god of love and pathos—having sympathy, tenderness, joy, and sorrow for man and woman—affirms at the same time the inherent dignity and sanctity of the human soul.[21] That affirmation came to the ancients, according to Edmond Cherbonnier, as the exhilarating revelation that they shared "the same kind of existence which God himself enjoys . . . It made the Israelite cry, 'Hallelujah!'"[22]

Also in the Book of Mormon (as in the Bible), man and woman are created in God's image (for example, Mosiah 7:27), and are the subjects of God's love. In the words of Ammon, "he loveth our souls" (Alma 24:14). And this (as in the Bible) affirms the great significance of humankind.

In the Book of Mormon and in general Mormon thought this significance for humankind combines appropriately with a positive view of the purpose of mortality. The "fall of Adam" involves a separation from God, but is not (as in Christian Orthodoxy) a tragic fall to total moral depravity,

Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1978), 156.

20. I am appropriating a word here. Personalism, as a philosophical position, has been defined as the "perspective for which the person is the ontological ultimate and for which personality is the fundamental explanatory principle." Paul Deats in *The Boston Personalist Tradition in Philosophy, Social Ethics, and Theology*, Paul Deats and Carol Robb, eds. (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1986), 2. I have in mind the same emphasis, but one obtained from scripture and based on religious experience rather than philosophical analysis.

21. Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets*, 2 vols. (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 2:6, 39-40.

22. Edmond L. Cherbonnier, "The Logic of Biblical Anthropomorphism," *Harvard Theological Review* 55 (1962): 206.

leaving humans unable to contribute to their own salvation. Whatever the process first intended for initiating mortality (perhaps different from what actually occurred, because of freedom to disobey), mortality was meant to be. So the actual process for initiating mortality is not critical for later generations. Mortality comes not as the end of free moral choices, but as a means to broaden the possibilities for those choices, and in that sense (initiated by whatever process) is a blessing (2 Ne. 2:25). According to the Book of Mormon, humans are free and responsible (vv. 26-27; Hel. 14:29-31). And men and women are expected to express that freedom through living the commandments of God. When they do not, they are expected to repent, and that repentance qualifies them for the gift of the Atonement (Alma 34:16; 42:13). That is, men and women are saved by grace, but only after all they can do (2 Ne. 25:23).

Joseph Smith expanded on these positive views of mortals and mortality. Later revelations taught that mortality was intended by God but also chosen by each of us before our birth—because of its beneficial purpose (Abr. 3:22-28)—and that as men and women live the commandments of God, they receive grace upon grace and progress eternally (D&C 93:19-20). Optimism about the destiny of men and women reached full expression in Smith's King Follett discourse, in which he elaborated on the eternal possibilities for the children of God becoming like God.

In the Book of Mormon (and in Mormon thought generally), we find a positive view of humanity tempered with serious reservations. As expressed by Truman G. Madsen, humans have been susceptible to two debilitating errors: "the blasphemous humility of considering [themselves] a worm" and "the prideful claim that [they are] not at present in a fallen and needful state."[23] Man and woman are capable of good, but all have sinned and all are capable of great evil. To give opportunity for moral choices and thus fulfill the purpose of life, it is inevitable—and serves a purpose—that there be an opposition in all things, that men and women be enticed by good and evil (2 Ne. 2:14-16). If they choose evil, they progressively bring themselves to be bound by the "chains of hell" (Alma 12:6, 11; 13:30). Thus humans are not born inherently depraved, but by ignoring the Spirit and making improper choices they easily become depraved.

The Book of Mormon presents this *fundamental predicament* of humankind in vivid, *personal* images that warn of the ultimate consequences of sin. Alma challenges the people of Zarahemla: "Do you look forward with an eye of faith, and view this mortal body raised in immortality . . . to stand before God to be judged according to the deeds which have been done in

---

23. Truman G. Madsen, ed., *Reflections on Mormonism, Judaeo Christian Parallels* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1978), 201.

the mortal body?" (Alma 5:15) According to Nephi, we will all be raised to stand before God, who abhors evil, with a perfect recollection and awareness of our life (2 Ne. 9:10-16). Because of this perfect remembrance, in a sense we become our own judge (v. 33; Alma 41:7). If we have not been cleansed through the Atonement, our sense of guilt will cause us to shrink from the presence of God with a pain and anguish that can be likened to "an unquenchable fire" (Mosiah 2:38). In the words of Alma, "our words will also condemn us, yea, all our works will condemn us . . . and our thoughts will condemn us; and in this awful state we shall not dare to look up to our God; and we would fain be glad if we could command the rocks and the mountains to fall upon us to hide us from his presence" (Alma 12:12-15). To the unrepentant sinner, Moroni adds the warning: "ye would be more miserable to dwell with a holy and just God, under a consciousness of your filthiness before him, than ye would to dwell with the damned souls in hell" (Morm. 9:1-5). So Alma asks the ultimate question:

> Can ye look up to God at that day with a pure heart and clean hands? I say unto you, can you look up, having the image of God engraven upon your countenances? . . . [T]here can be no man saved except his garments are washed white; yea, his garments must be purified until they are cleansed from all stain, through the blood of him of whom it has been spoken by our fathers, who should come to redeem his people from their sins (Alma 5:19-21).

Therefore, in the Book of Mormon and in general Mormon thought, there is a critical need for divine help. But the predicament of men and women is their personal estrangement from God, not some external, metaphysical incongruity. Men and women are capable of responding from within themselves to God's commands. And their concern should be how to achieve reconciliation and eternal presence with a God of holiness who "cannot look upon sin with the least degree of allowance" (Alma 45:16). The Atonement is the supernal means needed to transform men and women and to bring them back unestranged—unburdened from the shame and the regrets of their own mortal probation—back into God's presence.

If the *fundamental* problem for humankind was God's *unsatisfied offended honor*, the solution could come as Jesus Christ's superabundant merits for satisfaction. If the *fundamental* problem was a requisite *cosmic balance of sin and punishment*, the solution could come as penal substitution. But if the *fundamental* problem is *personal estrangement*, then (it seems to me) the solution must come as repentance and the spiritual healing of personal relationships, again that is, as *moral Atonement*.

THE PRIMACY OF OBJECTIVE ATONEMENT IN MORMON SOURCES

The presence in Mormon thought of the moral capabilities of man and woman and of the necessity of man's and woman's participation in the "process" of redemption (subjective Atonement) suggests a correspondence of the Mormon position with Abelard's and with subsequent Moral-Influence theories (as pointed out by Sterling McMurrin and Eugene England). The comparison is intriguing and has some validity. However, most Moral-Influence theories (since Abelard) have also been (in essence) denials of the existence of objective Atonement. Through modern history, the concept of "process" and human participation in the redemption process has usually been coupled with a diminished view of the divinity of Christ (as in Protestant Liberalism). The comparison with Abelard is not so simple, therefore, since Mormon thought includes the importance of human participation (the former position), but is completely opposed to these latter views.

The Book of Mormon is, first of all, a witness that Jesus is the Christ, not just a great teacher or inspired prophet. And in the Book of Mormon, the Atonement is the "great and last sacrifice" crucial for human redemption (Alma 34:10) that was "prepared from the foundations of the world" (Mosiah 4:6,7) and consummated or "made" by Jesus during his mortal existence (Jacob 7:12; Alma 34:9, 42:15). That is, according to the Book of Mormon, Christ's Atonement is first of all an objective Atonement.

For most Christians who have believed in an objective Atonement, Calvary is the focus of that event. And this seems reasonable. Supposedly, Calvary was where the worst happened to Christ, so that is where the "satisfaction" or "substitute penalty" was achieved. And those who believed that Christ's suffering was primarily revelatory (moral influence), accomplishing subjective at-one-ment, Calvary was also where his suffering, his majestic love, and his forgiveness were most clearly on display to influence the world. So Christians (orthodox and liberal) have generally focused on Calvary when discussing the Atonement.

However, emphasizing the suffering of Calvary raises a question about why Christ was so pleading and fearful during Gethsemane and yet so calm and composed after Gethsemane, with Calvary—supposedly his greatest crisis—still ahead of him. To explain this, some Christians have speculated that the story of Gethsemane was the redaction of later editors and that the passion of Gethsemane did not really happen.[24] Others have accepted the passion of Gethsemane as authentic but have

---

24. See, for example, Martin Dibelius, "Gethsemane," *Crozer Quarterly* 12 (1953): 265; and R. S. Barbour, "Gethsemane in the Tradition of the Passion," *New Testament Studies* 16 (1969-70): 231-35.

still made Calvary the central reality of the Atonement. They have supposed that Jesus (in Gethsemane) was only mustering his composure and strength for what was ahead. For example, Paul Fiddes writes, "The Gospel scene of the agony of Christ in Gethsemane is a paradigm of suffering, where the heart of the matter is anticipation of what is going to happen; it is the *expectation* of the cross that prompts the anguish and the bloody sweat."[25]

In the Book of Mormon and in Mormon thought generally, Gethsemane as well as Calvary are the scenes of the objective Atonement. Mormons, however, place great emphasis on Gethsemane as the primary place where Jesus suffered in the process of taking upon himself the sins of humanity. According to the Book of Mormon, it was Jesus' great anguish for human wickedness that would cause blood to extrude from his pores and bring him near to death (Mosiah 3:7). Therefore, the suffering for sin occurred primarily in Gethsemane. Support for this comes from modern revelation where the Savior declares,

> For behold, I, God, have suffered these things for all, that they might not suffer if they would repent . . . Which suffering caused myself, even God, the greatest of all, to tremble because of pain, and to bleed at every pore, and to suffer both body and spirit—and would that I might not drink the bitter cup, and shrink—Nevertheless, glory be to the Father, and I partook and finished my preparations unto the children of men (D&C 19:16-19).

Joyce Woodbury has expressed regret that this last passage has led some Mormons to overemphasize Gethsemane at the expense of Calvary.[26] Christ did "partake of the cup," suffer, and take on himself the sins of the world primarily in Gethsemane, but surely Christ did not finish the bitter dregs of the cup and complete the full objective Atonement, his "preparations" for humanity, until he took the burden of those sins to the cross. It was there that Jesus proclaimed, "It is finished . . . and gave up the ghost" (John 19:30). According to the Book of Mormon, he would "*suffer* and *die* to atone for their sins" (Alma 33:22, emphasis added; see also 22:14).

Thus, in contrast to the polarizations of the past, a Mormon understanding of the Atonement must include both subjective and objective Atonement. The objective Atonement is primary and must include both Gethsemane and Calvary. And considering the appropriateness of a

---

25. Paul S. Fiddes, *The Creative Suffering of God* (Oxford, Eng.: Clarendon Press, 1988), 77.

26. Joyce N. Woodbury, "Christ's Atoning Sacrifice: The Role of the Crucifixion," *Sunstone* 8 (Nov.- Dec. 1983): 17-21.

"moral" interpretation for Mormon sources, I must examine further the possibilities of Atonement—particularly objective Atonement—as "moral" Atonement. Subjective Atonement is inherently a moral process. In what sense is objective Atonement "moral" as distinguished from "transactional"?

DIVINE SUFFERING THROUGH MORAL ANGUISH

The nature of the suffering of Jesus was fundamental to the christological debates of the early centuries. Unless Christ was human (and able to suffer), the early theologians reasoned, his Atonement could not be relevant to humanity. And unless Christ was in some sense God, his Atonement would not have the power to save. "How then," they asked, "could God suffer and still be God?" Because of the prevailing influence of Greek philosophy, they had difficulty with the ideas of a passible god (a god who suffers) and a mutable god (a god who is affected by events). That aversion brought centuries of confusion into Christian theology. It led some to teach that, since Jesus was divine, he only *appeared* to suffer; his suffering was an illusion. Others taught that Jesus had two natures, that his mortal nature suffered but not his divine nature. But if that were true, did God the Father (being fully divine) not share in the anguish of the Savior and therefore not enter directly into the drama of salvation? And if Jesus had two natures, one suffering and one not, did even the divine in Christ participate in the Atonement?

Moral Vicarious Suffering in Mormon Sources

The Nephites of the Book of Mormon believed that the very God they worshipped would in mortality suffer for humankind. And that suffering would be, in part, moral suffering. In the Book of Mormon, God is a god of feeling and emotion, and these are not defects of character or limitations of mortality. In Jacob's allegory about God's work, the Lord of the vineyard *wept* for those that were lost (Jacob 5:41). The Son of God was to experience mortality so that *his bowels could be filled with mercy* for his people, that is, that he might experience full empathy for humankind (Alma 7:12). His true disciples would be those like him who "morn with those that morn" (Mosiah 18:9). The *perfected*, resurrected Christ in the Book of Mormon gathered his people around him and *wept for joy over them—and wept again* (3 Ne. 17:19-25).[27]

In a moral interpretation of the Atonement, vicarious suffering is the

---

27. See also Easton, "The Book of Mormon Bears Witness of the Father through the Son," 20-23.

inevitable experience of a sensitive personality. Given the love and holiness of God and the predicament of humankind, vicarious moral suffering is inevitable for God. The Father and the Son see the spiritual loss and the pain that men and women bring upon themselves and others, and suffer through empathy. And surely the "natural" experience of men and women suffering in empathy for others is but a part of the divine image within.

That divine capacity for moral suffering was a surprise to Enoch. He saw, in vision, God weeping over those of his children lost in the days of Noah: "And it came to pass that the God of Heaven looked upon the residue of the people, and he wept; and Enoch bore record of it saying: How is it that the heavens weep, and shed forth their tears as the rain upon the mountains? And Enoch said unto the Lord: How is it that thou canst weep, seeing thou art holy, and from all eternity to all eternity?" (Moses 7:28-29) Then Enoch himself was shown the vision, "And it came to pass that the Lord spake unto Enoch, and told Enoch all the doings of the children of men; wherefore Enoch knew, and looked upon their wickedness, and their misery, and wept and stretched forth his arms, and his heart swelled wide as eternity; and his bowels yearned; and all eternity shook." Enoch saw the destruction of the people in the days of Noah. "And as Enoch saw this, he had bitterness of soul, and wept over his brethren, and said unto the heavens: I will refuse to be comforted" (Moses 7:41-44).

So it was with Jesus in Gethsemane. According to King Benjamin, Jesus would suffer in empathy, "*so great shall be his anguish for the wickedness and abominations of his people*" (Mosiah 3:7, emphasis added). His suffering swept over him because of his deep love for his spiritual brothers and sisters. The suffering of Christ in Gethsemane was not only *endured* out of his love for men and women, but was *generated* out of his love for men and women.

In discussing the sentiments of the Savior in Gethsemane, we should not assume that the anguish and suffering of the Savior came only from pity that he felt for others. Love engenders wrath (or righteous anger) as well as pity. What else could Jesus feel for the evil of the world and the infliction of pain and suffering on the innocent? Those who had been sanctified by his spirit "could not look upon sin save it were with abhorrence" (Alma 13:12). In this they became like him "for the Lord cannot look upon sin with the least degree of allowance" (45:16; D&C 1:31). Love, expressed as empathy and wrath, by Father and Son, appears throughout the scriptures. Paul could speak of "the goodness and severity of God" (Rom. 11:22). And John the Revelator could refer succinctly to "the wrath of the Lamb" (Rev. 6:16). Joseph Smith described the Father as "more liberal in His views, and boundless in His mercies . . . than we are ready to believe . . . and, at the same time, . . . more terrible to the workers of iniquity, . . .

and more ready to detect every false way, than we are apt to suppose."[28] The same must be true of the Savior. The pity and the wrath, both arising from love, must have been part of the suffering of the Savior in Gethsemane.

For Christ, it seems appropriate that this suffering (distinct from the personal, physical suffering of the cross) should have occurred in Gethsemane, that is, in a setting distinct from Calvary. For an objective atonement understood in moral terms, where Christ takes all of people's sins on himself, that is, on his feelings, there must be an event such as occurred in Gethsemane.

In the scriptures we learn that the fullness of joy is experienced only with spirit and element united (D&C 93:33-34), so perhaps we can presume also that only spirit and element united are susceptible to a fullness of pain. If this were the case, we could also assume that the anguish felt by the pre-existent Jesus did not compare to his suffering in mortality. As expressed by Arthur Henry King,

> By taking on a body of flesh, the Lord, like us, takes a step toward perfection. In so doing, like us, he extends his powers of sensation and perception. The only difference is that the greatest spirit has entered flesh begotten of the Father, and consequently his range is immensely wider than ours . . . He was capable of experiencing more pain (as in Gethsemane) and more joy (as in the resurrection) than we are.[29]

In Mormon thought, the dual nature of Jesus is divine spirit veiled in mortal flesh. And when Jesus suffered, he suffered a fullness of pain in "both body and spirit" (D&C 19:18).

The anguish Jesus felt in Gethsemane became pain severe to the point of death. We read that as Jesus was about to separate himself from his apostles at Gethsemane "he began to be deeply distressed and troubled" (Mark 14:33 [NIV]; or according to the Moffat translation "appalled and agitated"). He told them, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death" (v. 34 [NIV]). King Benjamin referred to this deathly anguish at Gethsemane with the prophecy: "lo, he shall suffer temptations, and pain of body, hunger, thirst, and fatigue, *even more than man can suffer, except it be unto death*; for behold, blood cometh from every pore, so great shall be his anguish for the wickedness and abominations of his people" (Mosiah 3:7, emphasis added). The author of Hebrews also seems to refer

---

28. Joseph Smith, Jr., et al., *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, B. H. Roberts, ed., 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1932-51), 5:136.

29. Arthur H. King, "Atonement, The Only Wholeness," *Ensign* 5 (Apr. 1975): 17.

to Jesus suffering in Gethsemane—near unto death—with the statement that Jesus "offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears unto him that was able to save him from death" (Heb. 5:7). Jesus submitted to the Father's will (in Gethsemane as well as on Calvary), but it seems that he prayed for preservation from death in Gethsemane that he might successfully take humanity's moral burden upon himself.

Divine Passibility in Modern Theology

Modern Christian theologians have been changing their views, so that few now believe in the impassibility of God.[30] In contrast to the orthodoxy of early Christianity, where God neither suffered nor changed, heirs of the old orthodoxy now hold that God does suffer—but only because he *chooses* to suffer—and that God is mutable—but only because he *chooses* to be affected and changed. So Christ's suffering no longer is considered such an enigma. Also in the old transactional theories, with the emphasis on Calvary, it seemed that Christ came primarily to die. Now theologians discuss Christ's suffering in terms, not only of the physical agonies of the cross, but also of the moral anguish of his love, extending beyond Calvary. John Caird, for example, a Presbyterian minister and principal of Glasgow University, wrote the following graphic explanation of the suffering of Christ:

> [W]e are now considering . . . whether there are any elements of the suffering which flows from sin which a morally pure and sinless being can experience. . . . Not only can a good man suffer for sin, but it may be laid down as a principle that he will suffer for it in proportion to his goodness. Not only can the sinless suffer for sin, but there are sufferings for sin which only he who is himself sinless can in the fullest measure undergo. It was possible for Him who knew no sin to bear on His soul a burden of humiliation, shame, sorrow, for our sins, which in one aspect of it was more profound and intense than we could ever feel for ourselves.
> Consider how far, to a very pure and holy nature, and one which is at the same time intensely loving and benignant, the sins of those who are dear to him may become a moral burden almost equivalent to his own. Let us conceive for a moment what the feeling of such an one would be, if he learned that one related to him by the ties of kindred and home, and with whose welfare his own happiness was deeply implicated—child, brother, sister, husband, wife, had fallen into dishonor and infamy. Suppose him to

---

30. J. K. Mozley, *The Impassibility of God* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1926), reviews the history of the concept of divine impassibility up to the beginning of the change at the turn of the century. Warren McWilliams, *The Passion of God* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1985), surveys the accelerated shift in thought since then.

be a man of intense affections, and of high moral principle, and think what an overwhelming inexpressible shock of pain and grief it would be to him to hear, that one dearer to him than life had been detected in some act of shameful baseness and so had fallen into irretrievable disgrace. Would he not be stung by an anguish, a borrowed humiliation, as bitter as if the sin had been his own? Nay, would not the borrowed grief be in one respect more poignant than that of the evil doer himself? For the very fact that the latter could commit the sin would indicate a comparative moral insensibility; so that it would be possible for one of keen moral susceptibility to discern, as the culprit himself could not, the gravity of the guilty deed, and to feel the burden of borrowed guilt harder to bear than the original.[31]

Caird suggested that as Jesus "was endowed with a moral susceptibility infinitely more quick and keen than the best and purest of mankind, the presence of sin created in Him a repugnance, a moral recoil, a sorrow and shame, which the fallen and guilty could never feel for themselves." Further—and most important—he explained, this type of suffering "possesses this virtue, that it is the only kind of suffering that prepares for forgiveness."[32]

A "moral" view of Jesus' suffering (that is, that the suffering proceeded naturally from his love for men and women) is the beginning of a "moral" interpretation of the objective Atonement. However, the one does not necessarily lead to the other. Jonathan Edwards, for example, had this "moral" view of Jesus suffering[33] but still believed that once he suffered, that suffering redeemed humanity by functioning as "satisfaction" and "substitute punishment." And even John Caird followed the passages just quoted with the explanation that the moral suffering endured by Jesus atoned for human sins only in a mystical, representational sense. Thus we must ask ourselves not only about the source or nature of Jesus' suffering, but also about how that suffering atones for sin.

MORAL ANGUISH AS OBJECTIVE ATONEMENT

From Gethsemane to Calvary, Jesus suffered physical abuse, the agonies of crucifixion, and finally death. Out of that suffering and tragedy came the victory of the resurrection, the breaking of the bonds of death. Calvary and especially Gethsemane were also scenes of spiritual suffering

---

31. John Caird, *The Fundamental Ideas of Christianity*, 2 vols. (Glasgow: James MacLehose and Sons, 1899), 2:220-22; paragraph break added.

32. Ibid., 2:223.

33. Jonathan Edwards, "Concerning the Necessity and Reasonableness of the Christian Doctrine of Satisfaction for Sin," in *The Works of President Edwards*, 10 vols. (New York: G & C & H Corvill, 1830), 7:545.

through total awareness of sin, and again there was victory, in this case a "moral" victory in Christ that opened the way for the moral redemption of humanity.

From Knowledge to Suffering and Christ's Personal At-one-ment

It is not Jesus' suffering per se that redeems men and women. Suffering has an effect on him, and it is that effect (or change) that makes possible human redemption. The power of redemption comes through his expanded knowledge and sensitivity, which he then expresses through his role as mediator.

From the scriptures we learn that Christ changed and grew; "He continued from grace to grace" until he obtained a fullness of grace, truth, and of the glory of the Father (D&C 93:11-17). He grew not from flawed to perfect but from incomplete to perfect through the things he suffered: "Though he were a Son, yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered; And *being made perfect,* he became the *author of eternal salvation* unto all them that obey him" (Heb. 5:8-9, emphasis added). That is, Jesus learned (or experienced) the full depth of what it means to be obedient through accepting the will of the Father, even though that took him into experiences of consuming anguish and death. *He* reached perfection by obeying the will of the *Father,* and now *we* can progress toward perfection and achieve salvation by following *Christ.* He becomes mediator not in the sense of being our substitute punishment and of pleading our case before a reluctant Father, but as one now qualified as sponsor and teacher—to lead, inspire, and transform—in preparation for reconciliation with the Father. In this process, Father and Son are at one.

Jesus grew in the knowledge of persons that reaches fullness only through total compassion. In the culture of ancient Israel, the bowels are regarded as the center of human ethical or moral sensitivities. Alma prophesied that Jesus would "take upon him their infirmities, that his *bowels may be filled with mercy,* according to the flesh, that he may know according to the flesh how to succor his people according to their infirmities" (Alma 7:12, emphasis added). Jesus' suffering thus added to his ability to comfort and spiritually nourish others. He acquired a fullness of mercy in complement to a divine sense of justice. That is, he became perfect and *at-one* in justice and mercy. It is with that added knowledge, according to Alma, that Jesus would be able to deliver his people: "Now the Spirit knoweth all things; nevertheless the Son of God suffereth according to the flesh that he might take upon him the sins of his people, that he might blot out their transgressions according to the power of his deliverance" (Alma 7:13).

Isaiah too, in one of the "Servant Songs," ties together this suffering,

the knowledge associated with it, and the power of redemption that follows: "After the suffering of his soul, he [the Servant] will see the light of life and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities" (Isa. 53:11 [NIV]).

Some may interpret these passages in terms of redemption through "transactions," but they more easily lend themselves to profound statements of "moral" Atonement. I am suggesting that we should understand from these that Jesus, through a full awareness of human evil, "bore" men's and women's iniquities on his feelings and suffered intensely because of them. Through the acquired knowledge from this vicarious suffering he judges and mediates with full understanding and sensitivity. He would not, as noted by Eugene England, "offer . . . solutions without knowing the pain of the problem."[34] Through this experience, his forgiveness reached its full meaning and power, which then through the Spirit can comfort and transform. If Christ knew all and felt all and forgave, how then are the repentant estranged? As Isaiah foresaw, "he will see the *light* of *life*." The light of Jesus' understanding becomes the appeal and the means for us to achieve eternal life.

Jesus' taking upon his sensitive nature the sins of the world, opening his awareness to the totality of human evil, was in effect a *descent* into "hell." According to the *Lectures on Faith*, Jesus "*descended* in suffering below that which man can suffer; or, in other words, suffered greater sufferings, and was *exposed to more powerful contradictions* than any man can be."[35] According to modern revelation, this descent through knowledge was essential: "he *descended* below all things, in that *he comprehended all things, that he might be in all and through all things, the light of truth*" (D&C 88:6, emphasis added). That is, Jesus descended through awareness of human evil that he might obtain the necessary understanding to be a light to all men and women.

Joseph Smith, in an hour of imprisonment and discouragement, was encouraged to patience by reference to Jesus' suffering at Gethsemane and Calvary: "if the *heavens gather blackness*, and all the elements combine to hedge up the way; and above all, if the *very jaws of hell* shall gape open the mouth wide after thee, know thou, my son, that all these things shall give thee experience, and shall be for thy good . . . The Son of Man hath *descended* below them all. Art thou greater than he?" (D&C 122:7-8, emphasis added) In this, we glean insight into what Jesus went through: the descent, the receding of heaven, the frightening threat of the very jaws of hell, victorious endurance, and personal completion.

The statement that Jesus suffered through exposure to extreme *contra-*

---

34. England, "That They Might Not Suffer," 147.

35. Joseph Smith, Jr., *Lectures on Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1985), 59 (Lec. 5, par. 2), emphasis added.

dictions seems to refer to a passage in Hebrews: "For consider him that endured such *contradiction* of *sinners against himself*, lest ye be wearied and faint in your minds. Ye have not yet resisted unto blood, striving against sin" (Heb. 12:3-4, emphasis added). If this passage is the referent, it is important to note that it contains a mistranslation. According to F. F. Bruce, "the oldest recoverable reading [of this passage] by the consensus of all the ancient witnesses and of most versions"[36] shows it should read instead, "For consider him that endured such contradiction of *sinners against themselves*." Some modern commentators reject this reading as nonsense, but it is an appropriate reading for a moral interpretation. Knowledge of sin would bring painful awareness of *contradictions* in the human personality. Jesus suffered vicariously when through judgment and empathy he *descended* with us (or in our place) and experienced through empathy what in us becomes the painful *contradiction* of self condemnation versus our yearning for divine and self approval. In Gethsemane he faced these *contradictions*—through his perception and feelings—before we do, or before we must, as we stand with perfect recollection in the presence of God. He descended into that personal contradiction—for each of us—so that he might fathom, forgive, reach, and transform, that we might avoid that end.

Until Christ was completely victorious, confrontation with evil could also come as threat and temptation. He was tempted at the beginning of his ministry (in the wilderness of Judea) and was tempted at various times during his ministry (Luke 22:28). In the end he must have been tempted to avoid the physical agonies of the cross. He must also have been tempted to avoid the confrontation with evil in Gethsemane and tempted through his awareness of the sins of humanity. But he rejected all temptation, and in this too he gained the necessary understanding and power to redeem: "For we have not an high priest which cannot be *touched with the feeling of our infirmities*; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin" (Heb. 4:15, emphasis added). Perhaps this is what Jesus meant just prior to Gethsemane when in prayer he committed himself to the Father: "And for their sakes I *sanctify myself*, that *they also might be sanctified through the truth*" (John 17:19, emphasis added).[37]

---

36. F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1990), 332.

37. I might compare this aspect of Jesus' ordeal to the temptation a psychotherapist faces while trying to maintain a moral reference and simultaneously provide patients with unconditional acceptance. The phenomenon, called "countertransference," is the tendency for the therapist to be drawn into a problem (through the therapist's own possibly unresolved conflicts) instead of maintaining the strength and perspective for resolution of the problem. For the general analogy with psychotherapy, see Don S. Downing, *Atonement and Psychotherapy* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966). See also

The passion of Gethsemane was completed: Christ penetrated (through physical awareness) to the depths of human sin, suffered through empathy (because of the flesh) near unto death, grappled with the moral conflicts of humanity, and sanctified himself in the presence of evil. He became perfect in wisdom and knowledge, the light of all truth, supreme in obedience, at-one in justice and mercy, and armed with the full power of compassion and forgiveness. Surely, this painful, *moral* victory is the *objective Atonement.* For upon that victory our hope and assurance rest.

As mentioned, many Christians (including Mormons) use the word "Atonement" to refer to the *subjective Atonement,* that is, our process to at-one-ment. However—by contrast—the Book of Mormon uses the word Atonement only to refer to the *objective Atonement.* Therefore it seems to me this play on the structure (and origin) of the word "Atonement" in a Mormon context should first of all denote Jesus' own completion of perfection and *personal* At-One-Ment. The personal (or "moral") At-one-ment for Jesus is the objective Atonement for us.

Calvary as Christ's Supreme Witness to Humanity

At Gethsemane, Jesus through the power of love took the sins of the world on his feelings and suffered vicariously for all men and women. Through that experience came a fullness of understanding and conditional forgiveness for all. At Calvary he suffered again for those final, specific sins against him personally and, in reaction to those, demonstrated again the depths of his righteousness, love, and forgiveness. Jesus had taught that we would "find" our lives through "losing" our lives in service to others, and he lived as he had taught. On the cross, Jesus completed the perfect life through the literal giving of his life for others in selfless love. If humankind could not understand what had happened at Gethsemane, they could at least be moved by the love and forgiveness of Gethsemane extended and made visible at Calvary.

Jesus was the ultimate challenge to the empty social customs of his day and the most penetrating judgment on human vanity, ambitions, and immorality. Unfortunately, he could not teach his truths, provide his moral example, and declare his identity without pushing evil people to their limit. When he told them who he was, they were beside themselves to kill him, and he would not pull back—compromise his witness—to avoid it. His suffering and death were the inevitable outcome of the love, righteousness,

---

the discussion by R. G. Bruehl for the entry "Countertransference," in *Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling,* Rodney J. Hunter, ed. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1990), 239-41.

and holiness of God in an evil world. He was crucified *because of sin* (that is, by sinful people) and allowed himself to be crucified *for sin*, that is, as a witness, to enable others to overcome sin.

Thus both Gethsemane and Calvary were necessary parts of the objective Atonement. Gethsemane was necessary because it was the essential approach to understanding and forgiveness, Jesus preparing for the role of mediator. And the crucifixion of Jesus was necessary (in the sense that it was inevitable) and necessarily allowed (to preserve human freedom and present an effective witness).

History comes to a focus in Jesus Christ, and the whole life and mission of Christ come to a focus in Gethsemane and Calvary. Throughout his life, Jesus taught and exemplified the life of righteousness and selflessness, but especially in those last hours, he became the supreme revelation of the love and holiness of God. The more people brought evil on him, the more vividly he revealed the loving, suffering, and forgiving character of God. And because of this, the more he (even today) engenders acceptance and the more motivates to righteousness. As he told disciples at Jerusalem, "I, if I be lifted up from the earth, *will draw all men unto me*" (John 12:32, emphasis added; see also 3 Ne. 27:14-15). Now all nations look to this decisive moment and the life it represents. And the visible *reality* of the objective Atonement *enables* the subjective at-one-ment.[38]

Should We Borrow from Medieval and Reformation Theories?

Usually, when discussing the Atonement, Mormon writers cautiously avoid speculation and stay close to the language of the scriptures. They simply repeat the metaphors (or invent similar ones) and avoid attempts at deeper explanation. Because of that, we as Mormons have not defined a Mormon position relative to other Christian theories of the Atonement. As a result, we have left a vacuum, and occasionally expressions from medieval and Reformation theories creep into our thinking.

For example, even a writer as perceptive and informed as B. H. Roberts could write the following concerning the Fall and the Atonement: "The sin of Adam was a sin against divine law; a sin against the majesty of God. Only a God can render a satisfaction to that insulted honor and majesty.

---

38. For lack of space, I do not make the processes of the subjective Atonement part of the present comparison, but some excellent discussions of those processes from a Mormon perspective can be found in writings by Eugene England, for example, "That They Might Not Suffer," 141-55, which also appeared in his *Dialogues with Myself* (Salt Lake City: Orion Books, 1984), 77-92; "'Means unto Repentance': Unique Book of Mormon Insights into Christ's At-one-ment," in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon*, John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne, eds. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1990), 153-67; and *The Quality of Mercy* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1992).

Only a Deity can satisfy the claims of Deity."[39] Given the historical meaning of such words in the theory of Anselm, they seem inappropriate as an expression of the Mormon position.

As another example, Hyrum Andrus presents the following:

> To satisfy the demands of divine justice and institute a plan of mercy, an Atonement had to be made. The Father is a God of Justice; and justice had to be paid. The Father's will in regard to this matter had to be fulfilled. The honor and integrity of the man of Holiness had to be sustained in the redemption of the earth and its inhabitants. Justice required the Father to cause the chosen redeemer to suffer. It had to be; truth and consistency made it so.[40]

Again, this is more a caricature of the Satisfaction and Penal Substitution theories than an appropriate statement of Mormon thought.

Most early Mormons came out of a religious tradition where substitute punishment was the predominant interpretation of the Atonement, so it is not surprising that this legalistic interpretation has crept into some Mormon writings. One example is Eliza R. Snow's text to a popular sacramental hymn: "Behold the great Redeemer die,/ A broken law to satisfy."[41] Another example from our hymns is a text by Edward P. Kimball: "He came as man, though Son of God,/ And bowed himself beneath the rod./ He died in holy innocence,/ A broken law to recompense."[42]

B. H. Roberts also borrowed from this penal-substitution interpretation: As with the idea of correcting the offense against God's honor, there is "the same necessity for one not only willing but capable of making the Atonement, by suffering the penalty due to the sins of all men. He must suffer for them; for the ground work of their forgiveness and restoration to union with God must be that the penalty due to their sin has been paid."[43] Roberts also borrowed frequently from the Governmental theory of the Atonement.[44] In fairness, we should add that (despite this eclectic ten-

---

39. B. H. Roberts, *Seventies Course in Theology*: 1908-12, 5-year manuals republished in 2 vols. (Dallas: S. K. Taylor Publ. Co., 1976), 2 (fourth year): 94. For similar examples, see 2 (fourth year): 99, 108, 118, 126.

40. Hyrum L. Andrus, *God, Man, and the Universe* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1968), 396.

41. *Hymns of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), no. 191.

42. Ibid., no. 187.

43. Roberts, *Seventies Course in Theology*: 1908-12, 2 (fourth year): 102. For similar examples, see 2 (fourth year): 94, 103, 109, 112.

44. Ibid., 2 (fourth year): 92, 98, 108, 126.

dency) he seemed also to be searching for an interpretation of the Atonement uninfluenced by classical philosophy.[45]

These anomalous statements suggest that, for some Mormons, the old traditional theories represent acceptable Mormon doctrine, or perhaps (to be more generous) these old theories have now become new metaphors. Unfortunately, as history has shown, metaphors are often not recognized as metaphor. What begins as metaphor sometimes ends as literal interpretation, and confusion follows (see, for example, Matt. 16:6-12).

If it is true that the traditional theories of the Atonement are inappropriate for expressing Mormon concepts, we should take care not to assimilate them. Those who borrow from these old theories should realize that it is God's love that is satisfied, not his offended honor or offended sense of justice. And "penalty" or "punishment" are not used in the Book of Mormon to explain the suffering and death of Jesus.[46] Suffering or dying "for men" can also mean "for the benefit of men" and suffering and dying "for men's sins" can mean "as a means to help men overcome sin." For example, a person can suffer, put his or her life at risk, and even die "for" another (that is, to benefit another) without that suffering and death being a direct substitute penalty. Many have died for their country, but not as a substitute punishment.[47] If sympathetic, love-generated suffering leading to the full At-one-ment of Jesus provides a warning and an assurance of love and forgiveness to others, and that warning and assurance are the means to bring some person to repentance, and that person does not suffer—because of his repentance and forgiveness—then there has been vicarious suffering and even *substitute suffering*, but not *penal substitution*. Surely the power of the Atonement is love, not legal or metaphysical bookkeeping. And surely the difficulty in understanding the Atonement is in the breadth of the awareness and the depth of that love, not in the enigmas of moral incongruities.

45. Truman G. Madsen, "B. H. Roberts: The Book of Mormon and the Atonement," in *The Book of Mormon: First Nephi, The Doctrinal Foundation*, Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate, Jr., eds. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1988), 308.

46. The Book of Mormon explains the Atonement in terms of ceremonial sacrifice in the Law of Moses which was not based on vicarious penal substitution. See, for example, Vincent Taylor, *Jesus and His Sacrifice* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1965), 49-75; or Robert J. Daly, *Christian Sacrifice* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, (1978), 120-27. The Atonement is contrasted with substitute punishment in Alma 34:11-12.

47. On this same point (the meaning of "for men") as used in the New Testament argued from the meaning of the original Greek, see, for example, R. G. Crawford, "Is the Penal Theory of the Atonement Scriptural?" *Scottish Journal of Theology* 23 (Aug. 1970): 257-72; or George B. Stevens, *The Christian Doctrine of Salvation* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1905), 100-102.

The Book of Mormon (the Bible also) indicates that Jesus took on himself the *infirmities* of men and women. Again this is neither a "substitute punishment" nor a literal "gathering up" of the ills of humanity. It is the process of Jesus becoming one with men and women, taking their burdens—sins and infirmities—on his feelings, that he might comfort and bless them.

As Eugene England[48] has pointed out, the Book of Mormon portrays the Atonement redeeming people generations before Gethsemane and Calvary, before any "required transactions" could have taken place. The word had been declared in all ages that people "might receive remission of their sins, and rejoice with exceeding great joy, even as though he [Christ] had already come among them" (Mosiah 3:13). This alone should lead us to conclude that the Atonement does not refer to a literal *quid-pro-quo* substitution as prerequisite transaction. In the Book of Mormon, the people of King Benjamin knew what Jesus would do. That alone affected their relationship to him, and that was enough to bring the redemptive process into effect. "[T]he Spirit of the Lord came upon them, and they were filled with joy, having received a remission of their sins, and having peace of conscience, because of the exceeding faith which they had in Jesus Christ who should come" (Mosiah 4:3). When the Atonement is a "moral" atonement, the redemptive process (through faith and the Spirit) can happen before Gethsemane and Calvary as well as after.

The Modern Search for a Concept of Moral, Objective Atonement

I have contrasted the Mormon concept of Atonement and the suggested Mormon, moral interpretation of the Atonement with medieval and Reformation theories. If, however, I turn to recent (late nineteenth- and twentieth-century) developments in Atonement interpretation and note, in particular, the tendency to interpret Atonement as moral Atonement, I find a closer correspondence to the interpretation I am suggesting. Moral theories of the Atonement, of course, go back at least to Abelard's Moral Influence theory in the twelfth century, and some see its beginning in early Christianity.[49] But only in the mid-nineteenth century do we begin to see a balance in Atonement interpretation, that is, including both objective and subjective elements, with both explained as moral Atonement.

Perhaps the first to attempt an interpretation of both subjective and objective Atonement in moral terms was John McLeod Campbell (1800-72), a minister in the Church of Scotland. Campbell sought to dispel old

---

48. England, "That They Might Not Suffer," 145; *The Quality of Mercy*, 24.

49. H. E. W. Turner, *The Patristic Doctrine of Redemption* (London: A. R. Mowbray & Co., 1952), 29-46.

Calvinistic notions of "Atonement only for the elect few" and "Atonement as substitute punishment." Jesus' suffering, he claimed, was moral suffering from love and empathy for the sinner. Because of these teachings, Campbell was first condemned and then in 1831 ostracized from his denomination. He was able to continue working as a minister, but only through friends who helped him set up an independent congregation. During that ministry he was able to publish his pioneering work, *The Nature of the Atonement*.[50] Ironically, before the century was over the Church of Scotland changed its views and accepted many of his ideas.

In attempting to explain the objective Atonement, Campbell claimed that Jesus so identified himself with the sinner that he was able to offer "vicarious confession and repentance" in the name of the sinner, thus accomplishing moral or *ethical satisfaction* to God. In this way, Campbell abandoned the idea of legalistic substitute punishment but retained objective Atonement by moralizing and thus softening Anselm's notion of satisfaction to God. Many have acknowledged an indebtedness to Campbell, but this last notion has been difficult for many to accept. It still leaves some disturbing questions: Does it make any more sense for Jesus to repent for someone else than it does for him to be punished for someone else? Is the notion of a god who can be satisfied by substitute repentance any more acceptable than the notion of a god who can be satisfied by substitute punishment? Despite these reservations, Campbell is important for his attempt to understand the Atonement in terms of God's universal love and interpersonal relations. Whatever the defects of his interpretation, he began the search for a concept of moral objective Atonement.

Probably the most important pioneer for a complete moral interpretation of the Atonement was Horace Bushnell (1802-76), a Congregational minister in Hartford, Connecticut. Like Campbell, he sought to reformulate the orthodoxy of his day, to mediate between Unitarian Liberalism and orthodox Calvinism. He first stirred controversy by speaking and writing against the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity and by teaching that children could be raised through "Christian nurture" to be in a state of grace from birth instead of needing to be rescued in mature years from a state of moral depravity by revivalist conversion. For these ideas, he also was ostracized from his denomination, and he also was protected by his own parish, who in his case withdrew from the Hartford North Consociation to become an independent parish.

Like Campbell, Bushnell taught that Jesus suffered through empathy with the sinner, and he also published a moral-influence interpretation of

---

50. John McLeod Campbell, *The Nature of the Atonement* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1873).

the Atonement, his *Vicarious Sacrifice*.[51] Because he was influential in turning American Protestantism to a Moral-Influence interpretation of the Atonement and because of his work on Christian nurture, he has been called the father of Protestant Liberalism in America. His work on the Moral-Influence interpretation of the Atonement is widely recognized. What is less recognized is his own dissatisfaction with that work. He felt it fell short because it lacked a "moral" interpretation of the objective Atonement, and in his later years he continued to search for such an interpretation. Eventually, he found the interpretation he sought (he claimed, by inspiration) and presented it in *Forgiveness and Law*,[52] published as a correction to his earlier work.

In this later work Bushnell referred to God's objective Atonement as God's "self propitiation," which he explained as follows:

> It is objected that God loves his adversary already, and needs not love him more to forgive! Of course he need not love him more, and it is no office of the propitiation to produce in him a greater love for that purpose. The propitiation itself proceeds from that love, and is only designed to work on other unreducible sentiments that hinder his love, in forgivenesses it might otherwise bestow. Our own love, as we saw, might be sufficient if it were not hindered by certain collateral, obstructive sentiments, and God is in this moral analogy with us. He is put in arms against wrong doers just as we are, by his disgusts, displeasures, abhorrences, indignations, revulsions, and what is more than all, by his offended holiness, and by force of these partly recalcitrant sentiments he is so far shut back, in the sympathies of his love, that he can nerve himself to the severities of government so long as such severities are wanted. He is not less perfect because these antagonistic sentiments are in him, but even more perfect than he would be without them; and a propitiation is required, not because they are bad, but only to move them aside when they are not wanted.[53]

LDS readers can perhaps best appreciate this process—of first feeling or expressing righteous anger and then (through love) setting aside those unwanted sentiments—by comparing it to the "doctrine of the priesthood" (a guide for acting in the name of Christ) given through Joseph Smith. According to that guide, judgment and reproof are appropriate when prompted by the Holy Ghost, but then for the sake of the person rebuked,

51. Horace Bushnell, *The Vicarious Sacrifice* (New York: Charles Scribner and Co., 1868).

52. Horace Bushnell, *Forgiveness and Law* (New York: Scribner, Armstrong and Co., 1874).

53. Ibid., 54.

that response must be "set aside" and replaced by persuasion, long suffering, gentleness, meekness, love unfeigned, pure knowledge (which enlarges the soul without hypocrisy and guile), with bowels full of charity toward all people, and with virtue garnishing one's thoughts unceasingly. That sense of justice and that accommodation (as in Gethsemane) has the power to redeem (D&C 121:41-46).

Bushnell's view of Christ forgiving men and women—through a painful achievement of at-one-ment between his abhorrence of sin and his love of individuals—should not be confused with an earlier notion of Martin Luther in which God is torn between a wrathful urge to punish and annihilate a sinful world and a parallel urge to forgive and to bless. According to Luther, God (in Christ) accepts the punishment in vicarious suffering and then allows the blessing to proceed in love. Luther's view is not (as Alma would say) "mercy appeasing the demands of justice." Luther's view is more a case of mercy being allowed to proceed only after justice has extracted its vengeful due from a substitute victim.[54]

Bushnell's correction to his earlier work has been largely ignored or forgotten. However, a few have been influenced by it and have published their own variations of objective Atonement as moral Atonement. These include such theologians as H. R. Mackintosh,[55] in his discussion of the "journey of forgiveness" that Jesus' suffering involves; Donald Baillie,[56] with his discussion of empathic suffering as objective Atonement; and Fisher Humphreys,[57] with his concept of "cruciform forgiveness."

In this century, there has been another attempt to resynthesize the doctrine of the Atonement, in this case by breaking free from concepts imported into Christian thought from Greek philosophy. This second movement is actually part of a broader movement to reformulate Christian theology as a whole by replacing foundational concepts from classical philosophy with those of modern process philosophy. Theologians of the broader movement (for example, Charles Hartshorne, John Cobb, Schubert Ogden, Daniel D. Williams, and Norman Pettinger) have rejected the idea of an "immutable God" and have built a "process theology" upon the idea of God (through Christ) changing and growing. The implications of this process theology for the doctrine of the Atonement have been outlined

---

54. See the discussion by Fiddes, in *The Creative Suffering of God*, 22-23.

55. H. R. Mackintosch, *The Christian Experience of Forgiveness* (London: Nisbet and Co., 1927), 183-91. See also Paul S. Fiddes, *Past Event and Present Salvation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1989), 173-75.

56. Donald M. Baillie, *God Was in Christ* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948), 157-202.

57. Fisher Humphreys, *The Death of Christ* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1978), 116-35.

recently by Paul Fiddes,[58] Vernon White,[59] and David Wheeler.[60] And they have presented both subjective and objective Atonement as moral Atonement. In their case, the moral, objective Atonement is not the painful, internal resolution in Christ after an awareness of the sins of humanity (as with Bushnell). Instead, they emphasize Jesus' added perception and moral authenticity coming directly from his suffering at Calvary. White, for example, observes, "They [the theologians in the classical tradition] may betray a religious unease at any thought of a God who uses human experience to 'complete' his own."[61] However, "Far from implying divine inadequacy, it may be a metaphysical and religious *compliment* to deity to conceive God taking up human experience into his own."[62] As White explains, Jesus' suffering "achieves a victory over evil forces, and both God and man are [then] free to relate without their malevolent interference."[63] "He [Christ] is made perfect through suffering, and rises with the capacity to make others perfect through theirs."[64]

Fiddes also speaks of God through Christ suffering change, thus providing the *objective* basis for the At-one-ment. He speaks of Calvary, but what he says is especially true (according to the present essay) of Gethsemane:

> The most perfect forgiver that could be conceived still has to change—not from a reluctance to forgive to a willingness to do so, not from anger to mercy, but rather into new areas of experience. He has to move in his experience from having the *desire* to forgive to such an immersion into the experience of the other that he *can* win the other to himself. The other finds him to be the sort of person from whom he can accept reconciliation . . . A suffering God who was and is always willing to forgive gains through the cross a new experience of the human condition that gives him access into our resistant hearts. He suffers change in order to change us. This is the permanent validity of those so-called "objective" models of the Atonement which present a change in God as well as in the sinner. They certainly mistake the sort of change involved by presenting it as a change of attitude on God's part, as if God needed to have his law satisfied before he could forgive. There can be no question of change of attitude in a merciful God,

58. Fiddes, *The Creative Suffering of God* and *Past Event and Present Salvation*.

59. Vernon White, *Atonement and Incarnation* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

60. David L. Wheeler, *A Relational View of the Atonement* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 1989).

61. White, *Atonement and Incarnation*, 63.

62. Ibid., 64.

63. Ibid., 52.

64. Ibid., 104.

but there can be what we might call a "change of approach," gained through new experience.[65]

It seems that these two modern concepts of moral-Atonement-as-objective-Atonement are not mutually exclusive. Bushnell's concept of the painful "self propitiation" of Jesus at Gethsemane could be added to the "process" concept of Jesus experiencing and changing at Calvary, both to become the objective enabler of subjective Atonement. In this combined interpretation, these two experiences (Gethsemane and Calvary) are the total experience by which the Savior gains the necessary understanding and authenticity to reach humanity. Taken together, these views seem to come closer to the concept of the Atonement found in Mormon sources than do the old traditional theories of medieval and Reformation Christianity.

CONCLUSION

I distinguish the various Christian interpretations of the Atonement, ancient and modern, by whether they describe the Atonement process as "moral" or as "metaphysical and transactional." I also distinguish them by whether they describe the mechanism of the Atonement as a God-oriented, objective *event* or as a humanity-oriented, subjective *process*—or some combination of both. If I then use these distinctions to characterize Mormon sources, I find that the Mormon concept of Atonement (in contrast to traditional Orthodoxy) has a rich concept of subjective process and (in contrast to traditional Liberalism) has an unequivocal concept of Atonement as objective event. In contrast to both Orthodoxy and Liberalism, Mormonism has a sense of the importance (to the Atonement) of Gethsemane as well as Calvary. Mormon sources do not establish objective Atonement or subjective Atonement, one at the expense of the other. Rather in those sources the objective event is the necessary enabler for the subjective process. And when I consider the Mormon concepts of God, of humankind, and human predicament, I also find a simple and unique personalism that suggests the appropriate Mormon understanding of the Atonement should be *fundamentally* one of "moral" Atonement. This is strongly reinforced by the specific descriptions of the objective Atonement found in Mormon sources. I therefore suggest for consideration that in Mormon sources there is a basis for a unique concept of thoroughgoing (that is, objective and subjective) "moral" Atonement and that Jesus' achievement of personal at-one-ment in response to our moral predicament is the objective Atonement for us.

---

65. Fiddes, *The Creative Suffering of God*, 166-67.